SCOTTISH
CHILDREN'S REPORTER
ADMINISTRATION



2027-2030

RESEARCH PLAN

INTRODUCTION



This plan outlines the strategic research programme that will support the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) between 2027 and 2030.

It is designed to help us understand the effects of major legislative, policy and societal changes on children, families and the Children's Hearings System, while ensuring that future practice and decision-making are informed by robust evidence.

The plan is particularly focused on evaluating the impact of legislative reforms, including the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act and the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act. These reforms will affect who can be referred to the Children's Reporter, how children's rights and participation are incorporated into decision-making, and how children's voices are represented within hearings.



Alongside legislative change, the plan responds to wider societal challenges, including poverty, the cost-of-living crisis, child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, mental health concerns and changing patterns of harm experienced by children and families. The overarching aim is to strengthen understanding of children's experiences and ensure that interventions remain responsive, rights-based and evidence-informed.



The strategic research priorities captured within this plan were developed through:

- Undertaking a systematic mapping exercise of legislative, policy and practice developments expected to affect children over the next five years.

- Consultation with SCRA staff

- Prioritisation workshops held with SCRA's Executive Management Team and representatives of the Scottish Government's Children's Hearings Team and the Hearings for Children Redesign Board to assessing the risks, benefits and organisational relevance of the research proposals.

The views of children and families were not directly sought in the production of this plan. This was due to the significant level of consultation work that had already been undertaken with children and families to identify the transformative change that needed to occur within the children's hearings system in order to keep the promise.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Seven strategic research priorities were identified.

Project 1: Understanding the Criminal Exploitation of Children

A recent review identified that there is limited data available on the experiences of children who are being exploited. To address this gap, this research will combine case file data and qualitative work to understand more about how the criminal exploitation of children is identified and responded to within the children's hearings system.

Key areas of exploration will include: the extent to which criminal exploitation is identified as a factor in children's offending behaviour; the backgrounds of children who are identified as victims of criminal exploitation; the nature and severity of the offending behaviour that occurs within the context of criminal exploitation; the level of risk and harm experienced by children who are being criminally exploited; and how concerns about exploitation were identified and responded to by professionals in and around the Children's Hearings System.



Project 2: Understanding the impact of raising the age of referral to the Children's Reporter

The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act will, once fully implemented, allow all children aged 16-17 to be referred to the Children's Reporter. This ends a disparity in Scots law whereby a 16 or 17 year old could only be referred to the Reporter if they were already subject to a CSO.

This research will seek to understand the impact that raising the age of referral has upon both the number and nature of referrals and joint reports received by the Reporter for 16-17 year olds, along with the decisions taken in relation to these. The research will also explore professionals' experiences and views on raising the age of referral, including: confidence in decision-making, operational challenges and implications for public confidence in the hearings system.



Project 3: Identifying Bias in Professional Decision-Making

Research evidence suggests that children from ethnic minority communities, disabled children and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are over-represented within the care and justice systems.

This piece of research will seek to understand the extent to which individuals with different protected characteristics may be over-represented in referrals to the Children's Reporter, as well as key outcomes such as decisions to arrange a hearing and decisions to place children onto compulsory measures of supervision. It will also explore professionals' understandings of bias and discrimination, and perceptions of how these issues affect decision-making within the children's hearings system.



Project 4: Understanding how changes in advocacy provision affect hearings participation

The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act contains provisions that are designed to enhance the provision of advocacy services to children. These provisions will make advocacy available earlier within children's journey through the hearings system. They will also expand the use of advocacy to include the provision of non-instructed advocacy services for children with limited communication abilities.

This research will seek to understand: how and when advocacy services are being offered and explained to children; which children are accessing advocacy services and when this occurs; whether the use of advocacy affects hearings outcomes; children's experiences of advocacy support; and differences in the experience and impacts of instructed and non-instructed advocacy.



Project 5: Participation of children in hearings

The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) Act will, once implemented, remove the presumption that children should attend their hearings. Although this may reduce the number of children who attend hearings, it is likely that some children will continue to attend their hearings. In order to support children to meaningfully participate in hearings there is a need to understand which children continue to attend hearings, and how their needs can best be met. This includes addressing an existing gap in the evidence base focussed upon how children with additional support needs understand and experience hearings.

The first part of this research will explore how removing the presumption to attend affects the characteristics of children who attend hearings. This will include examining what types of hearings children are most likely to attend and the extent to which children with additional support needs, including neurodivergence, are attending hearings. The second part of the research will look in detail at what children with additional support needs, including children who are neurodivergent, need to help them meaningfully participate in hearings.



Project 6: Improving Understanding of Neglect

A recent learning review found that four children experienced prolonged neglect and serious harm that was not adequately identified or responded to by a range of agencies, including SCRA, despite long-standing professional involvement with the family, including around parental addictions. The review identified missed opportunities to recognise and respond to indicators of neglect and to intervene more effectively to protect the children.

This research priority will focus on exploring current understandings of and responses to neglect among professionals, with a particular focus on exploring child protection professionals understandings of neglect and how these influence their decision-making.



Project 7: The Role of Education and Health Professionals in Children's Hearings

Although 10% of all referrals to the Children's Reporter are made by education and health professionals there is currently little evidence around how these professionals understand and experience the children's hearings system.

This piece of research will seek to fill this gap by exploring the role that these individuals play in the hearings system as individual professionals and as part of multi-agency teams. In doing so, the research will explore issues such as: the circumstances under which education and health professionals would make referrals to the children's hearings system; how the views of education and health professionals are represented in multi-agency referrals; how disagreements regarding the need for compulsory measures between professionals are negotiated and recorded; and the barriers and enablers that influence meaningful participation of education and health professionals in children's hearings.



DELIVERY, DISSEMINATION AND IMPACT



Over the course of this plan the research team will adopt a new approach to disseminating research findings.

This will involve moving away from the publishing of large standalone reports to adopting a modular publishing approach in which evidence from desk reviews, statistical analyses and qualitative research are placed in the public domain as they become available. This approach will be supplemented by the publication of an integrated learning report on completion of all research relating to the priorities outlined above.

To maximise accessibility, we will publish evidence in a range of formats. These will include traditional report formats, short reads, graphic novels and policy briefings. We will also work with the practice team at SCRA to develop an evidence into practice series to support the continued and professional development of Children's Reporters and Assistant Reporters.



To assess the impact of our research we will produce an annual research impact report. This will provide insights into how the research at SCRA has: influenced policy and legislation; contributed to changes in practice or procedure at SCRA; and contributed to academic knowledge. The impacts of our research upon children and families will also be captured.