

Staying Together and Connected: Getting it right for sisters and brothers National Practice Guidance

What an opportunity for CELCIS to be asked by Scottish Government to take a lead role in the preparation of the new National Practice Guidance, 'Staying Together and Connected: Getting it Right for Sisters and Brothers' that has been published today. And what a responsibility to try and represent the energy, commitment and utter tenacity of so many in making this change happen, epitomised by the Stand Up For Siblings collective, including people with care experience, and pioneered by change maker Dr Chris Jones. Together they have made real change start to happen for children in care and their sisters and brothers in Scotland.

The new guidance celebrates that change!

A significant, practical resource for us all

The crafting of the guidance has been a high speed, exhilarating and humbling journey of listening, learning and much crafting and editing to be as effective a resource as possible.

The finished resource is designed as a practical guide for practitioners, parents, carers and strategic leaders to have clarity on their responsibilities towards children with siblings, understand how best to meet these, and to support children and young people to know their rights. It is offered as a hopeful torch to light the way for the next steps in implementing Scotland's new legal duty¹ that every 'looked after' infant, child and young person lives with their brothers and sisters, where it is safe to do so, and is able to sustain strong and positive lifelong relationships with them when they choose to do so.

The guidance sits within the context of the drive to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law too and is another step forward in realising a foundation of care articulated in The Promise that 'where living with their family is not possible, children must stay with their brothers and sisters where safe to do so and belong to a loving home staying there for as long as needed'.²

¹ <https://www.clanchildlaw.org/changes-law-brothers-sisters>

² Page 9. Independent Care Review (2020b) *The Promise*. Glasgow: Independent Care Review. Available at: <https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf>.

Listening to inform

Our starting point in putting the guidance together was listening to the vital voice and views of children and young people with care experience, their parents, including adoptive parents, kinship and foster carers, and the multi-agency practitioners who work alongside them. We heard their experiences and wisdom through a national survey and advisory group, workshops, children's stories and ideas, and hours of conversations. A major strength was the help we received from a group of young people with care experience who acted as consultants to the writing team and helped us to steer the content, tone and language of the document all informed by the reality of people's experiences. Together with this came the tremendous input from young people's groups such as the Care Inspectorate Young Inspectors, Our Hearings Our Voice, those looked after within local authorities and Who Cares? Scotland.

Throughout the process it was paramount to amplify learning, and ensure that we could incorporate this learning on behalf of children who depend on adults to notice, listen, understand, articulate and advocate on their behalf including babies, infants and children with disability.

We also knew that in providing a practical tool and reflecting real experience, we wanted and needed to put a spotlight on examples of creative, excellent practice currently underway in Scotland where practitioners are already working hard to ensure brothers and/or sisters can live together and be supported to maintain positive and meaningful relationships with their siblings wherever they live. These are starters for ten and we recognise the desire of many practitioners to be empowered to build on these to offer innovative solutions in the best interests of every child they work with.

The new legal duty in force from 26 July is a gift to all of us caring for and working on behalf of infants, children and young people in the care system and the relationships they hold dear. Let's seize this opportunity to further uphold children's rights in Scotland, galvanised by the UNCRC and The Promise powering us ever forward. Whatever our parental locus (biological, adoptive, in parentis or corporate) this is a new, albeit challenging, freedom to think differently and demonstrate our commitment, courage, cooperation, determination and innovation for the good of children in Scotland. Bring it on!