Action for Children works with vulnerable and difficult to reach children and young people across the UK, many of whom have been affected by issues around emotional wellbeing and resilience. Action for Children’s services are helping to raise the emotional wellbeing, and to improve the resilience, of large numbers of children and young people accessing our services. We are achieving this through the skilled use of a range of interventions with children, young people and their families.

Against this background, Action for Children has expressed an increasing commitment to prioritising the emotional wellbeing of children and young people, including campaigning for greater recognition of emotional wellbeing in all children’s and young people’s services through our Growing Strong campaign. Further details about the campaign can be provided upon request.

Action for Children Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Health and Sports Committee’s inquiry into mental health services for children and young people. Action for Children Scotland’s evidence draws upon our experience of working with young people affected by issues concerning emotional wellbeing and resilience at projects such as, for example, the Renfrewshire Primary Support Project in Paisley, the Intensive Supervised Structured Care (“ISSC”) Project in Ayrshire, the Moray Residential Service and the North Lanarkshire Young Carers’ Project in Motherwell.

One preliminary issue we would like to raise relates to how the Committee will be defining ‘mental health’ for the purposes of its inquiry. Action for Children Scotland recommends that the Committee should use a broad definition of ‘mental health’, and avoid using a medical and clinical definition. In this respect, we believe it is essential that the definition should include issues around emotional wellbeing and strengthening resilience, including the impact of trauma upon children and young people as a result of factors such as child abuse, bereavement and domestic violence. We believe that using a broader definition of mental health will add significant additional value to the Committee’s important inquiry, particularly as emotional wellbeing and resilience are increasingly viewed as the key to young people’s successful adaptation to adult life, to their achievement of educational success, to positive relationships and to their mental health.

How children and adolescents potentially at risk of developing mental health problems are identified and how those problems should be prevented?

Some of the young people we work with have had issues around emotional wellbeing and resilience identified at the point of their referral to our services. While in other cases such issues are only identified after referral, and the presented challenging behaviour often acts as a trigger for other issues. To take an example a young person referred to one of our projects was discovered to have Anorexia, and there was a real risk that the young person
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was susceptible to self harming behaviour and to depression. With early support from staff the young person has been able to address their issues around mental health, and to achieve more positive outcomes for themselves. This is just one example where the early intervention of Action for Children Scotland staff has been critical in helping a vulnerable and difficult to reach young person to strengthen their emotional wellbeing and resilience, and to turn their life around.

We take the view, based on our practice experience across the UK, that an approach based on early intervention and on prevention can make a significant difference to the lives of children and young people at risk of developing mental health problems. As part of this process, it is essential that age specific practice and procedures are put in place by all agencies working with vulnerable and difficult to reach young people to ensure the screening of mental health problems at an early stage is improved. By way of further background, Action for Children Scotland’s residential services in Moray have developed the Mindful Care Pilot Project with the local CAMHS team to promote the improved screening of mental health issues amongst looked after and accommodated children and young people in Moray.

It was recognised that this group of difficult to reach young people are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems, and the aim of the pilot was to improve outcomes for these young people by strengthening their emotional wellbeing and resilience. This has been achieved by providing early screening, promoting closer inter-agency work and delivering mental health training to staff. Early indicators suggest that the pilot has had a positive impact upon the lives of the young people accessing the residential service, upon the effectiveness of inter-agency working, in enhancing the skills of staff to deal with issues around identifying young people at risk of mental health problems and in supporting young people to deal with these issues.

What obstacles there are in identifying children and adolescents with mental health problems and how they might be overcome?

One significant obstacle is that children and young people often do not have the necessary language to express the level, and type of, mental health problems affecting them. This can hamper diagnosis and treatment. To address this, Action for Children Scotland staff support the children and young people accessing our services to cope with issues around emotional wellbeing and resilience. This includes encouraging children and young people to express their feelings about these issues, including how they are being affected.

Staff at Action for Children Scotland projects such as the Renfrew Primary Support project have also highlighted the difficulties of identifying children with mental health problems in situations where the latter’s home life is often chaotic. In these circumstances the starting point for our staff is to consider whether or not a child is displaying problematic behaviour because of a mental health issue, or as a reaction to problems within their home life. Action for Children Scotland considers that, where such problems are evident, Action
What action is being taken to facilitate early intervention and what else can be done?

Action for Children Scotland recognises that a medical/clinical solution might be appropriate in certain cases, but believes that for many children and young people an early intervention and a preventative approach can make a significant contribution to promoting their emotional wellbeing and resilience. At the Renfrew Primary Support project, for example, when problematic behaviour is presented, staff intervene early, and on a preventative basis, to address the behaviour. This can help to identify the under-lying causes of the challenging behaviour, which can include a range of issues around child protection, domestic abuse, trauma etc, and to assist Action for Children Scotland, the CAMHS teams and other key agencies to put in place appropriate, age specific support for the young people. There is also a very strong fit with the approach of this project, and the strategy outlined in the Early Years / Early Intervention Framework, which has just been published jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA.

We have developed this approach at Renfrew Primary Support through initiatives such as the Bedtime Reading programme which encourages parents to read to their children before bedtime, and the Action Man programme that provides children with opportunities to bond with male members of their extended family through structured activities. These initiatives have helped to improve outcomes for the vulnerable children accessing the service. The formal evaluation of the project by Edinburgh University is due to be published shortly, and will be profiled publicly. This will highlight the fact that the Primary Support Project has delivered: reduced exclusions, reduced likelihood of offending, improved behaviour and improved parent/child relationships, thereby reducing the risks of children being received into care.

How access to services and ongoing support can be improved?

Action for Scotland believes that there should be greater consistency in the design, development and delivery of age appropriate services to support young people with issues around emotional wellbeing and resilience. By way of example a 14 year old young person at the ISSC project in Ayr started to present extreme self harm behaviour, and was admitted to an adult psychiatric ward. This exposed the young person to a range of activities and behaviour, which were inappropriate and potentially detrimental to their treatment and recovery. Against this background, Action for Children Scotland considers it is essential that young people should not be placed in adult wards, but should benefit from age appropriate services and facilities.

Action for Children is aware of the stigma which mental health issues still have for many young people and for society as a whole, and that this can
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inhibit young people’s willingness to seek help, and to access key services. Action for Children Scotland takes the view that it is essential for the Scottish Government, local authorities, the wider voluntary sector and other agencies working with children, families and young people, should take the lead in raising awareness of mental health problems concerning children and young people.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on 0141-550-9010 if you require more information about any of the issues raised in our evidence, or would like to discuss this matter further. We would also be willing to give oral evidence to the Committee about the work Action for Children Scotland’s projects are undertaking to improve the emotional wellbeing and resilience of vulnerable and difficult to reach young people if it would assist the inquiry.

Andrew S. Girvan
Director of Children’s Services
22 January 2009