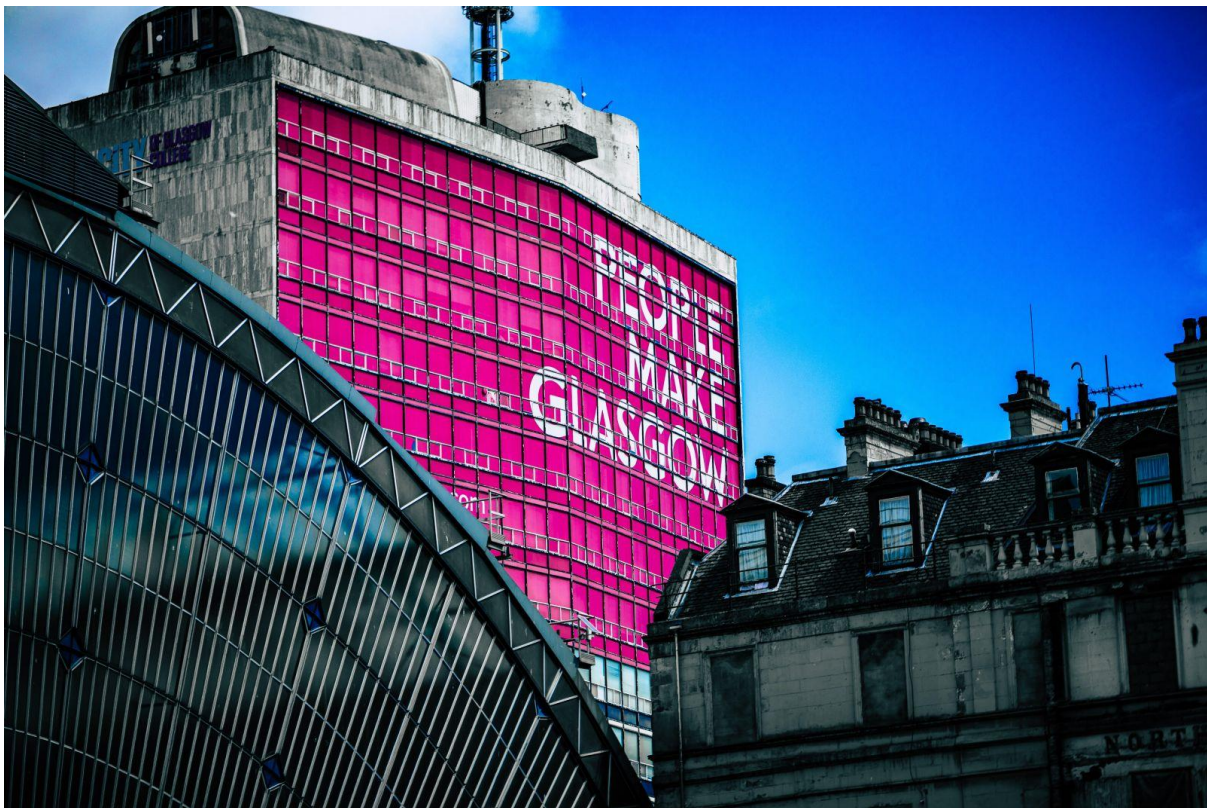


## Reducing unnecessary contact with Children in Care: An evaluation of Glasgow's Respect Programme

PHASE 1 REPORT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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## Background

The disproportionate criminalisation of children and young people in residential care has been recognised and prioritised by governments across the Western World for decades. Leading to over-representation within the criminal justice system, care-experience has become a criminogenic factor in the lives of thousands of young people. Nevertheless, solutions remain unclear. This project reports on the first part of an evaluation of an approach which has been piloted in Glasgow, Scotland, since 2020 and which aims to reduce unnecessary police contact with young people in care homes (known in Scotland as 'children's houses'). The 'Respect Programme' was initiated by Police Scotland in response to their statutory responsibility as a 'corporate parent' to address concerns highlighted by the Independent Care Review about the frequency of police callouts to children's houses, and the increased risk of criminalisation arising. Children's houses call police for a range of reasons, but most commonly it is to report that a child in their care has gone missing or, to report a misdemeanour involving a child which may amount to criminal behaviour. While all calls for service to police by care establishments are based on important safeguarding considerations and responsibilities, evidence has emerged that some police contact may be unnecessary and could, in fact, reflect discriminatory practices, and disproportionate criminal justice responses, towards those in care. Going missing, while not a crime, is a risk factor for criminal involvement. As such, the dual problems of missing children and offending involving children in care are often discussed together.

## The Respect Programme

Universally, it has been recognised that police are frequently called to children's houses for relatively minor behavioural problems, such as not returning home at the expected time or for minor acts of vandalism, which would not generally trigger a police response in the 'traditional' family home. Glasgow's Respect Programme pilots an approach whereby more of these minor incidents can be resolved in-house without recourse to the police. The approach is underpinned by an approved change to Scottish Crime Recording Standards and a protocol, set out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Police Scotland and the City's children's houses. The aim of the MoU is to guide care worker's decisions when incidents arise, and to inform police and care staff actions in dealing with children who:

- Have not returned home when expected from a known location but there are no concerns for welfare (or the level of risk is judged by care staff as tolerable). Using a new 'not at home' category to distinguish between these children and those genuinely missing and at risk of harm, care staff are not obliged to report the young person to police although this would remain under review until the child's safe return.
- Have been involved in low threshold criminal behaviour within the children's houses which could include minor anti-social behaviour, minor vandalism, and minor disorder where no injury was sustained, or the assault was minor. There are some exclusions to the application of the protocol, for instance, if the offence was

considered hate-related, it involved repeat victims or perpetrators, or the perpetrator was a member of staff. The protocol applies only to offences taking place inside of the children's house also, not in public.

As part of the implementation of the programme, officers and care staff underwent joint training to create a shared understanding of the approach. Furthermore, Police Community Liaison Officers were allocated to each house as Single Points of Contact (SPOCs), to visit the houses regularly and review any incidents arising. Care staff in turn were required to record the circumstances of any incidents, provide a rationale for decisions made (e.g., why it was not considered necessary to report the incident), and further actions taken. This would allow police SPOCs to monitor use of the protocol and, if necessary, to make a final assessment on the threshold of criminality. Importantly, care staff were still expected to contact police if concerned for a missing child's welfare, when they would receive a proportionate response (which would vary depending on subsequent police categorisation of the missing child's level of risk into 'high', 'medium' or 'low' risk categories).

The approach taken within the Respect Programme is not unique as multi-agency protocols to encourage partnership working in reducing unnecessary police contact have been established in all four nations of the UK, with Scotland one of the last to consider a national approach. However, it is notable that the status and individual nuances of each countries' protocol varies considerably. For instance, English and Welsh protocols were developed and published by the Governments of each country, whereas the Scottish (i.e., Glasgow) and Northern Ireland protocols have been independently created between key partners. Also, the English and Welsh protocols focus on reducing criminalisation only, whereas the Northern Ireland and Scottish protocols combine policies on missing children and offending in care homes. All of the protocols included other forms of looked-after children besides residential care although again this varied between protocols from foster care only (the Scottish protocol)<sup>1</sup>, to all types of placement (Welsh and Northern Ireland) and one protocol also covered care leavers (English protocol). Furthermore, the English Protocol is described as a 'template' to encourage the development of localised versions of the protocol between local partners which has led to further variation in approaches towards care experienced children and young people within the United Kingdom. The first conclusion of this part of the research is that the scope of each protocol may benefit from review to avoid a postcode lottery across the nation for looked-after children.

### **The findings of prior evaluations**

Preceding the Glasgow pilot of the Respect Programme, different elements of the approach, namely, the method of dealing with missing children and the approach to reducing criminalisation, had been subject to separate pilot studies. An earlier version of the 'missing person protocol', underwent evaluation in three districts (Edinburgh, Dundee, and South Lanarkshire) in 2015-16, followed by evaluation of the 'reducing criminalisation protocol' across Dumfries and Galloway region in 2019-20. Research was undertaken by both Police

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<sup>1</sup> Note, this evaluation of the Respect Programme was commissioned to consider only the impact upon children in residential care, not foster care.

Scotland and by independent researchers to establish the extent to which the approaches met their respective goals, to inform decisions on future roll-out across the country. The findings of evaluations into the 'missing protocol' were largely supportive of implementing the protocol across Scotland (which took place in 2021); the findings from the evaluations of the 'reducing criminalisation protocol' were rather more mixed, prompting the decision to merge the two protocols into the Respect Programme and to undertake a larger pilot across Greater Glasgow.

Findings from the prior evaluations identified problems associated with:

- a) Data collection,
- b) Lack of clarity around the respective roles and responsibilities of care staff and police officers,
- c) difficulty in addressing the needs of a small minority of repeat individuals, and,
- d) a reliance on professional judgement over protocol procedures in governing decision-making.

Shortcomings in data recording by local authorities of offending by children in care were identified repeatedly as a hindrance to developing a holistic picture of the problem, or of determining the impact of the pilots. Inconsistencies were noted in the understanding and application of the protocols between children's house staff, and between care staff and police, for instance in the definition of the 'absent/not at home' category and how it should be used. Tensions were also apparent between police officers and care workers in relation to expectations of their respective roles, for instance the extent to which care workers should proactively try to locate young people prior to calling police, or in determining who and how 'return interviews' should be completed following a young person's arrival back to the children's house. The previous pilots were also plagued by the seemingly intractable problem of many incidents involving the same small number of individuals. This raises questions around the extent to which the approach is meeting the needs of *repeat* missing persons and/or repeat offenders. In addition, care staff's personal knowledge of the young persons, and their subjective assessments of associated risks involved in their disappearance, prompted a preference for exercising professional judgement over protocol procedures in relation to decisions to call the police or report a young person as missing instead of 'not at home'. This in turn sometimes led to tension between police and care staff whose judgements differed on the risk categorisation and police response required.

Nonetheless, past evaluations highlighted some promising practices and implications arising from the new policies and procedures. For instance, there were significant reductions in the number of missing persons incidents reported to police in the period of the pilots, and in reports of assaults; staff and officers appreciated receiving joint training and valued the closer working which emerged; and the regularity of contact between the different agencies, particularly with police Missing Person Coordinators, was viewed very positively. However, reactions about the level of 'informal' police contact with children's houses outside of times of crisis were somewhat mixed. Although most care staff identified advantages of 'informal' visits by police SPOCs, including the opportunity to operationalise their corporate parenting role, form better relationships with the children, and share

strategies with staff for dealing with challenging behaviour, there was also an incongruence between attempting to reduce unnecessary police contact while regularly inviting officers into the houses without genuine cause - something that would never take place in a traditional home setting. Yet, there were unintended benefits arising from the new approaches, as children got to experience a more 'human side' of policing, there was greater information sharing between children's houses, and it was surmised that knowledge of the 'missing protocol' may have encouraged more young people to keep staff informed of their whereabouts in order to avoid police involvement.

### **The conclusions of other relevant literature**

Past academic and 'grey' literature (defined as literature which has not been peer reviewed but, nevertheless, provides useful learning) with relevance to the Respect Programme was also explored as part of the first phase of the evaluation. Specifically, this was to confirm whether a theoretical and research evidence-base existed for the approaches being taken in Glasgow. Largely, the conclusions arising mirrored those formed from the previous evaluations undertaken in Scotland on the 'missing' and 'reducing criminalisation' protocols; that the implementation of multi-agency protocols aimed at reducing unnecessary police contact are plagued by inconsistency in staff understanding and application of the agreed procedures; that a risk-based approach may be an over-simplification of complex situations and may encourage labelling or stereotyping of some children; and routine police contact with children in care leading to greater 'visibility' and, thus, disproportionately more likelihood of being stopped, searched and/or breached for breaking prior bail conditions.

Additional findings from the literature search highlighted problems arising from:

- a) the administration of these policies, including conflicting rules regarding reporting of incidents, for instance, for health and safety or insurance purposes,
- b) the importance of wider contextual issues, such as the ethos and culture within the home,
- c) the disproportionate impact of policies on certain groups of children, for instance, children with cognitive impairments were often referred to the criminal justice system due to a lack of other appropriate support services. Older children, females, and children from some ethnic minorities also had a different experience of care-criminalisation than other children.

The literature review also highlighted important gaps in current research which prevented a comprehensive understanding of the factors leading up to police callouts to children's houses, and the subsequent progression of events leading to criminalisation. While the dangers of introducing police officers into an already volatile situation are clear, a profound understanding of how interactions between children and staff, then between children, staff and police, can lead to disproportionate criminalisation is sadly lacking. The 'inner life' of children's houses, particularly the dynamics surrounding challenging incidents, requires a closer look. Also, research is somewhat silent on the application of alternative approaches to calling the police. While restorative approaches are frequently hailed as promising, where, and how they have been successfully applied is not clear.

## Conclusion and next steps

The findings from this desktop review of the Glasgow Respect Programme, including past evaluations and other relevant literature, imply that further work is needed to support further roll-out of the pilot programme across Scotland. A central question emerging is whether an MoU, protocol or policy can instigate the deep and shared multi-agency learning and partnership working required to prompt the step-change sought by professionals wrestling with disproportionate criminalisation of care-experienced children. While not taking place in isolation, protocols can only meet their objectives if supported by a tangible investment in joint training and peer support opportunities, shared values and ethos which empowers care staff to provide consistent, confident and emotionally warm home environments, and investment in pathways to further support for children who need additional mental health or other support. The evidence suggests it may be appropriate to review the scope of the Scottish protocol, and whether it is genuinely meeting the needs of different groups of children, especially those in foster care (who were not included in the scope of the current evaluation), those with characteristics which may create an intersectional experience (such as girls and those with neurodiversity's), and the individuals who are most frequently the cause of repeat police callouts to children's houses.

The next phase of this evaluation will seek to assess data on missing/not at home children, and the nature and extent of criminal and challenging behaviour within the children's houses (whether reported to the police or not) across an appropriate length of time before and after the implementation of the pilot. This will demonstrate if the programme has been successful in its primary aims to reduce unnecessary police contact, and to reduce the risk of subsequent criminalisation. This will be followed by a third phase of research which will seek to find out more about the 'inner life' of children's houses, by seeking the perspectives of all those involved (police, care staff, and young residents of children's houses) about police callouts and police contact, what tangible impacts the change in strategy has had, and whether further improvements could be made. Importantly, this phase of the research focusses on the voices of young care-experienced people, which are so often lacking in research of this kind. The findings of phases two and three will be reported separately in Autumn 2023 and Spring 2025, respectively. It is also the intention to follow-up the final report with a knowledge exchange event with key stakeholders in an event in Glasgow to explore further developments and roll-out of the Respect Programme beyond the City of Glasgow. This is expected to take place around May 2025.

For further information about the Respect Programme evaluation, please contact Dr Shona Morrison, Lecturer in Policing at the Open University, at [shona.morrison@open.ac.uk](mailto:shona.morrison@open.ac.uk)