



# VOICES

## Thank you

Includem wants to thank you for participating in and shaping our recent research. Your courage and honesty about experiences of poverty and what does and doesn't work in services will help us continue to improve, and to influence change in Scotland more widely.

Your views included a number of themes, from experiences of stigma and the feelings of shame; facing complex challenges, including the daily struggles with poverty, mental health and neurodiversity; and finding value in relationships based in trust and humour. Families are clear about what helps and hinders, and includem are committed to improving our practices to ensure we support securing a better life. We hope this prompts more conversations and activity about how we can end poverty for all, address the daily struggles of just getting by, and ensure the gap in wellbeing for those experiencing poverty no longer exists.

Below, we've set out a summary of the key findings, quotes and our recommendations. There was a wide range of valuable insights from families, which have been included in the full report (available [here](#)) that has been shared with government ministers and organisations across children, young people and family services to support change to #KeepthePromise.

## Voices of Families: Key Findings



### Peer researchers with lived experience

This research heard from 23 parents & carers and 5 children & young people, with interviews **co-designed & conducted by peer researchers previously supported by includem** - ensuring lived experience sat at the heart of the approach. This was supported with a review of the literature on poverty, families, and child welfare services.

### Poverty & stigma

With **poverty** already set to get worse after more than a decade of austerity, the associated **shame and stigma** can cause considerable under reporting. All those who were interviewed were working, in some cases with multiple jobs and over 35 hours per week. There was a reluctance to ask for help, especially due to feeling judged when they do.

*"I sometimes struggle but I just get on with it...My kids would never go without, I would, but not them. Sometimes I only eat one meal a day. I did contact the food bank. I felt in there they were judging me. I wouldn't go back."*

All participants spoke about having to be very careful with how and where they spent their money - paying for school clothing or new footwear as children grew was seen as almost unmanageable. Having choices in terms of food, toiletries and access to activities was severely restricted.

## The complexity of challenges & gaps in provision

The recent cuts to support services has had significant consequences for children, young people & families.

The circumstances faced by families are often complex, including experiences of domestic abuse, past trauma, the challenges of neurodiversity, substance abuse and online exploitation. Finding the 'right' support can be overwhelming – including significant gaps in support.

*“There are so many services offering a bit of this and that but nothing for kids on the spectrum with anger issues. You are trying to grapple with things and then you have far too many people involved. It is very exhausting...There were no mental health beds for someone their age, no drug residential services for those under 18. There are no service that deals with Asperger's, drug addiction and mental health issues.”*

Feeling judged was a frequently cited concern when trying to access support – including not being believed despite reporting problems to services and asking for help. Families also reported not seeing their social worker enough, struggling to get appointments with CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) and feeling concerned about what was being written in reports about them.

Following these challenges, families felt that they had not had enough support from services - with **help only arriving at crisis point**.

## What Families Value: Fundamentals



Includem's support was highly valued by families, with a striking emphasis on the relationships they developed with includem workers. In developing these relationships with families, our workers were recognised for their skills in being able to navigate support to families whilst ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and young people.

Some key values families identified from relationships with includem workers included **listening, trust, authenticity, commitment, humour, fun and flexibility**.

*“We are being listened to as granny and mum. We are entitled to say what is happening.”*

Some families recognised that includem workers were able to spend more time to support them than other services.

*“I could trust her. I was never rushed. They will never say – I need to go now. They have that freedom to do that. That is so useful.”*

Many families welcomed not feeling judged by includem workers, which helped to build trust with both children and adults.

*“...I think it is because they are so down to earth and there to help you, they do not judge you. The outcome has been good for Chris.”*

Closely linked to having trust was authenticity. Families frequently mentioned the importance of

their workers being ‘down to earth’ or ‘genuinely caring.’

*“He really liked her. She is a normal down to earth woman who had lived experience similar to mine. Her heart was in the job.”*

Persistence of workers, including during the restrictions of lockdown, was valued in helping to build relationships and improve outcomes.

*“I think that was when that relationship developed - that consistency that they did turn up even if it was only 20 minutes walking.”*

*“...they helped him in different ways. He was on the hard shoulder of the motorway and he spoke to Eve – she has a way of speaking to him – there is trust there.”*

Consistency was not always available however, due to workers leaving. Concern was also expressed about workers who were newer in post, with lack of experience contributing to engagements that were felt to be less helpful.

Key elements to developing these relationships was building from the needs and interests of children and young people. Several parents used the word ‘fun’ when describing how includem worked with their child and/or them, with some identifying the role of humour or ‘banter’ in the relationships.

Additionally, rather than having a fixed way of working, there was a sense that includem workers work with families in responsive & flexible ways.

## Recording & relationship-based practice



There were several occasions families highlighted feelings of suspicion about what was being recorded or how this came in the way of good relationships with services. Some noted a sense that professional perspectives dominate in records, so the voice of families is muted by comparison:

*“I think social workers take a situation and then write reports and they get listened to; the public aren’t given access to express themselves proper.”*

## What Families Value: From includem

Within the services provided by includem, several important features were highlighted.

**Social activities with children and young people:** Parents often noted includem’s practice of creating a separate space with the child or young person to build trust - by taking them on trips, activities or working online/outside during the pandemic. Activities were usually tailored to the interests of the child to enable the development of person centred and hopeful relationships.

*“Recently they said that they are taking me to a game. It has to be for a big reward so I would need to stay out of trouble for a good while.” (young person)*

One parent noted that care is required to ensure that activities are not perceived as rewarding challenging behaviour but is focused on developing trusting relationships.

**Whole family support:** Families appreciated that includem works with the whole family, linking to positive outcomes and being able to open up and be supported.

*“They understand in a different way and they know us all so well. She asked last week are you ok, you don’t look yourself. And that made me think, I am sad. I don’t feel myself. It made me think this is a struggle. We were always resistant to respite... And it was a kind way, it felt as if... Maybe I do need to say yes to the respite. It felt – because it’s natural and they know us – it wasn’t a criticism or we could do better...in all the years we have been involved - I can’t remember anyone saying are you ok.”*

**Advocacy:** Includem workers role in advocacy was highly valued, in both understanding their perspective and helping families navigate between different agencies and services - including social work, housing, education and CAMHS.

*“Any of these meetings – they are going to listen to social work first – and I say to [him] you are coming too – for my side – he is not biased towards me but he knows the story from our point of view.”*

**Small pockets of financial support:** Financial support to families resulted in the purchase of small items that made a significant impact on physical and mental wellbeing - ranging from families getting small items, such as mobile phones, to larger items such as a new bed or oven.

For example, one young person spoke about includem getting them football boots, which meant they were no longer on the streets, mixing with older people and misusing substances, but instead trained and played for their local team.

**24h access to support:** Access to responsive / 24-hour phone support can be a real lifeline for many families.

*“...just knowing I could pick it up at any moment. It really relaxed me. I wasn’t so anxious... Number one is the Helpline. You need to keep the Helpline.....It brought me so much reassurance and peace of mind.”*

## What Families Value: Outcomes & Impact

Children and young people described includem’s support as having a significant impact for them. They described themselves as being calmer and making choices to improve their lives - and future - in all areas – socially, their health and wellbeing and in their education.

*“Mark has calmed down. He has a voice now and is expressing his own opinions. He is making his own choices. He wants to live a normal life now, no appointments. He wants to be no different to his brothers.”*

Through supporting children and young people to develop consequential thinking skills, includem contributed to positive choices being made.

*“It is better but I think it is more about him deciding not to take drugs. Ciara was great because she was out the back talking to him, and I have no doubt she had mentioned his drug use. I know they had a great relationship. I think she may have played a part in it. I think him stopping drugs, 80% is down to him making that decision.”*

*“I get on well at school now... I would like to be a police officer maybe when I am older.” (young person)*

*“She basically stopped him from going to jail. I think the intervention was done at the right time.”*

All felt that their family relationships had strengthened. Outcomes were beneficial for the whole family, supporting the wellbeing of parents/carers, improving family relationships and helping break

the cycle of generational trauma.

*“The whole house was ready to break in half – we all carry trauma – me through domestic violence and childhood trauma and the boys from their dad and then Ava’s dad – we were all hurting and hating...I don’t want my children to grow up and be victims like I was. I want them to be positive and head strong. I had to change for my children to change, if I speak about what went on – I have to break the cycle.”*

## What Families Value: Moving On

In moving on from services, views were mixed on how it had ended or would be approached.

*“They had seen that he was more settled. They tried dropping it down a couple of days, but from there I think it was good for him to move on...I was happy for it to end...They said that if we needed anything and always could call, so it was there for him.”*

For improvements, some families suggested the need for greater consistency of workers and greater clarity & communication on the timelines for the end of services.

*“...I was ok with it. It just sort of happened that it ended. I would prefer to have a worker for longer. They had a conversation about it ending and I said it was alright but I do want them back. Since includem has ended I feel like I am getting in trouble a lot more.” (young person)*

## What else would they like to see change?

Almost all families noted the cuts to services in their local area and wanted to see more accessible services and activities available for children and young people locally to feel safer.

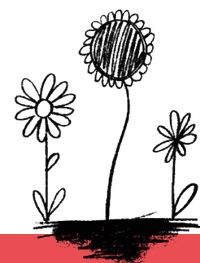
*“I’d make sure there was something for all kids to do – there is nothing here – no clubs for them. And I’d put in more cameras and get some of the greenery cut back because it’s creepy at night. We need more cameras to stop muggings in this kind of area. There are a lot of lanes and side streets – open that up. When the dark nights come in you want to be safe.”*

One parent/carers explained that the criteria for cutting off access free school meals and uniforms needed to be reviewed to take more account of the cost of living.

*“I could have cried when I couldn’t get access to the uniforms...I think they should look at how much people are actually earning and give more access to the uniforms and free school meals.”*

Another felt that the acceptance in society of food banks and low-income families having to struggle daily needed to be challenged.

*“Just to increase the money for low paid families and to do away with food banks. It’s terrible to see families struggling.... I do wish that we could stop people struggling. It’s heart-breaking to see. People going to the bother of working and they still have to choose whether to eat or pay bills.”*





## Recommendations

Includem are committed to hearing and acting on the voices of the children, young people and families who have contributed to this report. Includem recognise that the status quo needs to change for families, and their voice and experience have shaped the following four interdependent recommendations.

### **1. Children, young people and family support services must take into account and mitigate the wider economic and social factors impacting wellbeing**

Entrenched poverty and destitution should not be the shame of under supported families, particularly in light of the low wages experienced by the working poor, cuts to support and inequality in local services & safety.

Poverty puts pressure on families, severely impacting both physical and mental wellbeing of children, young people and families; and forming a barrier to access their human rights.

Multiple challenges of adversity must be recognised in practice to address underlying barriers to achieve A Better Life.

### **2. Services should be built on relationship-based practice & working with the whole family – where and when they need it.**

Particularly considering experiences of stigma & shame, building trust through relationship-based practice is critical for children, young people and families - in order to tailor support according to their unique challenges, strengths, interests and hopes. Families need time, persistence and reliability to develop trust and to make changes. This needs to be in their time.

Clearer communication is an essential feature to this. In reporting, greater clarity is needed about what information is shared with other agencies and ensuring families' experiences are reflected. In moving on, clarity is needed on timelines, to prepare for these changes and could include a period of review or reduction. Continued access to support at times of crises, including being available 24/7, can provide peace of mind in these transitions.

### **3. Addressing gaps in service provisions and greater partnership working is necessary to support families overcome complex challenges.**

Families face complex circumstances, including daily struggles with living in poverty & stigmatisation, experiences of domestic abuse, past trauma, challenges of neurodiversity, substance abuse and online exploitation. There are considerable gaps in services for children and young people, particularly in early intervention, and the current support from social work and CAMHS is too limited.

Children, young people and family support services in areas such as mental health, neurodiversity and substance misuse and greater partnership working across agencies could help address these challenges as they emerge and prevent families reaching crisis point.

Additionally, families must be able to self-identify as needing support, and be believed & supported to access responsive services. This could provide a number of benefits, including safeguarding family wellbeing and avoiding more costly interventions down the line.

#### **4. Investment in & support of the workforce are critical to enable them to undertake this highly valuable and skilled work.**

Parents/carers' recognition of understaffing in statutory services does not mitigate negative experiences of feeling under supported, judged and unheard. When expressing concerns about wider services, families talked about the concept of poverty of time – time with workers, to build relationships of trust or to make the changes services expect based on risk rather than needs.

To build relationships with children and families in a meaningful way, there is a need for investment in the workforce, the availability of help according to need, and sufficient time to allow for flexibility and trusting relationships. Staff must be supported in this highly skilled work to ensure retention and recruitment of talent, and rebuilding families' trust in services.

To continue its work to keep the promise, includem will work to ensure workforce participation in considering how to best support greater consistency of workers, and that new staff feel fully supported.

