

Strengthening the Voices of Young People Project

Fife – Student Voices

December 2017





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1 Background

- 1.1 The Strengthening the Voices of Young People Project was a 12-month joint initiative between the Scottish Health Council and Includem. The Scottish Health Council works in a variety of ways to improve the involvement of people and communities in health and social care services in Scotland. Includem is a specialist Scottish charity which supports vulnerable young people who are often excluded from mainstream services.
- 1.2 The aims of the project were to use the learning from four engagement test sites where we:
- provided an opportunity for young people to share what mattered to them when using and accessing health and social care services
 - created an environment for support staff, health and social care practitioners and organisations to effectively engage with young people in a meaningful way, and
 - explored how the voices of young people could be used to improve services in partnership with health and social care service providers.
- 1.3 The four test sites were in:
- Fife, which focussed on how to improve physical and emotional support services for students at St Andrews University
 - Highland, where we engaged with secondary school students and focussed on mental health and sexual health services
 - Forth Valley, where we engaged with looked after children to gather their views on health and wellbeing needs and support services, and
 - Greater Glasgow & Clyde, where we worked with Includem to gather views on transitional support services for young people.
- 1.4 The Scottish Health Council is a key delivery partner for Our Voice, which is a framework that operates at three levels (individual, local and national) and aims to strengthen public involvement so that people's views are listened to so they improve health and social care services. The Strengthening Voices of Young People Project fits with the aspirations of Our Voice.
- 1.5 This report describes the work we did for the Fife test site at St Andrews University.

2 The Approach

- 2.1 St Andrews University is located in Fife and has a student population of approximately 7,800. This test site focussed on gathering views on how to improve physical and emotional support services to University students. The Scottish Health Council worked in partnership with the University's Student Services team which, through an Advice and Support Centre located on the University Campus, offers a 24 hour 'first port of call' service for undergraduate and postgraduate students.
- 2.2 Through earlier work with the Scottish Health Council's Fife office, we were aware that the University was committed to improving embedding student views more firmly in the design of services which they used and so this seemed like a good test site.
- 2.3 In conjunction with Student Services, the Scottish Health Council organised four engagement events aimed at both students and University support staff. It involved careful and structured planning to ensure that we appreciated the background and context of 'student life' at the University. Moreover, it was important that we ensured that the engagement took place in a comfortable and safe environment.
- 2.4 In total we engaged with 31 people which comprised 17 students, 11 Student Support Wardens and three Student Services Managers. Participants included first year students, recent graduates, overseas students and University staff. The sessions were open to all University students to take part.
- 2.5 This test site was all about hearing about the experiences of students and what was important to them in relation to a support service. We also wanted their views and experiences of using health and social care services including their suggestions on ways that they could contribute to making a positive impact on improving both services and their own health and wellbeing. It was agreed that a report of the feedback gathered and any learning from the events would be published by the Scottish Health Council.

3 Key Principles for Planning the Engagement

3.1 **Agree outcomes.** From the outset, we agreed jointly with the University a set of outcomes which aimed to ensure that its students:

- felt that their views were being heard and listened to
- were motivated and had increased confidence to engage with Student Services and other health and social care services
- had an increased awareness of what affected their health and social well-being as well as their peer group
- improved their knowledge of the support services available to them both on and off the University campus
- developed their confidence about accessing services when needed, and
- increased their capacity for self reflection, improved self management and coping strategies as a result of an increased awareness and access to support services.

3.2 **Facilitation style and environment.** In terms of the format of the events, it was important that we adopted a facilitation style and moreover a safe environment which encouraged open conversations for those taking part. We also emphasised the importance of listening to others and asked participants to pause from time to time to reflect on each other's stories. It was also important that the engagement was seen as a means of gathering views on what participants felt comfortable about sharing with us and that no pressure was put on them to discuss issues that they preferred not to share. All this was done in the context of asking participants:

- what they felt worked well with current support services
- what successes or challenges had they experienced when working with support services
- what suggestions they had for how organisations could work more closely with them as partners to improve services and accessibility.

3.3 **Involvement from the start.** It was an important part of the planning process that we spoke with Student Services staff and the Senior Warden separately. By doing this we were able to get a feel for how students were currently supported. We also discussed our technique for the engagement and explored any associated challenges – we were keen to ensure that the structure of the

events lent themselves to discussing topics in a sensitive and open way that they were comfortable to participants and meaningful for staff and students.

3.4 **Appropriate engagement tools.** The four engagement tools we used to generate discussion and feedback at the events were: 'The Road Map Exercise', Emotional Touchpoints, What Matters to You and Attitudes & Assumptions, and Building Better Relationships. We used these tools based on the Scottish Health Council's experience of providing workshops on Chest Heart & Stroke Scotlands' Voices Scotland programme which builds the capacity of people to be involved by providing them with knowledge, skills and confidence to share their views and offer feedback. The approaches, which worked well in practice, are described in more detail below.

The Road Map Exercise is a simple visualisation exercise which encourages people to self reflect and explore their lives; what parts help make them healthy and happy, what parts cause them stress and to explore what helps them recover from difficulties they face. As a group they then discuss what can help people to achieve better balance in their lives, the importance of this and what helps people work towards better health and wellbeing.

Emotional Touch Points, Listen to Our Stories is a visual tool that empowers people to explore the emotions they are feeling around a situation or experience of using a service. This is accomplished by picking two cards from a menu of emotions, one positive and one negative, giving people a chance to share how situations and experiences of services and professionals made them feel.

What Matters to You? What can services do better? This section focuses on how to improve access and experience of services by exploring what matters to young people. This is achieved by looking at current pathways and structures of services they use, drawing on their experiences of using them and exploring through conversations what they see as working well and what could be done better.

Attitudes & Assumptions, building better Relationships is an exercise to help people explore how they would like to build better relationships with people and professionals involved in their lives. This is accomplished by exploring different attitudes and assumptions that people can have towards each other with a view to finding shared understanding and encouraging more open and honest communication.

3.5 **Plan for the feedback.** The Scottish Health Council built into the planning process some time to fully consider what topics it would use as a basis for the discussions. This was to ensure that the engagement remained focussed, generated good feedback and felt meaningful to participants. The basis of the discussions centred on three key topics which were:

- **what students found most helpful or unhelpful when trying to access support services** – we explored the University, NHS and Students Association’s role in overcoming barriers to accessing support services
- **what issues matter to students most while studying at St Andrews University and what affected their health, both positively and less so** – we explored how students wanted this to happen and also gathered staff perspectives
- **what the University’s Student Support Services could do to help encourage more students to use its services and become involved in their ongoing improvement** – we explored student perspectives on what helps or is a challenge currently with being involved or the support being offered.

3.6 **Provide an opportunity for additional engagement.** We also created the opportunity for students to get in touch with us following each event so that they could offer feedback on a one-to-one basis. Several took up this invitation and we also heard from other students who had not been part of the events but wanted to give us some feedback about their experience of using student support services.

4 Feedback Received

The feedback we received from the events is summarised below under broad themes.

4.1 Mental health and physical wellbeing

There were a number of recurring themes around mental health and physical wellbeing which participants raised such as the following.

- The importance of meaningful and positive relationships with peers, family members and the University's teaching and support staff.
- The challenges with not having time to 'switch off' from studying and academic pressures. Some students said though that they sometimes felt guilty taking time out to engage in pursuits which were not directly related to their studies or career pathway.
- How vital it was to be able to rest, catch up on sleep or just "escape from University life for a while".
- The importance of learning how to cope with any pressure around the need to succeed at University. Some students said that they felt under pressure to "excel" both in relation to academic studies and their future careers.
- How the pressure and worry about educational success often spilled into social lives which affected students' ability to build meaningful and long-lasting relationships.
- The feeling that other people did not fully appreciate students' anxiety (for example about the quality of their grades) and that they were being in some way judged by that.

When it came to coping with difficult situations, students said that they used a variety of mechanisms to help reduce anxiety and stress:

“Switching off, without feeling guilty is very hard but having some time away from the stresses of student life has been the most valuable thing that I try to do. It really helps me recover from difficult and stressful situations.”

“Being able to just talk with family and friends plays an important role in keeping me well. Having people that I trust who listen to me when I am stressed means that I am able to refocus my energies and continue my academic work during and following periods of stress.”

“I get a lot of support from my girlfriend which is great but I also tap into spiritual support from the local Minister who gives me comfort and helps build my inner strength.”

4.2 **Mental health – interaction with services**

There was a clear consensus from students that there needed to be a greater awareness about mental health support needs and more emphasis placed on preventative services. Students felt that they needed to have more access to early intervention services such as counselling or someone to speak to and that would make such a difference to their mental wellbeing. One student said:

“We need more mental health awareness training for both students and staff for the betterment of both.”

Students also said that some caution was needed to make sure that academic staff and students were not put under excessive pressure to be the key (and only) source of emotional support and also they needed to have the knowledge on how to deal with potentially complex and intimidating issues.

“I don’t think we want students or our lecturers to think it’s their sole responsibility to fix people with very difficult emotional or stress issues; but I do recognise that there is a definite need for greater awareness of mental wellbeing and helping people to get support early enough, before a big crisis happens to them. It’s right for the University to encourage people to have better self awareness of how to cope with all the pressures of being a student at St Andrews and to know where and who to turn to when you or a friend needs help most.”

4.3 Encouraging mental well being

Most students agreed that they would benefit from more formal and structured training on how to support each other to access help and assistance for their mental health needs. Some suggested for example training on suicide prevention such as ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) or SafeTALK. These are two separate but complimentary programs which provide skills on how to: (a) be alert and aware of suicide and (b) intervene with someone who is having thoughts of suicide, working with them to help them feel less overwhelmed and suicidal.

Students also felt that Mental Health First Aid Training should be offered not only to University staff involved with supporting students but on a wider, voluntary basis to students. One student who had experience of offering emotional support to fellow students on the University’s Nightline Support Service said:

“ We should make it very clear to other students that there is no expectation to become a counsellor or mental health support worker, but that we can all have improved knowledge of the different support routes on campus to help students early on and reduce the chances of serious complications people might suffer if left isolated and unsupported.”

4.4 **Visibility of support and awareness of mental well being**

One overseas student who described some of the challenges of living away from family and friends, suggested that it would be helpful to have an identifiable set of places for students to turn to for support across the University campus and the Halls of Residence where most people meet their friends and said:

“Having a range of ways for students to touch base and learn about what help is available across campus would help normalise seeking help and support. I’d like to see anonymous information access points across the University offering basic advice and support information, alongside the promotion of safe emotional touchpoint spaces across campus for confidential face-to-face contact, triage and signposting on issues that affect students.”

The suggestion of more centralised and recognisable help points, support offices or medical centres at various locations around the campus was thought to be a valuable step toward which students felt would lead to them feeling more comfortable about asking for help when they needed it.

Several students and support staff commented on how important it was not to judge people when challenging any stigma around mental health. They also mentioned the benefits of seeking help early. Specifically referred to in the discussion was the programme run by the Scottish Association of Mental Health (SAMH) which promoted the message, through it’s See Me Campaign, that “It’s okay not to feel okay”. Students agreed that sending out positive messages such as this would have a beneficial impact on the willingness of both students and staff to seek help and access University services or local health services.

Students also recognised and supported the idea of having some basic mental health awareness training before they started University. They described how it felt like a huge jump to go from for example being a secondary school pupil to a University student and that this was sometimes even more challenging when individuals were away from home (and sometimes overseas).

“You don’t realise how great the pressures are going to be when you first arrive on campus. Then you are faced with having to rise to the challenges of not knowing anybody, living in a new country, not having your family around to support you and feeling lonely and isolated all at the same time. Then there are the intense pressures to succeed academically.”

4.5 Supporting the work of University Wardens

Within each of the University's halls of residence there is a Warden and a team of Assistant Wardens which provide out of hours contact, support and links to day time services to ensure that help is available for its student population 24 hours.

They are a first point of contact if a health crisis occurs, if a student is in distress or is experiencing difficulties and their role is one of a mentor and adviser.

Students shared their own and others' positive experiences of the warden team and offered personal stories about the support they had been offered in dealing with overnight medical or emotional emergencies. They also acknowledged the difficulties that wardens faced when trying to get help and support for students, particularly when dealing with medical emergencies out of hours or when access was limited. Some wardens felt that there was a need (and opportunity) to improve the services they provided but to do that there needed to be a more robust and formal link with local and national health and social care providers.

“I've seen people ending up in hospital without anyone from the University knowing and having to find their way home in the early hours.”

“It would help that if I phoned A&E about a student, that they knew what a warden was and what my role in supporting students is.”

There was some consensus about the need to improve communications and develop a mutual understanding between wardens and local health service providers. It was agreed that this would make a big difference in ensuring that service providers and University staff were better equipped to support students with their health needs. The introduction of regular meetings between University wardens and local health service providers was seen as a good, first step forward in improving communications and dialogue.

In support of the role of the wardens, students made the following suggestions to assist them in their role:

- having access to a dedicated Student Crisis Management Centre and access to a 24-hour emergency medical service in St Andrews during term time

- develop better relationships and partnership working between the University, the wardens and local police service to combat and manage antisocial behaviour, which can negatively impact on student safety both on and off campus
- increase opportunities to build meaningful relationships between students and wardens to encourage open and honest discussions to help combat a student feeling of isolation, and
- improve access to healthcare education, explanations of what students can expect in terms of healthcare (and any costs) and their rights and responsibilities as patients.

4.6 Supporting the work of the University's Student Support Services

There are a number of ways in which the University's Student Support Service helps students; essentially it acts as a first port of call for both undergraduate and postgraduate students to reflect back, suggest options, create support strategies and open doors to other services.

There was acknowledgement amongst everyone who took part in the events of the real value of the Student Support Service and they were in favour of it having an increased and more visible presence across the University campus.

While students said they appreciated the help offered by the Service (mentioned mostly was financial, emotional and medical support) they also acknowledged that there was sometimes barriers to accessing it. Students also felt that waiting times for appointments could be improved and so could availability of the service when needed.

“It would be good if student services could always give you an appointment. If you come in for help you shouldn't leave without a follow-up appointment for that help.”

Some suggested the possibility of a triage system so at least students would be seen albeit for a short time to get some basic advice and then they could be directed to further assistance if needed.

“Knowing I was going to be ok and there was light at the end of the tunnel would have made all the difference.”

Some students said they often felt anxious about saying to Student Services that they had a problem as they felt it may adversely impact on their future

career prospects. This seemed to be more common for doctoral and post-doctoral students who mentioned that they would feel anxious about their supervisors negatively judging them. All agreed that creating a positive culture about seeking emotional wellbeing support at all levels across the University should be seen as a key priority moving forward.

4.7 **Improving access to support**

There was some discussion about how students would like to access support services as well as common themes such as the importance of effectively challenging stigma and asking for help when needed and early. One approach students favoured for tackling stigma was to raise awareness across other University activities such as the Student Union, various University Societies and associated charitable organisations.

They also stressed the importance of developing and designing support services with students as partners and from the outset.

“Counselling access limited to four sessions due to demand – some students need ongoing support. More workshops and staff awareness about mental health.”

Students mentioned that National Awareness Weeks or Days, which highlighted specific health topics were useful and could be used by the University to create more permanent and lasting awareness on certain issues.

“People can internalise stigma around lots of issues, so building up people’s confidence to open up about what is affecting them is vital.”

Whilst some who were more involved in the Student Union could see the beginning of better links between the Union and the wider University through new initiatives such as a Students' Representative Council's Wellbeing Subcommittee, it was still felt that a more concerted effort was needed to drive improvement.

4.8 **Supporting the work of the Student Union**

The Student Union was seen as the main hub for student life on the University campus. Students discussed its role in their health and wellbeing and recognised that whilst it could not be not be fully representative of everyone, all students would be affected by it or involved with the Union in some way.

Many students felt it had a friendlier and less intimidating presence when compared to Student Services and was not as daunting a place to visit – this was partly attributed to the Union’s venue which was located at the heart of University’s social scene.

Students felt, however, that there should be more outreach sessions on a wide range of subjects for people needing help and that there was potential for support to be delivered in partnership with the Student Union and in other neutral locations across the University campus. Examples included Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender support, Mental Health Crisis Services and Sexual Health Services and drop in arrangements.

5 Evaluation of the Test Site Approach and Engagement Approaches

5.1 A key aim of this project was to assess students' perceptions of how service providers (University and health) listened to and used their feedback and views and how important it was that they were asked about their support needs or services they access. To learn how they felt, the Scottish Health Council used an evaluation indicator tool (based on an approach used by Evaluation Support Scotland) which participants completed both before and after attending the engagement events. The questions we asked them were:

- how well do you understand what it means to be healthy and well?
- how confident do you feel in being able to ask for help from services?
- how important is it that decision makers explain why something has or hasn't changed?
- how seriously do you think your views are taken and that your voice makes a difference?
- how confident do you feel about sharing your views and getting your point across?, and
- how important is it to you that people making decisions listen to you?

The evaluation illustrated that there was a general increase in all areas and a rise in how confident students felt in asking for support and how valued they felt their views were. See appendix A for more details.

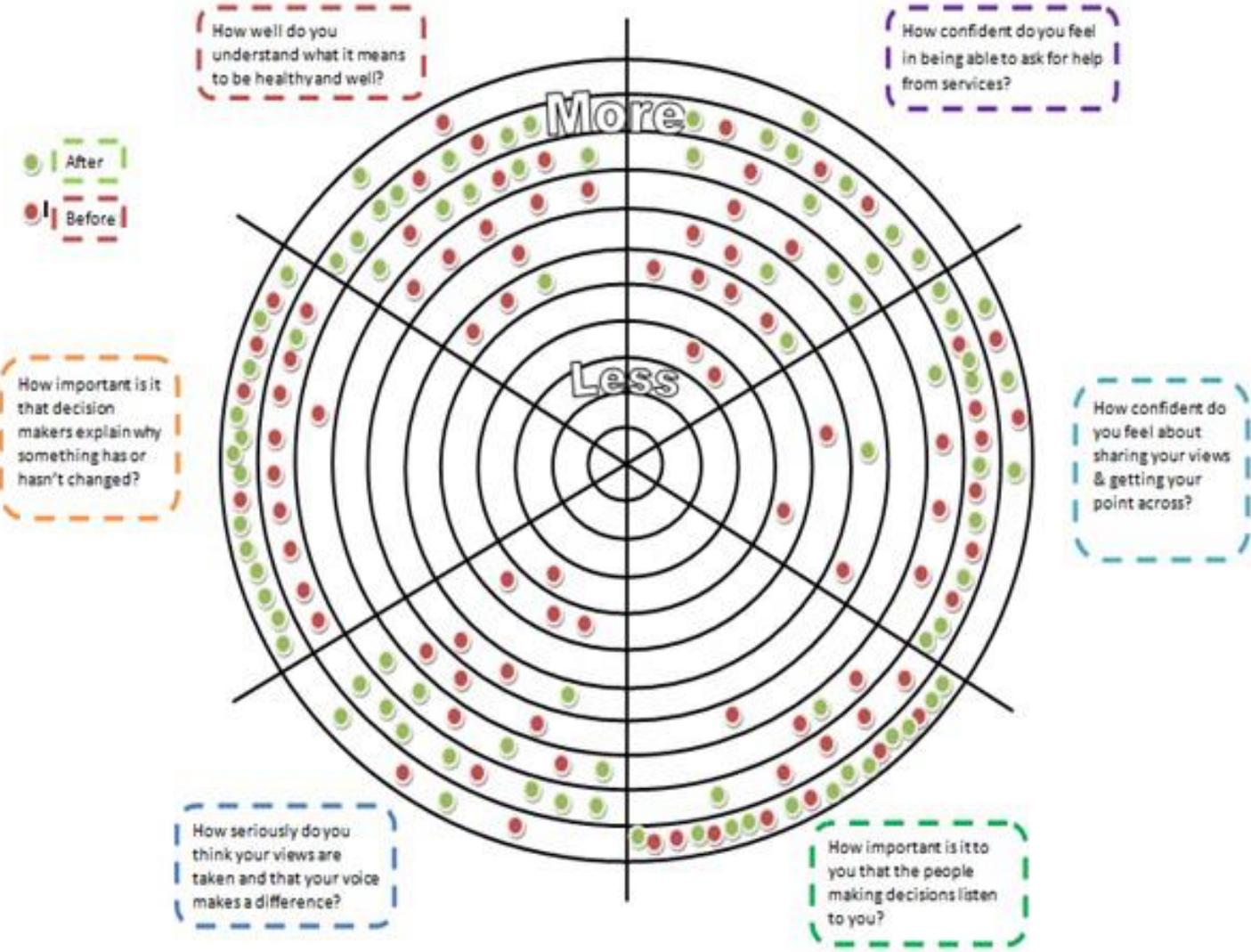
5.2 At this test site, the Scottish Health Council used a range of engagement approaches which are outlined in section 3.4. Our experience showed that these worked well in practice and lent themselves to gathering the views of participants. In section 3, we also describe some key principles around agreeing outcomes and ensuring the correct environment for discussions to take place; this was key to this particular project. Based on our experience, we would advocate using similar principles to other engagement activities.

5.3 Details about the Evaluation Indicator Tool approach and the four engagement methods used at this test site can be found on the [Scottish Health Council Website](#). They will also be incorporated into the [Scottish Health Council's Participation Toolkit](#) at the next revision.

6 Next Steps and Acknowledgements

This report will be shared with St Andrews University and everyone who participated in this test site. The Scottish Health Council would like to thank all the participants who shared their views and in particular the students and University staff who supported the project. We look forward to hearing about how the views and suggestions contained in this report have been used to improve access to health and support services to the student population in St Andrews.

Appendix – Evaluation Indicator Tool & Results



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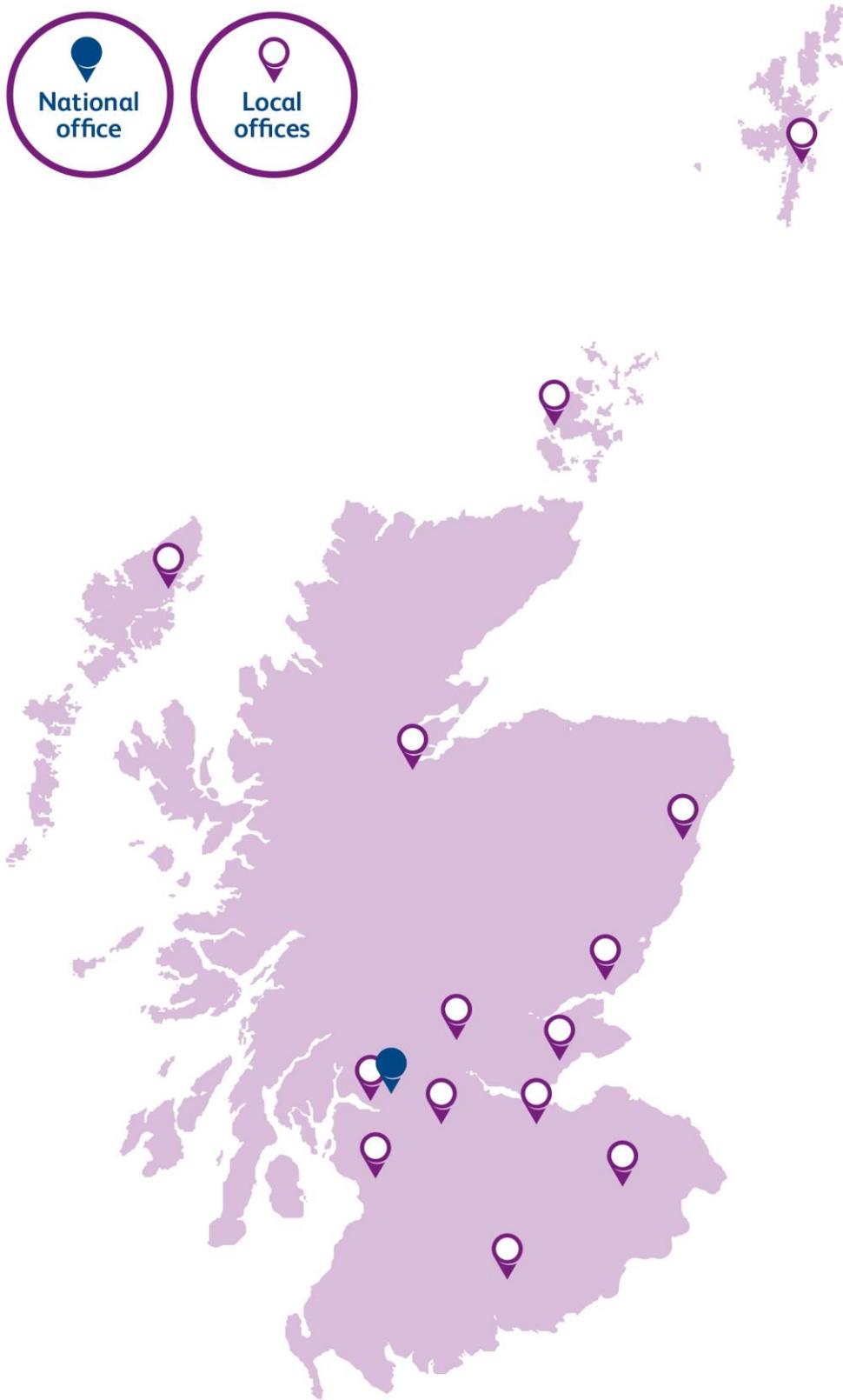
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