

Social Care and Health

Go On Make a Change



investing in children



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Executive Summary

In this report the feedback from agenda days and Investing In Children Membership with Durham Social Care and Health teams are brought together, looking at 5 crosscutting areas:

- Social Workers
- Looked After Reviews
- Activities
- Foster Carers
- Residential Homes

The report analyses feedback from young people and makes recommendations for Social Care and Health teams to promote the ongoing participation of children and young people in dialogue about service development.

Introduction

The Listening to Children Strategy report was presented to a meeting held between Maria Brannen (Children's Rights Officer) and Gail Hopper (Acting Head of Children's Services) in 2004.

It was decided that Maria would ask young people from the Listening to Children Strategy Reference Group to collate information from existing membership files and from agenda days into a report. This report would assist the Children's Services Management Team (CSMT) in drawing up an action plan that would hopefully enable change, leading to service improvements within health and social care.

The five main areas highlighted within this report are:

- **Social Workers**
This concerns visits from Social Workers. It highlights issues such as reliability, attitude, what is done within the visits and actual length of visits.
- **Looked After Reviews**
Including what young people think should happen before reviews, who attends, how they affect the young people, and whether they want to go to a review or have an advocate.
- **Activities**
Young people's views on activities provided by Social Workers and some recommendations for change.
- **Foster Carers**
Young peoples opinions on fosters carers, attitude, treatment, quality of care and also foster carers reviews - should they have more input?
- **Residential Homes**
This is about basic quality of living, food, exercise, privacy and contact with family and friends.

Social Workers

Feedback from the young people participating in agenda days highlight that young people feel Social Workers are not always on time and that Social Workers do not spend enough time with the young people. They do not take time to build a relationship with the young people and some young people felt that Social Workers talk differently to them when they visit. Young people felt that the Social Workers constantly repeat what they are saying and often don't make sense. "They repeat themselves too much".

Social Workers are too "old" to relate to young people and this makes the young people feel intimidated and uncomfortable. This could form barriers in communication between the young people and Social Workers. "They are too-fossilized if they were younger they would understand what its like to be me".

Social Workers are often patronising towards the young people and talk down to the young people " they talk down to you make you feel little, its patronising". The social workers seem "stuck up" and "act posh" and that gives young people the impression that Social Workers are better than they are. " Some are posh, stuck up and look down on you and are not down to earth".

Social Workers often come to a young person's home for visits; they sometimes take them out to McDonalds (but not often). Sometimes the young people want to talk away from their home because if a young person has a problem, it could be with their parents or foster carers and they would prefer to talk privately " they mostly come to my house I would prefer to go out somewhere"

Social Workers aren't seeing the young people enough. The young people want to see their Social Workers more and for them to acknowledge that when they visit they can sometimes make situations for the young people worse than it was originally "you don't get to see your social worker enough" .The Social Workers are changed too much for the young peoples liking and they would like to keep the same Social Worker so they can build up a relationship and develop trust " they change your social worker too often"

Young people would like to know more about Social Workers and their role. This would help the young people to understand why a Social Worker sometimes breaks promises or generally help with "getting to know" the Social Worker who is trying to provide help and a support for them.

The young people asked felt their contribution would be valuable in the recruitment; training and appraisal of social workers and social care staff. This would not only benefit social care and health but may help children and young people understand the role and responsibilities of a social worker.

Looked After Reviews

Here are some of the views that the young people at the agenda day's expressed;

The young people felt that if an advocate was present at all looked after reviews they would be able to rely on someone to speak up if they do not feel comfortable talking about certain things. They also stressed that the little booklets that they receive before their looked after review meetings are not big enough. They feel that they would prefer it if the booklets contained more spaces for them to write in (rather than the tick box) and then they would be listened to more if they can explain their answers. The young people feel that there are too many meetings before the actual looked after review meeting. Some young people wanted to chair their own Looked after review so that they feel in control.

One young person actually quoted "what is the point of a looked after review meeting if when you go to them you do not get listened to, they just sit there and talk about you as if you are not there". Of course It should be optional if you go or not, but the young people recognised that it is for your benefit at the end of the day. Some of the young people expressed that they do not like the Independent Reviewing Officer that is assigned to them, that their fostering officer never phones them, or in some cases the young people do not know or do not have a fostering officer. They feel that they should have the opportunity to change their fostering officer in this instance. Some young people found looked after reviews very intimidating. All of the adults sitting around the table (some of them they do not know), how can they make decisions for your future if they do not have some sort of a relationship with them?

Here is another quote from a young person talking about reviews "don't get the opportunity to express our feelings". The young person expressed that they (professionals) talk about you, and not to you. They also felt that the review can just last forever.

They also felt that the meetings were held at inappropriate times. Some said that they would have to go straight from school to the review and they did not have time to get anything to eat. Some young people had to travel quite a distance from school to the review and then back home and felt this was inconvenient. The young people feel that they are sometimes pressurised into going to their review meetings even if they did not want to attend. Clearly the young people asked felt that much could be done to encourage them to attend and participate looked after reviews.

Activities for young people and children

Young people share mixed feelings about activities. Generally they feel that activities need improving and that they would like more involvement with planning activities.

The young people go to many destinations when going on activities such as South Shields, bus trips and Flamingo Land but the young people also expressed an interest in going to Alton Towers, go-carting and sporty activities like “how town”.

Young people also raised the issue that some Foster Carers take their own children on holiday but do not take the looked after young people on holiday. They felt this is not fair. Social Care and Health pay for the young people to have holidays and if they are not included in the foster family holiday they can be moved into a respite placement and this is unsettling. “The carers receive money from the social care and health for the activities”

The young people do not like going on trips in groups with other looked after children or young people “in the system”. They would prefer to go with their own friends because they know their friends and can be themselves on these activities. “ Don’t like group activities, we only like to go with friends”.

The members of staff that go on the activities are fun and enjoyable to go on activities with. The young people like going on sports activities and did not raise any negative issues about the staff. The young people would prefer to go on activities without the carers, so they can roam freely. If the young people go without the carers, it gives them a little more time for themselves. In the young peoples opinion the carers are “boring” and the young people felt trapped when on activities, they want space and a little time on their own. Clearly, the children and young people asked are interested in planning more exciting and appropriate activities.

Foster Carers

The young people felt that Foster Carers are able to help young people with schoolwork and that foster Carers should attend parent's evenings. Some young people said that they are not able to speak to their Foster Carers about personal problems. An issue was also raised about money for example foster carers tend to buy Looked After Children cheaper clothing and personal belongings than they would but for their own children, even though foster carers receive plenty of money for that looked after child/young person for clothing etc.

“I would prefer more pocket money and not be bought cheap clothing”

All young people agreed that foster carers should be able to make appointments for young people e.g. doctors or dentists. Those who are 16+ 'care leavers' established that foster carers are very helpful especially when they wanted to become independent and in preparation for their own tenancy. Foster Carers were supportive to Care Leavers around further education. However they felt that they were often “bugged” about going into further education or employment.

“They are all right”

Foster Carers set up boundaries with the looked after children sometimes the young people disagree with them. The foster carers should “pay for holidays” and “buy clothing” and “lend them tabs”. Sometimes the young people were not able to understand and accept why foster carers set sometimes ridiculous or overprotective boundaries.

An ideal Foster Carer would be a Foster Carer who doesn't throw you out and someone who is there for a fostered child to talk to. Someone who won't get angry with you. It would be good if your Foster Carer could help prepare you for your own tenancy. A Foster Carer would be good if they accept your habits e.g. smoking but “we could smoke outside”.

A “Foster Carer from hell” would be someone who doesn't listen to you “goes in one ear and out of the other”. A dreadful Foster Carer would only be only there for the money and doesn't really care. A horrific foster carer is one who shouts too much. “ A Foster Carer that doesn't treat you equally or shows you respect”. An unfair Foster Carer is one that withholds pocket money and doesn't give equal same punishment. Privacy was another concern for the young people/children. “A foster Carer should never force you to do anything that we don't want to do!” when they “bar you in” for too long. Sometimes the punishment doesn't always fit with what they have done wrong.

Personal and private possessions are very important to Looked after Young People, they do not like it when foster carers take their possessions away from them. In some cases that's all the young people have and it's like taking a piece of them especially if the young person has brought this possession from another home or they have bought themselves. There is no code of conduct that says foster carers have the right to do this.

Young people have also praised the system whereby their Parents/carers are given time out either when parent are given a chance to go on holiday by themselves for a break or when young people are taken on holiday as this gives parents a break in the home. We think that this is a great system and hope that it can continue.

Some foster carers should change their behaviour towards young people. Most of the young people have had a really rough time and they don't need more trouble from Foster Carers when they are trying their best to sort out their own problems. A young person should be involved in the choice of foster carers after all it is their future placement. Young people could also be involved in the recruitment process or training of Carers. "We should be involved when someone applies to be a foster carer"

Young people feel that their Foster Carers don't have regular reviews and want to know why " We never have reviews on carers". The young people have looked after reviews and the Foster Carers are involved so shouldn't the young person know about the foster carers review and have some input?

A Foster Carer who really doesn't want to get involved in a young person's life shouldn't be their attitude. The young people recognise that Foster carers are busy with other family members but must find a balance. The young people asked feel their contribution could be valuable in the recruitment and training of foster carers.

Residential children's accommodation and Secure Accommodation

This is what the young people had to say about residential accommodation. One home had excellent facilities such as a Jacuzzi, Internet access, sky television and a Playstation 2. Another home had a water cooler and a soap dispenser. In one home a young person loved wildlife and because of this, the garden had new features put in place. At some homes as a treat to the young people they would be given credit on their mobile phones or taken out for meals and the staff increased a young persons computer time because they a got a new game for Christmas.

The residential staff are very helpful to the young people in general. One young person stated 'they helped me through pregnancy and set up a home for me and my baby'.

Some evidence of positive change as a result of dialogue with young people is highlighted. Some young people wanted hooks in the showers and received them; a shop was wanted on a site for shampoo, shower gel and clothes. However some young people in one home wanted a lot of basic items e.g. pillows, slippers, full length mirrors, units for televisions, computer games, variety of foods, toilet seats and the list continues.

However, there have been some complaints about the heating in a residential children's accommodation. The young people complained that it was too cold and the staff replied ' the local authority standards set the temperature in the placement and it was not the staffs fault for any inconvenience caused to the young people'.

Staff in one home did not force young people to have baths but as encouragement if they had a bath they would receive a reward, therefore if young people did not keep themselves clean they would miss out.

The young people feel that they do not get enough contact with family and friends and they are not happy with the time they are given for returning to the accommodation. Young people were also not allowed to wear hats inside. The young people felt that this is like treating the young people as if they were at school and people have the right to wear whatever they want, as it is where they live.

Young people want their friends to visit and feel the police checks put people off. Would you give your friends a police check if they wanted to see you in your own home? In the secure unit they are only allowed 2 phone calls a day, 10 minutes to mobile phones and 20 minutes to landlines. The young people felt this was not enough.

Privacy is a sensitive issue for young people. Young people in the homes do not like staff going into their bedrooms without given consent before hand. It's in the homes policy and code of conduct and that consent has to be given.

Staff often tries to get young people to organise shopping trips and help plan activities for them. They also ask young people to help plan holidays. Regular meetings are held and there is plenty of consultation with the young people. Generally the young people asked felt included in dialogue about service change within residential care.

Discussion of cross cutting themes

The main issue throughout this report is that young people want to be listened to. They love it when an adult takes time to listen to them, as it doesn't happen very often in many young people's lives. Do not pretend to listen to young people as they do notice and it means that you waste valuable time. This way young people feel that you may not always listening or misunderstand exactly what was said. This is where some young people feel that things have been "twisted".

'Go on make a change' Recommendations

1. Social Workers use all of the positive points that the young people make in this report to develop good practice in listening and implementing change.
2. Social workers spend more time with young people. To build up a positive relationship and good understanding with young people they work with.
3. Social workers should involve young people in decisions about activities. Young people should meet with whoever is responsible for planning activities to make sure they know what young people want.
4. Social care and health buildings should be more child and young person friendly. This should be done with a group young service users.
5. Treat each young person as an individual and ask how he or she would like they're looked after review to be carried out. The booklet and leaflets given to children and young people are good but they are more than one way of gathering young peoples views and opinions.
6. Social Workers should raise the awareness of foster carers reviews amongst young people, so that they have accurate information and can participate if they wish to do so.
7. Social Workers should make sure young people have information about advocacy services.
8. Social Workers should try and make each young persons life as normal as possible and encourage them to do 'every day stuff'.
9. The most important thing is the ongoing participation of young people. This could be as part of a young peoples reference group to bring about changes to individuals social workers practice, within teams or at a strategic/management level. Young people should be involved in recruitment; appraisal and training of social workers, social care staff and foster carers.
10. Share good practice wherever possible to improve and develop multi agency partnership.

Appendix

Catchgate Children's home (Successful members) 07/04

Crook Children In Need team Agenda day (Applicant Membership)

Newton Aycliffe Children in Need team (Applicant membership)

Coxhoe Children's home (Successful members)

Aycliffe secure unit (Successful members)

10 Borough Close (Successful members)

Moorside Children's Home (successful Members)

STEPS therapeutic service (successful members)

Saint Andrews Family Resource Centre (successful members)

Tow law Children's Home (successful members)

Framwellgate Moor children's Home (successful members)

West Rainton Satellite Home (successful members)

Bishop Auckland Nursery Centre (successful members) sep 04

Looked after Team, North of County Durham (Applicant membership)

Looked After team, South of County Durham (Applicant Membership)