



## **Re -evaluation for Investing in Children Membership**

**10 Brough Close, Aycliffe Young People's Centre**

I visited 10 Brough Close several times during March and April 2007 and met with Joan Inns - Deputy House Manager, the staff and young people. The home has been converted from former staff housing because of the benefits of working with small groups of young people in a domestic sized environment. Over recent years there has been a greater reliance on the local community to meet the needs of young people who now attend local schools and colleges and use other services in the community such as the leisure centre. Joan explained that the home is built around an ethos of freedom of choice but also one of high expectation. She and the staff are particularly proud of the fact that one of the young residents is excelling at school and is expected to achieve very high GCSE grades this year, something that can only happen, she feels, when young people are cared for and well supported.

The home currently has three young residents and I chatted to them about how decisions are made and how young people can get involved. The more formal methods of communication are **children's reviews** and **young people's meetings** which take place once per month. Young people also cited **key-worker sessions** as good opportunities to express their views and opinions. For most of the time dialogue between staff and young people is informal and takes place during the daily routine of living together. One young person I spoke to particularly likes the informal way she can approach staff and get issues resolved.

I gathered from my conversations with young people that they have, for most part, a very good relationship with the staff and gave numerous examples of recent changes to improve their lives. For example the garden is being developed as a wildlife and 'green' area for one young person who is particularly interested in environmental issues and there is a greater emphasis on recycling at his request. The young people are currently working together with staff to decorate their rooms and living room area. They also told me that they have a lot of freedom to go out and meet friends away from Aycliffe and are given a great deal of trust. One young person told me he likes to try different foods and there is more variety now, especially when in his words, "*we have staff on that can actually cook*"

One very noticeable aspect of life at 10 Brough Close is a very relaxed atmosphere with little evidence of strict rules or barriers to young people. While I was there young people talked openly and did not seem inhibited in anyway to express their views and opinions even when sometimes they were critical. I recorded the following comments:

*"Sometimes when I talk, I smile a lot and the staff think I am telling lies, some of them don't really understand my condition" (Aspergers Syndrome)*

*"I also think that my condition is used to stop me going places like when I wanted to go to Darlington and I wasn't allowed. The good thing is that after a review I am now allowed to go and it has been ok"*

*"The staff have been very good with my education and have helped me achieve, they talk to the teachers and explain what my needs are and I'm doing very well, I had a few problems before that"*

*“I like the rewards system, it helps to motivate me”*

*“One of the best ways to change things is at my review where I can say what I want”*

*“We also have young people’s meetings which are good because we can put stuff on the agenda and if we can’t get an answer at the time we always get feedback later”*

*“We have made some recent changes including better and fairer access to the computer and we are sharing things more”*

*“We used to get timed on the computer which was sensible really, now it is even better because the staff trust us to self regulate our time”*

*“If we want to make a complaint we have a complaint book we can write in”*

One young person expressed his frustration with the restrictions placed on him visiting certain places but did acknowledge that he had been given a good explanation and that eventually he was granted his wish when his safety could be guaranteed.

I asked about the system of rewards and expectations and how it works. It was explained to me that it isn’t really a system at all, rather an attempt to reflect the best of what a family environment can provide for young people. One staff member told me that young people are given treats and rewards because it makes them feel valued for what they have achieved either at school or in their general behaviour. He also explained how important he feels it is to have high expectations placed upon young people to do well and the young person who is achieving academically is an example he uses to illustrate this approach.

For the future the emphasis will be on ways to improve the building, staff and young people intend to work together to improve the general living environment with particular regard to the garden

## **Conclusion**

During my visits to 10 Brough Close I spoke to staff and two of the young people who live there. My conversations with them revealed a general satisfaction with the way they are able to express their views and influence change. There are several formal opportunities available but young people told me that in general they can have issues resolved by approaching staff on a day to day basis. Details of formal meetings with young people are recorded and I was able to see notes of previous house meetings. It seems recent discussions have focused on improving the fabric of the building and developing the garden as a wildlife area, issues young people told me are important to them.

I suggested that for future evaluations a separate Investing in Children file is kept to record conversations and meetings with young people and particularly the outcomes and changes that have taken place. For this year I am happy to recommend that 10 Brough Close becomes an Investing in Children Service.

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