

# The Craic

[craic-noun [U] (ALSO crack) IRISH ENGLISH  
enjoyable time spent with other people, especially when the conversation is entertaining and amusing  
To crack – to go crazy]

## **A report on the emotional well-being of young people at Aycliffe Secure Services**

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investing in children

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## Brief

In Autumn 2004 Ian Thompson the School Counsellor and Diversity Co-ordinator, from Aycliffe Secure Services approached Investing in Children and asked them to establish a group at the Centre. The group's brief was to consider the emotional well being of the young people who live there, and whether the services they receive at Aycliffe compare favourably with services they have received before. Pippa Bell from Investing in Children facilitated the project.

## Explanation

The young people have given this project the working title of The Craic (Crack in English). The word Craic can be interpreted on two levels. In Irish 'Enjoying The Craic' means to enjoy amusing conversation with friends. The English interpretation of Crack is to go crazy or 'To Crack up' meaning to become mentally ill. As in the title, the information in this report and in the presentation, work on two levels as will become evident throughout this document.

## Methodology

To establish an agenda and to discover the issues that the young people wanted to discuss an Agenda day was held at the beginning of January 2005 at Aycliffe Secure Services and facilitated by Liam Campbell. Liam is a young person with previous experience of Investing in Children. 10 young people from 3 of the 4 houses attended (one of the houses was banned from attending because of recent misbehaviour). At the meeting the young people discussed their experience of living at Aycliffe and identified the issues important to them. These were issues concerning:

- Confidentiality
- Counselling
- Access to counselling
- Choice
- Staff attitude
- Stigma
- Other available services

These issues formed the basis for the group discussions, which were held at Aycliffe once a month over the following 11 months. More than 40 young people from Aycliffe Secure Services have been involved throughout the duration of this project throughout it's duration.

## Problems encountered during the course of the discussions

There have been a number of problems to contend with during the course of the project.

1. The young people have been unable to leave Aycliffe to do further research so the findings in this report are based solely on their group discussions. Thus the view represented is limited to the ideas of the young people who were able to attend the meetings.
2. There is a high level of turnover amongst the young people at Aycliffe. Throughout the 12 months of this project not one meeting has involved the same combination of young people, although a core of young people have been present at most of the meetings. This has caused problems whilst trying to establish which issues are the most important to the young people, and whilst not everyone agrees with every point, those present at the last meeting reached a consensus on the final list of issues.

3. During the first few group meetings the staff were present which left everyone at the meeting feeling intimidated and unable to speak freely. This also meant that Pippa couldn't easily establish a relationship with the young people, who initially viewed her with caution. This was resolved when the staff agreed to sit outside the room for the duration of each meeting.

### **The Positive points about living at Aycliffe**

#### **Staff**

The young people agreed that the majority of staff at Aycliffe are easily approachable and have a good attitude towards them.

***'If I'm feeling sad in the middle of the night a member of staff will sit up and watch telly with me'***

***'Staff give you space and let you be yourself'***

They also value the support of the staff;

***'My key worker is very supportive'***

In some situations the young people prefer the staff's company to that of their peers;

***'I get fed up talking to the kids in my house about drugs, to get a decent conversation I'll talk to the staff'***

#### **School Counsellor and Diversity Co-ordinator**

At present Ian Thompson holds this post at Aycliffe.

The young people at Aycliffe appreciate having a counsellor on site, someone they can talk to in private should they need to. They are also pleased that this counsellor's role is separate from the key workers and not someone who has daily responsibility for them.

***'You know Ian is around and can ask to see him if you feel fed up'***

They know that the information they tell Ian will remain confidential and this encourages them to talk to him.

***'He won't throw your personal stuff back at you'***

Ian makes himself known to all the young people when they arrive at Aycliffe, so that they feel able to approach him for help during their stay.

#### **Contact with external support services**

The young people are able to contact external support services from the house phones and many regularly do. This gives them the opportunity to discuss their worries with people who do not work at Aycliffe, and someone who is able to offer a different understanding about their problems.

The services the young people are able to contact by phone are:

Connexions

National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)

The Samaritans

The Colvin Unit

Childline

Staff from the Colvin Unit and NYAS regularly visit Aycliffe so that the young people are also able to have personal contact with outside support services.

#### **Facilities**

Ian's counselling room, named the 'Speakeasy' is based in one of the houses. It is a popular facility amongst the young people who feel that it's a relaxing environment in which they can talk freely.

***'It makes you feel comfortable and safe, so you are happy to talk there'***

### Positive Environment

The majority of young people agree that the atmosphere at Aycliffe is, on the whole, a positive one, and one in which they feel comfortable. One member of the group summed up the young people feelings when he said;

***'It's like Butlins with locks here! Where else could you chose to do whatever you liked all day?'***

### The Negative Points about living at Aycliffe

#### Staff

Although the majority of young people believe that on the whole the staff are good, they have all encountered problems with staff attitudes. In essence they feel that the staff don't behave consistently. This can make the young people feel insecure, as they are uncertain about how the staff will react in various situations.

Based on their personal experiences the young people have said that they often feel:

- Patronised by the staff;

***'They talk down to you and make you feel 5 years old'***

- Unwilling to talk to staff for fear of being judged; 'You can't walk away from your key worker here, so if you chat to them about your problems you feel that then they will judge you'

- Reluctant to confide in staff for fear that their confidences will be broken;

***'Staff bring up stuff from your file and tease us about it, or bring it up against us'***

- That they are not listened to;

***'The staff twist your words like, and hear what they want to hear'***

***'They think they know what is best for you but they don't'***

#### School Counsellor and Diversity Co-ordinator

The young people are pleased to have a counsellor on site but find it difficult that there isn't a choice of counsellor, because, for example, some girls find it hard to talk about personal issues to a man;

***'It would be easier to talk to a woman about personal stuff and I don't always want to speak to the staff in the house'***

The group are also concerned that in the future someone could have a personality clash with the on site counsellor, and as there is only one counsellor, they would then have no option to talk to anyone.

The young people find access to the counsellor difficult and '**a hassle**' when they have to make appointments to see one;

***'I'd like to talk to someone when I felt I needed to, without having to fix a time to talk'***

#### Contact with external support services

The young people are grateful that they can contact some external support services but they are disappointed that contact has to be made through the house phone because this gives them little privacy.

***'I don't feel comfortable talking on the house phone because everyone can listen to me'***

The group also believe that their contact with these services is controlled by the staff, who on occasions;

***'Won't put me through to NYAS because they say that I am wasting NYAS time'***

or

***'Pretend that they are trying to contact the service for me but say that they can't get through'***

As well as being frustrating for the young person this also causes them to doubt the staff's intentions.

#### Contact with external support services contd.

The group considers that the limited choice of services they can contact offers them few options for support. For example, some of the young people have had positive experiences of using the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) before they came to Aycliffe. Whilst staying at Aycliffe they are unable to contact them;

***'CAMHS helped me before I came here, but no one has offered me CAMHS here'***

Instead the young people can contact the Colvin Unit which has a base at Aycliffe. Some of the young people don't consider that this is a good alternative to CAMHS as they too are difficult to access;

***'I contacted the Colvin unit when I first got here and they have never got back to me'***

Some members of the group have also said that they find the staff at the Colvin unit difficult to talk to;

***'I don't like the people who work at the Colvin Unit because they are strangers to me. It's easier to talk to Ian or someone who has helped me before I came here because they know me'***

#### Facilities

The 'Speakeasy' room is excellent but it is not always available for use, so frequently the young people find themselves having to talk about their problems in the computer room because it is the most convenient place. The young people find this a difficult place to talk in because it is not relaxing;

***'It's not a comfortable place to talk'***

and

***'You feel you can be interrupted at any time so you rush what you want to say'***

#### Negative Environment

Although the majority of the group agree that the environment at Aycliffe is a positive one there are some that would disagree. The young people recognise that the atmosphere varies between the houses and is dependant on which members of staff are working on a particular day. The young people do not like this inconsistency, it makes them feel uncertain and heightens their own negative feelings. One young person told the group;

***'Staff are very negative, it's 'do this and do that', and they don't praise you if you do well'***

However another group member gave the opposing view;

***'It's different in our house, the staff praise you and reward you for the good things that you do'***

The group believes that each of the houses should create the same environment for the young people to live in.

#### House Rules

The young people know that as the atmosphere varies between the different houses so does the house rules. They feel that this is unjust and believe that everyone at Aycliffe should be treated equally and have the same rights and the same options open to them regardless of which house they live in.

## Major Issues

A number of major issues have arisen from the young people's discussions.

Stigma

Trust

Negative Environment

Inconsistent Governance

Choice

Support

### **Stigma**

One of the problems encountered at the beginning of this project was in persuading the young people to talk about their emotional wellbeing. Young people find it difficult to talk about their feelings and they consider that asking for help, or sharing their problems with someone else is a sign of failure. Young people do not like the term 'Mental health' – *'You get laughed at if people know you're going for help at the Colvin Unit, your mates think you're a nutter'*. This concern has been addressed in part by Ian who offers the young people easy access to his service. However this anxiety should also be taken into account when planning access to other counselling services at Aycliffe.

### **Trust**

The negative atmosphere, which is prevalent in some of the houses, has in part, been created through a lack of respect and mistrust between the staff and young people. Clearly some of the staff find it difficult to communicate easily with the young people. The young people have reason to become distrustful of the staff when, for example, staff break their confidence and talk about confidential information contained in their personal files to other members of staff in the house. This makes the young people feel very exposed.

### **Negative Environment**

A negative environment is in part created when staff instruct the young people in a negative way, for example, 'Don't do this', rather than praising them when they are doing well, and encouraging them in a more positive manner.

It is important that any indication of a negative atmosphere should be addressed. Not only does a negative environment counteract the effect of a good counselling session, but it also undermines a young person's self-confidence at a time when they are feeling most vulnerable.

### **Inconsistent Governance**

The young people at Aycliffe are conscious that they are not all treated equally within the separate houses. By comparing the individual rules for each house they have discovered that major inconsistencies exist between them. They also recognise that the way some staff behave towards the young people is inconsistent and this can cause confusion and anger. Consequently they are resentful that they are not all treated equally when they all live in the same environment.

### **Choice**

The young people at Aycliffe are given some options concerning the support services they can contact, and their access to them, but these are limited. They only have one

choice of an on site counsellor. Lack of alternative counselling options may cause the young people to bottle up their worries and not talk to anyone.

### **Choice contd.**

The young people are not always able to choose which venue they can use to discuss their problems, and they feel that they have to make do with any space available.

They are only able to access a few external support services. As the staff often control their access to these services they are not able to approach the counsellors and services whenever they feel the need to.

This lack of choices makes the young people feel powerless.

### **Support**

Living in Aycliffe means that the young people have been taken away from their familial support group of family and friends at home. They are also unable to use services like CAMHS, which may have helped them in the past, and they don't have the same level of access to other support services that previously they have found helpful. This can leave the young person feeling isolated and more in need of support from the staff at Aycliffe and the external support services on offer there.

## Recommendations

Having considered the different points and the issues that have been raised from them, the young people have made the following recommendations as solutions to these issues.

### Staff

The young people are agreed that the majority of staff who work at Aycliffe are excellent. However there are some who may occasionally need guidance. So the group have created a list of 12 Guidelines for the staff to use as a reference point.

- Treat us with respect
- Make us laugh - have a sense of humour
- Take part in activities with us
- Put yourselves out for us
- Show you care about us
- Build up a good relationships with us
- Trust us
- See things from our point of view
- Don't talk down to us
- Show that you don't just do the job for the money
- Don't bring your bad mood to work and affect our lives
- Ask our permission before you look in our confidential files

The group believe that if these suggestions are followed by everyone at Aycliffe, this will create a more positive, happy environment for the young people to live in and the staff to work in.

### Counsellors

The young people suggest that when someone first arrives at Aycliffe they should be offered an opportunity to talk about their problems with a counsellor or member of staff, whether they feel that they need to or not. This will indicate to the new arrivals that there are staff ready to help them at Aycliffe, and in turn make it easier for them to seek support during their stay.

The young people appreciate being able to talk about their problems to people who know them well. This includes the School Counsellor, their key workers and staff they have a good relationship with. The young people believe that a good relationship has to be built on equity, trust and understanding. With this in mind they would like all staff who assume a counselling role to be aware of the following points:

- Do not patronise us but to talk to us as equals.
- Don't ask the difficult questions immediately, but build up to them during the conversation
- Don't be judgmental towards us

If followed, these suggestions will enable the young people to relax and benefit from all their counselling sessions.

### Counsellors contd.

The group would also like to be given options in who they talk to about their problems and to choose the environment in which they talk.

***'Not everyone will be able to talk easily to the same person'***

One young person said that;

***'I'd like the staff to talk to me like a mate, when I'm doing something with them like playing pool'***

If the young person and the counsellor play a game together this takes the focus away from the purpose of their chat and makes their talk seem less daunting.

Giving the young people opportunities to make their own decisions about their counselling will empower them and raise their self-confidence.

### Contact with external support services

The young people at Aycliffe are only able to contact a few external support services whilst living there. During the course of this project many of the young people have mentioned local and national support services that have been helpful to them in the past. These include CAMHS as well as local services such as the Blue Whale in South Shields and FACTS in Bolton. Whilst staying at Aycliffe the young people would like the opportunity to maintain contact with an external service that has previously been supportive to them.

The group would also like information about all the external support services available to them at Aycliffe so that they can make informed decisions when choosing the one which would be of most benefit to them.

If the young people have to contact the external services by phone they would like to be given a degree of privacy when they make their calls. This will allow them to feel relaxed whilst they are talking and not anxious that someone will overhear their conversation.

### Facilities

The young people like the 'Speakeasy' room at Aycliffe but sometimes this is not always available to them. Occasionally they feel self-conscious about using this room because if they are seen going in, other people will know why and will tease them about it afterwards. So a similar room based in another part of the Aycliffe site would afford them greater privacy and more opportunity to use a relaxing room.

It has already been noted how important it is to the young people to be able to talk in a safe environment such as the Speakeasy room. Their suggestions extend to the comfort of the room and this includes the type of seating available in it. One young person said;

***'I'd like to sit in a big comfortable chair just like big Brother's. Sitting in that would make you feel important when you're talking'***

They feel that this will help them to talk more easily with the counsellor.

Some members of the group have also suggested the need for an Anti-aggression room, a place where they could go to relieve their feelings of stress and frustration.

They imagine that this room would have to be sound proof and padded! They envisage using it;

***'When you're feeling bad it can be somewhere you can let your feelings out and scream and shout and chuck cushions around to let you aggression out.'***

### Environment

The young people feel that if all staff follow their guidelines then each house will create a positive environment in which to live. Most of the houses reward the young people's good behaviour. However some houses don't have a consistent reward system or they forget to use it. The young people would like all the houses to have the same reward strategy so that everyone at Aycliffe has a clear understanding of the consequences of good and bad behaviour. They have also suggested that one of the rewards for good behaviour should be to allow the different houses to socialise together.

The young people often feel that the staff try to control them and do not trust the young people to behave in a responsible fashion. They would like to be given opportunities to show that they can be trusted and to prove how well they can behave. For example, when this project began the young people had to attend the Investing in Children group meetings with members of staff. However since March they have been allowed to go to the meetings without a staff escort in the room. The members of the group have repaid this trust by behaving well in the meetings, and throughout the last 9 months there hasn't been one incident of bad behaviour from any of the group members.

### House Rules

The group understands that due to the nature of the house system at Aycliffe there must inevitably be some minor differences between the individual house rules. However they believe that all young people are entitled to the same rights wherever they live. They think that it is unfair that one house has a different set of rules to another and everyone living at Aycliffe should abide by the same rules. They would therefore like the following points to be at the core of each house set of rules.

- No one should have to wait in their room for a shower
- Everyone should be allowed to have 2 phone calls of 15 minutes each
- We should be allowed to socialise with other houses on break week activities
- If we are not allowed to swear, staff should set a good example and not swear either

## Conclusion

The points and recommendations made by the young people in this report highlight four main areas where the group would like to see improvements made at Aycliffe. These are:

1. Consistent governance across all aspects of their lives at Aycliffe
2. Easy and regular access to people and services who can support them whilst living at Aycliffe.
3. Being treated as individuals instead of being treated as a group of young people who all have the same needs.
4. Being allowed to make their own decisions and choices in support matters.

If the suggestions that the young people have made in this report are acted upon then they believe that this will further improve the lives of the young people who live there and the staff who work there.

In the past recommendations that have been made by other Investing in Children Aycliffe groups have not always been carried out, for example a previous group also highlighted the inconsistencies in the house rules between the individual houses<sup>1</sup>.

If the issues in this report are not addressed, then the young people will think that their project isn't valued and that they have wasted their time. This in turn could create resentment between the young people and staff and perpetuate a negative environment. However if their recommendations are acted upon this will prove to the young people that their points have been taken seriously. This in turn will raise their self-esteem and create a more positive environment at Aycliffe, which everyone can benefit from. This would then negate the need for an anti-aggression room for, in this improved environment, it would be hoped that people would no longer get stressed or frustrated!

So the young people's plea through their presentation and this report is to act now on their recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Mulhearn, Investing in Children Membership scheme -Aycliffe Secure Services re-evaluation document , Septmeber 2004