



"No Problem too small"

A report on how to make the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) in County Durham more user friendly for young people

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investing in children

No problem too Small

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Introduction

The Brief

In spring 2005 Patient Advice and Liaison Services (PALS) in County Durham approached Investing in Children¹ (IiC) and asked them to establish a young people's group to discuss their service and how they could improve the service they provide for young people.

Methodology

To establish an agenda and to discover the issues concerning PALS that were important to the young people an Agenda Day was held in June 2005. An Agenda Day is when young people get together to talk about a subject, and their experience of it, from their point of view. Brian Davies and Tabatha Tilley, young people who work for IiC, facilitated the Agenda Day. The IiC PALS group established at the Agenda Day consisted of 8 young people from the Durham City and the Spennymoor area.

Following the Agenda Day the Investing in Children PALS group have been meeting once a month to discuss the issues raised and to make recommendations on how to resolve them.

Issues

At the Agenda Day the young people identified the following issues relating to PALS which most concerned them

- A lack of awareness about PALS amongst young people
- A lack of information about PALS for young people
- Communicating the PALS message to young people
- Access to PALS
- The PALS Manager
- Using PALS

All these issues are important to the young people. However one member of the group articulated what they all considered to be a young person's major anxiety when approaching services such as PALS. That is;

“Children don't like to complain or ask for help because they feel smaller than the adults and they don't think that the adults will take them seriously. This is because children know that adults take other adults more seriously than they take children.”

¹ Investing in Children (IiC) is an organisation based in County Durham that supports young people and enables them to have a say in services and decisions which affect them.

The group believes that this concern has to be addressed, and young people reassured that this isn't how PALS operate, before more young people can be persuaded to access their services.

They suggest that PALS promote their approachability by adopting an attitude of:

'No problem too Small'

The group think that this will indicate to young people that PALS is open to everyone who needs it. That young people can approach the service with confidence and without fear of ridicule. This is why the group have called their report 'No Problem too Small'

Issues

Awareness of PALS

When asked about PALS The majority of young people who attended the Agenda day admitted that they had never heard of the service, but they were curious to learn more about it.

Some of those who had heard of PALS believed that the service is;

'Only for adults and I think it's something to do with complaints in hospitals'

Another young person considered PALS to be;

'Only for old people because they have time to complain and like complaining!'

The group learned from some of the PALS staff who attended the agenda day and from the PALS leaflet, that PALS is not just about complaints but more to do with customer services for the NHS.

They were impressed with the different services PALS offers but not impressed with the PALS leaflet, which they felt was solely aimed at adults. One young person thought it looked;

'Boring, the whole NHS thing makes it look very functional and uninteresting more about complaints than giving you advice'

The group felt that their first task should be how to let young people know that the PALS service existed and was there for their use.

Access to PALS

Initial contact

In general the group felt that if any of them had a query or concern about an NHS service they would ask their parents to communicate with the NHS or PALS on their behalf;

'I'd let my parents contact PALS for me because I wouldn't know how to contact them myself'

The group thinks that the PALS leaflet looks as if it is specifically aimed at adults (see above). They therefore believe that many young people who have seen the PALS leaflet could be under the misapprehension that initial contact with PALS has to be through an adult. They feel that this would exclude a large group of young people from contacting PALS, including those who have no parents to make the contact and those who don't want their parents involved. There is also another problem with some parents who don't give their children choices, who don't allow young people to make their own decisions and who feel that it is their duty to contact a service without first getting their child's agreement. The group feels that the present PALS leaflet would appeal to this group of parents to the exclusion of their children.

The group considered that many young people would feel awkward about making contact with PALS for fear of dismissive staff or looking ridiculous because;

'I'd feel I was wasting their time with a little problem'

In fact the group agreed that the majority of young people see problems as a ***'hassle'*** and consider trying to sort them out as;

'a waste of time' when they could be doing something else.

The only member of the group who had experience of using PALS told the others how hard it had been to contact PALS during their stay in hospital;

'It was difficult to get to use PALS when I was in hospital, my parents had to arrange a visit'

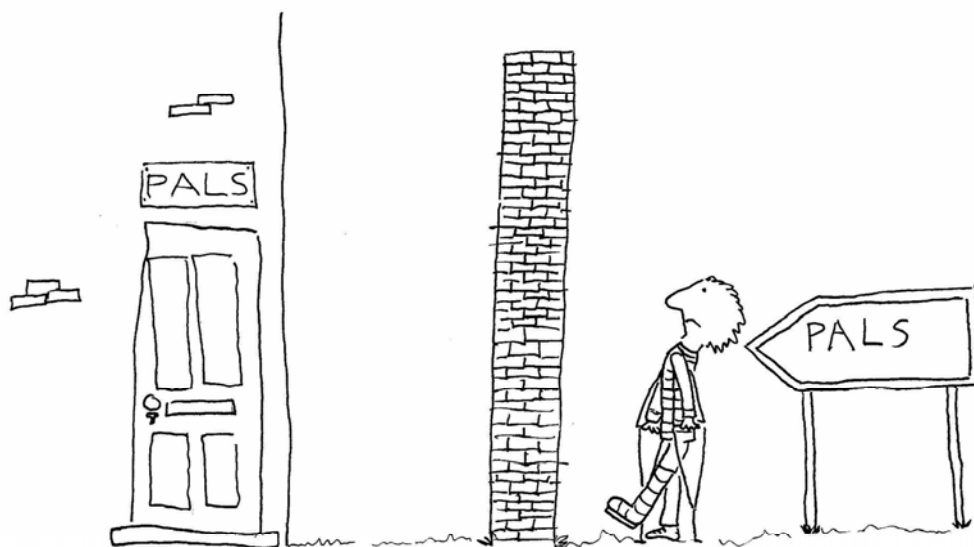
With these concerns in mind the group carefully thought about how best to approach PALS for an appointment. A few felt that they wouldn't be bothered to make an appointment to see a PALS manager because;

'It's a hassle having to phone up'

They also felt that meeting a PALS manager, or any service where you are asking for help is very daunting for a young person because;

'I'd feel embarrassed talking to them'

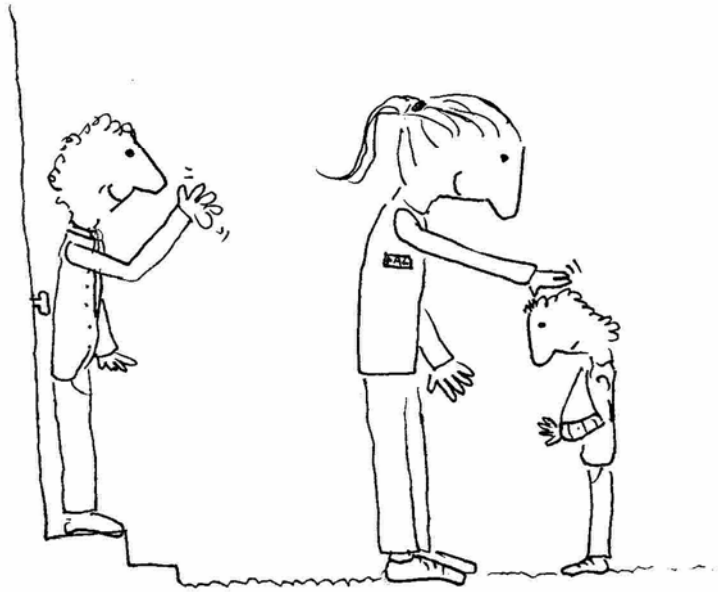
PALS Office



Being unaware of PALS meant that the group had no idea where the PALS' offices were situated in their area. They then discovered that the Durham office is based just outside the centre of Durham at Mountjoy. The office is a long walk from the bus stop and so it is not easy to get to for those using public transport, so this can cause problems for young people without their own transport. The group found out that the Durham Dales PALS office is also outside the local town and therefore not easy to access with public transport either. However some of the PALS offices in the region such as one in Darlington and one in Bishop Auckland are nearer to the town centres and are therefore easier for everyone to get to.

An office can be a very intimidating environment for a young person to enter and the prospect of this can add to their anxiety about the meeting. The group felt that if the only option for meeting the PALS manager is in the PALS office this could put a lot of young people off from using the service.

PALS Manager



Patronising

The PALS Manager is the public face of PALS and as such the group believe that PALS' ***'young people user friendliness'*** will be judged by the manager's appearance and their attitude towards young people. Although the group members have not had personal experience of a PALS Manager, they have all had experience of other adult service providers. These have not always been positive encounters as the following comments illustrate;

'I think that speaking to my parents and not me is annoying'

'They weren't listening to me and then didn't seem to know how to solve my problem'

'I was talked at like a two year old!'

'I felt angry, it was like they didn't believe me and I wanted some respect'

Many young people find it difficult to confide their problems to a stranger;

'It is much easier to talk to your friends and family about your worries than a stranger'

This anxiety may also hinder young people from wanting to use PALS.

The PALS service



Confidentiality

The majority of the group had no experience of using PALS. However, in the past some members of the group have had problems with communication during visits to the Doctor and whilst staying in hospital. They shared these with the group;

'In hospital the staff have different standards in how they communicate with you and their manner towards you varies.'

'I felt small as if I shouldn't be there and they seemed too busy for me'

One young person at the Agenda day who had experience of PALS had been impressed;

'PALS is a liaison service and they helped communication between my family, doctors and myself. They were able to get points across and get answers and they didn't take no for an answer and got the problem sorted'

The group believes that PALS reputation amongst the youth community will be judged by how they handle a young person's case. Therefore it is essential that PALS communication with young people is good.

Recommendations

- **Raising awareness about PALS amongst young people.**

The group are agreed that to make PALS better known to young people the service needs to raise it's profile with this population group. They have suggested that one way in which PALS can do this is to design a leaflet specifically for young people. Another LiC group has already created a leaflet to appeal to young people (see Appendix) which the group thinks successfully conveys the PALS message.

This is because the leaflet:

- a) Is more eye-catching than the standard leaflet
- b) Is more compact – 2 sides of A5
- c) Is easier to read and understand as it does not contain any jargon.
- d) States the benefits of using PALS in bullet points (young people don't like having to read too much information on a leaflet)
- e) Is professional looking. If it weren't it would look as if young people were not worth making the effort for and would then be deemed to be patronising.

In addition the young people would also like to see some examples, included on the leaflet, explaining how PALS have helped young people in the past. This would indicate that PALS are happy to handle the small problems as well as the big ones. In effect

- ***'No Problem too Small'!***

The group think that it is important for PALS to promote the positive aspect of their work and not to focus on the complaints side. This would show how PALS assists people, which the young people consider to be the more interesting part of PALS when compared to;

'the boring complaints part!.'

The group feels that knowing about the helpful side of PALS would encourage more young people to contact them.

The group suggests that posters should also be made using all the information from the leaflet. They would like to see the poster and young person's PALS leaflet widely distributed to wherever young people congregate. Not only available to be picked up by young people but also to be displayed on the back of toilet doors in such places as:

- Schools
- Hospitals
- Youth clubs
- GP's surgeries
- Pharmacies
- Night clubs
- On Public transport - Buses, Train stations, Airports

- **Alternative ways of communicating the PALS message to young people.**

The group suggests that as well as communicating the PALS message to young people through the distribution of leaflets, Pals can also convey their message through other forms of media.

The young people are already aware that PALS advertise their services in local information literature such as the Clever Clogs Guides in Durham. However they think that PALS should also :

- Advertise their services in teen magazines such as Match and Mizz (or Heat and Nuts for the older adolescent).
- Advertise on screen at the cinema before the film. Other local health services, which are aimed at young people such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are already successfully doing this.

The group suggests that PALS should create a self-help website for young people which as well as explaining the service could give basic advice and contact information for the local PALS manager. The service could occasionally include a live web chat with a PALS Manager.

They also recommend that PALS should take part in the health road shows regularly held in secondary schools. These present opportunities for handing out information and advice about health services which are relevant to young people such as sexual health, drugs and smoking. PALS managers could be available at these events to explain their service to young people and to answer their queries.

- **Access to the PALS**

In the first part of this report the young people have admitted that contacting PALS or any similar service can be very daunting for a young person to do. To make this easier and to encourage more young people to use the service the group believes that young people should have easy access to PALS and the PALS manager. Therefore they propose that in the first instance a young person should be able to contact a PALS manager either by;

- Email
- Text from a mobile phone
- A free phone number

These three options would guarantee that all young people wherever they live would have equity of access to PALS and would be able to contact the service easily.

Another reason that the group has suggested these methods of contact is that they ensure a person's anonymity. This is very important to the young people who would prefer to ask for advice first before committing themselves to the process of a PALS investigation. Moreover many young people may not want their parents or guardians to know that they are contacting PALS.

To encourage more young people to contact PALS and considering that many young people find meeting someone in an office for the first time intimidating. The group suggests that the PALS manager should be available for drop-in appointments with young people in their own environment. For example; at The Cube night club in Spennymoor, twice weekly on the under 18 nights youth workers are available to talk to young people about health and emotional problems.

Other venues could include schools, GP's surgeries, leisure centres and youth clubs.

The young people would also like the opportunity to bring their friends with them to their appointment for support.

The group also recommends that the PALS manager makes regular visits to the adolescent wards in the local hospitals. So that any young person needing advice during a hospital stay can easily approach PALS for support. This idea is in response to one member of the group who had difficulty accessing PALS whilst in hospital.

- **The PALS office**

The group think that the PALS office should be user friendly for young people and as such needs to be easy to get to and easy to find. The office needs to be near public transport routes and it could also have a base in a place that young people frequent like the Connexions office.

When young people are sent an appointment letter this should include a map and clear instructions on how to reach the office.

To ensure that young people don't feel self-conscious about going in and out of the PALS office they would like it to look anonymous from the outside, with no big signs declaring that it is a PALS office.

The PALS office hours should include after school opening times so that young people can visit without having to take time out of school.

- **The PALS Manager**

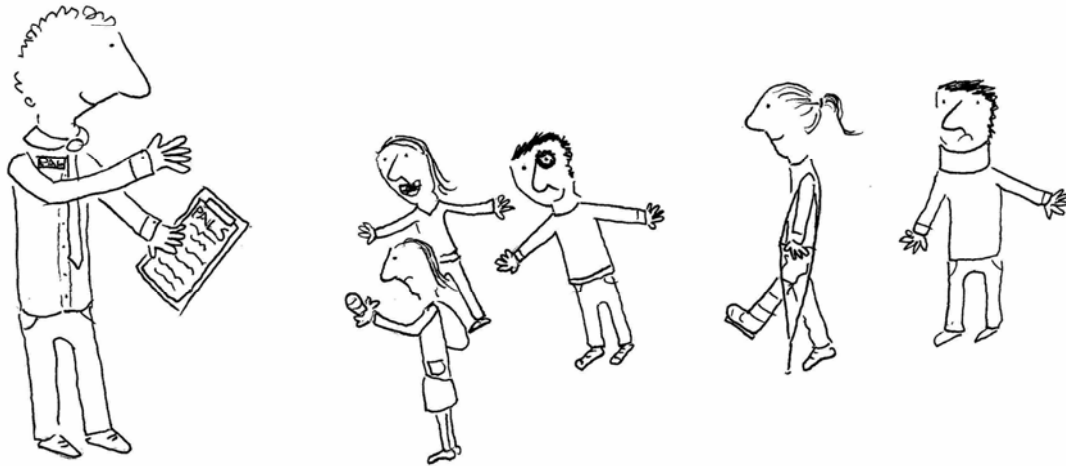
The group thinks that one of the most important ways of promoting PALS to other young people is by word of mouth recommendation from those who have already used the service. As the PALS Manager is the first contact a young person has with PALS the group regard the manager's attitude and approach towards young people as vital, as it is on this action that the service will be judged. They suggest that the manager should be able to put young people at their ease and talk to young people as equals; ***'in a non-patronising, sympathetic way'***.

The manager needs to create a relationship of trust and reassurance between themselves and the young person and make the young person feel confident about using the PALS service.

The young people believe that the following attributes are very important requisites for someone who can successfully engage with young people.

- Be youngish, mid 20's.
- Not too formal, but not cool or patronising either.
- Be dressed 'smart casual' ie. not in jeans and a t-shirt.
- Have an empathetic manner that showed they cared, but not someone who wants to be your friend.
- Not just be doing their job.
- Be easy to talk to and have good people skills.
- Be professional and know what they are doing.
- Be trustworthy
- Not use big complicated words to explain things but easily understandable English.

Guidelines for handling a young person's case



The group wants to ensure that each young person who approaches PALS can expect to receive the same high standard of service from the PALS Manager wherever they are based. To guarantee that all young people are treated with equity and that practice standards are assured in each PALS office, the group have drawn up a set of Guidelines for how a young person's case should be handled.

Guidelines for handling a young person's case

1. The initial contact with PALS should be with the manager who will be dealing with case.
2. Don't put the young person on the phone on hold
3. Don't ask to speak to the young person's parents
4. Reassure the young person that the case will be dealt with quickly
5. Reassure the young person that all discussions will be confidential
6. The young person to have one-to-one consultation with the manager – no other staff to be involved unless necessary.
7. Letters should be sent directly to young people and not their parents from the age of 13.
8. At the first meeting the PALS manager should:
 - Introduce themselves and explain the service
 - Take the young person seriously
 - Don't be patronising
 - Instil trust in the young person
 - Make the young person feel that they are a priority
9. Meet the young people in neutral territory, or if having to meet at the PALS office the young people don't want to be noticed going in and out of offices
10. Arrange to meet the young person after school hours so that they don't miss any schoolwork.
11. When arriving for their appointment don't keep the young person waiting long
12. Help the young person to start a conversation by gradual questioning
13. Use open questions
14. Reassure the young person that the PALS manager will be their advocate and will liaise on their behalf with other agencies.
15. Respect the young person's confidentiality
16. To keep their association with PALS confidential the young people don't want letters sent to them in envelopes with the PALS logo on.
17. The young people don't want to be called unless they have presented it. They prefer email contact where possible, as this is a more confidential way to communicate.
18. Always ask the young person's permission if there is a need to share their personal information.
19. Don't ask to meet the young person at their home in case they are keeping the issue confidential and not informing their parents.
20. Present the young person with several options on how to proceed with the case so that they don't feel pressurised to take the first course of action which has been suggested.
21. Don't push the young people into a particular course of action – they find it very hard to say no to an adult.
22. Allow the young people an option to drop out of the PALS process at anytime
23. The young people would like their case to be solved as quickly as possible – preferably straight away!
24. Keep the young person informed about the progress of their case.
25. The young people would like the option to change the PALS manager who is dealing with their case
26. The young people would like a follow-up from PALS once the issue has been resolved. However they don't want to be 'stalked' by PALS particularly if the young person's parents don't know about the case.
27. The young people don't want any of their information passed on to any third parties who may then contact them.

Conclusion

Young people do not easily ask for help. They consider problems to be a hassle and trying to sort them out as a 'waste of time' when they could be doing something else. Fear of ridicule by friends or by PALS, or concern about wasting people's time may initially prevent a young person from approaching PALS. Therefore in the first instance PALS need to reassure young people that;

No Problem too Small

for PALS to deal with.

A young person's decision about whether to use PALS will also be based on how easy they find it to approach PALS, and how quickly their issue is dealt with. The group has made recommendations in this report on how to tackle these issues.


It is also evident from the group's '**Guidelines on how to handle a young person's case**', that the young people want to be in charge (have ownership) of their case, be treated as equals and work in partnership with the PALS advisers. If PALS can assure young people that this is how they operate then more young people will use the service.

Finally, the group feels that the most effective way of encouraging young people to use PALS is for PALS to shed their adult image and to let more young people know about the service and how it can help them. The group has made many recommendations in this report about how they feel PALS can achieve this. In essence they feel that PALS should focus more on the positive advice part of their service and less on the complaints side. PALS literature should appeal to young people and PALS should use multi-media ways in which to let young people know about their service.

If these issues are addressed and their recommendations adopted then the group consider that this will make PALS more '***user friendly***' for young people.

NEED SUPPORT?

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NHS Durham & Darlington
Priority Services

PALS PATIENT ADVICE AND LIAISON SERVICE

Co. Durham & Darlington
Priority Services NHS Trust
FREEPOST NEA13596
Durham
DH1 4BR

GIVE PALS A CALL!

As a patient, relative or carer you may sometimes need somewhere to turn for on the spot advice, help and support.

PALS can :

- 👍 Advise and support patients, families and carers.
- 👍 Provide information on NHS services.
- 👍 Listen confidentially to your concerns, suggestions or queries.
- 👍 Help sort out problems quickly on your behalf.

INTERESTED?
CONTACT US!

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