

Looked After?

*A report on the Children's Hearings National School
Dunblane Hydro Hotel, 16-18 November 2007
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The concept of the Looked After child is well known to all involved with the Children's Hearings. In the course of this national school speakers both informed and challenged us.

The keynote speaker, Phil Frampton, is author of The Golly in the Cupboard, which chronicles his experiences as a child brought up in foster and residential care. Despite experiences of life in a children's home reminiscent of unpleasant revelations which have been in the headlines recently, Phil urged panel members never to assume that foster care is necessarily a better option than residential care.

He spoke of the support which children can draw from each other when in **residential homes** together and the advantage of larger sibling groups staying together. Presently, 75% of siblings who become Looked After are split up between foster or kinship carers or small residential units. In addition, he drew attention to the success achieved by residential homes in Germany (www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/oct/11/childrenservices.familyandrelationships). He asked that, when making decisions about places of residence for children who can no longer live at home, panels consider which options will allow a child to have the stability which will allow him to forge relationships and make educational progress. His experience had led him to the conclusion that family situations, whether foster or kinship carers, can be both chaotic and stressful for a child who has already experienced a great deal of stress and tension and may be reluctant to accept another family when he has just "lost" his own. Furthermore, if he experiences a series of short-term placements, he may well become increasingly reluctant to form friendships or other attachments as he may see this as pointless as he will soon be moving on.

Anna Fowlie, Head of Corporate Parenting, Care and Justice Division, Scottish Government, spoke of the need to deal better with LAC children, whose numbers are set to increase. She led us through current developments aimed at ensuring more satisfactory outcomes for this group. Guidance on working together and a draft Data Framework are planned for March 2008. These will be aimed at councils (particularly, elected members), parents, carers and agencies responsible for children and will relate to working together and to "**corporate parenting**". The latter relates to local authority responsibility for the care of looked after children and the need to make councillors realise that this is a whole council responsibility, not just the social work and education departments. Once again, the speaker stressed the need for a realistic child centred approach which gives consistency and long term planning. Children's Hearings must play their part in ensuring that this is reflected in their decisions and councils must produce high quality information for Hearings and provide adequate support for children and families.

NCH representatives spoke of the difficulty young people have in understanding the relationship between the Children's Hearings System and the adult system, particularly where offences are involved. In general, the court process is much slower and NCH workers find that, on the whole, 16 year olds do not have the level of maturity to cope with the adult system. Most young people who offend will stop in any case as they mature and current youth offending work aims to speed up this process. Several factors can influence this positively: 1) the existence of supportive relationships, whether from a boy-/girlfriend, family or a mentor. 2) A feeling of involvement in the community. 3) Educational achievement. 4) Employment. Together these factors build motivation, skills and opportunities and their absence reduces the likelihood of a young person turning away from offending. When dealing with this group of young people, children's panels

and the courts should be aware that curfews or bail restrictions may impact on the young person's ability to continue working with NCH or to take up a training place or employment and that it is important to create some positive reward for desistance from offending. Some young people working with NCH produced a rap about children's panels which can make uncomfortable reading for panels. (See appendix).

The final three presentations related to different modes of care: kinship care, fostering and residential care.

- i) **Kinship Care. Speaker: Jane Aldgate**, Professor of Social Care at the Open University. Professor Aldgate was co-author of a study of looked after children, *Extraordinary Lives* (SWIA 2006), which can be downloaded from www.swia.gov.uk.

There are no exact statistics for the number of children in kinship care as there are very many informal arrangements in this area, building on a long cultural tradition. However it is known that in 2006-7 over 1700 children were in kinship care out of around 13,000 children formally looked after.

Potential advantages *for children*: stability, safety, calm, regaining childhood fun.

In general the children were making good progress although early experiences could make them more anxious than other children. However, they showed a lack of understanding about their situation, worried about the future and missed their parents and siblings. There were significant contact issues. In general the children wanted more contact with parents and keeping contact with siblings and step-siblings was just as important as parental contact. However, seeing parents with a new family could be very hurtful. A minority wanted no contact with parents.

Potential advantages *for carers*: children kept in family, seeing children progress, keeping carers young, good company.

However, carers too carry a significant burden in terms of the emotional, financial and physical demands this situation places on them. Managing contact can also be problematic.

Kinship Care & Children's Panels. The annual panel review can be a source of great anxiety to all concerned and families resent poorly prepared social work reports which misrepresent their situation and carers appreciate recognition of their efforts.

What can improve support for kinship care? Financial support for children in kinship care would alleviate stress and improve outcomes, as would support for children requiring mental health and other specialist services.

- ii) **Fostering. Speaker: Barbara Hudson**, Director of BAAF Scotland.

Who are foster carers? On average they will be aged 49, live in larger families, foster for just over 9 years, have 22 different placements, care for more than one child at a time and have family pets or other animals. They should be empathetic, enjoy children, and be team players, flexible thinkers and problem solvers, resourceful and able to meet their own emotional needs.

Both foster carers and children face a great deal of uncertainty in their situation related to length of placement, dealing with new people and previous history which resulted in the placement. There is a need for support for fostering which will help create stability, minimise emotional/mental health problems, enable the child to reach his potential and the family to provide the positive parenting which is their aim.

Foster Care & Children's Panels. When considering a foster placement, panel members should be clear about the purpose of the placement and the support

available. They should also ensure that everyone is clear about this by making and recording specific recommendations, indicating what actions are expected, being clear about implications and consequences, setting realistic, child-focused time scales, and being prepared to manage uncertainty and risk. They should guard against a failure to place the child's welfare at the centre and an assumption that a foster placement is a "safe" place. They must ask themselves whether their decision will increase the uncertainties and anxieties or reduce them and remember "As a foster child you can still worry about what is going to happen to you."

- iii) **Residential Care. Speaker: Ronnie Hill**, Director of Children's Services Regulation, Care Commission. The Care Commission's aim is to regulate to improve the quality of care in Scotland. In the child care sector they deal with 10,832 different children's services. They aim to engage with both the providers and the clients to raise standards and inform social and healthcare policy.
- Residential accommodation is only one part of this. Currently there are 1214 places available in care homes, 1101 in special schools and 143 in secure accommodation. They are of particular value in situations where longer term or emergency care is needed, where families need periodic short term help for a child with complex needs or when the child requires specialist care and education on the same site.
- The strengths of residential services lie in their potential to provide an environment where young people can:
- access high quality support and be involved in care plan reviews
 - benefit good links with placing authorities and advocacy services
 - have good access to health care, education and specialist care
 - be given good preparation for return home or for independence.
- The Care Commission, Education and Health inspect jointly every 4 years and the Care Commission can visit twice annually with inspections being done without prior warning.
- However, in 2005-6, 54% of care homes and 48% of schools had at least one requirement for improvement after inspection, involving aspects such as poor care planning, poor practice in the use of restraint, poor risk assessments, inadequate self evaluation and poor leadership.
- Residential Care & Children's Panels.* When considering a residential placement, the speaker advised panel members should look critically at reports. We can use Care Commission inspection reports to ascertain the type of services provided and check www.carecommission.com to see whether there have been upheld complaints, an improvement notice or enforcement action on a proposed establishment. If the young person is already a resident, panel members should also speak to him/her without the social worker or care home representative present. As there are wide differences in the range of services offered by residential homes it is important that we try to ensure the care offered is appropriate.

Summary

The conference enabled us to look at the range of accommodation options, their strengths and their drawbacks. It encouraged us to look critically at our reasons for choosing accommodation out with the parental home and to be more focused in our decision making. The presentations provoked much discussion and there were good opportunities to talk with speakers during breaks. It was a worthwhile, informative and enjoyable two days.

APPENDIX

PANEL RAP

People let me tell you what it's like to be fifteen.
When you're living in a nightmare instead of in a dream
Everybody talks as if they know what's best for me
Take a walk in my shoes and then you'll truly see

You lot think it's easy trying to be good
Well you should spend a year living in my neighbourhood
You'd soon be drinking Buckie and skinning up some hash
Trying out some scams to see if you can raise some cash

The police they don't like us, they're never off our back
You end up in the cells for drinking Mad Dog down the park
Vandalism, breach of peace, they'll fit you up with ease
If you ask me bout the screws I'll tell you they're just sleaze

So you end up at a Panel, they're always running late
They seem to think that you'll enjoy a 30 minute wait
Referral this, referral that, agree or disagree
Why are three strange people firing questions at me

My Ma, my Da, my Auntie Kate, they all have their say
A social worker I've never met, they are all here today
They've even brought along a guidance teacher from my school
And everybody smiles at me like I'm some kind of fool

All you want to talk about is School, School, School
In my personal experience school's a load of bull
The teachers they don't like you, they want you out their class
They talk to you like something that you stand on in the grass
They try to teach you subjects like Physics and French too
They don't come in too handy when you're signing on the Broo

If you don't do this and you don't do that the panel members say
You'll go to a resi school so very far away
If you behave and change your ways you'll get home for a visit
For my own good! You're joking me! If it's no a threat what is it?

But in the end you all agree I need some supervision
You talk about how this has been a unanimous decision
The Social Work are now involved in looking after me
And I'll come back in twelve months cause it's the law you see

But what's this looking after? And just what does it involve?
A social worker on the scene my problems he will solve
My Ma and Da they play along but when we get back home

Get out the house they yell at me, so on the streets I roam

They send me to a project for young folk just like me
Who start to pick up charges and are at risk of custodee
They really seem to like me, my potential they could see
They helped me see that offending was not the life for me

It's not an easy journey through teens to adulthood
We can all make decisions which aren't always good
But don't get sad and don't get mad, Just listen to our view
And if you listen really hard you'll know what you must do

Give us a chance, some space and time to turn our lives around
It's not always that easy to step out on new ground
So don't give up too easy, help me learn what I can do
And maybe further down the line I'll be **LOOKING AFTER YOU!!!!**