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Short Article

Police and residential care

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Abstract:

This article describes the role of a police liaison officer working at a large Scottish residential education and care centre. Four main aspects of the role are outlined: child protection; preventive education about online safety, substance abuse and other harms; following up concerns raised about criminal activity by and towards young people; and being the first point of contact for missing children and young people. The article explains the philosophy behind the role and the author's perceptions of lessons learned.

Introduction

I have been a Police Officer for the past 12 years and for the last two years have been a Police Liaison Officer at a large Scottish residential education and care centre. The service supports at risk children and young people. Many of these young people have experienced significant trauma in their lives and have concerning behaviours that can increase their risk to themselves and others.

My Role

My role originated when Police Scotland and the residential provider agreed that having an officer who could work more closely with young people would be helpful both for young people and for the services supporting them.

My role covers a wide remit but can be broken down into four main areas:

1. Child protection: being the first police point of contact for young people and / or residential staff who want to raise concerns about child protection.
2. Educating young people, and sometimes staff, with a preventive focus, such as online safety, drug/alcohol misuse, knife crime, hate crime, anti-social behaviour, road policing safety, and criminal and sexual exploitation.
3. Dealing with complaints from young people in relation to them being a victim of crime or from staff members who are concerned about a young person's criminal activity.



4. Missing people: being a first police point of contact for staff who are concerned about a missing young person.

Police Scotland have a dedicated department within the Partnership, Prevention and Community Wellbeing Division known as The Children and Young People (CYP) Team. This team take the lead in delivery of Police Scotland's priorities and commitments to over one million young people within Scotland. At the heart of what the team does are the principles of Getting it Right for Every Childⁱ, children's rights, and Police Scotland's responsibilities as a Corporate Parentⁱⁱ. I work closely with the CYP Team on a regular basis. They provide me with relevant materials they feel would benefit children and young people and offer various inputs from external agencies that I am able to link in with should I feel they would benefit any of the children and young people at the residential service. Creating links with external agencies allows children and young people at the service to access various opportunities. For example, I have recently referred two young people to take part in a Cash Back Programme that two local football clubs offer. This is financed by funds recovered through the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and invests into community programmes largely aimed at diverting 'at risk' young people away from criminal or anti-social behaviour. This has allowed both young people to participate in a programme which helps them move towards a more positive future, including working, volunteering, or further education. The feedback has been extremely positive from both young people, and I hope that more young people from the service are able to take part in the future.

The philosophy behind my role

From the outset I believed that my role would be most effective if I could build meaningful relationships with young people. I wanted to break down barriers and hostilities they may have towards police given their previous interactions, often in a context of family neglect or following criminality. When I began in post, I invested a lot of time in being 'Nicky' rather than just a police officer. I got to know young people, was interested in them, and, most essential of all, I listened to them. I had hoped this would be useful, but it proved more so than I expected, as young people really responded to me. Being around every day and engaging with young people for reasons other than criminality meant I was more accepted, such that much of the usual stigma and hostility was broken down. Focusing on relationships has been a key aspect and without this relational approach I doubt I would have got far. Leaving the uniform at home once a week may have helped too!

Lessons learned

Working daily with care experienced young people has in turn been a huge eye opener to me. Listening to and being involved with young people has in turn shaped and developed my understanding of them. I have come to understand their backgrounds and how these have been key to their current difficulties.



Usually as a police officer you are under many and varied pressures which means your time with people can be brief and focused on the immediate issue, rather than their wider context or background. Now I know the trauma that the young people have often, if not always, experienced. I have learned how important this is in explaining their behaviours and how they engage with the world, including the police. Their hostilities towards the police are rooted in their experiences and I wanted to provide better experiences that could balance these.

The residential provider has supported a lot of training and learning for me, including their trauma-informed training that all residential staff receive. I believe that being trauma-informed is key for anyone working with young people in residential care, and this includes the police. I have tried to embody this in my work, trying to understand young people through their experiences and current situation. I'm convinced this means I'm more effective in my role.

The outcomes

I have been in post for some time now and the feedback I have received, and my observations, suggest that there have been a number of key changes.

1. Young people feel able to speak with me, as a police officer. Being 'Nicky' has meant that young people have been able to overcome hostility and difficulties and instead put some trust in me. I believe this has meant that they have been able to report child protection and safety concerns more easily. The importance of this is hard to measure, but given it is such an important aspect of keeping young people safe and preventing future harm I'm very pleased we've achieved this.
2. Young people are more open to education and hearing about how to keep themselves safe. Police officers have a particular set of experiences and knowledge that are hard to achieve in other roles. We can provide useful education that can be very specific to young people. Young people have been more likely to engage in preventive education around many areas, which has hopefully prevented future victimisation and criminality.
3. Young people have also felt more able to raise complaints about criminal behaviour towards them. This is empowering for young people and has meant that more of them have achieved some form of response, when in the past they would have accepted some crimes without expecting anything from adults or services. In turn, the response I and the police in general have provided has challenged their biases towards the police and helped show them that the police can support them and be a help, rather than an enemy.
4. Working in partnership with the residential service regarding missing young people has enabled a more effective response from both police and the residential provider. This has meant that robust responses have been



delivered when needed and helped avoid unhelpful or disproportionate responses when a more subtle approach is appropriate. Having a close and collaborative partnership on this has resulted in a more nuanced response that has benefitted young people, the police, and the residential service.

5. The Philomena Protocol has recently been introduced to care establishments within Scotland. This involves compiling a standardised form of useful information which can be used in the event of a young person being reported missing. I have conducted staff training in relation to the protocol to ensure they are aware of the vital information. Details of this can be found at <https://www.scotland.police.uk/what-s-happening/news/2023/may/new-process-to-help-trace-missing-children-rolls-out-across-scotland/>

These successes would not have been possible without a relationship-focused and trauma-informed starting point. This has enabled both my own and young people's biases to be challenged and overcome. It has helped create collaboration between young people and the police, but also with the residential service.

Recommendations

My role is funded by the child and youth care provider, while Police Scotland remains my primary employer. It is acknowledged that this will not be possible for many services, however where this is possible, it can be a unique use of resources that can directly benefit young people in both the short and longer term. If the resources are not there, then creating closer links between residential services and the police can be achieved in other ways. I would encourage anyone working in residential care to contact their local community police to establish links, build relationships, and increase understanding of each other's roles to support young people in our communities.

About the author

Nicola Glasgow is a police officer within Police Scotland currently conducting the role of police liaison officer at a large residential placement in Scotland.

ⁱ Getting It Right for Every Child is the Scottish Government's policy on the rights and support entitlements of children and young people in Scotland.

ⁱⁱ Corporate parenting refers to the statutory duties of certain public bodies in Scotland in respect of children looked after by local authorities.

