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Evaluation Report

Residential Child Care Workers Inter-Authority Practice Learning Exchange

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Falkirk Council



Shetland Islands Council

Improving care experiences

Introduction and background

Context

The new provisions of [Continuing Care](#) introduced in Part 11 of the [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) create real opportunities to ensure better care experiences and improve the life chances of looked after young people and care leavers.

Building on the principle and philosophy of care set out in the [Staying Put Scotland Guidance \(2013\)](#) the new provisions place responsibility on corporate parents to ensure that all eligible young people are enabled to remain in positive care placements, including residential care settings, until their 21st birthday. This positive and ambitious development has been widely welcomed across the child care sector in Scotland. However, successful and consistent implementation poses some significant challenges for practitioners and managers. Not least is the issue of the skills, knowledge and confidence of staff teams in supporting the ongoing development of young adults within a group care setting. Successful implementation will effectively be delivered by the practice and professionalism of front-line residential child care staff, hence the need to ensure that they, as a staff group, feel supported, enabled and empowered to do this.

In February 2014 three local authority Throughcare and Aftercare Services (TCAC), supported and facilitated by CELCIS, participated in an inter-authority learning exchange. The TCAC learning exchange experience was considered to be an extremely valuable experience for the staff concerned. The [evaluation report](#) identified a number of learning points and mutual benefits for the three local authorities involved, either as hosts, visitors or both. One of the key points raised was the potential that this type of experience may hold for staff in other settings, with staff and managers from both Shetland and Falkirk identifying potential benefits, particularly for residential child care staff.

CELCIS therefore agreed to explore and progress a similar exchange programme, this time for residential child care staff. This was initially flagged up as a request by Falkirk but was also a feature of the Shetland Residential Service Development plan. Initial negotiations took place over the Spring of 2015 leading to Phase 1 (Shetland to Falkirk) and thereafter Phase 2 (Falkirk to Shetland). These practice learning exchanges took place over May and June 2015, with the Shetland staff member spending two weeks at Tremanna Children's Home, Slamannan, and the Falkirk staff member spending five days in Lerwick.

Each component part of the practice learning exchange was tailored to the learning and development needs of the individual staff members concerned rather than being a direct like-for-like mirror image.

Preparation

Logistics and practicalities

Opportunities for staff in mainland authorities to meet, network, share practice and learn from each other are generally more widely available, and, due to geography, are generally more easily managed. Therefore, particular consideration had to be given to managing the practicalities of this programme. Setting up and supporting the residential staff exchange was helped by the previous TCAC exchange ; respective managers had already reported a positive experience and established a degree of trust and credibility with each other to ensure that any commitments made would be followed through. This involved not just a willingness to address the content of the exchange programme thoroughly by identifying and arranging a varied range of learning opportunities; it was also a vital element in addressing the particular practical and logistical challenges (e.g. in terms of staff accommodation). This was considered a key factor for other exchanges in future – particularly in relation to keeping costs manageable.

The importance of adopting a 'can do', problem-solving approach was highlighted by both sets of managers and workers in enabling the exchange to proceed.

Identifying staff

Selecting who should participate was left to each authority with no set expectations other than that individuals should be volunteers in the process, and have the motivation, ability and capacity to be able to reflect on their experience and share any learning with colleagues. Internal discussion within each agency had already begun to identify possible participants. The two members of staff who participated were employed as senior residential care workers, both in ideal positions to be able to bring expertise and experience to the exchange, and both in key roles, thus able to maximise and share learning with others, directly and indirectly. 'Planting seeds with others' was how one participant described it. This was echoed by their manager, highlighting the importance of ensuring that the participants were regarded as positive influences and leaders. This dissemination of good practice and shared learning across the team or service was seen as central to maximising any return on investment.

Being self-motivated to participate was a key factor for workers in approaching the exchange positively and creatively.

One participant reported that they had been:

...constantly asking for this type of secondment opportunity...to get experience of other residential child care settings.

The main purpose of the exchange for one practitioner was:

..to observe another local authorities structure of their Residential Service, to get a real feel of their philosophy of care and to gain a greater insight into how they gain the young people's interest to participate in their care.

She advised that she wanted a '*different experience*' to enable her to reflect on her knowledge and practice, both individually and also in relation to the way each service was run. Both participants highlighted a desire and motivation and regarded being open to learning as critical. This was validated by respective managers and the Training Manager from Falkirk, who provided a valuable in-house support role, particularly with regard to maximising learning through reflective learning sessions.

Pre-placement visit

As per the previous TCAC exchange in 2014, the importance of a pre-meeting was regarded as a critical factor in the planning and managing of expectations and practicalities, and ultimately in maximising learning.

A pre-visit took place in April, enabling staff to meet each other face-to-face and develop the process of preparation and sharing. The pre-meeting, even for experienced practitioners, was highly valued as an opportunity to form relationships, alleviate anxieties and re-affirm commitment and expectations. This was also valued by the respective managers, and the investment in terms of staff time and money was seen as that, as an 'investment' rather than a cost. Indeed, both managers highlighted the principle of both agencies investing in staff; this was a fundamental shared value.

The pre-placement visit was regarded as an important building block in the successful exchange. Quite simply 'putting a name to a face' for all concerned was fundamental. A brief orientation around the house, location and surrounding area was useful in managing and planning the practicalities. Access to relevant pre-reading and documentation was also made available and discussed at this meeting. Support structures and mutual expectations were clarified and agreed, along with the role of CELCIS in brokering and supporting the exchange.

The strength of the planning and preparation process at this stage enabled both workers to fully negotiate and plan the return visit confidently between them.

The emphasis on planning and the value of the pre-visit were highlighted as key factors in the success of the overall experience.

Practicalities

There were specific practical considerations to be addressed with this particular practice learning exchange arrangement. Accommodation and transport were more of an issue than if, for example, the exchange had been arranged between neighbouring authorities on the mainland. This potentially increases the financial commitment required from participating authorities. For example, availability and reliability of public transport in the semi-rural location of Tremanna (and to an extent in Shetland) necessitated the hiring of a car.

Staff accommodation also presents an issue if overnight stays are required. However, in this particular situation, creative thinking and the willingness of staff to problem-solve to 'make it happen' saw the attached 'transition' flat at Tremanna being made available for the visiting worker. This was an ideal solution as the flat was vacant for the period of the exchange. The return phase was partly financed by the host authority, as the visiting worker delivered a structured training session to a multi-agency staff group and thus accessing the central training budget helped offset some costs.

Other considerations would include shift cover and some adjustment to care rotas to free up staff to participate. Managing staff rotas to free up staff for learning and development opportunities is generally regarded as a necessary requirement of the job, rather than an additional task or hassle. That being said, managers will want to consider the impact of any unnecessary disruption to care rotas on their children and young people.

Any learning exchange does require some financial commitment from each authority but, as this example shows, financial outlays can be minimised with a 'can do' problem-solving approach. The overall costs were regarded by both managers as being far outweighed by the benefits to the individual staff members and ultimately the residential services. The primary motivation of investment in staff and services and ultimately in improving the care experiences and outcomes for children and young people was central to considerations.

In-situ activity

The actual programme of activity followed by each member of staff was tailored to their own learning and development needs. For one practitioner this involved spending greater time directly observing and reflecting on practice, being based primarily in the children's home. As she stated there was a need to '*witness it, to feel it, see it*', a view shared by others:

...nothing can touch the importance of the real experience of understanding the nuance of practice and culture of a team.

This was, in one sense, a challenge to manage, as being an experienced worker, there was a need to be clear about boundaries being crossed when directly engaging with young people. Being clear from the outset with focused discussion on limits, role and expectations was important; this factor was discussed both at the pre-visit planning meeting and throughout the exchange.

This also gave all staff involved an opportunity to reflect on policy, procedure and practice as it played out in real time. Having another child care senior 'observing' and asking the 'why' questions as a critical friend gave staff the objective prompt to stop and reflect on their practice as individuals and as a staff team. Again, this was perceived as a less threatening dynamic, prompting greater openness and dialogue between staff and also between staff and young people. It encouraged workers to reflect on the practice implications of the power of relationships.

Both residential services aspire to 'walk the walk' in respect of relationship-based practice, and this exchange provided a valuable opportunity to do this within a supportive but objective peer-peer dynamic. The often insular or domestic nature of residential child care, working in the group milieu or life space, can create a claustrophobic bubble:

It is crucial for those who work in this arena to have access to others who understand the complexities of the work.

This was key factor highlighted both by participants and managers.

Areas of mutual learning and discussion, prompted by in-situ practice scenarios, included what practitioners really mean when they talk about 'participation' by young people; how to encourage and enable young people to be actively involved in the appropriate co-production of their own care experience, as well as helping develop the wider care environment and culture within each home. This involved reviewing child-friendly paperwork and how to involve young people in interviews for new staff.

These are issues that may or may not be resolved in other settings, but the ability to unpick these, and to review them with fresh eyes as practice develops, was seen as an example of developing good childcare practice.

Other areas of work and learning included participation in review, resource and planning meetings and forums, as well as developing the ability to review policy and procedure and how this was (or wasn't) implemented consistently in practice, and exploring the reasons for this. Again, the

importance of having a 'neutral' observer acting as a 'critical friend' and operating on a peer-peer basis enabled positive dialogue around these issues.

Benefits

Practitioner benefits are many and varied, not least the opportunity to develop greater self-confidence by having their practice validated by peers. In a setting where the 'practitioner is the intervention' this is a powerful factor. This was a major benefit for both participants. Both workers reported gaining both personally and professionally in terms of confidence in their role and practice, and stressed the importance of validation as practitioners by their peers. One comment said that having first-hand experience of another setting enabled staff *'to absorb so much more than class-based learning'*.

The development of ongoing supportive professional relationships beyond the immediate work setting was regarded as a key benefit. Professional networking is often regarded as a vital aspect of professional development for managers and staff in other settings, so why not residential child care? In the opinion of both managers and the training manager, the CPD experience for residential child care staff can be greatly enhanced by the peer support and wider learning opportunities afforded by practice learning exchanges.

Building on external relationships and establishing valuable contacts was regarded as a key factor in developing confidence, with recognition of good practice and an affirmation of the vital importance of having good residential child care available for those children and young people who require care in this setting. This was not only about the individual staff members, but also about the recognition of the role that good quality residential child care can play in providing safe, stable, nurturing and healing environments for children and young people.

Other benefits identified included opportunities for skill transfer and skill acquisition as ways to develop staff confidence and leadership, empowering and motivating staff by enabling them to take responsibility for aspects of their own learning and development, and the development of their service.

Wider team and service benefits: Both workers and managers reported that whilst the key participant benefitted greatly, it was in their view not just an individual gain, but a team experience. Having a reciprocal arrangement was also hugely beneficial as it underscored the shared experience rather than having a worker on a development 'placement'.

It gave all staff the opportunity to reflect upon and to showcase practice and take professional pride in their service, providing a range of rich discussion topics within team meetings and support and supervision sessions. It also allowed for an easier acceptance of areas for improvement, as the peer-peer engagement within and across the service, without the line-management or 'inspection' dynamics, gave workers the opportunity to be more open and potentially less defensive about practice. One comment suggested a recognition of status...we have been chosen, reflected not just by individuals concerned but by the teams and services overall. For a sector that can all too often be undervalued, this can serve as a real morale booster.

Engaging with other workers in real-time practice situations with issues such as risk management and risk-averse practice, which can permeate residential childcare work, was seen as very useful. Discussing the context of practice (in this instance island community and semi-rural central belt)

enabled staff to reflect on the often blanket policies which staff are expected to follow, without really considering the limits this can place on supporting the primary task, i.e. young people's growth and development.

Having a peer 'outsider' ask simple questions about 'why and how' can enable staff teams to open the debate up in a more constructive, less defensive context.

As one worker opined, there were benefits from 'interweaving and offering ideas, sharing experiences with workers and learning from each other in a natural manner'.

Managers' Perspective: Both managers and the training manager regarded the opportunity as a highly effective way to develop staff confidence and improve the profile of the residential childcare service. Like staff, they saw it as an opportunity to reflect on and showcase practice. They appreciated the fact that it gave staff 'permission' to ask the awkward questions, to be the critical friend and to appropriately challenge custom and practice. In order to ask these questions, workers also had to reflect upon what they were observing, experiencing or analysing.

The role taken by Falkirk Council's training manager was extremely useful in assisting this reflective learning for participating workers. It is a role which was offered by CELCIS at the outset but was taken on and owned and embraced by the participating authority. This underscored the sense of importance attached to the residential setting, the practice learning exchange itself and the commitment to developing staff. As one participant noted:

The more you reflect on it the more you get.

Applicability / future use

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, there are significant challenges faced by the residential child care sector, not least in terms of the successful and consistent implementation of **Continuing Care** and **Staying Put** for all eligible young people.

Alongside this is the work-based learning that will be a feature of the new Level 9 qualification for residential childcare staff. This is likely to involve similar types of learning exchanges, with practitioners spending time shadowing and contributing to practice in other residential settings. The positive experiences of this and future practice learning exchanges will be excellent preparation for the work-based learning that will be required for the new qualification.

The potential opportunities available within a practice learning exchange programme offer a responsive, creative and person-centred learning experience, with ownership for this located within services and embraced by practitioners.

The relatively small-scale nature of this particular practice learning exchange has much greater repercussions and benefits for participants with the added peer-peer learning dynamic. This is predicated on establishing positive trusting working relationships, all the better to 'walk the walk' and role-model the relationship-based practice approach to which many practitioners and services aspire. Peer-focused, person-to-person connection has the potential to enable more creative and profound learning opportunities.

Whilst a one-way placement can and does offer mutual learning and development benefits both for host and visitor, the feedback from participants on this occasion made it clear that agreeing a two-way exchange at the outset, even if not involving a like-for-like experience, was highly important. It enabled workers and managers to see the exchange as a process rather than an event, better to support the development of supportive peer-peer networks.

CELCIS support role

Building on previous engagement with both local authorities, the support and facilitation role of CELCIS was seen as offering an important structure and framework for managing this exchange. The national profile of CELCIS and their support for this exchange was also regarded as conferring a level of validation. CELCIS offered a planning framework and objective evaluation.

As the exchange process developed, it confirmed that this is a process that can be suitably arranged and managed without external support. So long as there is sufficient time and energy given to planning, managing expectations, managing practicalities, identifying engaged and motivated staff and, importantly, offering consistent management support, then authorities can develop their own approaches.

However, to ensure those in placement are fully safeguarded, it was agreed that these exchanges are best supported by the structure and framework offered by CELCIS.

The involvement of a facilitating agency can:

- Assist with planning, structure and evaluation
- Help access wider networks and opportunities
- Bring objectivity
- Help mitigate risk

Risks to successful exchanges would include:

- Poorly-organised placements with no deliberation process
- Limited or inconsistent support from both host and placing authorities/agencies
- Limited time to reflect on or process information (this can happen if placement length is limited)
- Sickness or personal complications

All these risks can be managed by:

- Identifying motivated and positive participants
- Ensuring proper pre-placement planning (including face-to-face meetings)
- Clarity re expectations both for individuals and teams
- Addressing and troubleshooting practicalities
- Contingency planning
- Consistent management support which embraces the exchange process as an investment in staff

Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, the practice learning exchange has been regarded as a very positive and beneficial experience for individual staff members and the broader residential child care teams. The opportunities afforded by mutual peer-peer learning have given an added dimension to the development of professional practice.

Empowering, developing and nurturing staff in this manner, particularly within the residential childcare context, has brought added layers of confidence to practice. It has enabled staff to take a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for developing both themselves and their services.

At relatively low-cost to the sector, depending on the practicalities associated with individual exchanges, this approach offers real potential for shared in-situ learning, which can complement and enhance other staff and sector learning and development opportunities.

Alongside developing skills and knowledge, it offers residential child care staff another avenue to developing practice competence and professional confidence through supportive professional networks, based on a mutual learning experience.

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About CELCIS

Our goal is simple. We want to make a difference. We are totally committed to making positive and lasting improvements in the experiences, life chances and outcomes for Scotland's looked after children and young people. Taking a multi-agency, collaborative approach towards making lasting change thinking and ways of working, with everyone whose work touches the lives of looked after children.

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