

The impact of providing a continuum of care in the throughcare and aftercare process

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Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of a piece of practitioner research. The research examined the impact of providing an aftercare service to young people supported by one voluntary organisation as they make the transition from being 'looked after and accommodated' to living independently in the community. This voluntary organisation has supported children and young people since 1733. It set up an aftercare service in 2004 in response to concerns about the transition of young people into the community. Research in the area of throughcare and aftercare has highlighted major problems (Dixon and Stein, 2002; 2005; Stein, 2006; Elsley et al., 2007). In response to such findings, regulations and guidance were published, outlining responsibilities for supporting young people leaving care (Scottish Executive, 2004). The Regulations and Guidance includes duties to assess and review a young person's aftercare needs and to establish clear plans called *pathways*. In addition to this, reports and guidelines on best practice have been developed which offer support to practitioners (Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, 2006; Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People [SCCYPJ, 2008). The aftercare service on which this paper is based was set up in 2004. The principles behind the service were based on a series of factors identified by young people as being important to them when they were in transition. These factors were:

- Having a relationship with aftercare staff from the time young people are first admitted to the residential units;
- A flexible service which is available in the evenings and at weekends as well as during public holidays;
- Opportunities for group work with other young people in the same situation;
- The opportunity for young people to continue with the support on a voluntary basis;
- Young people able to decide how long they wish to receive support;
- Support plans are individualised, creative and client-led.

This study wanted to investigate if the aftercare service was a positive development and if the service could be adjusted to meet the needs of the young people in a better way.

The aftercare service

The role of the aftercare worker while young people are still in residence includes supporting young people to identify and secure appropriate 'move-on' accommodation. It also involves developing a relationship which will continue for as long as the young person requires this after moving into the community. This can be provided up to age 21, or 25 if they are parents.

Young people are given support to establish themselves in their tenancies. Both aftercare workers and residential staff get involved in decorating flats before young people move to make the flats as pleasant as possible, as the flats offered are often in a relatively poor state.

In addition to individual support, a number of groups are available to assist in aftercare, one such group is the *Feeling Good* group. The aim of the *Feeling Good* group, is to improve young people's self-esteem and confidence. Another example is the mother and toddler group which meets fortnightly and offers professional and peer support to seven young parents and their fourteen children. A variety of other general activity groups are also available.

Methodology

The study was carried out using documentary analysis, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The documentary analysis was carried out to obtain some quantitative data as a starting point for the study. Information was sought on four key performance indicators (PI) for two years before the introduction of the aftercare service and the first two years of the service being in place. The performance indicators and the numbers before and after the service was introduced are outlined in table one:

Table One: Performance indicators before and after enhanced service provision

	Young people leaving	Gender	Average age on leaving	Number losing tenancies within 6-12 months of leaving (PI 1)	Number receiving a criminal conviction after leaving (PI 2)	Number losing contact with support agencies (PI 3)	Number yet to find a job within two years (PI 4)
2002 & 2003 (Pre)	24	65% Female 35% Male	16 yrs 9 mths	24	10	17	20
2004 & 2005 (Post)	19	65% Female 35% Male	16 yrs 11mths	1	2	1	3

As can be seen from the figures, the composition of the resident group was similar over these four years but the outcomes were different.

In January 2007, all young people being supported in the community were given a questionnaire asking their opinions of the service. There was a 90 percent return rate. Ten young people were interviewed individually and the others were involved in a focus group. The interview questions were based on the answers to the questionnaires and the same questions were used as the basis for the focus group discussion.

In terms of sampling, it was important to involve all of the young people who were supported in the community. Even although some had moved from the units before the aftercare service was in place, all of their views were valuable.

Findings

Questionnaires

In looking at the results of the questionnaires, it was noted that the young people had come from a variety of settings before coming to the organisation. The majority had come from foster care or young people's units and all had been identified as young people whose next accommodation would be living on their own in the community. The average length of stay within the organisation was one year.

The length of time before young people were introduced to one of the aftercare workers was dependent on when they lived in the residential unit. Some had lived in the residential unit before there was an aftercare service. Others had come to live in the unit when the aftercare team was very small. This group of young people became involved with an aftercare worker within a month of moving into the unit.

The frequency of contact with the aftercare worker altered as the time for transition became closer. This took the form of individual contact and group sessions, either in activity groups or the *Feeling Good* group.

The majority of young people were visited weekly by their aftercare workers when they first moved out of the residential unit and for the first six weeks they also continued to have weekly support from the residential unit from which they had just moved. The majority of young people highlighted as important the help they were given to get their finances sorted out and the practicalities of getting furniture and decorating their flats.

All the young people said that having an aftercare worker was a good thing. They also reported that the most important things were having someone they knew and trusted to support them and who would sort out practical problems. The availability of aftercare workers at times that suited was also felt to be important as was the opportunity to contact workers outside of normal office hours.

After looking at the answers given in the questionnaires, it was important to hear directly from the young people about why the factors they had identified had been helpful to them. The author also wanted to know how prepared they felt by the time they moved from the residential unit. Finally, it was important to hear if any additional services would have been helpful and also if anything that was being offered was not helpful or could be

improved. This was investigated by conducting semi-structured one-to-one interviews and also by running a focus group.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Five main themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups:

1. Role of the residential unit in the success of life after residential care;
2. Importance of ongoing relationship with aftercare worker;
3. Difficulty of moving from residential environment to independent accommodation;
4. Role of the aftercare worker;
5. Factors which would have contributed to an easier transition.

Role of the residential unit in the success of life after residential care

Young people highlighted the role the residential unit had played in helping them to make a successful transition to living in the community, talking about both the practical and emotional skills they had learned. They also spoke about the fact that they began to trust people again and learned how to relate to people more effectively.

I learnt to trust again, that was a big deal. (Young mother aged 19)

You helped me find a new way to sort out arguments. (Female, aged 20)

I realised I was using things to try and make me happy. (Young mother aged 19)

A young person who did not have English as his first language his English improved and staff took time to help him with this. They also adjusted the environment to enable him to practice his religion. All of the interviewees felt the residential experience had been positive. One young person stated:

The residential unit made me feel safe, something I had not felt before. (Female, aged 21)

While young people also reported that they were left more able to care for themselves, the majority said they wished they had taken more advantage of the support on offer while in residence.

Importance of ongoing relationship with aftercare worker

With regards to the importance of the ongoing relationship with the aftercare worker, young people wanted to know that the person supporting them knew them well and would support them whatever happened. The small things were seen as being meaningful. These included knowing how they took their coffee, support at meetings, workers visiting when they said they would, and practical help to get a suitable flat.

Difficulty of moving from residential environment to independent accommodation

Young people found the worst thing to cope with when they first moved was their feeling of loneliness. They also reported that gate-keeping became an issue because of this, as young people tended to let anyone into their flat which in turn caused problems with neighbours. They said seeing residential staff and their aftercare worker regularly at this time was crucial. Many said if they had the option of going back to the residential unit at this stage they would have 'jumped at the chance'.

Role of the aftercare worker

Young people talked at length about the role of their aftercare worker and highlighted the importance of staff sticking with them, being flexible, being able to be trusted and being around for them for as long as necessary tackling whatever areas for which young people asked for help. This is illustrated in the following comments:

You covered lots of areas, helped me settle in lots of practical ways, painting, getting furniture and sorting out my money and bills but also talked to me about how I was feeling and at that time I was struggling. (Female, aged 21)

You didn't know I was checking you were really listening to what I said from one week to the next but I was. I wanted to know you really cared. (Female, aged 17)

You have stuck with me for years despite the crap I have at times thrown at you and the mental things I have done. No-one else has put up with me whatever. (Young mother aged 20)

You have done things for me that I needed not just what you had to do. (Female, aged 19)

Young people also talked about the importance of the groups on offer. The *Feeling Good* group are run by an aftercare worker who was previously a hairdresser. The group works on issues of self-esteem and personal hygiene, as well as providing free haircuts, and helps young people to feel better about themselves. It provides a service they could not otherwise afford. The young mothers reported that the mother and toddler group provided them with a group where they can share ideas with peers and receive emotional support from one another.

Factors which would have contributed to an easier transition

Young people had a number of ideas about what would have provided better preparation for the move from the residential unit. These included having less money to reflect the reality of living in the community, the opportunity to practice gate-keeping, and practice at seeking out the available resources in the local community. All said the issue of managing money was difficult. Although they had had the opportunity to budget while living in the residential unit, they felt the level of money was unrealistic and therefore this did not prepare them to manage on a tight budget.

It was a nightmare managing on £44 a week when I was used to having £66.50 a week and did not have to pay for fuel. Also I knew I would not be left to starve in the residential unit if I blew my money on something other than food. (Female, aged 17)

Almost all said they would have liked support for longer from the residential staff and the opportunity to return if things did not work out. A number suggested it would be good if there was another step before moving into the community alone in the form of a supported flat.

The move from being in care to living alone in my own flat was a real shock, something in between would have made it easier. (Female, aged 20)

Young people did not have any other suggestions about how aftercare workers could help them; saying more of the same was what they wanted.

Discussion and concluding comments

It was evident from the literature that the issues for young people moving on from residential care have become an area of concern over time, with the outcomes being unacceptable. Statistics show young people leaving the care system being more likely to become homeless, to leave school with fewer qualifications and being over-represented in the prison and youth psychiatric population (Dixon and Stein, 2002; 2005). This is not good enough. There is now both professional and political will to ensure young people in this situation are better served so that their life chances are improved (SCCYP, 2008, Scottish Government, 2008).

In looking at the results of this small study, a number of key factors emerge. First, young people have a great deal of enthusiasm about being engaged in the process of evaluating what we are doing and to explore what could be done better. This enthusiasm was striking in this study, as was their openness about their circumstances and the struggles they had as they moved into their own accommodation.

The area they raised as the most important was having someone who was there for them throughout the process. This person had to be someone who was reliable, that they had assessed as trustworthy, and who treated them as an individual. To fulfil this role the support worker had to be flexible and be consistent, both in their actions and over time. The fact that this support began at the beginning of the residential placement was important as it meant roles were clear and the story only had to be told once. It is now the practice in my organisation to introduce the aftercare worker at the placement meeting to ensure a continuum of support from the beginning of the placement.

None of the factors, which young people highlighted in the research, were a surprise but they emphasised what young people feel is important. This should serve to remind practitioners that our services should be developed to meet the needs which young people find important if they are to make a successful transition to living independently in the community. Engagement with young people can begin to reverse social expectations that young people who have been 'looked after and accommodated' have poor outcomes.

As can be seen from the figures at the beginning of this paper, good quality support can have a major impact on outcomes for young people leaving care. The impact of good support should be appreciated by all care providers.

In recent years throughcare and aftercare has become a recognised field of social work, with staff in this field having become experts in the issues faced by young people in this situation. As with any field of social work we can always do better and there continue to be areas in which young people are looking for more and different support. It seems important that we listen to what they have to say as they are, after all, the true experts.

References

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