

Exploring a role for performance management in residential child care

Russell Sutherland
Unit Manager
Southhouse Young People's Centre, Edinburgh

Introduction

Residential child care has a history which has been marked in recent times by a series of public inquiries (Levy & Kahan, 1991; Marshall, Jamieson & Finlayson, 1999; Waterhouse, 2000). The demand from inquiries for services to learn from their 'mistakes' echoes time after time. Inquiry recommendations place pressure on services to improve their way of working and their management practices.

While agencies such as the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and the Scottish Social Services Council have a role in setting and monitoring standards, it is argued that their activities are not focused enough to ensure that the mistakes highlighted in inquiries will not be repeated. Whilst it is possible to identify factors that indicate good practice, it is harder to evidence their operation in the day-to-day work of residential child care. Children and young people who require residential care are entitled to an experience that will enable them to fulfil their potential safely. It will be argued in this paper that performance management has a role to play in delivering a safe service. Performance management, as it relates to residential child care, is a means of measuring the performance of an organisation and its employees. It is a subjective process that involves seeking to measure both qualitative and quantitative factors. Two frameworks for helping to embed performance management in residential child care will be examined. These are Best Value and the National Standards. This paper seeks to explore the features of performance management and will evaluate *Best Value* and the *National Standards* as frameworks on which to base performance management. It will argue for a more realistic monitoring process for residential child care. Finally, it will suggest that unit managers should be skilled in management models and theories to enable them to achieve better integration between organisational objectives and delivery of services at unit level.

Keywords: performance management, residential child care;

Understanding performance management

There are a variety of models that assist in identifying how best to measure and manage performance. Williams (1998) proposed a model where performance management is a system for integrating and managing organisational goals and employee performance. This model requires the organisation to identify its corporate policy and resource aims in a realistic way by setting out detailed plans relating to budgets, targets, and standards of service delivery. It also requires identifying a means of reviewing the performance of its employees. Performance management

statements produced by local authorities can be so broad that they become vague and unreal, presenting as a pointless exercise for its own sake. In residential child care, such statements need to be contextualised and made real. Organisational statements of aims and objectives should put the 'meat on the bones' of an organisational mission statement and help it to define quality. Such statements outline aspects such as the strategy, policy and goals of the organisation. From these aspects, the outputs of an organisation and the activities that lead to the creation of these outputs are developed. Outputs, however, can be difficult to define in public services and this is acknowledged by Walker, Murray and Atkinson (2003) who state that:

the business model of quality was brought in and imposed on managers and practitioners who were, in the main, unready for such a shift in ethos. Social care is unsuited to such an approach because of the nature of public services (Walker et al., 2003, p. 165).

One way to help define outputs for the public services is to focus on the idea of quality. Quality systems encourage services to be clear and specific when defining outputs. Walker, Murray and Atkinson offer the following definition:

Quality is assessed through the production of professional standards or competencies against which the performance of an individual professional is measured or by some form of inspection or peer review (Walker et al., 2003, p. 163).

This definition of quality helps us to focus on how the service is delivered. An important aspect of service delivery is performance management. Employee performance has been the focus of many of the public inquiries into residential child care and resulting recommendations have reflected an emphasis upon systems of managing employee performance. The main focus of meeting these recommendations has been to examine issues of recruitment, retention, professional qualification, performance accountability and appraisal. While these are areas which are worthy of note, performance management would suggest that we need to focus more sharply on what actually happens in units and how organisational aims and objectives are put into practice. Williams (1998) suggests that performance management should be employee-centred while linking employee performance to organisational performance. For the author, a ready-made tool for achieving this exists in the unit statement of aims. The need for residential child care units to have statements of aims and objectives is a requirement of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. There are 25 factors listed for inclusion in the statement which range from:

'providing information about life in the establishment to children and parents prior to admission' to 'identifying the functions and role of external managers' (Scottish Office, 1997, p. 82).

These factors are reflective of both the management of employee performance and a system that manages organisational performance. Given the apparent acceptance amongst business management theorists that performance management involves managing both employee performance and organisational performance, then it is important to look at their integration. This illustrates the importance for managers of residential child care services to have a broader knowledge of management models

and theories. This is upheld by commentators such as Corby, Doig and Roberts (2001) who asserted that:

heads of homes tended to receive little guidance and to manage [targets] largely by personal influence rather than by more structured management techniques (Corby et al., 2001, p. 174).

This view suggests that the application of management skills to social services should be the norm and not the exception. Indeed such an application would contribute to creating a standardised approach to performance management in residential child care and reduce the risk of further public inquiries.

Integrating organisational objectives and employee performance

One means by which the systems of organisation and employee management can be integrated are found in de Waal and Gerritson-Medema's model of performance management analysis (2006). This model focuses upon both the structural and behavioural sides of performance management. The structural side deals with what needs to be implemented in order to use performance management, for example the identification of key performance indicators. The behavioural side of this equation focuses upon the people within the organisation and how they apply the performance management system. Both sides of this equation need to be given equal attention if their application is to produce positive change at unit level.

This model can appear to be abstract when considered in relation to the demands of managing a residential child care service. Once again, however, a concrete example of this already exists. Inspection and standard-setting contain elements of performance management and a means for establishing accountability outwith that defined by the profession itself. The Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (SCRC) examines both structural and behavioural components of care. While there have been criticisms of the inspection process, there can be no doubt that it can play a positive role in performance management.

Measuring performance (1): Best Value

This means of measuring performance was introduced by the Government through the Local Government Act 1999. Higgins, Jamy and Roper (2005) state that an aim of public sector reform is an objective of Best Value. The performance management framework is designed to achieve continuous improvements in the delivery of local services (Higgins et al., 2005, p. 149).

The Best Value approach is not one in which local authorities have a choice. Best Value is defined by the government as *the duty of continuous improvement for local authorities as set by the Local Government Act 1999* (Communities Department, 2006). Best Value is summarised by Higgins and his associates as requiring each local authority service to be reviewed once every five years. The review is a two-part process. The first part requires local authorities to:

1. Challenge the purpose and methods of existing services. This is done by giving consideration to whether the service is needed and, if so, is it needed in its current form and structure.

2. Compare the performance of services with alternative service providers using a range of indicators. This is to be done by taking the views of service users and potential suppliers into account.
3. Consult with stakeholders such as service users, taxpayers, partner agencies and others involved in the local authority.
4. Compete with alternative sources of supply to ensure effective and efficient services. This includes asking whether another provider would provide a better service.

The second part of the process brings in the performance management component by looking at *the performance comparison processes of performance indicators; audits and inspections* (Higgins et al., 2005, p.148).

The Best Value approach in Scotland was embedded by the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. The accompanying guidance underlined the emphasis on: commitment and leadership; responsiveness and consultation; sound governance and the management of resources; use of review and options appraisal; equality, accountability and sustainable development. The integration of Best Value into the managerial culture of residential child care requires extra work. On the positive side, however, it provides an additional framework by which to demonstrate that young people in units are being provided with safe and nurturing services. The drive from Best Value to secure continuous improvement in the performance of local authority services is admirable. Like other models of measuring performance, however, there are significant subjective elements to this process. For example, the views of service users, politicians, local residents, and social services on where and how best to provide services for young people may well conflict with each other. Additionally, there is a risk that the Best Value process may focus on convincing Best Value inspectors that the community has been consulted and best value achieved rather than looking at the actual process of service provision (Keenan, 2000, p. 49).

How has Best Value been applied to residential child care in practice? Local authorities are required to identify targets and indicators for each of their services. In total there are 79 such indicators, which are set out by Audit Scotland (2006). Of these, only three are directly relevant to the work of residential child care. These are the percentage of care staff with the appropriate qualification for the post held, the educational attainment of looked-after young people measured by standard grade achievements, and the amount of respite care provided. While relevant to the care of young people, it is suggested that these three indicators fall short of what is required to promote safe caring practice in residential child care. Hence, the major strategy for promoting improvements in the performance of local authority services may in fact have a minimal impact upon residential child care. The fact that 76 of Audit Scotland's 79 statutory performance indicators are not directly relevant to residential child care may be an indicator that the role of Best Value as a performance management function is focused at a more corporate and strategic level rather than being service-specific. As Watson commented:

the findings from this study give support to the contention that for front-line workers many of the Government's quality initiatives are limited or irrelevant to the 'real task' of providing services to residents (Watson, 2004, p. 165).

Measuring performance (2): National Standards

The existence of a gap between quality initiatives and the perceptions of front-line staff is supported by Kitchener, Kirkpatrick and Whipp (1999). They state that:

[implementing new models of external management accountability] has involved a complex negotiated and uneven process in which older patterns of autonomy have proved to be resilient ... [and that this has led to a] sometimes ritualistic and partial implementation of management audit (Kitchener et al., 1999, p. 349).

The introduction of National Standards can be interpreted as a means of closing this gap and attempting to ensure that the quality of service delivered is similar across the country. Such a process of standardisation could work if the accountability for their implementation is shared by management and staff, and vigorous inspection of care home services is pursued by external auditors. This section will examine the potential impact of the National Standards on performance measurement.

The creation of the Care Commission as an autonomous body along with the introduction of the National Standards reflects significant change in the concept of inspection and regulation. Morgan (2005) argues that this change has committed the Care Commission to:

modernising welfare inspection, focusing on outcomes for those using services it inspects, gearing inspection to improving rather than just commenting upon services and taking and advocating the viewpoint of the individual child or adult for whom services are provided (Morgan, 2005, p. 94).

Morgan defines outcomes as *what happens to, and what are experienced, by individual children when receiving a service and once they have finished receiving it* (Morgan, 2005, p. 97). The introduction of this new model of inspection and performance measurement does not, however, come without some areas of concern. It may be argued, for example, that the process of inspection allows for too much pre-inspection preparation by a service manager and the staff team. Although there is no clear evidence of this happening, Morgan (2005) outlines a series of messages from children to inspectors. One example from a young person is:

(i)f your visit is expected, expect that things will just have been improved specially for you to see - don't be taken in and think that you are seeing things as they usually are (Morgan, 2005, p. 100).

Also, there is little in the way of critical evaluation of the work of the Care Commission, nor of the impact of the National Standards on improving the service and reducing the risk of abuse. Stevens and Boyce (2006) outlined the views of young people in relation to the National Standards. This study, while valuable, was small-scale and did not examine wider organisational views. Whilst clearly having much to offer both users and providers of residential child care, the National Standards and the creation of the Care Commission can be seen as being *aimed to some degree at reassuring the outside world that regulation and inspection have a much stronger*

element of independence (Corby et al., 2001, p. 178). Potentially, however, it is argued that the National Standards can provide a framework for performance measurement that is more readily adaptable to residential child care services.

Integrating National Standards and performance management

To close the gap identified by Watson (2004) that exists between government strategy initiatives and front-line workers, there needs to be a consistent application of the use of indicators and frameworks. The City of Edinburgh Council has attempted to implement such a model. Within this authority, managers are expected to monitor the work of units by using five different tools derived from a performance management perspective. These are outlined in its performance monitoring guide and consist of:

- quantitative measures of output
- customer feedback
- qualitative reports
- performance appraisal
- statistical information.

These tools are designed to reflect performance review and improvement. The City of Edinburgh Council have also adopted a framework that pins the success of the continuous improvement programme upon the effectiveness of self-evaluation (City of Edinburgh Council, 2005, p. 3). Self-evaluation, in this context, is promoted as being the starting point of the review process. This should be validated by a relevant external inspection. Self-evaluation is based around asking three simple questions. These are outlined in the Departmental Review Procedures Manual and are:

1. How are we doing?
2. How do we know?
3. What are we going to do now?

The manual outlines how to evaluate the service against a set of quality indicators and to allocate a score from a range of one to six for each quality indicator, with level one being 'unsatisfactory' and level six being 'excellent'. The review team will then seek to establish evidence for the statements made in the self-assessment and to make recommendations for improvements in the delivery of the service in relation to the quality indicators. This review team is formed by a member of the Department's own quality improvement team and a practitioner trained in the use of this framework. The quality indicators themselves are drawn from the National Standards. The process can be criticised as it lacks much in the way of being 'arms length' given that the self-evaluation and its subsequent review are carried out by employees of the same department. Also, this approach to performance measurement carries significant levels of subjectivity. It is argued, however, that by using National Standards tied to explicit models of performance management that workable frameworks for ensuring positive outcomes in residential child care can be achieved.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is a range of differing frameworks for measuring performance. The two that have been specifically explored in this paper are those of Best Value and the National Care Standards. The difficulty with Best Value is that only three statutory

performance indicators out of 79 relate directly to the work of residential child care. Within itself, this is hardly sufficient to maintain safe care. The National Standards are specific and contextualised to residential child care and may provide a better framework for measuring performance and service outcomes.

Both of these frameworks reflect government priorities to impose quality-driven improvements upon the delivery of local authority services. No-one would disagree that residential child care should be quality driven. Our children deserve no less. However, the means by which we drive up quality has to be explored in order to make it fit for purpose. The responsibility for doing this must lie with those who manage the service. Hence, performance management needs to have a higher profile amongst social service managers. The registration process for managers of residential child care expects that these managers have both a social work and a management qualification. An understanding of performance management needs to be part of the training and should become part of the continuous professional development of managers currently in post. After all, improvements in local authority service delivery can only be achieved by those who work in it.

Unless the performance management agenda is an integral part of the job it will remain a tokenistic task. There is an opportunity in this twenty-first century to see residential child care service develop both its practice skills and its management skills. If performance management frameworks can be embedded in the cultural ethos of residential child care, then the route to developing quality services in which young people fulfil their potential may well be set out.

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