

Thinking about peer support for looked after children and young people



Introduction

This half-day seminar in March began with a short presentation about peer support. Four main types were highlighted:

- ◆ befriending;
- ◆ mentoring;
- ◆ mediation;
- ◆ counselling.

The examples used to illustrate each of these schemes came from school settings and focused on bullying, isolation and helping individuals to reach their full potential. The schemes were then considered in the context of young people who are in, or who have left, local authority care.

While the seminar focused on services delivered by Norfolk Social Services, it is equally relevant to other areas of the country. Participants included a range of professionals from education, social services, health, and community work, and also three young people with experience of living in care. The issues that they raised showed that even the most skilled and knowledgeable adults cannot always see things from the perspective of young people — simply because they are no longer young.

Whenever vulnerable groups are identified, young people in public care are frequently included. National research has clearly shown that they are over represented in a variety of disadvantaged groups (Warren 1999; Broad, 1998). The Quality Protects initiative has also highlighted the need for local authorities to improve the life chances of the young people in their care, particularly in terms of their educational achievement, health and general lifestyle. For these reasons it is important that social services departments consider initiatives and schemes from a variety of settings on behalf of the young people in their care.

The contribution that peer support schemes could make to the lives of young people in public care was the starting place for the seminar discussion. A list of benefits for those providing and those receiving peer support was quickly generated. Overall there was a sense that peer support could make a very positive contribution to the lives of young people in care.

How peer support can help

Participants were asked what they perceived to be the benefits of peer support for looked after children. Examples of some of the points made are included below:

- ◆ addresses isolation to which young people in care are particularly vulnerable;
- ◆ raises young people's confidence and self-esteem;
- ◆ knowing someone is there if you need them;
- ◆ helps with difficulties such as bullying;
- ◆ gives opportunities to share experiences of being looked after;
- ◆ a young person who has been in care may offer a positive role model to others still in the system;
- ◆ young people may be able to 'speak out' if they have peer support (promoting safe care);
- ◆ this type of scheme can help the service to improve — feedback by peer supporters;
- ◆ it benefits the peer supporter as well as the supported young person:
 - being valued;
 - self-esteem;
 - skills – active listening and problem solving;
 - keeping safe.

Many of the benefits of peer support for young people in care are similar to those for all children and young people. Additional benefits include sharing experiences of being looked after, being offered a positive role model by someone who has been in care, and, for the peer supporter, the opportunity to influence the care offered by local authorities.

What are the main concerns?

Participants were asked to identify their concerns about looked after young people accessing and providing peer support. Common themes were: the need for standards regarding training, support and supervision; selection of peer supporters; confidentiality and funding. Additional concerns included adult views about peer supporters, and access. Examples of the points made are:

- ◆ Peers would need to understand the rules, their limitations, for example, confidentiality – child abuse disclosures;
- ◆ confidentiality — when to pass on information

- and when to maintain confidentiality;
- ◆ accusations may be an issue with one-to-one work.
- ◆ having a clear 'strategy' to ensure that everyone who might be affected is aware/trained as necessary;
- ◆ some young people may not have enough maturity to cope;
- ◆ giving the 'wrong' advice;
- ◆ young person not 'transferring' baggage to others;
- ◆ sanity and welfare of 'supporters';
- ◆ selection – standards/criteria/ability;
- ◆ selection of peer supporters? Self-selection/volunteers/selected by professionals. Reasons for doing this – the needy helping the needy;
- ◆ funding – who, how and for what – serious investment is needed;
- ◆ recruitment, confidentiality, training, support for peer supporters, boundaries – what are the resource implications;
- ◆ adults may not take peer support seriously and may even find it threatening, so it needs to be embraced by the system providing peer support;
- ◆ accessing looked after young people - should every young person be accessed? How? Where? The location of young people in care is scattered and mobile;
- ◆ accessing the peer supporters – how do they do it without everyone knowing? How do they reach difficult locations, such as rural settings;
- ◆ one-to-one peer support would be difficult to implement because young people move around.

Most of the concerns identified above are likely to be shared by other peer support schemes. The key difference relates to how 'mobile' some young people in public care appear to be. School and placement moves may mean that one-to-one peer support is harder to maintain. Not all young people in public care experience excessive moves but clearly for those who do, peer support may not be workable.

Overcoming concerns

The participants were asked to consider how their concerns might be overcome and how the models discussed at the beginning of the day could be transferred to care settings. This led to discussions about who should be involved in peer support schemes for young people in public care and ideas about best practice.

The need for schemes to be universally accessible, flexible enough to meet different needs, and linked to social services policy, were key features of the

group's discussions. Additional themes were the need to secure substantial long-term funding; the potential role of the voluntary sector; using information technology; and the importance of asking young people who are or have been looked after by Norfolk Social Services what they wanted. Examples of the points made are:

- ◆ provide a range of services, which match individual needs, for example very informal (drop-in) to formal opt-in/referral;
- ◆ ensure that the scheme is included in the local Social Services User Involvement Strategy.
- ◆ establish funding, e.g. from Connexions, Children's Fund;
- ◆ look at ways of connecting to other schemes:
 - non-social services;
 - other areas;
 - common interest (e.g. football);
- ◆ keep it in the voluntary sector;
- ◆ local authority is responsible for peer support services but can buy in the service from provider organisations;
- ◆ benefits of the 'Listeners' scheme can be transferable to looked after children (local scheme provided for prison inmates where prisoners are trained and supported by the Samaritans to be peer 'listeners' for other inmates);
- ◆ use the internet to set up safe chat rooms for looked after young people —multi-media approach, for example, part of Kids In Care Together (KICT) website;
- ◆ shareline (Helpline) number and/or website;
- ◆ consult with young people - what do they need?

Discussions around the potential benefits of setting up befriending and mentoring schemes in different care settings resulted in a number of exciting practical suggestions, some of which are included below.

Befriending

- ◆ introduce young people to (a different) area in Norfolk and care system e.g. someone moving from King's Lynn to Norwich;
- ◆ introduce young people to a new school 'buddy';
- ◆ residential — existing residents are given befriending role for 'new' residents;
- ◆ long-term residential units could work as a county resource for peer support and provide ongoing support when young people leave care (peer supporters would not offer support to someone in their own unit);
- ◆ foster carers' own children could support looked after children and each other.

Mentoring:

- ◆ would work similarly to befriending, for example, to support young people not attending school;

- ◆ young people who are leaving care being mentored by young people who have left;
- ◆ enabling mentors with skills to help young people who want to develop those skills (e.g. maths, sport, dance, skate-boarding etc);
- ◆ mentors for specific goals/settings e.g. sorting out college/university.

All four groups seemed to be less comfortable with the idea of Mediation and Counselling schemes. One group commented: 'Mediation and Counselling (are a) big challenge for ANYONE. Needs clarity, training etc.'

The training received by adults and peer supporters, and the need for quality supervision/ support, were also identified as key issues.

Recommendations and summary

The groups were asked to identify how the issues that they had been discussing could be taken forward. Common themes included consulting with young people, the need for policy, networking and funding. Overall there was a sense that this was the beginning of a much larger piece of work, which would benefit from national direction and close multi-agency working. There was an acknowledgement that if peer support schemes were to be successfully transferred into care settings, some thought would need to be given to the complexity of the care system and the fact that it is multi-

faceted.

The potential benefits of peer support schemes for young people in public care have been clearly highlighted, as have some practical ideas about the way forward. With appropriate resources (including funding), befriending and mentoring schemes could be introduced fairly quickly.

If the enthusiasm from this half-day seminar is to be harnessed, Norfolk Social Services needs to:

- ◆ consult with the children and young people in its care and those who have left about befriending and mentoring peer support schemes;
- ◆ bring together a group of professionals and young people to consider how to integrate befriending and mentoring schemes within Norfolk Social Services policy documents, including the 'User Involvement Strategy';
- ◆ bring together a multi-agency group of practitioners and young people to take forward the issues raised in the seminar.

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References:

Warren (1999) *Too Much Too Young: Action on Aftercare Consortium*, 1996.

Broad B (1998) *Young People Leaving Care: Life after the Children Act*

With support from

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