

A Good Childhood:

Contextual Safeguarding in a Children's House

Background

North Lanarkshire's commitment to end the disproportionate criminalisation of care experienced young people is underpinned by our implementation of a contextual safeguarding approach to young people facing risks in the community. Contextual Safeguarding shifts the focus from a policing/anti-social behaviour approach to a welfare approach that upholds young people's rights to be safe in their community.

We have applied this approach in one of our children's houses where young people were at risk in the community but also in conflict with the law.

What was the response?

The external brought together practitioners from the Children's House, locality-based social work teams and policing partners as well as sexual health services.

Practitioners were encouraged to think about concerns raised in a contextual way, considering the risks posed outside of the children's home. Social Work staff worked with the home's workers to encourage a reframing of language and practice: to help them move from thinking of the young people as "taking risks" to thinking of them "as being at risk". This helped focus attention on different contexts of concern and which context was placing young people most at risk of significant harm.

A coordinated multi-agency response included:

- A move from individualised to group-based work, working with four young people together as a group.
- Work with parents and carers to support them understand the significance of risk that their children were experiencing and the value of group-based work.
- Peer mapping and safety planning with individual young people to explore relationships outside of the peer group and the areas they frequented.
- Information was shared - with the young people's consent - with the police on the peer group's networks and the risks of extra-familial harm posed.

- Peer mapping with the peer group explored the relationships between the four young people and non-resident young people (and whether these young people were also at risk of harm).
- Alongside the police, the young people assessed the safety of their accommodation and some of the vulnerabilities associated with the space. The layout of CCTV was changed to capture vehicle registration plates.
- The police used vehicle registration plates to speak to individuals about their frequenting of accommodation for minors. They were also able to identify young people named via peer mapping and investigate if recruited into organised crime, initiating further disruption work.
- As part of the ongoing work regarding reducing missing episodes, the service revised their missing protocol for young people aged 16 and over. This followed discussions between children's social care, young people and partners from policing and health on how best to balance young people's request for more age-appropriate freedom and any risks posed.

What difference did this make?

The young people reported feeling more settled in their accommodation and missing episodes significantly reduced. With additional outreach support provided from accommodation staff, one young person returned home to their family. All young people received educational attainments, including one young person starting an apprenticeship. Young people reported feeling much more valued, listened to and that their views were respected and understood.

Peer mapping and safety planning work also supported subsequent development of positive relationships with professionals. Staff anxieties around the risk and harms occurring outside the accommodation were much more contained, enabling a more supportive relationship. Specifically, relationships with the police improved. Two of the young people had been charged previously, reacting aggressively to any police contact reflecting a trauma response. Four to five months after the work was initiated, they would sit with community police officers and engage in dialogue.

The Fundamentals: Tackling Poverty

To address the core principle of tackling poverty to keep The Promise, North Lanarkshire is committed to ambitious plans to provide direct cash support as a fundamental component of family support.

The social work service therefore used its pandemic response monies to set up a scheme to support a strengths-based approach to working with families, empowering workers to provide direct and practical support to families and young people to mitigate the impacts of COVID with a minimum of bureaucracy. The financial assistance has supported children in a wide variety of creative ways, for example, by providing

- essential items such as beds and bedroom furniture, desks, and equipment to support learning;
- outdoor equipment for play and physical activity;
- specific purchases to support children on the autistic spectrum, for example a hot tub, an aquarium, sensory play equipment;
- greater equality of opportunity to access clubs and sports as lockdown eases through the provision of fees and equipment such as football strips, music tuition, dance classes.

The scheme also gave staff the opportunity to relate to families in new ways, learning more through conversations on the family's perspective of need and challenges faced as well as supporting relationships by providing opportunities to work *with* families, for example, by building furniture or equipment together with families and young people.

Through the scheme the service supported 1925 families (many more children) and care experienced young people from a fund of £1,498,839.

The service worked in partnership with CELCIS to evaluate the impact of the direct payments on meeting the wellbeing needs of children and young people and also how effective the scheme was in promoting strengths-based approaches to working with young people and families.

Responding to a survey 90% agreed or strongly agreed to feeling happier as result of the payment and 92% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt supported by their school or social workers. 33% of respondents reported that their relationship with their worker was 'much better' after having had a conversation about what financial support could promote wellbeing.