

‘My social worker listened to me and really cared what happened to me. She tried really hard for me and stuck by me when I was doing a lot of bad things’.

‘The social workers tried to get you on the right path, like sorting out problems at school; they did their best with you, to get you a better education and get you to make good decisions about things’.

WHAT WERE YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS OF SERVICES?

Key points

- More young people considered social work services as having been a good support or influence over their lives than those who considered it a negative one,
- The majority of young people thought their involvement with social work services had been ‘good and bad’ and were able to describe the ways in which it had helped them, but had also had difficult aspects.
- Young people also made observations about how some professional staff had made more of a difference to them than others.
- Young people appreciated social workers and other professional staff who were open and honest, non-judgmental and who listened to them.
- Undertaking practical tasks and activities with staff was seen as an important way of engaging with them and less threatening or ‘boring’ than sitting and talking; constructive discussion often took place while sharing tasks.
- Young people gained a great deal of confidence and feelings of self-worth from opportunities to participate, achieve and earn respect from other people.
- The young people interviewed were generally very insightful and realistic about services.

‘If you’ve had a bad experience with a social worker early on you stop taking them seriously. The best ones tell you straight out and don’t beat about the bush. They are honest with you, straight like; they explain things to you better’.

Young man, aged 17 years.

‘I can talk to my throughcare worker easily; he understands me. The staff there have a good attitude and have time to spend with you – doing more stuff and helping with practical things’.

Young man, aged 18 years.

CONCLUSION

- It is clear from this study that, in the main, the interventions provided by social work services and partnership agencies in South Ayrshire are making a positive difference to many of the young people with whom they become involved.
- There is evidence of a strong ethos of commitment and caring in the approach taken to the work, which is reflected in the generally positive relationships formed between young people and staff.
- There are a group of young people who are struggling to engage effectively with services; some of these young people require more focused interventions, if possible at an early stage of their lives, to help them cope with damaging family experiences, which may have resulted in mental health issues.
- Many of the services are working in ways which provide a strong basis for interventions to be developed which focus on strengthening the foundations young people require to engage and succeed.

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A copy of the full report is available at:
http://www.chyps.co.uk/familysupport/children_strategy.shtml

Staying Afloat: Effective Interventions with Young People in South Ayrshire

An evaluation of the impact of social work services and related agencies on outcomes for young people.

SUMMARY



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RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS

The research study commenced in June 2006 and was commissioned by the multi-agency 16+ Transitions Group within South Ayrshire Council. The purpose was to identify how interventions could be most effectively targeted to improve long-term outcomes for young people involved with social work services. There was a particular interest in those young people with complex social and emotional needs who, despite having been in receipt of multiple interventions, were in some cases having difficulty in making effective use of supports and services. These young people were struggling to achieve the considerable demands expected of them during the transition to independent living and, in some instances, for several years after.

The overall aim of the study was to outline the range of services offered by social work and related agencies and identify any particular models of intervention or common features within these which appear to have been successful in engaging and working effectively with young people, thereby helping to produce positive outcomes for them.

THE FINDINGS

WHY WERE YOUNG PEOPLE REFERRED?

Key points

- Most of the young people included in the study who became involved with social work services before the age of ten were referred for reasons which related to significant and often multiple family difficulties.
- There were a high percentage of young people referred at five years or younger whose families were previously known to social work services.
- Parental difficulties sometimes included significant mental health problems and substance misuse issues. Family relationship issues in some cases included violence, either between adults or affecting all family members.
- In some cases, services were clearly required to address deep-rooted issues for young people, requiring considerable resources and challenges.
- Those young people referred after the age of 14 often presented issues relating to problematic behaviour in the school or the community; however, in some cases this reflected wider family issues which required further assessment and engagement with the family to effectively address.

WHAT WERE THE SERVICES AVAILABLE AND HOW DID AGENCIES WORK TOGETHER?

Key points

- The study found that the services available to young people in the area were wide-ranging and that in general communication between agencies was good, in relation to planning and co-ordinating work across services.
- Interventions were used flexibly and were tailored as far as possible to the needs of individual young people.
- The strengths identified in the work with young people included an ability to form co-operative relationships with them, the strong commitment shown by many staff and the creative ways in which problem-solving was approached.
- There were well-established procedures and multi-agency meeting groups aimed at identifying, and agreeing resources for, services for individual young people.
- There was considered to be scope for services to be developed in a more strategic way which would minimise the chances of interventions duplicating work with young people.
- While some gaps in services were discernible, there were clearly identified strengths in the way in which many services succeeded in engaging with young people.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE? (in general and individually)

Key points

- Overall there was a high proportion of young people for whom positive or medium to positive outcomes were recorded, taking into account the complex family circumstances and needs of many of them.
- Of the young people referred under the age of 14, there were an equal number for whom positive or medium to positive outcomes were recorded as those with medium to poor or poor outcomes. However, a high number of those young people referred at age 14 or over were recorded as having positive or medium to positive outcomes.
- In relation to general outcomes for the whole group, there were a higher proportion of positive outcomes recorded in the areas of: living situation; and family and social relationships.
- The self-esteem factors identified by young people themselves were broadly located in the following areas: forming strong and positive relationships, participating in new activities and benefiting from opportunities, winning awards and prizes and making positive choices.
- Approximately half the young people in the study were accommodated at some stage in their lives and a high proportion of them were maintained in the local community; residential school placements featured for a significant number of the others, for some of whom positive outcomes were recorded.

The preventative work being undertaken with families by the Family Centre was intensive and, in some cases, endeavoured to manage high-risk situations. The indications were that satisfactory, and in some cases good, progress was being made with most of the families.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCH INDICATE ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SERVICES ON OUTCOMES?

Key points

- The social work role was crucial in relation to undertaking detailed assessment of need and providing a consistent adult with an overview of the young person's development, ideally over a significant time period. It was clearly an additional advantage if the young person was able to form a positive and trusting relationship with his or her social worker.
- The wide range of services available meant that there was a greater likelihood that the young person would engage with at least one intervention and form a trusting relationship with at least one adult. The challenge was balancing this with the need to avoid duplication of intervention and the young person feeling 'swamped' by professional workers and contact with agencies.
- For some young people, the difficulty in using services effectively was less about their willingness to engage or 'buy into' services than their ability to do so. These young people had deep-rooted issues which had not been resolved at an earlier stage of their lives and they were consequently unable to meet many of the demands made of them by agencies, however supportive.
- The ineffectiveness of interventions for young people with very complex needs indicated that more resources should perhaps be targeted at the younger age group, primary school age and below, particularly in the area of mental health and in resilience-building in general.
- The study findings indicated that services were relatively successful in helping young people to achieve positive outcomes in relation to their accommodation and in developing good family and social relationships. Education and employment and social behaviour were comparatively problematic areas, possibly in part as a result of difficulties in relation to mental health and coping skills.
- The promotion of resilience, including graduated independence skills and opportunities for risk-taking in a safe environment, would be beneficial in helping young people make the transition to independence.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Key points

- The main strengths of the recording systems were the referral and planning forms which were widely and effectively used, for example when referring a young person to a resource group meeting or some specific services; similar systems and materials might be developed to record intervention goals and to review progress.
- Case recording formats need to be developed and used, probably employing a computer-based system.
- It would be useful for systems to be put in place to enable information about interventions taking place with a young person across all services involved to be collated and kept within a central case file.
- The planned introduction of the Integrated Assessment Framework will require new ways of working and recording, involving all relevant agencies; it might be beneficial to monitor the effectiveness of the Framework as a tool for addressing the identified gaps before devising new systems which may lead to some duplication of work.

An example of a service which works with young people to develop most of the main protective factors is the Youth Support Team, with its emphasis on relationship building and positive role modelling, communication, creating opportunities and broadening experience, and enhancing confidence and social skills. Its new Music Group project, as an example, is supporting young people to take responsibility by working together to organise and find funding for a music rehearsal space and equipment.

THE STUDY USED BOTH QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS:

- quantitative data was systematically obtained from 78 case files in relation to young people's circumstances and the reasons they were initially referred;
- qualitative information from case files allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the impact of services as recorded by social workers and other professionals involved with the young person;
- qualitative data was obtained through 19 face-to-face interviews with young people on their views and experiences of social work services and with seven professional workers from both social work services and other agencies involved in service provision.

The information available about outcomes for young people was analysed using a framework which referenced a range of sources. By combining these, six dimensions were identified which related to different areas of work with young people and goals within these, with young people's outcomes measured on a four point scale from positive to poor.

An outcomes framework was developed to include risk and protective factors within each dimension. The four groups of young people, designated by age of first referral, were studied to see if common features emerged in relation to the enhancement of protective factors and positive outcomes. It was possible to give some indications as to which interventions had made a contribution towards strengthening young people's protective factors, thereby building resilience and standing them in good stead for the demanding stage of transition to early adulthood.

In undertaking research of this type it is important to acknowledge that, in addition to the impact of professional services, there will be a number of other factors which influence the direction of young people's lives. The difficulties in reliably assessing the impact of social work services in isolation from other external influences are widely recognised. The relationship between intervention and outcome is complex and it is only possible to offer indications as to the likely impact of particular services.