



This publication has been produced with the financial support of the SPECIFIC PROGRAMME "DAPHNE III" (2007-2013) of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.

With the financial support of the Daphne III Funding Programme of the European Union

Focus Group Report (Manchester London October 2013) for the 'Alternatives to Custody' Project - Developing Intensive & Remand Services

Introduction

Daphne III 'Alternatives to Custody for Young Offenders - Developing Intensive and Remand Fostering Program' held a focus group in October 2013 In Manchester involving young people with experience of care and custody. The focus group was conducted as part of an initiative between four main partners from the UK, Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary to develop a European good practice model of Intensive and Remand Fostering Programmes for young offenders on the basis that such programmes have the potential to provide vulnerable young people with opportunities to achieve better social and personal outcomes than the experience of custody.

Participants provided information in two ways: group discussion and written responses.

The focus group was designed to gather information from young people in regard to the following outcomes:

1. Their experiences of Youth Justice and custody, youth services, the looked after system, and their overall journey to their current living circumstances
2. How being in care/ looked after has supported or helped them or negatively impacted on their involvement in the youth justice system
3. Their perspectives on custody, alternatives to custody and potential effects on their offending behaviours including social and community considerations
4. Their perspectives on supports to their families which may impact on their offending

As well as attending the Focus Group, the young people were asked to provide written responses to 15 questions.

1. What support/help? Is/has been provided to birth parents/family of origin. If this isn't/wasn't provided, what would have been effective for you.
2. What does fostering mean to you? What would you rename it if you could?
3. Where would it be best for intensive/remand fostering placements to be-close to/far from home? Why?
4. What are the good and bad things about being placed outside of your home town?
5. What support is available for you now?



6. Where do you go, who do you go to, for advice/information?
7. Has there been anything negative about your care experience which you think has triggered offending behaviour? If so what would have prevented it?
8. Would returning home with family support be an option as an alternative to custody for you? What would the support need to look like if so?
9. Do you think it would be a good option to have support available to remain in contact with your intensive/remand fostering placement when you leave?
10. Given that many young people report lack of placement stability being an issue, while unlikely for young people to be able to stay in a special placement, should contact and supportive environment be maintained?
11. How would education work best? Should you be sent to a new school while you're in the foster placement or try and stay with the existing school?
12. Is it best for your education to be in mainstream or in specialist classes if you're behind in any subjects?
13. What do you think would work for you as a young person?
14. Did any of you young people have any positive role models [explain this phrase a bit more] to look up to for help?
15. If you had the choice of remand/intensive fostering placement instead of being locked up in a secure unit, STC or young offenders. What would you choose if you could?

Participant Demographics

- Seven young people took part in the focus group
- One young person responded to the questionnaire
- Four female and Three male, White/ British
- One male aged 18 years (Care leaver)
- One male aged 17 years
- One female aged 13
- One female aged 14 years
- One female and one male aged 15 years
- One female aged 16 Years
- All except the 18 year old male were "looked after" (in the care of the Local Authority)
- All had experience of the criminal justice system
- All the young people came from the northern regions of England



Participant Perspectives

Outcome 1:

Their experiences of Youth Justice and custody, youth services, the looked after system, and their overall journey to their current living circumstances

Key Themes

- Trauma
- Belonging

Each of the young people participating in the focus group had care experience 6 of them current. They were all open about their views on care prior to becoming looked after and the fact that it was nothing like the real experience.

“To be honest, it may sound stupid, but I thought, before I got put into care, I thought it was like one of them holiday parks, like some holiday park with caravan or summat. Little did I know it wasn't like that. It was horrible. And the only memory that I have of when I lived there is getting taken away in a police car, bawling my eyes out and not knowing what was going on. My mum was in agony... bawling her eyes out and that's the only memory I can remember, I wouldn't want any child to ever to go through that ever, so that's why I'm working with kids.”

“Some people look on you as different, because you're not living in a house with both your biological parents or just one of them, you're looked on as a different person, cause you have different people every day looking after you. You don't live with your parents; you don't live with siblings; you live with probably people that you've never even met before in your whole life and sometimes you do come across the lucky thing where you have met someone before you go in, but it's more about being different...”

Needing to belong was a key theme in the discussion relating to care experience providing a sense of security and within the criminal justice system as a factor in re-offending. Generally the young people felt that being in care meant they were treated more leniently when in contact with the police or the CJS .

“If I weren't in care yeah, I woulda been in prison, cause my mate got sent down for things we did, and they let me off, put me on ISSP and tagged me cause I were in care and he wasn't.”

“I'm not saying I like being arrested, but it makes you get treated like everyone else. And that kind of made me think, hang on a minute, this is the only time that I get treated any other person on the



street... In any other situation you get singled out cause you're in care. It's like you're in care, you're a bad'un aren't you. But it's like other things, like when you get arrested it's kinda like nice to get treated the same. If you know what I mean, it's like nice to feel the same as everyone else... Part of the community."

Three of the young people had experience of being in secure units and felt that reflecting on this experience they had felt safe perhaps for the first time although they may have fought against it. One also commented that she benefitted from the discipline of routine it gave them.

Outcome 2:

How being in care/ looked after has supported or helped them or negatively impacted on their involvement in the youth justice system

Key Themes

- **Negative stereotyping**
- **Stress: Finding inspiration an outlet**
- **Positive influences/ people who care**

Young people spoke about the challenges facing them when all the messages they receive not just because they are in care but because of the recession and the difficulties facing everyone, give them little hope of a future. They did feel that their care experience compounded this and existing negative stereotypes about them reinforced feeling of low self-worth leading to offending behavior.

*"People always seem to think that kids who are in care are always bad, they're always violent, they're always abusive, they're always a *bad* kid as such, but I think the mentality should change. So what if we're in care, it doesn't mean we're bad kids, it means I've got parents who don't look after us properly or who are in a bad situation. It doesn't necessarily mean we went out and stabbed a guy. It just means that one, we're not emotionally ready, and two, it's just the fact that we're just normal people. And people seem to think, oh the bad kids they're in care, and it's not right."*

"I done bad and I know I've done bad, I've sat there for days on me own and thought about stuff that I have done, and I am sorry for the stuff that I have done in the past, but I don't think like I'm a bad person. I don't consider like everyone like, just cause people are saying he's in care he's a bad kid, I didn't think I was a bad kid, you know what I mean, I still just thought, you know, I'm me. But more, more to the point like, when people were saying he's a bad kid, and then when I was sitting there thinking I'm not bad, I'm not doing anything bad, but then that gave me the incentive to do something that was bad, cause everyone was calling me bad, you're a bad kid, so yeah, I'll go and do something that was bad and next thing they know, couple of days later they've heard that I've done that thing, you know what I mean. That's how it kinda started, for me you know"



“And then every time you get a battle, soon as you’re in a group of more four and five oh he’s gang affiliated now. So then that gets put on your record.”

The young people spoke about the importance of having an outlet for the stress they experience; some turning to music whilst other to art and creative writing. The key for them sustaining these activities though was having someone who inspires them, who believes in them, who believes that they have value and can achieve; at least one positive and accessible role models. All of the young people had heard of Ben Ashcroft and his experiences and been inspired by his journey. Most of the young people also identified about their YOT worker, for another it was a police officer as the people who not only inspired them but whose support provided a sense of stability and honesty.

I think the staff at my care home are or any care home are quite, I don't know what the word is like...they help you to figure out what you're doing, kind of thing, does that make sense, so you come to them for help, they're like yeah I'll give you help, but again it has to be broke down, they don't get enough credit for what they do I don't think.”

“Well I can remember a time when I got restrained at school. I got restrained face down on the carpet and one of the staff said to me, in my year, they went, sorry for my language again, but "don't (mess) your life up, cause if you carry on doing this, you won't get education and you won't get a life" and since that day I've kinda thought, jeez, I need to seriously step up a bit. And that was my inspiration.

The group also spoke about how being in care changed the path they believed they were on. This was summed up by one young person;

“I think if I didn't get put in care, I would not be where I am right now, I would be a lot worse. I'd be going out robbing, I'd be burgling and all like that that, just cause I wanted to be a sheep and follow my big brother. And then he got remanded into care, so that brought social services into my life... Before, I'd think like oh, well I'll rob this, I don't care about that person. But now like I see someone robbing something, I'd actually probably go grass them up. Just cause it's cause like the other person has worked for that stuff. To work, they've had to work, go out, work to get the kids what they need and everything like that and for someone to just go up and steal it like I used, that's bad... I think just because they moved me out of the area, where I was at. I stopped hanging along with group, stopped following my brother and being a sheep”

Outcome 3:

Their perspectives on custody, alternatives to custody and potential effects on their offending behaviors including social and community considerations

Key Themes:

- **Punishment v Welfare**



The young people had a lot to say about “punishment” and “welfare”. Whilst recognizing that they may have committed offences for which there should be some form of punishment as they needed to be held accountable for their actions, others had experienced periods in secure accommodation where they felt they were being punished but had not committed any crime.

“I was put in a secure unit right, for caring for my parents, right, so exactly what you're saying there's gonna be the worst young people in society or some of the most damaged young people in society, yeah, and that, the rules and regulations of that secure unit is gonna fit all, it's gonna be for everyone, regardless of what we've done. I never broke the law, I went in to a secure unit and taken into care, for caring for my parents, yeah, yet I suffered the same kind of treatment that all those other people in there did who committed crimes, who committed murder and things like that.”

“We (should be) punished and helped at the same time.”

Strong views were expressed about preferences between “care” and custody, hinting at the importance of connections with friends and a sense of normalcy.

“Prison, with me mate would be preferable to care)... I would have been better in jail...It would sort me out.”

“(Much better in prison)...you get TV and you get pool table, you get your own personal gym, it's like, I swear to god it's like a luxury hotel.”

“Yeah but if you're in, say like you get moved into like prison yeah, you're with your mates, it's better that you're with your mates than on the outside you're on your own and all your mates are in prison. It's a lot more better (than care).”

“I've been to YOTs and you've just said YOT and I've been to YOTs three times, it may contradict what I'm about to say cause I've been to YOTS three times, but it does actually help anger management wise. Even though I've been there three times, YOT is really good for anger management. You just sit there and talk to someone. Cause they don't have to tell the staff what you've said, it's just like private, for once in your life it's private.”

“but surely right, going up to what we just said about the foster parent and the secure unit, surely going into an intensive foster care, yeah it's intense yeah, but it's still a positive thing, because oh yeah, I've just remembered I can do this and then go into a foster placement that's intense, but I'm still classed as normal cause I've got people looking after me, yeah, it's like that because you could live in a perfectly normal family home with both your biological parents and still have therapists come out and see you and stuff like that yeah? So it's just a way of saying, ah well done, we'll put you in a foster placement where you'll still technically be normal but it's intense, whereas they should be put in a secure unit where they can actually feel the justice being brought down on them.”



One young person expressed a view contrary to other group members about the benefit of being placed away from their communities and families.

“No (better to be placed away) if they lived near their parents. Like I know I would try and find my mum and go missing to go and find my mum.”

Outcome 4:

Their perspectives on supports to their families which may impact on their offending

Key Themes:

- **The importance of family and staying connected**
- **Not wanting to speak about birth family**

The young people seemed reticent to speak about their birth families steering discussions towards their “care” experiences or the actions of social workers. When they did touch on their families, it was clear that initial memories of becoming looked after were still fairly raw as were related feelings.

“Well, it was negative like my dad died, and then I started becoming a bit of a terror. Then got put in care, and then I was still a little terror, but it was when like I got arrested for running away and they brought me home. Then I got arrested the same night for disruptive behaviour. Erm, and then I finally realised hang on, just because I've lost one parent, doesn't mean I've lost another. So, it was my mum what changed my world. And then in was moving into a more stable placement from a, for myself, to keep myself from myself really. Stop me from hurting myself.”

“In a foster placement you don't, in my other foster placement, I didn't really, it might sound selfish, but I didn't really think about my mum cause I was in a family situation, but in a residential, I thought where's my mum gone. I think.”

“My mum asked for support with me, yeah and the word support to some social workers means put them in care [snaps fingers].”

Recommendations/ Conclusions

1. All UK studies show that whilst fewer than 2% of all young people have contact with children's services during their life, Looked after Children (LAC) are over-represented within the youth criminal justice system with around 24% of the youth custodial population have previously been LAC. Magistrates regularly raise concerns that they have LAC before them who have been charged with minor offences, which generally wouldn't have involved the police or resulted in a charge if the young person were being brought up in a family setting.



The focus group was in the main positive about their foster and residential care experiences although this was by no means unanimous.

2. Security is linked firmly to belonging, belonging is firmly linked to connections therefore the question of preference between custody and “care” was a complex one to determine in the time frame allowed. The young people talked about the security provided through friendships as being a determining factor through which both are viewed and were clear that the status of “care” or custody added little. They recognised that “justice” needs them to be socially accountable but they also value “care” which recognizes both their welfare needs. None of the young people had experience of remand or intensive fostering and none had heard of Intensive Fostering before involvement in this program but were generally welcoming of the approach in addressing both these concerns.
3. The group raised issues regarding negative stereotypes about care experienced young people and the need to raise more positive messages. As a group most are involved with changing care experiences for other young people through membership on Children in Care Councils and other forums and they feel the general public should be more aware of their work and efforts.
4. Positive roles models and family connections were expressed as important to group members in sustaining a sense of wellbeing and building on in interests and talents. This in turn provides a sense of looking forward beyond current and past experiences. For most of the group this came from a particular worker who seemed invested in them and indeed was demonstrated by those who accompanied each of them (only one group member came unaccompanied by a worker) and their constructive involvement in the group’s discussions.
5. All group members expressed views about the benefit of coming together to participate in this focus group but also of having the opportunity to meet other young people in similar positions to themselves. They spoke about the support they received through coming together.

“To be honest, I was nervous about coming here today, cause I thought, kind of like is everyone else gonna tell their stories or do or what or kind of thing, but here is kinda like opening my eyes to how many kids in care actually need help and support from someone outside of it kind of thing.”

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March 2014