

Two and a Half Cheers for the National Care Standards

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Nineteen volumes of National Care Standards were issued by the Scottish Executive in the Spring of 2002. The two volumes which are most relevant and important for residential child care owners, staff, children and young people and their parents, are the Standards relating to 'Care Homes for Children and Young People' (Scottish Executive, 2002a) and 'School Care Accommodation Services' (Scottish Executive, 2002b). It is extremely important that units and schools familiarise themselves with the standards and audit their services against them; they are the tool that will be used by the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (the Care Commission) when it registers and inspects services. It is therefore vital that we celebrate the major step forward which the Standards represent for looked after and accommodated children and other children living away from home.

It is equally important that children and young people and their parents are made aware of the Standards and encouraged to use them. The decision by the Scottish Executive to write the Standards from the point of view of the children and young people who use the services was a brave and progressive one. They are in stark contrast to the Standards produced simultaneously in England and Wales (Department of Health, 2002) and, I would suggest, much superior, both in their principles, ethos and content and in their language, layout and user-friendliness. Nevertheless children, young people and their parents may not find them easy or gripping reading and the leaflets which will be produced to accompany the Standards should be made available to them.

While some units, hostels and schools will only have minor adjustments to make in order to achieve the Standards, others will have seriously to overhaul their provision and, in some cases, their attitudes. This will not be easy but it is a necessary step in safeguarding, empowering and realising the potential of the children and young people concerned, and ensuring that the standard of care they receive is not a post code lottery.

There will undoubtedly be quibbles, and some more serious concerns, about aspects of the Care Standards and three serious concerns which I have as follows:

- Meeting the Standards will undoubtedly be costly. The physical accommodation requirements are fairly unspecific and not as demanding as anticipated. However, the staffing requirements, although justified, will

considerably increase costs in some settings, as will the training requirements. There is a danger that increased costs could lead to closures, or a reduction in beds, at a time when many units and schools are full to bursting.

- The user-focus, while welcome, will make the registration and inspection task more difficult. Using the Standards imaginatively and constructively, in a way that recognises the unique needs of each child or young person, will be a challenge. There is a danger that, in order to provide guidance to inspection staff and equitable recommendations to service providers that will not be open to challenge, the Standards will be interpreted in a rigid and uniform way. This could reduce choice and diversity in the sector and lead to children and young people being fitted to care regimes rather than the other way round.
- The Standards are bound to be found wanting over time. Omissions will be found, new issues will emerge and expectations will change. They will require regular monitoring and review and should be revised on a regular basis. Will the resources and the will be available to do this?

So, two and a half cheers for the Care Standards. The other half cheer will have to wait until we see their effect in practice. The Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care will have a considerable part to play in helping units and schools raise their standards through education, training, consultancy, advice and research. The first step, however, will be for organisations and establishments to embrace the Standards warmly, as an opportunity rather than a threat, and draw up plans for implementing them, in consultation with children and young people, as quickly as possible. The combination of Care Standards, national registration and inspection, and qualification and registration of staff provides a unique opportunity to ensure that children and young people in residential provision receive the services they need and deserve. Let's make sure we use the opportunity well.

References

Department of Health (2002) *National Minimum Standards and Regulations for Children's Homes*, London: The Stationery Office.

Scottish Executive (2002a) *National Care Standards: Care Homes for Children and Young People*, Edinburgh: The Stationery Office.

Scottish Executive (2002b) *National Care Standards: School Care Accommodation Services*, Edinburgh: The Stationery Office.