

Scottish Health Network: Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Children and Young People in and Leaving Care

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On behalf of the Scottish Health Network

Introduction

The health interests of young people in and leaving local authority care have received increased attention at a political and practice level in Scotland in recent years. A growing body of Scottish research is contributing to our understanding of the health needs and issues of this vulnerable and excluded group of children and young people. At the end of 2003, NHS Health Scotland led a conference that focused on the health of looked after children. This provided a much-needed opportunity to bring together key stakeholders from agencies concerned with improving the health of young people in and leaving care. This event was considered to be a welcome and valuable contribution to the growing interest in this extremely important topic.

At a local, practice level there have been many positive developments addressing the complex health needs of children and young people in and leaving care. Most notably, these have included:

- the development of specialist mental health and drug services;
- the development of mentoring and befriending social support programmes;
- the developing role of specialist designated nurses for looked after children;
- the development of the holistic 'health promoting unit' framework for residential care;
- the development of professional education and training programmes in health;
- the implementation of new national care standards in health for care homes (eating well and keeping well);
- the development of local and national networks and fora to exchange ideas, information and examples of good practice;
- the commissioning of local and national research studies;
- the implementation of Scottish local authority arrangements and duties for young people leaving care which include new assessment and planning materials with a significant focus on health;

- the development of new resources and publications relating to the health of looked after children.

While not an exhaustive list, these examples do signal some positive steps that have been made by Scottish local authorities, health services and other agencies to improve the health and social outcomes for looked after children and young people. Available evidence, however, would still suggest that health outcomes remain significantly poorer than for children and young people without a history of care. It is therefore imperative that this agenda continues to be driven forward, at a local and national level, as a key priority area for health and social policy and children's services planning.

A new health network for Scotland

Discussions and plans are currently under way to develop a new health network for Scotland, which will build upon and contribute to the ongoing improvement in standards and health services for children and young people in and leaving care. The new *Scottish Health Network* will further develop the work of the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum Health Working Group. The Health Working Group has been active for a number of years in bringing together professionals from across Scotland who have an interest or active involvement in improving the health of young people leaving local authority care. The *Scottish Health Network* will build on the recent successes of the Health Working Group and will form the base for a broader and more active network concerned with the interests of all young people in and leaving care in Scotland.

Why is the network being set up?

The introduction of new programmes for health improvement at a local and national level brings with it new challenges in the co-ordination, planning and delivery of services. There clearly remain areas for growth and progress. The network is being set up in recognition of the increased levels of activity taking place in Scotland to improve health outcomes for children and young people in and leaving care, and in recognition of the need for continued advances in standards and services if we are to witness marked improvements in health status for this particularly vulnerable and excluded group of children and young people.

What does the network plan to do?

The *Scottish Health Network* aims actively to promote links between professionals and organisations that have an interest and active involvement in improving health outcomes for young people in and leaving care in Scotland. The health

network will promote partnership working and provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas, information and good practice. The network will be active in raising the profile of health as it relates to children and young people in and leaving care and, in doing so, will provide a strong political voice in influencing health policy and practice at a local and national level in Scotland.

The *Scottish Health Network* will achieve these aims by:

- developing a broad based and active network membership of individuals and key health and children's agencies;
- publishing a network newsletter;
- publishing relevant information, resources and guidance;
- disseminating relevant material on good practice, innovation, policy, research and resources;
- creating opportunities for debate and the facilitation of ideas, good practice and information;
- actively promoting links between LAC nurses and teachers who are designated to champion the needs of looked after children in schools;
- actively promoting links between relevant Scottish (and UK) health networks and fora such as: the Scottish Nurse Special Interest Group for Looked After Children; the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association Special Interest Group for Looked After Children 'Champions for Children and Young People in Care'; and the YoungMinds and Department of Health 'Looked After Children Learning Network' which focuses on issues relating to emotional well-being and mental health.

We need your help!

The *Scottish Health Network* is at an early stage of development. We have recently secured some seed funding from the Scottish Executive. The backing of the Scottish Executive is an important acknowledgement of the importance of the new health network for Scotland. The Scottish Executive resources and support will provide a valuable start in taking forward this important initiative. We are keen, however, to establish a broad based network membership from professionals across all agencies and disciplines and would encourage you to contact the health network to discuss how you could be involved in supporting the ongoing development of this new initiative. The strength and success of any network is dependent upon the contributions of its membership. The greater the contribution, the greater the return for all members and ultimately for the improved health outcomes of children and young people. We would welcome

your comments and ideas on the proposals developed so far and any other suggestions on how to take forward and develop a meaningful and vibrant network that supports everyone who has an interest and active involvement in improving health outcomes for children and young people in and leaving care across Scotland.

For further information on the network, please contact:

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