Supporting High-Quality Children's Residential Care through Feedback and Observation

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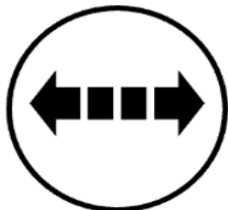Change in Residential Child Care in Scotland Webinar, 28 October 2025

1. Aberlour Children's Charity Sycamore Residential Service; 2. CELCIS Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection

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Background

- Focus of our partnership: supporting the implementation of consistent, high-quality residential childcare practice;

- **2023-2024**: work included strengthening readiness for and starting a pilot on carrying out observations of practice in two children's houses;

- **2024-2025**: consolidation of learning from the pilot.

- **Work guided by the Active Implementation Frameworks™** - support effective practices to be consistently used, to achieve meaningful outcomes:
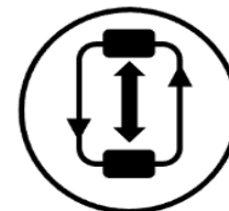
Usable Innovations™ Implementation Stages ™ Implementation Drivers ™ Implementation Teams™ Improvement Cycles™ Systemic Change™

Active Implementation Research Network

Before observations – Key milestones reached

Sycamore change team – driving this work

Aberlour Sycamore Practice Profile for high-quality residential childcare (2022)

8 Core components

1. Daily care
2. Rapport and relationships
3. Emotional and developmental support
4. Discovering and uncovering potential
5. Listening and communication
6. Resources
7. A shared framework
8. Recording

- Sycamore change team:
  - three highly committed members, mid manager and senior manager roles;
  - extensive experience of direct residential childcare practice, and exposure to Active Implementation.
  - with easy access to support from Sycamore's senior leader, when needed;
- CELCIS role included: support for the Sycamore change team to build their implementation expertise; supported the development of the Practice Profile.

Before observations – assessing and supporting readiness

- **Sessions on the Practice Profile**
  to increase staff familiarity with the tool, discuss the rationales for taking this approach, explore how staff feel about it;

- **Sessions on the use of feedback**
  to explore staff experiences, feelings and perceptions on the use of feedback to support their practice development;

Before observations – assessing and supporting readiness (cont.)

- **Mutual selection of two children's houses for the pilot** (beginning observations of practice) including:
  - drafting readiness criteria and readiness assessing tool;
  - exploring the openness of children's houses to be part of the pilot – discussions with house managers, other house staff and potential observers;

- **Estimate and protect time and capacity**:
  - two members of the Sycamore change team, each allocating 6h for observations and 2h for paperwork and providing feedback /week;
  - additional 8-10h/month for meeting with house teams and managers, Sycamore leadership, CELCIS and other associated work.

Observation of practice – pilot phase

- **Volume**: 77 direct observations, in 2 children's houses;
- **Duration**: approx. 9 months;
- **Two sets of observers**:
  'external' – Sycamore change team;
  'internal' – children's house staff;
- **Consent & consultation**: Children and young people were consulted before and during the pilot;
- **Relational Approach**:
  - observers were familiar to children, young people and staff, and respectful of house routine and activities;
  - focused on positive feedback (specific and descriptive) to strengthen good practice;
  - use of storytelling.

Consolidation of learning phase

- **Analysis of completed observation forms** conducted by Marc Blyth (Sycamore)

- **Sailboat retrospective** (methodology - Gonçalves & Linders, 2015)

  - two sessions with the staff team at each of the two houses, facilitated by Laura Quinn (CELCIS) who was not involved in the project;
  - one session with the CELCIS and Sycamore teams and leaders;
  - one session with the CELCIS team;
  - inductive and deductive coding, thematic synthesis.

Challenges

- **Capacity strain**:
  - o balancing observation duties with regular responsibilities; particularly time intensive for the change team;
  - o flexibility was required when scheduling the observations; e.g. Sycamore team extended the pilot from 6 to 9 months as a response to sudden changes;
  - o paperwork burden, completing the observation notes added workload, particularly at the beginning, when having to find the right balance;
- **Technical and administrative barriers**:
  - o limited access to laptops/software slowed the feedback loop;
- **Previous experiences of staff.**

Staff experiences

- **Initial perceptions and feelings:**
    - o   staff highlighted the emotional impact of being observed and offered feedback;
    - o   anticipation created uncertainty, worry, and apprehension;
- **Positive shift:**
    - o   experience of observation was described as being positive and supportive;
    - o   increased confidence around receiving and offering feedback;
    - o   the collaborative approach fostered a sense of shared ownership and commitment;
    - o   the pilot aided communication across staff and management teams;
- **Supervision impact:**
    - o   more purposeful and tailored supervision discussions, more reflections, informed by feedback from observations;
    - o   contributed to and reshaping the annual review process across the houses;
    - o   setting more manageable goals, more specific, aligned with the Practice Profile;

Key enablers

- **Leadership & permissions:**
  - Having a dedicated senior manager part of the change team – allowed timely communication and support from the wider organisation;
  - Senior leadership removed several barriers, and messages empowered staff;
  - Sustainability requires understanding the ongoing implementation support needed, appropriate capacity planning and relational leadership;
- **Learning culture:**
  - Emphasis on honesty, relationships and growth;
  - Focus on learning: observations support practice, not evaluate;
- **Observer familiarity:**
  - Observers who knew the work, the staff and the children;
  - Relational approach of observers built trust;
  - Helped normalise the process and reduce disruption;
- **Readiness building and scaffolding:**
  - Preparation and storytelling helped staff engage;
  - Time allowed for becoming comfortable with the new ways of working.

Thank you!

CELCIS Knowledge Bank for the programme:

References:

Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K., & Van Dyke, M. (2019). *Implementation Practice & Science*.

Gonçalves, L., & Linders, B. (2015). *Getting Value out of Agile Retrospectives*.

Manole, M., Quinn, L., & Watson, G. (2025). Observing high quality children's residential care: reflecting on an implementation approach. *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care*, *24*(1), 174-180.