

The National Care Standards: hearing the voices of young people in residential care

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Introduction

The National Care Standards describe what each child or young person can expect from their residential care home. They focus on the quality of life that the child or young person actually experiences (Scottish Executive, 2002, p. 4). The need for Standards has become apparent as research raised concerns about the level of abuse and neglect of children in residential and foster care (Kendrick, 1998; Thomas, 1995; Doran and Brannan, 1996). Government inquiries also highlighted abuse in care (Levy and Kahan, 1991; Kirkwood, 1993; Waterhouse, 2000). The general reviews of residential child care (Utting, 1991; Skinner, 1992), and the safeguards reviews in Scotland and England (Utting, 1997; Kent, 1997) also highlighted the need for Standards.

Giving young people the opportunity to present their views is an increasingly important aspect of service review. In her review of research on the involvement of children in planning their care, Sinclair (1998) commented that children 'offer...great insight into the process of planning' (Sinclair, 1998, p.140). Sinclair and Gibbs (1998) put this principle into action in their study examining children's homes in England. The study by Berridge and Brodie (1998) which reported on their research into 12 children's homes identified much of importance and relevance in the field. In this study, however, children's views were confined to a relatively small section on

residents' views. Emond (2003) in her study of two children's homes in Scotland, used participant observation to explore the experience of children. This study gave a fascinating insight into the care experience but was a much more holistic and qualitative piece of work than would normally be found in the literature. Other studies have set out to elicit the views of children about their overall care experience, such as the work by Ward, Skuse and Munro (2005); however, this study did not exclusively focus upon residential child care. Morgan (2005) elicited the views of children in care concerning the inspection process in one area of England; however, it focussed upon the inspection process and not on the experience of care. Dixon and Stein (2005) explored the views of young people; however, the remit of this comprehensive piece of work focussed on throughcare and not on the experience while in care.

The Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (SCRC) has the responsibility for registering and inspecting children's units in Scotland. They use the National Care Standards as their baseline. They also have a duty to take account of the views of service users. The SCRC invited SIRCC to carry out a study eliciting the views of young people. This enabled the SCRC to ensure that the views of young people in care were directly represented in their *Review of the quality of care homes in Scotland* (SCRC, 2004). The study was carried out between February and March, 2004 (Stevens 2007). This paper will present a selection of the findings where young people gave their views about the Standards.

Methodology

Twenty-four young people aged between 15 and 19 years took part in the study. The young people were from all over Scotland, and comprised eight females and 16 males. All of the young people had been in residential care for over a year. The sample was selected using SIRCC's *Residential Unit Database* (2004).

Each of the young people took part in two focus groups. Each of the focus groups lasted for around two hours and had four or five participants. The first focus group addressed questions on the principles behind the Standards. The second focus group looked at questions on the individual Standards. The data were presented using data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). The data were analysed using themes clustered around the questions asked in each of the focus groups. The findings presented in this paper are from the second focus group.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee. The process was explained to the participants, so that informed consent could be gained. Where young people were under 16 years old, consent was also obtained from parents. A written explanation of the uses of the data was given to the participants. Confidentiality was assured by using only gender and age in the reported findings.

Findings

The second focus group looked at each of the 19 standards. The findings, along with an actual quote from a young person is presented. An analysis of the findings and their implications for practice will be given in the discussion.

Standard One: Arriving for the First Time

This standard states that young people should be welcomed into their unit and they should know what to expect during their stay. Four fifths of the group reported being made to feel welcome at their unit, when they first arrived.

I was introduced to staff and encouraged to do what I liked to my room.

(Female, 18)

However, half of the group reported that transitions and changes were uncomfortable

Standard Two: First Meetings

This standard states that staff should help young people to settle. The unit should have a friendly environment and young people should be able to get support if needed.

Most felt that they were helped to settle.

It was good because staff and residents made me feel really welcome and they checked to make sure I had everything. (Female, 19)

Two young people reported issues which made their first few weeks uncomfortable.

Standard Three: Keeping in touch with people who are important to you

This standard states that a young person should be helped to keep in touch with family and friends. Three-quarters of the group reported experiencing some difficulty in this area.

They never helped me keep in touch with my family....I done a photo album of my life story and have kept it. (Female, 17)

Just under half of the group reported that staff were too busy to facilitate family meetings and there could be difficulties in physically accommodating visitors. In some cases, visits were restricted because young people were at risk from family members.

Standard Four: Support Arrangements

This standard explores the importance of care planning and ensuring that young people are involved in reviews. Four fifths felt involved in their care planning.

I had lots of meetings and one to ones with my key worker discussing the main issues of my review. (Male, 16)

A few young people raised questions about the process:

At the end of the day the panel will decide these decisions, regardless of what you have said. (Male, 15)

Young people valued time spent with their keyworker and also valued having an opportunity to participate in decisions about their future.

Standard Five: Your Environment

This standard tells young people that their unit should be clean and homely. Thirteen said that their living conditions were very pleasant, while eleven reported that they were not.

People were nice....the building was nice...it could have been better because the rooms were plain. (Female, 17)

Ten of the respondents said furniture was damaged by other young people in the unit. Repairs took a long time to complete.

Sometimes it was a mess...it just takes a long time to get new stuff. (Male, 15)

Standard Six : Feeling safe and secure

This standard states that a young person should feel safe and secure in their unit. Half said they always felt safe and secure. In particular, one young person who was an asylum seeker from an ethnic minority group commented on how safe and welcomed he felt within his unit; however, half of the group did not always feel safe, with two reporting that they never felt safe.

I have always felt safe because I stand up for myself. (Male,17)

Two reported that they felt unsafe because of other residents:

Saturday night feels dangerous because of other young people coming in drunk.

(Male, 16)

Three said that feelings of a lack of safety came as a direct result of staff and use of restraint. The above comments came from young men. Positive comments about safety tended to come from young women.

My home felt very safe. I was very insecure so I always thought that people were breaking in but staff didn't lose patience with me. They just showed me and convinced me I was safe. (Female, 18)

Standard Seven : management and staffing

This standard states that young people should enjoy good quality care provided by trained staff. All of the young people made comments about staff training and qualifications. The comments suggested that young people believe that training is currently inadequate.

The staff and managers do not get proper training...young staff come in without proper training making them think they know what's best. (Male, 15)

One young person spoke passionately about training. What he said encapsulates the feelings of many young people in the group.

If you could get the highest person in this room, proper training I'd tell them....they come from prisons and think they know about child care. Sometimes they dragged me round like a common criminal. What are they doing there without qualifications?..... They should be told how you look after children before they start work. (Male, 17)

Almost all of the group were aware that much staff time was taken up with writing. They reported that this had a detrimental impact on time spent with them.

You can talk to domestics more than staff...staff write down a lot...they have a lot of restrictions. (Male, 17)

Standard Eight : exercising your rights

This standard talks about the importance of the rights and responsibilities of young people. Three-quarters felt supported in exercising their rights.

If I want to do something, they try and make a way round so I can do it. (Female, 16)

A quarter of the young people reported that their rights were dependant on external factors, particularly staff availability, and were not consistently applied.

It depends how busy staff are. (3 respondents.)

It depends on your behaviour. (2 respondents.)

Standard Nine: making choices

This standard says that the young person should live in a place where their personal choices are respected. Two thirds reported that they were able to make choices, but that this could be constrained depending on which staff were on duty. The responses indicated that some degree of negotiation went on with staff to ensure that safe and appropriate choices were being made.

I was always allowed to take part in everything. There was cycling, swimming, ice skating and going to McDonalds. (Male, 15)

When talking about having a faith supported, most young people said they did not have a faith. One young person who was a practising Muslim was initially well supported to follow his faith:

When I came here, they took me to the mosque and gave me a prayer mat and the Quran. (Male, 15)

However, later in this young man's experience, his main support came from his friends, although staff maintained an interest in his faith. It appeared that the young man took on the role of teacher to the staff in relation to his faith. Spirituality and religion were not well understood by most of the young people, and it appeared that these issues were not as well addressed as they might have been by staff.

Standard Ten: eating well

This standard states that meals should be varied and healthy, and reflect the young person's preferences. There was a balanced picture about food, indicating that most young people were satisfied with this.

My dietary needs were catered for in K...with the kitchen staff doing their best to prepare vegetarian dishes every meal time. (Male, 16)

Standard Eleven: your lifestyle

This standard says that the health needs of young people should be met. Three quarters reported that their health needs were met.

The staff talk to us all the time. (Male, 17)

However, a quarter reported that there could be problems

I never had my health discussed with any family members or discussed with me by any members of staff. The only thing staff have done for me has been making appointments for me for the doctor. (Male, 15)

Standard Twelve: medication

This standard states that staff should be aware of the medication needs and arrangements made to ensure that young people take their medication safely. All the young people reported that this happened.

Standard Thirteen: learning

This standard emphasises the importance of education. It states that the unit should be conducive to learning. Three-quarters felt they were supported in their education.

Staff encouraged young people to go to school and encouraged learning.

Staff helped me with homework. They attended school meetings. I had space to do my school work. (Female, 17)

The young person who had been an asylum seeker was receiving good support at school and in the unit to learn English. Some of the young people, however, did not want to go to school in spite of the efforts of staff.

They try and encourage you to go, but I refused as I was too good to go to school (laughs). (Male, 15)

Three-quarters reported that they had a quiet place to study which was often their bedroom. A quarter reported some problems, with two saying they had no quiet place to study.

You had your room but you still got interruptions (13% of respondents)

Staff attitude had an impact on young people's views of school.

It depended what staff were in...it depended what unit you were in...one unit I was in, they never got us up for school.... I went to another unit, they had education. They pushed you. The education was better. (Male, 18)

Standard Fourteen: private life

This standard says that staff should respect the wishes of young people about their lifestyle preferences. Three quarters reported some problems. Two thirds stated that they could have private phone calls but that there could still be issues.

*The phone was in the sitting room and young people were always around.
(Female, 18)*

Three-quarters reported staff or others invading their privacy while they were in their bedrooms:

Staff open your door and then chap (knock)...staff speak to you when they want but if you want to speak to them you can't speak to them. (Male, 17)

Two young people were unsure about how their personal information was used:

Staff write reports three times a day on young people so you can't talk to staff about private things because anything said has to be written in reports. That's no sign of respect, privacy or confidentiality. (Male, 15)

Four young people reported that they couldn't speak to the staff member of their choice.

It depends on how busy they are. (Female, 17)

Standard Fifteen: daily life

This standard tells young people that they should be encouraged to take part in the life of their unit and their local community. Almost all of the young people reported that staff supported them to take part in activities outside the unit

I was taken on activities like walking and swimming. (Female, 17)

Three young people said that the numbers of staff on duty, or not having access to money could present problems.

The staff's the ones with the money but sometimes they can't get access to the safe. (Male, 17)

Standard Sixteen: communication

This standard states that young people are prepared for events like reviews. Four fifths reported that this happened for them.

After meetings, staff would sit down with you and make sure you understood.

(Male, 17)

Standard Seventeen : moving on

This standard says that young people should develop the skills and knowledge needed to live independently. Four-fifths reported that this happened. Their experiences were generally positive.

I was encouraged to get a place at a local college which I did. (Male, 16)

Two had some comments about improvements:

There's too much expectations on staff to go out all the time...young people are not getting taught about responsibility and how to control money. (Male, 18)

Standard Eighteen: concerns, comments and complaints

This standard says that the unit should welcome the views of young people. Almost all of the young people knew that there was a unit complaints procedure.

They tell you about the complaints procedure as soon as you come in. (Female, 19)

None of the young people questioned knew that they could make a complaint directly to the SCRC. Four-fifths felt that complaints processes were flawed.

You weren't really encouraged to express your views. If you had a complaint, it went no further than a member of staff from another unit judging and then delivering a verdict on the complaint. In nearly all cases, the complaint came to nothing. (Male, 16)

At the start of the study, none of the young people had heard of the National Care Standards. When they learned more about the Standards, they felt that all young people should know about them and that inspection processes could be tightened up.

Inspections should be all unannounced and if they're not doing the job, then they should get fined. (Male, 19)

Standard Nineteen: advocacy

This standard says that young people should have access to advocacy services.

Almost all felt that they would be supported in this.

They let me phone agencies. (Male, 15)

At the end of the second focus group, young people had an opportunity to vote for the standards they felt were most important to them. They were asked to identify their three most important standards and rate them from first to third. Fifteen young people completed the voting forms. The two most important standards were three and six, and the second most important standards were seven and 14.

Standard	First	Second	Third	Totals
1 : ARRIVING FOR THE FIRST TIME	2			2
2 : FIRST MEETINGS	2	1	1	4
3 : KEEPING IN TOUCH	5		1	6
4 : SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS		2	1	3
5 : YOUR ENVIRONMENT			1	1
6 : FEELING SAFE AND SECURE	1	3	2	6
7 : MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING	1	2	2	5
8 : RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES				0
9 : MAKING CHOICES		1	1	2
10 : EATING WELL			1	1
11 : KEEPING WELL-LIFESTYLE	1	2		3
12 : KEEPING WELL-MEDICATION		1	1	2
13 : LEARNING			1	1
14 : PRIVATE LIFE	2	2	1	5
15 : DAILY LIFE	1	1		2
16 : SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION			2	2
17 : MOVING ON				0
18 : CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS				0
19 : ADVOCACY				0
Totals	15	15	15	45

Discussion

External monitoring and regulation of care settings, guided by a set of Standards should provide real opportunities for improvements within residential child care. This study indicates, however, that there are inconsistencies in terms of young people's care experience. None of the young people who took part in the research had heard of the Standards. This is concerning because if a young person does not know what to expect from their care, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to making judgments or challenging what is happening to them. Children's participation in practice has been examined in recent times, as the issue of user involvement moves up the political agenda. Sinclair (2004) suggested that participation needs to move away from being an isolated or tokenistic event and should be more fully integrated into ongoing

decision making processes. This research appears to concur with Sinclair's views insofar as meaningful participation cannot be guaranteed without the information necessary to ensure this. The implication is that staff should spend time with young people to make them aware of the Standards.

The research highlighted areas of good residential practice. There was evidence of young people experiencing good support, improving living environments and increased opportunities. Many staff were working hard to ensure that young people had positive experiences. Participants mentioned how important staff attitude was to their well-being. In particular, a sense of being listened to, being cared about and being worthy of spending time with were features contributing to a positive care experience. Cavet and Sloper (2004), in their review of children's participation in service development, found that a listening culture among staff is extremely important and our findings uphold this.

Staff often did not have enough time for the young people with whom they worked. Young people identified low staff ratios as a problem and this was reflected as having a negative impact on care. Scotland, in common with the rest of Britain, continues to struggle with recruitment and retention for social work in general and residential child care in particular. Figures from the Scottish Executive (2004) indicate that social services are running with eight percent vacancies. The Department of Health (2001) reported that difficulties in filling vacancies are due to low pay, unattractive conditions of service, low status and lack of career progression for social care staff. Heron and Chakrabarti (2003) reported that:

The structural inequalities of residential child care , most noticeable in terms of its residualisation and failure to educate and professionalise staff, have been an enduring feature [of the service]. (Heron and Chakrabarti, 2003, p. 93).

A recurring theme was poor staff training. It was surprising how aware young people were about staff training. They believed that better staff training would improve their care. With the establishment of the Scottish Social Services Council in Scotland and the General Social Care Council in England, registration requirements for residential child care workers have now been set. It may be that this area will improve in the future. Our research suggests that units should have strategies for training which include how to enhance relationships with young people and how to encourage meaningful participation.

The importance of trust and safety came up in various guises throughout the study. Young people who are in care due to adverse life experiences will struggle initially to form relationships with staff, and this can have an effect on trust. Commentators such as Daniel, Gilligan and Wassell (1999) ‘emphasise the importance of relationships as fundamental to the human condition as well as to the helping process.’ (Daniel et al, 1999, p. 14) This has implications for trust and a feeling of safety. The young people in this study were clear that good relationships between staff and individual young people are essential to build trust. The development and nurturing of relationships should have a central role in the activities of staff. Sadly, a large number of the young people in this study did not feel safe all of the time, with worrying numbers not feeling safe at any time. Threats to safety came from other young people, sometimes from their families, and very occasionally from staff. Other young people were

mentioned most often as contributing to a feeling of being unsafe. These comments concur with the findings of researchers such as Kendrick (1998).

Young people discussed the importance of staying in contact with families. This standard was rated as one of the most important. While some young people had staff who helped them to keep contact, others were not given the assistance they required. Given the emphasis on partnership within legislation, and the findings from research which show that the majority of children return home to their families after a period in care (Bullock, Little and Milham, 1993), it appears that units could improve their practice in this area.

Questions were raised about the effectiveness of complaints procedures during this study. This echoes the findings of Paterson, Watson and Whiteford (2003) who said :

Open cultures encourage feedback even when that takes the form of complaints....Many young people currently do not know... to whom they should make the complaint, or are afraid to do so for fear of repercussions.
(Paterson et al, 2003, p. 101)

The key practice implication here is that staff should be committed to ensuring that complaints procedures are not merely tokenistic. This would help young people develop trust and create an extra safeguard within the unit.

Some questions were raised about how staff work with young people from ethnic minority groups. The young person following the Muslim faith reported a high degree

of support. However, he often had to explain his faith and rituals to staff. While it could be argued that this contributed to the young man's self-esteem, it also indicates a lack of knowledge which was not accounted for elsewhere, either at a personal or an organisational level. As Thompson (2001) pointed out, there are many ways that people can be oppressed or discriminated against. Given the central nature of anti-discriminatory practice in training, it is worrying to find that reactive practice may be a feature of the care experience for young people from ethnic minority groups.

The Standards provide an opportunity to ensure that the 'special protection' invoked by Article 20 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990) is forthcoming. By providing a practical working guideline for staff, inspectors and young people, they can help to ensure that

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