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# Sharing Practice to Improve Outcomes for Care Leavers: Evaluation Report on an Inter-Authority Learning Exchange

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July 2014



## Introduction and background

In November 2013 CELCIS was approached by Shetland Islands Council Throughcare and Aftercare (TCAC) Team with a view to assisting with the organisation and support of an inter-authority exchange opportunity for a member of staff from their Throughcare Team. As a small island authority with a relatively new throughcare provision, the aim was to enable a senior member of staff to spend time working alongside colleagues in more established or larger throughcare teams, to be exposed to different settings and approaches and to gain confidence, share experience and improve practice. Opportunities for staff in larger, mainland authorities to meet, network, to share practice and learn from each other are generally more available and due to geography, are generally more easily managed.

Shetland Islands Council was prepared and able to release a staff member for a four-week period, to spend time with one or more host authorities. Keen to support cross-sector learning and with an established range of positive contacts with other local authorities, CELCIS committed to taking on the task of exploring and scoping out the feasibility of such an exchange, and subsequently to facilitate and support the initiative. Approaches to several local authorities resulted in a very positive and enthusiastic response from front-line team managers with subsequent support and backing from their respective senior officers. Due to various logistical factors and anticipated benefits, it was eventually settled on a dual-placement split, with the Shetland Islands staff member spending two weeks each with Falkirk Council Throughcare Team and Glasgow City Council Leaving Care Service.

The exchange programme ran between 3 and 28 February 2014.

To identify and maximise any potential learning and benefits gained from the exchange, a set of learning outcomes for Shetland Islands were developed (Appendix 1). CELCIS undertook a range of follow-up interviews (Appendix 2) with participants to consolidate any learning gained in relation to the learning exchange process, identify potential future opportunities and share this with stakeholders across the sector. The following report describes the learning exchange and host and guest participants' experiences of it. Each section includes key points and learning for future exchanges.

## Preparation

Much of the pre-exchange preparation was conducted through telephone and email, directly with the respective team managers and staff. This included sharing the draft learning outcomes paper from Shetland (Appendix 1), and proposed draft timetables from host authorities to assist with meeting those desired outcomes. Additionally, a face-to-face meeting, facilitated by CELCIS and attended by all three authorities was arranged for January, which enabled relevant staff to meet and address mutual expectations and key practicalities. This allowed a draft agreement to be circulated in respect of roles and support.

There were no significant resource demands placed on host authorities, other than physical accommodation for the visiting practitioner, and providing staff time to mentor or chaperone. The key financial commitment was met by the requesting authority to enable the practitioner to be released from post for the period of time and to cover necessary living and travel expenses. It was recognised at the outset that this was regarded as a positive investment in staff development rather than negatively viewed as a cost or financial burden.

For one authority, at commencement of the placement, the key contact in the host authority was on sick leave. This exposed a communication gap as the information had not at that stage been widely shared with other staff. Although the new contact for the exchange had written paperwork they felt they would have benefitted from further information from CELCIS. This is a learning point for any future exchange.

The visiting authority commented that it would have been useful to know the full range of service provision that was offered by host authorities in order that they could have a more informed choice about services they visited and learned about.

For example, the visiting authority participant would have been keen to visit a drug and alcohol service but had been unaware of its existence until arriving at the authority.

- Participants considered this preparation phase to be well-planned and supported, with the face-to-face pre-meeting being particularly useful.
- Preparation allowed exchange participants to plan placement structure and timetable, based on individual learning needs and host authority capacity to offer opportunities.
- Engagement of the training officer in one host authority enabled authority buy-in and increased senior authority awareness and support for the exchange programme.
- Future planning should address the need to have an adequately-briefed back-up contact.

## In-situ activity

There were key differences identified between hosting a member of staff on a learning exchange and having a student on placement. In contrast to a student placement which would focus on individual development of knowledge and experience in different settings, the learning exchange with a senior member of staff could focus on how each service operated and approaches to TCAC provision. This enabled lower demands on host staff time or potential responsibility compared to that required for a student placement. Considerable pre-exchange consideration was given to what would be a useful and appropriate length of placement.

Initially there were thoughts that two weeks would be sufficient, or perhaps even more than was necessary. However, as the time in placement developed, both host authorities and visiting authority participants reflected that the full four weeks in one authority could also have been a very positive experience, albeit with a shift in emphasis to being active in the daily work, rather than observing or assisting. The visiting member of staff identified the length of time in each authority as, on reflection, too short. The ability to experience two authorities was very positive, in terms of a 'compare and contrast' approach, but time limitations impacted on this to a degree.

The impact on participating young people was fully considered and viewed overall as positive. Young people gave consent willingly to the worker attending visits or meetings. The young people were generally keen to engage in discussion and find out how life was for looked after young people and care leavers in other parts of the country. In addition there were some unanticipated positive consequences for the visiting authority in terms of developing staff confidence and skills in the absence of a senior member of staff. The opportunity for staff to deputise or cover for their absent colleague was regarded as a positive outcome, enabling other staff to benefit indirectly from development opportunities and increase confidence and efficacy.

Participants identified the following as some of the key points around the time and length of exchange placements:

- The dual-location aspect offered a very useful 'compare and contrast' opportunity.
- However, more time in one setting would have enabled a more thorough immersion into the life and practice of the team or service.
- Time and staffing demands placed on host teams were not considered to be particularly onerous or intrusive, and were considered to be time well spent when set against benefits identified.
- Participants identified the need to have a balanced schedule of activity, with time for discussion and reflection.

## Benefits

Based on the scale of operation, experience and developmental history of services/teams, it was anticipated the host teams would perhaps not realise as much benefit as the member of staff from Shetland. While this was the case, there were benefits for both the host and visiting authorities.

Below is a summary of the key benefits:

## Networking

All participants noted the very positive networking opportunities, and the ability to extend the reach and influence of good practice, and build alliances across a service area which they considered could otherwise be marginalised.

## Showcasing and sharing practice

Host authorities were keen to showcase practice and this had positive benefits for their own staff team, demonstrating and acknowledging good practice, raising the profile of their service, adding 'kudos' and boosting morale.

All participants acknowledged that while online forums and virtual networks were considered useful for hard knowledge exchange the view was:

*...nothing can touch the importance for the real experience of understanding the nuance of practice and culture of a team.*

Initially during each two-week placement, the visiting authority gathered and received information but as each placement progressed, information-sharing from the visiting authority increased, with increasing discussion and understanding of the issues and practices between differing authority settings; all participants reported positively on the ability to reflect.

## Reflecting on practice

Exposure to new or different ideas and the need to stop and reflect on why something was done in a particular way prompted reflective learning and 'energised and stimulated' staff members. All participants reported that the ability to reflect on their practice with other practitioners prompted ongoing reflection and consideration of why things were done in a particular way. This prompted and enabled staff either to re-validate their practice or re-examine and consider other approaches.

This was a mutual benefit identified in both host and visitor settings, as evidenced through both formal team meeting discussions and informal exchanges. Reflection and new ideas were often considered in a 'compare and contrast' manner.

All participants reported the learning exchange had:

- Promoted reflective practice and active thinking
- Provided a positive healthy challenge for staff
- Improved staff morale and boosted confidence
- Having a visiting worker from another team 'was a breath of fresh air'.

## Service development

Both host local authorities advised that they would be keen to send a staff member on an exchange but this would have implications for covering work. A new/newly-qualified staff member would be logistically easier, for example, if it was considered part of an induction. However, it was thought that service development would be enhanced if an experienced staff member took part in the exchange as they would have a grounding in the key aspects of TCAC and transitional support work and be able to apply a more informed and analytical perspective, to compare and contrast, and inform service developments within their own team.

Examples of service development on the Shetland Islands included:

- Adaptation of Falkirk matrix to assess readiness for care leavers
- Information leaflet stand
- Engaging with health professionals to enable free dental and other health resources to be provided for care leavers
- Improving information regarding supported carers and supported lodgings
- Improvements to financial procedures and increase in leaving care grants
- Integrated/cross-sector approach to identifying and meeting appropriate outcomes for care leavers
- Review and development of team support processes through informal and formal team meetings.

### Sharing information across departments and agencies

Benefits highlighted were not confined to Throughcare teams or practice. For example, practice information exchanged between agencies included policy and practice in relation to child protection, adult support and protection and family placement. This has enabled positive networking and sharing of practice between wider groups of staff in the host and visiting authorities.

- Establishing open communication with another positive contact
- Demonstrating a commitment to sharing ideas, updating each other on any changes or differences in policy or procedural documents
- Sharing information on data recording and financial procedures - enabled participants to review and update where necessary based on positive practice
- Sharing and developing the use of a 'postcards' approach to communicate positively with young people and maintain positive contact.

### Applicability/future use

All participants would be enthusiastic about being involved in a future similar learning exchange. Future formats could be varied to suit bespoke requirements but all agreed this relatively straightforward model worked well. The two host authorities spoke positively about the possibility of a similar exchange for their own staff; while the learning opportunities available to Falkirk, and particularly Glasgow, in visiting Shetland, may in one sense be more limited in terms of scale and resources, they would also create opportunities in terms of holistic person-centred practice, different approaches to local partnership working and the challenges of working in a small island local authority.

One participant suggested the opportunity should be offered to residential child care workers. A straight swap of staff in terms of 'like-for-like' workers across authorities, embarking on an exchange for a set period of time may enable staff to be freed up without undue disruption to rotas. This would enable staff to become immersed in the culture and practice of different residential settings.

- Host authorities highlighted the ability to promote their TCAC services, build networks of practice, and positive alliances, and influence practice and policy development by profiling their service locally and nationally.
- Participants all agreed that this approach would be useful to other authorities and agencies.
- Learning exchange opportunities could benefit other groups of staff, particularly residential staff, who often have less opportunity to engage in cross-sector practice exchanges.

## CELCIS support role

The role of CELCIS as broker, facilitator and support was valued by all participants. Adequate information at the planning stage, practical and personal support during the exchange and follow-up review and evaluation enabling reflective shared learning were key positives.

Access to a network of positive contacts was identified, as well as the national profile that CELCIS could give to local authorities' good practice. Participants added that while they may have been able to undertake this exchange unaided, they considered it very unlikely that they would have done so without the backing of a national centre. CELCIS brought enhanced capacity and professional support and expertise. Similarly, it is perhaps unlikely that CELCIS would have engineered such an exchange project without the initial request, motivation and enthusiastic response from those participating authorities.

- The exchange programme was viewed more seriously (and had enhanced status) given the involvement of CELCIS.
- The facilitating and support role of CELCIS added organisational capacity and gave reassurance to participating authorities.
- Participants valued the opportunity offered by CELCIS to share the positive aspects of this experience with the wider sector.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The aim was to support and facilitate a learning exchange to assist the development of a relatively new service, and by enabling a practitioner to work alongside colleagues in a more developed service. This was met very successfully, including additional benefits realised by the hosting authorities, and no significant disadvantages were identified by any of the participants.

The ability of all participants to learn from each other, regardless of how large or well-established their service highlighted the following:

- An appreciation of the real challenges faced by smaller, more remote services in meeting the often complex needs of vulnerable young people
- For all participating authorities, a greater understanding of the needs and issues faced by looked after young people and care leavers across the country

- A positive realisation of the need for throughcare practitioners and services to network, to share practice, to build alliances and come together to ensure the profile of an often marginalised group and service is raised and maintained.

The primary resource in improving outcomes for looked after young people and care leavers is staff themselves. Whilst any such exchange will have some resource or financial implications, developing staff and developing services is a valuable investment opportunity.

Recent research informs that provision and practice in Throughcare and Aftercare remains variable and inconsistent across the country<sup>1</sup>. With the advent of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 placing additional duties on local authorities and corporate parents with regards to supporting young people transitioning from care to interdependence and adulthood, the need to grow the skills, confidence and capacity of the workforce becomes essential.

The use of a learning exchange approach to increasing confidence and practice knowledge, enabling staff to learn from each other and increasing the network of support and contacts across the sector is feasible and useful, and can only enhance the practice and provision across the sector.

Thanks to:

Shirley Brown, Shetlands Island Council

Jenny Kane, Falkirk Council

Peter Finn and Mary Hanley, Glasgow Council

Charlie Gracie, CELCIS

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.celcis.org/media/resources/publications/Throughcare-and-aftercare-in-scotlands-local-authorities.pdf>

# Appendix 1

## Draft learning outcomes paper from Shetland Islands Council

Quality Indicator	Proposed Activity	Intended Personal Outcome(s)	Intended Service Outcome(s)
<p><b>1. Young people's involvement:</b> Preparation will take place with young people to enable meaningful involvement at all levels. Service providers and decision makers will actively ensure young people have a voice.</p>	<p>Planned around being super-nummary, in an observing &amp; learning role to include shadowing staff, undertaking joint visits, duty cover, attending planning meetings/reviews, joint strategy meetings, groupwork programmes etc. Opportunities for more in-depth observation/discussion to gain working knowledge of systems &amp; processes.</p>	<p>Learning from comparing/ contrasting:-  Implementation of the pathways process  Learning from the opportunity to reflect on participation processes (individual and group) and the management of non-engagement.</p>	
<p><b>2. Throughcare preparation:</b> Preparation for adulthood will be a long-term, continuous process. All those involved with the young person will help them to prepare to reach their potential in all areas of their lives.</p>	a/a	<p>Learning from the opportunity to reflect on how caseloads are managed (including tariffs) given geographical constraints and, within this, how preparation for adulthood is structured for individual YPs.</p>	
<p><b>3. Assessment, planning &amp; reviewing:</b> A comprehensive assessment will be carried out by a suitably skilled person; plans will be made and independently reviewed as an on-going process. Young people will be actively involved and their views will be sought at each stage.</p>	a/a	<p>Learning from the opportunity to review all aspects of documentation.</p>	

<p><b>4. Health &amp; wellbeing:</b> Young people will be supported to be healthy and well in all aspects of their life. Accessible arrangements will be in place to meet the health and well-being needs of young people as they engage with the through care &amp; aftercare process.</p>	a/a	Learning from the opportunity to reflect on how health and wellbeing is promoted, and the risk of harm managed – to include involvement of other professionals e.g. TCAC health workers, Mental Health teams.	
<p><b>5. Accommodation:</b> Suitable accommodation options and appropriate support will be provided to meet young people’s individual needs. The provision of accommodation and support will be provided to a quality and in a manner that reflects the values of a responsible parent.</p>	a/a	Learning from the opportunity to reflect on accommodation options and support provided – to include tenancy management and safeguarding.	
<p><b>6. Financial support:</b> Local Authorities will provide financial support to young people during the transition from the looked after system to independence, as set out in a clear, transparent, young person friendly policy.</p>	a/a	Learning from the opportunity to reflect on policies in place concerning financial support and associated engagement strategies e.g. the management of the Leaving Care Grant and incentive payments re. weekly living allowance.	
<p><b>7. Education, training &amp; employment:</b> Young people will be supported to achieve positive educational outcomes. Supported and achievable routes into further &amp; higher education, training and employment will be provided.</p>	a/a	Learning from the opportunity to reflect on how access to education/ training/ employment is supported by TCAC staff – to include relationship management, incentives and collaborative practice with other agencies e.g. <i>Bridges</i> and <i>Moving On</i> in Shetland.	

<p><b>8. Management of risk:</b> Procedures and arrangements will be in place for the assessment, support, reviewing and monitoring of young people who are or may be a potential risk to themselves or others and may or may not be convicted offenders.</p>	a/a	Learning from the opportunity to reflect on procedures and arrangements as they concern YPs, self, others, the wider community – to include collaborative practice with criminal justice and for example noise control officials.	
<p><b>9. Quality assurance &amp; development of services:</b> Key partners contribute to an integrated system for evaluating, ensuring and improving the quality of services for young people who are or have been looked after. This should be in accordance with national standards for the range of relevant support services.</p>	a/a	Learning from the opportunity to reflect on how quality is measured (what's important/ to whom) – hard and soft data – and enhanced – to include who is involved and the relative influence of different agencies/ individuals in the process and subsequent decision making – e.g. service growth/ shrinkage.	

### Proposed outputs from the visits

Output	Intended Deadline	Notes
1. Conference paper – CELCIS 2014	March 2014	
2. Presentation at a staff meeting		
3. ?		

## Appendix 2

### TCAC Learning Exchange: Evaluation Interview Questions

#### Preparation

- What was your/your teams motivation
- What were your/your teams expectations
- Was there clarity re aims and objectives
- What were the important practical issues & considerations
- Did you receive sufficient information pre agreement/pre exchange
- What would have improved the preparation phase
- What were the time demands/staffing implications

#### In-situ

- Practical issues/considerations
- Time in placement
- Range of learning opportunities
- Matching learning needs to opportunities
- Difference in having an “experienced” worker as opposed to a student on placement?
- Time demands/staffing implications

#### On reflection/key learning

- Personal
- Organisation/Agency
- Potential impact on service delivery/improvement for Falkirk TCAC
- What do you think SB/SIC gained from this
- Impact on YP who use Falkirk TCAC - directly/indirectly (what is your evidence for this)

#### Benefits realisation

- How will you maximise any potential benefits for your team/service/YP
- Who will be responsible for this?
- When will this take place?
- How/are these benefits sustainable
- Who were the primary beneficiaries

#### Dis-benefits

- What (if any) has been the down side to this exchange
- Time/staffing/disruption to service/impact on YP?
- How/has it impacted on young people - directly/indirectly (what is your evidence for this)

- Would you send a staff member off to another LA? Or would you see yourselves as primarily hosts?
- Why is that - status of team/financial implications?
- Is this something that other LAs could/should consider & why?
- Transference to other LAs
- Transference to other setting LAYP/Care Leaver
- Would you consider doing this again - reasons
- Any limitations?
- If so would you do anything different?
- Financial implications?

### CELCIS role

- Were you satisfied with CELCIS's input?
- What should CELCIS learn from the process?
- Are you aware of any other organisations who offer this type of support?
- Would you recommend other organisations to participate in the scheme?

### Any other comments.....

## About CELCIS

CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland. Together with partners, we are working to improve the lives of all looked after children in Scotland. We do so by providing a focal point for the sharing of knowledge and the development of best practice, by providing a wide range of services to improve the skills of those working with looked after children, and by placing the interests of children at the heart of our work.

## For more information

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