

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET

COOL KIDZ – OFSTED BEST PRACTICE

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Cabinet and ask them to note that North Lincolnshire Council Children's Services are featured on the Ofsted Best Practice Website for work undertaken on consulting and engaging with children and young people.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 During the 2012 Ofsted Inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children, Inspectors met with a group of children and young people who are members of the Cool Kidz Club. The Cool Kidz Club is a group of children and young people who are all subject of child protection or child in need plans. The group was established two years ago when we identified a gap in effective consultation with children on Child Protection Plans.
- 2.2 Through the good work and determination of social workers, their managers and the commitment of one of our Family Support Workers, we managed to gain consent from over 30 parents for their children to join in this group-work approach to partnership and collaboration.
- 2.3 For most local authorities, engagement with these children, who are some of the most vulnerable, has proved to be unsuccessful, as their parents/carers are often reluctant to let them join in. Inspectors were impressed with how we had managed to establish the group and gain consent from their parents.
- 2.4 One of the Ofsted Inspection Team visited North Lincolnshire after the completion of the inspection to meet with officers with a view to promoting this as Best Practice in the area of consulting and engaging with children and young people.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 It is proposed that Cabinet notes the work undertaken by Children's Services for the work undertaken on consulting and engaging with children and young people who are subject of a child protection or child in need plan and acknowledges that this work has been selected by Ofsted as a best practice case study (attached).

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

4.1 Involvement and participation of children and young people in the work that affects their lives has always been a priority in Children's Services. To achieve Ofsted recognition of our practice reinforces and celebrates the excellent work within the service

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

5.1 There are no implications from this report, though the continuation of this good practice will help to inform future inspection outcomes and continue to promote excellent services for children and young people in North Lincolnshire.

6. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

6.1 No integrated impact assessment has been undertaken, though the focus of the work is to consult with the children on the services they have received and provide relevant activities that aim to engage and develop self-esteem and confidence.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

7.1 The group meets during school holidays and is regularly attended by up to 30 to 40 children and young people.

7.2 The children report that they feel safe, that they have a better understanding of their plans and improved relationships with their social workers.

7.3 They designed their own Child Protection Plan and told us what works best for them in terms of communication and engagement.

7.4 Their views and suggestions have been put into practice with the child-friendly plan and the toolkit of activities to engage with children on plans.

7.5 Parents/carers have told us that the group-work approach has improved trust and better, more effective relationships with their child's social worker.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 That Cabinet notes the 'best practice' work undertaken by Children's Services on consulting and engaging with children and young people.

DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE

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A group-work approach to consultation with children and young people subject to child protection plans: North Lincolnshire Council

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Brief description

North Lincolnshire children's social care has established the *Cool Kidz Club* group-work approach to consult with children and young people who have experience of the child protection system. The *Club* meets on a half-termly basis where participants discuss and share views about their experiences to help improve services for other children and young people who are subject to child protection plans.

Overview – the provider's message



'The *Cool Kidz Club* has had a significant impact on improving the service that children and young people receive when subject of child protection plans because we have implemented a number of changes to the way we work as a result of what children and young people have told us. Two years ago, we identified a significant gap in our consultation processes. We were consulting with, and acting upon comments from, individual children. But, this did not really represent a consistent consultation and participation approach. Establishing the group has

been very successful and our project demonstrates that consultation of this type is possible with careful planning and commitment from all staff.'

Dave Basker, Head of Safeguarding

The good practice in detail

Seeking the views of children and young people; the context in North Lincolnshire

Over the last seven years, North Lincolnshire children's social care and its partner agencies have developed a wide range of methods for consulting with children and young people on issues that are important to them, including safeguarding issues.

The council recognised that although participation and consultation were strong features in the work of the authority generally, consultation with children on child protection plans took place on an individual basis. Although informative, it had limited impact on services overall.

Initially, there were concerns that consultation with a group of children who were subject to child protection plans would be problematic given the very nature of Children's Social Care's involvement with their families. Dave Basker, Head of Safeguarding explains: 'We believe that what children and young people say is important for improving our services and this has become embedded in the authority over many years. Working closely with our partners, we have built up a range of effective methods of consultation and we believed we could achieve the same results in the field of child protection work by adopting a group-work approach.'

Planning and preparation for group work

The Council initially asked its social workers to identify 20 children subject to child protection plans, who they thought would benefit from attending such a group. Social workers were asked to include consideration of families where parents were not always fully cooperating or engaging with the child protection services. It wanted to ensure that all families were consulted, not just those with whom Children's Social Care had positive working relationships.

‘This group makes us realise we are not alone.’

The group's main focus is to consult with children on the service they have received while subject of child protection plans. Children and young people undertake a range of activities to promote group cohesion and provide enjoyment. Around 30 children and young people now regularly attend.

When a child is referred to the group, one of the facilitators undertakes a home visit to meet with the parents or carers and explains what will happen. Jan Gouldthorpe, one of the facilitators, says: 'Parents are generally happy for their children to attend the group. It is

‘Our plan makes us feel safe and we know what our social worker is doing’

explained clearly to them that Children's Social Care want to consult with children and young people to improve practice, give children a say, and inform training for social workers. Workers, including senior managers, have been surprised that even in those families, where there may be a history

of poor engagement with children's services, parents and carers have supported their children's attendance at the *Cool Kidz Club*. Parents welcome the opportunity of children

having their say and feel that it supports a better and more effective relationship with the child's social worker. As the group has progressed, more and more children are attending.'

The challenges of a group-work approach

Resources

There have been a number of practical challenges in establishing and running the Club, however, it is successful because of the commitment of senior managers in agreeing to adequately resource the project. Facilitators need time and resources to plan and run the group which includes the provision of a healthy buffet at each session, as well as planning the activities and coordinating the consultation exercises. After each group, the facilitators collate and analyse the findings from the consultation and disseminate findings to senior managers. They are supported in doing this by the involvement of the Policy Officer from the Safeguarding Practice Development Team.

‘It’s awesome ... You get to play with people you don’t know, so next time you come you make better friends.’

Participation

Other challenges include the changing dynamics which is inevitable given that children are made subject of plans and taken off plans at different times. There is, however, a stable cohort that regularly attends, including older young people who support the younger members and new members joining for the first time. Children, who come off plans, can stay in the group for a while which provides useful opportunities to consult with those who have recently come off plans.

...it was important that children and their families felt comfortable with the venue for the group, so the group is held at a Children’s Centre.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important issue and the boundaries and ground rules have to be clearly established so that children and young people know that they can’t talk, in any detail, about the reasons why they are on plans. Jan Gouldthorpe explains ‘this can be a real challenge at times and is one of the reasons why we have a high staff to child ratio. If a child comes to the group

and is upset or worried, we need to have social workers on hand who can speak to the child on their own so that any issues do not spill over into the group.’

A Family Support Officer with over 25 years’ experience as a foster carer, together with the Policy Officer from an independent team were chosen to run the group to ensure that it was seen to be independent. It was felt that these staff members would be seen as more ‘neutral’ by children and their families. It was also important that children and their families felt comfortable with the venue, so the group is held at a Children’s Centre.

The outcomes and impact of this approach

Changes to the social work practice

The impact of the approach has been multi-faceted. The most immediate impact has been changes made to social work practice. Dave Basker explains that within the group 'children initially expressed confusion about the role of the social worker and the reasons and aims of

‘Being part of the Kidz Club means we have more of a say about what’s important to us and the workers listen to us about what we think needs to be done.’

their child protection plan. They have also expressed dissatisfaction with the format of the plan which was difficult for them to comprehend. This has led to the development of a child-friendly plan which is prepared by the social worker and child together in a format that enables the child to gain a clear understanding of the reason for the social worker’s involvement with the family and the purpose of the plan. The plan is regularly reviewed and updated by the

child and social worker together thus supporting the child in understanding what is happening and why. Active involvement in the plan means that the child’s views can always be represented well at the review conference. The impact of these changes has been that children report, through the group, a better understanding of the rationale for the involvement of children’s social care. In addition, there has been an increase in children and young people attending review case conferences from 15 attending in April 2011 to 40+ in 2012 – an increase in excess of 150%.

Jan Gouldthorpe reported that children and young people had said they were fed up with ‘just talking’ to social workers when they visited. This has led to the development of a toolkit of activities for social workers to take on home visits to support them in undertaking direct work with children through the use of

a range of creative techniques. All children’s social workers have attended best practice fora where they have been trained to use the toolkit and they report that this is a much more effective means of engaging with children and exploring their daily experiences as well as any areas of concern.

...an increase in children and young people attending review case conferences from 15 attending in April 2011 to 40+ in 2012 – an increase in excess of 150%.

Children and young people took part in a voting exercise to identify the qualities they most valued in their social worker. One of the most important was ‘being reliable and honest’; another was about ensuring consistency in approach and practice when there is a change in social worker.

‘Consultation has helped us refocus our training on direct work and communicating with children and young people with an emphasis on a more personalised approach to eliciting children’s views of their own safety and how this is integrated as a key component in child protection planning. This has also been a focus of Best Practice Forum, held

fortnightly with social workers in the Child in Need and Protection Team”

Di Rees, Service Manager for Child Protection

Improved relationships

Other outcomes include social workers reporting improved relationships with children and young people on child protection plans, and in a number of cases children’s attendance at the group has led to improved relationships with their parents and carers.

“If I wasn’t feeling safe at home, I would ring my social worker, because she comes to my house and asks me what’s going on.”

‘For some of the adults who were not previously engaging with services, their children’s positive experience of group work has begun to challenge and alter their own perception of Children’s Social Care’, says Dave Basker. Group facilitator, Jan Gouldthorpe has also found that young people’s self-esteem has improved: ‘Many of the children, who may previously have had difficulties, begin to develop positive peer relationships in the safe environment of the *Cool Kidz Club*. Children and young people welcome the opportunity to meet with others and this helps them to realise that they are not the only ones who have social workers and others involved with their families.’

‘My advice to other authorities would be to work towards setting up similar schemes’, says Jan Gouldthorpe. ‘We did not anticipate the group having such an impact on the improved engagement of children and families with Children’s Social Care nor did we anticipate the effect the group would have on improving children’s self-esteem and self-confidence. The benefits of this approach both for the children involved and for the development of the child protection service are clear for all to see.’

Provider background

North Lincolnshire Council is a mainly rural unitary local authority situated on the south side of the Humber estuary. Nearly one quarter of the total population is under 20. Nearly 50% of the population lives in Scunthorpe and 21.3% of children under 16 years of age live in low income families. Approximately 4% of the population is part of an ethnic minority.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We’d welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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