



Children's Services Innovation Programme

What do we mean by 'rethinking support for adolescents in care or on the edge of care'? Some ideas to get you started.

We need to change the way we care for troubled adolescents and their families.

The Association of Directors of Children's Services published a position statement and research paper in 2013¹ which makes a very strong case for rethinking how we respond to the complex needs of adolescents.

Some young people enter care in a crisis, following a long history of low level contact with the care system; some experience many unstable and short-lived foster placements; some are ultimately placed in residential care as a last resort. Some young people have all three of these experiences. As ADCS rightly says, we need to find ways to do better.

Children in residential care have high levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties. A recent research study found that 38% of children living in children's homes had a statement of special educational needs; 62% had clinically significant mental health difficulties; 74% had been violent or aggressive in the past 6 months². Children who live in children's homes achieve lower attainment levels in Key Stage examinations than other children.

In 2011-12, LAs across England spent £3.08 billion in total on looked after children, of which £1.05 billion was spent on residential care (which mainly caters for children over the age of 12)³. Some LAs now use outcomes-based commissioning, but LGA research has found that they do so inconsistently and that they could be more effective at gathering, understanding and applying information about children's needs and outcomes.

Once children are in residential care, local authorities sometimes think too little about whether and how they can return to their birth family or move to other forms of care. Local authorities need to get better at commissioning and planning, but some lack the skills and knowledge, and some are too small to be able to commission effectively on their own. This can lead to variable quality and a mismatch between costs and outcomes.

The Government has already started making reforms to strengthen safeguarding arrangements in children's homes, make inspections of children's homes more rigorous, and improve the skills and knowledge of people who work in children's homes. The DfE is funding a range of evidence based programmes like Functional Family Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy and Multidimensional Treatment Foster. This is good news but we need to do more. The ADCS, the LGA (through their

¹ <http://www.adcs.org.uk/publications/position-statements.html>

² Berridge, D., Biehal, N. and Henry, L. 2012, Living in Children's Residential Homes Research Report, DFE-RR201

³ DfE Children's Homes Data Pack 2013.

work on the commissioning of residential care⁴) and numerous witnesses to the recent Education Select Committee inquiry into residential care⁵ have called for fresh thinking on how to do more for this group.

We want to start a conversation about how we can reform the system to meet these challenges.

We want to help respond to these calls by supporting innovations that seek to improve outcomes for this group. These may address any part of the system or the child's involvement with it. We ask anyone with an interest to work with us to rethink the existing model of care for adolescents.

- We are asking you to ask yourselves the following kinds of questions.
- How can we improve the commissioning and management of residential care placements and other services for adolescents, and ensure that there are high quality residential care places where they are needed?
- How can we ensure that the way LAs plan placements for children is consistently high quality, evidence based, and outcomes focused?
- Can we improve our understanding of predictive factors of adolescent care entry, and develop ways of providing support prior to a crisis point, where that is in the best interests of the child.
- How can we ensure the right range of placement types is available to best meet the varying needs of the most vulnerable adolescents? For example, can we develop evidence-based placements that provide residential care for children and support children in their family home? Can we develop 'step down' support to help adolescents move from secure to non-secure homes or move back in with their family?

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⁴ Action Research into the Strategic Commissioning of Children's Residential Care Homes; final report to the Local Government Association. OPM June 2013

⁵ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/residential-childrens-homes/>