

SUMMARY STRATHCLYDE UNIVERSITY EVALUATION OF SWIIS EDUCATION SUPPORT

MAIN FINDINGS

STRENGTHS

There is evidence to support SWIIS's contention that they are providing foster placements for looked after children who could be regarded as otherwise 'hard to place'.

Despite typically having challenging behaviour and additional support needs, once children are placed with SWIIS they tend to become settled in the same school.

The young people had better than average attendance for their stage and status in comparison with government data for looked after children in Scotland and with foster children in research reported by the University of Strathclyde and Scottish Government in 2008.

The type of education support SWIIS provides is not only likely to lead to enhanced attainment by young people but is also a vital component of placement stability for challenging and troubled young people.

A particular strength in SWIIS's work is its multi-disciplinary approach, which is supported by effective communication across the agency.

Education workers help carers and young people to derive benefit from participation in schemes run by schools to encourage wider achievements.

The education support is implemented in ways that help to mitigate exclusions and when they do occur reduce the impact on children and carers.

The broad picture that emerges is of placements that offer educationally rich home environments and of carers able to collaborate with SWIIS in resolving difficulties in schooling.

Evidence of SWIIS's careful recruitment of carers who were committed to the SWIIS emphasis on promoting educational achievement and who had the personal resources to co-operate effectively with SWIIS towards this end.

SWIIS Carers involved children in decisions and took account of their preferences.

Most carers reported that they were involved in decision-making about educational matters as equal members of the care team.

Carers endeavoured to establish regular and supportive communication with the children's birth parents.

Carers have a clear understanding of agency roles, agency expectations and they feel they can work effectively with SWIIS staff.

Carers rated highly the communication with SWIIS staff and thought the quality of support about educational matters was excellent.

Most carers participated in further training and were positive about the experience but perhaps more needs to be done to help carers to gain formal qualifications. SWIIS has considerable strengths in providing professional development. This is particularly important since SWIIS staff have a key role in developing carers' understanding of how to support schooling and how to manage behaviours that might jeopardise the child's or young person's placement.

SWIIS appears to be adept not only in developing their social work and education staff but also in designing training events and one-to-one coaching for foster carers.

DEVELOPMENT AREAS

Carers felt the least effective aspect of support was for the assistance available when a child or young person has been excluded from school

Placement Support Workers need more training on how they can infuse informal learning into their tasks and this suggests that the training they receive does not go far enough.

The distinctions between the responsibilities of education case workers and education support workers are not always clear to staff and carers –more of a staff issue than a carer one.

Carers might benefit from development activities designed to show them how maximum learning can be extracted from informal opportunities.

Exclusion is a particularly difficult area to manage and we think that SWIIS needs to do further work in relation to the support provided for children when they are excluded from school.

DATA

A higher proportion of SWIIS placements are with older children compared to the numbers present in the wider foster care population in Scotland. (78%) were adolescents. The mean age was just over 13.5 years

National statistics show that 45% of all looked after children are teenagers.

SWIIS are placing a higher than average proportion of boys.

Fifty-six (93%) of the group were White-Scottish (compared with 86% nationally), while four were Scottish-Asian or mixed ethnicity

Fifteen local authorities placed children with SWIIS, with Fife (13), Aberdeen City (10) and Edinburgh (9) having the highest number of children placed. The placements locations were within 12 authorities, with Fife (23) and Dundee (11) receiving most children.

Seventeen (28%) of the young people were in placements within their home authority while the remaining 43 (72%) were placed in local authorities that were different to their home authority.

Forty-one (68%) of the young people had been placed with SWIIS carers for between one and two years.

- Less than one year 4 (7%)
- From one to under 2 years 41 (68%)
- From two to under 3 years 10 (17%)
- Three years and more 5 (8%)

The most common reason for the children placed with SWIIS becoming looked after was given as the lack of parental care. This was the sole reason for 32 (53%) of the young people. Other reasons were

- beyond parental control 11
- offences against child 2
- death of parent and drug or alcohol abuse 2
- offences by child 1
- drug or alcohol misuse by parents 1
- other (no explanation) 2

The local authority commissioning managers interviewed indicated that the most common reason for seeking placements with independent agencies like SWIIS was lack of capacity within the local authority's own resources. SWIIS explicitly offers a service for children who are particularly challenging and troubled and who are therefore regarded as 'difficult to place'.

Twenty-five (42%) of the young people were identified as having additional support needs, all but one attending mainstream school. There was a broad range of needs noted with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties being recorded either solely or in combination for more than half of these, including 10 noted as having mental health difficulties.

The data from SWIIS indicate that a substantially higher proportion of the children in their care are recognised as having considerable additional support needs than is reported in the wider looked after children population in Scotland.

SWIIS carers believed that 79% of the children and young people they looked after had social emotional or behavioural needs

Additional support needs of the children placed with SWIIS carers were recorded by their various schools in the following ways:

- Individual support plans 9
- Individual education plans 5
- Education review minutes 4
- Co-ordinated support plan 3
- Staged intervention action plan 3
- Individual Training Plan 1

THEMES

Analysis found that SWIIS's support for education is broadly consistent with the 'indicators of good practice'.

The SWIIS social workers were generally supportive of having an education team in SWIIS,

because it makes a difference and means that the education support for young people is effective.

The agency's multi-disciplinary approach is central to maintaining the stability of quality placements for children with more than usually challenging issues, and that the absence of any of the components is likely to weaken the agency's ability to meet this goal.

An agency is much more likely to be able to attend properly to the children's education if workers are employed who specialise in this aspect of provision.

When the high cost of placements in relation to the intensive support offered by SWIIS was explored in interview, a social work manager provided a very straightforward answer: Not if you count the cost of failed placements.

SWIIS provision costs around one-third of the cost of a typical residential care placement.

The type of education support SWIIS provides is not only likely to lead to enhanced attainment by young people but is also a vital component of placement stability for challenging and troubled young people.

Placements are more likely to break down if SWIIS deploy fewer staff to carer and young people ratio

SWIIS add value through intensive initial and ongoing coaching for carers, plus supportive, effective review and monitoring procedures, carried out in a context of shared values.

Carers' perceptions of SWIIS support for education were benchmarked with the indicators of good practice' - SWIIS support fully met each of the criteria

SWIIS staff support was consistent with values that underpin care, as described in the benchmarking sources listed .

In interviews carers reported being trusted by the agency staff, treated as equal partners, encouraged to involve the children and birth parents in decisions, to share high expectations with the children, and to operate in a non-judgemental way.

SWIIS are able to identify and recruit carers who hold or can develop values that ought to underpin care.

Carers reported in questionnaires that the training workshops they had attended were good or excellent in helping them to support children.

Carers believed that the monthly monitoring and review procedures were very well designed to promote open dialogue problems. Carers believed that their daily written logs, the focus of monthly about any difficulties with the children and encouraged a joint approach to addressing extended discussion with SWIIS education staff, contributed effectively to the monitoring and review procedures

The issue with lack of clarity between the roles of ECW and ESW was tempered by the swift response to difficulties experienced and was valued by carers much more highly than clear demarcation of roles.

'The education case workers were eager to help regardless of time of day'

CWF - evaluations by the children of carers suggested that the children engaged enthusiastically in the activities offered by SWIIS and perceived the provision as a benefit of fostering.

Some older children helped to run the activities and believed that they learned useful skills from this voluntary work.

The children's comments on evaluation sheets suggested that the provision enabled them to develop understandings that helped them to be supportive to the foster children.

Role modelling processes are complex and the family's own child can only be expected to function as an effective role model if the young person placed perceives the family's goals as effective.

Views of carers who previously fostered with other agencies and LA in comparison with SWIIS:-

- Effective communication systems at SWIIS allowed a very fast, reassuring, effective response when carers asked for help.
- Carers were encouraged to collaborate with SWIIS staff in constructing and implementing the response.
- Frequent opportunities to participate in training workshops.
- Effective, ongoing, pro-active monitoring and review of carers.
- SWIIS staff (including link workers) gave more time to addressing their concerns than their counterparts in local authorities.

Expectation of SWIIS on carers promoting education.

That's a very, very big part of SWIIS. That was one of the major reasons I went in to it, because they were so big on education. They're very passionate about it.

Communication systems with school designated managers and school teachers were well established and school staff knew that they should negotiate and plan with carers as well as with SWIIS staff. Thus, carers reported that at least as much, if not more, account was taken of interactions with the school than was the case with their own children.

SWIIS enables carers to support children strongly in relation to formal school provision and that it provides support tailored to the situation and the people in it.

SWIIS support is flexible, depending on the carer's experience of school liaison and advocacy

SWIIS workers helped to improve school attendance by ensuring that schools would notify carers immediately if children failed to turn up at a class
SWIIS help with addressing bullying was particularly appreciated.

Carers who had few formal educational qualifications themselves were imaginative in their provision of informal learning activities at home and most of the interviewees tried out interesting techniques similar to those used by primary teachers for helping younger children with reading and writing.

A carer suggested that it would be useful if SWIIS wrote a booklet for carers about optimising informal learning in the home.

If resources permit, there seems to be a case for enabling most carers to achieve formal qualifications that enable them to progress in their careers as carers. While carers seemed to learn much from training events and discussions with SWIIS staff, only a small minority of carers currently had opportunities to acquire qualifications that are required for employment outside SWIIS.

CONCLUSION

We therefore concluded that SWIIS, through its education support service, is indeed adding value to the care experience of children and young people placed with its foster carers. It appears that potentially difficult placements are made sustainable as a result of this additional support.

The extra support provided by education workers allows social work and placement support staff in SWISS to concentrate on specifically 'social work' aspects of the placement support task, in the knowledge that the educational aspects are being addressed.

Recommendation 1

Having invested considerable effort in setting up a baseline database, SWIIS should continue to develop this to provide outcome data for future reporting.

Recommendation 2

There should be further discussion within the education team in relation to resolving the difficulties in reporting aggregate quantitative and qualitative data on the educational achievements of the children and young people.

Recommendation 3

The indicators of good practice could become a valuable tool for assessing the quality of practice within SWIIS and also the quality of foster care settings, particularly in relation to educational support.

Recommendation 4

The distinctive roles and responsibilities of the education case workers and education support workers should be re-examined and clarified.

Recommendation 5

Training and development activities for placement support workers could be developed to enable staff to build explicit learning goals for children and young people into the outings and recreational activities they do with them.

Recommendation 6

Training for staff needs to focus not only on factual information about national curriculum innovations but also on more practical implications, such as what young people and their carers might do differently both at school and at home to benefit optimally from the innovations.

Recommendation 7

SWIIS could consider adopting an overarching theoretical framework for its education support work. Some training activities are currently informed by selfregulation theory and SWIIS might consider whether this framework is useful in guiding its work. Further, SWIIS might consider establishing a link with university staff who could share their knowledge of pedagogical research.

Recommendation 8

In reviewing its training provision for carers, SWIIS should consider including support to encourage carers to make maximum use of informal opportunities for learning, and also to provide more information about helping young people to access further education opportunities. As in the case of SWIIS staff, carers would benefit from understanding the practical implications of curriculum innovations. More carers could be encouraged to work towards gaining formal qualifications.

Recommendation 9

SWIIS should reconsider the support arrangements for children and young people who are temporarily not attending school either through exclusion or because of a delay in gaining a place in school place.

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