
5 Information for Young People in Residential Care: The Views of the Staff

The following view of information need and provision in children's homes is based on a series of six in-depth interviews with senior staff in five children's homes. Two homes were run by the National Children's Homes. They provided relatively long-stay places with a minority of young people arriving as a result of emergency admission. The others were run by local authorities. Of these, two offer a regional service, acting as a home for young people with severe behavioural difficulties. In these nearly all the young people had been in two or three other homes. They stayed for relatively short periods of between two weeks and three months (the latter being the maximum statutory length of stay). In the other local authority home the large majority of young people were in the home as the result of voluntary admissions.

The ages of the young people ranged from three to nineteen years. The two regional facilities looked after young people in the twelve to seventeen age group.

Young people's information needs

It should be acknowledged that in most cases young people do not exercise any significant degree of choice when being taken into a children's home. So we are not here dealing with information which will enable the client to choose between different options or different homes. Instead, information is needed to enable a young person to adapt quickly and easily to the change of circumstances.

There was a general feeling amongst the staff interviewed that young people did not have enough information, although this view was accompanied by a recognition that perhaps it would never be possible to meet all their needs:

Here I think they are given plenty of information but there's always room for more. I don't quite know where you start and where you stop. To some extent it has to be done on an individual basis depending on how much information they can cope with at a given point in time.

The incidence of emergency admissions heightens the need for information to enable the young person to adapt, but at the same time it makes it very difficult for the staff to convey information effectively and for the young person to absorb and retain the information they receive. Staff said, for example:

They come in at such a traumatic time in their life - they can't take it all in when they arrive.

At first they don't really want to know anything - sometimes shy, depressed, shocked, upset.

Some respondents expressed the view that the information-giving process should start before the point of admission. One felt that there should be no emergency admissions: 'everyone should know what is happening all along the line'. This is perhaps an optimistic view, but it does reinforce the need to prepare the young person with information whenever possible. In one of the National Children's Homes staff go to some lengths to establish contact - and exchange information -before the admission. This is a little easier with older young people:

With older children it has got to be a negotiated process. You want the child to come into care but you want them to feel as if it's their decision. We let them come and stay a night. We talk to young people before they come and we get other young people involved in responsibility for the newcomer.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that this is not always possible and for most young people the transition to life in a home is likely to be a sudden and probably unexpected one.

In such circumstances the young people feel bewildered and frightened. Several respondents referred to the need to put the young people at ease and to dispel their fears:

Most of our children are out of control when they come here -they don't know their feelings. We have to put them in touch with their feelings.

In emergency admissions it is all about being safe and away from something that's painful or hurtful.

In addition to the information and support needed to dispel fear and anxiety there seems to be a need for three distinct types of information: information about rules and procedures; information about rights and how to exercise them; and information which will enable the young people to exercise a degree of control over their lives. These three types of information will all be needed at the point of, or very soon after, admission.

Information about rules and procedures is perhaps the easiest to identify, indeed, many of the homes have clearly stated written rules and procedures. Similarly, the young people have clear questions to which they require answers. As one of the staff interviewed put it:

Who shall I share a room with; what time is bed; do I get pocket money; can I go out with my friends; can I have a pet?

Many of these questions will simply call for a 'yes or no' answer. The response may not be remembered and will need to be repeated in the future, but the process of information transmission is relatively straightforward. It was felt by staff, however, that there are also deeper questions which require a more complex response:

There are also underlying questions like 'Who am I going to be put close to and will they be all right; what am I going to be allowed to do?'

Slightly more contentious is the information about the young people's rights. All respondents freely acknowledged the importance of making the young people aware of their right to have access to the complaints procedure; to religious support; to have access to their personal case file, and so on. In the case of one of the regional facilities, some of the young people seem already to be well-informed:

Our young people know 'the system' pretty well by the time they get here. They know all about clothing grants, about NAYPIC [the National Association for Young People in Care], about the Children's Legal Centre. What they really want to find out is how to exploit the system in the home to key into the wider system.

Such young people are, however, the exception. They are probably in their third or fourth home and are well on their way along the learning curve. Life is more difficult for others who may be in a residential home for the first time. They will probably be unaware that they have any rights at all:

For a lot of children there's not a lot of choice in their lives. They accept that authorities will do what they will do. They don't feel they have a lot of control.

In such cases the staff in the home need both to inform the young people about the existence of the rights and also to ensure that they know enough about the procedures to be able to exercise their rights. In some cases this can present potential difficulties. The staff in the home may very well want to try to resolve problems before they get to the stage of a formal complaint. In such cases it would not be surprising if a member of staff played down the significance of a right of access to a formal complaints procedure.

We say to the older ones that they have a right to make a complaint but it never goes that far - we'd rather just talk.

There is a borough-wide complaints procedure and all the children are given a leaflet about it. But personally I think that what's important is that the children can bring complaints about the staff to me, and about me to my boss. The legal framework for complaints is necessary but on its own it can fail - the system can be misused.

In other circumstances the young people seem to know enough about their rights to circumvent the formal procedure when they feel it appropriate to do so:

They know how to make a complaint but often they go to the police anyway if something has upset them.

It is likely that giving information about young people's rights will always present a potential conflict of interests between the need of the young people to be able to exercise their rights and the need for the home to operate smoothly.

The third type of information that young people need when being admitted to a residential home is information which will enable them to assume some degree of control over their lives. We have already noted a tendency to feel powerless and to accept what authority has in store for them, but even in such circumstances it was felt important to provide young people with information which would allow them to come to terms with their situation and to operate within the constraints imposed upon them:

They need to know what they've come for, how long, what's expected of them.

One respondent referred to a 'package - a contract between them and us' and this is perhaps a useful way to think about the three types of information. The information about rules and procedures says what the home expects of the young person; the information about rights and how to exercise them says what the young person can expect of the home; and the information about control or adaptation provides the basis for operating the contract between the young person and the home - it is the soft information which will enable the young person to function day-by-day in the new circumstances.

Who's in charge of little bits of their life - that's what they need to know.

Once the process of admission is past the need for control or adaptation information continues as the young people seem to be building up their familiarity with the home, adapting to it and finding ways of making the most of their situation. One person described this as 'How can I ...' information:

How can I ... get in touch with my boyfriend; use a 'phone; tell my Aunty who's the only person who cares about me where I am; get back to my solicitor; get my stuff back from the other home; get some new clothes ...'.

Finally, it was clear that staff were aware that young people's information needs would differ according to their age. However, there was little evidence of this awareness having much influence on practice regarding information provision.

How young people obtain the information

There was a widespread view among staff we interviewed that written or printed information made a relatively small contribution to the overall flow of information between the home and the young people. Most respondents felt that oral communication with people was the most important source of information for the young people. Within this general statement a wide range of people were mentioned. Several homes operated a key worker or link worker scheme and in such cases these staff were seen as the most important source, followed by other staff in the home:

The keyworker does case work and is responsible for ground floor conduct. They are totally responsible for the transmission of information about ground rules, etc.

The relationship which develops between the keyworker and a young person is of obvious importance. The transmission of information must run hand-in-hand with trust if the message is to be received and believed.

Other staff within the home play an important part in transmitting information:

The second wave of information (after a printed booklet) is in the education department. We have a youth and community tutor whose job it is to maintain strong links with outside organisations and to make contacts between individual girls and sources of help they might need. Within the residential scene we are unique in offering this resource. The tutor visits lots of groups -AIDS, substance abuse, health education - and collects leaflets, etc.

We transmit a lot of information through the home economics course - it seems a more natural and normal way of doing it and we are trying to normalise the transmission of information as much as possible. Often the kids will talk to teachers who seem 'outside' the home rather than the social workers. However, we have a confidential process by which teachers can relay the information to the social workers.

The third source is the youngster's linkworker - this is a regular and daily source of information. The linkworker will have first hand information about where the client is moving on to, maybe photographs of the institution.

Another respondent stressed the diversity of the information needs and the requirement to adapt the response accordingly:

It depends on what they want to know. The issue is too complex. Corridor conversations, individual exchanges of views, regular systems of group meetings, also fairly regular counselling. You have to be aware of why they are asking the questions.

Social workers were cited as an important source, although in one case the respondent noted that social workers often give misleading information, perhaps in an attempt to reduce stress at the time of admission:

They get information by word of mouth from social workers only it is often disinformation. They tell them that they might be here for only three weeks or so. We then have to dispel this and tell them they might have to be here much longer.

Another respondent felt that social workers played an important part in preparing young people for their move to a home. To do this they felt that social workers should have much more information about the home. This they felt would be difficult to achieve because of the high rate of staff turnover among social workers. Another felt that the lack of information was more widespread:

There's a tremendous ignorance amongst the professional and other agency workers themselves about what facilities are available, and what the facilities themselves are really like.

The social worker can also be important in giving the young person access to the world outside the home:

All the children have their outside social worker who is particularly important for the legal situation and so on. So the child has a network and hopefully they can use this to get the information they need.

The young people's peers are also seen as very important sources of information. These include other young people in the home as well as peers on the outside. These sources are, of course, somewhat less than reliable. As one respondent commented:

There is a whole mythology about these places.

This raises a question about the authority of the information. In whom will a young person place most faith - their keyworker, or the first child to befriend them after admission?

Asked about language problems, respondents felt that this was often a greater problem for the parents of the young people than it was for the young people themselves. When interpreters were needed it was usually for mother or father, not for the young person.

Despite the importance attached to oral as distinct from printed information, most of the homes produce some form of printed leaflet or document to give to the young people. Most of these seemed to be concerned with the rules and procedures of the homes. In one case this was supplemented with a little information about the general reasons for care and a little bit about the alternatives. In one other case the general information booklet about the home was supplemented by a pack about each unit and a statement of equal opportunities.

A disturbing finding was that in three out of the five homes the information was felt to be out of date. In one case it was so out of date that the booklet was no longer distributed.

One respondent noted the problem of illiteracy:

The majority of our children are *Daily Mirror* standard - a reading age of 7-8 years. But others have very disparate abilities. In many cases emotional problems have prevented them taking part in education. Most could read a single document, but there would be problems motivating them - some have zilch reading and writing skills. There also needs to be cultural sensitivity to any documented information.

It is worth noting here the comment about motivation. Even if a young person has adequate reading ability he or she will not absorb printed information unless sufficiently motivated to do so. Probably relatively few young people will have come to a home from a background in which books and other printed materials feature prominently, indeed they may be perceived to have associations with the authority against which the young person is rebelling. In other cases, a booklet may give a child something concrete to cling on to:

The kids don't use our booklets. Yet sometimes when the Gideons come in and give them bibles, some kids really hang on to them. Some will really hold onto documentation - they own it.

Some respondents felt the lack of good printed information acutely. In at least one case the respondent had very clear ideas about what they would produce if only they had the time and the resources:

The whole business of information needs to be given priority - a financial and professional input. I would like to give every young woman who comes here a folder with a set of sheets on different things - they could make their own selection. The sheets could also be distributed by the client's link worker when she sees the need for certain kinds of information. For us the real challenge is putting together the information - you need a technical input on the legal aspects and the courts. You also need a professional communications input to make the information comprehensible and appropriate to the client group.

One respondent discussed the need to begin thinking about a wider range of audio-visual media, pointing out the attraction for many young people of computer games and videos. If these media could be used then it might be possible to

transmit information very effectively. They cited a BBC video which had made a big impact:

The BBC put out a video called 'Starting Out' which was all about leaving home and making the first steps towards independence - making new friends, locating places to contact, etc. It was an absolute magnet for our kids here.

In summary, the staff we interviewed saw young people as having three main types of information need. They require information about the rules and procedures of the residential home; information about their rights and how to exercise them; and information to enable them to exercise control over their lives.

Staff thought there is a significant need for information at the time of admission to the home. Subsequent to admission the type of information needed changes. There is less need for information about rules, procedures and rights. Of greater importance is information which enables a young person to adjust to life in the home.

The most important sources of information, according to staff, are people and relationships between young people and staff, particularly keyworkers, are of great significance. People outside the home, notably social workers and the young people's peers, play a part in providing information about residential care. Printed information is felt to be less important, although most homes produce some form of booklet or information pack for their residents. Audio-visual media were felt to offer a powerful means of conveying information.

Information for relatives and carers

The carers and relatives of young people in residential care will need information of some kind. This need may not, for a variety of reasons, manifest itself in the form of a specific request or series of questions. That should not obscure the existence of the need. Carers and relatives will probably require the same types of information as the young people themselves: they will need information about rules and procedures, about their rights and how to exercise them, and about ways of exercising control over, or coming to terms with, their situation. The provision of information could well form part of the development process, the objective of which is to enable the young person to return to the family. One respondent made a very telling comment:

We in social work talk a lot about the centrality of the family but in fact the family are 'also-rans'. Our efforts go into contacting the professionals first - a case-conference will never be cancelled because a family member cannot attend.

However, only one of the five homes in which the interviews took place made any concerted attempt to provide information for relatives or carers. Yet in four of the homes there was a general feeling that relatives and carers were not given enough information. In one home the view was expressed that relatives and carers were 'handled by the social workers - not our remit'. In another, the home used to make sure that relatives and carers received the home's booklets but that practice had fallen into disuse. The booklet concentrated on the provision of practical information like how to travel to the home, what the arrangements were for visiting, and so on.

Two of the interviewees noted the fact that relatives and carers frequently experience emotional stress which may make it difficult for them to ask for, or to assimilate, information:

Some don't want to know anything. There's a lot of guilt and resentment among parents. They are worried about what the authorities will think of them - will they be blamed?

It's very basic - families feel very bad that someone else is looking after their kids. Some families want to have a go at you - they need a lot of reassurance that their kids are being well cared for - even if their kids have been taken away from them. They need to know that their kids will be safe and secure. The parents need reassurance too - just like the young people.

In addition to feelings of guilt or resentment, some relatives and carers feel powerless and probably believe there is little point seeking information. As one head of home put it:

Many don't ask questions, they simply don't feel in charge.

This should not, however, obscure the fact that carers and relatives almost certainly do have significant information needs. As we have seen, they will need information that reassures them that their children will be all right. They will also need practical information. For example, if visiting is allowed they will need to know what the arrangements are. If the home is a regional facility they may have a long journey to make and they will need information about this. One home had made arrangements for parents to stay overnight and, again, information will be needed about the arrangements for this.

Relatives and carers also need information about what the young people will be doing during their stay at the home. One interviewee described this as peripheral information:

They need to know the peripheral things - that the child is doing well at school, that they are going to activities, etc. They need to know a list of things the child can do - can they go to Sunday school, for example. Maybe this relates to their stereotypes of childhood, perhaps to their own childhood.

The position is less clear-cut when the young people have been removed from their home against the wishes of the parents. In such cases it may be necessary actively to withhold information from relatives and to take steps to ensure that the young people do not make contact. In such circumstances there was a clear feeling that the responsibility for keeping relatives and carers informed rests outside the residential home:

Where children have been compulsorily removed, the information needs of parents and carers is not our responsibility. *Someone* has to satisfy their needs but not us because we have the responsibility for the child.

In such circumstances there seems to be some confusion about who precisely should be making sure all the parties are kept informed and what precisely they should be told. As things stand, there appears to be considerable scope for omission and confusion.

We are also concerned with the information needed when a young person returns from the residential home to their carers or relatives. Only one respondent referred directly to information needs in connection with this transfer, indicating that the family will need to know what the young person has become used to. The respondent felt 'this is more of a casework sort of situation' and thus, presumably, within the remit of the social worker.

This should not, they felt, reduce the importance of the need for information:

The emphasis, for me, needs to be on those people who will continue to be involved with the children while and after they have been in care.

Information for professionals

Professionals need information essentially so that the young people's residential care system can operate more efficiently and with greater effectiveness. The professionals need to understand the nature of the residential care facility so that they can refer young people appropriately. They also need to be well-informed so that they can pass information on to the clients and their families.

The remark at the beginning of the previous section about putting effort into contacting professionals first takes on an added dimension when placed alongside the fact that four of the six respondents felt that professionals did not receive enough information about the home. This was felt to be a major weakness as the relationship with the professionals was important, not least to ensure that inappropriate referrals were not made.

One home had produced an admissions document aimed at social workers but which they had also sent to local courts, probation services and all other reference sources. The document sets out the admissions criteria and gives other relevant advice. Even so, they said, 'we spend a lot of time saying "this boy doesn't need to be here"'. This breakdown in communication has obvious costs, both financial and emotional.

Another home, one of those in the voluntary sector, had put a great deal of effort into producing a brochure. It had photographs and set out the home's aims and objectives along with information that was intended to promote the home to social workers and parents. By the time the brochure was printed the home was full and the information has never really been used. After all, why should false expectations be raised? The home now fills all vacant places through referrals which usually start as telephone enquiries.

Others referred to the importance of the telephone when maintaining contact with professionals and referral agencies:

At the moment agencies are quite inclined to telephone us. It comes mainly from social workers, area managers and team leaders. Word of mouth is still important in spreading information about us.

While personal communication is undeniably important, reliance on telephone enquiries to arrange admissions is a costly and inefficient way of proceeding. As one respondent pointed out:

It depends partly on the person here who answers the telephone. Do they feel sure enough? Do they even have the information? It's very ad hoc. We ought to have something more professional which describes what we do.

It is hard to know where the responsibility lies. One respondent expressed the view that it was the professionals' job to find out what resources were available, rather than the home's job to make sure they knew. This, however, was an isolated view and most felt that the home had a responsibility to inform. This remark was made by the head of one of the regional facilities:

If we are a sparse resource, we must be used to our best. Places like this need to think clearly how best to help children. We need to define our aims and objectives and then let other agencies and professionals know what we do, what we are best at. Only when we do this will we be used properly.

The nature of the information which is required to ensure that children's homes are used effectively is complex. One respondent in a local authority home expressed it thus:

There is a big need for a system of information which can be monitored and updated - we need a central information system with which we can work in partnership. We should be committed to an annual statement of where we're at, what we've learned, where we're going. As it is, we spend a lot of time with social workers who phone up - they usually hear about us through word of mouth. We send them a brochure and an application form and tell them about the criteria for admission. We then ask them to send us all the information they can. We then get the psychotherapist and group leader to read it. Then, if they seem suitable, we ask the social worker to come down here with all the information they can find and, if necessary, someone who knows the case as well. We emphasise knowledge of early life and we devote a morning to it. The social workers' reactions to this vary from 'a grilling' to 'the best supervision we have ever had'.

This thorough approach is only feasible in the case of non-emergency admissions. It should perhaps be acknowledged, however, that this form of in-depth analysis of the young person and their needs should form the basis of all admissions. The circumstances of an emergency admission do not invalidate the need for information to flow back and forth. The existence of the emergency simply makes the process much more difficult.

Another respondent identified the types of information needed:

There is a lack of understanding of what is provided and what needs to be provided. What we have got is never monitored. We need to increase knowledge of alternative facilities, of local facilities. We need better communication between front-line workers and the executive. More information needs to be fed back from the front-line workers and needs to be fed into policy and used to influence the allocation of funds. Council managers need to assess the needs within the area.

Much of this information can be regarded as management information which has little direct impact on the particular needs of an individual client - in this case, the young person. The information is, however, needed to ensure the most appropriate allocation of resources within the system.

A more direct need for better-informed professionals was expressed by one respondent who linked the information professionals possessed to the attitudes developed by the clients:

The young people's primary workers need to find out a lot more about us so that they can present a more positive and better-informed image of the home and its services to the client.

Finally, one respondent, when commenting on the fact that professionals were ill-informed, made the point that the criticism applied equally to the professionals in the residential homes:

There is a tremendous ignorance amongst professionals. I work in virtual isolation myself - today, driving the kids to school will be my only foray outside. What I know is based on 20 year's experience of working in this area. I ought to be able to go out there and see other resources. Written documentation is not enough.

This point was reinforced by another respondent who noted that new staff and applicants for jobs needed information about the home and about working in residential care. They made the point that only a certain amount could be conveyed through written information and that the only way to get a full picture was to visit and spend time in the home. Once employed the staff need to build up their knowledge of local facilities and services as well as knowing where to find information on other topics.

Currently there appears to be a general feeling that neither the relatives and carers nor the professionals are being provided with adequate information. There is a confusion about where the responsibility lies. In particular, it is not clear whether the home or the social workers should assume the responsibility for informing relatives and carers. Further, there is a lack of clarity about whether it is the responsibility of the home to inform the professionals, or the responsibility of the professionals to find out for themselves what is going on.

It seems likely that the lack of information is preventing the residential care system for young people from operating as efficiently and as effectively as it might.

Key issues

Printed and oral information

There seems to be a general view that oral communication is the most effective way of transmitting information. This applies in all cases - when communicating with the young people themselves, their relatives and carers and with professionals. Despite this, most homes have made an effort to present information in a printed format. It is not clear, however, whether the printed information is intended to reinforce oral communication or vice versa.

The need for communicators to be well-informed

In a system which places a heavy reliance on oral communication, it is important to ensure that the people communicating the information are themselves well-informed. When information is communicated orally it is often very difficult to identify circumstances when incorrect information is given. Unlike printed information which

can be checked and corrected before being finalised and then reviewed periodically for currency.

At present, it appears that relatively few formal procedures exist for ensuring that the communicators are well-informed. Within the home, this might have implications for the staff training procedures. Training might in turn be supplemented by the provision of manuals and other written guidance. For those working outside the home it will be more difficult.

The responsibility for giving information

In certain circumstances there appears to be a lack of clarity concerning the responsibility for information. This seems less of a problem within the home where keyworkers and those in similar positions are recognised as having important information-giving roles. The responsibility for informing relatives and carers is divided between staff in the home and professionals working outside. It is not clear where the division of responsibility lies.

The collection and preparation of information

There is a similar lack of clarity concerning the responsibility for the collection and preparation of information. Most homes clearly felt that the responsibility rested within the home. In most homes the responsibility seemed to be shared amongst the staff. It might be more effective to assign the responsibility more clearly to specified staff, to recognise this in job descriptions and to support the responsibility with some training.

The collection, storage and dissemination of information can be seen as specialised tasks and it might be advisable to have access to specialist skills.

The procedures for giving information

For the communication of information to be effective it is necessary to build information-giving into the procedures of the home. This is particularly important during the admission period when young people need to assimilate a large amount of information in a short period of time. The need becomes even greater in the case of emergency admissions when there is a greater potential for information to be overlooked.

The formality of information-giving

Some information is imparted as part of a defined, formal process. In other cases, staff in the homes attempt to give young people information, or to make them aware of things, in a more covert way. The aim is to ensure that young people receive and retain the information they require despite their reluctance to accept formal information packages whether presented orally or in print.

The timing of information

Some information needs to be communicated at a specific time or in a particular sequence. This needs to be taken into account. Similarly, the staff recognise the fact that much of the information will need to be repeated as it will not be retained the first time it is received. This may suggest the need for information to be presented in

both oral and printed form so that young people can check and remind themselves about things they do not understand or which they have forgotten.

Literacy

There was a general awareness that many of the young people possess only fairly rudimentary literacy skills. To overcome this any printed information needs to be designed with particular skill.

Cultural needs

Information also needs to take full account of cultural factors to avoid alienation. This applies to oral and printed information.

Objectivity and bias

There is a significant potential for information to become distorted through lack of objectivity or through bias. This is often unintentional and occurs for the best of motives. For example, if the policy of the home is to try to defuse complaints and grievances through open discussion and informal conciliation they may feel that it is inappropriate to begin by giving all young people detailed information about their right of access to a formal complaints procedure. Similarly, in the stress of making an involuntary admission, a social worker may give a false impression of the length of time the young person will spend in the home because to do otherwise might be to exacerbate an already difficult situation. A related issue is the importance of the information being *seen* to be objective by the young people who receive it.

The authority of the information

Young people will pick up information from many different sources. One of these will undoubtedly be the other young people in the home. Much will depend on the authority which the individual young person attaches to the different sources of information. It will be in the interests of the home to work towards a position where information given by the home and its staff is perceived to have greater authority than that given by a young person's peers.