A Journey from Care to Independence

Evaluating a Model of Supported Living for Care Leavers in NI

Acknowledgements

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Contents

Northlands Young People Leaving Care - Summary

This evaluation investigates the availability and nature of housing and additional support for young people in housing need, within the Western Area Trust. It focuses on investigating the suitability of a new specialist supported living project for young care leavers with high support needs in the Western Area Trust as a transitional placement from formal care, such as, residential or foster care to long term independent living.

The Praxis Care project is an innovative specialist 6 placed unit for young people leaving formal care, who are aged between 16-21 years old and who are deemed to have 'high support needs'. There are 5 different services in the Western Area Trust providing supported accommodation for young people in housing need. The Praxis Care unit is the only service which was consistently rated as providing high level support by both the service provider and an independent housing officer.

Four young people living in the unit, eleven project staff and four statutory referrals agents participated in the evaluation.

The following highlights some of the key findings from the evaluation:

Common Themes Across the 3 Groups

(1) Support Planning
- The young people showed an appreciation of the purpose of support plans but they also showed frustration with having to work towards set objectives.
- The staff mentioned the challenges of achieving objectives within support plans due to resistance from some of the young people.

(2) Timing of the young person's move
- There was a common view that 2 years may not be a long enough period for a young person to be ready to move on from high level supported living and that each person's circumstances should be assessed individually.

(3) Suitable 'move on' accommodation
- All referral agents stated that there was poor supported living accommodation for young people in the Western Area Trust. In particular, it was felt that there was not enough low level support for young people leaving care.
- Young people could benefit from an advocate to help them negotiate housing services and to fully consider the suitability of tenancies.

Young People's Views
1. The young people were pleased to have their own self contained flats within the project. However, they did not like some of the service procedures and polices which restricted their freedom i.e. no alcohol and no smoking policy in flats, security features, such as having to be buzzed in and out of the building, having a 'signing in' book for visitors.

2. The young people identified budgeting as a key skill they required for living independently and an area in which they required support.

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3. The young people wanted a greater variety of activities to be arranged by the project. The young people were unable to think of any healthy activities which they could arrange themselves.

4. The need for good social skills and social support when living independently was viewed as important by the young people. Relationship building with professional staff, including project staff, was seen as very important.

5. The value of having consistency in staffing between supported living and an outreach service was highlighted.

Project Staffs' Views

1. All of the staff stated that they enjoyed working with the young people, with the majority stating this was the case *'all of the time'*.

2. The benefits gained from their job role related to the value of the work done and progress seen in the young people. Other benefits included their own professional development and learning.

3. The challenges mentioned by staff largely related to the management of the young people's behaviour and as a consequence the impact this had on achieving goals set out in support plans.

4. Training was raised as an area of further development. The in-house training received was rated as *'somewhat helpful'*. Staff identified a range of young people focused training which they felt could be beneficial for the project.

5. Staff mentioned the benefit of having more group and individual social activities. Staff felt that having more attractive diversionary activities in the evening and weekends could prevent young people from getting involved in high risk behaviours, such as excessive drinking.

Referral Agents' Views

1. All 4 referral agents stated that the project was a suitable transitional placement for young people exiting formal care.

2. Referral agents were pleased with the project in terms of its aim of promoting independence within a supportive environment and also the quality of the accommodation i.e. central location, flats, security.

3. Referral agents thought that the project could benefit from making the distinction from young people's previous care background. For example, job titles, terminology used and also practical aspects of the unit were felt to be very similar to those used in a residential care setting.

4. All 4 referral agents believed that an outreach service and a personal advisor or social worker would be important for a young person leaving the project.

Background

Transitions for Young People Leaving Care

In the 1980's concerns about the incidence of homelessness and unsuitable living conditions among care leavers was a major factor contributing to the development of specialist leaving care teams (Wade & Dixon 2006).

Appropriate housing continues to be a fundamental issue for care leavers and the people that support them.

One of the most basic human needs is for somewhere safe and pleasant to live. For young people making the transition to adult life, who are not able to live with their families, suitable accommodation is vital to a stable life that can include education, training, employment, and healthy relationships. Young people who do not have a safe place to live are more vulnerable to poor health, involvement in crime and substance misuse, sexual exploitation and long term unemployment (Barnardos 2006).

A series of small studies have also highlighted how poorly equipped young people leaving care are practically, emotionally, and educationally for managing independent living (Stein 2004, for review of these studies). As other reports have espoused, there is the expectation of instant adulthood for many young people leaving care. They miss out on the critical preparation stage - time for freedom, exploration, reflection, risk taking and identity search. For the majority of young people who have lived within a nuclear family, this happens through further/ higher education. In fact, within today's culture there is an extended transition involving longer financial, practical and emotional support from family. For care leavers, this is not always the case; family relationships (biological or social) may be missing or problematic rather than supportive (Stein 2006). New structures based around the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 and the Children (Leaving Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 came into force on 1 September 2005. This new Act attempted to resolve current weaknesses in the support given to care leavers (Office of Public Sector Information 2002).

UK Legislation- Leaving and Aftercare Services

The overarching aim of the Children's (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002 was to make further improvements in the preparation, planning and support for young people leaving care and aimed to create more consistent arrangements for financial support. Local authorities continue to hold a duty to assess and meet the needs of young people. Under this Act young people were placed under 1 of 4 categories, depending on their age and circumstances:

- Eligible
- Relevant
- Former Relevant
- Qualifying.

The different categories dictate what services and support a young person is entitled to (Office of Public Sector Information 2002, DHSSPSNI 2005).

"*The main purpose of the Act is to improve the life chances of young people who are looked after by health and social services trusts as they make the transition to independent living*" (Office of Public Sector Information 2002).

Young Care Leavers with Complex Needs

The often difficult experiences and life circumstances of young people from a care background has been found to predispose them to emotional and behavioural difficulties (Broad 2005). However, the likelihood of young people experiencing placement movement and instability after leaving care has not been greatly associated with the pattern of young people's past care careers. Wade & Dixon (2006) suggest that continued placement instability is significantly higher for young people with mental health, emotional, or behavioural difficulties and for young people who have experienced a number of problems in their life. Positive intervention through effective aftercare services is vital for the successful transition of young people, especially for those with the most complex needs. Research has shown that the outcomes for young people who move into independent living are better for those young people who receive support to find appropriate housing and who receive support during the settling in period (Dixon et al. 2004, Dixon 2008).

Rationale for the Evaluation

A major concern continues to centre on the shortage of appropriate accommodation for young people with complex or higher support needs, including young people with mental health problems, persistent offending, drug dependencies, disabilities and those not meeting the threshold of adult services (Wade & Dixon 2006).

Supported Housing can be an essential transitional placement between formal care, such as, residential or foster care and long term independent living. Wade (2003) highlighted evidence that Inspection and Reviews have found that Authorities which invested in specialist projects tend to have more comprehensive, effective and age appropriate services for care leavers.

This evaluation has investigated the availability and nature of housing and additional support generally for young people in housing need, within the Western Area Trust. It has focused on investigating the suitability of a new specialist supported living project for young care leavers with high support needs in the Western Area Trust as a transitional placement from formal care, such as, residential or foster care to long term independent living. To date these are aspects of leaving care which have received little attention in the research literature.

Aims of the Evaluation

1. To carry out a service mapping exercise of leaving and after care services (LAC services) in the Western Area Trust.

2. To evaluate an innovative model of support within a supported living project for young people leaving care within the Western Area Trust.

    I. To gather the views of young people who have experience of using the project.
    II. To gather the views of professionals who have referred young people to the project.
    III. To gather the views of project staff who support young people in the project.

Context of the Evaluation

Care Statistics
On 31 March 2007, there were 2,356 looked after children in Northern Ireland, a rate of 55 children per 10,000 population aged under 18 years (DHSSPSNI 2007).

The Western Area Trust, the region of interest for this report, accounted for 18% (n=427) of the total Northern Ireland figure. [1]

On 31 March 2007, there were 228 young people of leaving care status in the Western Area Trust. [2]

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[1] The DHSSPSNI statistics for the financial year 31 March 2007 relate to the pre RPA re-configuration. For the purposes of this report Foyle and Sperrin Lakeland Trust figures have been combined together to provide a figure for the Western Area Trust.

Table 1: Age profile of care leavers

Age	Male	Female	Total	% of total
<16	0	0	0	0
16	19	22	41	18.0
17	25	24	49	21.5
18	23	14	37	16.2
19	20	13	33	14.5
20	18	28	46	20.2
21	8	10	18	7.9
>21	3	1	4	1.8
Total	**116**	**112**	**228**	**100**

Source: Western Health & Social Care Trust (2008)

A similar number of males and females were categorised 'care leavers', 116 males and 112 females (Table 1)

Approximately 40% of the young people were aged below 18 years old.

The most common living arrangement was foster care / with ex-foster care (25%), living with relatives/ family (23%) and private tenancy (22%). 19 young people were living in supported living accommodation. This accounted for only 8% of all types of living arrangements (Table 2).

Table 2: Current living arrangements of care leavers in Western Area Trust

Current Living Arrangements	No. of Young People	% of total
Foster Care/With Ex Foster Carers	57	25
Living with Relatives/Family	52	22.8
Tenancy (NIHE/Private/Housing Assoc)	50	21.9
Residential Care	25	11.0
Supported Living Accommodation	19	8.3
Other	11	4.8
Student Accommodation	5	2.2
Prison	3	1.3
Hospital Setting	2	0.9
Moving between Friends and Family	2	0.9
Foyer	1	0.4
Homeless	1	0.4
Total	**228**	100

Source: Western Health & Social Care Trust (2008)

Service Mapping

The service mapping exercise identified 5 different services in the Western Area Trust which provided supported accommodation for young people in housing need (Appendix 1, Table 3). A service provider and an independent housing officer were asked to rate the identified supported accommodation services as providing low, medium or high support. As shown in the summary table below, there were differences of opinion in terms of the level of support each project was providing. The

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[2] Statistics for the financial year 31 March 2007 were provided by the Communication Office of the Western Health & Social Care Trust-[Altnagelvin.FOI@westerntrust.hscni.net]

project under evaluation was the only model of care which was consistently rated as providing high level support by both the service provider and the independent housing officer. It was also the only service in the Western Area Trust which dealt exclusively with young people aged 16-21, who were moving out of formal care.

Provider	WAT Area	Support Level rated by Housing Officer	Support Level rated by Service Provider
Praxis Care	Derry City	High	High
First Housing	Derry City	Medium- High	High
Shelter	Omagh	Low	Medium – Low
The Strand Foyer	Derry City	Low	Medium – High
First Housing * *This service has since closed*	Limavady	Medium	High

Praxis Care Supported Living Project

The Praxis Care project describes itself as an innovative specialist 6 placed unit for young people leaving formal care, who are aged between 16-21 years old and who are deemed to have 'high support needs'.

- The average age of young people actually living in the unit is 17yrs and 5mths, with ages ranging between 16 and 18 years old.

- The needs of those entering the project may include a history of significant moves and placement breakdowns, mental and emotional health difficulties, offending behaviours, dependent children, use of alcohol/ drugs, aggressive / challenging behaviour, ineffective coping mechanisms, detached from support networks, chaotic lifestyles, self harm and being highly vulnerable to negative influences.

> **Service Aim**
>
> *"The supported living project aims to enable the young people to achieve their potential within a safe and nurturing environment which will promote options and choices and which will be under-pinned by a person –centered needs led approach."*

Staff Configuration
There are 12 staff members working within the project: 1 manager, 3 senior project workers, 4 full time project workers, 2 part time project workers and relief staff.

Referral Process

All referrals to the project are planned and have a phased entry process. No self referrals or emergency referrals are accepted. A slightly different referral process is in operation depending on whether the young person is referred from Leaving and Aftercare services or residential services. However, the general process is that the Leaving/After Care Team completes a Praxis Care application form, a Needs Assessment and Pathway Plan. All applications are authorized by the Social Work Manager of Leaving After Care Team. A selection panel meets to discuss each referral. The selection panel comprises the Assistant Director (Praxis Care), the Accommodation Manager (Praxis Care), Social Work Manager (Leaving/After Care Team) and the Local Homeless Officer (Northern Ireland Housing Executive). A risk management strategy is also agreed by the interagency team prior to the young person moving in[3]. The completed referral form is then sent to the Accommodation Manager of Northland Road Project. It is the aim of the project that a young person moves on from the project after a period of 2 years.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

The project procedure requires full inter-agency input at all stages of the young person's tenancy. It is the co-operative work of these groups which ensures a holistic model of support is made possible. This includes the project manager, project key worker, social work key worker, personal advisor (if allocated) and the young person.

Person Centred Care Process

On entry to the project each young person has a detailed pathway plan and needs assessment which has been carried out by their statutory key worker. The detail of these documents forms the basis of an individual support plan which outlines identified needs and how these needs can be dealt with. They are outcome focused and are regularly reviewed. These plans are completed by the young person and their project key worker and overseen by the project manager. The support plans are reviewed every 3 months, however this can vary depending on changing circumstances. There are 9 key areas covered in a support plans. From these support plans, more specific weekly outcome based programmes are made.

Table 4: 9 Key Areas of Support Plan
1. Mental health, well being and behavioural Issues
2. Physical Health
3. Daily Living Skills (personal support, household tasks)
4. Budgeting/ Finance and Benefits
5. Daily Activities
6. Relationship with Family & Friends
7. Cultural/ Faith Needs
8. Education, Training & Employment
9. Housing Needs

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[3] There are slightly different referral processes in operation depending on where the young person is moving from .e.g LAC or a residential unit.

For each of the key areas, individual needs are identified, details of actions / support are noted, the anticipated outcomes are clarified and the names of the people who will be carrying out the action or providing the support are noted. Each support plan is signed off by all those people involved in the young person's development i.e. young person, project manager, project key worker and statutory key worker.

Support Plan Headings			
Identified Needs	Action/ Support required (include number of weekly sessions x hours	Anticipated Outcome	By whom: Praxis, Statutory, Other

The project works alongside the Children's (Leaving Care) Act (NI) 2002 and the requirements of its funding provider, Supporting People[4]. The project has added further policies and procedures which have been tailored specifically to the client group i.e. cooling off policy, curfew policy, visitor's policy, and a drug and alcohol policy (DHSSPSNI 2005).

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[4] Supporting people website link- http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/wwu_home/supporting_people-3.htm

Findings & Discussion

This section of the report will be divided into 2 main strands:

(1) Themes which are common across young people, project staff and referral agents
(2) Additional views from young people, project staff and referral agents.

Common Themes across the 3 Groups

There were 3 common themes identified through the data analysis stage which were raised by the young people, the project staff and referral agent groups.

- **Theme 1: Support Planning**
- **Theme 2: Timing of the Young Person's Move**
- **Theme 3: Suitable 'Move on' Accommodation**

Theme 1: Support Planning

Support planning was a strong theme which came out of the research. The young people showed an appreciation of why it was used but they also showed frustration with having to work towards set objectives. Staff also mentioned the challenges they faced in fully implementing the support plan process.

Content of Support Plans

The young people mentioned their frustration when staff members tried to assist them or check up on them with certain tasks they felt they did not require support with.

"You need them but you don't need them around you all of the time." (young person)

"They seem to put you down with bad marks if you don't want help with cooking or cleaning." (young person)

However, the young people were also aware that they did require staff to help them in some areas:

"If you really need them or you are really, really stressed. If you need someone to talk to. They have to be there. They can't say that they are doing something, they have to be there." (young person)

"At the moment I need support with getting work." (young person)

Challenges to Implementing Support Plans

Staff members also mentioned the challenges of achieving the objectives set out within a young person's support plan, due to the impact of the young person's behaviour i.e. verbal / physical aggression, alcohol / drug abuse, apathy, disengagement and the young person presenting with high risk behaviours.
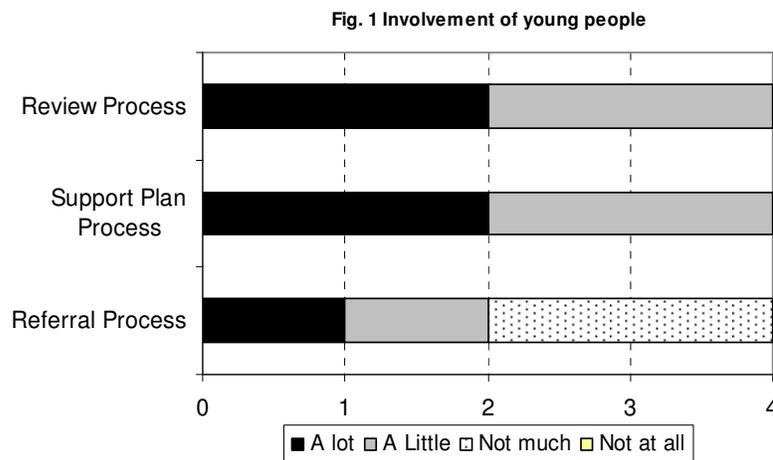
"(It's challenging) trying to motivate young people from difficult/ dysfunctional backgrounds to engage in support planning. Dealing with typical teenager/ young adult behaviour e.g. stubbornness, tantrums, etc. and managing clients who abuse alcohol/drugs and exhibit aggression when doing so. Sadly, it's difficult to undo many years of psychological trauma/ upset and many have a dependency on the care system." (project worker)

The staff also stated that reluctance on the part of a young person to engage with the goals set out in his/her support plan could have a negative impact on other young people's motivation and focus on achieving their goals:

"In my experience young people who do not want to engage in their support plan are not successful at the project and only hold other young people who want support back." (project worker)

There are clear guidelines set out in the Support Agreements, in terms of the consequences of repeatedly failing to attend support sessions or to work towards the support goals i.e. emergency reviews and / or eviction. However, staff stated that there were no clear consequences for non-engagement of support plans on a day-to-day basis. This, they felt, made managing some individuals difficult.

The referral agents who participated in the evaluation felt that the young people had either 'a lot' or 'a little' input into their support plan and the review process (Fig 1).

Fig. 1 Involvement of young people

However, 2 referral agents did not think that the young people they were working with had much involvement in the referral process.

One referral agent felt that there was no point in having a review meeting unless the young person was in attendance.

Recommendations from Theme 1: Support Planning

1. The scheme is to continue to match the professional support to the new young adult status by providing flexible, tailored support to the young person's needs. (Allen 2003)

2. There should be a continued recognition that there are inherent difficulties with managing the young adult status for those categorized as 'high risk / high need'. However, supported living should aim to be as much like 'real life' as possible

3. The culture, policy and practice of professional support given to young people leaving care must allow for a safe amount of risk taking. Otherwise, young people will not develop benchmarks for themselves, which is a critical factor for independent living.

4. Referral agents and staff at the unit should continue in their efforts to fully engage the young people in the support plan and review processes.

Theme 2: Timing of the young person's move

The young people who participated in the research were keen to move on to more independent living and were excited about the prospect of having their own place. However, they also showed some fears about the change:

"I, I would like to go. It would be good to go. But I would be worried about it too." (young person)

"Budgeting is alright. It's thinking about doing it when you are on your own, then. You have to learn to do it by yourself." (young person)

Through the use of a case study during the focus group, this young person was able to express their opinion on the possible difficulties of moving to independent living.[5]

"She (case study character) may have liked her old place better (foster care). Even though free-er. You know just the way that she is out on her own. She might have still liked the wee bit of support that she had. I am not saying that she would want to go back like. I think she would miss it, because she had loads of support and now it is gone. She can't run to get help from nobody, she's on her own." (young person)

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[5] See Appendix 3 for a copy of case study

Expectation of a 2 year tenancy

There was a common view held by the young people, the staff in the unit and the referral agents that 2 years may not be a long enough period for a young person to be ready to move on from high level supported living to more independent living.

"They may not be ready by the 2 years" (young person)

"I feel that the period of time a young person can stay should be extended, however, reviewed monthly after 2 years. Rationale for this being when a 17-18 year old moves in they have to move on at 20 and often it nearly takes a full 2 years plus to be fully independent" (senior project worker)

"A 2 year period is not suitable for all young people. They should be assessed individually. Although, (a young person) may be ready in some respects, on a practical level, emotionally (they may be) no where near ready." (referral agent)

The service mapping exercise (Appendix 1, Table 3) showed that all Western Area Trust supported living projects for young people in housing need had an expected tenancy of 2 years. Interestingly, a Barnardo's paper stated that supported accommodation should not be subject to arbitrary cut-offs due to age, but should continue until the young person is successfully supported into their own long term, independent housing (2006). The Praxis Care scheme accommodates the most challenging of young people. As there are no other support facilities in the area to provide for their needs, the Praxis care service tries to work through the most difficult of situations with the young person to enable them to remain supported within the unit.

Recommendation from Theme 2: Timing of a Young Person's Move

1. Funding for supported accommodation typically involves a 2 year moving on period. However, the research has shown that the young people, the staff and the referral agents felt that this may not be a long enough time for some individuals. Therefore, it is important to have regular inter-agency meetings, which includes the young person, the funder and the full range of professionals involved in making decisions to discuss an appropriate move on plan should the young person require high level support beyond their 2 year tenancy.

Theme 3: Suitable 'Move on' Accommodation

It was highlighted by the young people, staff and referral agents that there is *"very little suitable move on accommodation"* for young people leaving supported living in Northern Ireland.

The referral agents were asked for their views on the availability of supported accommodation for young people leaving care in the Western Area Trust.

- All 4 were of the opinion that there was not enough 'low level' support for young people leaving care.
- In terms of 'medium' and 'high level' support, there was conflicting opinions from the professionals questioned. 2 respondents believed that there was sufficient support and 2 believed there was insufficient support. One respondent felt there was inadequate medium to high level support in rural areas, such as, Strabane and Limavady.

Staff also mentioned the need for a greater continuum of care:

".....some young people who are leaving here still require low support. However, (there is) no accommodation to cater for their needs." (senior project worker)

Advocacy Role in Relation to Housing
One of the young people in the research mentioned the poor standards of accommodation that is offered through the Housing Executive. Young people moving from supported living to a Housing Executive tenancy are in a vulnerable position in which they are being asked to choose whether they feel a house is suitable for them in terms of safety and location. Young people, often desperate to move on, may not fully consider the suitability of a place which may lead to a disruptive series of short tenancies.

"The place I was going was full of druggies. And where I was in, I think there were 8 flats and I was in an upstairs flat. Me carting a child up the stairs on my own but I got used to it, but then I left a month after." (young person)

It is important that an advocacy figure is available for a young person to negotiate on their behalf with housing services and also to ensure that the accommodation is provided by an approved social landlord (Simon 2008, Barnardo's 2006).

Recommendation from Theme 3: Suitable 'Move On' Accommodation

1. Young care leavers are particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes in adult life. This is even more the case for those with a history of complex needs. It is important that the needs of this group of young people are a focus of concern, which includes further investment in housing partnerships, developing an improved range of after care services and having advocates available to the young people to assist them in making decisions the suitability of tenancies.

The remainder of the report highlights additional issues raised by the young people, Praxis Care staff and referral agents.

Young People's Views

Young People's Views of Staff & Accommodation
The young people felt that the staff at the unit were supportive:

"They are supportive here so they are. They listen."

"It's all right like they are here if you need them, if it's really important. If you really need them or you are really, really stressed, if you need someone to talk to. They have to be there. They can't say that they are doing something, they have to be there."

Practical changes like not having to share a kitchen or bathroom was a major benefit for the young people and made it distinct from the type of accommodation which is typical of a residential care unit:

"You have your own space, big space."

However some young people did not like the fact that you couldn't put posters on the walls:

"….you aren't even allowed pictures up on the wall."

Tenancy Agreement & Service Procedures
Some of the young people disliked some of the policies and procedures within the project, for example, signing in and out and being buzzed in and out:

"Sometimes it is like a prison coming in and out. You have to be buzzed in and handing your keys in and out."

The young people also talked about it being embarrassing for them to bring friends around to their flat because of the no alcohol and no smoking policy in the flats:

"It's mostly your friends, who want to bring a carryout in when they hear that you have a flat. Your friends don't want to come around because of the rules of no drinking."

Another young person mentioned the fact that certain friends who had criminal convictions were not allowed to come into their flat:

"Your friends have to be saints, if there is anything at all wrong with them or if they have been involved with the police then they aren't allowed in."

In contrast, the staff members were pleased with the policies and procedures which were set up within the project and viewed them as necessary:

"This client group is extremely demanding and risk levels are high. Policy and procedures have to be flexible and creative as in most instances the client group is unable to manage within the said boundaries."

Many authors have spoken about the fact that care experienced young people are often in a position of having to grow up faster and needing to learn to cope sooner than other young people (Centrepoint 2006, Stein 2006). In addition to managing a tenancy, young people need to be able to take control of situations where their friends or peers want to use their accommodation for drinking and smoking. It is important that staff support young people to learn the skills needed to deal with this pressure as it can become an issue again when they move on to more independent living.

Giving and Receiving Support
The young people showed variation in the levels of support they wanted to receive from staff. For some young people, assistance with doing day to day activities was viewed as important. However, others showed resistance to receiving this type of help, even though their support agreement stated that they required support in this area.

For one young person, the ideal type of support was help with:
"cooking, cleaning, washing. Making sure that you're flat is nice and clean"

Whereas for another young person help with cooking and cleaning was not what they wanted:

"Most of the time I don't want their help (..). I don't need people coming up everyday to help me clean. I have it done. If I find something hard to cook, I will ask them. Otherwise I will cook it myself".

Although the young person stated he/she did not want help in this area, their support plan showed that the young person had limited skills in this area and required support to develop new skills (Table 5):

Table 5: Extract from a Support Plan

Identified Needs	Action/ Support required (include number of weekly sessions x hours	Anticipated Outcome
Limited Cooking Skills	3 Individual work sessions with *x* and staff to prepare and cook meals in flat.	*x* to be able to cook a meal from start to finish and be aware of nutritional value of foods chosen.

Meaningful Activities within the Project
The need for more meaningful activities within the supported living project was an issue raised by both the young people and the project staff.

The young people spoke about being bored because they had nothing to do:

"Sometimes your head would nearly be away with boredom."

"But it is always the same thing over and over and over."

The young people said they would like more activities to be arranged within the project. The young people only mentioned *'drinking'* when asked for activities that they could think of themselves.

Record analysis of the support plans showed that staff worked alongside the young people to introduce a structure to their day through employment, training, hobbies and carrying out sessional work. The staff also highlighted the potential benefit of having more group and individual activities and the need to promote diversionary activities at the weekend.

Budgeting: In Supported Living and when leaving Supported Living
For the young people in the project, budgeting was a key area in their support plan and was an area where staff supported them with on a daily basis. By the time the young people leave the project it is the aim that they can effectively set aside money for bills. An additional challenge for the young people when they leave the project is managing a different budget due to changes in income, bill amounts and bill payment dates.

"You need to be able to keep a house, You need to be able to budget"

".. you can come down (communal kitchen in project) and get bread, milk and whatever. That is a big difference. (When living on your own) if you run out of milk and bread, you need to have it yourself"

The financial situation of young people can incorporate a range of different agencies i.e. social security, housing benefit and social services (Biehal et al. 1995). The bureaucracy of these systems and the time it takes to get entitlements arranged can be very difficult for young people to deal with. Traversing the different financial systems is a particularly challenging time for a young person who is moving out of the care system to live independently, and can mean that they are required to manage bigger bills with the same money (Dixon 2008).

"When I moved out of here (the project) and moved into that flat I was putting in £45 (electricity) (whereas) I was putting £5 in here every 2 weeks"

Social Skills and Relationships
The young people were asked about the skills they would require to live independently. The need for social skills and social networks were identified as important:

"The first thing you would need to be is sociable."

Young people also mentioned staff as continuing to be an important social connection when they were in the early period of independent living:

"It would be good if staff could come and visit you for an hour or two but not always there, 24/7."

"They (outreach staff) come and pick you up and bring you to the shops."

Becoming lonely and isolated is a fear for young people who are moving out on their own. For this young person, loneliness was the most difficult thing to get used to while living independently.

Researcher: "Can you think of any times that you have found it difficult living on your own?"

Young person: "Still to this day. It's loneliness".

Having professional staff available to provide social support to young people is important during their preparation for leaving care and also during the initial settling in period of independent living. However, in the long term, young people need their own social networks in order to buffer against negative life experiences i.e. social isolation, negative peer pressure. It is therefore extremely important that professional support helps young people to develop their own personal support systems before becoming fully independent (Biehal et al. 1995, Stein 2005, Allen 2003).

Within the Praxis Care unit, a key area of work is developing 'relationships with family and friends'. Record analysis of the support plans showed that support was given in building and strengthening relationships through encouraging social contact with friends and family and with making positive choices in terms of relationships. Both the visitor's policy and the curfew policy provide a framework to encourage safe relationship building.

Support during the Transition
It is important that young people are supported emotionally and practically before, during and after they move to more independent living. For some young people, the step from supported living to fully independent living is too big to make. An outreach service can provide a realistic transitional stage for young people before they move to fully independent living.

Before the move
"They need to be ready, they need to be talked over what is going to happen because it is a big hit when it hits yea, and it's just explaining to them what they are in for." (young person)

During the move
"Yeah, in here (the project) helped me with a whole lot, everything about moving, everything, right down to getting a kettle and toaster." (young person)

Immediately after the move

"I knew that they (outreach staff) were on the other side of the phone. You know what I mean, it wasn't that bad like. It just takes a lot to get used to. (..) you still have them come and see you. You are not completely on your own, which is a good thing. " (young person)

Consistency of Staffing between Services

The research has identified that continuity of staffing between supported living accommodation and an outreach service can be very beneficial. Both the young people and the staff members highlighted the benefit of such a streamlined service:

"I knew everybody. And I wasn't moving out on my own and I didn't have to deal with anybody (new)" …"I know how hard it is to meet somebody new and then to deal with them. That takes a lot of time to get to know people." (young person)

"Outreach is used to provide a continuum of care after (clients leave)." (staff)

As one would expect many young people who have had an unsettled family life and have experience of being in care, find it more difficult than most to form relationships and build trust (Broad 2005). The value of having a continuity of staffing during the transitional period between supported living and more independent living is an important issue that has been raised within this research.

In addition to the benefit of consistency of staffing between the accommodation and an outreach service, one young person talked about the value of having flexibility within the services.

"Like, I still came down here (project) on a Sunday which was good, for my dinner (laugh). I still came down for my dinner which was good because Sundays are the most boringest days ever."

"You know that they are there and they come out and see and help you with whatever you need. Like if someone needed help with their shopping when they have moved out. Do you know what I mean whatever you needed help with? They will help you if it is in their thing like, their area."


Recommendations

1. The young people struggled to identify alternative 'healthy activities' they could become engaged in during the evenings and weekends. The unit should continue to support the young people to build healthy hobbies into their lifestyle while living in the project, so that these may continue when they move on to more independent living.

2. The research highlighted the period just after a move to independent living as a particularly challenging time for the young people in managing their own budgets as their income and expenses may vary considerably. The project staff should continue with providing support in budgeting skills.

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3. The importance of the continuity of staffing between supported living and an outreach service provides valued stability to the young person. This option of a phased move on to greater independent living should be made available to all young people living in the supported living unit.

4. The young people stated they would like the scheme to provide a greater range of social activities. As there is no money in the current budget to cover such costs, the scheme should continue in its efforts to secure additional funding to provide additional activities to the weekly theme nights and social activities already on offer.

Project Staff Members' Views

The Job Role

Fig 2: Job as expected?
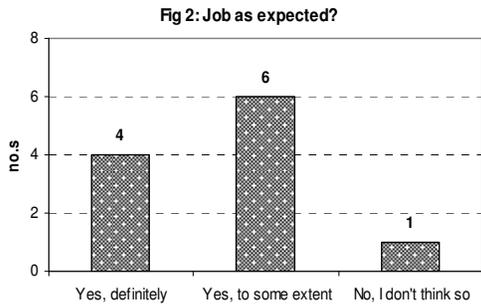
All 11 staff members stated that they understood the requirements of their job. As can be seen from Fig 2, 4 staff members believed the job was '*definitely*' as they had expected. 6 stated their job was what they had expected '*to some extent*'. 1 person said it was not as they had expected.

Benefits of working with this Client Group

Fig 3: Enjoy working with the client group?
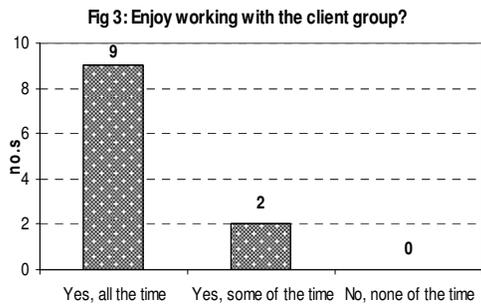
All the staff members stated that they enjoyed working with the client group, with the majority stating this was '*all of the time*'.

The staff also highlighted a range of different benefits that they thought they gained from working with the young people (Table 8). Some benefits related to the value of the work and the progress seen in the young people, others related it to the professional skills they were learning.

Table 8: List of benefits of working with client group

- Helping young people develop skills needed for independent living
- Seeing progress in young people
- Feeling a sense of achievement from work done with young people
- Building relationships with young people
- The opportunity to work with young people who have a range of needs
- Being challenged to think of alternative ways to work with young people
- Getting the opportunity to utilise professional training
- The opportunity to learn new skills

"I enjoy offering support / advice to vulnerable young people. I enjoy seeing young people realising their potential and who eventually move in to their own accommodation or succeed at college or finding employment" (project worker)

"Being able to give a client their own independence and helping them to make a fresh start in life with a little help from ourselves; It makes your job worthwhile." (project worker)

"Being involved in assisting these clients to develop the daily living skills to make successful transition to independent living" (senior project worker)

Challenges of Working with this Client Group

The challenges mentioned by the staff largely related to the management of the young people's behaviour and the impact this can have on completing objectives / goals set out in a young person's support plan.

"Challenges include the verbal aggression of some young people and difficulty motivating the young people who do not want to gain employment".

Related to challenges, staff also mentioned that their salary should be more reflective of the level of difficulty and risk associated with working with this client group. Staff reported that they had to deal with:

- Verbal / Physical Aggression
- Alcohol / drug abuse
- Demanding and / or high risk behaviour

"Praxis needs to re-evaluate its salary scales to reflect risk involved in this type of work and the quality of staff who bring a variety of skills to the organisation. "

"Salary scale seriously needs to be altered as it is no reflection of the intense work and high risk nature of the project."

Support Received

Fig 4: Support Received

Fig 5: Valued member of Team?
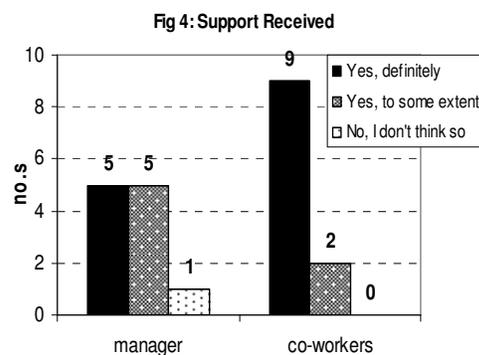
n=1 no answer

With the exception of 1 person, all staff surveyed said that they received support from their manager. Everyone felt they received support from their co-workers. Overall, respondents were most positive about the support provided by their co-workers.

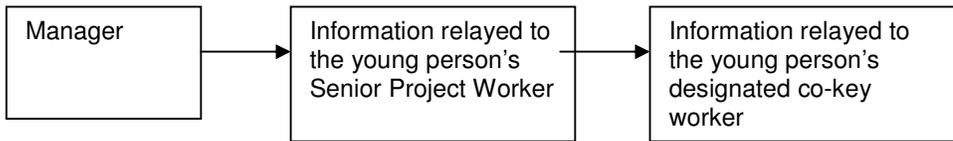*"Good project staff who work well as a team……Staff team keen to make a difference."*
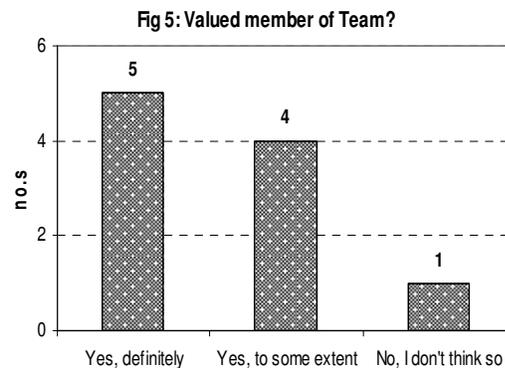
The majority of staff said that they felt like a valued member of the staff team. Only 1 member of the team felt s/he was not valued.

2

One staff member commented on the way in which information was provided to staff members and felt that information should be more freely available to all the project staff:

"The team needs to be more consistent- this comes from the top down. Manager could involve more with the team, when it comes to important issues with the young people. As often, Project Worker staff are on a need to know basis. If we understand more about the young people's circumstances we could understand triggers and reasons for outbursts in behaviour" (project worker).

The current practice of cascading information to the staff team is as follows:

```
┌──────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Manager  │ ───► │ Information relayed to│ ───► │ Information relayed to│
│          │      │ the young person's   │      │ the young person's   │
│          │      │ Senior Project Worker│      │ designated co-key    │
│          │      │                      │      │ worker               │
└──────────┘      └─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘
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The current practice was set up to ensure that each young person was given a 'new start' in the accommodation unit and that private details of their lives prior to coming to the unit were known only by the manager and those staff members working with the young person on a one-to-one basis.

Support Needs of Staff

Training was the most frequently cited area in which staff stated they like to receive more support. It was felt that this would be useful for both their personal development and their ability to work effectively with the client group.

Fig. 6: Training helped you in your job?

Training

- The majority of those questioned (n=8) stated that the in-house training they had received had helped them in their job, *'to some extent'*.
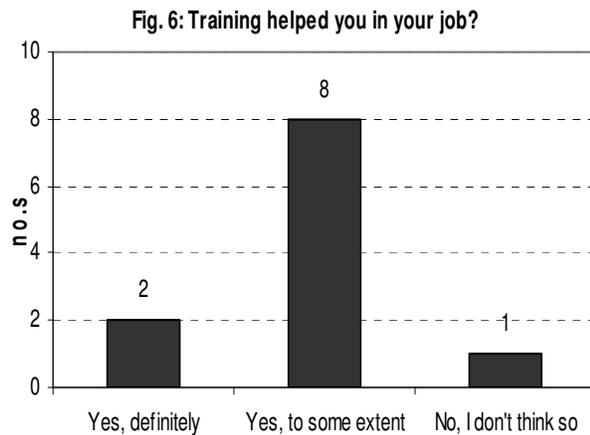
- 2 individuals said the training had *'definitely'* helped them

- 1 person said the training had not helped them in their role.

- 7 of the 11 respondents stated that they were quite dissatisfied with the training opportunities given to them.

- Staff members were asked to suggest training which they thought would be helpful for them in carrying out their duties within the scheme. Staff mentioned general training areas (Table 9) and also areas that were specific to young people (Table 10).
- Some of the training mentioned was not available through the in-house Training Dept and would have to be purchased externally.
- Staff also felt that the in house training had very little focus on working with young people:

"The training is currently geared towards older persons- specific to mental health or learning disability."

Table 9: Training Requirements

General areas where staff would like training
- Youth and Community work
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy / Counselling
- Management / Leadership qualifications
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)
- Brain Injury Training *
- Behaviour Training *
- Calming and Diffusing Training *

* currently available as in-house Praxis Care training

Table 10: Training Requirements

Young People Specific areas where staff would like training
- Motivational Interviewing
- Techniques to build self esteem in young people
- Understanding the effects of a range of issues on young people i.e. parental alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, alcohol / drug use in young people, emotional issues, attachment and loss.
- Training in group work skills, key work skills and facilitation skills.
- Risk management

Strengths of the Service
The staff members were asked to comment on the main strengths of the service. They highlighted 4 key areas:

1. **Ethos** – 'needs led' service, fair to young people, flexible and structured
2. **Staff** - caring, skilled, pro-active, committed, team players
3. **Learning Environment** - safe and supportive for young people
4. **Accommodation** – good standard, has privacy and security

"… (The) project has developed a dedicated and committed staff team and practice levels are excellent. Young People are actively consulted throughout the support process and programs of support are tailored accordingly to meet their perceived need combined with professional assessment."

"Young people are offered a supportive and safe environment in which to focus on building on daily living skills and dealing with emotional issues"

"Excellent staff, excellent policies and policies that protect young people and staff"

Areas for Improvement

Staff members were given the opportunity to suggest further areas of development for the project and for themselves as staff members.

Table 11: Areas of Improvement for Project and Staff

- Internal project policies and procedures were regarded as a strength. However, it was noted that they often have to evolve to respond to the risks posed by some of the young people present in the unit, and this can at times send a mixed message to the young people.
- Staff could be utilized more during the induction of young people
- Better communication with staff in terms of young people's circumstances so that triggers and reasons for outbursts in behaviour can be understood
- More opportunities to attend conferences
- More opportunities to develop initiatives in projects
- Supervision could be better at addressing staff concerns
- There is a need for longer lunch breaks[6]

Effectiveness of the project

The majority of the staff stated that the project was either 'very' or 'quite' effective at helping young people move to independent living.

Staff mentioned the potential benefit of having more group and individual social activities, including relaxation sessions.

Fig. 8: Effectiveness in helping young people to move to independent living

■ Very Effective ☐ Quite Effective ☐ No Change ☐ Quite Ineffective

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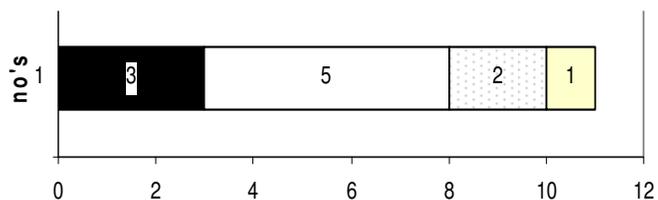
[6] Since the research, staff members have a half hour lunch break away from the young people in the unit.

Staff members were aware of the financial constraints of providing activities. However they mentioned the possibility of the project gathering extra money through funding opportunities:

"Can we not avail of funding bodies for our specific groups? Other organisations of the same client groups avail of such funding to offer more outside activities i.e. welfare weekends, adventure days and outdoor pursuits." (project worker)

Suitability of Referrals

Fig. 9: Suitable young people referred?
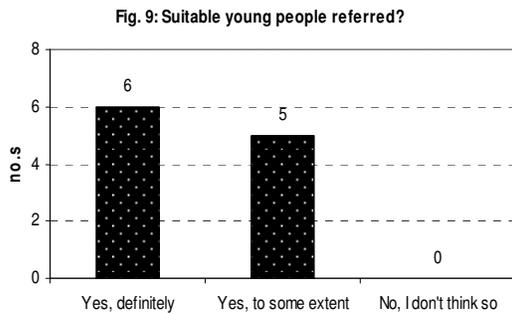
6 staff members felt that referrals made to the project were '*definitely*' suitable and the remaining 5 respondents said that they were suitable '*to some extent*'.

"…In some cases some young people need more specialised accommodation (..) The project is not (always) an appropriate service."

Recommendations

1. Relationship building and continuity of staffing were identified as important for young people, therefore maintaining a stable workforce is important. It is important that the project continues to use supervision and team meetings to address staff concerns. Also, Table 11 has outlined some of the key areas of improvement mentioned by staff.

2. A greater range of staff training would be beneficial to assist staff to support the young people who are referred to the project due to their high support needs. Training may help staff overcome some of the current challenges in managing young people's behaviour. The additional personal development and learning that training brings may also have an impact on job satisfaction and retention.

3. Alongside identifying healthy activities for young people to do individually, it would also be beneficial to consider the possibility of sourcing funding which could be used to increase the amount of activities arranged by project staff.

Referral Agents' Views

Fig. 10: Accommodation Features
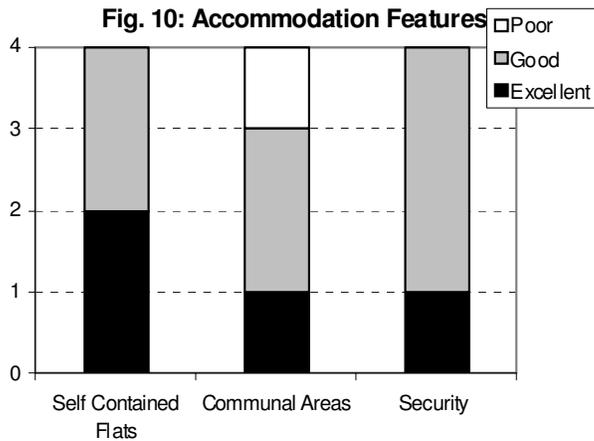
The Accommodation

- All 4 referral agents responded to the survey. The referral agents rated the flats and the security of the building as *good* or *excellent*.

- 3 of the 4 referral agents thought the communal areas were also good or excellent.

The Referral Process
The referral process was described as very good (n=1) or quite good (n=3). No one stated that the process was poor.

Each referral agent had positive things to say about the project, mainly in relation to:

- **The semi-independent nature of the project** – that the unit promoted independence within a supportive environment.

- **High quality of service** - in terms of communication and support to the young people and also the facilities and central location of the accommodation.

Some referral agents also suggested areas for improvement:

"Sometimes there can be meetings about meetings"

"(They) can be inclined to work staff/ project in a way similar to residential care e.g. key worker, sleep in duty, night duty etc. This often keeps young care leavers stuck in some ways with the risk of reverting to similar behaviours, patterns etc."

Again, this issue of making the project distinct from previous care experiences was highlighted by the referral agents, in relation to terminology:

"I think the project could be more creative in terms of titles, names of staff positions, support plans etc. just to make their service individual in its own right and removed from previous care experience".

Working Relationship between Praxis Care and the Referral Agents
Across 5 key areas related to 'working relationships' the scores ranged between 'very good' and 'good'. 1 referral agent rated accessing staff as 'quite poor'.

27

Fig. 11: Working relationship
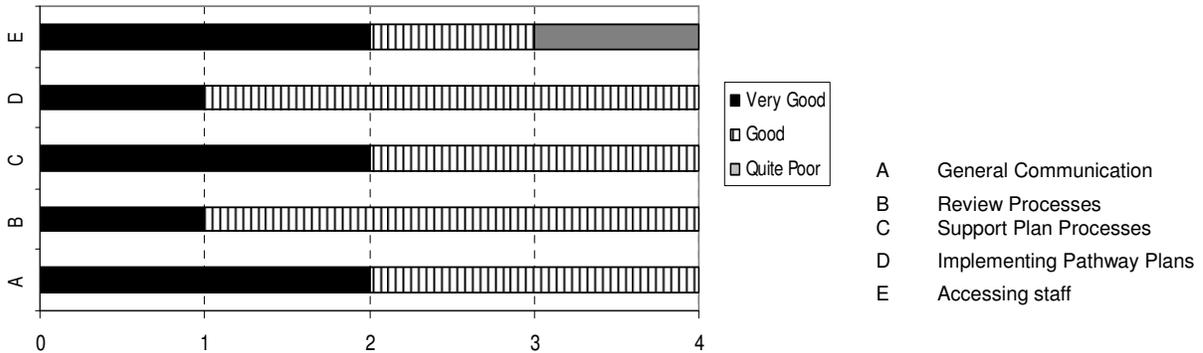
In terms of how working relationships could be improved, one referral agent stated:

"There is always room for improvement on all sides. Ongoing respectfulness and a patient attitude helps promote an awareness of all our efforts and limitations, at times, given shift work and the challenge to convene meetings, exchange information at times etc."

Each of the 4 referral agents stated that they were *'quite satisfied'* that they received up to date information on the young people referred. None of the referral agents had any suggestions on how this communication could be improved.

Support Package

One referral agent was *'very satisfied'* that the support provided at the project matched what was in the young person's pathway plan. The remaining 3 referral agents were *'quite satisfied'*.

Fig. 12: Satisfaction with support
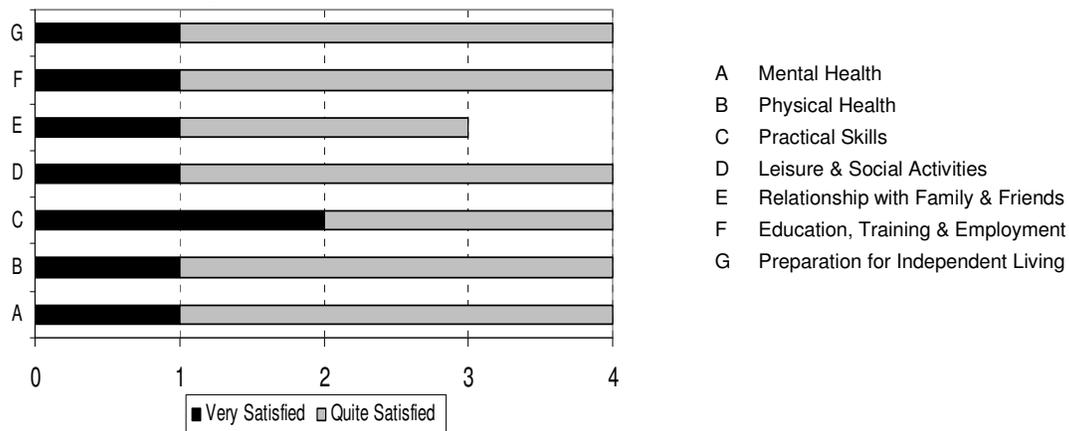
All referral agents were satisfied that the young people were being supported in each of the key areas. The strongest area of satisfaction was with practical skill learning, 2 of the 4 referral agents were *'very satisfied'* with this aspect of support.

Suitability as a transitional placement

All 4 referral agents stated that the project was a suitable transitional placement for young people exiting formal care.

Services needed by young people when they leave the project

The referral agents were asked to comment on the type of services / support that they felt the young people would require when they left the project. All 4 referral agents believed that an outreach service and personal advisor / social worker would be important (Table 12 & Table 13). 2 referral agents thought that a drop in centre would be useful.

Table 12

Services considered Important	No. of referral agents
Outreach Service	4
Drop in Centre	2
Telephone advice / support	1
Mediation service	0
Community Groups	0

Table 13

Individual Support considered Important	No. of referral agents
Personal Advisor	4
Social Worker	3
Befriender / Mentor	1
Community Psychiatric Nurse	1
Resettlement Officer	1

Recommendations

1. It was mentioned that terminology and practices within the project are very like those used in formal care settings. It would be important for the project to consider the value and feasibility of making such changes in order to create a distinction between formal care and non statutory supported living. This would have to be addressed at senior management level within the organisation.

2. The referral agents considered an outreach service to be important for young people when moving into independent living. In addition the young people also mentioned the value of having continuity in staffing between supported living and outreach. It would be important to consider the capacity for this within the project as well as within leaving care services as a whole.

Conclusion

This report has outlined the strengths and challenges of an innovative model of supported living for young people preparing for independent living. The main aim of the model is to provide young people with the practical, social and emotional skills they will need to live independently.

The evaluation identified 3 core themes, which were common across the young people, project staff and referral agents. (1) support planning, (2) timing of the young person's move and (3) suitable 'move on' accommodation.

In terms of support planning, this evaluation highlighted the inherent challenges of implementing set objectives with young people who have had, up to that point, much less structured lifestyles. The research identified tension between what the young people wanted and what professionals identified they needed. The research has concluded that ultimately the success of a young person's time within the project will depend on their engagement with their support programmes. However, a young person's reluctance to take direction and advice remains an inevitable difficultly of the work.

In terms of planning a young person's move, there was a common view that the present expected length of stay of 2 years may not be long enough for all young people. Professionals are aware that there is a fine balance between providing young people with the time to gain skills to move on and providing too much time and therefore making a young person dependent on the support of the project. A specific time frame also gives young people and the project staff a target to work towards. Ultimately all parties must come to a decision on when the time is right for a young person to move on. Connected to the planning of a young person's move, the point was raised that there is a lack of suitable accommodation for young people, in housing need, within the Western Area Trust.

The young people were pleased to have their own self contained flats. Although they expressed frustration with some of the policies and procedures within the project, they understood their purpose. The staff strongly identified with the value of the work carried out and the progress seen in the young people.

Praxis Care has also an outreach service, which has the same pool of staff attached to it as the accommodation unit. The young people stated that having the support of a trusted adult during the transition to independent living was very valuable. Also, the responses from the referral agents were positive. They believed that the project was meeting its aims of supporting young people to build the skills to live independently, as well as providing good quality accommodation.

The report has also highlighted a range of other points of useful learning for the project, which includes (1) the value of continuing to provide a consistency of staffing during the accommodation move, (2) the possibility of making the language and practice used within the project distinct from that used in residential care. Overall, this piece of work has provided evidence of good practice in terms of support provision to young people who are preparing themselves for leaving formal care and moving towards independent living. It is hoped that this small but significant evaluation will encourage a larger debate on the most useful models of supported living for young people leaving formal care.

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Table 3: Supported Accommodation EXCLUSIVELY for young people <u>in housing need</u> in the Western Area Trust

Provider	Address	WAT area	No. of Units	Group	Support Level (sp officer)	Support Level (service provider)	Age Range accepted	Referral option (professional or self)	Planned or Emergency Admissions	Expected length of tenancy
Praxis Care	NorthLands	Derry city	6	Young people leaving care- specialist model	High	High	16-21	Professional Referral	Planned Only	2 years
First Housing	Francis St	Derry city	9	Any YP in housing need (may include care leavers)	Meduim - High	High	16-25	Professional Referral	Planned Only	2 years
Shelter	Sl-eight	Omagh	9	YP homeless or at risk of homelessness (may include care leavers)	Low	Medium - Low	16-25	Professional Referral	Planned Only	2 years
The Strand Foyer ** this service has since closed*		Derry city	48	Young people- model dictates that yp must enter education/ training/ employment to maintain place	Low	Medium - High	16-25	Professional Referral	Planned Only	2 years

**if there is a greater demand than supply of beds- the referral will be based on the person identified as in 'most need'

**There is other housing provided by the Housing Executive which is not specifically for young people but does not exclude them

Methodology

Participant Demographics

Young People
5 young people were living within the project when the study began. 4 of them consented to taking part in the evaluation. The length of time they had been living in the project at the beginning of the study ranged between 4 months and 2 years 1 month. This gave an average length of stay of 1 year 5 months. At the beginning of the study the young people's ages ranged between 18- 20 yrs old with an average of 19 yrs old. Each young person had differing lengths and types of experiences of housing and support before moving into the project.

Project Staff
All support staff (manager, senior project workers and support workers) were asked to complete a questionnaire. 11 questionnaires were returned out of 12. 7 members of staff had been working in the project for 1 year or more. No one had been working in the project for less than 6 months. 4 of the staff had been working in the project for 2 years or more.

Referral Agents
Each of the 4 professionals who referred young people to the project completed a postal questionnaire.

Methodological Framework

Participants	Focus group	Record analysis[7]	Interview	Questionnaire
Young People in service	✓	✓		
Young people left service			✓	
Project Staff				✓
Referral Agent				✓

Focus group
A focus group was carried out with the young people living in 72 NorthLand Rd. The discussion centred on their views of 72 NorthLand Rd and on their preparedness for moving on to more independent living. This type of group discussion provides an opportunity to explore a breadth of views and enables participants to comment on and develop each others ideas (Armstrong et al. 1998). Before the focus group began the researcher provided a clear explanation of the purpose of the discussion and reiterated the points outlined in the consent forms, which the young people had accepted and signed previous to the focus group session. The researcher assisted the group to prepare a set of ground rules before the discussion. These ground rules set out expectations from each other during the following 1 / 1 ½ hrs. During the facilitation of the discussion the researcher used the topic guide to maintain a structure to the work, however, enough flexibility was provided to allow for additional unexpected information (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005, Gibbs 1997).

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[7] Referral Forms, Needs Assessment Forms, Support Plans

Interview
One interview was carried out with a young person who was an ex- tenant of the project who also had experience of using an outreach service managed by the same organisation. The interview was 35 minutes in length and the discussion was guided using a topic guide.

Informed Consent
All young people that were involved in the study were asked to complete a consent form which outlined key aspects of the study and what their specific involvement would entail.

Content Analysis
The focus group, individual records and interviews were analysed using the framework analysis. Framework analysis is a matrix based approach to qualitative data analysis. It allows within and between case investigations which are systematic, flexible and adaptable (Miles & Huberman 1994). A system of 'constant comparison' was also implemented in order to ensure full rigour in terms of analysis 'Constant Comparison' is the analytical task of continually sifting and comparing elements (basic data instances, cases, emergent categories and theoretical propositions) throughout the lifetime of a research project (Glaser 1978).

Questionnaires
Questionnaires were used to get the views of project staff and health professionals. It was deemed to be the most convenient way of accessing professionals and the technique most likely to provide the best response. The staff members were asked questions relating to their satisfaction with their role and their views on different aspects of the service. The referral agents were asked their views on supported accommodation services for young people leaving care in the Western Area Trust and their experiences of referring a young person to the project. As the sample was small, Microsoft Excel rather than SPSS was used to analyse the responses.

Service Mapping Exercise
The service mapping exercise involved a desk top research to compile a list of services for young people in housing need. This was followed by contacting a housing adviser from the Western Area Trust area to verify that all services had been identified. Each individual service was then contacted to confirm the service details.

Limitations of the Evaluation

Focus Group with Young People
It was decided that a focus group would be the best data collection technique for he young people. This was the case for a large amount of the group work. However, 'peer effect' [8] was observed to have influenced the amount of information shared about more sensitive topic areas, such as feelings of moving to more independent

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[8] The premise of 'peer effect' is that what people say in a group may not always be what they actually believe or what they will do (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005).

living. In hindsight, one to one interviews may have gained more open, honest feedback.

Questionnaires with Project Staff and Referral Agents
A focus group discussion may have gained a greater range and depth of understanding from Project Staff and Referral Agents. However, in practical terms the chances of getting a good sample of staff or referral agents to attend such a group within a short time frame would have been too small to base conclusive findings.

Appendix 3

This is Kat, she is 16 years old. She has been living in a residential unit since she was 11 years old. She moved into a supported living accommodation project called Park Road in Ballymena, about a year ago. Although she got on with most of the staff in the residential unit she was happy to move on. She has her own flat in the new supported living project. However, there are communal areas where she can sit with other tenants. There is also 24 hour staff support available if she needs it.

Can you imagine what it is like for Kat? What do you think she may like and dislike about living there?

What skills do you think will be important for Kat to learn, while she is living in the supported accommodation project?

Case Study :

Section (1) Living in a supported living unit
Section (3): Skills needed for independent living