

Peer Mentoring Opportunities for Looked after Children and Care Leavers

PEER MENTORING OPPORTUNITIES for LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN and CARE LEAVERS: MARCH 2012

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is based on a project undertaken by Susan Middleton, a consultant, on behalf of the Improving Outcomes for Looked After Children Team at Scottish Government, during the period October 2011 to February 2012. Susan has 30 years Social Work experience working with children and families in Local Authorities in Scotland, having retired as Service Improvement Manager from Scottish Borders Council in March 2011.

- i. The aim of this project is to develop, as appropriate and viable, the work undertaken through a pilot project completed by Scottish Borders Council(SBC) in partnership with GYP Borders (Giving Young people and Families Support), from December 2009 to February 2011: references to these 2 organisations throughout this report are as SBC and GYP Borders respectively. A full evaluation of this pilot was completed by Befriending Network Scotland in June 2010, with a supplementary report produced by the same independent evaluator in February 2011. Both reports, *Evaluation Report for the Looked After Children and Peer Support Pilot and Stage 2 Report (February 2011)* (1) are available from www.celcis.org
- ii. This pilot had 2 strands, i) the provision of /signposting of training opportunities in order to increase the skills and confidence of looked after children and young people and care leavers and ii) developing peer mentoring support for care leavers who were to become the initial tenants at Albert Place (supported accommodation project in Galashiels). For the purposes of this project it is the learning from the second strand regarding Peer Mentoring which is most relevant here. The development and piloting of training materials was also integral to the project and this requirement is also addressed in this report.
- iii. The findings for the SBC/GYP Borders pilot were limited, largely due to timescales, numbers and reorganisation within the Council. There were however, indications that Peer Mentoring/Support (the care leavers involved changed the terminology to utilise the latter), could have potential benefits for Care Leavers acting as “mentors” but the opportunity to evaluate any benefits for “mentees” was nullified by matched relationships only reaching the introductory stages.
- iv. It was also recognised that a number of peer education/mentoring/support services are available to meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people but there was limited knowledge regarding peer mentoring project(s) specifically targeting the needs of Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers.

2. PROCESS

- i. Exploration of relevant literature and research was completed and follow up discussions were held with SBC/GYP Borders staff to determine progress made since the completion of the pilot project.
- ii. A communication was sent to all Corporate Parenting and Throughcare and Aftercare Lead Officers in the 32 Scottish Local Authorities, requesting information regarding programmes/projects or resources offering Peer Mentoring opportunities to Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers in their area.
- iii. 15 Local Authorities and 5 Voluntary Organisations responded with information on current practice and/or improvement plans relating to or expressing interest in developing Peer Mentoring opportunities.
- iv. The vast majority of these contacts were followed up with telephone discussions and/or face-to-face meetings, including direct discussions with a number of current and ex-Care Leavers. Some discussions resulted in further suggestions of practice examples and expertise, thus widening the range of those consulted.

3. TERMINOLOGY

- i. A review of published research “ *A Synthesis of published research on mentoring and befriending*”(2) by Philip and Spratt in 2007 evidences well the challenges that are posed by seeking to define mentoring and/or befriending and thus the ability to effectively evaluate such interventions (Executive Summary)
- ii. The description and terminology used depends, not surprisingly, on the project concerned, its purpose, aims and objectives and the role of the “supportive relationship” in meeting these. A useful diagram “ *The difference between Mentoring & Befriending*” (3) developed by Befriending Network Scotland (BNS), Scottish Mentoring Network (SMN) and Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS), demonstrates, as a continuum, the role and tasks of these relationships which can help clarify their purpose and focus.
- iii. Peer mentoring is less well-defined in literature and is again open to interpretation by the project or organisation concerned. Most projects would appear to utilise the term “peer” to mean “of similar age” e.g. S5/6 pupils providing mentoring/role model to younger child, S1/2.
- iv. Other current practice examples of “peer mentoring” suggest that older youth/young adults who have themselves benefitted from support provided by a particular project, want to “give something back” due to the value they place on the service they received e.g. Xplore (Dundee) and the Aberdeen Foyer.
- v. During discussions and reading for this work, the opportunities suggested within the term “peer mentoring” included: providing 1: 1 support (befriending and mentoring); peer led group work; peer education, coaching or tutoring; and participation/service development activities. As a “catch all” the term “peer support” might better be used to encompass this range of roles/tasks.

- vi. In the context of “Peer Mentoring” for Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers, the views of the latter and most professionals, suggest that the “shared experience of being in care” is the single most important factor in identifying the target groups offering support to and receiving support from their peers. “*we’ve been where you are...we know what it’s like*” (Care Leaver); “*to help young people who are going through what I did*” (ex- Care Leaver).
- vii. Mentoring relationships are, in the main, established to provide 1:1 support and this “definition” is shared by most of those, including young adults and Care Leavers, who were consulted during this process. Understanding the context and purpose of this role, particularly with “peers”, is where diversity and flexibility arise e.g. 1:1 relationships can be supported/developed in the early stages through group activities and/or at drop in sessions.
- viii. Establishing a “definition” of Peer Mentoring for Looked After Children/Care Leavers at this stage would therefore seem almost impossible and probably not beneficial. However it seems important to establish some common ground to help characterise a Peer Mentoring relationship. Notwithstanding the discussion above, the two significant elements would appear to be:
 - 1) there is a 1:1 relationship based on a shared experience, which is that both parties have been or are looked after (this is not to suggest that children and young people’s experiences of the “care system” are all the same when patently each is unique to the individual and will remain so) and
 - 2) the relationship will be entered into voluntarily.
- ix. This is not to ignore other support mechanisms as suggested in **3. iv** but if meaningful or effective evaluation is to be undertaken then some parameters need to be agreed in order to establish a baseline for any comparative study. The confidence-building and skills development of any Looked After Child or Care Leaver interested in offering “peer support” should be encouraged and utilised as is meaningful and appropriate to them.

4. CURRENT PRACTICE

A list of those involved in discussions relating to this work, including contact details, is included at appendix 1, so the following provides only a brief summary of some practice examples.

- i. The majority of “mentoring” projects seeking to support Looked After Children and Care Leavers are targeted at the point of “leaving care” and train adult mentors to fulfil this role e.g. Rock Trust, Move On, West Dunbartonshire Council.
- ii. There are other services where, as a vulnerable child or young person, a Looked After Child may be supported by a mentor or befriender to achieve certain aims or goals. *Scottish Mentoring Network (4) and Befriending Network Scotland (5)*
- iii. There are also good examples of Peer Mentoring projects in Scotland where Care Leavers and ex-Care Leavers, as service-users, are trained as mentors and are providing support to other vulnerable young people who are not necessarily looked after e.g. Xplore, The Aberdeen Foyer.

- iv. West Dunbartonshire Council have a well-established scheme which offers befriending and mentoring to Looked After Children and young people involved with the Throughcare and Aftercare team. Although not specifically seeking to engage ex Care Leavers as mentors they have recruited 4 over the years with some success.
- v. Stirling Council has employed a Care Leaver on a sessional basis to co-facilitate preparation groups and to mentor Looked After Children or Care Leavers on an adhoc basis.
- vi. Scottish Borders Council Homelessness team are seeking to recruit peer mentors (those who have experienced homelessness) and this may include ex Care Leavers. The SBC/GYP Borders pilot programme has, unfortunately, not continued, although workers at the Homelessness team will utilise the training programme (with relevant adaptations) as developed during the pilot project. The main reason for the ending of the project seems to have been insufficient resourcing and staffing.
- vii. There are other examples emerging where Local Authorities are responding to the views of their Looked After Children/Care Leavers by exploring the concept of peer mentoring e.g. Dundee City and Argyll and Bute Councils are working with partners, including Who Cares? Scotland, to develop these ideas locally. St Andrews Secondary School in Glasgow is considering peer mentoring for Looked After Children as a progression from the group based strategies and developmental opportunities already established in the school.

5. PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME/PROJECT MANAGEMENT

- i. ***Any mentoring/befriending/peer mentoring project will underline that this is a resource intensive strategy which has, according to most research, benefits and value for both mentors and mentees be they adult and young person, young adult and child, or peer and peer.***
Evidence is available in the research paper published by the *Mentoring and Befriending Foundation in 2010 (6)*
- ii. The evidence gathered during this work clearly demonstrates the need for any peer mentoring programme or project to ensure it considers and includes the following elements:(additional guidance to this is provided in appendix 2)
 - 1) Dedicated coordinator/staff time
 - 2) Purpose, aims and objectives
 - 3) Budget/finances
 - 4) Selection process
 - 5) Training programme (suggested content included at appendix 3)
 - 6) Matching process
 - 7) Support mechanisms
 - 8) Review process
 - 9) Endings
 - 10)Evaluation

- iii. The Scottish Mentoring Network have published a *Good Practice Guide*(2011) (7) which enables organisations to self-evaluate their programmes at every stage of development and seek accreditation if they so wish. This resource is comprehensive and provides checklists and tools which should be of value to anyone considering setting up a project.

6. TRAINING

- i. This requires careful consideration and realistically a substantial input. Mentoring and peer mentoring training programmes do vary in length and intensity, but given the experience of current projects it is likely that a **minimum of 20 hours** will be necessary to properly explore the requirements as outlined in appendix 3.
- ii. Reassuringly, all the training programmes shared during this project include input on the same issues (as listed) with variations occurring due to the context and purpose of the project and relationship e.g. leaving care, social isolation, homelessness, employment.
- iii. One of the aims of this small project was to develop a training resource/pack to support the development of peer mentoring for Looked After Children /Care Leavers. Discussions, reading and practice suggests that, to go further than provide the list (appendix 3) at this stage is unnecessary for the following reasons:
 - 1) Local voluntary organisations and some local authorities already have comprehensive training programmes and resources which could be shared and adapted to meet the needs of particular project(s).
 - 2) Scottish Mentoring Network and Befriending Network Scotland have experience, guidance/and tools which can also be utilised.
 - 3) “Prescriptive” training requirements might restrict the development of local needs-led peer mentoring opportunities for Looked After Children and Care Leavers.
- iv. The experience of service-users becoming service providers/mentors in voluntary organisations would suggest that they, the individual, develop the self-confidence, self- awareness and understanding to reach a level where they recognise that they could be ready to “give something back.” The selection process and training programme are key to checking this out.
- v. It should be highlighted that projects will endeavour to offer the ex-service user/potential mentor other opportunities to utilise their skills and interest if it is felt that they are not yet ready to take on a “peer mentoring” role. This is, rightly, felt to be crucial to the continued development of the self-esteem of vulnerable children, young people and adults.
- vi. The benefits of “peer mentoring” for Looked After Children /Care Leavers have yet to be properly evaluated but it is unlikely that the requirements to provide an effective service will differ significantly from those listed above at 5.ii.

7. ISSUES and OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS

It has become clear during this process that there are potential benefits to developing peer mentors within the “Care System”. The potential value for them has been highlighted by the SBC/GYP Borders pilot, current practice involving Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers in “universal/mainstream” services and during discussions with Care Leavers. There is little evidence as yet as to the benefit for a Looked After Children or Care Leaver who might receive such support i.e. mentees. Limited research is available e.g. Care Leavers entering Higher Education *In Loco Parentis, Demos 2010 (8)* and of mentees being “enthusiastic about having care leavers as peer mentors as the mentees felt that the peer mentors understand their experience” *Mentoring for LAC National Pilot Dissemination Manual, April 2008 (9)*

- i. Given the research available on mentoring and limited information concerning peer mentoring, it is evident that ***any project seeking to develop Care Leavers and/or Looked After Children as peer mentors requires to be quite clear about the purpose of such a programme and the intended aims in establishing a peer mentor/mentee relationship.***
- ii. There is the potential to focus on the opportunity peer mentoring provides for Care Leavers/peer mentors whilst neglecting the needs of the Looked After Children or mentee concerned and this must clearly be guarded against.
- iii. Some members of the Debate project did recognise that, at certain times in their lives, they would “*battle against their peers as well as adults*” making them feel that the “*age of (potential) mentee might matter.*”
- iv. Offering support at the time of Leaving Care has often been the focus for mentoring projects and some discussions during this work evidenced this as a worthwhile opportunity. However, young people and some professionals have suggested that there might be other critical times when having the support of a “peer mentor” might be beneficial: times of transition, including reception into care (e.g. primary to secondary school, placement moves) and preparing for Looked After Children reviews and Children’s Hearings.
- v. The optimum duration of any peer mentoring relationship is one area where views and practice are quite varied. Some projects state quite clearly that mentoring relationships are time-limited i.e. for 3 months, then reviewed and may, if appropriate, offer on-going support for another 3 months -these relationships would usually be based on weekly meetings whilst others might meet less frequently. Other projects operate on the basis of the needs of the Looked After Children /Care Leaver, with mentoring relationships lasting for years rather than months. Certainly some Care Leavers were suggesting the potential value of a longer term relationship which might provide continuity and support through periods of change.
- vi. The use of social media in the 21st century should also be highlighted as young people recognised that a peer mentoring relationship could be provided without face-to-face contact on every occasion e.g. Facebook, email etc. always ensuring that the required “safety nets” are in place. These issues again underline the need for clarity of role and purpose from the outset of any peer mentoring relationship.

- vii. One of the major issues for any project involving Looked After Children /Care Leavers as peer mentors must be the potential for past experiences to be triggered and revisited as reported in the *Dissemination Manual* (9). The importance of selection, matching and, in particular support processes for mentors cannot be overemphasised, as reported by one ex-Care Leaver who has some direct experience “..I couldn’t do my job without this (monthly supervision from worker)”
- viii. There is also the potential for Care Leavers to experience periods of change and/or instability in their lives which may make them less available to their mentee (*Dissemination Manual*) (9). The safety and well-being of both parties must remain paramount and risk management needs to be undertaken during any matching process.
- ix. Confidentiality is of some concern to some professionals and was raised as a possible issue by young people who are well aware of the need for this in their own lives. Clear boundaries and communication channels developed through training are seen as crucial to making this work. In some, often rural, local authorities the need for confidentiality and anonymity will have to be balanced with location and availability of the peer mentor.
- x. Looked After Children or Care Leavers who are still “in the system” will, as ever, require the support of their social worker, throughcare worker, foster carer and/or residential worker, if they are to be encouraged to develop their potential as a peer mentor. Requirements, such as PVG checks, Parental and Local Authority permissions and procedures, can present barriers which must be kept to a minimum if they are not to be seen as insurmountable.
- xi. It should also be said that prior knowledge and experience of a particular Looked After Child or Care Leaver is not always relevant when recruiting peer mentors at a later stage in their lives. Young people and young adults who have reached the stage of reflection with a degree of objectivity are possibly well-placed to offer support.
“They (the young person) might not want to accept help. I was like that. It was only when I realised that the only person I was hurting was myself that I accepted help”(SBC/GYP pilot evaluation) (1)

8. CONCLUSIONS

- i. The single most important voice is that of Looked After Children and young people and Care Leavers who tell us that they “*know what it (being in care) is like*” and that they can say “*we know how you (mentee) feel and we actually do*”. Care Leavers believe that they could have benefitted from being supported by someone “*who’s been there*”, who had a “*shared experience*” which would have helped them understand and know “*what we were going through*” (Care Leavers and ex-Care Leavers)
- ii. Corporate Parenting responsibilities should now be embedded in practice and the direct involvement of Looked After Children and Care Leavers in service development is established in many local authorities. *These Are Our Bairns (2008)(10)*, highlights for the Corporate Parenting Family “*.. the difference that one individual can make..*” For those who are, or have been looked after, a peer mentor might be that individual. It should be restated that any peer mentoring relationship must be voluntarily entered into by both parties.
- iii. The limited research around peer mentoring for Looked After Children /Care Leavers does suggest that mentees appreciate it when mentors can fully understand their experience.
- iv. Care Leavers already provide support and mentoring to vulnerable children and young people even if they are not specifically “looked after”. There is a significant level of interest in, energy for and commitment to developing peer mentoring opportunities from adults, professionals and young people. This enthusiasm and the current momentum should be recognised and channelled to further peer mentoring as a relevant strategy which could improve the lives of Looked After Children and young people and Care Leavers.
- v. It should be acknowledged that related projects and programmes already exist and these could provide knowledge, experience and resources to guide the development of “peer mentoring” services.
- vi. The value of peer mentoring for Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers, both as mentors and mentees, needs to be properly researched and evaluated over time. There would seem to be value in having a consistent approach to review and evaluation established from the outset so that information from projects and programmes can be collated and compared. There may well also be value in seeking funding for an “overview programme” instead of a number of small projects each seeking its own slice of a small pie.
- vii. The development of peer mentoring opportunities for Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers might also be timely as there seems to be growing interest elsewhere in the UK e.g. a significant research project, The Carmen Study, “*Developing and piloting a peer mentoring intervention to reduce teenage pregnancy in Looked After Children and Care Leavers (11)*” is being undertaken from March 2011 to September 2013 involving three Local Authorities in England.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. This report will be circulated to all relevant stakeholders including Corporate Parenting and Throughcare Lead Officers, Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group (LACSIG), and all of the relevant hubs, Third Sector Partners and all those who have contributed to and/or expressed interest in this project.**
- ii. This report will also be made available on the Scottish Government Website at: www.scotland.gov.uk/lac-peer-mentoring**
- iii. CELCIS, in partnership with Scottish Government, will facilitate a seminar by autumn 2012 to consider Peer Mentoring Opportunities for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. This will enable i) dissemination of information from this report ii) further discussion of experiences and practice and iii) confirm interest in the development and/or piloting of peer mentoring opportunities.**
- iv. 4/5 programmes to be identified in different local authorities which can be established in partnership with experienced third sector organisations :to maximise the potential value of this project, these peer mentoring programmes should be focussed on Care Leavers around the period of their transition from care. The progress of this project should be monitored by the Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group (LACSIG).**
- v. Independent evaluation will be required to manage this project effectively and discussions should be held with CELCIS and Scottish Government to consider their role in this; the approach to evaluation should be explored through discussions at the seminar to ensure the development of a shared understanding of this process.**
- vi. Training resources should be adapted as required at local level depending on the particular focus of each individual programme and these should also be evaluated.**

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Many thanks are due to a number of adults, from statutory and voluntary sectors, who gave of their time to share their knowledge and expertise and to explore the opportunities presented through Peer Mentoring. The interest in and enthusiasm for the potential benefits of Peer Mentoring were evident throughout our discussions. Particular thanks are also due to colleagues who have shared training programmes and other relevant materials which will be of great value to the development of practice.

Special thanks must go to the young adults, Tony, Sarah and Ashley and Debate project members, Gemma, Jenny, Cheryl, James, Alistair, Alex and Murray who all demonstrated a serious commitment to considering and developing ideas which they believe could improve the lives of Looked After Children and Care Leavers in the future.

THANK YOU

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- 5) Befriending Network Scotland www.befriending.co.uk
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- 10) Scottish Government: These Are Our Bairns: a guide for community planning partnership on being a good corporate parent: 2008
- 11) St George's University of London: Carmen Study Project Protocol : 2010

APPENDIX 1**CONTACTS**

ORGANISATION	NAME/CONTACT
Aberdeen Foyer	Kathleen Singer Senior Development Worker Early Intervention Aberdeen Foyer KathleenS@aberdeenfoyer.com
Aberdeen Foyer	Jackie Whiting JackieW@aberdeenfoyer.com
Argyll-Bute	Wilson, Lisa Senior Social Care Worker lisa.wilson@argyll-bute.gsx.gov.uk
Dundee City Council	Bert Sanderman Integrated Children's Services Manager bert.sandeman@dundeecity.gov.uk
Dundee City Council	Dave Innes Senior Officer (Throughcare & Aftercare) dave.innes@dundeecity.gov.uk
Dundee City Council	Karen Gunn MCMC Implementation Manager karen.gunn@dundeecity.gov.uk
Edinburgh City Council	Helen Heatlie Throughcare and Aftercare Manager Helen.Heatlie@edinburgh.gov.uk
Glasgow City Council	Donna Cunningham St Andrews Secondary School DCunningham@st-andrews-sec.glasgow.sch.uk

GYP Borders	Mags Powell Business Development Manager GYP Borders MagsPowell@gypborders.co.uk
GYP Borders	Vanessa Henderson, Stable Life Project Worker vanessahenderson@gypborders.co.uk
Move On	Pamela Paton Housing Education Services, Operational Manager - Edinburgh pamela@moveon.org.uk
Perth and Kinross Council	Ian Wilkie Team Leader 01738 474593 IWilkie@pkc.gov.uk
Perth and Kinross Council	Colin Hay Youth Services 01738 474581 chay@pkc.gov.uk
Rock Trust	admin@rocktrust.org 0131 557 4059
Scottish Borders Council	Roger Barrow Principal Educational Psychologist RBarrow@scotborders.gsx.gov.uk

Scottish Borders Council	Ashley Thomson Housing Support Officer Galashiels area office Ashley.Thomson@scotborders.gsx.gov.uk
Scottish Borders Council	David Stewart Team Leader-Homeless Prevention Homelessness Services dastewart@scotborders.gov.uk
Scottish Borders Council	Jordan Manning Homelessness Services JManning@scotborders.gsx.gov.uk
Scottish Mentoring Network	Iain Forbes Strategic Development Manager iain@scottishmentoringnetwork.co.uk
Scottish Mentoring Network	Jacqueline Thomas Coordinator Glasgow Mentoring Network jacqueline@glasgowmentoringnetwork.co.uk
Scottish Throughcare & Aftercare Forum	Pamela Graham Training and Development Co-ordinator Pamela@scottishthroughcare.org.uk
Scottish Throughcare & Aftercare Forum	Amy Copsey Young People's Participation Co-ordinator Amy@scottishthroughcare.org.uk
Stirling Council	Andrea Priestley Children's Rights Officer priestleya@stirling.go.uk

Stirling Council	Ashley Cameron Sessional Worker camerona@stirling.gov.uk
West Dunbarton Council	Allan J White Youth Services - Mentoring Coordinator Allan.White@west-dunbarton.gov.uk
Who Cares? Scotland	Cheryl-Ann Cruickshank Regional Manager CCruickshank@whocaresscotland.org
Who Cares? Scotland	Candy Preater Young People's Worker - Dundee / Angus North Team cpreater@whocaresscotland.org
Who Cares? Scotland	Grant Gilroy National Resources Manager GGilroy@whocaresscotland.org
Who Cares? Scotland	Rosemary Murray RMurray@whocaresscotland.org
Xplore	Carie Burns Senior Community Learning Development Worker Carie.burns@dundeecity.gov.uk
Xplore	Jimmy Dodds Project Coordinator jimmy.dodds@dundeecity.gov.uk

The following brief notes are intended to provide some direction when establishing a peer mentoring project or programme. It is not suggested that this is an exhaustive list but it should be recognised that some aspects of planning and management are likely to require extra attention when considering the development of peer mentoring opportunities for Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers.

- 1) **Dedicated coordinator/staff time** – this is a resource intensive strategy and will require realistic staff resources to manage any project safely and effectively.
- 2) **Purpose, aims and objectives**—as with any project these require to be clear from the outset. The use of terminology without clear definitions could cause difficulties with evaluation and may raise unrealistic expectations for peer mentor and/or mentee.
- 3) **Budget/finances**—staffing costs will only be part of the budget required.
 - a. Project needs to ensure sufficient budget to cover peer mentor/volunteer costs e.g. travel, subsistence, training etc.
 - b. Petty cash system requires to work effectively to meet the needs of the mentors/volunteers when recouping expenses
 - c. Consideration should be given to having the facility to provide cash in advance (to ensure that potential mentors are not precluded from involvement due to financial circumstances)
- 4) **Selection process** – this should be a 2-way process which enables any potential mentor to understand the expectations and responsibilities of the peer mentoring role.
 - a. Project needs to provide information to explain its purpose and the role/remit of the peer mentor
 - b. Potential peer mentor should complete an application form
 - c. A face-to-face interview/discussion must take place
 - d. An application must be made to the Protection of Vulnerable Groups scheme (PVG)
- 5) **Training programme** – see appendix 3 for suggested content

- 6) Matching process**—again this should be a 2-way process, including
- a. Consideration of issues such as gender, locality, confidentiality, personal profile, interests etc
 - b. Risk assessment and risk management
 - c. Introductions – should be supported by staff
 - d. Contract – frequency of meeting/contact, goals/targets for relationship, duration of mentoring relationship (as appropriate), review timescales, evaluation
- 7) Support mechanisms** – these include both practical and personal
- a. Provision of mobile phones, access to venues as appropriate, expenses payments etc
 - b. Personal safety issues – “check in” procedures, communication channels
 - c. Supervision – feedback and recording, training and developmental needs
- 8) Review Process**
- a. Both parties must have the opportunity to review the contract/relationship as agreed
 - b. A procedure should be established to enable reporting/review of any concerns raised by either party at any time during their relationship
- 9) Endings**
- a. Clarity of this is crucial for both parties and should be acknowledged by “formal” review. The ending of the relationship can also be marked by a celebration of achievement, certificate and/or occasion/event.
- 10) Evaluation** – this is required both for the project/programme and for each individual peer mentoring relationship but with reference to the latter:
- a. How and when this will happen needs to be agreed at the outset and included in peer mentoring contract
 - b. Baselines need to be established at the outset to ensure that targets or goals can be monitored and evaluated with progress recognised and recorded.

The following is provided for guidance when developing a training programme to support Peer Mentoring opportunities for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. It is clearly not prescriptive and additional content is likely to be required depending on the focus of any particular project.

The outline is based on a **minimum of 10 sessions (2 hours each)** and reflects the programmes shared by a few organisations during the course of this project.

Thanks are due again to those who have willingly shared their experience and expertise.

- 1) Introductions - the project; training outline and expectations; baseline learning needs
- 2) Values, discrimination and stereotypes
- 3) Confidentiality and boundaries – including legislation, rights, and responsibilities
- 4) Personal safety- including basic first aid
- 5) Understanding adolescence and young people's development
- 6) Managing challenging behaviours
- 7) Child Protection* and/or Adult Support and Protection
- 8) Mentoring role and skills (1)
Communication, engagement, matching, goal/task setting
- 9) Mentoring role and skills (2)
Record keeping, reviewing, endings and evaluating
- 10) Review and round up
Evaluation of training input

*It is suggested that Local Authority training, levels 1 and 2, be undertaken by peer mentors

Additional content and/or sessions should be considered as appropriate e.g. drugs/alcohol, homelessness, new tenancy.



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