

Press Release – June 2006

Raising Ones Game:

Local Authority Secure Children's Homes have received a difficult press in recent weeks, but are they all the same, and do they, as suggested by Paul Fallon, Co-chair ADSS (page 11, 15 June) need to "up their game"?

The answer is complex and therein rests part of the problem. All LASCH's are not the same though one might mistakenly think so given the YJB dominance of the secure estate, and it's misapprehension that somehow it represents the entire estate. This understandably creates a dilemma for commissioners who are concerned by the notion of mixing longer term vulnerable "welfare" cases with the more fluid population of young people remanded or sentenced by the courts.

Assumptions that places are difficult to find, whilst once correct are no longer accurate. Herein lies a second difficulty. The estate may currently be over capacity as a result of a downturn in demand, but is also suffering because of the absence of a national strategy to plan for the future of the service. This results in LASCH's inadvertently fuelling an already difficult situation by reassigning beds from being contracted to the justice system to "welfare" as the YJB steadily switches to cheaper, and ever more institutional placement options.

This is not to be mistaken for a plea to nationalise the secure estate but for a recognition that there will continue to be a need for a finite number of "welfare", and youth justice LASCH places. The solution is for the DfES in conjunction with Local Authorities, and the Secure Accommodation Network to exercise leadership in the formulation of a national strategy having regard to the number of places likely to be needed, geographic spread, and national specialisms.

Thus all LASCH's are not the same though the recent Qualitative Study research conducted by Jane Held Consulting Ltd. seems to have missed this point. The report does make a number of valid observations despite being based upon a seriously flawed research template. Regrettably because of these limitations there are also some fairly major omissions.

The view that LASCH places are used as options of last resort may also have some foundation but in fact masks the real issue. Some of the emphasis placed on managing placement stability seemingly evaporates once the child has experienced three moves, there being no reporting difference thereafter between four or twenty four moves. A recent examination of placements passing through one "welfare" LASCH revealed that children had experienced up to eight, and in some cases as many as twenty changes of placement within the preceding 24 month period. Whilst the quality of non secure types of provision may be improving the evidence suggests they are still ill equipped

to positively manage these highly vulnerable children who remain on the placement merry-go-round, until spinning out of control into secure care.

The Jane Held study highlights cost as not being the driving issue in the decision whether to use secure pointing out that placements are significantly more expensive in non secure provision. It should also have pointed out that the majority of secure providers offer a far wider portfolio of services than is generally available in other forms of accommodation. So far as the “welfare” market is concerned this is also precisely where Paul Fallon’s “one size fits all” contention falters. LASCH’s do not simply “contain people” but bring a range of tailored therapeutic interventions and expertise to very vulnerable, high risk young people through highly individualised multi disciplinary programmes of care and education.

One leading provider of secure welfare placements has recently formed a partnership with a private adolescent mental health hospital service, themselves national leaders in this field, to supplement the range of specialist services / counsellors already contracted to the secure unit in relation to health, alcohol, drug, and sexual health / relationships work. This LASCH has similar agreements with Voice who not only provide a highly valued advocacy service to those placed, but operate strategically with the organisation on a range of other projects.

Evidence of the “welfare” service delivering good outcomes abounds. The above LASCH achieves a 75% success in young people leaving the unit with a recognised educational qualification – remarkable given the pattern of disruption and non attendance many have suffered before being placed. Similarly the diminishment of high risk and anti-social behaviour, the number of young people who disclose, or commence work to start dealing with serious past abuse is a testimony to the expertise and appropriateness of the care provided and the level of emotional security and safety felt by those placed. More subjectively, “thanks for helping me and keeping me safe” was the view of one young person, and “a very effective service..... the young person has proved to herself she has the ability. She is proud of her record of achievement and her schoolwork” was the view of a placing social worker, and “we love her so very much and are aware that (name) still has a lot of work to do, but as parents we both very much appreciate the care and dedication you all give” was recently sent by the parents of one child.

Interestingly the Jane Held report comments on the disproportionate number of welfare females placed compared to males. Whilst there is no doubt that males can be equally as vulnerable as young women, currently society views these groups differently. It is something of a “chicken and egg” debate as to whether there is a different societal response to vulnerability based on gender, or whether it reflects a society where predominantly abuse is perpetrated on females by males. This being the case the demand for female welfare places is unsurprising.

In conclusion, whilst some LASCH’s may need to “up their game” they are not all the same. Some units are already “welfare” only, and within this generic

grouping provide particular specialisms such as catering specifically for young women, mental health issues, or the consequences of abuse and exploitation.

In conjunction with other agencies, LASCH's offer a wide range of professional services and provide detailed programmes of therapeutic intervention matched to individual need. Above all the service can be seen to work, delivering measurable outcomes, which are understood by, and make a positive difference to the lives of those placed.



