

CHiP practitioner article

Youth mediation service: making a difference

**Written by Andrew Craig,
Mediation Officer,
South Ayrshire Council,
for Changing Homelessness in Practice**

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Youth mediation service: making a difference

The Youth Homeless Mediation post within South Ayrshire Council has been operational since February 2000. Mediation Officer, Andrew Craig, discusses the benefits that the service has been able to offer when dealing with youth homelessness.

Vulnerability of youth homeless

We continue to offer a very unique way of working with young people and their families affected by separation and transition brought about by homelessness.

It has been widely researched that the effects of homelessness for young people can be very damaging. Isolation from family and friends can exacerbate vulnerability and, coupled with loneliness, can increase difficulties associated with mental illness.

The need for family contact in youth homelessness has been highlighted as an integral part of the service offered within South Ayrshire Council. In many situations, this has brought about significant change within families to reduce youth homeless presentations, overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation and improve the better integration of services to support young people and their families.

Voluntary service

Aimed at young people aged 15-21 years of age, an open referral system operates and, as the mediation service has become more familiar, young people and their families have accessed mediation at an early, preventative level.

It has been positive that families see this role detached from statutory interventions. The voluntary nature of contact has seen a willingness from family members to consider alternative ways to improve relationships; the model has been developed to encourage families and young people to take a lead over their destiny.

Whilst there has been an increase in self-referrals, most referrals come from the Youth Housing Support Group (YHSG). The YHSG within South Ayrshire is unique among Scottish Local Authorities and has representatives across all sectors, including Health, Social Work, Housing and Education. The YHSG monitors and reviews all young people accommodated in temporary supported accommodation and acts as a positive resource for our vulnerable young people.

Promoting family relationships

Locally, mediation is seen as a service that promotes family relationships and is not exclusively aimed at prevention of homelessness. We recognise that mediation can play a key role at any stage in the process and is considered at Joint Homeless Interviews, Housing Review meetings and as part of ongoing casework.

As well as individual and family based work, wider agency and family meetings are considered as part of the process and to this end we have been able to identify and develop stakeholder involvement.

These developments have seen tremendous changes to the way we all work together to alleviate homelessness.

'The family mediation role has benefited young people in facilitating a return home and/or forging family links. Cross agency working has also strengthened and promoted the needs of vulnerable young people through the adoption of a common philosophy as well as de-stigmatising homelessness as a problem.'

YHSG member

Focus on young people

While other mediation services are aimed at couple separation, neighbourhood disputes and community mediation, South Ayrshire Council takes pride in the development of this post and its continued dedication in helping people re-build relationships that have broken down as a consequence of homelessness.

Young people need continued contact with family and friends whilst in homeless accommodation, even if a return home is not possible. Mediation has played a key role in re-building relationships and extending social networks. In an inclusive way this has brought families together, created pathways to additional resources in order that decision making can take place to avoid delay, drift and promote future planning for those young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Over the last four years the mediation programme has played a key role in facilitating either a return home or promoted family contact to approximately 200 young people. This has created a vast saving both financially and emotionally to the Local Authority and to families.

Pioneering third party mediation

As a pioneer for mediation, the service uses principles common to many mediation practitioners, but the focus recognises that the key to effective change in youth mediation lies with the family and young person.

As an objective, third party mediator, it is an important role to represent the views of all parties concerned, although this can be a difficult task to achieve - families, on occasion, will attempt to encourage a collusive relationship with the mediator. However, in South Ayrshire, our experience of offering a voluntary and discreet service has defined the focus for contact and separates this role from other key staff who may have had a statutory or longer term involvement. This had initially created some challenges, and although families welcomed the role, it was important that initial developments took account of staffing needs.

Skills development workshops were introduced that involved staff across the Local Authority participating in discussions that took account of the evolving needs of young people and their families and attitudes towards homelessness. This brought about improved understanding of the roles that each stakeholder had with young people affected by homelessness and promoted the independence of mediation and its relationship with young people and their families.

Views of partners

Consultation with families and stakeholders has been carried out and their comments reflect the importance of mediation.

'Our relationship with our daughter had been at breaking point when we asked her to leave the house. Mediation was something we were not aware of, but are now glad the Homeless Officer suggested this. Our relationship has improved and the difficulties have now been resolved and our daughter is now back home where she should be.'

Following a family meeting one family commented:

'Without the family meeting and the independent role we would not have been able to sit down together, make appropriate decisions and prioritise our thoughts. Although our son has not been able to return home, mediation assisted us in making a plan to help support him in his accommodation and the relationship has improved in a way we didn't believe could.'

Other partners have spoken about their scepticism and concern about the mediation role acting as a further barrier to youth homeless presentations. However, the Ayr Housing

Aid Co-ordinator explains that this has not been the case and believes the service now forms a vital part of services to young people.

'Our caseload numbers in the 16-17 year age group have dropped significantly over the last 4 years. Youth Homeless services in South Ayrshire has been proactive in this reduction through prevention and good information being provided to young people and their families.'

Ayr Housing Aid Co-ordinator

Future developments

Four years on, we continue to develop the highest standards of practice towards this population. The Throughcare Team alongside other Social Work, Housing, Education and voluntary agency colleagues have all been instrumental in promoting the needs of young people at an early stage.

We continue to be proactive and intend extending mediation through school based work and other developments. Currently South Ayrshire is in negotiation with the Scottish Church Housing Association to develop a Night Stop facility for young people at risk of homelessness and mediation will play a key role in offering support at this stage.

Further information

If you would like to contact Andrew for more information about his work, please email chip@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.