Briefing paper Place2Be –
Supporting Looked After and Accommodated Children through a school based service

Background:
Place2Be is a leading provider of school-based emotional and mental health services. Celebrating its 18th birthday this year, the organisation has worked in 500 schools over the past 18 months, mostly in areas of high deprivation and disadvantage, such as Easterhouse (Glasgow), Craigmillar and Westerhailes (Edinburgh) and Prestonpans and Tranent (East Lothian). An award winning charity we seek to improve the prospects of children aged 4-14 years, by tackling the complex social issues that result in educational disadvantage.

Place2Be works in schools providing early intervention mental health support, without stigmatising children, young people or families and at a point where they need it most. It effectively removes the emotional barriers to learning and prevents the downward spiral that can lead to low aspirations, poor educational achievement and truancy/exclusion from school. It helps improve children’s attainment and builds their resilience, providing them with brighter prospects and hopeful futures. In Edinburgh currently more than 10% of the children supported through long term interventions are looked after and accommodated children.

Place2Be’s core services are delivered by its clinical staff and highly skilled Volunteer Counsellors, of whom there are more than 700 currently. Place2Be offers consultancy support and advice and workplace learning to teachers and school staff. It is a leading provider of specialist training and university-validated professional qualifications to those who work clinically with children, helping to build capacity in local communities.

A joined up, collaborative approach
Place2Be is committed to multi-agency working and builds strong partnerships with the schools in which it is based. Place2Be operates within the principles of ‘Getting it right for every child’ (GIRFEC), seeing itself as one agent in a multi-disciplinary team, which might include social work, health and other voluntary sector organisations, working to achieve the best possible outcomes for the individual child.

Evaluating impact
Place2Be utilises robust monitoring and evaluation systems to analyse the outcomes for children and parents accessing our services. For children, this includes quantitative evaluations from children, parents/carers and teachers using the Department of Health approved Goodman’s Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires. This is used pre and post intervention to monitor the impact of our work as well as case studies and feedback from teachers and parents. For A Place for Parents we use the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) pre and post–intervention as well as a standardised ‘Concerns Form’ as evaluation tools.

We know that by providing early intervention counselling to children and appropriate support to their parents this offers an opportunity for families to cope with the difficulties they face, make changes and better informed decisions about their lives, frequently we are seen as a pivotal agency which prevents children entering the care system and/or being excluded from mainstream education. In 2009/10 in Edinburgh 62% of children rated by teachers and 65% rated by parents showed improvement following our one-to-one support.
Similarly, parents and carers (including kinship carers and foster carers) who have attended A Place for Parents consistently report an increase in confidence and self-esteem (approximately 75%); an improved ability to communicate with their children more effectively (approximately 75%); and a greater ability to cope and manage their lives (approximately 50%).

Paul Hunter, Head Teacher at St Catherine’s RC Primary School which has Place2Be as an integral part of his school’s resources describes its impact, particularly on looked after and accommodated children:

“St. Catherine’s RC Primary School is a school set in an area of regeneration in Gracemount in Edinburgh. With a high ratio of children actively involved with or known to social services, the school currently has 12 children who are classed as having ‘Looked after & Accommodated’ (LAAC) status.

These children find themselves in this situation for a variety of reasons - drug or alcohol issues in the home, marital break-up, mental health problems among the family or ill health among parents. Each of these issues is serious enough when trying to cope with them as an adult. We need to realise the traumatic affects that they can have on very young children. The school’s recent HMIE Inspection in September 2011 highlighted the school’s caring and supportive atmosphere, which contributes to meeting the needs of the children, with Place2Be named specifically as a significant contributor.

In fairness, a small minority of our LAAC children cope admirably with the status and the situations they find themselves in. However, this is not the case across the board. Many of these children are, every day, bringing very complex needs and experiences into our ‘caring and supportive’ atmosphere. As teaching professionals, are we fully equipped with the skills to meet these needs? Educationally, yes, but this is often not the case in helping the children meet their own mental health needs. If we cannot have children who are emotionally literate, we have little or no chance of expecting them to be educationally literate? In school we see many of these children exhibit their emotional upset through becoming aggressive, angry or uncooperative. Our staff do their best to support these children through a variety of strategies to keep them in school - many of them are constantly at risk of exclusion.

Place2Be offers an unrivalled and unprecedented resource to our school to compliment and extend the support of our staff. What other service can offer on-site, private and skilled intervention for our most vulnerable members of society? I use the phrase ‘members of society’ in its true sense as Scotland’s Curriculum For Excellence prioritises equipping our children with life skills. Our Place2Be volunteers and staff possess the skills, experience and time to be able to give these children an ‘out’ for their feelings and anxieties, in a place they see as a constant and safe space. In truth, this service cannot function in isolation and it is essential that Place2Be is seen as an integral part of a package of support and not an add-on or a method of last resort.

Trust is a short word with huge implications. It is something that our LAAC children have seen shattered time and time again in their own short lives. An environment of trust exists in the one-to-one sessions with Place2Be counsellors, where children of a very young age can explore issues that mature adults would find difficult to cope with. We must never forget the fact that these children are our future. What more valuable asset can we have to protect than our future? If we do not recognise the value of catering for the emotional needs of our children, then the downward spiral of life expectations will be the only thing the children of our children will inherit.”

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