

Adventurous Social Work?

USING RESOURCES DIFFERENTLY WITH
LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND THEIR
FAMILIES - SOME EARLY LESSONS FROM
THE SCOTTISH PILOT SITES

TIM KEILTY

Adventurous Social Work?

Introduction

For the past 12 months, 3 local authorities in Scotland have been building on their experience and expertise in self directed support to try this ethos and approach with children in the looked after system, building on some successful work in Middlesbrough and the growing use of Signs of Safety and Family Group Conferencing.

The three local authorities involved were Argyll and Bute, Edinburgh and East Lothian. At the end of the 12 months, all 3 areas have had success and struggles – doing adventurous work in difficult times was never going to be easy.

As the person supporting the work, and a bit of an idealist, I had hoped to completely transform support across the whole population of looked after children in Scotland. I had to remind myself of our rather more manageable aims;

“We envisage a partnership approach where the local authority will test the value and benefits of creative use of budgets and creative support planning with a small number of young people who are already accommodated away from home or are at risk of being accommodated.”

We did test the value and benefits of this approach with a small number of young people in all three areas, with some success and a lot of learning. The group of workers involved described our project as an opportunity to;

“Try some stuff, learn some stuff, share some stuff”

Hopefully this report fulfils that brief. Undoubtedly this report could have gone into more detail, analysed stories more forensically, been more thorough. In the grand scheme of things it really was a small piece of work...

Stories

Case studies will illustrate this report, due to the nature of the situations involved and the relative youth of this project, these stories are anonymised and not area specific.

The Challenges

A New Relationship?

At the heart of successful Self Directed Support is a fundamental shift in the relationship between the citizen and the state, perhaps a shift more difficult in the arena of child protection, the sharp end of the state. Even in these situations this different relationship is possible, described by Daniel Keogh (Social Worker, Argyll and Bute)

"Getting alongside families, believing that things can be different, putting solutions in people's own control"

Another Social Worker involved in the project said;

"If you drill down into what really matters to the child and what's really best for them, you are forced to think differently about it all"

A Nuanced Approach to Risk

This work requires a more delicate and nuanced view of risk, and requires workers to approach these conversations with the same nuanced delicacy. In this way risks about a child returning to, or staying at home are viewed through a different lens. Rather than mitigating, managing or deciding that the risk is too great based on an assessment of a situation where practical hands on support is absent, a situation where perhaps children and families feel a lack of control. In this approach the question is, "would it be safe to return this child home with *significant* support in place?" the answer is more likely to be yes.

Resources

Money is tight, but we still spend thousands of pounds per week for children to be sent out of area, the challenge in this project was to unlock some of that existing money to spend differently, this did happen but remains difficult.

The resources we do have are the people, in all of the areas I met and worked alongside amazingly talented, thoughtful, committed Social Workers – wanting to do things differently but struggling in a system which makes that difficult.

A Note on Creativity

There are some great examples of young people and families coming up with perfect individual solutions in this project - karaoke machines (to bring a family together), levitating UFO alarm clocks (to encourage teenagers to get up for school) good solutions. In a system which still largely operates along 'traditional' lines, block contracts for support, off the shelf commissioned services – these are known as 'creative' solutions, to the families and young people who came up with them, they were just normal, humdrum, everyday...

In conversation with Paul Kyle, Argyll and Bute Council we were discussing the work, Paul used the phrase *adventurous social work* but quickly changed it to *creative social work*. We agreed that adventurous was better.

A Note on Social Work

On a few occasions I have been gently challenged as I've spoken about this work in Scotland that '*there's nothing new here*' or '*it's just good social work*' or '*this is just old fashioned community social work*'. I totally agree, but perhaps we've lost some of that over the years. I've obviously been invited; I don't just turn up at events and demand to speak! There is already a lot of this work going on, I do believe that Self Directed Support offers citizens great opportunities to find solutions which work for them and which they control – equally the opportunity is there for workers to do the work they really want to, doing more of what matters.

That does sound a little adventurous to me.

Background

This work developed out of some interest in Scotland and beyond in the work of the Returning Children to Middlesbrough Project.

"If we sometimes spend £6000 per week on a placement for young person miles from their home, why wouldn't we consider spending money to keep them at, or closer to, home? If we do this right it's a win-win situation, in terms of outcomes for young people and use of stretched council budgets"

- Jill Blackwood, Team Manager, Middlesbrough Pilot

In Middlesbrough, as in many other places, there are a significant number of 'looked after' children many of whom are placed out of area, a long way from their families and communities and often in expensive residential and/or fostering placements.

For some, this is the best option in terms of meeting their individual needs and achieving their full potential. However it may be the case that for others, their needs could be met both more effectively and more efficiently closer to home.

The 'Returning Children to Middlesbrough Project' set out to explore whether the expertise developed in connection with personal budgets locally with adults and children with disabilities could be used to return some children and young people to Middlesbrough. The project utilised the skills and experience of social work practitioners in Middlesbrough and was supported by Tim Keilty, a consultant working with In Control.

The Middlesbrough project has demonstrated that use of individual budgets is not a magic wand - young people are placed in the care of the local authority for a host of reasons, often complicated situations for complicated children, but using money differently through the use of an Individual Budgets does allow for different solutions. The success of Individual budgets for looked after children relies on buy in from all involved, and a hands on approach to making plans a reality.

The Proposal/Offer

The learning from the Middlesbrough Project has created interest to do something similar in Scotland. Social Work Scotland and In Control Scotland were keen to support a small number of local authorities to develop a similar model using the experience and support of Tim Keilty. We envisaged a partnership approach where the local authority would test the value and benefits of creative use of budgets and creative support planning with a small number of young people who were already accommodated away from home or are at risk of being accommodated.

The pilot ran over 12 months and aimed to involve 4-6 young people/families identified by the local authority.

The suggested criteria to be considered for each child/young people to be included in the pilot were adopted from the Middlesbrough work as:

- It would be safe and in their interests to return them home (or to their home community).
- They would be willing to work towards achieving this.
- Their families would be willing to work towards achieving this.
- Those professionals working with the child/young person or their family see this as a positive way forward.

The Local Authorities taking part in the pilot were asked to fully commit and be;

- Willing to “search for capacities, seek connections and be open to yes”
- Able to create some capacity with 1 or 2 frontline workers who will have dedicated time to work with Tim and the young people for the 12 month period.
- Have flexibility in their systems (or agreed authority to do this) to support money being used different i.e. Direct Payments for purchases of items, support or services for the young person or their family.
- Have buy in from senior managers
- Be able to identify 4-6 young people who match the criteria.

What did we try?

The Beginnings

All three areas started the process with a series of briefing sessions for Social Workers, and managers to identify young people who might fit the 'criteria' for involvement in the project and get 'buy in'.

The work began in all 3 areas with the intention of Tim working alongside social workers to generate some success from which to build.

Planning

All of the 3 areas agreed to explore a loose framework for planning - drawing on the values, principles and approach of Person Centred Planning, rather than a set tool, support planning document or prescribed process – this loose framework is;

"Search for Capacities, Seek Connections, Be Open to Yes" - Figure out together what it would take.

In all of the areas we tried to get people together around the young person, family, friends, interested workers, allies. We tried to use neutral community venues or places where young people most felt comfortable, removing the feeling of this being a council process and more of a human one. We used big paper and utilised graphic facilitation where this made sense for the young person. For people steeped in Person Centred Planning, this is not new and shares many elements with Family Group Conferencing and the Signs of Safety approach, Asset Based Community development, Support Planning as part of Self Directed Support, Restorative Practice et al.

The unifying feature of all of these approaches is the deployment of 'capacity lenses'.

A Relentless Focus on Gifts and Capacities

Rather than teach a new 'model' we wanted to demonstrate how simple, human approaches can support families to find their own solutions. This requires a relentless focus on discovering the gifts, capacities and skills of young people and families;

Searching for Capacities;

- *What are you good at? What are the best times you have together? What is your mam really good at? How do you have fun together?*

Seeking out everyday community solutions, building community capacity and contribution;

- *You love boxing? Where does that happen round here? Should we have a look? You're great with animals? Where could you offer that? Who might welcome that?*

Seeking connections with families, friends, community, paid people - past and present;

- *Have you got any mates who don't get arrested? Who are the people who really get you, understand you?*

Being Open to Yes;

- *Instilling a sense of possibility, not settling for No, being tenacious as a worker!*

What would it take?

- *Your uncle Brian is a great influence but you don't see him? What would it take to make that happen? What would it take for you to get up in the morning without your mam getting frustrated at you?*

The answers to these questions provide us with the bones of some solutions, the task is to honour those solutions by aligning our resources (people and money) around them – proving we are open to yes!

Some Stories

Returning Children Home

All three areas identified a young person/family who were planning a return from a residential placement, and all 3 among the most 'difficult' young people to work with.

B's story

B is a 15 year old boy, from a marginalised community and was considered 'high tariff' frequently dealt with by police and other services. He had found school increasingly difficult, and life at home with Dad was becoming more fraught, due to Dad's issues with alcohol. B drifted into criminal behaviour, his criminal behaviour became increasingly violent resulting in his removal from his Dad's care to a secure residential placement a long way from his home.

B's Social Worker saw a return home as a real possibility, we planned together around the young man's gifts, skills and resources, his networks and relationships. The young man was described as a 'grafter' loving outdoor, manual work. Through an exploration of his relationships the social worker identified a successful period at school where B worked alongside a landscape gardener. We explored the possibility of supporting a work placement – this quickly developed into supporting real work. The money previously spent on a residential placement was redirected to support the landscape gardener to employ him. In essence, his budget was used to 'pay' his wages. Alongside employment, the Social Worker was supporting him to get qualifications and B identified a support worker who he'd met in the past to help him explore new activities - with the explicit aim of helping him build a new and more positive circle of friends.

B is still at home, in his community, not offending. Working and contributing. The reduced stress in the home is allowing dad some space to work with the Social Worker on other issues.

What made B's story possible?

- A Social Worker with a good relationship with young man, and his family and a willingness to be open to yes.
- Good person centred planning identifying gifts and networks

- Commitment from other people around, uncle and wider family and a teacher from school who really liked him.
- Agreement to spend money unconventionally
- Being able to 'free' local authority workers who had a good relationship with B.
- Seeing the 'whole' family
- A willingness and desire from B to try a different path

P's Story

P is 13 year old boy, previously in secure accommodation due to disruptive behaviour in the community. P had just moved from secure accommodation to close support on the same site. He consistently ran away - P was actually running back home. The social worker was brave enough to consider how we could support home to be a safer place to run to.

Mum needed confidence and support to see how she could manage. P's social worker and school were keen to see how a different use of resources, tailored around the young man and his family, building on the gifts and interests of P and his family could support a return home.

After many abortive attempts at getting everyone together in the room to plan together we eventually came up with some possible solutions; including bedroom furniture, incentives (vouchers for sports equipment) in school based on attendance, support at weekends from a worker he had built a relationship with. Support from his placement continued while he was back at home with the aim of continuing this with other workers when he settled. Part of the plan was an activity budget to support the family to do positive things together.

P did return home, and hung on for 5 months but eventually, despite the support of a talented social worker and an inspiring teacher, P returned to secure accommodation after increasingly worrying behaviour in the community.

What caused the struggle?

- Lack of flexibility within council block contracts (one-to-one support for young people commissioned as a service with specified hours) to release workers to support the young man.

- We realised too late that mam needed practical one to one support to make some of the things in the plan happen, someone to physically support her to arrange activities, this was put in place but proved to be too late.
- The draw of friends and criminal activity eventually proved too much for P - and our work was unable to create a strong enough 'pull' to home.
- Environmental factors undoubtedly played a part, housing, area, deprivation.

Keeping Children at Home

All 3 areas we also keen to explore what it would take to keep children at home when they were on the verge of care.

Family A

Parents with history of poor mental health and deemed not to be engaging in parenting programmes, five children not attending school regularly and living chaotic lives. However, lots of possibilities to help keep them together but would require significant intensive support, Family and Social Worker identified that what worked well was periods when they received intensive support from family support team – this helped keep things stable but was only ever put in as short term measure.

Some great planning identifying the skills capacities and gifts of all of the family, energetic engaging sessions with family, clearly a lot of love but the family were stuck. As a result of first planning session family identified that what they all really wanted was more positive time together as a family, a £300 budget was made available for them to plan 6 good activities together. The family came up with some great ideas, fishing trips, pamper sessions and horse riding but struggled to make these ideas a reality, struggling to find the time, space or the energy.

Longer term plans included a budget to decorate the dining room together, creating a family space where they could eat together, sing Karaoke etc. Family support was also identified with the family coming up with their own person specification.

Eventually one of the older children was accommodated and little in the family has significantly changed.

What caused the struggle?

- When a family support service was identified there was a three month waiting list, the family needed quick and enduring support.
- A lot of family interventions in the home are time limited, this family needed support for 2, 5, or possibly 10 years.
- Delays in getting money released, and plans approved led to the family and the social worker to begin doubting the possibilities on offer.

What worked?

- The planning process did open up some windows of hope for the family and for workers, we just couldn't keep them open long enough
- The young person in care *is* doing well

Family B

A large family, poor housing, poverty, neglect and concerns about the general welfare of the children, enough children to 'break the bank' of the local authority should they be accommodated. In the words of the social worker involved;

"Poverty causes terrible grief – what I asked was *what can we do to help out?*"

The Dad's own solution was some money to fund a plastering course so he could work and earn more money. That's what the social worker organised - £300.

£300 wasn't the complete solution, the children received some additional one to one support to get them out and about to relieve some pressure in the home. The social worker made it clear to school and health professionals that the aim was to keep this family together and that difficulties largely caused by poverty could be worked through.

12 months later the family have no social work involvement.

What made this work?

- An empathetic social worker trusting families to come up with good solutions.
- The ability and willingness to spend money differently.
- A belief in the capacity of the family.

Family C

A young person with a history of offences only 12 years old, involved in lots of anti-social behaviour in his local community. So much so that the local police are frequent visitors to the local council offices demanding that something is done to remove this child. The social worker knows the difficult family relationships at times but recognises that the parents are keen to support their son and engage well with local services.

The social worker agreed with the young person that he gets £20 per week to keep focussed in school and not offend. He can use it any way he wants. Part of this deal is that he continues to engage with his worker from the youth offending team.

He tends to use his £20 to buy a Friday night takeaway for his family and spend quality time with them. Sometimes he saves it up to go on trips with his Granddad.

There was a real risk this young person would be on a route to secure care, or at the very least find himself further embroiled in the criminal justice system. Instead he has hugely reduced his offending, his £20 per week has been reduced to £20 per fortnight, he doesn't need it. He was seen as a 'problem' for the family, the community and the local authority - now he's seen as a contributor.

What made this work?

- A talented social worker building a relationship based on solutions.
- Bravery from management to stand up to the police, saying "we are just going to try this £20 a week idea..."
- Trusting the young person and the family to take control themselves.
- Not sweating the small stuff, worrying...what if he doesn't spend the £20 in a good way?
- Not being too prescriptive in the support plan.

There are other stories of success and failure from this project, we may capture more of these as time progresses and stories mature. From the stories captured above some common themes emerge.

The Project Overall

What went well?

Getting everyone to hear the story

In Edinburgh we spent a morning with managers, finance, commissioners etc creating a PATH of where we hoped the project may take us, in the afternoon Social Workers and their team managers came along and discussed a young person they thought might benefit from involvement in the work; these conversations were useful in themselves, a wide range of senior managers heard the real situations young people and families were living with, and Social Workers were dealing with.

None of the young people discussed at this session formally made it into the project, but Social Workers left with permission to try something different and Managers left with a greater understanding – this could be a more regular occurrence.

Releasing resources

When the resources *are* made available, workers have permission and families are trusted, it does work. £20 for a Chinese takeaway or £300 for a plastering course are powerful examples of this in financial terms. A fluid workforce also helps, in Middlesbrough they have the home support team who can respond quickly for work with young people, Argyll and Bute utilised 'bank' staff from their own residential service, workers who were glad of the extra work.

Planning around capacities

Families and young people involved definitely get this approach and embrace it. In East Lothian we tried some interesting planning supporting families to take time out to just focus on each other's gifts, we built different relationships between families and workers, had some success.

Liberating workers

When workers are supported and freed to work in the way they would want to alongside children and families it does feel liberating - we've created a situation where asking for £20 is more difficult than a placement request, we did begin to tackle this as part of the project;

“I feel more confident than I did but would still find it hard to use this approach with families when it feels hard to ask for any money, let alone to use it in less conventional ways” (Social Worker, Children’s Services).

When all of the ducks line up...

In Argyll and Bute the work was carried out in a distinct locality where strong leadership, control over and access to a budget, control over council staff, and permission for workers were all in place and all directed by a pragmatic, inspiring and respected leader, close to social work practice.

Geography undoubtedly plays a part - when your nearest colleagues are a 4hr train journey away, local resources and solutions become more important. The Argyll and Bute experience could almost be a report in itself, but in essence the indicators of success in Middlesbrough - desire to do it, freedom with the budget, flexible staff - were firmly in place, leading to some great outcomes.

What did we struggle with?

Releasing resources

Releasing money quickly was difficult in most areas, getting cash is difficult, and the experience of this work in Middlesbrough is that quick responses are vital to showing families and young people that you are serious about solutions. One to One support for families and young people was difficult, block contracts with external providers often proved inflexible or involved referrals and waiting lists. Local authority staff were often tied up with other things.

Steering groups

We struggled in all areas with getting a steering group together, a group of people to share the risk, make decisions and release resources. After the initial wave of interest – local responsibility often fell on one worker, Paul, Lisa and Sara – who must have become heartily sick of me!

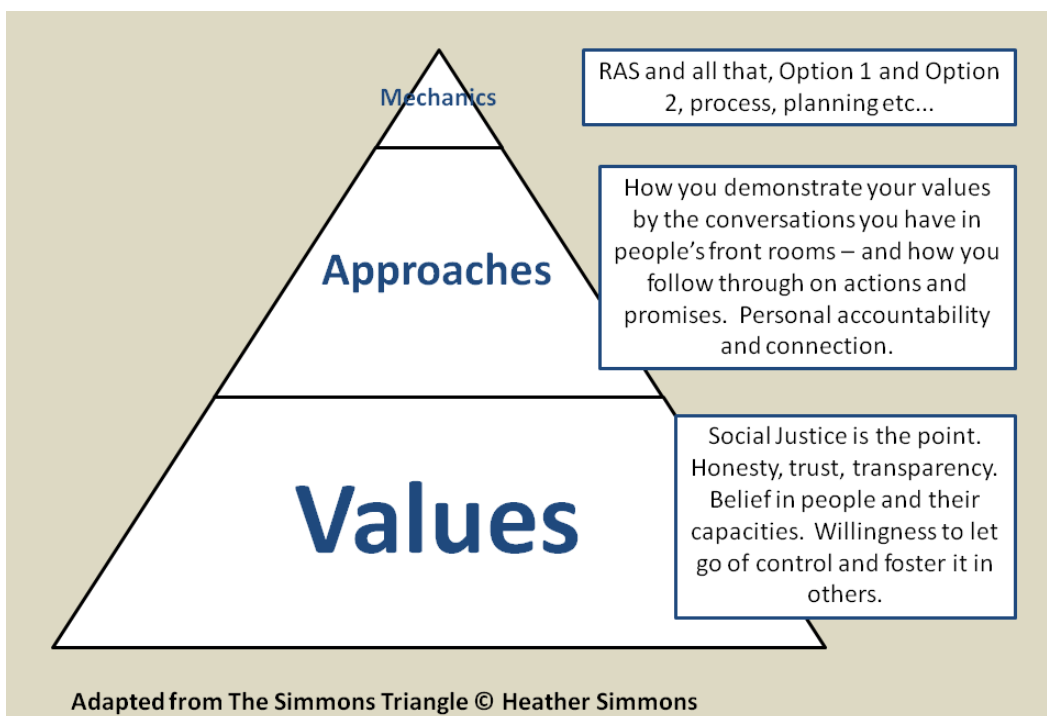
The Tim Keilty effect

The Project was seen (my fault) as the Tim Keilty Project! In retrospect the idea of me doing direct work with families and young people was a bit foolish, I'm too far away from the conversations and too far away to respond quickly when opportunities arise, with one young person in Edinburgh it took five attempts to get me, social worker, young person and mam in the same room at the same time...

A team

The need for a team that we could utilise to offer one to one support to young people and families was stressed at the beginning of the project, but the reality of releasing workers proved more difficult. Life, policy and 'austerity' got in the way.

The mechanics get in the way



In all of the work in Scotland I've shared an adaptation of the triangle created by Heather Simmons as a way to illustrate the importance of values to our work, and as an antidote to the systems and structures which make values difficult to shine.

Throughout the work I met great social workers wanting to be adventurous, wanting to take the opportunities self directed support offers citizens, but these workers were often bogged down with the mechanics of the system, stultified by the prescriptive nature of local authority procedures. None of the 'mechanics' described in the graphic are particular blocks in themselves, Resource Allocation Systems are quite a sensible way to allocate available funds in a fair way, the 'options' are a good way to illustrate to people and families how they can be in control with varying levels of

involvement with the management of the budget, support planning is a great way for people to discover and control their own outcomes - what does get in the way is the focus, energy and time we spend on them and our tendency to create a web of process around those inherently useful things.

In one local authority I found myself in the surreal situation of asking an adult social care representative to allow a family to be slightly more creative with their budget to enable them to keep the family together, the support was there to support mam with personal care..."if it says *personal care* in the support plan, that's all it can be spent on" a good worker stuck...

This is do-able

We solve the problems we want to solve

In essence what we are trying to achieve with this work is to shift resources closer to people, to allow them to come up with their own solutions, supported by their Social Worker and ultimately honour those solutions by resourcing them, often with time from Local Authority staff, and regularly with small sums of money.

There aren't any neat copy able solutions, but the problem, if we boil it down is a relatively straightforward one. How can we shift money from one budget to the next? How can we spend some of the money we commit to 'placements' to support children at home?

Getting £20 cash is difficult, but paying £3,000.00 per week seems relatively straightforward.

In brutal accountancy terms, young people in placements are a 'Budget Code' In the early days of this work in Middlesbrough we created a budget code under the Placement Budget and charged our spend to that.

I'm not suggesting a maverick or carefree approach to spending government money but I'm reminded of a conversation with a Finance Director in Australia, conducted respectfully...

Finance Director –

"How do you spend money on things like cookers, beds, rent arrears, man caves? It all seems a bit maverick to me...we don't have money available like that"

Tim –

“How do you keep spending money out of the placement budget when it’s already overspent? I didn’t think you had money like that....”

I’m sure it is solvable...

Money, money, money

We didn’t track spend as part of this work, an error on my part. If we take ball park figures this work makes perfect sense. Secure Accommodation or £20 for a Chinese Takeaway? Accommodating a large family or paying for a plastering course?

An Idea

Through this work we did come up with some great solutions which didn’t come to fruition. One which we explored a little in East Lothian might have some legs and would just be utilising what we’ve already got.

Foster care – could we pay a foster carer to not *take* a child but to *take on* a family? Could they come to a family home in the morning, help get the kids ready for school, pop back later and help with tea and homework? Could the allowance the child gets in foster care be used to bolster positive family time? In a family of four children on the verge of care this could be fantastic outcome for children, family and stretched council budgets.

What next?

More local authorities continue to be interested in this work, we’ll be clearer about what is needed up front;

- Control over budget and permission to spend it
- Access to a ‘team’ of flexible, responsive workers
- A steering group to safeguard, agree and advise
- A willingness to trust workers, allowing *them* to trust families.

Thanks and Apologies

Thanks to all of the young people and families who welcomed me into their homes and were willing to work with me, and sincere apologies to those families for whom my involvement failed to shift the blocks.

Thanks also to Lisa Shine (East Lothian) Sara Hampson (City of Edinburgh) and Paul Kyle (Argyll and Bute). Shona MacGregor (Social Work Scotland) and Keith Etherington (In Control Scotland).

About the Author

Tim works for New Prospects Association in the North East of England and as an Associate with In Control Scotland. He has been involved in self-directed support since its early days, as a consultant with Paradigm. His background is in the advocacy movement, supporting people with learning disabilities, and he has trained hundreds of people across the UK in person-centred planning and support planning.

Recently, Tim has focused on work with children, setting up the Support Planning Hub in Newcastle and currently leading work exploring self-directed support with looked-after children in Middlesbrough and Scotland. Tim is a qualified social worker, and a Fellow of the Centre for Welfare Reform.