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The role of external manager within residential child care: a view from research

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Launch of national guidance: the external management of residential child care establishments in Scotland

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Outline for this talk
- The role of the external manager (EM)
- How support to children's homes is provided
- When support to children's homes is provided
- The influence of the boundary around children's homes
- Factors which influence the potential for reciprocal engagement with children's homes
- The relationship between EMs and the residential manager
- Executing the role: what matters?
- Questions, comments and ways forward

The role of external manager of children's homes
- Has the potential to exert extensive influence within RCC, both positively and negatively

- Serves as an enabler of practice

- Acts as a conduit to 'external worlds'

- Involves drawing a fine line between providing support and enabling autonomy

How support to children's homes is provided

- Determined by individual/organisational preferences

- The EM or children's homes manager may prefer this to be 'as and when necessary'

- Alternatively, either party may have a more fixed approach

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I didn't want her there, physically, but just on some days I thought, sod this, and then I needed her, she'd been my line manager for two years, and when I did need her it was a blue light flashing, she was there, she cancelled meetings and prioritised what I needed. She rang me twice a week, and I would ring her. Her telephone advice kept me going, and made me feel very secure. She's now moved on and I've now got another service manager. We have a completely different relationship, and I've got to accept that.

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When support to children's homes is provided

- Frequently, times of crisis prompt EM support

- Regular support is not seen to be needed in some circumstances, e.g. when the home is ticking over well or when the EM is busy

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I have to say that my line manager's very approachable so if, if I did have any kind of problem or issue, you know, I can phone him, even at home, he's not averse to that. I just think his time is so tied up now that he can't manage to get around his managers in the way that he did when the service was initially set up.

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The influence of the boundary around children's homes

- Boundaries present EMs with opportunities and challenges in respect of relationship-building
- The permeability of the boundary around the home reflects the strength of identity held within it
- A suitably permeable boundary has been shown to be one where staff members work effectively from a secure base and operate competently with those external to the home
- A boundary that is too permeable might result in external influences holding sway and staff being insecure
- A boundary that is too tightly held might well encourage collusive practices

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Factors which influence the potential for reciprocal engagement with children's homes

- Reliability
- Consistency
- Authority

Demonstrated when acting as a:
- corroborator of practice
- champion for the home in wider environments

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'This [person] who's my supervisor, I've known her for a long time, she's worked in the department as long as I have, very nice [person] and very supportive, her style I struggle with. So basically [coughing] sorry, I've had to say to her 'Please don't pat me on the head all the time, I cannot cope with that. Please don't tell me how wonderful I am, that's not what I need to hear. What I need to know is when it, when the shit hits the fan basically you're gonna go to bat for me, that you're gonna protect this service.'

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The relationship between EMs and the residential manager

- Has to be tailored individually

- Will vary over time according to the needs of the manager of the home

- Develops organically

- Has to be sufficiently robust to withstand being tested without reprisals

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Safety net

Reliable

Sense of security

Safety valve

... knowledge ...

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I also like to have feedback from my line manager and just really as you would, it can be quite isolating because we don't, you don't have a peer group, you know. Like the seniors have each other and their care officers on shift I just have me really and I can't rely on seniors to give me that feedback all the time and it puts them in an awkward position sometimes .... there's some things that, that require line management feedback and checking out really. So I do rely on it as a support and it's an appropriate support because in the past, because I haven't had that, I've sought that support from seniors and that hasn't been healthy.

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Executing the role: what matters?

- Mutual clarity of roles between EM and residential manager
- Transparency of expectations
- Reliability of support
- Form and content of support
- Compatible style
- Capacity to be flexible, responsive
- Tuned into the residential world external to the home and acting as a reliable conduit to it
- Advocating and championing the interests of the home
- The capacity to listen and to enable reflection – and action

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