RE-IMAGINING SECURE CHILDREN'S HOME DESIGN TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

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Executive Summary

- This policy brief provides policy recommendations on the internal design of new Secure Children's Homes (SCHs).

- These policy recommendations are developed from findings from focus group discussions with academics, practitioners, frontline workers, and leaders in child protection services.

Introduction

There are 14 SCHs with 249 beds across England and Wales, but in September 2022 58 children still needed a secure placement. At that point only two beds were available despite occupancy rates of only 66% that same year (Tickle 2022; Mills 2022). Children's needs are becoming increasingly diverse and children often have to travel far from home for placements within SCHs.

Researchers and practitioners with unique access came together to cohere best practice from the sector, existing policy priorities from Ofsted and the Children's Commissioner, and innovative design solutions from original research

aligned with current statutory guidance. The focus is on maximising use of space and addressing key needs for children in secure care to achieve the best possible outcomes (Children's Commissioner, 2022).

The limited literature available identifies that the ideals of safety and homeliness are often experienced as inversely related within secure care and the prioritisation of safety detracts from feelings of homeliness (Andow, 2016).

Research from open residential care has indicated how feelings of homeliness can be supported in 'liminal spaces that strive to be both domestic and institutional' (Clark et al. 2014, p.1)

Homeliness and normalisation of the environment can also address issues of children required to travel far from home for placements and help with the home-care/care-home transition especially in circumstances which make regular family visits difficult. Feelings of homeliness and safety can aid normalisation and the development of agency and voice in children, who are then more able to gain the skills that underpin a successful transition beyond secure care, and support positive future outcomes (Arthur et al. 2020).

This policy brief recommends that i) safety and homeliness are viewed as compatible and complementary ideals ii) SCHs are designed for flexible use to meet complex and changing needs, iii) normalisation of secure space is prioritised as linked to positive wellbeing outcomes iv) a separate area is used to support children transitioning out of SCHs, and v) existing best practice from the sector is mobilised through internal dissemination.

Findings

Focus group discussions with stakeholders considered what currently works well in SCHs; the challenges; and key factors that should be considered in the design of future SCHs. The following themes emerged:

Safety and homeliness should not be perceived as mutually exclusive

It is appropriate that priority is given to safety within the SCH, particularly in recognising the risks of self-injury. The building design must be safe, but there is a need to balance the obsession with security with the realities of being placed in a SCH for the young people and fostering a homely environment. Participants identified challenges in maintaining homely atmospheres with jangling of keys and slamming of doors and drawers. The positioning of alarms in bedrooms with blinking lights was highlighted as an example of a feature that reinforces feelings of institutionalisation. Incorporating minor changes, such as unbreakable glass and fixed seating, can provide reassurance to staff and make children feel safe, whilst retaining a homely environment.

A need for flexibility

Participants considered children more complex than in the past and these complexities mean more is needed from the environment. Beds can remain empty due to problems in mixing children with contrasting needs

and behaviours, such as self-injury. The design needs to be flexible and adaptable as young people transition in and out of secure care to achieve maximum capacity and efficiency. Participants also identified a need for therapeutic space to facilitate access to specialist support, thereby assisting their timely transition from secure care back to their community.

Normalising the space

Normalising the space - through natural light and the ability to carry out every day domestic tasks - was considered important. There was a recognised need for allowing the young people to personalise the space, as they would within their own home. Further, access to outside space was identified as important. Participants recognised the challenges associated with family visits where children are placed far from home. Creating space for young people to have their voices heard in relation to the environment is imperative in terms of fostering agentic responsibility and creating a more homely environment (Arthur et al 2020).

Step down

Participants identified the importance of a separate space within the SCH that affords children greater freedom and encourages a successful transition back into the community.

Recommendations

Our recommendations map directly onto the themes identified.

Safety and homeliness as compatible ideals

- The design should consider the positioning of alarms and their lighting and using swipe cards or similar rather than keys for movement through the building.
- The use of soft close hinges or felt on the inside of lockable cabinets and drawers is likely to be experientially different from doors and drawers slamming shut.

- Innovative lighting solutions that mimic daylight and décor which reflects the landscape may assist in creating a more homely environment.

These changes are relatively low cost, simple to install, and require little maintenance. Homeliness is not an end in itself but a means to encourage improved voice, agentic responsibility and overall engagement from the young people.

A need for flexibility

- Space should be flexible to adapt to meet diverse needs of young people taking into consideration the different pathways - welfare or justice - through which young people might access a SCH.

- In addition to purpose-built rooms, for example, for teaching, readily adaptable breakout rooms could be considered since such rooms are by their nature flexible.

Normalising the space

Normal in this context is polysemic and it is essential to consider what "normalising" the space means to the young people residing there. Ofsted suggests personalising the space to the child and fostering homeliness (Ofsted 2022).

- Redecorating a bedroom whenever a child moves into a SCH is impracticable given the short length of stays, but involving young people in the appearance of their rooms may reduce damage.

- Vinyl stickers which are personalised and/or aligned to children's interests are inexpensive, quick to apply, and removable without damage meaning that all children can personalise their space in a cost-effective way.

- Displaying photographs and children's artwork can also assist in creating a more homely environment. Similarly, children should be involved in the cocreation of induction manuals to the SCH.

- The space should be used to foster independence, for example, growing vegetables outside, and should include nudges regarding day-to-day activity, such as hanging up a towel or setting aside laundry.

- The space ought to be designed in such a way that it supports pro-social development and transferable life skills before more traditional vocational skills can be taught/learnt.

- Placements that are a considerable distance from family and friends may make frequent visitation and transitioning from SCHs difficult (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

- Comfortable and homely family conferencing facilities must be available.

- In cases where it is permissible via the individuated care plan, it might be possible to arrange teleconference calls subject to contractual agreement not to exceed the care plan permissions, and the design should provide suitable facilities to do so.

Step down

- Step down provision should allow a child to leave the SCH to engage with services within the community.

- Step down provision should be designed to encourage independent living, with access to facilities, such as cooking and laundry.

- In policy terms, on-site provision is more efficient and provides the opportunity to maximise current resource to make it multi-purpose.

Learning from existing best practice

- Reviewing best practice and learning from challenges by visiting existing provision is likely to be beneficial.

- There is a need to identify how best practice can be enhanced, so that the norm is not just replicated and innovation hindered.

- The small number of SCHs provides a unique opportunity to review all extant provision, and to compare those adapted for use as compared with being built for purpose.

- Review of extant provision which outlines the key benefits and challenges associated with the built environment would not only assist in developing SCHs, but also in lifting the veil of secrecy that appears to pervade SCHs.

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