

## **Attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty**

Evidence from Includem for the Education and Skills Committee's Inquiry

### **About Includem**

Includem is a specialist Scottish charity which provides intensive, personalised support for vulnerable young people and their families. We believe that no young person is beyond help and that with a responsive, consistent service at the time of most need we can rebuild relationships and deliver positive, sustainable outcomes.

Our work is focused on providing support for young people and families so we can help them unlock their full potential. Our approach is preventative – whether preventing unnecessary accommodation away from home or exclusion from school. In all cases our framework of support consists of professional one to one relationships with to address the underlying needs and challenges in order to develop hope, aspiration, resilience and improved family relationships.

An increasing focus of our work is on earlier intervention through direct referrals from schools. We support young people and their families who are at risk of exclusion and who have poor engagement with school.

### **Our work on raising attainment**

Includem has always supported young people to attend and engage with school as an outcome to improve their wellbeing generally. More recently we have developed new services focused specifically on improving attainment, with young people being referred directly by schools rather than our more traditional route through social worker services. This is an opportunity to address barriers to attainment at an earlier stage, before potential social work involvement.

Working as an external provider alongside pupil support teams, we provide out of school, home based support for young people and their families to address the underlying barriers to attendance and engagement in school. The service is focused on working with young people out of schools hours, in evenings and weekends when they need support most, and builds on the strengths of whole families, recognising the crucial role parents and carers play in education.

We are currently delivering this service in Dundee, Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire and North Lanarkshire, with a combination of funding from independent trusts and from the Scottish Attainment Challenge Fund.

## **What the support looks like**

Our service focuses on building relationships with young people based on mutual trust and respect. This relationship is the key to unlocking change in the young person and their circumstances, allowing us to do focused work on managing emotions, risk taking behaviour, strengthening relationships with people in their lives and improving engagement with learning.

On average we work with young people four times a week totally around six hours of support, with additional support provided to families. Every young person has a personalised support plan which meets their individual needs so we have flexibility to increase or decrease activity depending on their circumstances in any given week. We also have a 24/7 helpline which allows young people and families to get support (including a face to face response) whenever they need it.

Some of the work our project is involved in with young people and families includes:

- Practical support for families to ensure attendance at school such as developing and helping to reinforce routines at home, e.g. around bedtime, homework and use of the internet;
- Proactive support for parents to help them set boundaries and manage challenging behaviour;
- Support for young people to understand and manage their emotions and frustrations in a positive way which does not result in negative outcomes at school;
- Working with families to improve access to health, housing and income maximisation services which are often the factors which make parenting so challenging;
- Close working relationship between school, home and Includem to pick up on emerging issues and share information where appropriate – e.g. sharing why a young person might be late to class to avoid them being excluded and put back into a cycle of exclusion/non-attendance;
- Close working relationship with social work and other services around child protection concerns which may not have been known by other services

Young people usually move on from our project after nine months, although again there is flexibility to work with them for longer if their needs remain. The key focus for us is on building resilience and a network of other supports so that the family has other people they can turn to if they have a continuing need of support.

## **Working with schools and local authorities**

Our project in Dundee is in each of the local authority's eight secondary schools, with a crucial coordinating role played by the City Council. Each of the schools has a direct link into the service and the City Council sits on a joint Project Board to oversee the delivery aspects of the work. They are also involved in coordinating activity between each of the secondary schools and provide a bridge between social work services for those young people who have met the threshold for compulsory intervention and those who are on the edge of compulsory measures.

In our submission to the Scottish Government's consultation on the proposed Education (Scotland) Bill we raised questions about the potential shift in the coordinating role by local authorities towards regional improvement collaboratives.

For us, it is important to recognise that although schools play a crucial role in breaking the cycle of poverty and helping to close the poverty-related attainment gap there are also a range of services outside of school which play an equally important role. Schools cannot themselves break the poverty/attainment cycle. We are concerned that by changing the education governance structures this collaborative approach between schools, public sector services and specialist third sector inputs may be more difficult as services which will continue to be delivered on a local authority basis (e.g. social work or social work commissioned third sector services) may not be as effectively co-ordinated alongside education specific services.

### **Kenny's Story**

Kenny was 13 when we started supporting him because of school attendance at below 50%. He had been excluded on a number of occasions for violent outbursts and disruption in the classroom. He was defeatist and disengaged and believed he had no future at school. Neither of his parents offered him any encouragement to even attend school.

We supported him to rebuild his confidence, and get him to think positively about future goals and ambitions. We helped to rebuild his relationships, and to challenge head-on his negative behaviour by providing structured support for his parents on setting boundaries and expectations. Both Kenny and his parents used our 24/7 helpline to reinforce the routine and to seek help before his behaviour reached crisis point. We planned a number of 8am sessions to get him up, make sure he had breakfast and take him to school to reinforce a positive routine of going to school. Alongside improved attendance, the work on improving his self-confidence led to him seeing a purpose in going to school and wanting to engage in lessons.

### **What more could be done?**

Addressing the poverty-related attainment gap must involve far greater recognition of the complexities of young people's lives outside of school. For young people's attainment to improve they need a stable family life, with positive relationships and encouragement to attend and engage in school. Families need support to make this happen – to overcome the multitude of challenges they face.

One solution or programme will not solve this, but personalised approaches, focused on the individual needs and risks of young people and families are part of the answer.

### **Further information**

Please contact us if you would like any further information on this project – Michael Shanks, Policy Manager, 0141 427 0523 or [michael.shanks@includem.co.uk](mailto:michael.shanks@includem.co.uk).