Break Staying Close, Staying Connected Evaluation report

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Executive Summary

The Break Staying Close Staying Connected project is one of eight Staying Close pilots funded by the Department for Education Innovation Programme following Sir Martin Narey's review of Residential Care (2016). It began in January 2018 in partnership with two local authorities in the eastern region of England and is now working in three local authorities (with the third joining after the first year). It provides supported accommodation primarily in shared housing, together with personalised support for residential care leavers to help develop stability, support networks and independent living skills. This evaluation report presents findings from qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with young people using SCSC, SCSC staff and local authority staff, this is supplemented by quantitative data collected through project outcomes tracking. The evaluation period was from September 2020-September 2021. Data was analysed thematically using NVivo software (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Key findings: Young people's interviews

Staying Close Staying Connected

Young people interpret Staying Close Staying Connected in a variety of ways. Whilst many stay close to former residential placements, they also view maintaining or rebuilding relationships with birth family as important. Some also see Staying Close as involving forming new networks of peer support. Seven of the 17 young people interviewed had not moved directly in to SCSC from residential placements so this may impact on the extent to which they prioritised staying close to residential homes.

Support

The quality of relationships with transitions workers was the most often mentioned positive aspect of the service and was rated highly, with young people feeling well supported and saying that they had a good relationship with their workers. The support offered was holistic and flexible and included building independent living skills, practical and emotional support, help with education, employment and training, support to keep in touch with family and signposting to other services. Some young people described their workers as like family or friends. Given the centrality of the relationship with the transitions worker it is notable that nine young people raised a concern about staff turnover and consistency.

Young people appreciated different means of accessing help with their mental health including support from the transitions workers and known staff on the project; use of the on call service; support from the SCSC emotional wellbeing service (EWS) and help with referral to external services. The outcomes tracker, a young person completed questionnaire, shows

that health and wellbeing improved across the year despite the challenging context of the pandemic.

Most young people spoke about help that they had received in accessing education or training, or opportunities they had within SCSC that increased their readiness for employment. The coffee van was mentioned by several as helping to increase their confidence and in some cases leading on to paid employment elsewhere. This was supported by quantitative data which showed young people reporting that they felt more work ready as a result of being part of Staying Close Staying Connected.

The social activities on offer via SCSC are an important part of their offer increasing young people's social networks and potentially bolstering their resilience. This was also an area of provision which young people felt was coproduced, with activities planned on the basis of their suggestions. Residentials and activities were viewed as improving housemates' relationships in some cases and enlarging social networks in others. Improvements in positive relationships were reported by young people through the outcomes tracker.

Housing

Most of the young people felt that they had limited options on leaving care, although some felt they had made a positive choice of SCSC. There were mixed views about the location of their placement within SCSC, some felt that they had a choice whilst others felt that they had to take what was available. Whilst some young people wanted to *stay close* to existing networks, others wanted to *move towards* prior connections including birth family, and others wanted to *move away* from existing connections if they were struggling, or felt they were a bad influence. Their satisfaction with their allocated housing was related to these factors.

House sharing is an important part of the SCSC model. Young people had mixed experiences of the matching process and of relationships with housemates. Where arrangements worked, young people spoke positively about the value of sharing with someone with similar experiences or interests. Most young people spoke of some problems with housemates, but these were not intractable. However, four young people spoke of more serious issues, which had a significant impact on their wellbeing. Several young people felt satisfied with attempts made to match them, however three felt that the matching system needed to be improved.

Coproduction

Young people talked about coproduction and the development of SCSC, through activities such as being involved in the young people's forum, interviewing staff and having a strategic influence on the coffee van project. It was apparent that coproduction is a process, and that some issues might be more difficult to address than others, for example it was easier to influence social activities than housing allocation.

Impact of Covid

The impact of covid over the period of this evaluation cannot be overlooked. The interviews with the young people underlined the extent of the impact of the long period of lockdown on their lives and the SCSC service. This impacted every stage of the process from moving in and matching, relationships with housemates and staff, and moving on from the project. In particular the staying connected aspect of the project was impacted with contact difficult with residential placements and birth family due to lockdown and concerns about transmission of the virus. SCSC had worked creatively to offer online as well as face to face support over this period.

Suggestions for Change

The young people made many suggestions for changes to the service including more one bed housing options; having a trial before moving in with a housemate; allowing young people to sleep over; ensuring flexibility so that the level of support from transitions workers matches the young person's felt needs; closer monitoring of problematic behaviours with realistic consequences; and staff training on mediation/de-escalation and on mental health.

Key Findings: Staff interviews

Support

LA interviewees said that SCSC fills a gap in provision unavailable for care-experienced young people in other leaving care options in the region and also provides support which is hard to access from adult services.

The attention to key transitions, moving into SCSC and continuity of support when moving on from SCSC was generally appreciated, and seen as successful in avoiding the 'cliff edge' scenario that can face young people leaving care. There was some indication that some transition workers may be more proactive than others in working with young people whilst they are in SCSC accommodation to develop independence skills.

All LA and SCSC staff talked positively about the ability of SCSC transition workers to provide individualised, empathic, flexible and tailored support for young people. Some (but not all) LA staff were aware of the wider service offer which is part of SCSC. There were positive references from several LA and SCSC staff to the Emotional Wellbeing Service provided by Break. They highlighted its flexible way of working with young people.

All the PAs felt that the support of the transition and housing workers alleviated worries about their young people, and in some cases reduced the time they needed to spend with them. This was noted to be a particular help during lockdown, when the knowledge that they had company and support was very reassuring.

Housing

From both the LA and SCSC staff perspective, the SCSC team was raising awareness that the SCSC offer was not a remedial or crisis post-care accommodation option. There was evidence of collaborative working with agencies with more detailed information collected on referral and better communication between SCSC and LA managers in the last year. LA and SCSC staff have developed a system to ensure longer lead in times to enable appropriate referrals and for young people to experience a planned move with clarity about the offer that they are taking up. There was recognition that the referral process was being adapted and SCSC is being stricter on its acceptance criteria.

There were still some references to referral pressures. A few LA staff indicated that there will always be pressure to accommodate in a world of limited choice. Insufficient provision in certain locations is a continuing challenge for LAs who have young people with family connections and a desire to stay in those locations. It was felt that the project was making some attempt to meet need in this area, despite short supply.

The house share model offers the opportunity for young people to develop relationships and peer networks, potentially building resilience, and is viewed as an important part of the SCSC model. Staff felt that sharing was beneficial for some young people. However, conflict and sometimes bullying behaviour between housemates was a worrying aspect of house sharing. SCSC's recent move to take on some one-bed properties was positively viewed by all LA and SCSC staff.

The matching system has been reviewed and SCSC now appears to be delaying filling rooms if the match is not right for the young person living there. Efforts have been made to ensure that matching is a joint decision, helped by relationship-building with the LA PA. It was felt that this had increased the success ratio of matches between young people.

It was suggested that SCSC staff are also making improvements around rules and boundaries for young people living in their houses; with a clear structure and process around tenant behaviour to encourage responsibility and independence, and the understanding of consequences.

Staffing and organisation

Although recruitment and embedding the team has been challenge the right staff were now considered to be in place and there was a clearer focus around roles and responsibilities for the day to day running of the project, rather than the implementation phase of initial set up. A few members of SCSC staff (at different levels of the organisation) felt that the current SCSC staff structure may be 'management heavy'.

The SCSC project had been significantly affected by a turnover of its SCSC transition workers across the early period covered in the previous evaluation. This was noted to be a considerable challenge to the SCSC project's early ability to provide a consistent service to young people, since this key worker relationship is a core part of the model. A high turnover

of staff was still referred to in some staff interviews in the current evaluation. However, all transition workers and the two housing workers interviewed were very positive about their jobs. All were receiving mandatory and optional training across a range of skills and were generally very satisfied with the staff induction, support and training opportunities received.

The wide geographical spread of the project's remit affected staff workload. Workers were often required to cover large distances to travel to young people or transport them to activities across the region (staff travel time was said to be included in the allocated hours for young people). A further challenge related to the geographical spread of the project and its work with three large LAs was ensuring operational consistency of the SCSC service; this was an issue also raised by Break managers in the previous evaluation. The appointment of one operational service manager was felt to have improved consistency across regions, although it was mentioned that there were more opportunities available in one city served by the project.

Communication

Current SCSC staff feel that the organisation generally listens to and responds to staff feedback and suggestions and staff at all levels feel they can have an influence on service development. The introduction of monthly case management meetings was felt to be improving internal collaboration and communication. These enable sharing of expertise from different levels and specialities, as well as involving all regions within the SCSC provision.

At the planning and early implementation stages of the project, Break had brought relevant stakeholders together from partner agencies to consult on the project through a quarterly project board and this continues to be viewed as beneficial. Regular meetings with key managers and commissioners within each LA have also started or developed within the last year, resulting in improved communication about referrals.

Communication between personal advisers and transitions workers was variable. Whilst some PAs had good communication with transitions workers, other PAs commented that they were not always kept in touch about the work that SCSC was doing with their young people – including activities, support hours and regularity of TW visits. Some said that they did not know what targets the project was working towards for the young person, what the consequences were for not meeting the targets, or how long the young people would be able to stay in the project. Not all were aware of the project's wider provision including the emotional wellbeing service and activities to support employment. Some workers were fairly new in their role (or based in the LA that joined the project more recently) and it may be that some lack of understanding may link to missing out on historical information events. However, a general lack of day-to-day communication around young people with individual PAs was evident in some cases.

Coproduction

The project team strives to include and respond to young people's views and feedback, facilitated by a participation worker who joined the team early in the project's development.

This role was aided by a young user of the project, who was taken on as an apprentice for a year. As well as suggesting and helping to organise activities, the apprentice was able to offer a more prepared and consistent input at a strategic level, for example, with project meetings and higher-level discussions.

Mentimeter surveys are administered regularly to give an opportunity for all young people to feed back their experiences. Around a third of young people currently using the project have engaged in the participation forum. This forum is held in different areas to maximise opportunities for young people to attend.

Having a separate participation worker, who can encourage engagement through visiting young people and building relationships, was thought to have worked well to promote participation, particularly as the role is positioned as part of the wider Break service.

Adaptation and Innovation

As recognised in the previous evaluation, Break constantly aims to innovate, change and improve. A continued openness to new ideas and adapt to needs was evident in this current evaluation, with many LA and SCSC staff at different levels noting they felt listened to and that all could contribute to the project's development. Through building good relationships with housing providers, SCSC now has access to one-bedroom flats and has put requests in for others. Other changes in response to feedback include improvements to the referral and matching processes as described above.

The emphasis on the future network is a recognition that young people need to develop organic social networks that will support them when they move on from the project. There was evidence of a range of activities that were encouraging the development of individual confidence and social networks, for example via the opportunities team

The option of one-bed properties has been pursued by SCSC and is seen as a beneficial option for young people for whom a house share is not appropriate. Some of these tenancies may provide greater stability for young people as the tenancy can be passed over to the young person when they are ready for greater independence, avoiding a need to move.

Sustainability

Sustainability of the project was understandably a concern for SCSC staff who were living with uncertainty about continuation funding and alternative future funding arrangements.

Suggestions for change

Partner agencies would like the provision to be extended to other care leavers, for example some leaving foster care; those who have been placed out of county and want to remain in locations outside of the three partner agencies; those who came into care at an older age and moved straight into semi-independent living, and pregnant women or parents and

babies who need less support than a parent and baby foster placement, but more support that can be gained from their own tenancy.

Although a volunteer mentoring scheme is in place and seems to have been positively taken up by some young people, there did not appear to be a specific system in SCSC for recent or past leavers of the Project to assist and mentor those entering it or at n earlier stage to themselves. This could be considered in the future.

Interviews with PAs suggested that communication between transitions workers and PAs could be somewhat ad hoc, a more systematic system could be considered for TW to update PAs regarding their work.

Key Findings: Quantitative Data

There are two main methods of data collection and outcomes tracking in Staying Close Staying Connected, a staff completed monthly project dashboard and a young person completed outcomes tracker.

The quantitative data collected through the project demonstrates an improvement in all intended outcomes planned for the service whilst making savings to the public purse. There are particularly strong improvements in financial and housing stability and security and potentially risky behaviors such as drug use and alcohol consumption are lower than national comparisons. There have been improvements in health and wellbeing despite the service being delivered in the context of the pandemic and lockdowns.

The quantitative findings compliment the qualitative findings, in particular that opportunities and support provided through Staying Close Staying Connected supports the development of positive social networks and helps build resilience towards work readiness. The positive health outcomes supports the views from young people that staff in the service are able to flexibly support their mental health.

Lessons and recommendations

The Department for Education summary of learning from the Innovation programme final report suggests four key learning points from the Staying Close pilots (Fitzsimons and McCracken, 2020:64). These are outlined below, alongside commentary on the extent to which SCSC is addressing these issues as evidenced in the current evaluation.

A range of different supported and semi-independent accommodation options is needed to provide young people leaving care with housing suited to their needs, preferences, and characteristics as they transition to independent living.

Young people and staff interviews both suggested that there are limited choices available to care leavers, but that SCSC was a positive option. In the previous evaluation it was noted that pressure on local authorities to find accommodation could lead to shortened lead in times and pressure to match and introduce new housemates to accommodation. (Dixon et al

2020) In the current evaluation work between SCSC and LAs on the referral and matching process was said to have led to improvements in lead in times, greater awareness of the project remit, more appropriate referrals, and to have increased young people's involvement and engagement in the matching process. It was accepted that there was still an issue with availability of suitable properties in places where young people wanted to live, whether their preference was staying close to a residential home, moving towards family, or moving away from an environment that they felt was not good for them.

The house share model of SCSC can offer several benefits to young people, potentially helping them to develop relationship-building skills, new social networks and combat isolation. However, it is not suitable for all young people and SCSC is therefore developing one bedroom accommodation options, in discussion with local housing providers. These also have the potential to offer greater stability to young people if they are eventually able to take on the tenancy independently. The success and sustainability of this strategy will depend on securing suitable housing, but potentially it may allow SCSC to offer a greater range of options to young people, and perhaps to accept referrals for young people that they would not otherwise be able to accommodate in a house share.

For those young people for whom a house share is appropriate the matching process and transition into the house are of great importance. There is evidence that SCSC and local authority partners have worked hard to improve this process, with closer work between PAs and SCSC. Many young people experienced a positive transition and got on with housemates. However, in a minority of cases there are still protracted difficulties between housemates and where these occurred the impact on young people's wellbeing was pronounced. Training for TWs in mediation and a mechanism for young people to report serious difficulties might help inform intervention in the minority of cases where serious problems emerge.

Tailored, specialist, multi-disciplinary, trauma-informed support is also required to enable young people's individual needs to be met effectively (including needs around mental health; independent living skills such as budgeting, cooking, and maintaining tenancies; education, employment and training; and building support networks).

There was ample evidence in the interviews to suggest that SCSC is successfully delivering a wraparound service that provides holistic individual support through the transitions workers, and additional in-house service offer. Young people spoke positively about their relationships with their transitions workers and the creative flexible approach to supporting them with a range of needs. In particular the emotional wellbeing service was mentioned by young people and staff as filling a gap when external services were hard to access, not sufficiently flexible or had lengthy waiting lists. The development of an independent living tool provides a structure for flexible levels of support, but also a sense of progression for young people as they move towards independent living. Young people underlined the importance of this tool being used with young people so that young people's own views on their needs form the starting point for discussion and should not be applied in a rigid way by staff.

Services and young people benefited from thoroughgoing coproduction of services, through which young people not only had a choice over their own package of support and accommodation, but also helped to determine aspects of the broader service offer.

There was evidence of coproduction in the service with young people offered some choice over their own support package. Barriers to coproduction include limitations on the housing available, which can result in pressured transitions. Young people commented that it was more possible to co-produce some aspects of the service such as social opportunities and initiatives to promote employment, education and training, than for the core housing offer. Coproduction is a core part of the SCSC value base. This is evidenced by involving young people in staff interviews, ensuring a mechanism for young people to feed into the development of services through the participation forum and ensuring it is run in an inclusive manner, coproduction in the opportunities team, and promoting young people's involvement in service evaluation including making a film about the service, and the employment of a young apprentice working alongside the participation lead.

Preparation for transitioning from care to post-care living should start early and form a core part of support for children in care, including those living in children's homes.

There is evidence of partnership working in the current evaluation to improve awareness of the remit of SCSC amongst agency partners and increase lead in times to allow relationship building with SCSC staff before young people move from children's homes into SCSC accommodation. Understandably covid had an impact on these processes and on the transition out of SCSC into independent living. As the service develops SCSC are also paying attention to young people's transition out of SCSC, developing their project to include focus on future networks to better prepare young people for independent living when they move on. The development of one bedroom housing options that may be transferred to the young person as an independent tenancy, thus avoiding a move, is an innovative development. The lifelong offer of support from Break will also help young people in their transition to independence. Both the housing offer and the lifelong support offer require resource, and should be planned for and monitored.

Future development and wider application

In addition to the developments outlined above Break plan to have a role in scaling up rolling out the model to other LAs. They are creating resources that can be accessed by other LAs and have been commissioned as consultants for the East Midlands as they develop their own Staying Close offer.