

# Lessons in coping and resilience

Enver Solomon and Julian Corner describe the approach Revolving Doors is developing with young people in the criminal justice system who have mental health problems and multiple needs.

**T**wo years ago Revolving Doors carried out research to ask young people with mental health problems who had been in contact with the criminal justice system what would have helped them. They said they were looking for a person outside mainstream services to offer befriending and emotional support. And they wanted help with applying for benefits and finding somewhere to live. Above all the young people wanted a person who could listen to their problems and offer long-term, consistent, practical support.

In response to this evidence Revolving Doors has established two Young People's Link Worker schemes. They were developed to build on the success of the agency's Adult Link Worker schemes which offer a needs-led service, using assertive engagement methods, to work with vulnerable people with multiple needs and mental health problems who encounter the criminal justice system. The focus of the new schemes has been on 15 to 22 year olds. This particular age range enables the schemes to work across the conventional age bands, which result in young people being neither eligible for child nor adult services.

refusal to engage with services. They have developed dysfunctional coping mechanisms which enable them to become highly resilient to very challenging circumstances. As one Revolving Doors Link Worker said: "They respond with anger, kicking out, rejection, pushing services and people away. 'Fuck you' in every sense of the term is their response and attitude."

The young people referred to the Link Workers were extremely disengaged and often highly withdrawn from wider society. They did not trust people and were reluctant to engage in any meaningful relationship, particularly with criminal justice or social care professionals. The skills needed to engage were completely at odds with the survival strategies that they had learned during their traumatic childhoods. Far from being able to 'work the system', Link Workers found that the young people could not grasp what was expected of them.

The symptoms of trauma were directly interrelated with a number of problems, including poor mental health, drug taking, homelessness, social isolation, lack of peer support and financial problems. Each young person had an average of two mental

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The schemes have been operating for 18 months and have so far been experimental and evolving. However, a number of significant interim findings have emerged that demonstrate how the statutory response to young people's emotional and mental health problems remains underdeveloped and is often based on a failure to understand their needs and how they can most effectively be met.

The neglected backgrounds of young people who enter the criminal justice system are well established. But what is most significant in the lives of the young people Revolving Doors has been working with is the abuse and loss they have experienced which has had an extremely traumatic impact on their lives. This trauma is at the heart of the young people's

health issues, ranging from depression, anxiety and paranoia to mania and psychosis. The young people were also assessed as suffering from a range of emotional, conduct, behavioural, attention, and learning disorders.

Despite this range of mental health problems it was clear to the Link Workers that there was a lack of services available to help their clients develop positive coping strategies. Some clients had been referred in the past to counselling services. However, they had often failed to attend after more than one session, saying they had felt that they were 'interrogated' and that the counselling had 'not really helped'. What the young people really needed was help to develop positive coping mechanisms. In

many cases this was one of their most pressing needs. Yet services did not recognise this. Instead there was a pressure on young people to respond.

In custody, for example, it was particularly noticeable that young people were attending various courses or programmes, such as basic skills, long before they were ready. The emotional trauma that the young people had experienced was not understood or recognised, nor the way in which it impacted on their behaviour. In effect, far too much was being expected of the young person, at the cost of potentially more effective approaches. According to the Link Workers this only caused further problems: "Services are awash with helping young people into college, finding them jobs and training, but I think we are missing the point. We are pressurising traumatised young people into situations they can't cope with and don't have the support to be able to cope with. This is simply further excluding them."

Given the traumatic and dysfunctional backgrounds of the young people, and the failure of services to engage with them, Revolving Doors has begun developing an innovative approach to working with this client group. It has centred on some key themes. Firstly the Link Workers have provided a holding space where the young people can learn coping strategies and recover from their experiences. They are able to express their anger or frustrations about current problems (which if they are in prison may be particularly acute) or their past experiences without support being withdrawn from them. The Link Workers say: "The space that we seem to provide for young people is a space where they can build a relationship, they can express their anger or they can fail to show for appointments but then call two months later and ask for help. Within that space we are beginning to develop a service where we can equip the young people with coping skills, which in the future should help them get back into education or hold down a job".

The aim of this approach has been to assist the young people so they can overcome some of the defensive mechanisms they have built up and develop a more positive form of resilience. The Link Workers have met the young people on their own territory, such as in a park or café. They have focused on giving young people the opportunity to be heard and listened to, discussing their needs and helping them to identify the best way of meeting them. The aim has been to help clients understand what they want to achieve.

The non-coercive nature of the service has been stressed to clients; they have had the choice whether or not to engage. This has been particularly important for clients who in the past have been compelled to engage with services and then fallen foul of the demands and conditions of these services, thereby getting into more trouble.

At the same time as providing a holding space the Link Workers have worked to provide a holistic

package of practical support by connecting the young people with the agencies that can address their multiple needs and, in turn, assisting agencies in working together to provide a co-ordinated response. This has involved working as a translator, explaining to the young people what is happening to them and what it means for them, matched to navigational support to guide them through the complex web of services. Link Workers have taken a very practical approach explaining the different rules, interventions and language used by each agency.

As many clients have been serving periods in custody, the Link Workers have focused on making sure that the various agencies working in the prison and the community are co-ordinated in order to meet the young person's needs. A main focus of the schemes' work has been re-connecting services with clients they have lost track of. Link Workers describe it as 'services reunited'. The schemes have therefore promoted more effective inter-agency working. They have brought agencies together to have case conferences that address the specific needs of clients. As one Link Worker said: "It is about building relationships not just with the client but inter-agency relationships. Sharing knowledge and information with agencies and getting people round the table means that professionals learn about other agencies they did not know much about".

The three themes of **trauma, holding space** and **navigation** are consequently the focus of Revolving Doors Agency's ongoing clinical, research and policy work with young people. They provide important insights into how services need to be modified to support young people with mental health problems and multiple needs who are caught up in the criminal justice system. Without reform to the system, vulnerable young people will continue to fall through the net of services and remain locked in a cycle of crisis, crime and mental illness into their adult lives.

*Lost in Translation – Interim findings from the Revolving Doors Agency Young People's Link Worker schemes is available at [www.revolving-doors.co.uk](http://www.revolving-doors.co.uk)*

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