

SEED Sponsored Research

Designing with Care
Interior Design and
Residential Child Care

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Final Report by

Farm7

Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care

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Executive Summary

1 Introduction

1.1 This exploratory study examined the attitudes to a range of design interventions in four residential care homes for children in South Lanarkshire. The project set out to identify the benefits and disadvantages to young people and staff of a change in approach to the design of interior spaces. It was undertaken by Farm7 (specialists in design research and consultancy) and the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care (SIRCC).

1.2 The main focus of the research was to evaluate design interventions aimed at removing 'institutional' approaches to design in the care environment and improving the experience of looked after children. This involved the commissioning of interior design consultants Graven Images in the development and design of South Lanarkshire's residential children's homes. Post-occupancy evaluation of the four residential homes was undertaken with the participation of both looked after children and staff.

1.3 It was envisaged that this study would contribute to the development of design guidance that will promote a more systematic approach to the design of care environments. This will allow social work and design professionals to draw on a design framework in order to significantly enhance the experience of looked after children and staff.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The design of our physical environment has been shown to affect our behaviour and impact on our well-being. Good design in health, education and work settings have been shown to have a range of positive effects. For example, the Scottish Executive views design as critical to realising aspirations for the school estate by creating the right environment to ensure students realise their potential. Perceptions of space affect people's attitudes and impact on their behaviour within particular spaces.

2.2 The design of care facilities has traditionally been driven by statutory and health and safety considerations, usually resulting in an 'institutional' look and feel. Children and young people in residential care have spoken tellingly about the impact of their environment on their experience of care. Although the links between the physical environment and therapeutic benefit have been known for some time, the literature on residential child care has not dealt with it in any great detail. The size of the children's homes has been the only aspect of the physical environment which a number of studies have linked to broader conclusions about the welfare of children and young people in care.

Standard 5 of the National Standards emphasises that children and young people should stay in a welcoming, warm and comfortable environment that is safe, secure and accessible. The poor design of buildings is likely to lead to stigma, and loss of children's, and young people's self-esteem and self-respect. Design also has an impact on rights of privacy and personal space. The relationships between staff and children and young people can also be affected by the design of buildings and young people have frequently commented on the role of the office in distancing staff. Design impacts on opportunities for education and development of independent living skills, as well as physical safety.

2.3 Consultation with the users of buildings is an important aspect of the design process. Consultation can encourage ownership and may assist in ensuring that the design issues are articulated and considered during the design process. The importance of gathering the views of a range of users has been emphasised. Lack of consultation can lead to poor briefing decisions and design failures.

2.4 Design guidance can provide a valuable tool to ensure that the pertinent issues that mark the success of a children's home are adequately addressed. It can also help identify approaches that are problematic and do not work well. Design guidance should be a resource that is tailored to the specific needs of both the commissioning client and the designers. It can help in the preparation of a design brief, facilitate good communication, and the effective management of the design process. It should not be prescriptive, but provide a framework for the client to effectively define the considerations to be addressed and to adequately inform the designer during the creative process.

3 Research Methods

3.1 A variety of research methods was employed during this pilot study. Interviews were undertaken with children and young people in residential child care, residential child care staff, social work managers and design professionals. Relevant documentation relating to the approach adopted by South Lanarkshire Council was studied. A survey of design professionals and social work managers in local authorities across Scotland was carried out.

3.2 Information on the rationale for the change in approach to the design of care facilities, the process for implementation, issues encountered and the resulting benefits of this new system were gathered through face-to-face interviews with key staff involved in the design of care homes for children in South Lanarkshire.

3.3 A national survey of 32 Scottish local authorities was conducted to establish best practice relating to the design of children's homes among design and social work professionals. The questionnaire combined both open and closed questions and addressed four key issues: current best practice in the design of children's homes; the level and impact of consultation throughout the design process; the requirement for design guidance; and issues around site selection. A total of 22 local authorities submitted 38 completed questionnaires.

3.4 Forty-five residential child care staff members took part in one-to-one, group or telephone interviews; representing 60% of the staff working in the four residential care homes. The themes covered in interviews included: what worked and did not work in relation to the design features; the impact on feelings and working relationships of the design features; consultation; and recommendations for the future.

3.5 The participation of children and young people living in the four homes was a central part of the research. Two research approaches were employed: facilitated participatory workshops; and face-to-face interviews. A total of 22 out of a possible 29 young people participated in the workshops; twelve took part in interviews. Participatory workshops were activity-focused, highly visual and relatively informal and were facilitated by an experienced design educator. Each participant was given a workbook for recording their activities which they retained at the end of the project. Workshop 1 focused on drawing, cutting and pasting of preferred designs for an ideal house; workshop 2 on design features in the house, and involved taking digital images of spaces and objects that were liked and disliked; and

workshop 3 explored in more detail the likes and dislikes based on the digital images. Face-to-face interviews allowed further information to be collected to augment the workshop information. The interview themes mirrored those of the staff interviews.

3.6 While direct comparisons between the homes was not possible due to a lack of common factors concerning the interior of each home, common themes have been identified. A case study was devised for each home highlighting information on the overall appearance of the house; the extent of design interventions and the reactions from young people and staff; and suggestions for the design of care homes for children and young people in the future. However, the material generated highlights the complexity of such evaluations. The design interventions are only partial and are constrained by other factors including architecture, health and safety, and broader organisational and management issues. In this context, broader themes have been identified and discussed in relation to their impact on the post-occupancy evaluations.

4 Findings

4.1 From the national survey, it was clear that no comprehensive knowledge base or guidance exists for the internal or external design of residential care homes for children. Both design and social work professionals rely on the client to articulate the design requirements of the project. To work effectively, this requires a design-literate client who understands design issues and requirements and can adequately prepare the design brief and provide information that will inform the design process and ensure a quality outcome of the project.

While most design and half of social work professionals considered reference sources to be adequate, this was mainly due to having a team with previous experience and engaging in consultation to determine requirements. The need, however, for comprehensive guidance and information on best practice was seen as desirable. An online guide was the first choice for the format of guidance by both designers and social work professionals. Meaningful consultation is recognised as an effective means of gathering relevant information to inform a design brief. A high level of consultation with residential staff was reported by both design and social work professionals. Consultation with children and young people was, in the main, undertaken by social work professionals. There is a need for design professionals to be more directly involved in the consultation process with children and young people. Consultation with the community was also varied.

Respondents considered that the main challenges in the design of residential care homes for children were those related to safety, including: fire regulations, escape routes and CCTV. The issue most frequently mentioned by social work staff was the difficulty in balancing the need for a homely environment with ensuring adequate provision for a residential care home and a workplace. Where a house is located is an important consideration in the success of a home.

4.2 South Lanarkshire Council identified the need to improve the quality of residential accommodation provided for looked after children and young people. Central to this was the recognition that existing residential homes did not provide a positive environment for children and young people: they were large; more than twenty years old; problematic to maintain; and with largely institutional interiors. Senior social work management recognised the need for a professional interior design approach and Graven Images were commissioned to provide this. Key elements that shaped the creative approach by Graven Images were the

high level of aspiration of South Lanarkshire Council for providing quality interiors, encouraging ownership of space by looked after young people, and developing a palette of materials and textures that introduced character and created a particular ambience in interior spaces. The specification of quality products to indicate that the residents are cared about was central to Graven Images' creative approach. Graven Images' input in three of the houses featured in this study varied as the homes were at different stages of development. The role of the interior designers has expanded to become more strategic and an integral part of design projects. They work closely with the client and in partnership with the architects at the outset of a project.

4.3 This exploratory study set out to explore the impact of various interior design interventions in the first four residential care homes for children in a phased development of residential child care in South Lanarkshire. Three of the four houses were new-build properties, the fourth a refurbished Victorian villa. The interior design consultants had varying degrees of input to three of the houses ranging from specifying interior furnishings for communal areas in one house to selecting interior furniture and decoration in all rooms in another house. One of the houses had no input from the consultants as the interior had been completed before they were commissioned.

4.3.1 House A is a new build property situated within a private housing estate. Graven Images had a wide remit for this particular house spanning the hallway, dining kitchen, sunroom, sitting rooms, bathrooms, studies, bedrooms and quiet room. Staff commented that on moving into the house, it looked good. However, once occupied, poor quality materials specified by the architect and lack of finish became apparent. All the young people liked the interiors of their bedrooms and generally liked the sitting room and dining kitchen. They were more divided about the bathrooms. Their key issue concerned the colour scheme and most commented that they would like more colour throughout the house. Staff tended to be more critical, considering that aspects of the design were not child-friendly.

House B is a two-storey new build property within a private housing estate. The interior of the house was completed before Graven Images were commissioned. Again, lack of robustness of materials specified by architects was commented upon by staff. Young people gave a mixed response on their liking of their bedrooms, the sitting room and the dining kitchen. Most did not like the bathrooms. Staff were more positive about the interior design than the young people.

House C is a refurbished, two-storey Victorian villa close to the town centre. This was one of the first houses to have input from Graven Images. The space and size of the rooms were commented upon positively. Young people liked the sitting room, bathrooms and bedrooms. They were more mixed about the dining kitchen. The overall impression from staff was that the house looked great even if it was not to their taste. Issues arose around design features which were intended to be personalised by young people but not implanted well by staff. Some staff also expressed concern that the house raised expectations beyond what could reasonably be achieved by young people.

House D is a new build property situated in an affluent residential area close to the town centre. Graven Images had a broad remit for the interior design of the house. The architectural style of the house is notably different from surrounding properties and some staff considered it 'stuck out'. All the young people liked the dining kitchen, bedrooms and bathrooms but there was a more mixed response to the sitting room. Staff commented

positively on the kitchen and bedrooms but the majority did not like the sitting room interior. A recurring comment from both young people and staff was that the colour scheme was dull, with the red wall in the kitchen prompting the only consistent positive response.

4.3.2 The key themes regarding the design of rooms identified in the research relate broadly to three categories: personalising space, aesthetics and functionality. A contrast in focus of response between young people and staff was apparent throughout the research. In particular, young people were more descriptive, commenting on aesthetics, while staff opinions tended to focus on functionality. What staff considered appropriate for a residential care home and what young people liked or chose to comment upon often differed. Some staff suggested that having a quality living environment did impact on young people's self-esteem and helped to raise their aspirations. Other staff considered the interior design of the houses to be expensive and impractical for young people in care. It should be noted that staff comments on cost were based on their perceptions of cost rather than their knowledge of actual cost.

Personalising space is important in taking ownership and thus respecting the environment; it is therefore an important determinant in the success of the design. Consultation is a useful way of engaging users (young people and staff), ensuring their needs are recognised and involving them in the process. Young people suggested they want to be involved in the design process, particularly in relation to their bedrooms. In relation to aesthetics, young people mainly commented on the colour scheme, the sofas and accessories such as plants. Staff tended to focus on functional aspects. The dining kitchen was often mentioned as the hub of the house.

4.3.3 In addition to design themes outlined above, other general themes that affect design were evident across the four houses. Over-occupancy of the four houses often results in a communal space being used as a temporary bedroom. Reducing the amount of shared space in a house puts pressure on both staff and young people. Having an open access workspace or study elicited mixed reactions from staff. Some considered it to be a good idea and appropriate not to restrict access for young people as the house is their home. Others thought that the freedom to come and go resulted in too many distractions for staff and could compromise privacy. Managing the relocation is an important consideration for staff and young people settling in, and taking ownership of a new house.

Smaller homes were considered more friendly and homely and were considered to have a positive impact on relationships between young people and young people and staff; and among staff themselves.

4.4 We outline a draft framework for a design tool that can be used by commissioning organisations to devise a design brief and as a reference guide for design consultants. The items noted relate specifically to information gathered during this exploratory pilot study of four homes. The list is, therefore, not exhaustive and further points of reference will be relevant for different types of care units outside the four referred to in this exploratory pilot study. A comprehensive design tool will contain a broader framework highlighting issues and opportunities related to specific types of environment: for example, refurbishment of an existing property, or new buildings intended for long-term or short-term stay. The framework covers: site selection; architectural; exterior; layout; space - size, proportions and types of space; structural elements; interior lighting; interior spaces; interior features; and consultation. Each section begins with a contextual quotation from staff interviews.

5 Key Findings and Recommendations

5.1 It is apparent from this exploratory study of four residential care homes for children that, generally, what staff feel is appropriate to create a homely environment may not be what young people would choose. Young people tend to comment upon aesthetic qualities whereas staff tend to focus on functional aspects of space or features. Style and function are both important although prioritised differently by the two groups. It is concerning that this research found staff reflecting very low aspirations for the children and young people in their care. Research has shown how such low aspirations are related to poor outcomes of looked after children and young people. In the three houses where the interior design consultants had input, there was more comment on particular features in the house than the one interior that was selected by social work professionals. On the whole, the spaces designed by the professional interior designers were liked by young people, although in some cases they suggested changes to colour and pattern, or replacing particular items in the house.

Comments on interior design centred around the personalising of space, aesthetic considerations and functionality of features. Colour provoked most response from both young people and staff. Young people indicated a desire to be involved in consultation, particularly regarding the design of their bedrooms. Consultation with young people and staff allows key design requirements to be articulated and considered during the design process, and can inform the personalisation of space. However, the consultation process must be carefully managed to avoid raising expectations. Some young people are in care for a short period of time therefore a flexible approach to personalising space is necessary to easily accommodate new residents.

Both the architecture and interior design of a space can have an impact on relationships and can help or hinder social interaction. Some staff considered that quality furniture and fittings were aspirational and positively impacted on young people's self-esteem. Others perceived the expenditure to be excessive and suggested that the furnishings chosen were beyond what young people could achieve on leaving care and so could have a negative effect. Such a lack of aspiration could further disadvantage children and young people. Staff perceptions and reactions to the initiative highlight a need to more fully engage staff in the design process. In fact, the professional design approach was shown, at times, to be less expensive than traditional interior furnishings.

The success of the design approach is dependent on other factors including whether the house is over occupied. This has an effect on access to shared space and interferes with the functioning of the house. Other issues that impact on the effectiveness of design involve the type of workspace available to staff and accessibility to young people; and the attitudes of staff. How a space is designed can challenge core working practices.

No comprehensive design guidance or best practice information exists for the design of residential care homes for children, although this is regarded as desirable and beneficial. At present there is a reliance on the commissioning client to guide the design process and to identify key design issues. The result is a constant pioneering approach to design, which obstructs the creation of a body of knowledge that can be shared and therefore reduce the learning in each project. Design guidance should be comprehensive and include information on interiors, exteriors, site selection and costs.

5.2 The recommendations from this exploratory study are listed below.

There is a need to challenge accepted norms and to be more creative in dealing with regulatory and utilitarian requirements when designing a children's home.

Professional interior design input seems to stimulate more response from young people and staff, whether positive or negative.

Professional interior design expertise is not necessarily more expensive than traditional in-house approaches, but can lead to additional benefits relating to quality and appropriateness.

Design expertise should challenge embedded working practices and the institutional aspects of child care.

Consultation with the children and young people as well as staff is necessary. Consultation must have input from design professionals to ensure design requirements are properly captured and addressed. It is important that consultation with children and young people becomes central to the different stages of the design process.

Consultation must be appropriately managed to ensure that expectations are clearly defined and can be met while catering for a regularly changing population.

The difference in opinion between young people and staff can be captured through consultation.

The relatively low aspirations of some staff for young people in care should be challenged. One option would be the more effective engagement of staff in the design process, with particular emphasis on how a professional design approach can provide tools to enhance their role and the experience of young people in care.

Effective management of the relocation to a new house could benefit from an assigned project manager who would be responsible for managing the move, involving young people and staff in planning, timetabling and purchasing of necessary goods to establish good culture and practice, and to ensure that snagging issues were addressed and finishing was to the quality expected before occupancy.

Post-occupancy evaluation is necessary to determine whether the objectives for the house are met. This will tend to be longer-term and will involve tracking young people after they have left care.

Design guidance for children's homes is desirable and perceived to be beneficial by design professionals and social work professionals.

Examples of best practice in the design of children's homes are required.

More detailed research is required to develop a framework for design guidance that can be used by social work professionals and designers.

More detailed research needs to be done on what makes an educationally stimulating environment.

This small-scale study of the interior design of residential care homes for children provides a starting point for the development of a more systematic evidence-based approach to the improvement of the quality of residential accommodation for children and young people. Hopefully, this will mean that more and more often children and young people will have positive experiences of residential care.