



Key practices for social workers

Welfare in education

Lesley Ann Cull

You are now going to hear from a practitioner who supports children and young people in education through her role as an Education Welfare Officer

Fiona Wraith

My name is Fiona Wraith. I'm an education welfare officer for Southampton City Council. My remit is for young people aged between 5 and 16, so that's young people of legal school age. Those are the young people that are referred to me. The referrals can come from the young people themselves; primarily they come from schools, because I go into schools at least once a week. So primarily they come from teachers or heads of years, or the head teachers themselves. And another way is through parents who can actually phone into the office. As an education welfare officer our remit is attendance and that isn't related to the old truancy officers. As a team in Southampton we are all qualified social workers. With attendance there are whole reasons why a young person will not be in school. Truancy, bullying, a lot of family problems, problems in school with peers, and so with the issue of attendance that encompasses a whole range of problems.

Lesley Ann Cull

What happens at the first meeting she has with a pupil who has been referred to her?

Fiona Wraith

The first meeting with the pupil will often be after I have actually met their parents, and I also actually have to ask permission from the parent to see their child. The first meeting might take place in school, or it might take place at home, depending on what the issue is and where that person feels most comfortable. My preparation for myself is obviously finding out as much background as I possibly can about the pupil from parents and also from the school themselves, depending on where the referral has come from. Generally I like to meet a pupil on their own, so I don't have a teacher present. The first meeting will be a general chit-chat about their interests, if they feel they have any issues that need to be talked about, progressing onto why I am there. I always explain who I am, what my role is, and that very often I am in school once a week and that they can actually come and see me. So the first meeting tends to be fairly open.

Lesley Ann Cull

What about the pupil's parents or guardian - how are they involved?

Fiona Wraith

They can be very involved, especially when I am working with infant and junior young people, children. At the end of the day a parent has parental responsibility for that young person until they are 16. The difference is that at infant junior level it is a lot easier to get to the parent and work with the parent, because their role is far greater. When you hit secondary level, you are really thinking that young person has to take responsibility for their actions, so you try to work more with the young person involved at secondary level. So I would say actually with parents in infant and junior, they are actually very, very much involved, and of course if you have got parents that are the ones who made the first referral, then they want to work with you all the way. There are a lot of parents who don't want to get involved and the ways they will not get involved is they won't return phone calls; I do a lot of cold visits where nobody answers the door. Sometimes there may be a case where a letter or the mere presence of you constantly going round improves the young person's attendance. If that does happen then I often write to a parent and say, 'I have been unable to contact you, but your child's attendance has improved so this is the end of the matter'. Where a parent is very difficult to get hold of, the

young person's attendance is not improving, then our powers of threatening court action come into play.

Lesley Ann Cull

Fiona talked about some of the other professionals who work with EWO's.

Fiona Wraith

We work with social services, child and family guidance, in the education department we work with educational psychologists, and the special needs team, obviously any other voluntary agencies that we have access to. We have quite a good relationship with the youth service; we are developing that, especially on my side of the City where I work at the moment. The relationship very much depends on the individual working on that case and how persistent they are.

Lesley Ann Cull

What are the main responsibilities of the EWO?

Fiona Wraith

As an education welfare officer my role can vary from actually taking a young person into school daily, there are cases where a young person needs that encouragement, just somebody to take them into school. I also take young people to groups if transport is a problem, or if they need somebody and they don't want somebody that is part of their family. For example I've taken quite a few people to a youth agency, a voluntary service where there is individual counselling there and also there is access to a wealth of information. I do see young people on a regular basis in school or at home, possibly for a couple of weeks, or a bit longer. Depending on the seriousness of the issue, especially if there are family problems, then the range of contact that I can have with that young person may sometimes be daily to weekly, to fortnightly. We also run activities in the summer and I get involved in those.

Lesley Ann Cull

Fiona gave an example of one particular issue for children and young people and how she tackled this in her role.

Fiona Wraith

Bullying is an issue in every school, and we often get parents say 'I am moving my child from this school because there is bullying going on', and primarily the first thing you say is 'Well, that might happen in the next school that your child moves to'. And unfortunately it does happen. As an agency we actually get many referrals to do with bullying and some schools are receptive to that and want to work with it, obviously some schools find it difficult. As far as the education welfare role in bullying goes we are there to advise parents and teachers, and primarily we are there to work with the young person and try and get them back into education, because they are the victim and they are the young people that are being excluded from their education. Education welfare officers are actually dealing with a lot of bullying cases.

Lesley Ann Cull

What general advice would Fiona give to professionals working with young people?

Fiona Wraith

The advice that I would give to anyone working with young people is if you don't have the time, don't make promises, don't make any commitments you can't keep, because primarily the young people that you are working with are coming from backgrounds where they don't have the stability, so primarily it would be 'don't say to a young person that you are going to do something that you can't do, and no surprises'. Don't shock them, don't surprise them, they don't need it.