

3.3 Good practice Case Study

Background

Helen is a 14 year old girl living with her mum in local authority accommodation in a densely populated inner-city area of the Leeds. Her dad moved out of the family home when she was two and has not maintained any contact with her. Her paternal grandparents live at the other side of Leeds and do keep in contact with her and see her regularly. She and her mom are both registered with local GP and dentist, but neither of them have attended appointments over the past year. Her mom has had a number of short-term low paid jobs over the years but always felt it was hardly worth all the effort for the tiny difference it made in terms of money. Her mom has very few social contacts that she is a very friendly outgoing person and strikes of conversations easily. Helen is much more quiet but is well liked by adults and peers.

Current service delivery within universal provision and presenting issues

Helen's attendance at a local high school has always been poor and the Attendance Service have worked with her and her mum for the past couple of years. The usual pattern is the attendance will improve for a couple of months but then gradually drop off again. School staff who come into contact with Helen and her mom always feel they can develop positive relationships with them both but can't really bring about change. Staff have never really got to the bottom of the fact that Helen's mum has been struggling with a drink problem for years which sometimes means she can be emotionally and even physically absent. Helen has got used to dealing with this and has become very good at hiding it from everyone around her. She sometimes stays with her grandparents who live at the other side of Leeds. She knows that her mum cares about her and when she is not drinking tries hard to "make it up to her". Helen recently came home from school and found her mum passed out on the floor and the house in a very poor state with broken windows, doors and other fixtures and stains on the walls carpets and furniture. Her mom could not tell her what had happened and they were both shocked by the incident. Helen was persuaded that they could move in temporarily with her mum's new partner even though Helen didn't like him much, as he she felt he was more a drinking partner than anything else.

Initial targeted response

The high school tried to contact Helen and her mum as part of their routine for dealing with first-day absence. There was no response from the mobile which had been disconnected and following a second day absence letter. The next day mum did ring school to say that Helen had been poorly but would come in the next week. Helen's mom did not tell them about the house move because she thought they might return to their own home at any point. When Helen did not return to school the next week the school contacted the attendance service and an officer sent a standard letter to arrange a visit and offer support to try to improve attendance. The officer checked the previous case notes and contact point to see who else had been involved with Helen and her mom. She visited the house four days later but there was no one there. The attendance officer picked up contact details from the previous case notes and rang the grandparents that they were unable to add any information. After four weeks there was still no sign of Helen in school. At this point the school could have taken Helen off role and completed a "Child Missing Education" form but because staff knew the family history and felt Helen was vulnerable they decided to keep her on role and continue to try to find her. Her friends in school were asked if they knew where she was or had seen her recently but no one had. Contact was made with the local community centre where the community warden was known to have visited the house on several occasions. They spoke to local residents who agreed they had not seen Helen and her mum for some time.

Outcome of initial targeted response

Helen and her mom were unaware of the effort being made to locate them. However Helen left her mum and her mum's boyfriend after an incident of domestic violence. During the incident Helen's mum was drunk and didn't realise exactly what was happening. Her boyfriend was initially verbally aggressive pushing Helen, the police were called but her mum said that there was no problem and the police left without taking the matter further. Helen decided that she could not live in the house with her mum's boyfriend and went to stay with her grandparents. The grandparents did not tell the school the whole story but did contact and the attendance officer visited Helen with her grandparents. The officer offered to complete a Common Assessment with Helen. She was given the young person's leaflet and her grandmother was given the parent/carer leaflet for information on the process of the Common Assessment. The officer also explained the process and it was agreed that the CAF would be completed the next day in the school. Helen was very happy to complete the assessment although she was still not telling the full truth.

Further actions leading to coordinated targeted response

The Common assessment identified various outstanding needs to be met as a matter of urgency. A multi-agency meeting was arranged by the attendance officer for 6 days later. Helen, Helen's grandma, the attendance officer a parenting support advisor and a member of the inclusion staff from school attended.

- An appointment to be made at the opticians, Helen wore glasses but they had been lost during the moves.
- Helen needed to be registered with another doctor as she also used an inhaler which had again been lost during the moves.
- It was agreed that the Parenting Support Advisor would support grandma to fill in the relevant benefit claim forms.
- School staff agreed to Helen returning to school via the Inclusion support area, where Helen would receive a high level of support after her absence from school.
- It was agreed that the attendance officer would be the lead professional and apply for funds to buy school uniform, shoes, casual clothes and outdoor shoes.

Outcomes of coordinated targeted response

Helen stayed for a few weeks with her grandma and grandpa and attended school although still somewhat sporadically. She spoke to her mum regularly on the phone but was adamant that she would not move in with the boyfriend. Helen wanted her mum to move back to their own home and so she herself continued to go back to the home and get her mum to meet her there which her mum did, often taking her money and food. Although on the surface things looked better now, including school staff, Helen's grandparents, her mum and even her friends knew what Helen was doing. Everyone believed that Helen was being supported that no one was properly supporting her. The attendance officer however, remained concerned and felt that even though Helen was attending things weren't really right.

Further actions leading to specialist response

The attendance officer was continuing to talk to the local community warden and suggesting that they keep an eye open because she was still worried about Helen. Neighbours believed Helen and her mum's house to be empty but did say to the warden that they sometimes heard noises. The warden passed this information on to the attendance officer who decided to make an evening visit. The officer found Helen alone in the house in the dark, with no electricity, living in one room. It was unclear how long Helen had been living there, and when she was found like that by the attendance officer she broke down saying she couldn't live like this any more. The attendance officer rang social care who got an emergency protection order and a woman police officer came round to take Helen into emergency foster care.

Outcome of specialist response

Helen remained in foster care for a week while social care mediated with Helen her mum and her grandma to plan a longer term solution. It was the first time that everyone had realised what Helen was doing and knew things could not remain the same.