



Evaluating the contribution of Residential Services

Alan Geraghty, Tricia Laing and Julie Warren report on the contribution of Residential Services to reducing youth offending

This paper reports on the first stage in the ongoing development of an evaluation framework which will provide a basis for Child, Youth and Family to evaluate residential services in an integrated way. It also discusses feedback from residential practitioners about the efficacy and feasibility of components of this framework, a work in progress that will be refined and improved over time. The first stage in its development has involved Child, Youth and Family and the Evaluation Unit of the Ministry of Social Development working together, with the assistance of the Centre for Research, Evaluation and Social Assessment (CRESA).¹

The process used in developing the framework involved documentary review, interviews with Child, Youth and Family residential staff, and workshops to develop and test the framework involving Child, Youth and Family and Ministry of Social Development staff. Participants in workshops and interviews included Residential Services managers, supervisors, key National Office policy and operational managers and other staff. Staff views were sought about specific outcomes associated with residential services, how residential services are or should be operated to achieve these outcomes, and evaluation needs and expectations. In addition, staff views were

sought to test the feasibility and appropriateness of the key components of the framework, given current service delivery practice and existing data collection and management.

The framework comprises:

- : a description of current and proposed residential services
- : their intended outcomes, the principles underpinning service provision and the standards of service required to achieve intended outcomes
- : potential evaluation objectives
- : issues to take into account in the design and implementation of evaluations
- : the next steps in the process.

Child, Youth and Family Residential Services

Child, Youth and Family provides 24-hour supervised residential placements for vulnerable children and young people, as a statutory requirement under the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989, when there are care and protection or youth justice concerns. Children and young people present with a range of behavioural problems and needs relating to offending and care and protection issues.

¹ The report on which this article is based was produced jointly by Child, Youth and Family and the Ministry of Social Development, under the auspices of the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act Research and Evaluation Fund Management Committee.

Residential placements are high-level interventions in the lives of children and young people who require specialised care. The tension between the rights of the children and young persons and their families and the need for containment, security and rehabilitative work in the interests of the children and young persons and the wider community is at its sharpest in these services. Accordingly, admission to and management of residential services are very closely regulated.

Residential Services provides 24-hour supervised care within a secure environment and is part of a Continuum of Care, a concept which includes a range of services, currently provided by Child, Youth and Family, Iwi Social Services, Cultural Services and Child and Family Support Services. They range from relatively low level intervention in Pre-care to higher levels of intervention in Residential Care and Specialist Residential Care. The types of interventions or programmes that match with these different levels of intervention on the continuum include:

- ∴ **Pre-care**, which includes assessment of risk, needs and service requirement, and wraparound support services – without care services
- ∴ **Care Services**, which include placement with family/whānau or Child, Youth and Family or someone who provides foster care or Child, Youth and Family Family Home
- ∴ **Specialist Care Services**, which include placement in Specialist Youth Services Strategy Family Home
- ∴ **Residential Care**, which includes placement in Care and Protection or Youth Justice facilities
- ∴ **Specialist Residential Care**, which includes placement in a Conduct Disorder Programme (Youth Horizons Trust) or Adolescent Sexual Abuser Programme (Te Poutama Arahi Rangatahi).

Residential Services operates within the context of the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989, which has a number of principles that are applied in all areas of work with children and young people. The principles require:

- ∴ the involvement of family, hapū, iwi and family groups in decision-making
- ∴ the strengthening of relationships within family, hapū, iwi and family groups
- ∴ consideration of the impact of decisions on the child, young person and their family, hapū, iwi and family group
- ∴ consideration of the wishes of the child or young person and the principle that decisions should be made and implemented within a time-frame appropriate to the child or young person.

Youth Justice residences in New Zealand offer shorter placements than many overseas programmes. The maximum length of time that a young person can be sentenced to spend in a Youth Justice residence is three months. Internationally it is common for young people to be sentenced for periods of residential containment in excess of a year.

The Youth Justice residences provide a secure environment for young people and a range of programmes to direct offenders away from crime, develop social skills, identify and meet cultural needs, meet educational needs and maintain family contact. The plans and objectives for a young person's stay in a Youth Justice residence are developed through the Family Group Conference and court process. With the short duration of placement in a Youth Justice residence, it is important to be able to evaluate and measure progress in meeting the goals and objectives for the young person.

Care and Protection services provide a safe environment in which the issues affecting a child

or young person can be assessed, with programmes and interventions identified “to turn the young people’s lives around” and return them to family/whānau and/or the community. Rehabilitation programmes focus on culturally appropriate education, specialist programmes, specialist clinical services and physical activities to meet the individual needs of children and young people. The mix of these required for each individual is described in individual care plans. The issues facing children and young people placed in Care and Protection residences are often complex. Placements are often made for periods of three to six months with careful discharge planning undertaken.

The provision of Residential Services requires work with a range of Child, Youth and Family and other services. Others may be involved in all the processes, from referral, needs assessment and placement, through to the provision of therapeutic programmes to discharge and follow-up.

As part of a broad Residential Service Strategy, the provision of residential services by Child, Youth and Family is currently undergoing significant change, with new and expanded facilities being developed across the country. In addition to the redevelopment of facilities, the strategy also focuses on improving the range and quality of specialist services and therapeutic and rehabilitation programmes which enable children and young people to re-enter their families and communities.

Why develop an evaluation framework?

A framework for the evaluation of Child, Youth and Family’s Residential Services was considered necessary to address a series of initiatives. A Residential Services Strategy was in the process of being implemented. Some residences were already operating and new ones were being

established. Others were still in the planning stages. Some, but not all, of the new residences had funding identified for their evaluation. This reflected variations in how managers and practitioners thought they could use evaluation results to improve the service.

The evaluations that were planned or being undertaken were set up with the expectation that they would allow for reflection on, and the monitoring of, specific residences. A common framework was needed to guide the design of the different evaluations so the results could be compared to one another and to international standards of best practice. It was necessary to bring together the knowledge of the Residential Services in a systematic way so that the service as a whole could be understood better. With an understanding of the service as a whole the Department will be in a better position to understand the contribution that Residential Services makes to the Continuum of Care, and to the intended outcomes for children and young people who use the service.

While the evaluation framework will evolve in response to what is learnt from evaluation reports, it will ensure that all evaluations will be designed using the best evaluation practice relating to Residential Services at the time. Practitioners, managers and evaluators participated in the process used to develop the first stage of the framework. These relationships can be built on to ensure that the approaches chosen for future evaluations fit with social work practice. Each new evaluation will not have to start from scratch but rather from a base of accumulated knowledge about Residential Services in Child, Youth and Family.

Issues in evaluating Residential Services

The process of developing an evaluation framework has identified the need to develop an

integrated policy and regulatory framework to underpin the provision and delivery of Residential Services. This framework is necessary both for the development of more feasible service outcomes and for the development of evaluation objectives for specific evaluations. The expansion or refining of current monitoring systems also needs to be informed by a more coherent policy framework.

As well as the need to be informed by a coherent policy and regulatory framework, evaluations of Residential Services need to be informed by the needs and experiences of Residential Services social work practitioners and other professionals and the experiences of New Zealand and international evaluators. Some broad messages for carrying out evaluations of Residential Services have been identified from these sources. These signal the need for participatory approaches to evaluation that reflect the reality of residential life and flexible evaluation designs based on the collection of qualitative and quantitative data.

The evaluation questions identified by Child, Youth and Family staff require both process and outcome components to evaluations of Residential Services. This focus is consistent with overseas experience showing that outcome evaluations alone provide insufficient information to make informed judgements.

Evaluators' experience with social workers and adolescent residents points to the importance of forming collaborative working relationships with residential staff and residents throughout all stages of the evaluation. These relationships are necessary for residential staff to have confidence in the evaluation approach, process and findings

and for evaluators to have appropriate access to people and resources. It is also necessary to ensure that evaluation approaches are consistent with social work practice and reflect the real world of residences. This may mean the use of more innovative, action-oriented and participatory approaches to evaluation.

Evaluations of Residential Services need to take mixed method approaches that generate both qualitative and quantitative data. Evaluations (especially process evaluations) require qualitative data that is rich enough to capture the complexity of relationships and other factors that contribute to the way services work and

the way young people respond to them (and the way they have responded to past interventions). This means that case studies may be more appropriate for identifying and

understanding the multitude of variables that have contributed to the individual circumstances of young people in residences.

At the same time, there is a continuing expectation from some stakeholders, including the Treasury, that outcome evaluations provide evidence based on measurable, quantifiable data of positive achievements. Further, there is also some expectation that the data used will demonstrate the extent to which the achievements can be specifically attributed to the services being evaluated. For evaluations of Residential Services, this may mean seeking to incorporate some comparative analysis based on the outcomes of young people with similar attributes and experiences receiving different interventions (by Child, Youth and Family and/or others) or no interventions.

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In commissioning evaluation, it is necessary to consider the difficulties evaluators may face in accessing useful and appropriate comparative data about young people in other programmes. Experience here and overseas shows that comparative analysis is difficult to carry out in evaluations of youth services given a mix of ethical and practical limitations.

International best practice that informs Child, Youth and Family Residential Services includes the involvement of family/whānau, processes to ensure quality service delivery, effective needs assessment and placement, wraparound service delivery and the provision of culturally appropriate services. Research and evaluation of adolescent Residential Services carried out overseas provide evidence of the value of these components of best practice. Child, Youth and Family staff expressed enthusiasm for New Zealand based research and evaluation that can show the extent of any links between particular components of Residential Services best practice and achievement of outcomes.

The separation of Care and Protection and Youth Justice is a main element of the Youth Services Strategy, the Residential Services Strategy and various operational documents. This separation is coupled with the development of larger residential institutions. Evaluations need to consider the impacts of these changes on the way that services are delivered and the achievement of positive outcomes (for example, whether residential size matters and, if so, how). These evaluation findings need to be analysed in the context of the research and or/policy documents that underpinned these changes.

Conclusions

The next steps in the development of the framework require it to be:

- ∴ further elaborated and refined as the delivery of Residential Services proceeds in line with changes outlined in the Residential Services Strategy
- ∴ informed by the ongoing experiences and findings of current Specialist Residential Services and future Residential Services Strategy evaluations
- ∴ informed, as now, by the views of Child, Youth and Family staff as they become more familiar with and interested in evaluation and its potential to contribute to improvements in service delivery.

The framework should:

- ∴ reflect the needs and expectation of stakeholders outside of Residential Services, including the Minister, the Ministry of Social Development, Treasury, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Justice, communities and family/whānau interests
- ∴ contribute to providing the best services for young people.

The next steps for Child, Youth and Family involve the application of the framework in the design of evaluations of Residential Services. Comments on this work in progress are welcome and can be sent to Alan Geraghty, Operations Manager, Residential Services at Child, Youth and Family, PO Box 2160, Wellington. 