

Key working to support schools and families

Gareth D Morewood, Cath O'Neill and Dianne Hand offer different perspectives on providing key worker support for a student at Priestnall School, Stockport

AT A GLANCE

Key workers are identified as having an important role to play in the green paper.

- This article looks at how such a role may benefit young people with complex needs who attend mainstream schools.
- It explores unique perspectives from school, key worker and parent, showcasing how a key worker can make a significant difference to the lives of vulnerable young people.

About the school

Priestnall School is a large 11-16 Secondary School in Stockport, which recently became the first secondary school in Stockport to be judged as 'outstanding' by Ofsted (June 2011). The report said:

'Outstanding support is provided for those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, as well as for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school's inclusive ethos is reflected in the outstanding promotion of equality of opportunity'.

The recent SEN green paper, *Support and Aspiration: a New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability*, considers the most wide-ranging shake-up of provision in 30 years. Throughout there is a theme of independently commissioned key workers supporting parents and carers as they negotiate and support provision. MA Social Care students undertake 100 day placements at Priestnall School each year in developing advocacy skills and supporting a wider remit than just 'in-school' issues. They provide an invaluable bridge between school and home, and further enhance the personalised nature of provision: a key worker in every sense.

This article details a case study where a key worker supported the mother of a student with autism at Priestnall School, also recently diagnosed with a degenerative genetic condition.

'The staff at Priestnall are used to seeing me in tears! I've been that way pretty much since George arrived at Priestnall! (Home circumstances... nothing to do with school!)

But in December 2010 I hit an all-time low. When I was told that George had retinitis pigmentosa and Bardet Biedl syndrome [see box, below] my world was devastated beyond belief. I was so lost and afraid and I definitely needed help to find the strength I was going to need to support George through this.'

Dianne Hand is mother to George. Her feelings are likely to be replicated across schools across the UK and beyond; supporting parents and carers and helping them know they are not alone can be vital at times like this; for us it was essential to provide both outstanding direct support in school but also outstanding support in the home. Whilst specialist services delivered differing levels of medical and emotional support, it was important that we supported both George and his mother at this crucial time.

An important part of developing confidence in provision at Priestnall has been the open and transparent nature of communication with parents and carers. Early face-to-face dialogue is essential, in addition to being able to move swiftly with regard to provision (Morewood, 2009, 2011); parents and carers want to feel listened to and be given time to explain their feelings (Lamb, 2009). As Mrs Hand puts it:

'Mr Morewood was very quick to organise a meeting with me and had, impressively, already been reading up on the condition. This meant he was aware of what BBS entailed. He was going to keep what he had found out in mind, but his priority was treating George as an individual and not as a 'BBS child', and the approach was going to be to make sure that George's new needs would be met through informed preparation

and careful monitoring and then addressing things as they arose.'

To help all this run smoothly, I was introduced to Miss O'Neill whose role was going to be to support George in school, and at home if necessary. She was also going to liaise between school, home and the excellent Sensory Support Service.

Cath O'Neill made sure that Mrs Hand was able to make contact with ease. As a key worker with a case load of about five young people, the strength of this position was that she had more time to dedicate to the people with whom she worked. In George and Dianne's case this was important. Ensuring Cath had the time to meet with Mrs Hand to listen to her helped to inspire her confidence in provision. In ensuring that all of Mrs Hand's queries and concerns were dealt with promptly, Cath began to understand that the smallest issue left unresolved could cause unnecessary worry for the parent/carer further down the line.

As the year progressed, it was clear that George's support at school was working well; however, support at home was needed, especially in light of constantly changing information and understanding.

Cath summarised: *'Providing information to Mrs Hand about school processes and procedures was another vital element of my role. For example, I attended the school's options evening with Mrs Hand. This was with the aim of supporting her to navigate the often complicated information gathering and decision-making process that*

Bardet Biedl syndrome

The syndrome is a rare inherited condition which is variable in the way it presents. Characteristics may include: rod/cone dystrophy, polydactyly (extra fingers and/or toes); mild to severe learning difficulties; and kidney malformations and renal dysfunction.

More information can be found at www.imbbs.org.uk

surrounds choosing GCSE options, a process that could be added pressure in light of George's recent diagnosis. I was able to ensure Mrs Hand understood all the information provided so that she was empowered to make decisions with George.

'My role also involved liaison with external services. Because of the nature of George's visual impairment I was involved in working with the Stockport Sensory Support Service to ensure that the school had the necessary resources to allow George to succeed in the classroom and at home. I was responsible for distributing guidelines to support staff working with George to ensure all staff were aware of George's needs. I aimed at all times to keep Mrs Hand up-to-date with progress at school and informed of all issues regarding her son, in addition to supporting her in the home. This served to again inspire parental confidence in herself, myself and the school.'

Reflecting further on the value of having a key worker like Miss O'Neill to work with her and George, Mrs Hand identified a number of benefits:

- I felt there was someone I could contact without feeling guilty that I was taking up too much of a teacher's time (not that anyone else ever complained, it was just how I felt).
- As always, I received very prompt responses to any queries. This was so important to me. With my concerns being addressed straight away, it stopped me getting over-anxious and gave me confidence that school had everything in hand.
- It was reassuring to know there was someone in school who was keeping a special eye on George. By monitoring him more closely, the key worker would be more likely to be in a good position to make observations which might have otherwise been missed. These observations would lead to recommendations and strategies being put in place.
- I was kept informed about how George was doing generally, or if someone had been in to see/assess him.
- Cath researched the right classes for George to join, to ensure that his transition into mainstream classes (from the Nurture Group) went smoothly for him.
- Cath helped to settle him in to the new classes and routines and helped me understand too.
- Cath ensured the class teacher was aware of his specific needs.

- She regularly sent emails checking George was OK and asking if I had any concerns from home – simple, regular communication was really important to me.

- Commendably, Cath always did what she said she was going to do.
- The key worker had excellent communication with Mr Morewood and the Sensory Support Service so whenever I went to any meetings I knew that everyone was up to date and well informed.

Mrs Hand summarised the help provided by the key worker as follows:

'Cath O'Neill came over as having a lot of empathy and gave the impression that she genuinely cared. Her role gave her the time to make a difference... and she did. I know that George and I are so fortunate to have had the opportunity to have the support of such an effective key worker.'

Often schools struggle in giving time to parents and carers, despite best intentions. They are now more accountable than ever with regard to being cost-effective (Morewood, 2011) and maintaining high quality personal support and care to families is going to be an increasing challenge. This is something that the school has worked hard to develop and sustain and it was pleasing Ofsted recognised this in a recent inspection.

To conclude, the role of the key worker, however it is envisaged in the future, will become increasingly important – and probably essential – as systems and processes change; George's mum puts this into words better than any of us could:

'George's future is uncertain but I trust Priestnall will continue to nurture and prepare him as best they can to equip him with life skills, social skills and a good education so that he can cope with what lies ahead. The progress that has been made this year, with us all working together, gives me confidence that George and me are being very well looked after at Priestnall. Mr Morewood is calmly reassuring and no doubt he will continue to make sure that George has the support he needs. I can tell how passionate Mr Morewood is about what he does. You can see the enthusiasm with which he leads his department and you can see how much his colleagues care about what they do. They want to make a difference to children with special needs and as a parent I can't ask for more.'

Enhanced role for key workers

Having identified through previous research that families value the practical and emotional support that they can provide, the DfE intends to expand the role of key workers. This will involve 'testing', as part of the pathfinder projects that are now underway, how they can support families in the single assessment process and 'Education and Health Care Plan'. The DfE is also planning to fund the training of key workers from a range of backgrounds in collaboration with the voluntary and community sector.

'I'm still doing the crying... but nowadays, it's more to do with gratitude than despair. I am so grateful for all the emotional and educational support that we have received from Mr Morewood, Miss O'Neill and the staff during this difficult and challenging year. I honestly couldn't have coped without you. Thank you.'

About the authors

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