

# "I know we have opened doors"



LISA D'ONOFRIO outlines a project that has made a huge difference to looked after children in Norfolk.

*"Thank you for sending me a book – it's my first book"*

*"Introducing a child to just one good book, sharing one great book with that child, could change their whole perception of reading." Jacqueline Wilson*

According to past statistics, the future didn't look too bright for looked after children. There are many reasons for this, both obvious and hidden, which are important to understand before trying to address needs (see box below).

Reports have shown that looked after children (LAC) in Norfolk were reaching lower attainment levels in reading and writing than their peer group. Norfolk County Council places great emphasis on developing children's educational attainment but equally recognises that academic attainment is only one aspect of development that needs to be extended.

The one-year Opening Doors project, jointly managed by Norfolk County Council's Library and Information Service and Children's Services and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, was developed to address both these needs.

It started in January 2006 with the aims of encouraging library membership; wider reading and enhancing shared reading opportunities for looked after children and their carers. It sought to offer children opportunities for personal development and to extend their achievements. It did this by consulting with the children, workers and foster carers, organising events and activities and sending out book packs (containing a book, stationary, library card, reward card and Library leaflet) to newly accommodated children and those in years 6 and 9 in the OC2 cohort.

Feedback from the first stage of the project was positive,

and in 2007 funding for a two-year project was received from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and a new part-time co-ordinator was employed.

### Activities

The co-ordinators role, according to the work plan submitted to the funders, was to continue to issue book packs designed to encourage and inspire LAC between the ages of 3-17 to read and use their local library and to initiate and deliver a pilot programme of literacy development work with LAC within six residential homes in Norfolk. As well as write and send out six issues of a newsletter aimed at foster carers, write and deliver a Literacy Toolkit and Mini Toolkit for foster carers. We also added extensively to our Carers Collections (collections of books and resource materials that are targeted to support Foster Carer's needs) and embedded the project into the library service.

In addition the co-ordinator acted as Reading Champion for LAC, offering support, responding to individual requests and facilitating visits to libraries, as well as organising events such as a Story Sack making session, a book selection outing and various Fun Days in conjunction with our local BBC and museum services. The co-ordinator provided support to Library and Children's Services staff around children's reading and literacy issues and involved more LAC in our usual calendar of events and promotions like the Summer Reading Challenge and Norfolk Book Awards.

After doing the project for a while, we realised that our usual services needed tweaking to really embrace foster carers, so the co-ordinator developed a *What the Library Offers Foster Carers* flier which was sent out to existing foster carers and included in the induction packs for new foster carers. This became a handy resource for library staff. We added a web page aimed at foster carers to our site which contains information relevant to foster carers as well as book reviews written by foster carers [www.norfolk.gov.uk/libraryfostercarers](http://www.norfolk.gov.uk/libraryfostercarers) and finally, created a group card specifically for foster carers.

### Book pack for looked after children



### Further information

For an overview of the current landscape for Looked after Children:

- *Understanding Why*, National Children's Bureau, 2006
- *Couldn't Care Less: a policy report from the Children in Care Working Group*. The Centre for Social Justice, 2008 [www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/Couldn't%20Care%20Less%20Report%20WEB%20VERSION.PDF](http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/Couldn't%20Care%20Less%20Report%20WEB%20VERSION.PDF)
- *Who Are Looked-After Children? Some facts and figures* The Network, 2009 [www.seapn.org.uk/content\\_files/files/who\\_are\\_looked\\_after\\_children.doc](http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/who_are_looked_after_children.doc)
- *Georgie*. Malachy Doyle. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001.
- *The Looked After Kid: memoirs from a children's home* Paolo Hewitt. Mainstream, 2003.

## Joint Working

For this type of project to be workable, a strong and reliable partnership with Children's Services is essential. Children's Services were committed from the beginning, and provided an ongoing contribution towards the co-ordinators salary.

The steering group was small and informal, consisting of the Senior Specialist Lead Teacher for Looked After Children, an Advisory Learning Support Teacher (LAC) (who came on board during the Specialist's Teacher's leave of absence and stayed) the Co-ordinator and the Young People's Services Librarian. Our Children's Services contacts were our necessary guides to the inner workings of Children's Services, and helped facilitate the opening of doors both with the children and the department.

For this type of project to succeed, it needs to be delivered in various ways and through various people. We worked with, and through specialist support assistants, social workers, the Virtual School team, the Family Placement team and residential managers, and of course community librarians, and other cultural and educational services staff, to name but a few. Finding the correct (and able) person became important and sometimes took a bit of work, but always paid dividends.

## Meeting the needs of foster carers

In delivering the project it soon became apparent that in some cases foster carers weren't happy with being the library membership guarantor for the children in their care and this was hindering LAC from accessing our services.

After some research and brainstorming (I am not a trained librarian so systems and procedures were quite new to me) we came up with the Corporate Guarantor Scheme. The scheme, launched last July, gives foster carers and other appropriate workers, the choice of becoming the guarantor for the child(ren) in their care, or passing that over to the Norfolk County Council.

Once the looked after child is signed up to the scheme, all overdue notices are sent to the scheme's administrator, the admin assistant for the Virtual School for Children in Care, who next contacts the social worker of the individual concerned, who then tries to find out what has happened to the errant items. Any charges are subsequently paid by the Virtual School. So far the scheme is working, and foster carers have appreciated being given the choice. Residential homes too have welcomed the scheme, as it means workers no longer have to be personally responsible for charges.

## Some facts and figures

Out of 381 book packs sent, 70 LAC so far have registered

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**Author John Dougherty at an event for foster families** (Picture: NLIS)

and used the library card in their book pack (as of August 09). Taking into account that 60% had previously had a library card, this means that 46% who have not already been using a library card now do so.

Book packs had expected and unexpected benefits; comments below from the specialist support assistants:  
*“The book for Y was a real winner. He loved it and is well ‘chuffed’ with his own library card, because at the moment his brother uses his old one on the computers at the library.”*  
*“What a lovely book for X. He loved it and is going to go to the forum and borrow the DVD of the film during the half term. It evoked a lot of discussion about WWII, so his class teacher is going to talk to the History teacher about setting some work for him to do next half term, as my sessions have ended now. Great result. Thank you very much.”*

The five existing Carers Collection in Earham, King's Lynn, Yarmouth, Attleborough and Gorleston Libraries have been added to and promoted and a new collection in Long Stratton has been created. The collections now hold over 180 titles, and can be viewed online  
[http://norlink.norfolk.gov.uk/05\\_ReadingLists/05\\_001\\_BrowseReadingLists.aspx](http://norlink.norfolk.gov.uk/05_ReadingLists/05_001_BrowseReadingLists.aspx)

The project has established relationships with a total of eight residential homes and each home now has a good rapport with their local community librarian, who has taken over the contact role from the co-ordinator.

Taster collections which ideally are changed every term are placed in the homes, with residents choosing what goes in the collection:

*“He asks more questions about what we are reading and is now showing an interest in books.”* (quote from a social worker re one resident since Opening Doors involvement)

## Reaching the hard to reach

Working with foster carers rather than the children themselves (who are often 'hard to reach' and also very busy, in many ways) can have a major impact.

This group of professionals face increasing demands and we as a service can always find new ways of supporting them – for example making sure that the books they need for their training are available in libraries, inviting them personally to events, encouraging them to use the library as a venue for their meetings, and tailoring tasters and courses to their needs.

The co-ordinator has spoken at all the foster carer support groups in the county, and each group has been paired up

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with a community librarian who now sends them relevant information and ensure that they are invited to participate in library promotions. By listening to what foster carers and looked after children need and answering their requests promptly and efficiently, their trust in the service and desire to use the service grows and strengthens. This includes reiterating what the service offers, not just for younger children, but for teenagers, school leavers, and the whole family. It also means looking at our service and constantly striving to meet the (often changing) needs of these groups.

*"I didn't realise how much a library can do to help."*  
(comment from a foster carer)

### **Embedding the project into the library service**

Unfortunately in many cases the good work done by a project often slowly disappears once the funding runs out. By consciously looking at ways to embed the project from the very beginning, we hope to have sidestepped this problem.

The community librarians have as good as possible working relationships with their respective homes. This was one area where perseverance was very necessary! On top of this they have understanding, knowledge and experience of issues surrounding LAC which they share with colleagues. Standard guidelines for working with LAC aimed at library staff have been written, incorporating existing good practice and feedback from librarians. All library staff have been kept informed about aspects of the project with bulletins and newsletter articles crucial, I believe, to group ownership. Role descriptions have been written for those librarians who have Carers Collections in their libraries or work with the residential homes or the Foster Carer Support Networks and this will ensure that work with these groups will continue, and appear in the community librarians work plans' even if the appointed librarian leaves that job.

### **Lessons learned**

- When working cross departmentally things can take longer to happen!
- It is good to have many strands on the go, so if something happens that is beyond your control i.e. data stops coming in, you can get on with other things.
- It is the individual approach and personal touch that seems to reap the most benefits. Personality plays a part too – librarians need to have the necessary motivations and skill sets for working with this group.
- The best way to keep LAC on the internal agenda is to have someone in a champion role that advocates and promotes from within the service, using a variety of methods.

A note from a social worker, sent in January 08:

*"I think it has taken some time for us (the fostering community) to get to know what Opening Doors has to offer, and to really get behind the push to get our children enjoying books and all the libraries have to offer. I am just beginning to find foster carers talking about your newsletter, for example.*

*"Things like your book bags sent to newly fostered children, and the book packs for children in years 6 and 9 are excellent, and as time goes on this will be sending a clear message about reading etc to our children and their carers. I do hope that there is a commitment to keep this going into the future – it feels like the project is just getting bedded in and some momentum is building up."*

- Advocacy and consciousness raising plays a big role as foster carers, like some members of the general public, may

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be unaware of what the library offer, or have misguided preconceptions about libraries.

- The person in this role needs to be flexible, both in their approach and in their time management, and needs to think outside the box.
- It is difficult to find ready-made groups of LAC to work with, and usually Summer Schools afford the only opportunity to do so.
- Part of this work is really about building relationships with and working with individuals who are on the 'front line.'
- There is a high number of learning and physically disabled children being looked after, and the service needs to address this in future planning and stock selection.

### **Outcomes**

There have also been various positive 'spin offs' from this project – for example supporting those who have left care to use library services, much partnership working with Bookstart, young people writing reviews for our website, and setting up a very successful Giving Tree Christmas project with our local Waterstones.

The commitment of the library service to the project has led to a member of the Libraries' Management team being included in the Corporate Parenting Operational Group. Speaking up for the 'enjoy' aspect of Enjoy and Achieve in this forum has resulted in a general work strand to support looked after children in "enjoying life" being established and led by Cultural Services.

### **The future**

Now the funding has come to an end, it is heartening that Norfolk Library and Information Service are committed to carrying this work on. The co-ordinator role will continue to expand, develop and utilise core aspects of the project in work with this and other vulnerable groups. And everyday I see, stuck on my desk, one of the cards sent to me by a child which reads: "Thank you for sending me a book. It's my first book. I love the pictures they make me laugh" and know we have opened doors.

### **Acknowledgements**

The following deserve special mention, for services above and beyond: John Vincent – who had a helpful and caring answer for everything; Stephen Maunder, the co-ordinator for the initial project; Michaela Dungate for helping me feel I wasn't the only one doing this work; The SSAs for their inspirational work; Dorne Fraser and Lorna Payne (Norfolk Library and Information Service), Tricia Ciappara and Amanda Roper (Norfolk Children's Services) for encouragement, support and opening doors!

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