

Building support for children who feel vulnerable

By Katie Macleod

Located in Edinburgh, Harmeny Education Trust has operated as a grant-aided special school since it was first set up in 1958, providing “specialist services for children with complex social, emotional, and behavioural needs.”

Today, Harmeny offers both a residential and a day service. The residential school service provides an integrated care and education programme for the 24 children, aged between seven and 15, who call the school home, while the day service enables a current school roll of six children to attend the specialist school each day and benefit from its resources.

“Children come to stay at Harmeny for a variety of reasons but usually stemming from family disruption. Maybe there’s been a history of neglect, emotional or sometimes physical abuse, and they’ve all at some point needed to live away from home,” explains Lynsey Moncrieff, Service Manager at Harmeny. “Some children in the day service have a diagnosis of autism or ADHD, and some have been adopted or are in foster care placements.”

Harmeny caters for children from local authorities across Scotland, but their recent involvement in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar’s Children’s Services Partnership, which involves Children’s Services, Western Isles Foyer, and Action for Children, was a new initiative for them.

The Partnership has been running since the end of 2016, and has “been quite a big step away from what we traditionally do, which is residential care and education,” says Alys Dickens, Senior Practitioner. “What the Partnership were interested in was not only what we could offer as a resource for children if there was a potential need for a place, but also what we might be able to do on an outreach basis in partnership with staff on the islands.”

Part of that outreach work has involved bespoke training, such as Resilience and Solution Focused Communication for Children’s Services staff in the Western Isles. Lynsey has been delivering



Harmeny School

resilience training, both as a day course and with follow-up refresher courses. The workshops are often quite interactive, using case-by-case discussions to work out how to promote resilience in children, as well as in staff, who can face emotionally challenging work days.

Through the Partnership, staff at Harmeny have been sharing their own best practices and experiences with staff at Education and Children’s Services, in departments such as Extended Learning, Fostering and Adoption, and the social work practice teams.

“It’s about us learning from agencies in the Western Isles, learning about the specific needs of children living in rural locations, and transferring some of the skills we have developed here in terms of promoting resilience in children, and looking at solutions-focused communication,” Alys explains.

This has included sharing approaches for assessment and intervention, systemic family work, and life story work, as well as offering consultation. In terms of sharing best practice in assessments and intervention – where there is focus on a child’s health, care, and education – Alys explains that Harmeny “helps agencies

by contributing to assessments and offering consultation to explore what interventions may be helpful when plans have become ‘stuck’”.

“Harmeny has a lot of experience in working with children and families with a high level of trauma in their background, so the consultancy work we’ve offered has been about approaches to support those children in the most positive way,” Alys continues. “It’s about identifying the strengths within children, their families and the professional agencies that have really moved things forward, and working with these systems to build on that. This ties in with the training that managers from Harmeny have offered.”

Alys has also worked with individual children in the Western Isles on life story work, a therapeutic process that can help children who’ve been in multiple care and education placements, or who have lost contact with their birth family, reflect on their past.

“Life story work supports children in a positive way to think about their past. It’s about giving them a coherent story of their life, without attributing blame to one person or one event,” says Alys.

Often these children have never had the chance

to discuss traumatic past experiences, such as their parents’ substance misuse or offending, as people can worry it’s too sensitive an issue. But as Alys explains, if this hasn’t been addressed, a child will have a lot of unanswered questions that can impact their self-confidence. “Life story work allows you to put that into context, and think with the child about how it changed their life, and how they’ve moved on, without alienating individual people that are important to them.”

Tied into life story work is systemic family work, another practice that Harmeny have been sharing with the Western Isles. “This is about focusing on the many aspects that influence a child’s life, rather than considering the child in isolation,” says Alys, adding that it relates to the consultation work they’ve been offering, as well as the individual case work which they’ve helped with.

Another opportunity provided by the Partnership is the chance for families from the Western Isles to access the residential facilities at Harmeny in Edinburgh. While no children from the islands have taken up a short-term placement there yet, the space is there if needed. It gives the Education and Children’s Services department flexibility in residential placements for children that need them, and ensures both teams work in partnership throughout the process, from before admission to education at the school, and rehabilitation back into their island community.

In the meantime, Harmeny has offered respite placements for a family with children with significant additional needs, allowing them to enjoy a family holiday that they otherwise would have been unable to undertake. “It’s about being quite flexible and responding to what the staff and the families are saying would actually benefit them,” says Alys of the Partnership so far.

“We’re really excited by the Partnership,” adds Lynsey. “It’s something new for Harmeny, and something new for the Western Isles. It’s quite innovative, and that kind of forward thinking and thinking outside the box is quite refreshing. We’re really pleased to be a part of the project.”