

## Looked After Children

Mehnaz Malik is the Social Inclusion Officer for Looked After Children (LAC). She started work in this key role in April 2004. She had been employed by Bradford Youth Offending Team for the last 3 years, working with persistent young offenders on ISSP. Mehnaz is based at the Young People's Support Unit (YPSU) at the Barkerend Road office.

Mehnaz is enthusiastic about her new role. Describing it she said, "The majority of children who are looked after are taken into care because of abuse or neglect rather than them being 'bad kids,' and are placed under a Care Order."

She explained, "A Care Order gives parental responsibility to the Local Authority who may limit the way parental responsibility is exercised by parents if necessary, although there is a presumption of 'reasonable contact' between parents and child."

### FACT 1

The majority of LAC are in foster care. Some still reside at home with their parents, but have a care order and are classed as LAC. There are also a number of children placed in Residential Homes and a few that are placed outside the Bradford area.

### FACT 2

In Bradford there are currently 850 children that are classed as LAC. The Local Authority, as a 'corporate parent, has a duty to 'safeguard and promote their welfare,' which includes providing them with opportunities to take part in socially acceptable activities that are open to other children.

Mehnaz continued, "The YOT introduced my role in relation to one of our national performance

indicators that looks at the percentage of all LAC who have been given a final warning or been reprimanded, cautioned or convicted.

Our performance last year was 3.2 which, in simple terms, means Looked After Children were over three times more likely to get in to trouble than other children in the district. Our target this year is to improve our performance to 3."

### FACT3

The target group for Mehnaz's project must meet the following three criteria:

- They must NOT have offended.
- They must be between 9-and-a-half and 17 years old.
- They have to be LA for 12 months or more continuously.

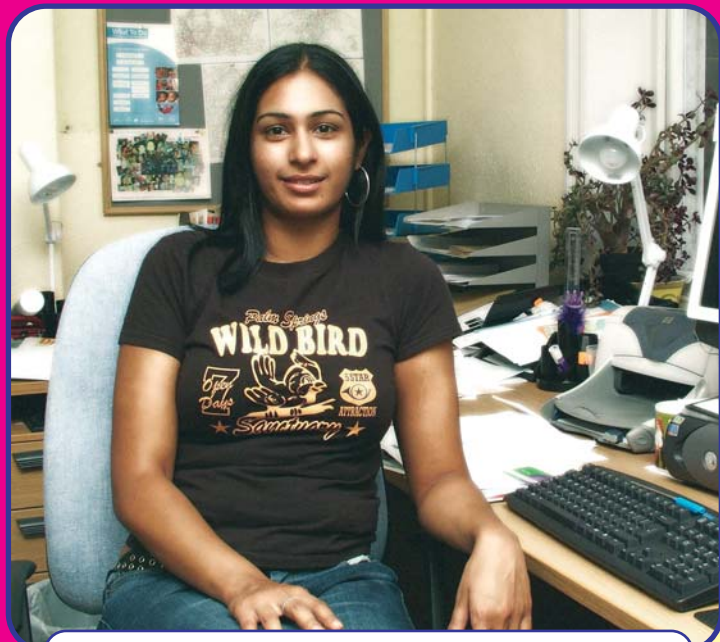
Mehnaz emphasised, "If a young person has already offended, then they are already receiving a provision/service from the YOT - my role is primarily a preventative one."

Due to there being a large amount of LAC Mehnaz had to prioritise who she was going to target in order to increase their life chances. She focused on children who had poor school attendance, were excluded from school, had siblings who were known offenders and those children who had returned from Out of Authority.

She said, "I then contacted the social worker for each young person to establish the young persons' interests and to see whether they were involved in any leisure or recreational activities. The key element of my role is that I do not work directly with young people, but signpost young people to services that are currently available."

### Case Study

Mehnaz described a typical example of how she works. "One of the young people had expressed, via his social worker, that he was interested in kickboxing. I was able to find the nearest centre that caters for this sport, found out the cost and day of the activity. The social worker was made aware of this provision and



Mehnaz Malik, Social Inclusion Officer for LAC

given the details. The social worker informed me that the young person would not go with him because, in the young person's words, "I don't want people to know I've got a social worker!" We both decided that it would be more appropriate if a volunteer was introduced to the young person who could go with him and support him, until he felt confident enough to go by himself."

Mehnaz summed up by saying, "This project is designed to improve the life chances of LAC and offer them the same opportunities that other young people have. It is centered around leisure and recreational activities, but also any hobbies that the young people may have."

**For more information on the LAC Project, Mehnaz can be contacted on 01274 436001**

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## LAC Volunteer Profile

Emma Pentelow is a successful financial advisor who has found time in her very busy schedule to volunteer every Tuesday evening at one of Bradford's homes for looked after children.

Emma's first involvement with volunteering came when she was a student in Glasgow and was involved in helping out on a one-to-one reading scheme. Following university Emma worked for a major plc which left no time for voluntary work but 3 years ago she switched to working for a smaller company which freed up a bit of her time.

In March 2002 she enquired about volunteering opportunities at the Shipley Volunteer Bureau and was told about NACRO's Quality Protects Project who were recruiting people to work with looked after children. After a CRB check and an Induction day Emma started work at Woodroyd children's home in May 2002 and has been there ever since. From the start of her involvement with the children and staff at

Woodroyd Emma has been made to feel very welcome. Whilst Emma's motivation is altruistic in that she wants to help those less fortunate than herself she's also finding the experience a lot of fun.

She said, "Sometimes I feel like a kid again. We can have a good laugh doing all sorts whether it's just plating hair or having a make-up session or something more dramatic like kayaking. I know for certain that I've helped children feel better about themselves and that gives me real sense of satisfaction".

In Emma's experience it is important that the volunteer plans each weeks contact in advance. This means liaising with staff to ensure that any



**Emma Pentelow**

necessary materials that are required are ordered in time, and that any outside activities – bowling, cinema, outdoor pursuits etc., - are booked in advance. In Emma's experience it is crucial that any visit is activity based. If all that happens is a session of watching TV then there is little point in the volunteer being there.

Belinda Greene, who works at Woodroyd, says staff have been highly appreciative of Emma's contribution. "Emma is an excellent volunteer who is always reliable and willing to join in with anything that is going on. She gets on very well with staff and children. Her contribution to our activities is most valuable and her commitment to the children is outstanding".

Emma feels that because volunteers don't have to be on call 24:7 they are able to "recharge their batteries" and

come to each session reasonably fresh and that this is a very good thing as the work can be very demanding. Some of the children have had to endure many harsh experiences and disappointments and exhibit challenging behaviour. Emma doesn't think that a volunteer who "can't stand to listen to bad language" will last very long. How to respond to a child who uses bad language is of course just one of many issues that staff and volunteers who work with looked after children have to deal with and guidelines have been produced to suggest effective ways of resolving any problems it causes. In Emma's experience it is essential that volunteers are made aware of the rules under which staff operate so that mixed messages are not given to the children.

Emma has found volunteering at Woodroyd to be a thoroughly rewarding experience despite it being very hard work on occasions. Her favourite activity is reading bedtime stories but play of all kinds reminds Emma of happy times from her own childhood.

It is a testament to how enjoyable working with the children is that she looks forward to every shift – which is not always the case with her financial advisory work!

**For more information on volunteering call Dave Pope on 01274 436060**



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