

Serenity Welfare



CEO Emily Aklan



Welfare services for children and young people in care and out of care

CEO Emily Aklan describes the secure transport service that Serenity Welfare offers as “second-to-none”. Nominated for a Queen’s Award in recent years, the multifaceted company mainly operates in the supported transport sector, but it also provides a variety of other social care services. These include mentoring, 24-hour support for vulnerable people in custody and supported accommodation.

FACTS ABOUT SERENITY WELFARE

- » CEO: Emily Aklan
- » Established in November 2016
- » Based in Enfield, but operates nationwide
- » Services: Welfare and secure transport for looked-after children and young people
- » No. of employees: Over 30
- » www.serenitywelfare.org

I established Serenity Welfare after experiencing first-hand the need for a comprehensive and effective care system. Following the tragic death of my sister at the age of 35, her ex-husband kidnapped their two young children, aged seven and ten, and fled to North Cyprus. My life was turned upside down and for the next year, I worked alongside the Home Office and the police to secure their return. A custody battle ensued, and we were able to win full custody of the girls.

While this was going on, I was contacted by a worker from the social services who told me they needed to establish a provision for looked-after children, especially focusing on how these children are transported from place to place. She said that if it wasn’t for me, my nieces would have entered the care system and likely been separated. I knew this was something I needed to look into.

Fighting for change

After two years of research, I decided to establish my own provision, focusing on changing the way this transportation was undertaken. In the vast majority of cases, young children are handcuffed and placed in a secure vehicle similar to a police van. Rather than continuing to conform to this model, I decided we would

focus on the wellbeing of the children. Because of this, we only transfer children in prestigious cars and never use handcuffs.

I made contact with Mercedes, chosen for their prestige and comfort, and asked them to open a credit line on a fleet of vehicles. All we had was a registered name with Companies House, but Mercedes were so impressed with our model that they issued us with our first vehicle.

Our service was established in November 2016 and immediately I set about finding staff who were just as passionate as I was. I didn't want to adopt the structure of our competitors; I wanted to adopt a more nurturing and mentoring approach. We always strive to make each journey as comfortable as possible and were fortunate to quickly find the staff we needed.

Over the next six months, we grew and developed the business. Our major obstacle was getting the local authority to understand our model. Although we use more prestigious vehicles, our model structure means we are able to offer our services at a cheaper rate because we focus on volume rather than the cost of each individual journey. We also explained our approach to the transports themselves: we do not use handcuffs and restraint is always a last resort. Instead, we focus on de-escalation and mentoring, and while challenging situations might take slightly longer to diffuse, our system works and preserves the dignity of the children we care for. This success is reflected in our wonderful outcomes and our near 100 per cent success rate over the last three years.

Expanding our provision

For the first six months, I would personally go out on our transport jobs as I wanted to meet the young people

and see how our model was working. The difference is immediately clear: when our cars turn up, the children are excited and immediately feel comfortable. Six months in, we picked up a looked-after young person from Manchester who was a looked-after child of Caerphilly. This individual was highly challenging but over the journey we built up a rapport.

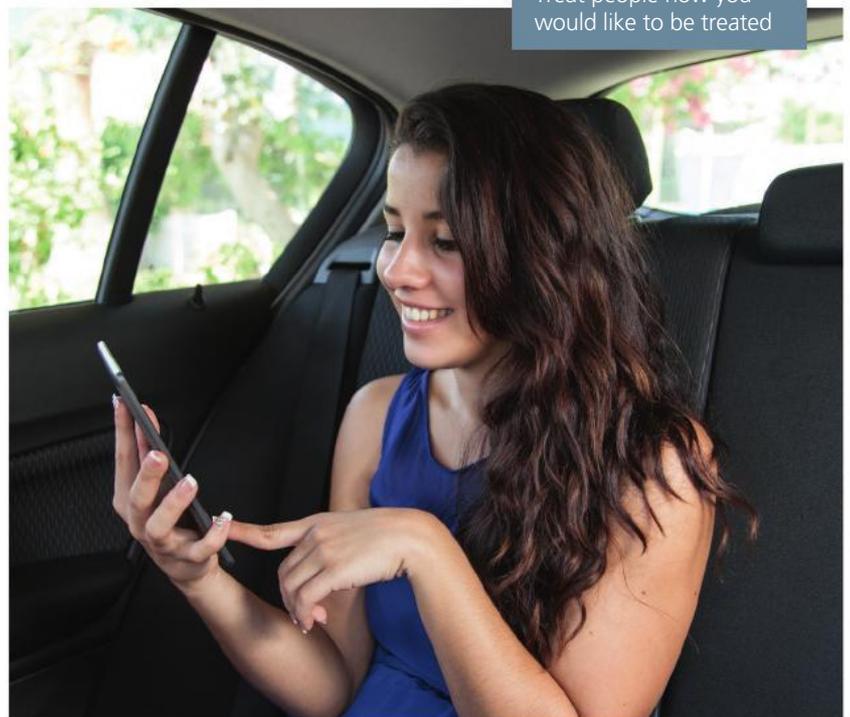
Two months later, I received a call from the social workers in Caerphilly, telling me the young person had requested to come into our care. Despite not having a care provision, I put together a package that included two-to-one care and budgeted for activities, food and spending money. A month later, the young person went to the High Court judge in Wales and the judge ruled that we were to be awarded custody under a Deprivation of Liberty agreement. The judge stated that she must have constant two-to-one supervision and live in a secure environment. We were told that she would be arriving in 48 hours.

We had to source and establish accommodation, alongside picking up the individual, within this timeframe.

“I would absolutely recommend Serenity Welfare to family, friends and anyone looking for outstanding service with a fantastic friendly, welcoming and caring approach”

Testimonial from a local borough

Our mission statement:
Treat people how you
would like to be treated





Interventions and workshops

“So many years of education, yet nobody taught us how to love ourselves”

We managed to accomplish this, and within nine months she had achieved dramatic improvement. After dealing with her self-harming issues, we focused on her education. We organised tutoring at a library in Enfield and taught her all the life skills she would need to live independently. At the end of the nine months, she moved on to semi-independent living, is getting married next year and has asked me to give her away.

Following this, we were contacted by another borough who asked to place a child with us, so we began the process of Ofsted registration. Significant difficulties ensued but we were able to navigate them. Our registration is

Selin and Ricardo have drastically helped me with expressing myself in a positive way and have guided me on the right path, showing me right from wrong. They have also helped me take education more seriously and helped show me how to spend my free time in a good way. They check up on me on a regular basis, seeing how I am feeling and to discuss my problems. If I have any, they help me understand where I'm wrong and how to fix things in a smart way. They have definitely changed my views in life and helped me understand and come to terms with the fact that there is more to life than violence, drugs and gangs.

Young person, 17 years old

still ongoing. Rather than creating a large, institutionalised setting, which I do not think works, we only have two bedrooms and we treat each young person how we would treat our own children.

We now focus on mentoring young people. We established this service this year and we work with vulnerable children, local authorities, schools and other educational provisions alongside maintaining our secure transport and welfare services, which include 24-hour support supervision, hospital watch, appropriate adult services and a residential home.

The need for further change

Although what we have achieved is a good start, much more needs to be done.

It is essential that transport companies stop the use of handcuffs and adopt a more nurturing approach. This is something that needs to be acknowledged across the sector and in government.

Furthermore, more funding needs to be made available to support mentoring. These services perform such a vital role. In order to provide adequate support to our young people, this needs to be addressed.

We see a bright future ahead. My main goal is to open a Serenity Retreat in Cyprus where we would take looked-after children twice a year, helping them to relax and widen their experiences.

We have contacted an international university who we will work with to showcase educational opportunities abroad and to give the children an understanding of the wider world. By continuing to widen and supplement our services, I know we can continue to make a positive difference.