'EVERY CHILD MATTERS'

Report of consultation meetings with children and young people

Summary

We consulted young people in writing on 'Every Child Matters'. We sent out a booklet with a form for them to complete, and around 3,000 replied. We also wanted to meet children and young people to talk about their ideas on the questions in the booklet. DfES staff set up meetings and met around 750 children and young people (aged 4-18, with a few over 18s) in 62 meetings spread around England. We tried to meet children and young people who could be seen as disadvantaged or who had faced some difficulties.

The meetings covered some or all of the questions in the young people's version of 'Every Child Matters'. We also talked about other relevant issues raised by the young people.

There is one key message that emerges from the meetings: **the need to involve young people in decisions that affect their lives**. This came through not just on the obvious question about how young people should have a say in council decisions, but also in other discussions: about the Young People's Fund, providing support to families, recruiting people to work with children and young people, and selecting the Children's Commissioner.

The other main messages from what young people said were:

- It is good to have other services based in schools, but schools must not be the only place where young people can access services;

- Children, young people and families should be able to make informed decisions about the support that they need;

- We need good people to work with children, young people and families; we should attract them by providing honest information about the work;

- Young people should know what information is kept or passed on about them – and information should only be passed on or shared with the consent of the young person concerned, except in the case of serious danger to the young person;

- Children and young people have views on, and concerns about, issues beyond those explicitly covered in the Green Paper. Issues of safety and security worry a large number of young people.

Background/consultation process

The Government is committed to getting the views of children and young people on issues relevant to them. When the Green Paper, 'Every Child Matters', was issued in September 2003 a young people's version of the Green Paper – aimed at 13-18 year-olds – was also issued. This included a form on which young people could write their comments and a Freepost envelope for returning the form.

We spoke to young people while we were writing the young people's version. They made it clear that the written consultation would not enable all children and young people to make their views known: younger children would generally not understand it, and young people able to read and understand it might not want to fill in forms. This was most likely to be the case with disadvantaged or marginalised young people, the group whom the Green Paper is most trying to assist.

Meetings were therefore set up with groups of young people around England. The Government's own networks (Children's Fund, Connexions, Sure Start) provided some contacts and voluntary organisations were used to set up meetings with specified groups of young people.

In all, 62 meetings took place involving DfES officials and/or colleagues from other Government departments. In 54 of the meetings, those officials led the discussions with the children and young people; the other 8 meetings were set up and managed by a voluntary organisation, who invited DfES officials to attend.

Geographically, there were 21 meetings in the North[1], 18 in the Midlands, and 22 in the South, with one meeting of a national group.

Around 750 young people participated in the meetings. Most meetings consisted of 6-10 young people, but there was one meeting of around 100 (the entire Year 7 of a school) and 3 others of 40-60; at the other extreme, 6 meetings contained less than 5 young people, and one was attended by one young man alone. 53% of participants were male, 47% female. 20% were from black or minority ethnic groups. The ages of participants varied from 4 to 18, with a few over 18s also taking part in groups where they mixed with under 18s.

Because of the nature of the Green Paper's proposals, it was important to get the views of disadvantaged young people. Half of the meetings were therefore with groups of young people who could be identified as being in a specific 'risk' group (young people in care/care leavers, young carers, disabled young people, children of asylum-seekers, young people in Pupil Referral Units, young offenders, young homeless, travellers' children, children of prisoners, teenage mothers, lesbian, gay and bisexual young people).

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[1] 'North' means the areas covered by Govt Offices for the North-West, North-East and Yorkshire and Humber; 'Midlands' those for East Midlands, West Midlands and East; 'South' those for South-East, South-West and London.

Four or five other meetings were with young people who might be seen as at risk of social exclusion without fitting in any specific category. A further five or six were with groups already engaged in children's rights groups, or regional representative groups. The others were with mixed groups of children and young people in schools, half-term clubs and other venues.

The meetings covered some or all of the 8 consultation questions in the young people's version of the Green Paper. They also allowed the young participants to raise other relevant issues of concern to them. The format of meetings varied, depending on the number, age and preferences of participants. The most common format was a simple discussion with the young people sitting in a circle.

In almost all cases, the groups who took part have had the opportunity to see the notes of their meeting and correct any errors before the notes were used in this report. There were no requests for changes.

The notes below cover the questions in the young people's version of the Green Paper in the order they were asked, with 2 variations:
- 2 pairs of questions have been grouped together (Q4 with Q7 and Q5 with Q8) because of how young people responded – this is explained more under the questions concerned;

- there is an "other issues" section at the end covering issues that did not arise under the specific questions.

Because we used open discussions, it is not possible to count 'votes' for different ideas. Not all groups discussed all questions, and in a group a view may have been expressed by one young person alone without others saying whether or not they agreed. This report tries to give a balanced flavour of what was said: where we say "most", for example, we mean that this opinion was expressed in most groups where that question was discussed and that few young people disagreed with it. Where there are lists in bullet form, these generally show the ideas raised most often at the top of the list.

Question 1: How do you think you should have a say in what your local council does to make things better for children and young people?

The clear message coming from the young people consulted is that they should have, and want to have a say in what their local councils provide for them.

The young people said what they like and don't like in their areas, and some put forward ideas about how things should improve. However the main thing they talked about was the role that children and young people should have in a consultation process. They saw 'consultation' as a three-level process – informing, consulting and participating:

- The local council informing young people about its activities;

- Young people giving their own opinions and providing feedback.

- Young people's active involvement.

Most young people felt that the local council should inform them about its activities and that they should have an opportunity to comment on these activities. Some raised the question of more <u>active</u> participation: not just asking young people to comment on proposals, but involving them in the work to develop those proposals.

With the exception of a few groups, most were not aware of their councils or others consulting young people. Some were quite cynical:

> "They don't ask what people want – they do stuff and then ask people about it"
>
> [female, 17, London]

To get information to them, young people recommended better use of modern media such as the Internet and texting. They also suggested the use of local radio stations, or using schools to pass on information.

When it came to how to consult young people, by far the most popular idea was for councillors to go out to meet young people where the young people live and spend their time: schools, clubs, community centres. Some took this idea a little further, suggesting that councillors should have to live for a time in the poorer parts of their area to know what it feels like. If there are to be meetings, young people want them to be:

- Fun, lively and informal, using appropriate language;

- Promoted through colourful and child-friendly fliers;

- Inclusive – an idea stressed by a group of young people in care.

Other methods of consultation were also discussed:

- Young people visiting councillors or attending council meetings – while some young people felt it interesting to see how things happen, most felt they would find meetings boring and would feel like outsiders.

- Questionnaires – many felt that few young people would complete them, and that those who would fill in forms might not be representative of young people's views. If a council, or the Government, wants a high response rate to a questionnaire, they should offer incentives, for example a lucky draw to win prizes.

- Young people elected to represent others – whether through a children's parliament/forum or for one-off meetings. Most who discussed this saw it as a good idea, but not enough by itself.

- Ballots in schools.

- A named "young people's officer" in the council whom they could contact.

Apart from some younger children, those consulted were not happy to have adults represent them, neither teachers nor parents.

This question was about councils in particular. But much of children's lives is spent in schools, so it is not surprising that many spoke about consultation in their schools. Among the young people we met in their schools, most were aware of a school council in their school. Those who had been part of school councils were positive about the experience

> "It feels like you're a teacher, you can tell people to stop talking"
>
> [female, 10, London]

Those who had not been in school councils but whose schools had them mostly, though not in all cases, recognised that the councils had improved some things in schools. Most of the examples they gave were relatively minor, though important to the pupils. In no school did pupils say they had been asked about what is taught, the employment of staff, or how large sums of money are spent.

Finally, young people were very clear that consultation is only worthwhile if adults are willing to listen to, and act upon what young people say. The highest level of cynicism was from one of the groups with most experience of consultation: they had been asked their views on a range of subjects, but even when there had been a clear message to do something (school buses, for example) nothing had happened. From several groups of young people came the message that, whatever young people may say, adults will usually prefer to listen to other adults.

Question 2: Apart from education what services would you like to see in your school?

This was generally discussed in two parts:

1   What other services or facilities would you like to see in your school?
2   Is school the right place to bring these together?

On the first of these, the suggestions received fell into three broad categories:

- Leisure

- Learning

- Health and support services

In all these categories, the young people stressed that all services should be free; it may be necessary to pay for food and drink, but even that should be subsidised to keep costs down.

In the **leisure** category, where there was some overlap with points raised under Question 3, the most popular suggestions were:

- A wide range of sports activities after school: football, swimming, skateboarding, gym, tennis;

- Music/video rooms

- Internet access

- Social club

- Breakfast clubs (many schools had these already)

Learning issues that emerged fell into three areas: support with schoolwork; broader learning for pupils; learning for non-pupils.

Support with schoolwork includes:

- Learning support through learning mentors or peer mentors;

- Support for young people with special educational needs (support for those with dyslexia, sign language lessons);

- English language classes for children with English as an additional language.

Broader learning for pupils meant

- Arts-related: drama, art, mixing, dance, singing;

- Life skills: cookery, first-aid, managing money (though some felt these issues should be in the main curriculum);

- Special interests: IT, languages, history.

Some recognised the possible use of school facilities for those not attending the school:

- Education for young people not in school or college – in another context, one group of 16-18 year-olds raised the importance of 'second chance' education for those who had not done well in GCSEs;

- Classes for parents, with possible emphasis on

    o Parenting skills

    o English as an additional language

In terms of **health and support services,** most young people liked the idea of having health services in school, especially counselling services for both pupils and teachers. Different problems which might potentially require counselling were mentioned: drug and alcohol problems, sexual health and family problems. The problem mentioned most often was however bullying. Support services for both victims and bullies were suggested, more frequently those for victims.

Some saw advantages in having doctors and dentists within the school. There was however disagreement about whether social workers or counsellors should be in school. Confidentiality came out as an important issue and young people felt that counsellors should be trustworthy.

The question of whether school is the right place to put additional services attracted very mixed views. Many saw the practical benefits of not having to travel somewhere else for leisure activities at the end of the school day. Some also felt that it would make school more attractive, and therefore might bring back some young people who do not wish to go to school.

There were however some quite strong feelings against this proposal:

- Young people who have been excluded from school, or who have stopped going to school, may find themselves excluded from other activities also;

- Some want to get away from school premises as soon as the school day is over; anything taking place in school would be associated with lessons and be a turn-off;

- Some young people live a long way from school and would not be able to stay around or go back to school

- Young people are suspicious of schools' motives – some think that headteachers want too much power

- Young people might not want to be seen going to more 'sensitive' services (sexual health, mental health) so would not use them if they were in schools

- Pupils do not just want to mix with others from their schools; their friends in other schools would not be able to enjoy leisure facilities with them.

Overall, four messages emerged on this question:

1   Schools can be a useful place to put other services and facilities
2   It is possible – and may be helpful – to have services on school premises but managed by others
3   Schools must not be the only place where those services can be accessed; there must be other places if those out of school are not to miss out on other services
4   (referring back to Question 1) young people in a school should be consulted about which services it is to offer – whether through school council, suggestion box or voting.

Question 3: How should we spend the Young People's Fund to give young people more and better things to do?

Most groups discussed what money should be spent on. Some also spoke about what might affect young people's ability to use those facilities.

Almost all children and young people said that there was a lack of things to so and places to 'hang out'. This was generally less of a problem for younger children, as they often prefer to do things at home. But teenagers wanted to be out with their friends. Even in areas where there appeared to be plenty of things to do, factors such as cost affected young people's ability to take advantage of the opportunities.

When the Young People's Fund was mentioned, young people welcomed the idea of more money being spent, though it was difficult for them to understand what £200m across England meant in terms of money for their town. When they were asked what the money should be spent on, young people gave similar answers to those on Question 2 above, but some extra ideas emerged:

- Various sports facilities: gyms, table tennis, swimming pools, facilities for rock climbing and ice-skating;
- Youth clubs. They provide space for 'hanging out'; however they should also include activities to enable more active involvement for those who want it: music, dance, computers, health, fitness, martial arts, cooking, arts and crafts;
- Night clubs/bars for under 18s
- Cafes offering cheap food and drink
- Better playgrounds in parks (from younger children);
- Computer facilities (free IT cafes for young people);
- Cookery clubs;
- Games arcades;
- More drop-in-centres;
- Trips and holidays;
- Young people's TV and radio stations.

There were mixed views about some of the above, for example night clubs and bars for under 18s. Many 15-17 year-olds saw these as the type of activities most suited to their age group, but a few thought they were not a good idea.

> "I don't think that's right. It encourages you, that's what you should do at 18, get totally wrecked"
>
> [female, 16, Doncaster]

Many young people reported that they would like to participate in designing and decorating youth clubs as they see this as a way of creating a feeling of ownership and preventing vandalism.

As well as leisure facilities, some young people suggested that money should be spent on:

- Disability awareness training for council staff and people who work directly with the public such as traffic wardens, staff in sport facilities and clubs, teachers and public transport staff;
- Training in general for staff who work with children;
- Specialist programmes such as those for drug prevention and rehabilitation;
- Hospitals;
- Child support groups;
- Homework support programmes;
- Advice centres (counselling) on a range of issues such as further education and healthy food;
- Supporting more outreach workers;
- Developing apprenticeships.

Though most of the young people's proposals related to facilities and services, a number of young people suggested direct financial support to young people in need: clothing vouchers, higher benefits, support with independent accommodation.

As well as saying which facilities and services they want, young people also raised broader issues affecting their potential use of such services: cost; access (transport and disability); safety.

For all except the youngest children we met (and even for some of them), cost was an issue. If young people are to use leisure facilities, those facilities have to be free or very cheap.

Transport came up in many groups, but was particularly an issue in country areas: for some young people, public transport services were virtually non-existent. Others could not afford to use public transport often, and did not think it fair that they are charged adult fares at 14 or 16 when young people do not have the same rights as adults. They suggested free bus passes or discounted fares for all young people, with discounted taxi fares for those in areas not served by public transport.

Giving young people access to facilities also means having things in the right places. While young people wanted some big leisure facilities and accepted that these could only be in larger towns, they also wanted other smaller facilities nearer to them. Mobile facilities were suggested as a way of reaching young people in very isolated areas. Even within cities, there should be clubs for different areas or different estates: young people from a Bradford estate affected by racial tensions felt that there had to be clubs for each major group on their estate; and others in London would not use a club a mile or so away if it meant going on to someone else's 'territory'.

The final aspect of access is that of making services accessible to disabled young people. That involves transport, accessible buildings, and the training and attitude of staff and other service users. Young people with severe learning disabilities said that they rarely went out other than with their school or their families.

Another prominent issue that was raised was that of security. It was sometimes mentioned as a problem within clubs and leisure facilities, and some young people questioned the point of spending money on facilities in very rough areas.

> "A good pool table wouldn't last 2 minutes"
>
> [female, 16, Bishop Auckland]

Many of the young people reported that they felt unsafe in their areas. For younger children, the park was the example they quoted most often, and the children of asylum-seekers seemed to feel particularly vulnerable in this respect.

> "Even though I go to the park with mum, I don't feel safe"
> "I wouldn't let mum take me to the park as I'm scared she might get in danger"
>
> [female and male, both 9-11, London]

Others felt that the streets are unsafe at night, and wanted more security measures: CCTV, police or street-wardens. Each of these was seen as having pros and cons: CCTV is less intrusive than police stopping you on the streets but, though it may help to catch whoever attacked you, it does nothing to stop you being attacked. There were conflicting views of street-wardens in two areas where they were known. In one, street-wardens were seen as a waste of time who "don't do nowt", but in the other they were a visible presence on the streets while the police "are in the police station with coffee and doughnuts".

In conclusion, the range of issues that the young people raised shows that it is impractical to try to decide national priorities from their comments. Local decisions have to be taken and it is for councils to involve young people in making these decisions.

Question 4: How do you think the government can best help families at difficult times?

AND

Question 7: How do you think children and families should have a say in deciding what extra help they need?

Note: comments on these two questions are being considered together as the two questions are closely linked.

The main message from the consultation events regarding Question 4 was that the government should certainly provide more support for families at difficult times.

> Parents deserve it – it's a big job.
>
> [female, 12, Surrey]

Discussions around how the government can best help families and young people at difficult times centred around three main themes:

- What are 'difficult times', and how do they arise?

- Could they be prevented?

- What help is needed, and how can it best be delivered?

Young people identified a range of difficulties that could arise in families or in their own lives. They saw two groups of problems: firstly, things that related more to parents (but affected children); and, secondly, things that were to do with young people's own lives (but could have an impact upon the family).

The issues relating to parents included:

- Unemployment;

- Lack of money;

- Housing;

- Divorce and remarriage;

- Addictions: drugs and alcohol;

- Health problems.

Those more related to young people's own lives included:

- Bullying;

- Problems at school;

- Moving from primary into secondary school;

- Sickness;

- Teenage pregnancy;

- Sexuality issues;

- Crime and violence;

- Child abuse;

- Addiction/substance misuse (by young people): drugs and alcohol.

Young people's ideas about what might help can broadly be divided between prevention and intervention, though some ideas would apply to both.

Prevention and intervention

Financial support was raised by several groups. Investment in better housing would be a preventive measure. Several young people mentioned that problems arise within families when people feel that they are forced to live in confined accommodation with little space of their own. Money to spend on leisure activities, or discounted access to them (see Q3 above), could stop young people getting into trouble through boredom. Getting the young people out of their home through leisure activities is also a way of giving parents a break. However, as young disabled people pointed out, this only works if the service provider takes care of everything, including taking the young people to and from the leisure facilities.

Targeted financial support can also be used as an intervention measure; assisting families whose income has been hit by unemployment, illness or other problems can enable them to get through a difficult spell.

Parenting classes were seen as another measure that could be preventive, or be used to address a problem before it got worse. There were however very mixed views about these: young people were fairly evenly split between those who felt that parenting classes could be effective, and those who felt that parents would consider them insulting and humiliating. On balance, there was more support for their use as a universal preventive service than as a targeted intervention; having them just for 'problem' families would make the classes stigmatising.

Some specific issues around parenting were raised, anger management training being one issue that arose a few times. In this context, one group suggested that such training should be led by other parents who have experienced such problems, and who would therefore have more credibility and be more readily accepted than more 'traditional' teachers.

Prevention

The value of <u>sex and drug education</u> was discussed in several groups. The timing and quality of this appears to vary greatly. As a general rule, young people felt that sex education should be provided around Y8 – when young people are old enough to take it seriously, but young enough to learn before it is too late. Though some had received effective drug education from teachers or the police, a more popular approach was for this to be provided by young people, perhaps those with personal experience, coming into schools.

Some felt that, however good the teaching on such issues, young people are still likely to wish to experiment. Young people in one group proposed that what is needed – for drugs and alcohol – is not just education, but also a safety net when things go wrong. Wherever the question of age limits came up, young people said that it is easy to get alcohol, cigarettes and fireworks whatever your age; in any area, young people know which shops will serve them.

Some groups identified better, and cheaper, <u>childcare</u> facilities as a way forward. They would enable parents, mothers in particular, to work or study and give them better future chances.

Some identified the need for parents who are not working to have better access to day-time <u>education</u> facilities. Asylum-seeker children raised the specific issue of English language classes for their parents.

Interventions to help children and families

The message from almost all groups was that when a child or young person encounters problems, the first person that they turn to for help is usually a parent or family member. Some groups raised the need for parents to get information about problems their children may encounter (drugs in particular) so that they will be more able to help.

Young people realised the need to act quickly before problems get serious

> "If you don't get help when you are stressed then it just builds up in your head until you can't cope with it any more."
>
> [male, 17, Norfolk]

Better counselling is needed for parents and young people; there should be services to which a young person or parent can go for support as soon as they realise that they need it. There was no clear view about who should provide such services.

Where young people need to use a range of different services, it is important for them to have one worker that they trust who can help them access all the support they need.

Better rehabilitation services were mentioned in one group of slightly older young people. Those who have had problems of substance misuse need help to address their problems.

Independent housing for young people was, understandably, raised in groups of young homeless people, but in some other groups also. When young people of 16-17 are unable to stay with their families they need somewhere safe to live.

Care as a means of addressing family problems was only raised twice, both times in groups of young people in care. Views were however split on its use. One group felt that taking young people into foster care for a short time could enable families to get through a difficult patch, but the other group were firm in their view that care was not the answer.

Young people identified the need for better information if they are to make informed decisions about how they can be helped. Instead of asking young people "what help do you need?" workers should ask them "what is the problem with which you may want help?" and then offer them alternatives.

One consistent message from young people was that they and their families should be able to determine if and when they get help. Some said that their parents had asked for help, but it had been refused because service providers felt that their problem was not yet serious enough.

> "My mum's fed up of people coming round to see me, but nobody helping me"
>
> [female, age not recorded, Northampton]

Yet, as soon as the service providers feel that a family needs services, they all try to get involved, and families are faced with off-putting large meetings where

> "there are lots of people round the table, all of them useless"
>
> [female, 16, Norwich]

Young people emphasised that help should not be forced upon them and they should have the right to refuse help if they don't want strangers interfering in their lives. Even those who acknowledged that there were problems in their families wanted the right to accept or refuse help.

> "I'm not letting someone in my home to tell us what to do. It's a family thing"
>
> [female, 17, London]

Question 5: Do you have any suggestions for encouraging people to become foster carers and making sure that they feel good about their work?

AND

Question 8: What ideas do you have for encouraging people to consider careers that involve working with young children and families, such as social work or childcare?

Note: These were the questions which the fewest groups of young people spoke about. Q5 was discussed by few groups other than those of young people in care and care leavers. The answers received on the two questions were very similar, so are together here, though we do mention some specific issues about foster carers.

As service users, it is perhaps not surprising that young people tended to concentrate on what makes a good foster carer or worker with young people rather than on how to attract people into these professions.

While a lot of different qualities were put forward as desirable, there was broad agreement that the following were important:

- committed

- enthusiastic

- good listener

- friendly/kind/caring

- patient

- trustworthy

- supportive

- fair

- respectful

- emotionally strong

- smart

One group felt that these were inherent qualities that adults either have or lack, and that they could not be trained to demonstrate these qualities. Young people's views on whether the professionals they meet have these qualities were as mixed as one would expect. Some were very positive, but there were also strong criticisms.

> "Most teachers look like they don't care; it's not in their job description"
>
> [female, 13, London]

Young people in care identified other qualities that they would wish to see in foster carers:

- an understanding of and support for children's rights;

- treating young people in their care as though they were their own children – though one group felt that if this were taken too far it might increase the pain of separation if a care placement has to end;

- awareness of different religions, values and customs.

Young people generally felt that the age of those working with them was irrelevant. Most felt that the gender of workers was also irrelevant, though one young woman did point out that a young woman in care might not want to discuss certain issues with a male foster carer. A group of young lesbians and gay men also felt that gay and lesbian foster carers could be helpful for some, though they did not think it necessary for their carer to share their sexual orientation.

In order to attract the right people into working with children and young people, there needs to be:

- more information about this work

- a chance to gain experience of working with young people

- advertising that is accurate and honest: selling the fact that it can be rewarding to help young people, but not giving a false impression of the work

- better training and support

- better pay, though those who raised this also said that pay should not be the main incentive for people to go into this work.

Those who made comments about foster carers felt that it was important for social workers to build strong links with foster carers.

Young people recognised that this is not always easy work, as they may not be the easiest of customers for professionals to deal with.

> "I wouldn't want to work with us."
>
> [female, 16, Hull]

Other messages that emerged specifically about the recruitment of foster carers were that:

- young people should be involved in the selection of foster carers;

- there should be independent assessment of foster carers, thorough police checks, and an effective complaints system.

Question 6: When do you think that services should talk together about a child without the child knowing or saying that it is OK?

The immediate response from almost all groups was "never", though younger children were generally less worried about this than teenagers. However, when pushed a little further on this, most conceded that it was acceptable for workers to share information without consent when there is a risk of a child or young person suffering serious harm.

> "It's OK to share information about someone if their life is in danger."
>
> [male, 17, Norfolk]

Views were mixed on whether substance misuse would constitute sufficient reason for passing on information.

Even in the most serious cases where it is acceptable to share information without the young person's <u>consent</u>, the view was still that the young person should be <u>told</u> that the information is being passed on.

Many of the young people understood that it could be helpful for professionals to share information. They were happy with the idea of professionals trying to persuade a young person that it was in their interest for information to be passed to others who could provide more help. It could also save the young person having to tell the same distressing story to several different professionals. However, they thought that the young person should have the final decision except in the most serious of cases.

Young people should be made aware of what the rules are for different groups of workers: what information do they have a duty to disclose? If a young person knows this they can decide what they tell professionals; if they don't know, they may keep things quiet as they fear that their trust will be betrayed.

There was no objection to basic factual data being shared between services: name, date of birth, address, parent/carer name. However these data must be accurate.

There was a certain amount of suspicion about the type of data held, by schools in particular. There were concerns about its accuracy and, more importantly for some of the young people, about how long it is kept. Some of them were concerned that one example of bad behaviour could remain on their files forever. If information were being shared between services this would be even more worrying for the young people involved.

There were mixed views on whether professionals, schools in particular, should have information about young people's families. Views may have been influenced by young people's ideas of how others might perceive the issue affecting their family: a group of young carers felt that teachers would be more sympathetic if they understood their home situation, but young people with a parent in prison did not want people to know.

Young people in care generally acknowledged that someone in the school needed to know, and some commented favourably on having a designated teacher in their school, but they did not want their care status to be the subject of staffroom gossip.

In certain groups, young people were more worried about professionals passing information to their parents than about professionals exchanging information with one another. Two examples of why this could worry young people were:

> When a school discovered that a young woman was pregnant, the headteacher called her mother. Later, the young woman later felt that this may have made things easier for her as she hadn't known how to tell her mother. But at the time, she felt that she had no say in whether her mother was told.

> A young gay man who sought blood tests for HIV and hepatitis was told that the tests would only be carried out if he had a parent with him. As his mother did not know he was gay, he chose not to have the tests.

The question of controlling how information is passed on was discussed in a few groups. One group proposed clear rules for professionals, with punishment for those who break the rules by passing on information when they should not do so. Another suggested that there should be a lead worker for each young person who would judge when others need to be given information. One felt that other young people would be best placed to judge, and suggested a panel of young people to decide on difficult cases.

Other issues raised by young people in consultation

As well as the areas covered by the consultation questions in the young people's version of the Green Paper, young people commented on a number of issues.

In most cases, the other issues discussed were determined by the young people: either from comments they made while discussing the main questions, or from things they said when asked about their own lives.

One extra question that was raised by DfES officials rather than young people was about the <u>Children's Commissioner.</u> With hindsight, this should perhaps have been a formal question, so it was mentioned in a number of meetings in order to get young people's views.

Young people felt that the Commissioner should be:
- highly qualified

- aware of all the issues facing children and young people today

- a good listener

- nice

- willing to go out to meet children and young people.

Those who discussed how a commissioner should be recruited were clear that children and young people should be involved in the selection process. This could be done through an election or through young people being on the interview panel.

No names were suggested for the post. One group did however come to the conclusion that it should not be a politician. Some members of that group suggested that it should be a young person, but the others present did not share that view.

One group were concerned that the job is too big for one person and that the commissioner may therefore not be successful.

There were a number of comments about the <u>police</u> and <u>crime/security</u>. In the notes under Q3 above there are a number of comments about young people not feeling safe on the streets and how this influences their access to leisure facilities, and some groups said more about the police.

Young people want to feel safe, but there is a tension between this and their perception of the police. Several groups complained of the police showing them little respect. Young people felt that they might be picked on by the police if they: had been in trouble before; hang around in a group; dress a particular way (eg hoods); belong to a particular group (a young man of Bangladeshi origin and young travellers raised this); come from the 'wrong' part of town.

One group saw irony in the Government asking about leisure activities for young people in the evenings while introducing laws on anti-social behaviour that could get young people arrested for being out late in the evening.

Police were seen as being able to get away with things, with no effective way for young people to complain. Young people in one group said they had heard police openly boasting about this.

There were few positive comments about the police from those who had experience of them, though one young man did try to empathise with them.

> "A lot of young people have guilty consciences. A policeman wants a conversation with them and the young person starts swearing at him."
>
> [male, 17, Sussex]

Issues of punishment were discussed less often, though the young people in one group made it clear that they were opposed to offenders getting what seem like 'rewards' (holidays, driving lessons), when other young people cannot afford these. They felt rewards should be for those who are not doing wrong. This clear sense of right/wrong and reward/punishment was even more apparent when talking about schools. Younger children seemed to feel that their schools had got the balance about right, as they did get rewards for good behaviour or doing well in class.

Issues of race came arose comparatively rarely. Asylum-seeker children in London (primary school age) were particularly nervous on the streets, and some young asylum-seekers in Doncaster reported attacks on themselves and their homes. Traveller children in the North-East felt that teachers did not understand racism against them: when a boy complained to a teacher that another boy had called him a "gypsy", the teacher's response had been "well, you are one". But white children from a Bradford estate wanted to make it clear that racism happens in both directions.

The issues mentioned above were raised in a number of groups covering a range of young people. Other issues only affect young people in a particular situation, or affect those young people more than anyone else, so only came up in one or two discussions.

Disabled young people raised a number of issues: access to facilities (see Q3 above) was one of their main concerns, but they also raised questions about financial and practical support for their parents, discrimination and raising awareness.

Accommodation was a problem for care leavers and for homeless young people. There is a lack of support for young people living alone, and too little suitable accommodation. Young people find themselves constantly moving from place to place and having to live with adults in potentially unsafe places. The procedures for getting recognised as homeless were also criticised: young people are expected to have a letter from their parents saying that they will no longer have them living in the family home, but many will not want to go back to ask for a letter if they have left in difficult circumstances.

While the **lack of money** came up under various questions, it was particularly identified as an issue by homeless young people having to survive on around £43 income support. They felt worse off than friends living at home with their families

> "I can only fit in with my friends to a certain extent… then the money runs out"
>
> [female, 17, London]

There is a risk of the lack of money leading young people into other problems:

> "when the £43 is gone, all I need to do is jack someone"
>
> [male, 17, London]

While the young man who said that appeared to be joking, he and the other homeless young people with him were faced with difficult choices every day. They suggested that extra benefits could be in the form of clothing vouchers so that no-one could accuse them of wasting the money on cigarettes or alcohol.

A group of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people raised issues that had affected them: a lack of information and of supportive counselling; a culture of 'heterosexism' in schools; the need for recognition of discrimination and bullying and for action to address it.

Asylum-seeker children mentioned the delays that some of them had experienced in getting into school after arriving in the UK. The secondary school children in this group were very focused on their career aspirations, and most saw school as the best thing about living in England, so they had found delays particularly frustrating.