

Children and young people giving feedback on services for children in need: ideas from a participation programme

1. Introduction

The Children's Commissioner has a key role in promoting children's right to be listened to and have their views taken seriously under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and, in particular, to promote the rights of those less likely to be heard. We have met with a number of groups of children and young people who are 'in need' or have been supported by child protection services in order to find out more about how they would like to give feedback on services. This began with our response to the Department for Education consultation¹, following the final report of the Munro review of child protection in which Professor Munro commented on the importance of understanding the experiences of children and young people and whether services made a difference to their lives. The views we gathered were included in the published analysis of the consultation responses. Young people have told us that they do not consider that their voice is heard sufficiently well when it comes to feedback on services. Indications from recent research are that their views are an 'under-developed source of information'.²

We wanted to hear from children and young people about how they might give their views on what helped them, whether the adults made things better and what they could have done to help more. We learned that children find it hard to do this, often do not understand the processes in which they are involved and they may not know what they were entitled to in the first place. We also learned that for children to see the point in giving feedback, they needed to feel they could influence their own situation and they wanted to know what happened as a result.

2. What we learned

- Children and young people said they wanted to understand; be understood and to hear what difference their views had made.
- Children and young people find it hard to talk or evaluate service provision at the organisational level if they cannot inform or influence what happens to them at an individual and personal level.
- Many young people do not know what they can expect from help, so they did not have a starting point for feedback. Our discussions indicated that it would be helpful for young people to have an idea about the professional's plan to improve their safety and wellbeing – what 'better' might look like. It would also be helpful for professionals to know what young people think 'better' might look like. All of this is likely to help young people to provide useful feedback on the help they received.

¹ Children's Safeguarding Performance Information Consultation for Department for Education April 2012

² <http://www.policyintelligence.co.uk/articles/article2.html>

3. Young people came up with five main messages about feedback

'It has to be the norm to listen to young people'

This is what we call a **listening culture** so what everyone expects is to listen and to be listened to. This might be assisted by local authorities and other organisations having, as a starting point, a pledge or a charter for children in need which made clear what they could expect from services – including how they will have a voice. Young people's charters have now been developed by many groups within organisations and, in discussion with these young people, we found they were valued above a 'pledge' because young people set the terms: a pledge could be required in response. There was a strong message that 'young people see things adults don't see' so if only adults come up with the questions they may miss what really matters to young people. As another example of good 'usual practice', young people considered it important that their views were included specifically in written plans. While this might be more common practice with care plans, many young people who were not looked after did not think that their own views about risks and protection were gained or included in a helpful way. The following points amplify further the principle of the listening culture.

'You've really got to trust them'

Young people wanted to **build trust** with their helpers, particularly their social workers, and to be clear that they would manage feedback well. Building a relationship with the helping professionals and feeling they mattered was of great importance to young people and how feedback would be received – particularly if this was negative – would influence the likelihood of young people giving it.

'Not all young people are the same'

Young people wanted to be seen as **individuals** and have a **choice of ways to be heard** according to their needs. We heard from a group of young people with special needs who would like the choice to give feedback as a group as this would make them feel stronger and also wanted more visual and creative approaches. Young people wanted the choice of more anonymous routes and to be supported by an independent advocate. Others wanted to be able to match the feedback method to the situation. This takes time and effort – especially for children who have different communication needs.

'It's about starting a conversation'

Young people told us that if they were going to give feedback, this needed to be **two-way** so they could **hear back** from adults. They wanted face to face conversations – so adults need to know how to talk with children and respect their views. *'If people make the effort to spend time with the child, it makes them feel valued and listened to.'* This links to the importance of ensuring that young people **understand the processes and roles** of those involved in the child protection and care systems: many young people have told us that they often do not and this needs to be checked out regularly. Explanations were considered to be the adults' responsibility, though some might ask if they trusted the adult. One young person also said *'you need to know that you can ask'*. Many young people wanted their social workers to have conversations with them about whether things are getting better for them and what they think needs to be done and this is where the feedback process began for them.

'It's the actions afterwards that have the impact'

Young people wanted to see that **their feedback has made a difference** and to have an **explanation** if something could not be changed. They stressed the importance of being informed about what happens as a result: *'It's the actions afterwards that have the impact'*; *'we want to see the differences – that's important to us'*. So feedback to young people after they had given their views was vital to young people.

4. Some practical ideas

Young people came up with many practical ideas for giving feedback. Top of their list were

For individual feedback:

- children's views are included in **written plans**
- each child to have a **relationship of trust** with an adult who they can tell about what is working and not working
- having **choices** and **creative ways** of contributing – through visual and other means
- having an **advocate**, especially if feedback was negative.

For general feedback:

- a **charter** created by young people and/or a **pledge** from adults against which claims can be made
- **groups of children** giving their views: some groups thought this was likely to send a stronger message and gave them mutual support
- a **comments box** or postcard to the director: this could be anonymous
- **online surveys or questionnaires**: most of the young people we spoke to thought these were only of limited use..

5. What might a charter and pledge for children in need look like and how would it be done?

'You have an argument to fight on – if it's agreed they have to go through with it'

- Children and young people could identify what they want to know about and the rights and expectations they have. This could start with a survey of children and young people about what is important to them.
- Young people could get together to write a charter with help from adults and negotiate a pledge for their area – the pledge to respond - much as Children in Care Councils have done. This could include such things as how children can get to see their social worker; their right to see the plans made to support them; that their views will be heard and how this will be done; how they can expect professionals to behave towards them.
- The charter would be written as part of having a 'listening culture' and the pledge would mean action on what it said. The Director and the elected Members responsible for children's services would agree to be held accountable by this and other professionals who are part of safeguarding

boards could sign up too.

- Plans would be made to check that the pledge was working and that children and young people knew how to complain if it wasn't.

6. Drawing on children and young people's feedback for inspection

We believe that drawing on the principles above, inspectors could both examine how well local authorities are gathering feedback by their own accounts and use a range of methods to check out whether young people hold the same view. The focus could include the following.

- How well do they make clear to children and young people their rights and what they can expect? For example: is there a charter or pledge to children in need as well as to those in care in which young people have been involved and a way of checking if this is working?
- Do they offer a choice to young people as to how they can give feedback and do young people hear about the outcome?
- Is it routine practice to include in written plans the views of children and young people about their own protection and needs?
- Are young people clear as to how they can access independent advocacy?

These ideas should have a local focus so that areas have thought about and worked with their own population of young people so that they come up with ways to get feedback which work for them.

Jenny Clifton
Principal Policy Adviser (Safeguarding)
December 2014