

How Looked After Children are Involved in their Review Process

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Abstract Children reporting on their research: Introduction by Mary Kellett. Following is an example of a children’s report on their own research project which I presented to the Symposium on “Children as Experts in their own Lives”. At the time I drew attention to the way in which less powerful groups are empowered within a context where their interests are more likely to be met, and when they set and lead their own research agendas. This situation has been shown to be the case for feminist, ethnic minority and disability research groups. Historically, research has been based on an adult way of looking at the world and, consequently, the knowledge generated is about adult experiences. The legitimacy of research into children’s worlds and children’s lived experiences, where the research is conceived wholly from an adult perspective, is open to challenge. The research agendas children prioritise, the research questions they frame and the ways in which they collect data can be substantially different and space has to be made to accommodate them. Moreover, evaluation data suggests that children’s engagement in the research process, particularly when this is about issues of concern to them, results in an augmentation of agency in their own and other children’s lives (Davies, B., & Ryan-Vig, S. (2004), Girls want to play too, <https://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk> [accessed 29/09/09]; Kellett, M., & Dar, A. (2007), Eleven year olds researching links between poverty and literacy. Published by Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, UK.). Arguably, the biggest impact of research by children is the contribution it makes to knowledge and understanding of childhood and children’s worlds. The number of child-led studies is growing steadily. The report (2008) that follows is authored by a group of young people in the UK care system who researched issues about their care review processes. The language, style and format of the report are their choice and have not been changed. The strength of the study is its insider

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perspectives. Young person to young person data were generated from within a peer culture where adults are outsiders. It is hoped that this paper will make an important contribution to the scholarly debate on the place of children in child well-being indicator research.

Keywords Young people as researchers · Looked-after children · Care review processes · Children's rights

1 Introduction

Have Your Say is a group of young people who are currently, or have been in care. We are keen to make sure that looked after children have their say in every aspect of their lives and the review process is an ideal way for them to do this. We know that there are a number of ways that young people in care can have their voices heard but we are specifically looking at the review system as it covers all looked after children and young people and is specific to their own situation. At the moment, there is no consistent way for looked after children and young people in North Tyneside to record their views confidentially before a review meeting.

We decided to do this research to try and improve the way looked after children have their views and opinions heard in the review system. We felt that many looked after children do not attend their review meetings as they think they will not be listened to and if they do go, they feel like they are talked about and not talked to. We also wanted to find out how involved they are in the organisation of the meetings and find ways for looked after children and young people to take a more active lead so that they feel like they have more control.

2 Literature Review

As part of our research we did a literature review to find out what evidence there was to support our decision to research the looked after children's review system. The North Tyneside Looked After Children's Charter was created to ensure that young people in the care system have the same treatment and opportunities as any other young person in North Tyneside. One of the pledges states that: *We will support, inform and involve you in the choices and decisions that affect all aspects of your life*. This pledge refers to things such as the review system and their promise to make sure that you are happy and comfortable enough to give your views, opinions and have your say on decisions that are made during your reviews. The Your Rights Your Say Placements, Decisions and Reviews: A Children's Views Report highlights a number of issues that young people across the country have with their reviews such as: -

- Who attends their review meeting?
- The young person being talked about as if they are not there
- Not having their views and opinions understood

North Tyneside Council's Corporate Parenting Strategy has a lot of information about how looked after children and young people can have their views heard but

there is no specific reference to the review system. Prior to our research, a task group of staff from North Tyneside was formed to look at the review system and they pinpointed some of the areas and issues in the review system that may need improving such as: -

- Making sure review meetings are a good experience and that young people feel comfortable
- creating a high quality consultation paper, which is available in different age related versions. This should also be available in electronic form
- encouraging young people to meet with their IRO on their own, prior to review meetings and have more time to spend with their social worker to prepare for the meeting.
- Making sure that everyone involved is clear about the purpose of the review process.

3 Research Aims

We hope that our research will improve the way they looked after children's review system works in North Tyneside, by improving the way adults listen to looked after children and finding better ways for young people in care to get their views across. Our research questions are:

- a) Who controls the review process?
- b) Are children and young people's views listened to in the review process?
- c) How can looked after children and young people contribute to the review process?

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Stage 1 We sent out information to all young people in care aged 10–17 who live in North Tyneside, inviting them to take part in one-to-one semi structured interviews with the aim of involving 40. The questionnaire was sent to those young people who said that they would like to be involved but could not attend an interview. Information was also sent to Social Workers of children and young people who are living outside of North Tyneside to give them the opportunity to take part. We ran a staff awareness raising session for key staff to make sure that they knew about our project and could encourage young people to take part as well as sending information out via email. We also put information into the foster carer's newsletter so that they knew about our project. Interviews were scheduled to take place in August at the Riverside Centre. We planned to run focus groups to gain further information and to ask follow up questions.

Stage 2 Questionnaires were to be given to young people when they left their review meetings so that we could find out how they felt immediately after the meeting. Similar questionnaires were to be given to Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers so that we could compare their perceptions and to gather information about review meetings where the young person did not attend.

As the Independent Reviewing Officers co-ordinated the completion of the questionnaires at this stage, we met with an IRO to explain the process to them and detailed information was given to all of their team.

4.2 Research Participants

During Stage 1, 14 young people took part in total:

- 9 young people took part in one-to-one interviews
- 5 young people completed questionnaires. 3 of those young people live in residential units, 1 outside of North Tyneside.

During Stage 2, we gained information from the reviews of 22 young people:

- The young person was present in 12 of the review meetings and completed the questionnaire.
- Information was gathered from the Independent Reviewing Officer and Social Worker in all 22 reviews.

Overall, we gathered data relating to the review meetings of 36 looked after children and young people, with information coming directly from the young people in 26 of those cases.

4.3 Research Ethics

As our research project involved looked after children, we had to be extra careful that they felt safe and protected when they took part. The young people needed to be confident that they could talk freely about their experiences without worrying that what they said would be passed on to anyone. All information gathered was only seen by Have Your Say and members of staff who supported them directly. To make sure that everything was kept anonymous, we gave each young person a number so that what they said could not be linked to their name. All information gathered was stored securely using North Tyneside Council systems and will be destroyed when the research project is completed. During the interviews, Rachel Gibson and Jennifer

White were around to support the interviewer in case any difficult issues were discussed. We had very clear procedures in place to deal with disclosures. These were explained to all participants before their interview and they signed an agreement to say that they were happy to be recorded on a Dictaphone. All of these recordings have been deleted.

4.4 Research Procedure

Despite publicising our project with a large amount of staff, the number of young people who responded directly to our initial letter was very low. Letters were sent to 90 young people but only 9 responded initially. We contacted the Social Workers for those young people who lived too far away to attend an interview to find out the best way to get them involved. After follow up work, 14 young people took part in Stage 1. Due to the low response, we decided not to run the focus group sessions—we also felt that we had gained enough information from the one-to-one interviews and questionnaires. Stage 2 of the research covered 22 looked after reviews taking place in September. All of the young people who took part in their reviews (12) completed the questionnaire, as did the social workers and IROs. This means that:

- We gathered information about the review meetings of 33.5% of our target group.
- 13% of our target group took part in stage 1 of the research.
- 11% of our target group took part in Stage 2 of the research
- 24% of our target group contributed directly to the research across both stages.

All of the young people who took part were sent a voucher and thank you letter.

5 Analysis

A) Who controls the review process?

During the first stage of the research, we asked the young people whether they think it is important to be involved in the planning of their reviews—**65% felt it was important**. We asked young people across both stages how involved they are in the planning and the results are shown below.

Where you asked where you wanted your meeting to be held?

31%—yes; 65%—no; 4%—not sure

Were you asked at what time you wanted the meeting to take place?

35%—yes; 57%—no; 8%—not sure

Where you asked who you would like to have at your meeting?

35%—yes; 61%—no; 4%—not sure

We also asked young people in stage 1 whether they felt some adults should only attend parts of the review meeting relevant to them and **65% said yes**.

B) Are children and young people's views listened to in the review process?

We asked all of those who attended their most recent review meeting about whether they felt listened to in the meeting.

- 76% felt that that they could say what they wanted to say at the review meeting.
- 76% also felt that the adults at the meeting listened to them.

We asked young people in stage 1 whether they had been asked for their views before their review meeting.

- 57% said yes but 36% said no.
- Of those who were asked for their views, 88% felt those views would have been passed on.

C) How can looked after children and young people contribute to the review process?

We asked young people whether they were asked if they would like to speak to an Independent Reviewing Officer before their review meeting. The results are shown below:

Were you asked if you would like to talk to your Independent Reviewing Officer before your meeting?

54%—yes; 38%—no; 8%—not sure

In stage 1 of our research, we asked young people questions about how they can contribute to the review process and asked about some of the methods suggested by the Review Task Group.

- A majority of the young people said they would be happy to complete a good quality consultation form either on paper (71%) or electronically (57%).
- Only 14% would like to keep a diary to record their views while 36% would write a statement to be used in their meeting.
- 71% said it was important to actually go to the review meeting

6 Research Findings

From our analysis, we have found the following:

A) Who controls the review process?

- Young people in care feel it is important to be involved in the planning of their review meetings.
- Children and young people in care do not have control over the planning of their review meetings and in many cases are not even involved.
- Adults are controlling the review process and not involving young people in decisions about where and at what time the meeting should take place, or who should be at the meeting.

B) Are children and young people's views listened to in the review process?

- While more than half of those involved said they were asked for their views before the meeting (57%) a large amount said they were not (36%).
- A large majority of those asked for their views (88%) felt that those views would have been passed on.
- Although many looked after children and young people are not involved in the planning and do not attend their meetings, they are listened to by adults when they do attend their meetings (76%).

- Most of those who do attend their meetings feel that they are able to say what they want at the meeting (76%).
- C) **How can looked after children and young people contribute to the review process?**
- More than half of the review meetings covered by the research did not have the young person present even though a large number of the young people involved (71%) thought it was important to attend the meeting.
 - Around half of the young people said they were not asked whether they wanted to meet with their IRO before the meeting and this is supported by information from Social Workers.
 - Young people would like a way to have their views recorded before the meeting other than talking to their social worker or carer.

7 Conclusions

We feel that children and young people who are looked after in North Tyneside do not feel that they are fully involved in the review process. Many are not asked about where and when they would like the meeting to take place and one said

The social worker just decides

Most know that they should go to the meetings

It's my meeting so I should go

but often do not have the best experience.

Some of their comments include:

I didn't want myself to be there to be honest. I don't like going to them but I can't not go to them because otherwise you don't get told what is happening.

I don't like going to meetings and sitting in front of loads of people

I don't want to hear anything bad I just get embarrassed

When asked what would encourage them to attend, one young person said:

Nothing I don't like people talking about me when I can hear it

Some young people have positive reasons for not attending their views. This could be because they are happy for their carer or social worker to pass on their views, or that they see themselves as part of a family and not 'in care'.

if you are settled you only need to talk on the phone

On the positive side, a number of young people were very happy with their review meetings. One stated that nothing could have made the meeting better while one said

Most of my reviews are good

Young people felt that in general they are listened to when they attend their meetings and that any views they have will be passed on

I put my views across and they would listen

although one person said that in meetings, the adults '*seem to talk amongst themselves*'.

We need to make sure that young people in care have a comfortable and positive experience in their review meetings. However, we know that some young people will never enjoy attending review meetings.

8 Recommendations

We wanted our research project to achieve the following:

- Raise awareness amongst looked after children and young people on their rights related to the review system
- Make the review system more young people friendly
- Encourage staff to be more consistent in the way they work within the review system
- Change people's behaviour so that they make sure children and young people are listened to and encouraged to share their views and opinions

We also wanted to know what is going well and keep those parts.

In order to achieve this, we recommend that the following happen:

- A checklist should be devised which social workers go through with a young person before the review meeting, to discuss and agree details. This would make sure that young people are asked for their views on the time and place of the meeting, who should be there and whether they would like to meet with their IRO. This could also cover whether certain adults should only attend relevant parts of the meeting, such as teachers.
- Looked after children and young people should be given clear information about the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the review process. While most had a good idea about what the review meeting is for, many were not clear about the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer. They also need to be clear about their own rights and responsibilities.
- There should be an ongoing opportunity for young people to evaluate their review meetings immediately afterwards. This could be done using a short questionnaire, similar to the one used in our research. If the Independent Reviewing Officer knew that a young person was not happy with the meeting, they could make sure it was better for them the next time.
- Looked after children and young people should be given opportunities to be involved in the process at different levels if they choose to. Young people who are confident are more likely to get involved—we should find ways for those who are not very confident to be involved as well if they want to be.

- We would like to see a consistent way for young people to record their views confidentially. This should be a high quality consultation booklet, with different versions depending on age and ability. This could also be made available in an electronic version. This will mean that young people, who choose not to go to their review meeting for whatever reason, still have the opportunity to get their views across.

The most important thing is that children and young people who are in care are given choice over how they are involved. If young people are given more control over their own reviews, they are more likely to contribute and have their views heard. Our research has shown that when they have the chance to give their views, they feel that they are listened to. This is the most positive thing which came out of our project and is a good, strong foundation for the looked after review system to build upon.