



Participation and safeguarding during COVID-19: The role of Mind Of My Own apps

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures that have been introduced, Coventry's children's services have dramatically changed the way they work to safeguard and support children and their families. Michelle Wallace, Participation Officer at Coventry City Council, explains how Mind Of My Own apps are helping staff and young people to continue to work together.

Maintaining children's links with workers

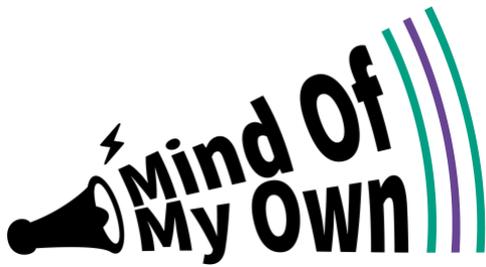
Children need to maintain links with their workers and know they are still there to support them, even when face-to-face contact is not possible. Our staff are using various forms of technology to carry out their role and Mind of My Own apps are a key part of this. We have been vigorously promoting the use of Mind Of My Own, particularly the use of young people's accounts so they can stay in touch with their worker and have access to the app 24/7.

Since March of this year, we have distributed a step-by-step guide to signing up to a young person's account and created a new information sheet for parents and carers so they can support their children to create an account and understand what Mind Of My Own can do for their child. We also encourage social workers to share the video guide that Mind Of My Own have made available.

There has been an increase in young people's accounts since COVID-19 restrictions were first introduced: 153 new young person's accounts, 52 new worker accounts and 448 statements submitted using the apps between March and October 2020. We are really pleased that our children and young people have Mind Of My Own as a way of staying in touch with their workers to share their views, wishes and feelings during these exceptionally difficult times.

Being creative with Mind Of My Own apps

As the lockdown and distancing situation has continued, our workers have become more creative in how they use Mind Of My Own for children who do not have their own account. Some meetings with young people have gone online. One of our family hub workers shared his screen over Microsoft Teams so they could use Mind Of My Own to structure the conversation and enable the young person to share their views and feelings. He was able to gather a broad range of information from the young person, who shared experiences from their past, information about their relationships and feelings of loss and hopelessness.



Chris Birkin, our family support worker, told us:

The young person's school arranged for her to be in an office at school on Teams, I signed in to Mind Of My Own and shared my screen.

In the past when I've used the app with young people, when the text box has come up they've almost not wanted to do all the typing. This time I was doing the typing as we were talking, she could see what I was typing and this prompted further conversations.

This young person and I had a face-to-face (via screen) chat and then moved on to Mind Of My Own. When we got to certain boxes, she gave me some answers but I was able to say 'I think we could put XYZ in here (things that she had already mentioned) what do you think?' and because I was typing for her, this freed her up to talk as openly as she needed to. It provided a starting point for some things and an elaboration point for other areas. I was able to say 'tell me more about this, what do you mean by that, or give me an example'. I really enjoyed doing it this way and she did too.

Strengthening the voice of the child

We make sure we're promoting our use of Mind Of My Own to social workers and early help. We've trained all our family hub workers across the city because they're working with families and children at an early stage. It's important they are able to understand what the child's life is like and the child is able to share that information at a point where support can be put in place early so things don't escalate.

While our workers use a range of direct work tools to get to know children and to help them share their views, wishes and feelings, Mind Of My Own has enhanced this. It's given our workers another valuable option to use alongside the child.

Children tell us they get tired of workers using the same approach and asking the same questions to find out about their lives - Mind Of My Own gives them a fresh way that can engage them. The feedback from workers is that some children who couldn't engage previously in a traditional way, can share things and open up through use of the app. And, of course, during COVID-19 restrictions the apps have been invaluable.

A lot of views we receive are from young people using the apps alongside their workers. Once children and young people send their worker a message using their own account, they usually continue to use that as a way of sharing their views.

Inclusion for children and young people

Before COVID-19 we implemented a new strategy to make sure that, as a participation service, we have contact with all our looked after children. We've started to visit every looked after person in children's homes, those children who are in placements outside of Coventry and those in custody. I've started engaging with all our young people in children homes, trying to find out how involved they feel in planning their care - that they feel safe and secure and checking they know about the advocacy service.



With my Mind Of My Own flyers, I go out to meet young people to show them the app on the laptop - what it looks like and how to create their own account if they want to. We've also been training all the residential care workers to make sure they know how to use the app.

I leave information on how to make a complaint and how to get involved with what the participation service has to offer, such as the children in care council, and ways to get more involved with our service as a whole.

A range of participation activities

One of our participation activities is involvement in recruiting social workers and managers in children's services. We have young people on interview panels who sit alongside professionals and are fully involved in the recruitment process. A few children I've met during my residential visits are currently not attending school and are quite disengaged. I've spoken with them about getting involved in interview panels so that they can gain skills and experience, give their views and make a contribution to the development of children's services by helping to recruit the best workers.

Children are paid for their work on recruitment panels and it's a great way for them to feel part of something and be rewarded for the good work that they do. My hope is that these experiences will give them a sense of purpose and identity which in turn may support them to re-engage in other areas such as education.

When I meet children in children's homes I ask about things they enjoy and their interests, so we can plan activities as a service around those interests. One young boy who loved to ride his bike so now I'm looking into a cycle training course just for looked after children. We've previously held a dance academy and a drama academy, and I've found that of the young people who attended those, over half then joined our voices in care council. That might have been the first time they met others in the same situation as them and met us as a team and it's why they were confident to join our children in care council.

Activities like these are a great way to get them to engage in other participation activities. The more young people that are involved in the children in care council, the more feedback we are able to gain about services and how to develop those services to meet the needs of our looked after children. My colleague will be visiting young people in custody to do the same - checking they're okay and that their rights and needs are being met.

Capturing the views of children in child protection conferences

In Coventry our social workers and schools work really closely together to ensure the views of children are captured in child protection conferences. As a former primary school pastoral manager, I know that pastoral staff often share the children's voices and do direct work to bring those voices to conferences. This is in addition to social work sessions with young people, which now can also use Mind Of My Own.



The *Prepare for a meeting* scenario within One app is used to help a child who might attend a conference to be ready and know what they might want to say. Any child who doesn't want to attend can use Mind Of My Own to create a statement in their own words for their social worker to share during the meeting on their behalf.

Our child protection chairs are vigorously promoting use of the apps to support child protection plans and to get the child's views. They're adding Mind Of My Own as an action to child protection plans so that the young person is supported to create an account and the social worker uses the app to gain the child's views, wishes and feelings. The child protection chairs will let us know if the social workers are unfamiliar with the apps and will refer the social worker to us for training and support in order to use the apps. I'm really pleased that our child protection chairs are on board and enthusiastic about Mind Of My Own being used as a way for young people to have their voices heard in conference.

In their own words

John Gregg, our director of children's services, could see how beneficial Mind Of My Own was for children's views to be heard and so, when we came to re-commission the apps in October 2019, we added the new scenarios 'Return from Missing' and 'My Education'.

Prior to this, when we were visiting family hubs to carry out training, many workers were discussing how difficult it could be to engage young people in return from missing interviews. They felt that if we had return from missing with Mind Of My Own then children and young people might be more likely to use one app in their own time to share information with their worker. The apps could help them verbalise their feelings so that their worker could provide the right sort of support.

When workers see statements from children in their own words it convinces them that the apps are effective and one of our main strategies is to gain feedback from both children and workers and share that throughout the service to promote use.

Charlotte, a social worker who used 'return from missing' fed back:

It was very useful. At first the young person refused to speak with myself and they had their head in their arms on the desk. However, they were happy to engage when they had to complete the Mind Of My Own work.

The young person found it very straightforward and it most certainly did help them to share information with me as prior to using it they did not wish to engage at all.

The information that was gathered through the app has been useful and has contributed to discussions with the parents, young person and the edge of care team.

For us, the great thing is that Mind Of My Own captures the child's views in their own words rather than relying on the interpretation of the adult to put across their perspective. Mind Of My Own enables the raw, unedited words of the child to be heard and that has a powerful impact on decision making.