



Participation: meeting the challenges

How to embed participation as a fundamental part of practice

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The challenges

Caseloads can limit the amount of time that workers have to really engage with each child or young person. It is important that direct work is reflected within case notes so that all professionals accessing them appreciate the child's wishes and feelings and how these have influenced the plan for moving forward.

As part of my role I regularly audit case files from the perspective of the voice of the child. When looking at files some of the elements I want to understand are the individuals' lived experience, their wishes and feelings and how they are involved in the plan moving forward. It is vital that we understand the impact we as professionals are having on children and young people's lives.

Participation needs to be multifaceted; our children and young people are not homogenous – they are individuals with different needs and aspirations. That said we are still living in austere times; we must work within the budgets we have whilst being as creative as possible.

A big challenge is ensuring that the voice of the child informs what we do. When we develop new services and make changes to existing practice, we must be sure that the young people are informed. Providing information to the young people involved needs to be timely, accessible and feedback should be sought from as representative a group as possible.

During COVID-19 young people took part in several virtual interview processes, informed the development of our CAMHS re-design, gave views about the adoption process and the tier 2 mental health service. They designed a feedback form and carried out research for a website proposal.

Overcoming the challenges

We involve children and young people in **commissioning**.

During the prequalifying phase, potential service providers must tell us how they make sure the views of young people inform their work. This question is set and marked by young people themselves. The young people's feedback really helps commissioners decide which



organisations are invited to put in a full bid. Young people also set questions for the next phase of selection and their feedback about the tenders is always shared with potential providers. This feedback is usually well received and helps providers think further about how to involve stakeholders in their work.

Children and young people should have a say about all aspects of life that impact them. This includes areas that are more difficult to talk about. For example, I visited a project to speak to children and young people impacted by domestic violence. They told me how schools could provide additional support to families and this was considered in the future development of services.

We also involve children and young people in **recruitment and training**. Young people with lived experience of social care issues have a perspective that most professionals do not have. A candidate's ability to relate to service users is left in no doubt when service users are part of the panel.

Each year, we survey all our looked after children and those leaving care to get a snapshot of our services, what's working well and areas for development. We then develop an action plan based on these responses which support teams across our children's services to develop.

Routinely, we **monitor participation activity across children's services** to check out how well children and young people's voices are being listened to and the impact those voices are having. My team has a database of all the looked after children and identifies what kind of participation activity they have been involved with. Where activity is limited, the team identify how they can better engage with the individual child/young person.

Making a difference

Practice informed by the input and views of our children and young people helps us identify where we need to focus our development, and what we can celebrate as working well.

Young people repeatedly told my team they didn't feel life story work was happening in the way they felt it should. It was important to investigate what good life story work looks like. Coventry has its own social work academy which agreed to carry out some detailed research on this issue. The participation team also consulted our children in care council known locally as Voices of Care. The result was our social work academy produced a good practice guide which incorporated the views of our children in care council. Children and young people are now feeding back positive messages about their experiences of life story work.



Winning hearts and minds

Coventry children's services do a variety of things. We hold 'parties' at Easter and Christmas which bring together looked after children, carers, staff and elected members to have fun together which enables staff and families to further develop their relationships in a relaxed/fun atmosphere. We also have an annual celebration event for looked after children aged 15 years and under, and a separate care leaver awards night for 16 plus. Partner agencies, our staff and carers are all encouraged to nominate looked after children in a variety of categories. Everyone that is nominated gets a certificate, there are also trophies which are presented at a huge celebration event. I produce a report afterwards that identifies percentages of children involved and who nominated them. Not only is it a lovely event where everyone enjoys themselves, but a little bit of competition exists amongst teams to nominate the most, which I think helps.

When training staff on the use of Mind Of My Own, the Participation Team focuses on the interests and needs of our staff so they can relate it to their areas of work. We also incorporate young people's views and experiences to make sure it really hits home with the workers. Once they start hearing the views of young people it helps relieve any anxiety, staff may have had about the app.

We also put out newsletters which share positive experiences of staff and services users. This includes a worker of the month - we have different reasons from them being the worker of the month It may not be the one who has used Mind Of My Own the most but stories of amazing breakthroughs. Once a worker has one up in our open plan offices suddenly everyone wants one!

Digital participation

As well as Mind Of My Own we use Twitter and Facebook, also Slido and Mentimeter in our conferences to get real time feedback from delegates. Digital participation is both necessary and important when working with children and young people. Digital forms of communication are part of everyday life for young people and if we want them to engage with us, we must accept that.

During COVID-19 restrictions, digital contact has really come to the fore. We worked virtually with a group of young people to identify how they wanted to be involved in the development of a new project. Using Mentimeter allowed the young people to express their views and vote in a variety of ways all at the same time. The approach was fun and not something the young people had previously tried which added to the excitement. Mind Of My Own has also been used extensively by young people sharing their feelings and keeping in touch with their workers.



I don't think we've even scraped the surface of the capabilities digital participation can offer. I would love to see more training to help develop this further. I believe there should be a mixed approach so it's accessible for all children and young people. It is also important to train staff. My observation is that when staff struggle to make sense of how to use digital tools in their work it has a knock-on effect and the young people don't get access to it.

Engaging the disengaged

Our participation activity database helps to identify young people who are currently not engaged, and we go to where they are to understand their needs. In addition, we also offer activity to attract those not interested in traditional participation. Before COVID-19, we involved them in activity such as a football tournament. Warmup may take the form of getting a ball through a hoop then answering a question tied to the hoop. It's part of the fun and as far as the participants are concerned it's just part of the warmup.

We also run drama and dance academies through the year, these tend to attract young people who normally wouldn't come anywhere near us for traditional participation, but they are happy to share once we build a rapport and demonstrate it can be fun to participate. If you asked them if they'd been involved in participation, they'd say no because they're just there to dance or do drama. The key is ensuring the activity is relevant, fun, accessible and allows young people to take some leadership and control.

During COVID-19 restrictions we ran more activities on-line, one example included sending out ingredients to make cakes to some of our young people and asking them to send us photos of the finished product with a description of how it tasted. Although we were all in our separate homes it was nice to know we were united in an activity and keen to share the finished product with each other.

The role of leadership

For me leadership is essential. Leaders should be active, accessible and in direct contact with young people. We had the director of children's services at the last Christmas party, he got involved in the activities with the children and met lots of carers. Elected members also regularly get involved in activities which means they get children and young people's views first-hand.

Our corporate parenting board has a young people's shadow board in attendance which prepares lists of questions on whatever the meeting theme happens to be. Recently we had a discussion regarding virtual schools. The young people had questions and ideas for



development which they presented at the board to elected members, partner agencies, senior staff and representation from the virtual school. Responses were recorded and actions developed, which will be monitored by the corporate parenting board. This way of working ensures the corporate parent is both accessible and accountable to looked after children and young people.

Responding to COVID-19 restrictions with Mind Of My Own

Like every organisation, we have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and have had to rapidly adapt our ways of working during restrictions, whilst keeping participation key to all we do. We quickly developed online training for staff in the use of the Mind Of My Own app. Staff adapted and were able to keep using the app even where meetings with children and young people were held virtually. We also sent out information to all our children and young people about the app and have prepared information in the 10 most common languages used in Coventry. We set our children and young people a challenge to use the app as a digital diary during lockdown. All this really helped to keep the use of the app up and helped young people to learn about all the additional features of the app.

Mind Of My Own is central, it is a great direct work tool, particularly as the worker and young person are looking at the screen rather than each other, making it easier to share difficult information. Both are busy using the sliders and other features rather than the child or young person feeling uncomfortable because they are the centre of attention. I find that being able to focus on the app helps young people to structure their thoughts and express their views. During COVID-19 restrictions, Mind Of My Own really came into its own as young people were still able to use the apps to share their views remotely without their worker needing to be in the room with them.

We really value the opportunity for our young people to send information into their worker using Mind Of My Own. That information is produced as a PDF and can be uploaded directly to case notes. This means the child's voice is captured in real time and in their own words! If a young person is having a meltdown and explains through the app how they're feeling - a worker can understand the raw emotion they are going through: emotion and feeling that the worker wouldn't get to the same level if they met them a day or a week later. Such understanding helps the worker respond appropriately and get a clear picture of what their lived experience was like rather than an abridged or watered-down version relayed days later.