

Are You Serious? Involving Young People in Children's Service Planning

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ABSTRACT *This paper was written by the Making A Difference Today (MAD2DAY) Group, which is a group of young people who came together over the past 24 months in order to support the participation and involvement of young people in the Western Area Children's Services Plan. This group, supported and mandated by the Western Area Children and Young People's Committee, has been based on the core principle of peer-led involvement in planning, and has recently hosted the 'Are you Serious?' Conference held at the Broomhill Hotel in Londonderry on 30 June 2003, at which some 120 young people representing organisations throughout the Western Area came together to give their views of the services available to them.*

The paper was delivered to the 'Think Global — Act Local' Conference held in Ballymena on 29 November 2002 to launch the four Children's Services Plans for Northern Ireland by Fiona Mullin, and to the 'Child Care in Practice' AGM at the in Belfast on 29 May 2003 by Stieneke Willis. It addresses the experience of the young people in MAD2DAY, and sets out a number of challenges that need to be taken up in order to create the conditions that will enable the views and experiences of young people to be incorporated into the planning process.

Introduction

We are a group of young people from Derry to Irvinestown. We have been involved in the Children's Services Planning process in the Western Board area for almost 2.5 years, since January 2001. I am here representing our group to pass on some key messages that we feel as young people, adults need to consider when 'consulting with' or 'involving' 'service users' in the 'planning of services' — see all the jargon, or waffle as I would call it, we have had to listen to and learn. So, why should very senior, professional and knowledgeable people, like yourselves, involve young people in your organisations?

- Very simple — 'It will make you look good' and you can quote it in all your reviews and reports.
- 'Inclusion is a government requirement'.
- 'You'll meet your targets'.

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- If you don't meet your targets — 'you can blame us if it all goes wrong'.
- If all that's not a good enough reason — 'it's the right thing to do'.
- Why should I get involved? 'What's in it for me?'
- I know I've 'made a difference'.
- I got to meet MLAs and told them what I thought about, the soon to be appointed, Children's Commissioner.
- I got to meet the likes of Norway's Children's Commissioner as well as the UN Special Envoy for Children in Armed Conflict — and impress them with some of the things you are hearing.
- 'I got to meet you' — not sure how impressed you might feel about that but it's going to look good on my CV.
- I was invited to be here so I feel that the expertise I've gained — being a young person as well as having gained knowledge about a range of things and the confidence to be able to brag about what I've done — has been recognised.
- I was involved in organising and hosting our 'Are You Serious?' conference on 30 January this year. We had young people from across the Western area who had a range of experiences: being disabled, homeless, on probation, in care, ex-care and with mental health issues. All of these had to have experience and attend the appropriate workshops under those particular headings.

They gave their experiences of how the services they received had helped and had hindered them. They also gave their ideas on how the various organisations, disciplines and professionals could make their services more relevant, how they could make their services 'needs led'. All this information is being presently feed back into the Children's Services Planning process in the West — to over 90 organisations.

But that is not the best thing about my experience of being involved. The conference was the stepping-stone to getting other young people involved. I helped devise the structure so that reference groups of young people, with the experience, can speak directly to the relevant adults whose services they use of and have experience of.

To let you know, over 75% of those attending our conference agreed to remain involved. Not bad given the 'types' of young people who were there. At the minute, these reference groups are being established and will be meeting adults from the appropriate subcommittee. Being part of this has been my greatest achievement.

Why Should These Young People Get Involved — 'What's In It For Them?'

- It's in legislation such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Order.
- 'Young people have the right to be heard'.
- 'It's also right that we are heard'.
- Millions, if not billions, of pounds are spent each year on research by big companies about what their customers like and don't like about the companies products and services, so 'If it's good enough for Mr Ford' then surely there's learning in what makes him successful.
- If you listen to what your customers are saying, you will 'delight your customers'.

- If your services are right, young people are less likely to go on the referral roundabout so 'get it right'.

That is what is in it for everyone. So, if you want to consult, involve or listen to young people, our messages to you are:

- 'Don't ask if you're not serious' — tokenism doesn't work and we can easily see through it. We'll vote with our feet ... and not come back.
- 'If the old ways worked, they would have worked by now' — I'm the only one here out of our group because of the time and venue of this. You have to be much more flexible and creative when trying to get young people interested. Remember we don't work 9–5.
- 'Translator required'. A translator is the link between people of different languages, cultures and traditions. Young people and adults are different and there has to be a link person who can not just work with and understand all the jargon, but they have to be able to explain this in a way which is interesting to young people. On top of this, they have to be able to motivate and encourage them so young people can be standing in places like I am here today. Again, remember this is not our job. This is on top of family and friends, school, work ... emailing, texting and stuff.

Here is the story so far in our group:

- Adults took responsibility from the start.
- Success matters.
- They had to let go.
- Believe and achieve.
- You be patient with me and I'll be patient with your 'processes', 'procedures' and 'problems with ...'.

Here's the structure that we're trying to create in Children's Services Planning (Figure 1). We want you people to be involved in all of the levels, supporting each.

'It Will Cost You'

- Money.
- Effort.
- Risk.
- Time.

Given the right opportunity and support, young people can achieve great things and make it worthwhile for both you and I so please do not patronise us.

To Finish Some Messages

- Tokenism doesn't work ... find new ways.
- Employ a co-ordinator.
- Meet at our place — in our time.
- We don't all use diaries ... or want to use diaries.
- It takes time.

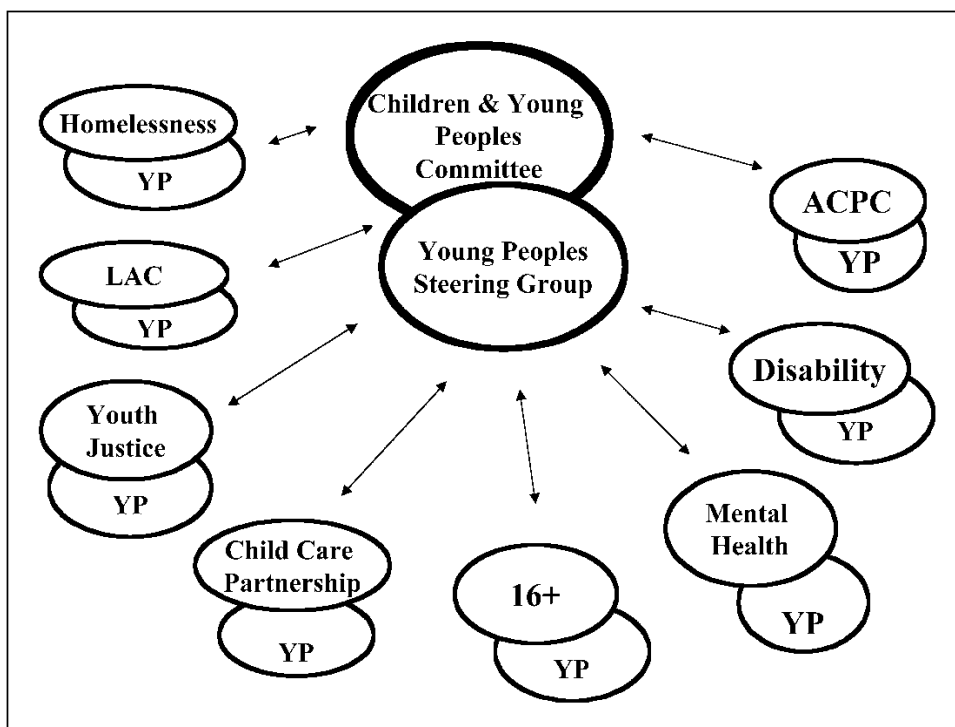


Figure 1. Model for young people's involvement in children's services planning.

... Final Thoughts

- Learn to text.
- Sometimes we don't know what we want right away ... give us choices.
- Just when you thought you had it sorted we all grew up ... think long term.
- We are the experts.
- It's really important.