



Voice and Influence in the Youth Justice System



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Introduction

Involving service users makes services more effective and can also have benefits for service users too (Clinks 2010)¹. In the youth justice system, NCB² research found that although young offenders have the same right to have their views taken into account as other young people, there is a lack of strategic direction as to how this should be implemented. Expectations are limited to the 'engagement' of young offenders rather than enabling them to have a say in decision-making and there are a number of barriers to young people's participation within the youth justice system.

During 2009–10 the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Youth Agency (NYA) to undertake research with Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)³ and service users to examine the extent of service user participation and identify examples of good participatory practice within YOTs.

Executive summary

- NYA research has found that whilst there are some examples of good participation practice this is not widespread across YOTs and there is a general lack of strategic direction within YOTs.
- The youth justice system doesn't encourage user participation. YOTs are governed by National Standards and reporting requirements and are not sufficiently measured on participation performance.
- There is some misunderstanding among youth justice practitioners of what participation is and many suggest they have too little time and too few participation methods and resources to engage with young people in a meaningful way.
- Young offenders have little experience of participation and have low expectations about their ability to influence their individual plans and shape YOT services, but many would like more opportunities to do so.
- Participation can improve outcomes for young people and youth justice practitioners and YOT services by increasing access and use of services and positive experience and feedback about services. Participation can also contribute towards reducing reoffending rates, by increasing compliance and reducing breach rates.

What is participation?

NYA research found participation means different things to different youth justice practitioners, and may be influenced by a range of factors including the professional background and training of staff. As one YOT practitioner commented:

There is a misunderstanding about what participation is, if you come from a youth work background you understand, whilst others might see participation as simply sending a young person to constructive leisure activities.

Practitioners we interviewed gave a variety of definitions for participation from: *two way communication between young people and practitioners, engagement with services, compliance with orders*, through to those who viewed participation as: *empowering young people to have voice and influence in the services that affect them* and many interviewees felt it was crucial that:

Participation is absolutely integral to the work we do, we can't do our work without their active involvement and young people won't change without buy-in.

Ipsos MORI (2010)⁴ research suggested practitioners found it difficult to define participation and to differentiate between engagement and participation, although clear overlaps were found with participation defined as “*young people turning up to appointments, meeting targets and completing worksheets*” and engagement as “*forming positive relationships, being motivated to change and being aware of the consequences of behaviour.*”

The NYA definition of participation differs from the more passive definition suggested by Ipsos MORI and YJB⁵. We define participation as young people having a voice and influence within the youth justice system in line with the UNCRRC⁶. We believe participation requires young people to have a voice and influence within their individual orders and with the service design and delivery more akin to co-production as suggested by service users we interviewed:

Participation is the process within which young people engage and subsequently influence the decision making process which in turn then brings about the necessary change in themselves, their peers, the service providers and in time their communities.

Young people's views

As part of our research we consulted with young people from six YOTs representing a geographical spread across England and Wales including both rural and metropolitan areas and YOTs of different sizes. To ‘practice what we preach’ the NYA employed young people with direct experience of the youth justice system to coordinate and facilitate the research.

The young people consulted were either interviewed at random whilst waiting for their appointments or consulted in small focus groups. Each young person was rewarded with a £10 High Street voucher for their participation.

In total 33 young people, 24 males and 9 females, took part in the research. The young people were aged between 11 and 19-years-old with the average age being 16 years. The majority of young people described their ethnicity as White British with only two young people from Black and Minority Ethnic groups. The young people were subject to a wide range of orders such as YIP⁷, YISP⁸, ISSP⁹ and IRS¹⁰ and included some recently released from custody and those on prevention programmes.

Findings

Many of the young people we spoke to had long histories of statutory service involvement in their lives. Often their experiences were negative due to their inability to influence decision makers and perceived adverse decisions made about their own lives. Some also felt they were not listened to when they had requested statutory help, as explained by one young man:

Social services have been in my life for most of it, but when I have needed them most they have not been there for me.

Young people spoke of deep rooted distrust of authority and in particular social services, the police, and schools. Reasons for this distrust included: *not being treated with respect, not being listened to, labelling, not being treated equally* and feeling negatively stereotyped by practitioners because of previous bad behaviour.

Many young people spoke of feeling disempowered and apathetic towards any statutory intervention and where possible some attempted to disengage with services.

It is not therefore surprising that when we asked young people about their participation within the YOT some were very sceptical about the research and what difference the research would make, but nevertheless were keen to participate. As one young person stated: *I want to be heard so people understand we're not all bad.*

● Engagement with YOT

Young people were generally more positive about their involvement with the YOT when compared to other statutory services and several young people who had been involved with the YOT for a number of years acknowledged that over time they had become more receptive to the service and staff:

Been with the YOT a long time, you get to know them and they get to know you, but takes time.

● Engagement with staff

For the majority of young people whether their YOT was deemed good and whether they engaged depended very much on the relationship young people had with YOT staff, as two young people commented:

My worker is down to earth, most of them they don't know and they can't connect, mine I speak to her as a friend; I look up to her.

My worker always listens to me when things are going wrong in my life, I can ring him anytime I need to.

The most important qualities young people felt were important in their YOT workers were those who shared similar experiences and background and who could communicate effectively with them, as one young person stated:

They need to employ people like us, who understand, not prim and proper stuck up workers, ones that are on our level and talk our language.

Young people also said they wanted a YOT practitioner they can trust, someone who is reliable and consistent, with whom they share mutual respect, someone they can have a laugh with and someone who listens, as summarised by a group of young people at an attendance centre:

Our attendance centre workers were alright, we had a bond with them and respect ... felt comfortable with them ... they let us go outside [for a cigarette] they were funny, and we all got on straight away.

However, not all young people were positive about their workers, some complained about the rules workers set, many suggested they did not always get to see their own worker, or their worker wanted them to talk during appointments when there were underlying or personal reasons why they did not want to talk openly, as one young woman stated:

Workers are petty, rigid, and stubborn, you don't always get to see your own worker, and they think you want to talk to them when you don't.

Many complained about double standards where their workers enforced rules that they themselves did not adhere to, which caused resentment and frustration amongst some young people:

If we are late we get a warning letter, if the workers are late they tell us to get over it.

My YOT worker was due to come for a session 2-5pm at home but didn't turn up until 3.20pm, supposed to be there by 2.30 so I went out at 3pm. I got breached and worker said they were late for personal reasons. Doesn't work both ways, we can't use personal reasons for an excuse.

Some young people, particularly from rural areas, complained it could take them up to two hours by public transport to get to YOT appointments and public transport was more often than not late which could lead to being breached for something they felt was out of their control. One young man suggested workers need to understand the reasons why a young person is late: *Don't say you are late, first ask us about our problems.*

Young people felt they had little influence or choice about where or when they met their worker or attended the YOT which they felt could adversely affect their ability to comply with their order. A few young people stated they would like home visits but their YOT did not offer them and others said they would like and would benefit from participating in group work sessions but they were not offered by their YOT.

● Participation experience

Several young people said they felt involved with the individual plans and were able to influence what their individual plans contained but very few young people said they had any experience of involvement in developing or designing the services they were subject to:

Here [at the YOT] if I made a suggestion or had an idea they would listen, but I haven't in other services – they always talk down to you.

Many of the young people had realistic ideas of what they would like to do and what would make a difference to them within the YOT programmes and services they received:

It's our Saturday, when we come here we want to do something good to make amends for the bad stuff we've done and we can also do something they want to do.

If I was listened to, if I was given the tools to survive – education, skills – my life might be better.

Need to look at young people as individuals, not as a piece of paper, understand the reasons why you have done it, not just offending behaviour.

Some young people found their YOT programmes and contact useful mainly because it made them think about the consequences of their own actions. As one young man admitted: *You learn about consequences.* A small number of young people thought because they were not offending whilst attending the YOT that in itself was a positive thing. Yet other young people suggested there were often little or no benefits from the YOT services they received, as one young person commented:

Some programmes are not there for your benefit, sometimes they are no help.

Most young people on statutory orders said they did not enjoy their YOT visits or programmes but were resigned to the fact they are required to attend: *Don't like it but have to come.* However, the young people we consulted on prevention programmes were generally more positive about the services they received, as one young woman said:

I enjoy YISP activities, I liked last summer where we went skiing, and I loved getting stuck in.

A few young people were highly critical of the YOT services they received as they suggested they did more harm than good:

Just coming here is pathetic, just makes me angry and want to go and offend.

Some service users spoke about their lack of involvement in sessions and how this led to a complete lack of engagement with the YOT services provided. As one young man said:

They get all these people to come down here and talk to us without explanation and we don't know anything and if we get asked to do something we just rip it up.

A few young people felt the YOT was not really interested in helping and supporting them, and some felt the support they received was too short term, as one young man on Integrated Resettlement Support commented:

YOT don't care about you, two months later they chuck you out with no support, and help doesn't last.

Views from youth offending practitioners

In September 2009 we sent an electronic questionnaire to all 157 YOTs across England and Wales asking for information about participation practices. In total we consulted 27 YOTs and this was followed up with in-depth telephone or face-to-face interviews during 2010 with participation leads with 12 YOTs. A list of all the YOTs that took part is included in Appendix A.

During our consultation we asked specifically about participation activities within YOTs, whether young people are involved in strategic planning of services, staff recruitment, training and induction, how young people are consulted and engaged, whether young people are involved in planning their individual and group work programmes, does their service have a dedicated participation lead officer, does the YOT use a strategic mapping and planning tool for participation and what are the benefits and barriers to young people's participation within YOTs.

Findings

In line with the Hear by Right participation standards framework developed by the National Youth Agency (detailed in Appendix B) we have grouped our research findings around the Seven S model for organisational change, starting with shared values which is central to the participation standards framework.

● Shared values

The NYA believes it is vital for YOTs to have a central commitment to the participation of children and young people and should adopt the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognising Article 12's central role. There also needs to be honesty about what young people can and cannot change and what the limitations are due to the YOTs statutory responsibilities.

Only one of the YOTs we consulted explicitly mentioned it had adopted article 12 of the UNCRC as part of the overall mission of the organisation. Overall, YOT practitioners said knowledge of the UNCRC amongst YOT staff was generally low:

Nobody knows about the UNCRC and young people's right to have a voice. Whether you understand participation or not you have to understand that young people have a voice.

We held a fun UNCRC activity at service briefing recently and I realised there was little knowledge amongst staff about what this is and what it means. Next stage is a participation workshop to look more

in depth at UNCRC, what is participation, participation map exercise and bounce some ideas around.

We are currently involving young people in reinterpreting Hart's ladder of participation to make it relevant and have meaning to young people.

● Styles of leadership

Promoting the participation of children and young people means changing a YOTs' culture and requires leadership with courage and clout among staff, management, board members and children and young people themselves. While dedicated YOT staff will be needed to establish and develop good working practices with children and young people, support at a senior and executive level is essential to champion the cause and build in the structures, systems and resources for maximum impact.

During our research we were made aware of a few heads of service who were instrumental in the creation of YOT participation posts and high priority given to participation within the YOT:

Our head of service is passionate about Voice and Influence having funded the first full-time dedicated Voice and Influence Coordinator over the past five years within the criminal justice system in England and Wales.

Our head of service is the driver behind the creation of the participation officer role and is keen to make improvements.

One head of service regularly gave young people the opportunity to meet and discuss any service issues on a face-to-face basis:

We hold quarterly 'meet the manager' meetings in each of the four areas between 4 and 6pm.

Several YOTs identified participation as a key management priority that features as a standing agenda item on board, management and performance meetings as well as staff supervision sessions:

Participation issues are picked up during management meetings both operational and strategic as well as staff supervision sessions.

Via the Voice and Influence process feedback and recommendations go to the YOS management team.

● Strategies

Hear by Right (see Appendix B) is a useful framework for developing a YOT participation strategy. There needs to be coherence across all YOT plans and clarity that the purpose of the participation strategy is action for change and needs to be specific about resources of time, money and people, including what is required to sustain and develop the participation of a range of groups of children and young people.

As part of our research we asked YOTS whether they had used Hear by Right or any other participation tool

which allows for existing participation activities to be mapped and planned. Our research found that Hear by Right is not widely known or used by YOTs and where Hear by Right is used it usually reflects a strong participation lead within the YOT often supported within Integrated Youth Support Services or at strategic level as the following quotes from practitioners and example illustrate:

To complete the Hear by Right self assessment I read all our policy documents and spent time talking to staff and young people on a variety of orders. I did some duty cover to get an understanding of some of the issues. As part of my evidence gathering for the Hear by Right mapping I spoke to lots of young people informally about the service.

We have used Hear by Right as an audit tool. We have identified key areas for planning and improvements and are looking at what we can do in both the short and longer term. I am taking it to the County Council Participation Lead in a couple of weeks and intend to do some Hear by Right briefings for staff as I want to get the staff on my side.

Example

Staffordshire YOS has developed a three year plan to implement Hear by Right standards and has mapped current participation practice and identified actions for improvement. A Participation Lead and Participation Steering Group have been formed and members have received participation training. The steering group is responsible for cascading training across the organisation and for the participation strategy action plans.

● Structures

Structures to set up and sustain young people's active involvement within a YOT need to be accessible to a range of children and young people, avoiding over-reliance on a small group and responding especially to those most often left out. Structures need to be flexible and open to regular rebuilding and renewal. Many successful models are more local or task specific, where children and young people's involvement can be more relevant, engaging and fun.

Commissioning/service design

Very few of the YOTs we consulted had developed structures for young people to shape the design and delivery of YOT services. Of those YOTs that did involve young people, the majority were those involved in the design and development of prevention services and ISSP programmes:

We have just started involving young people in commissioning using young people on ISSP in the retendering of ISSP programmes.

YISP is very good at participation and ensuring young people are actively engaged in the design and delivery of their summer programmes.

Both prevention and statutory teams encourage young people to contribute to planning groups and sessions.

Young victim consultation helps shape the design and delivery of young perpetrators intervention programmes.

Each year over one hundred young people within the YOT make a positive contribution to the development, delivery, evaluation and improvement of their service from a young person's perspective by actively engaging in the Voice and Influence process.

Several YOTs acknowledged they were developing young people's involvement in the design and development of YOT services:

Some involvement and developing – all teams have action plans to develop this work.

Individual intervention plans

Many YOTs suggested young people were able to actively contribute their voice and influence towards their individual orders, as the following examples illustrate:

Yes, this is absolutely encouraged by staff teams, given the often limited parameters of their court orders eg timescales

Young people and their parents are always involved in the intervention plans. They may not always agree the interventions but are part of the process of identification and understand the processes and principles of what types of interventions are to be used.

Consultation and feedback

One of the main ways YOTs suggested young people were encouraged to contribute their voice and influence was via service user consultation and feedback. Some practitioners highlighted limited opportunities for young people to convey their voice and influence within existing youth justice arrangements, as one practitioner stated:

With Asset¹¹ whilst there are opportunities for young people and parents to contribute, in practice it is usually only the practitioners' views that are recorded and often these are not done thoroughly.

A few YOTs acknowledged they have created their own consultation and feedback processes as the following participation officer commented:

Our YOS has replaced the "What do you think form?" as we really want to know what young people think, the new form is computer based and we are currently consulting with young people about it.

Some YOTs stated they encourage young people to give feedback at the end of every programme session:

Young people complete an evaluation form at the end of every session. This is collated and provided to the intervention team meeting. This can then be forwarded to the performance meeting.

Many YOTs encourage young people to give feedback about the services they have received during YOT review meetings:

As part of the YRO¹² case review we ask all young people what's worked and what hasn't worked, which will give us a great opportunity to revise their plans.

The majority give opportunities for young people to feedback at the end of the young person's order, as the following statements illustrate:

Every young person does a Viewpoint session at the end of their order to provide feedback on the service they have been given. This is then collated and provided at a monthly performance meeting with managers.

Young people's views are gathered at the end of their orders. The information is collated by me and if there are concerns about a particular programme then we will have a look at them and see what can be done to resolve them.

Several YOTs reported service user feedback is systematically fed into YOT management and performance meetings and some display service user feedback in publicity materials in YOT reception areas as the following quote and example illustrate:

We have an exit interview feedback questionnaire developed by young people and completed with a volunteer. The anonymous results are fed back to the participation officer who collates the information which is presented to the management board and also goes on publicity boards.

Example

Rotherham YOS has made a commitment to deliver Voice and Influence opportunities to young people. Voice and Influence is a robust process to systematically gather feedback from young people subject to YOS interventions as it is recognised that the effectiveness of the service depends on listening and responding to the young people involved in the criminal justice system. On a voluntary basis young people across the range of court orders are encouraged to provide feedback by expressing their views about their experiences during their time at the YOS. This can be done in two ways:

1. Have Your Say form – forms are distributed at YOS receptions and staff are encouraged to provide opportunities for young people to complete the forms at any time, which are simple to complete and consist of four questions. Feedback is collated every six months by the Voice and Influence Coordinator, who produces a Voice and Influence report presented to the strategic director and YOS Management Board. On average 150 feedback forms are completed a year.
2. Young people's questionnaire – at the end of the court order each young person is offered a voluntary appointment with the Voice and Influence Coordinator and in the first six months of 2010 90 young people took part. Feedback from these meetings is fed into the Voice and Influence process along with Have Your Say feedback.

In addition to service user feedback at review or at exit interview, some YOTs provide other opportunities for young people to feedback, either through a suggestion box or through the YOT complaints, compliments and comments procedure. Some undertake ad-hoc consultations with young people for specific purposes, as the following examples demonstrate:

When I started in my role as participation officer I consulted with service users to gain their views of the service. So far I have undertaken more than 50 questionnaires with young people and the feedback has been there have been very few issues with staff but more concerns with structural issues.

Young people engaged in research and activity around stop and search leading to presentation to senior police officers and elected members. This has led to direct input into the training programme for new PCSOs¹³ and Safer Neighbourhood Team officers.

We are also consulting with young people about developing and maximising the complaints, compliments and comments form.

Literature and resources

The majority of YOTs stated they involve service users in the design of YOT service information and publicity materials

We are involving young people in the design of new service information ie YISP and YRO information leaflets.

Young people involved in the development and design of our feedback cards.

Young people have recently designed 'anti-knife' posters that are proudly displayed within our reception areas.

Example

Young people from Reading YOT developed an eight week Knife Possession Prevention Programme for young people convicted of weapon related and violence offences. The programme includes two short films – “Impact of Knives” focusing on the potential devastating impact of knives and features actual stories from local knife crime victims and the families of deceased victims and “Act of Knives”, featuring a fictitious story about carrying knives developed by a group of young people on statutory orders, with support from staff at Reading YOT. Reading University was involved in the development, design and production of the films and accompanying knife crime resources.

The young people were also involved in the accompanying Knife Crime Prevention Programme aimed at raising awareness of knife crime in schools and youth clubs in Reading.

Design and layout of YOT reception/interview rooms

Some YOTs have involved young people in the redesign of reception areas and interview rooms in an effort to make them more inviting and young person friendly. One YOT said they had involved young people in painting and decorating the YOT whilst other YOTs cited health and safety issues prevented young people from actually carrying out the work themselves.

Examples

Reading YOT's Head of Service consulted with young people informally while they were waiting for their appointments and asked what they thought about the reception area and what would make it more comfortable. The HOS said: Most service users weren't brave enough to be critical, but we were able to talk about what they did value, ie the information supplied through posters, leaflets, etc. The reception has now been redecorated, has new furniture and display boards and has a music license to play the radio.

Rotherham YOS has redecorated the two town centre office receptions because of feedback from young people who said they wanted magazines and music in the reception area. The YOS has bought music equipment and gained a music license and young people have voluntarily helped to redecorate the waiting areas and using their own tags and graffiti have created art that represents their voice and influence.

Inspections

A number of YOTs involve their service users in inspections, not only as mystery shoppers within their own services but also as part of wider teams that inspect local youth services, as demonstrated in the following examples:

We have a borough-wide young people inspection programme but this is not just for young people involved with the YOS but also includes marginalised young people who are at risk of teenage pregnancy, NEET and young people in care. The YOS was inspected recently when Connexions pulled out at the last minute and the inspectors went in as kind of mystery shoppers.

We have also developed our Young Inspectors Programme and with the support of Connexions have trained two young people who have conducted an initial inspection and we have several other young people who want to be trained.

Service user forum/reference group

A number of YOTs have, or are in the process of setting up or would like to set up, a youth forum/reference group for service users:

We are looking into setting up a service users' reference group, particularly with those young people on intensive support and surveillance programmes.

Example

Hackney's Youth Offending Team supports a number of service users who are members of the shadow board that helps to inform the YOS business plan, policies and strategies. Shadow board members sit on the local children's trust board. Young people as shadow board members meet regularly to discuss issues around living in Hackney, future careers, supporting the community and youth participation.

A few YOTs encourage young people to actively participate in forums outside of the YOT, as the following participation officer explained:

We encourage young people to voluntarily engage in the wider children and young people's agenda. At present 65 young people have contributed to the prioritising of funding for the Children and Young People Plan 2010-2013 and we are hoping to get this figure to 80 young people.

● Systems

Systems are needed to support and sustain children and young people's involvement within YOT activities and to record outcomes. YOTs need to consider the impact on children and young people and to ensure practice is safe and sound, thinking through children and young people's consent, safety, access, rewards for involvement and support needs.

Young people are consulted on policy and service delivery changes.

We have recently introduced Quality Impact Assessments whereby we are involving young people in new policies.

Several YOTs have established peer mentoring programmes where young people are trained to mentor and support other young people:

We have developed the peer mentor service so young people are met by a peer mentor on their first visit [to the YOT] to explain the processes from a service's perspective.

A peer educators programme has been rolled out in one area by the participation lead. The plan is for participants on the peer education programme to work towards becoming future peer educators.

Motivation was identified by several practitioners as a key factor to supporting and sustaining young people's participation within the YOT:

We push motivation with young people. They have an initial two week induction which is all centred around motivational work conducted with their key worker.

We are trying a different way of working at the moment. When a case manager has a new case, they do

not put a young person immediately onto a group for example but for the first two weeks use that time to get to know them and motivate them. This is key to engaging them.

Very few YOTs have participation budgets. Some provided innovative examples as to how they encourage young people to participate:

You have to dangle a carrot – it might be their participation in an activity is classed as a contact so they might not need to come in again that week, it might be involvement in something that they get accredited for or experience say in recruitment and selection procedures. We find financial incentives very difficult especially if the person has been convicted of a violent offence. Food is always a good incentive and we will cover travel expenses.

● Staff

YOT practitioners need to support and contribute to the development of practice and policy on children and young people's participation. Staff need to appreciate the benefits to support participation for both YOTs and service users, and sometimes there is reluctance from some to share power.

Involving young people in the recruitment and selection, induction and training, supervision and appraisal of YOT practitioners are all important ways to help develop participation within a YOT. Some YOTs already involve young people in the recruitment and selection of certain YOT roles such as head of service, case workers and participation officers, as the following quotes illustrate:

I was interviewed for Head of Service by a young person panel as part of the recruitment process. After all the questions, I was asked to tell a joke that I thought was funny – it was a brilliant question.

Young people are involved in the recruitment and selection of some staff, usually with a separate young people board, but this may not be the case with police and probation secondees. Young people were entirely responsible for my recruitment and even had to ring me to offer me the job and they were really surprised at how long it took for me to take up the position due to the delays with CRB checks.

Although many YOTs were keen to develop young people's involvement in induction and training practice only a very small number of YOTs involve young people in YOT staff induction. As one practitioner commented:

We have produced a DVD training manual with young people that we use as part of the staff inductions.

Having dedicated and accountable participation staff within a YOT to coordinate and implement the participation strategy is vital. Ideally the post holder needs to combine direct work skills with children and young people along with ability to influence and make strategic impact and the post needs to be adequately resourced. However, very few YOTs have dedicated participation staff as described, with a few notable exceptions as follows:

Our YOT has a full-time dedicated worker responsible for developing the participation lending library for staff, providing regular YOS team awareness raising events coordinating all service user consultation and

feedback and related activities and providing additional opportunities for young people to contribute their voice to influence the children's agenda and wider community.

Several YOT participation posts were part-time and some short-term funded:

I am a part-time participation officer and also parenting coordinator which complements the participation work as well because I am aware of parents' points of view too. I take the responsibility as participation officer to remind staff of the importance of participation work and work directly with young people on specific participation projects.

More often the role of participation lead is an additional responsibility attached to a full-time role, which ranged from head of service, middle manager to junior youth inclusion programme worker. Many YOT practitioners suggested that despite participation being integral to the work of the YOT because there is no funding or strategic priority given to participation it is difficult to justify and create a dedicated role:

Whilst participation needs to be incorporated in everything we do on a daily basis, the reality is that to do this properly and engage young people in full consultation regarding development of a service, requires dedicated time and resource, which just isn't available currently.

Where YOTs had participation officers, there was a suggestion that some YOT staff wrongly assume they do not need to get involved in participatory work and can hand work over to the dedicated postholder:

Having a dedicated participation officer is a good thing but it can also mean some colleagues think they can pass participation over to you to do.

● Skills and knowledge

Building the skills, knowledge, confidence and capacity of YOT practitioners and children and young people is crucial for their participation to be meaningful. Training and support is also important to encourage participation and sell the benefits to both YOT staff and young people.

A few YOTs provide participation skills and training for YOT practitioners. Where YOTs have a participation lead many have developed and delivered some form of participation awareness raising or training for staff, as outlined in the following examples:

Examples

Sheffield YOS has developed a participation toolkit, and participation training has been provided and a large proportion of staff has already accessed this. The next stage is to provide participation training for YOS volunteers.

Stockport YOS, with support from the participation practitioner, has provided some staff with participation training. The diversity and participation group will be responsible for rolling this training out further to staff.

Staffordshire YOS participation steering group has received participation and Hear by Right training from the National Youth Agency. Steering group members are responsible for cascading training across the YOS via their teams.

A handful of YOTs benefit from participation training developed and supported by local authority participation lead officers:

The county council has developed core corporate induction training on participation which is for all staff.

Many practitioners admitted their organisations needed to improve participation knowledge, training and skills for staff, volunteers and young people. Particularly as mentioned earlier in this report as YOT practitioners acknowledge there was a lack of recognition of the UNCRC and understanding of what participation means and the benefits for both YOTs and young people.

Benefits to YOTs

YOT practitioners have suggested there are many benefits to increasing young people's participation in YOTs. The benefits suggested include:

- YOT services including structures and systems changed and improved for young people and new services introduced.
- Increased access and use of services and positive experience and feedback about services.
- Reduced reoffending rates, breach and increased compliance which may save money.
- YOT practitioners develop their knowledge, skills, improves job satisfaction, motivates staff and gives them an added sense of achievement knowing they are empowering young people, and can reduce paperwork ie reduced breach paperwork.

Benefits to service users

YOT practitioners also suggested there are many benefits to service users. These include:

- Increased social inclusion and levels of responsibility of young people through involvement in youth forums and inspections.
- Improved relationships and the perceptions of young people with YOTs and in the wider community.
- Enhances young people's personal development including motivation and sense of achievement, confidence, self belief and pro-social behaviour.
- Empowers young people to have an increased belief in their ability to create change and levels of control over elements of their lives.
- Improves literacy levels, gain practical skills, increases positive career choices and employment prospects.
- Reduces breach, increases attendance and compliance and can reduce reoffending.

Barriers to young people's participation

Finally, we asked YOT practitioners what they felt were the main barriers to participation within the youth justice system. Practitioners raised several key points including:

- Culture within youth justice system doesn't encourage user participation. YOTs are governed by National Standards and reporting requirements, focused mainly on managing risk and reducing reoffending.
- YOT practitioners repeatedly spoke of having too little time and appropriate methods and resources to engage with young people in a meaningful way.
- YOTs are multi-disciplinary teams and different organisational employment practices can make it difficult to have consistent participation practices across the organisation.
- Staff do not understand participation, different professional training and values, and lack of commitment from management.
- Young people on statutory orders may not want to participate.

Conclusion

Young people

- Our research found young people were more positive about their involvement with the YOT when compared to other statutory services.
- Whether a service was deemed good and whether young people engaged depended very much on the relationship young people had with staff. The most important qualities highlighted by young people in YOT workers are similar experiences or background, trust, someone who is reliable and consistent, mutually respectful, someone young people can have a laugh with and someone who listens.
- Young people felt they had little influence or choice about where or when they attended the YOT. Some would like home visits and felt they would benefit from group work sessions.
- Young people felt involved with the individual plans but very few had been involved in the design of the services they were subject to. Some spoke about how their lack of involvement in sessions led to disengaged and sometimes disruptive behaviour.
- Young people had realistic ideas of what they would like to do and what would make a difference to them within the programmes and services they received.
- Young people are complimentary of some programmes and workers and highly critical of others they feel do more harm than good.

Youth Offending Teams

- Our research has found there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and what participation is amongst youth justice practitioners.
- Very few YOTs have a clear strategic commitment to participation. Where YOTs have head of service and management support these YOTs generally have participation champions who promote and coordinate participation work across the service, and only a few YOTs have developed and implemented participation strategies.
- Young people's involvement in their individual service plans is considered by youth justice practice to be established but young people's participation in the development and design of services is generally underdeveloped.
- Participation work in the development and design of services tends to concentrate on specific activities such as consultation and designing service literature, recruitment of key staff and decoration of reception areas. Our research also found good participatory practice where young people were involved in service inspections, commissioning new services including peer education programmes and service user forums.
- There are many barriers to participation including staff culture and commitment; knowledge and skills in effective methods and too little time to engage with young people in a meaningful way.
- The youth justice system doesn't encourage user participation. YOTs are governed by national standards and reporting requirements and are not sufficiently measured on participation performance.
- Participation can improve outcomes for young people and youth justice practitioners and YOT services by increasing access and use of services and positive experience and feedback about services. Participation can also contribute towards reducing reoffending rates by increasing compliance and reducing breach rates.

Recommendations

Through our research we have found a significant level of commitment amongst the YOT practitioners for participation to play a more influential role in YOTs and in the wider youth justice system but we also found there needs to be a greater emphasis on removing some of the barriers to participation to make this happen. The following recommendations aim to promote young people's voice and influence within the youth justice system to ensure services better reflect their individual needs:

- YOTs should consider establishing a strategic commitment to participation and may wish to consider developing a participation strategy with the involvement of young people to benchmark current participation practice and plan future participation activities.
- YOTs may wish to appoint a Participation Champion, ideally a dedicated resource with sufficient authority to promote and co-ordinate participation work.
- YOTs should assess whether providing all youth justice practitioners with participation awareness raising and training including article 12 of UNCRC might help them to fully appreciate the potential benefits of service user participation.
- In the current financial climate, YOTs should calculate the pros and cons of additional investment in YOT participation work.
- YOTs should consider consulting with young people about staff and services in a user friendly format and young people's feedback should be included at YOT management and performance meetings.
- YOTs should consider ways to evidence the impact of participation and the outcomes it produces in terms of service quality and effectiveness.
- Wherever possible, opportunities for YOTs to share effective participation practice examples across the youth justice system should be promoted.

Future work

The NYA in response to these recommendations has developed Engagement and Participation Training for YOT Practitioners in conjunction with the organisation YOT Solutions, who have developed an accompanying Participation Resource for YOTs.

The NYA, with the support of the LGA, is undertaking a detailed investigation into the impact and potential cost benefit analysis of participation work within youth offending and a report of the findings is due out in Spring 2011.

Appendix A

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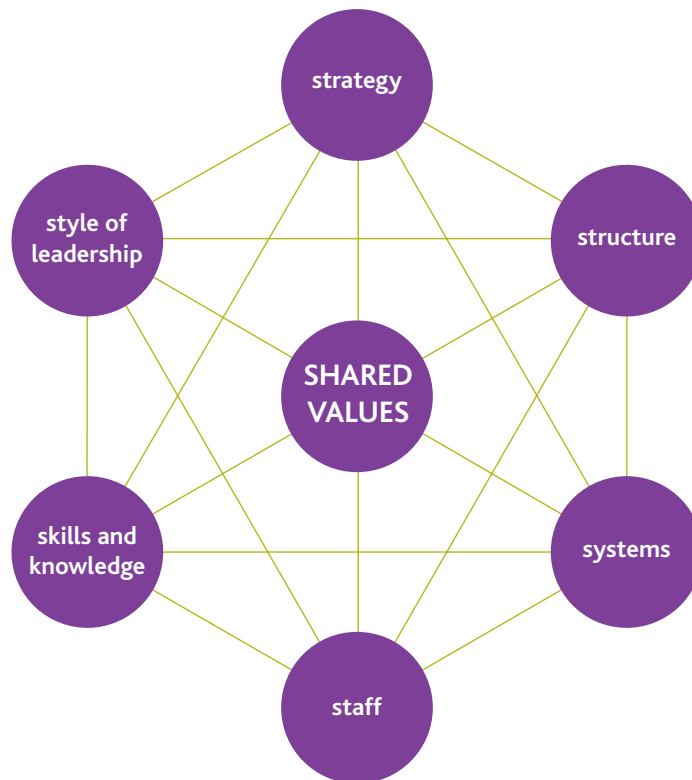
London Association of Youth Justice
NACRO Cymru
National Children's Bureau
User Voice
YOT Solutions
Youth Justice Board

Appendix B

Hear by Right

Hear by Right¹⁴, developed by the NYA, is a tried and tested participation standards framework used widely across the statutory and voluntary youth sector to assess and improve practice and policy on the active involvement of young people. Hear by Right enables organisations to map current participation practice and plan improvements. It relies on self-assessment and is based around a core set of values for the participation of young people that need to be owned and shared by all those involved.

Hear by Right is based around the **Seven S model** for organisational change: **Shared values; Strategy; Structure; Systems; Staff; Skills and knowledge** and **Style of leadership**. For each of these seven standards, there are seven indicators. The standards are split into three levels of performance, emerging, established and advanced with each building upon the previous one.



The standards framework forms a practical, evidence based model of how to further develop young people’s participation and achieve change in an organisation, showing how each standard relies on the other to move forward. The shared values are at the core of the framework and are vital when developing a shared dialogue between service providers and their users.

In 2010 the National Youth Agency enhanced Hear by Right making it practical for YOTs to use. The NYA has also developed a self-assessment toolkit and a national award scheme. Achieving the Hear by Right award proves to service users and funders that the organisation takes the voice of young people seriously and that participation is at the heart of service delivery and development.

References

- 1 Clinks (2010) *Service User Involvement: A volunteering and mentoring Guide*, York, Clinks.
- 2 Hart, D. and Thompson C. (2009) *Young People's Participation in the Youth Justice System*, London, NCB.
- 3 It is recognised that the term Youth Offending Team (YOT) and Youth Offending Services (YOS) are used in England and the term Youth Justice Services (YJS) is used in Wales, for consistency in line with the original terminology in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 the term YOT is used throughout this report.
- 4 Ipsos MORI (2010) *A Review of Techniques for Effective Engagement and Participation*, London: YJB.
- 5 Mason, P. and Prior, D. (2008) *Keeping Young People Engaged Source Document*, London: YJB.
- 6 "Children have the RIGHT to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account" Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989).
- 7 Youth Inclusion Programme.
- 8 Youth Inclusions and Support Panels.
- 9 Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme.
- 10 Integrated Resettlement Support.
- 11 Asset is a structured assessment tool used by YOTs in England and Wales on all young offenders who come into contact with the criminal justice system.
- 12 Youth Rehabilitation Order.
- 13 Police Community Support Officers.
- 14 <http://www.nya.org.uk/quality/hear-by-right/about-hear-by-right>.



About the National Youth Agency

The National Youth Agency works in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations to support and improve services for young people. Our particular focus is on youth work and we believe strongly that by investing in young people's personal and social development, young people are better able to live more active and fulfilling lives.

Working with young people, we advocate for more youth-friendly services and policies. We have four themes:

- Developing quality standards in work with young people
- Supporting services for young people
- Developing the youth workforce
- Promoting positive public perceptions of young people.

We deliver our work through training and consultancy, campaigning, publishing and online communications. Through our activities we want to ensure that young people have a strong voice and positive influence in our society.

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