

national transition support team

working together to improve transition
for disabled young people

Case Study: Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames – improving communication with young disabled service users

Introduction

Disabled young people in Kingston upon Thames are having a real say about who is recruited to support them, how they spend their leisure and what they feel about local services as a result of a three year programme of work on improving communication and participation.

Overview

Disabled young people in Kingston upon Thames are having a real say about who is recruited to support them, how they spend their leisure and what they feel about local leisure services as a result of a three year programme of work on improving communication and participation. Staff running leisure facilities are now trained to carry out ongoing consultations as part of the day's programme. Young people have gained in confidence and some are taking part in other areas affecting their lives including staff recruitment, conferences and building assessments.

Main transferable learning points

- Simple, immediate ways of eliciting views of disabled young people are often more effective than formal or more traditional mechanisms.
- Consultation is seen as an ongoing endeavour involving all disabled young people and the responsibility of all professionals, not an add-on activity.
- Feedback can be used to help improve services for disabled young people.
- Staff training is an essential first step.
- Communication needs to be two-way so staff should consider giving information about themselves to young people about how they fit in their lives through a visual information sheet or booklet.

Background

Kingston upon Thames is an outer London borough with about 135 disabled young people in transition at any one time. In recent years the authority has brought together health, education and social care services within a new Children and Young People's Trust.

As the authority moved to integrating services there has been an increased focus on providing children and families with opportunities to feed back their views about services and to influence service design and provision.

At the end of 2007 a single full-time three year post was created to work specifically on participation with disabled children and young people as it was felt that more focussed work needed to be undertaken in order to ensure their views were heard and taken into account.

The participation work with disabled children and young people was originally set up as a three way partnership between Kingston Council, Action for Children, who manage the authority's short break service, and the Children's Society. The post was filled by Grace Over from the Kingston's transition team who knew the authority well and was able to make a strong case for what needed doing.

Aims and objectives

With an overall aim of improving participation of disabled young people in the decisions that affect their lives, the Kingston work seeks to

- improve access to information

- improve communication between professionals, services and disabled young people
- ensure consultation with disabled young people is ongoing and feeds into commissioning and policy.

Approach

The work focuses on two-way communication, considering how resources and software can be tailored to ensure that information is accessible and how disabled young people can be enabled to express their views. At the outset training sessions concentrated on ensuring professionals understood the principles of genuinely including disabled children and young people so their views could be heard whether in a meeting setting or as feedback.

Feedback is seen as an ongoing process. For example, Kingston runs a lot of holiday activity groups for disabled young people so simple resources such as basic facial expression stickers were introduced so, at the end of any activity, children and young people are able to give their feedback in a very immediate and concrete way. In the past it was hard to know whether questionnaires had been completed by parents or the young person, and they lacked the immediacy of the new system.

Informing future development

The feedback is useful to argue for improvements to the service. For example the understanding of young people's favourite activities could be fed into bids for development funding such as the now sadly defunct Play Builder bids. It also highlighted gaps in local provision which relevant council departments could act upon. For example, swimming – the most popular activity by far among disabled young people in the borough – involves hiring buses and travelling out of borough for many disabled young people because local public baths are not warm enough especially for those with mobility difficulties.

Grace Over believes that ongoing consultation of this kind is really vital. The thinking is that for many disabled young people being asked to give simple, immediate and concrete responses to an activity session can have more relevance and validity and inform provision more

effectively than more formal consultation mechanisms such as questionnaires or forums which can seem abstract or daunting.

Building relationships

Grace believes that for staff to communicate effectively it also helps if the young people know something about them and how they fit into their lives. She has created an About Me visual resource for staff to introduce themselves more effectively to disabled young people. "We ask for so much information from children and young people but we give little about ourselves," says Grace. Staff use 'About Me' guides to bridge the gap, explaining what they like and don't like and what their job is. For example, Grace has an Eastenders logo to show she enjoys watching the soap and for some young people that provides a point of contact.

Participation in recruitment

An important element of the participation work in Kingston is the involvement of disabled young people in all recruitment interviews of staff. Young people form a panel for every post in the Kingston service and at Warren Park where Action for Children's short breaks service is located. Between 25 and 30 disabled young people have been trained up with 12 currently taking part on a regular basis. Generally there are four or five young people on a panel who conduct a fairly standard formal interview, each asking questions in turn of the candidate. Sometimes speed interviewing may be employed, generally where there are a number of jobs e.g. with casual project workers or family support workers where candidates could all technically be taken on. As with speed dating, the young people each form a "station". The candidates then come in together, each spending around five minutes with the young person at each station.

Only rarely are young people included on a professional panel. Grace feels that the young person would need to be involved in agreeing all the questions and would need to be able to understand all the questions and answers, something which might rule out a lot young people. She also believes that the power balance is an obstacle. It would take a brave young person sitting alone to speak up if they

disagreed with a group of professionals for example. In contrast those taking part in young people specific panels feel confident to fully discuss their views. Part of the structure of the young people's panel is asking after the interview: "Do we think this person could do the job?" While the young people's favourite might not be the successful candidate only those thought to be able to do the job by the young people would be offered the job. One example of a recent appointment process where the young people thought a candidate did not have the required skills but managers thought they had, resulted in discussions leading to the candidate being offered a different level job working within a group rather than one to one. (Link to recruitment presentation?)

Quote from one of the recruitment crew:

"Recruitment is great fun, it builds your confidence and you feel a lot more involved. It's for everyone and everyone should do it."

Challenges

At the outset three different partners were involved in steering the participation work and this proved to be too cumbersome a model. Not only were there different ideas about what the focus should be, the participation worker had to negotiate three different procedures and getting agreement was slow and difficult. After the first year and a half the Children's Society left the partnership and management became less complex with the local authority in the driving seat.

Successes

As well as establishing a culture of ongoing consultation in Kingston, spin-offs of the work have included participation in one off events and processes:

- Disabled young people have gained confidence to speak and take part in workshops at conferences for professionals working with disabled people.
- A small group of disabled young people were recruited to carry out an accessibility check of an old building in the process of being adapted. Two young

people who are wheel chair users (one manual and one electric) took part as did a deaf young man with learning difficulties and a young man with cerebral palsy, visual impairment, communication problems, some mobility issues and some difficulties with fine and gross motor skills. They compiled a report for architects and senior management. As a result a number of changes which might otherwise have been overlooked were made including the relocation of a doorbell at the entrance to a ramp, so visitors having difficulty negotiating the ramp would be able to call for assistance. (Link to young people's audit?)

Conclusion

Small, often simple, ways of involving and listening to disabled young people are effective in informing leisure provision in Kingston. For some, this simple involvement is just the beginning as they gain enough confidence to take on more demanding roles within the authority and the wider world.

Ongoing consultation and improved communications are now routine and should be self sustaining in the borough. Key staff at Warren Park, where the Action for Children service are based, are taking the work forward as the three year period of Grace's post draws to an end. It is important, however, that participation is kept on the agenda and with that in mind there is potential for the participation post to continue.

How to:

Key issues and principles

Good communication and ongoing feedback underpins Kingston's participation work. It enables disabled young people to have their voices heard and influence services and to make a positive contribution: one of the five key outcomes identified by Every Child Matters.

Barriers

Working to make information accessible for all disabled young people can be a challenge because different solutions are required for different people. For example, stickers are not appropriate for all disabled young people.

However, the message they carry is that young people's views should be sought at the end of every session or day. They act as a prompt to staff who may have to devise different ways of eliciting views for some young people.

Staff can be anxious about young people expressing negative views, particularly if a single short unhappy experience overshadows a successful day or session. Grace believes that it is important that staff are able to allow young people to express their frustration or annoyance in the same way as workers might when they come home at the end of an otherwise good day!

Practical ideas

Training is a prerequisite for staff and to make the communication two-way consider using a booklet such as About Me to introduce individual workers. In the case of young people's recruitment panels, panel members should be prepared and trained. This can lead to them developing confidence to take part in training events where they are providing training and insights for staff.

You can access templates of the materials used by Grace Over in Kingston from:
grace.over@rbk.kingston.gov.uk

Top tips

- Think of simple concrete ways for young people to give feedback
- Allow them to give feedback straight away where possible
- Gather information from feedback as evidence for improvements in services

Organisations and websites

- **Aiming High for Disabled Children**
www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/healthandwellbeing/ahdc/AHDC/
- **National Strategies**
<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/inclusion>
- **RADAR: the disability network**
www.radar.org.uk

Key policy and legislation

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| Department of Health (2001). Valuing People White Paper. A new strategy for learning disability for the 21st century. | |
| Department of Health (2004). National service framework for children, young people and maternity services | <p>Standard 4: Growing up into adulthood.</p> <p>Standard 8: Disabled children and young people and those with complex needs.</p> <p>Standard 9: Promoting the mental health and psychological well-being of children and young people.</p> |
| Department of Health (2006). Transition: getting it right for young people. Improving the transition of young people with long term conditions from children's to adult health services | |
| Commission for Social Care Inspection (2007) Growing Up Matters Better transition planning for young people with complex needs | |
| The Children Act 1989 | requires local authorities to publish information about their services, and to ensure that this reaches those who might benefit. |
| The Education and Skills Act 2008 | Transferred responsibility for all IAG services to local authorities |
| Aiming High for Disabled Children | <p>Launched in May 2007, this is the transformation programme for disabled children's services. It aims to actively involve children, young people and their families in the planning and delivery of services in their local area. Participation is a key element of the Disabled Children's Core Offer made under the AH programme. This sets out a national statement of expectations for how disabled children and their families will be informed and involved in assessments and services. The Core offer covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information • Transparency • Assessment • Participation • Feedback |
| Aiming High for Young People: a ten year strategy for positive activities | Published in July 2007, this strategy aims to ensure that young people are empowered to have a say in the creation of services and local funding decisions. |

Useful resources

- Transition guide □ CDC, 2007.
A transition guide for all services: key information for professionals about the transition process for disabled young people.

Participation

- **Disability Toolkit** □ produced by the Children's Society, this website includes useful resources and case studies about involving disabled children and young people in participation and decision-making activities.
- **Participation (DVD) case study:** A group of 10 young people produced a film about participation for staff induction or training. Available from Young Londoners Participation Network (YLPN) www.participationworks.org.uk/networks/regional-networks/london
- **How to involve children and young people with communications impairments in decision-making** □ produced by Participation Works and the Council for Disabled Children (2008)
- **A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation** includes a chapter on disabled children's participation in the UK. □ (Routledge, August 2009)
- **Hear by Right** □ – a standards framework for organisations across the statutory and voluntary sectors to assess and improve practice and policy on the active participation of children and young people.
- **Making Ourselves Heard** □ is a project which aims to ensure the active participation of disabled children and young people in all decisions directly affecting them in the development of their local communities, in the strategic planning of services, and in all aspects of the work of the Council for Disabled Children.

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National Transition Support Team (NTST)

NTST is working alongside the National Strategies and the Child Health and Maternity Partnership to coordinate the delivery of the Transition Support Programme.

NTST is based at the Council for Disabled Children (CDC), the umbrella body for the disabled children's sector in England. CDC is hosted by NCB. www.ncb.org.uk/cdc

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