Voices and choices: young people participating in inspections - Summary

Learning from the Listening and Responding component of Social Services Inspectorate (551) inspections of local authority children's services

Author: Pam Hibbert

Consortium: Barnardo's, First Key, National Children’s Bureau, Save the Children, Social Services Inspectorate and The Children’s Society.

Introduction
Involving care-experienced young people and the voluntary sector in the inspections of local authority children's services has been a unique and innovative project. For the first time children and young people who are recipients of those services have had the opportunity to have their views heard by people who can empathise with their experiences and communicate using methods specifically designed for this purpose.

This report outlines the learning from this project and identifies the added value of the approach and methods used. A consortium of voluntary agencies has worked closely with the Social Services Inspectorate (551) to develop a process for gathering better information directly from children, young people and their carers which enables them to give their views and opinions on how well local authorities listen and respond to them.

In 19 inspections of local authority children's services, a Listening and Responding team of one voluntary agency representative and two care-experienced young people specifically met with children and young people and other significant adults to discover how they felt they were listened to and their views and opinions taken account of.

The young inspectors were aged between 18 and 25, and all had experience of social services provision, including care experience. Some of the young people held substantive posts in the consortium agencies, for example those from the Barnardo's Voice Initiative, while others were employed on a sessional basis specifically for each inspection.

From the beginning it was acknowledged that the learning from this initiative needed to be recorded and disseminated thereby providing valuable evidence of 'what works' to enable the 551 to take decisions about future work. The consortium also feels that the learning is of immense value to anyone wishing to develop more effective ways of measuring the impact of policies and practice by listening to and involving children and young people.

The consortium would like to acknowledge the support of all the 551 lead inspectors and to thank the Listening and Responding inspectors for their hard work and their contributions to the review of the initiative; their views and opinions have been represented in this report.
Summary learning points

Main Messages

- Involving care-experienced young people in 551 inspections gave added value in terms of both the quality and quantity of the information acquired. Having a distinctly labelled section of the inspection indicated to children and young people that the 551 valued their views and opinions.

- Employing care-experienced young people as inspectors provided a valuable role model for other looked-after children and young people.

- The initiative gave young care leavers an opportunity to link to and network with others to share learning and develop peer support systems.

- The experience of the Listening and Responding teams was varied. Where the lead 551 inspectors had experience or skills in participation and involvement, the environment was supportive and comfortable for young inspectors. There is a need to ensure that all lead inspectors have an understanding of and share common principles about participation and involving children and young people.

- A culture of equality, where young inspectors felt part of the process, enhanced the inspections. Where young inspectors felt unequal, e.g. where they were given separate accommodation, the feeling of ‘not being part of the team’ led to lack of confidence.

Main Messages from the Methodology and Training

- The methodology used needs to be clear and simple and include practicalities. There should be joint training on the methodology prior to inspections to ensure a sense of ‘ownership’ and consistent interpretation. The methodology needs to be regularly reviewed and developed.

- Recruitment of both adult and young inspectors from the voluntary agencies provided a diversity of people. There was a wide range of skills and experiences offered and a number of the inspectors had specialist skills, e.g. groupwork, participation methods etc.

Main Messages from the Pre-information and Briefing Meetings

- Young people should form an integral part of the inspection team; they should be involved in the planning and debriefing.

- Paperwork given to young inspectors should be relevant.

- Meetings involving young people should be relevant and ensure that travel time, etc is taken into account. Young people should be consulted about times and venues.

- Inspection teams need to have sufficient preparation time together and inspections should have debriefing sessions built into the timetable.
- Careful pre-planning needs to take place to ensure that the inspection teams have the opportunity to meet with relevant and appropriate groups of children and young people in each local authority.
- Pre-planning also needs to ensure that the views of disabled children and those in 'out of county' placements are also obtained.

**Messages from the Fieldwork**
- Young inspectors need back-up support, particularly while on site. There should be a routine debriefing session with a support worker after each inspection.
- Thought needs to be given to the timing of the Listening and Responding input to the on-site work. There should be time for debriefing built into the programme.

**Messages from the Practical Arrangements**
- The wide geographical area covered and the timing of inspections did not always allow for the best 'matching' or diversity within the Listening and Responding teams.
- There needs to be a simple and flexible system for ensuring good accommodation and petty cash provision for inspectors.

**Messages from the Model**
- The involvement of an independent management/steering group with representatives from voluntary agencies ensured an independent child-focussed approach.
- The multi-agency model gave opportunities for sharing good practice, philosophies, skills and learning.
- The Listening and Responding teams demonstrated the need to be flexible and respond to situations, e.g. by changing their methods depending on group dynamics.
- The use of sessional rather than dedicated workers was not conducive to continuity and stability and gave little time for inspectors to reflect on and to share learning.
To order a full report

To purchase a copy of the full report please contact:

Barnardo's Publications,
Barnardo's Trading Estate,
Paycocke Road,
Basildon,
Essex, SS14 3DR

Tel: 01268 520 224
Fax: 01268 284804

Or email your order stating the title of the publication(s) together with your full name, billing address and contact telephone number to: jo.barnes@barnardos.org.uk