

Measuring up

Some years ago Children in Northern Ireland's Participation Network developed a set of standards for engaging children and young people in public decision making. The standards were endorsed by OFMDFM and adopted by the Health and Social Care Board.

The ASK FIRST standards underpin the CYPSP strategy for engaging children and young people – but how are they being applied in practice?

Two CYPSP regional sub-groups focussed on disability took part in extensive engagements with children and young people in developing their action plans. A more comprehensive paper sets out how this work took place and details the impact of the engagement (see "ASKING FIRST: The involvement of children and young people with disabilities in regional planning with the CYPSP", on the CYPSP website). Of particular interest is the degree of alignment between the clearly articulated ideas and suggestions from the young people and the actions set out in the sub-group plans.

This shorter article illustrates how the process involving the Transition of Children and Young People with Disabilities to Adulthood group (TCYPDA), the Children and Young People with Disabilities group (CYPD) and the Disabled Children and Young People's Participation Project (DCYPPP) - matched the ASK FIRST Standards.

The standards

Standard 1: **A**ppropriate methods

Standard 2: **S**upport

Standard 3: **K**nowledge

Standard 4: **F**eedback

Standard 5: **I**nclusion

Standard 6: **R**espect

Standard 7: **S**enior people

Standard 8: **T**iming

Appropriate methods

Children and young people will be engaged in a variety of ways, based on what is best suited to their age and level of development / maturity. In particular, play based methodologies will be developed for involving pre-school children.

The Disabled Children and Young People's Participation Project (DCYPPP) have a great deal of experience of working with young people with a wide range of disabilities. Their expertise was critical in designing methodologies that were accessible, would interest the participants and facilitate them to actively contribute. The Path methodology developed by the project proved to be particularly effective.

Support

Children and young people will be provided with the support needed to engage effectively in the decision making process.

All of the young people engaged in the process were supported by staff from the participating agencies. This ranged from preparation for the workshops, opportunities to think through their ideas in advance, transport to the venue through to having someone to talk to when the work, often deeply personal in nature, impacted emotionally.

Knowledge

Children and young people will be provided with the knowledge they need to engage fully in decision-making processes. Information will be easily understood, child friendly and produced in a range of accessible formats.

The DCYPPP produced a range of accessible materials to ensure that the young people understood the purpose of the engagement. Explanations of the CYPSP structure and the part the children and young people could play in the decision-making process were reiterated at each meeting.

Feedback

Children and young people will be told about the outcomes of their involvement and how their input has been considered. Where their ideas have not been taken on board they will be told why this has happened.

Children and young people had on-going feedback during the process through the liaison role played by the DCYPPP manager and worker, who attended meetings of both the sub-groups. As the draft plan evolved it was clear how their ideas were being translated into specific actions. They had a specific workshop to prepare questions in advance of a meeting designed to hold the sub-group chairs to account.

Inclusion

All children and young people will be facilitated to engage in public decision-making processes. Particular measures will be put in place to ensure the involvement of those who are vulnerable and marginalised, in line with Section 75 and UNCRC obligations.

The focus of the engagement was children and young people with disabilities. Clearly, not all children and young people with disabilities are the same and it was important to ensure the inclusion of those with a range of disabilities. The project succeeded in including those with physical and learning disabilities, autism, life-limiting conditions and complex needs.

Respect

Children and young people will be treated with respect. They will decide the nature and extent of their involvement, including the option not to participate.

Perhaps the most respectful thing we can do is to listen and take account of people's views. The plan produced is evidence that this happened. Respect can be indicated

in other ways for example one of the sub-group chairs took a day out of his holiday to meet with the young people.

Senior people

Children and young people will have direct contact with senior people who are in a position to make decisions and take action in relation to their ideas, views and experiences.

Both chairs of the sub-groups met directly with the children and young people to tell them how their views had been taken on board, to answer questions, offer clarification of the next steps and how the children and young people could be involved in implementing the plan through working on developing passports and designing / delivering training.

Timing

Children and young people will be involved at the earliest possible stages of policy and service development, including processes to establish the need for service or policy initiatives.

Clearly this engagement took place at the start of the planning process when the views of the children and young people could have the most impact. As one of the sub-group chairs said "Having young people at the centre of change from the beginning is the only way."

The partnership created by Rosemary Murray (DCYPPP), Iolo Ilian (TCYPDA) and Kieran McShane (CYPD) shows how much the CYPSP has to gain by engaging children and young people. The commitment and energy of the young people involved in this process will ensure that the plans they have helped shape are relevant and robust - outcomes for children and young people with disabilities will surely be improved. It is particularly heartening to see that quality work from Northern Ireland is having an influence beyond these shores. This work was recently presented by Maurice Leeson, Children's Services Planning Professional Advisor, at international conferences in Milan and Cardiff.

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