

West Lothian Children's Rights Forum – Having Your Say

In a Nutshell

The West Lothian Having Your Say Forum was set up ten years ago as part of the wider participation agenda, to give looked after children and young people a voice and a structure to influence decision makers. The Forum is funded by West Lothian Council and was designed for children or young people aged 5 to 15 years old with experience of the care system.

The project is managed by the Children's Rights Officer for West Lothian Council and supported by health and social care partners including NHS Lothian and West Lothian Community Health and Care Partnership. The Children's Rights Officer acts as a channel between the Forum and the Council's Early Intervention multi-agency team for looked after children and young people.

Aims & Objectives

Having Your Say was set up as the result of an initial drive by the Head of Social Policy for West Lothian Council. The main objective of Having Your Say is to provide a forum for participation for looked after young children and people in the area, enabling them to have a say in health and social care issues affecting them. The key aims of the Forum are to:

- nurture personal, social and emotional development;
- actively involve children and young people in decision-making processes;
- influence service development; and
- Inform young people about their rights

Having Your Say targets young people in three age groups, across primary and secondary aged children, and care leavers in transition. The Children's Rights Officer stated that "no definite outcomes" had been set for the project in an attempt to avoid being prescriptive. It was felt that set outcomes would result in participants losing interest; instead the Forum evolved "organically". While the project was initiated by staff, it was emphasised that "young people quickly got on board".

Method

The project year is organised in line with the three school terms in West Lothian. The Children's Rights Officer determines what participants want from the Forum on a term-by-term basis. They felt that a shorter-term planning approach (in the context

of the long-term aim of increasing participation) was key to keeping young people engaged; giving them ownership over how the project is designed.

“Young people won’t do it if they think they are being told to do it”.

(Children’s Rights Officer, West Lothian Council)

The Forum works with three separate age groups, and each has its own group meetings. Each group meets once a month and sessions are run by the Children’s Rights Officer, with the assistance of colleagues from health and social work, including Council nursery nurses and family support workers. An agenda is agreed with participants beforehand. The Children’s Rights Officer felt that each group had very consistent and long-term membership. All young people involved are in foster care. Different techniques and activities are used to engage young people, including:

- peer negotiation training with the Peer Mediation Network Scotland;
- discussion groups, focus groups and round table discussions;
- nutrition awareness training with the West Lothian Health Improvement Team;
- guest speakers e.g. representatives from the Youth Congress;
- involving young people in consultations around children’s issues and rights;
- engaging young people in related groups, including the West Lothian Youth Health Forum run by NHS West Lothian;
- young people taking part in and presenting at relevant events.

The Children’s Rights Officer explained how several young people had played active roles in a range of national events including the Respect Me anti-bullying and Who Cares? Scotland conferences. Additionally, Having Your Say members had been asked to take part in a consultation event with the Children’s Commissioner for Scotland, to test and evaluate a set of new engagement tools for young people.

All young people are encouraged to take on a role in Forum activities. The Children’s Rights Officer highlighted that the National Standards for Community Engagement and Scottish Health Council Participation Toolkit are consulted for guidance on effectively engaging children and young people. A range of communication and engagement techniques have been used from the Participation Toolkit including focus groups, presentations, round table workshops, surveys and children’s panels. The Children’s Rights Officer emphasised that these tools used “must be used in an integrated and flexible way”.

Having Your Say participants were invited to take part in the development of a training DVD for GPs and health professionals in the area to raise awareness of young people’s experiences with healthcare services. This was undertaken in collaboration with West Lothian Youth Health Forum. Young people wrote the video script, acted, filmed and edited the DVD with support from the multi agency support

team. The young people involved were invited to attend several West Lothian GP practices to present the DVD and talk about their experiences.

The Children's Rights Officer explained that new members were reached through regular recruitment drives assisted by young people. Posters are sent to relevant professionals including health and social care workers. Once potential members are identified they are invited to attend a session to see if they enjoy it. Having Your Say is in the process of developing an associate membership scheme, enabling children and young people to join the Forum remotely and receive project updates. This is to engage with young people who may not be confident enough yet to attend a group.

Impact of Involvement Activities

While there are no set outcomes to measure project impact against, the Forum aims to increase membership and progress participants through project activities, advancing their personal and social development and opening up access to various opportunities. The Children's Rights Officer highlighted the impact of the project on young people as observed through regular contact with them:

- increased confidence and self esteem;
- making new friends and socialisation achieved through group bonding;
- providing a safe forum to express their opinions and discuss experiences;
- increased knowledge of children's and young people's rights;
- increased feelings of being valued and listened to;
- influencing local policy, e.g. creating resident's groups in children's houses.

Having Your Say enables participants to achieve Dynamic Youth and Youth Achievement Awards through participation in certain activities, such as presenting at events and facilitating workshops. These awards allow participants to gain recognition of their progress on the programme. The Forum is linked directly to a Modern Apprenticeship scheme, which employs a young person who plays a role in supporting children's rights policy and activities in West Lothian.

"Coming together with other young people who are in similar situations helped them know that they were not alone and that it helped them better cope with the situations they often found themselves in."

(Public Involvement Coordinator, West Lothian CHCP)

Evaluation

The Children's Rights Officer felt that the project approach, which is developed in partnership by young people and staff, worked well. They emphasised that the success of the project was based on a clear understanding of all stakeholders of the aim of the work - to facilitate the participation of looked after children and young people in issues affecting them. It was felt that the ability of the project staff to remain proactive in designing engagement activities was essential to success, as "a

year is a long time to work with young people and keep them interested". While evidence of project impact is largely anecdotal, an evaluation system has recently been introduced allowing young people to evaluate twice a year what they have done in the group, to determine the impact and development of future activities.

"There needs to be purpose to and a benefit of all project activities, otherwise they won't facilitate project aims".

(Children's Rights Officer, West Lothian Council)

Key success factors

The Children's Rights Officer identified several key success factors of the project:

- the role of the Children's Rights Officer in managing the Forum as a day-to-day co-ordinator with strong links to the multi-agency operational team;
- staff with a consistent understanding of the purpose of the Forum;
- quality and commitment of project staff;
- two-way dialogue and relationships between project staff and participants;
- determining short and long-term goals helping to better engage participants;
- encouraging young people to set their own agenda for meetings helping to sustain interest and involvement;
- the durability of the Forum which is still very active where similar services have stopped running due to their resource-intensive nature;
- access to a "good, accessible venue".

Barriers and challenges

The Children's Rights Officer also identified challenges that had to be overcome:

- time – all project staff, most notably the Children's Rights Officer, ran and supported the Forum on top of day-to-day jobs;
- motivation – some Forum participants were more difficult to motivate, particularly those who felt "forced" to be there.

Future Development of Involvement Activities

Work will continue with existing groups, and the Council has begun to develop the basis for an additional group of older young people aged between 16 and 17. This would take the form of a consultation group to help develop Looked after Children strategy and policy in West Lothian. Young people involved will attend relevant strategic consultations and meetings reporting back to younger Forum participants on their experiences. This will help build Forum capacity while offering a progression route for children and young people in care in West Lothian.

For further information on the project, please contact Janis Watson at West Lothian Council on 01506 282857 or janis.watson@westlothian.gov.uk.