

TELL IT How It Was
2011-2012



Introduction

The 'Tell It How It Was' project was devised in 2007. The aim of the project is to consult with young people once they have become care leavers, to hear real, live accounts of their overall care experiences.

By identifying the themes from the young people's interviews the Speaker Box Council present and make recommendations to the Corporate Parents and Heads of Service. The information received will be available to shape and improve services for future looked after children.

As always, the picture that emerges from young people themselves is a complex, insightful and challenging one. There are both strong positives and strong negatives that deserve careful consideration by all of us.

Training

Young people decided that the best way to engage and receive real and honest feedback was for the consultation to be undertaken by Speaker Box Council members.

The Children's Rights Officer facilitated the training, - on interview techniques / skills, safeguarding procedures, ice breakers, communication skills and professional relationships. Young people undertook mock interviews and role playing. They explored possible ways to deal with difficult situations.

Following training Speaker Box members conducted telephone surveys and face to face interviews. Speaker Box decided on the location of the interviews and let young people choose the method in which they would give information. Members were aware of possible safeguarding concerns and meetings were held in public locations.

Speaker Box members designed the layout of the promotional flyers/posters and worked on questions/guides to be included in the consultations and interview topics. Speaker Box members record all their interviews with young people and pulled out what they thought were the key messages. These were discussed and shared; the ideas and experience of interviewing were gathered. Members suggested ways to improve the peer consultations process in the future.

In recognition of their work the peer interviewers were paid - either as paid employees of Southwark Council or per interview - and given certificates and a written reference to include in CVs.

Tell It How It Was Interviews

From the months of July 2011 until February 2012 Speaker Box have conducted 40 interviews. The original target was 80 interviews however the start dates for the Speaker Box Project Officer & the Speaker Box Apprentice were delayed and so the original target was not met.

The process of interviewing young people proved to be challenging. This was mainly due to contact details not being updated or contact details continually changing. Speaker Box used a variety of methods to engage care leavers - Interviews conducted at the monthly Speaker Box meetings, sending out personal invite letters, attending 'Drop-in' sessions at Bradenham, telephone interviews and advertising the project in the quarterly Speaker Box magazine.

See Appendix 1 for all of the 'Tell it how it was' quotes.

THEMES AND FINDINGS

Speaker Box is to present the findings to the Corporate Parent Meetings with the Speaker Box Council, the Heads of Service Meeting, the Foster Carers Annual Meeting, the Commissioning and Placements Team and Social Worker. The Speaker Box Council hopes that the messages from care leavers will shape, change, improve, support and congratulate and encourage the service.

The main themes that have come out of the Tell It How It Was interviews are:

PREPARATION FOR LEAVING CARE AND INDEPENDANT LIVING

Young people in care leave the family environment of foster care or residential care at a much earlier age than their peers and this can have a huge impact on heir future outcomes. Key to the messages from young people is that the transition from care to independence should be planned and properly managed, that young people should be consulted about their wishes and feelings.

Young people's views on their experiences of transitions varied widely with each young person identifying a key person who helped them through to independence. There was not a clear and measurable indicator to what methods/tools were use to move to a clear process of independence. Young people identified the need for

- Early Preparation for leaving care and independent living
- Empower young people to participate meaningfully at each stage of the transition process
- Enhance communication and relationships between social workers/ Personal Advisors and young people.
- Implement robust review mechanisms that ensure care and pathway plans reflect the needs and wishes of young people.
- Improve the stability of final care placements and reduce the number of young people moving to independence before reaching age 18.

A small number of young people said the preparation for leaving care was not at the right pace and that the transition should be a process and not an event. The reasons why young people left care were varied; some of them just wanted to get rid of the label of being in care, for others this was the result of either a placement breakdown or becoming a parent.

A few young people thought that their move to independent living was too abrupt and thought it important to make sure they leave care at the right time and that it should be their decision to move to independence. This is important so young people do not feel like they are thrown in at the deep end. Young people also wanted to know that support was available from a worker if they needed it.

A small number of young people stated they were eager to leave semi-independence to live on their own and that they were keen not to have to answer to anybody. Moving into their own place seemed exciting at first.

"I was glad to be out of foster care and able to live independently. I had all the support I needed".

“I didn’t really give my foster parents a chance to support me but social services did try their best although I did not think it at the time. I did it all myself really, I viewed the property by myself got all the furnishing myself, the leaving care grant helped with the essentials though. It was hard I’ve been here two years and it’s only just becoming a home. I think where the viewing and everything was concerned social services could have tried more, they took long about things when I just wanted to get it out of the way and start the next chapter in my life”

However, a lack of preparation or understanding of what it was like to live on their own meant that some young people wished that they had not left supported housing or foster care so soon. Some young people did not realise just how hard it was really going to be living alone.

“I found the benefit system hard; it really isn’t as easy as filling out your form and getting money. When I think about it I was definitely way out of my depth back then, I literally didn’t have a clue what I was doing. Even though I applied I found there were way too many appointments, too many places to go and to be honest I just felt like I was being asked for too much too often. Even though the council started sending letters of arrears I didn’t know what to do or where to go for help.”

Young people welcomed preparation for living independently and felt that this should be done over a period of time and often started too late. Young people also cited the need for accommodations to be in the young person’s locality to avoid moves to other areas, and more preparation for independence through training flats or lessons and advice on budgeting, cooking, socialising and managing living independently as an adult.

“I was independent so when I moved out I didn’t need help when it came to JSA/Sorting bills, but when problems got heavier I had to go to Bradenham to get help. I got help and my issues were sorted out quite quickly”

The findings also showed that more emphasis should be placed on finance and budgeting and what to do if you get into debt or have rent arrears. One young person mentioned that even though she had been prepared for this, she still felt it was a learning curve and that anyone who has never lived independently needs time to adjust.

“When I got my first tenancy. I didn’t know what to do, couldn’t sort out the rent & was eventually evicted for arrears. I weren’t ready to go into my flat & I felt forced to go into there, no one prepared me & I blame that on my PA. “

The key points to highlight on the theme of preparation and transition to independent living are that placements end for many different reasons; a small number of young people are very eager to live independently. Those young people that felt they moved at the right pace considered that they had been prepared for what to expect in the future.

Even when they had left care, young people wanted reassurance that somebody would still be there to support them when they may need this. Young people also said they should be allowed to be young people first and should be allowed to make mistakes so they can learn from them as their peers do. They said this may put less

pressure on them becoming independent a significant amount earlier than their peers who live at home with parents.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEYWORKERS

Young people coming out of care may not have had consistent parent or role models to encourage, support and show them the path to follow as they progress towards adulthood, which can be a difficult and stressful time. Good relationships with workers and carers are therefore essential and should be based on trust, communication, respect and understanding. A number of young people were positive about the support they received from their social workers/personal advisers, which is really encouraging

“My personal advisor is great, I really couldn’t ask for more. He listens to me and he has helped me a lot, he helped me get into college and looking at nurseries for my son, he helped me with getting my passport – he just genuinely tries his best to help me out.”

A message that came out of the consultations was that young people who have had the same social worker/personal adviser or foster carer for some time felt they could be more open with them. They felt maintaining a positive relationship can help young people feel less isolated when living independently.

“I only had one Social Worker whilst in the service. She was a very nice person. I would say that I was very lucky because she was very attentive, approachable, informative and very friendly, so I could tell her everything. My social worker use to take me everywhere all over London for trips and days out. This made me very comfortable with her.”

“The first foster carer I had was good, I’m still in touch with her now and she’s a big part of my life.”

The consultations also revealed that some young people had experienced lots of changes of social workers and foster carers. A clear message that came out of the consultations was that young people who have had stable positive experience with their foster carers were more likely to succeed in the transition to adulthood.

“She made the house very welcoming, put pictures of my mum around the house and stuff. She was just an all round good person.”

“My relationship with my foster carer is great, that’s my mum. She’s never treated me as a foster child she’s always treated me as one of her own. She worked hard to build a bond with me even though for the first two years I was quite hostile with her. She was open and understanding; she never tried to take my mums place and worked hard to keep her spirit alive.”

PLACEMENTS

Young people were living in a number of different types of accommodation post 16. Some were still living in foster care, others were in semi-independent or supported housing, or council or privately rented properties. There were one or two young people placed in hostels.

Some young people interviewed stated that they didn't like the semi independent placements as they said some of the placements did not meet their standards. For young people, semi independent units were a very different environment to a foster placement. Young people said that foster placements were like a family environment where they felt secure as they knew everyone in the household and had a good routine.

“Semi independent was both good & bad. The place was not secure & things got stolen. Nonsense crime, stealing food like bread, noodle and stuff. Certain danger of living on your own, it's easy to get involved with some type of gang when you don't have a lot of money or people around you to support and guide you in the positive manner. They should have more security & more staff on hand. They should also have more tutoring with cooking, budgeting money and on things like 'who you should and shouldn't let in your house'. It is important that certain guidelines are set”.

Young people told us of the pressure of having to deal with new things, such as paying bills and applying for benefits, created a certain panic amongst some young people who felt that they were not prepared. They also needed extra support with moving to independence to give them the skills they needed to be successful.

“I mentioned my time living in semi-independence, which was rubbish as I had no support & it wasn't a very happy time in my life. I didn't know what benefits I was entitled to & felt like I was just left & didn't know what to do... However in the end social services did help and sorted it out but that was after eight months of stress thinking I was going to end up homeless.”

Young people suggested that support from friends, family or key workers, who had dealt with similar situations in the past, was helpful and could help young people to cope with some of the pressures of living independently or with a young family.

Some young people had a good experience of living independently as they were prepared properly on how to budget, put on cooking courses or just given more time to get ready.

“It needs to be monitored more closely because semi-independence means that someone should still be there making sure that the young person is preparing for independence & learning the skills they need to have to live independently. I also think young people should be given workshops in like DIY skills & working out the benefit system as well because I felt like I was just chucked into my tenancy & was left to get on with it.”

Many young people said they felt lonely after they had left care because they did not have enough support from their family and friends or professionals. Young people stressed the importance of building meaningful relationships with key workers especially if they had no contact with family.

“I think it is so essential for a young person to have someone there who they trust and can depend on and considering the vital role a social worker play in a young person's life I think that social workers on a whole should be doing more to build positive and trusting relationships with young people. It may not seem like much but it really does make a difference to the outcome for a child or young person depending on the relationship they have had with their social

workers and Personal Advisors, not just during their time in care but for the rest of their lives.”

The key points of this theme were that a few young people felt the quality of accommodation they were offered wasn't good. There was also talk of how limited the accommodation choice was in certain areas. Another issue raised by some young people who didn't have a good network of support was that they felt isolated and lonely.

IMPROVEMENT TO THE LEAVING CARE PROCESS

Speaker Box asked young people what improvements they would make for Children in care and care leavers. Young people suggested that more training is needed to cover things like making claims for housing benefits/council tax, cooking lessons, budgeting lessons.

Young people suggested more information on how to secure their permanent accommodation was essential. They felt that this task should not be achieved alone. They wanted meaningful relationships with Personal Advisors to assist them. The majority of young people were positive about the support they received from personal advisers. A handful of young people stated they wanted to keep the same personal adviser for longer so they could build up a good relationship, this may be the only consistent person in their life.

Speaker Box learnt that some young people want additional support when they were moving on to independence in preparing them for this challenge. Young people said they found it difficult if they have too many different professionals involved in their lives.

For those young people who had a good personal adviser from the start, they created a bond that they wished to maintain even after they have left the care system. Young people said that there should be more personal advisers that have the right knowledge, as they need to have knowledge about many different issues, for example, housing, benefits, health, crime, education and employment. Young people thought that maybe there needed to be more specialised workers.

One young person mentioned the availability of accommodation in their local authority needed to be looked at. Living outside the area, or not close enough to friends and families, can make it harder for young people, leaving them isolated and living in a new environment that they were not familiar with. A few young people were sent to independence with nothing more than what they knew and/or what life had taught them, rather than having been trained and supported.

CONCLUSION

The following concluding remarks and recommendations are based on findings from the face to face interviews and the perceptions and views of the peer interviewers. We feel as peer interviewers, one of the main messages we got from the consultations was that young people felt that they could only be honest with a personal adviser/social worker if they had built a trusting relationship.

“It’s about building relationships and waiting until a young person is ready to tell them things instead of forcing it, obviously if they are in danger it’s different but I think social workers need to work on communication. “

Young people said they needed to build up a mutual respect, understanding and level of trust with their workers and foster carers which would help them form important relationships.

For some young people they also wanted to maintain these relationships when they had moved on to independence instead of having it cut as if they were a closed case as this would make them feel less isolated. They also said they should be allowed to be young people instead of having to grow up so quickly when they might not be ready for the transition to independence.

The majority of young people interviewed though said they had positive relationships with their Personal Advisors and foster carers. Most young people interviewed were happy with the priority housing scheme for social housing and found it easy to use.

It was found that the young people wanted extra support when it came to building their confidence and understanding in settling into their own homes of their life. Many wanted some extra support with gaining work experience and training to build their confidence to get into the world of work.

A majority of the young people interviewed said that when they got to the leaving care stage it felt too rushed. It was more of an event rather than a process which should be started from when a young person comes into the looked after system.

Young people felt that disruption at vital points in their lives can have a negative impact, for example when they should be concentrating on their studies. Care Leavers were pleased that they were not being pushed to accept their priority housing if studying outside London and there were other housing options available.

The Speaker Box members believe that training and taster flats would be ideal for young people as they said it would have helped to test the water first so they knew what they were letting themselves in for. The flats could be a good place for cooking lessons or any other life skills training that could be done on an individual basis or as a group.

The general feeling from the consultations was that those young people that had been placed with a foster family, where they were prepared at their pace and had the right support, would almost definitely make the transition to independence more effortlessly. In these situations the young person was also more comfortable in asking for help.

Finally, young people wanted more support after leaving care, in terms of finance, independent living skills and just having someone to be there if they need it. Young people made varied comments as to how the leaving care process could be improved including the need for more continuity with workers. Other improvements suggested were: more planned visits with their Personal Advisors to the housing, Council tax, and benefits office to ensure benefits, claims and financial matters are in place, before accepting council tenancies, Ensuring rents were paid directly to landlords.

Recommendations

- Speaker Box to present the Tell It How It Was findings to the Corporate Parents
- Speaker Box to invite themselves to team meetings to present the findings of the 'Tell It How It Was'.
- Speaker Box to set up training for social workers on relationship building with young people.
- Speaker Box to present the Tell It How It Was findings to the children's services inductions to inform new social workers.
- Speaker Box to look at how the quality of visits is monitored.
- Speaker Box to present the Tell It How It Was findings at Foster Carer's annual meeting
- Present housing proposal to prevent young people from getting into arrears to the Councillors.

Actions

- Speaker Box presented the Tell It How It Was Report to Corporate Parents in an informal meeting
- A training programme on relationship building has been drawn up and is to be offered to all social workers. The training was piloted with corporate parenting group members earlier this year.
- Speaker Box have fed back the findings of the interviews to the young people who were interviewed.
- Awaiting a date to be invited for the Annual Foster Carer's Meeting
- Speaker Box Council have met Councillor Catherine McDonald, Councillor Ian Wingfield, and Councillor Richard Livingstone to present a proposal to prevent young people from getting into arrears.
- Speaker Box has revised the Speaker Box Presentation for the Children's Services Inductions to involve the new findings.

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