

**Good Practice
Guidance
for
Children in Care
Councils**

**A joint document by
NYAS and NCERCC**

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Good Practice Guidance for Children in Care Councils

Contents

Introduction	3
Organisation Backgrounds	5
Facilitation of Children in Care Councils	7
Commitment – Director’s Pledge	8
Commitment – Facilitating Progress	8
Commitment – Attendance, Engagement	8
i. Creating a Supportive Structure	8
ii. Targets and Outcomes	9
Process and Performance Indicators	10
Facilitation of Children in Care Councils	11
Recruitment to Children in Care Councils	11
Resources	11
Structure of Children in Care Councils	12
Beyond the CICC – Inclusive for all Ages and Places	13
Young People’s Involvement in Children in Care Councils	13
Conclusion	15

Children in Care Councils

The meaningful involvement of children and young people in decision making, evaluation, planning and delivery leads to services that are effective in meeting their needs in the long-term.

The partnership of NYAS and NCERCC brings:

- A track record to provide the support and expertise that is needed to develop meaningful Children in Care Councils.
- A participation infrastructure and ethos in place to support our role in the facilitation of Children in Care Councils (CICC).
- The ability to translate our combined successes to the development of Children in Care Councils.

Introduction

The Government's White Paper, *Care Matters: Time for Change*, includes an increased expectation of providers and care staff to develop the mechanisms for participation across all children's services. There is a real emphasis on service users' views and participation.

"It is important that children have a chance to shape and influence the parenting that they receive at every level – from expressing their wishes and feelings about the individual care they receive in their placements, through to helping to shape the overall strategy for children in their area through a Children in Care Council"
(DfES Time for Change 1.21 Page 20)

The Government's decision to provide all children and young people with the opportunity to participate fully in decisions that affect them is to be welcomed. It should give Local Authorities the opportunity to develop the appropriate methods of communication that participants need to engage fully in the Children in Care Councils.

There are many examples of good participation practice in children's services including residential childcare, but this is not always as widely shared or promoted as it could be. The Children's Rights Director for England and his team have noted in several reports that too often children and young people do not participate fully and are not being provided with the right platform to communicate their needs. Other publications make the same point and consider that such a situation can lead to young people feeling disenfranchised and detached from the system which is responsible for their well being and care.

Children in Care Councils have the potential to contribute to transforming the lives of those involved, providing that children and young people are given the correct platform to share and discuss their views. Equally, supporting staff and

senior management need to show a strategic commitment to the establishment and continued support of the CICC. Only then can Children in Care Councils achieve their true value and potential.

NYAS and NCERCC have the track record to provide the support and expertise that is needed to develop meaningful Children in Care Councils.

Organisation Backgrounds

NYAS and NCERCC have a strong belief in, and commitment to, an accessible, inclusive and collaborative approach to participation. We have the skills and abilities to deliver this and believe that the success of many of our own services is evidence that meaningful involvement of children and young people in decision-making, evaluation, planning and delivery leads to services that are effective in meeting their needs in the long-term.

Younger children, and those with learning difficulties or disabilities, have the same right to participate as any other children. NYAS and NCERCC are proactive in engaging with all children and young people and actively work towards breaking down any barriers, perceived or otherwise, which could prevent the full involvement of any child or young person who wants to participate.

NYAS has regularly been asked by local authorities to advise on and develop innovative participation practice for looked after children and young people. In partnership with Surrey County Council, NYAS asked looked after children and young people what may have improved their initial experiences of being in care. Many young people suggested having more information about: what to expect; jargon explanation; what roles different professionals they may encounter have; and how to get support. In response to this, NYAS trained and supported a group of looked after children and young people to produce a DVD full of information, advice and signposting. The bulk of the film was shot during a *Big Brother* style residential, complete with challenges and a diary room.

NYAS has the commitment to active participation as evidenced by the Young Person's Advisory Group (YPAG) which sits alongside the Professional Advisory Group. The YPAG consists of fourteen young people aged 11 – 21 who all have experience of NYAS services. Their advice, support and development work helps to inform the organisation's direction and activity.

NYAS have extensive experience of developing and facilitating participation groups, forums and events exclusively for children and young people in care around England and Wales and has successfully promoted and encouraged the involvement of looked after children and young people in such groups.

The participation work that NYAS has developed has garnered a great deal of praise from commissioners, partner agencies and children and young people themselves.

Examples of this include: a group in North East Wales winning an excellence award from the Welsh Local Government Association for developing a welcome pack for looked after children and helping to set up a drop-in centre for children and young people in care; a group in Surrey who write, design and edit an acclaimed magazine, *Wazzzup*, for other looked after children and young people in Surrey. In the North West of England, NYAS facilitate a

young persons' consultation group for CAFCASS and the Family Justice Council for issues relating to the family courts and legal matters. The group's work has been personally acknowledged and praised by senior government figures, including the former Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer and by the Ministry for Justice.

To achieve success in any participation activity, NYAS have found that it is important to establish ways for staff and children and young people to share good practice and experience. To facilitate this, NYAS have the Participation Network. The Network allows the opportunity for the development of common approaches to participation and ensures that staff and volunteers feel supported by their peers and able to overcome problems they encounter.

NYAS is also an active member of cross-agency networks and forums that promote good participation practice including: Participation Works; the Children's Consultation Partnership; and the Children and Young People's Participation Learning Network (an e-based network of participation practitioners and academics from all over the world). NYAS is taking an active role in the development of Participation in Action, a national pilot that aims to achieve a high standard of participation training for young people, with a 'beacon of excellence' mark awarded to organisations by the groups of young people who have already been trained and accredited. NYAS will help to develop the training and accreditation packages that will be rolled out following the pilot.

NCERCC has extensive experience of working and facilitating the development of children and young people in residential childcare. The Children's Residential Network (CRN) provides the means for information, advice, support and experience to be shared, and for the standards of daily life in residential care and education to be enhanced.

The CRN is a network - not another pressure group or national association. As a network the CRN exists to support discussion and development, to share examples of best practice and to learn from colleagues, exchanging information and ideas about practice issues and is used in homes and special schools across the country.

A CRN Participation Tour went on the road to find out how children and young people felt about participation and to focus on the mechanisms to evaluate participation within their homes. Over twenty three homes and two special schools participated. The outcomes of the project included a report on participation in residential child care commissioned by the DfES, a Participation DVD and training pack and media skills for all those that took part.

In addition NCB, the host of NCERCC, is a member of the Alliance for Child Centred Care and part of the core team facilitating a cross-regional young persons' group which will work with children and young people on a regular basis and provide training, support and consultancy for their staff.

Facilitation of Children in Care Councils

NYAS already has a participation infrastructure and ethos in place to support our role in the facilitation of Children in Care Councils (CICC).

The advocacy, independent visiting and legal services (as well as existing participation activity) provided for children and young people means that there are strong links with other agencies who work with children in care as well as with the children and young people themselves.

NYAS have been extremely successful in developing participation activity in close partnership with local authorities and other providers; providing a strong link between children and young people in care, other agencies involved in their lives, and corporate parents. NYAS believes it possible to translate these successes to the development of Children in Care Councils.

Through the shared experience and knowledge of the NYAS Participation Network, the mechanisms are in place to rapidly respond to the development needs of the CICC's at an organisational level.

NCERCC has the capacity to provide professional consultancy and support for the development of Children in Care Councils.

Commitment

– Director's Pledge

In order for the Children in Care Councils to be successful, there needs to be a collaborative agreement between health, education and social care on the role, scope and remit of the CICC's. As a first step, there should be a promise and commitment from the Strategic Partnership Board/ Children's Trust Board which highlights their long term commitment and resources to the CICC. This reinforces the strategic commitment to CICC from the top.

From this commitment, relevant directors from each service/ partner agency can detail their commitment to listening and responding to issues raised by looked after children and young people and consulting with the CICC on decisions that affect looked after children and young people.

Unless this commitment is made at the highest level of the local authority and as a shared portfolio across services, the CICC potentially fail to provide the collaborative support that the government envisioned and be in danger of becoming tokenistic and redundant.

Commitment

– Facilitating Progress

For the Children in Care Councils to be a success, careful consideration should be given as to who facilitates the process. The level that participants engage in is dependant on the facilitator's capabilities. How comfortable participants feel to share and be open depends on the facilitator's credibility. Ideally, the Looked After Children participation worker would co-ordinate the process of recruiting for the Children in Care Council and helping participants to develop the aims and structure.

Commitment

– Attendance, Engagement

i) Creating a supportive structure

There should be a commitment from at least one senior member of staff to attend a Children in Care Council meeting. In each service/ partner agency there should be an elected member who acts as the lead contact. This ensures there is a member of staff in each area who acts as the point of reference and support for the CICC when needed. It also ensures that the

lead can highlight the CICC aims and any meeting outcomes when necessary to the rest of their service.

The CICC should receive the list of lead members and be able to invite them when they see appropriate.

ii) Targets and outcomes

There needs to be an agreement on measurable targets and outcomes as CICC's performance indicators. For example: the CICC's should have some responsibility for annually reviewing their local authority's Children and Young People's Plan (or developing one if necessary); they should be consulted in regard to information that is provided to young people involved with the child protection and looked after process, identifying their targets and outcomes and ensuring they are determined by children and young people with adults. This could be incorporated into an introductory session of vision, mission and aims for the CICC members.

Process and Performance Indicators

The following are baseline indicators which can then be extended/ localised to fit the needs locally of the Children in Care Councils.

1. Looked after children strategy agreed and completed in collaboration with CICC and partner agencies.
2. Completion and launch of a looked after children pledge that reflects the involvement of CICC.
3. Involvement of CICC in launch and promotion of agreed pledge to looked after children.
4. Numbers of looked after children involved in CICC, including targets for younger children, children with learning difficulties/disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups.
5. Key messages and feedback provided by CICC and strategic responses evidenced.
6. Numbers of young people accessing/delivering training within the local authority following involvement with the CICC.
7. Any meetings concerning children in care will involve representatives of the CICC.
8. Numbers of young people receiving accreditation.
9. Improved outcomes for looked after children in key areas.
10. CICC involved in the publication of any new paperwork for young people involved with child protection and looked after children processes.
11. Participation understanding and practice has improved amongst local authority staff.

Facilitation of Children in Care Councils

NYAS and NCERCC have the capacity to deliver staff training on participation and facilitating CICC. For CICC to be sustained and develop long term, local authority/providers must have the skills to facilitate children and young people meetings appropriately. This places NCERCC and NYAS' role as one of support and development rather than creating a dependency on external facilitation.

NYAS will visit every quarter and take an evaluation role or address any complaints that may have arisen. NCERCC will draw on resources from its host NCB and act as a provider of good practice, resources and consultancy. This creates a triangulation of support and good practice with NYAS/NCERCC@NCB, CICC and the LA.

Recruitment to Children in Care Councils

A strategy would be required to ensure looked after children accessing health, education and social care services are included. Any other local authority departments and external agencies (such as CAMHS) that are working with looked after children in the area should also signpost young people.

Resources

The local authority needs to allocate a realistic budget that includes costs for: venue hire; activity materials; travel costs; refreshments; accreditation costs; rewards and incentives; NYAS and NCERCC support costs; promotion; ICT.

Structure of CICC's

The CICC should have a maximum of sixteen members, aged 9-18, to ensure that the group remains a manageable size and is of a size that should allow all the members to feel able to have a say.

Serious thought should be given to the different roles and tasks that will be available at the CICC. Positions should vary beyond the normal chair and secretary roles, so that every individual feels they have a means and method to contribute to the development of CICC and the meetings. For example, one member could take responsibility for sending emails to those children that are placed out of county, another could be in charge of skills that the CICC want to learn (training).

Consideration needs to be given to the involvement of younger children, children and young people with disabilities, young people whose first language is not English, young refugees/asylum seekers and those from minority ethnic groups. In order for this to happen, the allocated local authority member needs to have the capacity to translate materials to another language/use Writing With Symbols and where appropriate meet with participants before hand to give them extra help to ensure they can engage in meetings fully. If the local authority member does not have skills to provide, money should be allocated for an external organisation/consultant to provide.

NYAS has also set up other CICC models and the NYAS Participation Network provides the ideal forum to exchange innovative practice between the different CICC models.

Beyond the CICC – Inclusive for all Ages and Places

CICC Forums could be developed to work with specific groups who may not feel able, or are too young, to be involved with the full CICC. For example, younger children could be recruited to take part in play-based consultation exercises; perhaps with the support of an external playwork organisation in partnership with NYAS. NCERCC could create a separate proposal for this with Play England, which is based within our family at NCB.

However, specialised provision should not diminish the involvement of minority groups in the CICC. All efforts should be made to fully accommodate them in the CICC and performance indicators should be in place to monitor this and to ensure that failure to do so is accountable. Recruitment processes, therefore, must include specialised local authority departments and external agencies.

Technology should also be utilised to enable the capturing of as many young people's opinions as possible. All views and opinions gathered can then be fed into the full CICC. NYAS have utilised a variety of different ICT technology to hear the views of as many young people as possible. NYAS' websites make Browsealoud – a 'screenreader' that can be used to read aloud the text on a website – available. NYAS carry out online polls that have proven popular with children and young people that visit the sites and have provided online chat forums. NYAS are also exploring and developing more interactive ways of hearing children and young people's views; including the uploading and downloading of videos and podcasts, and consulting with children and young people via text messages.

Young People's Involvement in Children in Care Councils

Members of the CICC should be encouraged to take a lead on the development of the CICC. For example, they may wish to come up with a different name for the CICC. They should also be asked to consider the format of meetings, their frequency and how the agenda should be structured. This should help to provide the members with a sense of ownership and responsibility to the CICC, as well as making them feel more comfortable.

There should be a process of development where children's needs are mapped. This should include providing CICC members with a means of interacting in meetings via multimedia resources, and, where needed, Symbols (i.e. In Print2 etc). CICC should not conduct all its meetings in a board room style manner if it is to cater for the diversity of its members.

An agreement also needs to be reached between the local authority and CICC members with regard to rewards and incentives. Young people should be recognised for the work that they do as part of the CICC. One important way of recognising young people's work is through accreditation. Exploration should be made of whether an accreditation process could be set up as part of the CICC. As a minimum, certificates should be distributed that detail skills the young people have developed and work they have undertaken. Millennium Volunteer, Art Council Accreditation, ASDAN are all possibilities, and the Participation in Action pilot will provide a model of accreditation by and from young people. Another option is cash or voucher payments. Social events for the members should also be considered as recognition of their work. NCERCC can provide a policy around rewards.

NYAS currently facilitates the involvement of young people in relevant training, such as recruitment and selection and training them to train social workers, foster carers and others who work with looked after children and young people. In addition to focusing on staff recruitment, which can be an adult-led agenda, children and young people could be provided with the opportunity to shadow a department within local authority. This could take the form of a skills day, all the way through to work experience or internships. Again, children and young people should be provided a menu of choice that includes choices that are not related to being in care or children's services. This provides them with a real chance to develop new skills and understand the local authority that is providing them a service.

Conclusion

The Children in Care Council should be an integral part of local authority's children and young people's services. It will provide an essential forum for consultation and development with looked after children and young people.

This is the first time that there has been a requirement for such clear evidencing of consultation with looked after children and young people and it is an opportunity to be embraced by all involved. For local authorities, this provides the means to demonstrate their commitment to listening to the voices of children and young people. For the children and young people involved, this is a valuable opportunity to influence change at a strategic level.

NYAS and NCERCC are both passionately committed to finding ways to get the voices of looked after children and young people heard and have the experience and resources to support the development of this vital mechanism for change.



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