Listening to young people with special educational needs and disabilities

As part of the implementation of the Children and Families Act (2014), Luton Borough Council (LBC) conducted a series of workshops to involve young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and hear their views. These workshops are part of wider work to promote pupil participation. We are at the early stages of developing this work and further updates will be published here.

Seven workshops were held in total in 2014. Six workshops were held in schools: three in mainstream secondary schools, one in a secondary school for pupils with severe learning difficulties, one in a behaviour provision for secondary school age pupils, and one in a mainstream primary school. These workshops followed a similar structure, although the approach developed over time, to consult young people on LBC’s approach to implementing the Children and Families Act. A description of the workshops is in the Appendix.

A further workshop was held at Takeover Day, a borough wide event for young people organised each year by Luton Borough Council to listen to young people’s views and hear about their experiences. This year, workshops on ‘enabling abilities’ were held to listen to the experiences of pupils’ with SEND. These discussions at this event were led by young people and so followed a different structure. Views from this event are recorded separately from the workshops in schools.

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**Workshops in schools: key messages**
The aim was to consult young people on: how we involve them and listen to them in the assessment and planning process; and the development of the Local Offer. Not every workshop gave views on each topic.

This is a summary of the key views expressed in discussions. Some views expressed have been interpreted. Some implications are also discussed and these are recorded in *italics*. (A description of the views expressed in the workshops is in the appendix).

**Pupil voice**
There was variation in the extent to which young people with SEND felt listened to and how confident they felt about expressing their views and making decisions. There was variation in how confident young people felt about contributing to review meetings with some young people actively disliking them. This variation in confidence seems to affect the way in which young people want to communicate and be involved. Some young people preferred ways of communicating that minimise the direct communication demands e.g. that are visual and/or prepared in advance.

Some young people suggested they would feel uncomfortable with too much attention on them and may find some meetings too intense. This does not mean they don’t want to be involved or heard, they may prefer to prepare something in advance to express their views, e.g. a video, WIKI pages (explained below).

> One important implication is that professionals working with that young person need to check in with them about how confident and comfortable they feel, the level of involvement they want and what would help them feel more confident and comfortable. I.e. – personalise the person centred planning.

Some young people expressed a preference for making decisions about the future, e.g. post 16 education and training, with family members. However, others expressed preferences for making the decision independently of family members.

> An implication is that young people should be consulted about who they want to help them make decisions about the next stage of their education and training.

Pupils from the primary school also expressed views about decision making for transition to the next phase of their education. They talked about the importance of staying with friends, e.g. in form groups and classes, and how important it was to them to be listened to about this.

> One implication is that young people should be consulted about what is important to them at transition.

Young people’s views about some person-centred planning tools were gathered. Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) is a type of planning meeting that aims to promote person-centred planning using drawing to capture the views and aspirations of the young person, realistic goals and steps to achieve those goals. Young people expressed varying views about this approach. Some felt that it would be an intense experience and they would feel uncomfortable. Other young people were more positive and saw it
Young people’s views were sought about WIKI pages. WIKI pages are a type of self advocacy tool using multimedia (e.g. websites and videos). Young people can develop password protected web pages and videos or messages to go on the web pages that are about them and their needs. WIKI pages can be shown in a review meeting to either by the young person or a representative, and they can be used by staff working with that young person to ensure they understand what is important to them and why. Again, there was variation in views. Young people who liked the idea of using WIKI pages tended to be those who were less confident expressing their views. These young people seem to like the idea of WIKI pages because it enabled communication without talking. Some concern was expressed about privacy of information.

Young people’s views were sought about one page profiles. A one page profile typically has three sections: an appreciation about the person; what is important to that person from their perspective; and how to support them well. They are also known as learning passports. They are typically shared with a pupil’s teachers and support staff to help adults working with the pupil know what is important to them. In the workshops, young people were generally positive about one page profiles. Young people felt that they would give teachers key information without the need for young person to have to communicate directly. Some reservations were expressed about whether a one page profile was necessary and about sharing personal information. There was some preference for developing the profile with family but also some desire for autonomy in expressing yourself, at least to come up with initial ideas.

Young people often want support from family or school staff, in particular TAs/key workers, in expressing their views, attending review meetings and making decisions. However, some also want the opportunity to explore/express their views without being influenced. What young people say at meetings doesn’t always reflect their views – they may be just agreeing with all that is said or repeating others’ views. Even when young people are not invited to review meetings, they may be aware that decisions are being made about them.

It is important to note that some young people are concerned about what information about them is shared and with whom.

Local offer website
Young people liked the front page of Luton’s Local Offer website and thought that the front page invited them in to use the website. Young people liked the post code search facility of the website. However, they also felt that they would need and want support to get the information they are looking for from the website.
There are implications for support services (e.g. Transitions Team, remit of the new Independent Advice and Support Service) in terms of providing support to young people to use the Local Offer website.

Young people liked the range of services they found on the Local Offer website. However, young people also felt upset when they didn’t see their needs reflected in the description of the service. This seemed to be really important to young people, perhaps compounding a sense of exclusion they have experienced at other times in their life.

Implications include involving young people in reviewing the Local Offer website and seeing the information through the eyes of young people with SEND. There are implications for services to consult their users about how the service is presented.
Takeover Day workshop

Young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) spoke about their experiences of having a SEND and how people treated them. Themes included:

- Feeling judged and how painful this can be
- Others having stereotypes or making judgements based on superficial factors like appearance
- Feeling misunderstood
- Adults talking about young people or describing them without being thoughtful about how it would feel to hear/read those comments
- Feeling different or not feeling different – some young people saying their difficulties were a small part of them and they didn’t feel different; others did suggest they felt different to their peers
- Being excluded, especially socially amongst their peers. Sometimes not having the opportunity for others to get to know you because they’ve judged you from the beginning and don’t give time to find out there’s more to you.
- Being bullied by peers and what a huge affect that can have on your life, sometimes making you withdraw.
- Having aspirations but not always knowing how to pursue them or feeling confident about how to achieve aspirations
- Worrying how future potential employers would view them if they know about their SEND
- Not being able to get work experience that helps them achieve their aspirations
- Being asked for your views but then not being clear whether anything was done in response. And a general feeling that if you are not responded to and nothing changes, then there is no point in asking for views.

The discussion amongst the group as a whole included thoughts from ‘typically developing’ (TD) peers about how they hadn’t necessarily thought of the perspective of peers with SEND and they thought there was a lot of misunderstanding amongst young people. Others talked about the importance of young people with SEND knowing their rights and when they are being discriminated against. Discussion also turned to all services for young people and the importance of these being as welcoming as possible to young people with SEND. Suggestions included:

- Promoting shared understanding between TD young people and those with SEND. For example, through youth clubs that promote diversity so that young people with SEND aren’t only using separate spaces. Another suggestion from young people in the group ‘audience’ was to have workshops to promote understanding amongst TD young people of SEND. Some young people with SEND thought this was a good idea, others disagreed.
- More peer mentoring so that young people with SEND who have been through the system can inspire, encourage and support those still at school.
- More apprenticeship opportunities that don’t require minimum qualifications requirements. In particular, that LBC should directly provide apprenticeships without minimum qualification requirements.
- Establishing a forum for young people with SEND that could meet all year round to improve how we empower and listen to young people. In addition, a takeover day just for young people with SEND was suggested.
Appendix – descriptive information and evaluation of workshops in schools

Process

All participants were young people in years 6-11 with statements of special educational needs.

The workshop in the special school was the first workshop. In this workshop, participants were introduced to concepts (e.g. giving their views, contributing to review meetings, making decisions) using symbols from Talking Mats and asked to place the symbol on the Talking Mat to indicate how confident/happy they felt about this concept. They were also given symbols for people and asked who they liked to support them. There were single copies of each symbol, therefore participants were each given a turn. This made it difficult to capture a range of views. Participants were also shown a video of a person centred review using graphic facilitations (PATH) and asked to give their views.

In subsequent workshops, a PowerPoint presentation was used to help give context to the consultation process, i.e. explain about the changes in legislation, and to provide more visual support when talking about abstract concepts, e.g. making decisions. (presentation attached).

In the workshops from all the mainstream schools, specific symbols were created for each topic. In addition, each participant was given a symbol for each topic so a range of views could be presented on the Talking Mat. Pictures of Talking Mats are included in this note. A key to the Talking Mat and symbols is below.

In the workshop from the primary school, the section on making decisions and the local offer website was removed as it is less relevant to these pupils’ experiences and, therefore, harder to engage with.

Description of groups

In each school, SENCOs were asked to invite young people with a statement to take part in the workshops. Those invited depended on practical considerations such as timetables.

*One secondary special school.* In this school, ‘special school’ (SS), pupils were invited by the Deputy Headteacher based on whether they were likely to be able to engage with concepts (with visual prompts) such as giving views and making decisions. Six pupils (5 boys, 1 girl) took part from years 9 and 10. These pupils had complex needs including autism, developmental delay and physical needs. Some pupils were accompanied by key workers to help them communicate their views.

*One key stage 3 behaviour provision.* From this school, ‘behaviour provision’ (BP) two pupils (1 boy, 1 girl) in year 9 were invited to participate, however one of these pupils was very resistant to engaging and views were just gathered from one boy.

*Three mainstream schools.* None of these schools have a specialist provision, one is a faith school and one is a school for boys.

  In the school for boys, ‘School 1’ (S1), five boys in year 7 were invited to take part. They had a range of needs including speech and language difficulties, visual impairment, learning difficulties/developmental delay, and autism.

  In the second school, ‘School 2’ (S2), six pupils from years 7-9 were invited (5 boys, 1 girl). They had a range of needs including physical, autism, and learning difficulties/developmental delay.

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1 Talking Mats are an interactive resource using symbols to help thinking and communication. [http://www.talkingmats.com/](http://www.talkingmats.com/)
In the third school, ‘School 3’ (S3), three pupils (3 boys) from year 9 were invited. They had needs including autism and dyspraxia.

In the primary school (P1), three pupils (2 boys and 1 girl) from year 6 were invited. They had a range of needs including learning difficulties, a medical condition and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Views expressed in workshops
Expressing views and being heard

All the young people from the special school (SS) reported feeling listened to about their views of school. There was more variation in how confident participants felt about expressing their views. Family and key workers/teaching assistants (TAs) were the people who participants wanted to help them express their views. Accompanying staff expressed some concern that less confident participants may have copied the more confident participants in expressing their views; however, there was some variation in responses.

Most participants at the first mainstream school (S1) reported feeling confident about giving their views and that they were listened to. Participants in the second mainstream school (S2) (which included more participants with autism) reported feeling less confident expressing their views. Participants favoured TA’s and family to help them express their views. Participants at the third school (S3) either felt confident or ‘middle’ about expressing their views and they all favoured family supporting them to express themselves.

Participants at the primary school had some difficulty engaging with the abstract/general concepts of being listened to and giving their views. However, one participant asked questions about the discussions that his parents and the SENCo had which he was not part of. This appeared to reflect a sense of knowing that discussions and decisions were being made which he was not part of.

S1: how happy/confident about giving views and being listened to
To note:

- Importance of family members and teaching assistants/key workers in helping young people express views across special school and all three mainstream schools
- Variation in confidence expressing views
- Primary school aged pupils in this workshop expressed less positive views about being listened to

Review meetings

The participant from the behaviour provision (BP) felt it was really important to attend review meetings and felt relatively confident about expressing views at this meeting. He also liked the idea of making a video in advance of a meeting that could be played at the meeting to express views.
Many participants from mainstream schools were confident about attending review meetings, although some were unconfident and some ‘middle’, as below. Some participants actively disliked attending review meetings. One participant suggested that he always said yes at review meetings regardless of what he thought.

Family and teaching assistants were the most popular people to support the young person give their views at these meetings, although one participant suggested they would choose their teacher. One participant suggested that although family try to support you, they end up telling you what say and it can be difficult to make up your own mind.

One participant from the primary school talked about being unsure what to say at a review meeting. Another talked about attending a review meeting and enjoying the experience of hearing his parents and teachers positive things about him.

S1: how happy/confident about contributing to review meetings and preferences for support

S2: how happy/confident about contributing to review meetings
(picture contains symbols for review meetings and PATH planning meeting)
To note:

- Variation in confidence contributing to review meetings, with some active dislike and some resistance
- Support for a video made in advance of meeting to express views. (Making a video is also part of WIKI pages which was supported by young people who expressed less confidence about expressing views (below)).
- Mainly family chosen to support the young person at these meetings, TAs also popular
- Suggestion from two different participants that what you say at review meetings doesn’t necessarily reflect your views either because you just say yes; or it is hard to say what you think/make up your own mind because support can tip over into influencing your views
- The idea that review meeting can be positive for a pupil even if they are not contributing to the meeting, as they will be having the experience of home and school coming together this may include talking about the pupils’ strengths/progress.

Wiki pages

Some workshops were shown video excerpts of a family of a young man with severe learning difficulties using WIKI pages to help those working with the young person understand him and his perspective.

Some participants did not like this idea. Those who did like the idea tended to be the participants who reported being less confident expressing their views/contributing to review meetings. Some participants even expressed this themselves, e.g. one participant observed that it would make it easier to communicate, another participant said they liked it because they could express views without talking.
One participant expressed concern about privacy and who would see the pages. They said they would only want close friends and their family to know a lot about them.

To note:

- Divergent views for WIKI – participants who said they were less confident expressing their views/at review meetings tended to be more positive about it than more confident participants. Idea that WIKI pages would make it easier to communicate views/possible to communicate without talking
- Some concerns about privacy and sharing information widely

*One page profiles*
One page profiles were explained and participants were given some examples of one page profiles to look at. This was generally a fairly popular option. Participants from the BP, S1, S3 and P1 were all very positive about one page profiles. One participant commented that he liked one page profiles because it would be like telling the teacher without having to tell the teacher and that it would be good to make sure the teacher knows what makes you feel anxious. Some participants at S2 were less positive and one commented that you don’t need it because you can just tell the teacher. Another participant expressed concern about sharing personal details with the teacher.

Participants generally wanted to develop a one page profile with their family with a few wanting to do this with their TA. Strikingly, one boy spoke about wanting to do it first on his own so that it would be his ideas. Otherwise, he explained, it would be just like the annual review where others give you ideas of what to say.

Pupils at the primary school were very positive about the one page profiles and wanted to develop their own straight away.
To note:

- One page profiles were generally popular
- Reasons given included to make sure teachers have key information without the need for young person to have to do the communicating directly
- Reasons for not liking the one page profile included that it was not necessary and concerns about sharing personal information
- Preference for producing with family
- Some desire for autonomy in expressing yourself, at least to come up with initial ideas

Making decisions

There was a good discussion at the special school about making decisions. This seemed to be because some of the participants were at the stage of thinking about their next step. Some participants had visited colleges and therefore they could relate their own experience to this concept. There was variation in confidence about making decisions and about whom participants wanted to support them in making a decision. Some participants wanted to be supported by their family and others did not. After the session, school staff
expressed concern about young people’s expectations about choosing their next step. They suggested that, in practice, there were limited options which may be limited further by practical considerations such as travel and their families ability to provide transport. Staff also expressed concern about parents’ expectations about who makes decisions and felt that more work may be required at a parental level.

Although ‘making decisions’ was discussed at the first school, participants were in year 7 and may have found it hard to relate to the concept of making decisions about their next transition at age 16. They were very positive about their confidence in making decisions, but the participants appeared a bit over excited at this stage in the workshop and I was not confident that the discussion was grounded or reflected pupil’s underlying opinions. In the third school, there was a calmer discussion and participants expressed mixed feelings about making decisions. They wanted to be supported by family.

Pupils from the primary school were not directly asked about making decisions. However, during the discussion they expressed views about transition to secondary school and how important it was to stay with their friends, e.g. in form groups or in classes, and to be listened to about this.

To note:

- Variation in confidence about making decisions
- Preference for family supporting them in making decisions, but some young people less keen on this

**Person centred planning meetings**

Some workshops were shown a video of a person centred planning (PCP) meeting for a young women with SEND. The PCP tool used was Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH). This was generally popular at the special school. However, staff raised concerns, as above, about young people’s expectations following a discussion about their dreams.

The participant at the behaviour provision did not like this idea and described it as ‘too intense, too much’.

Most participants at the second school were not keen on the PATH meeting.

In the third mainstream school, the video was not shown to participants. Instead, I described the process of developing a PATH using a picture of a finished PATH. These participants were all positive about that type of meeting. One commented that it easier to see what you mean in a drawing and to show other people. He elaborated that it made it easier to think about the future and to be able to relate this to what pupils do in school. Another participant in this workshop said he liked it because it was better to see it in a picture than having to repeat yourself.
To note:

- Concern that a graphic facilitation person centred planning meeting is an intense experience, and some young people may feel this is uncomfortable for them
- Contrast between S2 and S3 in terms of preference for PATHs – could this be due to how the idea was presented? Did the video of a PATH meeting put participants off who couldn’t identify with individual with SEND in video?
- Positive views of PATH come from the drawing element of it – well explained by one participant who I interpreted as saying that the drawing/picture can help to envisage the future and to make links
- Another positive aspect may be the accessible record of the meeting provided by the drawing
- (concern from staff, not pupils, about managing expectations)

Local offer website

Participants in the behaviour school and S1 were shown Local Offer websites for Luton, Hertfordshire, and Leicester. However, there was limited time to explore these websites and it was difficult to help participants engage with all three websites meaningfully to provide a comparison. One effective way to help participants to engage seemed to be to use the websites to find out information that they were interested in and this was difficult for websites relating to other areas. However, in terms of how inviting participants found the
front page, there was general preference for the Luton website. There was also preference to use the website with support from members of their family or a TA.

The participant in the behaviour provision had used Luton’s Local Offer in the previous week with his adviser from the Transitions Team. He said he found it really useful, he particularly liked the ability to search by postcode. However, he also reported that he wouldn’t have found it easy to use on his own. We looked at the other websites to compare finding similar information on those and he suggested they were confusing.

In S2 and S3, I decided to explore Luton’s Local Offer website in more detail with the workshop (rather than focus on a comparison). I showed them some examples of searches and there was general support, and some enthusiasm, for the site. Several participants were pleasantly surprised about what information they could find, e.g. youth clubs in their area for young people with SEND. However, one participant commented, ‘its a good idea but I wouldn’t use it’ and added that he would ask family instead. Others said they would only use it with support. Many participants suggested that they would need support to find the right information.

In S2 and S3, some participants expressed negative feelings about the content of some items from searches on the Local Offer. In particular, participants were upset when they felt that their SEND was not reflected in the information. Participants in S2 felt very strongly about this suggesting that they felt insulted when there wasn’t information about whether the service was open to young people with autism, one participant said if there’s no information about autism ‘its like they’re laughing about it’. A participant with dyspraxia in S3 also felt upset that this need was not mentioned in any of the items we found.
To note:

- Where compared, a preference for the look of Luton Local Offer, at least the front page.
- Positive views about the post code search facility and the range of information on the site, e.g. fun services such as youth clubs as well as schools.
- Preference to look at Local Offer website with support, some concern about whether pupils would be able to find the information they were looking for without support.
- Strong feelings, which I interpreted as feeling rejected/excluded, when pupil’s SEND were not reflected in description of items.
Key to Talking Mat and symbols

Scale along top of Mat, left to right = positive to negative

Symbols for topic discussed & symbols for people indicating preference for who should young people

Topic symbols: talking, being listened to, review meetings, video, Shanes Wiki, one page profile, making decisions, PATH planning meeting, Luton’s Local Offer website, Leicester’s Local Offer website
People symbols: family, learning assistant or TA, teacher, other
Evaluation of workshops in schools

Some of the concepts were difficult to gain young people’s views on because they didn’t have direct experience, e.g. of coordination meeting and developing an EHC plan, developing a one page profile, using a website etc. Therefore, views expressed are a reflection of the young person’s idea about these which may differ significantly to how they would experience it.

Participants’ understanding of the concepts discussed appeared to be supported by using the PowerPoint presentation. Using Talking Mats with symbols for each participant appeared to help discussion and reflection. The videos were mixed, some participants may have made judgements about the PCP tool (e.g. PATH meeting) on the basis of whether they identified with the young person in the video.

The quality of the discussion in the workshops varied. The most successful workshop in terms of quality of discussion was at the third school which had only three participants. The quality of discussion was also affected by time and the amount of material to be covered. Where the quality of discussion was good, it was difficult to capture views in detail if there was one workshop facilitator.