A practical guide to engaging young people and professionals in a dialogue
Successes, challenges and impacts

Authors: National Centre for Social Research
Date: May 2010
This document provides a guide to conducting engagement between young people and professionals with the aim of generating dialogue. It draws on the National Centre for Social Research’s (NatCen’s) experience and learning from the ‘Responding to youth crime and antisocial behaviour’ project to provide practical examples. The guide outlines benefits and challenges of organising a process of engagement that may assist agencies wishing to conduct a similar process.

1. Background

The Police Foundation and NatCen were awarded grant support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation’s Social Justice Programme for a research and engagement project with young people who had experience of the youth justice system as witnesses, victims or perpetrators of crime. The insights obtained through the project contributed to proposals for reforming the way society responds to youth offending that were developed by the Independent Commission on Youth Crime and Antisocial Behaviour (‘the Commission’). The commissioners include senior police officers, youth workers, broadcasters, academics and CEOs of multi-national companies. The project is therefore a demonstration of how marginalised young people that have been involved in or affected by crime and antisocial behaviour can be engaged with to participate in deliberations about reform with professionals and experts involved in the field, and inform recommendations that may engender change.

The main aims of the project were to:

- Explore young people’s experiences of the youth justice system and their involvement with antisocial behaviour or criminal behaviour
- Examine motivations for young people’s criminal or antisocial behaviour
- Generate recommendations for improvements to the youth justice system, that have relevance to offenders, victims and witnesses
- Model a learning process that not only enables participants to contribute effectively to the Commission’s work, but also demonstrates how marginalised young people in contact with the youth justice system and adult members of the Commission can productively be engaged in a dialogue about policy and service reform.
The first three aims are addressed in a separate report. Aim four is considered in this practical guide.

The project consisted of a three-stage process. The first stage comprised of 21 confidential in-depth interviews with young people aged between 12 and 25.

The second consisted of four small deliberative group discussions (4 – 6 in each), inviting a new sample of young people (aged 12 – 25) to build on the findings from the first stage and consider options for reforming the youth justice system.

The third phase was the engagement workshop - a face-to-face meeting between young people and the Commissioners with the aim of creating an active dialogue between them regarding the youth justice system. All of the young people involved in the process had direct experience of the justice system themselves.

2. Research and engagement with young people

In this section a detailed account of the three stages of the project is provided.

2.1 Depth Interviews

Young people who had experience of the CJS as offenders, victims, witnesses (or in most cases, all of these roles) took part in face to face depth interviews. Contact was made with the young people via agencies that support them such as foyers, youth groups, schools and support services for young people involved in crime. The interviews took place on premises provided by these agencies, in a private and comfortable room.

The interviews were used to ascertain the young person’s personal experiences of crime and antisocial behaviour. This took the form of a life history interview, first exploring the young persons’ current circumstance, then exploring their experiences of crime and antisocial behaviour chronologically from the first to the most recent episode. Their experiences of contact with the CJS and the impact that they felt such contact had on their offending/victim
pathways was also explored. Finally, the young people were asked to identify measures that could have prevented their offending, and key messages that they would like to pass onto the Commission.

Extensive efforts were made to ensure material for the interviews could be used flexibly and interactively with participants of different ages. Examples of this material included an A3 colour diagram mapping the research process which included pictures of the Commissioners and pictorial images to represent who was conducting the research, and the eventual audience. The diagram was used to promote the understanding of the young people during the informed consent explanation process, before obtaining their consent to continue with the interview.

In addition to a topic guide, a set of scenario based images of actions that may constitute antisocial behaviour or crime were developed. These cards were used to explore young people’s actions, and what constituted either crime or antisocial behaviour, from their perspectives.

The young people were also provided with sheets of paper, pens and ‘post it’ notes enabling them to draw or ‘stick on’ their life story whilst verbally recounting it during the interview, and also when discussing their experiences and views on crime and antisocial behaviour.

Older participants who were comfortable recounting their experiences verbally without additional prompts were also given that option. The interviews were audio taped to provide a clear record of the discussion and young people given written material that they had created to take with them or destroy as they wished.

2.2 Deliberative group discussions
The second stage of the research, which followed the in-depth interviews with young people, consisted of a series of four deliberative group discussions. Deliberative groups are intended to allow space for participants to discuss different opinions and try to find a point of agreement or conclusion. The young people involved in the deliberative groups also had personal experiences of crime and antisocial behaviour, and of contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). However group discussions are generally not
appropriate forums to explore personal experiences, rather they allow for ideas and concepts to be deliberated within a group dynamic, and for scenarios and suggestions to be developed that include the perspectives of a number of participants. The aims of the deliberative groups were to generate ideas for improving responses to youth crime and antisocial behaviour, including ways of preventing children and other young people from becoming involved in crime and views on policing, courts, custody and other parts of the youth justice system.

Similar materials were used to inform the young people of the research during the group discussions as during the interviews, such as the diagram of the research process. A set of cards was also created that outlined principles of the Commission. These were used in the group discussions with the young people to explore their views of the justice system and how it should respond to youth crime. The young people were asked, for example, to order the cards by the level of importance they felt these principles had for addressing youth crime, and to explain why they had ordered them as they did.

2.3 Engagement event between commissioners and young people

The third and final stage of the engagement process, which followed the deliberative focus groups, was an engagement event between commissioners and young people. The young people involved again had personal experiences of crime and antisocial behaviour, and of contact with the CJS, and were drawn from those previously involved in the research and young people willing to attend from youth groups in the area.

The intention of the workshop was to develop an iterative and responsive dialogue between the Commissioners and young people, the results of which (alongside the findings from the qualitative research completed as a precursor to the engagement workshop, and a range of other research activities completed for the Commission) would inform the Commissioners thinking and conclusions. The purpose of the dialogue was to enable both the Commission members and young people to share their views and understand and learn from one another in dialogue, rather than simply a consultation.
To facilitate this dialogue a series of three workshops took place over two days in March 2010 (preparation workshops with each group and one engagement event). The location for the workshops was a café space in a centrally located arts venue. Each of the workshops are described in turn below.

**Workshop One: Commissioners**

The first workshop was a facilitated dialogue with the Commissioners, exploring their aims, anticipation and concerns regarding engagement with the young people. There are 12 Commissioners and six were able to attend the workshop sessions. The workshops were led by an experienced facilitator with the support of members of the research team. Prior to the first workshop with the Commissioners the research team identified nine key themes regarding youth crime and the youth justice system that would benefit from input and the opportunity to discuss solutions. These were sourced from the qualitative interviews and deliberative groups and the Commissioners’ consultation document. Due to time constraints it was not possible to discuss all these themes during the workshops with young people, so the Commission members were asked to identify six themes they would like to discuss with the young people (the young people were also given the opportunity to choose the themes they wanted to discuss). The facilitator encouraged the Commissioners to consider the optimum means by which they could meaningfully engage with the young people, and commissioners completed paired discussions to hone the key questions of interest they wished to discuss with young people. These questions were then discussed within the group and the facilitator ensured the questions were specific and practical, rather than abstract or complex and discussed the significance of this to the commissioners.

The Commissioners also prepared a presentation to introduce themselves to the young people. For the presentation they were asked to write details about their occupations and their expertise and experiences of crime (either as a victim, perpetrator or witness) on cards and place them in a sealed box. These cards were anonymous. The Commissioners then organised this information into an order with which they would read it out to the young people.
The six key themes identified by the Commissioners to be the focus of the discussion with the young people were: custody; experiences of court; restorative justice; young people and police relations; criminal records; and the prevention of crime/antisocial behaviour. The findings from the research stage were then reviewed by the research team, to draw out key findings and suggestions for reform that had previously been made regarding these themes. This material was then used to develop group exercises that could be completed with the young people to support them to enter into a dialogue with the Commissioners that focussed on the priority themes the Commissioners identified and ensure there were clear questions or exercises for the young people to engage with rather than abstract concepts.

**Workshop Two: Young People**
The second workshop was held on the next day and attended by the young people and facilitators. Nine young people were recruited to attend, but only six were able to on the day. The purpose of the young person only workshop was to allow the young people a space to meet each other, identify the key points they would like to make during the discussion session and also the ensure that any questions that the young people had regarding the engagement workshop with the Commissioners could be answered. The young people did have a number of questions and concerns regarding the nature and purpose of the third session, which were allayed during this stage. In this way the young people were engaged in the process and comfortable in the space where the engagement would occur, prior to the engagement workshop. This session also allowed the young people the opportunity to become versed in talking through the six issues and familiarise themselves with each other’s views and experiences prior to meeting the commission members.

The young people also prepared a presentation for the Commissioners, where they outlined the types of experiences of crime and antisocial behaviour they had had and their views on why these occur. The young people chose to develop this presentation though drama and act out their experiences with narratives at the end of each scene. During this process the young people (who had not previously all met) also began to operate as a group and support each other.
Workshop three: Commissioners and young people engagement session

At the third workshop the Commissioners joined the young people for the deliberative engagement process. On arrival all of the attendees – facilitators, young people and commissioners - were asked to sign in on a board with their first name and age beside it.

The facilitator introduced the aims and structure of the workshop and both groups – commissioners and young people – made their presentations to each other. The young people were asked to match the Commissioners to the occupations they had listed the day before. This exercise appeared to work very well and the young people also particularly appreciated hearing the types of crime and antisocial behaviour that the Commissioners had engaged in via the anonymous cards being read out. The young people then gave their presentation to the Commissioners, which was well received. An ice breaker exercise – speed dating - between the young people and Commissioners followed, where they could ask pre-planned generic questions (such as favourite television programme, or in a question posed by one young person, how much they earn) about each other and their interests, in order to establish an informal atmosphere.

The formal sessions then began. In the first session small group work took place. In each group two Commissioners and two young people selected one of three of the six key themes and worked through exercises focusing on the theme. The aim of these sessions was to encourage people to share and discuss their opinions, and in particular any differences in opinions (both within and across expert groups), and where possible reach a consensus about possible solutions or improvements to the CJS. The discussions were audio recorded. After the first session a general feedback session was held with the whole group before splitting into two groups and repeating the discussion session and relevant exercises, for two further themes. The entire group then joined together for a final plenary session focussing on the topic of prevention of crime. The engagement workshop concluded with a reflective feedback discussion on what the young people and Commissioners felt that they had learnt from the process. The Commissioners agreed to send Postcards to the young people once they had made their conclusions to keep them informed about the outcome of the research. To close, all of the
participants were thanked and the next steps of the Commissioners work outlined.

Some young people also exchanged contact details with the Commissioners and have since been in contact. The research team remained in contact with the young people to ensure they are informed of the progress of the research and have been able to comment on the findings if they wish. The young people involved in the workshops are also invited to attend the launch of the Commissioners recommendations in July 2010.

3. 1 What might the benefits of engagement events be?
- Allowing groups to come together that would not traditionally hear from each other in such a personal direct manner
- Facilitating less powerful people’s views being heard by powerful groups
- Empowering young people to have a say in issues that affect them and that they have experience of
- Genuine, meaningful engagement of young people to inform decision making processes

3.2 And the challenges...
- Ensuring that all participants are clear as to the purpose of the event, their role at the event and adhering to set codes of conduct even if they have experience of attending similar events previously
- Protecting all participants – ensuring that people are not taken advantage of, or personal information that they do not wish to share is exposed during the course of the event
- Attendance levels – gathering large groups of people can prove very difficult e.g. professionals commitments, quickly changeable nature of young peoples circumstances

4.  Practical guidance

The process of setting up and conducting the workshop enabled NatCen to develop a sense of how to effectively arrange and conduct such events. Practical points that may be useful for other agencies wishing to conduct similar engagement workshops that bring young people and professional
together are outlined below. These are structured around three points in time: ‘event set up’, ‘on the day’, and ‘after the event’. This is followed by a list of good practice tips for conducting similar engagement events between young people and professionals that were provided by the young people after the event are outlined.

**Engagement process: Set up**

- **Logistics** - allow time for setting up the event e.g. booking venue, providing materials for event, booking travel and accommodation for participants can be very time consuming so ensure that adequate time is factored in.
- **Suitable venue** – ensure that the venue is fit for purpose e.g. having ample space with a suitable layout and is not intimidating to young people.
- **Dress code** – ensure participants are aware of dress code for the event e.g. professionals to avoid clothing that may be seen as intimidating and young people are aware that they can dress casually if this is the case.
- **Roles of facilitators** – clear distinction of roles and lead facilitator. Try to avoid having people observing engagements without facilitating.
- **Event timetabling** – ensure that adequate time is built in to achieve clarity about purpose and aims of event, ice break exercises etc.
- **Preparation workshops** – these may seem time consuming but are essential to establish the purpose and the process of the engagement workshop, allow groups to establish aims of the session, priority areas and discuss expectations, hopes and questions. This is as much the case for professionals as it is young people as it allows the chance to empathise with how young people may perceive the discussion and promote active dialogue rather than consultation.

**On the day**

- **Create a varied, interesting day** – building in exercises that engage participants and aid developing a group dynamic such as ice breakers session, presentations.
- **Format of materials** – consider most effective materials, such as using visual materials to help explain research and people involved.
- **Joint exercises to remove power dynamics** such as a signing in board with everyone’s name and ages, both sides doing a presentation to each other, professional reading out experiences that they share with the
young people (i.e. experiences of crime including offences they may have committed).

- **Event conduct** – ground rules should be set at the outset of the workshops agreed upon by the participants. These should be reiterated throughout.
- Develop appropriate methods for feedback such as visual charts and stickers that can be placed to illustrate positive/negative scale anonymously feedback method
- Inform participants of what will happen next.

**After the participatory event:**

- Ensure that any follow up activity that is promised to participants is carried out such as sending on reports or Postcards and that they are clear about the duration of their involvement

4.3 **The view from young people:**

The young people involved in the workshops were also invited to comment on the summary findings from the research and engagement process, and reflect on the experience of taking part during an informal session held two months after the workshops. This section presents the young people's views on being involved in the engagement workshop, in terms of what they felt worked well and their suggested learning points:

**What works to engage young people with professionals:**

- **Composition of the group** – useful to have young people who do not know each other and from different geographical areas to have a diverse range of views.
- **Preparation workshops** – allow the young people to get to know each other and bond as a group prior to meeting the professionals/commission members.
- **Range of activities** – young people doing their presentation through drama helped them to bond. Having a mix of small group exercises and large group discussions keeps the day interesting.
- **Focused sessions** – sticking to the aims of the research helps to keep young people engaged and feel the discussion is important.
- **Follow up activities** – important for young people to see the outcome of their participation and feel their involvement matters:
“If I don’t see any outcome from anything why am I going to help? There’s no point doing stuff if there ain’t an outcome”

“It’s good to know what’s going on and how it’s going to help people around me”

- **Type of participants attending the event** – everyone needs to have a similar experience level so they have something to contribute to the discussion in order for there to be a meaningful dialogue between participants. It can make it difficult to relate to others if they do not have anything to share
- **Numbers of participants** – a good number of participants (approx 10) helps to keep the conversation flowing and generate difference in opinions
- **Ice breaker sessions** – for young people to get to know each other better e.g. backgrounds and how they got involved in the research and to get to know the professionals/commissioners
- **Ensure information is available prior to event** - information about the professionals/commission members allows young people to feel prepared for the event
- **Sharing personal experiences** – the young people felt listened to by the commissioners, but they would have liked them to share their views / experiences more so it is important that both young people and professionals share the same level of personal information
- **Confidentiality** - young people can be reluctant to share their personal experiences with strangers and there need for robust procedures to be formulated and assurances about confidentiality to be conveyed to participants that are agreed and acted upon

5. **Impact and influence**

The feedback given by the Commissioners at the end of the engagement event indicated that the workshop helped to **remind** the Commissioners of the reality of young people’s experiences of the CJS, by hearing personal stories and perspectives, and helped to reignite their passion and enthusiasm for their task of recommending changes to the system.

Feedback from the young people was that they felt genuinely listened to and that they are keen to be informed of the recommendations.
The extent to which the engagement process actually influenced or informed the commissioner’s recommendations will be reflected upon and reported once the recommendations are released in July 2010.

The National Centre for Social Research
This project was conducted with the Police Foundation and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Rachel Kinsella
Nicky Cleghorn
Carol McNaughton Nicholls

www.natcen.ac.uk