IRISS
Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services

Community Research: Working with Young People

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1. Introduction

This report describes a community research project that was undertaken by IRISS between August 2010 and May 2011. The project involved working in partnership with Who Cares? Scotland and the young people supported by this organisation to evaluate the advocacy services which it provides to young people who are, or have been, in care in Scotland.

This report primarily describes the process of the project, the lessons learned through undertaking the work and the impact of the project. It does not detail the results of the research, but directs to other resources that describe these. There are several accompanying resources to this report including:

- A presentation of results by the young researchers.
- A response to this presentation by Who Cares? Scotland.
- An article on the young people's experience of the project, originally published in Who Cares? Scotland's *Speak Out* magazine.
- A comic illustrating the process and outcomes of the project in an easily accessible format.
- The brief given to potential partner organisations.

These resources can be viewed and downloaded at:
http://www.iriss.org.uk/project/community-research

1.1 What is community research?

Community research (also known as community participatory research, community-based research and other variants) is an approach to research that acknowledges the community of interest (be that geographic or united by some common characteristic) as an entity that is a partner in research that is of importance and interest to them rather than a group on which research is done. It seeks to redress the power imbalance between the 'expert' researcher and the 'subjects' of research. Importantly, it recognises that members of a community are themselves the experts in their own lives, situations and experiences. It is strongly related to traditions of 'user controlled research' (which refers explicitly to users of services particularly in the field of disabilities – see Turner and Beresford (2005)) and 'participatory action research'.

In common with the other research types mentioned above, amongst the purported advantages of community research are the unique perspectives that members of a community have on the issues of importance to them and their ability to access and communicate with other members of that

community at a level that an 'expert' researcher is unlikely to be able to (eg Brownlie, Anderson and Ormston, 2006).

IRISS was interested in undertaking a community research project as it fit within our three-fold definition of evidence as a combination of research evidence, practice wisdom and service user views. We hoped to show that in working in partnership with people supported by services to produce research, this could generate valuable evidence that could have a real impact on those services.

Key principles included working in partnership with the community as far as possible and be led by that community.

1.2 Choosing the community group

Young people are an important group of people supported by services, who can often be, or feel, overlooked and unimportant in the process of developing policies and services. Although considerable consultation is undertaken with groups of young people, questions surround how much some of this consultation actually contributes to decision making and initiating change. Where change is not possible, it is also questionable how much young people actually believe their views and needs have been taken into consideration.

This project was focused on young people for two reasons. First, we wanted to ensure that this group was meaningfully represented within the projects undertaken by IRISS. Second, we wanted to ensure that the community research project helped to give a real voice to a marginalised group.

1.3 Working in partnership with a service provider

As a key principle, IRISS aims to work in partnership with practitioners and provider organisations. Throughout this project we were conscious that we would be working directly with young people and that we would need the support and expertise of a partner with real experience of working with this group and understanding of their specific needs and challenges. We, therefore, decided to seek out an organisation to act as a full partner in this project.

2. Selecting a partner

We considered a number of options in to identify a partner to work with on the project. For example, we discussed identifying a specific issue of importance to young people and approaching organisations that worked on that issue. However, due to advice received about ensuring a high level of commitment from the partner organisation over a long period of time, it was decided that the best option would be to allow interested organisations to apply to undertake the work on a topic of their choice.

YouthLink Scotland agreed to approach suitable partner organisations on our behalf with a brief on the project. The brief can be downloaded from the project pages (http://www.iriss.org.uk/project/community-research). In summary the main criteria were that:

- the research topic must fall within an area that has a strong link to social services.
- the young people involved were to be 16 years of age or above.
- while we welcomed proposals from national organisations, the community itself must be geographically discrete.
- the proposal must represent the true concerns of the young people within the community rather than the organisation more generally.
- there must be an understanding of, and commitment to, the length of time required both from the organisation and from the young people.

On the basis of the brief, several organisations agreed to an initial meeting to discuss potential participation in the project. As a result of this we received two proposals, and from these, selected Who Cares? Scotland as our partner organisation. The main reason for this choice was that the topic proposed for investigation had a clear and original research requirement, whereas the other organisation suggested further investigation into an area where research had already been carried out and recommendations made, leading us to believe that they were at the stage of implementation.

Additionally, we were impressed by Who Cares? Scotland's commitment to actively including young people's views and supporting their participation through the way their organisation is structured.

Who Cares? Scotland wished to conduct a young person-led evaluation of their advocacy services. This topic had already been discussed and approved by young people involved with the organisation via their Board

(which includes six young people as members). We were, therefore, confident that this research topic represented an area of real interest and concern to young people supported by Who Cares? Scotland.

2.1 Who Cares? Scotland

Who Cares? Scotland is an organisation that provides advocacy to children and young people in Scotland who are, or who have been, in care. They provide a voice for young people by working with them, listening to them and speaking out with them. They also have a campaigning function and aim to promote and protect young people's rights, as well as fully involving young people in their organisation, including their decision-making. To this end, their Board is equally made up of young people and adults. This fully participative, young person-centred approach was one of the key reasons that IRISS chose to collaborate with Who Cares? on this project.

3. The process

3.1 Initial considerations

Although the plan for the project was fairly fluid due to the details depending on the direction that the young people wanted to take the work, there were a number of key issues to resolve before involving the young researchers.

These issues included:

- Project details such as geographical scope and organisational requirements.
- Recruitment of young people.
- Support, compensation and rewards for young people.
- Initial discussions around young people undertaking fieldwork and ethical issues that may arise.

3.1.1 Initial scoping

As discussed above, Who Cares? Scotland proposed conducting an evaluation of the advocacy services that they provide to young people who are or have been in care. It was important to ensure that despite this fairly defined topic area, the young researchers would still have the scope and freedom to shape the work based on their own concerns and opinions. It was, therefore, agreed that the young people would determine the exact areas for evaluation, along with the research methods used to conduct the evaluation. There would also be scope to explore the topic of advocacy for young people who are, or have been, in care more generally if that was of interest to the young researchers.

However, as Who Cares? Scotland is a large national organisation it was important to limit the scope of the project to something that would be achievable by the young researchers within the available timeframe. For this reason, we chose to limit the project geographically to two areas around Glasgow City. This would enable the young people involved to travel easily to meetings and to conduct fieldwork and also ensure that the amount of fieldwork required would not be too onerous no matter which research methods were chosen. The areas selected by Who Cares? Scotland were South Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire.

3.1.2 Recruitment and group characteristics

It was agreed that six young people would be recruited to the group, which, ideally, would be composed of two young people from South Lanarkshire, two from Renfrewshire and two from the Who Cares? board. Recruitment in

the two localities was achieved by circulation of information about the project via children's houses by the Who Cares? young people's workers from those areas. Interested young people were asked to complete a short form about their reasons for applying and suitability for the group. Their young people's workers supported them to do this where necessary.

Who Cares? Scotland and IRISS assessed the applications and young people were selected on the basis of their reasons for wanting to be involved, their stated commitment and their availability in terms of time and duration. Prior to the start of the project, we recruited two young people from Renfrewshire, three from South Lanarkshire and one from the Who Cares? Scotland board. However, before the first meeting, the board member dropped out for personal reasons, so the project commenced with five young people in the group.

Recruitment and attendance was an on-going issue in the initial weeks of the project (see further information in section 4.2). Several young people left the process for a variety of reasons, reflecting the often complicated lives of the group of young people with whom we were engaging. Further recruitment took place on an ad hoc and less planned basis, resulting in a fairly steady group of six young people attending from session four onwards. This group comprised two young people from Renfrewshire, three from South Lanarkshire and one Who Cares? Scotland board member.

The core group comprised four girls and two boys whose ages ranged between 16 and 22 years, with the majority aged 18 and 19. By the end of the project, all the young people had left care and were living independently, though at the beginning two had been resident in children's houses.

3.1.3 Support, compensation and rewards for young people

From the outset, it was clear that the young people recruited for the project would need considerable support from their Who Cares? workers. This would include assistance to travel to the venue for those who did not self-travel (due to their circumstances or location) and availability during the training sessions to support the young people with any issues that might arise for them through the work. It was also anticipated that the IRISS researcher might need support from experienced young people's workers with issues relating to the young people's behaviour or needs.

The workers would also need to assist with transport and support during fieldwork and with the recruitment of participants for the young people to conduct the research with.

As well as ensuring that the young people were properly supported to take part, we were also keen to meaningfully reward the young people for their time and commitment in participating in the project. There are arguments in the literature (Pryce, 2009) both for and against financial compensation for

young people's participation in research and the form this compensation should take. We believed that the young people would derive considerable benefit from receiving a financial reward and that this would be appropriate given their circumstances. Who Cares? Scotland was keen to move towards cash payment rather than vouchers for all young people's participation in their organisation. Despite some reservations on IRISS's part, this was the route agreed on. However, it became clear after the first two sessions that due to the frequency of the meetings this would not be practical, as it would adversely affect the benefits of the young people involved. We, therefore, moved to payment via vouchers of the young people's choice, in addition to covering travel expenses and providing a meal at each session. Who Cares? Scotland is currently working on a policy for moving towards cash payments.

We also wanted to ensure that the young people received other tangible benefits as a result of their participation in the project. For this reason, we arranged via YouthLink Scotland to have the work accredited by awarding the young people who successfully completed the project the Participative Democracy Certificate. This is a qualification developed by YouthLink Scotland and accredited through Adam Smith College based on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

The Participative Democracy certificate is based on decision making in groups. It gives participants the opportunity to acknowledge and develop communication, research, decision making and negotiation in the context of democratic engagement. It is worth two credits at level 5; each credit based on 10 hours of learning activity. The level describes the complexity of learning involved; level 5 has the same learning complexity as a credit standard grade or a SVQ 2 or an Intermediate 2.

In order to gain this accreditation, the training programme and planned research was checked by YouthLink Scotland to ensure it met the requirements for the certificate, and a number of pieces of evidence had to be submitted in support of each young person's work towards it.

3.1.4 Ethical issues around fieldwork

From the beginning, we were keen to ensure that any risk and safety concerns around the young people conducting research with their peers were anticipated and procedures put in place. Whether or not young people conducted interviews without supervision was discussed in detail and we decided to apply for clearance through Disclosure Scotland for all young researchers in order to leave this option open. Who Cares? Scotland drafted an information sheet to explain the implications of going through the disclosure process to the young people so that they could make an informed decision about whether to proceed. We agreed that any cases where the disclosure process raised concerns would be dealt with on an individual basis, with a view to allowing the young person to still participate in the research project as far as possible.

In the end, very few disclosures were processed in time and young people did not undertake any unsupervised fieldwork with their peers, but were accompanied by the researcher from IRISS. This compromise was seen as the best solution by both organisations, as it mitigated concerns from Who Cares? Scotland that young people would not be as open and honest about their organisation with a member of Who Cares? Scotland staff present. It also ensured that if any issues around risk or disclosure arose, the young researchers would have immediate support to deal with them.

3.2 The training and research process

The young people attended 15 sessions between 10th November 2010 and 5th April 2011. The sessions were held weekly, with breaks over Christmas and while fieldwork was being undertaken. Some sessions scheduled in December 2010 were also postponed due to adverse weather conditions. Each session ran for around three hours, including breaks, and was held on Wednesday afternoon/evening in the Who Cares? Scotland offices in central Glasgow. Times and dates were arranged to accommodate the young people's other commitments.

Sessions were primarily facilitated by the researcher from IRISS, with input from a number of Who Cares? Scotland staff. ICA:UK (http://www.ica-uk.org.uk/) were also commissioned by IRISS to run two sessions, one on research methods and one on analysis.

The sessions were run on a participative basis with little desk-based work. A number of interactive techniques, such as post-it storms, dot-voting, drawing, role play and a consensus workshop were used to encourage the young people to get involved and to contribute as much as possible. It was very important to encourage the young people to generate their own ideas and to facilitate their ownership of the research and its design.

It was also important to be able to adjust the sessions based on the young people's responses to the techniques used. Our ability to do this improved over time as we got to know the young people in the group. Some of the areas that the young people (and the facilitator) found most challenging were questionnaire design and data analysis.

3.2.1 Areas covered in the sessions

The sessions covered a large number of areas. In session one, we began by explaining the project, introducing the idea of community research and explaining that the group was in control of what we did within the parameters of evaluating Who Cares? Scotland's advocacy services. The young people also generated ground rules for their participation in the project. These

covered areas such as showing each other respect, time keeping and mobile phone usage.

In session two we began to discuss what constitutes an evaluation and why we would want to do one. We also introduced the concept of advocacy and what made a really good advocate. This led to discussion about what Who Cares? Scotland did and how we would know if Who Cares? Scotland was doing the things it should be. From this, we generated a long list of outcomes, which we defined as the desirable results of the advocacy activities undertaken by Who Cares? Scotland.

Session three was run by ICA:UK and gave the young people an overview of a number of different research methods and allowed them to explore what barriers might prevent people from taking part in research.

In sessions four and five we returned to the outcomes and the young people voted for the ones they thought were most important. This led to the identification of four outcomes to assess Who Cares? Scotland's performance against:

1. People know about Who Cares? Scotland.
2. Young people get support from Who Cares? Scotland when they need it.
3. Young people have a voice (because of support from Who Cares? Scotland).
4. Young people know their rights and are fairly treated (because of support from Who Cares? Scotland).

Emphasis was placed on this part of the process so that the young people understood that choosing these outcomes would shape the research they did for the remainder of the project. The facilitator then explained that in order to evaluate how Who Cares? Scotland was performing on each of the outcomes, we needed to identify the things that would let us know whether each outcome had been achieved. In this way, the young people generated a number of indicators related to each outcome and again voted on the most important indicators. They then came up with questions to ask or things that could be measured against their chosen indicators.

In these sessions, the young people also started to discuss which research methods they were most interested in using and which groups of people they were most interested in consulting.

In sessions six and seven, time was spent on ensuring that the young people understood ethical issues such as confidentiality, disclosure and informed consent and on discussing any concerns they had around these aspects of research. The young people also worked on developing an information sheet that could be given to young people who might take part in the research,

explaining these issues to them and helping them to make an informed choice about whether to participate.

We also agreed on the research methods that we wanted to use. These were:

- Online questionnaires with professionals (such as social workers, health, education, people in the Children's Hearings system).
- Paper questionnaires with staff in residential children's houses.
- Two focus groups with young people (one in South Lanarkshire and one in Renfrewshire).
- One-to-one interviews with young people in both areas.

The young researchers wanted to do both focus groups and interviews, partly because they wanted to get experience of both methods, and also because they felt that some young people would respond better to a group situation and others to a one-to-one discussion. On further reflection, they agreed that the interviews and focus groups would also capture different types of data. The interviews would be useful for hearing about individual experiences with Who Cares? Scotland, and the focus groups for generating data about Who Cares? Scotland's advocacy services that young people might not have thought of alone.

The young people divided into two sub-groups. One group agreed to work on the focus groups and the other on the interviews. Each group also took responsibility for one of the questionnaires.

These sessions also focussed, in depth, on learning about the chosen research methods and covered areas like questionnaire design, what makes a good interviewer, when to use a focus group and when to use a one-to-one interview, and gathering information via participative games in groups.

Finally, we used these sessions to develop the questionnaires that would be used with professionals and residential staff. This was done by selecting questions from those generated in the previous sessions using card selection and sorting games. The young people then worked with the facilitator to refine the questions based on what they had learned about questionnaire design.

Session eight was used to produce both the online and paper questionnaires and to discuss their distribution. Sessions nine, ten and eleven were spent developing schedules for the interviews and focus groups, and practicing conducting this type of research. Again card-sorting techniques were used and, additionally, the young people working on the focus group schedules selected a number of participative games to help them gather information from the participants. This was a particularly challenging part of the process for the young people and they required a lot of support from the facilitator to move from a number of disjointed questions to usable research instruments. All research instruments are appended at the end of the report.

Once the research tools were ready and the young people felt confident in their abilities, fieldwork began. Subsequently, sessions 12 and 13 were used to analyse the data generated by the research and in sessions 14 and 15 the young people worked on preparing presentations of their research. These aspects of the work are discussed in the following sections.

3.3 Fieldwork

The fieldwork was conducted between February and March 2011.

3.3.1 Questionnaires

Electronic questionnaires were distributed by email to professionals via Who Cares? Scotland's mailing lists and contacts within the relevant local authorities. Paper questionnaires were taken to every children's house/home in the two local authorities for completion by residential staff and then collected by the Who Cares? workers for those areas.

Due to delays in distributing the questionnaires and the overall timescale for the project (see further information in the section on *Challenges*), only a short time of around two weeks was available for completion of the questionnaires. Additionally, reminders were not sent out for the electronic questionnaires. These factors were likely to have contributed to a poor response rate for both questionnaires. Only 27 responses were received from professionals and 28 from residential staff. As discussed in section 3.4, *Analysis,* the young people were made aware of the fact that this low response rate would affect their results.

3.3.2 Considerations for conducting research with young people in care

In order for the young people to conduct research with their peers, several issues had to be considered. Issues around arranging for the researchers to undergo Disclosure Scotland checks to carry out unsupervised interviewing are discussed in section *3.1.4, Ethical issues around fieldwork.* As outlined in that section, none of the interviews or focus groups were carried out without appropriate adult supervision.

We also had to arrange access to the young people in residential children's houses/homes. This was a two-stage process. First, Who Cares? Scotland approached the two local authorities (Renfrewshire and South Lanarkshire) via their liaison contacts, by email and telephone to inform them of our plans and ask for their permission to conduct the interviews. This process was quite time-consuming, as it took some time for local authorities to respond and additional information about the research was requested. On reflection, we should have begun to arrange this aspect of fieldwork earlier in the project.

Access was permitted in both local authority areas but some conditions were placed on it. For example, the young people were not permitted to interview within the areas that they had been accommodated. This was sensible both because it meant that they would be unlikely to know any young people they interviewed and also from the point of view of the young researchers who may have been upset or made uncomfortable by returning to houses where they had been accommodated.

In the second stage, the Who Cares? Scotland young people's workers, worked with children's houses to identify and recruit potential interview participants. Due to the delays in achieving access to the children's houses, this part of the process was somewhat rushed and, therefore, the sample that was interviewed was based on the young people that were linked in with their Who Cares? workers already. Again, as described in the section 3.4, *Analysis*, the young people discussed how this might bias their findings.

Potential participants were given an information sheet about the research designed by the young people and, additionally, this information was explained to them verbally by the Who Cares? Scotland worker. Those who chose to participate gave consent by signing the form on the reverse and for anyone under 16 years old, the consent form was also signed by local authority staff. These forms were kept by the young people's workers.

3.3.3 Interviews

The young researchers carried out seven individual interviews with young people resident in children's houses. As mentioned, consent was gained in advance by the young people's workers. The young researchers sought consent to audio record the interview with the participants prior to beginning the interview. We had decided that if any participants did not agree to be audio recorded, the IRISS researcher, who accompanied the young researchers during their interviews, would take notes. However, all participants agreed to their interviews being recorded.

A further difficulty with the interviews was frequent cancellation by the participants. In Who Cares? Scotland's experience, this is not unusual with this group and we were prepared for this eventuality in the sense that the young people's workers were then able to recruit additional participants to make up numbers. However, this was somewhat disappointing for the young researchers when they had prepared to undertake the interview and travelled to the location only to have it cancelled. Their young people's workers supported them to understand the reasons behind the cancellations and to remain positive about the process.

3.3.4 Focus groups

The young researchers had planned to carry out two focus groups, one in each of the local authority areas. We had considerable discussion about the best way to organise focus groups and decided to use existing groups for the purposes. The advantages to this were that we would not need to recruit a large number of individuals, which was likely to be very difficult in the time available, and that a pre-established group would be easier for the young researchers to work with because they would not need to establish a group dynamic from scratch as the group would be used to speaking and interacting together. The main disadvantage was that the pre-existing groups were already linked in with Who Cares? Scotland and therefore likely to be biased in their opinions of the organisation. Again, as discussed, the young people were aware of this and kept it in mind when reporting their results.

Two potential groups were identified by Who Cares? Scotland. However, the group in South Lanarkshire was going through a number of changes in membership at the time and did not want to participate. The young researchers therefore only conducted one focus group, which was held in Renfrewshire.

Although the adult facilitators thought that a lot of data had been generated by the focus groups, the young researchers were quite disheartened by this part of the process. They found it hard to motivate the group to speak and were frustrated by their perception that the group members were not fully participating in the activities they were leading. Although we had discussed that this is a common experience when moderating focus groups, they found this quite difficult and required support from their Who Cares? worker to understand this part of the process and appreciate the value of what they had achieved.

3.4 Analysis

Analysis was another challenge. The initial analysis was facilitated by ICA:UK using a consensus workshop methodology. In this workshop, the young people were assisted in identifying key findings and recommendations from the data they had collected. To help them do this, a certain amount of preparatory work had been carried out by the adult facilitators on the raw data. Basic descriptive statistics from the online questionnaire were provided for the young people, and the questionnaire was divided into small sections (or data 'pieces'). The one-to-one interviews had also been transcribed for content rather than verbatim by staff from IRISS and Who Cares? Scotland, and the transcripts provided. Finally, the focus groups had been conducted in such a way that the majority of information had been conducted via participative exercises or in notes taken by a young person's worker, which had then been typed up and given to the young people.

Using this data, the young people identified key findings and, where appropriate, quotes from each piece of data. They then organised their

findings into themes and developed recommendations for Who Cares? Scotland within each theme.

The next stage was facilitated by IRISS and designed to relate the themes, findings and recommendations back to the original outcomes and decide how well Who Cares? Scotland was performing on each one. First the young people decided whether we had collected enough evidence to comment on each outcome. They felt that they weren't able to say whether Who Cares? was successful in achieving *Outcome 4: Young people know their rights and are fairly treated*, so this was discarded from the analysis due to insufficient data around this issue. The young people then voted on how, based on their research findings, they believed Who Cares? was performing on the other three outcomes using a traffic light system. Green signified that performance was very good with no improvements required, amber signified that performance was okay but some things could be improved, and red signified that performance was poor with significant improvements required.

The outcomes were rated as follows:

1. People know about Who Cares? Scotland.
   RATED AMBER
2. Young people get support from Who Cares? Scotland when they need it.
   RATED AMBER
3. Young people have a voice (because of support from Who Cares? Scotland).
   RATED GREEN

Finally, we discussed what might have biased our results. We agreed that the small number of responses received on the surveys was likely to affect the results from that part of the research. This was partly because we could not be sure that they were representative of most professionals and residential staff and partly because the people who did respond might have done so because they already knew about Who Cares? Scotland or had particularly strong feelings about Who Cares? Scotland.

We also talked about the young people who had taken part in the interviews and focus groups. We agreed that because they were already known to and had interacted with the Who Cares? Scotland young people's workers and, in the case of the focus group, were part of an on-going group run by Who Cares? Scotland, this was likely to have affected the way they answered questions. Some of the young researchers thought this might have made them more positive about Who Cares? Scotland but others weren't sure.

The final type of bias considered was any bias that the young researchers might have had themselves when they were conducting the research or thinking about the findings. We agreed that because they were all closely linked with Who Cares? Scotland and had good experiences with the organisation, they had found it difficult to be impartial, despite trying to be.

This might have affected how they interpreted the results or caused them to conduct interviews in a way that encouraged some of the respondents to be more positive about Who Cares? Scotland than they might have been.

We agreed that much research is subject to bias, however hard we try to avoid it. We discussed the importance of being aware of anything that might have affected the objectivity of research results and of reporting this whenever we talked about the research.

Further information about the young people's findings and recommendations is published in the PowerPoint presentation, written by the young people, which accompanies this report at http://www.iriss.org.uk/project/community-research).

3.5 Reporting the results

We worked with the young people to come up with several different ways to communicate their findings. They also listed a large number of people and organisations that they thought should know about their research. It was decided that the most important groups to communicate with were Who Cares? Scotland, as they were in a position to act on the research, and young people in care, as they were most affected by the service being provided.

The young people decided to write a PowerPoint presentation to be presented to Who Cares? Scotland. They were also given the opportunity to communicate with the young people via a magazine article to be published in Who Cares? Scotland's magazine *Speak Out,* and the group was happy to work on this.

The PowerPoint presentation covered the background, methodology, main findings and recommendations. The young people were invited to present it to Who Cares? workers at two regional team meetings (in the Central and South areas) and also to the Who Cares? Scotland senior management team.

The work was positively received at all locations, and was met with a real interest in using the results of the research to inform practice and service development. The Who Cares? Scotland senior management team were particularly positive and interested in the results. Further information about the impact of the results on Who Cares? Scotland and their services can be found in section 5.

4. Challenges and lessons learned

4.1 Timing and resources

Community research projects are incredibly resource intensive in terms of time, budget and commitment. This was not fully appreciated by either partner prior to beginning the project, with the result that considerable unanticipated input was given by staff from both organisations. While both Who Cares? Scotland and IRISS were able to absorb this additional commitment, a better understanding of the amount of support the young people would require to undertake the project would have improved planning.

The time available to complete the project was also limited. As project funding within IRISS is based on yearly financial planning, it was necessary to complete the fieldwork elements of the project by the end of the financial year. Various delays occurred, due to many factors including severe weather, illness, arranging fieldwork and having over-estimated how quickly the young people would undertake certain aspects of the work. This placed significant pressure on both partners, which was detrimental to the project overall. In particular, the quality of the fieldwork was lower due to the short timescales available to complete it. Who Cares? Scotland also felt that, at times, the process felt rushed for the young people and that in future projects additional time would be necessary to allow them to get the best out of the project. However, it should be noted that time was also limited by the available funding, which restricted the amount of time Who Cares? Scotland was able to offer to the project.

Despite, these setbacks, it was possible to complete the project within the agreed timescales, perhaps at a reduced overall quality. Key lessons for any similar future work would be to build in a significant amount of contingency time to allow for inevitable slippage and additionally to anticipate more accurately how much staff time may be required. Clearly additional staff time could result in higher associated costs, which would also need to be planned for. However, clearer upfront planning about staff requirements rather than the exploratory approach taken in this project might mitigate this to some extent.

4.2 Recruitment

Recruitment of young people was a significant issue in the early stages of the project. We recruited only six young people, the number identified in the project plan, rather than anticipating a dropout rate and over-recruiting early on. It soon became clear that more young people would be required for the

project as some quite quickly left the process. There were many reasons for young people deciding to leave the process, some of which, such as maternity leave for two of the young people, could have been planned for and others that were unexpected. This is not unusual for the group we were engaging with as young people in care or care leavers often have complex and changeable personal situations and, indeed, dropout rates are widely acknowledged as high in research projects with other groups.

The main reason for not over-recruiting from the outset was financial as the budget only allowed for expenses and support costs associated with six young researchers. Nonetheless, in future projects, it would be highly desirable to allow for inevitable dropout at the initial stages of the project. In our experience, even allowing for over-recruiting, expenses are likely to average out over the course of the project as even the most committed young people are unlikely to be able to attend every session.

4.3 Biases

One of the issues related to recruitment was that the majority of the young people who became involved in the project were already known to, and involved with, Who Cares? Scotland through other activities and groups. It is not clear whether this is because these are the young people who were most interested in the project, the ones who were easiest to access through the recruitment process, or a combination of the two. Certainly, the time constraints meant that carrying out a longer and more open recruitment process would have been difficult.

There were advantages to involving young people who were known to the organisation, in that they already understood what Who Cares? Scotland did and aimed to do and that Who Cares? Scotland could, to an extent, predict that they would maintain their commitment throughout the project. However, this also led to two concerns about the project. First, the young researchers were positively biased towards Who Cares? Scotland and their performance, an issue that was addressed throughout the research and in the reporting of the results. Second, it raised questions about whether these young people were entirely representative of the community that Who Cares? Scotland supports.

4.4 Group dynamics

A number of the young researchers already knew each other through previous involvement with Who Cares? Scotland or because they were from the same local authority area. Additionally, the young people started working on the project in distinct groups due to the need to recruit additional group members once the process was already underway. This led to some challenges in the way that the young people related to each other. Initially,

there was considerable division between the group, which over time diminished as they got to know each other better and became more cohesive. This was exacerbated by the time-limited nature of the project, which did not allow us to take time out and work through these issues explicitly. However, young people's workers did discuss this with the young researchers on an individual basis, which they found helpful.

The project and its outcomes would have been enhanced by dealing with these issues as they arose and being able to spend a greater amount of time on team building and group work specifically designed to break down some of the barriers between the young researchers.

4.5 Negotiating access through children's homes

There were significant delays to the project due to the difficulty of negotiating access for our young researchers to interview young people in residential care. As discussed in section 3.3.2, despite Who Cares? Scotland's prior relationships with the local authorities, it took some time for local authorities to respond initially. Following this, additional information about the research was requested and assessed, which also added to the time. On reflection, this aspect of fieldwork could have been started earlier in the project rather than waiting until definite details of the young people's intended project plan were available.

4.6 Balancing priorities and expectations

Managing the young people's expectations of what they could expect from the process was really important. We were very clear from the beginning about two things. First, what the limitations on the research were – i.e. that they were in charge of the research and would be supported to look at whatever issues they wanted in whatever ways they wanted, but that this had to be within the framework of evaluating Who Cares? Scotland's advocacy services in the defined geographic areas. Second, that we could not guarantee what would happen as a result of the research, but we would ensure that decision-makers were made aware of the results. In giving this assurance, it was very helpful that Who Cares? Scotland, as an organisation, was committed to the research and was also the key decision-maker about the service involved. Who Cares? Scotland undertook upfront to listen and consider the results of the research though, of course, they could not guarantee that they would be able to act on them.

It was also important to be clear with the young people early on, that although they were in control of the research, there would be timing, resource and ethical issues that might constrain what they wanted to do. The young people were happy to accept that this was part of any 'real world' research project. In the end, the young people's research ambitions were

fairly conservative and no real issues of this type arose. Additionally, their expert understanding of the community of interest meant that they were highly attuned to treating information in confidence and not asking about issues that might be sensitive.

Finally, it was important to manage the expectations of Who Cares? Scotland about what the research might consist of and the extent to which the young people were in control of the work being done, as this was a key principle of the project. There was the possibility that this could have resulted in an evaluation that did not address the points expected or meet the needs of the organisation in the way that they had hoped. Who Cares? Scotland accepted this possibility as part of the process and were very pleased with the results that the young people had achieved.

5. Impact

From the IRISS perspective, the key outcome of the project was not so much the results of the young people's research, but the effect of the process on the young people involved and also what could be shown about the importance and impact of research undertaken by people supported by services, rather than by 'expert' researchers.

5.1 Young people's perspectives

We were very keen that the young researchers in the project would reap real benefits from their involvement, both in an experiential sense and also more tangible benefits. To satisfy the latter requirement, we ensured that the young people were compensated for their time by receipt of vouchers for participating in sessions, provision of an evening meal at each session, covering of expenses to allow them to attend, including childcare in one case. We also ensured that young people completing all of the training would be eligible to be awarded the Participative Democracy Certificate (see section 3.1.3), which five of the young people achieved.

The experience of the young researchers and their perspective on the process are a crucial part of assessing the success of the project. We tried to make it as easy as possible for the young people to communicate on an on-going basis what they thought of the project and what they would change. Sometimes they found aspects of the project challenging or boring and we tried to change our approach to make it more engaging (though it was not always successful). One of the young people pointed out that we had got better at this as time went on and as we got to know them better.

In a more formal way, at the first session we discussed hopes and fears for the project as a group. We also interviewed the young people at the beginning of their participation in the project about why they had got involved, what they hoped to get out of involvement and any challenges they thought they might face. An additional individual interview was conducted with each young person on the final day about what they had thought of the process (both good and bad points) and what they thought they had got out of it. They also evaluated the project each week by rating several dimensions from 1 to 10. Finally, at the beginning of their participation in the project we asked them to identify up to six areas that they wanted to work on themselves, such as working in a group or talking in front of people, and each week they rated how they felt they were doing in each area from 1 to 10.

5.1.1 Initial hopes and fears

At the initial interviews many of the young people were not sure what the project was really about or why they had got involved in it other than that their young person's worker had said it would be a good idea. Several were motivated by the idea of getting a qualification or experience for their CV as a result of being involved. Some of them talked about wanting to make friends and having something to do. A couple mentioned wanting to improve things for other young people. Individually, young people either had no concerns about the project and challenges that might arise in it or were unwilling at this stage to admit to them, though as a group they were able to identify some (see below).

When discussing hopes and fears for the project as a group young people hoped:

- To learn new skills for the future
- To get a qualification
- To gain work experience
- That the research would make life easier for others who are still in the care system
- That they would help to give young people and workers a better voice
- That the training would be well structured
- That they would learn about research
- That everyone would enjoy the experience

Their main fears were about the content of what they would have to do and whether they would enjoy it and included:

- That it will be like school
- That the meetings won't be informal
- That people won't say what they are thinking
- That it will be boring
- That once they had done the research nothing would come of their findings
- That the sessions would be too long
- That it would be difficult to talk in the group

We tried to take account of these hopes and fears as much as possible when thinking through and designing all the sessions.

5.1.2 Thoughts at the end of the process

In the final interviews, the five young people completing the process were very positive overall. All of them said they enjoyed the process and had got something out of it and had moved towards achieving the goals or outcomes they had identified for themselves at the beginning. They had particularly enjoyed finding out other young people's views on the issues, although some had found it difficult to act as an interviewer or focus group facilitator. They had been pleased to find that the sessions had not been formal or like school

and had found it easier to work in a participative and social way. Several of the young people talked about having increased their confidence and their ability to talk, listen and make decisions as a group. A couple of the young people said that it had made them want to work with young people themselves or continue doing research. One had started work as a youth worker during the process and said that he was using some of the participative exercises we used in the group work with his own group of young people.

Most of the young people in their final interviews mentioned group dynamics and how this had been challenging to begin with. They all felt that this had improved over time and were pleased about that. One girl who had found this particularly challenging throughout the process felt that meeting and getting along with new people had been very good for her confidence.

5.1.3 Rating individual goals

The young people found it quite difficult to identify individual goals or outcomes to work towards, with most only choosing one or two things. These goals covered skills like listening, talking in a group or making decisions; personal attributes like increased confidence; or knowledge such as understanding research. In general, there was some improvement in the way that young people rated themselves on each of their goals over the life of the project and when asked about them at final interview they all felt that they had made progress towards achieving the goals identified.

5.1.4 Project evaluation

The young people were asked to rate five different aspects of the session each week on a scale of 1 to 10. These aspects were whether they had enjoyed the session, whether they had learned something new, whether the facilitation had been good, whether they had become more confident in doing research and whether they were looking forward to the next session. This process was anonymous, which was intended to encourage the young people to be honest about their feelings. There was also space on the form for them to make any additional comments that they wanted to, but this part was never filled in.

It is hard to make any comments about the success of the sessions based on these evaluation forms. If an average score for all five categories is calculated, a slight trend over the course of the sessions for the ratings to become more positive can be observed but this is for an average rating of 7 rising to an average rating of 8. There is subtle variation in the ratings from a low of 6.5 to a high of 9, which does correspond with sessions that went well or less well and this was helpful to know to inform planning and reflection. Additionally, taking average ratings for each individual category showed that no individual category was rated more positively than another. The reason these results

are not very informative is probably due to the fact that the young people did not take this process very seriously and made comments throughout suggesting that they were not critically assessing different aspects of the sessions but just recording their overall impressions or making arbitrary ratings. Clearly, this method of evaluation is not the most effective with this group and thought should be given in future to alternative methods of capturing views on this type of session or of communicating the purpose and importance of evaluating the process in this way.

5.1.5 Overall opinions

Overall, the young people felt that being involved in the project was a good experience and that they were involved in something important that could improve things for other young people like them. They believed that it was important that young people who really understood the experience of being in care had carried out the research, rather than adults. They also felt that they had been in control of the work they were doing.

Some of the skills gained from the process included:

- Having greater self-confidence and feeling valued and listened to.
- How to work as a team.
- How to problem solve.
- Positive group skills.
- To work through challenges within the group.
- How to debate with each other.
- How to make compromises.
- How to stay calm when under pressure.

Who Cares? Scotland published an article in their magazine *Speak Out* which talks about the young people's experience of the process and what they felt they got out of it. This can be downloaded from the project pages (http://www.iriss.org.uk/project/community-research).

5.2 Who Cares? Scotland's services

While both Who Cares? Scotland and IRISS were conscious that there were some difficulties in the administration and running of this project, overall both organisations were very pleased with the outcome of the projects.

Who Cares? Scotland felt that, overall, involvement in the project was a positive experience for the young people and were very pleased with the results, which they felt provided a unique insight into the experience of receiving social services in a residential care setting. Who Cares? Scotland took the findings of the research seriously and was keen to find opportunities for the young researchers to present their results to decision-makers and practitioners in the organisation. They also provided a written response to the research, which included actions that they plan to take forward in future

based on the findings (this can be viewed at http://www.iriss.org.uk/project/community-research)

This included the following actions:

- We will work harder at sharing information about what we do with all young people.
- We will expand our promotion to ensure people are aware of our full range of services.
- We will continue to work to empower young people.
- We will consider a free phone number for young people to call us.
- We will ensure that there are clear guidelines for our staff and young people know about how and when we will respond to them.
- We will work with providers to make sure we offer the best service and at the right level to meet the needs of young people in their care.

IRISS is very pleased with this response. The young people's work has not only been listened to and taken seriously by Who Cares? Scotland, but is also going to contribute to change within the services evaluated.

Who Cares? Scotland are also taking their learning from this project forward and conducting further young person-led research in additional local authority areas.

6. Conclusions

We believe that despite numerous challenges, this has been a very successful project, which illustrates the value of partnership working and offers a number of lessons which can be applied to future projects, not just for IRISS and Who Cares? Scotland, but also for the wider social services workforce. This project has also had real impact on the young people involved, equipping them with skills, a qualification and confidence that will be valuable to them in the future.

Most importantly, however, this project shows that people supported by services can design and conduct a research project when given the opportunity, training and support to do so. Rather than being a token exercise, as Who Cares? Scotland have shown in their response to the findings, this can be used as evidence to support genuine change and improvement to services. Although it is important to be realistic about the resource intensive nature of conducting a research project of this type, we believe that doing so can provide a unique contribution to the evidence supporting service development, which should be particularly valuable in a landscape which takes co-production of services seriously.

7. References

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