

Building participation: what works?

A co-ordinated set of strategies can provide a firm basis for successfully implementing a program to promote participation by young people. Once the policy and practice design phases are finalised, it's helpful if the following elements can be launched simultaneously and then maintained over time in order to ensure continuing momentum and accountability. Each of these elements is important in its own right but also complements the others.

1 Publicised program launch followed by consistent promotion and marketing by high-profile leaders

Using a range of communication strategies, high-profile leaders play an essential role in proclaiming, commending and launching the program. Their ongoing public engagement in marketing, reporting and celebration of achievements is also essential to maintain momentum to embed the program in the agency's functions, and to avoid slippage, ie a view amongst staff that the program was a passing whim and over time becomes irrelevant.

2 Skills development and learning opportunities for staff

Many human services workers have little or no training to help them develop skills in direct work with children and young people, and rely on their own life experience and individual talents. Focused learning opportunities are valuable in developing a worker's understanding and application of trauma-informed practice in their work with vulnerable young people. In particular workers should understand the barriers which prevent such young people from identifying and expressing their views, fears and ambitions in the way non-traumatised individuals may do. Workers need to understand that indirect communication methods like Viewpoint ACASI (Audio Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing) invite and enable traumatised young people to connect with feelings and fears which may otherwise be too dangerous to confront, and to identify goals and wishes they may not dare to confide in direct discussion.

The use of contemporary digital technology can be a familiar and attractive option for young

people, providing a safe and private environment where sensitive personal issues can be considered and brought into the open. However, young people may be unfamiliar with the notion of participation and workers need to be prepared to encourage and coach them and to overcome resistance. Staff who are responsible for chairing reviews or other planning forums require skills in managing and cultivating active participation by young people and in the respectful acknowledgement of their contributions.

3 Inclusive practice guidelines

Comprehensive practice guidelines are an essential adjunct to staff learning opportunities, and in particular should describe the pathway from beginning to end. For example the process may include:

- *The use of Viewpoint ACASI as a communication tool to open up the participation process*
- *Timely review of young people's input and urgent service responses to any at-risk indicators*
- *Face-to-face discussion between the worker and young person to acknowledge and further explore Viewpoint ACASI responses, apply the young person's priority ratings to the issues raised, and develop proposals for action*
- *Participation by the young person in a decision-making event (such as a review meeting) where proposals are considered and given weight. Participation may be enhanced by the choice of medium best suited to the individual young person, eg drawing/painting, a map, prompt sheet for verbal presentation, or written list or plan. (NB Depending upon the age and capacity of the young person, it may be that they participate in only part of the event)*

- Follow up by the worker to advise the young person of outcomes and options for challenge/appeal.

4 Workload management

It's essential that workers have sufficient time to spend with targeted young people so they can offer encouragement and support to engage, and ensure a meaningful acknowledgement and service response to the worries, views and wishes they share. It's arguably unethical and potentially harmful to vulnerable to young people to encourage them to confide their intimate thoughts and for these to be inadequately acknowledged and respected, and to result in no tangible outcome. Workers and supervisors should be acutely aware of the risk re-traumatising a young person by failing to provide a meaningful response, and that this is also likely to lead to a loss of confidence in the agency and its processes and to reinforce resistance to future engagement.

5 Resourcing

It's inherent to success that the organisation provides sufficient physical resources to enable staff to deliver the program. For example, this may involve the rollout of Viewpoint software and enough hardware (functioning tablets or smart phones) to make it accessible and attractive to targeted young people in a way which is most likely to engage them. It is a powerful disincentive for all concerned when resources are scarce or malfunctioning.

6 Effective professional supervision

Professional supervision policies generally include support and accountability components amongst others. However, combining a demand for work with a supportive stance can be challenging and supervisors require skills to clarify that workers are expected to deliver the program, and that this is not negotiable according to any personal views the worker may hold. There should be consequences at both service delivery and management levels where

there is failure to implement the program. For example, a worker's personal resistance or scepticism about the program may be explored within the supervisory relationship but supervisors should make it clear that implementation is not optional.

7 Compliance measurement

Compliance with the policy must be effectively recorded, managed and reported on. There is some risk that an over-emphasis on compliance alone can exclude consideration of the quality of practice and its outcomes. It is likely that a multifaceted system is needed to measure compliance as well as service quality and outcomes. Viewpoint ACASI offers a range of reports which contribute in real time to the overall picture.

8 Measuring and improving outcomes through customer-led strategic planning

Feedback from young people needs to be carefully evaluated at individual, group and corporate levels. As a reflection of what young people as individuals and as a group experience as helpful or otherwise, this feedback provides a solid foundation for strategic planning at case management, team, local area and whole-of-business levels. Viewpoint ACASI software aggregates self-interviewing responses across a range of profile fields at all levels, and facilitates the identification of service responses which will lead to customer-led planning, improved feedback and optimal outcomes. Improvements or areas for development can be easily identified, tracked and addressed and improvements celebrated using a range of communication strategies including announcements or publications by high-profile leaders.

About the author

Judy Garsed qualified in social work in the UK and has worked in statutory child protection agencies in London and Australia as practitioner, supervisor and manager. She stepped down recently from her role as Advocate for Children in Care in Western Australia where she provided personal advocacy services for children and young people in care and developed policy and practice to promote their participation in decisions and service provision.