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Engaging young people in resettlement: research summary

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Beyond
YOUTH CUSTODY

**ENGAGING
YOUNG PEOPLE
IN RESETTLEMENT
RESEARCH SUMMARY**



LOTTERY FUNDED

One of the prerequisites of effective resettlement intervention with young people leaving custody is that they are fully engaged with the services provided to them. The evidence base in relation to the engagement of marginalised young people is relatively slim. This briefing reports on research undertaken by Beyond Youth Custody that aims to contribute to an understanding of effective engagement in a resettlement context.

Key points

- Many practitioners struggle to identify what engagement means. While it clearly involves a young person participating in at least some aspects of an intervention, simple attendance is not sufficient to guarantee engagement. Engagement is a multi-faceted process that involves overcoming service user resistance across a number of arenas: behavioural, emotional and cognitive. It might be helpful to understand engagement as a combination of interconnected processes that can lead the young person, over time, towards adopting a changed identity.
- The chaotic social circumstances and previous negative experiences of many young people leaving custody constitute barriers to engaging them in resettlement services. Involvement in the criminal justice system is itself stigmatising and processes of labelling can undermine young people's motivation to invest in service provision aimed at supporting change.
- At the same time, the period of transition constitutes a window of opportunity as young people are frequently motivated to make a fresh start at the point they leave custody. From a resettlement perspective, engagement prior to and around the point of transfer to the community is crucial.
- The issue of trust is important for initial engagement. Early contact with young people while they are still in custody and focusing resources at the point of release can both help to establish a trusting relationship. Approaching young people through agencies, peers or other adults with whom they already have a trusting relationship can be beneficial. Persistence and a reluctance to take no for an answer at the point of initial referral are vital.
- Outreach work, attractive, easily accessible premises, and resources to ensure that staff can devote time to responding to individual young people are essential.
- Resettlement provision must be seen as relevant to young people – either in the form of enjoyable activities, emotional or practical support, or as being helpful in enhancing their future life prospects. Services should respond to the needs of young people as young people see them, rather than defining the problem on their behalf. Different forms of activities will appeal to different groups of young people at different times.
- Engagement is more likely where user involvement in decision-making is well developed and where young people participate in planning their own intervention.
- Positive relationships between staff and service users are key to successful engagement. Such relationships are predicated on mutual respect and a perception on the part of the young person that projects exercise authority fairly and legitimately.
- Young people distinguish between staff who 'care' about them and those who do not. Staff qualities associated with building relationships that demonstrate 'caring' include: an ability to demonstrate empathy; a genuine concern for the young person's well-being; and a commitment to service user self-determination.
- It may be helpful to conceive of the process of engagement as having three phases or steps, each of which involves the young person developing relationships in a different form:

Step 1: The service engaging with the young person – initial engagement, generating an interest in project activities and stimulating attendance.

Step 2: The young person engaging with the service – the establishment of a sustained relationship between the young person and the service that helps to promote a shift in identity.

Step 3: The young person engaging with wider society – the shift in identity is sufficiently well established that it is no longer dependent on the resettlement service, allowing the young person to develop constructive relationships with broader society.

Ensuring engagement from the perspective of a resettlement provider involves finding ways of facilitating the young person's journey at each of the above stages.

The research

This research briefing is the first in a series produced as part of the Beyond Youth Custody (BYC) programme, funded under the Big Lottery Fund's Youth in Focus (YIF) initiative. YIF aims to engender positive change in the lives of vulnerable young people, with a particular focus on those leaving custody, care leavers and young carers. BYC is a learning and awareness programme that works with YIF projects in the resettlement strand to advance knowledge and promote positive resettlement for young people making the transition from custody to the community and beyond in order to improve outcomes.

The briefing reports on research undertaken to date by BYC on the issue of engaging young people in resettlement services. It consists of two elements. First, it synthesises findings from previous studies on engaging disaffected young people and considers the implications for work with young people leaving custody. The literature evidence is complemented by a survey of staff working in the YIF resettlement projects that aims to enhance the existing literature, drawing on the practice knowledge and expertise of service providers in the voluntary sector, and to contribute to the development of evidence-based resettlement practice.

The full research report by Dr Tim Bateman and Professor Neal Hazel, on which this briefing is based, is available at www.beyondyouthcustody.net.

Meaning of engagement

Young people leaving custody have a range of complex needs and are amongst the vulnerable in society. Unsurprisingly, engaging them in resettlement services is a challenge. But it is also important to be clear what engagement means. Engaging a young person clearly requires that he or she is involved in some way with the intervention, but simple attendance is not sufficient to guarantee full engagement. It is helpful to conceive of engagement as having three interlocking elements as follows. Behavioural engagement refers to the young person's participation and cooperation signalled by, for example, attending appointments and participating in activities. Emotional engagement refers to the young person's attitudinal relationship with the project and those who work in it and might be manifested in the young person being motivated to attend, being enthusiastic about (at least some) activities and getting on well with staff. Cognitive engagement focuses on a personal investment on the part of the young person to achieve the goals of intervention and a commitment to working towards necessary cognitive and behavioural changes.

Complete engagement will involve each of the above spheres, but young people may be engaged in different ways and to different degrees at different times. Engagement might therefore be best understood as a collection of processes that, where successfully negotiated, can facilitate the young person moving towards adopting a changed identity or reflecting on the person that he or she would like to be.

Barriers to engagement

Young people leaving custody are frequently subject to a statutory requirement to cooperate with resettlement activities, although many YIF projects operate on a voluntary basis. 'Involuntary' service users are not necessarily resistant to engagement but often are since their attendance is predicated on avoiding sanctions rather than being as a result of a motivation to take advantage of the benefits offered by resettlement intervention. Such contextual difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that the background and social circumstances of young people who come to the attention of the criminal justice system are chaotic, making it more difficult to spark an initial interest in resettlement activities and undermining consistent attendance. In many cases, backgrounds of disrupted care are such that there is a lack of familial support to encourage engagement.

The transition from custody is a disorientating period in which rigid structure is replaced by a lack of routine and stability. Contact with the criminal justice system renders young people liable to stigmatisation: processes of labelling can operate to reinforce an identity of opposition to agencies whose perceived function is to hold them to account for their offending. At the same time, the point of release also constitutes a window of opportunity where the young person may be motivated to take stock and make a fresh start.

Initial engagement

Developing a relationship with young people while they are still in custody is important. The transition to the community is frequently traumatic and an intensive focus at that point can help to avoid drift and maximise the prospects of early engagement with the service.

Given the extent of the barriers outlined above, traditional methods of 'recruitment' such as sending letters, the provision of leaflets and other written materials are unlikely to be effective. Word of mouth approaches, either through agencies with whom the young person has already engaged, trusted adults, or peers offer greater chances of success. The importance of meeting the young person on his or her own territory is a recurrent theme in the literature, suggesting that some form of detached or proactive outreach work may frequently be required for initial engagement. Drop-in or taster sessions may provide a useful complement to outreach work. Incentives of various sorts can facilitate initial engagement and may be used to maintain engagement over the longer period.

The evidence on matching staff and young people by gender and ethnicity is mixed, and most young people regard other staff qualities as more important. Equally, having a staff team that is broadly representative of the population of service users can improve initial perceptions of the service among young people.

Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Visit a young person whilst they are in custody to start building a relationship before release?
- Offer intensive contact around the point of the transition to the community?
- Use a range of non-traditional approaches to engaging young people?
- Offer incentives to young people to attend and take part in activities?
- Meet young people on their own territory, making use of outreach work, drop-in facilities and taster sessions?

Organisational issues

If outreach work is frequently a precursor to initial engagement, maintaining engagement over the longer term requires premises that are accessible and attractive to young people. Sufficient resources are required to allow a flexible approach and to enable the dedication of considerable amounts of time to each individual young person. In particular, the key to engaging marginalised young people is persistence, patience and perseverance, recognising that progress may be slow and manifested in small steps.

The project ethos should signal a commitment to inclusive working, which can be as important as the nature of activities undertaken and the services offered. Inclusivity involves an individualised approach and requires recognition of the diversity of young people who are in need of resettlement services. Failure to attend appointments should be regarded as an indicator that a proactive approach is required rather than that the young person cannot be engaged.

Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Have premises that are young person friendly?
- Ask young people what they think of the physical space and involve them in making the environment more appealing?
- Provide adequate time to staff to ensure that they can respond flexibly to the individual need of young people?
- Have an inclusive ethos that seeks to recognise, and respond to, diversity?
- Consider how to adopt a more proactive approach to engage young people who do not attend appointments?

Interventions and activities

Formal sessions, such as paper-based offending behaviour sessions, are unpopular with young people and can inhibit engagement. Conversely, there is considerable literature on the benefits of using activities that are enjoyable, rewarding, practical, exciting or challenging. They typically include outward bound and adventure programmes, sports, music, arts, or other forms of structured leisure activities that might be attractive to young people. Such approaches have been used with considerable success, particularly in preventive work, to engage young people considered 'at risk' of offending, but also with those whose delinquency is more entrenched. It is also important to recognise that different activities appeal to different young people and that interests vary with age.

In the first instance, enjoyable activities can function as a hook, encouraging young people's interest in order to enhance motivation and over the longer term enable work on other issues. However, it is also important to recognise that they can also function as 'enrichment activities' in their own right that improve self-confidence and self-esteem which are themselves requirements of the process whereby the young person is enabled to make a shift in identity.

Provision of practical and emotional support and of services that young people see as relevant to their future is more likely to sustain engagement than interventions planned around issues defined as problematic by professional workers. Over the longer term, young people's interest should be reinforced by having clear goals and progressive pathways that allow achievement, and by offering the requisite levels of support to ensure that the chances of attainment are enhanced.

Key to engaging marginalised young people is the delivery of services that reflect young people's own perception of their needs or interests. In this context, a participatory approach that encourages and values young people's input into project planning and helping to design their own intervention is both more likely to

engage service users and to facilitate the development of agency which, the literature suggests, is a requirement of desistance. A participatory approach is likely to be constrained by a variety of factors, depending on the circumstances. In a resettlement context, whether or not compliance with the intervention is a statutory requirement will impact on the extent to which a fully participatory approach can be adopted. Nonetheless, it is important that there is some element of empowerment and that the young person's voice is taken into account when decisions are made.

Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Use structured, enjoyable leisure activities as a way of stimulating young people's interest in the service to enable work on other issues in the longer term?
- Respond to young people's interests as they perceive them?
- Provide practical, emotional and developmental support?
- Have mechanisms that acknowledge young people's progress and achievements in concrete terms?
- Allow young people to determine their own intervention plans so far as is consistent with agency expectations?

Relationship dynamics and the qualities of effective staff

There is a growing consensus that relationships are central to engaging marginalised young people in interventions, although there is less clarity about the nature of effective relationships. One view, for instance, is that effective work with young people in conflict with the law involves staff being firm but fair; conversely, there is evidence that firmness, as opposed to clarity about expectations, can undermine flexibility and be off-putting to young people. The concept of fairness is also open to a variety of interpretations and it would appear that more effective engagement is achieved where professionals' starting point is recognition of young people's vulnerability and an explicit acknowledgement of the likelihood that they will have experienced considerable disadvantage. For such reasons, approaches that emphasise compulsion or are based on punishment are often ineffective. It is important that authority is exercised in a manner that is perceived as legitimate by the young person.

Young people make a clear distinction between workers who 'care' about them and those who do not, and they are more likely to form effective relationships with the former. The literature suggests that certain qualities of staff are associated with approaches that will be perceived by service users as caring. These include: demonstrating empathy; a non-judgemental attitude; conveying warmth; focusing on issues identified as problematic by the young person rather than those defined by the service; a commitment to a young person's self-determination; and a preparedness to 'go the extra mile'.

Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Emphasise the importance of developing good relationships between staff and young people?
- Provide a flexible response to young people's behaviour that allows the development of such relationships?
- Demonstrate an understanding that most young people leaving custody will have experienced significant disadvantage?
- Ensure that authority is exercised in a way that young people perceive as legitimate?
- Promote a caring ethos and an empathetic environment?
- Employ staff with a strong commitment to young people's welfare and self-determination?

Conclusion

Engagement encompasses more than attendance; it is a complex process that includes emotional and cognitive dimensions that can facilitate a shift in the young person's identity from a socially marginalised offender to a socially included non-offender. This briefing and the research on which it is based present a model of engagement that involves resettlement providers facilitating that journey. One way of conceptualising that process is to consider it as having three interrelated stages, each of which involves the young person in developing different forms of relationships.

Step 1: The service engaging with the young person – this is concerned with the service establishing a meaningful relationship with the young person, interesting them in the service and enhancing motivation so that they begin to become involved in project activities.

Step 2: The young person engaging with the service – this is concerned with establishing a sustained and developing relationship with the service. It involves the young person identifying with the service and the objectives of intervention, and engaging with activities that both contribute to, and require, a shift in identity.

Step 3: The young person engaging with wider society – this is concerned with the young person transferring the relationship that has developed with the service to mainstream society. The shift in identity achieved through engagement with resettlement provision is no longer dependent on the relationship with a particular service but is established to an extent that allows the young person to engage in a constructive manner with other agencies and wider society.

On this model, the role of resettlement services in terms of engagement is to facilitate the process by which the young person negotiates each of the above elements of the journey with the aim of helping them to achieve a shift in identity conducive to social integration.

In spite of the evident barriers to engaging young people in resettlement in the manner described and the variety of different forms of resistance that need to be overcome to facilitate full engagement, a number of principles of effective practice emerge from the findings of this study. These include reaching out to young people in environments where they feel comfortable and providing activities, interventions and support that are flexible and are delivered in response to service users' articulated interests and needs. Persistence, perseverance and patience are required in equal measure. Expectations must be realistic and progress, however small, acknowledged, reaffirmed and rewarded. Encouraging user participation and involving young people as agents in their own resettlement are both of central importance.

Relationships between young people and staff are key to successful engagement. Staff who are able to demonstrate that they care about young people's well-being, acknowledge social realities, are committed to service user self-determination, and promote a sense of agency and optimism, are more likely to exercise interpersonal influence with young people, thereby increasing the prospects of full engagement and beneficial outcomes.¹

At the same time, our knowledge of engagement is still underdeveloped and important questions about engaging young people in resettlement remain. Little is known, for example, about how young people themselves experience engagement in resettlement and how they understand their relationships with service providers, and the extent to which this varies according to age, gender, race and other relevant factors. Given that engagement is about changing identity and how young people perceive themselves, these are important questions. BYC will continue to work with partners to consider the implications of the answers to these questions for effective resettlement policy and practice.

¹ The relationship between engagement and offending is a complex one. Clearly a young person being engaged in an intervention is a prerequisite of that intervention having a positive impact. On the other hand, it is not clear that engagement guarantees that a young person's offending behaviour will be reduced. This is an issue which requires further research.

This review has been produced by the Beyond Youth Custody partnership, consisting of Nacro, ARCS (UK) Ltd, The Centre for Social Research at the University of Salford, and the Vauxhall Centre for the Study of Crime at the University of Bedfordshire.

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