

REPORT OF THE VULNERABLE CHILDREN'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

YOUNG PEOPLES VIEWS ON SAFEGUARDING

1. BACKGROUND

As part of Local Democracy week, the Participation and Engagement Unit worked with the Director of Children's Social Care and the Scrutiny Office to arrange an event, at which a cross section of young people living in Birmingham were invited to express their views on safeguarding. On Thursday 13th of October, over forty young people from across the City got together to spend an afternoon focussing on this issue. The young people were representing a variety of schools and groups including the Young Disabled Champions, Out Central, the Children in Care Council, Voice is Power and other Birmingham Youth Service projects across the City.

Initially the event was intended to consider the viability of setting up a Shadow Children and Young Peoples Safeguarding Board; however the young people represented had many alternative suggestions on:

- How they could influence the work of the Safeguarding Board;
- What safeguarding is and what it should mean to us all;
- What the priorities should be in keeping children and young people safe in Birmingham; and
- How to keep children and young people safe in this City.

The Vulnerable Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that young peoples views should be shared with all Members so that their voices can be heard, valued and incorporated in the planning of our services.

2. WHAT SAFEGUARDING MEANS TO YOUNG PEOPLE

The event began with a discussion in the Council House on what makes young people feel unsafe, how Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board works to keep them safe and how they could share their views with the Board in future. Members of the Vulnerable Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Karen Hamilton and Councillor Tim Evans also attended the event. They talked to young people about their role as Councillors and how the Council values young peoples views and experiences. They listened to young peoples suggestions and were fully involved in the activities throughout the day.

Young people were very clear that safeguarding is about keeping people safe and that it is supported by the rules that govern what people can and cannot do. They felt that safeguarding is not only responding to dangerous situations but most importantly preventing dangerous situations arising in the first place. Key areas included preventing bullying, self harm and crime. There was a strong feeling that young peoples;

'Individual freedoms should not be restricted to keep them safe but they should be equipped with the knowledge to keep themselves safe.'

Young people were clear that safeguarding is not just about looking after children and young people but also all those who may be vulnerable, including adults. A key message was that;

‘Everybody should look after and look out for each other because we are one big community.’

The Service Director and Assistant Director for Children's Social Care discussed the role of Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board with all those present. **Not one young person had heard of Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board previously.**

3. WHEN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL UNSAFE

Following discussions in the Council House, the group travelled to Base K/S, a Youth Service provision in Kingstanding and were joined by parents, grandparents, more of their peers, Youth Workers and Councillors. In small groups all informally discussed activities that currently take place in Birmingham to keep young people safe and possible options to create a safer City.

Finally we visited ER Mason, a Youth Centre in Ladywood. Here the young people talked about what makes them feel safe and unsafe, the best ways for them to influence Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board and most importantly why they should be listened to and their views valued by those with the power to change things. A number of issues were mentioned throughout the day. These are outlined below.

Dark Places – Young people expressed concern about being in dark places especially during the winter months. It was felt that street lighting was positive and should be improved in places such as underpasses where young people feel particularly at risk.

Parks – Young people felt that parks should be a safer place for them. They felt that if alternative provision was available in the evenings such as youth cafes, then parks should be closed at night in the winter. There was a strong feeling that Park Rangers could help young people feel safer as they could challenge anyone intimidating them by being in a gang or having dogs. Young people felt that they were more at risk of being mugged or assaulted in parks.

Schools – Young people were clear that they felt their schools were not always a safe place and that teachers did not always have the knowledge or skills to deal with issues sufficiently. Young people said that they were nervous of situations when teachers could not control a class or when they were not around. School toilets and changing rooms were mentioned as dangerous places.

There was a feeling that more needs to be done to address bullying in schools, particularly to challenge issues such as homophobic bullying and cyber bullying, which young people reported that teachers do not always know how to respond to. It was suggested that there should be someone that young people can report bullying to outside of school as they don't always feel safe or comfortable reporting issues to teachers because they don't handle things confidentially. Young people felt frustrated that often little is done to challenge bullies or support the young person experiencing bullying. It was suggested that teachers need to know who they can refer young people on to to get help. In addition to bullying, young people were also concerned about what times schools finish. They felt that rival schools finishing at the same time created potentially dangerous situations.

Going into a different area of the City – Young People said that they were fearful of young people from different schools or areas. They suggested more opportunities to meet young people from other areas of the City to break down negative stereotypes and build cross-community relations would be helpful. They suggested more activities to get them off the street and into new areas which they may have avoided previously due to an unfounded fear of the environment. This fear came about because of the type of housing in the area, vandalism and the area appearing dirty and unkempt. They felt that activities

that bring children and young people together from different schools like this Safeguarding event, could help reduce rivalries and mistrust. Suggestions included:

- Community sports days;
- Mixed after school clubs;
- Joint activities at lunchtime and through the holidays with other schools;
- Youth clubs mixing with other youth clubs;
- Year representatives spending a day at a different school and reporting back to their peers;
- Inclusive community events led by young people but for all ages;
- A Birmingham 'Young People Matter' TV Channel which advertises events to all young people in the City and is run by young people from across the City;
- Youth Forums and consultation days on hot topics;
- More festivals like the Harborne Carnival, which isn't targeted at one section of the community;
- More mixed use community centres;
- More young people led community discussions.

Public Transport – Young people expressed concern that they felt particularly unsafe on public transport or waiting for public transport. Graffiti on bus stops and smashed bus stops made them feel unsafe in the area. Anti-social behaviour, intimidation, smoking, and drug use are issues that all the young people had experienced and felt fearful of when using public transport. They felt that fines and warning signs were meaningless as they are not reinforced so they do not act as a deterrent. They felt that there should be more security on buses and trains in the form of community support officers, ticket inspectors and bus drivers who are trained and supported in dealing with challenging behaviour.

Reports in the media – Young people told us that stories in the media created fear that bad things would happen to them. They also felt that young people were misrepresented in the media creating community mistrust and fear of them and of one another.

Walking home alone - Young people were concerned about other people on the street. They worry about being followed or having to walk past pubs or big groups of people. They worried about being mugged or targeted by drug users, gangs, irresponsible dog owners, sexual predators, strangers who approach and talk to them and aggressive drivers.

Being yourself – Young people worried that expressing their homosexuality, wearing their school uniform in public or helping someone else in trouble could be risky, as it identifies you as different and could attract unwanted attention.

4. WHEN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL SAFE

Young people were keen to tell us when they do feel safe in the City. They feel safe when:

Communities work together – There is a clear feeling that when a community or group of young people work together rivalries and stereotypes can be broken down creating a feeling of mutual respect and safety.

They are in familiar surroundings– Young people discussed how they feel safer in their own community, following their own routes to and from school etc and with the people that they have grown up with. They feel safe with their friends and trusted professionals. Some young people felt that knowing people had had a Criminal Records Bureau check was reassuring.

They are in a 'Safe' Environment – Young people said they feel safer in a clean environment free from graffiti, empty homes and abandoned cars and where the law is

clearly enforced. Young people said that they do not however like security cameras monitoring their every move. They feel that areas where people clearly take pride in, feel safer and friendlier as people clearly respect the area and trust one another. They also preferred an area that was busy and lively and where people were out and about, rather than a deserted area.

They have the knowledge and equipment to keep themselves safe – Young people said that they feel safe if they know they can call someone if they do get into trouble so having their mobile phone with them is really important. Young people said they feel safe if they have rape alarms or are in a place that has a working burglar alarm or fire alarm. Some young people said that it was reassuring to have some knowledge of self defence if they needed it.

There is evidence of neighbourhood policing – Young people said that they feel safer in areas where there is visible community policing and a Neighbourhood Watch scheme.

People are challenged if they break rules – Young people said they feel safer in environments where people are challenged and punished for breaking the rules. Some young people expressed frustration that poor behaviour was often rewarded in schools.

5. WHY SHOULD YOUNG PEOPLES VIEWS ON SAFEGUARDING BE LISTENED TO?

Young people felt their views are important as people in power are often making decisions that will impact on them so they need to understand young people and their needs. In particular they felt that young people need to be engaged in safeguarding to identify what makes them feel unsafe so that the right issues can be tackled. Young people said that decision makers need to be able to empathise and identify with them to know what their issues are and be challenged to see things from other perspectives. One statement was that;

'Today's young people are Britain's tomorrow! Young people are part of society and should be able to shape the policy that affects them.'

Importantly young people said that they have good ideas, a fresh take on things and adults are not always right! They felt that without their views being put on the table nothing will ever change.

There was a strong feeling that adults need to listen to young peoples views to build their trust and break down stereotypes between them. Listening to young peoples views helps young people feel safe and valued in society. The young people said that;

'Talking to us should not be tokenistic. It should raise awareness of our problems and challenge you to sort them out.'

6. HOW CAN YOUNG PEOPLE BE INVOLVED AND INFLUENCE BIRMINGHAM SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD?

Young people had a number of excellent ideas about how they could influence Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board. These ideas included:

- Young people raising issues with their local Councillors and MP's for the attention of the Board;
- Young people setting up publicity stunts such as 'Flash Mobs' to raise awareness of the issues that matter to them.

They suggested that Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board should raise awareness of their work amongst young people by:

- Using a variety of methods to communicate with them, for example through social networking and discussion blogs.
- Working with young people to put on performances about safety in public spaces.
- Sending representatives into schools and youth centres to introduce themselves, explain about the Board's role and ask young people for their views.
- Advertising their meetings and arranging for them to take place in Community Centres around the City, outside school/work hours so that young people can attend and share their views.
- Feeding information into Constituency Forums.

Young people suggested that in the long term the Board should include them in their work by:

- Setting up a model to enable all youth groups and schools to feed back issues to the Board as and when they arise.
- Helping to set up a Shadow Safeguarding Children and Young Peoples Board made up of a diverse group of young people who are encouraged to be involved through a recognised qualification or recognition of their work by the Board.
- Sending a questionnaire to all young people in the City to ask them about their views with prizes available to encourage them to complete it.
- Setting up annual focus groups for young people to meet with Members of the Vulnerable Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Members of the Board to talk about Safeguarding.
- Working with young people to arrange community events with a focus on safeguarding cross the City. Graffiti boards and posters should be used to get feedback.
- Attending local events so that young people can share their views with Board Members.
- Advertising for young peoples opinions in places that young people go such as schools and youth centres.

7. CONCLUSION

The Vulnerable Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and its Chairman Councillor Anne Underwood are committed to doing everything that they can to ensure that the views of children and young people are heard and influence the work of Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board. The Committee will therefore review progress in April 2012.

MOTION

That the City Council recognises and values young peoples views and incorporates them in defining the priorities for safeguarding children and young people in this City.