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Short Article

Seeing beyond the surface: An exploration of relationships, connection, and ownership in peer research

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Our Hearings Our Voice

Abstract

An exploration of a participative approach to youth-led research as part of a project by Our Hearings Our Voice. Research findings formed the basis of an interactive guide aimed at professionals, including decision makers, who work with children and young people in the care system in Scotland. The structure and key themes of the guide are outlined, with a particular focus on a common thread that runs through them - the importance of trusting and meaningful relationships between children in the care system and the adults who support them.

Introduction

Who are Our Hearings Our Voice?

Our Hearings Our Voice (OHOV) was established in 2015 as an independent group that ensures children and young people have a decision-making role in improving Scotland's children's hearings system, thus creating shared understanding and positive change through children and young people's lived experiences. The board currently consists of 15 young people aged 18-24 but is open to recruitment of members aged 8-18. Information about OHOV's previous projects is available here: www.ohov.co.uk.

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How the project started

Since OHOV was established, its work has primarily focused on reform of the children's hearings system through engagement with decision-makers and professionals working within that sphere; for example, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, Children's Hearings Scotland, Social Work (Scotland), Promise Scotland, and the Scottish Government.

The young board members expressed a desire to broaden their reach, with the aim of influencing a wider range of professionals who have a supportive role in the lives of children in the care system overall, not simply within the children's hearings system. Children who attend hearings do not exist within a vacuum – their journey to and through the hearings system will have been influenced by experiences with a range of adults, such as teachers, health professionals, foster parents, residential workers, housing officers, social workers, solicitors, youth workers, and more. Some young people shared examples of exceptional professionals who had offered personalised and effective support that had made a positive difference. Others shared how it felt when they had needed support during critical times in their lives, and their needs had gone unmet by the adults around them.

Preparing for research

The young people proposed the creation of a 'guide', broadly aimed at all professionals who support children and young people in the care system. Their hope was that adults would engage with the guide, learn from it, share the resource with others, and that this would ultimately improve practice. To ensure the messages within the guide contained the voices of as many children and young people as possible, OHOV reached out to a range of youth organisations across Scotland to invite young people of all ages to contribute to the guide.

Eleven groups agreed to take part in the research, ensuring the messages within the guide represented the thoughts and lived experience of children and young people from diverse care settings and geographical locations. These included secure care facilities, a prison, local champions boards, where young people with care experience can influence local practice, kinship and foster care support groups for young people, and more. The groups involved were:

- St Mary's Kenmure

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- Falkirk Champions Board
- Perth Champions Board
- Youth Just Us
- Polmont's 'Inside Out'
- Experts by Experience
- Quarriers
- The Fostering Network
- The Shetland Crew
- Rossie Secure Care
- The National Leadership Network

Recognising the potentially emotive nature of the research question – 'what do you wish all adults knew when supporting care experienced children and young people?'- OHOV board members requested support to ensure that they carried out peer research in ways that minimised the risk of re-traumatising those children and young people who opted to take part. They undertook training on trauma-informed practice and on effective research skills, creating a 'trauma-informed guide' to working with young people, which can be viewed here:

https://www.ohov.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Being-Trauma-Informed.pdf

Finally, the board members co-created, tested, and edited a catalogue of child-friendly resources to aid research with children and young people, including worksheets, flashcards, conversation prompts, and more.

The OHOV board members requested to be recognised and accredited for their learning and development during this process. Their skills were therefore evidenced and assessed by Youth Link Scotland as part of the participative democracy certificate. This qualification is the equivalent of a National 5 and assesses skills of group work, communication, decision-making, participation, and negotiation.

The research process

Supported by a member of OHOV staff, the young people met with the research groups. They shared some of their own experiences of the support they had received during their time in the care system and invited the children and young people to engage with the research resources, or to simply participate in conversations about their thoughts and ideas. Findings were recorded using the research resources, through voice recordings, and in written notes taken by OHOV staff during

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conversations. One young person chose to express their experiences through writing a rap.

OHOV board members often prefer to express complex thoughts and ideas through creative outlets, such as poetry, videos, voice recordings, and art. They were keen to allow the children and young people in the research groups the option to do the same. The thinking behind this approach was that it could break down literacy and communication barriers and encourage children to express their thoughts in ways that best suited them.

Following each research session OHOV board members were debriefed and supported by staff to ensure they had the opportunity to share their thoughts on the process, suggest ways future sessions could be improved, and talk through anything they had found upsetting. The young people they met with were offered the same support as part of a trauma-informed approach to peer research.

OHOV board members reflecting on the research process

A key benefit of the peer research approach is that it shifts the traditional power dynamic, allowing participants to take greater control over the research process, take ownership in findings, build confidence, and connect more authentically with participants. When invited to reflect on the research process, OHOV board members described the experience and project in positive terms. Some young people stated that their confidence had grown, particularly those who had the opportunity to work with several groups. Many felt empowered by the experience and inspired by the young people they had met:

> I felt really empowered after speaking to the groups because they were so strong and confident in the way they were able to open up and talk about what hadn't gone well as well as what had […] these kids with care experience, they were so strong […] they're so bright. I was really empowered by it.
>
> (OHOV board member)

Another valuable aspect of the research process was the opportunity to build connections with other young people and bond over similar shared experiences:

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> We're all different, but we've all had quite similar experiences in the care system. It helped me to feel that I wasn't alone in what I'd been through.
>
> (OHOV board member)

> We all started as strangers but as we were doing the work with the other young people it showed me that we'd all quietly been stitched together by our experiences. It was really nice to see that.
>
> (OHOV board member)

Discovering that many children in the care system had experienced similar setbacks to themselves reinforced OHOV board members' commitment to working towards positive change:

> A lot of the experiences children had been through have all been quite similar. That's helped me to keep doing what I'm doing and keep striving for change in the system.
>
> (OHOV board member)

> Speaking to other young people about the guide gave us a perspective on what children have been through and how much they've overcome. I think it's really important to hear everyone's stories and make sure other young people don't have to go through the same broken system that we did.
>
> (OHOV board member)

In addition to the personal benefits the OHOV board members gained from the process, OHOV staff felt that the peer research approach had allowed for richer, more authentic, and relevant conversations than adult-led research might have yielded:

> The research conversations for this guide felt different as they were led by young people, talking to other young people with care experience. No-one has the same experiences but the young researchers' ability to be open about what supports helped them or got in the way allowed a much richer and more authentic sharing of information- the research participants were not performing for adults; they were talking and bonding with their peers. I haven't experienced that in other research settings before. The

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> young people used humour, personal stories, patience, bravery, new techniques they had learned and empathy to step into unfamiliar settings and spaces where the research participants may often feel wary of trusting others. I watched and listened as OHOV board members gathered valuable testament and made other young people feel heard.
>
> (Gordon Main, OHOV project lead)

Seeing beyond the surface – the guide

The written notes, artwork, and voice recordings produced by the research were examined and six key themes emerged:

- Relationships with key adults
- Support
- Language and communication
- Seeing children's potential without judgement
- Children's stories and personal information
- Children's participation and voice

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 'relationships with key adults' was the most prevalent theme. Some children talked about love in the care system, and, although not all children used this term, throughout the research children repeatedly highlighted the central importance of friendship, unconditional acceptance, and empathy from those people providing care or other support to them. Within the theme of relationships, subthemes emerged, such as trust, reliability, consistency of adult relationships, and adults seeing children as people rather than cases.

Naturally there was some overlap between the six themes, for example, the importance of countering the stigma care experienced children face is an issue that could be addressed through the language children experience, and in the way that adults see their potential without judgement. Other overlapping themes included getting to know children, and tailoring support accordingly, and involving and informing children throughout support provision. The one recurring message that permeated all six themes was the importance of reliable, trusted relationships. Indeed, as previously stated, the trust and connection that formed between the OHOV board members and the children who took part in the

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peer research was one of the most beneficial aspects of the process for participants.

The launch of the guide

The OHOV board members were clear from the start that Seeing Beyond the Surface should be an accessible, interactive, and engaging resource for professionals. The guide appears on the OHOV website with a colourful interface that allows users to navigate easily between the six themes; searching for issues that pertain to their interests and learning needs or reading through each of the themes in their entirety. The guide is enhanced by the inclusion of the voice recordings, videos, artwork, poetry, and quotations collected from young people during the research.

Seeing Beyond the Surface was officially launched on the 22nd of October 2025 at 'Rise Up', a celebratory learning event designed and hosted by the young people at OHOV. Rise Up was attended by representatives from numerous organisations who support children with care experience, and the minister for children, young people and The Promise, Natalie Don-Innes MSP[1]. Many of the young people who had contributed to the guide were in attendance and had the opportunity to see and celebrate the culmination of their work and hear first-hand from the adults in the room who pledged to listen to their voices and take action.

Young people reflecting on their hopes for the guide

OHOV board members were invited to share their hopes for the future of the guide and to consider how they would like adults to respond to it:

> I hope that one of the main takeaways for adults is that young people want to work with them – we want to make the system better together and not just call out bad practice. We know that professionals aren't going to get it right 100% of the time because that's not realistic. But if we work together and there are healthier conversations then things can only improve.
>
> (OHOV board member)

> It's a guide that everybody can use instead of everyone developing their own practices independent of each other,

[1] Member of the Scottish Parliament

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> which can make a young person's life more difficult because they're being treated differently by every organisation.
>
> (OHOV board member)

> This guide is for any adult who works with children and young people in or around the care system, including teachers, healthcare staff, social workers, carers, police, and others. It's made to help adults really listen to what young people are saying, understand what matters to them, and use that learning to improve practice.
>
> (OHOV board member)

Conclusion

The key message to emerge from this research was the importance of trusted positive relationships for children in the care system. This is by no means a new concept, but one which underpinned the peer research approach during this project, allowing for meaningful connections and improved confidence for the young people leading the research. These connections yielded research findings that were authentic, relevant, and rich, culminating in the creation of a comprehensive resource designed and researched by young people for the adults who support them.

You can access the Seeing Beyond the Surface guide here:

https://www.ohov.co.uk/guide/

About the author

Amy Miskimmin-Logan is the participation development worker at Our Hearings Our Voice. A former primary teacher, Amy has a particular interest in participation and education. Her role involves amplifying and learning from the voices of children and young people to effect positive change in both the children's hearings system and the wider care system.

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