Insight Bristol

Youth Council Data Ethics Exercise

Overview

On 13 July 2021, Insight Bristol Team attended the Bristol City Youth Council (BCYC) monthly meeting to gather views and opinions regarding how public bodies (e.g. local authorities, the police, schools) should share information with one another to support young people and their families.

The BCYC is an elected group of young people, aged 11-18, which creates a forum for young people to express their views on the decisions that are important to them. This forum acts as a mechanism to ensure that their opinions are voiced and heard. They meet formally monthly, with a set agenda, which is the meeting that the Insight Bristol team attended.

Method

The young people present were split into three groups to discuss an overarching question and three scenarios.

The overarching question was:

"When do you think public bodies should share information about young people and their families?"

The members of the council were given 10 minutes to write their thoughts on sticky notes and stick these to flipchart paper outlining the question. They were then invited to feedback to the group their thoughts and reflections.

After this, the members of the council were presented with three different scenarios, designed to highlight situations where information might be shared between different agencies. For each of these they were asked to consider a number of questions. These scenarios and questions can be seen below.

Scenario 1 – Josie:

Josie's parents had an explosive argument last night which resulted in the police being called to their house. No arrests were made, but this left Josie upset, and when she got to school the next day she swore at a teacher when she was asked to hand in an assignment that she hadn't done because she was so upset last night. This resulted in Josie being placed in isolation for the rest of the day.

Discussion points:

1. Should the school have been told?
2. How much information should the school have been told?
3. What should the school have done?
4. Consider if Josie hadn't acted out, does this change your opinion?
5. What risk are there involved in sharing/not sharing?

Scenario 2 – Dan:

Dan got arrested over the weekend after he was found with a knife on him by police. He was released on bail, is yet to be charged or convicted of a crime, and will be referred to the

council's youth offending team. Dan will likely be cautioned by police, and is back in school on Monday.

Discussion points:

1. Should the school be told and when?
2. How much information should the school be told?
3. Imagine if Dan was instead arrested for being in possession of a small bag of cannabis, does this change your opinion?
4. What do we think the school should do in response to this?
5. What risks are there involved in sharing/not sharing?

Scenario 3 – Nadia:

Nadia's family are experiencing immense financial pressures and are at risk of losing their home with the Council. Nadia didn't make it home from school yesterday and after a few hours her parents reported her missing to the police. She came home at 1am, was obviously upset, but wouldn't speak to her parents about what happened. She went to school the next day.

Discussion points:

1. Should the school be told that Nadia went missing?
2. Should the school be told about the other problems her family is experiencing?
3. How much information should the school be told?
4. If the school were to be told, what would we expect them to do about both types of information?
5. What risks are involved in sharing/not sharing?

Council members were again given 10-15 minutes to discuss the scenarios and associated discussion points before feeding back to the group.

The group were then invited to discuss any common themes that were present throughout the discussions around each scenario. This involved some prompting through questions posed to the young people by some of the youth workers present at the meeting.

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Findings

"When do you think public bodies should share information about young people and their families?"

When responding to the first question, the young people struggled initially to understand the question that was being asked. This meant initial responses were of limited usefulness. However, after reframing and giving the examples of public bodies as schools, the council and police the conversation picked up.

All groups mentioned elements of the police sharing information/having information shared with them:

- Group 1 observed that schools should be made aware of policing issues such as drug possession or knife crime, but that specific students involved in such practices should have their anonymity protected.

- Group 2 felt that information about missing persons, arrests and children being groomed/exploited should be shared between agencies.

- Group 3 argued that public bodies should share information about police misconduct to hold them accountable, and that theft regarding council/taxpayer resources should also be shared (when asked for more information, it seemed that group 3 had slightly misinterpreted the ask of the question).

Sharing information about familial crises and general vulnerabilities was also a consistent theme:

- Group 1 outlined that schools should be told familial issues to tailor support for the young people. They specifically referenced mental health problems and financial issues, "in order to provide free school meals".

- One respondent within group 1 took a more conservative approach to information sharing, arguing that information should only be shared if it is in relevant to an Education Health Care Plan. Upon being questioned about this the respondent seemed to be of a view that information should only be shared when the young person is open to services.

- Group 2 felt that any familial crisis should be shared with schools/other agencies, such as if a family were to become homeless or experience extreme financial difficulties.

Interestingly, one group argued that protective factors should also be shared with different agencies, such as attendance at youth groups/clubs, as they argued that this helps different agencies to understand the support network around a young person. This aligns closely with the 'team around the family' approach.

The Scenarios: Dan, Josie and Nadia

All of the scenarios were designed to promote conversation around interagency information sharing, and the initial question did well to frame the scenarios for the young people. The 'discussion points' were also broadly consistent across each scenario, so rather than documenting the responses to each scenario in turn the responses have been aggregated into the themes present in the young people's discussion.

Regarding whether the school should be told:

- Almost all the young people from across the three groups were in agreement that the school should be told about the information outlined in each of the scenarios.

- One group was split, in that some young people felt that consent should apply and that it should be up to the young person whether their information was shared or not. It was evident that the members had a limited understanding of the statutory responsibilities of the local authority and other agencies to share information.

- One group highlighted that there should be limitations on who the information is shared with and only the safeguarding teams should be told, to reduce prejudice amongst staff members. Some of the members outlined that they did not know who their DSL's and pastoral teams were, and some did not trust/have a positive relationship with their DSL. They outlined that they may go to a trusted teacher to share information around things that are bothering them instead of the DSL.

Regarding what the school should do with the information once they had it:

- All groups outlined that an offer of support/mentoring/counselling should be put in place for the young person in each of the scenarios.

- For the scenario regarding the young person with the knife, the young people suggested that depending on why he was carrying the knife (i.e. whether it was for protection as he was scared or carried with intent to do harm) different interventions could be put in place.

- One group observed that the school doesn't necessarily have to do anything, but just knowing can help as the school can react accordingly when things go wrong with the young person.

Regarding the risks of sharing the information:

- All groups highlighted that prejudice and judgement could take place if the information were to be shared that can impact the young person, such as gossip amongst staff leading to prejudice, or information finding its way into hands of other pupils leading to bullying.

- One group argued that breaching of perceived confidentiality may upset the young person.

- Two groups highlighted that it may lead to the young person feeling overwhelmed if lots of agencies suddenly attempt to offer support as a result of an incident happening, making young people feel uncomfortable.

Regarding the risks of not sharing:

- Two of three groups highlighted safeguarding risks to both the individual and other pupils within the school.

- The school being 'blind' to the issues and unable to offer adequate support.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the scenarios offered a foundation for a series of engaging and quality discussions between the members of the council. It was clear that the young people had a good grasp of the issues outlined in each scenario, and offered a mature response to each. The key conclusions can be summarised as follows:

- The young people felt that information should be shared between agencies to support young people and their families, but this must be done proportionately and with the right people (i.e. safeguarding teams) to reduce the risk of prejudicing young people.

- They felt that contextual information was very important, such as protective factors around the young people, to contextualise and give staff a better understanding of why an event might have happened so they can respond appropriately. This adds to the argument of needing lead professional information so the young person doesn't become overwhelmed with people offering support.

- The members of the council unanimously agreed that the risks of not sharing are outweighed by the benefits of sharing.

- When schools receive this information they should act upon it, and whilst there are benefits to just knowing the information it should be used to offer an enhanced package of support to the young people affected.

The outputs from this exercise will now be used to influence the information sharing agreements and data protection impact assessments.