

Vulnerable Children and Young People wanted to ensure the specification for these services was properly informed by young carers and approached Norfolk Young Carers Forum to be involved and form the Young Carers' Panel.

What are the aims and objectives?

Aim:

- To ensure that the young carers services commissioned by Norfolk County Council are directly informed by young carers.

Objectives:

- To directly consult with young carers about the service specification for young carers groups across the county.
- To involve young carers as per the Young Carers and Young Adult Carers Plan, drawn up jointly by Norfolk County Council and the Projects Advisory Group for Young Carers.
- To provide support for Forum Members through training so that they have the skills to be able to evaluate bids from tendering organisations.

How is it funded?

Norfolk Young Carers Forum is funded by Crossroads Care East Anglia with money from Big Lottery Fund. The time that the Forum Participation Worker at Norfolk Young Carers Forum devotes to the commissioning work then comes from her core Norfolk Young Carers Forum hours. However, Norfolk Young Carers Forum has the additional expense of paying for taxis to transport young carers across the county to commissioning training and meetings which amounts to £500; this comes out of the Norfolk Young Carers Forum budget.

What has it achieved?

“I think young carers should have as much involvement as possible in how the money is spent to help them. They need to hear it from us and not people who think they know what we want.”

Forum Member

“The Forum’s involvement in the commissioning process for young carers services has been especially valuable, helping to ensure that our specifications truly reflect the views of young carers, and contributing to a tender-evaluation process in which service users have real influence. Forum members always approach these processes with maturity and commitment, earning the respect of all of us who have worked alongside them.”

**Service Development Manager (Vulnerable Children and Young People),
Norfolk County Council**

The co-production of services and the need to ensure that service users are involved in designing and planning the services which will ultimately support them are key themes in contemporary social care. This commissioning exercise achieved the primary aim of ensuring that there was real and direct involvement of young carers in the design and commissioning of new service provision.

Contracts for all of the young carers services for 12–18 year olds up for tender were awarded. A total of 11 young carers' services were commissioned altogether, awarded in three block contracts across three regions of Norfolk.

The involvement of Norfolk Young Carers Forum in the service specification design and the evaluation of bids has been welcomed by the Projects Advisory Group for Young Carers at Norfolk County Council.

The Carers Council for Norfolk, a partnership of carers, voluntary organisations and local authority commissioners and officers, has been fully supportive of the work of Norfolk Young Carers Forum too. Currently, there is a commissioning exercise for adult carers services underway and this will also involve a panel of carers in the process, organised by the Carers Council for Norfolk and using a model similar to that developed with the Norfolk Young Carers Forum but with some modifications as it is working with adults.

After a successful commissioning process, Norfolk Young Carers Forum is now involved in further commissioning exercises. One concerns groups for 6–16 year old young carers, as although these services in Norfolk are mostly provided by voluntary groups, some were run by Youth Services and provision across the county has been patchy since it dissolved. A one-to-one service is also coming up for re-commissioning and Norfolk Young Carers Forum is likely to be involved in that too.

How have carers been involved in planning and delivering this work?

The Norfolk Young Carers Forum members were involved from the very beginning when the commissioning exercise was in the planning stages. Even before the commissioning process had begun, the Forum had been campaigning for young carers groups to be reinstated after the loss of Youth Services in Norfolk.

When approached by the Council, the Forum Participation Worker asked the Forum if they wanted to be involved in contributing to the design of services and the development of the service specification. Following this first commissioning exercise, the Forum's involvement in the commissioning process was discussed at length by members of the local forums who sit on the county forum at their annual evaluation meeting. A firm decision was made that the Forum would be keen to be involved in any future commissioning work.

Commissioning work is open to all members of the county forum, but if it is oversubscribed the Forum Participation Worker will pull names out of a hat. A further five of these members were trained to be members of the Young Carers Panel which scrutinised the bids.

How is the initiative run?

The commissioning exercise is part of the work of Norfolk Young Carers Forum.

Norfolk Young Carers Forum

Norfolk Young Carers Forum is organised into five local area forums for young carers aged 11–19 and one county-wide forum for young carers 14 and older. These are supported by a Forum Participation Worker and a Forum Sessional Support Worker, working between them four days a week. Management and administrative support for Norfolk Young Carers Forum is provided by Crossroads Care East Anglia's Norfolk Young Carers Project; an Administrator works for the Forum two days a week. Project Workers from Norfolk Young Carers Project provide additional support at key events for Norfolk Young Carers Forum, such as the annual conference.

Any young carer aged 11–19 in Norfolk is entitled to become a member of their local area forum. Young carers usually become aware of the Norfolk Young Carers Forum through either attending an event hosted by Norfolk Young Carers Forum, Norfolk Young Carers Forum visiting their young carers group or through speaking with a one-to-one worker and receiving an application pack. Once a young carer becomes a member of their local area forum, they can attend forum meetings as they wish. Those members of local forums aged 14 plus who have a good attendance record, and are confident and interested in doing more forum work, are invited to join the county forum.

The main aim of Norfolk Young Carers Forum is to give young carers a voice and let them have a meaningful say in the issues which affect them. As such, members of Norfolk Young Carers Forum have a say in the use of the budget and running of Norfolk Young Carers Forum and it was a natural step to get involved in the process of commissioning the services that they would use.

The commissioning exercise

The commissioning exercise was jointly organised by the Forum Participation Worker and two members of staff from Norfolk County Council – the Service Development Manager (Vulnerable Children and Young People) and the Commissioning Officer assigned to this strand. Forum members aged 14–19 designed the service specification and the tender-evaluation process.

Service specification consultation

The initial consultation was carried out by two officers from Norfolk County Council with Forum members. This identified the expected outcomes of young carers services and the necessary resources and knowledge needed to achieve this. It took place at one of the Norfolk Young Carers Forum county group meetings, with the forum members discussing ideas in groups and recording ideas on large sheets of paper so that everyone could be involved. This initial consultation about the service specification then fed directly into the service specification Norfolk County Council issued.

Following the consultation, officers from Norfolk County Council reported back to the Norfolk Young Carers Forum to show them how their ideas were incorporated into the service specifications and to explain why some ideas could not be included.

Scrutiny process

Five Forum members were selected to form the Young Carers Panel for the scrutiny element of the commissioning exercise. They undertook a training session that covered choice making, scoring, finding evidence and anti-discriminatory practice.

This was conducted by a Commissioning Officer, supported by the Forum Participation Worker.

The commissioning specification – decided by the young carers – requested that all the bidding organisations provided a young-person-friendly summary of their aims, how they would provide the service and what structure they proposed for the service. These were made anonymous since some young carers were being supported by the organisations bidding for the tender.

The Young Carers Panel then scored the summaries against the criteria they had worked out with the Commissioning Officer, while the Adult Panel worked through the complete tender documentation. Once the bids had been evaluated, the scores from the two panels were combined. In this process, 20% of the overall score was attributed to the Young Carers Panel. This meant the local authority retained the overall accountability for the commissioning decisions but gave young carers significant influence in that decision. The first commissioning exercise resulted in a tie between the scores of two organisations, so in this case the Young Carers Panel was given the deciding vote.

What methods have been particularly effective?

The established and respectful relationship between Norfolk County Council and Norfolk Young Carers Forum has been a solid foundation for this commissioning work. The Norfolk Young Carers Forum, for instance, has a one-hour slot – where it determines the agenda and content – at alternate meetings of the multi-agency Young Carers Projects Advisory Group. The Service Development Manager (Vulnerable Children and Young People) also regularly attends the Norfolk Young Carers Forum’s sessions to hear its priorities and update it on the progress of Norfolk County Council’s Young Carers Plan.

Partnership working was essential to the success of this commissioning exercise. From the beginning, the commissioning team at Norfolk County Council demonstrated a real commitment to the meaningful involvement of young carers at all stages in the commissioning process. For instance, the commissioning team made adjustments to the timing of the process to ensure the consultation and evaluation stages fell within the school holidays so that young carers did not have to miss out on their schooling.

The existence of the Norfolk Young Carers Forum as a ready-made resource was invaluable as it meant that a group of young carers, from different areas of the county and differing ages was already available and – importantly – accustomed to working together. This was helpful as the short timescale that Norfolk County Council needed to work within meant that there would not have been sufficient time for a new group of young carers to develop relationships, build a trusting support network and learn effective group work skills.

Have there been any challenges along the way?

There were potential biases and conflicts of interest that needed to be circumvented as some of the young carers at Norfolk Young Carers Forum were being supported by the organisations bidding for tenders. It was therefore determined early on that the summaries of the tender applications presented to the Young Carers Panel needed to be made anonymous.

Issues of potential bias concerning the Forum Participation Worker were also discussed, but in this case it was identified to be a very low risk since the organisation which employed the worker (Crossroads Care) was not tendering for any of the contracts. As an additional precaution, an Officer from the Commissioning Team or member of Children's Services was present during the consultation, training and evaluation exercises with young carers. With subsequent commissioning exercises however, this has become more of an issue.

Partnership working has meant that from the outset the Forum Participation Worker has engaged in a dialogue with the officers from the Commissioning Team about how to manage the process while ensuring that the members of the Forum have access to support from people they trust. The new arrangement for these commissioning exercises will involve consultations being carried out by officers of the Commissioning Team with an accompanying member from Children's Services who is already known as a trusted professional to the Forum members.

What hints and tips might help me get started?

- Work closely with the Commissioning Team and the lead worker to ensure that you all have a clear understanding of the need for meaningful engagement and are all keen to ensure that young carer involvement is not tokenistic.
- Make sure that the young carers you are working with have actually agreed to play a part in the commissioning process. Clearly, professionals all see the value and importance of having user involvement – but it is hard work so be honest about this with young carers from the beginning.
- Consider and address any issues of bias and conflict of interest right from the start of the process. For instance, in this case the organisations bidding were made anonymous as some of the young carers were currently receiving their services.
- If you do not have an existing group like the Norfolk Young Carers Forum then do be realistic about how you will set up the consultation and evaluation processes. It is not feasible to bring a group of young carers together who do not know each other and expect them to be able to work together to evaluate applications. This is where training and/or meetings would need to be put in place beforehand.
- If you are bidding for specific funding to run a commissioning exercise involving young carers and where there is not already a forum structure in place, then remember to factor in the costs of transport, food and time.

Are there any useful documents or resources that could assist me?

Read **Norfolk County Council's Young Carers and Young Adult Carers Plan**.

Find out about the Norfolk Young Carers Forum and its commissioning work on its **website**.

Keep up with the latest news from Norfolk Young Carers Forum on its **Facebook page**.

Young Devon has an accredited training programme to enable young people to participate meaningfully in the commissioning of services.

Where can I get further information?

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