



Use your situation to change your destination: Evaluation of the Howard League for Penal Reform's U R Boss Summary



## the Howard League for Penal Reform

- The Howard League for Penal Reform established U R Boss as a participatory programme to improve young people's experiences in the criminal justice system
- U R Boss supported young people both in custody and the community through legal representation and by involving them in campaigning for change in the criminal justice system
- The combination of legal and participation work was key to the success of U R Boss
- U R Boss produced a wide range of resources for young people and youth justice professionals
- U R Boss worked with young advisors, young people who advocated for those in the criminal justice system. Young advisors helped to decide on the direction of U R Boss work and actively took part in its delivery
- U R Boss had a significant impact both for the young people directly involved in the project, and more widely by successfully campaigning on issues relating to the treatment of young people in the criminal justice system, including ending the use of strip searching on arrival at Youth Offending Institutions.

## 1. Introduction

*I think we have moved from the back seat into the driving seat.... We are like a microphone for other young people in custody.  
Young Advisor*

This is a summary report of the external evaluation of U R Boss conducted over five years by De Montfort University. It captures key messages about impacts, learning and implications of the work. The full evaluation report is available online.

### *Aims of U R Boss*

The Howard League established U R Boss as a participatory programme to improve young people's experiences in the criminal justice system. Funded by the Big Lottery Young People's Fund 2 from July 2009 to 2014, the aims of the U R Boss project as described in the evaluation specification were:

- *to enhance the legal service being provided by the Howard League for Penal Reform to children and young people in the penal system;*
- *to campaign to change national and local policy and practice in the statutory and voluntary sectors working with children and young people;*
- *to change public attitudes to children and young people in the penal system; and to come up with new ideas about children and young people in the penal system.*

*The views and experiences of young people are seen to be fundamental to achieving these aims and the reason for having a range of activities focusing on participation.*

Early consultation with young people in custody and the community influenced priorities for action and ensured focus on day-to-day life in custody and resettlement.

## 2. Activity undertaken by U R Boss

U R Boss supported young people both in custody and the community in two main ways: extending the existing enhanced legal service and involving them in campaigning for change on issues arising from their experiences in the criminal justice system.

*The Enhanced Legal Service and access to justice*  
The Howard League legal team provided free, independent and confidential advice and representation. In the first four years of U R Boss,

617 new cases were taken on by the legal team. Calls to the Helpline increased with 857 new inquiries in year 4. The legal work with young people also shaped the work of the whole U R Boss team.

*She took me serious and took everything I said into consideration. Thank you for your hard work and dedication for my release.  
(Legal feedback form)*

### *Public Legal Education*

Public Legal Education helps ensure practitioners and clients understand the legal requirements and entitlements of young people in, and on release from, custody. The resettlement training and guide produced universally positive feedback. This work brought together the specialist resettlement knowledge of the Howard League solicitors, U R Boss expertise in involving young people and the practical experience of young people themselves. Useful resources were created for professionals and for young people on a range of issues.

### *Welfare Fund*

The Welfare Fund provided financial support for young people in contact with U R Boss who could not access it from any other source, and was designed to help young people meet practical needs; for example to purchase toiletries, phone credit and clothes for those in custody and help with household goods, bills and food for those in the community. The fund supported 169 young people, 21 of these in the community and 148 in custody.

### *Work with practitioners*

The U R Boss focus on practical improvements for young people in custody and on release included work with practitioners such as lawyers, YOT and YOS workers, staff from YOI and prisons, and workers from local authorities and NGOs. U R Boss engaged with practitioners through information on the website, the Policy and Practice Newsletter and the Public Legal Education work. U R Boss Facebook and Twitter had hundreds of followers, sharing news and updates, blogs, reports, information and campaigns about youth justice issues, for example breakfast packs.

### *Participation of young people*

At the heart of U R Boss were the young advisors. They contributed to the development and direction of U R Boss by being involved in programme decision-making, campaigning,



production of resources and internal matters such as staff recruitment. A wider range of young people influenced the direction of U R Boss by giving their views and opinions through a number of consultations.

### 3. Young people's participation in action

#### *Campaigning and policy work*

The young advisors wide-ranging activities included contributing to policy consultations, committees and enquiries; giving evidence to a number of parliamentary groups; contributing to policy reports and briefings; meeting with politicians; speaking at party political conferences, on event panels and to the press; contributing to training materials and resources; leading workshops; building web and social media resources and presence; developing the *Young Person's Manifesto* and being on an awards judging panel. Their work also fed into other aspects of the Howard League's work, giving them a voice and influence across the organisation.

#### *Meeting with Rob Ffello, Shadow Minister,*

One of the many meetings the young advisors had was with the then Labour Shadow Minister, Rob Ffello MP. They raised five issues: resettlement, work and education, legal aid, Schedule 1 offenders and foreign national young people in prison. He brought three questions to them: the age young people move from YOT to probation, early intervention, and what can be done to stop so many young people in care ending up in prison. The young people thought the meeting was significant and Rob Ffello took them seriously and listened to what they had to say.

#### *A Young Person's Manifesto*

The Young Advisors drew together the work that had been done with over 350 children and young people in custody and pulled out the main themes and priorities. Children and young people contributed information about the issues they faced through a series of group discussions in custody, the community and through individual reflections verbally and in writing. *A Young Person's Manifesto* identified ten key issues: licence conditions, breach and recall; relationships and support (family, friends and professionals); work and education; wiping the slate clean; the basics – housing, finance and ID; legal aid; it's different for women

and girls; police; prisons; and participation. It stressed that these calls for change should not be seen in isolation as they overlap and all need addressing for the criminal justice system to be reformed effectively.

*Without U R Boss no one would care about our points, no one would care about our opinions.*

*Young Advisor*

*Because it is the Howard League people listen. They are quite powerful and they have authority.*

*Young Advisor*

### 4. Impact of U R Boss

While some impacts have already happened; others may take longer to realise.

#### *Impact on young people involved with U R Boss*

The impact varied depending on the nature of young people's participation. The young advisors involved in campaign activity gained confidence and skills as activists and spokespeople.

*I learnt so much about how to think things through, having an idea and being able to make it clear to other people.*

*Young Advisor*

They also said a profound impact was being listened to, being part of an organisation campaigning for change and being part of creating change for many other young people in the criminal justice system.

#### *Impact on policy, legislation and practice – benefits for wider group of young people*

Policy and practice changes, with young people driving those changes, were seen to have the potential to create better experiences and outcomes for young people in the justice system.

A key policy success was ending routine use of strip searching on arrival at a Youth Offending Institution.

*In 2012 twelve thousand children were strip searched and this year it will be a handful at most. I think U R Boss has achieved loads of stuff, but if that was all we had achieved I think the money would be worth that alone – because it is one of the most horrific practices and U R Boss has brought that to an end.*

*U R Boss team*

The influence of U R Boss was also about 'smoothing the corners, a little change here and there,' for example on promoting the debate on access to education for young people in custody and influencing opinion on reducing the use of custody for children.

*There are small things that change and the small things can lead to the big things and that will have a positive impact for young people.*  
*Young Advisor*

And finally, at times the impact of U R Boss has been about reducing the risk of negative things happening, such as stereotypical campaigning about young people during the Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

## **5. Lessons learnt about involving young people in campaigning**

Supporting young people in custody and upon release to have a major influence on the direction of the Howard League gave rise to significant learning, under four main themes:

- Values: the young advisors felt genuinely in control of U R Boss. They felt the organisation was behind them and believed in what they were doing.
- Preparation and support: young people identified the quality of the workers as crucial in helping them take on challenging and daunting tasks. Care was taken in planning meetings, ensuring effective safeguarding, sharing accessible information and building the young people's confidence, skills and ability to work together.
- Being prepared to take risks: the Howard League's capacity to be ambitious and try new things grew and the organisation ultimately welcomed and responded to the opportunities and challenges.
- Time: involving young people in custody or on release who often had significant personal challenges required time to build trust and relationships and plan and support activities.

*Give it a go. Never say "No, it is too hard."  
Just say "Let's see how we can make it work".*  
*U R Boss team*

### **Impact of policy initiatives and legal challenges U R Boss contributed to**

- Ending routine strip searching of children on arrival at YOI
- Successful representation of seven children against a privately-run prison which was found to have unlawfully punished them

after they were involved in a protest over conditions. The prison is no longer allowed to hold children.

- Extending Prisons and Probation Ombudsman remit to young people detained in Secure Training Centres, giving them an independent external complaints system.
- Intervention in the legal case leading to the High Court ruling that 17-year-olds must be treated as children in police stations with access to an appropriate adult.
- Changes to the length of time that young people must declare convictions under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, set out in the guide, Wiping the Slate Clean.
- Ending Project Daedalus at the Heron Unit, Feltham YOI, an enhanced resettlement unit accused of covering up poor results.
- Shelving proposals until after the next election to scrap the protection of young adults in detention in a YOI and dedicated prison.
- Part of the successful campaign to establish the independent Harris Review into deaths of young people in custody.
- Substantially raising the remand threshold under the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act.
- Changes to remand legislation. 17-year-olds are now treated as children and all children on remand now get Section 20 Status relating to accommodation and support.
- Closing all YOI units for girls. Girls are now only held in secure units.
- Youth Justice Board acknowledging and responding to over-representation of care leavers and Black and Minority Ethnic children in custody.
- A joint inspection framework for Secure Training Centres established between HM Inspectorate of Prison and OFSTED.

## **6. Conclusions**

The project was groundbreaking and innovatory in two ways: first in aiming to work in such a deep and detailed participatory way with young people in the criminal justice system and second by involving young people directly in campaigning work to change policy and practice.

U R Boss was effective and transformative, not tokenistic because:

- Participation involved being heard and something changing for the better as a result
- Participation was promoted through opportunities for engagement in dialogue, not as an oppositional or confrontational process between young people and decision makers
- Participation was rooted in the lived lives of children and young people and addressed tangible issues of concern and importance to them
- Participation was political, seeking to enfranchise a disenfranchised group to enable effective action to make change happen
- Participation was inclusive through young people taking part on their own terms and on their own issues (Edwards and Davis, 2004).

The partnership between the legal and the participation work was crucial to the achievements of U R Boss. The legal service worked to protect children's rights and to ensure they understood the legal system and how it could support them achieve their rights. The service enabled solicitors to get to know young people and build trust, leading to some becoming young advisors and contributing to the project and to changing policy and practice. Many had serious convictions, with little previous constructive engagement with adults.

Participation was at times painful for the Howard League; it took commitment and time to adjust and establish the necessary systems and support. Flexibility and adaptability were crucial,

with the right organisational support in place regarding leadership, staff, policies, structures and resources.

## Evaluation methodology

In keeping with the participatory ethos of U R Boss, the evaluation was designed to involve young people. The development of the methodology was supported by a group of young people working as Associate Research Assistants employed by De Montfort University. They helped shape the focus and scope of the evaluation and the development of the methods and questions.

## About the author

Jennie Fleming is Co-director of Practical Participation, and was formerly Director of the Centre for Social Action, De Montfort University.

## References

Edwards, R. and Davis, J. (2004) 'Social Inclusion, Children and Young People', *Children and Society*, 18, pp. 97–105.

All U R Boss publications are available to download from the Howard League website. <http://www.howardleague.org/urbosspublications/>.

## About the Howard League for Penal Reform

The Howard League is a national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison.

We campaign, research and take legal action on a wide range of issues. We work with parliament, the media, criminal justice professionals, students and members of the public, influencing debate and forcing through meaningful change.

## the Howard League for Penal Reform

1 Ardleigh Road  
London  
N1 4HS

**t**  
**e**  
**w**

020 7249 7373  
[info@howardleague.org](mailto:info@howardleague.org)  
[www.howardleague.org](http://www.howardleague.org)

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