

## Use your situation to change your destination

### Summary for young people

*I think we have moved from the back seat into the driving seat*

#### **Young Advisor in the community**

This is a summary for young people of an [evaluation report](#) carried out over five years by De Montfort University. It summarises what we did and what we learnt from U R Boss.

The Howard League for Penal Reform was funded by the Big Lottery to run the U R Boss project from July 2009 to 2014. The aims of U R Boss were:

- *to enhance the Howard League's legal service;*
- *to campaign to change national and local policy and practice;*
- *to change public attitudes to children and young people in the penal system.*

U R Boss supported young people in custody and the community by:

- *building on the Howard League's legal service;*
- *involving young people in campaigning for change on issues that affect young people in the criminal justice system.*

### What did U R Boss do?

U R Boss was groundbreaking in two ways. First, it aimed to work in a deep and detailed participatory way with young people in the criminal justice system, and second, it involved young people directly in campaigning work to change policy and practice.

### Legal work

The Howard League legal service worked to protect children's rights and ensure they understood the legal system.

*... Until I had a Howard League solicitor no one explained what was what and wrote me letters I could understand. She explains what is happening – explains the options and what could happen with each one. ... **Young advisor in custody***

The legal team took over 1800 calls to the telephone helpline and solicitors worked on 617 new cases with young people. In one year alone they had a 78 per cent success rate for their clients in cases they took on. Young people and professionals said the legal service provided high levels of care for vulnerable and isolated young people.

*Regular solicitors would not want to know. You would not ring a regular solicitor and say 'I am worried about this or this is going off', they would not be bothered to do something to help you. With the Howard League you can ring with anything and they take it serious. **Young advisor in community***

U R Boss also ran **public legal education** to make sure professionals and young people knew about their rights in custody and when they were released. The project ran training and made guides using the knowledge and experience of both young people and the Howard League solicitors.

The partnership between the legal and participation work was crucial to what U R Boss achieved. Solicitors got to know young people and build trust, leading to some becoming young advisors.

## Campaigning and policy work

*Getting our voice heard and other young people's voice heard and getting involved in campaigns and projects so that young people can change policy and promote change. We are like a microphone for other young people in custody.*  
**Young Advisor in community 2011**

U R Boss ran many policy and campaign activities. These included the reports [Life Inside](#) and [Life Outside](#); the [Manifesto](#); the leaflets [What is MAPPA?](#) and [Moving On](#); and the [Police and Crime Commissioner Campaign](#). All of these responded to the ideas and priorities of young people.

*We all have a criminal past and all believe we want to make change, and Howard League provide us with the tools to get things done. They explain to us what things are and what we can do to achieve the change that we want. They do not feed the words into you – it comes out of you.* **Young Advisor in community**

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

The Manifesto was based on what 350 young people in and out of custody identified as their ten key issues. They gave information about what issues they faced through group work in custody, the community and through individual conversations. The Manifesto has meant the charity can highlight key areas for change in the justice system with authority, knowing the issues were chosen by young people themselves.

One of the many meetings the Young Advisors had was with Rob Ffello, Shadow Minister for Youth Justice at the time. They raised five issues they had chosen and he asked them three questions of his own. Young Advisors who were there thought the meeting was very significant and that the Minister listened and took them seriously. Hear what Rob Ffello thought about the meeting [here](#).

All of U R Boss' policy and campaigning work is listed in [section 1](#).

## Young Advisors and participation

*I thought about it, before I got involved I had a lot of problems and people I was going to they weren't really sorting them out. So when I heard we could go to higher people and express our problems to them I thought well that is going to help a lot more. And not just me – I know 8 or 9 people with the same housing problems as me, so if that changed things how many people who benefit?*

**Young Advisor in custody**

At the heart of U R Boss were the young advisors. They were involved in the project's development and direction, decision-making, campaigning, resource development and staff recruitment. They were involved in a large number of activities including:

- *contributing to policy consultations, political enquiries, policy reports and briefings*
- *giving evidence to parliamentary groups*
- *meeting politicians and decision makers*
- *going to political party conferences*
- *speaking at events and leading workshops*
- *judging on awards panels*

U R Boss recognised the value of young people's voices and experiences in understanding criminal justice issues, policies and practice. This gave the project credibility among young people who believed and trusted in the project.

*The Howard League they say we will bring you up to the front and you can say it yourself, they are not going to take it and like sugar coat it . . . U R Boss don't twist anything – it is the truth coming straight from young people. So it is my truth what I say. **Young Advisor in community***

Sometimes young people's participation can be 'tokenistic', which means there is only a token effort to involve young people, but U R Boss avoided this.

*I love that about it – it is us that define things. We think of the issues that we could work on, we decide which are the most important and then what we will do about them. **Young Advisor in the community***

High levels of support, time and preparation by staff meant participation at U R Boss was high quality and adapted so that everyone could take part, even if their lives were complicated or they had a lot of problems.

*U R Boss and the other Young Advisors give me more support than anyone else. More support than my social worker – more support than my mum even. **Young Advisor in custody***

Young advisors also really valued the support they gave to each other and the value of working as a team to try and change things.

*I think it is mutual respect because we know where we have come from and we have mates who have gone in the opposite direction to us. That mutual respect for being able to break out of the cycle and having the Howard League there to offer support is why it works so well. **Young Advisor in community***

## What did U R Boss achieve?

*A lot of people think, 'oh you talk about things that is not going change anything', but 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 in community*

U R Boss aimed to achieve real change in a number of areas. Some of these changes are hard to measure but others are easier to see. The main impacts were:

1. Young Advisors gained **confidence and skills** as activists and spokespeople.
2. They also said **being listened to** and being part of an organisation campaigning for change had a big impact on them
3. **Changes in policy and practice**, driven by young people, had a wider positive impact for young people in the criminal justice system overall
4. **Changing attitudes** and **promoting debate**, which one person described as 'smoothing the corners, a little change here and there'
5. **Reducing the risk of negative things happening** such as stereotyping young people during the Police and Crime Commissioner campaigns.

### **Ending routine strip searching**

One big change as a result of U R Boss was bringing about an end to the routine strip-searching of children in England and Wales, from May 2014. Read more about how we worked [to bring about this change here](#).

*The strip search change was most definitely down to them. It is a huge transformation – the end of routine strip searching for young people on arrival in custody. **Other organisation***

All of U R Boss' achievements are listed in [section 2](#).

## What lessons can be learnt?

The main themes learnt from U R Boss were:

1. **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.
2. **Preparation and support:** young people said the quality of the workers was crucial in helping them take on challenging tasks. Care was taken in making sure everyone was safe and supported to take part.
3. **Being prepared to take risks:** the Howard League was ambitious, tried new things and ultimately welcomed opportunities and challenges.
4. **Time:** plenty of time was given to planning, support and activities to build trusting relationships with young people who faced significant personal challenges.

*From the experiences we have gained from campaigning it's kind of given us the knowledge you know we can do this ... we have all had a taste and now let's get out of the paddling pool and go for a swim. **Young Advisor in community***