The University of Kent's consortium project to explore how technology can support young people in care Evaluation Summary

Background

This project, led by the University of Kent, brought together a consortium of technologists, designers and academics to understand how to leverage advances in technology for the benefit of some of the most vulnerable young people in society. Four waves of co-design workshops were conducted with young people in care, their carers and social workers, to scope out a new digital service for vulnerable young people. By the end of the project, several concepts or early prototypes were produced for potential further development, should the project receive further funding to continue.

Aim

The overall aim of the project was to find out how traumatised young people in care linked their context and experiences with their emotional state and behaviour, and to discover whether they could co-design behavioural and support technologies and to integrate them into a service to help them thrive.

Evaluation

The independent evaluation of this project, led by Kantar Public (formerly TNS BMRB), consisted of observations of the co-design workshops, follow up interviews, and validation workshops. It had 3 main evaluation aims:

1. To examine the extent to which the outputs from the project were grounded in faithful translation of the views of the young people and carers who took part – i.e. how far the concepts reflected participants' views and priorities

2. To provide some external validation of the concepts with a fresh audience who had not taken part in the main co-design workshops, by exploring the views of young people and carers on the proposed digital solutions

3. To explore the effectiveness of the process of engaging young people and carers, identifying if possible any impact participation had on those involved in this project

Findings

Of the 7 concepts tested, 2 had the most traction with the young people and carers that took part: 'Real World' – a virtual flat that teaches young people the skills they need to move into independence, and an online platform – a place for information to be collated and shared between young people, carers and social workers. These concepts were most supported as (i) they responded to genuine issues and information gaps which young people identified, and (ii) young people could imagine themselves using them. Other concepts had more of a mixed reception, with the key criticisms levied against them relating to (i) likely engagement amongst the intended users; (ii) the fact that participants could not see what they offered over and above existing tools and

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resources, (iii) the fact that the tools threatened to replace face to face contact, and (iv) their not being perceived to adequately respond to the key issues which participants had themselves identified: in some cases they were perceived to exacerbate them.

Across all the workshops, young people expressed concern with inadequate face to face contact with their social workers. As a result, some were occasionally quite resistant to technology that seemed to supplant in-person contact time with social workers. Carers echoed this view, not only because they felt face to face meetings facilitate better relationships, but also because they help build young people's social skills. Carers tended to be wary of technology that might encourage social isolation and insularity, perceiving technology in general as something that risked deskilling young people by undermining their ability to communicate face to face.

A common response amongst some of the young people participating was that although they thought an idea might be good in principle, they could not see themselves using it. Young people also felt that whilst they might engage initially, they were likely to stop engaging relatively soon. Carers discussed the challenge of ensuring young people adopted and used new technology designed for young people in care, raising the point that the most vulnerable may be the least likely to engage. Carers felt there would need to be incentives for using the technology to keep young people interested and engaged.

Participants were able to engage with the ideas relatively well, and though there was variation in the extent to which some individuals were enabled to contribute, on the whole the co-design process was effective and allowed the views of young people and carers to be captured and incorporated into the development of new technology.

Overall, participants interviewed said they thought the process was creative and interesting, and identified several positive impacts of taking part. Though participants said they initially did not expect to be heard, by the end they felt that they were genuinely being listened to, and felt their ideas had been incorporated into the final concepts. From observation of the co-design workshops, activities were varied, active and flexibly adapted according to the needs and abilities of participants. The evaluation suggests that some things could be adapted in future co-design projects with this audience, namely: (a) spending more time introducing the purpose of the co-design workshops and individual activities, to aid comprehension and engagement with the co-design process; (b) splitting groups by language and ability, with careful facilitation supported by engaged social workers where possible; and (c) involving participants more closely or providing more visibility of the design process.

Recommendations

This project and the evaluation have evidenced the potential and pitfalls of involving this audience in a co-design process. Participants were able to engage with the ideas relatively well, and though there was variation in the extent to which some individuals were enabled to contribute, on the whole, the co-design process allowed the views of young people and carers to be captured and incorporated into the development of new technology.

To push the co-design aspect further, young people and carers could be involved in, or have greater visibility of, some of the design process, such as attending workshops with the development team, or hearing feedback about how their ideas have been incorporated into product concepts. The evaluation team conclude that more could have done to increase participants' sense of input into and ownership of some of the concepts overall.

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