

Young people's involvement in improving the experience of living in Ballydowd

Tusla Ballydowd Special Care Unit

Ballydowd is a special care unit that provides stability in a secured therapeutic environment for young people between the ages of 12 and 17. The objective of the service is to provide young people with an individualised programme of support and therapeutic interventions, which will enable them to return to residential care.

The care provided in Ballydowd assists the young person to develop internal controls, reduce risk-taking behaviour, enhance self-esteem and focus on their strengths. The care also provides the young person with the capacity for constructive choice, resilience and individual responsibility. Ballydowd focuses on achieving the above through building positive relationships with the young person, showing respect and compassion, being attentive to them, and providing recognition and praise for their efforts.

The self-contained campus at Ballydowd currently comprises an administration building, three residential units, a school, indoor recreational facilities and a green area. There are, on average, four or five young people staying in Ballydowd at any given time.

1. How the topics were identified

- Staff in Ballydowd set up and facilitated three committees where the young people came together in a safe and supported space to have their voices heard on how to improve their experience at Ballydowd.
- These committees came about as a result of staff attending Tusla Child and Youth Participation Training, and a desire on behalf of staff and management to increase the level of the young people's participation in Ballydowd and give them greater influence.
- The young people were asked if they wanted to participate in the committees, and expressed an interest in doing so. All the young people in Ballydowd were invited, and could participate in all three committees if they wished.
- The committees were on the topics of the Environment, Activities and Restrictive Practices and met regularly (in agreement with the young people).
- Many different suggestions were put forward directly by the young people to the staff, not only in relation to improving their experience in Ballydowd but also in the context of easing the transition into Ballydowd (which, the young people identified, can be difficult).
- Based directly on the views of young people, the process resulted in 30 restrictive practices being changed and new activities and initiatives being introduced.
- Staff and management have pledged to commit to participation going forward. They will sustain existing processes and develop new ones to ensure they continue to engage with all young people in Ballydowd in order to bring about change.

2. The young people's participation in the decision-making

- The management and staff of Ballydowd were both the audience and the decision-makers.
- The staff who facilitated the committee meetings brought the ideas and suggestions of the young people to the rest of the staff and management for serious consideration and discussion.
- Ideas and suggestions that emerged during daily interactions with staff were also included and considered.
- Staff opinions were sought and the staff and management made decisions as a team on what changes could happen in order to improve the experience for all young people in Ballydowd and to ease the transition for young people into Ballydowd.

- The decisions made were communicated back to the young people verbally along with timelines for implementation when their suggestions had been approved, and explanations and rationales if their suggestions had not been approved.
- Some decisions took longer than others to negotiate due to the complex nature and statutory footing of the service Ballydowd provides or if additional funding was required. The young people were kept updated on the progress of each suggestion.
- Staff and management were available to discuss the proposed changes and their progress with the young people, either individually or collectively, outside the meetings if they wished.

3. How the views of young people were sought, and how they affected the decisions

SPACE

- Staff facilitated the three committees where the young people came together in a safe and supported space to have their voices heard and to suggest changes that would improve the experience of all young people in Ballydowd.
- Each committee was facilitated by staff who had good relationships with the young people, but their work was supported by all staff and management.
- The committee meetings were held in a communal room chosen by the young people and recently renovated by them; a place they have ownership of and feel comfortable in.
- The tone of the committee meetings was always informal, with snacks, comfortable seating and flexible start and end times.
- All committee meetings were open to all young people at all times.
- This safe and supported space meant the young people were involved in giving their suggestions from the start.

VOICE

- Young people were encouraged to identify the issues they wanted to discuss to improve the experience for all young people.
- They could identify issues through the committee meetings: they were asked questions and allowed to make suggestions that could make a difference to their experience of living in Ballydowd.
- During group sessions they were encouraged to put forward any idea or suggestion that could be teased out and discussed.
- The young people could also, if they wished, identify areas for change through their daily interactions with staff and management.
- Most young people preferred to put forward their ideas during discussions at the committee meetings. Those who didn't want to contribute to the group discussions could write down, draw or record their ideas. Creative ways of expression are encouraged at Ballydowd. For example, one young person liked to draw on the walls, so we painted a wall in their bedroom with blackboard paint and encouraged them to express their ideas that way.
- Some young people acted as a representative for the rest of the group if they didn't want to attend a meeting. The young person would consult with the others before the meeting, voice their opinions during it and give them feedback afterwards. This process was facilitated by staff.
- With the arrival of new young people in Ballydowd, more consultations were held, as we believe in the principle of participation as an ongoing process.

AUDIENCE

- The right decision-makers were involved: the management and staff in Ballydowd.
- Changes to the living arrangements in Ballydowd that were suggested by the young people were brought to management and staff for consideration. The young people were informed of this and given a timeframe for a response.
- Their views were taken seriously as a commitment to the process had been secured from staff and management before the consultations began.
- In addition, management sometimes attended the committee meetings to hear directly from the young people and there is an 'open door' policy in Ballydowd so young people can talk to management directly if they so wish.
- The ideas were discussed at staff meetings and staff opinions were sought. Staff and management agreed to make the requested changes if they were possible.
- Some suggestions were totally novel for Ballydowd and understandably there was a little apprehension in relation to these changes. However, staff and management agreed that ongoing individualised risk assessments would allow the majority of changes to be implemented while also keeping young people and staff safe.

INFLUENCE

- The collaborative process resulted in approximately 30 restrictive practices being changed and new activities and initiatives being introduced based directly on the views of young people. These included:
 - » the unlocking of internal doors within units;
 - » reduction of nightly checks;
 - » holding own pocket money;
 - » greater number of outings;
 - » unlocking the kitchen during the day;
 - » replacing plastic utensils with 'real' ones;
 - » allowing greater access to Wi-Fi and television;
 - » being involved in menu planning;
 - » introducing new facilities such as a gym, pool table and outdoor furniture;
 - » building a new playground designed by the young people.
- Following consultations with new arrivals to Ballydowd, additional changes implemented by management and staff included:
 - » leaving bedroom doors unlocked at night (if young people want this, some do not);
 - » removing the Perspex screen from in front of the television;
 - » introducing individualised bedtimes;
 - » having internal locks on bedroom doors to give young people privacy (these can be over-ridden in case of an emergency).
- Many of the young people's suggestions on how to make the transition into Ballydowd easier were also supported, approved and implemented. These included:
 - » The creation of an admissions video by young people, to be viewed on arrival instead of booklets, and a new and more welcoming admissions suite in which to view the video.

continued

- » One young person explained:
“I was in a room for a few days, 101 different people coming into me telling me the same rules over and over and showing me a book. I couldn't take it in. I thought watch a ten-minute video and that would be it. The video will be way better.”
- » A new admission pack with a welcome letter, food and toiletries put together by the young people.
“Little things like munchies, water bottle, toothbrush holder, shower mat, dressing gown. Hot water bottles, teddies, think of all the age groups, not just the older kids.”
- » A readymade pre-admission bedroom, which the young person can individualise with their assigned budget when they feel ready.

5. Subsequent developments

- To date, the feedback about the changes has been positive from all young people, both those directly involved in the engagement and those who were not.

“More freedom in the place than there was before. We are allowed hold pocket money ourselves now.”

“We weren't allowed make our own food before going to bed. Now the doors are left open and we can go into the kitchen. We were not allowed glasses, cutlery. We had to have plastic cups, knives and forks, plates. Now we have real cups.”

“We can lock our door from the inside. We only got the locks since Christmas. We are more independent. Staff have a key to over-ride the lock but they would only use it in case of emergency.”

“Staff are always asking our opinions. They listen to us.”



The new admission suite and the admission packs designed by the young people