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# Evaluation of the Champions Board Approach

*Summary Report*



**Young People with Care Experience**  
Programme: *Evaluation*

life  
changes  
trust

# Champions Boards<sup>\*</sup>

## SUMMARY

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### About this evaluation

The Champions Board approach covers 21 Champions Boards which have received funding from the Life Changes Trust, and a National Network of Champions Boards. Champions Boards aim to support young people with care experience to engage, challenge and influence those who make decisions about services which affect their lives, leading to positive change.

The Life Changes Trust committed approximately £5.8 million to funding 21 Champions Boards between 2016 and 2022. All of the Champions Boards provide significant match funding and resources, through cash and/or in-kind contributions.

The Champions Board approach sits in the context of wider developments around the rights of the child and the rights of children and young people with care experience in particular. The Independent Care Review (2017 - 2020) and The Promise (2020) set out a clear national policy commitment that young people with care experience in Scotland matter, and that Scotland will love its most vulnerable children and give them the childhood they deserve.



# Taking part in Champions Boards



## Participation and values

Young people are very positive about how it feels to be involved in Champions Boards. Young people have found it exciting, special, rewarding, supportive, empowering, fun, respectful and worthwhile.

There is strong agreement across almost all young people, partners and staff that young people are well represented, listened to and respected, and are having an important say in setting priorities within the Champions Boards approach.

The key factors underpinning successful Boards are:

- investing in relationships - between young people, staff and partners
- offering participation options, creativity and fun
- an informal, flexible and relaxed environment - with food being important
- support to get involved but no pressure.

During 2020/21 much of the participation moved online due to the pandemic. There were challenges to this, but some young people have enjoyed virtual participation and found it more equal and easier to get involved in. However, newer Boards have found it very difficult to shift their activities online without a strong, established group.



## Resources, staff and space

Boards have found that concentrated effort is required to ensure a mix of young people are involved and retained. Young people require a wide range of individualised support - including one to one meetings, pre-meetings, informal chats, peer support, training, mentoring and coaching.

To support effective participation, engagement and meaningful involvement in decision making, dedicated staff support roles are essential. These funded roles provide Boards with the driving force and energy so that partners and young people can be involved effectively. Without these posts some felt it was possible that participants and partners could lose focus - despite their commitment to the Champions Board.



Champions Boards also need resources to focus on building relationships between young people and with partners, which can take time. Having a dedicated physical space for the Champions Board, which young people have ownership and control over, helps to create a safe, trusting and welcoming environment.

These findings highlight the importance of dedicated investment in the participation of children and young people. Ensuring that staff members are clearly assigned to this work as well as making physical spaces available play a critical role in supporting young people to engage.

## Accountability and structure

The design of Champions Boards is deliberately flexible and tailored to local needs. Boards have worked hard to establish a structure that works for them. Structures have evolved over time, and a few Boards have re-imagined their structures to enable more change and accountability. Young people are clear that there is not one perfect approach to structuring a Champions Board, and that different options suit different people.

Some Boards work deliberately on an intensive basis with a small number of young people. This approach enables the development of relationships and skills, and a focus on areas of change that are important to the group. However, at times this approach causes perceived barriers to others becoming involved, and careful thought needs to be given to routes into decision making and influencing roles.

Many Boards have worked to create a wide range of opportunities, tailored to different age groups, geographies, situations and levels of engagement. However, at times it has been challenging to move people from participation and fun, to influencing change.

Some Boards have found that developing a clear sense of purpose and agreed actions could be challenging, for example if there were differences in priorities between organisations. In one of the 21 areas, partners were ultimately unsuccessful in setting up a Champions Board over the funded period due to challenges developing a shared understanding of the Champions Board approach and what it should achieve locally.

Overall, flexibility and responsiveness emerged as a strong success factor - both in terms of the local context and the needs and aspirations of young people. It is clear that Boards need to be willing to regularly review and adapt their approach, as there is no one blueprint to successfully engaging young people over time.

### Partnerships

Partners are very positive about how a Champions Board feels - interesting, natural, honest, rights-based and focused on making a difference. However, some staff and partners also describe feeling challenged, overwhelmed, frustrated or nervous. While relationships between young people and Corporate Parents are felt to be critical for embedding change, some have found it can take time to get key decision makers to the right place to be able and willing to hear the voices of young people and respond with compassion and respect. Investing in supporting partners to build relationships and become ready to listen and take action helps, but takes time and resources.

## Impact on young people

### Relationships

Almost all the young people involved in this evaluation feel strongly that the Champions Board has helped them to build and strengthen relationships. Activities such as cooking and eating together are particularly valued, helping people to feel connected and included.



Young people said that their Champions Board has helped them to develop positive relationships with their peers, meet people who understand them, get on with different people, develop positive relationships with adults and work with adults as equals. This has helped to build trust and encourage some to seek support and advice when needed, demonstrating that investing in relationships in this way can have additional ripple effects.

## Confidence

Almost all of the young people involved in this evaluation feel that by being involved in the Champions Board, they have increased their confidence - including confidence trying new things, speaking to people and sharing ideas. Many have developed confidence in themselves, building their self-esteem and feeling more positive about their experiences and having care experience.

## Skills and opportunities

Champions Boards help young people to take part in a wide range of new opportunities. Almost all young people involved in this evaluation said that they enjoyed learning new things through the Champions Board. Many have developed skills around teamwork, leadership, resilience, independence, employability, problem solving and creativity, as well as practical life skills like cooking. A few mentioned that their involvement with the Champions Board has helped them to re-engage with school or feel more confident learning in school.

## Leadership

Most young people said that being involved in the Champions Board has helped them to feel that they could be a leader. Some feel that they are already acting as leaders through the Champions Board, including becoming role models, adapting their behaviour, leading on key areas of work, helping peers and volunteering their time. However, some of the young people we interviewed felt uncomfortable using the word 'leader' when thinking of themselves.



## Goals and aspirations

Most of the young people we spoke with feel that because of their involvement in the Champions Board, their aspirations have developed or strengthened and their focus on achieving their goals has become clearer. Almost all now believe they can achieve their goals. Many indicated that being involved in the Champions Board has helped them to see the range of employment and learning opportunities available. Having the opportunity to work for the Champions Board made a big impact on the aspirations of the young people involved, demonstrating the importance of providing employment opportunities directly to young people as part of the Champions Board approach.



## Health and wellbeing

Many young people involved in this evaluation feel that their Champions Board has helped them to be more active - as they are more confident going out of the house, confident going to the gym, busier, happier and more positive. Champions Boards helped young people during lockdowns, giving them a purpose, a distraction and a route to support and connect with others. A few feel that being involved helps with their mental health, supporting them through difficult times and providing a supportive network.

## Practical support

Most Champions Boards have delivered individual grant schemes, offering small grants. Although we prompted young people specifically on the practical support received through their Champions Board, this was not a major focus of discussion for many of the young people we interviewed. Most were aware of individual grant schemes, and a few had accessed support. A few had received hampers, food vouchers or birthday presents and welcomed this support. In some areas, these grant schemes helped to highlight areas where there were gaps in support, or gaps in awareness about the support young people could access.

# Impact on policy and practice

## Ability to bring about change

Across the Champions Boards, participants are largely positive that Boards have made an impact on policy and practice. Most feel they can point to concrete results achieved by the Board, and that services better meet the needs of young people with care experience as a result.

Most young people feel that their Champions Board can bring about change and had either contributed to a change in policy or practice, or were working on something which would soon make a big difference to young people with care experience. However, young people's ability to talk about bringing about change varied very significantly between Champions Boards. A few of the young people we spoke with couldn't point to any changes because of the Board, with a small number feeling that discussions were not translated into action or that they didn't necessarily hear about everything that was going on and that change may happen without them knowing.

Some staff and partners also feel that change needs to happen more quickly and visibly. A few partners feel that they are still in the early stages of a significant culture shift, and that policy and practice has not yet changed. These partners hope that the Champions Board will lead to transformational change in the longer term. These findings highlight the importance of regular feedback and open and honest conversations about progress and barriers.

## Change themes

Champions Boards have contributed to local implementation of national policy and practice, acting as an important bridge between national policy intention and the reality of day-to-day life for young people with care experience. This includes:

- ensuring young people leave care only when ready, can access housing options and do not have to enter the homelessness system
- implementing council tax exemptions
- ensuring brothers and sisters are able to stay together
- nurturing and supporting young people with care experience in schools
- supporting the mental health of young people with care experience
- increasing opportunities to access employment and training
- stopping early criminalisation of young people with care experience
- introducing new approaches to Children's Hearings.

## Impact on systems change

### Understanding and commitment

There is clear evidence from young people that the Champions Boards help organisations to better understand care experience. Young people feel that Corporate Parents are looking at young people differently, seeing them as individuals and thinking about the language they should use. Partners have developed a greater understanding of:

- care experience, trauma, and the strengths, commitment and individuality of young people with care experience
- corporate parenting responsibilities
- how the decisions they make impact on people's lives
- what they could contribute to the agenda.

This has built commitment to bring about change and is helping partners to do their everyday work and make decisions while remembering the overarching reason they are doing their job, to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and families. Some feel more confident challenging situations which may be unfair.

Some partners indicated that organisations and staff now feel a moral as well as statutory responsibility to corporate parenting. Almost all partners felt there had been a clear shift in terms of how their organisation listened to young people, since being involved in the Champions Board. Partners are involving young people in decisions at an earlier stage, across all stages of policy development, and in a meaningful way. In many cases, Champions Boards have become the go-to place to explore views of young people with care experience.

“ We can hear their voices when we’re making decisions.”  
-PARTNER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE-

A few partners said that the wider context in which they were operating, with The Promise and a focus on children’s rights, helps to give partners permission to really listen to children and young people and try out the things they suggest. However, a few Champions Board staff feel that while there is now a greater understanding and commitment among partners, some remain unsure how to take this forward into action. And in some areas, partners feel there is more to do to get young people’s input from the start of the process, rather than towards the end.

Decision makers at the political level also emphasised the significant difference that taking part in the Champions Board has made to their knowledge and understanding of young people with care experience. However, in a small number of cases, elected members have experienced challenges being Chair of the Champions Board, partly due to tensions between representing young people and chairing the group.

These findings highlight that Champions Boards can play a vital role in helping Corporate Parents to embrace their responsibilities, improving their knowledge and strengthening their commitment to getting it right for children and young people.

### Relationship-based practice

The young people involved in this evaluation feel that Champions Boards have contributed to better relationships between the individual young participants in the Board and partner organisations. Partners also said that they have developed strong individual relationships with the young people involved in Champions Boards. Some partners highlighted that these individual relationships are helping to build trust in organisations and Corporate Parents more generally. Partners highlighted that it took time to build trust, but they feel they are moving in the right direction.



In some cases, individuals are taking their experience of the Champions Board and building it into their wider practice - empowering them to build stronger and more informal yet consistent relationships with the young people they work with. A few partners feel more confident encouraging others to take a relationship-based and person-centred approach, as the Champions Board makes it feel normal and appropriate to work in this way.

While these positive relationships are developing, this approach can be challenging and new to many organisations. Some partners said that while they recognise the power and importance of developing relationships, they can also feel a bit vulnerable and out of their comfort zone. In some cases, there are limitations to the relationships that staff are allowed to form with individual young people. This applies across all levels - political decision makers, senior staff and front-line staff. Most said it was good that the Champions Board challenges them, holds them to account and makes them feel uncomfortable at times. They feel this is one of the ways that change comes about.

### Rights-based approach

Partners, staff and young people involved in this evaluation feel that the Champions Board approach is strongly focused on rights and indicated that rights are at the heart of Champions Board meetings. The rights-based approach is:

- increasing understanding of rights among Corporate Parents
- increasing the ability of Corporate Parents to advocate on behalf of young people with care experience
- helping young people to raise their voice about specific issues
- embedding young people's experiences within policy and practice design and review - keeping their needs and rights at the forefront
- increasing awareness of rights among children and young people with care experience - for example to digital inclusion, to a passport and bank account, or to have their voice heard.

This highlights that Champions Boards can support increased realisation of the rights of children and young people with care experience.

## Collaboration and sustainability

Most partners feel that the Champions Board approach has strengthened their collaboration with other teams, services and organisations. Boards can act as a lever to attract partners, to build stronger partnerships and to think about joint working in a more meaningful way. Partners said that the Boards connect partners around the issues that are important to young people, giving structure to collaboration with partners and young people. It also helps people to connect informally outwith the Board and work better in partnership across all areas of their work.

Most feel that there is a commitment from partners to long-term support for the Champions Board process. In many areas there is confidence among staff and partners that the work is embedded within the culture of organisations to the extent that it could now continue. Many highlight that the wider context of The Promise has helped to consolidate support among partners for a Champions Board type approach.

However, in a few cases the end of the Trust's funding and the pandemic have combined to lead to uncertainty about the future of the Champions Board, and the development support available. A few feel that there is a risk of going backwards, with the loss of core funded posts, even for Champions Boards that were previously thriving.

Overall, Champions Boards offer a strong platform for collaboration and a focus on what matters to young people with care experience.

## The National Network

The National Champions Board Network provides opportunities for people involved in Champions Boards to connect, build skills and share learning. Over the time of this evaluation, the Network was entirely online, with regular drop-in online peer learning sessions, and larger online events focusing on specific topics and themes.

Staff, partners and young people are very positive about the opportunities to network with and learn from other Champions Boards. Young people had attended face to face events, pre-pandemic, and found these very helpful for learning, hearing how others were doing, sharing their own work, influencing others and networking. Young people highly valued the collaborative and friendly atmosphere of the events. Most of the young people we spoke with had not been involved in online events.

Staff said that the Champions Board Network has been invaluable for them. In particular, some find their role is quite unique and it can be lonely, and the network has helped them build a shared experience - particularly during lockdown. Staff find the online space to be a great platform, providing a forum for focused and meaningful learning. Boards not funded by the Trust also highly value the events, both face to face and online, as a means of accessing peer support, sharing ideas, exploring challenges and discussing sustainable approaches to Champions Board work.

## Peer evaluation

This evaluation involved 11 committed young people with care experience as peer evaluators. As well as supporting fieldwork, they were very interested in reporting on and presenting findings. The peer evaluators strongly influenced the outputs of the evaluation, helping to focus on what is important to young people in terms of outputs and learning. The young people were paid at the Living Wage, to recognise their contribution.

## Conclusions

The Champions Board approach is having significant impact on the young people involved, in terms of confidence, aspirations, wider skills for life and learning and leadership skills. More than this, the Champions Boards are enabling young people to develop strong relationships with one another, and with adults, providing an important sense of family, friendship and connection. Champions Boards are special places where young people are empowered, have fun and support one another in a safe space that is their own.

Champions Boards are also having a significant influence on policy and practice within partner organisations. In many areas, the Champions Boards are part of a transformational culture shift, in the context of wider activity around The Promise and children's rights, which helps make it easier for partners to listen to children and young people and adapt policy and practice in response.

The Champions Boards are helping organisations to better understand care experience, think about the language they use, understand corporate parenting responsibilities and the rights of young people, and think about how the decisions they make impact on the lives of young people with care experience. Fundamentally, Champions Boards help remind people of the purpose of their jobs - to support children, young people and families.