

Language Leaders - Because what we hear in Hearings matters

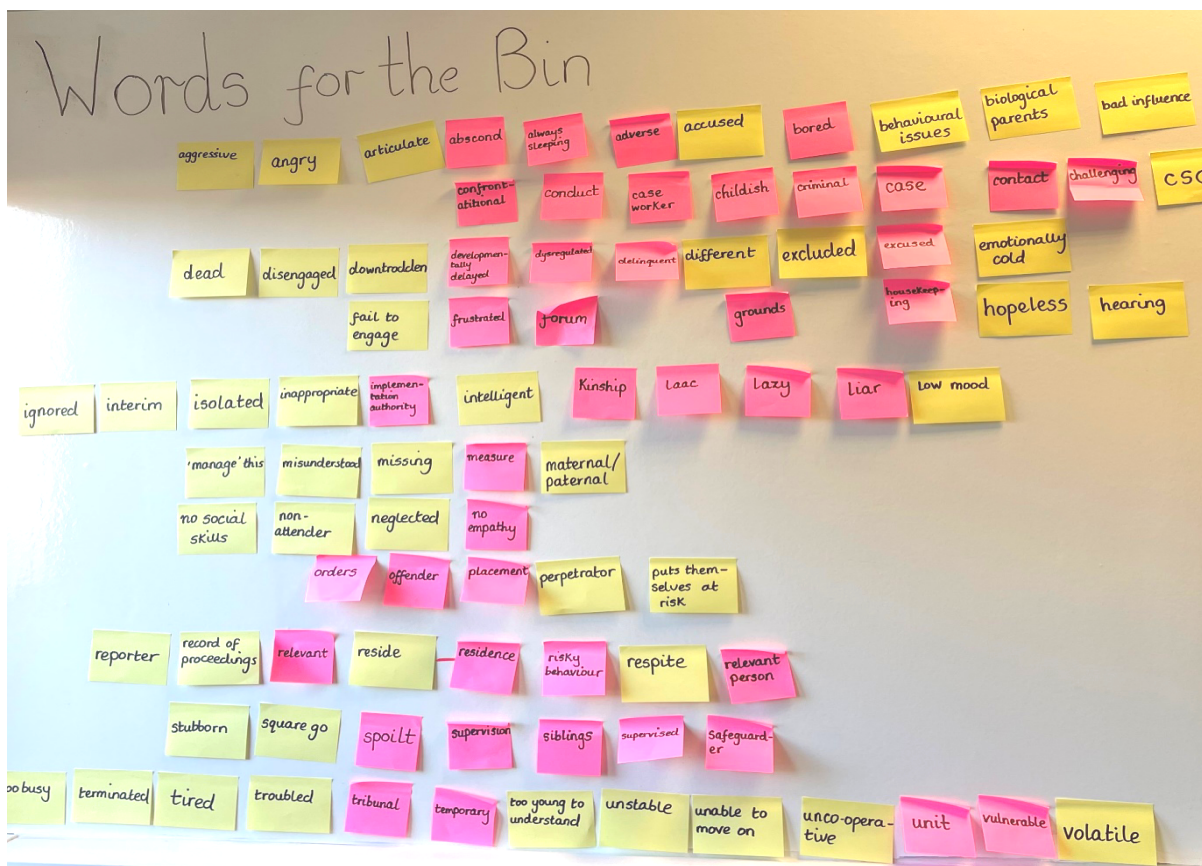


1. Background and description of tasks



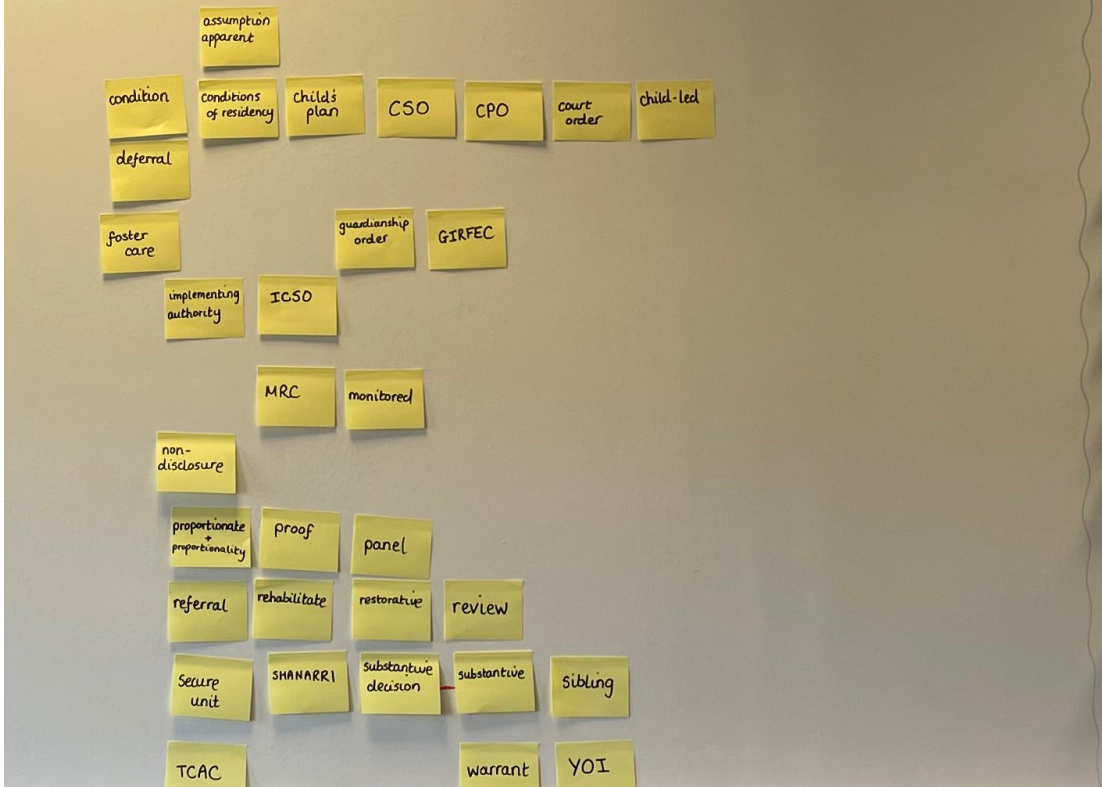
Over four sessions, our group has established itself, agreed membership, ways of working and their purpose: to prevent misunderstanding, distress or re-traumatising of children in the Hearings System, through changing the language used. We are made up of six young adults with lived experience of Hearings, five professionals from across the Hearings System (SCRA, CHS, Social Work, Advocacy and Children's Rights) with facilitation by Our Hearings, Our Voice. More detail on the early stages, membership and work to date can be found in this [OHOV news item](#).

Through collaboration between the Hearings-experienced young people and adult professionals in the group, and through reaching out more widely to Hearings-experienced young people, we collated two groups of words - those that needed to be 'binned' from the Hearings System and those that we need to keep, but described differently to prevent distress or confusion. The pictures below show the words which had been gathered.





Words that need an explanation for children + young people

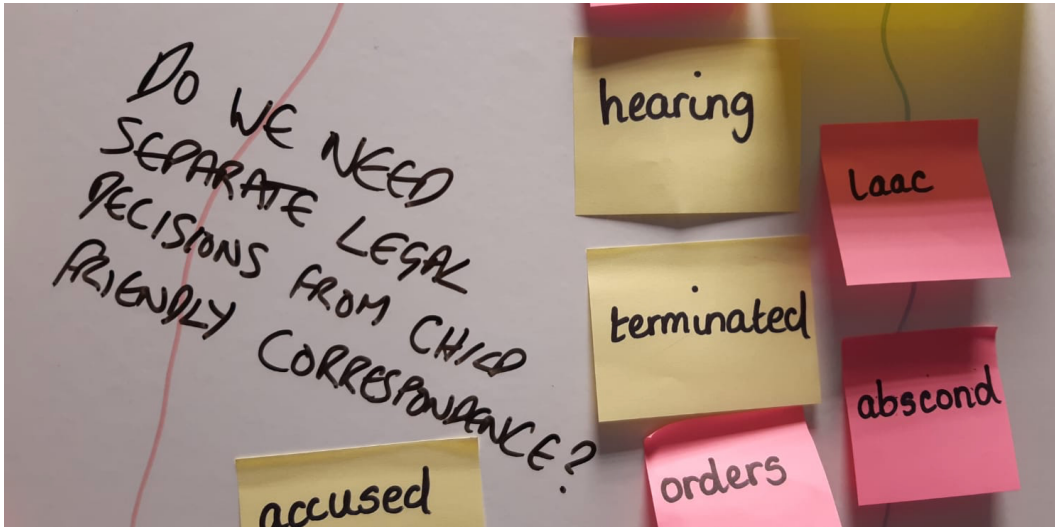


We asked the group to take a further look at the words and to move them around if they wished. Were they all in the right categories? Were any words missing? Were there any types of words or connections between the words they wished to 'bin'?

We began to notice some important things which could help guide us in making changes, such as, some categories of words we would like to stop being used in Hearings and some principles we would like professionals and volunteers to stick to (more details on both of these below).

Another discussion that came up here was what do we do about legal terms in the Hearings System? Are we legally bound to use one set of words to describe decisions or processes but use other words to support children and their parents in understanding and accessing that information?





Some members of the group felt the specific nature of the legal words is important to ensure there is no confusion about the decision made while other group members felt only words that do not need translation for children should be used (the young people in the group mostly expressed this latter view). We were unsure if this would take a change in practice or a change in the law to resolve this. For now, we understand the different positions better but require further investigation and discussion before we can agree on the way forward.

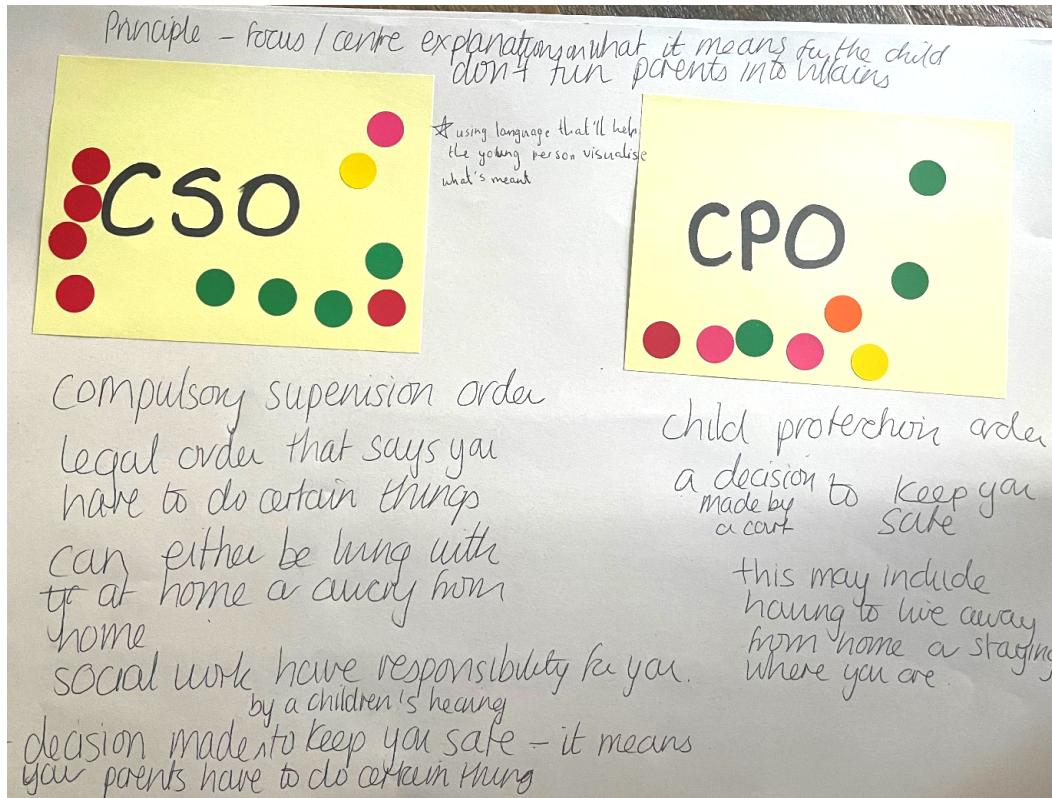
2. Voting exercise and early attempts to re-write words for children and young people

We spent some time prioritising which of the words we wished to describe differently for children and young people first. Each group member was given 12 votes for the words they wished to prioritise and after all members voted the words opposite were chosen.

Group members split into small groups of 2 or 3 and began providing alternative ways of describing these terms to children and young people. We hope this will form the beginning of a resource for children, young people and adults in the Hearings System to make use of.



Here is an example of some of the work at this very early stage:



We will continue this process for all of the words the group wish to describe differently.

3. Bin categories

While discussing the individual words we had identified for 'binning' or re-writing it soon became apparent that certain words fell naturally into specific categories. For example, terms such as 'moody', 'lazy', 'abusive' were harmful labels, while terms such as 'puts themselves at risk', 'cannot move on', and 'fails to engage' were negative and non-contextualised descriptions of behaviour. We listed the various categories of words and terms and discussed which category each word might come under. Our list of categories was as follows:

- Judgemental language
- Negatively emotive language (including patronising, presumptuous, unkind, and arrogant language)
- Confusing language (including cold, technical, hard to understand, legal terms, and language that presumes understanding)





- Irrelevant language (including the repetition of historical negative information/events)
- Language that labels and/or stigmatises rather than describes
- Traumatizing and/or distressing language
- Impersonal language (including language that lacks context)
- Language that focuses on deficiencies and is not strength-based

This is a very rough compilation of categories and future work might involve adding to these categories or expanding their descriptions.

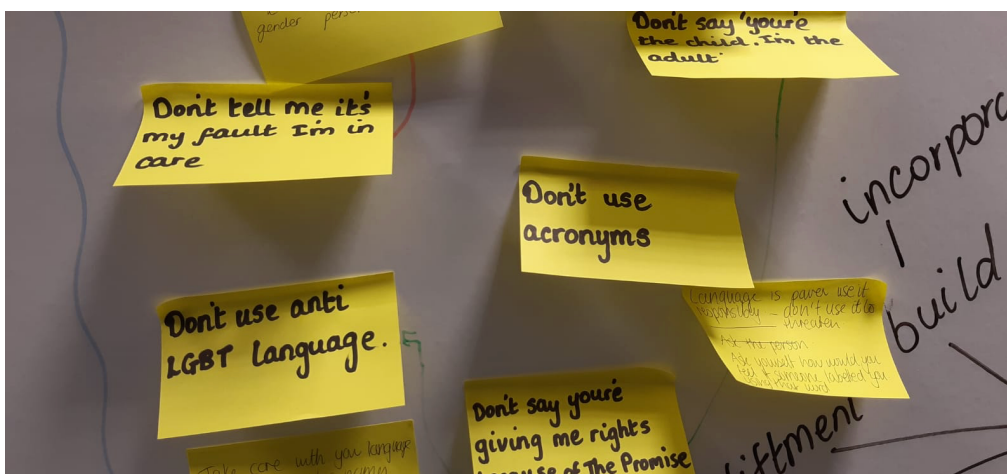
It became apparent that some terms, such as 'LAAC' could possibly straddle more than one category, as it is both a cold/technical term, is confusing and has the potential to be distressing.

4. Principles of language

During the initial collection of 'words for the bin' some of the young people suggested examples of communication that could not be described as singular words or terms, but more of a lack of principles in communication. For instance, one young person recounted that she was told at a Hearing 'we have to support your right to x because of The Promise'.

Another young person recalled receiving praise at a Hearing because of her behaviour, being told, 'most young people in your situation are out kicking police and you're not. Well done'.

Many of the young people stated how it felt when their names, or the names of people who were important to them, were consistently misspelled in documentation.



Although we do not have a clearly defined path through this complex and messy project, future work might involve interrogation of the previously mentioned categories of words against what we consider essential positive principles of language.



For example, keeping the basic principle of respect central to the language and communication children and young people experience in Hearings would tackle language that is 'judgy', 'stigmatising', and 'patronising'. The principle of clarity would address language that is 'cold/technical', 'legal', and 'hard to understand'.

We will continue to collaborate on defining principles which will help adults in the Hearings System ensure that children only experience words which are kind, clear, easy to understand, promote full involvement of children in their Hearings, recognise their strengths and protect them from distress or re-traumatisation.

Our basket of principles to be re-defined or grouped currently include the following, which have been shared across several meetings:

- Children will have some control over what is discussed in their Hearing
- Language will include the child's wishes
- Positives will be highlighted, not just risks
- Language will be based on strengths- reports should not be written about the avoidance of problems ('no issues') or blame children or their families
- Easy read reports and letters are standard good practice
- We will get rid of irrelevant background information
- We will write about the individual child within the family, not just the family
- Young people will not have to repeat themselves over and over because language will be clear for all
- Attention will be paid to balance and not just making people feel rubbish
- All language used will be non-stigmatising and will not discriminate
- Terms will be changed so we don't shorten them or use acronyms or jargon
- Report and letter authors will write to the child (the whole child)
- Authors and speakers in the Hearings System will understand the power of language
- Language used in legislation will be accessible and understood (not translated)



5. Feedback on digital work



The young people in OHOV expressed a wish to engage with a greater number of young people in their work around language in the Hearings System. To this end, three of the board members collaborated on an idea of an online 'digital bin', where young people could submit their own suggestions for language that should be abolished from the Children's Hearings System.

With this design brief in mind, we sought the help of a web developer who could be attentive to the concept and help us achieve our plan. The web developer was able to create a digital prototype of a virtual interactive bin surrounded by labels containing some examples of words we had voted to 'bin'. There was also a function which allowed users to suggest their own words for the bin. The user could then drag and drop the label into a digital bin where it would be submitted to us as moderators to review. We had no clear idea on how we would illustrate the words we had collected at this point.

During our meeting we evaluated the web developer's prototype and discussed whether it met our needs and vision. Several pertinent points were raised and included in feedback for the web developer including the following:

- Having some of the labels pre-populated with harmful words might cause unintentional distress. For example, if a child's experience of language in Hearings has been generally positive, they might feel hurt by reading words like 'aggressive', 'lazy', 'problem child'. If we do pre-populate some of the labels we should be very mindful of the words we choose to include here.
- We need to ensure users have a clear expectation of what will happen with their words. Their suggestion might not necessarily be 'binned' from Children's Hearings in real life, but it will be shared with our language group who are working on changing language in the Hearings System. We should be careful not to overpromise.

We have submitted our feedback to the web developer and look forward to working with him on this project. Our young people have often stated that engaging more widely with other care experienced children and young people is important to them and we are hopeful that this feature will afford us another way in which we can achieve this.



6. What's in a name? Moving from 'Word Busters' to 'Language Leaders'

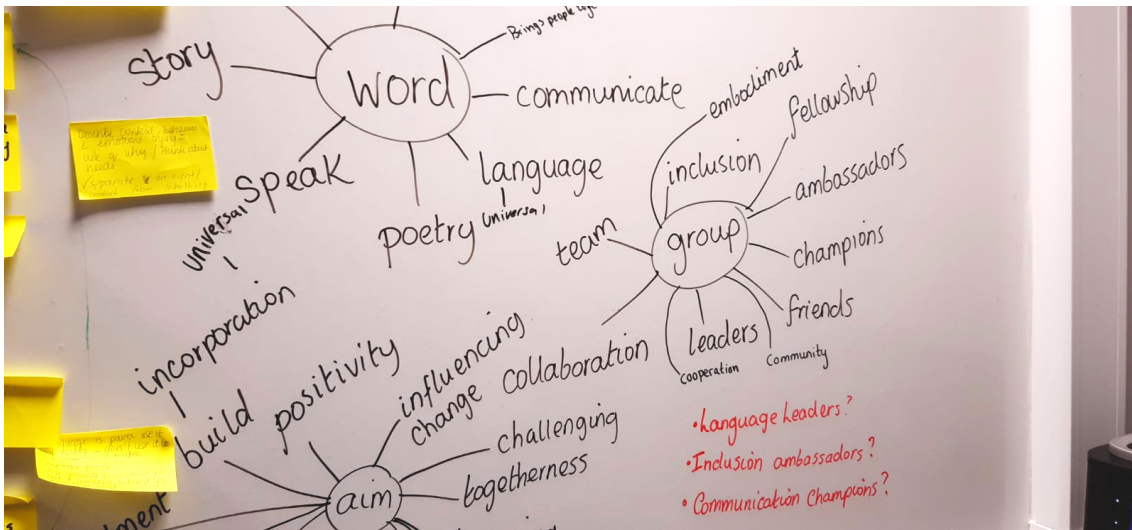


Prior to setting up our language group we sought guidance from the Family Justice Young People's Board at CAFCASS, who had set up a similar group in England and Wales. We learned about their 'word busting' approach to improving language which involved eliminating ('busting') some words and re-wording others in a way that's less confusing to children and young people. For a while, we referred to our own group as the 'Word Busters' and spent the first few sessions gathering and discussing examples of words and phrases we wanted to 'bust' from the Children's Hearings System.

Our group had an ambitious vision with an unestablished approach. The task before us seemed messy and complex; we had to accept that our path to its realisation had to be somewhat flexible and open-ended. As our meetings progressed the work we were undertaking started to take on more of a definite form. Through our discussions we were able to tease out recurring themes and explore links between different elements of language. It soon became apparent that our project encompassed more than purely 'busting' words and we realised our name, 'Word Busters', was no longer reflective of our approach.

At our most recent meeting we put our heads together to come up with different ways of describing what our group had set out to accomplish. We mind-mapped words that we associated with our work around language, and came up with examples such as, 'stories', 'speak', 'express', 'communication'. We then repeated this activity with the word 'aim', which unearthed several broad terms including, 'positivity', 'building', 'challenge', and 'improvement'. Finally, we carried out the exercise one last time with the word 'group', and came up with 'champions', 'team', 'ambassadors', 'leaders', and more. We left these mind-maps on the board during our meeting and encouraged members of the group to add to them if inspiration struck.





By the end of the session we were ready to choose our new name. One of the young people suggested 'Language Leaders', which was met with approval from the rest of the group. 'Language' embodies more than simply 'words', and the term 'leaders' reflects our determination to lead improvement in the Children's Hearings System. One member of the group formerly known as Word Busters mentioned that 'Language Leaders' isn't specific to the Children's Hearings System and suggested we add a strapline to clarify our purpose. After some discussion we agreed on: 'Language Leaders: Because what we hear in Hearings matters'. We also settled on the hashtag for social media #wordsmatter

**Gordon Main and
Amy Miskimmin-Logan
(on behalf of Language Leaders)
17/02/22**

