

Evaluation of Listen Well Scotland's Award Pilot in Schools

Summary evaluation report July 2018

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Contents

1. Introduction and methodology.....	1
2. Pupil views.....	4
3. Teacher views.....	11
4. Conclusions	15

1. Introduction and methodology

About this report

- 1.1 Research Scotland was commissioned by Listen Well Scotland to provide evaluation support to understand the impact and effectiveness of its pilot training and award programme in schools.
- 1.2 The pilot was delivered between August and October 2017, in seven schools across Scotland – four in Highland, two in Moray and one in South Lanarkshire. The pilot involved Listen Well Scotland volunteers providing training and associated activities directly to 95 school pupils.
- 1.3 This evaluation report mainly draws on evaluation forms designed and issued by Listen Well Scotland to training participants (school pupils) directly after training. In total 89 pupils completed a form. The report also reviews data from seven responses to an online survey designed by Research Scotland, and issued by Listen Well Scotland in June 2018 to fourteen teachers (head teachers and guidance teachers) involved in the pilot.

About Listen Well Scotland

- 1.4 Listen Well Scotland is a Scotland wide charity founded on the belief that being able to “listen well” plays an important part in health and wellbeing. It works to a vision that Scotland becomes a listening people.
- 1.5 Listen Well Scotland recognises that encouraging people “to talk” about mental health is receiving high profile. In addition, it also wants to see an increased focus on encouraging people to listen, and to learn to listen well, to what people have to say.
- 1.6 Listen Well Scotland offers a Listening Training Programme and a one to one listening service – Listening Time4U. Its activities are delivered by a small but growing team of committed volunteers from diverse and experienced backgrounds across Scotland.

Listen Well Scotland’s work in schools

- 1.7 In 2015 Listen Well Scotland was approached by two schools in Scotland to discuss opportunities to develop work on listening within the schools:
 - In one of these cases, contact was initiated by CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service). The contact had identified an unmet need for support for young people experiencing stress and anxiety. Young people who did not meet the CAMHS criteria may not have access to another suitable service. For those who did meet the criteria there was a long waiting time for an appointment. The CAMHS representative wanted to explore having a trained adult listener available in the school to deliver a one to one listening service, similar to the service for adults already delivered by Listen Well Scotland.

- In the other case contact was initiated by the Head of Guidance who identified an increase in young people experiencing stress and anxiety requiring support from the school guidance team. This school asked for listening training for senior pupils who might then be able to provide support for younger pupils experiencing more low-level concerns and anxiety.

- 1.8 Listen Well Scotland simultaneously tested both a listening service delivered by adults, and training to older pupils, over a six month period to explore the benefits of each approach. The pilots showed that pupils were more confident with a trained adult listener rather than older pupils with more limited experience. The pilot in one school also identified the necessary input from staff to ensure that a “listening buddy system” worked safely and well.
- 1.9 Listen Well Scotland continues to deliver a listening service from trained adults in some schools.

Listen Well Scotland’s training and awards pilot in schools

- 1.10 Since its initial work in schools, Listen Well Scotland has explored its role and potential contribution to the ongoing policy agenda around young peoples’ mental health and wellbeing, in line with the Scottish Government’s Mental Health Strategy’s (2017 – 2027) focus on early intervention and prevention, and in support of the Curriculum for Excellence.
- 1.11 To further explore how to support young people develop their listening skills, Listen Well Scotland took the decision to invite six schools across Scotland to participate in a new pilot. A seventh school approached Listen Well Scotland and was included.
- 1.12 Listen Well Scotland initially held meetings with the head teachers and head guidance teachers in all schools. It then presented the pilot approach to pupils in assemblies in all schools involved. The maximum number of pupil places on the training from each school was 16 pupils. All pupils interested were asked to complete an application form.
- 1.13 Ninety-five pupils between the ages of 15-17 applied. The pilot was delivered in the seven schools during August and October 2017. The project involved:
- Delivering a ten hour listening course run over two days, in each school.
 - Supporting pupils (in groups) in the Listening Challenge to produce marketing material to raise awareness of the importance of listening for health and wellbeing among young people demonstrating the learning gained on the course.
 - Supporting pupils to plan how this could be used within the school to encourage a greater listening culture.
 - Exhibiting the Listen Well Award at the Scottish Parliament in June 2018.

Methodology

1.14 In developing this report:

- We reviewed and analysed 89 evaluation forms returned by pupils who participated in the training. These evaluation forms were designed by Listen Well Scotland, and pupils were asked to complete them at the end of their training.
- We analysed seven responses from teachers to a short, qualitative online survey. We designed and administered the survey using Smart Survey, and it was issued by Listen Well Scotland directly to their school contacts.
- We briefly reviewed 95 application forms submitted by pupils in advance of the training. These forms were designed by Listen Well Scotland.

1.15 In advance of gathering views, Listen Well Scotland secured permissions from the relevant education authorities.

2. Pupil views

2.1 This chapter provides an analysis of the findings from the 89 completed pupil evaluation forms. It is mainly structured around the key themes we asked about in each of the surveys. It includes direct quotations from pupil responses. It begins with a short analysis of key points arising from the application forms received from pupils in advance of the training.

Motivations to become involved

2.2 The application forms asked pupils about why they wanted to get involved in the training, and why listening was beneficial or valuable. The forms demonstrate that young people could see the value of listening, and its relevance to them. Pupils highlighted the importance of listening in helping others, and improving health and wellbeing. They clearly saw it as a skill, that they could use now and in the future. Some highlighted that young people often do not feel listened to.

“I think it’s important to listen to young people today to get more of an understanding and to try and help their mental wellbeing.”

“I think listening is one of the most important things for young people to be confident in today due to online bullying and bullying first hand.”

“A lot of young people suffer with mental illnesses and need someone to just listen to what they’re going through. High school is a stressful, busy time so there is a lot going on. “

Feelings before and after the course

2.3 The survey asked pupils two questions about their feelings: “How did you feel when you came on the course on the first day?” and “Now you have finished the course, can you say how you are feeling?”

2.4 Most pupils spoke of feeling nervous or excited before the course. Most of those who gave reasons for feeling nervous said this was because they didn’t know what to expect, would be meeting or working with new people, or learning something different.

“I didn’t know what to expect at all, so a bit nervous.”

“On the first day of the course I was very nervous about meeting new people and learning new skills. . .”

2.5 A few also mentioned they were unsure if it was for them, or were concerned about opening up and sharing their experiences with others they might not know well.

2.6 Commonly pupils were excited about doing something different and learning about an important skill that could help others.

“I felt excited and ready, this is something that is rarely focused on and being a part of it is very exciting!”

“Excited to learn more about such an important life skill and become more knowledgeable in order to help others in the future.”

2.7 Often people spoke of feeling both nervous and excited at the same time.

“I was feeling nervous but excited to learn more about what Listen Well is and how it can help me to help other people.”

“At first I felt nervous as I did not know what to expect, but after a few minutes I found the content of the course very interesting and was excited to learn more.”

2.8 Most pupils experienced a change in how they felt, following the course. Some even spoke of feeling more at ease and less nervous shortly after the course began. The main feelings pupils highlighted at the end of their training were:

- feeling good or positive about themselves and their ability to help others;
- feeling more confident about their skills; and
- feeling more knowledgeable and skilled at listening, including a deeper understanding of what that means and how to do it well.

“I feel like I have learnt something new that will stay with me.”

“I feel very positive as I feel as if this course can benefit me in the future and has given me a deeper understanding about why it is important to express your emotions.”

“I feel like I can listen to people and help more.”

“More prepared and confident when dealing with situations.”

2.9 A few mentioned it had helped them understand themselves better, or deal with difficult experiences they might have in the future.

Key learning

2.10 When asked “What is the most important thing you have learnt from this course?” participants emphasised how their understanding of listening had

changed as a result of the training. The most commonly mentioned learning point was around not giving advice, in favour of listening and supporting the other person.

“That listening is needed in society today and so many aren’t being listened to properly.”

“That when you listen to someone you don’t always have to give them advice, just listening to them is enough.”

“The most important thing I have learnt from this course is how to properly listen to someone, and that it is important to let people speak about their problems without interrupting them.”

2.11 Other learning points identified by pupils included:

- the importance and value of good listening;
- being quiet, and not interrupting;
- avoiding letting their own agendas and filters shape their approach;
- recognising the need to let people understand and overcome problems themselves;
- the importance of body language; and
- key questions to ask people, to help them.

2.12 When asked what they would do as a result of the training, individual pupils suggested they would apply their key learning and skills in their lives. Many emphasised they would use their new skills and confidence to help others – their family, friends, other pupils or in their future careers.

“I would like to use the skills I learnt to help my friends and listen to them in a way that’s helpful to them.”

“I want to try and use these new skills that I have to help other people get through hard times. I like that I feel like I can help other people by allowing them to speak to me and letting them make their own choices, all I have to do is be there for them.”

2.13 Some suggested they would like to take forward specific actions around listening to raise the profile of listening skills, or to reach others with the approach. For example, starting a school group or ambassador programme.

Presentation and content

2.14 When asked: “Is there any comment you would like to make about the presentation or content of this course including any changes you would like?” Many respondents said no or reinforced that they really liked the course. Some were very positive:

“The course was amazing.”

“Most insightful course I’ve been on, no change necessary.”

“It was very informative and I don’t want to suggest any changes.”

2.15 Those who commented on the content generally felt it was very good. Answers to other questions suggest participants were able to recall key messages, and at times reinforced how well explained the messages were. It was suggested the content was relevant to their lives, and for helping others. Respondents also suggested the content was well presented.

“I felt that the presentation and content in the course was very educational and taught me so much about listening.”

“The presentation was great, explained everything very well.”

2.16 The most common area participants suggested could be improved was around the balance between presentations and activities. For example, while the content was good, they often felt the presentation time was too long, and suggested this made it difficult to concentrate. A few mentioned that there were a lot of quotes, and these were very long.

“I think the PowerPoint talk and presentation part could do with being shorter because I started to find it difficult to focus on this after a while.”

2.17 Often participants really liked the paired or group work. They asked for more of this, for fewer presentations, or for the presentation time to be broken up more. They felt that more focus on activities would help hold their attention better, engage with the material more effectively, and help develop their practical skills.

“I think the presentation of the course was very good, although I believe that more activities could be added in to involve the students more instead of there being huge amounts of talking about the course.”

“I think maybe add more opportunities to put the skills into practice as I found that they were a very effective way of learning.”

“I would like the opportunity to work in pairs or groups because we didn’t do that as much as I expected we would.”

2.18 A few suggested using other interactive tools – such as videos, music, or snappy phrases to help remember content – to diversify and strengthen the training.

“There is a lot of information to remember so possibly rhymes or snappy sentences will make it more memorable.”

2.19 Some commented on the style and atmosphere of the training. A few suggested there was a nice, welcoming and open atmosphere created by the trainers. For example, bringing along snacks.

“It was a much better feeling having it in a relaxed environment rather than feeling it was like a classroom.”

“It was presented in a great way and didn’t feel like a classroom.”

Most helpful aspects

2.20 The survey asked pupils “Which aspects of the course did you find the most helpful?”

2.21 The practical activities were most commonly mentioned by pupils as being helpful. In particular, pupils emphasised the benefits of the group work, and one to one work, suggesting this helped them to build practical skills, embed knowledge and helped them to increase confidence.

“I found it most helpful when we got to practice what we had been taught by listening to other people on the course.”

“The group discussions where we could input and hear other peoples’ views.”

“More practical group activities rather than the PowerPoint.”

“I found that practicing the actual listening and speaking itself was helpful as at the beginning of the course I did not realise how powerful both listening and talking to someone could be. It was only when I actually tried things and practiced this that I realised the power this has and how much better it can make you feel.”

2.22 Respondents also highlighted the benefits of watching the listening demonstration from the trainers.

“I found watching the example of talking about something really helpful as it can be difficult for people to share these experiences.”

“I found it helpful listening to Sue and Maureen’s stories as it gave me a better idea of what to do.”

- 2.23 Continuing the theme of keeping the learning practical, a few emphasised how they liked the real life nature of the examples and quotes used.
- 2.24 Other pupils emphasised particular elements of the content that they felt had worked well. Most commonly mentioned were the three suggested questions for using when listening. Some others mentioned reading body language, not giving advice, or just spoke generally about the learning points they had picked up.

“Finding out the building blocks of being a good listener.”

What was difficult

- 2.25 When asked what was difficult about the training, many respondents either didn't answer or simply said there wasn't anything particularly difficult about the course for them. Some took the opportunity to reinforce the strengths and benefits of the course.
- 2.26 Respondents who did comment on what was difficult, often focused on how the course made them feel vulnerable or emotional. Some emphasised that it was difficult to open up about emotional topics – such as loss – and particularly in groups with people they might not know or like. For a few people they had issues in their own lives that this brought to the surface, with one participant actually saying they found it very difficult to concentrate as a result of overwhelming emotions. For others this may have related to an unfamiliarity (and therefore discomfort) around the nature of true listening – for example, when being the person speaking about a topic, not having someone interrupt, which isn't something they were used to.

“The ‘losing people’ topic as it was hard to talk about.”

“The listening exercises because I don't often talk about stuff in that situation.”

“I found it hard to open up to my problems during our listening activities as it felt weird to continuously talk about something without being interrupted.”

- 2.27 Some said it was difficult to work in groups with people they didn't know or like.

“Talking to people I don't know or like.”

“Although [the group exercise] was useful, I found it difficult to give my honest thoughts, when paired with someone I did not know well.”

2.28 A specific challenge mentioned by some participants was thinking of a topic to get started with.

“I found actually taking part in the role play the most difficult as I found it hard to find things to talk about with the other person.”

“It was quite difficult to think of something to talk about when doing listening and speaking activities.”

2.29 Some others spoke of finding it difficult to speak in front of the group, or in smaller groups – either because they felt shy or because of the topic.

“Yes, the speaking out in the large group because I’m not comfortable talking in front of lots of people.”

2.30 Some pupils focused their comments about what was difficult on specific learning points which were hard for them to put into practice. In particular, avoiding advice giving, using the three questions, or not speaking during listening exercises.

“The process of learning how to listen effectively and learning how and when to use the three questions.”

“The difficult part of the course would be not being able to give advice to those you listen to.”

2.31 A few emphasised points made elsewhere about the amount of information provided during the presentations, which was at times difficult to concentrate on.

“I found it difficult to concentrate as it was very heavy with a lot to take in.”

3. Teacher views

3.1 This section provides an analysis of the findings from the seven online survey responses from teachers. It is mainly structured around the key themes we asked about in each of the surveys. It includes direct quotations from survey responses.

Motivations to become involved

3.2 The survey asked teachers why their school was interested in participating in the Listen Well Pilot.

3.3 Almost all of the schools who responded emphasised the importance of mental health within their school. They felt the training offered pupils the opportunity to explore mental health issues, or develop their own skills in helping others. A couple emphasised that there is increasing pressure on teachers or wider services to meet the mental health needs of young people – and that having these skills developed by peers may help more people, more quickly.

“We are very aware of the issues around poor mental health for our young people and, often, lack of resources for them to tap in to. Where resources are available there are long waiting lists to be seen. There was something positive about empowering young people with the skills to support each other.”

“It provides an excellent opportunity to raise awareness around mental health and to train young people.

What worked well

3.4 When asked: “What do you think worked well about the project?” teachers highlighted different things:

- improved understanding and awareness of the value of listening;
- the opportunity for pupils to explore their own wellbeing;
- the safe environment created by the training;
- the concept of peer support – which young people ‘bought into’; and
- having trained listeners provide the training.

Suggested improvements

3.5 The survey asked teachers based on their experience, what they thought Listen Well could do to improve or strengthen future training and work in schools?”

3.6 A few teachers suggested having some kind of follow up training or support, to help young people implement their skills.

“Explore ways in which young people can utilise the skills developed in training in their school. A lot of young people lost the drive to be engaged after the training was complete. Possibly some kind of official follow up?”

3.7 A couple suggested there may be opportunities to gather and share experiences among pupils.

“I think share experience, as this grows utilise young people who have seen their training help (or have been helped) to show that it is helping.”

“Now that the pilot has run it would be good for young people to hear from other young people who have taken part in the training.”

3.8 Two suggested that the training could have benefited from being more practical or collaborative, reflecting comments made by pupils.

Skills developed

3.9 When asked: “What are the main skills you feel young people have developed through the project?” teachers identified the following main learning areas:

- awareness and understanding of the listening process;
- listening skills;
- improving confidence; and
- empathy.

3.10 Other skills included improved sense of self, leadership, planning and organisation, awareness of others and patience. One teacher suggested that those who had experienced listening were happier and more empowered.

“The young people getting the training have developed patience, awareness of others and empathy. For some individuals it increased their confidence and they were noticeably more even in terms of managing their emotions. For pupils who had the listening experience they seem to be happier and more empowered following the sessions.”

Impact of new skills

3.11 The survey also asked, “How do you feel these skills will help the pupils in your school in the future?”

3.12 Most teachers emphasised that the training would enable pupils to take on leadership or support roles around listening within their schools.

“We are hoping the pupils will be Wellbeing Ambassadors and lead projects. They have already led a project on diversity and been buddies to the P7 pupils.”

“It will also allow our young people to support others in a way that perhaps they did not feel comfortable doing previously.”

3.13 A couple of teachers suggested the training would impact on how pupils deal with mental health issues.

“I think it will allow our young people to ‘normalise’ their emotions and not feel as isolated.”

“I think youngsters are sharing and talking more about mental health difficulties.”

“As more pupils become exposed to the ethos and value of listening and being heard and solving issues for themselves it should increase resilience for them.”

3.14 The survey asked teachers to provide examples of things they had seen or heard pupils do differently as a result of the training. They described pupils being more aware of listening, putting in place listening skills, and being more effective in supporting others.

“We are hearing of youngsters sharing their difficulties with friends.”

“Pupils acting as buddies had greater sensitivity and took time to talk and listen supportively to their wards. They also passed on information to Guidance staff about issues. The group bonded and have been keen to work together and promote wellbeing.”

“We have witnessed one pupil reacting more calmly to situations and trying to listen first before reacting. Another pupil has been seen to be mentoring a younger pupil during study sessions.”

Wider benefits

3.15 The survey asked teachers if they felt the project had brought wider benefits to the school, staff or the wider community and what these benefits were.

3.16 Teachers suggested that the Listen Well training and associated awards raised awareness of the importance of listening, and its role within the school, and even the wider school community. Pupils in at least one school were using their skills to help others through their volunteer work.

3.17 Teachers also emphasised that the work was at an early stage and that more needs to be done to develop the approach, raise awareness, and put skills into practice.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 Overall, both teachers and pupils were enthusiastic about the concept and implementation of the training. Both pupils and teachers felt the topic was important, and very relevant to their lives within and outside school.
- 4.2 There seemed to be a lot about the training that worked well. Pupils felt the content was interesting and well presented. They liked the training atmosphere, and the knowledge of the trainers. The use of real-life examples was welcomed. Importantly, the training seemed to deliver what they expected, based on their application forms.
- 4.3 The interactive activities were the part pupils found most beneficial, and this really seemed to help them embed their learning. The training could be improved with more focus on interactive activities. Using these more could break up the presented information and may help pupils concentrate and learn more effectively. There may be other opportunities to incorporate innovative activities and accessible messages into the training. Listen Well Scotland recognises the benefits of making the training more interactive, based from their own discussions with pupils and schools during training. They plan to further develop the activities within the training.
- 4.4 The training and associated awards seem to have had a real impact on many of the pupils who participated, and has the potential to have wider impacts. Those who undertook the training spoke of increased confidence and skills, and a much better understanding of why listening is important, and how to do it well. They often recognised that good listening isn't easy, but felt they understood much better how to help others with these skills.
- 4.5 Some pupils were uncomfortable with some topics and exercises. This was sometimes a result of their personal issues or circumstances, the topic, or the people they were working with on that task. While it may be inevitable and even beneficial to create a little discomfort during the training, this is an area Listen Well may wish to pay special attention to in the future. Thought could be given to how groups could be created in which there is more trust, and how to recognise and deal with any emotional issues that are uncovered as a result of the discussions. Listen Well Scotland has considered this learning point, and committed to taking account of this feedback. In particular, they plan to work directly with help young people to manage issues that might arise and to support young people to feel as comfortable as possible.
- 4.6 The feedback on this initial pilot is largely very positive, and suggests there is potential in developing this training opportunity for pupils further. Schools suggested there may also be opportunities to create some form of follow-up support to help pupils and schools take their learning forward. As part of the pilot pupils developed a range of ideas and plans to take their learning forward, with support from the Listen Well trainers. Listen Well Scotland plans to work closely with schools to explore how they might support and sustain listening approaches in the school environment beyond the training period.