Speak Up!
Children’s Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)
‘Control’ group report

1. Background information/Introduction
The focus group took place in January 2012 in a community centre in an Essex town of approximately 80,000 inhabitants. The session was organised by a youth worker from the county council. The children who participated all attend a mainstream secondary school for the majority of the week and also attend a behaviour support unit. Three adults from the behaviour support unit and two adults from the county council were in attendance to provide additional support where needed.

Nine children aged 13-16 participated in the focus group. Those aged 16 were included as they are in the same academic year as the 15 year-olds. The children could not be separated as they all attend the behaviour support unit together. Unfortunately a female participant was unable to attend on the day so all the participants were male. The ethnicity breakdown of the children was eight White and one Mixed. All the children lived in the town where the focus group was taking place.

This particular group was chosen as a control group as they attend a mainstream secondary school but also have a number of shared characteristics with the ‘vulnerable’ group, including behavioural issues. The predominantly male group is broadly reflective of the gender breakdown of children involved in the juvenile justice system.

Preparation of the children
All the children received an information sheet beforehand, summarising the Speak Up! project, the purpose of the focus group interviews, and a draft outline of the day. The information sheet also explained that we would like to take photos and use quotations from the children and that we would need their consent in order to do so. Each child was given a consent form for them and their parents/carers to complete.

All the children knew each other as they attend the same behaviour support unit. The children knew the adults from the behaviour support unit, but not those from the county council. The children had not previously met the facilitators from CRAE.

None of the children recalled learning about human rights or children’s rights. However, the staff at the behaviour support unit indicated that the children had previously received some information about children’s rights.

Programme/Methodology
The focus group meeting took place between 11am and 2pm, including a lunch break, as we were unable to secure more time with the children. The meeting was facilitated by two members of CRAE staff. The majority of the meeting took place in a room with one central table surrounded by chairs. Whiteboards were used and large sheets of paper were also put up around the room to assist with discussions. The programme of the day covered:

- Introduction to CRAE and the Speak Up! project
- Introductory session on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
• Choosing the four rights that are most important to you
• Focus group discussions on each of these four rights
• Next steps for the project

The first activity was conducted as a whole group. For the second activity, the children divided into four groups to discuss their ideas for their own set of rights. The third activity was introduced to the children as a whole and then they divided into three groups, with one group using an adjoining room with a central table surrounded by chairs. The children then reconvened as a whole to vote on the four most important rights chosen by the groups. For the detailed focus group discussions, the children were divided into two groups, with one in each room.

The children made notes on flipchart paper about their own ideas for what rights children need and their suggestions for the four most important rights in the CRC. The focus group discussions were recorded and the facilitators also took handwritten notes. These recordings were then transcribed.

Throughout the day, the activities were facilitated by CRAE staff. The facilitators encouraged all children to participate in the discussions and gave further explanations where these were necessary. Additional support was also provided by the other adults in attendance.

2. Key findings
This group of children had little to no prior knowledge of children’s rights and human rights. When asked to identify what rights they thought children should have, however, the children chose many rights that were reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

After introducing the children to the rights of the CRC, the group chose the following four rights as the most important:

• Children without a family have the right to special protection (article 20)
• Children have the right to express their opinion (article 12)
• No child shall be abused (articles 19, 34)
• All children have the right to play (article 31)

The group consistently reported that children’s views should be sought and respected in order to give effect to these rights. However, they reported that often this was not taking place.

None of the children had been involved in local, national or European government decision-making. The children were sceptical of whether these adults would take any notice of their views.

3. Children’s awareness of children’s rights
The children did not recall learning about children’s rights or human rights at school. We introduced the principles of human rights by asking the children what “FRED” stood for. After some discussion, they guessed that the first three letters stood for freedom, respect and equality. They did not identify dignity as the fourth principle.

The children had no prior knowledge of the CRC. However, in the activity where the children were asked to choose what rights they thought children should have, many rights identified were common with the CRC. The most widely chosen rights were rights to safety, to food and drink, to play and sport, and to be educated. Some of the
other rights chosen were a right to be listened to and to have a say, a right to have a 
family and to see them, a right to have friends and meet people, a right to health and 
medical attention, a right to privacy, and a right to an identity and name. Some of the 
rights chosen were not obviously reflected in the CRC, including rights to love, 
money, work, a car, to not go to school and to get any help you might need.

After the rights of the CRC were explained to the children, they were divided into 
three groups to discuss the children’s rights game and to choose which four rights 
were most important to them. Each group shortlisted four rights and then the whole 
group voted for the top four from the shortlist. The results of the vote are below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Right</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children without a family have the right to special protection (article 20)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children have the right to express their opinion (article 12)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No child shall be abused (articles 19, 34)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All children have the right to play (article 31)</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children have to be protected from torture and deprivation of liberty (article 37)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All children have the right to health care (article 24)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children have the right to an identity (article 8)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled children have the right to special care (article 23)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Since five of the rights received the largest number of votes, it was decided that 
article 37 would not be part of the top four. This was because the children’s main 
reason for choosing this was the right to be protected from torture. The view was that 
this could be covered in the discussions on protection from abuse.

- **Children without a family have the right to special protection (article 20)**
The children thought that the right to have a family and to be in contact with them 
was very important. This may explain why all the children voted to have this particular 
right in the top four. Although unaware of an explicit right within the CRC, the children 
knew that the State was under an obligation to find children who cannot live with their 
families a good place to stay and to look after them properly. The children seemed 
unaware of the right of children living in care to have their situation regularly 
reviewed.

- **Children have the right to express their opinion (article 12)**
All but one of the children chose this as one of the top rights. One of the groups 
(aged 15-16) put this as a top right because ‘Children should be heard and have a 
voice’. Some of the children knew that this was a right and they had previously 
discussed it as part of a social development qualification undertaken with the 
behaviour support unit. Some of the children identified this not as a “right” but as 
something that should be expected.

- **No child shall be abused (articles 19, 34)**
All but one of the children also chose this as one of their top rights. The children 
identified a number of reasons for this:

  - ‘They should not be abused or hurt’ (boys, aged 15-16)
  - ‘ Keeps children safe’ (boys, aged 14-15)
  - ‘Links with human rights and dignity’ (boys, aged 14-15)

The children understood that the State should protect children if they are being 
abused but thought that it would not be possible to protect every single child. When 
asked what ‘abuse’ meant, several mentioned physical violence and, when 
prompted, also mental and emotional abuse. Bullying was also considered abuse:
‘People get beaten up just because they do work and everything or because they look different or they smell funny or something like that.’ (boy, aged 15)

‘Some people … get bullied because they’re fat.’ (boy, aged 14)

Some of the children thought that shouting at someone in public can be abusive.

When asked about ‘neglect’, one of the children said that this could be when parents cannot afford basic things such as food and heating.

- All children have the right to play (article 31)

Seven of the children chose the right to play as one of the top rights. They felt this was important because of ‘Making new friends’ (boys aged 14-15) and that it ‘Helps develop their identity’ (boys aged 14-15). The children recognised that having access to sport helped them be healthy and prevented obesity.

Some of the children knew that play was a right and others were unsure. One of the boys, aged 15, identified that fun was something that everyone could have, not just children.

4. Children’s needs in relation to the four selected rights.

- Children without a family have the right to special protection (article 20)

None of the children had experience of being in care. One boy said he was nearly placed in care by his mother, but he now lives with his grandmother. Another boy said he lives with his mother, but not his father. Both children are in contact with family members who they do not live with.

Do you have contact with both sides of the family?

‘Yes I've started to now. Well in my family, I didn't know my dad's family, I haven't seen my dad's family since I was five and now I've got back in contact with them.’ (boy, aged 15)

Two of the boys knew children in care:

‘My stepdad's daughter's in care and she won't see her dad until she leaves it; that's when she's 16. They should get a right to see the dad like once a month or once a weekend.’ (boy, aged 15)

When asked what parents’ roles were in looking after their children, they responded:

‘Keep you safe.’ (boy, aged 15)
‘Put food on the table, give you a decent house to live in, that sort of thing.’ (boy, aged 16)
‘To keep a roof over your head, shelter, clothes.’ (boy, aged 15)
‘Love.’ (boy, aged 15)
‘Time for you.’ (boy, aged 16)

The children thought that their carers’ responsibilities should be the same whether they lived with their parents, grandparents, foster carers, or staff in a children’s home. They thought that this might be hard to make a reality:

‘Because there's a lot of kids to look after’ (boy, aged 15)
'And they're not like your real parents, it's hard to get attachments' (boy, aged 16)
'They won't have a lot of time’ (boy, aged 15)

The group thought that children in care should be part of a family and that all children living in care should be treated equally.

The children were asked what qualities they thought were sought after in potential carers:

‘A nice family. People that are nice, got lots of money.’
‘Look like each other.’
(boys, aged 14-15)

One boy said that sometimes it can be the child’s actions that lead to them being taken into care:

‘Because they're really bad and the police and all that and a criminal record and the mum and dad can't handle it.’ (boy, aged 15)

The children thought that they should have a say in decisions such as the people they are placed with, where they should stay and whether they should move schools.

The group thought that it was not fair for children in care to be moved around often as this can have an impact on many areas of their lives.

If a child has to keep moving foster families, what’s that going to do to the child do you think?

‘Break their heart.’
‘It's not fair really.’
‘Think about it, it’s not fair because they've got to keep moving if they don’t like their families.’
‘They've got to pack all their bags.’
(boys, aged 13-16)
...

What if they're always moving to different areas, different schools?

‘Then that would just be lonely.’ (boy, aged 14)
...

What would you miss if you had to keep moving? What else would you have to keep changing?

‘Bed.’
‘House.’
‘Scenery.’
‘School.’
‘Your friends.’
(boys, aged 13-16)

The children thought that it would be harder for foster children to make friends if they have to keep moving home. The group thought that if they wanted to, children in care
should be able to stay with the same family, but if they wanted to move they should be able to move.

- **Children have the right to express their opinion (article 12)**

One boy (aged 15) spoke about his experience giving evidence to a court following a road accident. He said that his views were taken seriously and that the offender’s licence was taken away.

Two boys mentioned specific incidents where their views were not taken seriously by teachers in their school:

‘They took me out of a lesson and I didn't want to get taken out of it.’ (boy, aged 16)
‘That happens to me a lot as well.’ (boy, aged 15)

So they made that decision but they didn't ask you what you thought about it.

‘They take you out of the class and don't say anything to you. They just say it's the best thing for you but then you're thinking, well where's my say; because you can't get education if you're not in a lesson.’ (boy, aged 16)

Were you able to go to anyone afterwards and say anything or complain?

‘No, because they said that was their final decision.’ (boy, aged 16)

The children thought that some adults were more respectful of their views than others. This included people they lived with, parents, grandparents and friends. They thought that most adults at school did not ask for or respect their views. One boy (aged 15) said that only one in ten teachers listen to their views. When asked why they thought some teachers did not listen to their views, one boy (aged 16) responded ‘Because they don't care, they don't like you, they care more about their jobs’. The children did not think that teachers thought of listening to and respecting children's views as part of their job.

The children thought that a teacher’s account of an incident would be believed over a child’s account:

‘If you had an incident with a teacher … and went to grass the teacher up … the teacher would agree with the teacher, won't listen to us, just agrees with the other teacher.’ (boy, aged 15)

‘We'd be excluded.’ (boy, aged 16)

The children spoke about the children in their school who are supposed to represent students’ views to staff:

‘They take the teacher’s side all the time’ (boy, aged 15)
‘They talk about things that suit themselves’ (boy, aged 15)

They thought that it was just ‘goody two-shoes’ students who were able to take on these roles. The children did not believe that these children accurately represented their views and that they only put forward the views they wanted to. They were asked if they had approached these students about an issue. They said they had not because:
'It's a waste of time'
'They won't listen'
'They just stare at you going uh, uh.'
'Uh, uh now get out.'
(boys, aged 15-16)

Every year, the county council sends around a survey to schools to be filled in by students and/or their parents. When asked, only one child seemed to know about the survey and said he had never looked at it, and that his parents had completed it.

When asked how they feel when adults do not take their views seriously, the boys said ‘angry’, ‘annoyed’ and ‘fed up’. They were asked to imagine how a disabled child with communication difficulties would feel if their views were not being respected. They responded:

'Unwanted'
'Make them want to give up'
'Some of them probably do'
(boys, aged 15)

None of the children had experience of being involved in decision-making with local, national or European government.

- **No child shall be abused (articles 19, 34)**

The children questioned how all child abuse could be prevented.

‘Can't go round every house to see if kids get abused.’
‘It's hard, people might hide the abuse … they might not know.’
‘Not everyone will be honest if their child's getting abused.’
(boys, aged 15-16)

The children discussed the case of a 17-month old boy who had been abused and killed at home, which had been publicised in the media:

'I don't know how parents could do that to a baby though.'
'They shouldn't have kids.'
'I think they should go to jail for life.'
(boys, aged 15-16)

One boy (aged 15) spoke about being punched by his cousin.

When asked if there was a service to help children who are being abused, one of the boys (aged 14) mentioned the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children). The children discussed what they might do if they were being abused at home:

Do you know what you’d do if you were being abused at home?

'Go to the police.'
'I wouldn’t, I’d just leave.'

Where would you go?
The children identified social services as people that take children into care, but also people who monitor family situations. They thought that social services could provide help for both children and parents.

When asked about what could be done to prevent abuse in schools, the children expressed concerns about confidentiality.

‘If you're in secondary school you go and tell the teacher and they take the piss out of you.’ (boy, aged 15-16)

‘Also they always interview the bully as well if you're in primary. If you go and tell the teacher that you're being bullied they'll go to the bully and get their side of the story.’ (boy, aged 15)

They were also concerned that adults such as teachers and the police would not believe them if they reported abuse, unless there was evidence.

- **All children have the right to play (article 31)**

Some of the children objected to the word 'play' since they felt it did not describe the activities they took part in. The children were asked what sort of leisure activities they were involved in. Their responses included meeting people, playing on a games console, football, running, skating, swimming, music, getting drunk and going clubbing.

Some of the children felt that they did not have much free time because of schoolwork and that they needed a healthy balance:

Do you all get a lot of free time within your day to play?

‘No, because you’ve got six hours at school.’
‘Then you go home tired.’
‘Yes, and then you've got homework.’
(boys, aged 13-14)

One boy had caring responsibilities at home which made it difficult for him to have time for leisure activities.

Generally, the children said they had access to fields to play on. Most of them had not experienced adults telling them to stop and go away, although one boy (aged 16) mentioned someone telling him ‘No ball games’.

The local swimming pool was felt by some to be unaffordable. Despite attending a specialist sports college, the children had no access to a pool at the school.

The children thought that there were not always enough leisure activities for them to get involved in. Some of them identified going to the beach (boy, aged 16) and going skydiving (boy, aged 15) as things they would like to do.

The children who attended organised group activities said the adults generally listened to what they had to say and respected their views. They also said that the adults asked their opinions.
Some of the children said that no-one had ever asked their views on what leisure facilities they should have in the area. Asked what they would say to the local council about leisure facilities, they said they would not talk to them because:

‘They probably won’t listen to you anyway.’
‘They’ll probably go back and do the wrong thing.’
(boys, aged 14, 16)

The children felt that they were very low on local priorities and that the council would not want to spend money on providing facilities for them. There seemed to be more of a focus on building new houses in the area:

‘Now, because they’ve built all houses all over the fields and that you’d have to play football in the road.’ (boy, aged 14)

The children raised safety concerns about having to play in the road. They also had safety concerns about a public skate park because of the kinds of people that hang around there.

When asked whether MPs ask children what they think, the children responded that they only ask adults. The children thought that if they emailed their MP it would not get read or would just get deleted (boys aged 15-16).

5. Proposals for policies or actions for children's rights

- **Children without a family have the right to special protection (article 20)**

One boy suggested that in a foster or children’s home there should be one child per carer to ensure that each child gets enough care and attention.

The children were asked how the State could check whether the rights of children living in care were being protected:

‘Have a visit from someone on the council or something, regular checks’ (boy, aged 16)
‘Conversation with the kids’ (boy, aged 15)
...

Do you think they need to look into the families in a bit more detail before they place the child?

‘Yes, they should ask the child’s opinion.’
‘If the child wants to move...’
‘They should have a chance to move.’
(boys, aged 13-16)

Having a say in decision-making was a key factor.

- **Children have the right to express their opinion (article 12)**

The children were asked what the adults around them could do to ensure that they uphold this right:

‘Listen to you more.’ (boy, aged 15)
‘Take your view into account.’ (boy, aged 16)

...)

If your teachers wanted to move you out of a class, what should they do?

'Talk to the student about what's wrong first. Don't rush into things' (boy, aged 16)

The children thought that there should be an adult they could go to who would listen to them and help them deal with problems.

When asked what MPs could do to find out children's views, one boy (aged 16) said 'Go around schools; go to the assemblies asking people, actually asking a wide variety of people'.

- No child shall be abused (articles 19, 34)

The children were asked what the authorities could have done to help the 17-month old boy who was being abused at home (publicised in the media). In this case, the boy's bruises had been covered by chocolate.

'Look around and see the baby'
'If that baby was covered in chocolate you wouldn't just like leave it; you'd check.'
'You'd make sure.'
'Exactly.'
'Or clean the baby just to make sure.'
(boys, aged 15-16)

The children thought that reports of abuse and bullying should be treated confidentially.

The children discussed what could be done if a child was being abused. Suggestions included a panic button that alerts the police and getting social services involved. They also suggested support for parents such as anger management classes, parenting classes, and alcohol and drug treatment centres. One boy (aged 13-16) mentioned the Prime Minister, but did not say how he could help specifically.

One boy (aged 15-16) suggested putting cameras up in schools to prevent abuse by members of school staff.

- All children have the right to play (article 31)

The children were asked how they could attract companies to provide leisure activities in their area. They suggested starting a campaign, writing letters and posting videos on YouTube. They also suggested taking a photo of all the people supporting the campaign to send to the company (boys, aged 15-16).

After it was explained how it could be done, the children said they might email their MP in future. They said they were more likely to use email, Facebook or Twitter than a letter to contact their MP (boys, aged 15-16).

To address problems of safety at the local skate park, one boy (aged 14) suggested putting up a camera that people could not damage and that would be monitored regularly.
6. **Evaluation of the focus group meeting(s)**

The children were provided with feedback sheets used by the county council. These were completed and then analysed by the CRAE facilitators. Overall, most of the children (five out of nine) rated the session as “Good”. Two children rated it “Great”, one rated it “Okay” and one rated it “Not so good”. Below are some extracts from their feedback.

The children were asked what their favourite part of the session was:

- ‘Learning about new rights.’ (boy, aged 15)
- ‘Talking about rights because it helped me learn.’ (boy, aged 16)
- ‘Choosing four most important rights.’ (boy, aged 15)

They were also asked what their least favourite part was:

- ‘Talking into the recorder because it made me nervous’ (boy, aged 16)
- ‘Too much writing’ (boy, aged 16)

Taking on board these comments, we should explore how to ease children’s concerns about using recorders. We should also consider what support should be put in place for children who have difficulties with writing and/or reading.

Eight out of the nine children said they had either “learnt something new” or “got information”. Seven out of nine said they had “had a say in what goes on”. Five out of nine said they had “found out where to get help”. Four said they had gained “a better understanding of people who are different from me” and two had “gained more confidence”.

7. **National Research**

Please refer to information sent previously.