


Involving young people in local authority decision-making

Concerns about the democratic process and a wide range of specific policy initiatives (such as Best Value, Connexions and the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy) have led many local authorities to look at ways of enhancing young people's involvement in local decision-making. A study carried out by the Institute for Public Policy Research explored the challenges that local authorities may face when seeking to involve young people in local governance and potential solutions. It found:

-  Focus groups of young people revealed a genuine enthusiasm for playing a part in certain aspects of decision-making processes, particularly at the local level. Common issues of concern included crime, personal safety, education, facilities for young people, the environment and housing.
-  Ninety per cent of councils responding to the project survey stated that involving young people was important to their authority and that they had increased the amount of work they had done to involve young people over the past four years. However, less than one in three evaluated the impact of initiatives.
-  Reasons for involving young people included: gaining information on young people's views and improving service delivery; empowering young people and giving them a voice; and giving young people a chance to develop their skills.
-  More than 8 out of 10 councils said that increasing young people's awareness of local government was an important reason for involving young people. Interviews found that officers and members were concerned that young people lacked an understanding of the relevance of local government to their lives. In addition, there was widespread anxiety about the low levels of voting among young people at local elections.
-  Interviewees stated that involving young people in democratic process is a rewarding and positive experience for both young people and local authorities. Public involvement can be empowering, especially for traditionally excluded young people, and can promote feelings of inclusiveness in society.
-  Case studies showed that the successful involvement of young people in a range of democratic processes often requires a different approach to involving other sections of the population but also revealed straightforward ways to avoid the obstacles.

Background

Young people are well aware that decisions made by politicians affect them yet there is much evidence to show that they feel cut off from the political process. One young person in this study commented:

"Tony Blair says 'I will do this and we will make this better' but I haven't seen him come up to us and ask us what we want."

The Quality Protects and Connexions initiatives specifically require involvement of young people. In addition, many councils are committed to including young people in decision-making around other policy priorities such as Best Value, the Community Strategy, Local Strategic Partnerships, local Public Service Agreements, the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and the New Deal for Communities programme.

This study aimed to provide a map of the challenges that local authorities may face when engaging young people in decision-making and suggests solutions to overcome them.

Why involve young people?

The need to engage young people is clear. In the 2001 general election the overall turnout of 59 per cent was the lowest recorded figure since 1918. Voting among young people was lower still. Estimates suggest that turnout fell to approximately 39 per cent among 18- to 24-year-olds (The Electoral Commission, 2001). There is also evidence that young people are not likely to get more interested in voting as they get older (British Social Attitudes 16th Report, 1999).

Local election results make for equally depressing reading. But it is at the local level that issues such as crime, housing and education can feel more real and relevant for young people. One young person included in the research said of local government:

"It affects us more directly, it's where we are".

'Politics' may have negative associations for young people but the research shows that this does not make them apathetic. Common issues of concern include crime, personal safety, education, facilities for young people, the environment and housing. Young people may feel disconnected from political debate and decision-making but they are interested in a wide range of political issues. There is genuine enthusiasm for playing a part in decision-making.

"Politics can be really petty ... but the decisions they make are important for the public." (Participant in 15- to 16-year-olds' focus group)

Government is also clear about the need for local authorities to experiment with new ways of involving the public in service delivery and policy-making. Enhancing dialogue between local authorities and their communities is seen as important in order to develop a new relationship based on mutual understanding and trust.

Meeting this challenge is not easy. Involving young people in decision-making requires different approaches. There is a danger with any consultation or involvement exercise that local authorities opt for those who are easily reached. As a result the needs of some groups, particularly those who are most excluded, can be overlooked. Mainstream involvement and consultation mechanisms may not be enough to reach some groups, including young people.

What are councils currently doing?

A survey of local authorities in England and Wales (carried out by the study in conjunction with the LGA) found a lot of commitment already to involving young people:

- Nine out of ten councils responding stated that involving young people was important to their authority.
- More than seven out of ten were currently working to involve young people.
- Nearly nine out of ten of respondents said that the amount of work they had done to involve young people in decision-making had increased over the past four years.
- More than nine out of ten councils cited gaining information on young people's views and improving service delivery as the most important reasons for involving young people in decision-making.

However, less than one in three local authorities responding to the survey evaluated the impact of initiatives involving young people in decisions.

Involving young people

The research identified four crucial stages in developing initiatives to involve young people:

1. Creating the right environment
2. Planning
3. Doing
4. Follow up

Below are some of the main challenges and suggested solutions at each stage (the full report offers more detail in these areas).

Stage 1: Creating the right environment

Involving young people effectively requires the right structures, systems and resources to be in place in the early stages.

Challenges

- making young people's involvement central;
- getting resources in place;
- developing officers' and members' skills in working with young people;
- working in partnership for young people.

Some solutions

- Identify leading members and officers across the

council who are in a strong position to be champions who will generate wide support for young people's involvement initiatives.

- Involve young people, alongside adults, as equal partners in the authority's existing public involvement activity in the development of Local Strategic Partnerships and in Children and Young people's strategic partnerships.
- One approach to making involvement central to a local authority's activity can be to establish a centrally co-ordinated programme. An example is the Kirklees Involving Young Citizens Equally (IYCE) initiative which was established in 1997 to develop ways in which children and young people could influence the strategic development of local public services. IYCE works through the secondment of permanent members of staff who join the initiative on a part-time basis for up to twelve months. They learn about approaches to involving young people in decision-making and are then supported in applying what they learn to their own department.

Stage 2: Planning

At the planning stages there are a number of factors to consider.

Challenges

- being flexible to young people's needs and agendas;
- choosing the right issue;
- choosing the right method;
- reaching a wide range of young people;
- developing young people's skills.

Some solutions

- Many authorities have established Youth Forums and Councils as a way of sustaining the involvement of young people. Over three-quarters of those responding to the LGA/IPPR survey stated they use this method. The implementation of both long-term and one-off exercises is more likely to meet the needs and interests of different groups of young people.
- The City and County of Swansea demonstrated flexibility to young people's needs in their initial steps to involve young people. The Council first involved young people through a series of focus groups with over 350 people to find out issues of concern. Issues raised in the consultation were expanded on at a youth conference - an effective way of beginning dialogue with young people.
- South Bedfordshire District Council tried to reach a range of young people by using a number of different methods to advertise an involvement exercise in a rural village. This included using leaflets, posters and the local radio and newspapers. They also worked in partnership with

other agencies to spread the word about the event, for example through outreach work carried out by the police, voluntary organisations and the local authority at young people's meeting places such as bus stops. Eighty young people attended the event.

- Peer-based research techniques are a good way of developing young people's skills. In the London Borough of Camden young people were trained in a range of research skills and used them to find out the views of their peers on improvements in a local regeneration area.

Stage 3: Doing

Challenges

- motivating young people to get involved;
- valuing their involvement;
- being clear about how young people will benefit from participating in initiatives.

Some solutions

- One solution is to offer formal accreditation. For example, in Kirklees, the Mayor's Award scheme allows young people and children to gain accreditation for their informal learning in the community. Those young people involved in the planning of Kirklees Children's Service Plan were formally accredited through this scheme.

Stage 4: Follow up

To be effective, councils need to follow through on their commitment to young people by ensuring that involvement exercises have an impact on services and on practice.

Challenges

- making sure there is an impact on decisions;
- giving feedback to young people;
- learning from successes and mistakes.

Some solutions

- Evaluation needs to be planned from the start of a project, and it is important that findings are used to improve future practice. There is currently little activity in this area.
- Long-term projects require ongoing feedback mechanisms to enable the young people involved to get a sense of progress to date and their contribution. Authorities might also consider alerting the wider community to the achievements of young people's involvement activities, for example by using the local press and radio.

The benefits

Interviewees confirmed that involving young people in their democratic processes could be a rewarding and positive experience for young people and councils alike.

"More and more each time something significant happens - a change in policy or a new decision to

make – people are straight away thinking ‘how do we involve young people in this?’ ” (Council officer)

The research highlighted that young people are both willing and able to share their experiences and views on public services as well as on a broad range of other issues. Empowering young people and giving them a voice was regarded by more than eight out of ten local authorities surveyed as an important reason for involving young people.

"We hope to excite them to make a difference to their town. I don't think young people realise that they have the power to change things and make a difference." (Youth councillor, Chesham Youth Council)

Furthermore many respondents valued the opportunity it gave young people to develop skills that can be harnessed in everyday life situations. Young people themselves recognised how this could assist them in the future, for example by equipping them with a range of skills attractive to employers.

Young people who had taken part in involvement initiatives confirmed that public involvement can be an empowering experience, especially for traditionally excluded young people, and can promote feelings of inclusiveness in society. One practitioner gave an example of how young people were involved in designing a logo for a local authority project. This was rejected by the PR department of the authority but the young people refused to back down and succeeded in overturning the council's preferred option. As the practitioner commented: *"By equipping young people with skills they will have the confidence to go to the council and argue their case."*

The case study research also revealed genuine concern among officers and members that young people lacked an understanding of local government and how it is relevant to their lives. In addition there was widespread anxiety about the low levels of voting among young people at local elections. Some officers involved in the research suggested that involvement activities can generate interest in democratic processes. One officer said: *"I know if I succeed if - at the next general election - the youth vote goes up in Kent."* Another officer from Buckinghamshire commented: *"Bucks may in the next 10-20 years have a lot of young councillors because they have already tasted how to influence and take decisions."* While rigorous research is needed on the impact of involvement initiatives on voting or increasing the number of people standing for political office, evidence suggests that deliberative forms of public involvement can begin the process of reconnecting people to political processes.

Conclusion

Providing meaningful opportunities for young people to be involved in shaping local government services and policies will take time, resources and

commitment. Involving young people may mean taking risks and making mistakes is part of the process of getting it right. However, those that have taken the leap to involve young people in their democratic processes in committed and active ways report it to be a rewarding and positive experience for both young people and local authorities.

About the project

The research involved four key stages:

- A literature review and review of qualitative research.
- Six focus groups with young people across different age groups to explore their engagement in politics and decision-making.
- A questionnaire sent to all local authorities in England and Wales in April 2001, measuring activity levels in involving young people (55% of authorities responded). IPPR carried out the survey in partnership with the LGA.
- Case study research in six contrasting local authority areas between May-August 2001, involving semi-structured interviews with local authority officers, elected members and young people. The authorities that took part were South Bedfordshire District Council, Buckinghamshire County Council, London Borough of Camden, City and County of Swansea, Kent County Council and Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council.

How to get further information

The survey findings and a report of the discussion groups are available online at www.ippr.org/public.

The full report, **Up for it: Getting young people involved in local government** by Vicki Combe, is published for the Foundation by the National Youth Agency (ISBN 0 86155 273 3, price £12.95).