

# Influence through participation

A critical review of structures for youth engagement

September 2007



Executive Summary

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## Background

The Centre for Social Action, De Montfort University and The National Youth Agency (NYA) were commissioned by the IDeA and beacon authorities to undertake a critical review of structures used by the beacons to engage young people, and identify key learning for other organisations working with young people.

The aim was to find out what young people and local authority staff considered to be the best examples of youth participation practice in their authority. This could be examples of how young people had been able to bring about changes in policy and practice, and in some cases make a real difference to the lives of other young people in their areas.

The research team, which included young people, met with 8 groups of young people involved in various participation groups; one from each of the beacon authorities. They gave their views on what had worked or not worked for them in taking part in various participation groups, what they felt they had achieved and what impact the work had on them personally. Members of the research team also interviewed a total of 15 adults including managers, youth participation workers and Councillors from the Beacon authorities to get their views on what practices worked best in encouraging youth participation.

## What groups work best in youth participation

- Young people have a variety of interests and starting points from which they might get involved in participation groups so it is best for a local authority to support many different kinds of groups. These can be large elected groups covering the whole authority, local area forums and youth councils, youth conferences, Youth Opportunity Fund (YOF) groups, effective Schools Councils and groups for disabled young people, young carers or care leavers
- In order for these groups to achieve the kind of far reaching changes that young people want, there should be clear links to decision makers including Councillors
- Most young people rated the YOF and YouthBank groups very highly as organisations where they were in charge of the decision-making and could make a big difference to other young people through the grants they made and the projects they supported
- Some youth forums and councils run regular elections to decide which young people will be part of them, while others allow young people to dip in and out according to their interests, or when they have particular issues to bring up. Both of these approaches have advantages and disadvantages. It is important that all kinds of young people feel able to take part in these groups and don't feel put off because the proceedings are too formal, or too few young people know about them. Some young people felt that more needed to be done to improve access to their groups. Youth work staff worked hard to contact young people in a variety of groups and get them interested in taking part, for example using a mobile bus and detached work to reach young people in outlying areas

## What young people have been achieving

Young people said that they had accomplished many different things within their groups. These included

- helping recruit staff to various departments in the local authority
- changing policy and practice as it affects groups such as looked after young people
- challenging agency practices such as Police Dispersal Orders
- contributing to official plans of various kinds, for example Children and Young People's Strategic Plans
- campaigning and lobbying on a wide range of issues such as getting reductions on bus fares, or new play facilities locally
- helping to counter misleading adult perceptions of young people
- grant giving as part of YOF or YouthBank groups

## What young people get out of participation

The most frequently mentioned benefits that young people identified for themselves are

- increased confidence
- communication skills
- listening skills
- teamwork
- leadership and groupwork skills
- public speaking
- meeting and talking to new people
- planning
- negotiating
- running events
- dealing with the media

They also enjoyed and benefited from meeting and working with young people from different backgrounds to their own.

## What young people say works best to achieve youth participation

- Young people setting the agenda
- Young people being listened to and heard
- Having seats/places at adult meetings
- Organisations being flexible, well organised and well resourced
- Having a good mix of people and being open to all
- It being fun and interesting

In summary, young people want structures for youth engagement to be truly youth led with young people participating as of right alongside adults, setting the agenda and being treated seriously.

## What young people said about working with Elected Members

The majority of young people indicated they felt that Councillors were listening to them more, but not all felt that Councillors were then acting on what they heard. Some young people felt that change would happen eventually but it might take a long time, while other young people were impatient for their local authorities to start to involve young people much more and for the changes they wanted to happen at a faster rate.

## Recommendations to improve youth participation practice

Based on findings from young people and adults involved in the critical review, the key recommendations are:

- Regular youth conferences so that young people who don't belong to participation groups can make their views known to decision-makers
- Regular meetings at least monthly of all local and authority wide participation groups
- Clear lines of communication to Councillors so young people can lobby and make their views known
- A budget for publicity to ensure all young people in the authority know what groups exist, how to contact them and how to join them
- Ensure that groups who face particular barriers to participation such as those excluded from school, those leaving care, disabled young people and young offenders are given a chance to get involved
- Provide opportunities for young people to join local groups and then move on to other more centrally based ones, giving other young people a chance to take their place, so many rather than a few young people get the benefits of getting involved in groups of this kind
- Ensure there are sufficient youth workers to support all the participation groups
- Ensure there is dedicated training for young people and adults regarding working with each other, decision making and the processes of local government
- Ensure that young people can decide on their own priority issues to take action on and not be expected to spend too much time on other people's agendas
- Ensure that young people and Councillors have discussed and are in agreement concerning the amount of power and influence young people can expect to have within their groups whether local or authority wide.
- Ensure that all Councillors and group members have a chance to meet regularly with each other, not just young people's champions and committee members, for example, via joint training courses, shadowing of Councillors and youth conferences
- Ensure a greater accountability of Councillors to young people concerning the outcome of issues they raise
- Provide more opportunities for young people to influence top level decision making