

Influence through participation

A critical review of structures for youth engagement

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Researched by a partnership of



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Executive Summary



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

Setting the scene

In June 2007, the Centre for Social Action and The National Youth Agency (NYA) were commissioned by the IDeA and beacon authorities to review the positive youth engagement structures of the local authorities who received beacon status with the aim of enabling them to further develop and share good practice with each other and more widely. The Centre staff worked in partnership with the NYA, particularly with their trainers, who are themselves young people, to carry out the review in all eight beacon authorities.

The purpose was to critically review current practices and models of positive youth engagement, to identify useful learning about the use of existing structures in the context of frameworks such as the Hear by Right standards and to identify what has changed as a result of young people being listened to within these structures.

This review has drawn out that there is much to celebrate in the work of young people who are taking their place at the centre of local democracy and ensuring that their voices are being heard and that much decision-making that affects them is informed by their opinions, wishes and aspirations.

Taking part in the various assemblies, councils and forums which have been set up can be life changing for these young people, helping to equip them with a range of skills, extending their horizons and releasing their potential. Some young people have contributed to strategic planning within their authorities, been involved in grant giving that may have transformed a small community, or won local travel concessions through hard persevering lobbying which has not only benefited their own age group but also the young people coming after them.

The authorities in this review were awarded beacon status because of the work they had done in youth participation. Since achieving beacon status, there continues to be an increasing awareness within the authorities of potential outcomes of young people's active engagement and what young people can achieve through their participation and these developments are tracked in the review using the voices of young people as the measure of the achievements.

The policy context

Children and young people's participation has risen near the top of the agenda for statutory and third sector organisations working with or for young people in England (and the UK) in recent years, driven by a wealth of policy drivers and cross-sector initiatives. The participation agenda is underpinned by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by the government in 1991. The Article states that children and young people have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them.

The Children Act 2004 which provides the legal underpinning for the Every Child Matters: Change for Children programme, also acted as the main legislative driver of young people's participation. It established a new role of Children's Commissioner for England, whose duties included looking at how bodies including Government, the public and private sectors, listen to children and young people. The statutory guidance on children's trusts states that "the voice of children, young people and their families should be heard at all levels in order to inform local design and delivery of the arrangements"

Legislation covering young people's participation has been introduced across a wide range of sectors. For example, Local Education Authorities must refer to guidance on pupil consultation, and Ofsted must take pupils' views into account during school inspections. Courts should ensure they have regard to the thoughts and wishes of children when making decisions about them.

There is legislation that impacts on health services, children at risk, children in care, young offenders and more. The general duties on Local Government around young people's participation include consulting young people on the Children and Young People's Plans, the provision of 'positive activities', and strategies such as the Homelessness Strategy or Crime and Disorder Strategy.

Most recently, the government's "Aiming high: ten year strategy for young people" devotes one section to 'empowerment', including the extension of the Youth Opportunity and Capital Funds, the intention of giving young people influence over 25% of spending on youth activities by 2018, a Youth Leadership Fund, an expectation that local authorities will adopt good practice in engaging young people, and investing in training and support to champion the views and needs of the most disadvantaged young people.



2006-2007
Positive Youth Engagement
(in the Community and
Democratic Process)



Models of involvement and structures



The Beacon councils have developed a range of different structures to facilitate youth participation. All have evolved in accordance with local preferences and practices and have support from young people to varying degrees; they have produced examples of practice which young people have valued as ways of making a difference in their local communities and authority.

Key findings on young people's relationships with structures

- **Young people's needs are best met by the existence of a wide range of different kinds of structures and different ways for young people to be involved in them at both the local and the authority wide level.** However, there needs to be clear links between them and opportunities to present their views and different insights. YOF groups, area forums and councils, authority wide political bodies, consultation groups and status forums are all likely to meet the needs of different young people. An annual youth showcase event which can put on display all the youth groups around both locally and centrally may be valuable publicity. Authorities that are strong in one area and less developed in the others are currently looking at plans to strengthen the missing links – these mostly involve creating more viable local youth councils, or youth forums.
- **Structures at both the local and council wide level need to have some explicit political engagement through which young people can work to achieve the changes they desire.** Young people in two authorities where this link was diffuse or unclear expressed little confidence that their voices were being heard and acted upon by Councillors, and in another where local structures did not particularly accommodate political engagement this was felt to be a development need.
- **Young people's opinions vary as to whether they feel particular structures are effective in achieving the political outcomes they wish to see.** This can lead to young people within the same group rating the same structure they belong to at different levels in the hierarchy of participation.
- **A particular project or form of practice which has a clear outcome would sometimes be rated more highly by young people than involvement in a participative structure.** In some authorities, young people who had organised their own youth conference rated this higher as a participative process than taking part in an area forum.
- **Forums and panels connected with grant giving such as the Youth Opportunities Fund (YOF) and YouthBank attract the most unambiguous support from young people.** This arises from the clear youth led context in which they operate, the diverse membership of panels, the real responsibility given to young people and their ability to make a clear difference to a local situation without having to wait for adults to follow lengthy policies and procedures.
- **The UK Youth Parliament as a structure has attracted the most diverse response of any youth engagement structure.** Some young people rate it quite highly while others, including local authority officers, regarded it as tokenistic. It is looked upon most favourably in authorities which do not have existing county wide representative structures, where it supplies a degree of political engagement which would otherwise be missing.
- **The degree to which young people are genuinely able to operate in structures which are truly youth led and participative varies across authorities.** In one authority young people told researchers that a number of the structures they belonged to were affected by overly intrusive adults.

"I would like a young people's committee discussing problems with the area you live in and how it can be improved." Young person
"I would like more access to 'real council' for young people and more help getting into the democratic process" Young person

"The Regional Assembly, this represents young people's voices 'theoretically' but you still get 206 page documents to read at short notice. In the UK Youth Parliament, young people need more say, in our group they are dictated to by adults. In the Youth Fund, you find that adults are too much in control, the boards are run by adults". Young Person

- **In some areas relatively small numbers of young people belong to several different participation groups or organisations.** Belonging to more than one group was quite common and in one authority a young person represented 7 different organisations and another member of the group belonged to 5. They told of a tendency among youth workers to encourage them to join other groups.
- **Youth workers need to ensure they keep looking for different groups of young people to be involved in participation work, particularly from seldom heard groups, and not rely too much on the same people.** This issue had been recognised and was starting to be discussed in at least two authorities.

"I get emails demanding I go to everything." **Young person**

"I have become involved in a lot more youth groups via the original ones, your association with central youth workers means that you usually get invited to all the things they chair and organise." **Young person**

"With regard to the over involvement of young people, the key is about networking and not being lazy. There has been a culture of using the same people which will take time to change. I have only been here for 3 months but we are starting to look at this. Some young people find it difficult not to be picked, so it's around supporting young people to understand this and supporting the youth worker to look further." **Participation worker**

Structures for participation



When deciding what structure to use to enable young people's participation, it is important to understand what works in the local context and why, and consider issues such as what is more likely to attract and support young people as part of their involvement.

Young people can be engaged in different levels of structures including authority-wide or local area groups and via different processes including elected and non-elected processes. Whilst it is not essential to have authority-wide structures in place to enable participation to happen, understanding how this type of structure works provides the context in which local structures may be used.

Whatever approach is adopted to structures for participation, authorities need to consider the accessibility of their local groups first as this is where young people are likely to make their first contact with workers and structures.

Authority wide structures

Elected Authority wide structures

In these types of structures young people from a wide variety of groups are invited by youth workers to compile their own manifesto and stand for election. Ballot papers are distributed widely and schools and youth centres are the venues for young people to vote on the designated election day.

In most cases election procedures are identical to those of general and local elections with the same ballot boxes and local authority staff organising the count. There may also be an Election Night when the results are announced by the Returning Officer. Members of these bodies expect to elect their own officers, have regular contact with adult Councillors and be invited to attend meetings and make presentations to them.

Examples of these groups include Derwentside's Youth Forum, the West Sussex Youth Cabinet and Lewisham's Young Mayor and Young Advisers Panel.

Where young people are formally elected to a Forum or cabinet issues, such as how those elected are representative of the local youth population, the training and support they need and the extent to which the election processes attract or deter young people should be considered and measures taken to ensure the widest possible outreach.

The young people participating in the review did not make any particular comment about voting procedures either in support or as criticism. However, the issue of elections can raise some strong feelings in local authority officers.

Those practitioners in favour of voting systems pointed to the increased element of democracy they could achieve; for example, in one case 46% of the young people eligible to vote did so, a far greater mandate than local Councillors may achieve. Election nights were exciting when procedures exactly followed those of national parliamentary elections. It was also felt that Councillors took these bodies seriously and recognised their legitimacy.

With regard to the various structures adopted by the beacons, there appear to be no clear differential outcomes between elected or non-elected structures and this decision is likely to depend on the personal preferences of both staff and young people. Having a range of opportunities is most beneficial.

Elected structures provide a clear engagement pattern but it is difficult to ensure adequate diversity amongst young people taking part. They have the benefit of legitimacy in status and assumption of responsibility to feed back to a constituency, but the more formal processes which are likely to be present may be a deterrent to some young people. A high investment in a centrally-based body as well may mask less development at the local level.

Keeping the structure flexible so it does not put too much pressure on young people was advocated.

Identifying and getting young people involved

Ensuring a diverse range of young people are elected to various representative bodies exercises both young people and local authority staff.

"The concept of having young people elected puts more barriers in place than it opens up. It creates an elitist approach with no scope for inclusion. There is no set group of young people who can represent young people on all issues, so one should not get locked into a rigid structure. Young people move us on in our thinking about this. The UKYP doesn't work - the whole concept of election and taking on a role hasn't worked. Young people as individuals get a lot out of it, but at the local level it has created a hierarchy which is not appreciated. The distinction between local and national drives wedges and there can be a fall out from that." **Local authority officer**

"A fluid structure works best; you need to recognise who the young people are. It works well so that young people can engage or not engage and are not expected to turn out to every meeting. They can dip in or dip out and with outreach to other groups it keeps the doors open." **Local authority officer**

Young people felt it was a privilege to take part in the various youth councils, forums and youth cabinet run by the beacon authorities, but some said that they did not think their group was as fully representative of the youth population in their area as it should have been, so that a wide range of young people had the same opportunities as they did.

Most directly elected bodies recruited through schools, although participation workers encourage other young people in youth centres and other places to participate. One of the focus groups involved in this type of structure felt they needed to try to make their voting base more representative.

Local authority staff strive to encourage diversity but have to strike a balance between the preferences of young people and the inherent formality of the structures to which some young people adapt better than others.

In Derwentside the workers have used different methods to try and reach some of the young people from seldom heard groups. Like the others they go to schools and youth centres to recruit young people but they also have a youth bus that tours disadvantaged areas where staff do some detached work and publicise the forum to young people. They have also made contact with the Impact Group of young people aged 10–11 who have been excluded from school. There are three young disabled people as members. They acknowledge that it can be hard to keep the more disadvantaged group members but some are very keen and able. They have a link with a special school and while the young people did not feel able to be part of the formal structure they do feed their issues to staff to be passed on and they do get feedback from the forum. Staff keep a record of the unsuccessful candidates for election so they have a pool of people to draw on to replace any who drop out.

Training and development for young people

Young people elected to these structures usually receive formal training in their new roles and responsibilities.

To try and minimise future dropout, the Lewisham Young Mayor's voting process offers prospective candidates a training weekend prior to their election where they can get a clear idea of what will be involved if they are elected.

Other authorities have been able to develop young people's skills so they can deliver this training to their peers.

Non elected authority wide bodies

These bodies have similar objectives as the elected structures described earlier, namely, providing a setting whereby young people from all parts of the authority can meet together, discuss issues and engage politically with Councillors, but have decided that a formal elected process for all their members does not meet their needs. In the beacon authorities there were two models by which this can happen; young people being nominated from area based youth councils, or nominations from a range of different youth groups and school councils in some cases. The Lancashire Youth Council and the Gateshead Youth Assembly are examples of these bodies.

"YOT groups/Black and Minority Ethnic/traveller groups are really disengaged and didn't feel involved. I found it surprising, it seems to depend where you are in the county."

Young person

"There are special interest groups but their issues are not necessarily being passed on and acted on."

"Having a younger forum allows younger young people to have a say but they should get more disabled people involved."

Young person

"In our first year we recruited from schools but it didn't work and we got the wrong people, next we did hold some places for groups e.g. special needs, we did some networking and got adults supporting them. Subsequently however, young people made it a first past the post system so these elements were lost ... we did have some travellers elected but they didn't find the process worked for them. We did outreach to a special school and have a person elected onto the cabinet. We have made huge progress but have to keep banging on about migrant communities."

Participation worker, West Sussex

"We are trying to reach excluded from school young people so we can be open to Pupil Referral Units. We go to local shopping centres, youth clubs, leisure centres, local college and we have a good mix. We have 2–3 disabled young people on the advisers' groups".

Participation worker, Lewisham

"We take them away for a day and a half, which is really testing out whether they want to do it. They get input from previous campaigners, the adult elected mayor and a senior officer who tells them what will be expected of them. They will meet youth workers and the team who support them and offer advice. Not many drop out later."

Participation worker, Lewisham

"We hold a full training day once a year. This is about Chairs' and members' decision making. The first time we used an external person, but we have now developed a piece of training. Those previously elected will now deliver this training".

Participation worker, Derwentside

"Two weeks after the election we have a weekend residential. This is facilitated by adult experts alongside older young people as peer trainers. Young people might get coaching on particular skills they might need. This includes Youth Cabinet, Youth Council, YOF training, county wide group training."

Participation worker, West Sussex

"Staff get nominations from secondary schools, area forums special schools, other organisations and individual members.... they meet in the council chamber and are quite formal with the corresponding roles. There is no set number of places... if they are keen they can turn up, we accept all comers and we work hard with other groups including representatives from special schools and different sexualities. We have achieved a better gender balance, with more girls in evidence. There are only a few who are not UK based. In our first year of the Assembly we contacted people more formally, we are now more informal."

Local authority officer, Gateshead

Non elected structures may allow more diverse membership than structures where young people are elected; but this informality may create difficulties in retaining membership and political partnership with Councillors needs to be built in at both local and council wide levels to ensure that young people can see valid outcomes.

Identifying and getting young people involved

This more open structure faces similar issues to the elected bodies in trying to recruit young people from a range of backgrounds and retain them, as they do not necessarily have the public endorsement of coming from a particular group.

The Lancashire Youth Council is the coming together of the representatives from 12 District Youth Councils across the authority to look at issues. The LYC Executive is nominated from each group. They have a planning meeting at County Hall once a month. All services are aware of it, recognise it and value it as it has evolved over 7/8 years. The earlier version was rather regimented whereby young people were elected to serve, but it has now evolved into a more informal state where young people find their niche within it. The Participation and Inclusion Workers have mechanisms to reach the hard to reach.

"We have a training weekend for the Youth Assembly. Half a dozen youth workers and half a dozen Executive Members deliver a 17 core skills course – they are rewriting it. We used to elect a new Executive at once, but now the old Executive keep going for a few months while the new young people find their feet."

Local authority officer, Gateshead

"There is training available that varies according to need and will include team working and group working, where young people are taking on a role such as chair."

Local authority officer, Lancashire

Training and development for young people

Training was also seen as important for this group of young people by these authorities.

Authority wide specialist forums/groups

Young people may also have the chance to participate in forums where they share the same characteristics as other young people. In the beacon authorities, there were a range of such groups including Leaving Care User Group in Lewisham, Gateshead Black and Minority Ethnic Youth Forum, Travellers' Forum in West Sussex, The Jigsaw group for gay, lesbian and transgender young people and We R Able 2 for young people with learning difficulties in the Wirral.

One authority has recruited young people to two particular groups who have a remit to make contact with young people throughout the local authority area in a variety of outreach ways. They are not formally elected but are interested in taking part.

In Wakefield, young people belong to the Wakies Shout and Watchdog groups which talk to young people in different areas and get their views on current issues which can then be the basis of future campaigns such as the quality of sex education in schools.

Identifying and getting young people involved

Issues of recruitment for the specialist forums are rather different from the others, as it is a case of ensuring that disabled young people, care leavers and looked after young people etc, from across the authority know about the groups and can be supported to attend meetings and that locations and travel costs do not act as a deterrent. Other groups need to ensure the young people recruited are representative of the general community.

Training and development for young people

It is not known what kind of training is currently provided for these groups. A particularly important issue is how groups such as these who are not formally linked to the political process can ensure their views and experiences are made known to Councillors and service providers. It is important for service user groups to influence the practice of service providers and involving them in conferences and manager and practitioner training events can be a significant means of doing this.

Issue based groups similarly need find ways to make productive links with decision-makers to avoid young people getting disillusioned about the lack of discernable outcomes.

Local area panels and forums

Most authorities have developed representative structures for young people based on local districts or areas. This is especially important in large geographical areas.

Youth Opportunity Fund

The Youth Opportunity Fund (YOF) is a central government initiative distributing money to all local authorities in England. Young people have a central role as decision makers and grant givers. In at least three different beacon authorities young people rated their involvement in YOF at the very highest level regarding the degree to which they felt it was youth led.

“The Youth Fund has opened opportunities to lots of young people who would not previously have been able to afford them.” Young person

West Sussex has put considerable investment into creating 24 very localised YOF forums as a way of increasing young people’s involvement. They have found that this has been the best way to develop the interest and participation of young people and now have a total of 300 young people involved in forums.

With YOF, creating as many different local groups as can be sustained is a good way of involving many local young people who might otherwise miss out. This approach is likely to be particularly important in large shire counties.

Local youth councils

With the local youth council or forum model, some have a formal relationship with an authority wide body in which representatives attend meetings and feed back locally, whilst others are free standing bodies that are designed to give young people a chance to discuss issues in their local areas. Within the same body, some members may be elected and others nominated.

The evidence from the review indicated that in some authorities there were difficulties in how youth councils related to local adult area forums and engaged with the political process. Using a matrix as an analytical tool reveals how local activity is connected to more formal and wider structures, through arrangements such as networks, e-communication or occasional larger events. Whilst beyond the scope of the review local authorities should consider how these structures relate to each other.

The participation of children and young people in the work of beacon authorities										
Ladder of participation	Approaches to the participation of children and young people:									
	A. Individual	B. Consultation	C. Local activity	D. Arts	E. New media	F. Networks	G. Advisory groups	H. Large events	I. Parallel structures	J. Committee places
Rungs of participation										
8. Young people initiated, shared decisions with adults										
7. Young people initiated and directed										
6. Adult initiated, shared decisions with young people										
5. Consulted and informed										
4. Assigned but informed										
3. Tokenism										
2. Decoration										
1. Manipulation										

Lancashire has 12 Youth Councils, one for each of their District Councils. Each local Youth Council has 20–30 members and nominates 2–5 Executive Members for the Lancashire Youth Council. Local youth councils meet weekly and young people are involved in a lot of activities. The process is flexible so that if there is a scheduled meeting of the authority wide body anyone who wants to be involved can have the opportunity to take part.

The young people who contributed to the review tended not to rate local youth councils very highly. However, those which had a relationship with existing council-wide structures ranked them higher.

In the majority of cases, authorities were currently reviewing their local area structures. In some cases these had been set up to shadow adult area forums and it was being acknowledged that these did not meet young people's needs. Young people would sometimes be allocated slots in meetings, but it was difficult to ensure that adults at this level were responsive to young people. Sometimes Councillors were engaged, and would meet with them, but not necessarily all. Some young people noted they would like to run youth surgeries alongside Councillors, but there had been no progress on this anywhere as yet.

"Young people having seats on the local management committee, having a 'slot' and being 'allowed' to have our opinion heard."

Young person

Relationships with adult forums may not be on a very equal footing. A young person noted the following as an example of one of their achievements.

One authority was struggling with its area forums which meet three times a year as an open structure for anyone interested to come along to the meetings and raise issues. Although young people meet to pre-plan the forum and many local agencies are contacted, the workers are finding some difficulty in sustaining a consistent membership from young people. Another authority has been required by Ofsted to develop more localised youth-led practice.

Identifying and getting young people involved

Participation workers encourage young people to take part in local youth councils and forums from a wide range of groups with varying success.

"We do have impact – if we want to meet someone we do, if we want something to happen it does."

Young person

One young person praised a youth forum in their area suggesting they do create change. However another young person responded, *"not many people know about it (the forum), there is no set way of getting on it and I only heard about it via my family."*

Training and development for young people

Some authorities provide training to young people who are involved in local youth councils and forums although one relied on the organisations that supported young people to prepare them for their roles and it is unclear how well or consistently this was done. Dedicated training by the supporting youth workers of young people involved in these forums is likely to be the most effective way of building their skills and engagement.

"It is the head's perception and her agenda and you get into trouble if you don't agree."

Young person

"We need honest and effective school councils in every school – not just when Ofsted call."

Young person

School councils

Schools are an important arena for publicising youth participation structures and recruiting young people and school councils often feature as structures at the local level which should encourage youth participation but can be very variable regarding the extent that they are youth led. Young people were well aware of their limitations.

In West Sussex young people have addressed this issue by offering training at head teachers' conferences on the value of school councils and it is reported by participation workers that this initiative has resulted in heads valuing school councils more and promoting junior governors.

Community Cohesion

Young people's participation in youth engagement structures make a contribution to community cohesion. The definition of a cohesive community promoted by the Faiths and Cohesion Unit, part of the Department of Communities and Local Government, is one in which there is

'a common vision and sense of belonging for all, the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated, those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities and strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and neighbourhoods'.

When asked, young people identified that they got to meet young people from diverse backgrounds through their groups. Some young people also mentioned in other activities that they had welcomed the chance to meet other young people from different backgrounds, abilities and cultures.

Ways of engaging with the local communities – young people's comments

- You get to meet people from different family backgrounds and upbringings and find out about different cultures by being involved in different projects. **Lancashire**
- In our group we have young carers, a person with disabilities comes to our meetings and gets involved. I have met a lot of people from different backgrounds. **West Sussex**
- I am involved in the youth parliament- there are more people from different backgrounds, more so than in the adult parliament. **Wakefield**
- We meet disabled people and people from different backgrounds on the Young People's Forum. **Derwentside**
- Both the groups I go to have lots of people from different backgrounds. **Gateshead**
- There is a diverse group in the youth parliament. **Wirral**
- Youth parliament is very diverse, disabled people, travellers, young carers, and different cultures. **South Norfolk**

Some young people didn't feel that the groups or structures they were part of were diverse enough, saying that it was often the same young people taking part – often the more academically able. They wanted to do something about this, and considered ways to increase the range of young people who would take part. They pointed out the need for structures to be attractive to diverse groups of young people.

"On County YOF we probably don't stress as much as we could but everyone does come from different backgrounds. We are improving but we could do more. People need to want to do it, not be wanted." **Young person**

"There is a wider mix of people in the authority and the elected group are diverse, but not that many are involved from really minority groups, for example, there are no deaf or blind people, not many from Asian backgrounds, foster care, teen pregnancy. Some have been in the past but not at the moment." **Young person**



Sustainability



The issue of sustainability is an important one for all the beacon authorities and there were varying accounts of how this had been achieved.

Where council funding is the major important financial contribution, a key issue is the degree to which Councillors can see the benefits and achievements of young people within the various participation structures; and are therefore prepared to maintain the funding to this strand of work despite the pressures of other issues and groups.

Lancashire, Gateshead and Lewisham noted that they have been able to have the youth participation work mainstreamed within their authorities so that the funding for young people and the youth participation posts was maintained year on year and had good backing from their Councillors. Their authority wide youth participation structures are well publicised and have a close relationship with Councillors.

Two key issues which can affect sustainability, despite close relationships with Councillors, are local government reorganisation and funding cuts.

In Derwentside, the recent decision to create Durham as a unitary authority means that a whole range of future funding decisions affecting the authority, including youth participation work, can not be predicted at this stage. In these circumstances young people should have the chance to make their views known alongside adults in the consultation process.

In West Sussex, the authority is undertaking a fundamental service review to make substantial savings over two years. However, the Youth Cabinet expects to supplement its small budget through the efforts of the young people themselves, who have been successful in leveraging in money from elsewhere.

This approach in West Sussex could be a useful policy for all authorities to follow so that they are not over reliant on local authority sources of funding in case of unexpected developments.

Arenas for effecting change

There are a variety of settings or arenas in which young people can contribute to making change happen including the local authority cabinet, local authority departments, organisations such as the police, Primary Care Trusts, bus companies and their local communities.

Both young people and adult workers highlighted examples of practice which for them showed ways in which young people had been able to make a difference. This good practice occurs across a range of strategic levels within local authorities and in their local communities, through participation in a variety of structures and taking action on a range of issues.

It was not possible to follow up these examples of practice in terms of long-term outcomes within the local authorities, but even at face value it is clear that young people have been able to exert positive influence on a wide range of fronts.

These changes have been grouped together under the headings of – change for organisations, change for individual young people and, by far the largest section, change for wider groups of young people. There were many examples of changes which affect wider groups of young people, illustrating how the work of relatively few young people can have effects on the whole age group.

Change for organisations

Participation in departmental decision making

The major area of departmental decision making that young people are involved in is the selection of staff. In recent years, young people have been asked to be part of recruitment processes in local authority departments. A number of young people mentioned having been part of such procedures and cited them as an example of how they had made a difference.

Young people who are part of representative structures are likely to be asked to do this, particularly if they represent specialist groups. Posts within the Youth Service and Connexions where managers and practitioners are working with young people are most likely to involve young people on selection. It was much less usual for other departments to involve young people, so that authorities where young people are involved in, for example, social services department recruitment, are taking a much broader approach to youth engagement than is common.

In South Norfolk, young people have been involved as equal players in recruitment and selection which has involved a change in power dynamics. The first post in which young people were involved in this way was the Chief Executive of Connexions for Norfolk. It was initially a struggle to have young people involved, but now if young people are not involved in recruitment and selection there are protests.

In Wirral, young people interview staff in the youth service and 80% of social care staff. They are involved in person specifications and job descriptions and have also created a DVD 'My ideal social worker'.

In one case, young people from a local authority structure were asked to be part of the recruitment process in an outside agency.

Strategic Planning

Local authorities have been required to create a variety of planning documents in relation to children and young people and involve young people in drawing them up. Young people have been able to influence such documents as a result of their involvements in representative groups of various kinds. For example, young people in Wirral contributed to the integrated youth support strategy and young people in Wakefield made changes to the Young People's Service Plan in their authority.



"A housing company involved young people from the Youth Assembly right from the start in interviewing staff. They got their advice on adverts and job descriptions and they pay young people if they have to be consulted. It produced a major change in this organisation. It arose from criticism of their work done in the community which highlighted the need to relate better to young people."

Local authority officer, Gateshead

"Our own youth strategy was developed by the Young People's Forum. They used the bus to get out and talk to young people and 3,000 took part. They designed the participation strategy and developed a CD rom with pdf clips on the page explaining why young people should be involved and included top tips on overcoming barriers. This was designed and made by young people."

Local authority officer, Derwentside

"Young people have influenced things like the regeneration strategy and ensured that the strategy was more focused on the needs of young people. On the Children and Young People's Plan, they were keen that leisure and fun should be part of it and made it a more rounded document."

Local authority officer, Derwentside

"The council decided to put into effect a model of youth shelters and discussed the idea with young people. They were opposed and lobbied against it and succeeded in getting a change in policy."

Local authority officer, Gateshead

Young people in West Sussex designed the young people's version of the 'Your partnership, our plan' magazine and thus allowed young people to understand the 5 Every Child Matters outcomes a lot more.

In Gateshead, the Youth Assembly and Children's Rights and the NCH Children's Say project did a large consultation with young people about the Children and Young People's Plan. They used a simple paper chain for young people to record their views and got 19, 500 responses. The NCH Children's Say project was instrumental in making the paper chain more accessible to younger children, taking it to voluntary groups, schools etc. The paper chains were displayed in council offices and photographed for media release. The council wanted to know young people's views on what would make a good Gateshead and young people opted for 'Places to Go and Parks' which is now the No. 1 priority within the Children and Young People's Plan.

This influence of young people included them challenging adult notions of what young people want.

Changes for individual young people

Young people were able to point to many ways they themselves had benefited as a result of being part of active engagement structures of various kinds. The most frequently mentioned benefits identified by all the young people were increased confidence, communication skills, listening, teamwork, leadership and group work skills, public speaking, meeting and talking to new people, planning, negotiating, running events and dealing with the media.

As well as these very personal gains young people also mentioned becoming more open minded and developing their awareness of the needs of different groups and their issues, having a greater knowledge and understanding of services available and how local democracy and citizenship work. Many also had appreciated being a voice for young people, being able to influence change and being decision makers.

Local authority staff were able to point to changes in individuals known to them.

"They like to meet more young people and we find there is a big change in their confidence while working in the Forum, it is better than a school council. One young lad, in 5 years' time he aims to be a politician. He is very confident, has definitely come on, his speech has improved and his parents have praised the effect on him. They gain skills so they are able to give a presentation. The little ones have more ideas and more communication and team work skills."

Local authority worker, Derwentside

"Our Vice-Chair – his mum said he wouldn't ever speak, now he does presentations in front of 200 people. Another young woman had a lack of confidence but blossomed as chair of the conference on Women and Power. Young people who are difficult to work with and excluded from school come to us, go to conferences and their teachers are really surprised."

Participation worker, Gateshead

What young people say they gained from involvement in youth engagement structures

- Better working in a group
- More knowledge on what's happening in my local area
- Knowing that I can have a say for young people
- Make new friends

- young people given something to do instead of being on the streets
- a lot more young people's voices being heard
- promoting projects
- many opportunities
- speaking to councillors made me feel like I was cared about
- more activities for young people
- Chance to socialise
- chance to help others
- People realising that not all young people are naughty
- Integrated youth support strategy
- Confidence
- Communication skills
- Help and advice where needed
- Made friends

- A place at uni
- opportunity to have a say
- team work skills
- organisation skills
- grants/funding
- communication skills
- understanding of language
- qualifications through courses
- understanding citizenship
- methods of working
- confidence
- further education
- an understanding/awareness of different groups/forums
- promoting the voice of young people
- promoting positive images
- enjoyment

- More opportunities
- Meet new people
- More confidence
- New contacts
- Found an interest in UKYP/politics

"There were two young people, who had been bullied and were quiet when we first met, they now acknowledge they have grown a lot. One is now designing websites while the other is making films. One is an Eco-Schools Champion – she organised a national environmental conference, and is highly involved. She was elected to the World Health Organisation youth body and is now 1 of 4 delegates for the whole of Europe."

Participation worker, West Sussex

"It is a great experience for them, it builds a notion that you can make a difference, you have rights and responsibilities. You can see them evolving, dealing with Government ministers at a young age, normalising the idea that young people can get involved and make inputs. They are ambitious and have higher aspirations and have credibility and esteem on a personal basis. It's good for the CV of people without a traditional engagement route. The collective perspective will bring in more people, they see the importance, some get involved in public life."

Participation worker, Lewisham

"Four young women from an alternative curriculum group were involved in doing some interviews. One said 'I feel really important' as this was one of the first times she has sat in a room with decision-makers in suits and they have been interested in what she had to say."

Local authority officer, South Norfolk

Change for wider groups of young people

Changing existing organisational policy and practice

In this arena, young people have had the opportunity to address issues which may affect them directly as members of particular groups, residents in local areas, or users of services provided by the local authority. As members of representative bodies they often have greater confidence and influence than many of their peers to take up these issues. Young people gave a number of examples including their impact on bullying policies, service plans and local Young Peoples' Plan.

In Lancashire, there was a growing sense from young people that the ASBO strategy was not being used effectively. Young people in a local District Youth Council were involved in identifying the need to provide a youth shelter on District Council land. Young people were involved in securing funding for this. The police wanted to set up a Dispersal Order which would have kept young people away from the area where the shelter was going to be. Young people ran a campaign to get the Dispersal Order overturned, held public meetings and lobbied at the County Council and District Council level. It was a very proactive process in which young people carried it through and won.

One local authority worker noted how young people's participation had developed over a period of time.

Adults also identified examples where young people had influenced policy and practice in a variety of agencies local

Young people in Norfolk were involved in rewriting Police young person documents under the 'wiseup-wisekids' campaign.

Young people in Lancashire took part in a PCT consultation which produced changes in attitudes in how adults engage with young people in dealing with emergency contraception.

Young people in West Sussex campaigned for the introduction of an Independent Service Assessor who young people could go to if they were dissatisfied with their Mental Health Service. This is now being implemented across the NHS in West Sussex.

In Wakefield, arts were used as a method to engage with young people and a few years ago youth workers did work on young people and mental health which led to a performance in front of the head of PCT and CAMH.

Changing agency practice regarding the experiences of a specific group of young people

Young people who share key experiences and meet together in a special forum, may be able to exert particular influence if their experiences can be relayed directly to service-providers. For example, the inclusion of disabled young people was mentioned by a young person from Wirral and also the work of a group of looked after young people in Lancashire.

"We have the young people's Watchdog group where young people talk to other young people and take their views back. They raised issues of sex education in schools as it depended on teachers or the school what information you got. They did a presentation to school governors and the Local Strategic Partnership which led to money being allocated through the Local Area Agreement. Teams can now go into schools and deliver SRE, now called RSE with more emphasis on relationships. For example you might now get two youth workers and a nurse doing sessions and styles of delivery will change."

Local authority officer, Wakefield

"There has been cultural shift within the County Council over the last 5-6 years. It is now mainstream for young people to be involved in and invited to things."

Participation worker, West Sussex

"There were issues about a school meals leaflet. It was brought along and taken up at a meeting where young people gave their views. It was revised in response and the new leaflet is much better. Young people encouraged the meals people to go out and eat at schools with students."

Participation worker, Gateshead

"Participation has helped to change policies to make things better for other young people in the care system and after care service. We have been able to discuss as a group what affects us and how the policy change would make things better like overnight stays at friends' houses. In the past, police checks had to be made before you could stay over - this has now changed. We have also been able to change the public perception of young people in care by talking at conferences, for example one for Every Child Matters. I also attended the education of looked after children training course and took part in giving my opinions about the way young people should be supported and treated at school. I have also taken part in a video about my experiences in care and at school which has been shown to professionals and will help to promote other young people's needs and change adults' perceptions of young people in care."

Young person, Lancashire

Grant giving – awarding money to youth projects

Young people consistently valued and appreciated their capacity to be involved in grant giving. This could be either as part of the official YOF and YouthBank groups or dispensing the funding provided to their authority wide or local structure.

"We are funding people who would otherwise be unable to take part in activities, like knives for cookery course and guitars for those unable to buy instruments."

Young person, Norfolk

In Lancashire, young people said that they had seen changes in young people's lives since YouthBank appeared. Many areas had no money or activities running for any of the young people. This created a rise in crime but after money appeared, new activities and educational trips were found. Now a certain area has a youth club for girls which never existed before, giving them something to do.

Campaigning and Lobbying

Young people in local and area forums have taken up a number of issues and campaigned on them. Their status makes it likely that they may get an increased audience for these. Young people identified a range of issues on which they had successfully campaigned.

Young people's successful campaigns for change in services

- In Norfolk, they successfully campaigned to remove sun beds from leisure centres
- In Wirral, they introduced healthy eating in schools
- In Gateshead, they changed the school meals menu leaflet
- In Lancashire, they informed young people about AIDS/HIV and campaigned on the environment and alcohol and drug misuse
- In Gateshead, they changed the view of international work by creating a DVD and having an open evening to influence both young people's and adults' opinions of this work
- In West Sussex, young people campaigned on ecoschools and environmental work which allow schools to become more eco-friendly
- In Derwentside, the youth bus goes round schools and targets areas, where crime is higher. It does different activities, sexual health workshops and healthy eating and workers ask young people what they want to do. The youth bus funding came out of the youth forum and is part funded by the council

Workers also recognise the power of young people's campaigning and in one area detached work from a mobile bus helped access seldom heard groups of young people.

"The youth bus is a powerful tool and works in an area over 3-4 months doing outreach. Young people got involved who would not otherwise have done so. In Stanley it reduced crime. Young people who had issues with ASBOs and alcohol produced a video 'Derwentside Wasted'. It was a big achievement as it was a very positive video and it got disseminated widely."

Participation worker, Derwentside

The cost of travel and transport for young people was another issue where a number of people mentioned young people's success in their campaigns and lobbying.

"Free travel for young people." Young person, Lewisham
"Young people have issues about concessionary bus fares as at 16 they have to pay double but may still be in full-time education. Young people set up a meeting with the bus operators. They lobbied the appropriate council person to come and meet them. They did their research and consultation and managed to negotiate a concession. They got a 3 in 1 card which acts as ID, halved the price of travel and gave special offers in shops and leisure centres – 75% off for under 16s."

Participation worker, West Sussex

"The Council did a consultation as part of their initiative Vision in 2030 and young people participated in this. It was agreed that young people will get free transport in 2025/27."

Local authority officer, Gateshead

"We lobbied Mersey Travel to get a leaflet changed which had a picture of a stereotypical teen. We attended a meeting and said what we thought. Successful." **Young person, Wirral**

"Code of conduct for Arriva."

Young person, Wakefield

"A commissioner was put in post after lobbying at the Youth Parliament for a Children's Commissioner for England." **Young person, Gateshead**

"Challenged media perceptions of young people." **Young person, Norfolk**

"Local authorities have begun to change their views on young people." **Young person, Norfolk**

"Slight improvement in adults taking young people seriously." **Young person, Lewisham.**

"Organising Youth Voice conference."

Young person, Wirral

"Youth conference." **Young person, Lancashire**

"Young Mayor's stage at People Day."

Young person, Lewisham

"More opportunities for young people to speak out and express their views, for example the youth conference." **Young person, Lewisham**

"We deliver training courses for School Council. We devised a participation strategy. It was made into a DVD and circulated."

Local authority officer, Derwentside

"Helping youth forums get money."

Young person, Wirral

"Park development, we have helped the next generation, helped the residents, got picture in the paper." **Young people, Wirral**

"Organised development of New College."

Young person, Wakefield

"'Alternative project' creation."

Young person, Wakefield

Lobbying is a form of campaigning and young people as members of representative structures are often in a good position to lobby various agencies outside the council on particular issues.

Working on issues affecting the status and perception of young people generally

Young people across the different authorities had similar issues concerning the way they are portrayed in the media and treated by adults. Some groups have made significant changes in these sectors.

Running young people focused events

Young people identified they were involved in the organisation of a variety of different events. Involvement in these kinds of events enabled young people to achieve quick results with maximum youth control.

Young people seemed to value large scale events where these were participative and recognised their work. Being a beacon was a positive recognition of work that was already going on in the area.

Community-based involvement

As well as taking a lead in lobbying and working on authority wide issues, young people have also had a role in more local areas and communities where they may have worked with a particular school council, or developed a project in one particular community. The following are some examples of this.

Advisory/Information giving and training role

Young people who were known to be actively involved in representative structures are likely to be consulted by their peers and through their developing knowledge and skill are able to work with their peers, for example with training, information or advice. Many of the examples given by young people included supporting and offering information to other young people about participation structures they could be involved in.

Campaigning on local services and local environment

Young people were able to specify various issues which they have followed up at the local level, resulting in improvements in their local area or improved opportunities for participation.

Many young people felt they had made a significant difference by their involvement in local and issue focused projects. These included work on a garden project, disability video and setting up an outreach company reported by young people in the Wirral.

In Wirral, groups of hard to reach young people who were contacted via the outreach team, were in conflict with residents. They were concerned about provision in a local park which was misused with poor facilities. They got engaged with the issue and attended an Area Forum although they had to wait a number of weeks before meeting and they took the issue to the Youth Parliament. A key worker helped to set up a meeting with the Parks and Open Spaces Department. Young people worked with the architect and they changed the face of the park. They were helped to make an application to YOF. There was a successful public consultation by the young people and they did a demonstration to the adult area forum. The existing Youth Forum was a way by which they could contact the political structures. The group have now set up a 'Friends of the Park' group consisting of young people and residents to oversee its continued safety and development.

Other areas of change

Young people's active engagement in participation structures results in a number of other changes as well, for example working with national representative bodies, international work and taking part in consultations.

One youth council in Lancashire specialised in responding to national consultation opportunities from a range of agencies such as the Minister of Sport, a Youth Arts audit, a countryside consultation and the national bullying strategy.

"Changed UKYP manifesto."

Young person, Wakefield

"Young people have had opportunities to be European Youth Ambassadors."

Young person, West Sussex

What helps participation structures work?



This review of current practices and models of positive youth engagement within the beacon authorities has rightly been informed by the perceptions and understanding of young people and other stakeholders in each of the eight beacons. In order to use the findings to critically examine the beacon's overall use of engagement structures, their impact, and inform further development, the researchers have reviewed the feedback from these stakeholders in the context of a commonly used framework of organisational development.

The Hear by Right standards are a recognised framework to map and plan young people's participation in organisations and have been adopted by a large number of local authorities, children's trust arrangements and voluntary organisations. The standards are based on an established model for organisation change (Peters and Waterman). The Hear by Right standards give guidelines on what constitutes genuine youth participation at emerging, established and advanced levels.

The Seven standards are:

Shared values – commitment to participation has to be demonstrated across an organisation.

Strategy – young people need to be involved in the development of a strategy of participation which needs to be specific about the resources of time, money and people required to sustain it.

Structures – these need to be accessible, flexible, open and explicit about the extent of power sharing between adults and young people.

Systems – systems are needed to support and sustain activity and record outcomes.

Staff – having dedicated staff to implement the active involvement strategy is vital, combining direct work skills with children and young people with strategic impact.

Skills and knowledge – this requires action to build the skills, knowledge, confidence and capacity of children and also training and support for adults.

Style of leadership – this requires changes in an organisation's culture and requires leadership with courage and clout among staff, Councillors, trustees and children and young people themselves.

The beacon authorities are not required to use the Hear by Right framework (although a number of them do), nor were they assessed against them during the assessment process for beacon status. The framework has been used here as a means of providing a widely recognised set of standards based on an established model for organisational change, through which to interpret stakeholders' impressions of how participation is working in their authorities, and to inform the recommendations in 'Beyond structures – shaping the future' for local authorities.

Young people's views of what makes participation work

Young people clearly set out their own views on the criteria which they felt helped to make all structures work and contributed to their active participation, many of which clearly relate to the standards of shared values, structures, systems, staff, skills and knowledge and style of leadership with the Hear by Right standards.

What's important to young people....

- Young people setting the agenda
- Young people being listened to and heard
- Working together
- Having an impact
- Having a local focus
- Having seats/places at adult meetings
- Showing diversity
- Organisations being flexible, well organised and well resourced
- Being open to all
- Having a good mix of people
- Providing payment
- It being fun and interesting

What makes participation work

West Sussex:

- both sides are open to having criticisms and talking things out
- fun outlook
- communication
- lots of young people from various backgrounds and points of view
- cooperation
- listening to what people have to say

Wakefield:

- Free food
- Interesting to young people
- Engagement and fulfilment
- Fun
- Entertaining

Derwentside:

- Fun and interesting
- Enthusiasm
- To get more voices from young people to make sure they are heard

Gateshead:

- Communication
- Teamwork
- When young people are enjoying themselves
- Decision making
- Posters and websites
- Listening
- Working together
- Sharing your ideas

Lewisham:

- Teamwork
- Publication – when and where is it going on
- Communication skills
- Everyone needs to participate
- Listen to one another
- Good cooperation
- Money – reward
- You need to get something back for it

Wirral:

- Fun
- Everyone gets involved
- Voices get heard
- Everyone is included
- Treat people equally
- People learn

Norfolk:

- Taking part
- Getting involved
- Having your say
- Going along to things
- Fun for young people

Lancashire

- Something you are interested in
- Unstructured (not too formal)
- Snacks
- Enjoyable

Working directly with officers and Elected Members

The quality and consistency of the political support available to young people is central in achieving the highest levels of the Hear by Right standards.

Not all authorities had structures which entailed very regular contact between young people and Councillors but where there were, local authority staff often reported good relations between them.

In structures where young people were engaged in a direct relationship with Elected Members, the attitudes of Councillors towards them and their responsiveness to the issues the young people wished to raise was a key factor in ensuring their continued enthusiasm and willingness to take part.

Focus groups with young people found that all but two groups agreed that Councillors were listening to what they said. They were divided however in their response as to whether Councillors then acted on what they heard.

Among the young people involved there were two clear reactions to their current experiences of working with Councillors. One response was essentially pragmatic. It recognised that considerable strides had been made in a short time, but that youth participation was a new experience for many Councillors who had not previously had to consider young people's views and the full implications of this change would take time to be realised. They also understood, if not approved, of the fact that local government processes can take a considerable time. These young people essentially accepted that there still might be 'emerging' levels of participation practice within local authorities and progress to more advanced levels might take time.

The second reaction shows some degree of frustration on the part of young people who were taking their responsibilities very seriously and wanted to make changes quickly. They felt that to some extent Councillors were listening more, but being selective in their responses and sometimes taking credit for young people's ideas. They challenged whether the amount of time some processes took were really necessary. Numerous examples were given of both feeling that things were not acted on and of things taking such a long time for decisions to be made, that in their opinion it amounted to the same thing.

"A key element is that political support is absolutely crucial"

Local authority officer, Gateshead

"The Overview and Scrutiny committee have regular contact with young people. The Champion for young people is the youngest County Councillor. There is a relatively equal balance now between councillors and young people in terms of young people being consulted on issues and being able to take up points. Young people and elected members have learnt a way of engaging that says this is real – you have to make choices on contentious issues."

Local authority officer, Lancashire

"Young people get invited into Scrutiny and if there is something on the agenda, they can give 15 minutes to young people who talk informally. We have some social events such as a meal with councillors which is a team building event where young people talked about the barriers to participation. Some councillors are very forward thinking. The link for young people is mainly with the elected member who has the Safety Portfolio – she is very approachable and comes to Forum meetings. It is about 50:50 now with regard to issues going up and coming down."

Local authority officer, Derwentside

"We have a good relationship with councillors, they do value us and we are now 6 years down the line. They are proud of the youth council, they invite young people to take part and hold democracy dinners where councillors sit down with young people and debate issues." **Participation worker, West Sussex**

"They do act on issues but not straight away, it takes a long time and a lot of campaigning." **Young Person**

"In general the local authority is supportive; we have 2 Chief Executives and the council leader behind us even if older members are tokenistic. The fact the youth council exists and is funded is an achievement." **Young Person**

"Things take time to achieve, it's so hard for young people to have patience to wait for impact, they need feedback." **Young Person**

These young people wanted their authorities to be operating at the advanced levels of youth participation as set out in Hear by Right as soon as possible. Involving young people in local government can clearly cause tensions in terms of the slow pace of existing processes set against young people's desire for quick results, particularly when young people's engagement might only be for 6–12 months. Young people shared their views on a number of situations where they had experienced this tension.

In one case young people spoke of a more extreme reaction from Councillors.

While adult workers generally pointed to good productive relations between young people and Councillors, they acknowledged that in some cases there were small numbers of Councillors who had not yet fully embraced the spirit of youth participation.

Areas for improvement in how Elected Members and young people work together

Such situations would seem to point to a number of underlying issues which may need attention in some authorities. The quality of engagement between young people and Councillors is a key factor but the expectations that both have of each other also influences their reactions. The following examples illustrate the need for attention to the Shared Values and Structures aspects of the Hear by Right Standards to ensure that relationships on both sides can reach the highest standards.

- Young people assuming they may have a degree of power and influence within their structures, but finding the equivalent of an unacknowledged glass ceiling in terms of the issues they can take forward and the attention they receive.
- Councillors assuming that creating the structures, adding young people on to as many committees as possible and meeting occasionally face to face with them, but not otherwise changing their practices, constitutes youth participation.
- An over reliance on enthusiastic Chief Executives and Young People's Champions as intermediaries between the council cabinet and the shadow youth group which might hinder the development of true collective cabinet responsibility for youth participation. It was noted how often the same Councillors turned up at events leaving the others effectively disengaged.

Within the beacon authorities there were also a few examples of practices which seem to have become a little stale or do not respond to the realities of young people's lives.

There are, however, some potential ways in which these issues might be addressed.

"Youth Parliament, when following up an issue it takes a long while. You have to take it to one person and they have to keep taking it higher and higher, for example, getting the lighting in the park or more performing arts. None of it has happened yet. By the time it does I'll be out (of the group) and won't get the answer."

Young person

"They listen but there is not really a culture yet to engage young people."

Young person

"Our voices don't get heard unless you go to meetings and you have to keep asking for your views to be passed on. I had to do 5 presentations to get the redevelopment in the park...it was a lengthy process and could have happened quicker."

Young person

"At a council meeting, we got ignored. They were rude – a youth worker had to have a word with them."

Young person

"I genuinely think that councillors take the participation seriously and are involved but some elected members and officers still struggle with the views and manners of young people."

Local authority officer

"Councillors do need closer working relationships with young people and not all councillors see young people as justified in what they do. It tends to be the same adult people who come to the events."

Local authority officer

"There are occasions when there is a need to tick the box, where young people are consulted but never get feedback – that is tokenistic."

Local authority officer

"We used to have regular meetings with adult councillors but because they had to be held on the day when young people couldn't attend they stopped."

Local authority officer

"Youth members can get added to various Boards and Committees automatically but these are not touched by the general ethos. For example the local Environmental Services and Education meetings are dull. The adults concerned are not thinking about the process. They meet at stupid times in venues which are not suitable or the catering. They are not asking why young people should be there, it needs to be given more thought."

Local authority officer

Joint Training

Young people usually receive some training to assist them in taking up their new roles, but it is rare for Councillors or officers to receive training in working with young people which may help to break down barriers of misunderstanding and aid communication. However, some of the beacon authorities had beneficially undertaken joint training.

In Wirral, there has been facilitated training to Councillors which was delivered by young people working alongside staff from John Moore University. There is an age gap so this is a key piece of work to establish communications.

Delegated decision-making

An explicit delegation of real power to the young people's group avoids the uncertainty of where the limits to political power lie.

In Derwentside, any decision about children and young people has to go via the Young People's Forum and if young people don't pass it – Councillors have to have a re-look at it.

In Lewisham, the Young Mayor and Advisory Group can meet the adult elected Mayor any time. The Young Mayor and the deputy attend council and the Young Mayor can address council. They develop their own budget which is presented to the Mayor and Cabinet and the adult Mayor will accept this, they won't change it. Young people attend Scrutiny Committee if there are particular issues and they are consulted on policy issues regularly. They used to be based in Education but are now based in Resources so there is a direct strategic link into the political side. All the political parties have endorsed this as a model.

Face-to face contact between young people's group members and Councillors

Where young people had direct contact with Councillors this was seen to be a good thing by both young people and adults.

In Gateshead, members of the Youth Assembly and Youth Executive get matched up with portfolio holders and shadow them for a day. This helps to break down barriers and allows young people to see what the Councillors do and builds relaxed relationships between the Councillors and the young people.

Young people also run 4 conferences a year on different issues that will bring in Councillors, Directors, MPs on Saturday mornings. For the "Women and Power" conference the young women organised everything. The youth work staff did the routine jobs to allow young people the chance to do the high profile networking.

Greater attention to young people's agendas

As an alternative to young people having slots or token membership of committees or groups they can be given more extensive power over the agenda. This has been done by some of the beacon authorities

In Derwentside, young people are invited to attend every 3rd meeting of the Children and Young Person's Planning Group with all the adult workers in attendance as well. Young people set the agenda, e.g. road safety or bullying and a variety of young people come from all over the authority and are invited to discuss the issue. Every meeting there are follow-up actions to take and young people put responsibilities on adults to take part.

Accountability of Councillors

The following example of practice shows a model where young people who have not been elected or part of set structures are nevertheless enabled to meet face-to-face with Councillors to discuss issues and hold them accountable for future action. It was not possible to hear from young people that had been directly involved in this approach, but reactions from other young people indicated some frustration at the pace of change and certainly a nine month wait for action as part of the process, which does not then materialise, would not produce very positive responses. This practice is evolving and represents an open access authority wide structure where other more conventional forums and councils do not yet exist in this particular authority.

In Wirral, the annual Youth Parliament meets in October each year and this is a formal meeting of the whole cabinet with young people. Some representatives come from schools, youth clubs and other agencies and around 200 young people representative of Wirral attend each year. Young people plan the Youth Parliament and present issues to the Councillors who take them up and report back formally in July next year. In the feedback sessions young people can score their responses as red, amber or green and unresolved issues can be carried forward to the next Parliament. Between October and July young people meet on particular issues with Portfolio holders.

Avoiding consultancy overload

Young people who want to try and achieve progress on their own agendas may get frustrated if they are required to give their views too often on a range of unrelated issues. This was recognised in Lewisham and a separate group was set up to respond to these issues, parallel but separate to the Young Mayor and Young Advisors Committee.

In Lewisham, the Young Citizens' Panel comprising 300 young people offer their services to be consulted by departments or Councillors. They are linked through email or text and this takes the pressure off the young Councillors. If a service wants young people to provide this information on issues, they act as a pressure valve as otherwise the Young Mayor and their group might get swamped by these requests.

In summary, this review can conclude that the beacon authorities are broadly doing well in the standards of shared values, strategy, systems, structures, staff and skills and knowledge. There is considerable evidence of young people and adults sharing common values to underpin youth participation, strategies for active involvement and there are a range of structures – both informal and formal.

There are staff to support young people's active involvement and in a majority of cases young people and adults have the skills and knowledge required for active participation. Regarding style of leadership it is clear there is political and officer commitment to youth participation, it has backing and resources and there is recognition and celebration of success and change. Despite this, it is in the area of style of leadership that there is still the most progress to be made. This finding is supported by other research by Badham and Davies in 2007.

Beyond structures – shaping the future



It is clear from the comments of both young people and staff that, while staff were amazed sometimes at how far authorities have been able to come with youth participation structures, young people are ready to go a whole lot further and are impatient for change. They have taken on board both the spirit and the practices of youth participation; indeed, they relish the responsibilities they have and are ready for more. They are also well aware of the privilege entailed in being part of these representational structures and were self critical about the extent to which others were being given the same opportunities.

If they were sometimes critical in their comments regarding their current experiences, it should perhaps be acknowledged that it is unrealistic to expect all young people to be grateful that adults are moving from a position of routinely ignoring their wishes to gradually starting to listen and respond to them.

The young people who took part in this review had clear views on what could improve the active engagement of young people in youth participation structures:

- A wider recruitment
- More representation
- More young people
- More information about groups
- Clearer routes to join groups
- Being taken seriously and treated respectfully by adults
- Less direction from adults
- Things needing to happen – young people needed to see some result or impact from the work they were putting in
- More funding, transport and time
- Plan more in advance
- Less small group work
- Young people to speak more and give more opinions
- Young people to have slots on agendas of adult elected bodies

Evidently, 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.

In the light of findings from both young people and adults in the beacon authorities, there are a number of ways in which current youth participation practice within local authorities could be strengthened and address some issues which have been raised. These would support all youth participation structures whether authority wide or local, and would build on current commitment and engagement. These points are explicitly contained in the Hear by Right standards of structures, systems, staff, skills and knowledge and style of leadership; though some suggestions cover more than one standard.

- Engaging with young people not directly involved in existing structures via regular open area or council wide events facilitated by them where young people can come and make their views known
- Regular meetings of young people and adequate youth work staff to sustain this. The most active groups appear to meet at least once a month and sometimes more often. Regular meetings help to bond a group of young people, enable them to acquire the skills and experiences they need and plan their agenda
- Clear lines of communication between young people and decision makers

- A budget for publicity and some expert help in deciding the best methods of advertising and communicating with other young people. Most of the young people complained about the magic circle syndrome where you only found out about different groups once you had made the initial step
- There needs to be more opportunities for the more marginal and seldom heard groups to take part. It may be that standing for election or joining a rather formal group may not be the best way to engage these young people initially. It is possible however that the development of forums or groups in which young people who share certain experiences, for example traveller young people, or Lesbian and Gay young people, are brought together informally initially would be a more accessible setting for their participation, with the anticipation that they could join other groups as they became more confident. It is clear what benefits can be achieved by young people participating in these democratic structures and youth services should be careful not to over involve the same young people because they are willing, well organised and/ or possess certain characteristics. Efforts need to be made to recruit young people more widely and have a range of different structures and systems for young people to move on to
- Currently Youth Services, Connexions as well as Looked After Children services are heavily involved in participation work and there can be a tendency to rely on them to ensure young people's active involvement. But other agencies are also centrally concerned with young people's lives. There needs to be a co-ordinated cross authority departmental strategy placing responsibilities and accountability on all departments and agencies to develop their youth participation practice
- There should be the means for young people to move from specialist or local forums to more centrally based structures
- Participation structures require adequate staffing levels to ensure young people receive the training and support they need
- Dedicated training for young people and adults regarding working with each other, decision making and the processes of local government
- Acquiring an agenda which is genuinely young people's own made up of key issues which have resonance at both local and authority wide levels. Not being too distracted by other demands for local or national consultation issues which may be young people focused but are not necessarily of priority importance to them
- Young people need to have realistic negotiations regarding the boundaries of their power relations with adults. This should be an informed debate between young people and the whole council regarding the purpose and direction of youth participation, rather than young people adapting to the existing structures and procedures
- There should be wide ownership of the youth engagement agenda within authorities. This could be achieved through regular face-to-face contact between all Councillors and young people to build trust and communication, without leaving it to the intermediaries of young people's champions on the adult side and young office holders on the other. Joint training, regular shadowing of all council members, informal youth conferences with mandatory council attendance all help to create bonds
- Positive youth engagement would be improved if there was greater accountability of officers and Councillors to young people and the youth engagement structures
- Consideration should be given to how to increase young people's influence at top level decision making

Within youth participation, it is the case that to achieve good outcomes a quality participative process is essential. However, good processes are of themselves not sufficient. The outcomes also must be far reaching, demonstrating real changes in young people's lives; not just the lives of those most closely involved, but others in their age group and communities. There is little use in participation for its own sake if the lives of all young people are not improved.

The practice of youth work for the foreseeable future is likely to take place in the context of the new government strategy embodied in the joint HM Treasury and the Department for Children, Schools and Families document 'Aiming high for young people: a ten year strategy for positive activities'. The strategy sets out a series of reforms based around three themes: empowerment, access and quality. The impact on young people of genuine participation in decision-making is recognised within the review.

Aiming High goes on to recognise that successful services and programmes involve young people in their design at the outset and make a genuine effort to be sensitive and responsive to the needs and views they express and suggest that public services should actively engage all the young people they aim to serve:

'It is clear from the evidence considered by the Review and consultation with young people, that giving them genuine influence is a crucial first step to increasing participation in activities and access to wider public services. This is true for all young people, including those from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, or those facing specific challenges, such as young people with disabilities.'

In line with this review of youth engagement structures, the new joint HM Treasury and Department of Children, Schools and Families ten year strategy for young people acknowledges that being involved in local decision making helps young people to develop important new skills. It goes on to say, "The best Local Authorities and third sector organisations set high standards, using innovative methods to increase the number of young people taking decisions locally. Building on good practice to increase further the influence of young people, particularly among minority, disadvantaged and marginalised groups, is a clear priority for the next ten years."

One important aspect of the strategy is that Local Authorities will devolve up to 5 per cent of their budget for youth services to young people's influence in 2010 and 2011, and the "Government's long term aspiration is that, by 2018, young people could actively shape decisions on 25 per cent of Local Authorities' budget for positive activities".

The experience and learning about positive youth engagement from the beacon authorities will assist other local authorities to develop their practice of youth engagement to meet these ambitions set out in the strategy. It will also help give a lead to all local authorities throughout the country on the best way of involving and supporting young people to have their voices heard and acted on within their communities where they live and be part of the design, delivery and review of services that meet their needs so that they get a better deal.

How the review was undertaken

The research team met together and agreed the aims for the consultations with young people and adults and developed a two-hour session for young people from all eight beacon authorities. During the session they facilitated a range of activities which enabled the young people to discuss and rank the groups they belonged to according to how youth led they felt they were and the extent to which they felt their local authority listened to them and acted upon their issues. They also described the impact that their participation work had had on them personally and the most important differences they felt they had made in their communities, services and policies.

Beacon authorities were invited to bring together groups of young people involved in participation work in their areas. A total of 56 young people were spoken to, most of whom then completed forms giving information about their age, gender, ethnic background and membership of any groups who face particular barriers to participation.



Numbers of young people participating

Area	No.	Gender	No.	Ethnic background	No.
South Norfolk	6	Male	23	White British	34
Lewisham	8	Female	33	British	2
Wirral	11	Total	56	Black British	1
Lancashire	5			Asian	5
Derwentside	5	Barriers to participation	No.	Vietnamese	1
West Sussex	6	Disabled young people	2	Black African	2
Wakefield	6	Supported with reading/writing	3	Ethiopian	1
Gateshead	9	Looked after	1	Mixed Heritage	1
Total	56	Young carers	3	British Indian	1
		Refugee	1	Punjabi Indian	1
Age	No.	Young lesbian/gay/transgender	2	Pakistani	1
8-11	1	Rural area	3	Not supplied	6
12-15	15	Total	15	Total	56
16-18	31				
18+	9				
Total	56				

Interviews were conducted with a total of 15 adult members of staff drawn from all the Beacon projects comprising 6 senior youth managers, a councillor and 7 participation workers. They provided a more detailed insight into the issues involved in running these structures and gave examples of practice.

Further reading



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<http://www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright/page.asp?cid=2020>

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<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>

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For more information about the beacons:

www.beacons.idea.gov.uk