

An Equal Place at the Table for Children and Young People

National Participation Strategic Vision



Participation Works enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. We are a consortium of six national children and young people's agencies made up of the British Youth Council, the Children's Rights Alliance for England, the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, National Youth Agency, NCB and Save the Children. We offer a comprehensive programme of activities and resources on participation – including workshops, training sessions and practitioner networks – designed to support organisations and practitioners that work with children and young people under 25 years old. For more information visit:
www.participationworks.org.uk

The National Participation Forum (NPF) brings together organisations and associations within the public, private and third sectors. By raising awareness of participation and its value to organisations and individuals, NPF aims to strengthen the commitment to participation amongst leaders and decision-makers. For more information visit

www.participationworks.org.uk/npf

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Steered by the National Participation Forum

Cover images, clockwise from bottom left:

Students on the School Council of St Mary's C of E Primary, Slough, meet with their teacher who is Council co-ordinator.
UNICEF UK/2009/Davies

Students from the School Council at Turton High, Bolton, meet with the Headteacher.
UNICEF UK/2009/Davies

Students from gardening and environment group at St Joseph's Catholic High School, Bolton, display bird boxes they have made and standing by a willow tunnel they designed and made.
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Association of Directors of Children's Services
British Youth Council
Children's Rights Alliance for England
Consumer Focus
Council for Disabled Children
Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations
Family and Parenting Institute
Improvement and Development Agency
Local Government Association
National Association of Head Teachers
NCB
National Council for Voluntary Youth Services
National Foundation for Educational Research
NHS Confederation
Office of the Children's Commissioner
Save the Children
UNICEF UK
YouthBank.

NPF members come from a variety of professional backgrounds, including education, health and social care, but share a common aim. That aim is for all children and young people to be given opportunities and support (where needed) to influence decision-making that affects them, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child which the UK ratified in December 1991.

In drafting and producing this paper, we wish to thank Lucy Ward whose style and turn of phrase helped us to put our strong message into a powerful form. The critical readers from both within NPF (Anita Tiessen, Lesley Gannon, Tom Burke, Barbara Hearn, James Cathcart, David Kerr, Patricia Suarez, Ben Wright and Carolyne Willow) and beyond (Ann Baxter, Amy Tatum, Sir Paul Ennals and Lisa Payne) have helped give it the relevance and, we hope, the impact we want to achieve.

Foreword

As a young person who has chaired the National Participation Forum that has produced this paper, I feel that with a little support children and young people from all backgrounds and different walks of life have relevant experience and the energy and capacity to contribute to decision-making processes.

During times of change, uncertainty and fewer resources, adults setting the agendas need to be sure that the services and activities invested in are relevant and will be used by us, as young people. Listening to the distinctive interests and perspectives we have is both a cost saver and engages us in meeting the needs in our communities. We believe that keeping our direct involvement central to any matter that affects our lives and those around us, protects and values us. We, like everyone else, want to be listened too. It can be a challenge but one that we do rise too. It would enhance the lives of the millions of children and young people eager to play a fuller role in their schools, neighbourhoods and communities.

Drawing on the huge potential of children and young people that is available to this country as it faces the challenge of providing more effective services with less money, is the way forward. It goes hand in hand with this country's international human rights obligations, expressed in its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Extensive efforts have fuelled the significant progress already made in ensuring children and young people's voices are heard and responded to in all areas of our lives. Together, as partners, we can do more.

We hope that in reading this short paper you will feel inspired to join us; to take action to include all children and young people in things that affect our lives through things that you do.

Richard Serunjogi
Co-chair of the National Participation Forum

Executive summary

Participation matters. Children and young people under the age of 18 make up around one in five of the UK population. They are one of the largest user groups of public services – they go to school everyday, seek advice about their health, use public transport, take part in local sports and other activities, and are affected by crime. But most individuals and organisations, statutory and voluntary sector services, businesses and local government fail to ask them for their views – views and experiences that would improve service planning, design, and implementation; opinions that would save money by making sure what's on offer is what children and young people want. Nearly 20 years after the UK ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 'tipping point' for participation has been reached.

The National Participation Forum (NPF) has devised four core principles that provide a framework for participation.

- 1** Listen to children and young people uninhibited by their or your age: a fair society values all age groups among its citizens. Children and young people have a right to have their views taken into account.
- 2** Consider participation as a process not an event: participative practice can take many forms that give new skills to both the children and adults taking part.
- 3** Be clear about the achievements of participation: measure the impact of participation to demonstrate its benefits. Prove its worth and the practice becomes more pervasive.
- 4** Weave the involvement of children and young people into the culture of organisations and wider society: the more evidence of benefit, the more underlying attitudes towards children and young people will change. Everyone gains.

What are those benefits?

Children and young people who feel their voices are heard are more likely to respect others. They have the opportunity to learn social skills, take part in teamwork, learn how to listen to others, gain confidence, and develop a stronger sense of citizenship and community. Involving children and young people in decision-making has a protective effect as well – they are more likely to speak up when they're being hurt.

Services that listen to the views of their users are more likely to deliver what their users want. When their users are children and young people, in part or full, their views need to be considered. To do so reduces waste and improves service provision. Money is spent more wisely.

Consultation or participation?

There are different levels of participation. The easier option is consultation, but participative practice is more strategic and inclusive, and would require some investment in, and commitment to, building the skills of the workforce. The workforce needs to be able to understand and explain the positive impact of participation, learning how to embed participative practice in their own work and promoting it beyond.

Who's listening?

Local authorities, schools and colleges have a clear remit to listen to children and young people, although not all do so in a meaningful way. Other public services, like transport or local planning, should share that interest. And the wider public need to begin to take notice. Negative attitudes towards children and young people permeate UK society; making participative practice the norm would challenge those mistaken and discriminatory assumptions.

What next?

There's a notable push to empower local communities that crosses the political spectrum. Children and young people are active participants in those communities, and have a right to be heard. Those who work with and for children and young people have a responsibility to listen and take account of those views. They should embed participative practice in their own work, and show others how it can be done.

The National Participation Forum invites you to post your views, experiences and ideas about participation to help inform the creation of a National Participation Strategy. To take part, go to www.participationworks.org.uk



UNICEF UK/2009/Davies

Principal Hazel Edwards meeting student members of the Ballycraig School Council, Northern Ireland.

Setting the scene

Imagine a conference table. Around it are 20 seats, most of them filled with people – all talking, discussing, arguing and deciding. But four of the seats are empty, or occupied only very occasionally. There, no one joins the conversation, let alone steers the debate.

For the children and young people under 18 who make up around one in five of the UK population, finding a voice and having an influence over their own lives remains a profound challenge. As users of education, social care, health, transport, leisure facilities and housing, they are the biggest single consumers of public services,² yet their views on those services are still only patchily sought and taken into account. At school, their student council may have few teeth. In their neighbourhoods, play spaces may vanish under new housing, and their objections too often go unheard. If they are in care, they may have no final say over their next placement. Yet at 18, they will be expected to make sensible and informed personal and public decisions as responsible citizens and as voters.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Both for the sake of fairness and for an array of individual and social benefits, children and young people should have a greater say over the decisions that affect their lives, both individually and as a group. Conservative and Labour governments, and Liberal Democrat parliamentarians from both Houses have understood and accepted this 'in principle' and some progress has been made.

Evidence

In a recorded dialogue with young people, Michael Gove, now Secretary of State for Education, said that 'pupils should have a bigger say in how schools are run' (First Direct Decision Debate, April 2010).

But much more needs to be done to make the direct involvement of children and young people in all matters that affect their lives a permanent feature of our society.

Through greater participation – the term now widely used for this active involvement – their voices will be heard at our imagined 'conference table', and will have an influence on decisions. Their ideas and energy can be tapped, bringing concrete benefits that reach well beyond children and young people alone: family life can be enriched; public funds can be more effectively spent on fairer services; and communities can become stronger as younger members feel valued – and respect others in return.

The case for participation

Participation is: *a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change.*³ Change can be within children and young people themselves (skill or knowledge development or a change in attitudes), within a service (such as different opening hours) or in society (better perception of children and young people's contributions).

There's no doubt that children and young people's participation is a radical idea: it requires adults, organisations and governments to unpick traditional ways of thinking, to take some risks and to hold up a mirror to their own, sometimes negative, attitudes towards children and young people. Central to participation is that children and young people's voices are listened to and have an impact on decisions and actions, but not that these voices should always predominate – though they sometimes will. Far from encouraging selfish individualism, participation places young people firmly as citizens within a wider community. By far the best way for children and young people to understand that they live in an interconnected society – where they must respect the rights of others to be heard – is to know that their views and perspectives are respected too. The fact that children and young people must work cooperatively alongside adults, far from being a limitation, is one of participation's strengths.

Progress on participation is 'multi-speed' – innovative, exciting and effective in some areas; sluggish or 'still on the starting blocks' in others. A public debate examining the issue has yet to take place.

One increasingly obvious challenge is that children and young people have far from equal opportunities to develop the underpinning knowledge, understanding and skills, as well as the attitudes and values, necessary to make participation work. Class, disability and ethnicity, in particular, define the participation 'haves' and 'have nots', and the most excluded risk feeling – and becoming – yet more marginalised.

Add to this the variable and limited nature of the funding streams that often finance the support of adults, the costs of skill development among young people that is essential for their effective participation, and the likely straitened times ahead, and the danger is clear. Participation can, over time, save money – at a time when the UK is braced for likely deep cuts in public service funding – by making sure that services meet the right needs in the right way.

Participation has reached a tipping point. On paper, the argument has been won: involving children and young people in decisions affecting them has multiple benefits, ranging from fairer public services to a more socially and democratically engaged younger generation. We accepted this when we helped draft, and then signed, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, back in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴ But in practice, progress is piecemeal and highly

inconsistent. Countless studies highlight the frustration felt by children and young people, particularly those already at the margins, at not being listened to by adults – an issue the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly urged the UK to address.

Ensuring participation makes the leap from policy promise to an irreversible, widely understood norm will require commitment, imagination and the courage to secure what must ultimately be a cultural change. But the prize – a society in which the views, experiences and dignity of all ages are respected – is worth striving for.

Participation matters because it:

- follows the model of relationships and family life we all value
- is good for children and young people
- is good for adults
- is good for our economy
- is actually good for us all.

Our vision and its implementation

Our vision is of a society strengthened by respect for all citizens, where age is no barrier, with less fear and ignorance and greater intergenerational understanding. A society that is anchored, firmly, in the accumulated reality of our individual experiences.

Quality participation work can help implement this vision and narrow the social mobility gap that shamefully restricts all children and young people from reaching their potential. We must think of children and young people as partners not antagonists and, if we do, we shall all be the richer. We need:

- a continued commitment to deliver what is set out in law and required by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other Human Rights treaties and legislation
- new legal and policy levers to drive action where change is slow or non-existent
- strong local and national leadership
- greater respect across generations
- continued investment, locally and nationally.

Our four core principles

At this 'tipping point' in the progress of participation, with young people hungry for change but frustrated at what's being offered, is it possible to define what successful participation looks like? While there are now some valuable studies recording the range and types of good practice, it's more helpful to offer a set of principles than rigid policies and structures to be taken down from the shelf whenever the 'participation box' needs to be ticked.

NPF's four core principles

- Listen to children and young people of all ages.
- Consider participation as a process not an event.
- Be clear about the achievements of participation.
- Weave the involvement of children and young people into the culture of organisations and wider society.

Listen to children and young people of all ages

Our nation is constituted of a listening, concerned and interested people. In a fair society, which values all age groups among its citizens, children and young people have a right to a voice and to have it taken account of. There is a basic principle at stake. A mantra for everyone in our society regardless of age could be that:

Having a voice on things that matter to you, knowing that your voice is respected and has an impact, and respecting other voices – these form the bedrock on which our nation is built.

The radicalism of such a mantra lies in its application to children and young people, and to all matters of concern to them.

We don't ask ourselves why women deserve the vote or an education, nor question whether disabled people should be able to take advantage of the same opportunities as others.⁵ So why do we need to justify the merits of youth participation at all?

A fair society values all age groups among its citizens. Children and young people have a right to a voice – and to have it taken account of. There is a basic principle at stake.

I would like to have more of a say on bigger issues like a new government coming into power... a bit more say on going to war... the government might think 'oh it doesn't affect them at all' but it does.
(young person)

I wish I was let in, talked to about financial situations because I would quite like to know because at some point I am going to have to learn it. Dad's adamant I will not know but I think it's useful if I know something.
(young person)

Consider participation as a process not an event

Participation is a process over time – not a discrete, 'bolt-on' initiative or one-off consultation – by which children and young people are able to influence change within an organisation or community. It can take many forms, which will be valid with different groups of young people at different times: children may help design a service run by adults, or move on to initiate and take charge of a project of their own. Far from being a disadvantage, this fluidity goes to the core of participation, which NCB describes as 'a journey, where children, young people and adults work in partnership to increase the empowerment of children and young people'. The process is mutual: adults genuinely challenging their own assumptions can experience empowerment too.

The participation journey can sometimes lead not only to increased participation by young people – but to their empowerment, such as being legally and totally responsible for all the governance of an organisation.

About BYC

The British Youth Council (established in 1948), a charity and company, is governed by 13 young trustees aged 17–25 who are elected by their members who, in turn, are made up of 130 organisations that are either youth-led or have a high degree of youth participation in their decision-making. Young people govern the organisation, employ 12 staff and are responsible for a budget of £1 million, which is used to promote empowerment activities and develop and run campaigns chosen by young people across the UK and overseas. In 2010 they launched an election manifesto to influence a future parliament, focusing on five keys issues:

- Mental health – Our minds matter
- 16: A new age for democracy
- Equal pay for equal work
- End child poverty
- All aboard for affordable travel.

Evidence

British Youth Council research estimates 600,000 children and young people take part in youth council elections every year.

Be clear about the achievements of participation

The more the benefits of participation can be demonstrated, the more faith in the process young people and adults alike will have. Flexibility over how participation happens should not be allowed to blur the essential question: What has it achieved? It is crucial to measure impact, and children and young people should be involved in this process.

Evidence

Every five years, the United Nations examines the children's rights record of the UK. The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) supported thousands of children to take action at the international, national and local levels.

A team of young children's rights investigators travelled across England to find out the views and experiences of a wide range of *under 18*-year-olds. A delegation of 12 children, aged 8–17 years, gave evidence to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva and many more ran campaigns to try and change how children are treated. All 14 of the children's recommendations to the UN were included in its report to the UK. Children took their messages to Parliament and met government ministers and civil servants.

Weave the involvement of children and young people into the culture of organisations and wider society

Underlying attitudes must change for children and young people to be effectively involved in organisations and in wider society. Politicians, organisations, services and businesses need to recognise the value of children and young people participating in what is traditionally, but not sensibly, adult territory. Staff in organisations seeking to involve young people must ensure that the culture is one that welcomes children and young people and avoids reaching for tokenistic gestures. Leaders must create mechanisms that ensure that children and young people know that they have the right to participate in all matters affecting them. Alongside this, children and young people must have the chance to gain skills that enable them to be effective operators as well as real opportunities to participate, especially the most excluded.

About NCB

Participation is at the heart of everything NCB, a national charity, does. We have six under 18-year-olds that form part of our governance structure, including two on the board of trustees. These young people come from the 400 Young NCB members aged eight to 18.

Our young members not only get involved in local research into the views of their peers, but also speak with ministers and government officials about issues that affect their daily lives from education and transport to the management of crime and anti-social behaviour. Their views are important in steering NCB's work.

A culture of participation has the potential to be that rare thing: a win-win policy. Implemented effectively, it has benefits for the individual children and young people involved, for their families, for the public services engaging with them, for the neighbourhoods they live in and for society as a whole.



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Students at Hafod Primary School, Swansea, taking part in the school's recycling scheme.

Where are we now?

If we consider how children and young people are respected in public and private life, the picture blurs in and out of focus as if in an old home movie. Within many families, they are seen in sharp relief – they are considered as individuals, and their views matter. The picture is similar in many schools; or in children's services where workers are skilled at ensuring that young people in care, for example, are truly able to express their views.

But elsewhere, children and young people are all but erased from the picture, or are distorted beyond recognition. Transport and housing planning may happen with no reference to their interests, or at least without asking them directly. The media will make the actions of a challenging minority represent the many, and a multiplicity of voices will go unheard. And, of course, while many families and schools treat children and young people's views with respect, in others their opinions and ideas may be invisible.

A society where children and young people truly participate would abandon forever this constantly changing focus. It would accept the principle that the opinions and interests of children and young people matter, as individuals and as a group, and that their voices must be listened to and acted upon appropriately.

Continuing our forward journey means taking a clear-eyed, practical view of where we are. Children and young people aged 7–17 years report that they feel they have influence over decisions in the family (75 per cent) and school (61 per cent) some or all of the time. This sense of influence, and value, rises consistently within the family, reaching 81 per cent at the age of 16–17; but in contrast drops away in relation to school, reaching a low of 55 per cent at that age. In their local area, teenagers experience a consistent decline in their ability to influence. Their sense of insignificance rises just as they start to make independent choices about whether and where to study, to vote, to work. Even though within one parliamentary cycle 14–17-year-olds will become voters, only 24 per cent of them feel listened to by their local MPs; 56 per cent of this age group do not even know who their MPs are.

What can we learn from family life?

Over the past century, our attitudes to children and young people within the family have changed beyond recognition: the Victorian model of a domestic dictatorship in which children were seen and not heard is a discredited historical relic. The idea that children and young people are listened to and their opinions valued runs with the grain of widely accepted evidence on good parenting.

Evidence suggests that some level of participation is already the norm in most families, and it makes children and young people happy. Home is the place

where children and young people are most likely to feel their voices are heard. Over 80 per cent think their parents or carers take their views into account 'always' or 'most of the time', with only 3 per cent saying that they 'never do'.⁶

I think as you get older, your parents seem to trust you more, but then again they expect a lot more from you, grades wise and stuff. If you do everything that your parents say, they're there to guide you, so once you do that then they'll be a bit more lenient, how long you can go out for, when you can go out, using the computer, stuff like that.
(child)

Children and young people value these relationships highly. Parents are top of the list – above friends and teachers – as the most likely sources of information, advice and help for children up to 16.⁷ And when Save the Children asked young people to name their three most important world figures, they ranked their parents only just below Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Jesus Christ.⁸

The challenge, then, is for this model of participation and strong child–adult bonds operating day in, day out, in countless mini family democracies, to be mirrored in communities, services and wider society, with children and young people's interests *automatically* taken into account. In other words, we need to extend the respect we now commonly afford our own children and grandchildren to all children and young people.

Participation should not imply child-versus-adult conflict – although this may arise, just as adults working together cannot always reach consensus. Ultimately, there is a win-win opportunity for generations to work together and to develop mutual respect.



UNICEF UK/2009/Davies

Students from gardening and environment group at St Joseph's Catholic High School, Bolton, display bird boxes they have made and standing by a willow tunnel they designed and made.

What are the key benefits of participation?

Benefits across generations

Giving and receiving respect works like children's stilts – one alone creates only imbalance, but together the lift is exhilarating. Involving young people encourages that mutual benefit, because **children and young people who feel their voices are heard are more likely to respect others**. A child whose opinions are listened to, who is given information and explanations, and who is encouraged to articulate their views, is also learning to exercise social responsibility and is far more likely to understand those obligations towards others.⁹

Involving children and young people can strengthen relationships – within families, and within communities. The cross-generational potential here is a particularly powerful 'glue' to bring communities together, and to reduce conflict. Some of the most progressive forms of citizen engagement arise when generations come together in communities to listen to one another, to exchange ideas and concerns, and to negotiate an agreed approach to addressing issues they are confronted with.¹⁰

At stake is nothing less than the strength of our democracy. A nation is democratic to the extent that all of its citizens are involved, particularly at the community level. The confidence and competence to be involved must be gradually acquired through practice. Democracy has to be felt, rather than taught. It is for this reason that there should be gradually increasing opportunities for children to participate in any aspiring democracy and, in particular, in those nations already convinced they are democratic.¹¹

Benefits for children and young people

Fear of the consequence of listening to children and young people's views has sometimes led to condemnation, deliberate misrepresentation or ridicule. But a couple of decades on, evidence is building to demonstrate that active participation offers a wide array of personal benefits for young people. Research tells us that by participating, children and young people can progress in ways not afforded them by targeting their academic development alone.

Evidence

Participation can boost young people's confidence and self-esteem, improve relationships with teachers and others, develop skills such as communication and teamwork, and increase a sense of personal responsibility and autonomy. There are positive connections between children and young people's participation and their attendance, behaviour and achievement at school.¹²

Personal and social skills – sometimes called 'soft skills' – such as communication, teamwork and moral maturity, are those that now have a huge impact on determining life chances.¹³ Yet children and young people from less affluent backgrounds, with less adult and community interaction and guidance, are much less likely to develop these skills, so vital in the modern labour market and in a healthy society in general.

This sounds stupid coming from a teenager but I would get rid of the TV [as Dad is] just obsessed with the TV and I think that if the TV was not there he might listen to me a bit more.
(young person)

The development of children and young people as individuals naturally extends to their ability to build relationships – with each other, with family and with society. Being engaged leads to greater engagement with others. Tolerance and respect go hand in hand with empowerment, with benefits for all.

With a stronger sense of themselves as citizens, young people are more likely to overcome the barriers that prevent them taking a full role in their community and wider society. That journey is of the greatest importance for the most disadvantaged and disengaged young people, who are least likely to believe they count and can contribute and most likely to be sceptical of participation approaches that do not reach out to them directly. If they are excluded from expressing their opinions and not involved in decisions, their behaviour is likely to be negative and indicative of the disengagement forced upon them.

I've not been to school for a bit, and they probably wouldn't choose me... because they don't trust me, and I don't think that's fair at all because I could do it.
(young person)

Benefits for child protection

Building the confidence and competence of children and young people through involvement in decisions affecting them also has a protective effect. Children and young people with experience of speaking up are likelier to voice their concerns in situations they feel are hurting them, including abuse. A culture in which adults listen to children and take what they say seriously is a society committed to child protection.

Participation may offer a more subtle protection too: helping to guard young people against the pressures of a technology-driven consumer age. Consumer brands have a profound and growing influence on teenagers, taking the place of communities and parents as dictators of acceptable values and aspirations.¹⁴ With less interaction with adults, in poorer communities in particular, the most disadvantaged teenagers are the most exposed to the unmediated forces of consumerism. Participation, with its capacity to enable children and young people to gain self-esteem and responsibility, not only offers vital adult–child interaction but could help support young people in an all-too-unequal battle with commercial pressures ‘running fast, out of control and unchecked’.¹⁵ Social participation – among our youngest citizens – may be one means of challenging the destructiveness and social divisiveness of a consumption-obsessed society.

Financial benefit

Like any other people who use services, whether public or private, children and young people will walk away if the services are not relevant to their lives and aspirations. Under-use of expensive provision is a waste that cannot be afforded. Where they cannot walk away they may ‘play up’ if they have no route to express their opinions, which can be costly. By involving children and young people in deciding what is right for them, real savings can be made out of stretched budgets.

Evidence

In one local area, a skate park was planned and built by well-intentioned adults. But it was not where young people wanted it. No-one had asked them and they did not use it. This was a wasted £76k. The lesson was well learnt and now the local area consistently listens to children and young people when making budget decisions about services aimed at them.

At a time of tightening belts there is no doubt that money can be saved by listening to children and young people about what they want and where they want it. Their desires and demands are invariably reasonable and cost-efficient. By being involved in, or even leading, spending plans their sense of personal responsibility and their understanding of consequences strengthens.

Benefit for young people

Elsewhere, moves to place significant spending (£220m over three years across England) in the hands of young people is starting to have an effect on the market. In areas where young people feel services on offer do not meet their needs, teenagers have used the Youth Opportunity Fund and the Youth Capital Fund to buy alternatives. There is evidence that young people are increasingly choosing to use these funds to support voluntary sector provision.¹⁶ The system brings a dual benefit. First, young people are supported to gain skills: they build their confidence and enjoy new opportunities and experiences provided by their participation. Second, public money is spent on the right services, bringing new suppliers and partnerships between

providers into the market and increasing contestability. This sits within a policy framework, Aiming High, that radically and forcefully places young people 'at the head of the table'. Through working as paid inspectors of local provision; expressing themselves through youth councils; designing youth service provision; or participating in youth leadership opportunities, such as becoming Young Mayors or Youth Parliamentarians, teenagers are showing their ability to take action, hold responsibility and improve how young people are viewed.

Evidence

The Youth Opportunity and Capital Funds are controlled by young people and spent in their community on positive activities. Panels of young people make the decisions, supported by local adults. In some areas they are requiring match funding to ensure their money goes further – and thereby maximising impact.

Across England, 905,227 young people made 14,163 grants in 2009. One young person said that the experience meant young people were: *taking part in stimulating and positive activities to change the world around them for the better, both for themselves and future generations*. Another panel agreed money for a hostel for homeless young people and a member said that: *it made me realise how much I have and how money I give can change someone's life*.

Evidence

The Youth Capital Fund was released to local authorities on condition that the spend was the direct decision of local young people on positive activities.

In Barnsley, to devise a provision that worked for local young people, the Youth Panel merged their Youth Capital Fund investment with some from the local football club, local youth service and the Metrodome. The outcome was 7-day-a-week provision with high uptake.

In Stoke, the young people decided not to invest in a new expensive provision but to use their fund on five mobile facilities and refurbishing ten existing facilities. They commissioned a company to make the changes, which in a very short time delivered young people good quality facilities for comparatively little cost per facility.

What are the challenges?

Summary of the key challenges to overcome

These challenges are to:

- move beyond the 'consultation' model of involvement
- understand the impact of involvement and being able to explain it
- improve all the planning processes to be more inclusive
- extend involvement to the services that children and young people use alongside adults, such as transport, town planning, GP surgeries
- build the skills and competencies in the whole of the workforce
- get all schools and colleges to follow the successful majority in involving students
- extend the constructive engagement between police and young people
- improve the media and public views
- reduce exploitative involvement.

Challenges in public services

The active means of listening to children and young people must be evident in all spheres of society – from the family and school, health care, civil courts and the juvenile justice system, child protection and local community decision-making through to local and national government policy-making. And in all these areas, adult attitudes must begin, or continue, to change.

The four UK children's commissioners, in their 2008 report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, highlight inconsistent experience: children and young people's participation is limited by barriers such as complaints procedures accessible only to adults; or attitudes that exclude them, such as a refusal to listen to the opinions of young children. Though laws and policies to promote participation are now often in place, children in care or disabled children still face particular obstacles to having their voices heard and

'there remains resistance to allowing children to exercise their right to participate in decisions that affect them at school'.¹⁷

Genuinely participatory public services remain patchy, and monitoring and evaluation of initiatives is similarly inconsistent even though there are powerful signs of improvement.

It isn't rocket science. You can run a youth centre in the wrong venue, on the wrong night or with the wrong activities, and potential young users of the service will, quite simply, stay away. A badly timed bus service will soon find its seats remain empty.

Much law and regulation – including the 1989 and 2004 Children Acts – have underlined the importance of listening to children and young people in areas such as social care and education. Local authorities and their partners are now required to secure the 'active participation' of young people and their families in designing and delivering services – including the most vulnerable.¹⁸ But this can be limited to 'consultation events'. As well as limited variety in models of involvement there remains limited analysis of the impact that children and young people's involvement has made. What changes have occurred? What investments have been saved? What improvements have been delivered? Children and young people are concerned about this too.

*I would like to know how to make lots of people listen, because if we don't, the future generation is going to become less happy. If you leave children with problems and you don't listen to them, it will make it worse.
(interview with a group of disabled children)*

Happiness, for all of us, is now recognised as one of the keys to the economic prosperity of the country.¹⁹

Legal reforms

- 1926** In deciding whether an adoption order should be granted, due consideration should be given to the wishes of the child
- 1975** Local authorities to ascertain and consider the wishes and feelings of a child in care
- 1989** Courts required to 'have regard to' the wishes and feelings of children when considering the child's upbringing
- 1999** Local authorities must consult local citizens when making plans to improve their services
- 2001** NHS bodies should involve patients and public in service planning and decision-making
- 2004** Local authority social workers must give due consideration to children's wishes and feelings when making child protection enquiries, and before providing 'children in need' services
- 2005** Disability equality duty was placed on public bodies requiring them to involve disabled people in the development of their disability equality scheme
- 2006** Duty on local authorities to have regard to such information as is available on the views of young children (under 5s) on early childhood services
- 2009** Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members have as part of their statutory roles the 'champion for children' responsibility set out in statutory guidance

While local authorities have made great progress overall on participation, it has not filtered through to departments not dealing directly with children and young people. The Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member have important roles here. At the centre of corporate governance they provide a conduit through which Local Authority departments not dealing directly with children and young people (e.g. planning, housing) can and should take account of the views of children and young people. And there is still a shortage of professionals who are really skilled in listening and empathising with children and young people, and working with them to bring about change.²⁰

As the private sector has always known, the most successful services are those that respond best to the needs of those that use them. This lesson over the past decade has become central to public services too – though implementation is still far from consistent. Children and young people are often the least likely to be asked about their needs and preferences, reflecting an underlying belief that they will passively accept the service offered or have the same requirements as adults who use the service. They may well have no choice over the kind of provision they receive; a case of 'this or nothing'.

But a generation brought up to choose, or even dictate, the way it communicates, that discovers information or hears music – and reportedly spends £12 billion annually of pocket money and part-time earnings²¹ – is ready to use that ability to discriminate in other ways. Providers of public services should embrace this: if they can adapt, the way is open for services that are more responsive, more efficient and consequently better value for money at a time when budgets are under enormous pressure.

Schools and colleges

Legal reforms

2003 Individuals under 18 can become associate members of school governing bodies

2008 Duty on governing bodies of schools to invite and consider the views of pupils (*implementation fixed for September 2010*)

Both the recent Cambridge review of primary education²² and Ofsted's latest annual report²³ highlight the centrality of the active voice of children and young people in successful schools and colleges. Ofsted concludes that in such schools 'there is a strong focus on the needs, interests and concerns of each individual pupil. Staff talk to pupils – both as individuals and as a group, listen to what they have to say, consult them on decisions that matter and value their views.'

Evidence

A study of student participation in school and colleges²⁴ found better student–teacher relationships emerged where children and young people were listened to. Improved behaviour followed children and young people being involved in designing anti-bullying policy. School organisation also improved where students were involved in curriculum planning and governance issues and where school councils were genuinely influential.

Enabling children and young people to become active citizens by encouraging their full participation within the classroom and school is one of 12 key aims promoted by the Cambridge Primary Review. But patronising gestures won't do: where pupils think their school councils are merely tokenistic they have a more negative perception of other aspects of their school too. Some schools that have fully embraced the participative process of mutual listening and respect, regardless of age or position, have seen significant benefits to their achievements. These schools have, in some areas, been recognised with the UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) believes that all children and young people should have the opportunity to achieve their potential and become active, caring citizens. We know that this is more likely to happen when children and young people are fully engaged and able to participate in the life of their school and local community. For that reason we are passionate supporters of the Rights Respecting School model and its focus on educating whole school communities about rights and the responsibilities that accompany them.

(Mick Brookes General Secretary, NAHT)

Evidence

An evaluation of UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award found that, by listening and involving pupils with the UNCRC framework, the following occurred.

- Eight out of twelve schools saw stability or improvement in their attainment.
- All twelve schools found an increased sense of belonging and well-being among pupils, staff and parents.
- All schools reported improved behaviour and relationships, so a more disciplined environment.²⁵

The message of Ofsted's annual report 2009, for example, could not be clearer: in colleges and schools which have 'achieved and sustained excellence ... there is a strong focus on the needs, interests and concerns of each individual pupil'.

Evidence

The Sorrell Foundation has led pupil involvement in the design and development of new and refurbished schools through its website – www.thesorrellfoundation.com/joinedupdesignforschools – and has found that not only is the result better school design but children learn the skills of teamwork, problem solving and communication, and gain self-confidence and self-esteem.

Juvenile justice

Legal reforms

- 1996** The police must have arrangements for obtaining the views of local people about policing
- 1998** Every local area must have a Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and consult local people about reducing crime and combating substance misuse
- 1999** The programme agreed between a young person in conflict with the law and a youth offender panel should be made in a language capable of being readily understood by, or explained to, the young person
- 2009** Police authorities must have regard to the views of local people about policing in that area

While the principles of participation are not yet embedded throughout the juvenile justice system, the process has brought clear benefits where effort is being made. In one small example, young offenders in Rochdale were commissioned to produce a DVD on their experiences of resettlement and attend the programme board to suggest how the process could be improved, increasing their confidence and raising the awareness of those shaping policy.²⁶ They would not have been asked to attend had the Board concerned not wanted to listen and change the provision. In the community, the police have made great strides in engaging with children and young people as part of an effective prevention strategy. In 2010, only 10 per cent of children say that they have been treated unfairly because of their age when speaking to the police, however this figure rose to 22 per cent among 16 and 17-year-olds.²⁷ There is more to do.

Public perception

Far too many young people remain alienated from their local community, distanced from society at large and disconnected from decisions made for and about them by adults.²⁸

One factor in this alienation is the deeply ambivalent and often negative attitudes to young people pervading this country, particularly the media. This was one of the observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its last examination of the UK in 2008. An intense focus on protection of children on the one hand – some of it more than justified; some stifling – is counterbalanced with fear-driven efforts to restrain and control young people, from ASBOs to the indiscriminate whine of the mosquito device, a high-pitched squealing device used to keep children away. While young people are the largest section of the population that freely volunteers, they are also the primary group that is perceived as a problem to be solved. The distortion of fact and opinion only damages all our futures.

Now is the time for moving forward faster

Political consensus

The case for embedding real and effective participation is stronger than ever. There now exists political consensus on the need to build strong communities in which citizens are closely involved in the design, commissioning and even provision of services.

No matter how citizens ultimately play a part in the provision of their local services, children and young people must be a big part of that picture. The services will be less effective – and consequently more wasteful – otherwise. Moreover, rebuilding the link with citizens is crucial to a reinvigoration of democracy. If civic engagement and democratic participation are to mean anything to young people, they must feel their voices count.

Participation by children and young people runs with the grain of our times. Citizens expect, rightly, to be consulted and to exercise influence on a wide range of matters. Politicians agree that the views and contribution of local people matter enormously to the way neighbourhoods and communities develop.

Evidence

Darlington: 40,000 young people voted for their Member of the Youth Parliament (MYP) – a greater proportion of the voting population than most MPs achieve. This is clear evidence that young people are keen to use their democratic vote when engaged by a manifesto that speaks to them.

What next and what can you do?

The benefits of genuine participation are being recognised independently of those who support it as a right. But as we have seen, participation has yet to become securely and consistently embedded, either in practice within organisations or within the minds of most politicians and the public. What can we do to ensure this happens?

Undeniably, organisations will have to work harder to ensure young people's voices are heard, making a top-down commitment that means participation is not a bolt-on optional extra. The case will have to be argued, as belts tighten, for resources to fund both participation and the training of all those who facilitate it. And more effort will be needed to find consistent ways to measure and evaluate participation programmes and initiatives, so that the case for more can be made, and good practice shared.

But beyond this, a greater transformation is required. Only a fundamental shift in attitudes – by politicians, the media, parents, carers and the wider society of adults and elders – will ensure that the voices of children and of young people matter, and have a genuine influence. We seek a society in which all members are respected, and respect each other – a society in which we truly are 'in this together'. If we are to achieve that, no seat at our national conference table should go unfilled.

At the start of a new political term in this country an opportunity exists for an even greater transformation to begin. Too often, politicians gain easy political mileage out of vilifying the young. In 2010, let them take up the challenge: where young people are concerned, involve, show respect, try to understand and don't ostracise.

As responsible adults, enabling the participation of children and young people, it is necessary for us to:

- continue the listening we have begun, listen in new places and be committed to learning and listening more
- make sure that we understand and can explain the impact that children's views have on us, the decisions we make and the services we provide
- avoid equating success with simply holding a listening event isolated from action and shared responsibility
- expand the necessary cultural change that is underway in some public services to all public services
- attune media behaviour and commercial bodies to recognise children and young people as interested parties worthy of respect.

If having read this paper you are thinking about what you can do then share it with other readers. Place the first thing you intend to do, to demonstrate your commitment to the involvement of children and young people in changing their services and all our lives for the better, on www.participationworks.org.uk. We will post constructive commentary and ideas for other readers to see. Sharing ideas can lead to sharing action, saving effort and increasing impact.

The National Participation Forum will move from this 'think piece', aimed at engaging those who are not yet aware of the importance of listening to children and young people, to developing a National Participation Strategy. This will be a route map to greater participation. If you wish to contribute your thoughts on what should be included in a Call for Action in your field, please post it on www.participationworks.org.uk



A student in senior class at Paddock School, London, with the Class Charter that they created.

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