

How to involve young people in your project



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Photography Rob Baker Ashton, Colin Baldwin,
Peter Devlin, Shaun Fitzpatrick,
Alex Skibinski and Paula Solloway

Further information is available from:

Email general.enquiries@biglotteryfund.org.uk

Phone 0845 4 10 20 30

Textphone 0845 6 02 16 59

Our website www.biglotteryfund.org.uk

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Introduction

This brief guide sets out some ideas of how organisations providing services for young people can involve them in developing, running and reviewing services and activities. The guide is based on findings from the evaluation of our Young People's Fund (YPF) programme. It summarises information about the benefits of involving young people in every stage of a project, provides examples of how YPF funded projects have involved young people in their activities, and details some of the challenges they have faced.

The Young People's Fund was established in 2003 and has funded a wide range of projects across the UK. Each country has designed its own programme with a focus on funding projects that improve the lives of young people and engage them in all stages of the projects. Some projects are working with young people from a particular group, including people living in deprived areas, with a physical or learning disability or at risk of exclusion. Other projects are open to all young people in the



community. The projects used in this guide have been funded under the YPF programme.

As part of YPF young people were represented on the decision-making committees and played a key part in influencing what projects were funded. In Scotland local panels of young people were set up in every local authority area. They made recommendations on which projects should be supported in their local area.

Why involve young people

The right of children and young people to be involved in decision-making is recognised in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Over recent years there has been a significant focus on increasing participation and promoting active citizenship in all areas of public life. The active involvement of children and young people is now a central feature of policy and practice across the UK and it is increasingly expected that service providers will ensure the involvement of children and young people.

There is considerable evidence that the involvement of children and young people can engender change. It can benefit young people themselves, as well as the organisations that provide services for them, and the wider community.

Involvement can give young people a voice and empower them to influence activities and help improve services. It enables young people to feel that their opinions matter and that they will be taken seriously.

One of the main benefits of involving young people is that it improves their confidence and skills, and helps to motivate and heighten their aspirations. It can also give young people an opportunity to develop skills which can help to improve their life chances and future career prospects.

The way services are delivered and the activities available can be improved through the involvement of young people. They can help adult project workers to understand the needs of their client group and how to meet them, and ensure that the services provided are tailored to the needs of the young people being targeted.

The wider community can benefit from the involvement of young people and help them to be included into society. Some young people feel that they are viewed as anti-social by virtue of their age. Through active and meaningful participation, young people can make a valuable contribution. One young person involved in the YANE project said “I feel like a member of society and part of the community”.





How young people are involved

For YPF funded projects the most common method of involving young people is by informally asking them for feedback on project activities. Project workers felt that this was a good way to involve young people as it is easy to do and can help to build a good rapport between staff and young people. Using more structured feedback as a means of involving young people was also a common method for YPF projects. Structured feedback is usually through some form of a survey questionnaire. This is a popular method as the surveys are simple and quick for young people to complete but provide a sound evidence base to inform the development of the project.

A large number of the projects gave young people the opportunity to be involved at a higher level. For example, young people have delivered activities, managed certain elements of the main project, or are represented on a steering group, committee or youth forum. Project workers found that this kind of involvement can successfully increase

the engagement of young people in the project as it gives them a sense of ownership and responsibility. This form of active participation will generally involve a limited number of young people in a more intensive way.

The YPF evaluation found that the ways young people are involved in projects can be categorised into two different types. The first type is where young people get involved in how the project operates and the day-to-day delivery and management of activity. In these projects young people meet regularly and may take an active role in:

- developing and drafting training resources
- gauging the opinion of project participants
- planning 'everyday' project activities
- delivering 'everyday' project activities
- taking minutes in committee meetings.

Some examples of how projects have involved young people in the operation of the project include:

- ▶ The youth committee of the Y.A.X. project meet on a regular basis to discuss current and future project activity. They identify and cost future opportunities, plan and deliver the club newsletter, and deal with any issues to do with activities, such as lack of attendance.
- ▶ Young people who are involved with the Inspire project completed a questionnaire to identify and implement 'boredom busting activities'. They also have the opportunity to voice their views, concerns, likes and dislikes through their new youth club.
- ▶ Young people who attend the Express Yourself project are given the opportunity to volunteer and become peer-educators. When they are confident and capable they plan, deliver and evaluate their own activity. They believe that having been participants

themselves, they are well-placed to know what works and what the young people may enjoy doing.

The second type of involvement is where young people tend to take a high level view of the direction and activity of the projects, while project workers deal with daily aspects of it. Although there are exceptions to the rule, these young people are likely to meet less often than those involved in the day-to-day running of projects. Young people may take an active role in:

- setting the strategic direction of the project
- identifying issues
- identifying activities
- identifying who, how and why to approach people.

Some examples of where projects are involving young people at a more strategic level include:

- ▶ Young people involved in the Get Ready for Geneva project make long-term decisions about what

they want it to achieve while the project workers take responsibility for the day-to-day aspects of it. By defining the focus of campaign activity and articulating their messages at a high level, young people are involved in setting the strategic direction for the project.

- ▶ Young people in the Eye Matter – Campaign for Equality project are involved in campaign activity by identifying the issues to be addressed, who they should approach and how they should frame the issues. Project workers take care of daily aspects of running the project such as event organisation, finance and funding.
- ▶ Young people involved in the YANE project decide at the start of the year what three issues they want to address. They then form campaign teams, which include only young people. These teams report to a young person's steering group which has a strategic overview of the campaign work being undertaken across the region. Project staff are



available to provide operational support where this is needed but the campaigns belong to the young people.

It is important to remember that there are elements of both types of involvement present in many of the YPF projects. For example in Feile an Phobail, the youth sub committee meet on a regular basis to plan their activities and take part in social events. They are mainly involved in the daily running of the project, however the management committee currently includes two young people which gives them a role in the strategic development of the organisation as well.



Learning points

Peer recruitment is effective in encouraging young people to participate

Young people are well placed to communicate with their peers. Project staff find that young people can have more success than adults in encouraging other young people to get involved in the project. This can help projects to maximise their reach and encourage a wider range of young people to become involved. Word of mouth was the most common method used by young people to engage their peers, but more formal methods can include the development of promotional materials or strategies to help recruit other young people onto projects. The peer approach can be successful because:

- young people find it easier to trust other young people than they do adults
- the project can be promoted in a way that other young people can relate to and understand – they talk the same language
- when the message is coming from

another young person they do not feel that they are being preached to by an authority figure and are therefore more receptive

- seeing another young person like them involved in the project activity gives them a realistic role model to which they can aspire, thereby motivating them to give it a go too.

Recording how young people have influenced the project can be useful

For many projects, changes to services and activities are made on a regular basis in response to feedback from those participating. However, if these changes are not recorded then it is difficult to evidence how young people are effecting change in the projects. Having evidence to show how involving young people has influenced decisions and brought about change is important. It can help ensure that young people are being involved as fully and meaningfully as they can be and enables projects to realistically assess involvement and its impact.

Young people benefit more when they are actively involved

Young people who are actively involved in a project, through designing, running or managing activities, benefit more than those who only participate in activities. Active involvement can have a significant impact on young people's confidence and skills, but can particularly impact on their employability and future career prospects. It is important to ensure that young people are fully aware of how they can become actively involved in projects if they want to be. However not all young people can or will want to be actively involved and this should be respected.

Project staff must have the necessary skills to enable young people to get involved

Project staff need to have the necessary skills and expertise to identify and facilitate a range of involvement activities to suit the diverse needs and capacity of young people. It is vital to recognise that 'one size does not fit all' and that

involvement activities must be pitched at a level that is appropriate for young people and tailored to their needs. Project workers need to be skilled in:

- identifying a range of involvement activities to suit the variety of young people engaging with the project. This needs to include those who may lack confidence and those who may only engage with the project for a limited period of time
- identifying a level of activity that suits the young people in the project to ensure maximum participation
- effectively communicating the short and long term benefits that young people can gain from being involved
- challenging young people, including those that may be hard to reach, to become involved.

Young people may require time and support to build confidence and skills to help them be involved

It may not be practical, appropriate or possible to meaningfully involve young people in all aspects of project activity. Young people often need support to develop the confidence and skills to become actively involved. This can take time and appropriate support will be needed from skilled project staff.

Young people involved in the Eye Matter – Campaign for Equality project mentioned the role that training has played in increasing their confidence. This project recognised that some of the young people lacked confidence in their ability to be actively involved. As a result they now offer OCN Level 2 'Preparation for Participation' training. This allows young people to become involved gradually, in a manner and at a speed that suits them.

Young people value formal, accredited qualifications

Young people, especially those who have not achieved at school, are highly motivated by formal, accredited qualifications. To ensure the active involvement of young people over a sustained period it is important that they recognise the skills they have developed and feel they have gained something concrete as a result of their efforts.

The use of incentives and rewards can help sustain engagement

One of the challenges in keeping young people involved is generating and maintaining enthusiasm and commitment from them. One way to overcome this is to use incentives and rewards. For example following meetings of the Feile an Phobail project's youth sub-committee the young people tend to have a trip to the cinema or go bowling.

Further Information

Young people's needs should be considered to enable them to be fully involved

Young people tend to have rapidly changing priorities and circumstances that may make it difficult for them to be involved. Consideration will need to be given to the different needs of the young people so they are not prevented from taking part. For example do young people need support to build confidence or skills? Can young people access the project easily? Will young parents need support with childcare? Is there a cost associated to enable young people to take part and are there any cultural issues that need to be considered?

A number of YPF projects have adopted ways to overcome these barriers through a variety of methods. These include meeting any costs incurred by young people, providing transport to take young people to and from the project, supporting young people to manage a particular element such as a community event; or providing a progression route which enabled young people to become more involved in a project over time after an initial capacity building phase and with ongoing support.

Involving young people in all stages of a project is a central theme of the Young People's Fund across the UK. The evaluation is now in its fourth year and further information can be found on our website:

www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/eval_ypf

For further information on how to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives see Participation Works for more details:

Website:

www.participationworks.org.uk

Email:

enquiries@participationworks.org.uk

