

Good practice guides for organisations working with young people



2 Good practice in... actively involving young people

Introduction

The right of children and young people to be involved in decision making that affects them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In recent years there has been a considerable push to increase participation of children and young people in all areas of public life. This is promoted in law, in policy and in practice across the UK.

The active involvement of children and young people can be an emotive issue. There is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes active involvement nor is there agreement on the nature and extent to which young people can be meaningfully involved.

This guide outlines the approaches to active involvement that have worked well for projects funded through the Big Lottery Fund's (BIG) Young People's Fund (YPF). The active and meaningful involvement of young people was core to the design of YPF and was a key element setting it apart from other funding streams. The findings from the UK wide evaluation, carried out by GEN Consulting and Wavehill Consulting, showed a range of benefits arising from this.

The guide provides advice, practical examples and sources of further information and support for current and future projects wishing to achieve active and meaningful participation of children and young people.

Why involve young people?

Before embarking on activity to promote the active involvement of children and young people, you should have a clear understanding of why you want to involve young people and a clear view of what you are hoping to achieve.

This clarity will ensure that participation is meaningful and **NOT** merely tokenistic.

There are recognised benefits of active involvement for all relevant groups. These include:

Benefits to young people...

- ▶ A voice and an opportunity to influence the services that affect them.
- ▶ Services which better reflect and meet their needs.
- ▶ Opportunities to develop new skills.

Benefits to organisations...

- ▶ New ideas from young people.
- ▶ Improved service quality and efficiency as a result of greater accountability, improved structures, policies and decision making.
- ▶ Better able to meet the needs of young people.
- ▶ Improved skills for workers.

Benefits for communities ...

- ▶ Enabling the participation of children and young people in wider society.
- ▶ Equipping children and young people with the skills and attributes to be responsible, participating adults.
- ▶ Improved community and intergenerational relations as young people are viewed as positive contributors.

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How to involve young people

To ensure that involvement is meaningful, there are a number of questions you should ask and answer before you begin ¹.

1. What are we aiming to achieve (for us and the young people)?
2. Where are we now?
4. Are we willing / able to resource it?
5. Are we being honest with young people?
6. Are we prepared to give up some power?
7. Are we prepared to take criticism?
8. Is this a long-term commitment?
9. Will we build in changes long term?

There are many ways that young people can be actively involved. There are no right or wrong methods. The most effective methods of involvement will depend on the nature of your project activity and the characteristics of the young people you are working with.

Across the projects involved in the evaluation of YPF, the most common means of involvement included:

Most popular ways of involving young people

- ▶ Review activity providing informal feedback to staff.
- ▶ Review activity by providing structured feedback to staff e.g. surveys/focus group.
- ▶ Design of project activities.
- ▶ Engagement of other young people in activities e.g. peer recruitment.
- ▶ Involvement in youth forums or steering groups to guide the development and delivery of activity.
- ▶ Delivery of project activities.
- ▶ Management of activities/elements of activities (including managing budgets/resources).
- ▶ Recruitment of project staff e.g. involvement in drafting job specifications and in interviews.
- ▶ Young people represented on the management committee of the wider organisation.

The evaluation of YPF highlighted two distinct types of involvement:

Operational involvement:

Young people are involved in the day to day delivery and management of the project. Projects tend to have an internal focus meaning that while the wider community may benefit from project activity, the primary beneficiaries are the young people themselves. Activities include:

- consulting with other young people.
- planning everyday project activities.
- delivering everyday project activities.
- developing project and training resources.

Strategic involvement:

Young people take a high level strategic role in the activity and future direction of the project while project workers deal with daily aspects of delivery and management.

Projects are often issue based bringing together young people with shared characteristics or views. These include campaign groups and youth forums. Activities include:

- setting the strategic direction.
- identifying issues and activities.
- identifying and approaching strategic stakeholders. to bring about change.

Active involvement enhances the benefits to young people as a result of participation in project activity.

There is no evidence that a particular type of involvement brings about greater benefit than the other and it is often the case that elements of both types of involvement are present in a single project.

¹ Adapted from Treseder, P. (1997), *Empowering Children and Young People*, Children's Rights Office and SCF

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In other words...

...it is the process of involvement that is significant in achieving impacts rather than the specific activities...

Getting it right!

Additional resources will be needed:

If your organisation is committed to the active involvement of young people, additional resources will be required. You must be aware of:

Costs to young people – involvement which requires more frequent attendance at the project may result in costs for young people, for example transport costs, meals and refreshments or childcare costs (for young parents). You should be aware of these costs and work with young people to overcome barriers and facilitate their involvement. You could consider:

- providing transport to and from the venue.
- providing healthy and nutritious meals and refreshments to young people to promote involvement.
- promoting involvement that fits with childcare responsibilities e.g. providing onsite childcare facilities so young parents can be involved while their children are present.

Training and ongoing support for young people –

there will be barriers to active involvement if young people lack the capacity or confidence to become involved and remain involved. Differences in levels of confidence and ability may easily result in young people who could benefit from involvement being marginalised.

You should be aware of this and should promote and support involvement opportunities so that young people feel confident and able to participate at the time and in the way that is suitable for them. You can provide:

- ▶ **Practical support** – for example, assistance to take minutes at meetings, to develop project activities and resources, or to organise events.

- ▶ **Emotional support** – for example support to develop the confidence and self esteem of young people, assistance with presentation and public speaking.

Much of this support can and will be provided by experienced youth workers.

You may also want to consider formal training to support young people. This proved successful for some YPF projects (Case Study Example 1).

Case Study Example 1

Country: Northern Ireland

Project: Eye Matter Campaign for Equality

Organisation: RNIB

The Eye Matter Campaign for Equality is a campaign group for young people with a visual impairment. The group campaign for positive change to promote accessibility and equality for those with a visual impairment.

While some young people were very proactive in terms of campaigning, others lacked the confidence to become heavily involved straight away.

Project workers recognised this and gave young people the opportunity to complete the OCN level two Preparation for Participation qualification. This allowed young people to become involved gradually, in the manner and at the speed that suited them.

Project workers noted a significant increase in participation over the course of the funding period. This happened in line with increasing confidence and skills of the young people as they realised that they had the power to make real and lasting change.

For more information see:

Evaluation of the YPF Year 3 (2009)

Or

www.eyematter.co.uk/

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Flexibility is key:

The move from childhood to adulthood can be a difficult time for young people; it is a time when many aspects of their lives are changing and when they will have many competing priorities.

Flexibility is important in achieving and maintaining active and meaningful involvement:

- ▶ **Vary involvement methods** and processes to find solutions that best meet the changing needs of the young people you are working with (case study example 2).
- ▶ **Don't be afraid to test things out.** It will take time to put in place the processes and structures which will best promote active involvement and sometimes things will not work. Try new ideas and adapt your approaches in line with feedback from young people.
- ▶ **Mixed methods may be effective.** There are no universal solutions and different young people will enjoy and respond to different methods of involvement. Don't be scared to mix it up!

Case Study Example 2

Country: England

Project: SOLE (Shout Out Loud Everyone)

Organisation: Youth Project @ Apostles and Cuthberts (YPACs) (Manchester)

SOLE is a youth forum that gives young people responsibility for the planning, delivery and management of YPACs youth activities. Flexibility has been important to SOLE's success and ongoing development.

At the outset, SOLE found that attendance at meetings of the forum was irregular and many young people struggled to give the commitment that was needed to drive forward YPAC's youth activities.

SOLE decided to change its format and moved to a fortnightly meeting of core members and monthly meetings of all members. Meetings were run with minimal numbers to maintain momentum and agendas were kept short. This meant there was a core group to drive activity but that all members still had the opportunity to be actively involved (but in a way that was more suitable to their needs).

It was originally anticipated that SOLE membership would be for a limited period, for example two years, allowing as many people as possible to take responsibility for developing YPAC's activities.

The time taken to embed arrangements has resulted in a core group remaining in post for an extended period although changes are now planned. The project lead's advice was to be flexible and to remain committed to involvement by finding ways you can bring young people on board at different times and in different ways.

For more information see:

Evaluation of the YPF Year 5 (2011)

Or

www.ypacmanchester.org.uk

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The importance of relationships:

The skills and personal attributes of project staff are crucial if youth sector projects are to engage young people and make a positive difference. This applies in all areas of youth work and also to active involvement.

To become involved young people have to feel motivated, empowered, supported, responsible and trusted. They should enjoy their role and enjoy spending time with the young people and project workers present.

In other words...

...relationships are the key ...

There are a number of things that you can do to help build the relationships necessary to promote and support active involvement:

- ▶ **A partnership approach** – successful examples of active involvement often involve a partnership approach.

Young people feel respected, trusted and on an equal level with adults. Through a partnership approach young people can also see the hard work that is done by project workers on their behalf and can be motivated to work equally hard to give something back (case study example 3).

Case Study Example 3

Country: Scotland

Project: Fairway

Organisation: The Hansel Foundation

Example: The Fairway project supported young people with learning difficulties or disabilities to make the move to adulthood. It offered a wide range of activities including peer mentoring, one-to-one support with professional staff and Friendship Circles. The project involved young people in planning activity through its Advisory Group. The Group was made up of project staff, young people and peer mentors. The Advisory Group advised on the types of activities sought by participants.

The Advisory Group was an effective link between young participants and project workers. It ensured two way communication between workers and young people and increased buy-in to the project from all sides.

For more information see:

Evaluation of the YPF Year 3 (2009)

Or

www.fairwayproject.org.uk

- ▶ **Incentives and rewards** - increase the enjoyment of young people, encourage and motivate them for continued participation and show them that their efforts are appreciated. Rewards and incentives commonly include outings to the cinema and bowling or short residential trips.

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Where can I find out more?

There are many sources of information and support if you are looking to increase the active involvement of children and young people in your project.

National structures and policies:

If you would like further information on national structures and policies supporting the active involvement of children and young people see:

England and Wales:

The Children's Commissioner for England

Visit: www.11million.org.uk

The Children's Commissioner for Wales

Visit: www.childcomwales.org.uk

For policy statement see: Every Child Matters (ECM)

Scotland:

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP)

Visit: www.cypcommissioner.org

For policy statement see: Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)

Northern Ireland:

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

Visit: www.niccy.org

For policy statement see: Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge

Resources for involving young people:

If you would like information and resources to help you implement and increase the active involvement of children and young people in your organisation visit

Participation Works at:

www.participationworks.org.uk

The Northern Ireland Participation Network –

Visit: www.participationnetwork.org/

Other sources of information and resources are:

The National Youth Agency – Hear by Right

Visit: www.nya.org.uk

UK Youth Parliament structures

UK Youth Parliament.

Visit: www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk

Scottish Youth Parliament

Visit: www.syp.org.uk

Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Visit: www.niyf.org

Funky Dragon – Welsh Youth Parliament

Visit: www.funkydragon.org

If you would like information about the national evaluation of the Young People's Fund contact:

BIG: 0845 410 2030

Copies of the YPF evaluation reports and supporting documents are available online from BIG at:

www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/eval_ypf