



British Youth Council
the voice of young people in the UK



A Participation Worker's view

A report from BYC's young people and governance workshop at the 2005 PWNE Annual Conference

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The British Youth Council (BYC) believes that young people should be involved in decisions that affect their lives, and participate in wider society and civic life. It is this belief that underpins BYC's work to support and encourage the involvement of children and young people at all levels of an organisation, from its decision making processes to its operational activities.

The benefits of listening to children and young people are widely acknowledged, but taking their involvement to the next step can be difficult. Organisations need to address important questions such as: how should children and young people be involved in their organisation's governance at all levels? What level of involvement is appropriate?

Regardless of the level of involvement, BYC believes that young people should be given a seat at the table of organisational governance. Unfortunately this is not the accepted norm. In fact, many organisations ignore children and young people altogether.

To counter this view, BYC's *Youth at the Table* programme aims to support young people's involvement in governance through the development of appropriate resources and support systems.

Governance can mean different things to different people. Adults, as well as children and young people might struggle to fully understand what governance means and how it applies to the everyday operation of an organisation.

For some, governance describes how an organisation makes its decisions; for others it ensures that an organisation has policies and procedures that explain how it should operate. In reality, both are two sides of the same coin, as governance represents the processes by which an organisation makes the decisions which guide its operation.

This report is based on the findings of a BYC workshop that took place at the first annual conference for Participation Workers in England in October 2005. It captures the discussions of Participation Workers as well as academics and others from the voluntary youth sector and central government who attended the workshop. The report captures the perspective and views aired by those participants that attended the workshops.

This is one of a series of three reports; the other two reports are,

- > Governance - what's it all about? BYC's research on children and young people's understanding of governance and their resource and support needs;
- > Involved or ignored? BYC's research on children and young people's involvement in organisational governance.

BYC's *Youth at the Table* programme is focused on children and young people's involvement in governance. It is an initial 12-month programme to develop resources and materials to help children and young people be involved in the governance of youth-led and adult organisations.

Over that 12-month period BYC will,

- Consult children and young people on which resources they would need or want to be involved and how they would like to be involved in an organisation's governance;
- Survey organisations to find out how many, and at what level, they involve children and young people in their governance;
- Develop resources, including training materials for children and young people on governance;
- Test and assess the effectiveness of the resources and training materials with children and young people.

The programme is partly funded by the Department for Education and Skills, as part of a wider partnership project – CHYPP (Children and Young People's Participation Partnership), which includes five other leading organisations involved in children and young people's participation. CHYPP believes that improving the influence children and young people have on public decisions requires a new collective and collaborative approach between NGOs, Governments, and children and young people.

BYC facilitated a workshop at the first annual conference for Participation Workers Network for England (PWNE), which was organised by the Carnegie Young People Initiative. The conference was held at Regent's College, London on 11 October 2005.

BYC's Citizenship Worker and four young people from Refugee Youth delivered presentations at the start of the workshop to focus participant's minds on BYC's *Youth at the Table* project and words associated with governance from both positive and negative points of view.

More than 30 workers attended the workshop, which was delivered twice, during the conference. Notes, based on the two presentations and the following discussion questions, were taken,

- > How can an organisation's culture inspire or restrict young people's involvement in governance?
- > How can organisations ensure those young people involved don't burn out?
- > Are there any assumptions associated with involving children and young people and governance, if yes what are?

Definition

BYC has regularly been asked for a definition of governance as part of this programme. As part of Refugee Youth's presentation, two definitions were proposed,

"To direct and control the actions, affairs, policies and functions of an organisation."

Source: Oxford Dictionary

"People's authority to take action, not merely the authority to make decisions that guide other people's action."

Source: Anne Matthews, Poplar HARCA

Participants from both workshops felt that Anne Matthews' description accurately reflected the variation in practice within organisations on how their governance operates.

Wrong assumption

Participants felt that many adults wrongly assume that children and young people are not interested in politics as it is seen to be boring and thus they would not want to be involved in governance. In reality, the dilemma revolves around how to keep them involved and how to make the subject matter interesting to keep children, young people, and adults interested.

For some, the debate on incentives is worrying. Involvement should be about making changes; adults get paid for the work they do but since it isn't participation. Suggestions for easy ways around this included, informing children and young people about what happens by giving them regular feedback, thus demonstrating that their views are being counted.

It was acknowledged that whilst some children and young people find governance boring, others find it exciting. Participants felt that it was important to captivate children and young people's motivation through local issues in a targeted approach. They also felt that adults would be enthused to involve children and young people if children and young people feel they have a say.

The norm not the exception

Mainstreaming involvement through organisations such as councils will help. Such organisations know that they have to involve/consult children and young people on issues that affect them. However sometimes organisations don't know how to do this; participants identified training as a possible way to help children and young people voice their opinions.

Participants pointed out that the education system currently does not support this; and noted a need to start teaching children and young people about governance. Concern was raised about the growing trend to 'use the "good" kids rather than those kids who really know how things work.' Since in cases like these, only a select group of children and young people are used, those not participating might think they do not have voice in the process or a platform from which to express their views.

Examples of practice

During the workshops, many participants highlighted work currently undertaken in their organisation in this area. They included,

- > The Foyer Federation, where they reward young people's involvement through certification and the gaining of a qualification, rather than just providing vouchers.
- > NDC (new Deals for the Community) Kilburn, where they use a prize draw as an incentive to get young people to vote. When they asked young people what motivated them to vote, all the young people stated that they were not encouraged to vote because of the prize draw; they just wanted to vote for their friends!

- NCB (National Children's Bureau) have young people on their Board of Governors. They are realistic with the young people right at the start, informing them of how much they are able to change the (governance) structure. All young people on the Board have an adult mentor who supports them; they carry out ongoing evaluation to ensure that the process is working for those young people and the organisation.
- Northants Children's Fund is building a framework; they are looking at the organisation's structure so that key decision-makers take participation on board.

Training and support

Participants expressed a need to build children and young people's confidence and power. It was acknowledged that this depends on a number of factors, including their own awareness and resources that are made available to children, young people, and workers.

There is an assumption that young people, youth workers and adults working with children and young people have all received appropriate training to participate in governance. Participants view this as something that decision-makers should be doing, but the awareness necessary for everyone to take part is not there.

Whilst training was acknowledged as an essential element, an obsession with only training that was accredited could frustrate and disengage all involved, as this can take a lot of time due to the amount of preparation that needs to be completed.

Respondents believe that organisations need to involve their staff, through training, on how to inspire and find children and young people to get involved. This is closely linked with the need for organisations to be creative in the way they involve children and young people; suggestions included holding meetings via video links or having adults attend children and young people meetings.

The provision of budgets and resources, were seen as essential to make this happen. Encouraging children and young peoples' involvement in the design and delivery of training received by adults and workers is also necessary.

Developing a map to highlight existing work on the ground was seen as a positive step. Such an exercise helps establish links and possible collaborations between workers and organisations, as well as overcome the isolation experienced by many workers in the field.

Those who attended the workshops supported the need to involve children and young people in the governance of organisations.

The 'one size fits all approach' should not be followed; instead organisations should use a variety of structures at different levels, with which children and young people themselves feel comfortable and confident. There is a belief that working in the voluntary sector provides more opportunities to think outside the box and act creatively in this area.

There was consensus that many children and young people may already be involved, as shown in the examples of practice, but that they may not recognise what they're doing by the name 'governance'.

Participants were in agreement for the need to move from a style of 'government' which creates edicts and focuses on decisions being implemented by sending decisions downwards, and move towards a system of 'governance', which is about involving people at the most appropriate level or levels.

For further information about BYC's *Youth at the Table* project please contact Jules Mason, Head of Citizenship and Development at jules.mason@byc.org.uk or on **020 7785 6456**.

For more information about the Children and Young People's Participation Partnership, visit the Participation Works gateway at www.participationworks.org.uk.

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