



# Executive summary

## **Valuing young voices, strengthening democracy:**

the contribution made by youth engagement

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Councils are supporting young people to participate in society – from shaping services to be delivered differently and helping to make public decisions, through to supporting social action where young people have changed their area for the better. Through youth engagement work, councils have enabled young people to improve their local areas and strengthen democracy. Whilst future budget decisions will be difficult, the evidence in the full report demonstrates how wise investment in youth engagement can bring many benefits to the council, local area and young people.

This report, commissioned by the Local Government Group and the National Youth Agency (NYA), demonstrates the contribution that youth engagement makes to strengthening democracy and delivering many outcomes that communities and councils seek. It focuses on three aspects of youth engagement.

- **Public participation:** typically through involvement in youth forums or councils, participation in surveys and consultations or through activities linked to quality assurance and improvement of services such as inspection, mystery shopping and involvement in recruitment.
- **Social participation:** defined as group activities that young people are involved in. These include many examples of social action projects, where young people are motivated to improve their local area; volunteering, as both a one-off and an on-going activity; activities such as group fund-raising and support for charities or good causes; and participating in more generic social group and positive activities.
- **Individual participation:** as a way of exploring the motivation and benefits for young people and the impact this has on strengthening democracy.

**Accountability and legitimacy** is increased amongst decision makers where young people are involved in public participation activities. There is evidence that decision makers change their approach and attitudes to young people, as well as changing the decisions they make, as a result of public participation work. Research found that the involvement of youth councillors in public decision making:

- increased young people's participation in decision making (89 per cent)
- improved quality of youth services (62 per cent)
- saved the council money (22 per cent)<sup>1</sup>.

There is evidence of particular progress in **increased accountability** to and **improved services** for young people in health and education settings. Ofsted<sup>2</sup> found that the impetus created by youth participation work had a positive impact on other council services and departments. Examples were seen where young people had influenced the development of sexual health services and where architects and planners looked to youth forums for their views and opinions on, for instance, play spaces.

Analysis of examples of 'What's changed' using the NYA's Hear By Right framework<sup>3</sup>, show that young people positively influence the **development of new provision** in their area, such as BMX parks, youth cafes or improved youth centres responding to the needs expressed by young people. Young people have also been able to **influence the way in which services are delivered**, for example, improving and changing the times a Connexions centre or sexual health clinic is open to young people, making it better suited to their needs.

There has been significant growth in the numbers of youth and school councils and other representative structures. There are significant benefits to the participating young people who increase in **confidence** and gain a wide range of **personal and social skills** often linked to the skills required to participate in democratic life and to take on leadership roles. Ofsted<sup>4</sup> found that youth services have engaged young people well through youth councils, forums and community action. They enjoyed participating and developed **political literacy skills**, as well as the more practical and essential skills of **communication**.

Volunteering also plays a significant role in developing the **self-confidence and skills**<sup>5</sup> of young people. It supports the development of **self-efficacy** as young people start to see that they can influence decision making, take some control and improve their local area, thus contributing to **community cohesion**.

Volunteering contributes to improved **employability**<sup>6</sup> of young people as they gain the skills required for work and adult life. There is evidence of improved **social capital** in local communities where young people volunteer and greater **empowerment of communities**.



### Tim's story

When Tim was 10, he was having trouble dealing with his home situation. His attitude often got him into trouble, he talked-back often and he vandalised his own home and other people's possessions, often spurred on by his friends. During this time, he met a voluntary mentor, who he spent a lot of time with talking about home and school, and about how he didn't have to do certain things to be accepted. His mentor wanted to see him become a positive influence at school, with his friends, and at home. This encouragement from his mentor to be a positive influence, along with the skills he had gained at the regular youth event, led to Tim being able to volunteer as a leader of weekly motivational workshops for young people, and lead a monthly event for young people. Tim also voted in the last election. Tim admits, that if it were not for the mentor and the positive friendships he developed, he would not have got involved in volunteering, or voted. He would have been a part of the ranks of the disengaged and probably in a considerably worse position in life too - somewhere similar to the friends who used to spur him on.

There are benefits derived from the engagement of young people in the wider community through initiatives that engage peer groups rather than individuals. The evaluation of the pilot National Citizen Service for 16 year olds found that amongst other things the scheme provided social mixing and supported community engagement. Outreach work and supportive adults are required to build the conditions for disengaged young people to become involved.

“Volunteering developed me as a person, and instead of now thinking small, I can now think big... it has given me a purpose in life”

**(Zak, 18)**

“I was excited about being in a group that ‘did’ things productively, other than just sitting around waiting for things to happen; we make these things happen... being in the group gives me a way to do some good in the area.”

**(Jonah, 15)**

(All quotes have been drawn from responses to the questionnaires and focus group held with young people as part of this research.)

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# References

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