

Supporting & Developing an Effective Youth Council



A guide for councillors, staff and volunteers
supporting youth councils in county, district
and unitary authorities



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Introduction

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From Fermanagh to Fife, Bridgend to Birmingham, over the past decade there has been an explosion of youth councils, cabinets, parliaments and forums funded and supported by local authorities.

The challenges to actively involve young people in local democracy and decision-making are many and varied; from youth projects and school councils to local youth councils and the Children's Trust Board. Despite this, there is a clear appetite to effectively support the participation of young people in local democracy and decision-making.

In a pick 'n' mix approach of tried and tested techniques and projects, this guide seeks to pull together existing effective practice from across the country. It is just a guide, and is not designed to be a 'one size fits all' resource. There are too many variants locally for that type of approach to ever work, for example finances, staff support, local politics.

The Effective Youth Council Checklist (later in this document) and the Scaling Activity (available to download from www.byc.org.uk/resources) might be useful starting points. For the sake of ease and consistency the term youth council will be used throughout this document - this means the same as forum, cabinet, parliament etc.

Please read, check, change and adapt things to meet your local needs.

Characteristics of a successful youth council

The many successful examples of youth councils shaping services share similar characteristics;

A clear **rationale** as to:

- Why the local authority seeks to involve young people.
- What young people can and can't do and thereby establishing boundaries for what **impact** they can have in decision-making processes.
- A nominated **Participation Champion** to help lead the participation agenda (at officer level), with a **network of supporting staff across the council or department** (at middle management and front line levels) to support the agenda and share the responsibility.
- A participation **audit process and implementation plan** to raise expectations and share responsibility for achieving change, coupled with a mechanism to measure the success of young people's involvement.
- **Flagship projects** to help raise the profile of the agenda and win the 'hearts and minds' of a range of audiences e.g. staff.
- **A group of young people that looks and sounds like the youth population and speaks on their behalf with authority.**

Typical barriers and suggested solutions/opportunities

Workers and young people the length and breadth of the country have banged their collective heads on the same brick wall but these barriers aren't insurmountable. Below are some of the more typical challenges with suggestions for overcoming them. More information on specific ideas is detailed later in this guide.

Barrier 1 Understanding of participation and identifying opportunities

Solutions:

- Capacity building training for young people and adults
- Forward planning of participation work.

Barrier 2 Sceptical decision-makers

Solution:

- Supporting and developing positive relationships between youth councillors/Members of Youth Parliament (MYPs)/Young Mayors and Lead Elected Member/ Director of Children's Services (or equivalent) such as through a local shadowing project.

Barrier 3 It's easier to do things without participation

Solutions:

- The upfront costs and timescales mean it's probably easier not to involve service users; however to what extent does this make for a customer-focused service? Does it develop an appetite for shaping decisions that affect young people?
- Strong policy and legislative steers: local authority participation strategy, the area plan for Children and Young People, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) e.g. Article 12, 'Duty to Involve' - service users helping to shape services, resulting in a stronger customer-focus where service users are respected and are supported to be actively involved.

Barrier 4 Tokenistic, quick and dirty approaches viewed as 'good enough'

Solution:

- Recognise the need to work from where people are at, combined with raising expectations and aspirations - research good practice and re-model it to fit the needs and expectations of your area.

Barrier 5 Money and time

Solution:

- Effective planning of opportunities. For participation to be sustainable and systematic, it needs to be embedded in the performance management and planning cycle to ensure it's thorough, time-scaled and resourced to meet the expectations and self-assessment/ inspection requirement.

Building an Effective Youth Council

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With young people

The group will need to receive induction training to include team building, meeting and communications skills. It should be considered to what extent the group will be involved in planning their own activities i.e. contributing to/ writing a work plan.

Peer mentoring training could be considered (where appropriate) as an exit strategy as well as a means to providing sustainability.

With adults

For staff, this would be participation theory, establishing expectations and identifying key participation opportunities. As well as sharing existing good practice and lessons learnt, identify gaps in knowledge and development needs.



Youth council stages of development:

1. **Establishing** - the group have been recruited or identified, either through election, selection or a combination of the two. This stage is all about gelling the group together - so ice breakers, team building exercises and the like are very much order of the day.

As well as keeping the group together, the challenge is for them to know what they're doing - through an effective induction. Typically this could include an introduction to decision-making processes, what their role is in these processes, who does what at the council and identifying present and future opportunities.

2. **Consultative** - keen to get value for money and meet legal 'Duty to Involve' requirements, the council will rightly be eager to consult the group on issues that affect them. If people are queuing up to speak to the group, this is a welcome development, particularly in the early stages. To be viewed as a group worthy of consultation, they will need a good mandate (sizable turnout) and be credible in the eyes of decision-makers.
3. **Agenda setting** - this is taking responsibility for highlighting issues that concern young people, rather than solely reacting to the issues and consultations that the council or other organisations want feedback on.

To do this, the youth council needs evidence/intelligence of which issues concern young people most (through consultation or the use of existing data). A creative vehicle/opportunity (a project, meeting or event) then needs to be used to communicate these messages; to influence the decision-makers and systems constructively instead of reacting to them.

4. **Scrutiny** - over the past few years, accountability has become a huge focus of local government.

For a time, young people's involvement in scrutiny work was typically limited to a young person sitting on a committee but fortunately things have moved on. There are now good examples of local government providing a vehicle to enable young people to ask questions on how decisions have been made in order to consider whether service improvements can be put in place and make recommendations to this effect. As such, decision-makers are familiar with this approach as it is based on evidence.

5. **Systematic and sustainable** - the youth council is trusted as the voice of young people and this is evidenced by them being the 'go-to group' for hearing what young people think about an issue affecting them. Consultation with the group is planned in advance (where possible). While the youth council sit at the decision-making table such as the Children's Trust Board, they can raise issues that concern young people and establish relationships with key players which can be build on and fostered.

The youth council will have a good profile with the wider youth population, and crucially where there will be evidence of change. At this stage sufficient support is available by way of core funding, staff, access to information and people.

Evidence, evidence, evidence:

Evidence of change is one of the questions that's most frequently asked of youth councils. When budgets are pressed, participation projects such as youth councils need to increasingly prove their worth - and rightly so. If it's not challenging, influencing and changing things that concern young people, why does it exist?

While examples of tangible change demonstrate milestones in moving forward, in order to be sustainable they need to be underpinned by cultural change (those things that can be taken for granted when you have them, but are missed when they're absent).

It might be pointing out the obvious, but without cultural change, tangible change is at best challenging to achieve. It is within grasp, however, and all the projects and ideas that supplement this guide (available on www.byc.org.uk/resources) provide platforms to develop relationships and influence, which young people can feed into while making recommendations for change.

Gathering examples of well executed projects involve:

- People - the power of experiences and stories passed through word of mouth
- Papers - quantitative and qualitative data, minutes of meetings
- Records - photos and video of events and activities.

Effective Youth Council Checklist

	Yes	Some/ Maybe	No	Priority Ranking (1-16)
1. Are senior managers and councillors committed to the youth council?				
2. Is there an effective, committed Participation Worker(s), admin support and operational budget?				
3. Is there a direct channel of communication to Children's Services SMT/the Council's Chief Officers?				
4. Is there a direct channel of communication to Lead Elected Members?				
5. Does the youth council have regular and diarised meetings?				
6. Does the youth council seek to consult the wider youth population and present these issues to decision makers?				
7. Does the group have a strong mandate i.e. is it elected democratically with a high turnout?				
8. Is training provided for all members of the youth council?				
9. Does the youth council have a budget?				
10. Do youth council members have regular meetings with the Director of Children's Services/Lead Elected Member?				
11. Are youth council meeting minutes distributed to all elected representatives and appropriate staff rapidly after each meeting?				
12. Do council departments, services or external organisations e.g. the police, seek to consult the youth council?				
13. Does the youth council use the ability to tell decision-makers what is important for young people i.e. an agenda setting ability				
14. Are members of the youth council involved in scrutinising services and policies affecting young people?				
15. Is there public recognition of the contribution members of the youth council make?				
16. Is the youth council seen as an agent for change in the council?				

Being Representative

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Many youth councils exist in part as an entry level to understanding the democratic process and as a result, a significant proportion of youth councils are elected. Despite this, the question of being representative is a broader one.

Does it mean looking and sounding like the wider youth population, the group it seeks to represent? Or, should youth councils have skills, contacts and relationships in the community that means they can speak on behalf of young people?

The short answer is both, and although achieving these goals is more difficult, they are within touching distance.

Rightly or wrongly, there is a perception that youth council members are head boys/girls, middle class, high achievers - the 'usual suspects'. There are a few responses to this:



Firstly, **challenging the 'usual suspect' stereotype** through activities like the 'Register of Interests' activity available on www.byc.org.uk/resources.

Secondly, **Substance** - does being on the youth council mean going to committee meetings and reading through lots of paperwork? Or is it more dynamic project based work, where young people learn things like filming, editing and interviewing skills to consult with other young people, subsequently using these views to challenge decision-makers.

Thirdly, **Style** - for example the promotional materials used for the election. Flyer design companies can frequently offer more competitive design and printing services than council's in-house alternatives. Crucially they're used to

producing materials for a young audience such as gig and club nights. The same goes for the image of the youth council - are they usually photographed shaking hands with a stereotypical suited politician or mayor? Is this really the imagery that will make young people proclaim from the roof tops that they want to be part of their local youth council?

Expectations are probably high and time is likely to be short so enough pontificating, let's be pragmatic:

Speak to your Head of Electoral or Democratic Services - this person could be an amazing ally, from supporting or running the election process to promoting access to councillors. And if you smile sweetly enough, they might even contribute to or cover costs of the elections, and youth council/councillor relationship-building activities like a shadowing project.

Questions:

- 1) **Who will sign off the youth council model including how the young people are elected or selected?** Director of Children's Services, Head of Democratic/Electoral Services, Head of Integrated Youth Support Service or similar.
- 2) **What would a 'representative and reflective' youth council look like?** Investigate the demographic breakdown of the youth population in the area.
- 3) **How can the youth council complement and add to existing participation structures that already exist?** Such as the NHS, police, Youthbank (inc Youth Opportunities Fund etc.), Connexions, Children in Care Council (or equivalent).
- 4) **How many young people can realistically be supported within existing resources?** Including inducting, feeding and watering them for the year, plus travel costs and staff support time.
- 5) **If any of the young people have complex needs, will there be additional funding available to ensure their full participation?** For example, the support costs for signers for a young person who communicated only using British Sign Language could come to over £3,500 for one year. When Managers and Elected Members talk about inclusivity and the group being representative - is there a cheque book ready to make this happen?
- 6) **Outside of a general election what is the local election turnout?** This is the target turnout for the youth elections. There is very little that gives youth councils more credibility and a stronger mandate than sitting next to adult councillors who were elected on less votes.
- 7) **Can you include a consultation of the main issues in the local area that concern young people most on the reverse of the ballot paper?** Are the issues within the remit and control of the council? These issues can provide focus and form the basis of the youth council campaigns and work plan during the term of office. Plus it makes decision-makers really sit up and listen if over 4,000 young people say their number one concern is bullying, for example.

Two year terms - it's very tempting to look at costs for running annual elections (printing, travel, staff time etc.) and seeing the possibilities of 'efficiencies' by changing to two year terms. There hasn't been detailed research into drop-out rates for two year terms, but anecdotal evidence suggests that there is around a 25-30% drop-out rate during the term of office.

Up-front savings are made, but these are displaced by recruiting and inducting new members. This places additional pressures on workers and increases their hours and workload.

Elements of running a youth election

A whole guidance pack could be produced just on how to run a youth election but here is a snapshot of things to take into account:

Speak to Democratic Services, and see what support they can provide (this didn't provide the response you were hoping for? Try updating your line-manager/strategic lead for participation and/or the Lead Member. But tread carefully).

1. Ensure admin support availability
2. Agree the election model
3. Arrange use and delivery of ballot boxes
4. Communicate as early as possible with Polling/Voting Stations - a letter of encouragement from the Director of Children's Services, the Council Leader, local MP(s) always helps. Build on goodwill following other participation work e.g. support given to school councils or consider offering training to schools with the highest turnout.
5. Establish a named contact at each polling/voting station
6. Obtain quotes for printing of promotional materials used to find candidates (e.g. 20,000 A5 flyers, 1000 A3 posters), ballot papers (including consultation on reverse), and Candidates' Election Statement posters (dependent on number of candidates). It's best to get these as one quote as this will give you greater leverage for negotiating a discount.
7. Write a polling/voting briefing pack
8. Write a candidate briefing pack
9. Deliver briefing session with candidates
10. Print ballot papers and distribute with posters etc. that the polling/voting station needs
11. The vote - high turnouts have been achieved when polling/voting stations have had some flexibility in when to vote. This also gives more options for freak situations like school closures due to snow or illness. Two weeks is a good period.
12. Arrange for the ballot to be collected
13. The count
14. Send thank you letters to the polling/voting stations
15. Announce results, providing a good opportunity to celebrate the achievements of the out-going youth council - in front of parents, and the local great and good.

There are lots of resources on the internet to get inspiration from (e.g. polling station packs) so you shouldn't need to start off from scratch for any of the materials mentioned above.

Approximately 95% of the youth population are in full time education in establishments which provide captive audiences. There is a pattern of higher turnout when all local schools take part in an election, therefore it's worth really pushing for at least one candidate to stand in each school.

Making it Work

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What the youth council is about...

- Who does it seek to represent? Such as 11-19 year olds who live, work or are in education in your area.
- How will local issues be represented regionally and nationally? For instance through the British Youth Council.
- Is the youth council non-party political?

Youth council members

- If there is an election, how many of the group will be elected? Over what areas (Wards or constituencies).
- Who can stand and vote? For example any young person, who lives, works or is in education in the area, aged 11-18.
- How long will the terms of office be? Such as all members of the group serve one term and each term runs from January to December.
- What is the electoral system? For instance the candidate with the highest number of votes becomes the youth council member.
- What about young people who wouldn't necessarily want to stand for election, or who are key groups that the council need to hear from? Such as a maximum of six young people can be invited or co-opted or nominated onto the youth council, this is to help ensure that the group is reflective of young people in the area and/or specific groups e.g. Looked After young people.
- Will elected and non-elected young people be equal members of the group?

Adults and the council

Adults and the council have different roles in relation to the youth council:

1. Co-ordinate the election, e.g. every year, 18 months etc.
2. Provide advice and support, both individually and as a group.
3. Ensure the group is inclusive and doesn't discriminate.
4. The youth council may request adults to leave meetings for short periods where deemed appropriate if they consider that the adults presence would slow down discussion. Adults need to be kept aware of the youth council's workings to enable them to fully support the group - they should be kept fully informed of decisions.



The master plan

Will there be a flexible work plan (that is disseminated to decision-makers)? For example a programme created each year that includes meetings with Councillors and Children's Services senior management, training, campaigns and projects.

Meetings (all dates to be set in advance):

- The whole youth council will meet monthly - will this be a formal chaired meeting or a more informal facilitated one? Or a combination of the two?
- Will youth council members meet locally - such as in their constituencies - every 2-3 weeks?

If youth council members are unable to attend a meeting, what should they do? Such as send apologies to the organiser.

Spreading the word

- How will the youth council be supported to regularly communicate their work using a range of different methods, such as flyers, posters, e-newsletters and events.
- How will the youth council best use social networking sites? Will they have their own Bebo, Facebook, Twitter accounts or will this be part of the council's own youth website? How will this be organised, for example two members of the youth council nominated to update the site. How will safeguarding be addressed?

Sounding out young people

- How will the youth council hear from other young people? Will they use existing consultation data or be supported to carry out targeted consultations with 'marginalised' groups? Will they conduct surveys and/or face to face interviews or focus groups?
- Which decision-makers will this information be presented to and how? Such as the Lead Elected Member.

Money

- How will core costs be funded? Such as staff support, residentials, food, travel, phones.
- Will the youth council have a role in allocating its own budget? For example for projects and campaigns.
- Will young people ever be given 'out of pocket' as a result of their involvement? Or are reasonable expenses covered such as bus/train to and from meetings/events? If the young person doesn't have a bank account, how will these expenses be paid - are the financial systems set-up to accommodate this?

Equal opportunities

- Equality and diversity statement – such as, all members are equal in status regardless of office, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, age, gender, religion, academic ability, disability or any issue, which affects a person's life such as parental separation or financial status.
- How frequently will this document be reviewed? Once a year?

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Comms, Checklists, Managing Expectations (and egos)

Communication - internal and external

Youth councils are in a unique position to grab the initiative and position themselves on a platform as the authentic voice of young people in the area. Coupled with the youth council's insider pressure group role within the decision-making process, the group are well placed to address the very real issues that affect young people in their lives.

When the local media cover issues affecting young people, where do they currently go to as the authoritative 'voice of young people'? Is an adult championing young people or simply nothing at all? This imbalance can be addressed and the youth council has the potential to be this respected vehicle which enables young people to challenge negative coverage, ensuring a consistent profile is built for this policy area in the press.

There are a number of limitations and communication needs to overcome scepticism that the youth council simply reaches beyond the 'usual suspects' of an already engaged group of politically aware young people. Instead it needs to robustly ensure that the 'hard to reach' are not 'hard to hear'.

The project ideas supporting this document (available on www.byc.org.uk/resources) are designed to be engaging and inspiring – they are newsworthy vehicles which allow young people and the youth council to input an issue or message.

Relationships

The youth council is the interface between the decision-making process and young people in the outside world and both need to know about and trust the youth council. Young people need to feel that the youth council can address issues facing them locally and decision-makers need to trust that the youth council can credibly speak on behalf of young people. This can be a difficult balancing act.

The groups who the youth council need to have good relationship with can be roughly broken in two:

- Decision-makers and opinion-formers – Chief Executives, Leaders, Lead Elected Members, Officers, MPs, local and trade media, voluntary sector organisations;
- Young people – widening the appeal and impact of the youth council amongst young people themselves.

Internal Opportunities

- **Blogs** - interesting and regularly updated blogs can be a great way of 'drip-dripping' information.

e-newsletters - The British Youth Council's e-newsletter 'The BYC Project' (sign up at www.byc.org.uk) is a practical example.

Having a standard format will help with consistency and planning – software such as MailChimp could be a starting place.

- **Making use of interest in 'awards'** - everyone loves a good award. It connects directly with, and celebrates the achievements of, key audiences that the youth council need to work with.

It doesn't need to be on an Oscars scale event, it could just be a winners list released, with certificates and mini trophy sent to the lucky recipients. Alternatively, it could be incorporated into an existing awards scheme.

External Media Opportunities

Piggy backing

Establish a forward planning diary identifying key dates in the calendar (such as national days, anniversaries, reports being issued and key council parliamentary events, local democracy week, the Queen's Speech and the budget) and support young people to develop positions and ideas to issue as comment.

Not the Queen's Speech / New Year's Message

At a quiet time of year for stories satisfy journalists' demands for New Year's messages with a selection of thought provoking messages from the youth council, together with a campaign call drawn from the programme of activities.

In 2009, Barnardo's Teen Speech gave an open invitation to UK teenagers to address the nation at Christmas. It gave young people the chance to speak out on a range of profoundly important issues and provided the rest of us with an extraordinary opportunity to see the future through their eyes.

The Alternative Budget

Piggy-backing on budget announcements of central or local government, (depending on the issues), the youth council could consult other young people or simply identify the things they would prioritise if they were responsible for setting the budget.

These figures could then be compared with the actual allocation, such as transport subsidies for young people. This could act as a way to secure press coverage and as such be a media milestone for a campaign.

It could be a stand alone piece of work, or incorporated into a meeting. This could inform any participatory budgeting that the council is seeking to support.

- Identify existing budget areas, and tangible examples of this budget in action.
- On colour paper print Monopoly-style money.
- Ballot boxes - labelled with the budget areas and tangible examples of the services provided - photo opportunity of the vote.
- Prepare and issue press release.

Social Networking

Facebook, Twitter and Ning are currently social networking sites de jour. From experience, they're great at providing added value to existing projects and could be a means to the group communicating amongst themselves outside of meetings (make sure you consider safeguarding issues). They could also be a means of communicating with the wider youth population (again, take safeguarding into account) but are not great as stand alone participation projects.

When thinking through which social media would best achieve your desired results, it might be useful to consider the following:

- Why would someone want to read this?
- What information do they need to know?
- What am I/we needing them to do with the information e.g. are we looking for a response?
- Establishing a loose editorial forward plan/schedule. This should ensure flexibility and the ability to deviate from it. If stumped for what to write about, the schedule provides a framework which could be informed by the youth council work plan and /or campaigns and suggests general types of posts or topics.

As is the nature with this strand of communication, it's evolving constantly - just ask the creators of MySpace, which now seems to be as down with the kids as Cliff Richard.

To keep on the cusp of all things social network-y it's well worth having a look at the personal blog of Tim Davis - an independent consultant and researcher, writing about young people's participation, social media and social change: www.timdavies.org.uk

Retaining Members of the Youth Council

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Try to keep it engaging and fresh and have things for individuals and the group to look forward to - both future work and social elements, and communicate these well. Ensure people have defined roles in tasks and activities, and that they feel valued. Above all manage expectations...

Having a vision and a plan is fairly academic.

- What can the youth council deliver? Both possibilities and limitations.
- Dialogue with people - whether it's over a pint (of pop) or tea and cake - and services. Understanding people's motives and knowing what will be of particular interest to different people.
- In practice it might be useful to use the BYC Scaling Activity (available on www.byc.org.uk) with people who work closely with the youth council.

Talent Management: Or, working with egos

The more experienced youth council member or a newbie with a particularly big personality can be difficult to support. Again it's about managing expectations and unlocking potential by establishing a rapport with the young person. Going 'local' and agreeing with, rather than constructively challenging and questioning, might make life easier in the short term but could help create a walking ego later. Two tactics for positively responding are:

- Emotional intelligence - your local authority could run a leadership programme for young people, which is well worth looking into. A starting place could be to do a self-awareness inventory.
- Adopting a different role - what expertise and skills do they have that they could help develop in other youth council members? Consider a mentoring/ budding role.

Safeguarding and Child Protection

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Your council will have its own safeguarding policy and procedures. It will be available on the intranet or through the Safeguarding Team.

There is also a handy briefing available from BYC (download from www.byc.org.uk/resources).



About BYC and How We Can Help



8

What we do:

The British Youth Council (BYC) is a charity run by young people for young people. We empower young people across the UK to have their say and ensure their voices are heard.

We inspire and empower young people aged 25 and under to have a positive impact through campaigning, engaging with local, national and international democracy, and as volunteers, decision-makers and leaders.

Our membership encompasses over 120 youth organisations large and small around the UK. We reach out to over 600 local youth councils and our networks reach into local communities and around the world.

Our training workshops develop young people's skills so that they can have a say and be heard, while our consultation services tap into the views and opinions of young people across the UK.

Online:

Our free online resource centre (www.byc.org.uk/resources) is packed with information and briefings to help with the running of your local youth council. We have tips on how to run meetings effectively, different roles that young people can take at meetings, how to campaign effectively and make a difference. There are also resources covering fundraising, campaigning and managing the media.

In person:

We run a range of events throughout the year to support local youth councils, from delivering training courses right the way through to our annual Conventions which bring youth councillors from different areas together. To find out what is going on and where, check out our online events listings.

We also provide in-house training for local youth councils. Have a look at the training pages of our website (www.byc.org.uk/training) for the latest training offerings. And if none of these do what you need, we do offer bespoke sessions tailored to your needs.

On the phone:

Whether you're establishing a local youth council or looking to develop an existing group, we offer support and advice to people looking to set up a local youth council. Give us a call on 020 7785 6460 or email: lyc@byc.org.uk.

empowering inspiring campaigning inspiring



For more information

about BYC training:

www.byc.org.uk/training

or to download further resources:

www.byc.org.uk/resources

British Youth Council

We empower young people across the UK to have a say and be heard.

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