

Turning up the Sound



The feasibility of establishing a consortium to support the involvement of children and young people in public decision making processes

**Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Save the Children Northern Ireland
Youth Council for Northern Ireland
YouthNet**

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April 2005

“Developing policy without consulting children and young people is like watching television with the sound turned off”

Interview with Departmental official



Save the Children



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Foreword

In recent years there has been a growing impetus by public authorities to involve children and young people in decision making which affects their lives. Increasingly, government policy makers and providers of public services seek the views and opinions of children and young people. To a certain extent, this has been driven by statutory duties and an increasing awareness of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, government and public authorities recognise that consultation with those, who are impacted by public policy or in receipt of public services, is essential if we are to succeed in our quest to develop policies and services which are relevant, high quality and evidence-based. We also recognise that our children and young people are key contributors.

Consulting with children and young people is about much more than simply asking them what they want. It involves making them feel comfortable, encouraging them to speak out honestly, listening carefully and taking action as a result of the points they raise. The practicalities of getting it right have proved to be a considerable challenge for many public sector bodies. The difficulties they face are many and varied and include: securing access to children and young people; ensuring that those who are the most marginalized are given an equal voice; sustaining long-term involvement initiatives; and tailoring information to meet the needs of all children and young people consulted, taking account differing levels of understanding often linked to age.

Those who work with children and young people within the voluntary, community and youth service sectors have significant experience to offer the public sector, and this report has signalled an openness to share ideas and build capacity.

We very much welcome the report and view it is a first positive step by creating a framework which will not only provide support for the public sector, but will ultimately serve to benefit children and young people.

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Acknowledgements

This report has been written by Paula Keenan, an independent consultant contracted by Save the Children and Clare Harvey, Policy and Research Officer, Youth Council for Northern Ireland.

The authors are grateful to the 108 individuals who participated in this study. The young people, voluntary sector personnel, youth service staff, statutory workers and Departmental representatives gave freely of their time. We hope they will feel that their ideas and opinions have been reflected in this document.

Interviews with voluntary and statutory representatives were conducted by the research team consisting of Rodney Green (Independent consultant), and on behalf of YouthNet by Fidelma Carolan, Karen Witherspoon and Nora Greer.

Marie Quiery (Independent consultant) and Paula Keenan interviewed senior Departmental personnel.

The reference group and focus groups of young people were facilitated by Drew Neill of the Youth Forum and Suzanne Mooney of Save the Children, who also drafted the section on young people's views.

Data analysis was undertaken by Jen Crothers.

I. Introduction

Context

In Northern Ireland the debate in relation to the necessity of involving children and young people in decisions which impact upon their lives has largely been won. A range of agencies across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors are now committed to the principle of meaningful engagement with children and young people when developing policy, practice and services. **Section 75** of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, places particular duties on statutory authorities to take into account the impact of their services and policies on children and young people.

In order to fulfil that duty many statutory organisations are seeking help in developing their capacity to involve children and young people. While there is evidence of a great deal of excellent practice with children and young people in Northern Ireland, the principles of effective participatory engagement are not always consistently applied. It is also clear that the majority of statutory agencies do not currently have, “in-house”, the requisite expertise to ensure that participatory practice is strategically and culturally integrated within their organisations.

In addition to the statutory obligations enshrined in Section 75, the public sector in Northern Ireland will be required to adopt recommendations of the forthcoming **Strategy for Children and Young People**, which is being co-ordinated by the Children and Young People’s Unit of the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister. Discussions with key stakeholders during the consultation process for this strategy revealed the need for a significant focus on the development of participation. A Taskforce which was established to advise the strategy in this area made several recommendations about the strategic Action Plan, including the need to assess current practice and to provide clear support to the statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors. The draft Strategy was released for the last phase of consultation in November 2004, with an intention to finalise the Strategy in Spring of 2005 (although progress of the Strategy may be influenced by the political status of Northern Ireland at this time).

Another significant influence in the field of child and youth involvement is the **Commissioner for Children and Young People**, whose principal aim is to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people. The Commissioner has a statutory remit to ‘..have regard in particular to the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child or young person’ (Commissioner for Children and Young People (NI) Order 2003, para 6.2.b). Since appointment, the Commissioner has placed participation as an area of high strategic importance, signalled in the recruitment of a Participation Manager, and the intention to develop regional outreach workers to support the participation of children and young people.

There are therefore an increasing number of ‘champions’ for youth participation emanating from within the statutory sector. Concomitant with this, the youth service sector has recently issued a draft **Youth Work Strategy** for Northern Ireland, which contains Participation as one of four strategic themes. The theme of Participation includes priorities to facilitate participation not only within the youth services, but also to support participation in the development of public policy. Proposed actions include the development of a Forum of young people to advise government, provision of interface exchanges between young people and political bodies, development of a youth-led policy unit, and relevant research.

Beyond the traditional youth services, there are a number of NGOs with longstanding expertise in the field of child and youth participation, including advocacy groups, specialist interest groups, lobby groups and mainstream child and young people's charities. It is fair to say that, whilst many of the youth service and NGO groups work in effective partnerships, there remains an absence of coherent collaboration in the development of participation. The result is that public bodies are often unclear of where to turn to seek guidance on the involvement of children and young people.

Within this context, a number of agencies came together to explore how children and young people can be more fully engaged as equal citizens and how they can have an input into the development of policy and services. The group, comprising the Youth Council NI, YouthNet, NI Youth Forum and Save the Children, sought to find effective mechanisms whereby the various 'youth provider' groups (eg youth service and NGOs) could collaborate to support service providers in developing the capacity to engage children and young people in their processes. The group aimed not only to empower service providers in terms of fulfilling Section 75 consultative obligations, but also to promote a more meaningful and sustained approach to the involvement of children and young people within public organisations.

From the outset, the group agreed that the feasibility study should explore the potential for developing a network among existing organisations, as opposed to establishing a new organisation. It was proposed that the initiative should take the form of a consortium or alliance of organisations, each making a commitment to contribute their skills as appropriate. For example, one member group could act as 'host' to a paid co-ordinator, who would act on behalf of the network. Potential activities could include acting as an 'access point' to the public sector, maintaining a databank of resource materials, and co-ordinating a 'training the trainer' approach to ensure that public sector groups develop the skills needed to sustain meaningful participation of children and young people.

In terms of age range the group decided that ages 11–25 would be the main focus, but that the feasibility study would explore the scope for widening the network to include organisations working with under 10s.

Objectives of the study

The feasibility study had three primary objectives :

- a) To audit current resources pertaining to participatory practice with children and young people in Northern Ireland
- b) To determine what the views of the public sector and children and young people themselves, are in relation to what support is needed
- c) To develop a business plan based on the synthesis of need (public sector / children and young people) and resources (skills/resources within existing organisations) which makes practical recommendations for progress within a network approach

Methodology

Desk research and internet searches were performed to provide an overview of existing resources and materials.

The primary method of data collection comprised structured interviews and focus groups as follows:

- Interviews with senior personnel from 30 voluntary sector and NDPB groups, including the NGO sector, youth service groups, and childcare sector. These groups were selected due to their expertise in youth involvement and/or their representation of groups of young people who have been traditionally excluded from civic engagement*.
- Interviews with managers from 14 statutory and public sector organisations, and with 10 senior officials at Departmental level. These were identified as being potential 'recipients' of any youth involvement network.
- In order to elicit the views of young people, a reference group of 9 young people was established. These participants had experience of being involved in decision making, and served to advise the researchers on the most appropriate questions for interviewing young people with no such experience
- Focus group sessions with 45 young people who had no experience of being involved in public consultation or decision making.

In total 54 in-depth interviews were conducted, along with focus group sessions involving 54 young people.

- (1) Interviews were conducted by representatives of Save the Children, Youthnet and Youth Council NI.
- (2) The advisory groups and focus groups with young people were organised by NI Youth Forum and Save the Children.

* The researchers acknowledge that there are many other NGO groups which were not interviewed, but which could be potential and valuable members of any proposed initiative. The number of interviews conducted was based on the resources available for this study.

2. Literature review

The feasibility study is focussed on the participation of children and young people in decision-making processes relating to policy making and service development within statutory agencies and Departments of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The study covers children, young people and young adults up to the age of 25, for the sake of readability, the term “young people” is used in this report on occasions to include all three groups.

Definitions

Within the broad child care and youth work fields terms such as consultation, involvement, engagement and participation, are often used interchangeably to describe what are, in practice, quite distinct processes concerned with being inclusive of children and young people. Informing children and young people of plans that have been made for their future is clearly not the same as working in partnership with them to create those plans.

The literature makes a clear distinction between consultation and participation. Alison Gray (2002) argues that

“Consultation entails asking children directly about their views. Participation refers to the extent of children’s involvement in decision making.”⁽¹⁾

Undertaking consultation, which essentially is focussed on the needs of the planners or policy makers, has been described as a consumerist approach. Alternatively, engaging actively in participation, which inherently is focussed on the needs of the children and young people, is understood to be an empowering approach.

The empowering approach incorporates participation as an end in itself. In a document commissioned by the Scottish Parliament, Save the Children has emphasised the empowering nature of the approach in defining participation as

“people sharing ideas, thinking for themselves, expressing their views effectively, planning, prioritising and being involved in the decision making process”⁽¹⁾

The concept of child and youth participation has been developing over the last few decades. Thirty years ago the National Commission on Resources for Youth (USA) reported that:

“Youth participation can thus be defined as involving youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with the opportunity for planning and / or decision making affecting others.... There is a mutuality in teaching and learning (between youth and adults) where each age group sees itself as a resource for the other and offers what it uniquely can provide”⁽²⁾

Much of the promotion of child and youth participation has been undertaken within the children’s rights field and the concept has gained international recognition as a standard of good practice. A recent UNICEF document has defined participation as a human right and an end in itself.

“Many people agree that every human being has a right to dignity, to respect, to be treated fairly, to have a voice, and to take part in influencing and shaping their world. In other words, to be able to participate is central to being human. It matters for its own sake, regardless of whether it brings other benefits. The Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that children and young people are

full humans too, with rights, including the right to participate. As Marie Santos Pais puts it, ‘children can no longer be perceived as not-yet-persons, waiting in the lobby of life to become mature’⁽³⁾

Increasingly, local and National Governments are taking on board the messages emerging from the youth participation lobby over the last few decades. Many are giving practical expression to the principles through implementing youth participation strategies. One such strategy, from Aotearoa / New Zealand is underpinned by a definition of participation as

“the involvement of young people in policy and programme development, in having a say about what is done and being involved in decisions about what is done. A participatory approach requires an intentional process that progressively grows young people’s capacity to contribute.”⁽⁴⁾

Closer to home, the Children and Young People’s Unit of the UK Government (now renamed the Children, Young People and Families Directorate) issued guidance which includes the following definition of participation and clarifies the extent and range of their commitment to participative measures

“In encouraging departments to consider how children and young people should be involved we include action at a number of levels

- Where individual decisions are being taken about children’s own lives....
- Where services for, or used by, children are being developed or provided locally....
- Where national policies and services are being developed or evaluated....”⁽⁵⁾

The government of Queensland in Australia has issued a Youth Charter as part of its youth participation strategy. The charter commits the government to increasing young people’s participation in government processes thus giving them a means of influencing decisions that impact on their lives. In a forward to the charter the Minister for Employment, Training and Youth argues that implementing an active form of youth participation, at government level will have positive outcomes for the whole Queensland community

“It is through adherence to best practice that we will create a welcoming climate and real opportunities for young Queenslanders to play a positive role in the development of policies, programs and services that impact on their lives and the lives of their communities. The inclusion of young people in decision making will result in a balanced, representative and democratic community that ultimately benefits all Queenslanders.”⁽⁶⁾

Models of participation

The most frequently cited theorist in relation to Youth Participation is Roger Hart⁽⁷⁾. His ladder of participation model, developed in the early nineties is still widely used. The ladder describes eight types of “participation” ranging from the bottom rung representing non-existing participation to full participation on the top rung of the ladder. The first three rungs of the ladder – manipulation, decoration and tokenism – describe non-participation. The remaining five represent degrees of participation.

Save the Children and the Children’s Rights Office⁽⁸⁾ have suggested that the effectiveness and appropriateness of the remaining levels depend on other factors such as the decision-making environment, the types of decision being considered and the adults motivations for having children or young people involved.

Hart's ladder of participation

8. Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Children and young people have the ideas, set up the project, and invite adults to join them in making decisions.
7. Child-initiated and directed	Children and young people have the initial idea and decide how the project is to be carried out. Adults are available but do not take charge.
6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children	Adults have the initial idea but children and young people are involved in every step of the planning and implementation. Their views are not only considered but they are also involved in making the decisions.
5. Consulted and informed	The project is designed and run by adults but children and young people are consulted. They have a full understanding of the process and their opinions are taken seriously.
4. Assigned but informed	Adults decide on the project but children and young people volunteer for it. The children and young people understand the project and know who decided they should be involved and why. Adults respect their views.
3. Tokenism	Children and young people are asked to say what they think about an issue but have little or no choice about the way they express those views or the scope of the ideas they can express.
2. Decoration	Children and young people take part in an event, e.g. by singing, dancing or wearing t-shirts with logos on, but they do not really understand the issues.
1. Manipulation	Children and young people do or say what adults suggest they do, but have no real understanding of the issues, OR children and young people are asked what they think and adults use some of their ideas but do not tell them what influence they have on the final decision.

Hodgson develops this idea further in asserting that there are five preconditions for meaningful participation. To meet these children and young people must have:

- access to those in power
- access to relevant information
- choices between different options
- support from a trusted, independent person and , where needed, a representative
- a means of appeal or complaint⁽⁹⁾

In a recent publication⁽¹⁰⁾ the Youth Council for Northern Ireland cautions the public sector against following Hart's model too rigidly and necessarily aiming for the highest rung, which in their circumstances may not be appropriate or feasible.

“Hart's model illustrates a shifting power balance between adult control and young person control, whereas public consultation and meaningful dialogue require equality of power relations between conversants rather than one group (be it adults or young people) controlling the agenda.”

The model has also been criticised for implying that the top rung of the ladder is necessarily the best. To combat this assumption Treseder⁽¹¹⁾ has developed a circular, non-hierarchical model.

Barriers to participation

Some work has been undertaken to identify barriers to young people's participation. Working on behalf of the New Zealand Ministry of Youth Affairs, Mc Gachie and Smith⁽⁵⁾ studied six youth participation organisations. In their report they refer to a previous Ministry publication, "Keepin' it real"⁽¹²⁾, which highlighted a number of factors, that young people themselves identified as barriers to their participation.

These included organisations that discriminated against young people or which had unfriendly, overly formal environments. Demands on their time and losing out on income also presented problems for young people who couldn't afford to be away from work or study for prolonged periods. Bureaucratic language and complicated procedures within organisations were identified as obstacles to involvement, as were unreasonable or unclear expectations.

In relation to the issue of discrimination, the UNICEF⁽⁴⁾ document poses the question – "who gets to participate?" and goes on to list 30 factors that can form the basis for discriminating against young people:

The bases on which adolescents can face discrimination

Sex (male or female)	Education	Disability
Class (income and wealth)	Language	Amount of experience
Age	Political beliefs/affiliation	Your occupation
Size	Rural – urban	Family occupation
Looks	Being new in the area	Athletic ability
Ethnicity	Where you live	Intellectual ability
Race	Past history of trouble	Being quiet / shy
Nationality	Who you know	Illness (e.g. Aids)
Religion	Sexual orientation	Personal choices
Being an orphan	Wars / refugee status	Colonial history

There is a danger that, in the process of identifying who they will engage with, organisations may unwittingly reinforce inequalities.

"UNICEF's determination to reach to the most disadvantaged children means it must be prepared to reach out beyond those children's representatives who have already developed the skills and opportunities to ensure their voices may be heard. If we fail in this respect, we run the risk that initiatives we promote and support may be skewed in favor of the articulate, the organized, and easy to reach, thereby serving to perpetuate rather than to reduce inequality."⁽⁴⁾

"Keepin' it real"⁽¹³⁾ also sets out barriers to young people's participation as identified by organisations. These are:

- youth participation not being seen as a priority
- not knowing how to go about it
- not knowing how to support young people to be involved
- not having connections to young people or knowing where to find them
- thinking that young people won't want to be involved
- not having the time, energy or resources
- not knowing how to discuss some issues with young people
- language barriers
- cultural barriers

Benefits of participation

The benefits of participation are seen as accruing not only to young people but also to the organisations they become involved with. Until relatively recently the literature concentrated on articulating the advantages of participation from the perspective of young people. These can be summarised as:

- being able to exercise their rights in society
- gaining an improved understanding of social policy and decision-making processes
- increasing their connection to communities
- developing increased confidence, skills and knowledge
- gaining experience that can be put to use in future employment and an extended social life⁽¹⁾

Researchers are increasingly focussed on testing how the participation of young people impacts on organisations. The recent study by McGachie and Smith⁽⁵⁾ concluded that organisations benefit along eight dimensions.

- Organisations become more relevant to young people
- Relationships with young people are enhanced
- Ability to achieve outcomes is improved
- Funds are more effectively targeted
- Organisational credibility and reputation are enhanced
- Organisational planning can avail of a wider variety of perspectives
- Organisational systems improve
- Organisations build greater capacity and become more sustainable

An American study⁽¹³⁾, advances the concept of “youth infusion”, a term which according to the authors:

“refers to the fundamental goal: to integrate youth and adults into all spheres of community life and to ensure that their voice and action are valued and utilized in efforts aimed at social or community change. At the organizational level, an institution is ‘infused’ when youth are valued as effective partners and when structures are created at multiple levels to ensure that the voice of young people is represented in decision making.”

Their study found that, where young people were involved in decision-making, organisations benefited in a number of ways. As with the McGachie Smith study, the organisations became more relevant to young people and programming was more responsive. In addition they found that the culture of the organisations changed as the principles and practices of youth involvement became embedded and they became more generally inclusive and representative and reached out more to the wider community. They also reported that the young people helped clarify and bring focus to the organisational mission.

Policy and legislation on participation

The literature on the participation of children, young people and young adults in decision-making is generally based on and refers to one of two United Nations initiatives: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes in 1998 (the Lisbon Declaration).

The UNCRC had its beginnings in the International Year of the Child in 1979. It is the broadest and most highly ratified international human rights treaty. The convention essentially establishes a set of minimum binding standards and obligations in relation to all aspects of life for children up to the age of 18.

The most significant article in relation to the participation of children and young people is article 12, which establishes the right of children to express their views and opinions. It states that:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, whether directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13 is also important, stating that the child:

Should have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of the child's choice. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) for respect of the rights or reputations of others; or (b) for the protection of national security or of public order or of public health or morals.

Article 42 of the UNCRC confers a duty on states that ratify it to inform and educate children about these rights. Britain became a signatory to the UNCRC in 1991.

The United Nations also adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond as a framework for nations to increase their capacities to address youth needs and issues. The Lisbon Declaration followed in 1998. One section of the declaration relates particularly to the issue of youth. Within this government leaders committed to:

- ensuring and encouraging the active participation of youth in all spheres of society and in decision-making processes at national, regional and international levels
- promoting education and training in democratic processes and the spirit of citizenship and civic responsibility of young women and young men with a view to strengthening and facilitating their commitment to, participation in and full integration into society
- facilitating access by youth to legislative and policy-making bodies
- upholding and reinforcing policies that allow independent and democratic forms of associative life
- giving higher priority to marginalised, vulnerable and disadvantaged young women and young men
- giving priority to building communication channels with youth
- encouraging youth voluntarism as an important form of youth participation

Within the more local context the most significant legislation is Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity –

- a) between persons of different religious beliefs, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- b) between men and women generally
- c) between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- d) between persons with dependents and persons without

A public authority is also required in carrying out its functions, to have due regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of a different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

While this legislation is seen as progressive in taking into account issues which have not been covered by any previous legislation such as age, sexual orientation, political opinion and having dependants. It is also limited in that it only obliges those in the public sector to consult with children and young people.

3. Findings

The young people

An important objective of the study was to ascertain the views of children and young people themselves in relation to involvement in public decision-making processes.

The focus was on the views, interests and needs of two categories of children and young people, those with previous experience of participation in public decision-making processes, and those with little or none to date

A reference group of 9 young people was recruited from among a number of established groups. These included the Children and Young People's Advisory Forum (Children and Young People's Unit, OFMDFM), Voice Of Young People In Care, Youth@CLC (the Children's Law Centre), Craigavon Youth Council and the NI Youth Forum. Members of the reference group had all **experienced involvement in public decision making**. Their task was to explore their own experiences of involvement and to provide the researchers with advice on devising materials for the focus group interviews.

Their views are highlighted by use of the word **reference**.

Three focus group discussions were carried out with young people who had **no previous history of involvement in public decision-making processes**. The groups were convened by Include Youth, BTEDG, and PHAB.

In addition to this the facilitators were supported by the Belfast City Centre Detached Youth Work Project to undertake individual interviews with young people in the city centre.

Their views are highlighted by use of the word **focus**

In total 45 young people took part in the study. A detailed breakdown of the profiles of those young people is contained in Appendix I.

This section summarises the main issues raised by the various groups and individuals in addressing the following:

- *What meanings do children and young people attach to the concepts of consultation and involvement?*
- *What are children and young people's expectations of participation? What are the motivational factors?*
- *What do they feel works well / doesn't work well?*
- *What encourages / supports them to participate? What are the practical and attitudinal barriers to participation?*
- *What do children and young people welcome being involved in?*

1. What meanings do children and young people attach to the concepts of consultation and involvement?

Discussion with the **reference** group evidenced considerable awareness of their participation rights and current legislative requirements on the public sector. The young people demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the concepts of 'participation / involvement' and 'consultation', and the difference between these processes.

The term 'consultation' was commonly presented as meaning "asked what you think", "getting an opinion", although interestingly one participant ironically highlighted the common usage of the term ie "going to the doctor!". Responses to the term 'involvement' (including "working together", "inclusion" and "co-operation"), evidenced an understanding of the more egalitarian nature of fuller participation in decision making processes.

Although general comment highlighted the advantages of greater involvement (e.g. “when you are involved there is more impact” and “consultation can be tokenism”), appreciation was shown of the relevance and value of both forms of participation (“some things you can’t be involved in, but you can be consulted”, “balance is needed”).

Young people in the **focus** groups, who had never been involved in participation, had very restricted knowledge of their rights in this area. Unsurprisingly they also had a limited understanding of the concepts involved.

Despite this, the term ‘involvement’ was recognised by many as meaning “taking part”, “joining in” and “being in there”. Although some young people understood the term ‘consultation’ to involve “talking to people”, “asking people” and “people in power consulting you about what you do”, a significant number of interviewees stated that they didn’t know what the term meant.

2. What are children and young people’s expectations of participation? What are the motivational factors?

Thirty four of the thirty six young people interviewed as part of the **focus** group process expressed their interest in working with public sector agencies and making a contribution to their service policy and practice development. The two young people who were not interested cited as reasons their own lack of confidence and lack of faith that their involvement would make any difference.

In line with categories suggested by the reference group, we have set out below a number of factors that young people felt would motivate them to get involved in public decision-making initiatives

(i) ‘social issues’

The most common reasons identified by both groups of young people for getting involved were an awareness of the need for change, and a desire to be part of creating that change.

“something needed done”

An awareness of how young people’s needs were not being adequately met in a variety of service delivery contexts was evident throughout the discussions and interviews. Many expressed strong feelings and a sense of frustration at that urgent and basic needs were not being addressed. One young person commented “I was hacked off about how children and young people were being treated, so I wanted to change it”.

“give us a chance to be heard”

An opportunity to have their experiences and ideas listened to and included in public sector decision making processes was identified as an important source of motivation. Many wanted “the chance to have my voice and ideas heard to make changes for the future”.

“we knew that the end result would make a big difference to other youth projects”

A desire to play a part in creating change or “making a difference” to other young people’s lives was also identified as a key aspect of motivation.

(ii) ‘personal development’

The opportunity to have a new experience, to develop knowledge and skills, and receive some accredited training were also identified as motivational factors by both reference and focus group participants.

Many expressed their interest in simply having the experience of being involved in an initiative of this kind, which it was thought would lead to increased self-confidence and an ability to be able to “stand up for yourself”. A number of young people in the **focus** groups

also felt that participation of this nature would lead to increased knowledge of “the system”, and would support them to know how to influence and create change again in the future.

Of those young people who mentioned training and skill development as potential motivating factors, specific reference was made to basic skills such as reading and writing, confidence building, personal development, communication and presentation skills, ECDL, and Driving License.

(iii) ‘bonus’

The chance to have fun and develop friendships was identified by the **reference** group as being important initial and ongoing motivational factors: “I met lots of people and learned about different people’s backgrounds”. Conversely interest and enthusiasm waned when the “group got stagnant – same old faces, same old work”.

The need for the work to be enjoyable, involving meeting new people and having new experiences was reiterated by many of the young people in the **focus** groups. One focus group commented that “strict rules” would put them off becoming involved in any initiative.

Incentives such as trips, activities and travel opportunities were also mentioned by both categories of young people as useful in initiating and maintaining interest.

(iv) ‘people’

Reference and **focus** group participants identified the encouraging influence of youth leaders and friends, although many also stated that they would not be deterred by not knowing anyone, if they considered it important themselves to be involved.

Expectations of participation

Not surprisingly, “seeing change”, “improvement” and “action” were mentioned as desired outcomes by almost all **focus** group participants. It was believed that these end results would show that decision-makers had really listened to and used young people’s ideas to create more and better provision for young people.

Young people also highlighted the importance of adults acting with integrity during the process: “do what you say you’re going to do”.

Conversely it was felt that a sense of “not getting anywhere” would undermine interest. One **focus** group was particularly clear that the production of a report was not evidence of change, they wanted to see “real outcomes and positive changes”.

Limiting factors

Some young people did not trust that their participation would influence decisions, and consequently were not motivated to become involved. There was a perception that statutory agencies are not interested in what young people have to say: “they usually don’t want to know ideas”; “they don’t listen”. There was even a sense that their views would not be given credibility: “they might not believe us!”.

Lack of confidence, not feeling they knew enough, or had anything useful to contribute were also mentioned as reasons for not getting involved.

3. What do young people feel works well / doesn't work well

The reference group identified a number of initiatives which they felt were positive in relation to their personal development and which also had been effective in bringing about change. Common contributing factors were identified as follows:

(i) Individual versus Group

Almost all the positive examples highlighted by the reference group, had been group experiences. The two main negative experiences mentioned had both involved individual participation. The key factor of peer support had been missing on both occasions, leaving the two participants feeling that the opportunities had been "a complete waste" and "over my head".

A clear majority of young people interviewed in the **focus** group process also stated that they would prefer to be involved as part of a group as opposed to individually, with one respondent remarking that "it is good to have more than one voice". There were however a small number of young people who would have been prepared to work alone.

(ii) Worker support

"Ensure there are good facilitators and team building opportunities"

The role of support staff was identified by the **reference** group as key to maintaining and maximising young people's participation. It was felt that this would ensure that young people could participate fully and would be well prepared for the experiences they might face. The experience of having "no support" and "not enough information" was regarded as limiting of full, informed participation.

The support of a professional worker was also rated highly by the focus groups, to "help them plan what they wanted to say and find out who they should go to". However a note of caution was evident in one young person's response: "the worker should support young people to speak. If it's about young people, it should be by young people and not filtered through adults". It was generally felt that, where possible, the role of the worker should be to support the young people to articulate their experiences directly to decision-makers rather than seek to do this on their behalf.

(iii) Time commitment

Most of the positive examples identified by the **reference** group had involved a considerable time commitment over an extended period, often including residential. These had been supported by an organisation and a dedicated worker. It was felt these longer term experiences had led to a real sense of being very involved and on occasion had given the participating young people the opportunity of training.

Although the amount of time needed to get involved was an issue for a small number of young people interviewed as part of the **focus** group process, most young people, perhaps surprisingly, stated that they would be happy to be involved on a longer term basis, as opposed to one-off or short term experiences. Rather than time, the key factor was that the initiative should be successful in creating change: "if change happens with a short term commitment great, if not stick around".

4. What encourages / supports young people to participate?

What are the practical and attitudinal barriers to participation?

Factors identified as being key to supporting or limiting young people's involvement included:

(i) Being treated with respect

Most of the key messages for public agencies encapsulated the desire for young people to be acknowledged by decision-makers as having valuable experiences and opinions, and to

be treated well:

- “they can learn from talking to users!”
- “show some respect that we have our own views and experiences”
- “don’t act like they know everything – things are not the same as when they were young”

Many felt that they were often blamed for the problems as opposed to being “treated with respect”

This sense that young people were valued would be evidenced by agencies “taking it seriously” and “allowing time for preparation and discussion”. One **focus** group was keen that decision-makers would keep in contact with them on an on-going basis and take the initiative in coming to them rather than waiting to be approached.

(ii) Communication

Poor communication and lack of feedback were considered to be undermining of participation.

Many young people highlighted the need for agencies to adopt a young person friendly approach to support involvement and avoid using professional jargon:

“Ensure the opportunity is advertised widely, using easy to understand language”

But neither did they wish to be patronised:

“Don’t use big words, don’t treat us like idiots, no talking down to us, we are not children”

Public agencies interested in involving young people were advised to take measures to ensure that they were approachable and accessible to young people, in order not to “intimidate” or “terrify” a group of young people. Young people also advised that agencies should make efforts not to “hide anything”.

(iii) Fun

“Make sure it is fun mixed with work”

Most young people interviewed identified the importance of ensuring that participation in any initiative would be enjoyable.

(iv) Personal development and training

As previously mentioned, it was generally felt that young people would need the support of training and often a dedicated worker to ensure that they were able to participate fully in the process. Basic skills such as reading and writing, and speaking out in a group were considered essential to being able to contribute effectively.

(v) Expenses

Expenses reimbursement was seen as important by all interviewees. This included transport to and from venues, and when needed childcare costs. The young people with disabilities interviewed, mentioned that actually providing transport (as opposed to just reimbursing young people for the expense) may be important to encourage the participation of those young people with disabilities.

(vi) Payment

Interesting discussion centred on the issue of young people being paid for their involvement. Most young people interviewed felt that payment would help but it was not a necessity.

Many interviewees reiterated that as long as change occurred, “money was not the issue”. This principled motivation was also evident in other responses “Getting paid? Yes I suppose so – not a definite yes, it wouldn’t matter if it was something I really wanted to do”.

Some young people suggested alternative means of valuing their contribution. Personal vouchers and financial resources for their supporting organisation were felt to be acceptable. Some mentioned that if there were job opportunities associated with participating that this might encourage involvement.

Interestingly, the two young people who were not interested in being involved in any initiative, were clear that the chance of payment would not make a difference to their decision.

(vii) Scheduling

Inconvenient scheduling, and the amount of time required, was acknowledged as having had a limiting influence for many young people in the **reference group**. This was particularly true of residentials involving travel time and necessitating taking time off from school or work.

Ensuring that participation was scheduled around other aspects of young people's lives including work and school was also mentioned as important by a considerable number of young people in the **focus groups**.

(viii) Choice of venue / location

A number of young people said identified that the choice and location of the meeting venue would be important in supporting or hindering their participation.

5. What do children and young people welcome being involved in?

The young people did not come out strongly in favour of any particular *type* of initiative. They were clear however, that any type of involvement should be taken seriously by decision-makers, should be effective in creating change, and that the experience should benefit the participating young people themselves as well as to the public agency in question. Additionally, young people wanted to be able to address issues that were of relevance to them as opposed to following an agenda set by either the supporting organisation or the public agency responsible for service delivery.

That said, a broad spectrum of initiatives were of interest:

(i) Ongoing groups / forums – speaking directly to decision-makers

Being a member of an ongoing young people's advisory forum, was considered to be the most positive form of involvement by the **reference group**. They felt that such groups were effective in bringing about change and also provided positive experiences for young people themselves. While acknowledging the amount of time involved, the young people felt that such participation meant that they got "*access to people right at the top*", received ongoing opportunities including and training, and were more likely to receive feedback on their contributions.

This was echoed by the young people in the **focus group** process whose preferred option was to "*meet people face to face since they would hear the messages clearer*".

(ii) Research

Research questionnaires were mentioned by the **reference group** and a number of the **focus groups** as possible ways of gathering information and ensuring that ideas from all young people were sought. It was felt that these would be particularly successful, if administered by young people themselves rather than by "*outsiders*". Other popular methods were researching young people's issues through video or holding conferences.

(iii) Commenting on written documents

This form of consultation received a mixed response. In the **reference** group, two examples were highlighted, one of which was a positive experience while the other was considered to have been very poor.

Focus group members viewed the process of commenting on written reports alone, without the active participation of young people, with some scepticism. They felt such responses were “*not always looked at*”.

(iv) Consultation events / conferences

A ‘one-off’ consultation event attended by some **reference** group members was felt to have been “*disappointing*”. The young people felt there had been little impact and that that ideas had been shelved. However despite this those involved felt that they had been able to learn from the experience and that the event had succeeded in raising young people’s issues.

The idea of using conferences to raise awareness of young people’s issues was rated quite highly by **focus** group respondents.

(v) Production of resources / materials

One young person in the **reference** group had been involved in creating materials to be used to influence public sector agencies. This was considered to have been a very useful and successful initiative.

(vi) Providing training to public agencies

None of the young people in the **reference** group had had experience of this type of involvement but it was felt that it would have been useful. **Focus** group participants shared this view.

Statutory agencies

Fourteen statutory organisations were interviewed.

List of those interviewed in Appendix 2.

Previous experience

All of the statutory organisations had some experience of involving children and young people in their work. Four stated they had “a little”, seven “some”, three “quite a lot” and no organisation claimed they had “a great deal” of experience.

The biggest area of experience was in consulting young people.

A few organisations had developed consultative forums or “shadow” youth councils/committees, but the majority of experience was with consultation via questionnaires/user surveys or focus groups. One organisation said that they preferred focus groups because they were more interactive and enjoyable (for the young people). A small number conducted youth and child consultation through third parties due to a lack of skills, experience and resources in house.

One organisation noted that “it’s a big step to involve (children and young people) in the policy and planning process”, mentioning the need to dedicate resources and personnel.

Potential involvements (activity, forms, mechanisms)

The vast majority of statutory organisations stated that it would be useful for children and young people to be involved in all categories of agency activity, such as policy generation, service planning and delivery, evaluation and researching need. Two agencies stated that while it would be ideal to involve young people in all this work resources are limited and dedicated resources are required to support children and young people in this level of involvement.

Most agencies said they wanted to continue and extend the work they are currently doing with children and young people. A more continuous, integrated and strategic approach was proposed by some groups. Partnerships with other similar organisations or with more experienced third parties was also mentioned by a few agencies.

More than four fifths (85.7%) of organisations had existing mechanisms that young people could become a part of. A couple of organisations said that existing mechanisms for involving young people were mainly at operational level and not at a central or strategic level.

Groups of young people

There doesn’t appear to be a specific age range of young people that statutory organisations are interested in involving. One organisation noted that they would like to do more work with young people in the 11–15 age group but they have difficulty gaining access through the school system.

The majority of organisations worked with all groups of young people, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Resources (now and future, money and dedicated staff)

Many agencies did not allocate resources specifically to involving children and young people. This was generally because it was part of the duties of some or all staff. Resources were often directed at outside groups who, it was felt were better able to achieve the aims of the funding organisations.

Almost two-thirds of statutory organisations (64.3%) stated that currently there was no specific budget set for involving children and young people.

Most agencies did not think that in the future further resources would be allocated to involving children and young people but that funding and resources would remain steady. One organisation did note that “further resources would be allocated if needed to meet statutory duties”. Another agency said that cross department and inter-agency work would be important to maximise resources.

A specific budget for the future would not be set in half of these organisations. A little under half said that there would and one organisation said that there may be a budget set.

A number of agencies said they could identify particular personnel who might take the lead in implementing the involvement of children and young people.

Organisational policies

When asked about organisational policies or guidelines which underpin the importance of involving children and young people, most organisations mentioned the legislative framework and statutory duties to which they were bound, particularly in relation to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. Beyond this, specific policy regarding the importance of involving children and young people was limited. One organisation noted that it was “built in as an underpinning priority to all work undertaken in future”. Another agency stated that a “central guide for consultation and an accepted set of standards might be useful”.

Priority

Amongst those agencies reporting that involving children and young people within their organisations is a high priority (64.3%), two key reasons emerged. The first was that involving young people was a principle that the organisation was committed to. The second was that participation was a direction from government.

“Young people often have many ideas to contribute and can see how to improve things.”

“It makes sound organisational sense to ensure involvement and or participation in service planning and delivery.”

(Examples of principle)

- Internal drivers, not direction from above
- Increase effectiveness of work
- More than just Section 75 – it’s a specific need/priority that’s been identified
- Core component of work
- Committed to concept and importance of “needs led” and PSI
- Organisational priority and commitment

(Examples of government direction)

- Direction from government but also greater sense of community involvement and general feeling on the ground
- Direction from legislation and government
- Government direction
- Direction from government also important but resourcing and practice not there at this level to match this
- Statutory framework
- Influence by partners and government policy

Limited resources were the reason quoted by two of the four agencies that placed involving young people as a medium priority in their organisations.

Support factors and Barriers

Factors which would support the process of involving children and young people in the organisation	Factors which would block the process of involving children and young people in the organisation
Previous positive experiences of involvement (7)	Limited resources (13)
Staff commitment and attitude (5)	Staff attitude, lack of knowledge and skills (4)
Desire to build on existing experiences and expertise (4)	Constraints of government (2)
Built into planning process, practice and policy objectives (4)	Must be within parameters of organisation's remit – we can't do everything – limited authority as public body
Strong experience of working with partner organisations (3)	Structures/bureaucracy is not conducive to involvement (2)
New developments possibly through sectoral initiative	Can't forget our other responsibilities (i.e. other equality groups)
Existing structures and mechanisms – access to children and young people	Over consultation – schools need to ensure students aren't over pressured
Communication between departments, sections, agencies	Fragmented nature of Department and services
Momentum developed	No direct access to children and young people
Shift of policy towards involvement across all groups	Limited access to certain groups of young people
New environment after establishing youth committee facilitates involvement of children and young people	Outside influences may inhibit young people from getting involved
Using the web to garner the views of young people	Level of interest of young people at our committee meetings
	Priorities/circumstances change – work needs to be continuous
	Process not “mainstreamed” yet
	Not wanting to see involvement as tokenistic – dealing with complex issues
	Communities are changing – the involvement of people across the board is decreasing
	Young people scared to say what they think sometimes

“Everyone is very positive about this. The drive is from the bottom up”.

Help Wanted

Support to facilitate consultation events.	12
Training for staff on how to consult with/work alongside children and young people.	11
Support to involve children and young people on planning groups/decision making forums.	11
Help to develop a strategy/action plan for involving children and young people.	8
Access to materials/manuals on how to involve young people.	8
Support to raise awareness within the organisation on the importance of involving children and young people.	3
Help to assess/review current situation in relation to involving children and young people.	3
Identifying/accessing individual children or young people.	2
Help to establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.	1

Other comments made regarding what organisations might find useful were:

Theme	Comments
Partnerships	<p>Inter-agency work to ensure cohesion and best practice</p> <p>Working more with local statutory organisations to reduce duplication and barriers</p> <p>Collective approach and consortium needed</p> <p>Work in partnership to facilitate consultation</p> <p>Develop partnerships – including sharing information especially best practice</p> <p>Greater cooperation/info on how to improve involvement of young people and best practice</p> <p>Greater inter-agency work – sharing ideas and resources and avoid duplication</p> <p>Joint approach with statutory/voluntary partners</p> <p>Sounding board/consortium/lead group re young people in public decision making</p> <p>Want to extend links to wider youth interest groups (particularly strategic policy makers)</p> <p>Linking with other statutory agencies</p> <p>Sharing resources, experience and expertise</p> <p>Inter departmental</p>
Resources	<p>Central contact point</p> <p>Access to pool of skilled facilitators</p> <p>Single framework to engage with young people</p> <p>Package of information and resources</p> <p>Central resource database on young people’s issues, work and research</p> <p>One stop shop for sourcing young people to participate in consultation (wider than school)</p> <p>Central resource/contact point</p> <p>Support in consultation – best practice questionnaires, focus groups</p>
Standards	<p>Agreed standards or guidelines for consultation (not just young people in school system)</p> <p>Bench marking check list</p>
Connecting	<p>More information on needs of local (Belfast) young people, not just all Northern Ireland</p> <p>Support to “get to” marginalised young people</p>
Strategy	<p>Support to explore potential to develop more strategic framework for the involvement of children and young people</p> <p>Support to develop strategy</p> <p>Long term strategy</p>
Other	<p>Making funding process more accessible</p> <p>Development of staff training for participation/involvement of young people</p> <p>Support in gaining views from wider youth population</p> <p>Follow through from central government i.e. resources</p> <p>Promotion of positive benefits of involvement</p>

Training

Training was provided in house or bought in as needed by each organisation.

Next steps

The statutory agencies were finally asked what they considered were the key next steps towards their organisation fully involving children and young people.

Theme	Comments
Partnerships	Partnership approach (11) More cohesive approach and sharing of information re best practice etc (2) Supportive of consortium, particularly if local as well as central
Resources	Secure funding/resources (3) Concentrate resources where most needed Accessing support materials
Connecting	Must respond to “users” Ongoing consultation Explore how to get views of 11–16
Strategy	Develop clarity in role, focus, issues of policy, strategy etc (3)
Support	Continue support for existing groups (2)
Training/ Awareness	Develop staff training (6) Raise awareness amongst staff (2)
Evaluation	Monitor and evaluate to ensure good practice (2) Implementation of evaluations and assessment of outcomes Ongoing pilot and evaluation work
“Shadow” theory	Develop shadow framework Complete feasibility study into shadow youth council Get shadow youth council fully working
Other	Develop good practice guidelines re consultation Organisational review Develop adult free zone on web site Promoting the positivity of experience and benefits of involving young people Long term commitment as things change Take care not to overburden young people Knowledge of structures/systems for young people Appoint lead person

Summary

“We take this work very seriously; it is currently a big focus”

Departmental bodies

List of those interviewed in Appendix 3

In all ten senior Departmental officials were interviewed, some of these had responsibility for units within Departments. Without exception these interviewees proved to be open and candid in their responses. While some recounted extensive experience of working in partnership with young people others readily admitted that they “had no clue how to involve young people”. Most respondents understood the directives underpinning young people’s participation and felt that these were positive developments. They did however offer words of caution in relation to some factors that might militate against incorporating child and youth engagement fully into the day to day work of their department.

Previous experience

Seven of the respondents reported that their Departments had had experience of directly involving young people and all of these viewed the encounters positively. The experiences ranged from establishing and working in active partnership with an advisory group composed of young people, through facilitating IT based workshops with young consumers, to more traditional consultation exercises.

As one departmental representative said of a participation event:

“It was only a toe in the water but it exposed us to the potential benefits”

Another described an extensive consultation on proposed legislation, which would impact very directly on children and young people. The government agency involved had engaged proactively across a wide age range, including, unusually, those as young as four years old. In doing so they drew extensively on the experience of the voluntary sector, teachers and independent consultants. Developing policy without consulting children and young people was compared, by this official, to:

“watching television with the sound turned off”

Two Departments felt that while there may be merit in consulting with young people, such consultations should be undertaken by Non-Departmental Public Bodies and the individuals concerned could not see a direct role for young people in developing policy at a Departmental level. They remained to be convinced of the relevance or usefulness of engaging with young people.

The remaining Department was in the process of developing a range of policies and felt that involving young people would be a particular priority.

Benefits

Most of the respondents were able to cite the benefits of engaging with young people very readily. The Department which has perhaps had the most direct and substantial experience of young people’s involvement was among the most fulsome in articulating the benefits.

“The benefits are huge, there is nothing to beat direct contact. It’s not that we find anything particularly surprising, we already hear many of the messages from the NGOs, but to hear it directly from the young people themselves is incredibly powerful. And they will offer challenge – pose the questions that others are afraid to ask.”

Most Departments mentioned that a positive factor in relation to consulting young people was that it was a means by which government could fulfil its obligations in relation to a number of policies and legislation. Among those mentioned were the UNCRC, Section 75, the Hague Convention, and a number of E.C. directives. One official remarked that the necessity of completing Equality Impact Assessments

“has made us go out and talk to people. Our own research unit hasn’t consulted with young people yet but we are going down that route”

The current work, spearheaded by the Children and Young People’s Unit, on creating a ten-year strategy for children was seen by many as a useful vehicle for mainstreaming participation. It was felt that the strategy would:

“give a focus to the principle and a direction to the practice”

Another official mentioned that direct contact with young people did much to counteract negative stereotypes of young people, and that it would be good:

“to see young people as helping develop transport policy rather than seeing them as people who vandalise buses”

Most often cited as a benefit of participation was being able to hear young people’s perspectives and how this made policies more effective. One representative who was regularly tasked with briefing decision-makers commented that:

“putting young people’s voices in there allows others, including Ministers, to hear real truth.”

And another said of participation:

“In the end of the day you get more robust policies. It just makes sense.”

Potential Barriers

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the respondents mentioned the same potential barriers to child and youth participation. Key among these were the lack of specific expertise, in relation to engaging with children and young people, within Departments.

“we don’t know how to do this, what level to engage at”

“There is a skills deficit. Participation with children and young people will require a lot of front-loading”

None of the officials felt that it would ever be feasible for Departments to consult directly with young people without considerable support from youth / childcare specialist agencies or consultants. However as one official said;

“We will need a lot of help and support but we can’t hand it over entirely – that would give the wrong message – that it’s not important. Decision-makers need to be there for direct dialogue. Senior people from departments need to be involved to give the process credibility”

There were a few references to the need to overcome what was described as the “civil service culture”

“Consulting is not part of how we’re used to doing things”

“If Permanent Secretaries don’t push this it won’t happen”

“Quality thresholds and standards tend to be driven by service providers we have no culture of involving children and young people in determining these”

“Policy is still developed in the traditional way”

Conversely, one respondent was very clear that;

“the voluntary sector sometimes doesn’t understand the amount of good will there is towards this work. The Civil Service isn’t a monolith, a lot of people are trying to do the right thing”

and another stated

“the main driver for doing this is that we want to do it”

Everyone interviewed was fully aware of the resource implications of engaging children and young people in meaningful participation. One person referred to the “almost unbearable constraints of time and resource” that staff were already subject to in relation to implementing equality duties. Another cautioned that the concept of youth participation would meet resistance if it was seen by already hard pressed civil servants as an additional task and responsibility.

“Without additional resources the idea of consulting with young people is ‘pie in the sky’”

A number of Departmental officials felt that if the commitment was made resources could be found.

“We are willing to allocate both personnel time and costs. We want to do this properly”

“Cost is not a major issue”

Allied to this concern was the fact, identified by many respondents, that there are nine equality groupings with which Departments have to engage, and therefore, there is limited time to devote to children and young people.

“We need to get the stakeholders right. It’s not just young people”

Another tension for Departments was that the nature of government sometimes requires decisions to be made speedily.

“Don’t build up something that we won’t get time to use”

However, it was agreed that on-going engagement with young people would help to ensure that their perspectives informed even those decisions that had to be made very immediately.

Some concerns were expressed that current participation methodologies might further exclude already marginalised young people, such as those from working class communities.

Support needed

Given the enthusiasm with which most of the representatives embraced the idea of further developing their engagement with children and young people, it is not surprising that they were keen to avail of an extensive range of support.

Most often cited was the need for training both to raise awareness of the need to promote participation and to support staff in acquiring the skills to develop effective partnerships with children and young people.

All of those who acknowledged a need for support felt that it would be important for their Departments to have assistance in developing a strategic approach to engaging more actively with children and young people. They were aware of the need to build capacity over a period of time.

Interestingly, some respondents said that the most crucial support they needed was direction from their more senior colleagues

“We’ve been doing this off our own bat. We realise that consulting makes us more relevant and effective. No-one has put pressure on us or talked to us about having to consult – no direction from above, we could be doing with that support”

A number of officials mentioned that guidelines on good practice, would be particularly useful in supporting them to develop their engagement with children and young people. It was felt that the Children and Young People’s Unit of OFMDFM might be best placed to both produce and promote the implementation of such guidelines.

Support to develop child friendly versions of relevant Departmental documents was also requested, as one representative said;

“If we can translate documents into Irish, Chinese and Ulster Scots, why can’t we produce versions that can be understood by children and young people?”

Similarly, it was felt that Departmental web-sites should be accessible to younger audiences, and that perhaps young people themselves could be involved in making this happen.

Overall, the vast majority of respondents expressed the view that a great deal of support was needed and would be welcomed.

Youth Provision organisations

Thirty agencies were interviewed, including voluntary organisations, the Youth Service and NDPBs.

List of those interviewed in Appendix 4

Agency profile (specific/wider, age range, issues, regional/local)

Most agencies (70%) targeted children and young people specifically rather than as part of the wider community (30%).

As with statutory organisations there is no consistent age range of young people that provider organisations work with. Most organisations worked with 0–25 year olds or 16–25 year olds than other age ranges.

Who does your organisation target?	Number
All young people	9
All young people, and specifically the disadvantaged	6
All disadvantaged young people	3
Other	11

“Other” usually meant that the group worked with a specific group of children and young people, for example young Chinese people, or young deaf people.

Over half of the agencies interviewed (56.7 %) worked on a regional basis across Northern Ireland. The next largest sector worked in Greater Belfast.

Work with young people

A wide range of activities are undertaken by most organisations. Counselling and mentoring were provided by less than half of the organisations (10 % and 33.3 % respectively). None of the providers interviewed provided an accommodation service. A strong majority of organisations provided skills development (76.7 %) and an opportunity to meet other children and young people (66.7 %).

Work with adults

Training adults in skills/information relating to children and young people was carried out by a majority of agencies (83 %). Work with adults in relation to children and young people within each organisation was within a relatively narrow range.

Experience of facilitating involvement (what agencies, demand/capacity, plan to develop)

Provider organisations had a range of experiences in facilitating the involvement of children and young people in external agencies. Almost _ had experience surveying children and young people and feeding this back to the agency (73%). More than half had experience running events to bring children and young people and professionals together (63%). Similarly, 63% had experience supporting organisations to raise awareness on involving children and young people.

What experience does your agency have of facilitating the involvement of children and young people in external agencies?

Surveying children and young people on their needs / experiences and feeding this back to the agency	22	73.3
Running events to bring children and young people and professionals together on particular issues	19	63.3
Running on going groups or forums to bring children and young people and professionals together on particular issues	11	36.7
Supporting agencies to raise awareness within their organisation on the importance of involving children and young people	19	63.3
Helping them to assess / review their current situation in relation to involving children and young people	14	46.7
Helping them to develop a strategy / action plan for involving children and young people	13	43.3
Giving them access to materials / manuals on how to involve young people	15	50.0
Training their staff on how to consult with / work alongside children and young people	13	43.3
Supporting them to facilitate consultation events	12	40.0
Facilitating the involvement of children and young people on their agency planning groups / decision making forums	10	33.3
Helping them to establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that involve children and young people	5	16.7
Identifying/accessing individual children or young people	18	60.0
Other (please specify	5	16.7

Range of agencies facilitated to involve children and young people

NoF Children's Fund Youth Council (4) ELBs (11) Suicide Task Group Local school Local health centre South Belfast Partnership Board "Highway to Health" project OFMDFM including Children's Unit & Commissioner (10) Department of Education (7) Education for Citizenship (Dept of Ed) JEDI Initiative (Dept of Ed) Schools Health boards (6) Youth clubs N & W Trust Mental Health Team YouthNet YESIP DHSPSS – Teen Pregnancy, Sexual Health Strategy N & W Trust NIHRC (3) PSNI (3) Health trusts (3) Guardian Ad Litem DHSPSS (6) Museums	Department of Culture, Media and Sport (UK) Shared Future Childcare Partnerships LSPs Inspection Processes Department for Social Development (4) Belfast City Council (3) Ards Council Armagh City Council Dept of Education? (2) OFF-OLR NIO (2) NDPBs ECNI Police Ombudsman Policing Board Community Relations Council SEUPB District/City Councils (4) Health & Social Services – Belfast & Derry Health Promotion Agency Youth Justice Agency EHSSB – CSP HSS Trusts Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure(2) Department of Health Fire Service
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Many organisations said that it was written in their plans to develop facilitating external agencies to involve children and young people further, but that it was dependent on additional funding. Only a small percentage had funded plans to develop the work further.

More than 75% of provider organisations had had requests in the last twelve months for help from Statutory agencies in relation to involving young people (79 %). But only 23% of all the agencies had the organisational capacity to respond positively to appropriate requests.

Which statutory agencies have you had requests for help from in the last 12 months in relation to involving children and young people?

Not applicable or didn't answer (6) ELBs (6) OFMDFM including Children and Young People's Unit (5) Home Office Childcare (NI) Western Area Children and Young People Committee	Armagh City Council NOF CYPS Southern Area Childcare Partnership (2) Shared Future consultation DE-Burns Report Inland Revenue 'All public bodies'
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Department of Education (5)	Youth Council
Fisheries	Community Relations Council
Department of Environment	SEUPB
Health trusts (4)	NIO
Health boards	District/City Councils (2)
Guardian Ad Litem	Schools within BELB area
DHSSPS (4)	Health Promotion Agency
WHSS Board	SHSSB
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure	YJA
Family Policy Unit on Domestic Violence	PSNI
Department of Health	Department of Social Development

“An ELB area youth project was keen to involve young people in their coordinating committee. (We) advised them on how to access young people and communicated the need to prepare and support them appropriately, so it wasn’t just tokenism”.

“Providing information to statutory authorities requires a big commitment. We will honour commitments, but won’t take on many more without funding”.

“This needs done as there is a big gap on a regional basis”.

Consortium approach (yes/no, level of involvement, attractions/deterrents)

All of the organisations bar three were broadly supportive of the idea of adopting a consortium approach to working with the statutory sector to develop their capacity to involve children and young people. The other agencies were unsure and wanted more information before replying.

Within a consortium 66 % of respondents thought that their organisation could play a role as a member of a management/steering group. Most wanted a direct role as only 11 out of 30 said that their organisation would be supportive but would want no direct involvement.

What would attract your agency to become involved in or to support such a consortium?

In line with our mission	12
Have already identified the need for work in this area	12
Cannot cope alone with current demand	10
Partnership	16
Opportunity to standardise good practice	15
Opportunity to generate income	6

Comments

“There is no common strategy and we have failed to give young people a real voice”.

“Young people themselves have identified the need to have a voice and have an impetus to reach a wider audience and to influence other agencies”.

“Giving a voice to young people is an underpinning principle of (our) work and (we) see the influencing of other agencies to do the same as an appropriate next step.”

“It will ensure more effective delivery of Article 12 and Section 75.”

“It will increase pool of young people who are being consulted so it reflects diversity.”

“It will build capacity within public bodies to enable them to fulfil statutory duties effectively.”

“A huge job to get them (statutory agencies) to build capacity, but they need to do it themselves.”

“With the appointment of the Children’s Commissioner we have the opportunity to change.”

“(We) want to ensure that particular skills in play work sector are recognised, utilised, and translated into adult forums. An example is imaginative work re ‘unlocking’ children’s perceptions.”

“(We) disagree with traditional ‘ladder of participation’. (We) don’t think stand-alone youth structures are necessarily the best approach and instead (we) have a long term aim to build intergenerational links.”

“(We) want to ensure quality, ethical consultation processes.”

The vast majority of provider agencies mentioned limited staff, time and resources as a deterrent to them becoming involved in or supporting such a consortium. However, a couple of organisations whilst noting the problem of limited resources said that it was important to find a way to overcome these problems.

A selection of other comments are:

“Might become a rambling monster.”

“Just the usual suspects – i.e. big voluntary organisations.”

“Needs to bring additionality and resources.”

“Fear of being toothless. Needs to be accepted as robust by those who want the consultations. Would want a broad range of involvement so that it will carry a mandate.”

“Talking shop. Needs to be proactive.”

“Overwhelmed by a few large organisations.”

“Needs to be with young people as opposed to about young people.”

“People have already said the issues and nothing has happened.”

“Young people are sceptical about consultation.”

“Talking shop.”

“Cultural tensions and infighting.”

“Not knowing people’s agendas.”

“Must not do it for them (statutory sector).”

“Fear of being only a tiny community support organisation with all the ‘big guns’.”

“Want to keep our special niche. Want to be careful that our distinctiveness is not lost. This would need to be addressed up front.”

“Has to be inclusive of 18–25 age group.”

“Need to market this work ourselves. We do not want to lose our particular niche. It’s about survival. Our new training and consultancy unit will generate income.”

“If we felt consortium was not open, or had a ‘controlling agenda’.”

“Consortium delivery would have to show evidence of impact. Don’t want to get carried away by a consortium for its own sake.”

“It must be set up with evaluator in at the start to set up mechanisms to assess impact.”

“Concerned that consortiums often end up in cul-de-sac meetings with little practical action. Perhaps it’s more useful to have time bound work groups with tasks.”

“‘Community Relations and Learning Consortium’ is a model of a relatively successful consortium, however this still ended up too bureaucratic. It sought too much information from its members.”

“Will need to fit with members’ agendas.”

“Focus should be on ‘capacity building’ as opposed to ‘one-stop-shop’ for consulting young people on documents.”

“Budget (from public sector) needs to reflect this commitment. Don’t accept the ‘cheap’ approach.”

Agencies were finally asked what they could bring to the consortium. The majority offered expertise and experience in involving children and young people.

Expertise	20
Resources	8
Experience	17
Skills	13

Access to young people from specific groups was also mentioned frequently.

“(We) have used a range of models to empower young people. Not all young people are at a stage where they can use their voice.”

“(We) have experience of rebuilding our organisation with young people at the heart. This is an ongoing process.”

“(We) work directly with statutory departments and OFMDFM. If kept informed, (we) can act as a vehicle for passing on information.”

Other comments

“This must not become a vehicle just for articulate middle class young people who do not understand the reality of drug dealing or getting pregnant at 14. To make a difference for the most disadvantaged young people this process must find a way to give voice to the most disempowered. This will entail particular skills, approaches and models.”

4. Conclusions

As a general overview, this study found overwhelming support for the development of a **strategic and collaborative approach** to extend the involvement of young people in public decision making in Northern Ireland. The need for this was affirmed by the potential members of a future consortium (primarily voluntary sector groups), by potential service recipients (statutory and departmental bodies), and most importantly, by young people.

There were, however, several important caveats to this support; from young people, the view that participation would have to be **meaningful and impacting**; from NGO groups there were concerns about the **effective operationalisation** of such an endeavour; and concerns from statutory bodies and departmental groups centred on **ensuring senior-level commitment** and the need to give due regard for **other equality issues**. Many respondents from both voluntary and statutory perspectives voiced concern about current and future constraints in terms of **insufficient resources** to support participative approaches.

The feasibility study was designed to assess a) the nature of existing and future participation needs, from the perspectives of young people and statutory/departmental groups, and b) whether the appropriate skills and support exist within the ranks of child/youth providers to fulfil this need.

Needs assessment

Do young people identify a need to increase opportunities for participation in public decision making?

Whilst focus group sessions with young people revealed clear distinctions between those who had, and had not, previous experience of civic involvement, it was notable that the latter group appeared as enthusiastic about the concept of participation as the former grouping.

In selecting young people with no prior experience of involvement the study had intentionally targeted young people who are commonly regarded as 'hard to reach' and under-represented in public participation (for example homeless, unemployed, young offenders, as well as those from minority groupings). There is a widespread perception that such young people are variously politically apathetic, disinterested in civic engagement, difficult to motivate, and unwilling or unable to express their views to authority figures. The focus group sessions found the converse to be true with virtually all of the young respondents expressing a desire to engage. The evidence would suggest that reasons behind failures to engage with 'marginalised' young people rest with the use of inappropriate methodologies, as opposed to an inherent resistance to engage by young people.

Whilst young people clearly support the concept of youth involvement, the sustainability and quality of their input was viewed as conditional on several elements, and particularly:

- Young people must sense that they are truly part of change creation, ie. the impact of their involvement has to be demonstrably 'real'
- A personal development element should be incorporated, both to build capacity among young people for immediate involvement and to provide skills which can be applied in their future lives
- Participation should allow for social interaction with peers

Those young people with experience of participation offered further advice in terms of what had 'worked' for them, these being group dynamics, the key role of support staff, time commitment, positive adult attitudes, clear communication, 'fun', training, expenses, appropriate scheduling, and accessible location/venues.

The fact that so many of the young people who contributed to the study were unfamiliar with the concept of youth involvement and yet were extremely positive when the principles were outlined to them, offers evidence of the need to enhance and extend current opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland to engage in public decision making processes.

It is acknowledged that this study focused on young people in the 11–25 age bracket, and hence is unable to provide primary data on the demand for involvement by younger children.

Do statutory and Departmental bodies identify a need to increase youth involvement in decision making?

Whilst all statutory bodies and most of the Departments recounted some experience of involving children and young people, it was apparent that this primarily took the form of short term consultative approaches, with relatively few bodies reporting sustained involvement mechanisms.

Whilst statutory groups tended to cite Section 75 as a prime incentive to develop youth involvement, it was notable that most respondents were keen to integrate youth participation in a comprehensive manner, over and beyond the statutory obligation to consult on relevant screened policies. For example respondents recognised the value of including young people in policy generation, service planning and delivery, and needs assessments and evaluation.

Departmental respondents tended to cite a wider selection of dictats as incentives to involve young people, ie. not only Section 75, but also the UNCRC, EU Directives and the Hague Convention. It was noted that two of the ten Departmental respondents felt that the involvement of young people was unnecessary at Departmental level, and deemed this activity more appropriate for their respective Non Departmental Public Bodies.

Given that there was majority consent on the need to increase and improve youth involvement, it is important to reflect on the perceived barriers. A lack of organisational expertise was widely cited, as was a lack of resources. In terms of the former, some agencies admitted a dependency on external groups to elicit the views of young people, whilst in terms of financial resources it was noted that two thirds of statutory groups did not have a specific budget. It was highlighted that this issue related not only to young people, but posed a difficulty in terms of engaging with other S75 groupings.

When respondents were asked what forms of support would be useful, statutory groups appeared to focus on practical and action-based needs, with less perceived need in the area of ‘selling the concept’ of youth involvement. The most commonly mentioned needs were

- Support to facilitate consultation events
- Training for staff on how to consult with /work alongside children and young people
- Support to involve children and young people on planning groups/decision making forums
- Help to develop a strategy/action plan for involving children and young people
- Access to materials / manuals on how to involve young people

It was notable that Departmental respondents tended to give greater focus on the need for raising awareness of the value of youth involvement, stating that top level commitment is vital. Departments also tended to make more reference to the role of the Children and Young People’s Unit, and to voice an expectation that the forthcoming CYP Strategy will provide direction on the participation of children and young people. It was assumed by some that the Children and Young People’s Unit would adopt a role in issuing guidance and standards on youth involvement throughout the public sector, with a recommendation that any future consortium would need to ensure synergy with the CYP Unit.

There was considerable interest in the idea of a central point of access which would provide practical forms of support to develop youth involvement. Distinctions were drawn between the needs for youth involvement in strategic vs operational matters, and also the need to ensure both regional and local forms of support.

There was also recognition that a central resource point on its own would not alleviate all barriers to youth involvement. Respondents gave particular emphasis to the need to build on partnerships, both inter-sectorally, and between public and voluntary/community bodies.

Having identified a needs-deficit at statutory and Departmental level, and from young people, the study sought to explore the extent to which providers of child and youth services could fulfil this need.

Matching needs to existing skills and resources

Do skills within the child and youth sectors meet the needs identified within the statutory sector? How can providers of child and youth services work in partnership to more effectively build capacity within the statutory sector?

The study included interviews with senior personnel from 30 voluntary sector and NDPB groups, including the NGO sector, youth service groups and the childcare sector. These groups were selected due to their expertise in youth involvement and/ or their representation of groups of young people who have been traditionally excluded from civic participation. The study acknowledges that there are many other NGO groups which were not interviewed, but which could be potential members of any proposed initiative.

Overall, it was found that the child and youth providers had played various roles in terms of supporting a broad range of statutory organisations and Departments. The most common forms of intervention had included research/survey-based advocacy, running events to facilitate dialogue between young people and professionals, and awareness-raising activities, although many other activities were mentioned.

Whilst around eighty per cent of the respondents had received requests for help from statutory agencies in relation to involving young people, the majority of all respondents stated that they had limited (13%) or no (63%) organisational capacity to respond.

Nine out of ten of the respondents stated they were broadly supportive of the idea of adopting a consortium which would develop capacity within the statutory sector to involve children and young people. Most groups felt this was in line with their organisational agenda, would develop more coherence to youth involvement, and that a partnership approach could reduce the pressure on individual agencies and would offer opportunities to standardise good practice. A small number of respondents also felt that this would offer an opportunity to generate income.

The three organisations who were unsure of their support for a consortium stated they would require additional information, as opposed to rejecting the proposal.

Most respondents asserted that they could make a positive contribution to such a consortium, primarily in terms of expertise, experience and skills. Over half felt that they could be involved in delivery of the services, eg. Training, consultancy and support work, under the auspices of the consortium. Two thirds expressed interest in being a member of a management/steering group, whilst just over a third felt they would be in a position to support the initiative but not have a direct role.

Although there appeared to be strong affirmation of the proposal to establish a consortium in principle, it should be noted that many of the respondents voiced some concern as the most appropriate operationalisation of this endeavour. There were some firm messages as to what is **not** wanted, these being:

Domination by a few of the larger voluntary organisations
Becoming over bureaucratic...a 'rambling monster'
Becoming a talking shop
Detracting from the 'niche' of member organisations

Conversely, it was suggested that the initiative should:

- have a broad range of members so that it will carry a mandate,
- have clarity in objectives,
- be proactive and action-oriented,
- allow for a sharing of organisational agendas,
- respect the distinct role of members,
- be able to demonstrate impact,
- include young people within its operation,
- focus on building capacity within statutory groups as opposed to conducting consultations on their behalf, and
- be set up with an evaluator from the outset.

The Way Ahead

Rationale

It is clear from the feasibility study that there are many examples of good practice in relation to the statutory sector consulting with children and young people, most often with the support of external agencies. However, it is also evident that while the statutory sector is keenly aware of the need to involve children and young people, a situation persists whereby:

- Statutory authorities and agencies do not currently have the capacity to effectively engage, consult with and involve children and young people, in line with their Section 75 obligations
- The child and youth provision sector (voluntary sector, Youth Service and NDPBs) has the knowledge, skills and experience needed to facilitate children and young people's participation but does not currently have the resources, operational capacity or an effective mechanism to fully support that engagement with the statutory sector

As a consequence, the rights of children and young people here, to participate in decisions affecting their lives, as envisaged within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, are not being fully met.

In order to address this situation it is proposed to establish a Participation Consortium project, with the overarching aim of developing the capacity of statutory authorities and bodies in Northern Ireland to fulfil their duties to effectively engage, consult with and involve children and young people in decision making. It is proposed in the first instance that a consortium be piloted and thoroughly evaluated over a two year period.

At this stage, the findings of the feasibility study indicate that the focus of a consortium should be to:

- Offer an access point for statutory authorities and agencies wishing to consult with, engage and involve children and young people
- Act as a co-ordination point for the expertise and experience of child and youth provision agencies
- Support the statutory sector to develop its own capacity for direct engagement with children and young people
- Develop a bank of resource materials in relation to child and youth participation

Following on from this focus, the most appropriate objectives of a consortium would be:

- To create a register of agencies with expertise in child and youth participation
- To establish mechanisms for matching the specific needs of the statutory sector with agencies that have the expertise to facilitate their engagement with children and young people
- To offer training and consultancy support to the statutory sector in order to develop their internal capacity to engage directly with children and young people
- To develop and promote standards of good practice in relation to child and youth participation
- To develop a bank of resource materials, information and a web-site in relation to child and youth participation

However, given the evolving context outlined in Chapter 1 of this report (ie. potential implications of the Strategy for Children and Young People along with recent developments by the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, and the Youth Work Strategy) there is a need to discuss these proposals with key stakeholders in order to ensure a joined-up approach in the development of participation.

It is also essential to return to those agencies who signalled a willingness to join a consortium in order to discuss the most effective organisational model. In this respect, the option of a 'host agency' is the preferred option of the report authors, but again this proposal will require further debate with all relevant stakeholders.

Finally, it is acknowledged in Chapter 1 of this report that the number of interviews with youth providers – who may be potential contributors to a consortium – was constrained due to resources for this study. It would be essential that the membership of the consortium be fully representative of the range of sectional interests of children and young people, and hence it may be necessary to extend discussions to a range of additional youth providers.

APPENDIX I

Profile of Young Respondents

	TOTAL
Male	14
Female	31
Age: 11–15	12
16–18	24
19–21	5
21–25	4
Disabled	4
Not disabled	41
Live in: country	2
city	37
town	5
Parent	1
Carer	1
From a protestant/unionist background	25
From a catholic/nationalist background	19
Neither	1
From ethnic minority: Chinese	0
Traveller	8
Indian	0
Jewish	0
Other	2
Gay/Lesbian	2
Experience in care	5
Experience of criminal justice system	5
Low income	12
Unemployed	19
Employed	9
Full time education	33
Experience of exclusion from school	14
Experience of homelessness	15

APPENDIX 2

Statutory Interviews

Belfast City Council

Belfast Education and Library Board – Equality Unit

CCEA

Careers and Guidance Service

Derry City Council

DHSSPS – Invest in health / Health Promotion / Family Policy

Health Promotion Agency

North Eastern Education and Library Board – Equality and Human Rights

Northern Ireland Policing Board

Rural Development Council

Southern Health and Social Services Board

Western Health and Social Services Board

Youth Conference Service (Youth Justice Agency)

Youth Justice Policy Unit

APPENDIX 3

Departmental interviews

Statutory Duty Unit (OFMDFM)

Department for Social Development

Dept of Education

Criminal Justice Division

DHSSPS Policy Directorate

Policy Innovation Unit (OFMDFM)

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Dept of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Department of Employment and Learning

Children and Young People's Unit (OFMDFM)

APPENDIX 4

Youth Provision Interviews

Belfast YMCA
Barnados NI
Black Youth Network
Brook Clinic
Children in Northern Ireland
Children's Law Centre
Chinese Welfare Association
Disability Action
Drumcree Youth Project
Foyle Down Syndrome Trust
GLYNI
Include Youth
National Council of YMCAs (YMCA Ireland)
NIPPA
Northern Ireland Deaf Youth
Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Play Board
Public Achievement
Rainbow Project
Save the Children
South Eastern Education and Library Board Youth Service
Tar Anall
Taughmonagh Community Forum
Volunteer Development Agency
VOYPIC
VSB
Western Education and Library Board Youth Service
Youth Action
Youth Bank and Community Foundation
Youthlink

APPENDIX 5

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