



# **The British Youth Council's shadow report on the first two Common Objectives: Information and participation**

## **Introduction**

The British Youth Council (BYC) is the national youth council for young people aged under 26 in the UK.

BYC represents and involves a unique coalition of young people through their involvement as individuals or through their youth organisations.

We bring young people together to agree on issues of common concern and encourage them to bring about change through taking collective action.

BYC aims to

- Provide a voice for young people;
- Promote equality for young people;
- Help young people be more involved in decisions that affect their lives;
- Advance young people's participation in society and civic life.

### **1.0 The White Paper and UK Young People**

In 2002 BYC participated in the UK consultation on the EU White Paper on Youth Policy, acting as a gateway to young people, youth fora and other youth groups. The consultation was conducted on behalf of the Children and Young People's Unit's (CYPU), Inter-departmental and International Affairs Team.

BYC sent out over 500 questionnaires to BYC member organisations and other bodies. Organisations included Young Voice in Wales, the Young European Movement, Labour Students, the Southeast Millennium Volunteers Youth Forum and NUS Scotland. The questionnaire was distributed electronically and in a hard copy. Just over 100 questionnaires were returned. As much of the information was new to the organisations, a seven page briefing prefaced the questionnaire, providing background information on each section of the questionnaire, the European Union and the White Paper itself.

Some organisations conducted group workshops, enabling young people to come together and discuss issues around the questionnaire. Others forwarded hard copies of the questionnaire to young people involved in their organisation, for them to complete independently.

If BYC were to conduct a similar exercise now, which would test the knowledge and understanding of the White Paper, we believe that the awareness levels amongst the organisations asked wouldn't be much higher than they were in 2002 and similar levels of briefing materials would need to be distributed.

### **2.0 Government and the National Youth Council**

BYC has enjoyed an increased role with the UK government over the last few years. This has largely been due to the increased recognition of the involvement of young people in decision making and emphasis on the

participation agenda.

BYC has collaborated with government on a number of consultations with young people and currently supports the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) *Youth Board* in partnership with a children's NGO. The Youth Board was set up to advise the Minister for Children, Young People and Families on issues and policy affecting children and young people.

The relationship between government and BYC has become closer over the last few years and there is an increased awareness of BYC's role as the national youth council. This is due to the increased emphasis on young people's participation from government which has resulted in increased partnership working with BYC.

There is still work to be done in developing this relationship and BYC is lobbying to be officially recognised as the national youth council for the UK.

BYC has pushed for this recognition through the organisational response to the government's green paper *Youth Matters*. BYC is also pushing for the recognition of local youth councils in local authorities. The section below outlines BYC's position on official recognition from government and also describes the current situation for local youth councils and their relationships with local government.

### **BYC's vision for building a vibrant network of local youth councils**

*"Young people should be involved at a local level to allow them to be represented and to make their voices heard. Young people must have the right to scrutinise service providers to ensure they get a fair deal".* BYC Youth Manifesto 2004

The importance of youth involvement in decision-making is recognised across all levels of Government. As Every Child Matters cites: *"Real service improvement is only attainable through involving children and young people and listening to their views."*

This paper outlines a programme of action to strengthen the involvement of children and young people in local decision-making by developing a vibrant network of representative youth councils. BYC has long promoted and supported meaningful involvement of young people in local decision-making, predominately through youth councils. This is increasingly being recognised across Government as an important part of ensuring that services meet the needs of young people and helping to create cohesive communities. It is therefore vital that the work and role of youth councils is highlighted in the Youth Green Paper.

## Youth Councils and their reach

*Youth councils are community, voluntary forums that represent the views of young people at a local level. They give young people a voice, enabling them to make their views heard and have an influence within their communities. (BYC, Youth Agenda: Local Youth Councils, 1999).* Youth Councils can also be called Youth Forums and in this form they are often more issue based.

BYC promotes and support local youth councils as a model for young people to come together, discuss issues of importance to them and to engage in local action to address these issues. Our vision is to support a vibrant and resourced network of independent youth councils which would:

- Effectively represent and communicate the views of local young people
- Empower and encourage greater involvement of young people in local communities
- Provide a consistent and recognised approach to involving young people across all local authorities.
- Provide a mechanism for young people to influence the work of Children's Trusts and the Every Child Matters local change programmes
- Ensure that young people can be involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of local services, governance and strategic planning
- Enable young people's needs to be more fully and accurately assessed and ensure that services meet those needs
- Share information and build links with other strategic bodies
- Provide a support network for smaller youth-led community groups e.g. local young carer's groups, young refugee groups and enable these groups to influence local decision making,

There is a general perception that youth councils and forums are well-resourced groups of articulate young people associated with the local authority. This may be true of a small minority; but the majority of youth councils are established by young people in response to a local need and as such have very limited local support or resources. Amongst BYC's network only 16% of youth councils have some form of staff support.

There are often several councils and forums in a locality but because of limited resources they may not be aware of the other groups or are able to collaborate. Lack of resources including, staff, funding and appropriate expertise, also means that these groups are often not able to actively reach the harder to reach young people and may, in many cases not be aware of what groups of young people are in their areas. Therefore, youth councils may miss the views and involvement of groups of young people who are more marginalized.

This lack of support for youth councils and forums undermines the positive impact they have and weakens the level of youth involvement in local decision-making.

## Identified need

Evidence suggests that there is a clear need to develop more effective youth involvement in local decision-making and that youth councils would be the ideal mechanism through which to make this happen:

- A recent study of how statutory and voluntary organisations involve children and young people in public decision-making revealed that although there are positive views towards participation amongst statutory and voluntary organisations, there are considerable variations in approach and effectiveness between different types of statutory sector organisations. There are also strong messages about the need to adequately resource this work and importantly, for children and young people to be supported in order to avoid tokenism. One of the most popular approaches for involving young people included youth councils or forums. (DfES Research Report No.584)
- Research into the pathfinder Children's Trusts found that processes to enable parent and carer involvement are more advanced than arrangements to engage children and young people's involvement (40% of substantial involvement compared to just 28% for children and young people). ('National Evaluation of Children's Trusts', Phase 1 Interim Report, Dec 2004)
- Young people's responses to Every Child Matters showed support for the role of youth councils. When asked '*how do you think you should have a say in what your local council does to make things better for children and young people?*' the third highest response was youth councils. The first two responses were 'consultations and surveys' and 'open meetings and forums', which are mechanisms for involvement, which youth councils use. (Every Child Matters ... and young person: What you said... and what we're going to do, DfES, 2004).
- Feedback from young people during the course of BYC's work also supports the view that youth councils are an effective tool to encourage greater youth involvement.

The current focus on local youth participation, the changes taking place locally as part of Every Child Matters and the proposals coming out of the Youth Green Paper and the Russell Commission [see Youth Volunteering], provide an ideal opportunity to strengthen the support and development of youth councils and the section below details how this could be achieved.

## Programme for building a network of vibrant youth councils

BYC has 450 local youth councils and forums, across England, in our network. For more than 20 years, BYC has supported young people to create, develop and sustain their youth councils and forums. BYC's wide-ranging support to youth councils and forums currently includes:

- Information on grants and other sources of funds to groups starting up councils and forum, as well as established youth councils and forums (work with YouthBank of which we're a partner);

- Training for young people on a range of skill sets through our National Training Programme;
- A dedicated newsletter *Voices*, which is circulated to youth councils and forums throughout the UK;
- Sharing practice and through our *Voices* newsletter, as well as e-group;
- An annual training and practice sharing residential event for young people in local youth councils and forums;
- Practical publications such as our *Essential Guide (BYC's youth council handbook)* and our *How 2 Series'*, which includes: *How 2 Manage a Budget*, and *How 2 Write a Constitution*.

What young people running youth councils need is support and recognition for their work from government to enable the vision of a vibrant network of young people led councils to become a reality. Government can make this happen by supporting a programme of work that will ensure:

- The creation, in every locality, of an independent youth council, recognised by the local authority.
- Youth councils represent the needs of young people in their area by:
  - Promoting ways of working and resources to support young people's involvement in local decision-making, such as BYC's Every Young Voice<sup>1</sup> and *In Touch*<sup>2</sup>. Every Young Voice provides youth councils with resources to help them widen the range of young people they involve in the decision-making and activities;
  - Engaging in regular consultation with young people
  - Developing partnerships with local organisations with particular emphasis on those working with marginalised young people such as homeless young people and young refugees and asylum seekers, as well as organisations that oversee the provision of local services, e.g. Local Strategic Partnerships;
  - Holding open forums for young people to come and voice their concerns.
- Children's Trusts will link with the youth council when developing/reviewing policy affecting young people or commissioning services for young people.

The British Youth Council can make this happen through investment in its current activities to expand the organisation's programme of support to local youth councils and forums. This investment will enable the delivery of this programme at both a central (strategic) level as well as local (operational) level.

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<sup>1</sup> Every Young Voice enables local youth councils (LYCs) to strengthen their ability to be representative forums of young people's views, influence local decision-makers and participate in the wider agenda of social exclusion and community cohesion.

<sup>2</sup> The *In touch* programme aims to put young people in touch with decision-makers at a local level, providing them with resources and materials to support their engagement in local life, whether as decision-makers, service users or citizens.

### **Central (Strategic) Support**

The programme's long-term effectiveness in developing a national network of vibrant youth councils needs to be supported by a strong and responsive centre where a core staff team will oversee the rollout of the programmes' activities. They will ensure that youth councils are informed of developments in the national agenda concerning young people and their continued involvement in decision-making.

Activities co-ordinated at the network's centre would include:

- Sharing practice amongst youth councils;
- Producing a dedicated national newsletter;
- Holding a National Youth Council Convention – an annual training and networking event for young people involved in youth councils;
- Promoting and raising awareness of local, regional and national issues concerning and affecting young people;
- Developing and overseeing the rollout of new initiatives that support young people's involvement in decision-making, such as *In Touch*;
- Enabling grant-making facilities to support youth councils through partnership working with YouthBank UK.
- Monitoring and evaluating the impact of the work across the country and ensuring milestones for development are met.

### **Local (Operational) Support**

In order to provide strategic and adequate support at the local level, the deployment of an outreach team, located in the English regions will provide young people and youth councils with dedicated regular support to supplement or add to the existing support they currently receive in their area. The Outreach Team will consist of **Youth Council Support Officers** and **Outreach Training Officers**.

The **Youth Council Support Officers** will be responsible for the delivery of Every Young Voice, linking with Children's Trusts, Local Strategic Partnerships, grant assessments, assisting in staff recruitment, assisting setting up new youth councils, and bringing local organisations together.

The **Outreach Training Officers** will be responsible for rolling out a National Training Programme, consisting of a number of courses, as well as other bespoke training courses including Youth at the Table, which is focused on increasing young people's involvement in civic life.

### **Strategic and Operational Outcomes:**

The delivery of this co-ordinated programme would ensure that:

- Youth councils can access resources to enable them to employ staff with the necessary skills to involve young people in the local area and be responsive to the particular needs in relation to the demographics of the area with the right staffing complement;
- There are resources to enable youth councils to engage a broad range of young people where the condition of funding does not affect the youth council's independence and ability to scrutinise;

- Young people engaged with youth councils are provided with the necessary training so they can effectively engage with local decision-making and represent young people's views;
- Young people who need extra support to become engaged with the youth council are able to access training and personal development support appropriate to their needs.

### **National Outcomes**

- An effective and sustainable network of local youth-led organisations;
- Consistent youth involvement in the design, delivery and evaluation of local services, participation in governance and strategic planning;
- Services meet the needs of children and young people locally;
- Stronger partnerships between local youth-led groups and key partners;
- A diverse cohort of active young citizens;
- Positive peer-led activity and participation.

Building an effective, vibrant network of local youth involvement would in the long term:

- Strengthen and create more cohesive communities;
- Tackle social exclusion;
- Ensure a holistic approach to the needs of children and young people.

### **3.0 Policy Developments: Information and Participation**

Since the White Paper government has addressed the issue of youth information in a variety of settings. Particularly of note is the development of the Connexions services

#### ***Connexions: information, advice and guidance***

Connexions is the government's support service for all young people aged 13 to 19 in England. The government aimed to bring together all the services and support young people need during their teenage years and offer differentiated and integrated support to young people through Personal Advisers (PAs). For some young people this may be just for careers advice, for others it may involve more in-depth support to help identify barriers to learning and find solutions brokering access to more specialist support, e.g. drug abuse, sexual health and homelessness. PAs work in a range of settings including schools, colleges, one-stop shops community centres and on an out-reach basis.

The government is also able to collect information concerning young people through the Connexions service, particularly around NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

Connexions is delivered through 47 local partnerships working to national planning guidance. However, over the last few years there has been recognition that this service is not fulfilling all the needs of young people.

The UK government has made a move to address this issue in legislation coming out of Every Child Matters and Youth Matters documents [addressed below] and are currently undertaking a review of online provision for young people (websites and telephone helplines), the aim of which is to improve and rationalise what is currently available so that young people can have easy and immediate access to the information they need, when they want it and in a way that best suits their needs.

The review will report in early 2006 and will inform the Government's response to Youth Matters. The government is currently developing the specification for a project to develop quality standards for young people's Information Advice and Guidance. We expect to see a final draft of the standards in November 2006. These will then be put out for consultation and the standards will be published in April 2007.

BYC surveyed over 500 young people, to find out their views on services that provide them with information, advice and guidance.

| Currently the most popular places to access Integrated Advice and Information services are:

- The internet (69%),
- Friends (55%),
- Parents (49%)
- School (49%).

When asked where they would ideally like to access services:

- 60% said that the internet would be the ideal place to for Integrated Advice and Guidance services,
- 47% said school
- 39% said local youth club.

The majority of the young people said they would like to access additional advice and information on how to cope with teenage life, bullying, how to avoid debt, information about being gay, crime and bullying. They would like to receive this information through the Internet, youth advice centres and youth clubs, very few mentioned school.

BYC will be encouraging the government to take this on board over the next few months.

### ***Every Child Matters***

In 2003, the Government published a green paper called Every Child Matters. The green paper prompted a debate about services for children, young people and families. There was a wide consultation with people working in children's services, and with parents, children and young people.

Following the consultation, the Government published *Every Child Matters: the Next Steps*, and passed the Children Act 2004, providing the legislation for developing more effective and accessible services focused around the needs of children, young people and families.

*Every Child Matters: Change for Children* is a new approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19. The Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic well-being

These five outcomes mean that the organisations involved with providing services to children - from hospitals and schools, to police and voluntary groups – should be working in new ways, sharing information and working together, to protect children and young people from harm and help them achieve what they want in life. Children and young people will have far more say about issues that affect them as individuals and collectively.

Every local authority should be working with its partners, through children's trusts, to find out what works best for children and young people in its area and act on it. They should involve children and young people in this process, and when inspectors assess how local areas are doing, they have a mandate to listen especially to the views of children and young people themselves.

### ***Youth Matters***

In July 2005, the Government published the Youth Green Paper, *Youth Matters*. The Green paper, aimed to build on *Every Child Matters*, *Youth Matters* aims to re-shape services for young people.

The Green Paper set out a comprehensive package aimed at improving outcomes for all young people, with a particular emphasis on those who are disadvantaged.

The Government received over 19,000 responses from young people, 1,000 responses were also received from professionals, parents and organisations. In addition the government collected views through consultation with 'hard to reach' young people and their parents and through regional events involving local partners.

### ***Citizenship Education***

Citizenship education was introduced into the schools curriculum in 2003, which ensures that all young people in school receive information about: social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy.

### ***Children's Commissioners***

In March 2005, the first Children's Commissioner for England was appointed – Professor Al Aynsley-Green, to give children and young people a voice in government and in public life. The Commissioner will also look to gather and put forward the views of the most vulnerable children and young people in society, and will promote their involvement in the work of organisations whose decisions and actions affect them.

Professor Aynsley-Green's appointment resulted in all the UK's nations having a Children's Commissioner. Wales appointed Peter Clarke as Children's Rights Commissioner in March 2001. Nigel Williams, Northern Ireland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, took up post in October 2003 and Scotland's Commissioner, Kathleen Marshall, began her job in April 2004.

Whilst each Commissioner is the primary independent advocate for children's rights in their nation, the Children's Commissioner for England has a coordinating role for UK-wide issues between all the Commissioners.

### ***Education Bill***

Legislation is expected in the Education Bill early in 2006, which will place a statutory duty on upper-tier Local Authorities to secure access to positive activities for young people.

The government presented its Schools White Paper entitled *Higher Standards; Better Schools* in October 2005. The White Paper intended to provide more choice for parents and pupils; its main elements were,

- Developing a new school system, whereby every school can acquire a self-governing Trust.
- Improving choice and access for all – to be achieved through provision of better pre-admission information for parents, extending rights to free school transport to children from poorer families, as well as banding.
- Promoting personalised learning.
- Improving behaviour in schools through clear school policies, supported by a “clear and unambiguous right for teachers to discipline pupils.
- A new role for local authorities (formerly local education authorities), essentially based around the concepts of ‘champion’ of users and ‘commissioner of services’. A Schools Commissioner will be appointed at national level to support and challenge local authority plans.

BYC's main criticism and serious concern is that this white paper only mentions involving young people once throughout the entire document and this is through a small section on School Councils UK. We believe that children and young people should have greater say and be able to make informed decisions about which school they attend and how the school is governed.

However, the paper does say that Local Authorities will now have a statutory duty to consult schools on their Children and Young People's plan and

schools will need to regard this plan when creating their own school development plans.

The White paper puts forward recommendations from the Steer Report around discipline in schools. Not only does there not seem to be any mention of involving young people in schools to deal with the problem, but the white paper also outlines the Steer report recommendation to punish bullies – this is not supported by any evidence or materials that have been produced to deal with bullying.

#### **4.0 Quality assurance**

##### ***Education and training of those working in the field of youth work***

In 2002, the DfES published its specification for 'an excellent youth service'. It continues and refines the government's 'modernization' attempts to locate youth work within its Connexions strategy.

The National Youth Agency (NYA) in the UK welcomed the renewed emphasis on 14-19 learning, formal and informal. It strongly encouraged youth work involvement in what the Agency saw as the Government's two key priorities for youth work intervention - social inclusion, and the development of learning about and active participation in citizenship.

The NYA was commissioned by the DfES to run a residential event with 30 young people to consult them on key elements of Transforming Youth Work, the Connexions Service and the Youth Service Standards Fund. The young people presented directly to representatives of the DfES their insights and views about what might be done, why and how.

In addition, to this the Green Paper, Youth Matters, outlined a number of policies to look at improving the education and training of those working in the field of youth information.

##### ***Improve the link between information and counselling***

As a result of the consultation, with young people and youth organisations around the government Green Paper – Youth Matters, the DfES are currently establishing integrated targeted support pathfinders in a small number of Local Authority areas. The selected areas have been asked to redesign their targeted support services for teenagers, as envisaged by Youth Matters, and discover, record and feed back what is working, what barriers there are and how these might be overcome. Some of the pathfinders will take on a wider remit looking at how they can better support and intervene early with 'at risk' young children and their families to help prevent a range of possible poor outcomes.

Through the pathfinders we hope to explore how Local Authorities can deliver effective integrated targeted support; and to develop a change management

toolkit and case studies which other local areas can use when approaching service and role redesigns.

***Promote the dissemination of specific information for young people through all information channels***

In addition to the work around Connexions, a number of activities, including Millennium Volunteers, Year of the Volunteer 2005, the Frank drugs campaign have used a range of information channels to get messages out to young people.

BYC surveyed over 500 young people and found that they want information about where they would ideally like to access information on issues such as sex, relationships, health and family:

- 53% said that friends would be their ideal place to go to get this type of advice
- 48% said the Internet.
- 39% said youth club,
- 32% said parents
- 23% said school.

***Participation by young people in information***

The DfES have involved young people in the development of the five outcomes for Every Child Matters, in the Green Paper - Youth Matters consultation, and often commissions organisations to consult with young people to find out their views in certain issues – but rarely actually involves them in developing the strategies and in the production of information materials on a national level.

## ***Youth Volunteering***

The Russell Commission was established in May 2004 by the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, to develop a new national framework for youth action and engagement. Two advisory groups were set up to assist Ian Russell and the Review Team with the consultation - an Independent Advisory Group that included representatives from the voluntary sector, business and the media and a Youth Advisory Board that was made up of young volunteers and non-volunteers.

Following extensive research into the current volunteering landscape, both within the UK and abroad, the Commission launched a nation wide consultation in October 2004.

The Commission engaged a wide range of stakeholders including young people, the voluntary sector, business and the media, receiving over 700 responses from voluntary and community sector organisations, and a further 6,000 responses from young people.

'A national framework for youth action and engagement' was published by the Russell Commission on Wednesday, 16 March, 2005.

The Report details the Commission's recommendations for delivering a step change in youth volunteering in the UK – a step change in diversity, quality and quantity. In its report, the Russell Commission responds to the clearly expressed desire of young people to find meaningful ways of contributing to their communities. It addresses current inconsistencies and weaknesses in provision, which prevent the full potential of youth volunteering opportunities from being realised, as well as identifying ways to engage more young people from disadvantaged and under-represented communities. Additionally, the Commission proposes measures to significantly improve the range and quality of activities for which young people can choose to volunteer.

In addition to this, the government supports and funds a number of voluntary organisations and initiatives in the UK, including the British Youth Council, School Councils UK and the United Kingdom Youth Parliament (UKYP),

2005 was the Year of the Volunteer, a year long campaign co-ordinated by the Home Office to celebrate of the amazing work volunteers do and a call to action to get more people volunteering.

## ***Young people and political engagement***

The Electoral Commission and the Department for Constitutional Affairs run a number of programmes and conduct research to examine young people's involvement in the political processes.

The government is keen to re-engage young people in the political process and believes that the introduction of citizenship into the school curriculum will help to achieve this.

However, the UK has a long way to go – only 37% of 18-24 year olds voting in the 2005 general election, compared to 51% in 1997.

We know that many young people currently feel disengaged from national politics because they are not able to vote. Not letting 16 and 17 year olds express their political views through the ballot box gives the impression to young people and to society that young people's views are not valid, or not as valid as the views of older citizens.

One of the key issues for young people is the lack of consistency – they can leave home, leave school, work full time, pay taxes, I join the armed forces and receive social security benefits all at 16, but are not vote. Young people feel that by receiving the vote at 16, politicians will be recognising the valuable contributions that young people make in society.

BYC policy, determined by young people within our membership, states that BYC would like to see the age of majority for all political and social rights, including the right to vote, lowered to 16. BYC have been campaigning to lower the age of voting to 16 for two decades.

BYC conducted a survey of 10,000 young people between the ages of 15-24 in 2001. 52% of young people said that they would or would like to be able to vote in a general election. The report, BYC 'Listening to the Unheard' also highlighted that young people feel they should be given a say at the ballot box at an earlier age

The British Youth Council believes that the age of voting, should be lowered to 16 and is currently campaigning to ensure this is included in the Electoral Administration Bill, currently passing through parliament.