

# Young People's Participation in Social Services Policy Making

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## Abstract

*This paper draws on data collected from three case studies to explore how young people who are 'looked after' participate in social services policymaking. The fieldwork was carried out as the Quality Protects initiative was being implemented and provides a benchmark against which subsequent change in practice and culture may be explored. Three social service departments are used as cases in which the policy process is examined from the different viewpoints of stakeholders. Varying patterns of participation were discerned in the three cases. Only one of the departments studied had been able to successfully embed participation into its policy process.*

## Keywords

User participation, young people, policy, social services, social exclusion, citizenship, democracy, case studies, interviews

## Introduction

Despite the advent of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) 1989 and the *Children Act 1989*, the 1980s and 1990s saw revelations about the failure of the UK state to provide protection to young people living in substitute care. Scandals concerning abuse in residential care led to *People Like Us*, reporting an enquiry led by Utting (1997). These failings combined with a series of government inspections that showed how poorly young people, looked after by the state, made transitions into adulthood, led to the launch of *Quality Protects*. Seeking to transform the public care system in England and Wales it was a management initiative that aimed to uphold rights to provision of service, protection from abuse in substitute care and participation in case and policy decisions (Department of Health 1998). It developed rights to be heard in case decisions and living environments outlined in the 1989 Act. More recent developments that promote participation include the Care Standards Act (2000), *Every Child Matters*

(2003) and the developments of National Service Frameworks designed to ensure effective service delivery to young people. Each are part of the New Labour government's 'Modernising Agenda', that aims to promote the views and needs of service users in the provision and evaluation of service and are in themselves part of wider commitments to reduce social exclusion.

While children and young people are key potential beneficiaries of this drive to reduce exclusion and their voice is now canvassed widely by politicians, policy makers and practitioners to help develop and evaluate strategies, doubts have been expressed that participation alone either achieves change or improves policy decisions. In the field of community development, Cook and Kothari (2001) comment on participatory processes that are manipulative or harmed those who were supposed to be empowered. In the special 'participation' edition of *Children and Society*, Hill and colleagues (2004) note that participation rather than consultation is social inclusion and that to date; children

have had little input into policies designed for services that they use.

This paper reports on doctoral research completed by the author (Gunn, 2002) that investigated the realities of young people's participation in social services policy making and it is part of a growing body of literature that helps to get behind the rhetoric of participation to uncover the practical effects it can have, not just on young people's lives, but on the organisations and workers within organisations who pursue participatory agendas. (Kirby and Bryson 2002, Sparks 2004).

The impetus for the work was that despite research into children's rights, participation in social work case planning (Kirby and Bryson 2002, Lansdown 2001, Thomas 2000, Tisdall and Davies 2004) and the development of service user movements (Barnes 1997), there has been little published on the perceptions of stakeholders (young people, front-line workers, managers and elected members) who have to make the policy process work. The paper describes the legislation that facilitates participation and how its implementation has created policy spaces that enable young people's voice to shape service design and delivery. Three cases are then used to explore the reality of participation for stakeholders.

#### *Legislation and policy that facilitate participation*

Young people are citizens and service users and share the same fundamental rights to participation as adults. Their rights to consultation have been promoted outside the nation state in the UNCRC, and in England and Wales through legislation (the *Children Act 1989*, *Care Standards Act 2000*) and associated policy ('Best Value' framework, 'Children's Service Plans', *Quality Protects* (1998), *Every Child Matters* (2003)). Their participation also enhances the democratic process by helping them to become active members of their communities. Participation also has a more practical purpose. By

getting involved, young people can contribute to the improvement of services through representing their diverse and changing needs and bringing about better-informed decisions. Also, by legitimising their voice participation goes some way to addressing the past failure of local authorities to listen to them, a recurring theme of successive inquiries into abuse exemplified in the 'Pindown' inquiry in Staffordshire, Beck in Leicestershire and physical and sexual abuse in North Wales (Fawcett *et al.* 2004). Finally, participation enables young people to develop as active citizens and enhance their self-esteem by being heard and through the acquisition of skills in debate, communication, negotiation, making priorities and decision-making (Sinclair and Franklin 2000).

Participation is regarded in policy rhetoric as active involvement in the social sphere and can be judged by the extent to which people can exert influence and bring about change. Advocates of participation say it has tended to fall into two main types:

- The consumerist approach - initiated by central government's moves to the political right in the 1980s and pursuit of market ideologies in the provision of welfare.
- The democratic approach utilised by service user movements such as those developed by disabled people, mental health survivors, and older people with an emphasis on civil rights at national and local levels.

(Beresford and Croft 2000)

Participation is affected by people's own circumstances (the personal sphere). To be effective people need access to political structures and support. It can also be used by organisations to obstruct rather than increase involvement when initiatives tokenise or co-opt people with the aim of legitimising pre-determined agendas or delaying decisions. Treating people in

separate groups according to age or impairment can enhance social stereotyping and decrease individual rights for support (Beresford and Croft 2000). This is a particularly important factor for young people looked after who suffer the double disempowerment of being categorised as young and negatively stereotyped as recipients of state care.

### *The voice of users in policy*

Involving young people in policy making can be seen as evidence of shifts in democratic and organisational efforts to empower groups of outsiders (Grant 2000) who had traditionally been excluded from the policy making process (Barnes 1999, Beresford and Croft 1990, Beresford and Harding 1993). Cornwall and Gaventa (2000) argue that citizens are not just users and choosers, but have the potential to be active participants engaging in making and shaping social policy and social provisioning. They identify shifts in participation (Figure 1) that change the relationship service users have with service providers and explore the potential for participatory exercises to open up new 'policy spaces'.

**Figure 1: Model of a shift in participation (Cornwell and Goventa, 2000)**

From	To
Beneficiary	Citizen
Project	Policy
Consultation	Decision making
Appraisal	Implementation
Micro	Macro

Such spaces can enable the articulation of service user expertise and provide a bridge to build accountability at all levels in welfare organisations but may be sensitive to particular institutional and social contexts. The shifts imply more independence and

increased levels of power to shape outcomes in the policy process. The culture and organisational practice of participation in this context are the particular focus of this paper.

### *Practice developments*

Statutory social work is changing in response to views expressed by service user movements (for example the work of the *Shaping Our Lives* group and the participation of service users in social work degree programmes) and a management driven response to service delivery. First, departments are pursuing a more holistic approach to the delivery of welfare with social work functions being linked to housing, education, and health. The second change is the development of partnership working between service providers and service users (Butler and Roberts 1997, Powell 1997 and Thompson 2000). "A commitment to partnership practice has been reflected in all areas of public policy and is particularly clear in relation to personal social services" (Pinkerton 2001 p.250). These developments, reinforced by legislation from Conservative governments between 1989 and 1997 and Labour governments, have produced changes in the way that welfare services are managed and produced, which have affected the relationship between service users and service providers. Twenty three examples of policy participation with young people are evaluated by Kirby and Bryson (2002) and other examples include the work of local groups affiliated to People First, the United Kingdom Advocacy Network, the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People and the Fife User Panel Project (Croft and Beresford 1992; Clarke *et al.* 1994; Leach *et al.* 1994; Barnes 1997). This study was designed to investigate the reality of these changing relationships at departmental level.

### **Case studies: the method**

To explore these developments in participation, three social services departments were selected at random as

cases to reflected the different organisational structures, sizes and locations of local authorities (rather than identified practice approaches) and which could provide insights into the different experiences of stakeholders. Each had been involving young people in their policy making for different lengths of time and had responded to a national 20% stratified random survey on the extent of young people's participation in social services (Gunn 2002). Stratification was by authority organisation under the following categories:

- County Council
- London Borough
- Metropolitan
- Unitary
- Wales Unitary

More than one department was studied to ensure diversity of practice and approach and to reflect the different organisational structures, sizes and locations of contemporary local authorities.

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders nominated by the organisations to explore the different perceptions of stakeholder groups: young people, front line workers, managers, and elected members. The ethical issues inherent in collecting potentially sensitive information were addressed by assurances of confidentiality and the ability of participants to withdraw their consent at any time. Ethical guidelines for research with young people produced by children's charities which address their relative lack of power were used as the framework for data collection and dissemination.

Respondents were asked by the author to reflect and comment upon their experiences of participation. On completion of each interview, researcher perceptions of each encounter were recorded. Whilst not a primary tool of analysis, personal reflection

contributed to the record of the investigation and acknowledged the reflective approach taken in the study. Documentary data collected from each department were examined for information about its policy process and the role of stakeholders within it. Subsequently reports produced by inspectors who conducted the 'Joint Reviews' (inspections by teams from the Audit Commission and Social Services Inspectorate that focus on efficiency and effectiveness) in each case study site were scrutinised, especially where they referred to the organisation's ability to listen to stakeholders and direct participatory experiences. The data collected were transcribed and examined for evidence of homogeneity or diversity of stakeholder experiences using themes that had been identified in participation policy literature: consumerist versus democratic approaches, shared visions for participation, what drives the process, evidence of empowerment and goals for stakeholder groups.

An analysis sheet for each transcript containing a list of themes was produced. These lists were compared between groups and within groups. Areas of dissonance or congruence were highlighted. If there were points of congruence within the groups, these were identified, as were points of congruence or dissonance across groups. It was therefore possible to produce a list of issues that were significant for the different groups in the process and how these either coincided with or varied from points from the other groups. This was a moderately deductive approach to the data and did not rely on any particular theoretical approach beyond that already discussed.

**Table 1: An illustration of the differences exhibited by case study sites**

	Case study sites		
	<i>Our Town</i>	<i>Our City</i>	<i>Our Borough</i>
<b>History</b>	Unitary authority from medium county. Three borough councils merged into new authority	Unitary authority previously part of big county	Long established London borough
<b>Political control</b>	Labour with weak Conservative minority	Labour with weak Conservative minority	Liberal/ Labour with strong Conservative minority
<b>Management style</b>	Managerialist, top down, directive	Consensus building (weak), top down	Delegation of consensus-seeking/making

### Discussion of the data

The case study evidence accentuates the diversity of each site. Whilst working to similar ends within the same legislative framework, each was particular in its character and distinctive in operation. There are clearly defined differences in history, size, political complexion, and management culture between the cases. Their differences can be summarised in the following ways: continuity and maturity (Our Borough); New Labour/managerialist (Our Town); and lost ideal of newly emergent corporatist organisation (Our City). These categorisations are arrived at as a means of understanding the different factors that may have shaped each departments approach to participation with young people. These differences are expanded upon in Table 1.

#### *Comparison of areas*

##### Our Borough

Our Borough was a Liberal/Labour controlled authority with a strong Conservative minority. It displayed a delegation of consensus, with a range of stakeholders shaping responses rather than strong centralised control. Social work autonomy was presented as a professional response shaped by the liberal values of the Principal Officer who created and drove forward the vision that shaped participation.

The informal dress code of staff and politicians mirrored the relaxed, approachable style of the organisation. The Principal Officer brought in people from outside the department who had experience of working with young people and who were ideologically sympathetic to their empowerment, such as the Children's Rights Development Unit (a UN funded initiative). Such involvement with other organisations with a children's focus displayed an outward looking corporate culture ready to respond to new ideas and reflect upon practice.

Participation was management-led but the prime mover, the Principal Officer (who was the lead officer for children's services) expressed his desire for young people's voice to be at the core of policy making and had pursued his aim for seven years prior to stakeholder interviews. He was proactive and able to motivate others with his vision of participation. In reaching out to young people, the department tried to engage with them in the way it developed its services. Its participatory strategy developed initially from conferences for young people to give them information, to surveying opinion and latterly to representatives meeting managers to develop a dialogue that changed the way the department conducted its core business. Much of the success of participation seemed to reside in the vision and enthusiasm of the Principal Officer:

*I think there is a strong sense that we want to consult with young people and involve them...it wasn't young people driven, it was much more about managers being sensitive and committed to this style of work...I got a lot of support from Senior Management ...that it was actually the right thing to do.*

(Peter, Principal Officer)

Recognising young people's lack of power in dealing with adult structures, the department brought in independent agencies to support young people to be more effective stakeholders in the policy process:

*We wanted to have somebody there that the young people could relate to... what we want to talk about is what it is like being a person that is looked after and how it feels to be involved in the decision making process.*

(Tim, Training Manager)

This support was closely allied to the view shared by managers, workers, young people and elected members that participating with service users is the right thing to do:

*I think that any service user, no matter what that service is, should be involved somewhere in the formulation of the policy for that service, because after all they are the ones that are using it and they are the ones who know what is needed...*

(Elaine, Elected Member)

*Everyone should have a say, everyone's got the same rights ... there are things you can talk with them, tell them what you feel, what you think, so everyone should have their say*

(Yolanda, Young Person)

Young people were confident that their views would be respected and that it was worth investing in the process:

*I know everyone in the chain of social services, so I could phone them up and say, look listen to my ideas.*

(Emmie, Young Person)

Our Borough began its attempts to involve young people at the start of the 1990s but found its preferred method, conferences, was tokenistic. This reassessment led managers to change their approach to be more inclusive and to draw on a wide range of

opinions via surveys and they developed direct work with users of their services. Managers' reflexivity led to this change of approach (Fook 2002). As the process developed, young people's positive experience of participation meant that representatives reported more satisfaction with the process. Working together enabled development and the chance to change ideas and re-evaluate positions; in Cornwell and Goventa's terms, to develop new policy spaces:

*I think people respond positively when they are asked to try and engage other people and do it quite well but it's not built into people's everyday way of working ... what I have got to do now is make sure that we do develop the structures to enable us to have our own dialogue with young people.*

(Tim, Training Manager)

### Our Town

Our Town was a Labour controlled authority which developed from a medium sized county social services structure. It displayed a top down, directive management style and was newly emerged from a management overhaul under the direction of a charismatic Assistant Director. Managers had a formal business-style dress code which gave the impression of a group who were primarily focussed on organisational management tasks. Managers and elected members were 'on message'; keen to present a united front with a clear message that focussed on the quality of service. The chair of social services committee was part of the dynamic management group, an implementer, whilst the other member interviewed appeared subordinate although supportive. Participation was management led, linked to established processes and procedures. Managers saw participation in strategic terms and espoused a belief in participation as part of the management task:

*[Involving young people] was on the back of the push around 'Quality Assurance' and getting service users' views, staff's views, managers' views to develop services and to plan and develop for the future...I guess in the*

*previous authority it never really progressed into anything more than collecting individual views and giving an initial direction at grass roots level.*

(Paul, Manager Child Care)

*I've got to be honest and say the push [for participation] initially has come from the government.*

(Elspeth, Elected Member)

A major objective in involvement was ownership of policy to facilitate its successful implementation. Young people and front line workers did not appear to be involved in setting the participatory agenda. Some stakeholders' experience of participation had not been positive:

*There had been a youth council put together ... where young people had actually been consulted and proposed something and it was vetoed by the main council. If we are going to consult people, then it's got to make a difference ... If it's tokenism then there is no point in doing it.*

(Carole, Principal Officer)

Managers were able to list the various participatory strategies they had initiated and were confident that the approaches they were using would deliver the best possible outcomes for service users. However, young people interviewed seemed unaware of the efforts taken to include them in policy making and interpreted the methods used, such as questionnaires, as intrusive rather than empowering. They saw no change resulting from it:

*I just ignored the first one [questionnaire] and then they sent me another one ... so I thought I better fill it in before they start knocking on my door and saying "look fill it in". So I filled it in and posted it back and heard nothing since.*

(Robin, Young Person)

*They are always asking our true feelings about the services and most of us try to change it but I don't think they listen, not taking it offensively, they do a lot for us young people but I don't think they listen.*

(Robin, Young Person)

This indicates a reliance on management strategies to improve welfare services (Cutler

and Waine 2000) without testing them against young people's found experience. 'Managerialism is a set of beliefs and practices, at the core of which burns the seldom tested assumption that better management will prove an effective solvent for a wide range of economic and social ills' (Pollit 1994 p.1). The lack of reflection by managers and elected members on the potential limitations of their strategy meant that they failed to convince their workers that their approach was the most effective way of addressing social need. One front line worker in particular questioned the masculine values that she felt pervaded Our Town's systems-based approach to the delivery of services and promoted a feminised view of service delivery:

*I think there would be more flexibility, I think there would be more creativity, I think there would be more impact emotionally for the kids, more around quality issues, silly little things like that can be dismissed because it's a bit womanly but actually they are really quite important for meeting kids' basic needs. I think the women actually give more consideration to issues about self esteem and self confidence and that they have a more holistic view of meeting kids' needs...they start from where the kid is and fit the service to that, where I think there is a tendency to ...identify what services are needed and fit the kids into the services, I would say that the process should be the other way round.*

(Maggie, Front-Line Worker)

Indeed, managers seemed unaware of some of the problems associated with their participatory strategy that became evident in the research. For example, there was no apparent evidence of an understanding that participation would need to offer young people the power to help set the agenda if they were to become empowered. This approach did not leave any 'space' (Cornwall and Goventa 2000) within the strategies and systems for other stakeholders to create their own approaches to participation or to incorporate them into their way of working:

## Our City

This Labour controlled council displayed a top down approach that appeals to consensus building, but this corporatist approach was seriously undermined by the absence of the lead officer who had been a change agent. Corporate vision was politically driven with a strong rights focus. Our City was coming out of the shadow of a large county trying to shape its own political initiative and discard the history of its previously subordinate status in county affairs. Although a large city, it had not been the seat of county authority. In forging a new identity it was struggling to put in to practice its ideological vision for participation, that all service users could exercise their right to shape the services they used. Practical problems of delivery meant that there was no widespread belief in participation across all stakeholder groups. Uncertainty of management structure was proving corrosive to the belief that the organisation could deliver its vision. The strategy was to recruit young people looked after to act as representatives of the wider group. There had, however, been difficulties from the start:

*... One of the sad things is that it started as something that was going to be really good ... in the end it came to a group of us sitting there, pulling names out of a hat, almost saying well I know this kid and I know this kid, so that was a shame...*

(Sharon, Manager Family Placement)

Front-line workers outside the group were concerned that the particular vehicle chosen for participation was an initiative that was being given more credibility than it deserved. The small numbers of young people in the participation group were not seen as representative of looked after young people as a whole, especially of those disaffected with social services who were in the greatest need of support from the organisation:

*I don't believe three kids are representative of the views of nearly four hundred looked after young people in Our City. It's a good start, but you know that [it] has been as it is for a year now and it's not what it ought to be.*

*Every time we need to publicise the fact that we involve children in our planning and whatever, we wheel out the photo of those three kids and that's exploitation that's what that is.*

(Tess, Manager Residential Services)

Past experiences of the social services department left the young people with a jaundiced view of the department's motives for participation. Two out of the three active group members talked about their mistrust of the department and its motives for setting up the group of which they were members:

*... So it can make the department look good but that's only because I feel very negative against them [the social services department] but it does make me wonder sometimes what with all the publicity... I don't think it's fair that they keep using our three faces, I am sure that there are other young people who would love to be in our shoes and aren't allowed to be.*

(Mary, Young Person)

More negative feelings were expressed about the way participation operated in Our City than in either of the other two case studies. It was noticeable that quite strong feelings were expressed, for example:

*I really can't see politicians listening to the likes of us and remembering everything.*

(Mary, Young Person)

Expression of such direct criticism to an outsider [the researcher] sits uneasily in an authority that made large claims for its participatory approach. It seems that enthusiasm and commitment at the top of an organisation do not obscure the fact that a process that is management controlled may alienate young people and front line workers. The young people who were themselves included sensed that even as the elect they were controlled. Projects with apparently positive outcomes proliferated, yet the evidence suggests that young people had little faith that such work would lead to positive changes.

## Conclusions

This research evaluated whether young people's experiences, insights and desires were a fundamental aspect of policymaking and service delivery in three particular social services departments. The cases examined reflected the policy rhetoric of advocates of participation; it was found that there was a mixture of consumerism (young people viewed as customers of service) and democracy (young people as citizens with rights that were to be upheld by local authorities acting as corporate parents). No department had a clear focus on either approach; this confusion seems to be at the heart of the under-developed participation of young people in policy development.

The national and international rhetoric of participation was influential with managers and elected members who strove to promote it in each department. Young people were provided with a 'space' for participation. However, having a 'space' is not the same as being at the core of local policy making and in only one case (Our Borough) were there discernable shifts towards making organisations more accountable to the young people who relied on their services (Cornwall and Goventa 2000). While all of the departments appeared genuine in their desire to involve young people in shaping the services they received, young people and the workers who directly support them were not convinced that departments really listened to them. It was interesting that none of the young people involved in participation, not even those in Our Borough, which had the greatest depth of experience, could give a clear account of the purpose of their involvement nor give examples of any positive practical changes that it brought.

The feature that marks out Our Borough is that the practice of participation had developed and matured through the reflection of managers beyond a strategic management objective to become normalised in organisational practice. Participation was

helping young people develop as active citizens who were confident they had a voice which counted in the organisation that cared for them.

If the underpinning philosophy is empowerment of the user and upholding young people's rights to participate in policy and service planning, this requires movement on the part of all social services department workers to be successful, not just by the councillors, directors, senior officers and strategic planners. Service users and front-line workers seem wary of management initiatives to change young people's lives for the better when they have been let down by the same organisations in the past. A reliance on rhetoric in the complex human activity of policy making is no substitute for action, and the need to demonstrate discernable change for the young people who are the intended beneficiaries of policy initiatives.

White (1994) concluded in her study of user involvement in the planning of services in social services departments that it is complex, time consuming, needs financing both directly and indirectly, but above all needs commitment and understanding. Despite this, it needs to begin somewhere. In each of the three cases, the process has begun. Making participation a fundamental aspect of an organisation's culture is now seen as an important aspect of successful policy making (Wright *et al.* 2006) and it seems that developing a participatory culture takes time, a reflexive approach and the mutual respect of the people involved in the process.

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### **Notes on contributor**

Robert Gunn has worked as a social worker, as a probation officer and in youth justice before taking up his post as lecturer in social work at the University of York. He is especially interested in the policy context in which social work exists and how the political philosophy of welfare shapes the services people receive.

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