

Children's participation in decision-making

A Children's Views Report

Dr Ciara Davey, Tom Burke and Catherine Shaw

I would like to know how to make lots of people listen, because if we don't, the future generation is going to become less happy. If you leave children with problems and you don't listen to them, it will make it worse ...

(Interview with an involved group of disabled children)

The **Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)** protects the human rights of children by lobbying government and others who hold power, by bringing or supporting test cases and by using regional and international human rights mechanisms. We provide free legal information and advice, raise awareness of children's human rights, and undertake research about children's access to their rights. We mobilise others, including children and young people, to take action to promote and protect children's human rights. Each year we publish a review of the state of children's rights in England. For more information visit: www.crae.org.uk

NCB's mission is to advance the well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives. As the leading support and development charity for the whole of the children's sector in England and Northern Ireland, NCB provides essential information on policy, research and best practice for our members and the members of our wide range of networks and partnership bodies, operating under our charitable status and based in our London headquarters. For further information visit: www.ncb.org.uk

The **National Participation Forum (NPF)** brings together organisations and associations within the public, private and third sectors. By raising awareness of participation and its value to organisations and individuals, NPF aims to strengthen the commitment to participation amongst leaders and decision-makers. For more information visit: www.participationworks.org.uk/npf

The **Office of the Children's Commissioner** is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. The Children's Commissioner is a position created by the Children Act 2004 and is there to champion the views and interests of all children and young people in England and has UK-wide responsibility for issues relating to asylum and immigration. We aim to help build a stronger society, to develop healthier families and to improve the well-being of children and young people by putting across their perspectives. For more information visit: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

Participation Works enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. We are a consortium of six national children and young people's agencies made up of the British Youth Council, the Children's Rights Alliance for England, NCB, the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Save the Children and The National Youth Agency. We offer a comprehensive programme of activities and resources on participation – including workshops, training sessions and practitioner networks – designed to support organisations and practitioners that work with children and young people under 25 years old. For more information visit: www.participationworks.org.uk



Participation Works is based at National Children's Bureau.
Registered charity number 258825. Registered in England and Wales No 952717.
Registered Office: 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE. A Company Limited by Guarantee.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for comments on drafts of the report by Barbara Hearn, (NCB), Carlyne Willow (CRAE), Anne Mason and Ross Hendry (Office of the Children's Commissioner). We would also like to thank Mike Lindsay for helping to design and conceive this research, Hayley Barrett (CRAE) for assisting with the research and Pat Gordon-Smith for her advice on designing the interview questions.

A very special thank you also goes to the teachers and support workers who helped to organise the interviews, and to the children who so generously gave up their time to share their views.

We thank the members of the advisory group which helped to steer the wider project. Members included: David Kerr (National Foundation for Educational Research), James Cathcart (British Youth Council), Ben Wright (Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations), Kate Martin (Council for Disabled Children), Jenny Willmott (National Council for Voluntary Youth Services) and Connie Wessels (UNICEF).

Contents

Introduction	6
What do we mean by participation?	7
Aim of the current report	7
Methodology	7
Conducting research with disabled children	9
Sample demographics	9
1 Children's involvement in decision-making at school	11
1.1 Do children feel they have enough say in school?	11
1.2 What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in school?	16
1.3 If a child was the head teacher how would they ensure children have more of a say in school?	18
1.4 Summary of key points	19
Do children feel they have enough say in school?	19
What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in school?	19
If a child was the head teacher how would they ensure children have more of a say in school?	20
2 Children's involvement in decision-making at home	21
2.1 Do children feel they have enough say at home?	21
2.2 What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say at home?	24
2.3 If a child was the head of the household, how would they ensure children have more of a say in the home?	27
2.4 Summary of key points	29
Do children feel they have enough say at home?	29
What decisions would you like to have more of a say in and why?	29
If a child was the head of your household how would they ensure children have more of a say at home?	29

3	Children's involvement in decision-making in their local area	30
3.1	Do children feel they have enough say in their local area?	30
3.2	What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in their local area?	34
3.3	How would a child ensure children have more of a say in the local area where they live?	36
3.4	Summary of key points	37
	Do children feel they have enough say in decision-making in their local area?	37
	What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in decisions made in their local area?	38
	How would you ensure children had more of a say in the local area where they live?	38
4	Children's general views on participation	39
4.1	Why should adults listen to children?	39
4.2	If a child had a magic wand how would they make sure children's views were taken seriously?	40
4.3	Summary of key points	41
	Why should adults listen to children?	41
	If you had a magic wand how would you make sure children's views were taken seriously?	41
	Conclusion	42
	References	43

Introduction

In 1991, the UK Government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This human rights treaty guarantees to all children and young people¹ the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and for these views to be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity (Article 12).

In the autumn of 2009, the National Children's Bureau and the Children's Rights Alliance for England were commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner to examine children's participation in decision-making in England. The overarching aim of this study was to provide an up-to-date insight into the levels and ways in which children are currently involved in decision-making in order to inform the National Participation Forum in developing a National Participation Strategy for England from 2010 onwards.

The study was split into five distinct parts which have been written up as individual reports² in addition to an overarching summary document, visit: <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/npf/publications>. The reports cover:

- a review of policy and research on where children influence matters affecting them and how their involvement in decision-making has changed since 2004;
- an online survey of senior managers with responsibility for participation examining the levels and ways in which organisations in England currently involve children in decision-making and the barriers that limit children's participation in decision-making processes³;
- an online survey examining the levels and ways in which front-line participation workers involve children in the development, delivery and evaluation of policies and services and the training and support needs of participation workers⁴;
- focus groups with children examining the extent to which children feel they have a voice and influence in matters affecting them and how this varies by setting and level of decision-making⁵;
- a nationally representative survey of 1001 children aged 7–17 years in England looking at the participation of children in decision-making processes more generally⁶.

A version of the overarching summary document aimed specifically at children and young people has also been produced.

What do we mean by participation?

Article 12 of the UNCRC grants a child who is capable of forming a view the right to express that view freely in all matters affecting him or her; and these views should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Other rights in the UNCRC – for example, the right to access information, freedom of association and expression and respect for the child's evolving capacity – actively support the implementation of Article 12⁷.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's 2009 General Comment on the child's right to be heard considers the meaning of participation⁸:

A widespread practice has emerged in recent years, which has been broadly conceptualized as "participation", although this term itself does not appear in the text of article 12. This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.

Whilst 'participation' is the most common term used for the process of listening to and engaging with children, the exact definition remains contested⁹. There is no one fixed meaning or definition which has universal agreement.

Participation Works has adapted Treseder's definition of participation, which is used in this review¹⁰:

Participation is a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change.

We are interested in not just whether children can freely express themselves, but also if this has influence on a decision and brings about change. The exact change which is brought about will vary on the context but may relate to both process (how children are treated) and outcome (the end result of a decision). It may be a change in law or policy, how a service is delivered or in the values, attitudes and behaviours of adults or children.

Aim of the current report

The current report focuses on one particular strand of the overarching study in children's participation in decision-making. It examines the extent to which children living in England feel they have a voice and influence in matters affecting them at school, at home and in the area where they live. This report is based on the findings from 12 focus group interviews conducted between November and December 2009 in the north, south, east and west of England with 44 boys and 42 girls from a variety of backgrounds aged between three and 20 years of age.

Methodology

In October 2009, a flyer inviting participation workers to organise a focus group interview with children was cascaded through the membership database of Participation Works (PW), the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE). We were particularly interested

in interviewing groups of children who were either very 'involved' in making decisions about matters that affect their lives (through their memberships of various children's rights organisations, youth forums and youth parliaments), as well as children or who were generally 'not involved' in decision-making processes.

A blurb describing the aims of the research and inviting children who were either very 'involved' or 'not involved' in decision-making processes to participate in the research, was also posted in newsletters and e-bulletins distributed by various children's rights charities working across England.

To ensure that the research reflected a broad range of experiences in decision-making, we interviewed five groups of children who were active members of school councils and/or youth forums and seven groups of children who we identified as being less likely to access participation opportunities (including very young children, refugee and migrant children, disabled children and children in care). Although this design strategy aimed to capture a range of children's experiences in decision-making, in reality the categorisation of interviewees into groups that were either involved or uninvolved in decision-making was somewhat arbitrary. This was because some participants were categorised as belonging to an 'involved' group of decision-makers on the basis of their membership of an active school council but yet they may have had little experience of making decisions at home or in their area.

Prior to conducting a focus group interview, the organiser was sent a copy of the interview schedule to check that the questions were appropriate for the participants and that we had not missed any key issues they thought it might be important to flag up which were relevant to decision-making. We also sent an information leaflet to the participants outlining the aims of the research to help inform their decision about taking part in the discussion and we have promised to send a child friendly summary of the key findings from this report to all of the participants (with a translated version for refugee and migrant children).

We interviewed groups of six–eight children who were of a similar age and had similar experiences of being 'involved' or 'not involved' in decision-making with each interview lasting one hour. We chose to interview children in focus groups on the basis that the rich exchange of information that often results from a group dynamic might encourage participants to critique the points being raised in the discussion. To depersonalise the research, we phrased each question to ask 'do you think children of your age...' on the basis that this might encourage children to give more open and honest answers to our questions.

Before the interview began, we reminded children that their participation in the focus group interview was voluntary and we asked their permission to tape-record the conversation. We explained that any quotes we would use in reports and presentations arising from this research would be written up in such a way that no one individual could be identified. Although some refugee and migrant children expressed trepidation at having the conversation recorded (as this brought back 'uncomfortable' memories of being interviewed by the immigration authorities when they initially entered Britain), none of the participants declined our request to record the conversation. For child protection reasons, we also asked the interviewees if the organiser could sit at the back of the room for the duration of the interview. Whilst it arguable that this may have inhibited children from openly discussing their experiences of decision-making, we found this arrangement very beneficial because the

organiser was able to clarify and provide more detail on barriers to participation based on their knowledge of the structures of local councils and youth forums which children often alluded to but may not have necessarily understood.

Each focus group interview was structured around 12 core questions which looked at children's involvement in decision-making in school, in the home, and in the area they lived, with a final set of questions examining more general issues around participation. For the discussions relating to school, home and area, we showed children a collage of photographs and pictures denoting the widest possible range of decisions which children may be involved in making. For example, the collage on school contained pictures of children eating in a canteen, studying in the classroom, a child being taught at home with a parent/carer, children interviewing teachers for a new job, children playing in the playground, children wearing a school uniform, children deciding school rules, children lining up for the bus to take them home, children participating in school concerts/school plays and pictures of rooms in a school such as the toilets, library, play and sporting facilities. These photographs depicted children of different genders, ages, ethnic background and disability. Although captions were inserted under each photograph/picture, we deliberately chose generic images to encourage children to put their own interpretations on the meaning of the pictures.

On some occasions, a prompt card displaying the interview question was also used to ensure the discussion was kept focused on a particular issue, although this technique was most often employed with younger aged children and children with disabilities.

All of the children who took part in the focus group discussions received a certificate acknowledging their contribution to the research.

Conducting research with disabled children

To assist with the research we conducted with one group of disabled children aged 4–13 years and who had a diverse range of physical and mental disabilities, we enlisted the help of several child mentors (or 'buddies' as they called themselves) who were responsible for supporting younger disabled children in the group to engage in the research. Before the session began, we briefed the buddies on the aims of the research and we worked with them to rephrase the questions in a way that children would understand. During the session, the buddies asked the research questions and the researchers recorded and/or wrote down their answers. We also worked alongside several key adult workers who knew the children well and were therefore attuned to their communication needs. These adults worked on a one-to-one basis with children who had severe learning impairments asking the child to point to the picture that best represented their response to a particular question and then recording this information and any additional comments from the child. The wording which the child mentors used to elicit responses from children with disabilities became the overarching template which we used for all subsequent focus group interviews. This ensured that the research was firmly grounded in the perspective of children.

Sample demographics

Table 1.1 shows the number of boys and girls from the groups that were 'involved' or 'uninvolved' in decision-making who participated in the research.

Table 1.1: Sample demographics

	Type of group	Age range	Number of boys participating	Number of girls participating	Total
1	Involved group of children in Kent	8–11 years	4	4	8
2	Involved group of disabled children in Brighton	4–13 years	7	13	20
3	Involved group of children in care in Stockport	17–18 years	2	2	4
4	Involved group of children in Halifax	13–18 years	5	2	7
5	Involved group of children in Kent	14–15 years	3	3	6
6	Uninvolved group of children in care in Stockport	12–15 years	4	2	6
7	Uninvolved group of children in Hampshire	5–7 years	2	4	6
8	Uninvolved group of disabled children in Walsall	15–19 years	3	3	6
9	Uninvolved group of children in Coventry	3–4 years	3	3	6
10	Uninvolved group of children in London	13–16 years	2	4	6
11	Uninvolved group of refugee and migrant children in Coventry	15–20 years	4	2	6
12	Uninvolved group of refugee and migrant children in Coventry	18–19 years	5	0	5
		3–20 years	44	42	86

1. Children's involvement in decision-making at school

This section addresses the following questions:

- Do children feel they have enough say in school?
- What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in school?
- If a child was the head teacher, how would they ensure children have more of a say in school?

1.1 Do children feel they have enough say in school?

Although our interview sample consisted of an almost equal number of children who were either involved (45 participants) or uninvolved (41 participants) in decision-making processes, the overwhelming majority were of the opinion that children generally do not have a sufficient say in decision-making processes in school. Only a minority of children in schools which operated a very proactive school council (most of whom were of primary school age) rejected this view. In these particular schools, students were involved in decision-making processes which ranged from helping to decide the rules of the classroom and what should happen if these rules were broken, to having an input into the content of lessons.

... we jotted down ideas of what we could actually do during lessons, and some of them are actually going to be used, like comparing differences between Modern Greece and Ancient Greece, and sculpting, and joining literacy and art and everything into the one subject, which was quite a good idea ...

(Interview with an involved group of primary school children)

That said there were limits to the type of decisions children were generally involved in making, and it was awareness of this fact that led some children to criticise the extent to which they felt listened to in school. It was suggested that children were more likely to be involved in choosing what food was served in the canteen, suggesting equipment for the school playground and ways to stop bullying, as opposed to making decisions in relation to the appointment of new teachers and deciding how the school budget should be spent.

I think in a lot of schools they run really well and young people are taken seriously when matters arise and they deal with it in the right ways and take the right actions, but I think in the general running of school, in the curriculum or in the way that lessons run and in the way that we learn, in interviewing processes for teachers and stuff like that I don't think there's

enough say from young people because it is where they have to go day in, day out for their education ...
(Interview with an involved group of children).

When asked what decisions would they like to have more of a say in, the most common responses were: wanting to sit on the interviewing panel when recruiting teachers; being involved in the ongoing assessment of teachers in the classroom; having a say in the writing of school rules and the design of the school uniform; and wanting to be involved in decisions to improve the school environment. It was suggested that the poor condition of their school building had a negative impact on children and young people's motivation to learn.

I'd like to have more of a say in how the school looks. Say, what happens in the classroom, what it looks like in the classroom. Because it's normally just really boring, it doesn't look very inviting. So if you had a say in it, it might make more people go to class instead of skipping it ...
(Interview with an involved group of children in care)

When discussing the types of things they would like to have more of a say in, children seemed very aware of the imbalance of power in the adult-child, teacher-pupil relationship, although as suggested in the extract below, most children tended to accept this as natural and inevitable:

Child 1: Well, I think that our school, we're given things to decide from, so say if we want things sport wise, we're given options and we have to decide from them, so actually we can't say what we want to do. There's a certain amount of decision-making, but not to the extent of just free will.

Child 2: Because everything has to be within reason, because obviously, if we say we want to go sky diving as a sport, they're not going to take us, are they?
(Extract from an interview with an uninvolved group of children)

Child 1: Teachers don't want to listen to you anyway. When I was in school they said we're doing skipping and foundation stuff. We told them let's do the skipping, [but] people were going "this isn't how I learn; let me do it my way". We were doing it the teacher's way for five minutes but then stopped, and said it's boring. So the teacher stopped the lesson and said everybody has to go home. I said what is the point when you take our advice, and you don't want to really enjoy the stuff you want to do, and your advice you bring, it's sometimes good and sometimes it's not good.

Interviewer: Why do you think teachers don't listen to you?

Child 1: You feel that you haven't got that much knowledge so they just think you're young, what do you know. That's what they think.
(Extract from an interview with an uninvolved group of refugee and migrant children)

The above extract suggests that children could be rational, reasonable and measured in their approach to decision-making and candid in their understanding of the context. This point was illustrated throughout the

interviews. Some children had a pseudo-adult approach when prioritising the things other children suggested needed to be changed in a particular school. As suggested in the extracts below, if effective mechanisms for engaging children in decision-making processes are embedded into the culture of the school, children can make responsible decisions even from a young age.

Child 1: We did decide what new things we should buy for the school, and some people said silly things like tree houses, trampolines ...

Child 2: And swimming pools and stuff.

Child 3: Some people don't really take it seriously.

Child 2: A jacuzzi.

Interviewer: And what happened when someone said something like a tree house or a swimming pool?

Child 1: In my class, we had post-it notes, and we just put them all on Post-it notes, and when we went to the meeting, I just put all the silly ones to one side and the good ones I gave to the school council.

(Extract from an interview with an involved group of primary school children)

I make decisions on when school buildings are made but I can't decide prices in the canteen. They are hard to change as production prices are high ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of disabled children)

Having the means to voice an opinion, however, was only the first stage in engaging children in decision-making processes. A second, equally important stage was providing children with feedback on decisions taken by the school council as proof that teachers had actually listened to what children said.

People in my school are just lazy, they just really can't be bothered to feed back to their forms. As far as I know they've had about four meetings in the last two months and I've heard nothing, absolutely nothing, and when you try and talk to them they say, yes, I'll go to the next one. The next meeting comes and goes and then, what happened? ... I don't get told what goes on in my school ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

I think the problem with our school council is there's no publicising because we only have one assembly of school council a year and then the minutes are put on a board in a corridor where nobody goes because it's on the way to the deputy head's office and not many people go there ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Children who felt disengaged from decision-making processes at school were amongst the most likely to describe their school council as 'tokenistic' and a waste of time because of the lack of feedback from council meetings. Not being informed about decisions left many children questioning the validity of

the school council and the willingness of staff to actually share power with pupils. Interestingly, it was not so much the case that children objected to staff making decisions on behalf of pupils – on the contrary many children accepted that adults were often the best placed to make decisions relating to children's education. The issue for children was more that they were excluded from understanding the rationale on which a decision was based. They were therefore left with little understanding as to what their views had contributed to that particular decision-making process. Many children saw this as indicative of the low value that was generally accorded to their status as children. This point is illustrated in the quote below where the erection of large gates around a school to protect children from unauthorised strangers accessing the premises, had the unforeseen effect of blocking important escape routes which children used to avoid being bullied. Here an adult-led decision which was uninformed by the opinions of children had unintended consequences for the victims of bullies.

Child 1: My school has got big green gates all around and they had it locked automatically, no one could get in or out, and I basically found that really annoying because it's like being locked in a space, you can't get out and I don't think that's fair.

Interviewer: So you'd like to have a decision in school safety?

Child1: Yes.

Interviewer: Why's that important?

Child 1: Because I don't feel a lot of people would be comfortable with the fact that they're just getting shut in a space and if they got really upset or something they couldn't just walk out. And they wouldn't just go home when a lot of things do happen, and some people get beaten up. Stuff happens to people and a lot of people don't tell teachers because they think it's going to come back on me, so they prefer to go home, but they can't.

(Extract from an interview with an involved group of children in care)

Despite children's often rational and considered approach to decision-making processes, the downside to not involving them in decision-making processes or providing feedback as to what decision had been reached and why, was to position children and adults in opposition to one another.

I think they do surveys and consult with young people to tick a box rather than to actually listen to them and to actually consult with them and take it for word, so that's what I gather in school anyway ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Yes most schools have a school council, but when you're doing the actual thing, like the meeting or whatever, and they listen to you for that hour or half an hour, and after that you don't hear anything about it, it's all just forgotten about. It's like, what was the point in expressing all your views when they don't even do anything about it?

(Interview with an involved group of children)

The above quotes were fairly typical of the majority of schools which our interviewees attended¹¹. It emerged that many school council meetings tended to be ad hoc, and delays in feeding back decisions to pupils not only appeared to stunt progress on making change happen, but it cast doubt on the importance the school accorded to pupil voice and participation. This resulted in many children feeling powerless to change what they considered to be an archaic schooling system which was not fit for purpose.

... I've never been in a school where the students choose the school rules. Our school literally set the system... and it's like everything's set. So if you do one thing, that's the way it is. And if you do another thing that's the way that is, so we've never actually had a say on the rules we have ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

... And also school councils, even though they say they are going to do stuff because it's quite apparent in our school they say they're going to do stuff but it never actually moves forward anywhere, they come up with this great idea and they just put it on a piece of paper ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

Children who commented on the differential power they saw as inherent in the teacher–pupil relationship were also the most likely to flag up power differentials between students. Although the comment below was made by a disabled child who could not walk, the sentiments that it contains are indicative of the negative affect a culture of non-participation can have on relationships among and between teachers and pupils.

So like in PE, for instance, they play games but then all of them can't run [because] they're fat, but then if you say to them [the teachers], let's play a game with smaller groups where we can all run and be safe, then they're [the teachers] like, no, that's not a PE lesson. So they're not including me. They could include you in PE lessons, if they play, say, football, then I could play a smaller group or whatever. But if they're like ten in each group, I get scared because then they just push you, as I say. I'd rather sit on the sideline... they should have found something where it could be safe for me, and everyone else, not just leave me out...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of disabled children)

Similar stories were recounted by other children who had a disability, the majority of whom were very critical of the non-inclusive nature of some mainstream schools. It was not uncommon for these children to say they were physically excluded from school activities on account of their disability and sometimes this exclusion resulted in them being publicly humiliated in front of their able-bodied friends because of the failure of the school to take account of their needs. One girl told us:

When I was at my first secondary school I was told that I would be taken out of the class for PE because they couldn't adapt the PE lesson for my needs, and I wasn't allowed to do something else, and it wasn't acceptable. And in music I was taken out of the lesson because I couldn't hold a guitar properly, so I didn't do music in the end. Yes, it's like I wouldn't bother, but... the attitude towards me was a bit abrupt ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of disabled children)

In response to this situation, some children devised their own strategies to challenge their disengagement from decision-making processes. For example, one pupil said that as a result of not being involved in changes to their school uniform the students now *'wear it as scruffy as they can'*. Others suggested that rather than tabling a motion for discussion at the school council, it was much more effective to approach individual teachers:

If you want to do things, you don't have to do a big thing about it, you can just go to a PE teacher and ask can we do a club after school? And he says to me, if you get 12 people, then you need to do that. It's more like there's certain people who will get things done, otherwise you have to go through one person, and then it has to go through another... our way I think it's better because it saves you the hassle really ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

1.2 What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in school?

Although it was clear from the focus group interviews that different schools had different processes for recruiting children to school councils and different rules regarding re-election, the general consensus was that children who were *'clever'*, *'behave really well'*, *'good attendees'* and *'popular'* were the most likely candidates to be voted onto the school council.

I think on the school council there's a lot of creative people and good decision makers... we want creative ideas; good people that have charisma that can go and speak. They're not afraid to speak in front of groups ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

However, not all of our interviewees thought these characteristics necessarily made the best student reps. In fact there was strong support for school councils to be made up of children from a wide range of backgrounds if the council was to be truly representative. It was suggested that when schools engaged students who would not normally get involved in an activity (such as the school council meeting), there were often immense benefits both for the council (in terms of opening up the debates from a previously overlooked perspective), and for the student involved (in regards to confidence building and developing public speaking and negotiation skills). The majority of children wanted fair representation on school councils to ensure that there was a mix of opinions which were representative of the divergent interests of the children who make up the school community.

... if say a naughty student was put on the school board they might not come across in a really well mannered way or anything, but they could ask the question that is key to the post that they're going to be getting because it is a young person and they know what they want when it comes to their lessons, they know how it's going to help them learn, they know how it's going to keep them focused. So I think not just choosing the high academic or the ones that are constantly involved in the school community isn't always the best idea either because it's maybe the ones that aren't so focused that need to be focused ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

Children in care and disabled children were also very conscious of their perceived 'unsuitability' as school reps which they blamed on the non-inclusive culture of some schools.

Child 1: In my school there's quite a few disabled people, and I think people just ignore them because they're different.

Child 2: And they don't want to speak up, because they think that they're different because of the people in school.

Child 3: And disabled children, in care children, they're sort of the same, they're in the same category because they're in care, and they're disabled, so you get picked on and stuff.

(Extract from an interview with an involved group of children in care)

... the charity committees and things in school... people that get chosen for things like that are the people that have always been in school, and always done the right things. I've not been to school for a bit, and they probably wouldn't choose me to be on something like that, because they don't trust me, and I don't think that's fair at all because I could do it ...

(Interview with an involved group of children in care)

There were also criticisms of schools that held council meetings during lesson time where it was suspected that students who wanted to 'bunk off lessons instead of doing something' were disproportionately represented. The impact of this factor was further accentuated by the low priority teachers also seemed to accord the business of school council meetings:

... people will go, "Oh yes I'll do it" then they might not want to give up lunchtime or something or they might not be bothered to feed back and then teachers will think there are more important things to them. So I think it's from both sides really that it's not working as well as it could possibly do ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

It was suggested that as children grew older they should have more of a say in decision-making processes. This was based on the rationale that with age, you become more knowledgeable and more aware of how things could be improved and as children have the responsibility of passing milestone GCSE examinations at the age of 16, they should be given some responsibility in shaping the processes that affect their education. To prepare for this role, children argued that very young children should be encouraged to take part in decision-making to familiarise themselves with the process of weighing up the pros and cons of decisions before they are made.

At our school, from year seven to eight, there were people that actually wanted to be on the school council... then after year nine, ten, you couldn't re-elect, so it was just like people were just forced to go on, because no one wanted to do it, so you'd have to make someone do it. ... That's why I think it would be better to get more from the younger ones involved... because at the end of the day, they're going to be in our position one day ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

1.3 If a child was the head teacher how would they ensure children have more of a say in school?

The most common response from children to this question was to emphasise the importance of having a range of different media to enable children to engage in decision-making processes in various ways. Suggestions ranged from having a comments box and making better use of the discussion boards/forums on school websites, to using sport as a way to elicit children's views on key issues:

I'd get loads of nets around from somewhere, and I'd say, like, which choice do you want, and you've got to shoot a football into what choice you want to say if you want more school dinners, and there's a net for more school dinners, you can shoot a football in, and your football would have your name on and you'd have to use it for every goal, then you'd know ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

Having a variety of ways through which to express their views was deemed the best way of accommodating the wide variety of ways children could express themselves. Children with disabilities were especially likely to make this point.

... if I were the head teacher I would not class disabled people and able people; I would treat them the same as everyone else, but I would also recognise that if someone had a disability... I'd try and find another solution. But I would also include the disabled people as much as possible into the group ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of disabled children)

Despite widespread criticism of school councils, it is notable that schools which operated a proactive school council, also tended to have democratic and transparent recruitment processes to elect student representatives.

... we've got quite a lot of monitors in our class, so we've made decisions as well like that, like who's done that, and who's done what, and who should be this; who do we think is the best for the job. So I think that's quite important as well ...
(Interview with an involved group of primary school children)

Staff in these schools not only appeared to listen, consider and act on the ideas of students, but they also seemed to embed the principles of Article 12 of the UNCRC in the very ethos of the school. As a result, children were empowered to take part in different decisions on various issues, the effect of which gave them a feeling of having responsibility, being listened to and most important of all, being seen as a valued member of the school community.

If there's anything we want to add to the school, we take part in that as well; like it will be run through us before it actually happens to see if children at our school actually want that to be done, because we go back and give feedback to our class so that everyone gets a say ...
(Interview with an involved group of primary school children).

As suggested above, involving children in decision-making processes can help foster a culture of respect and appreciation for diversity and difference. This may in part explain why children who had a disability, or who were in care, or from a refugee or migrant background were the most likely to emphasise the

need for balanced representation on school councils to ensure that the interests of *all* children could be accommodated.

The ad hoc nature in which some school council meetings were held, also led to calls for there to be more regular meetings and/or annual review surveys (as opposed to only sending out a survey if there was a particular issue the school wanted children's feedback on).

It should be a bit more set, instead of just a questionnaire or a piece of paper every now and again, or somebody saying, what do you think of this, we'd have something that's like a bit more set, like everybody maybe gets together once a week and goes through everything that they've had to make decisions on ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children in care)

It was suggested that power sharing between staff and pupils might be more effectively negotiated, if school council meetings were to take place in more 'official' locations such as the head teacher's office. This suggestion was based on the rationale that it:

... breaks the barrier between the head teacher and the children, because if it's in their office it's like I've been in here before and you feel more comfortable about talking to them there. Because head teachers are only feared because you hardly see them, and they tell you off once in a while. But if you're in their office you feel a bit more important ...

(Interview with an involved group of children in care)

1.4 Summary of key points

Do children feel they have enough say in school?

Most children were dissatisfied with their level of input into decision-making processes in school. The lack of feedback on how children's opinions had been taken into account when making (what were usually) 'micro' level decisions left many children disillusioned with power-sharing mechanisms. The data suggested that a non-participative culture can have a negative effect on relationships among and between teachers and pupils with the result that the values of respect and inclusiveness fail to be embedded in the culture of a school.

What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in school?

Clever, popular, well behaved children who were good attendees tended to be disproportionately represented on school councils. This was deemed to be unreflective of the different groups of children who made up the school community and likely to have a negative impact on the issues discussed. They emphasised the need for greater representation of children with diverse interests to sit on school councils and for younger children to be involved in decision-making processes to ensure that opportunities to learn new skills could be made available to children from the earliest age possible.

If a child was the head teacher how would they ensure children have more of a say in school?

Children said that having range of mechanisms through which to express their views, as well as more frequent school council meetings with regular updates on the rationale for decisions would enable children to undertake responsible decision-making in an environment where children felt listened to and a valued member of the school community.

2. Children's involvement in decision-making at home

This section addresses the following questions:

- Do children feel they have enough say at home?
- What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say at home?
- If a child was the head of a household how would they ensure children have more of a say at home?

2.1 Do children feel they have enough say at home?

Due to the varied ages and home backgrounds of the children we spoke to, it was difficult to generalise from our sample of 86 participants whether children thought they had sufficient say in decision-making processes at home. At one end of the continuum we spoke to children who lived in very democratic households where power sharing was an intrinsic part of the ethos of family life:

We get to choose what sort of chore we would like. We all sit down and we make like a family rota and schedules of homework; when we do homework, when our free time is. So we decide on quite a bit like we decide what chores we do, when we do them, whether we want to help ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

At the other extreme, we spoke to children who had very little involvement in decision-making at home:

I've been in care since I was six, it's like bath time, bath, now, bed, now, watching TV, you've had an hour, go play outside or something. ... But that can stop as well, because if they don't like the person who you hang about with, it's like, you're not allowed to hang about with them anymore. I get really upset ...
(Interview with an involved group of children in care)

Unlike school, there were no official mechanisms for engaging children in decision-making processes with parents/carers and siblings at home and as a result, children generally had different ideas about when they should be involved in decisions and the best way to do this. The complexity of being involved in decision-making processes at home was summed up by one child who said:

I've got two sisters and I'd say that I have quite a lot of say but I know people around me that have got brothers and sisters and they don't have any say, so I think it depends. Each family's different, it's made up of

different people that have had so many different experiences and it's all been put together. You live in one household so you're together all of the time and I suppose your parents are just trying to get the best out of you and spur you on to do the right things all the time. Sometimes they might have to make a decision or they feel like they're making the right decision for you and don't consult you which may be right, but it may be wrong ...
(Interview with an involved group of children).

It was also suggested that being involved in decision-making processes was not just about empowering children to put across their own point of view, it was also about supporting children to see both sides of the argument and to make an informed decision as a result.

I know for my GCSEs it wasn't just me and my parents decided; it was the whole family, me, my brother and sister and my parents decided what I wanted to do. I think, in that sense, it's not about whether you get a chance to say, it's about whether you're supported in what you want to do ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

As children grew older, they also recognised that often they had to negotiate how much say and influence they had over issues that affected them. However, as noted in the comments below, many children agreed that it was important to have some form of input and advice from parents/carers because *'they're guiding you at the end of the day'*. Having parents there to steer decision-making processes was often considered invaluable in assisting children become more independent as they move from childhood to adulthood:

I think...your mum's always right, even if you really don't agree, if she's not, you're not going out and you really wanted to you, you know in the end she's doing it for the right reasons ... but obviously, like the school thing, when you're 11, 12, 13, you really want to do everything your way and don't listen to your mum, but then as you start to grow up, you realise mum is right. She's not there for bad and she's not doing it to upset you, she's doing it for your own good ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

My parents raised me [and] they treat me as a normal person. Obviously, when it comes to hospital appointments and things, then I'll need help organising; they'll do it for me. But... with things like colleges... they say it's my decision, they can't make me go anywhere, they can only advise me. So they're trying to make me become more independent, because I think I am a bit timid ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of disabled children)

Generally speaking, younger children's involvement in decision-making processes tended to be limited to particular types of decisions (among the most popular were) choosing what food they ate at meal times, choosing what TV programmes they watched, and choosing *'what I want my room to be like'*. As children grew older and became more vocal about wanting a say in things that affected their lives, their involvement in decision-making was more likely to be negotiated, as illustrated below:

Child 1: Well, I would like to put a few posters up on my wall, but my dad won't let me because he says they're damaging to the wall.

Interviewer: And what did you think about that? Do you think that was fair? Do you disagree?

Child 1: I disagree.

Child 2: It's your room.

Child 1: If you're going to keep them up, then like... I should decide, because we have homework every Friday, and I get to decide whether I do it at the weekend or have to do it on Monday, but I normally decide the weekend, because I don't have to do so much homework ...

(Extract from an interview with an involved group of children)

With many of these decisions I have to do one thing (like housework), to be able to do another (like spending time with friends) ...

(Interview with an involved group of disabled children)

I get a say in what my room looks like, what I eat, but I've got chores to do in the house which I get told to do ...

(Interview with an involved group of children in care)

The one area where children's involvement in decision-making tended to be restricted was in children's homes (although the degree to which this happened varied significantly depending on who was in charge). Children who had experience of staying at a children's home were generally in agreement that decisions relating to bedtime, bath time, playtime, and the food available were usually non-negotiable. Decisions such as inviting your friends over for tea, were also more problematic for children in care because of the bureaucracy and child protection issues that surrounded these particular types of decisions. As one child explained:

... when you're in a children's home you have to think, say if you want your friends to come round, you have to have a meeting to see whether you're even allowed to see your friends, and then you have to have another meeting to say like, if your friends come round, how it's going to affect other people ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children in care)

Rules regarding who they could invite over for tea, who they could hang out with what time they showered or went to bed seemed to be part of the institutionalised living arrangements that came from being under the care of the State. Yet some children in public care felt these rules prevented them from exercising their independence and negotiating what they deemed to be an unfair and inappropriate regime for children of all ages who, through no fault of their own, happened to have been taken into public care.

I'm in care right, social services have set rules for us kids, foster kids, they label us as foster kids. You're in a foster family, they'll give you your rules. They shouldn't have any rules, you're supposed to be in a family. But social services label you as foster kids, you can't do this, you can't do that, yet other normal kids, kids who aren't in care, are doing it. And it's, why can't we do that?

(Interview with an involved group of children)

This indicates the lack of explanation and debate about why there are rules in the context of a foster home.

2.2 What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say at home?

When discussing whether they had enough say in decision-making processes, age was considered a significant factor in how much say children were afforded in the home with older children being more likely to be involved in decision-making processes compared to younger children. This was because the routine of eating dinner, bath time and bedtime which parents set for very young children, inevitably changes as children grow older, and with this change comes a potential window of opportunity to negotiate or influence how things are done.

I think as you get older, your parents seem to trust you more, but then again they expect a lot more from you, so grades wise and stuff. If you do everything that your parents say, they're there to guide you, so once you do that then they'll be a bit more lenient, how long you can go out for, when you can go out, using the computer, stuff like that ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

Although age was a key determinant of the opportunity to voice an opinion, this did not mean that very young children did not want to, or could not take part in decision-making processes. In fact, discussions with five-year-old children showed that although these children were very capable of expressing an opinion, their views were rarely considered because when it came their opportunity to speak, they would often forget the point they wanted to make on account of having (what children described as) a 'smaller brain'. As they reasoned:

[Older children] have bigger brains so they have more to say ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of very young children)

In follow-up discussions, very young children said they felt 'really left out', 'very upset' and 'you feel as if they're not thinking about me' when others neglected to ask what they thought. When asked what needed to happen to avoid these feelings they simply suggested:

Let the younger children say their things first, rather than the older children... because they might forget what they're going to say ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of very young children)

It was also noted that the power to engage in decision-making which often comes with age could be undercut by other factors such as disability or gender as noted in the comments below:

I've got an older brother and a younger sister and a younger brother, but they're all disabled. And I get more responsibility than any of the three of them. I've got responsibility to look after them. So I've got more responsibility than they'll have probably in their life, but you've still got to respect that he's your older brother and he can tell you what to do ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

At my house my parents are ill so most of my time I spend all my time deciding what I do, because of them and their illnesses. So I end up making most of the decisions, but the spending time together I don't think... I've probably done that once a year or twice a year, so it doesn't happen often ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

When asked what types of things would they like to have more of a say in, children with disabilities were much more likely than able-bodied children to come up with suggestions for things they wanted to be consulted on. In particular, they wanted to have more of a say in what time they got bathed and went to bed, what programmes they could watch on TV, how long they could spend on the computer and where they spent time with friends. It was perhaps on account of their disability that some (though not all) disabled children felt that their independence and involvement in decision-making was sometimes undermined or restricted.

I want to be able to go where I like, when I like. I don't mind family time as I enjoy it, but sometimes (as I am getting older) I would like to go without having to be interrogated about where, when, and who with ...

(Interview with an involved group of disabled children)

Other children also expressed a desire for greater independence in decision-making especially when it came to wanting to have more of a say in life-changing decisions such as moving house or choosing subjects for GCSE. Underpinning children's frustrations with not being included in decision-making processes was the lack of rationale to explain the reasons why a particular decision had been taken, especially when the decision had major implications for children.

When families move house, it's maybe because of the father's job, you they [the parents] don't really ask the kids, and the kids get a bit depressed that they have to move ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Older children also wanted to understand the rationale behind decisions – in part because it would help them understand the outcomes but also because it would furnish them with important insider knowledge and strategies about how to weigh up the pros and cons of different dilemmas to make an informed decision.

I think that the care crisis team should tell us more when my Mum goes into respite. Because sometimes I get home and I find out my Mum's not there, so it makes it quite hard. I think it would be easier if I was involved in making that decision ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

I wish I was let in, talked to about financial situations because I would quite like to know because at some point you are going to have to learn it. Dad's adamant I will not know, it's their money, I will not know any of it and it's quite like, actually I think it would be quite useful for me to know something; I don't need to know everything ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

The last comment is particularly significant because it was indicative of the growing emphasis children tended to place on decisions relating to budgets and how to manage money as they got older.

Similar frustrations were expressed by younger children who at times seemed bewildered as to the reasons why particular decisions were made when there seemed not to be logical explanation or attempt to engage in discussion.

Sometimes when it's hot, when I feel hot, my dad always says, put your coat on, and I really want to say something, but he just shouts at me and says, get your coat because it might rain. I wanted to say it's my decision but he didn't let me ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Like yesterday, when we were at school, we came back from school, and because we've got this trampoline in our garden, we were going to go on it ... and then we found out that half of the trampoline was taken down ... and my mum said that she was taking it down for winter, but then me and [name of friend] didn't really get to say, it's our trampoline ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Younger children were also very aware when their opinions were discounted even when this was unintentional by their parents:

... when my dad has a conference call, I can never speak to him, but sometimes before the conference call he'll say, shall we go to the park? And then he asks me which park we should go to, but then while I'm saying he's on the conference call, so I can't actually tell him where I want to go ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

It is also notable that some children in care wanted to have more of a say when key decisions relating to a placement move or moving school were being made. Although regular review meetings and ongoing support from social services meant that the majority of children in care did have a say in key decisions, when things went wrong in a foster placement or a school it was not always apparent to the young person how much weight had been accorded to their views when solutions needed to be actioned quickly.

Sometimes social services put you in a school that you may not want to go to, or wherever you're living at the moment you may not like it, and you want to move to somewhere else. And then you're not going to get a say in where you move to, so it would be best if you could actually do that ...

(Interview with an involved group of children in care)

Children in care also wanted to have more of a say in choosing the school they attended. Often this decision was made for them by Social Services or their carers and they were informed afterwards – a process which left some children in care feeling belittled and powerless to change the outcome.

They let you come in at the end of the meeting [to decide the child's school], [and] tell you what they've said, and ask you what you think about it when it don't really matter what you think because that's what's happening anyway ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children in care)

Children living in children's homes also voiced a desire to have more of a say with regard to who they shared their home with when a decision was being made regarding whether a new child should be admitted. Although they were very aware that new arrivals to a children's home often misbehaved as a strategy to get themselves moved, they still wanted to be given more of a say in deciding who should be admitted into their 'home'. This situation often had the potential to prove unsettling both for the new child who had been taken into care, and for the children who were already living and settled in the home:

... sometimes when you move somewhere, you try and make it so that it doesn't work and you try and make it so that people don't like you and then, you've got a reason for wanting to move, whereas before like you wouldn't have, you would just move into somewhere where, you didn't really want to go to ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children in care)

... you should get a say, if the person say, has anger problems and the house is running smoothly and that child is going to come in and disrupt that flow then they shouldn't be moving in and the kids should have a say on that ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children in care)

Although the sample size meant it was not possible to generalise from these findings, it is important to note that there seemed to be markedly more opportunities for children in care to engage in decision-making as they got older compared with children who lived with their parents/carers at home. This may have been because their attendance at review meetings and close working relationships with Social Services placed them in an ideal vantage point to become engaged in research and consultation on issues affecting children in care.

2.3 If a child was the head of the household, how would they ensure children have more of a say in the home?

The most common suggestion to ensure that children had more of a say in the home was for there to be more family meetings when parents/carers and children could get together and talk to one another. This did not have to be a formal sit down meeting. Rather the point children made was that by simply talking with parents and other siblings at home, they were more likely to have the opportunity to say what they were thinking and by default, to feel engaged in decision-making processes. As one child put it 'give them a voice by talking to them a lot'.

[You don't have to go to a restaurant] you can sit at home around the kitchen table, or the dining room table and have a meal together, and talk about what you want to talk about. You don't actually have to go out with each other ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Underpinning these suggestions was the realisation that parents were often too busy working to spend time with their children.

Because my dad always goes to work early in the morning, and I don't get to see him until late at night when he says goodnight ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Even when parents were at home, it seemed that the opportunity to talk or spend time together as a family was fairly limited. Younger aged children were especially likely to raise this issue:

... our dad works nights as well so it's a bit of a... trying to fit in, and then it's like, "dad, are you off tonight?" And it's like, "yes. Can we go out tonight?" "Oh, no, I've got work tomorrow." And it's like, "well, dad, you don't work until the night" ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

When I want to go to the park, I never get a chance to say it, because my daddy's too busy speaking, and he's too busy on the computer, so I don't get to speak to him ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

To counteract the problem of having little contact with parents, children came up with their own unique strategies. As illustrated in the quote below, sometimes getting the attention of parents amounted to just wanting to share their stories and feel listened to:

... this sounds really stupid coming from a teenager but I'd get rid of the TV because, ... [I went to this event in] the House of Commons... and my dad was watching TV and I go in and I try and tell him about the House of Commons and how exciting it was and trying to give him all the details and he was just obsessed with the TV and what was on telly and he just didn't really care and I think if the TV wasn't there then he might listen to me a bit more or he might actually speak up about things ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Other children took a more pragmatic approach to decision-making in the home:

... I'd sit the family down and say what do you want to do this week, what I want to do this week, and what your Dad or Mum wants to do this week. And then you can fit things in what you all want to do in that one week. You can ask them what they want shopping, what they need, what clothes, what food, whatever they want. But then you come to an agreement about what they can have. So then you've got a bit of leeway either side, they can do what they want really, but then you've still got the structure ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Give children a chance to plan a day out; if they say where they want to go and the parents would say, yes, we will go there, and the kids get to say what time they want to go, what time they want to come back, obviously unless it's really unreasonable ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

As illustrated above, children could be very reasonable and adult-like in their approach to decision-making, an observation which would appear to

strengthen the argument for involving them in a range of decision-making processes as commensurate with their age and maturity.

2.4 Summary of key points

Do children feel they have enough say at home?

The data suggested that as children grew older they were more likely to have a greater say in decisions that were made at home although the extent to which children's views influenced the outcome of a decision was said to be mediated by the degree to which parents concurred with their views. Children who lived in a children's home were the most critical of their lack of say in decision-making processes which they described as restrictive and inappropriate to the differing needs and ages of the children living in a children's home.

What decisions would you like to have more of a say in and why?

Rather than listing individual decisions they wanted to make, younger and older aged children instead emphasised the importance of explaining the rationale on which a decision had been made as a means of understanding the process rather than focusing on the outcomes. Disabled children were the most likely group to want a greater say in decision-making processes generally and children in care wanted a say in decisions relating to care placements and the admission of a new resident into a children's home.

If a child was the head of your household how would they ensure children have more of a say at home?

The data suggested that as a result of parental working patterns, the easiest way to engage children in decision-making was to hold more family meetings where parental attention was undivided.

3. Children's involvement in decision-making in their local area

This section addresses the following questions:

- Do children feel they have enough say in their area?
- What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in their area?
- How would a child ensure children have more of a say in the area where they live?

3.1 Do children feel they have enough say in their local area?

This question produced a marked difference in the responses from children who were involved in decision-making when compared with children who were uninvolved in decision-making. Those in the former category were significantly more likely to be involved in making decisions relating to their communities by virtue of belonging to a local youth council/forum or an organisation such as UK Youth Parliament or Young Inspectors. These particular children were aware of a number of organisations *'that are proactive in terms of getting children to have their say'* an observation bolstered perhaps by their proximity to information about decisions they could get involved in:

... if you go into the foyer there, there's certain things up there like phone numbers that say, if you know about a space in your area, they say you can do whatever with the help of the councils or... in a way we do have our say. We can voice our opinions, we can express what we want, whenever we want, because there's contact details, there's a free phone number, there's an email address ...

(Interview with an involved group of children in care)

If we didn't have youth council, I would have no say in anything ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

Children who were members of proactive youth councils or youth forums were especially likely to want a say in a greater range of discussions relating to 'regional economic development' such as housing, building of roads and high speed rail networks because these decisions would have a 'long term' effect on their lives as they grew older. These children often spoke highly of the benefits of being involved in council business and the sense of empowerment that came from being listened to:

It's really good because we get quite a lot thrown at us, but it's a good thing, like you feel quite independent about yourself, and every week we get an agenda with all this stuff on it and you quite feel good about having it all ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

I think it's nice that people actually care about what you think ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

The benefits of getting involved in youth councils/forums included being able to make new friends, gaining confidence in public speaking as well as learning how to negotiate and carefully think through the pros and cons of decisions for all parties it might affect. Another consequence of being empowered to bring about change was that it encouraged children to use their own initiative to engage other children in similar projects. During the discussions there were numerous examples of where children who were very involved in decision-making processes had pursued their own ideas to make their communities more child friendly. For example, one child had written a letter asking for the opening hours of the water park to be extended because it was closing before children had a chance to use it after school. Another child was involved in a project to fundraise money to buy new equipment for their local park whilst a third group of children (with support from adults) were writing a funding bid outlining how local services could be made more amenable to the needs of children living in their community.

We've got a thing that we're organising soon and we're bringing all the schools in from the area to come and talk to us, so it's giving them a voice there, because we're going to have little meetings like this, and what they want in their area, ... we're organising it, we're making it happen, and I think that will get more people's opinions, not just ours ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

There were many benefits to be gained from engaging in discussions and decision-making about their local area. However, by virtue of the way youth councils were organised, these benefits were often open to a select number of children meaning that issues which affected children who did not have the opportunity to partake in discussion forums, were often overlooked. To their credit, this was one of the key points children on youth forums wanted the council to address if it was to be truly representative of *all* the voices of children living in that particular area.

I know that in my area there are gangs and whatever else you want to call it, trouble makers, but I think they just get shoved off rather than being listened to and they don't get consulted on anything and, yes, people come and talk to our Youth Parliament and they say, "Yes, we're going to go and talk to this group and that group and that group" but I think that when you're in maybe a bit of a dodgy area, for want of a better word, I think that they don't really get much of a say and I know that sounds bad but I think that's the way it is ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

According to our interviewees, one of the main obstacles to attracting a more varied range of children to partake in council meetings was the poor advertising strategies that had been put in place to publicise opportunities to engage in projects/youth forums to promote decision-making.

... to be fair from authority's point of views, they actually do give the opportunity; whether that opportunity's publicised enough... I think that's the issue ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

When it came to getting their voices heard (whether this was through research, consultations or other projects/events), the need to advertise widely and in places which children could access was raised throughout the discussions. It was suggested that if leaflets and flyers were marketed as being designed and produced by children, this could prove a powerful incentive to attract other children to sign up *'because children could think, oh they get to make products like that, maybe I could join it'*.

When discussing how to *'access that big chunk of people whose voices aren't represented'* it emerged that the way youth forums are packaged and perceived by other children needed major work.

I think it's like a double bladed sword issue, like you get adults to listen to you but you still need the children to speak up. It's two things, you can't just have it like, say if every child wanted to speak up and nobody wanted to listen then obviously that's a major issue but then if there are loads of adults that want to listen but nobody that speaks up then that's a problem ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

As noted in the quote above, the issue was not just about giving children the opportunity to voice their opinions, it was also about empowering children with the confidence to share those opinions in an environment where they felt comfortable to express their view. It was suggested that the formality of public meetings may be the greatest deterrent to encouraging children to join the youth council, closely followed by children's general unfamiliarity with actually being asked to voice an opinion. Even when children were trained to circumnavigate these factors by taking part in meetings and talking about issues from a young person's perspective, their contributions were not always valued by adults because they challenged established etiquette. This point was noted in the extract below:

... I sit on the Youth Opportunities Fund and I... interviewed these young people and ... We asked a question about sustainability and are they going to come back for more money? [The young people] said that they weren't going to spunk the money up the wall and one of the members on the panel was really shocked and they're like, "Oh my God I don't think we should give them the money because they just spoke to us like that", and I was like, if you take away that language they're saying that that is sustainable, they're saying, it's a positive thing basically... I think the problem is people are trying to be too correct with things and they're forgetting this big wide group of young people, all the average people that are around, we can't all be expected to talk as correct all of the time and people do come from a bad background but they were still confident enough to come and do the interview and they don't really get thought about ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

It is also interesting to note that disabled children and very young children seemed to struggle with the idea that they had a right to be consulted on decisions that affected their life in their community. For example, when we asked three-year-olds to think of an example of a decision they had been

involved in making, they struggled to respond to our question even though these children were involved in choosing what they played with during the school day. Similarly when we asked five- and six-year-old children if they had ever been asked for the views about the equipment in their local playground they interpreted this as whether their parents asked what they wanted to play on, in the park.

Children with disabilities as well as refugee and migrant children also struggled to respond to questions about having a say in their area, most likely because they had never been consulted on these issues. Yet refugee and migrant children faced a number of problems relating to racism in their community which left them feeling disempowered and alienated from their neighbours.

Children with disabilities spoke openly and frankly about the discrimination they had faced from other members of the public on account of having a physical and/or mental impairment. They said:

... people of all ages stop, stare, look at him, and you're caught in a very awkward position... I don't mind little kids because they're little and don't understand, but 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds still stare, and it's like, what? I'm in a chair – so ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of disabled children)

Because local leisure centres and youth clubs were not adept to cope with the needs of these children (because they either did not have the equipment or staff were not trained) these children were unable to challenge misconceptions about their disability, a situation that left them vulnerable to abuse by their peers and powerless to challenge negative perceptions of the ability of disabled children.

They further added that their right to have a say must not be misplaced by ill judged preconceptions about what they can or cannot do. As one young child remarked:

If you have a disability, it would be very difficult [to get your voice heard] but as long as you can move your eyes you can communicate ...

(Interview with an involved group of disabled children)

Disabled children had lots of different ideas about how their communities could be made more accommodating to wheelchair users which ranged from lowering the buttons at road crossings (so they could safely cross the road) to placing more ramps and elevators in shops and restaurants so they could use the amenities. For these reasons, refugee, migrant children and disabled children were particular likely to emphasise the importance of having a balanced representation of different groups of children on community and youth forums. This was deemed to be instrumental to helping others understand the standpoints of groups who normally are silent in the community thus strengthening community integration by addressing the divergent interests of people who may not always have a platform to voice their concerns.

I think people could treat us as not simply disabled, or people could treat you as the next person, as if you're completely normal. But then, yes, we have got these issues, obviously you've got to put that aside... and not be, oh, you can't do this and you can't do that because you're disabled ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of disabled children)

3.2 What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in their local area?

Children generally were very aware that it was the *'the more confident ones... the high achievers, the go-getters, the one's that do well'* that were most likely to be elected to youth councils. Yet they criticised this calibre of young person on two counts: first, for being unrepresentative of the diverse range of children who lived in the community; and second, for causing *'the naughtier people'* to lose out on an important opportunity to develop their negotiating and public speaking skills.

Children who were involved in organisations that placed a high priority on listening to the views of children were often in an advantageous position to access additional opportunities to take part in other research and consultations exercises, because they were known by adult gatekeepers and therefore an easy target group to access. As a result, those children who were already engaged with the work of a particular organisation were the most likely to take advantage of further opportunities to engage in decision-making.

I think one problem with [name of local council] is that there's a loop of where you can have your say heard, and if you don't know the loop then you can't get anything in unless you've found a part of that loop. And as soon as you're in the loop you can find all the different routes ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

According to the majority of children we interviewed, the negative stereotype of children as *'trouble makers'*, *'immature'* and *'silly'* was the most likely factor to limit children's involvement in decision-making.

[There are people out there] who think that all children carry knives and guns, that's what he said. But there are some people out there that don't, and they have to care about the town and stuff. So they want to do stuff, but there are people who think, oh no you can't because you're all like this ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

... they don't know if we'll be able to understand what they're doing or they think that we're not mature enough in whether its education wise, politics wise or just a general sense, they don't think we're capable of understanding it when really we are, I think they underestimate what we're capable of ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

Although children challenged these stereotypes, they also held them responsible for dissuading younger, less confident children from expressing an interest in getting involved in decision-making with adults:

I would say everyone's different, but say if you really were up for this thing and you got all your stuff ready and then a horrible person looked down at you because you were younger, you would feel like I shouldn't be doing this and be scared because they're looking down at you, putting you on the spot, I think that would put people off ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

It was suggested that documents that accompanied discussions involving adults were generally not child friendly and therefore inappropriate to enabling children to fully engage with the issues or even join in the discussions. This suggestion was based on the suspicion that:

... if there's something they don't want you to see it will be a few sentences in the middle of a 30 page document with about 30 pages of complete tripe. But two sentences within there will be really what young people would be like... but because they've shoved it in that 30 page document young people are just like, boring, no ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

It is often the case that a decision to involve children in a consultation is dependent on factors such as timing, funding and whether there is capacity within a staff team to fully support children's engagement. Children were very aware of these constraints and in fact, there was a lot of scepticism as to whether attempts by councillors to seek the views of children were actually genuine or merely part of a tokenistic 'tick box' exercise.

... I think that the councillors do go out to tick a box sometimes because they think, because of all this political correctness and stuff, we've got to get such and such young person and make sure that we're a diverse ... and it's like, I'm going to go out just to tick my box but they don't actually get taken into consideration, they don't put a lot of thought into it ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

To get a balanced representation of what children thought about a particular issue and access a wide range of opinions from boys and girls of different ages and backgrounds, it was recommended that decision-makers:

Take off their suits and ties and stand on a street corner and do some ... you know like detached youth workers do, they just go out in their jeans and...just go and talk to a big group of young people, and see what they're up to and see what their thoughts are but councillors wouldn't do that ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

This approach was deemed to be efficient, inexpensive to carry out, and likely to produce more insightful results than a traditional questionnaire which relied on children understanding the questions, filling it in and posting it back. Conducting research and consultations in the street was also considered a useful way of accessing the hidden populations of children whose voices might otherwise be missed if more traditional methods of consultation were used. For example, during a discussion on the need to target those children who rarely have a say in decisions relating to (in this case) the provision of play and leisure facilities for children, it was suggested:

I think if you're going to go round to a group that's maybe on the street or something like... [you need to talk] to them about what is in their area, do they actually know what's in their area? And the things that are going on, if they do know about it, why aren't they going in? It might be because they don't want to go there; it's not what they want to do. So they need to think about what these people want to do rather than saying, there's a youth club think about using it ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

3.3 How would a child ensure children have more of a say in the local area where they live?

There were many varied suggestions as to how children could get more involved in decision-making. These ranged from having open days in drop-in centres where children could engage in exercises and activities aimed at eliciting their views on a particular issue, to setting up child councils and regional meetings. Given children's familiarity with the internet, it is somewhat surprising that no-one suggested using the web as a medium for communication although postal surveys were forwarded as attractive alternative, possibly because of the association of this method with conventional research.

Do a random survey, so you post it through the door like, we want your opinions, and tick boxes to make it easier, and maybe a freepost envelope so they go and hand it in. Simple survey, maximum about 20 questions, not overpowering. And a standard poll created by the degrees of answers shows which is most favoured and which is most needed. Also you can have an email address for feedback, comments ...
(Interview with an Involved group of children)

Although some children were very aware of power differences between themselves and other children of their age in terms of their involvement in community decision-making, this realisation did not undercut the general consensus that children were much better placed than adults to know what children wanted '*because first hand information is always the best because it hasn't been tampered with*'. In fact it was this no-nonsense approach to decision-making which led some children to argue that being young, meant they had a unique perspective to offer. As one young person described it:

... we could say we think this youth club is rubbish, but it could be better if you did this. Say if you were writing it for us, but you'd put, well this youth club is not appropriate for young people. We would not put that, we'd put, well we don't like it. It's got to come from us, not from other people ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

As noted above, there were criticisms of adults' misplaced perception that children did not understand what it meant to make a decision. As one child pointed out, the bottom line was that children had a right to have a say in decisions that affected their lives, and this right was non-negotiable.

I think the fact that the Government and councillors... They don't really think there's a point of listening to children, because they think that adults have more of an understanding of what actually making a decision actually means. And I think even if you're like, I don't know, 14, you might not even get a say because they still think you're a child, even though you are a teenager and you do have the right to have a say ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

Interestingly, the phrase that often came up in interviews was the need for adults to talk to children as '*people to people*'. This phrase emphasised children's commonality with, as opposed to difference from adults on the basis of their shared humanity and their shared stake as citizens of a community.

At the minute I think ... we are just seeing young people as young people and adults as adults rather than just seeing everybody as people ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

Although there was great enthusiasm for treating children as equal to adults – as people in their own right, this did not dilute the power difference inherent in the adult–child relationship. What it did do however, was strengthen some children's resolve to capitalise on the unique perspective that being of a certain age could contribute to decision-making processes. Recognising that adults and children may both have something very unique, to contribute to the discussion was deemed to make decision-making processes more informed and inclusive, and better grounded in the interests of all:

... I think adults; a lot of the councillors are older, like in their 50s and 60s and living in a completely different era with completely different ... how much we've modernised and stuff like that and we have a first-hand experience of this, this is what we've grown up in, this is what we know, and I actually think they should just listen to us just for more information themselves, just to broaden their views, not be so stuck in their ways ... but I think that needs to be a two way thing because I think we could make a real difference and really help what does go on ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

And even though we're young, we've still got ideas and in the end of the day, if we want a better place, all these ideas put together will make the right one, not just listening to certain people. If you talk about freedom of speech, everyone should get a say, I think it's beneficial for people to listen to other people, respect what they have to say and people's opinions. Like we respect their opinion, the elders' opinion, and we look at them, and we respect them and think they know right all the time, we don't question it, whereas they should do the same for us ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

... people should not judge on what you can't do, they should judge you on what you can do, and it's not about disability, it's about ability ...
(Interview with an involved group of disabled children)

3.4 Summary of key points

Do children feel they have enough say in decision-making in their local area?

Children who were involved in decision-making processes through their membership of local councils and youth forums were the most likely to feel valued and empowered in decision-making compared to children from refugee and migrant backgrounds, disabled children and very young aged children. Good advertising strategies were key to involving children in decision-making and the benefits of taking up these opportunities included confidence building, empowerment and encouragement to use your own initiative.

What types of things might affect whether a child gets a say in decisions made in their local area?

Children who were already part of an established group were the best placed to take advantage of additional opportunities to engage in decision-making and these tended to be the high achieving go-getting students. These children, however, criticised youth forums as being unrepresentative of the diverse interests of children living in a community and they suggested more practical, street based approaches to better educate councillors in the real life needs of those children who did not have a platform to voice their views.

How would you ensure children had more of a say in the local area where they live?

Having more regular and well advertised meetings as well as open days in drop-in centres was deemed the best way to engaging children in participation and of breaking down the power barriers that often exist between adults and children.

4. Children's general views on participation

This section addresses the following questions:

- Why should adults listen to children?
- If a child had a magic wand how would they make sure children's views were taken seriously?

4.1 Why should adults listen to children?

A number of reasons were put forward to explain why children should have more say in decision-making processes. First and foremost it was argued that children have a unique perspective to offer which is by virtue of belonging to a 'different generation', and therefore they have something new and unique to contribute to the discussion:

... children might know something that was very important and that the adults didn't know ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

Some adults ask a complicated question to another older person; that person will think hard to answer the question. If you ask a little youth that question, he will give you a simple answer because that's what little children do. They're innocent, so they'll give you the simplest answer ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of refugee and migrant children)

Second, it was suggested that children are much more creative in their approach to problem solving and therefore their opinions are a valuable asset in helping adults 'think outside the box':

... they should [ask children] because children might have good ideas, better than them ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Children can be very imaginative. Like me, I sometimes think of things that I would like to be real, and I'd like scientists to invent, but can't tell them because they don't ask children. And so I just think children should have a little bit more say ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

Third, children make up a large part of the community and therefore have a stake in the outcomes of decisions that affect the residents in that area.

... they [adults] always say, oh, everyone in the community has taken part in this, well, children are part of the community as well, it's not only the adults in the community – we're part of the community and we matter as well, because they always say everyone's say matters and they want it to be the best for everyone. Well that's mainly just best for the adults, because we never really get a say ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

4.2 If a child had a magic wand how would they make sure children's views were taken seriously?

By far the most common suggestion to ensure that children had more of a stake in decision-making was to hold more meetings, although there were mixed views as to whether these meetings would involve adults and children discussing issues together or separately.

Discussions with children who were very involved in local decision-making processes showed that having got a taste for working with adults in helping to resolve local community issues, they wanted more of a say on national issues – the most pertinent being having a right to vote. This argument was premised on the rationale that 'everyone' (adults and children) had a stake in how their country was run and, by implication, the public had a right to have a say in major decisions such as 'going to war'. It was reasoned that voting rights for 16-year-olds would help prompt children to 'get more interested in what's happening around you, your country as a whole, the world even – you'll get more knowledge'.

I would actually like to have more of a say on bigger decisions like a new government coming into power next year, possibly, a bit more say in going to war; I don't think the public in general get enough say in it, let alone young people and just bigger things like that the government may think, no it doesn't affect them at all, but actually it does ...

(Interview with an involved group of children)

However this would only happen if party political manifestos were specially adapted to appeal to children because:

If they give us a big essay, we're not going to take any interest in it. If it was short, snappy little things with, pictures, diagrams, stuff like that, more people would take an interest and go oh yes, this party's doing this and the 50 per cent of the people might actually want the [voting age] to be dropped ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

It was suggested that having a direct link to government would significantly minimise the potential for children's views to be misquoted or misrepresented by adults working at different stages in a decision-making process. As one young person put it:

It's a game of Chinese whispers I think, because what happens is the kids have to give their voice... the kids have to tell the adults, who tell the council, who then tell it to the local authority, and then it gets sent to London, and then it gets sent to the government. Somewhere along that line things get changed. So we need a short cut ...

(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

Primary school children who were generally very involved in decision-making also supported the suggestion for children to be given a more active role in parliament. Suggestions ranged from having a children's president to having a shadow children's cabinet which could feed into decisions made by government. To avoid mis-representation of their views it was suggested that:

... every three weeks... there should be a chance for every child to go up to Gordon Brown, or whoever's Prime Minister at that time, and say I've got some ideas. Can you look at them, and think about them, and can you write me a letter, or write to me and say whether you think it's going to be used or whether you think there's anything that can be improved ...
(Interview with an involved group of primary school children)

In regards to other ideas to promote children's voices, one child suggested using the magic wand to turn all adults into children so they could experience what it felt like when their voices were silenced on issues that mattered to them:

I would do it so that they could see what it's like for us being stereotyped and having all of this against us and we can't make decisions for ourselves ...
(Interview with an involved group of children)

Other ideas included:

I would say you listen to me, because otherwise I would go in my room and shut my door and then be in myself... in my room for about ten minutes, until I wanted to come out ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

And knowing when to choose the right moment before they voiced their views:

If they were watching their favourite programme, I would make sure that they had finished watching it, because they wouldn't listen if they were still watching it ...
(Interview with an uninvolved group of children)

4.3 Summary of key points

Why should adults listen to children?

Children were very aware of the unique perspective they brought to discussions on account of the fact that they were of a different generation and as such were more likely to be creative in their approach to problem solving. As citizens of their community they also stated that they had a right to be involved in decision-making processes.

If you had a magic wand how would you make sure children's views were taken seriously?

Children wanted more regular meetings with adults and were particularly keen to access government structures which they deemed to be the most powerful and influential mechanisms for making change happen.

Conclusion

The findings of this report raise a number of key points. First, most children in our sample were generally dissatisfied with their level of input into decision-making processes in school, in the home, and in relation to the area where they lived. Although there were some excellent examples of where school councils, youth forums and individual parents/carers had proactively engaged children in decision-making processes, in general, these opportunities were not the norm.

The second key point is that most children accepted the inherent power difference in the adult child relationship although they were more likely to negotiate this power difference as they grew older. What they did not accept, however, was the low status adults often accorded to children's opinions and the lack of explanation on how children's opinions had been taken into account during a decision-making process. Irrespective of the setting in which a decision was being made, the effect of not being listened to was to leave children feeling belittled, powerless and undervalued. Disabled children, very young children and those from a refugee and migrant background were amongst the most likely to miss out on opportunities to raise concerns that were pertinent to their lives and to have these concerns addressed as a result.

The third key point is that even very young children can take a very rational and reasoned approach to decision-making – a finding which reiterates the importance of engaging children in participatory processes from a young age. Doing so not only benefits the children in terms of developing their negotiating, thinking and networking skills, but it also helps ground decision-making process in the lived reality of children's worlds as well as empowering children to access their rights to participation and to have a say – the effect of which is to make children feel respected, valued and active citizens in a shared community.

References

- 1 For the remainder of the report children and young people will be generically referred to as children as this term constitutes the legal definition of a child under the age of 18.
- 2 These reports can be downloaded from www.participationworks.org.uk/npf
- 3 A total of 231 questionnaires were completed by senior managers of whom 81 per cent worked in the statutory sector and 18 per cent worked in the voluntary and community sector.
- 4 A total of 280 questionnaires were completed by front-line participation workers of whom 80 per cent worked in the statutory sector and 20 per cent worked in the voluntary sector.
- 5 A total of 86 children aged 3–20 years old living across England took part in 12 focus groups. These included children who were highly involved in decision-making (for example in school councils, local youth forums etc.) and children who often struggle to be heard or influence decision-making (including very young children, asylum seeking children and children in care). The format of the interview was adapted for children with disabilities and very young children.
- 6 This survey was undertaken by ICM.
- 7 Burke, T. (2010) *Listen and Change: An introductory guide to the participation rights of children and young people* Second Edition, Participation Works.
- 8 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) *General Comment Number 12 the child's right to be heard*.
- 9 Lansdown, G. (2009) 'The realisations of children's participation rights – critical reflections' in Percy Smith, B. and Thomas, N. (eds) *A handbook of children and young people's participation – perspectives from theory and practice* London: Routledge.
- 10 Treseder, P. (1997) *Empowering children and young people* London: Save the Children.
- 11 It is important here to note that only two out of 12 focus group interviews (involving a total 12 participants) were conducted in a school setting. The remaining 74 participants attended a variety of schools in the area.

The National Participation Forum invites you to join us in this journey. If having read this research you are thinking about what needs to happen to enable our youngest citizens to have their voices heard in delivering a better society for us all, post your ideas and thoughts on **www.participationworks.org.uk**

We will post constructive commentary and ideas for other readers to see. Sharing ideas can lead to sharing action, saving effort and increasing impact.

Participation Works
8 Wakley Street
London
EC1V 7QE

enquiries@participationworks.org.uk
www.participationworks.org.uk

Published for Participation Works by NCB June 2010

© CRAE and NCB 2010