Children's Rights Alliance for England

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Participation Works

Children's participation in decision-making

A Summary Report on progress made up to 2010

Dr Ciara Davey

children's commissioner
Championing Children and Young People in England

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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**

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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**

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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 people[1] 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[2] in developing a National Participation Strategy for England from 2010 onwards.

The study was spilt into five distinct parts which have been written up as individual reports[3] 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 processes[4];
- 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 workers[5];
- 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-making[6];
- a nationally representative survey of 1001 children aged 7–17 years in England looking at the participation of children in decision-making processes more generally[7].

A version of this 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 12[8].

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 participation[9]:

> *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 contested[10]. 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 review[11]:

> *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 this report

This report summarises and synthesises the key findings from each of the aforementioned reports. In so doing, it provides an up-to-date insight into the levels and ways in which children are currently involved in decision-making in various settings[12], and highlights the nature and extent of existing barriers to promoting a culture of inclusive decision-making. To keep the information focused but reflective of the large amount of data contained within each of the five reports, the findings are presented in the form of responses to nine questions focusing on key messages to emerge from this review of participation. Where relevant, the report also draws on previous research to highlight how the 'participation map' has changed between 2002 and 2009.

1. What progress has been made in children's participation in decision-making?

Over the last seven years, significant progress has been made in relation to children's participation in decision-making in legal, structural and cultural terms. The introduction of the 2004 Children Act has provided the legislative framework for taking forward the 2003 *Every Child Matters* and the 2007 Children's Plan, and these have helped change the way local and national government, and other organisations, work with children. Additional legal and policy reforms in relation to participation in areas such as education, health and the police service, have also been beneficial in empowering children to have a say in decisions that affect their lives.

As a result of these reforms, there has been a steady rise in the number of structural mechanisms to enable children to participate in decision-making through student voice and democracy initiatives in schools and youth forums. There has also been a cultural change in the value children, adults and organisations are now placing on children's views. For example, in our nationally representative survey, 50 per cent of children reported that adults listened to what they had to say 'always' or 'most of the time', with a further 36 per cent stating that they were listened to 'sometimes'. Only 5 per cent thought adults 'hardly ever' or 'never' listened to them. Almost all of these children (96 per cent) had been told, often by their parents/carers, teachers or their peers, that they had a right to be listened to, and to have their views taken seriously. Surveys of participation workers and organisations revealed similarly high levels of enthusiasm and support for involving children in decision-making through participation work. The majority of survey respondents supported the claim that there were no decisions in which children cannot be involved, providing they are properly supported. They also agreed that the involvement of children in the work of statutory and voluntary organisations was integral to improving services and policies that directly affect children. Over two-thirds of organisations surveyed had a written policy or strategy to support participation

and 92 per cent of organisations said children's involvement in decision-making had increased over the last five years.

These findings suggest a positive outlook for the active involvement of children in decision-making. However, a recent review of the literature on participation, and focus group interviews conducted with children, suggested that in some areas, many children continue to be denied opportunities to influence matters affecting their lives. National surveys about healthcare, quality of local service provision and civic activity often fail to ask children and young people about their experiences. In the most personal decisions affecting them – individual healthcare, private law proceedings, child protection investigations, the immigration and asylum seeking process and school exclusion – children's views are often not sought, and where they do appear, they often have little impact.

2. Why involve children in decision-making?

The research showed that children, adults and society all gain considerably from children's involvement in decision-making. The focus group interviews suggested that being a member of an active school council or youth forum means that some children are ideally placed to develop their confidence and public speaking skills. As a result, they have a number of opportunities to negotiate and think through problems from different angles and to use their own initiative. However, these opportunities are only open to a select number of children. For example, during the focus group interviews, children said that having only those who were 'clever', 'popular' and 'well behaved' elected onto school councils, failed to reflect the differences among and between children in terms of life experiences, class background, age, gender, disability and ethnicity. Refugee, migrant and disabled children were particularly likely to emphasise the importance of having a balanced representation of different groups of children on community and youth forums. These particular children had a number of ideas as to how schools could become more inclusive by making small adjustments that would address their needs. This was deemed to be instrumental to fostering a culture of respect and appreciation for diversity and difference.

Focus group participants argued that having a diverse representation of children on decision-making committees is fundamental to meeting the differing needs of all children who could be affected by a particular decision. Doing so would not only enable more children to have their say, but it would also help ground decision-making processes in the lived reality of children's lives, and consequently better inform the outcome of decisions. Children argued that they were more likely than adults to creatively problem solve because their young age afforded them a unique perspective. They also stated that they had a right to be involved in decision-making processes and accessing this right made them feel respected, valued and active citizens in a shared community.

3. Which groups of children are involved in decision-making processes?

Our survey of organisations and participation workers showed that secondary school-aged children were more likely to be involved in decision-making than primary school-aged children. Over the last five years, there has been little

change in the relatively low levels of involvement of children under eight in participation. This is in spite of the fact that just over half of our sample of organisations surveyed were responsible for developing services and policies that would affect children under eight, and that the majority of adult survey respondents (in both surveys) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that there were no decisions children could not be involved in, provided they were properly supported. This issue was also raised in focus groups where discussions with children (including those under the age of eight) showed that they could be rational, reasonable and measured in their approach to decision-making, and candid in their understanding of context. Extracts from the discussions showed that if effective mechanisms for engaging children in decision-making processes are embedded into the culture of the schools, families and communities, children can make responsible decisions even from a young age. The result of not doing so, was to leave very young children feeling 'really left out', 'very upset' and 'you feel as if they're not thinking about me', when others neglected to ask what they thought.

Whilst more work needs to be done to ensure that the voices of young children are included in decision-making processes, it is encouraging to note from our surveys of organisations and participation workers, that there is an ongoing effort to involve marginalised groups of children in participation. However, a review of the literature on participation suggests that refugee and asylum seeking children and children in trouble with the law remain significantly under-represented in participation work. The literature review, alongside data from the focus groups, also strongly suggested that disabled children were less likely to be involved in decision-making than their non-disabled peers – even when the decision directly concerned their personal health. This is happening despite the fact that the landmark Gillick case in 1986 established a basic principle that as children mature and acquire understanding of the consequences of their decisions they should have increased autonomy in decision-making, particularly with regards to their healthcare. The literature suggests that not only are disabled children afforded few opportunities to voice their views, but health professionals often struggle to communicate effectively with them, causing further stress and anxiety about their illness or condition. There is also little published evidence of asylum seeking and refugee children engaging in decision-making processes relating to their immigration status.

The acknowledgement that participation workers 'could do better' at involving different groups of marginalised children in their work was reflected in the responses to our surveys. This may in part explain why approximately only 10 per cent of participation workers and organisations rated themselves as doing 'very well' when it came to involving marginalised children in their work. The need to ensure that the voices of different groups of marginalised children are adequately represented in the work of organisations is of particular significance given that the surveys found that the main task children undertook for organisations was representing the views of other children.

4. What type of decisions are children involved in making?

Focus groups with children suggested that there was a general acceptance of the inherent power difference in the adult–child relationship when it came to making decisions, although children were more likely to negotiate this power difference as they grew older. There was a strong suggestion that within the

school setting, children were more likely to be involved in decisions such as choosing what food was served in the canteen, suggesting equipment for the school playground and ways to stop bullying, than decisions regarding the appointment of teachers or deciding how the school budget should be spent.

Data from our survey of organisations suggested that children tend to be involved in decisions which seem to have an obvious impact on their lives, such as leisure/recreation and play activities, youth services, and education, but are unlikely to have an input into decisions about regeneration of their local area, housing, environmental issues and transport. Although this may be due to the specific focus of organisations who took part in our research, the reporting of this finding in a similar study conducted in 2004 would suggest that with regards to particular decisions, organisations might still hold adult-centric ideas about the types of issues children should have a say in. This was the case even though focus groups showed that children 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. The omnibus survey showed that 46 per cent of children felt they had 'a little' or 'no influence' over decisions about the locality where they lived, and as children grew older they felt they had progressively less influence over decisions concerning their area.

Surveys of organisations in 2004 and 2009 showed that children have rarely been involved in setting budgets. Yet the request to have more of a say in how money for children's resources are allocated emerged as one of the key areas our focus group participants said they wanted to have more of a say in. Our survey of organisations suggested that consultations, making children members of decision-making bodies/committees and using service user forums were becoming increasingly common for eliciting the views of children. Although more children are now involved in the recruitment and selection of staff, little, however, has changed over the past five years in terms of the level and way in which organisations involve children in decision-making. For example, children are still most likely to comment on proposed new policies and services, or to volunteer ideas about improving and changing existing policies and services. Around seven out of ten senior managers and participation workers said children had 'some influence over decisions in particular areas'.

5. What has been the impact of children's participation in decision-making?

Although the majority of adult survey respondents thought that children's services had improved as a result of participation, there is still room for progress in regards to evidencing how children have contributed to this improvement. Our survey of organisations showed that only 37 per cent evaluated the impact of participation on their organisation.

Among organisations, there was little consistency in how children's involvement in decision-making was monitored or evaluated. Although some respondents acknowledged that it was difficult to evidence the influence of participation because it did not necessarily result in a tangible outcome, the fact that such work was not being evaluated at all represents a lost opportunity to reflect upon and improve practice. Our survey respondents appeared to be

aware of these arguments, and in fact, ranked the need to improve evaluation and monitoring of participation as one of the top three ways to improve children's involvement in decision-making, and workers were keen to receive more training in this area. Children who participated in focus group interviews also emphasised the importance of evaluating their contributions to decision-making processes. They reasoned that having the means to voice an opinion was only the first stage in engaging children in decision-making. A second, equally important stage was providing children with feedback on decisions as proof that adults had actually listened to what children said. In particular, children wanted evidence of how their opinions had impacted on decision-making processes and a rationale for why a particular decision had been reached. Irrespective of the setting in which a decision was being made, the lack of feedback on how children's opinions had potentially influenced the outcome left many children disillusioned with power sharing mechanisms and feeling belittled, powerless and undervalued.

Interestingly, it was not the case that children objected to adults making decisions on their behalf – on the contrary, many children accepted that adults were often the best placed to make decisions. The issue was more that children were excluded from understanding the rationale on which a decision was based. They were therefore left with little understanding as to how their views had contributed to a particular decision-making process. Focus group interviews with children showed that a non-participative culture can have a negative effect on relationships between adults and children, with the result that the values of respect and inclusiveness fail to be embedded in the culture of schools, families and communities[13].

6. Which methods are most likely to be used to seek children's views?

At an organisational level, children were most likely to be engaged in decision-making through consultations and being members of decision-making bodies and committees such as youth councils and youth forums. However, these forums were only open to a select group of children. Children suggested that the formality of council meetings was 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. As an alternative, they wanted a wider range of mechanisms to be made available through which to express their views. Suggestions included having a comments box and making better use of the discussion boards and forums on school websites, having open days in drop-in centres where children could engage in exercises and activities aimed at eliciting their views on a particular issue, and setting up child councils and more regular and well advertised regional meetings. When it came to getting their voices heard (whether this was through research, consultations or other projects and events), the need to advertise widely and in places which children could access was emphasised. Having a variety of media through which to express their views was also 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. 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 (such as surveys) were used. It was suggested that using age appropriate methodologies to empower children to take part in different decisions on various issues, would not only

give children a feeling of responsibility, but it would also enable them to feel respected and valued as a member of a community who had a right to be listened to.

7. What gaps still remain in participation training?

Our surveys of organisations and participation workers suggest that between 2002 and 2009 there has been considerable investment in resources to support children's participation. This includes more organisations now having a dedicated participation worker, having a budget for participation related training and events and identifying a senior member of staff to be a champion for participation. Over time, there appears to have been an increase in the proportion of organisations offering training and support to children involved in participation[14]. Although the number of training opportunities in participation for those working directly with children has increased over the years[15] there remains a high demand for further training on evaluating children's participation and training on participation techniques and strategies. Senior staff, however, are still less likely than front-line participation workers to receive training in participation[16]. This would suggest that there is a bottom-up approach to training opportunities in participation. This is in spite of the fact that senior members of staff are ideally placed to act as mentors to children who wish to take a more active role in understanding the structures and processes which underpin organisational decision-making. Providing training opportunities for senior staff on how to engage children in participation could also give senior managers a more grounded understanding of what the involvement of children in participation actually entails on the part of participation workers, and as such is likely to lead to better work and resource planning. These findings would suggest that more work needs to be done at the senior management level before participation practices are embedded into all echelons of the organisational ladder.

8. What barriers continue to limit children's involvement in decision-making?

At an organisational level there emerged three key barriers to involving children in decision-making. The first was the low number of organisations who were proactively measuring the impact of children's participation on their organisation. The second and third key organisational barriers concerned the need for better promotion of the benefits of engaging children in decision-making, and related to this, the need for better senior management commitment to children's participation. Front-line participation workers identified lack of staff capacity and the need for better senior management commitment to participation as major barriers from their perspective. The front-line staff survey showed that although most senior managers were strategically committed to involving children in decision-making, their lack of understanding about staff capacity, funding and other resources needed to fully support children in participation had the potential to limit children's involvement.

Participation workers have a perception that neither the media, nor the general public, accord much respect to participation work with children. A similar point was raised by children who took part in the focus groups who were generally very critical of the low status that adults often accorded to children's opinions on account of their age.

9. How can organisations and government better promote participation?

The surveys of organisations and front-line participation workers asked what action they thought organisations could take to improve children's participation in decision-making. The top suggestions included the need to better promote the benefits of participation and the need to measure the impact of participation. In addition to these, front-line participation workers wanted additional training and capacity building for their own roles. There was general agreement from both organisational and worker perspectives that Government needed to do three key things to better promote participation. Top of the list (for both workers and organisations) was the need for long-term funding of participation work. This was the number one priority by a significant margin and research shows this has remained a key issue for organisations over the last five years. The other key priorities concerned: the need for increased legal requirements for the participation of children in decision-making and the need to incorporate requirements to consult children in all funding streams.

Front-line participation workers also identified a need for government to promote attitudinal change among adults as one of their priorities. Primary school children who were very involved in decision-making processes, and who took part in the focus groups, were particularly keen to highlight the role government could play in prioritising the importance of listening to children. These children deemed government structures to be the most powerful and influential mechanism for making change happen, and they reasoned 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. The findings from the omnibus survey, however, showed that as children got older, they became more sceptical of the power of government to initiate change. Forty-one per cent of children thought they had 'a little' or 'no influence' on decisions made by the government and a further 21 per cent of children thought that the government 'never' or 'hardly ever' took children's views seriously.

Conclusion and next steps

The key aim of the five individual reports which have informed this overarching review is to assist the National Participation Forum in developing a 10 year strategy for participation in England.

The impetus behind writing the strategy is to ensure that all children can access their right to have their say and for this to be taken seriously. 'An equal place at the table for children and young people' sets out the National Participation Forum's strategic vision. Four core principles emphasise the need to:

- listen to children of all ages
- consider participation as a process not an event
- be clear about the achievements of participation
- weave the involvement of children into the culture of organisations and wider society.

These principles encapsulate the National Participation Forum's framework for participation. As the evidence from the research summarised in this review makes clear, more work must be done by us all before this vision can become a reality.

This summary review, alongside the five stand-alone reports, suggests that great strides have been made structurally (in terms of the importance now being placed on participation in policy and legislation), financially (in terms of the resources that have been invested in participation) and culturally (through the growing recognition of the improvements it brings to service delivery, policy making and to children themselves).

However, challenges remain. We need to consistently monitor and measure the impact of participation on children's organisations and the services they provide. Financial resources must be sustained and training opportunities in participation widened, particularly to senior staff. We need to involve a wider range of children in all decisions that affect them, make further progress in involving children in personal decisions affecting their lives, in decisions taken at school and decisions in their local community.

The five research reports provide a baseline assessment of the current participation landscape. The challenge now, and what the strategy aims to achieve, is to set the journey which takes us to our shared vision of all children having an equal place at the table.

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 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 http://www.participationworks.org.uk/npf

3 These reports can be downloaded from www.participationworks.org.uk

4 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.

5 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.

6 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.

7 This survey was undertaken by ICM.

8 Burke, T. (2010) *Listen and Change: An introductory guide to the participation rights of children and young people* Second Edition, Participation Works.

9 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) *General Comment Number 12 the child's right to be heard.*

10 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.

11 Treseder, P. (1997) *Empowering children and young people* London: Save the Children.

12 This includes decision-making in voluntary and statutory organisations, as well as decision-making in school, in the family and in the area where children live.

13 Similar results were also found in a study conducted by the Carnegie Young People Initiative where, as a result of student participation, better teacher–student relationships emerged, behaviour was improved and pupils felt greater ownership of schools (see the report on the review of literature for more information).

14 In research conducted with senior managers of participation workers in 2004, around three-quarters of organisations offered training and support to children, whereas by 2009 this had risen to 91 per cent.

15 For example, in 2009 70 per cent of participation workers had received training to work with children (mostly on child protection and safeguarding and/or participation techniques and strategies) compared to only 57 per cent of participation workers in 2002.

16 For example, over 80 per cent of organisations provided training opportunities for participation workers and staff working directly with children compared with 59 per cent for senior officers and 38 per cent for board/elected members.

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.

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