Children's participation in decision-making

Survey of participation workers

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children's
commissioner
Championing Children and Young People in Englan

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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**

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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, NCB 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 spilt into five distinct parts which have been written up as individual reports[2] 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[3];

- an online survey into the levels and ways in which frontline participation workers involve children in the development, delivery and evaluation of policies and services, and into the participation workers' training and support[4];

- 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[5];

- 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[6].

A version of the overarching summary document that is aimed specifically at children 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 that these views be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Other rights in the UNCRC – for example, to access information, freedom of association and expression, and respect for the child's evolving capacity – actively support the implementation of Article 12[7].

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[8]:

A widespread practice has emerged in recent years, which has been broadly conceptualised 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[9]. There is no one fixed meaning or definition that has universal agreement.

Participation Works has adapted definition of participation, which is used in this review[10]:

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

We are interested not just in whether children can freely express themselves, but also in whether this expression 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.

Aims of the current report

The current report focuses on the findings from the online survey of participation workers, whose job it is to ensure that children are involved in decision-making processes through a range of participation strategies that include, but are not limited to, group work, forums, youth councils, consultation groups, committees, advocacy, media and the arts. This report has three main aims:

- to examine the levels and ways in which frontline participation workers involve children in the development and delivery of policies and services

- to identify the barriers to promoting a culture of inclusive decision-making

- to examine the training and support needs of participation workers.

Methodology

An online questionnaire was developed, to be completed by frontline participation workers. The design of the questionnaire[11] was closely modelled on a previous questionnaire, used in research conducted in 2002[12], with similar aims.

Although the current study builds on the 2002 research by asking similar questions, it also goes beyond it, by additionally examining the levels and ways in which front-line participation workers involve children in the development, delivery and evaluation of policies and services. As we were unable to return to the organisations originally surveyed in 2002, and given that the 2002 research included participation workers in Wales, the findings from both studies are not directly comparable. That said, both surveys do cover the same broad themes and, as such, provide an informed basis from which to examine both how the participation map has changed between 2002 and 2009 and the outstanding training and support needs of participation workers.

The current questionnaire consists of 38 questions, grouped into seven key themes, namely:

- information about the organisation

- organisational policy/strategy for involving children in decision-making

- how and at what levels children are engaged in decision-making about policies and services

- which groups of children are involved in decision-making

- what training and support is available for participation (for children and participation workers)

- organisational attitudes towards, and perceptions of, participation

- ways to promote the involvement of children in decision-making.

The survey was piloted before it went online in November 2009 and was taken offline in December 2009. The data was then cleaned and analysed using the SPSS software package.

Survey distribution

Due to the limited timescale and resources available for this exercise, it was not possible to construct a nationally representative sample of organisations. Instead, information about the survey, together with a hyperlink to the questionnaire, was distributed to:

- the children's statutory sector via directors of Children's Services, who were contacted by email[13]

- the voluntary sector via the extensive networks and contacts of NCB, CRAE, Participation Works, and those of other leading children's organisations.

In both cases, contacts were asked to pass the link on to relevant colleagues within their own or other organisations. Before the survey closed, a reminder email was sent to all relevant contacts to boost response rates. This method of electronically cascading information about the research was successful in generating interest in the research across England.

The questionnaire itself was accessed via a hyperlink on a dedicated web-page on the Participation Works (PW) website, which also outlined the aims of the research. Respondents were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially.

While our strategy aimed to ensure that statutory and voluntary organisations working at local, regional and national levels were included in the research, we did not use a stratified sampling strategy and it is therefore not possible to make generalisations about voluntary or statutory sectors more widely, or to compare progress and issues across different sectors. For these reasons, this report can provide no more than a very general insight into organisational policies and working practices with regards to the involvement of children in decision-making.

1   Key findings

1.1 Responding organisations

A total of 280 questionnaires were completed by frontline participation workers. The vast majority were from the statutory sector (80 per cent), while 20 per cent were from the voluntary and community sector. We have excluded the single respondent from the private sector from the analysis. This leaves a working data-set of 222 respondents who work in the statutory sector and 57 respondents working in the voluntary sector.

Table 1.1 shows that most of the frontline participation workers in our sample, worked at a local level (83 per cent) with 6 per cent working at the regional level and 11 per cent working at the national level. While the majority of both statutory and voluntary sector organisations had a local focus, statutory organisations were less likely than voluntary sector organisations to be operating at regional or national level. This is almost certainly a reflection of the survey distribution strategy, whereby the statutory sector was initially approached via local authority contacts, and the voluntary sector via national organisations and networks. Although our sample size was 279 respondents, it is noteworthy that the *n* value is sometimes less than this because of missing data.

Table 1.1: Sector of organisation by local, regional, national focus (n=276)

	statutory (%)	voluntary (%)	total (%)
local	90	57	83
regional	4	14	6
national	6	28	11

As shown in Figure 1.1, the majority of respondents were working in the statutory sector at a local level (just over 70 per cent). An additional 12 per cent of the sample were working in the voluntary sector at the local level.

- Statutory local 71%
- Statutory regional 3%
- Statutory national 5%
- Voluntary local 12%
- Voluntary regional 3%
- Voluntary national 6%
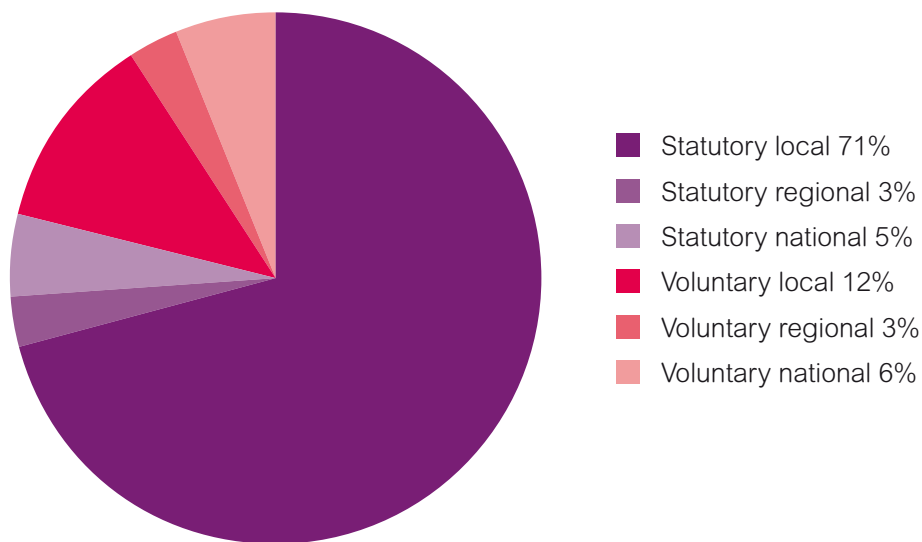
Figure 1.1: The breakdown of sectors by national, regional and local focus (n=276)

As shown in Figure 1.2, the distribution strategy was successful in encouraging respondents from across the nine government regions of England to participate in the research[14].

Region	%
Yorkshire and The Humber	18%
London	17%
North West	13%
West Midlands	11%
South West	10%
South East	10%
North East	9%
East Midlands	7%
East of England	5%
All of UK	3%
All of England	2%
Other	1%
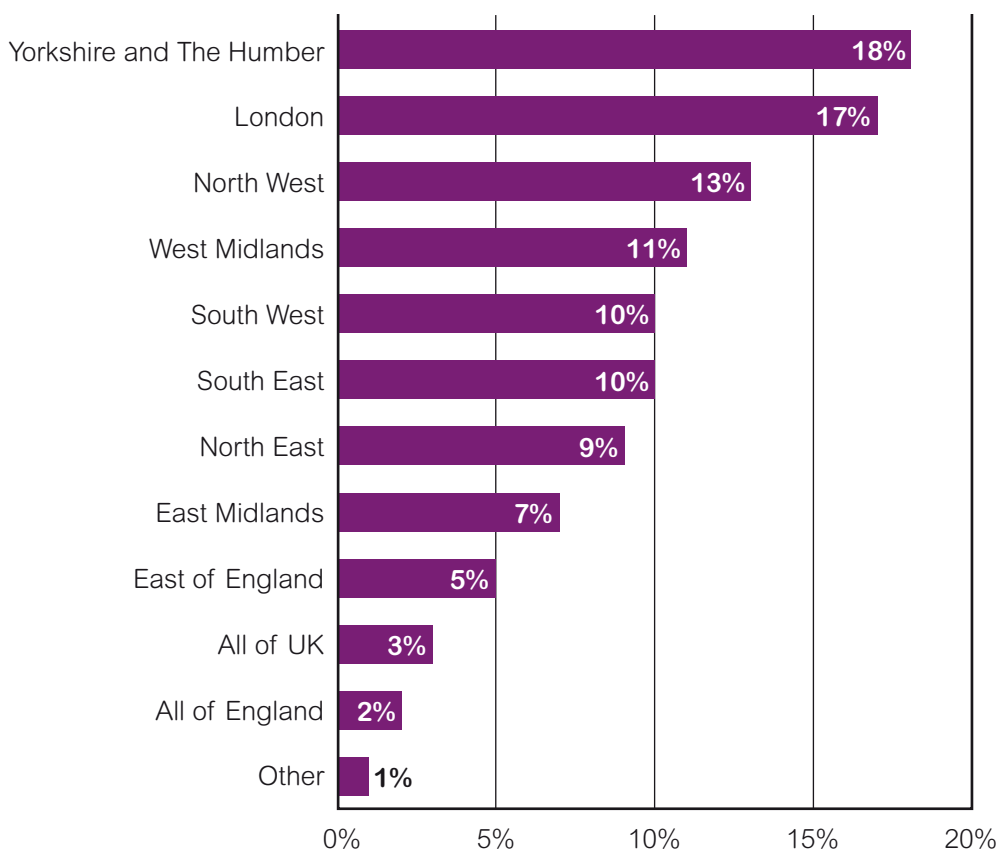
Figure 1.2: Region that respondents came from (n=279)

To gain an insight into the type of work undertaken by respondents, we asked front-line participation workers to identify the focus of their participation work. Table 1.2 shows that respondents were most likely to be working in the youth/

community sector. Whilst this focus was common across both statutory and voluntary sectors, it is of interest that 74 per cent of youth/community participation workers were based in the voluntary sector. The percentages in Table 1.2 do not add up to 100 because respondents could tick more than one answer (indeed 10 per cent of respondents indicated that they worked across all five named areas).

Table 1.2: Focus of participation work by sector (n=279)

	statutory (%)	voluntary (%)	total (%)
youth/community work	55	74	59
education	37	42	38
social care	33	26	32
health	30	21	28
crime/community safety	16	12	15

Around one in eight respondents declined to answer demographic questions about themselves. Of those who did respond, three-quarters (75 per cent) were female. Those who specified their ethnicity were predominantly white (91 per cent); the remainder being fairly equally split between Asian, Black or mixed heritage. Nine per cent of respondents reported having a disability.

Table 1.3 shows the age distribution of respondents and reveals that a surprisingly low proportion of participation workers (just 4 per cent) were under the age of 25.

Table 1.3: Age distribution of participation workers (n=246)

age	total (%)
18 to 24	4
25 to 34	35
35 to 44	24
45 to 54	28
55 to 64	9

Over half the respondents had a degree or equivalent qualification (55 per cent); with a further 29 per cent having a postgraduate qualification.

The vast majority of respondents (84 per cent) were in full-time employment. Without additional information about hours worked and so on, it is difficult to accurately establish (or compare) the level of remuneration of participation workers. However, responses suggest that the typical respondent to our survey was receiving a salary of between £25,000 and £30,000 per annum.

Taken as whole, the above data suggests that the typical participation worker who responded to our survey was a white, 35- to 44-year-old, able-bodied, female who was educated to degree level. She worked for a local statutory organisation and was paid between £25,000 and £30,000.

1.2 Is children's participation supported by an organisational policy or strategy?

Overall, 90 per cent of respondents reported that their organisation was either involving children in participation work or decision-making about policies and services, or both; and 68 per cent had a written policy or strategy to support this engagement (see Figure 1.3).

- Yes 68%
- No 8%
- Being developed 16%
- Not sure 8%
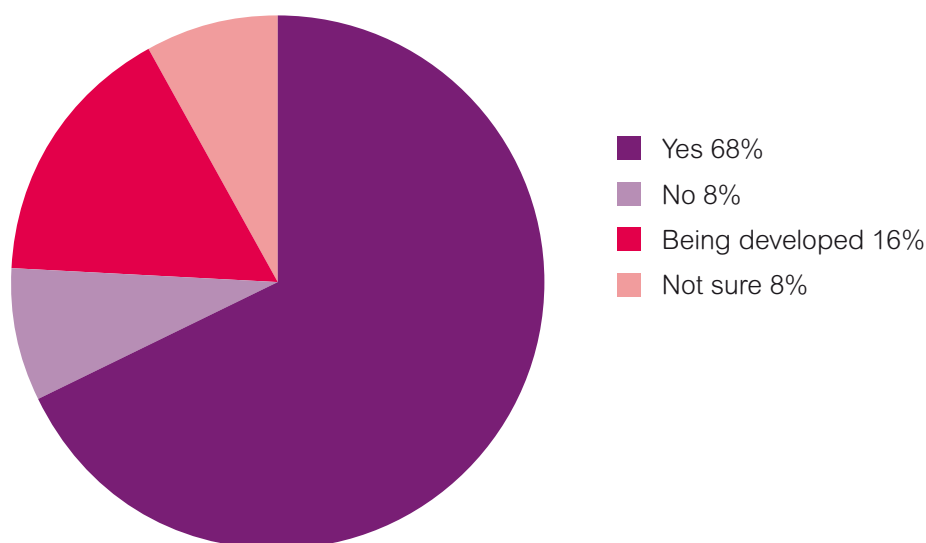
Figure 1.3: Does the organisation have a written policy or strategy for involving children in decision-making? (n=278)

Unsurprisingly, the 8 per cent of organisations that did not have a policy for involving children in participation were amongst the least likely to be engaging children in decision-making. When asked why children were not involved in decision-making, responses fell into three broad categories:

- policy is currently being developed

  Currently this is not happening, however we have just got a group of young people together from across the county who will sit alongside the Senior Management team and will be involved in all decisions, business planning and allocation of resources.

- policy is partial or inconsistent

  There is a small amount of consultation /participation, but my remit is babies and children under three and the organisation does not recognise their need /ability to participate.

- the culture of the organisation is a barrier

The organisation's culture is not one that naturally seeks to involve children in its own policies and services in a meaningful way.

Children's right to have a say in matters affecting them in accordance with their age and maturity is enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC. Yet only 26 per cent of the participation workers who responded to the survey (equal proportions from the voluntary and statutory sector) reported that Article 12 was referenced in their job description.

1.3 How and at what levels are children engaged in decision-making about policies and services?

Respondents were asked to indicate at which levels they involved children in decision-making. More than half of the participation workers were involving children and Table 1.4 shows the types of involvement. The most common levels of participation included involving children in decisions that were made about them as individuals; and asking children to comment on proposed new policies and services (in more than 70 per cent of organisations in each case).

Although children were less likely to be involved in 'setting the agenda' (by identifying policies or services of concern to them) or in actually delivering services, it should be noted that this was nevertheless happening in more than half of the organisations where these front-line participation workers were based (see Table 1.4).

Table 1.4: Level of involvement by sector (n=279)

level of involvement	statutory (%)	voluntary (%)	total (%)
children are involved in decisions that are made about them as individuals	76	70	75
children are asked to comment on proposed new policies or services	73	74	73
children are asked about their ideas for changing existing policies or services	70	67	69
children are involved in monitoring or evaluating services and policies	65	75	68
children are involved in the delivery of services	53	57	56
children are involved in identifying the policies or services they are concerned about	55	40	52

It is also interesting to note that, at the local level, children appeared more likely to be involved in decisions being made about them as individuals and asked about their ideas for changing existing policies and services, than at the regional or national level (see Figure 1.4).

regional/national   local

Children are involved in decisions that are made about them as individuals
63%
77%

Children are asked to comment on proposed new policies or services
65%
74%

Children are asked about their ideas for changing existing policies or services
54%
72%

Children are involved in monitoring or evaluating services and policies
74%
66%

Children are involved in the delivery of services
54%
56%

Children are involved in identifying the policies or services they are concerned about
46%
53%

Figure 1.4: Types of involvement at the local, regional and national level (n=279)

As well as looking at the level at which children were involved in decision-making, we also requested information about the methods used to engage children in decision-making.

As shown in Figure 1.5, the most common methods for engaging children in decision-making were to involve them in consultations; make them members of decision-making bodies or committees; or hold a public meeting or event. All three methods were common in both statutory and voluntary sector organisations working at the local, regional or national levels. However, the findings suggest that voluntary sector participation workers were more likely to involve children as members of decision-making committees and bodies than those working in the statutory sector. Conversely, those in the statutory sector were more likely to hold public meetings and events to engage children in decision-making than those in the voluntary sector.

Consultation documents **68%**
Involving children as members of decision-making bodies or committees **60%**
Public meetings and events **57%**
Question and answer session **50%**
Service user forums **49%**
Complaints/suggestion schemes **38%**
Interactive websites **31%**
Opinion polls **22%**
Citizens' panels **23%**
Referendums **3%**

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80%
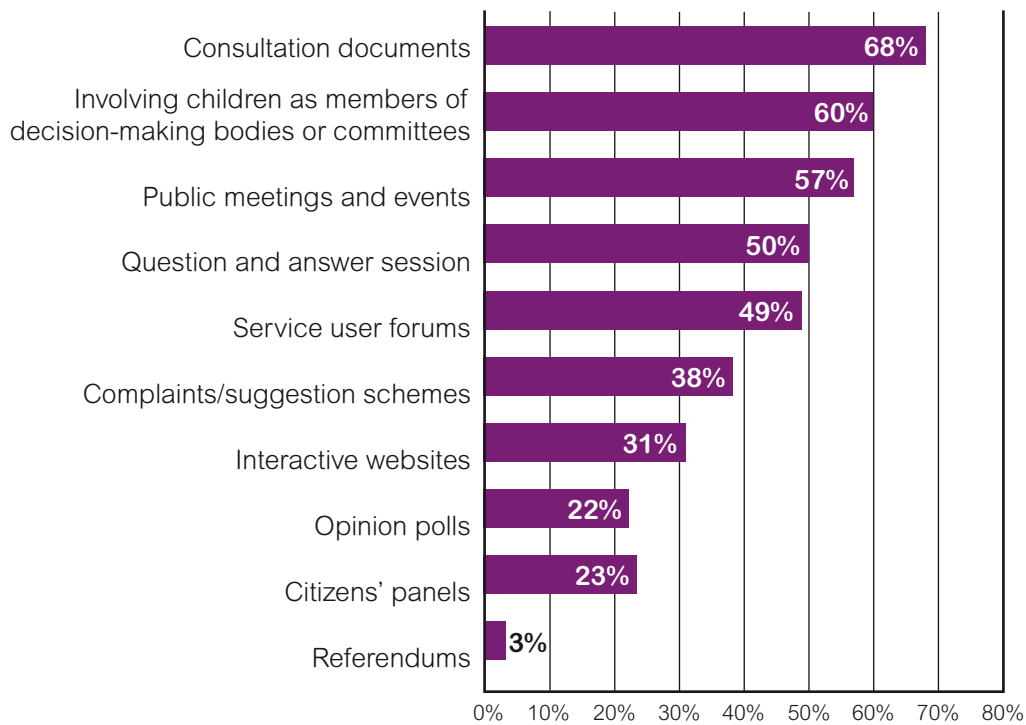
Figure 1.5: Percentage of organisations using each method to involve children in decision-making alongside adults (n=279)

Respondents were also asked whether, in addition to children working alongside adults to change or review a policy or service, their organisation used any specific child- or youth-centred methods to engage children in decision-making. The findings (presented in Figure 1.6) show that consultation documents designed for children and youth councils and forums were most commonly used.

Consultation documents designed for children **65%**
Youth councils/forums **65%**
Focus groups **58%**
Arts-based projects **57%**
Children's service user groups **55%**
Public meetings and events for children **51%**
Other project work **42%**
Polls/surveys of children **39%**
Visioning exercises **31%**
Interactive websites specifically for children **25%**

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%
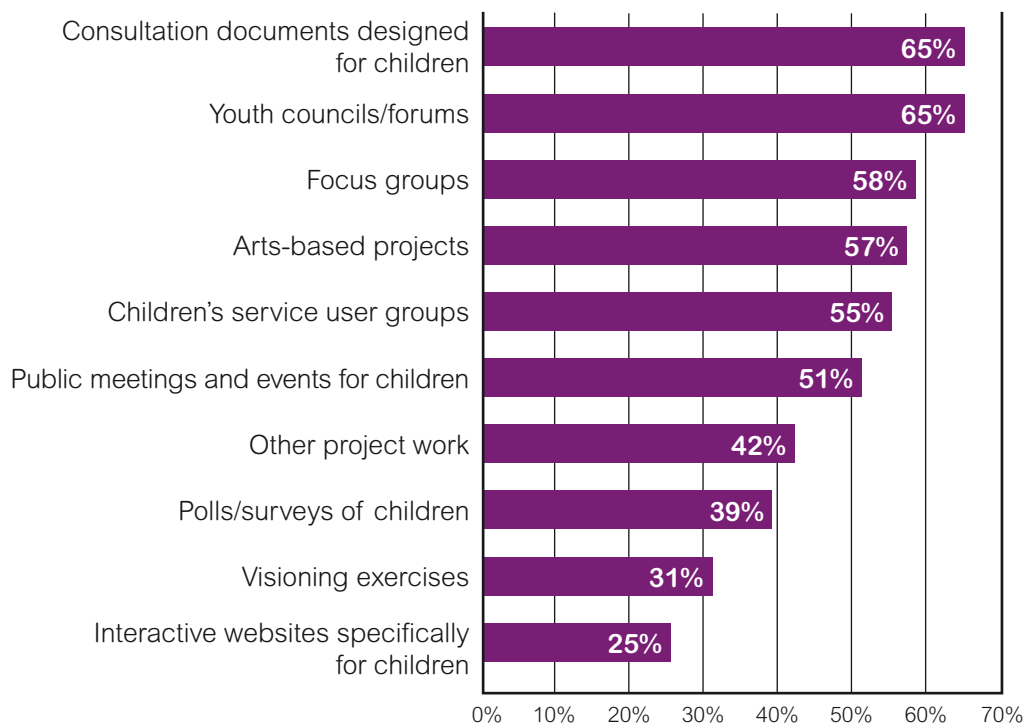
Figure 1.6: Specific methods of involving children in decision-making (n=279)

Participation workers were also asked about the specific tasks children undertook for, or through, the organisation to enable children to engage in decision-making. Figure 1.7 shows that the most frequently reported task was representing the views of other children (this occurred in three-quarters of organisations). A further 69 per cent of children were involved in meetings; and 61 per cent helped in recruiting and selecting staff for jobs.

At the other end of the scale, children were involved in setting budgets in just 9 per cent of organisations and only 12 per cent involved children in developing complaints procedures. These two findings suggest that many organisations still operate narrow ideas about the types of decisions to which children can meaningfully contribute.

Task	Percentage
Representing the views of children	75%
Attending meetings	69%
Recruiting and selecting staff	61%
Organising events	57%
Promoting services to other children	54%
Assessing services	43%
Assessing grant applications	42%
Training other children	40%
Developing policies, strategies, objectives or plans	39%
Researching the needs of children	38%
Working with the wider community	37%
Helping secure money and resources	37%
Campaigning for change in policy and provision	36%
Training staff	33%
Developing youth charters	32%
Mapping existing provision	21%
Developing frameworks for assessing services	17%
Developing complaints procedures	12%
Setting budgets	9%

Figure 1.7: Tasks undertaken by children in organisations (n=279)

Further analysis showed that children's involvement in tasks undertaken for the organisation were similar for statutory and voluntary sector organisations, with just two apparent areas of difference: statutory organisations were more likely than voluntary organisations to involve children in assessing grant applications (45 per cent compared to 28 per cent) and in assessing services (46 per cent compared to 30 per cent). However, this may simply reflect differences in the nature and function of the organisations themselves (for example, whether they give grants or provide direct services), rather than a generic difference between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

1.4 How much influence do children have on decisions made by organisations?

Respondents were asked how much influence they thought children had on decisions made by their organisation or department. Table 1.5 reveals differences between perceptions of influence within the statutory and voluntary sector, with children apparently wielding more influence in the latter. For example, a third of respondents from voluntary sector organisations (33 per cent) felt that children had a 'great deal' of influence, compared to just 14 per cent of respondents from the statutory sector. Overall, just 10 per cent of respondents judged children to have 'very little influence' within their organisation.

Table 1.5: Amount of influence children have on decisions made by sector (n=243)

	statutory (%)	voluntary (%)	total (%)
a great deal of influence	14	33	18
some influence in particular areas	74	60	72
very little influence	11	4	10
no influence	0	0	0
not sure	0	2	<1

We asked respondents to explain their answers. For those who reported **'a great deal of influence'**, explanations focused on the range and extent of children's influence on decisions across organisations, the quality of the processes in which children participated (or initiated), and the outcomes in terms of examples of influence on policies or decisions. What is striking about the comments below is the emphasis placed on the importance of power sharing, to ensure that outcomes of decisions are firmly grounded in the shared interests of adults and children; and the range of decisions which children could meaningfully contribute to.

All our service staff are interviewed by young people as part of the recruitment process; and all our project work across the county is monitored and evaluated by young people, and their recommendations are used to form new areas of work and to inform policy.

Young people influence all the work I am involved in, they apply for funding, they identify what the needs of the area are and advise us what to do, we negotiate with them to find something that works for us both, but many young people are clear that it is their money/funding!

Policies written by the council have active input from youth councillors before they even get to the draft stage and this is in no way tokenistic. Policy-makers come to consult with the youth council on policy, bringing with them their first draft; young people comment and suggest changes; then policy-makers come back with a second draft of the document with the changes that the young people have made clearly highlighted, so that young people can see the direct influence they have had within a particular document. When new strategies and ideas are launched throughout the Council, young people are invited to the launches, to say a few words about their input and to take ownership.

Some respondents who said that children had **'some influence over decisions in particular areas'** described being at a relatively early stage of a journey to place children's views at the core of decision-making processes, but were making steady progress towards this goal. Often this view was expressed with a great deal of optimism and enthusiasm. Typical comments included the following.

My appointment last month is demonstrative of how seriously the YOS [Youth Offending Service] is taking the participation agenda. Some initiatives had already started but now things are moving more quickly to actively involve young people in mapping, commissioning and representing on boards as well as recruitment and information disseminating.

We are still developing the high end of young people involvement to ensure that they have an effective voice at the highest levels of decision-making in the organisation and its partners. The structures are in place but the training and opportunities for them to be involved at the higher levels on decision-making have yet to be fully realised. We are working towards the Hear By Right[15] standards.

Others described how children's participation could be patchy across large organisations, with pockets of good practice while other areas or services lagged behind.

As a department young people take a key role in the decision-making processes in all aspects of their involvement; however in other departments, the main focus of youth engagement is not a key priority and not incorporated into their work.

As a whole CYP [children] are involved and valued locally/regionally; but as a national company, practice is not always common throughout the country.

The pattern was less systematic for some, with children's involvement apparently varying according to the issues or individuals concerned.

CYP's involvement seems to be very sporadic. At times, young people have had a great deal of influence and on occasion it has been very tokenistic.

Very dependent on the issue or area and to some extent on individual managers.

Others suggested that adults tended to be selective about when and how to involve children, or whether to act upon their views.

Also, adults may listen to some aspects of what the young people say about the services they receive and not others.

However, services are not transparent enough and young people are only given information that adults feel comfortable with. Making a decision that suits the young people and adults works well but anything slightly controversial is very difficult – for example funding of their own organisation, i.e. the parliament.

Another factor that was reported as limiting the influence of children was a discrepancy between the time required for meaningful participation and the need to sometimes make decisions very rapidly.
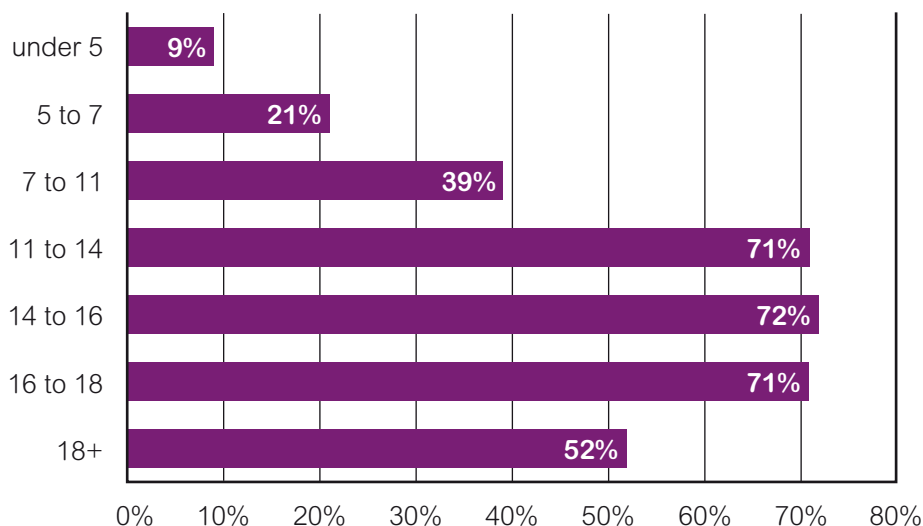
We are specialists in facilitating participation of children, and are dedicated to involving our Steering Group of children in as many ways as possible. However, the challenge of involving them at every level, in so many projects, that often have fast turnarounds is daunting, and often decisions have to be made before consulting with them.

We involve young people in planning, but when we receive budget cuts we have to re-jig our services quickly, and we do not always have time to consult young people.

When asked why children had little influence on decisions, it was suggested by some that a target-driven culture coupled with an overall lack of leadership and strategy at a high level resulted in piecemeal or patchy participation practice; with the result that children's views were either not taken seriously or their involvement was sidelined to more micro-level decisions.
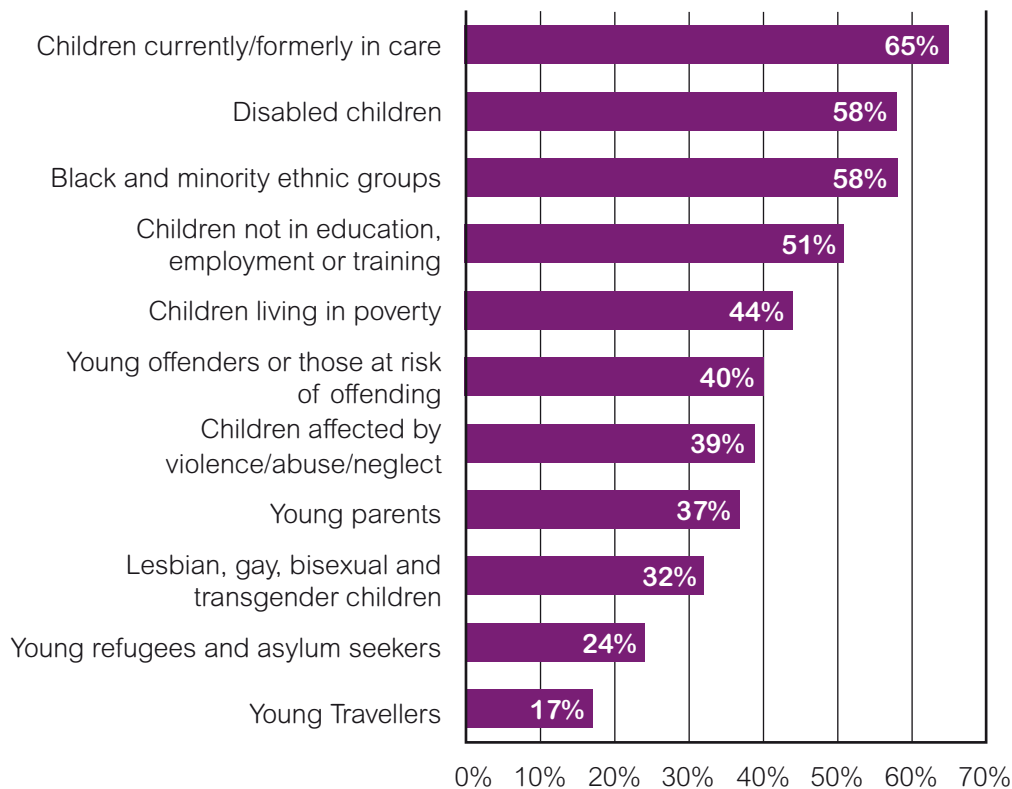
1.5 Which groups of children are involved in decision-making?

When asked to specify the age, gender and type of group that their organisations involved in decision-making, the data showed that 99 per cent of organisations included both boys and girls in participation but that children of secondary-school age were more likely to be involved in decisions than those of primary-school age (see Figure 1.8). Of particular interest was the low proportion of organisations reported to be involving very young children (around one in five organisations were involving children aged five to seven, and fewer than one in 10 organisations were involving children under five). This may, of course, be partially a reflection of the types of organisation in question, and the age groups they provide services for, as opposed to evidence of a selective approach to participation on the basis of age.

Figure 1.8 bar chart:

| Age group	Percentage
under 5	9%
5 to 7	21%
7 to 11	39%
11 to 14	71%
14 to 16	72%
16 to 18	71%
18+	52%

Figure 1.8: Percentage of organisations involving children of different ages in decision-making (n=279)

Figure 1.9 shows that children from a variety of marginalised groups were engaged in participation, although we have no way of knowing whether our respondents specifically targeted these marginalised children (or indeed have a particular remit to work with specific sub-groups) or whether such children 'happen' to be involved as part of a broader participation strategy (that is, they are part of the general population of under 18s). Nevertheless, it is worth noting the low proportions of organisations apparently involving young refugees and asylum seekers, and young Travellers.

Figure 1.9 bar chart:

Group	Percentage
Children currently/formerly in care	65%
Disabled children	58%
Black and minority ethnic groups	58%
Children not in education, employment or training	51%
Children living in poverty	44%
Young offenders or those at risk of offending	40%
Children affected by violence/abuse/neglect	39%
Young parents	37%
Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children	32%
Young refugees and asylum seekers	24%
Young Travellers	17%

Figure 1.9: Percentage of organisations involving specific groups of marginalised children in decision-making (n=279)

As well as asking for information on the particular groups of children involved in decision-making, we were also interested in the quality of participation work carried out by organisations. We therefore asked participation workers to assess how well their organisation involved marginalised groups of children in decision-making and to explain their response. The findings are displayed in Figure 1.10.

Very well 11%
Quite well 61%
Not very well 19%
Not at all well 3%
Not sure 6%
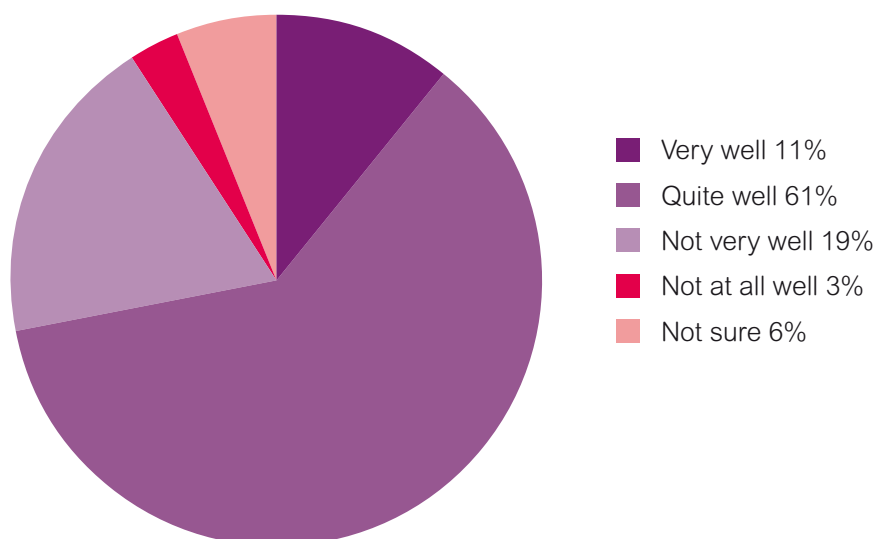
Figure 1.10: Participation workers' assessment of how well their organisation involves marginalised children in decision-making (n=234)

It was difficult to fully interpret these findings as it is likely that some respondents were working on projects or services with an exclusive focus on a particular marginalised group, and were therefore – by definition – involving this group in decision-making, whereas others may have been working across several services or on more general youth-led projects.

However, overall, 11 per cent of respondents described their organisation as doing 'very well' in involving marginalised children in decision-making processes, and a further 61 per cent reported that their organisations performed 'quite well'. One theme which emerged from respondents' explanatory comments in the 'quite well' group, was that participation workers 'could do better' (this phrase was used by more than one respondent) in terms of working with more targeted groups of children, as well as engaging marginalised children in decision-making across a wider range of services.

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding from this section is that more than one in five participation workers (22 per cent) said that their organisations performed 'not very well' or 'not at all well' when it came to involving marginalised children. Several of these participation workers recognised a 'need to do more targeted work' with particular groups. Funding and resources were also identified as key issues for some (but not all) respondents.

1.6 Incentives and recognition

Almost eight out of 10 participation workers (79 per cent) said their organisations offered some form of incentive or reward to encourage children to get involved in decision-making. All of the respondents who said that their

organisation offered incentives to children used at least one of the options listed in Figure 1.11. The most frequently cited incentive (used by 90 per cent of respondents) was a certificate celebrating the child's contribution to the work of the organisation. However, group events and references/letters of thanks were also used by more than three-quarters of the participation workers surveyed.
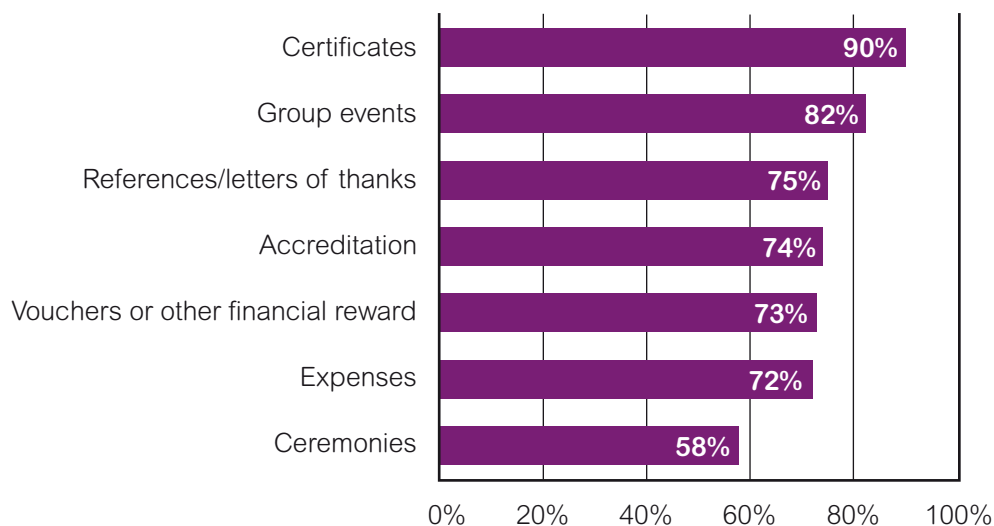
Figure 1.11: Organisations' use of incentives and recognition for children involved in participation (n=279)

1.7 Training and support

Training and support for children

We asked participation workers what training and support was provided for children to enable them to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes. Overall, 86 per cent of participation workers said children received training and support to enable them to carry out their roles. Only 3 per cent of respondents reported that their organisations *did not* offer training and support to children, and a further 11 per cent were unsure whether training or support was available. The data also suggested that voluntary sector organisations were less likely to offer training and support to children than statutory sector organisations (2 per cent compared with 9 per cent).

We also asked participation workers to indicate (from a list of options) the types of training and support their organisation offered children. Figure 1.12 shows the range of support on offer. The most frequently occurring were training for specific roles (reported by 81 per cent); and provision of information and support about procedures and structures (77 per cent). The form of training and support least likely to be offered to children was the opportunity to participate in the same training opportunities as staff (available in only 23 per cent of organisations).
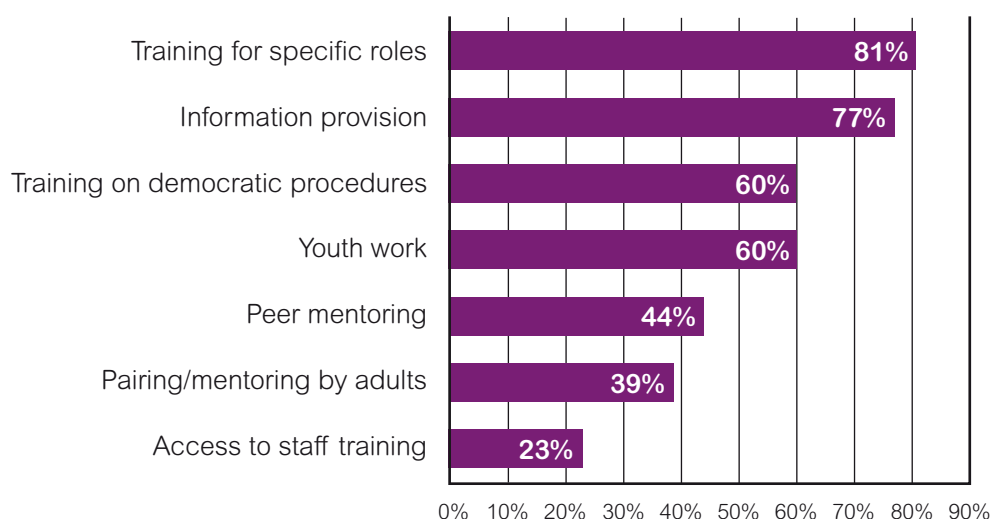
Figure 1.12: Types of training provided by organisations to children involved in decision-making (n=279)

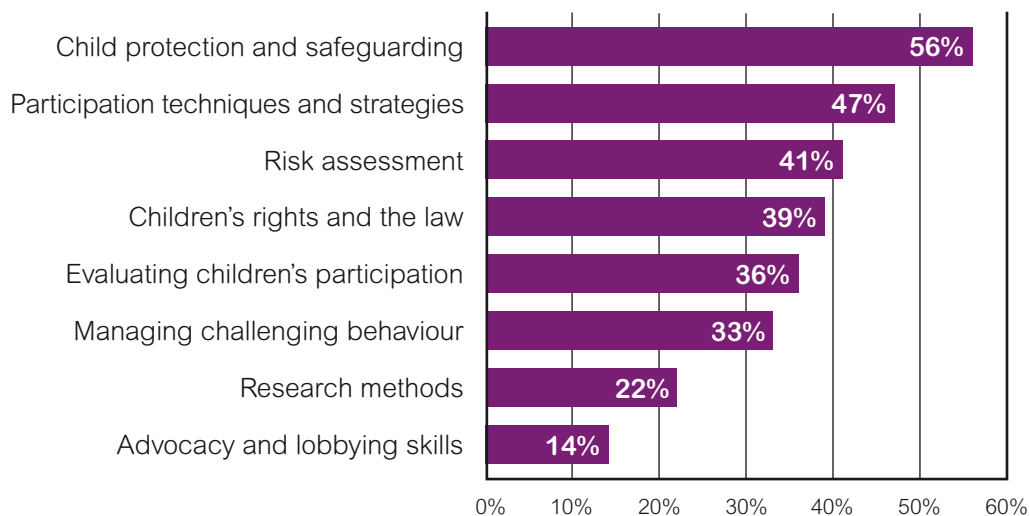## Training for front-line participation workers

We also asked what training participation workers had received to enable them to carry out their job. Overall, seven out of ten participation workers had received training for engaging children in decision-making, but this appeared to differ between voluntary and statutory sector respondents, with the voluntary sector more likely to have received specific training for their role (85 per cent as opposed to 66 per cent).

This leaves just under a third of respondents untrained. There was a variety of reasons given for this:

- A number of respondents who would have liked training, reported that they were unaware of relevant training, or couldn't find or access it locally.

- Some required training in very specific areas or issues, which did not seem to be available.

- Others reported that they were not 'offered' training.

- A small number were new to the post and were awaiting training.

- Some respondents felt that they did not need specific training of this nature, because it was covered adequately within their professional training (youth and community work), or because they had acquired appropriate skills and experience through their work.

- Others felt that it was not relevant to their particular role (for example, if participation was a very small part of a wider remit; if they didn't have direct contact with children; or if they worked with very young children).

As Figure 1.13 shows, participation workers were most likely to have received training on child protection and safeguarding (56 per cent). Four in 10 had received training on risk assessment. Aside from these more 'generic' types of training for those working directly with children, respondents also reported receiving training on more specific aspects of their role. For example, 47 per cent

had received training on participation techniques and strategies; 39 per cent on children's rights and the law; and 36 per cent on evaluating participation.

Category	Percentage
Child protection and safeguarding	56%
Participation techniques and strategies	47%
Risk assessment	41%
Children's rights and the law	39%
Evaluating children's participation	36%
Managing challenging behaviour	33%
Research methods	22%
Advocacy and lobbying skills	14%

Figure 1.13: Training and support for participation workers (n=279)

Figure 1.14 shows what additional training respondents would like to have in order to enable them to do their job. While there appears to be little further demand for child protection and safeguarding or risk assessment training, there is an ongoing demand for more training in specific aspects of the participation worker's role. The most common requests were for further training on participation techniques and strategies (38 per cent), advocacy and lobbying (37 per cent) and evaluating children's participation (36 per cent). Indeed when given the opportunity to comment on 'other' courses they may like to attend (but which were not listed in the questionnaire), the responses showed an appetite for training opportunities across the board, including the chance to refresh skills. A few respondents referred to wanting to know about new and innovative methods for engaging children in decision-making, including practical examples of how this could be done.

Category	Percentage
Participation techniques and strategies	38%
Advocacy and lobbying skills	37%
Evaluating children's participation	36%
Research methods	30%
Children's rights and the law	24%
Managing challenging behaviour	18%
Risk assessment	11%
No more training	7%
Child protection and safeguarding	4%

Figure 1.14: Additional training requested by participation workers (n=279)

1.8 Perceived barriers to children's participation

Respondents were asked to assess a number of potential barriers to their participation work in terms of either a 'major' or 'minor' barrier, or alternatively 'not a barrier'. The results are presented in Table 1.6.

Table 1.6: Barriers to participation

factors that might act as a barrier to working with children	major barrier (%)	minor barrier (%)	not a barrier (%)	NA (%)
lack of funding (n=225)	44	40	15	1
lack of incentive for staff to promote children's participation (n=222)	24	35	38	3
lack of parental support (n=219)	9	43	40	8
support from other organisations/departments (n=220)	25	44	29	2
children don't recognise the benefits of participation (n=219)	13	42	42	3
lack of training opportunities for participation workers to help them meaningfully engage with children (n=221)	16	45	35	4
lack of written policies on children's participation (n=219)	15	38	44	3
negative public attitudes towards children (n=219)	24	52	22	2
problems keeping children interested in participation work (n=223)	20	48	30	2
lack of senior management commitment to children's participation (n=219)	23	28	47	1
staff availability to support participation (n=220)	41	35	23	1
difficulty recruiting appropriate children (n=222)	16	49	32	3

Table 1.6 shows that resource issues such as lack of funding or staff availability were most likely – by a considerable margin – to be cited as 'major' barriers (44 per cent and 41 per cent respectively). Resistance from parents was the issue least likely to represent a major barrier, cited by just 9 per cent of respondents, and issues around recruiting or persuading children of the value of participation were also not widely considered to represent major barriers.

1.9 Perceived attitudes to children's participation

We asked respondents to rate the amount of respect that different groups of people accorded children's involvement in decision-making, based on their experience and observation as participation workers. The results are presented in Figure 1.15.
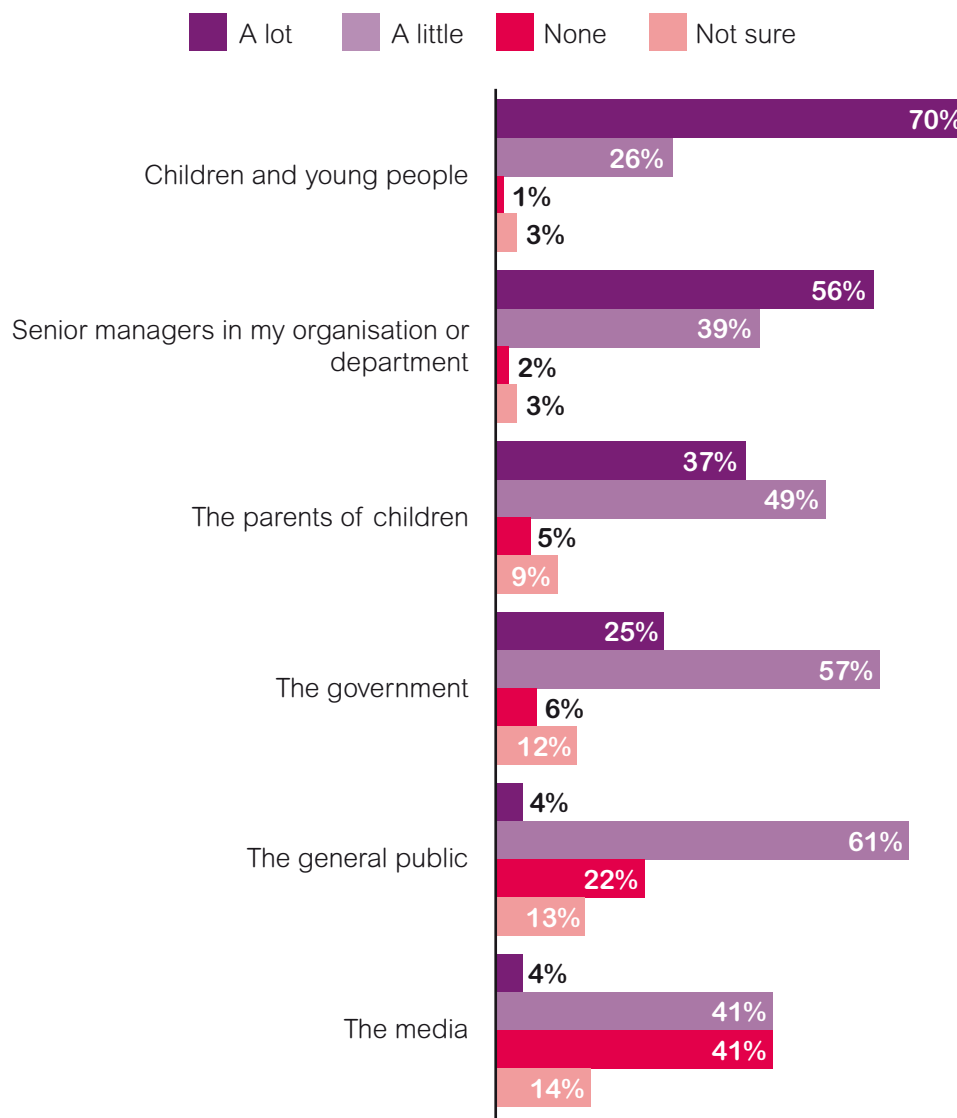
Figure 1.15: Participation workers' assessment of respect accorded to participation work by different groups (n=279)

Figure 1.15 shows that – in the view of participation workers – the individuals most likely to value participation work a lot were children themselves, senior managers, and parents. These findings are consistent with the results in Table 1.6 above, which showed that the commitment shown by senior managers and parents to participation were not perceived to be barriers to children's involvement. However, neither the media nor the general public were felt to accord much respect to the involvement of children in decision-making, with just over two-fifths of respondents (41 per cent) suggesting that the media did not respect children's participation; and a fifth (22 per cent) feeling the same about the general public.

To further probe general perceptions of participation work, we asked participation workers to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a number of key statements associated with their work. The results are displayed in Table 1.7.

**Table 1.7:** Participation workers' views about children's participation

	strongly agree (%)	agree (%)	disagree (%)	strongly disagree (%)	not sure (%)
children have a right to be involved in decision-making (n=251)	90	10	0	0	0
children should only be involved in decision-making where there is clear evidence about the benefits of their involvement (n=251)	28	29	27	10	6
it is too difficult to involve children under eight in decision-making (n=251)	2	4	49	38	7
there are no decisions in which children cannot be involved, providing they are properly supported (n=250)	46	37	8	2	7
children's participation is integral to the work of my organisation (n=250)	59	30	6	3	2
my organisation always ensures that children are told about the results of their involvement (n=250)	28	40	21	4	7
our services have not improved as a result of children's participation (n=248)	3	7	47	33	10
senior managers in my organisation do not value the right of children to be involved in decision-making (n=249)	4	12	49	27	8
senior managers understand the practical implications of involving children in decision-making (n=246)	19	40	21	13	8

The first point to note from Table 1.7 is – hardly surprisingly – that there was very strong support for children's involvement in decision-making: 90 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that children had a right to be involved in decision-making, and no respondents disagreed with this statement. More specifically, 83 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed that there are no decisions in which children cannot be involved in, providing they are properly supported. This was the case even with very young children, with 87 per cent of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that it is too difficult to involve children under eight in decision-making. It is interesting to note that 37 per cent felt that there was a case for involving children in decision-making even if there was no clear evidence of benefit.

Children's participation was felt to be integral to the organisations of nearly nine out of 10 respondents (89 per cent), although children were only told about the results of their involvement in around two-thirds (68 per cent) of the organisations. Nevertheless, 80 per cent of respondents felt that services have improved as a result of children's participation. Senior managers were generally felt to value the right of children to be involved, according to 76 per cent of the sample, but were thought less likely to understand some of the practical implications of participation.

1.10 Improving children's involvement in decision-making

Looking forward towards how to promote children's participation, we asked respondents to choose three priorities from a list of seven options for improving children's participation in decision-making in their organisation. Figure 1.16 shows the numbers of votes accorded each of the seven suggestions.
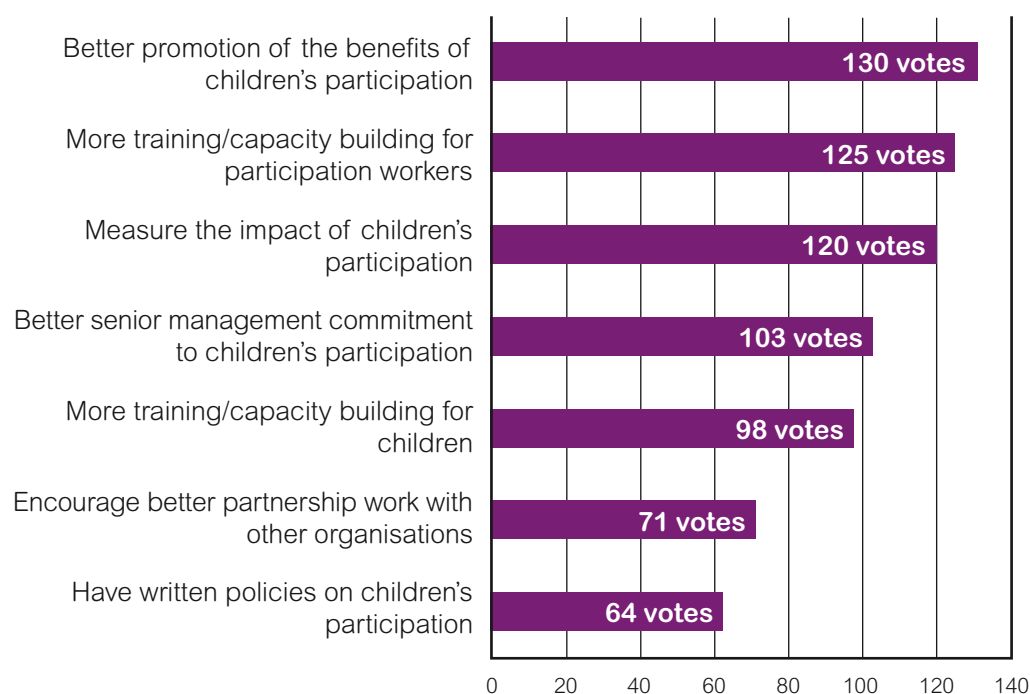

Figure 1.16: What would improve children's participation in your organisation? (n=279)

The data displayed in Figure 1.16 shows that the top priority for improving children's participation in decision-making is the better promotion of the

benefits of children's participation. The second priority focuses on improving the training and capacity for participation of workers themselves, and echoes earlier findings – for example, the identification of staff capacity as a barrier to participation work, and the noted appetite for further training among survey respondents. The third priority, which is closely linked to the top priority, was the need to measure the impact of children's participation. It is interesting to recall that evaluating children's participation was one of the top three requests on the wish-list for additional training (see Figure 1.14 above).

When asked if there were any additional approaches not mentioned in our survey, which their organisation could adopt to improve children's participation, two key issues emerged. The first (and most frequently stated) issue was the need for a wider understanding of participation throughout the organisation, including among staff not working directly with children. The second issue concerned the need to commit financial resources to participation work.

We also asked participation workers what they thought the government needed to do to support improvements in children's participation in decision-making. Respondents were asked to indicate, from a list provided, three priorities for the government. Figure 1.17 shows the number of votes that each of our 12 suggestions received.
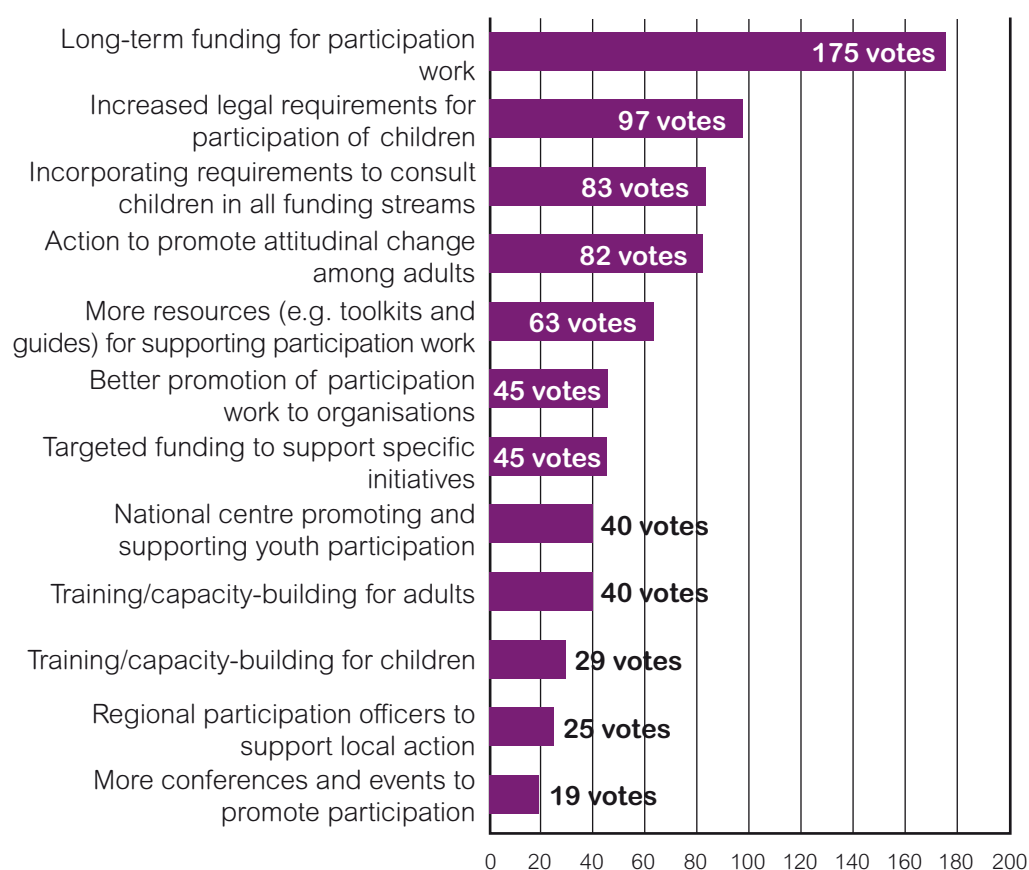
Figure 1.17: What should the government do to promote participation? (n=279)

Long-term funding was, by some considerable margin, the top priority (receiving 175 votes) and this was followed by two other suggestions which would also serve to embed and secure the future of children's participation.

Participation workers also identified, as their fourth priority, a need for the government to promote attitudinal change among adults.

When asked if there were any additional approaches not mentioned in our survey which the government could adopt to improve children's participation, there were no strong, consistent messages. However, the one overarching theme which did emerge was the need to adopt a stronger stance on children's right to have a voice in matters that affect them in accordance with their age and maturity, as stated in Article 12 of the UNCRC.

2 Comparisons between this research and the research conducted in 2002

As noted at the beginning of this report it is not possible to draw direct comparisons between the findings from this research and the findings from a similar study conducted in 2002, due to differences in organisations, together with some necessary updating of questions. However, to assess how the participation map may have changed between 2002 and 2009, the key findings from both surveys have been themed into specific subject headings.

The research sample

The data from both studies suggest that the participation workforce remains predominantly female. This was the case for almost two-thirds of the sample in 2002, and for three-quarters of the sample in 2009. Given changes in employment patterns in other areas, this could suggest that participation work is regarded as having a low value or status, despite the growing legal duties to involve children in the work of organisations.

How are children involved in organisational decision-making?

There has been little change in how participation workers involve children in decision-making. For example, it remains common for organisations to ask children for their opinions about changing existing policies or services, or to comment on new policies or services (more than seven in 10 organisations were involving children in this way in 2002 and 2009). Although children have traditionally been less likely to be involved in delivering services, this appears to have increased slightly over the years.

Which groups of children are involved in decision-making?

In both 2002 and 2009, children from a variety of marginalised groups were reported to be engaged in participation, although, in both studies, it was unclear whether the responding organisations specifically targeted these marginalised groups or whether such children were involved as part of a broader participation strategy (that is, they were included as part of the general population).

The data also suggests that children of secondary-school age are still more likely than younger children to be involved in decision-making processes, and

this has not changed dramatically over the years. In 2009, around seven out of 10 organisations were involving children aged 11 and older in decision-making processes, yet fewer than one in 10 organisations were involving children under five. These findings may be a reflection of the types of organisations who participated in the research, and the age groups they provide services for, as opposed to evidence of a selective approach to participation on the basis of age. Nonetheless, when set against the seemingly more active involvement of older aged children in participation over the years, these do constitute interesting findings.

What training and support is available for participation workers?

There were more opportunities for participation training in 2009 than in 2002. For example, seven out of 10 organisations in the 2009 sample had received training for their job, compared to just over half of the sample in the 2002 survey. Interestingly, in both studies, the most common requests were for further training on evaluating children's participation and for training on participation techniques and strategies.

Although the number of participation workers who have not received training related to their job has dropped over the years, in 2009 just under a third of participation workers were untrained – a finding that warrants further attention.

Conclusion

To put the information in this report in context, the conclusion will focus on the key issues that emerged under the three broad aims of the study.

Aim 1: To examine the levels and ways in which front-line participation workers involve children in the development and delivery of policies and services

This study has shown that there is a very high level of commitment from front-line participation workers towards involving children in decision-making processes. This was illustrated in a number of ways. For example: nine out of 10 respondents were involving children in decision-making about policies and services; over three-quarters of organisations had a written policy or strategy to support this engagement; and over eight out of 10 participation workers said children had received training and support to enable them to carry out their roles. The majority of front-line participation workers also supported the claim that there were no decisions in which children cannot be involved, providing they are properly supported, and that the involvement of children in the work of their organisation was integral to improving services and policies that directly affect children.

Organisations were also shown to be involving children in a range of decision-making processes. For example, more than seven out of 10 organisations involved children in decisions that concerned them as individuals, or asked children for their ideas about changing existing policies or services, or asked them to comment on new policies or services. Although children were less likely to be involved in identifying policies or services of concern to them or in delivering services, this was nevertheless reported to be happening in more than half of the organisations where front-line participation workers were based. A variety of methods were also used to keep children engaged in participation processes, for example consultations, making children members of decision-making bodies or committees, or holding public meetings or events (all of these methods were used by more than half the front-line participation workers surveyed).

It was also noteworthy that around two-fifths of front-line participation workers felt that children had a 'great deal of influence' on decisions made within their organisations; and that seven out of 10 participation workers suggested that children had 'some influence'. That only one in 10 respondents judged children to have 'very little influence' on decision-making processes is suggestive of the growing importance and value that organisations are now according to the views of children.

Aim 2: To identify the barriers to promoting a culture of inclusive decision-making

The top two barriers to supporting children's participation in decision-making were: a lack of funding; and staff availability to support participation. It is possible that the impact of these factors on children's participation could be exacerbated by inappropriate resource planning at a more senior level. For although senior managers were generally felt to value the right of children to be involved in decision-making (according to over three-quarters of the sample), the data showed they were less likely to understand some of the practical implications of participation. This could explain why the need to measure the impact of children's participation was one of the top three suggestions for improving children's involvement in decision-making processes; alongside better promotion of the benefits of participation and more training/capacity-building for participation workers themselves.

The data also showed that although children often represented the views of other children, they were highly unlikely to be involved in developing complaints procedures or setting budgets. Front-line participation workers were keen to address these gaps. In fact, their second priority for the government (after a request for long-term funding), was to implement increased legal requirements for participation (presumably on the basis that listening to the views of children – through, for example, complaint systems – could help improve services by making them more amenable to the needs of children as clients). The request to incorporate requirements to consult children in all funding streams also emerged as one of the top three things participation workers wanted the government to address. Participation workers also identified, as their fourth priority, a need for the government to promote attitudinal change among adults. The media and the general public were identified as two groups who could benefit from this move, particularly as they were seen to accord little respect to the involvement of children in decision-making.

Aim 3: To examine the training and support needs of participation workers

Overall, seven out of 10 participation workers had received training for engaging children in decision-making, mostly on child protection and safeguarding and/or participation techniques and strategies. Whilst this is welcome news, it was noted that just under a third of our sample were untrained, and voluntary sector respondents were more likely to have received specific training for their role than statutory sector respondents.

Although there were more opportunities for participation training in 2009 than was the case in 2002, demand remained high for further training on evaluating children's participation, and training on participation techniques and strategies. This finding is perhaps reflective of the differing needs of the groups of children with whom participation workers are engaging in decision-making. 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 main task children undertook for organisations was representing the views of other children.

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 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 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 realisation of children's participation rights – critical reflections' in Percy Smith, B. and Thomas, No. (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   A copy of this survey is available on request. Please contact cdavey@ncb.org.uk

12   The 2002 research was carried out by the Carnegie Young People's Initiative (CYPI) to investigate the training, support and development needs of participation workers across England and Wales. See: Kilgour, K. (2002) *Circus Skills: A training, support and development needs survey of participation workers*, Carnegie UK Trust.

13   Approval was obtained from the ADCS research group.

14   'As some respondents worked in more than one region, the percentages in Figure 1.2 do not add up to 100.

15   Hear by Right is a standards framework for organisations, across the statutory and voluntary sectors, to use to assess and improve practice and policy on the active involvement of children and young people. It uses measurable standards to map the current level of young people's participation across a wide range of service providers, then strategically develops an action plan to further this.

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.