

ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE GOVERNANCE AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES OF ORGANISATIONS

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1) Defining Youth Participation and Engagement

Firstly, in order to assess participation of young people, it is essential to clarify what we mean by this term. There are several ways to define participation, however at the core of all definitions is that young people 'have agency, form opinions, take action and exert influence' (Crowley & Moxon, 2017).

“Youth Participation is taking consultation further by involving young people in shared decision making and making changes from the outset of the process, ensuring they are active participants in planning, delivering and evaluating the services they receive.” – *Youth Focus (2014)*

Participation needs to be a planned process; one which allows the recording of young people's views, which is then followed by action. This should include some sort of feedback on what potential impact the young people's ideas will have on the organisation's policy and practice (Leverett, 2008). It is therefore important to understand participation as **a process** rather than a one-off event. Youth participation is not something you simply bolt on to the end of your work; it needs to be established and embedded within the organisation's culture (Youth Focus, 2014).

“Participation is about having the opportunity to express a view, influence decision making and achieve change. Children's participation is an informed and willing involvement of all children, including the most marginalised, in any matter concerning them either directly or indirectly.” – *Save the Children (2005)*

It is important to acknowledge the importance of meaningful and real participation; this is most famously demonstrated through Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation. Using this model you can consider whether an organisation is acting as an authentic structure for youth engagement, which will lead to adults and young people sharing the role of decision-making and ultimately generating change—or whether it is just a tokenistic gesture, which creates the illusion that young people's input is valued when in reality the adults are the ones making all the decisions (Davies, 2009).



The result of youth participation should be youth engagement. Meaningful youth engagement should involve equal levels of power between the young people and the adults, so there is an interdependent relationship. The young people's concerns need to be listened to and responded to. Engagement should also involve critical reflection and social change (Youth 4 Yeg team, 2014).

“Meaningful youth engagement is an inclusive, intentional, mutually-respective partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations that affect their lives and their communities.” – *Youth Power*

Fundamentally, youth participation and engagement are moral obligations which help young people feel valued and supported (Youth Focus, 2014).

2) The Benefits of Youth Participation and Engagement

At face value the answer to why young people should be involved in the decision-making process appears to be an obvious one. However, if we do not ask what this involvement aims to achieve, then its value diminishes. The moral and political externalities associated with this are henceforth lost, with involvement of youth being present for the sake of it. We need to ensure that the outcomes are prioritised over the process itself. By clearly identifying the benefits, we are one step closer to guaranteeing that participation does not become a tokenistic practice and thus a waste of time and resources (McLeod & Clay, 2018).

Individual Benefits

Youth participation and engagement helps young people to develop a range of social and communication skills. The process helps young people to build upon their confidence, improve their decision-making skills and their self-reflection abilities (Leverett, 2008). Youth participation and engagement can improve a young person's overall wellbeing (Youth Focus, 2014). Not only does participation offer young people a space where they can express their needs but also one where they can show off their skills and knowledge. Giving these young people a voice empowers them, something which is especially important for the youth who may be traditionally excluded; this involvement can provide a feeling of inclusiveness in society (Combe, 2002). All the skills which the young people learn during their time in the organisation can be used in everyday life and can assist them in the future, i.e. by providing them with skills attractive to employers and experience that will look good on applications (Combe, 2002). Ultimately, involving young people provides them with the rights of respect and acknowledges that they are equal human beings (Leverett, 2008).

Organisational Benefits

Including young people in the decision-making process means the organisation will improve its ability to respond to and reflect the people it aims to assist. By bringing young people in as the central actor and the rest of the organisation working as an enabler and facilitator, social change will ensue (McLeod & Clay, 2018). Young people inject a sense of enthusiasm and bring fresh ideas; these can alter the way services are designed and effectively improve the decisions that get made (Youth Focus, 2014). This participation could also save the organisation money and resources by enabling the organisation to get its services exactly right, or close enough (Youth Focus, 2014). The young people can relate to the organisation's beneficiaries and can therefore provide a specific insight into what they need and want. They may also have knowledge of new technologies and communication forms that are popular at the moment – there may be a gap in this knowledge from older trustees (Charity Commission, 2010).). In addition, 'increased confidence, engagement, social connections, access to information, and relationships' are not benefits limited to the young people themselves but can also be true for the staff (McLeod & Clay, 2018). Furthermore, including young people is vital for the Key to ensure that the organisation can act on their own vision, mission, values and charitable objectives; through this inclusion, the Key can make informed decisions, collaborate and strive to be the best it can be.

Societal Benefits

There are also wider benefits to youth participation and engagement; through the development of social networks, communities are developed, which establishes a collective capacity. The involvement may also harness great levels of trust, respect and tolerance within local communities; thus, the youth participation is also acting to serve the wider community (Youth Focus, 2014).

3) What models are other organisations using?

My research has led me to speak to other national and regional organisations to find out what systems they have currently implemented. It has been insightful learning what they deem successful and also the limitations of the models they are using.

Organisation	Model Used	Successes	Limitations
Sheffield Young Carers <i>– a charity dedicated to supporting young carers across the city.</i> <i>Contact: Laura Selby</i>	Action group – age 12+ - meets fortnightly for two hours – there is also a twice a year interactive meeting. Aims are to raise awareness, help to run the organisation and to improve national services. There is a separate group for younger ages 8-12. They also help with staff recruitment. ASDAN accreditations are offered.	In terms of making change, it has made a real impact as people really listen to the young people's experiences. The individual young people's progress has been very noticeable. Involving young people has meant that the organisation has been able to make sure their services are the best they can be – they recognise that young people are the experts and they need to be guided by them.	Capacity – a lot more time has to be invested than the funding permits Annual recruitment is a lot of work and have to constantly monitor group dynamics. It's hard to reach the right people
Just for Kids Law – <i>works with and for young people to ensure their legal rights are respected and promoted.</i> <i>Contact: Joel Carter</i>	Have two young people on the board of trustees , both members were under 19 when they were recruited. They did have a youth advisory board previously but changed this model as they didn't have any decision-making power.	The young people are engaged. It keeps the board real and close to the mission of the charity.	The young trustees are not young people who have accessed their services -they are not necessarily representative. Board meetings are usually very heavy and not very accessible, so begs the question whether the young people can actually influence the board.
Map – <i>advisors, counsellors, youth workers and other professionals working together to provide the best support they can for young people.</i> <i>Contact: Paul Webb</i>	They have youth advisory boards across the region. There is a full-time member of staff in each one of the seven districts. There has been a change from youth involvement towards youth led. The YABs are all chaired by young people and 2/3s of members are young people. Youth workers	The model has worked really well – a big part of this is having the support of the senior team. The progression route will mean that the young person has developed many skills by the time they reach the board.	A challenge was making it clear to young people what the youth advisory boards actually were. Some staff members found it challenging to let go and accept it was youth led. Worries about funding is a big difficulty.

	<p>are now more youth organisers.</p> <p>They try to recruit young people who have had some lived experience of the issues.</p> <p>Young people are always involved with staff recruitment.</p> <p>In January they are having young people inducted into the board.</p>		
<p>Young Minds – UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health Contact: Sarah Faithfull</p>	<p>A Youth Panel – there are 15 people aged 16-25 from all over the country. The youth panel meet on a Saturday every other month.</p> <p>One member of the youth panel will attend the full board meeting and present back to the rest of the group.</p> <p>Members from the board sometimes attend the youth panel.</p> <p>They are putting in place an 18-month term. The youth panel is involved with recruiting the new panel – they advertise through social media.</p> <p>There is a separate activism panel.</p>	<p>It has been beneficial for the trustees – has given them the experience to have direct contact with young people.</p> <p>The young people have had a lot of valuable input into the organisation's policies.</p>	<p>They sometimes struggle to make the information accessible. They originally found it hard to keep the young people engaged so they moved their weekday meetings to a Saturday which has been successful.</p> <p>They had great difficulty with expectations of what being in the panel actually meant – but they've got a lot clearer in how they describe it.</p>
<p>The Prince's Trust - help 11 to 30 year-olds who are unemployed or struggling at school to transform their lives. Contact: Edward Browne</p>	<p>Youth Forum – recruited ten people- the group decided to meet once every two weeks for one hour. The idea was that the young people were to drive it all and that staff would only facilitate the meetings.</p>		<p>Ten young people wasn't enough. Some of the young people were working/in education, so sometimes they couldn't make the meetings. Some of the young people were disengaged and others moved away from the area. They are going to spend more time setting it up and recruiting more engaged young people and plan to have it running again in the near future.</p>

4) What do the young people think?

Fundamental to my research was listening to young people and finding out their opinions and what sort of role they would like their involvement to take the form of. This research included conducting focus groups with Key members in Farringdon, Northbourne and North Benwell. Opinions and data were also gathered through creating and sharing a survey online.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID 19 situation, many focus groups we had planned did have to be cancelled, this meant that the number of young people we did speak to was limited. Nevertheless, there did seem to be a general consensus within the views of the young people that I have still been able to make conclusions from. These conclusions have been supported by the responses from the online survey, which proved to be a successful tool to reach young people even through the COVID 19 situation.

The overall consensus was that young people want to be involved and enjoy making decisions about the services they use. This opinion was particularly widespread for the Key members who were interviewed in the focus groups. Not a single young person said they do not want to be involved. Through their experience completing Key projects they all seemed keen to continue playing an active role in decision-making processes. Members in Farringdon said that being able to make their own decisions through their Key projects made them feel responsible and more confident - they felt like they were making a difference. From the survey responses, we can see that an overwhelming amount of young people (89.13%), say that they do want to be involved in making

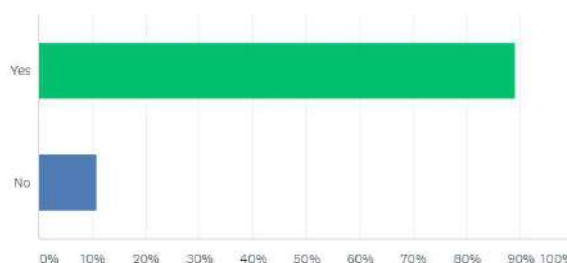
decisions. Comparing this figure to the number of young people who say they have been involved in decision-making processes, shows a massive disparity. Only 31.91% of respondents said they have ever been involved in making decisions about the services they use. This clearly shows that there is a failing not on the young people's part but on the adults running these services. The young people are being denied their right to have a say in their own wellbeing.

"Adults should listen to young people because the young people know what they want to do." – **Member of Northbourne Youth group, Age 11**

The focus groups also showed that all young people agreed that decision-making should be a joint process with both adults and young people having an equal say. Members in North Benwell thought that this was important because both groups had valuable input to add. They said that while adults may not understand the younger generation fully, adults had more life experience, so it was vital that they collaborated through discussion and arrived at a group

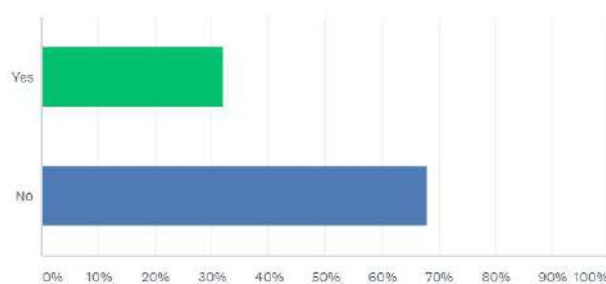
Do you want to be involved in making decisions about how services you use are run?

Answered: 46 Skipped: 1

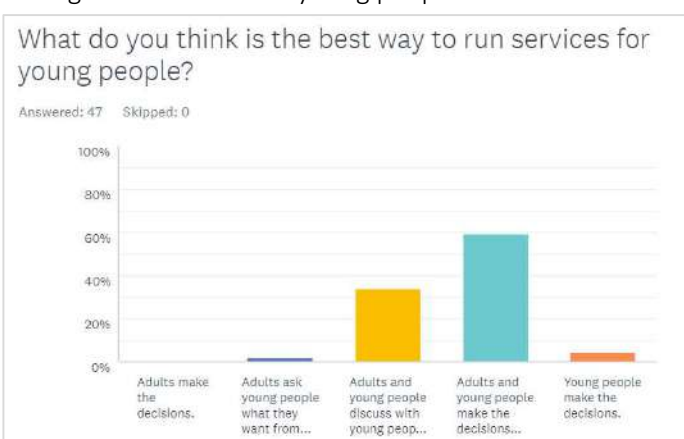


Have you ever been involved in making decisions about how the projects and services you use are run?

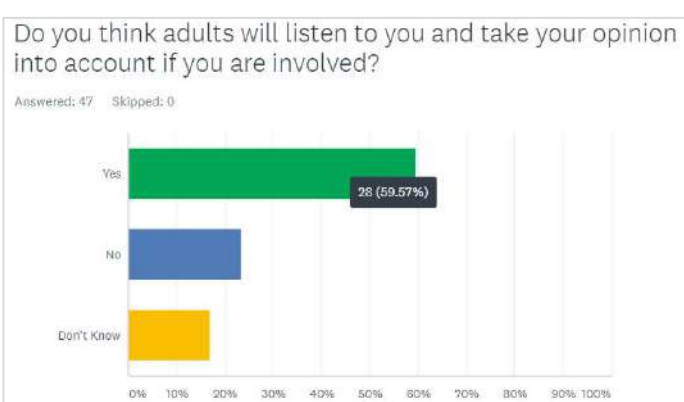
Answered: 47 Skipped: 0



consensus. This again was reflected in the survey's results. The majority (59.57%) of respondents thought that adults and young people should make decisions jointly, while a considerable amount



(34.04%) of respondents thought that adults and young people should discuss with young people how the services should be run, and adults take their opinion into account when making decisions. It is important to acknowledge that no respondents said that adults should solely make the decisions. It can therefore be concluded that decision-making needs to be a collaborative process, with young people keen to make this happen.



It is also important to acknowledge that while all the young people in the focus groups thought that the adults in their youth groups listened to their opinions and valued their involvement, they said that this was a rare experience and in other aspects of life adults do not listen, for example, in school. This was also mirrored in the survey when the question 'Do you think adults will listen to you and take your opinion into account if you are involved?' was asked. Whilst positively,

the majority (59.57%) chose yes, there was nearly a quarter (23.4%) of applicants who said no. Some of the additional comments also showed that young people were sceptical, with some of the respondents saying that it depends on the adults and one saying that they had experience of adults 'letting them down'. This is further illustrated in this quote from one of the focus group participants:

"Some adults think they're better than us and that they know everything, they don't care about our opinions. They put young people all in one group." – **Member of North Benwell Youth Group, Age 18**

I think it is important that this perception changes and the Key now has a great opportunity to help do this. By listening to young people and including them in the decision-making process, young people can recognise their own agency and feel empowered.

Essentially, what I would say is most important to take away from this, is that young people **do want** to be involved in decision-making processes and that this should be a **joint process** between adults and young people.

5) Options Appraisal

From my research I have identified three viable options that the organisation could implement, these are: having young people as full board members, a youth advisory board of some description and a digital survey platform.

Option	Benefits	Challenges	Considerations
Having Young people as full board members	Young people can provide a fresh and enthusiastic perspective to the board.	The young people may lack confidence in their ability or feel they are not being taken seriously (Charity Commission, 2010). There is the possibility of resistance from board members.	Legality, e.g. age restrictions There needs to be an extensive training period - not providing enough induction material or support could lead to an ineffective role. Need to consider diversity and inclusion.
A Youth Advisory Board	Young people can develop a range of skills that will help them in both their social and academic lives, e.g. confidence working in groups. The young people may feel more confident giving their opinions in a participatory space with their peers.	Participation retention may be challenging Recruitment can be time-consuming and resource intensive (Baird, 2016).	The impact of the youth advisory board may be hard to quantify e.g. the personal and professional development for young people (Baird, 2016). Need to clearly define the goals and objectives of a youth advisory group. Activities need to be flexible to the young people's needs and resources (Combe, 2002)
Digital Survey Platform	Can access a large number of young people. Young people are free to determine the time, extent and method of their input. It is easy to track the impact of youth participation It is a communication method that young people use and can relate to.	May exclude young people with learning or cognitive disabilities (Crowley & Moxon, 2017). May be expensive and difficult to implement – would possibly need specialised consultancy.	Need to ensure clear and accessible language is used. Need to ensure that there is enough time for young people to access information, develop their understanding and give their considered view.

6) Other Considerations

Recruitment process

Recruitment is a very important part of the process. Student unions, colleges and schools can all be a great way for young people to come into contact with organisations. Peer-to-peer recruitment and social media are also important tools (Charity Commission, 2010). All communication needs to be written in a clear and accessible way, with it being designed specifically for the intended audience. The Charity Commission (2010) advises a check-box approach which would enable the young people to quickly decide whether they were suited to the role and if it was something that would appeal to them.

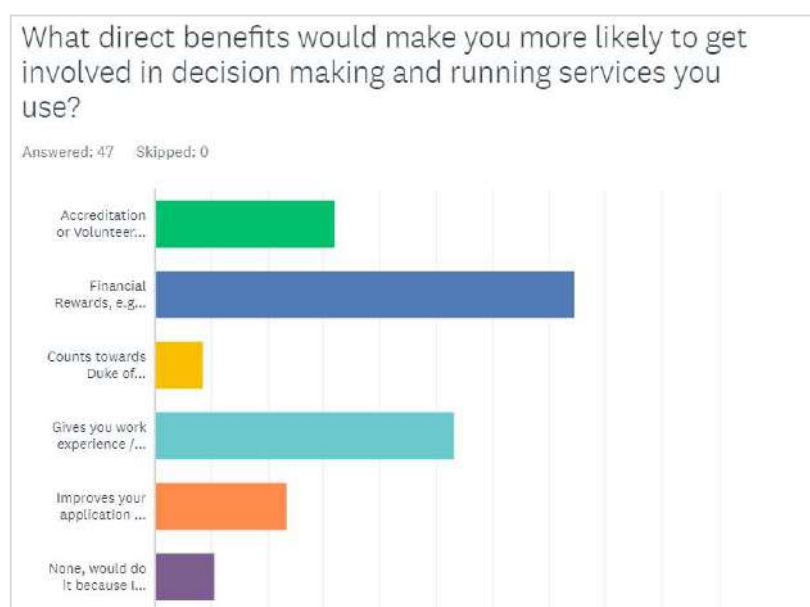
It is important to emphasize to young people that not only will they benefit a great deal from their cooperation, but so will the organisation. It should be stressed that they are capable of the role despite their inexperience and there should be reassurance that the organisation genuinely wants the young people's input and contribution (Charity Commission, 2010).

It is also important to consider whether it would be more beneficial to involve young people who have gone through the Key framework and have an idea about the type of work the organisation does. It is also critical to recognise that traditional forms of recruitment may not reach the type of young people that the organisation would benefit most by involving.

The recruitment process is a vital part of youth engagement as it indirectly impacts youth retention. By reaching out to more young people and having a larger number of applications will mean that staff can be more selective and invite young people who are at a stage where they are able to commit to the role (Baird, 2016).

Incentives for the young people

Whatever option the organisation chooses to use will involve young people sacrificing their time, therefore incentives are vital to attract these young people to the roles. This was one of the questions in the survey that was put out. As seen from the bar chart, *financial rewards e.g. tickets for events/ Payment* was the most popular option, with 74.47% of respondents choosing this option. These could take the form of a direct payment or a voucher however I would advise that a direct payment is likely to be much more effective. Other popular options include the incentive *Giving you work experience/enhancing your CV*. This will be a driving factor for a



lot of young people, which is a positive thing. However, to attract young people who may not traditionally apply to a role like this, a direct payment may be necessary.

The majority of the young people in the focus groups said that they would be motivated by knowing they were helping their communities. By emphasising this message, the Key could attract a lot of members who have completed or are taking part in the Key and have experienced the satisfaction of helping their community. It is important that the organisation is able to show that the actions of the young people are having positive outcomes on local communities and individual's self-confidence (Charity Commission, 2010).

Accreditation schemes

One incentive route which could be looked into is some sort of accreditation scheme. This can boost the young people's self-esteem and provide a sense of achievement (Brierly et al, 2012). Additionally, it may help their chances of employability and getting into further education, by providing their applications with some credibility. It would be advisable to use a scheme that has some level of national/public recognition, e.g. Youth Achievement Awards, DofE Award or the Vinspired programme to ensure it is valued by young people and employers/education establishments. If accreditation is done well it can be a great way of recording participation and achievement, however if it is handled incorrectly it may be seen as time-consuming and off-putting to the young people (Brierly et al, 2012). It is therefore important that if the Key does choose to apply it, that it is not seen as something which is simply bolted onto the end of the project.

Not only does accreditation schemes motivate the young people already involved but it can also play a part in encouraging more young people to become involved thus playing a role in the recruitment process. As the young people achieve their awards, this achievement will be acknowledged with a celebratory event, this celebration may then motivate new young people to join the organisation (Brierly et al, 2012).

Grant Schemes

In order to allow for adequate incentives, sufficient funding is essential. There are several grant schemes that can be looked into to help towards this:

Virgin Money Foundation: Heart of the Community Fund

<https://virginmoneyfoundation.org.uk/grants-programme/heart-community-fund/>

BBC Children in Need

<https://www.bbcchildreninneed.co.uk/grants/apply/small-grants/>

Training

The Charity Commission (2010) states that when introducing young trustees to a board, the experience is likely to be a lot more successful if a full introduction and training programme is offered to the new board members. It is important that the young people are fully aware of what their role in

the organisation is and what range of responsibilities they have. The training stage should not just be implemented at the beginning of the process but should be ongoing; this could come in the form of a mentoring process, where each young person is allocated a member of the board as a mentor who can guide them through this new experience. 'Adult' board members should also be aware of their role and responsibilities as a mentor, particularly with regards to safeguarding.

Including the young people in staff recruitment

Many of the organisations I have spoken to during my research included young people in their recruiting process. Through this, young people are granted the same power as adults, which essentially is what youth engagement is all about. The young people need to have an equal weight as the adults, and it is of utmost importance that their opinion is listened to and respected; fundamentally they should have an influence.

Diversity and Inclusion

It is vital to recognise that young people are not a homogenous group. They are diverse and have differing attitudes and interests, therefore it is essential that an inclusive environment is created (Crowley & Moxon, 2017). It is important to use a variety of styles or forms of participation; this is where a good facilitator is vital. It is critical to ensure that no young person is invisible in the participation work. Having people from different backgrounds and with a range of experiences being part of the decision-making process will lead to a more effectively run organisation (Charity Commission, 2010).

It is important that the Key makes sure the young people are representative of the people they aim to benefit, and this should be reflected in their recruitment process. Choosing accessible and relatable forms of recruitment should help with this.

7) Final Recommendation

My research has led me to believe that the only way to achieve meaningful and real participation is to have young people as full members of the board. I suggest having a progression route to ensure that this will be a sustainable model.

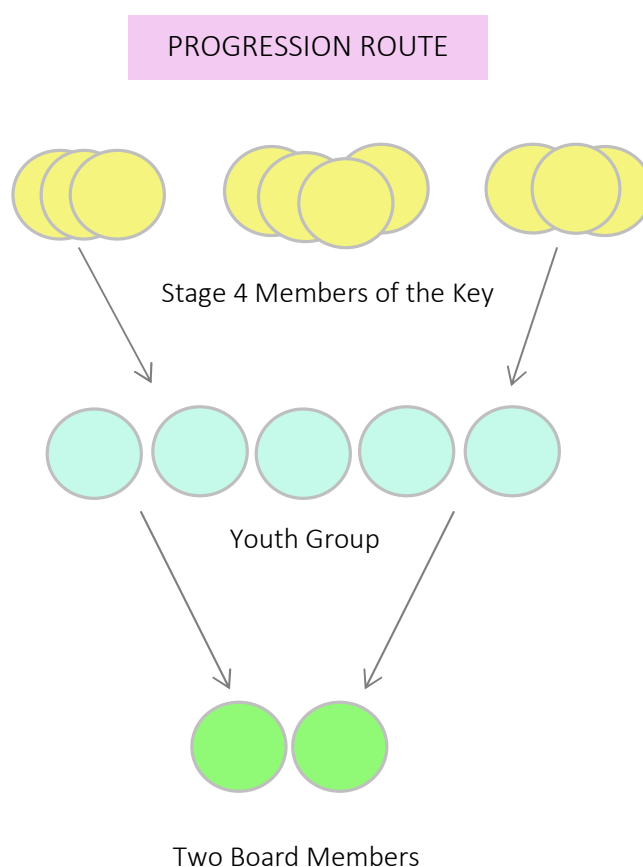
A **progression route** will involve the members evolving from a Key member to becoming a member of a youth advisory type of board to finally becoming a full board member. In Section 6, I detailed various recruitment strategies which are still useful tools to consider, however as the Key already has an excellent framework in place which empowers and encourages young people, I strongly feel that it would be wasteful not to use these talented young people in the Key's own governance structure. I have suggested that this position should be offered to those who have completed the final stage of the Key, as this means they will have built a good level of knowledge about the organisation as well as the skills desired. This should be open to review and perhaps in the future could be opened up to stage 3 members as well.

One person from the Stage 4 groups should be put forward to stand as a member of the youth group. I would advise against calling the youth group by the name of a '*youth advisory group*' as not only does this give disingenuous notions but also tokenistic ones. I recommend prescribing it with alternative names, such as an '*Action Group*' or a '*Youth Empowerment Group*'. This group should work alongside the main board; the role of members needs to be made explicitly clear to all in the group, the main board and the staff in the organisation. This will be up to the board to do; the board also needs to be clear in detailing what decision making or influencing power the youth group will have. Defining the scope of the work will enable members to feel more united in achieving their goals (Baird, 2016). It will also be the board's role to ensure that this youth board is properly consulted and included.

The youth group should be region wide in order to be representative of the Key's beneficiaries. In order to for all regions to be included, technology such as Zoom calls, can be used to ensure that the group still meets and collaborates regularly.

There also needs to be complete **transparency** between both the main board and the youth group; for example, the young people could be included in some of the board meetings either by presenting their work or just observing. Ensuring the young people have an understanding of the running of the organisation will make for an easier progression to the next stage.

My recommendation would be that two members from this group should be nominated and elected within the group to stand as board members (for legal reasons they made need to be of a certain age). It should be two members rather than just one to try to provide a less daunting experience.



This progression route will mean that the young people will have the opportunity to gain a further understanding of the work of the Key and further develop the skills required to engage as a member of the board throughout their time in the youth group (Crowley & Moxon, 2017). It will also give the organisation time to prepare its support systems and develop the listening skills needed (The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, 2014).

The young people will need support and sufficient training is vital. I would recommend releasing the board meeting papers before the meeting to the young board members and have them arrive early to go through any queries they have about these papers with a member of staff. This will ensure full participation and engagement. It is also important to consider the timing of the board meetings, for example weekday meetings may not suit the young people's schedules so perhaps should be moved to Saturdays or evenings. A mentoring scheme is also something the organisation may like to look into.

It is important that the Key does not fall into the trap of creating an environment where young people are simply 'invited' to join adults in a space which already has established rules (Crowley & Moxon, 2017). To get away from this, it is important that board meetings have good chairing and include active questioning and listening (The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, 2014). The board papers should also be clear and accessible.

I think the most important thing to remember when creating the environment for young people to thrive in, is to remember why you are including the young people; that is, the young people have a great deal to contribute to boards, in particular being able to empathize on topics which directly affect them.

As part of my research I interviewed Dan Connolly, a senior lecturer in Community and Youth Work, who is also on the board of Investing in Children alongside their young trustees. He spoke a great deal about how the first step of including young people needs to be by asking yourself:

'Are you ready to listen to young people?'

Unless the answer is truly yes, the efforts will fall short of achieving the outcome. He also spoke about his experience working alongside young board members, stating that there needs to be recognition that young people are responsible; there should be no hesitation discussing confidential or financial matters with them. The young people do want to be involved and have fresh ideas to bring but it will only work if the adults are willing to change their perceptions and accept an equal partnership.

Lastly, this will only work if there is a process to allow for honest and **open evaluation** which includes critical reflection and review of the contributions of both 'adult' board members and young people (Wyness, 2006). I would recommend a yearly evaluation which adaptations can then be made from to ensure for an effective participation process.

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