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Children and young people's participation in policy-making:

sharing practice

The participation of children and young people is now widely accepted, demonstrated by examples of children and young people's positive engagement in policy and practice (see CRFR briefing 1 *Children and Young People's Participation in Policy-making: Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable* for examples). However, the complexity of policy and organisational environments still throw up considerable challenges in ensuring that children and young people's influence on policy is effective, meaningful and sustainable. Exploring these challenges underpinned this collaborative initiative.

The initiative brought together academic researchers from the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at the University of Edinburgh and practitioners and policy-influencers from Barnardo's Scotland and Children in Scotland in a knowledge exchange partnership, based on a process of action learning. It ran from April 2011 until September 2012.

It was funded through the Economic and Social Research Council's Follow on Fund. It used research findings and practice experience in assisting organisations to support children and young people's participation in policy-making. It did this by exploring sustainable ways of working with invited members of Scotland's Children Sector Forum run by Children in Scotland. This Forum mobilises an united voice among children's sector organisations to influence national policy and local practice, in ways that advance the best interests of children and their families.

This briefing is the culmination of the programme of activities and the relevant findings. Previous publications are available here:

CRFR Briefing 1 (December 2011) *Children and Young People's Participation in Policy-making: Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable*

Children in Scotland magazine supplement (August 2012) *Exploring new paths: children and young people influencing policy*

What do we mean by participation

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child describes participation as:
... 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.

General Comment No. 12 The Right of the Child to be Heard (2009) para 2

What we have done and who was involved

The initiative undertook six main activities:

1. A Think Tank was held in June 2011 at the University of Edinburgh bringing together policymakers and policy-influencers, academics and children and young people and their organisations. For more details see the CRFR briefing *Children and Young People's Participation in Policy-making: Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable*.

2. Barnardo's Scotland facilitated a comprehensive and in-depth practice development programme for five member organisations. The programme explored how to involve children and young people in policymaking in each of the five organisations (details below and see *Children in Scotland Exploring new paths: children and young people influencing policy*).

'Pathways to Influencing Policy' Programme

Five organisations were recruited to work intensively with the Children's Rights and Advocacy Team of Barnardo's Scotland from the membership of Scotland's Children's Sector Forum. A mix of organisations was sought, to include public sector and national voluntary organisations. The selected organisations were:

- Grounds for Learning (a Scottish programme of the UK charity Learning through Landscapes, which supports outdoor learning and play for children)
- the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)
- NHS Forth Valley
- respectme – the Scottish national anti-bullying agency, and
- Stirling Council Youth Services.

The Children's Rights and Advocacy Team of Barnardo's Scotland used its 'Pathways to Influencing Policy' Programme as a tool to focus on building capacity amongst nominated staff from these organisations. It was adapted from a programme previously piloted in seven Barnardo's Scotland services over a two year period.

The core elements of the programme included:

- An initial audit of current practice and one to one information sessions.
- Three national workshops and networking events exploring: children and young people's rights; how organisations influenced the public policy agenda; and the ways in which organisations involved children and young people.
- Each organisation had a further two individual consultancy sessions tailored to their specific requirements and services around children and young people's participation and provided by Barnardo's Scotland.

Evaluating the Barnardo's Scotland Programme

The evaluation of the programme found that:

- Participants identified the programme as helpful and supportive. They appreciated the structured support from Barnardo's Scotland, which enabled them to explore the participation of children and young people in their own organisations. The positive interaction with a large children's voluntary organisation was particularly welcomed.
- Participants enjoyed networking with other participants in the national workshop programme, viewing it as an opportunity to share experience, explore thorny issues and learn from others.
- Participants identified that the consultancy support provided to each organisation, which constituted the second part of the Barnardo's Scotland programme, was particularly useful in exploring their individual needs and experiences around participation. The bespoke nature of the consultancy support from Barnardo's Scotland helped them to focus on areas they wanted to develop strategically.
- Participants found that child rights models were extremely helpful in analysing how well organisations were doing in supporting participation. The models used in the programme were: the Pathways to Participation model devised by Harry Shier¹ and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) practice guide on the participation of children in shaping social care².
- Overall, participants stated that effective participation approaches required positive organisational cultures, underpinned by the need to take account of the external environment.

For more details on participants' feedback on the Barnardo's Scotland programme see *Children in Scotland Exploring new paths: children and young people influencing policy*

¹Shier, H (2001) Pathways to Participation: opening, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15 107-117

²Wright, P., Turner, C., Clay, D. and Mills, H. (2006) Guide 11: Involving children and young people in developing social care, London: Social Institute for Excellence.

3. Wider discussions were held with children and young people's organisations and professionals during the project to explore different approaches and issues around participation in policy-making.
4. An ongoing reflective process enabled the team to explore their experiences and consider how their perspectives could inform the programme.
5. Children in Scotland facilitated the participating organisations to contribute actively to its Scotland's Children's Sector Forum and other Children in Scotland activities.
6. Learning from the initiative was disseminated through briefings, a Children in Scotland magazine supplement, UK and international conference presentations and journal articles.

The activities were evaluated by the CRFR research team using reflective diaries, questionnaires, interviews and evaluation discussions.

Levers to effective, meaningful and sustainable participation

Drawing from the learning across the initiative activities, the following factors were identified as impacting on the effective, meaningful and sustainable participation of children and young people in policy-making.

1. Organisational structures, culture and internal energy

Those supporting children and young people's participation emphasised that the ways their organisations were structured impacted on implementing participation approaches. This was specifically the case when organisations had complex organisational structures, with responsibilities relating to children and young people spread across different service departments. This complexity required detailed negotiations around participation activities with a range of professionals and decision-making processes.

Participants emphasised the importance of a receptive organisational culture that supported engagement with children and young people. Having a strategic and organisational commitment to children and young people's participation was essential, as was 'buy in' from staff with a range of responsibilities. One large organisation emphasised that having the support of the Chief Executive was key in ensuring support for their participation activities.

Internal organisational 'energy' was necessary to maintain commitment, problem solve and make sure that children and young people's participation in policy-making was sustainable. Having enthusiasm and sustained interest across teams helped avoid responsibility for participation being held by a single member of staff or small team.

2. Support, mentoring and opportunities for sharing practice

Different forms of support and knowledge exchange

were regarded as helpful. Being able to access informed and expert support was welcomed by organisations, enabling reflective discussions and aiding strategy development. The participants on the Barnardo's Scotland programme found it useful to access external bespoke support, which focused on their specific needs. It was emphasised that people and organisations have different starting points for what is effective participation and using rights-based models can stimulate the development of engagement approaches.

At the same time, participants wanted a dynamic forum or space to share their own learning and experiences with others. There was no appropriate place for critiquing what works in participation practice. Having a space for discussion could also provide a forum where children and young people could contribute in ways that were meaningful. These shared spaces did not need to be resource intensive but could make use of existing networks. They could provide mutual knowledge exchange possibilities. In addition, a legacy of effective participation practice could be disseminated.

Establishing partnerships and collaborations to support participation were identified as being helpful. Building on the example of the Barnardo's Scotland programme, organisations with known expertise could develop their roles in supporting others to develop their practice and promote joint activities. This could be undertaken as an extension of organisations' current roles or as a mutual exchange of skills and expertise.

3. Responding to changing external contexts

Organisations needed to be able to respond effectively to changing external contexts and incorporate these into their participation strategies. The Scottish policy environment had changed significantly during the lifetime of the project. New policy priorities and structures had consequences for children and young people's participation.

National policy agendas needed to reflect both children and young people's interests and local priorities. Participants emphasised that the current economic situation could have a negative impact on children and young people's participation. Changing demands could mean staff having to focus on other policy and service areas. These demands on resources should not be seen, however, as a reason to retreat from supporting children and young people's participation.

4. Participation approaches should start where it matters - with children and young people

National policy-makers initiate most policy development. However, participants in the Barnardo's Scotland programme emphasised that their priorities do not necessarily reflect children and young people's interests at local or national levels. It was therefore essential to find ways of responding to children and young people's concerns, particularly in a local context, and find meaningful ways of incorporating them into policy-making processes.

Particular attention should be given to how to gather children and young people's views and how these could be communicated to policy-makers. National networks and structures should explore ways of reflecting children and young people's views in ways that were interesting and dynamic. Organisations could also take a responsible view of whether there is always a need for policy consultations and if previous evidence of children and young people's perspectives could be drawn on. This would help to avoid tokenistic consultation with children and young people.

Participants believed that children and young people's participation would be given added impetus by ensuring participation was routine and embedded in everyday policy and practice environments. It should not be seen as exceptional and unusual, requiring specific expertise to make it happen. Overall, involving children and young people in discussions about how to improve and develop participation approaches was essential to improving organisational practice.

Conclusion

The initiative, 'Children and young people's participation in policy-making' sought to extend existing knowledge on children and young people's participation in policy-making. A core objective was to assist participating organisations in a national programme led by Barnardo's Scotland to support children and young people's participation in policy-making.

The evaluation found that policy-making processes and organisational structures and cultures influenced the effectiveness of participation approaches. Rights-based approaches were extremely helpful in exploring strategies for involving children and young people. Organisations welcomed the opportunity to explore the relationship between participation theory and practice. They wanted to share their expertise as well as explore challenges with others. Ensuring that children and young people contributed to these in meaningful ways was central.

These findings suggest that opportunities should be developed to share understandings of participation, which can deepen and extend our current knowledge across academia, the public and voluntary sectors and by those developing policy at national and local level.

Authors

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Further information

CRFR Briefing 1 (December 2011) *Children and Young People's Participation in Policy-making: Making it meaningful, effective and sustainable*
Children in Scotland magazine supplement (August 2012)
Exploring new paths: children and young people influencing policy