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Young Edinburgh Action: Reinvigorating young people's participation in Edinburgh

YEA in action

Case study: Better Sex Education Action Research Group

At the Gathering in 2014, this topic was identified as an issue to be taken forward by an action research group. The group of nine young people first met in February 2015. After a series of animated conversations about the topics they decided that they wanted to answer the following questions:

- ◆ Do young people think that the sex education they get at schools is relevant to their lives?
- ◆ What ideas do young people have about how sex education could be improved?
- ◆ Where do young people get their information about sex and relationships?

The group designed a survey and asked their PSHE (Personal, Social, Health & Economic education) teachers to encourage students in school to fill it in. 158 young people completed the survey. The group then collated the survey responses and took part in a collaborative analysis workshop facilitated by a YEA staff member, where they identified key themes from the data. The group made a short film to share the results from the survey and their own thoughts.

The Conversation for Action took place in July 2015. Invited adult decision makers included local elected members, the Director for Children and Families, lead NHS officials and staff from voluntary sector organisations. Action points from the conversation for action included:

- A new post to be recruited focusing on improving sexual health and relationships education in schools.

- A resource for teachers being developed looking at sex education from a young person's perspective.
- Young people presenting their findings to Depute Head Teachers and several other conferences attended by relevant professionals.
- Ongoing discussions between young people and partner organisations about some of the research findings.

The outcomes of this process are:

- A City of Edinburgh Council / National Health Service Sexual Health Officer will be appointed in July 2017. This role will help improve the quality of training being provided to young people in Edinburgh and the Lothians.
- A 'Top Tips' for teachers, written from young participants' perspective, has been used to train teachers and other staff. It is hoped this resource will be form the basis of a video for training.
- The YEA research data and recommendations have been fed into the a review being conducted by NHS on primary school sexual health education.
- Young researchers presented their work to the CEC Depute Head Teachers, resulting in a key contact being identified whose role is to liaise with NHS regarding Sexual Health and Relationship Education.
- The young researchers' video is being used in Sexual Health and Relationship Education training across the Lothian's.
- The young researchers' data was presented to the 'Healthy Respect'³ working group. Young people were involved in identifying questions and themes to be raised with staff involved in providing sexual health education.

Conclusion

Young Edinburgh Action represents a move away from formal youth participation structures towards an approach that emphasises collaborative inquiry, dialogue and spaces for participation on young people's terms. The purpose of this engagement is to ensure 'live' issues, important to young people as service users and citizens, are heard by senior decision makers. The strength of this approach ensures the engagement of young people within the work of the Council and its partners in a way which is co-productive, dynamic and responsive to current legislation. It is envisaged the process will be reviewed regularly by all stakeholders.

While early in its implementation, the YEA approach has made a significant impact on improving services in Edinburgh whilst also building the capacity of young people to be actively involved in their community. As an example of good practice, which is cost effective and has made a real impact, we would recommend the approach be adopted in other local government areas.

We have also, importantly, had a lot of fun, engaged in fascinating conversations, agreed, disagreed, played silly games, tried lots of different ways to appeal to a wider group of young people eaten a significant number of chocolate biscuits.

References

Percy-Smith B (2010) 'Councils, consultations and community: rethinking the spaces for children and young people's participation' *Children's Geographies* Vol. 8, No. 2, May 2010, 107-122

Author and acknowledgements

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³www.healthyrespect.co.uk

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Young Edinburgh Action (YEA) is an innovative approach to implementing the City of Edinburgh Council's Young People's Participation Strategy. It is informed by the views of young people and professionals, academic theory and the need for local government to evidence the work that they do and critically review their approaches. YEA developed a partnership with the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships to capture the unique qualities of the approach and to share learning.

Background

Young people have the right to be involved in making decisions that affect them. The Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 demonstrated young people's capability and desire to engage in vibrant dialogue and campaigning about the sort of world in which they want to live. Although young people's participation has been increasingly integrated into legislation and policy, in practice it can be limited, even tokenistic, relying upon overly bureaucratic structures and processes that prioritise adults' agendas and can exclude individuals and groups of young people.

This briefing discusses Young Edinburgh Action, an innovative approach to implementing the City of Edinburgh Council's (CEC) Participation Strategy. As one of the largest local government areas in Scotland, the CEC is a main provider of services for local people. In 2012, CEC elected members agreed that a new approach was required to ensure young people's active citizenship and input to the improvement of young people's services in Edinburgh, moving towards an approach based upon inquiry, dialogue and spaces for meaningful participation.

YEA enables young people to set an agenda for action and supports groups of young people to undertake research and make recommendations on topics about which they feel strongly.

Key points

- Young Edinburgh Action (YEA) is an innovative approach to ensuring young people's views are taken into account by local authority decision makers through Action Research.
- YEA supports young people to define the issues that matter to them.
- YEA identifies action for local decision makers and holds them to account.
- YEA has had demonstrable impact at service improvement level.
- Young participants have increased skills and personal confidence.
- Young participants are more involved in their communities.
- Adult decision-makers have developed action plans based upon young participants' research.

The approach

The approach draws on research suggesting that a move away from formalised participation structures towards opening up spaces for inquiry, dialogue and action can enable young people's meaningful participation and active citizenship (Percy-Smith, 2010)

YEA believes that young people's participation is intrinsically valuable but is also important because it leads to:

- Improvements in services for young people
- Learning and development for the young people involved.

¹United Nations (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, Geneva: United Nations. The *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

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Building on existing good practice, YEA provides an interactive and dynamic model of young people’s participation. YEA’s approach aims to be flexible, allowing young people to move between different levels of involvement depending upon their interests, capacities and other commitments. In a discussion between young people and YEA staff, a set of shared team values were identified:

- Valuing young people’s opinions and rights
- Giving young people a voice
- Tackling problems
- Having fun and learning at the same time
- Respecting differences of opinion and being non-judgemental
- Friendship and solidarity
- Equality
- Independence and interdependence
- Being willing to give things a go and take risks
- Creativity, discussion, banter, going off on tangents
- Creating a safe space
- Good food!!

The model is made up of several interconnected core activities that respond to and feed into other youth services in Edinburgh and across Scotland:

Young Edinburgh Action leaders

The YEA leaders training is an ongoing capacity building and peer education programme for young people across Edinburgh. This 40 hour training programme helps to develop confident and able young people who can participate effectively and encourage others to get involved in democratic processes in Edinburgh. The programme seeks to encourage young people to get involved in other YEA activities but also to support them to get involved in their communities in other ways, for example political campaigning.

Youth gatherings

Gatherings, which take place annually, are events planned and facilitated by YEA leaders with the aim of identifying issues that young people want to be taken forward by the action research groups (see below). Gatherings ensure that young people set the agenda and focus for YEA. Young people are recruited to attend Gatherings through a database of interested young people, a network of youth organisations, events in schools and by word of mouth. By the end of each Gathering, young people choose the priority topics that YEA will focus on for the next year.

Action research groups

Action research groups are at the heart of YEA’s approach and enable a core group of young people to explore and present the views of a wider group of young people in Edinburgh. An action research group is established for each of the topics chosen at

the Gathering. The group is open to any young people who are interested in the topic and is usually made up of between 6 and 15 young people.

The way that the group operates is flexible, depending upon the topic and the participants, but with the support of YEA staff each action research group will:

- **Think** about the topic and what it means for young people in Edinburgh.
- **Investigate** the current situation around this topic and find out the views of other young people in Edinburgh.
- **Make recommendations** to the people who make decisions about this topic.
- **Create a resource** (for example a poster, a video, a piece of drama or art, a song or a blog) to share what the group learns and their recommendations.

Topics undertaken so far in these groups include: bullying, mental health support in schools, poverty and inequality, sex education and gender inequality.

Conversations for action

From the beginning of the action research process the groups discuss the impact that they hope to have. The Conversation for Action is an important interface where young people and adult decision-makers invited by the young people come together to discuss the topic and develop an action plan.

A Conversation for Action is convened at the end of each action research process. The agenda for the conversation is set by young people and the meeting is chaired by the senior worker in YEA. Young people present their learning, ideas and recommendations in order to facilitate meaningful dialogue between young people and relevant policy makers and senior officers. The minutes of the meeting take the form of a list of action points assigned to specific adults and young people. Follow up meetings ensure that professionals and young people are held accountable for completing their agreed actions.

Reflection

As part of its partnership with the Centre for Research into Families and Relationships and YEA’s desire to evidence the work that we do, young people and adults participated in a self-evaluation workshop². Together participants reflected upon the team’s contribution to its wider aims and developed a logic model that illustrates the model of participation.

This model, of course, illustrates the ideal picture. In reality YEA faces many risks and challenges, some of which will be explored in a follow-up briefing paper looking at YEA from young people’s perspectives.

Impact

As can be seen from the logic model (right), outcomes take different forms and occur at different levels of the project. For example, young people report a wide range of personal outcomes from their involvement in Young Edinburgh Action.

²Self evaluation workshop led by Sarah Morton using Contribution Analysis.



“Most young people have a passion inside themselves for making a difference and YEA helps to bring it out.”
(Young person)

YEA has also had demonstrable impacts at the service improvement level. The action plans developed at Conversations for Action often include both “quick wins”, i.e. the identification of where change can be quickly achieved, and the requirement for more complex pieces of work with young people’s involvement. Some of the actions that Conversations for Actions have initiated or contributed to include:

- A new, jointly funded City of Edinburgh Council / National Health Service post focusing on Sexual Health and Relationships Education in secondary schools.

- A city wide review of mental health services for young people in Edinburgh.
- Young people presenting to practitioners and academics on a wide range of topics.
- Young people’s input into a CEC review of youth services.
- The development of a storybook aimed at under 5 year-olds tackling the issue of gender stereotypes.
- A training programme about civic education for young people in schools and community settings.

These impacts have resulted from a clear participation strategy that opens spaces for young people to engage in their own research and adult decision-makers to develop action plans based upon this research.

(cont.)