# Participation under the spotlight: defining future directions

**Key players workshop, November 2007** 





# Introduction

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

Treseder, 1997

With children and young people's participation now clearly on the agenda at a number of levels – local, national, European and international – and here to stay, the *Participation under the spotlight* workshop, co-sponsored by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), Local Government Association (LGA), CfBT Education Trust, National Children's Bureau (NCB) and National Youth Association (NYA), saw key players discuss and debate how children and young people's participation should play out in the future and propose key actions to move the participation agenda forward. These key actions are designed to ensure children and young people's right to best outcomes.

The three objectives for the key players workshop were to:

- 1. review current issues and challenges concerning participation
- 2. decide on what actions are needed and who should take them
- 3. consider what can be done to speed up the process of change

The workshop brought together senior officials, leading policy makers, major service providers, researchers and children and young people from across the UK with relevant experience of the issues and challenges in taking participation forward at individual, community, local and national level.

At the centre of the event was a position paper entitled *Participation under the spotlight: interrogating policy and practice and defining future directions* (Cleaver *et al.*, 2007) which was prepared in advance to stimulate discussion and debate (available at www.nfer.ac.uk/participation). The paper puts forward a position on the future of children and young people's participation in the UK today and sets out several scenarios for consideration on the future direction and success of participation. It addresses three central questions.

- 1. Why participation?
- 2. How far have we come?
- 3. W(h)ither participation?

The emphasis for the day was on working group discussion centred on three workshops.



- 1. Building in, not bolting on participation What do we know? What don't we know?
- 2. Future scenarios for participation What are the key drivers? What are the key barriers? Do we need an architecture for participation?
- 3. Ways forward for participation *Where should our energies be focused? What should happen next?*

Each working group was chaired by a young person and facilitated by a co-sponsor. The group sessions were interspersed with short, thought-provoking, inputs from key speakers to stimulate the discussion. The day produced a rich diversity of experiences, reflections and opinions that, in combination, provide an action plan for taking participation forward and speeding up the process of change that is at its heart. This report summarises the main outcomes and outlines the recommended key actions from the discussion workshops.

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# Why participation?

A number of factors have combined to bring the participation of children and young people centre stage in society. This has led to increased calls for it to be mainstreamed and embedded in all organisations and settings so as to ensure the right of children and young people to best outcomes. The factors include:

- championing of human and children's rights, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 2006
- failing of services for children and young people as evidenced in the recent UNICEF report, which highlighted Britain as the worst place for children and young people to grow up in Europe
- growing concern about a 'democratic deficit' and the prospect of this
  and future generations of children and young people becoming
  disillusioned and detached from civic and civil society at all levels
- focus on participation as a vehicle for children and young people to bring about effective change in their daily lives
- ambition and vision of the *Children's Plan* to make Britain, within the next 10 years, 'the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up' (DCSF, 2007).

These factors, particularly the final one, help to explain why now is an opportune time to review children and young people's participation and set out clear future directions.

# **Building in, not bolting on participation** (workshop 1)

It needs to be a central priority to provide children and young people not only with the expectation of participation, but the skills of participation and opportunities to participate. To do this we need a clear definition of participation.

Cleaver et al., 2007

# What do we know about participation?

Back in the day when I was at school Mr Burns [our teacher] said that 'respect was usually framed around young people respecting adults, but I think adults need to respect young people more. With adults challenging their own attitudes and handing over power, participation engenders mutual respect.'

Yet in the same school, the new Reception Area entrance had a sign on it which read **Students Please Use the Other Door**. Who is the customer here? Where is the mutual respect?

Ellie Munro, speaking at the workshop, November 2007

# What good practice is there and how can we build constructively on it?

Though there is much good practice in participation, supported by a growing evidence base, overall the participation of children and young people across society is patchy, uneven and piecemeal. Current practices do not make the most of the sum of their parts. As a result, the participation agenda struggles for widespread recognition, acceptance and support in society and consequently for resource and funding. It is viewed as a 'good thing' for society rather than an essential need and right of children and young people.

This is despite the fact that, as the workshops highlighted, the current legal and policy frameworks are very helpful in supporting and encouraging participation, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Human Rights Act, Disability Discrimination Act and Education Act 2004. Indeed, *Every Child Matters* (ECM) (HM Treasury, 2003) and the *Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007) provide outcomes-driven policy for participation, and numerous examples of effective practice from individual and local community through to national and international level prove the power and worth of participation.

There was general agreement that good practice can be built on constructively where it takes account of the cumulative lessons arising from such practice. These were the lessons cited in the groups.

- Do not treat children and young people as a single, homogeneous group, but develop a range of mechanisms to contact and engage with them.
- Recognise that tokenism in participation does not work and may do more harm in the long run.



- Do not force things but instead look for natural opportunities to encourage children and young people to participate and affect change.
- Make participation relevant and real to the lives, interests and experiences of children and young people, as well as adults.
- Build strong, lasting infrastructures that underpin participation at all levels.
- Develop effective networks to support participation at all levels.
- Adopt a more integrated approach to participation that looks to join up networks, contexts, people and best practice.
- Work hard to reach and get the next generations on board with participation, be they children and young people, community leaders, school leaders, policy-makers or ministers.
- Recognise the crucial role of schools and local authorities (LAs) and of school and LA leaders in introducing children and young people to participation and laying the foundations for their future lifelong engagement.
- Do more to win the battle for hearts and minds and convert the sceptics and doubters to the participation agenda by promoting the impact and benefits, making use of the media, sharing and celebrating best practice and building advocacy.

## What don't we know about participation?

Why do we have to do the adults' jobs
Young person on pupil voice quoted in Ellis et al., 2007

# What do we need to understand better and learn how to influence more?

Despite the favourable policy context, evolving practice and growing evidence base for participation there are still many areas and aspects of the participation agenda that we need to understand better and learn how to influence more in order to sharpen outcomes and bring about real change. These areas and aspects concern how to:

- overcome problems caused by differing approaches to participation in terms of culture, ways of working, language, ethics and confidentiality
- work in a more integrated and participatory way founded on teamwork and interlinking networks and contexts
- influence senior managers and cultures more effectively, particularly in relation to LAs, schools, central government and ministers
- find out which children and young people participate and why, and likewise which children and young people don't participate and why
- find out which children and young people are involved in real decisionmaking that leads to change and how such involvement can become more widespread and accepted

make participation relevant and real to the lives, interests and experiences of children and young people, as well as adults

- enable children and young people to set their own priorities for action based on their agendas and not those dictated by adults
- define and measure non-cognitive, 'soft' skills associated with participation, such as resilience, team building, leadership, initiative and risk taking, and get them accepted as valid learning outcomes
- build a robust evidence base that includes longitudinal studies that chart the impact of participation over time for children and young people as well as for institutions
- involve children and young people more centrally in research and evaluation, in its construction, commissioning, conduct and reporting
- envisage what truly participative organisations, such as schools, LAs
  and third sector organisations, would like for all those involved with
  them and work toward their realisation in reality
- reach a point in time where participation workers and units are no longer required because everyone is actively involved in promoting the participation agenda.

Taken together these cumulative lessons from the first workshop afford a powerful set of principles and challenges for taking the participation agenda forward.

# **Future scenarios for participation (workshop 2)**

It is an axiomatic no-brainer that children and young people must be part of the design, delivery and evaluation of services.

Caroline Abrahams, speaking at the workshop, November 2007

The position paper set out four future scenarios for participation to act as catalysts for debate (see www.nfer.ac.uk/participation). Their intention was to challenge perceptions of the present and the future and to help us to consider practical ways forward for the participation agenda. The scenarios worked very well, sparking a series of lively, productive discussions.

# What are the key drivers of participation?

Schools that take up the participation agenda don't go back. Inclusion first participative strategies work, schools become better, more humane places and examination grades go up as a result.

Tony Breslin, speaking at the workshop, November 2007

There is no single key driver (trends, forces, issues and other factors) of the participation agenda. Rather there are a myriad key drivers – short, medium and long term – which are interconnected and can impact on children and young peoples' participation now and in the future. These are some of the main drivers identified in the workshop.



### Broad societal drivers, such as:

- demographic trend of an ageing society and the importance of winning hearts and minds of both young and old people concerning participation
- vision of 21st century society based on equality, inclusion, social justice, democracy and participation for all and the building of strong communities
- impact of climate change and efforts to encourage participation in the drive toward worldwide environmental sustainability
- life skills required to live happy and fulfilled lives in society, involving not just the acquisition of knowledge and understanding but the development of skills, attitudes and values through a broad range of learning opportunities and experiences
- economic and business needs in a fast changing, competitive world
- social and community needs in a world marked by faster change and increasing uncertainty.

## Technological drivers, such as:

- new information and communication technologies, such as social networking, which have the potential to expand opportunities for consultation and participation on a scale never experienced before
- media, such as social media, which have the power to change the nature and dynamic of participation.

## Policy drivers, such as:

- legislation that can provide frameworks and regulations (mandatory and non-mandatory) that establish an entitlement to and 'norms' for participation across society
- sought-after efficiencies in the delivery and use of integrated services across society from local community to national level.

#### Infrastructure drivers, such as:

- drawing up of an overarching strategic plan for participation
- identification and appointment of champions and advocates for participation across institutions, contexts and communities
- building of an evidence base that demonstrates the benefits, impact and worth of participation.

#### Demand drivers, such as:

- getting children and young people to participate in issues that are relevant to them and their lives
- demand from children and young people, as well as adults, for increased participation opportunities in society as more people experience the benefits of participation.

there is no single key driver (trends, forces, issues and other factors) of the participation agenda These drivers comprise a bewildering amalgam of people, institutions, societies, technologies, sectors, infrastructures, networks, visions and values, which are constantly jostling to promote, advance, block, direct, ignore, select, nurture and drive the participation agenda all at the same time. The challenge is how to marshal them effectively to take participation forward.

# What are the key barriers to participation?

Children and young people's participation takes place within a wider culture, which is not necessarily designed for or easily adapted to the needs of children and young people.

Cleaver et al., 2007

Many of the key barriers to participation are directly related to the myriad key drivers. A driver that does not drive positively can quickly become an impediment or barrier to participation. A number of drivers working against each other can lead to competing priorities. The key barriers also contain a similar amalgam of people, institutions, processes, infrastructures, visions and values, as in the key drivers. Some of the key barriers highlighted include:

- culture of non-participation across society
- lack of equality for and inclusion of all children and young people in society
- lack of interest from children and young people in participation and a perceived lack of relevance of the agenda to their lives and interests
- lack of real commitment and support from leaders and senior managers for participation, from government ministers through to school and community leaders
- lack of commitment to participation from businesses and business leaders
- policy-busyness and competing priorities that often see the participation agenda lose out to more immediate policy directives
- competition and territorialism among the support organisations and workers involved in promoting participation, who adopt a 'silo mentality' protecting their own interests above others
- lack of clear standards and accountability concerning participation across society
- lack of training and development opportunities and of adequately trained people, including children and young people, to take participation forward
- hijacking of the potential for social media and social networking to be consultative and participatory by commercial forces that encourage the individual, sensationalist and banal.

The question is how, and by whom, these barriers can be broken down most effectively.



# Do we need an architecture<sup>1</sup> for participation?

Standards can vary and need not be all of one type across all settings – e.g. Hear by Right – but they do need some core agreed and expected components to safeguard against tokenism.

Harry Wade, speaking at the workshop, November 2007

On balance, there was support for the creation of a stronger, tighter social and structural architecture for children and young people's participation along the lines suggested in the position paper (see Box 1).

# Box 1 An architecture for children and young people's participation

- **Identity** building a definitive voice and single language for children and young people's participation.
- **Standards** a national framework of standards for participation building on the strong base provided by the NYA's *Hear By Right* mapping and planning tool (NYA, 2007a), which identifies seven standards of organisational change. (Do we want a 'charter mark'?)
- Champions and leaders identified champions across national and local government and third sector organisations who have the political and social stature to lead children and young people's participation forward and to influence change. Awareness raising of the benefits of participation in all leadership training (from headteachers, through to LA chief executives).
- **Training and development** centred on the national standards of participation.
- **Recognition and value** of children and young people's participation by the media and central and local government.
- **Acknowledgement** of children and young people's contributions through awards and other celebration.
- Evaluation and accountability using rigorous methods with a clear focus and the strong starting point provided by the NYA's *What's Changed* tool (NYA, 2007b). Being accountable for meeting these standards (returning to the idea of a 'charter mark').
- **Sharing and dissemination** good standards and examples of participation are often best seen in action and discussed rather than simply being read about and reflected on.

The merits of creating a stronger and tighter architecture for children and young people's participation – what one group termed the 'nuts and bolts'

1 With thanks to Tom Wylie for this concept.

of participation – outweigh misgivings. Such an architecture would be helpful in overcoming the key barriers and utilising the key drivers for participation. In particular, it would:

- provide an overarching framework built around children and young people
- create a common language around participation that could be used by service providers to overcome territorialism and to educate leaders and senior managers in government, local communities, schools and business about participation
- increase the chances of the participation agenda proactively being discussed when new policy initiatives were under consideration.

However, there was also a recognition from one group that the 'architecture' needed a clearer rationale and must guard against becoming a generic standard, given the variety of settings involving children and young people.

The main proviso is that any architecture is regularly reviewed and revised so that it remains strong, tight, dynamic and fit for purpose for what is happening now and what needs to happen next.

# **Ways forward for participation (workshop 3)**

The final workshop was a focused discussion, informed by the position paper and the previous sessions, about the practical key actions that now need to be taken to move the participation agenda forward to ensure the right of children and young people to best outcomes. It concluded with consideration of how these could be translated into a clear, defined action plan for participation that could be shared more widely following the event.

# Where should we focus our energies?

Participation is about building a movement of inclusion, not just turning up to events.

Miro Griffiths, speaking at the workshop, November 2007

There was unanimous agreement that those involved with children and young people's participation should focus their energies on interacting priorities, looking both inward, in order to strengthen what is currently happening, while also building outward. Such a course of action would put people in a much stronger position to educate and engage other sectors about participation. The inward focus should be on:

 getting our own house in order with regard to participation opportunities, overcoming territorialism and self-interest, breaking out of silos and encouraging more collaboration and integrated, cross-sector team working



- providing more time for reflection and review
- building a stronger, tighter architecture for participation from existing expertise that includes a clear working definition, common framework with standards, training opportunities and evaluation and accountability measures
- sharing practice and creating a culture of learning around participation
- building participation from the ground up and ensuring it has strong, secure foundations
- ensuring that children and young people help to set the priorities for action, the agendas for change and the evaluation of what has happened
- · establishing common professional standards for participation
- recognising that participation is about bringing change (in schools, local communities, etc.) and commissioning more longitudinal studies that focus on the impact and effectiveness of participation for children and young people in bringing change to organisations and communities over time
- encouraging more cross-departmental, cross-sector participation work that looks to build on the move to more integrated services, including children's services.

Having strengthened the participation agenda from within, there should be a complementary drive to build participation outward. The outward focus should be on:

- establishing clearer lines of communication with leaders and senior managers at all levels, starting with ministers and central government, through to LAs, schools and local communities
- identifying and developing champions and leaders for participation at all levels in society who can advocate and lobby for increased participation opportunities and practices
- campaigning, through legislation, for the establishment of a general duty in society to promote participation, such as that provided in the Disability Discrimination Act or in the new duty to promote community cohesion in schools
- establishing an entitlement to participation in society that leads to the development of participation 'norms' at all levels
- providing continuing professional development and training to empower adults to work more closely and regularly with children and young people in ways that share power and decision-making based on mutual respect and trust
- building a higher media profile for participation that focuses on champions and celebrates practice, thereby ensuring more widespread awareness and acceptance of it across society

any architecture should be regularly reviewed and revised so that it remains strong, tight, dynamic and fit for purpose

- developing increasing momentum for the case for participation being seen not just as a 'good thing' but as an essential need in society
- targeting and lobbying specific areas notably:
  - central government need to get ministers and leading civil servants signed up as advocates for participation and ensure that it is considered when drawing up new policies and legislation
  - LAs getting civic leaders and senior managers on board so that there is an integrated approach to participation across all services (education, social services, housing, transport, etc.) and not just in children's services
  - schools targeting school leaders and teaching unions to ensure that
    all schools are more participative for children and young people and
    all those who work in them and that schools become more integrated
    with other services rather than acting as independent units
  - third sector working with third sector organisations to strengthen partnerships with the public organisations such as LAs and schools as well as local communities in order to build capacity and encourage innovative practices
  - business establishing a will in business to participate, perhaps through a refocused corporate social responsibility framework, and persuading local businesses and business leaders to get children and young people interested in participating through local schemes and initiatives funded by business.

# What should happen next?

I used to think we had won the battle of 'why participation?' but I don't think we have yet.

Pete Pattisson, speaking at the workshop, November 2007

The workshop concluded with a series of practical suggestions, framed around five interrelated areas – policy, practice, spending/funding, evaluation/research and campaigning/advocacy. Taken together, these comprise a targeted, strategic action plan for where the participation agenda should go next in order to speed up the change process.



# **Action Plan for Children and Young People's Participation**

#### Area Key actions

#### **Policy**

### Lobby in partnership on these actions.

- Push for overarching legislation to establish a duty for children and young
  people's participation across society. Such legislation will increase legitimacy
  and provide a powerful but simple overarching framework for participation.
  This framework could be achieved by pushing for domestic law to be
  compliant with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as has been
  the case with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- Engage in the passage of the Education Bill and work for the insertion of a clause on the entitlement of all children and young people to participation rights in all school matters at a collective and individual level.
- Work to ensure that the vision and ambitions of the Children's Plan to improve children and young people's lives over the next 10 years is translated into effective actions that continue to respond to the concerns and experiences of children and young people.
- Strive to ensure that the new statutory duty to involve (from 2009) makes
  explicit the role of children and young people in relation to this duty. This will
  ensure that central and local government see children and young people as
  an explicit group to inform, consult and involve in drawing up sustainable
  community strategies.
- Get LAs to prioritise children and young people by establishing ring-fenced budgets for participation across all services and not just children's services.
   They also need to establish standards for positive outcomes from such expenditure.
- Push for more 'joined-up' thinking about children and young people as well
  as 'joined-up' policy making that brings cross-sector stakeholders together
  and does not demonise and portray children and young people as a
  problem.

### **Practice**

# It is recommended that we work collaboratively to ensure actions in practice.

- Get our house in order and encourage partners to initiate collective action to create a stronger, tighter architecture (or infrastructure) for children and young people's participation that builds upon existing strengths, lays strong foundations for participation across society and is subject to regular review, revision and updating.
- Look to promote actively more practice that is real and relevant to children
  and young people, to their interests and circumstances, and includes the
  central aim of involving children and young people in real decision-making
  that seeks to bring change. It is vital to guard against tokenistic practice
  driven by adults' agendas.
- Work more forcefully to develop a more integrated approach to participation that overcomes the 'silo mentality' and maximises current energies, expertise and interests to develop stronger, underpinning partnerships and networks.
- Do more to draw out, evidence and share best practice from differing contexts – schools, LAs, local communities, and particularly those embedded in tough areas – to progress children and young people's participation (e.g. in exclusion procedures) as a stimulus to reflection, review and action.

#### Area

#### **Key actions**

## Spending/ funding

#### Advocate and put these things in place.

- More flexible funding mechanisms that channel resources direct to communities and community projects, particularly those led and managed by children and young people. In this way resource can go to where it is most needed and can be most effective.
- More innovative private sector, third sector and business investment in participation to bring different perspectives and to work in partnership with those in government and the public sector.
- Ring-fenced budgets for participation in all services and sectors of society, particularly in LAs and schools where it can be hard to prioritise participation, with designated champions with responsibility for that budget.
- Increased and prioritised funding for continuing professional development and training in participation for children and young people, and all adults who work with them, in order to raise competence, capability and capacity levels for participation across society.

#### Evaluation/ research

#### Promote these actions at a national and local level.

- Call on partners to prioritise, advocate and promote evaluation and research
  on children and young people's participation. Kick start this process by
  setting aside specific funding for collaborative projects that have the needs
  of children and young people at the centre (rather than the agendas of
  evaluators and researchers). Ensure that more longitudinal studies are
  undertaken to chart participation over time.
- Work together to establish rigorous standards for evaluation and research
  concerning participation so that people can have confidence in the methods
  and outcomes and use them to make the case for the benefits and impact of
  participation.
- Actively seek to involve children and young people more directly in the
  evaluation and research process in defining research priorities, working
  alongside researchers, analysing outcomes and reporting them in ways that
  engage children and young people. This will strengthen outcomes and make
  them more accessible.
- Do more to review, evaluate, research and publicise examples of effective practice in participation, particularly with regard to 'tough areas' such as looked-after children and young people, those with disabilities and school exclusions.
- Work more collaboratively to develop a culture of evaluation and research in
  participation as an integral part of a strong architecture or 'infrastructure' for
  children and young people's participation. This should provide a strong
  evidence base for this area. It will also help to drive increased sharing and
  dissemination of effective practice as a motor for raising participation
  standards across society.



#### Area

#### **Key actions**

## Campaigning/ advocacy

Lobby to achieve these actions.

- Campaign for the integration of participation across all organisations that seek to bring change with and for children and young people starting with central government and the role of ministers, through to LAs, schools and businesses. This would send out a clear message that participation is essential to society.
- Encourage more debate about the purpose and effectiveness of setting standards or kitemarks for participation, such as Investing in Children and *Hear by Rights*, to be awarded to all organisations public, private and third sector who work with children and young people. This could encourage greater accountability for standards.
- Lobby business and the third sector, particularly social enterprises, for a new framework for corporate social responsibility that includes an explicit focus on engaging with children and young people. This would strengthen the rationale and will for businesses to become more involved with the participation agenda.
- Raise the public profile of participation by getting the press and media on board and utilising the power of new communication technologies, such as social networking. This will raise awareness about participation and its benefits and challenges and help to redress the largely negative media-led image of children and young people.
- Push for more youth-led organisations that can create opportunities for campaigning and advocacy led by children and young people. This will provide more informal spaces for the voices of children and young people to be heard as a counterweight against formal activities and mechanisms. It will reduce the danger that informal places and spaces are squeezed out as participation becomes more mainstream.

The action plan represents the clear steps that workshop participants believe are required in order to speed up the change process of children and young people's participation across society and ensure best outcomes. The action plan must now be carefully considered, reflected upon, discussed and turned into action. This begs one final challenging question, namely: what will be your contribution to taking forward children and young people's participation? We look forward to finding out.

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