

# Democracy for All

## Engage your young constituents now

By the time we reach the next election today's 14 year olds will be eligible to vote, yet they are still not being systematically involved by politicians to have their voice heard. Engaging with those young people starts today.



## Listening to children and young people will make you a better Councillor or MP

As every politician knows, the best way to represent your area well is to listen to local people's views so that you can represent them. This includes children and young people, not least because they are some of the biggest users of public services – schools, health services, social services, transport, parks and leisure. If you want to know how the legislation you make in Parliament or the decisions of the Council really affects people on the ground, children and young people are some of the best people to ask – they often have a refreshing and new perspective on old issues.

Children and young people know their own needs and can best prioritise what is important to them as members of society, service users or consumers. Whether or not children and young people come up with ideas about what is important to them, there is intrinsic value in having them involved. Children and young people are interested in things that affect them alone, such as quality of school and youth provision, or affect them alongside others, such as access to and safety of transport. They are also concerned with matters that affect adults, such as quality of health provision for their elders, and environmental issues.

Finding out what service users such as children and young people think about the area and the services available can improve planning. Services aimed at young people that did not include them in the design or delivery may be underused and wasted.

Involving children and young people offers many opportunities for them to build their confidence, improve their self-esteem, and develop new skills, so engaging your young constituents can increase their quality of life and their chances to succeed.

## The legal basis for involving children and young people

Children and Young People's right to express their views in all matters that affect them, and have them given due consideration, is encapsulated in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This treaty was ratified by the government in December 1991.

UK law now requires the vast majority of public services and professionals working with children and young people to elicit and take seriously their views. Precisely because they do not have a vote, it is imperative that you develop mechanisms to hear what your youngest constituents have to say and want to do to make their and your community a better place.

Meaningful participation is a process, not simply the application of isolated participation activities or events. You and your staff need to work to involve your young constituents just as staff in schools, children's services, the police and health services are already doing more and more.



## How could they be involved?

A small proportion of young people typically, though not exclusively, aged 14–19, do get engaged in local, national and international campaigns. This can be as members of youth councils, as associate governors on school boards, as a member of the UK Youth Parliament, as Youth Mayor, or it may be those on school councils or those who sit on representative bodies such as the English Secondary Students Association and A National Voice. These committed young people should be the first that you contact and listen to. They are activists in your community. They will have local knowledge from a youth perspective and they may even have actively supported local campaigns for the election. They will have established priorities for young people and they will welcome you understanding and supporting these. When their priorities align with yours, there is scope to strengthen your messages and your work with their voice and energy.

More generally, if you design your surgeries and your office in a way that welcomes children and young people then they may just walk in off of the street. But you could also search them out through existing local places such as primary and secondary schools, youth centres, children's centres and youth festivals. Contacting the staff and indicating what you would like to engage young people on, and asking for their support in doing so, is a good first step. They may ask you if you have been 'CRB checked' or 'vetted'. This is not necessary in all cases but the parameters are changing so take advice.

It is more challenging but of greater importance to involve those who are not publicly active or face life challenges. This can include those with learning difficulties or disabilities, those who have to live away from their family, or those who have used a variety of public services. These children and young people also have the right to be heard. You can do this by visiting special schools, children's homes, custodial establishments, and agencies that specialise in disability.

All children and young people in your constituency should have access to information about their Councillor and MP. You could approach a cross-section of local children and young people to ask for advice on creating materials that will inform and engage under 18s. These children and young people will also be able to advise you about the best places to send your materials, from local leisure centres, to the youth sections of public libraries, to children's homes and paediatric outpatients.

## Why might children and young people want contact with you?

They may be keen to find out the views of their peers for you to use or to inform the Children and Young People's Plan, local planning mechanisms or service reviews, all of which should invite and include children and young people's views. Research commissioned or undertaken by children and young people will provide meaningful, informed, and evidence-based contributions that can help to influence and shape policy development and implementation locally. They might just want to talk about matters that concern them, which could be anything from immigration to noisy neighbours, family issues to elder care, or to recognise themselves and their concerns in the way you talk and what you do.

## Preparation always helps

Know about what is relevant to young people in the area. If you have some knowledge of the activities and places intended for children and young people or recognise what the lack of them can mean, this helps. Or you can check out some of the barriers they face such as transport availability; this will impress them and affirm your commitment. Have your own staff with you if you are meeting in numbers, or engage the help of experienced local staff from youth facilities, schools or colleges.

## Celebrate the engagement of your young constituents

Mark their involvement with anything from a ceremony or festival to public praise. Gestures such as thank you letters and certificates go a long way towards making children and young people feel that they and their contributions are highly valued. Press releases to local radio, television and newspapers, or highlighting their input on your website keeps your effort in the public eye. At the same time as profiling you, they demonstrate to a wider audience the positive contributions that children and young people can make and ensure that they are recognised as part of the community.

Avoid tokenism at all costs. Tokenistic and decorative modes of participation do little to enhance children and young people's well-being and skills; bring their opinions to bear on decision-making; or re-draw systems and structures of decision-making. Children and young people need to have control over their opinions and expressed views so watch out for the over-enthusiastic worker who speaks for them. Let them speak for themselves.

## Who else needs to know?

By including some children and young people, you are acting as an advocate to other children and young people. You are showing that they are all valued members of the community and not the stereotypes referred to in some media or among some adults. You can promote participation activities via a vibrant noticeboard, on your website, through visits with your local schools or in your surgery. Gather proof of how participation works, get evidence of how young people feel after meaningful engagement, and share your own good practice.

## Who else needs to work with you?

Your office staff should be encouraged to welcome the involvement of children and young people. This means including a commitment to youth participation within your staff recruitment criteria. This may involve young people on recruitment panels, to help assess staff suitability. If you do involve young people in your constituency work, do remunerate them.

For more information on involving children and young people download the How to Guides from [www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)

Democracy for All was developed in consultation with:



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