How to involve children and young people in school governance

This How To Guide aims to assist schools seeking to encourage the participation of children and young people in their schools. It explains different ideas and approaches to promote pupil participation in school governance and offers some best practice advice and tips about achieving this.

An alternative definition, which aims to explain governance in terms more easily understood by children and young people, comes from the British Youth Council (BYC):

‘Governance covers everything involved in making sure that an organisation is run effectively and achieves its goals.’

Governance is… ‘Young people coming together with decision makers or by themselves and looking at a problem; not only how to fix it straight away (short term) but looking into the future and how their action can be long lasting and make the change they would like (long term).’ Gayle Campbell, 19, Youth Trust.

Participation in school governance is about pupils getting involved in all aspects of school leadership, management, systems and structures. It is not about just ‘taking part’ in school or lessons. It is about getting involved in real decision-making in school, which is systematic, consistent and sustained.

It implies that a range of avenues are available for all pupils and not just representatives on school councils. It is about participation of pupils in decision-making threaded continuously through all the key aspects of school life and teaching, learning and curriculum.

What is governance?

In simple terms, governance is the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) offers a formal definition of governance:

‘the systems and processes concerned with ensuring the overall direction, effectiveness, supervision and accountability of an organisation.’
What is meaningful participation?

In this context, participation means giving pupils a say, listening to them and involving them as much as possible in school life. It means valuing their opinions and ideas and giving them control of their learning. Children have a right to a say in decisions that affect them. By introducing participation into the classroom and school you are helping children realise their rights.

Involvement is the overall term for children and young people being included in the decision-making process at any level. The terms participation and involvement are interchangeable in the context of this Guide.

Why is it important for schools to encourage children and young people’s participation?

There are international and national legislations and a number of policy initiatives supporting pupil participation. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) gives those aged under 18 the right to have their say and views taken into account on decisions affecting their lives.

A central part of the citizenship curriculum is the development of the skills necessary to participation. These include:

- Listening
- Working co-operatively
- Negotiating
- Participating in school decision-making processes.

Consulting with pupils is now something schools are expected to report upon as part of school self-evaluation and is something Ofsted report on.

Children and young people have defined student participation as:

“Students taking an active interest in something in their school or community,” Amy, 14.

“Students being part of school run initiatives, like the school council, to get students heard,” Karimah, 16.

“Working with teachers to make learning better,” Andy, 13.

“Doing things to make a difference,” Ian, 12.

In 2004, the then DfES (Department for Education and Skills) published guidance on pupil participation entitled, Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say. The guidance defined pupil participation as follows:

“Pupil participation, in practice, means opening up opportunities for decision-making with children and young people as partners engaging in dialogue, conflict resolution, negotiation and compromise – all important life skills. Children and young people’s personal development and our democracy will benefit from their learning about sharing power, as well as taking responsibility.”

Why should we involve children and young people in school governance?

Benefits for children and young people

Participation in school governance can support children socially and emotionally by building their knowledge, personal and social skills and a positive attitude towards citizenship and decision-making.

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It can promote achievement because of its positive impact on teaching and learning. For children and young people it can lead to:

- Empowerment – increased self-esteem, self-confidence and belief in their ability to create change
- Enhanced communication and listening skills for pupils
- Sense of responsibility – increased levels of responsibility
- Active citizenship – skills and knowledge of democracy and politics are increased
- Schools feeling happier and a safer place – less bullying, less isolation for some, more interaction with students and staff
- Improved relationships with peers, teachers and other staff
- Greater respect for decisions – if they or their peers have been involved in the decision-making process they are more likely to understand the reason why decisions have been made.

The above benefits were evident from the partnership work done by Save the Children, Carnegie Young People Initiative and Esmee Fairbairn Foundation on encouraging pupil participation in schools. In addition, lessons were also learnt by work undertaken by Save the Children with schools in Hertfordshire on pupil participation.

Benefits for schools
When pupils become involved in the governance of a school, the school can benefit enormously and become better equipped to meet their needs. Schools involved in pupil participation initiatives indicated that involving pupils more in school life can have positive impacts for themselves, the school and staff. The case studies discussed later in the guide clearly demonstrate the benefits for the school. It can lead to:

- Improvements in achievement and learning
- Pupils feeling more confident in their learning
- Improvements in teaching practice
- Better discipline and behaviour
- More positive community relationships between the school, children and adults.

Involving pupils in governance can also bring a sense of legitimacy to the school. Decisions can then be viewed as legitimate and not as something that have been imposed from above.

Getting pupils involved in governance can also help to bring fresh, new perspectives and ways of looking at and thinking about a whole range of issues.

Ideas and approaches for involving pupils in governance in schools

There is already a range of short-term and long-term initiatives and innovative practice in the area of pupil participation in school governance, which provides ideas for schools undertaking this kind of work.

The range of activities falls broadly under the following categories:

School management
Pupils can bring a unique and valuable perspective to issues of school management and have a useful role to play in decision-making. By working in partnership with staff and governors, pupils can help find creative
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solutions to issues of school life. Carrying out such roles also enables learning of a different kind, the development of skills in decision-making, negotiating and communication.

Sharing leadership and democracy in school systems and structures
School Councils are a democratic way of involving pupils in school governance. It gives all pupils a chance to participate, stand for Council and then be democratically elected. It is good practice to have more than one structure in place, such as form councils and class councils, to ensure that all students have a chance to participate.

‘The School Council in my school decided reasonable things for schools that the children want but that the school doesn’t have’. Boy, aged 9.

Reviewing and developing school rules, policies and procedures
Pupils can be involved in policy and practice development by commenting on existing policy, for example on bullying or drug education. Having a task group, such as a policy-working group, allows students to evaluate existing policy and draft new policies after consulting with other children, which makes the process participative. A participative approach, involving staff and pupils together, can lead to better behaviour and a more inclusive school ethos. From involvement in School Self-Evaluations, helping write school policies on anti-bullying, or sex education, there are a number of ways pupil participation can enrich school life.

‘Class rules are very important and when we make them it is better.’ Boy aged 9.

Being involved in staff selection
Children and young people can be involved in staff selection interview panels for the school. It is helpful for pupils to receive training in interview skills and to be briefed about the process and to be supported to participate effectively on the interview board.

Pupil advocacy, support and mediation
Many schools now have peer support services from mentoring and counselling to anti-bullying councils. The pupil’s perspective is vital to making provision fit need and taking part in such activities can be a valuable way of developing new skills. There are schools that have found that involving pupils in initiatives like these has brought about positive changes in their school ethos and behaviour.

“In my school we have a peer-mentoring scheme. All year 7 and 8 students are linked with a year 9 or 10 student, who they can talk to about any problems. We’ve found that bullying happens much less now because students feel they can talk to someone about what is going on.” (Hear by Right, Participation in your school or college: for students, by students.)

Involving pupils in decisions about their education
Pupils can be involved in a range of decisions that affect them, for example, around target setting and learning assessments. They can be involved in improving their learning by giving feedback on the method of teaching and reviewing the curriculum by providing feedback on teaching and content methodologies.

The following quote from a young person shows how effective this can be:
“In science my class didn’t like using textbooks. We found them hard to read and didn’t learn much from them and preferred to do worksheets and activities. We spoke to our teacher who let us do a survey of what activities people feel they learn the most from. We now help to plan lessons and have more of a say about what happens in class.”

Volunteering and supporting community action
A school can gain a lot from being an active participant in its local community. Pupils can become actively involved in their local communities not just by being involved in local consultations but by volunteering or running campaigns on local and national issues. They can be involved in community activities, such as raising money for the school and for charities, participating in youth forums and projects of local and national organisations like Youth Council, being a buddy for the elderly or peers with special needs.

The following case studies are real examples of how pupils can be involved in governance and where participation is making a difference to pupils and to the school environment.

They highlight participation of pupils in different areas and aspects in the school’s governance and student learning.

**School management**

**Boothferry Primary School**

**How does it work?**
Representatives of each class form the school council that meets once a fortnight. Class representatives gather the ideas for school improvements from their peers and report back during circle time. Circle time is held every Friday afternoon and is a dedicated space/time for pupils to discuss – uninterrupted – the issues affecting them. In some schools, students have attached ‘Do not disturb: circle time in progress!’ signs to their classroom doors.

**What have they achieved?**

**School Level**
The school council has been particularly involved in improvements to the school environment, both through planting trees and through playground development. The playground development was paid for by the profits from the school’s fruit tuck shop. Pupils saw this money as ‘their money’ and were committed to spending it on their playground.

**Classroom Level**
After consultation with all classes, the school council contributed their profits towards building a wooden wall to divide the playground and create a partitioned ball games area.
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They also made a small alcove for other games and bought smaller play equipment, such as cars, cards, dolls and dinosaurs. This work on pupil involvement on developing the playground has paid off.

Recently, the school council won an award for £650. This was for reaching the final of the LA’s anti-bullying award for ‘promoting anti-bullying through pupil participation’.

Individual Level
Pupil involvement in the running of the school has extended to them having a say in school rules too. The school council has recently negotiated with senior management regarding the school’s ‘Scoobie’ policy. Originally, the toy had been banned but after discussions, the school council managed to negotiate a relaxation to their rule, so that they were allowed to play with their Scoobies in lunch and break times.

Benefits of participation at Boothferry

1. Pupils have improved the school environment
2. Pupils have won money and recognition for the school
3. Pupils are well behaved, have high self-esteem and a sense of pride in their school
4. In a recent inspection, Ofsted said that the school council was an outstanding feature, giving ‘the pupils a voice in making important decisions with regards to their safety, welfare and pastoral care’.

Stubbings Infant School
Participation and pupil involvement in decisions is at the foundation of all work at Stubbings Infant School in Calderdale.

How does it work?

Individual Level

Peer support
Pupils are actively involved in the school’s positive relationships, including anti-bullying and peer support work. Year 2 pupils are encouraged to take on leadership roles as ‘Rainbow Helpers’. They are trained to support children who are feeling lonely or needing help. They are supported by ‘Rainbow Wizards’ who are trained to lead playground games and act as positive role models.
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All pupils are involved in peer support, in making playtimes safe and minimise the risk of bullying. Even very young pupils are taken seriously and are able to contribute to strategies, which make the school safer for everyone.

Classroom level

The Sunshine Crew and Thoughtful Thinkers
Participation of all pupils is inherent throughout the school community, but of particular interest are Stubbings’ school and class councils. Every member of the Stubbings’ community is a ‘Thoughtful Thinker’ (that is, a member of a class council). This includes the head teacher down to three-year old part-time nursery pupils.

Thoughtful Thinkers feed their ideas to the ‘Sunshine Crew’ (otherwise known as the school council made up of representatives from all classes, including the nursery groups). The Sunshine Crew are then responsible for discussing the ideas from the Thoughtful Thinkers and feeding back to them with an action plan for implementing the idea, if appropriate. This process takes as long as it needs to, dependent on the idea, but the emphasis is that nothing is impossible to achieve.

Children’s ideas and thoughts have also been incorporated into the master plan for converting the library area into a ‘Communications Centre’. The pupils are also considering how their play opportunities can be provided indoors as well as outdoors and are currently fundraising for curtains for all classrooms as an on-going project.

School level

There are other elements of school life, which contribute to creating the ethos of shared ownership of the school. The biggest space in the school is shared not only by the pupils for a variety of functions (such as lunchtime and after-school clubs) but also by other groups, such as the Toddler Group. Extra curricula activities also feed into the shared culture, with the cookery club cooking with produce grown in the gardening club!

Creating an inclusive and participative culture in school is far from straight-forward and there are few resources for children as young as the infants at Stubbings. Whilst this has meant that staff have been forced to produce all of their own activities, this has also meant that everything has always been extremely relevant to the school’s needs. For example, one of the ways in which ideas are collected from Thoughtful Thinkers is via a suggestions board. This is designed as a cobbled which mirrors the cobbles on the playground.

Benefits of Participation at Stubbings

At first, not all members of the school community realised the importance of pupil voice, or appreciated that even the very youngest child can have an input. Slowly, this has been
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turned round by placing the emphasis on removing the barriers to participation for the
youngest children and making it possible for the smallest voices to be heard. Success has
meant that the culture of the school has developed and people are willing to embrace
pupil empowerment. Key to this has been ensuring that all staff voices are heard and that
management tasks are shared among staff. Moreover, constant evaluation of the process
with all members of the community is integral to ensuring that work is kept fresh and
relevant.

Impacts
- Pupils have high levels of confidence and self-esteem
- Pupils are empowered to learn
- Pupils have high levels of emotional literacy.

The following case study is an example of pupils being involved in assessment, teaching and
curriculum.

Cannon Lane First School

Cannon Lane First School provides education for children aged four to eight and has a
significant number of pupils who speak English as an additional language, or who are in the
early stages of learning English. In 2005, Ofsted placed the school on its list of ‘particularly
successful schools’.

Cannon Lane First School works on the basis of the key principle that children need a safe,
secure, and happy environment to learn, and that pupils need to be confident for their
learning to be meaningful. For this to happen, pupils need to have ownership of their
learning. Below are some of the ways in which the school promotes these principles.

How does it work?

Individual level

Pupils are also involved in assessing teaching. Teachers ask pupils at the end of the week,
during the week, or even during lessons, “How do you think I taught you?” and, “How
could I have done it better?” and, “Did I teach you what I said I was going to teach you?”
The teacher then uses this assessment when planning future work.

Pupils assess their learning using the ‘Traffic Lights’ system. Pupils are involved in deciding
their own targets and are aware of the targets of fellow classmates as they support each
other in class to work on these. Pupils are also aware of their teacher’s targets because the
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pupils and their teacher sit together to discuss and agree what these should be. It has been found that targets now tend to be more relevant to the specific needs of the children in the class, therefore, having a direct impact on the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Classroom level

Teachers use a variety of techniques to involve pupils in planning and in assessing teaching and learning. They work with pupils to develop, agree, and review classroom rules.

A ‘Curriculum train’ is on the wall in every classroom. Each carriage on the train represents the subject that the class will be working on for the week, half term, or the whole term. Inside each carriage there is an outline of the specific areas that need to be covered. The teacher uses the train to plan with pupils how they would like to learn about sections of the curriculum. Pupils are asked what equipment and resources they feel they need to help them with their learning.

School level

Through their involvement in the school development plan, lesson observations, interviewing and appointing staff, deciding on budget spending and the content of assemblies, pupils have learnt valuable skills in communication, confidentiality, delivering presentations, and negotiating and articulating their perspective.

All children are offered the opportunity to apply for roles at a strategic level. The head teacher announces the available positions in assembly and the children then apply through a drawing or a short letter stating why they want to be involved (this can be written with the support of parents or teachers if literacy is an issue). The head teacher then informally interviews pupils.

Pupils develop and write the school development plan, called the School Book, which is, “all about ways to improve our school and to make learning more fun” (Introduction to the School Book 2004-2008). It contains ‘6 strategic intents’.

Selected pupils design questionnaires to survey the rest of the pupils in the school about what they feel the strategic intents should be. This is then presented to the staff and governors, who negotiate the 6 strategic intents. These are then shared with pupils, parents, staff, and governors in a report that is written by the pupils.

There is a review of the strategic intents; this review is undertaken through a similar process as above by a group of pupils who ask, “What difference does the intent make to our learning?” and, “What do we need to do now?” They will then feedback to pupils, parents, staff and governors.
Pupils also take on the role of ‘Little Inspectors’. Selected pupils will:

- Observe lessons
- Conduct a survey to ascertain the views of parents and/or pupils on the school
- Inspect how teachers teach each other
- Inspect how the head teacher is doing their job.

They then write a report on what they find, and this report is sent to parents, pupils, staff, and governors. It also feeds into the School Book and is used by pupils to set targets for the head teacher. In their 2005 report, the pupils stated, “being an inspector is a great responsibility, it is not a job you can rush, you learn a lot from others, watching other classes and we think other people help you by doing things”.

Pupils are given informal training to undertake this role; they look at boundaries, rules, confidentiality and how to act in the class as an observer.

**Impact**

Everything that the staff and pupils do in school is about creating the safe, secure and happy environment needed to learn.

**Benefits of Participation at Cannon Lane**

Involving pupils at all levels has meant that pupils take responsibility for their learning and school.

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**Isambard Brunel School**

Isambard Brunel Junior School has implemented initiatives that create an inclusive and listening culture. The school is situated in a deprived area of Portsmouth, and the percentage of pupils on the special educational needs register is higher than the national average. Within this context, the school has become a central point for the community, offering support services and forums for both pupils and parents.

**How does it work?**

**School Level**

**School and class councils**

Every class in the school has a class council: comprised of two representatives who are elected by the class. Class councils meet fortnightly to discuss issues to take to school council meetings and class reps will give feedback on school council meetings. The school
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council also meets fortnightly. Council members have the opportunity to raise issues and ideas with governors and senior managers and get involved in decision-making at a whole school level.

To date the school council has managed to change the school uniform, set up a healthy tuck shop, and set up the school court (see below) to support pupils.

**Pupils as governors**
One pupil from year 4, 5, and 6 is recruited to attend governor’s curriculum committee meetings and one whole school governing body meeting where budgets are discussed. Meetings are adapted to ensure that pupils feel comfortable in taking part. Pupil involvement ensures that there is an opportunity for the children to directly contribute to curriculum and budget decisions. Governors also have an invaluable opportunity to hear directly from the pupils’ experiences in the school.

**Prefects/head girl and head boy**
Prefects, head girl, and head boy are year 6 pupils. They work closely with senior management in the school to support the running of the school. Pupils apply for the position of prefect in year 5 and are interviewed by the head teacher, deputy head teacher, and the PSHE manager. The head boy and head girl also attend school council and governor’s meetings.

**Classroom Level**

**Peer mediators**
Peer mediators have to apply for their positions and go through a similar selection process to the prefects. Peer mediators wear special badges and are introduced to pupils during assemblies. They work with pupils to resolve bullying or friendship issues. One peer mediator stated how “the school has changed a little bit because when there were no peer mediators people didn’t used to talk about bullying.”

Peer mediators have had external training from Childline and receive in-house training and support from the PSHE lead in the school. It is planned that current peer mediators will train next year’s peer mediators once they have been recruited.

**Curriculum planning**
Pupils in year 6 were involved in planning part of their curriculum. This is another initiative that is being supported by Sussex University staff who worked with pupils on a topic ideas of their choice. Pupils then turned these ideas into a lesson plan. At the end of this project, pupils created a video and presentations, with university staff, to illustrate what was done, what they learnt, how learning can be improved, and how they planned together.
Individual Level

School court
The school court was an idea that came from the school council as a way of supporting pupils whose behaviour was disruptive. Prefects sit on the school court and undertake the role of mentor to pupils who are referred to the court. Children are referred by teachers to the court if they feel that the strategies in place at classroom level are not working.

In the school court, the prefects begin by asking the pupil what they like about the school. They start to unpick what the pupil feels the issues are and what they feel will help them in school. The pupil will then be assigned two mentors from the school court panel. They agree weekly targets and rewards with the pupil. The length of mentoring is individual to the needs of that pupil and progress is reviewed weekly.

Training is provided by the local community police officers who work with the mentors on questioning styles, how to be supportive, and body language.

Pupil research project
Pupils are currently working with Sussex University on a related research project. University staff trained pupils in research skills and pupils are now carrying out their own research project on how playground facilities can be improved. They are questioning adults and pupils, and will then begin analysing this data and presenting the findings and suggestions for improvement.

Benefits at Isambard Brunel
Through the formal process of class and school councils, every child in the school has the opportunity to have a voice.

Impact
Inside the school, pupils have the opportunity to take on various roles of responsibility and decision making, which encourages a sense of ownership and belonging to the school. Pupils are involved with:

- Staff recruitment
- Extra responsibilities in the library
- Managing the tuck shop and reception
- Monitoring the use of equipment and ICT.
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Top tips to get started

• Develop a vision and commitment. Be clear about what you mean by pupil voice in governance. Have a vision to ensure it is embedded in how the school operates

• Develop a clear plan and strategy for pupil participation, which is backed by the school management to ensure their commitment. Have open and honest discussions with staff and management about involving children and young people in governance

• Involve pupils early on. This helps to ensure plans for change are child-focused and valued by all students

• Find out what activities are already happening in school. There may be participation activities happening in classrooms that all teachers are not aware of

• Identify and develop mechanisms and put structures in place in the school to facilitate participation in school governance

• Identify what resources and support you will need to undertake the work. Work in partnership with other schools, agencies and youth organisations. Working with other people and developing support networks has benefits for sharing skills, knowledge and practice

• Visit other schools and young people’s organisations to observe their work, or invite them to talk about their work

• Create a culture of participation in the school. Have discussions with students in the classrooms about the benefits of participation and promote participation activities via a vibrant notice board. Raise awareness of the importance of and benefits of student participation and the different forms it can take

• Identify participation training for staff

• Decide on a small scale student voice project if you are starting the participation work first time in your school

• Include head teachers, life skills teachers, governors and all school staff in the participation work.

Ways to encourage and motivate children and young people to participate

• Introduce the concept of participation in the classroom and encourage debates and discussions about participation in school governance, and how this will benefit the students and the school

• Share examples of good practice of participation from other schools and youth groups with pupils to highlight the process and the positive outcomes

• Encourage students to share their ideas about participation through the notice board and the school website

• Invite speakers (such as adults or young people from other schools and projects) to share their experience of developing participation with pupils in the class or the school assembly

• Set up participation task groups in each class to take the ideas forward.

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Conclusion

Children and young people have the right to be involved in the governance of their school and involving them can bring positive outcomes for the pupils, school and the wider community. There are a number of different ways pupils can be involved in their school governance, and there are different levels of participation.

When involving pupils, both teachers and the school need to give their full commitment and support to the participation process. This may require training for the teachers and school management, including the governors, to ensure they are on board. Pupils need to be supported in the process and encouraged to take part. They need to be involved at the outset of the process so that they have a sense of ownership of the work and value it.

Participation in school governance needs to be monitored and evaluated so that lessons can be learnt and the children and young people can celebrate their achievements.

References


Hertfordshire Children’s Trust Partnership Participation Toolkit.


Case studies have been taken from a partnership project on Participation in Schools with Save the Children, Carnegie Young People Initiative and Esmee Fairbairn Foundation.

DfES: Working Together. Giving Children and Young People a Say 2004
Resources

This page brings together a list of resources and organisations that may be helpful in supporting the implementation of pupil participation.

**Participation Works** provides access to policies, practice, networks and information on young people’s participation.
www.participationworks.org.uk

**ACT (Association for Citizenship Teaching)**
The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) is the professional subject association for those involved in citizenship education. ACT came into existence in 2002 to further the aims of Citizenship teaching and learning.
www.teachingcitizenship.co.uk

**British Youth Council** provides manuals and trainings for setting up a participation project.
www.byc.org.uk

**The Citizenship Foundation** is an independent charity which aims to empower individuals to engage in the wider community through education about the law, democracy and society.
www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk

**I was a teenage governor**
www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/resource.php?s186

**National Youth Agency**
www.nya.org.uk/hearbyright

**School Councils UK – Resources**
School Councils UK produces a range of resources: practical toolkits, videos, posters and badges, to help you set-up and maintain your pupil councils. Many resources and guides are free to download.
www.schoolcouncils.org

**Save the Children**
www.savethechildren.org.uk

**United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund**
www.unicef.org/crc

**Empowering Children and Young People**
- Training manual promoting involvement in decision-making.
  Phil Treseder, Save the Children & Children’s Rights Office
  ISBN 1 899120 47 5
Participation Works enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services, which affect their lives.

The Participation Works How To guides are a series of booklets that provide practical information, useful tips and case studies of good participation practice. Each one provides an introduction to a different element of participation to help organisations enhance their work with children and young people.

The Participation Works Online Gateway enables you to explore the latest developments and resources in participation. Visit www.participationworks.org.uk

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