

[include]
youth

promoting best practice with young people at risk

**External Evaluation:
Young Voices Project**

Executive Summary

April 2009

Report by:
Rodney Green
RG Consultants (NI) Ltd





INTRODUCTION

Young Voices is a way of delivering participative democracy to marginalised young people in Northern Ireland. Its main aim is to support young people at risk or with experience of the criminal justice system, as well as young people marginalised for a variety of reasons, to become involved in decision-making processes which impact on their lives, particularly in social welfare, education and criminal justice matters.

The project works with: a range of groups of young people in the community; young people and the police in North Belfast to improve relationships and influence wider policing policy and practices; both youth custody facilities in Northern Ireland – Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre Northern Ireland (JJC) and Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre (YOC) focusing on matters internal (to the regime they experience) and external (policy and service planning consultations).

In December 2008, Include Youth received funding from 'YCNi Short-term Funding Programme 2008-2009' to 'consolidate all aspects of Young Voices work' and to ensure the governance of Include Youth was informed by the views of young people. The project aimed to meet the programme outcomes of 'contributing positively to community and society' and 'living in a society that respects these rights'.

BENEFITS & IMPACT

The evaluation findings were measured against the outcomes, outputs and measurements set for the project as agreed with YCNi. Young people involved in the evaluation (27 in total) highlighted various reasons why young people should have a voice as it was their right, issues affected them most and to improve things for others and they thought it was particularly important for marginalised or excluded young people to have a voice because *"we're people too"*, *"people don't normally talk to us"* and *"no-one listens to us and they won't listen to people who come behind us either"*.

Organisations were appreciative of the support provided and the staff involved in project delivery, highlighted the positive way in which the project was structured and delivered and were complimentary about the commitment and professionalism of the Co-ordinators and the way in which they both supported, encouraged and enabled young people to have a voice and also challenged young people, organisations and decision-makers through the process. The role of relationship building was central to the success of 'Young Voices' whilst the nature of the relationship between young people and the Co-ordinator within the custody setting was considered to be different to those of other professionals with less of a role to challenge views or behaviour.

"(name of Co-ordinator) doesn't really judge you for what you are in here for – he just wants to know the craic – he really understands you. Other people out there judge you and all – they'd say there's that wee boy that's just got out of jail." Young Person
"It has to be personality led – if the person is not skilled enough in working with the kids then they won't talk. We have in (name of Co-ordinator) a skilled and experienced worker with plenty of common sense and who is driving the project forward."

Organisational Representative

Increased Numbers Involved in Decision-making Processes: Of the estimated 115 sessions/interactions with young people, 107 were delivered involving 215 young people (58 in custody, 97 in policing and 60 in community settings); an additional 18 became involved in two projects in March 2009. In the absence of YCNI funding, these young people would not have been involved in decision-making.

In custody settings, the project enabled young people's involvement in external public policy consultations and direct engagement with decision-makers either through facilitated work with young people and advocating on their behalf or enabling decision-makers to meet young people directly. Discussions also concerned matters internal to the regime in both custody settings with built-in feedback to the regime; this worked well within the JJC where relationships were built up over many years, however feedback systems within the YOC appeared to be less well developed. Young Voices influenced the setting up of a Youth Forum in the JJC and a similar initiative in the YOC is being considered; both initiatives designed to enable young people to provide feedback and influence internal decision-making processes.

The work with the PSNI enabled young people to engage with police at various levels (Neighbourhood Officers, Area Commanders, Police Training, etc.) and in policing and community issues in their local community. This was supported by various community/youth organisations and the NBYV Co-ordinator who also advocated on young people's behalf with decision-makers. Community participation work with marginalised young people was supported by both Co-ordinators: one supported young people's engagement in decision-making with other community and policing organisations and with the emergency services and the other with the referral procedures and services provided within early intervention programmes.

There were many benefits identified for young people, organisations and decision-makers. Young people benefited from getting their views across to decision-makers and organisations benefited from accessing and hearing views of marginalised young people and those with experience of the criminal justice system. In some circumstances, the feedback influenced practices and procedures, whereas in others outcomes were limited by lack of feedback and the time delay in decision-making processes. Include Youth utilised some of the information to inform policy positions, however the estimated 90% target was difficult to calculate.

"We've talked about things like knife crime, YJA, youth conferences and community safety." Young Person

"It enabled us to engage with young people who were outside the mainstream education system – they spoke about the work they were doing with young people and brought some young people along, although it's too soon to say what's been done as a result of this." Organisational Representative

"I have certainly been impressed with the Young Voices Project – from my perspective, writing policy responses, the material gathered from discussions with the young people is absolutely invaluable – as a result I think Include Youth policy work has real depth and genuine input from the young people – I guess what is less clear is what the young people get back in return?" Organisational Representative

Increased Knowledge of Young People: A minimum of five information/training sessions were to be undertaken to increase knowledge of young people in specific areas e.g. rights, policing, health, governance and recruitment/selection. Most group work sessions and consultations undertaken in custody settings involved providing information to young people prior to the engagement e.g. focusing on community safety, health awareness, knife crime, youth rights, etc. and sometimes involved staff from other organisations. A total of ten information sessions were undertaken by the NBYV Co-ordinator focusing on anti-social behaviour, rioting, emergency services and lobbying and young people being informed about policing matters through engagement with police and the Ombudsman/Information Directorate. There were no sessions on recruitment/selection or governance and no involvement in recruitment/selection processes during the funding period. All the sessions led to increased knowledge and understanding for young people of the relevant subject.

"Helped us to develop the 'wall of opportunity' – we know now who we need to talk to if we have to." Young Person (NB: the wall has all the numbers of relevant agencies re: sexual/mental health, suicide, rights, housing, drugs/alcohol, etc.)

"We do citizenship with them in here and this can be fairly abstract – but what they do with (name of Co-ordinator) brings this to reality for them." Organisational Representative

"The young people themselves have also developed through the meaningful engagement as they learn about the reasons why we do things, for example, stop and search, confiscate alcohol, etc." PSNI Representative

Direct Engagement with Public Bodies: The estimated figure of six meetings with decision-makers was exceeded; seven were held with Down DPP, Big Lottery, NIO Community Safety Unit, Police Ombudsman/Information Directorate, PSNI North Belfast Area Commanders, NIO Criminal Justice Board and Youth Justice Board and the launch of a 'rioting leaflet' involved politicians, PSNI, BCC and BELB (all this was in addition to public bodies requesting the Co-ordinators to obtain views and opinions on their behalf or to advocate on behalf of young people). This direct engagement benefited young people enabling them to put forward their views and opinions and to make them feel they (and their views) were valued and appreciated. Organisations benefited as the project had already built relationships with the young people and the Young Voices staff had the skills/experience to engage with young people – this enabled the public bodies to consult with marginalised young people who otherwise would have been excluded. Feedback from professionals to the Co-ordinator highlighted the fact they would not have been aware of young people's perspective on these matters and therefore, in the absence of engagement with Young Voices, would not have considered their views.

For many of these consultations it is too soon to identify how these have influenced decision-making processes, given the time delay between consultation and decision/policy-making. It is important to note that young people and organisational representatives highlighted how they felt they had influenced matters e.g. in the JJC they felt they influenced the play developed on knife crime and some immediate feedback was received in the form of letters to thank the young people/Young Voices for participation and highlighting the next steps whereas in others the views of young people were actively being considered by the public decision-makers.

In the case of consultations with police, the views of young people directly led to some new issues and ideas to be considered e.g. engagement with the area commanders led to police considering the need to involve response officers in engagement with young people, engagement with the Ombudsman directly led to young people feeling their views were valued, engagement with neighbourhood officers/area commanders led to an impact on policing procedures/practices and engagement in the training at Garnerville influenced new recruits and future training. The ethos and practice of direct engagement was considered preferable to staff advocating on behalf of young people and highlighted as an area for development.

“It makes you feel important when they come in here and talk to you – makes you think you’re not just thrown in here and forgot about.” Young Person

“It was important from my point of view that (name of Co-ordinator) had already built the relationships with the young people and this enabled me to meet with the young people and to hear their views on the issues for discussion.” Organisational Representative

“What came out of the group (and the wider consultation) has been summarised into a report which has gone to committee and will then go to the wider UK Board who will consider this in detail when planning future programmes.” Organisational Representative

Improved Relationships between Young People and the PSNI: In the initial phases, work focused on the building of relationships at three levels: between the NBYV Co-ordinator and the community group/young people, between the NBYV Co-ordinator and the PSNI (at various levels) and between the community group/young people and the PSNI (particularly neighbourhood police), but some groups engaged with new recruits, as well as directly with the area commanders. It is important to highlight these relationships were built up over many years and in most cases led to longer-term engagement as opposed to short-term/one-off initiatives.

Young people generally described the engagement as a *“real learning experience”* and an opportunity to get to *“know the police officers”*. The experience of involvement in the Young Voices Project led to: an opportunity to explain how each party (young people/police) saw/experienced matters in policing/community; changed perceptions of police towards young people and vice-versa; improved relationships and behaviour and changed approaches towards each other and more openness and understanding of each other and the role of policing.

“It’s improved things a lot – at the start everyone was cracking up and called us touts, traitors and were really annoyed at what we were doing – now we can stand and talk to them and have a laugh with them. Others have got involved in talking to the local police officers too.” Young Person

“There used to be continual harassment – now they are a lot more open and understanding.” Young Person

“The events we had with the young people, for example, bowling, residential, etc. were good as these helped to build up the relationships with them and then this enabled us to move into the project work itself. This was relevant to both parties as we were able to explore with the young people policing matters and explain things from our perspective and they were able to do the same – we had open discussions and were both able to challenge each other.” PSNI Representative

The project positively benefited local communities, e.g. young people causing less annoyance/hassle to the community, quieter interfaces/areas, improved ability to diffuse tensions/situations, young people having greater sense of belonging and ownership and channelling energies more positively into the community and the potential for shared work across traditional community divides. The project also positively benefited policing in local communities and policing practices, e.g. improved approaches and ways to deal with young people, tangible benefits in terms of policing and diffusing tensions/situations, dealing with and resolving problems, changing attitudes and procedures, influencing training of new recruits as well as starting to influence other parts of the police and it was reported some young people were considering the police/emergency services as a future career.

“The Building Bridges Forum has really helped. There’s very little or no people hanging about now on the interface. This has helped to stop people rioting.” Young Person

“It has increased their sense of belonging and pride in the community and also the community don’t see them (the group of young people) as a negated thing.”
Organisational Representative

“The process has been validated. There was tangible benefit on the street in situations where things that could have gone into disorder but didn’t.” PSNI Representative

“It helped the police review their actions and helped young people to know what they were doing wrong. We were able to resolve social issues in this area without things being heavy handed.” Organisational Representative

Improved Self-esteem and Confidence of Young People: Young people reported the positive impact of being involved in the project as it *“gave us something to look forward to”*. This view was stronger in custody than in community/policing work given the limitations placed on young people in this environment. Young people in custody reported it *“gives you something to do – takes your mind off this place for a while”*, *“passes a few hours in here”*, and in the JJC they were particularly appreciative of the *“take-away every month”* to recognise/reward their involvement in the project.

There was also a positive impact on the young people in relation to having staff they could talk to or confide in as, *“it saves us lying about out there and we get to talk to someone that we can talk to”*, *“it makes you think more and you know that there’s someone there you can talk to”* and *“it’s good as it helps to get a few things off your chest”*. Again these feelings were articulated more in the custody settings than in the community/policing work, although young people in S2S and

CAPS were also appreciative of the approach and engagement through Young Voices (a view that was also shared by the parents of the young people involved in these projects).

It was evidenced, through feedback from youth workers, staff, organisational representatives and engagement with the evaluator, that young people had improved their confidence and self-esteem. Within the short period of time covered by the evaluation, young people themselves seemed to find it difficult to measure this improvement. Some further work by Include Youth/organisations involved to help the young people measure their development would be beneficial.

“From the young people’s view it’s a good thing as it raises their confidence, self-esteem and sense of ownership of the community.” PSNI Representative

“The confidence and self-esteem that the young people get out of this is good – we had the young people speaking at the launch and other things and this has been good for them.” Organisational Representative

Governance of Include Youth Informed by the Views of Young People: was to be achieved by facilitating young people’s involvement in all Include Youth’s projects/areas, the training of staff and Board in governance with young people and advisory groups attended by key Board/staff. There were eight meetings of local advisory groups during the period of funding and two meetings of the central advisory group, the latter in April to review progress of Give and Take, plan future events and meet with the external evaluator (total target of four exceeded). There was no training undertaken by staff/Board members in governance with young people during the funding period, however, Include Youth are investigating the potential for involvement in The Big Deal Organisational Change Programme. As anticipated, the views and opinions of young people were fed back to the Board through reports from staff and the Director to ensure their views informed organisational decision-making.

Young people and organisational representatives highlighted the value of this process in terms of enabling young people to speak out, accept responsibility, meet others, experience new opportunities and solve problems and unlike some of their other experiences they felt: listened to, valued, a sense of belonging and on a level with workers. Organisationally, these views informed practice, the policy agenda and added value and depth to the views expressed by Include Youth. Whilst there were benefits from young people’s involvement, some changes were suggested in terms of helping them to prepare better for meetings and to gather the views/opinions of their peers in advance of these and also in the processes to feedback the results/outcomes from the central advisory group meetings to young people in local areas.

“It makes it fair – the Ballymena ones did not have enough laptops the last time and now it’s all sorted.” Young Person

“It makes you feel like it’s your own and you have a say.” Young Person

“You can be on a level with the workers and that’s good.” Young Person

“We need to try to find out the views of the other young people and get them all together to share their views.” Young Person

“We need to meet with people afterwards and feedback the ideas from here.” Young Person

Review and Agree a Participation Model with 'At Risk' or 'In Need' Young People: As agreed with YCNI, an independent evaluator was appointed, however no evaluation steering group including young people (as suggested) was established given self-evaluation was already being conducted by staff on a monthly basis (or as and when a session or project was completed). It was agreed the evaluation report was to highlight the mechanisms used by way of examples of good practice.

The overall Young Voices model was highly praised by various organisational representatives and decision-makers and policing representatives as a positive model for engagement with marginalised young people and those 'at risk', or with experience of the criminal justice system. It has provided opportunities for young people to influence decision-making and working practices in organisational and policy making processes. As a result of the PSNI highlighting the work of NBYV at a ministerial steering group, the model of engagement with the police in North Belfast is being investigated by KPMG as a 'model of best practice'.

"We have a tried and tested model here and a good example of a collaborative project and what a partnership looks like and how it should work." Organisational Representative

"Include Youth have become one of the key groups in the field as they are doing something substantial and consistently well. They are a credible organisation with a value base that does not change and this project is second to none." Organisational Representative

DIFFICULTIES & CHALLENGES

Relationship Building: There were difficulties and challenges in the process of building relationships and generating understanding of the work/project between:

- Young people/youth and community organisations and the police
- Project staff from an external organisation (Include Youth) with staff in custody settings and the PSNI
- Youth/community organisations/staff and project staff from Include Youth.

Turnover of Young People: Both in and out of the custody settings there was a high turnover of young people. This varied dependent on the length of time a young person was in custody, whereas in community/policing work this depended on:

- The attitudes and behaviours of some adults towards young people
- The young person's availability of time or their commitment to the project
- The ability of a young person to stay out of trouble/custody settings
- Other personal reasons and circumstances.

In custody settings there was appreciation of the food and activity 'rewards' offered and an apparent reluctance to participate in their absence; staff within the YOC were willing to try to improve this, but there were difficulties regarding health and safety and scheduling additional activities. Some young people in community and custody settings were switched off by hearing the same messages and the nature of the longer term engagement, particularly when there were limited or no outcomes emerging; project staff, organisational and PSNI representatives agreed with this. For some organisations there was a practical challenge in relation to the participation of young people and unwillingness of staff or the organisation to be involved.

Scheduling/priorities: There were some difficulties with the scheduling of activities in the YOC and in the time available to support young people in the community when they were released from custody settings. There were particular difficulties in the engagement with the PSNI associated with other work taking priority over this project and arranging times when people could meet. One of the community organisations felt a more detailed work plan may assist in planning and implementing activities.

Feedback: Feedback could be improved at two levels:

- Organisations and decision-makers providing feedback to young people involved in all the projects about the issues discussed – the lack of feedback to young people was most apparent in custody settings (particularly the YOC)
- Young Voices providing feedback to organisations/institutions, particularly in relation to internal matters raised by the young people (there appeared to be particular difficulties in this regard with the YOC). It was noted that this feedback should take place soon after discussions/consultations to ensure young people did not become disillusioned with the process.

There were also specific difficulties associated with the length of time it takes to make changes or improve policies and procedures and this in itself can create frustrations for young people, youth/community workers and organisations themselves. In this regard there needs to be clarity in relation to this and good communication to let people know time-scales and change processes.

Moving Toward Direct Engagement: Encouraging and facilitating direct engagement between young people and decision-makers was advocated at two levels: with decision-makers in organisations and institutions and with external decision-makers consulting with children and young people. There were issues raised regarding the absence of relationships between decision-makers and young people, the need to build capacity of young people (and decision-makers) to engage directly and the necessary support mechanisms/skills required to facilitate direct engagement. In custody settings direct engagement creates particular challenges given the: turnover of young people, difficulties in relationships between young people and staff internally and loss of an independent facilitator. The whole concept of youth participation could be broadened further within Include Youth and engagement with the police needed to continue at a more strategic level.

Work with PSNI: Some other difficulties and challenges associated with work with the PSNI not previously noted included:

- Actions/attitudes of Response police officers and some police recruits towards young people and the project itself
- Limitations of working in narrow geographical areas or with specific sections of the police and the need to broaden the coverage of the project
- Threats from dissident republican paramilitaries to youth/community workers engaged in discussions/activities with the PSNI and the recent deaths of police/army officers carried out by dissident republicans.

Funding and Sustainability: There were difficulties and challenges associated with short-term funding for the project and the limited financial resources available in organisations to support engagement with children and young people. It was highlighted there was a need to secure more long-term funding to sustain the work.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The YCNI Short-term Funding Programme enabled Include Youth to continue to support the vital work of Young Voices. The project met the short-term funding programme aims of 'contributing positively to community and society' and 'living in a society that respects these rights' as evidenced by the evaluation findings.

Include Youth, through the various components of the Young Voices Project, has built up a wealth of experience/skills and a positive reputation for facilitating the involvement of young people at risk or with experience of the criminal justice system, as well as young people marginalised for a variety of reasons, in decision-making.

The project increased the numbers of young people involved in decision-making either through direct engagement with various decision-makers or staff/Include Youth advocating on their behalf. Whilst both approaches were valuable, there appears to be a movement towards facilitating more direct engagement.

In custody settings there is also movement towards more direct engagement through the establishment of youth participation structures, although limitations given the turnover of young people, difficulties in relationships between young people and staff internally and loss of an independent facilitator, therefore, it may be too soon to consider the withdrawal of Young Voices from dealing with internal custody matters.

The work facilitated by Young Voices to build relationships between young people and the police has progressed beyond initial expectations in terms of neighbourhood policing and moved towards engagement with decision-makers and influencing recruitment, training, practice and procedures. This dual approach to development is important and one which should guide future work of the project in this area.

In the work developed around community participation and custody settings there appears to be clear boundaries about the role/remit of the project whereas these seem to be less clear in the relationship building between young people/community organisations and policing; some clarity around boundaries may be beneficial in terms of, for example, commitment, time-scales and withdrawal from the process.

Include Youth worked to ensure young people's views informed the policy agenda and organisational governance. There is scope for further development by ensuring views of young people are fed into policy matters and strengthening participation structures and interaction between young people and governance structures.

Feedback systems were not consistent across the project and there is a need to further develop these to ensure decision-makers and organisations provide this to young people and Young Voices provides this to organisations and institutions, particularly in relation to internal decision-making matters.

The very nature of 'short-term' funding for a project of this nature, although very welcomed and appreciated, appears to work against what is essentially a longer term commitment to ensuring the views of marginalised and 'at risk' young people are listened to, heard and respected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Include Youth must:

- continue to support the work of the Young Voices Project and to enable the views of marginalised and excluded young people to be heard
- work to further develop ways to help young people measure their development, particularly in relation to their confidence and self-esteem
- further develop internal structures and systems to ensure the views of young people are inputted to the policy agenda and organisational governance
- work to develop the model of engagement with the police to ensure further interaction between young people and decision-makers and to influence both policing practices and the policy agenda
- continue to work with the relevant public bodies to:
 - (1) extend Young Voices in custody settings beyond original agreements
 - (2) support further development of structures to enable the views of young people to be heard on matters internal to youth custody settings; and
 - (3) seek to secure financial/human resources to support young people who leave custody to have a voice on their return to community settings
- develop a draft 'service level' or 'partnership' agreement for organisations wishing to utilise the Young Voices Project which clearly establishes the boundaries and roles/responsibilities of each party
- work to enhance the feedback systems to organisations that utilise the services of the Young Voices Project to obtain the views of young people
- work in partnership with the Participation Network and other organisations to encourage direct engagement between young people and decision-makers
- continue to seek sustainable sources of funding for this project.

Public Bodies and Decision-makers Engaging with Young Voices must:

- recognise the valuable service provided by Young Voices and contribute long-term funding to support the project
- build their capacity and skills to engage directly with young people and be prepared to listen/act on the views and opinions expressed
- commit to working with Young Voices Project to establish appropriate and agreed recognition/reward for young people who take part
- commit to providing immediate feedback to young people explaining the outcomes and proposed action as a result of engagement.



Alpha House 3 Rosemary Street BELFAST BT1 1QA
Tel: 028 9031 1007 Fax: 028 9024 4436
E-mail: info@includeyouth.org Website: www.includeyouth.org

Inland Revenue Charity Reference No. XR25598
Limited Company No. NI38084