Reflect and Review
Youth Councils in Northern Ireland

Background

This report outlines the findings of The Big Deal Reflect and Review, a small scale study of education and Library board (ELB) and district council shadow youth councils in Northern Ireland carried out between April and June 2008. The study was undertaken to gain a more in-depth understanding of youth councils, their purpose, role, function and value.

The findings have been used to feed into the development of The Big Deal youth council guidance and resource pack.

Methodology

Five youth councils from across Northern Ireland took part in the study:

- Ards Youth Council (SEELB)
- Belfast City Youth Forum
- Craigavon District Youth Council (SELB)
- Newtownabbey Youth Council (NEELB)
- Omagh Youth Council (WELB)

Focus groups were undertaken with youth council members. Interviews were conducted with support workers and senior members of staff within the organisation responsible for the youth council. An interview also took place with an elected representative from Belfast City Council. The findings are a culmination of all the responses.

Goal and purpose

In general, all of the youth councils had a similarity in their goal and purpose in that they felt the council was there to give young people in their community a voice.

Ards youth council provided their mission statement:

"We believe that young people have the power to make positive change for themselves and their community. We (Ards youth council) will work as an acting body that reflects the views of young people in Ards, and work to meet the needs of young people living within the Ards area first and foremost. We will work to achieve this aim by providing opportunities for young people aged 12-25, to express their views and work together to improve support for young people, in a creative and fun way"

Awarding funds from
The National Lottery®

Tel. (028) 9033 1990
prsw@thebigdealni.com
www.thebigdealni.com

Although all youth councils felt that they existed to give young people a voice, many of them felt that they existed to fulfil another purpose. For example, one council felt that part of their purpose was to provide activities and facilities for young people locally and to target the general community about young people related issues. Another felt that it existed to empower young people and '*influence change'.* Another acknowledged the importance of "*skills development"* and *"confidence building"* along with *"meeting new people and making friends"* and a goal of *"40% fun and 60% work".*

Only one youth council stated that it was involved in developing the goal and purpose for their youth council. The four other youth councils were not involved as the goal and purpose was developed before they joined. Nevertheless, all the young people were given the opportunity to be involved in planning and deciding on new goals. Overall the young people seemed to be in agreement about the goal and purpose of the youth council.

A voice for young people

There were different methods employed by each youth council in order to provide a voice for young people. These are outlined below.

1. Having a representative youth council

Having a representative membership and making opportunities for membership available to all young people. Some youth councils felt that they existed to represent all young people in their area.

2. Getting the views of young people in the area

Some have held events to consult with young people in their area on their needs. Others have carried out research with other young people, for example through questionnaires, etc. Newtownabbey Youth Council has an Information Point where young people can come with their issues.

3. Taking part in consultations as a representative of the youth council

Youth council members have taken part in consultations, for example:

- British Youth Council campaign 'Votes at 16'.
- The Big Deal standards for youth councils.
- Anti-social behaviour.
- District Policing Partnership.
- Community Safety.

4. Bringing the voice of young people to decision-makers

The young people use various methods to bring their voice to decision makers:

- Invite decision makers to come and meet with them.
- Attend panel discussions.
- Attend events where there is an opportunity to speak to MLA's.
- Visit their local council and meet with the councillors.

- Write letters and send emails.
- Members of the youth council sit as representatives on other groups, for example: Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Local District Policing Partnership, WELB & SELB Stakeholder Forum, UK Youth Parliament.

Belfast City Youth Forum has a youth champions group. A representative from each of the political parties in Belfast City Council sits on this group. The young people have direct contact with them and meet with them regularly to discuss issues. Belfast City Youth Forum also write reports on local youth issues, these are passed through Belfast City Council before they are published.

The role of youth councils in their local community

Each of the youth councils have been involved in doing work which has benefited the local community:

- Suicide awareness training.
- Consultations on anti-social behaviour.
- Improving leisure facilities.
- Organising a conference.
- In case of emergency cards.
- Band night.
- Raise Money for local charities.
- Run interclub projects.
- Host plays.

Benefits for young people

The young people got involved for a variety of reasons from the altruistic of wanting to do something for their community to getting UCAS points. The young people also commented that they didn't know what to expect when they joined. It is apparent however, that all the young people who took part in the study were really glad they joined their youth council and are getting a lot out of their experience.

The young people spoke about why they liked being a member of a youth council. They like the sense of responsibility and importance and the fact that they are making a difference and are appreciated by their community. The young people were also aware of the learning they have gained on local and national politics and other skills, for example, event planning, IT and research methods.

The young people also spoke about how enjoyable it is to be a member of a youth council. They commented that even though they work hard, the fun element is a big part of being a youth council member. This coupled with the fact they get a new circle of friends is really rewarding for the young people involved.

Functioning

Four of the youth councils meet as a whole group once a month with sub groups meeting more often depending on the work they are doing at that time. One of the youth councils meets fortnightly, with sub groups meeting between times. One youth council decided to have meetings on Mondays and Tuesdays as these days suited best to fit in with members' part time jobs. They also agreed not to meet on Fridays as people always had things going on.

All the youth councils write agendas for their meetings. These are developed at the previous meeting. The young people also spoke about how they try to create time for socialising before and/or after meetings. Some played games and for others it was as simple as making sure that the members had time for a chat and catch up with each other.

The youth council members are heavily involved in decision making within their youth council. The young people organise and plan events, lead meetings, decide on the partners they work with, on procedures and recruitment for the youth council, how to fundraise and on the issues the youth council will focus on. Two of the youth councils make decisions around awarding small grants. One youth council has sought out training and advice on responding to issues.

Support and improvements

Youth council Members

The young people get a lot of support from each other. In all the youth councils they commented that they are always there for each other and make sure everyone has good fun. Some young people commented that all members should agree to participate at the same level and that members need to put the youth council as a high priority in their lives. Some stated that young people should only stay a member of the youth council if it is for them. These young people had a sense of being 'privileged' to be a youth council member and felt that any member who is unable to commit to the youth council should give up their 'sought after place'.

Some youth councils stated they could improve by having a membership from a wider geographical spread and by developing their inclusion policies.

Worker

The young people and senior management acknowledged how dependent the youth councils are on their worker: they provide guidance, deal with practicalities such as venues and budgets and get the young people started at meetings. Workers also help develop new skills within the groups, for example, research and lobbying as well as more proactive work to secure the voice of young people. Young people and senior management would like to see this aspect continue.

One of the youth councils said they would like if the worker handed over more responsibility to the youth council members.

The organisation

Support for workers emerged as a consistent theme. For four of the five workers engaged in the study the youth council co-ordinator role was only one part of their overall job. One worker described how training for the youth council can be intense and felt that it would be a great help to have another support worker to assist them. Belfast Youth Forum had a dedicated worker however the worker commented that the youth forum could be more effective with additional support. Help with administration was highlighted as another potential area of support as this was often time consuming. The support provided by placement students was acknowledged as valuable and often timely.

ELB councils operate on a relatively small budget and they were in agreement that they would benefit from having increased financial support. It was also suggested that lead organisations should redeploy resources of the wider youth service to develop capacity building and help develop formal partnerships with district councils.

Another suggestion was that lead organisations allow more flexibility in relation to the youth council's programmes. It was commented that the times of meetings and deadlines can be imposed by the organisation rather than the youth council members.

Council elected members

As a district council sponsored group, Belfast City Youth Forum has a structured mechanism for local councillors to hear the views of young people. ELB youth councils share their views and opinions through, for example, consultations on local issues and attending events where there is an opportunity to meet politicians.

Some of the ELB youth councils would like if the District Councils got the views of young people in a more structured and coherent manner. They would like if local councillors were easier to get hold of and had a quicker response time. One of the youth councils was also concerned as to whether decision makers actually do anything with the information the youth council provide on issues.

Training

The youth councils noted different training that they would like to be offered to youth council members such as research methods, event management, campaigning, lobbying, good relations training, junior youth leaders, communication skills, negotiation skills and peer consultation training.

One youth council worker suggested the development of an OCN in youth councils.

Networking

All the youth councils had networked in some way with other youth councils. With some exceptions, they young people found it good fun and a good way to find out what is going on in other parts on Northern Ireland.

The youth council members thought it would be difficult to have a network as all the groups are so diverse, but one commented it would be interesting especially if there were resources or money attached. It was also noted that it could be a way to work together on bigger projects. There was no clear response as to whether a network would be feasible.

Advice to other youth councils

The youth councils gave some key pieces of advice to other youth councils:

- Take your time.
- Get good training on what you want your youth council to do.
- Make sure you are in an area that doesn't already have a youth council.
- Have a clear focus.
- Schedule your business so you aren't as busy during exam time from March to June.

Conclusion

It is apparent that youth councils vary in their operation and functioning, however they all have a similar purpose and goals - 'to be a voice for young people' and 'to have fun' intertwined with doing something positive and worthwhile for their community in a learning environment.

Young people are motivated in different ways to become members of local youth councils. However, it is evident that membership brings benefits to both the young people involved (e.g. skills development) and their local areas (e.g. information sharing and awareness-raising).

The role and activities undertaken in the local youth councils as well as the way in which they function are similar. Each of the councils provided the scope at different times for young people to organise and plan events, lead meetings, decide on the partners they work with, on procedures and recruitment for the youth council, how to fundraise and on the issues the youth council will focus on.

The ELB youth councils do not have the structured links with local councillors that are afforded to shadow youth councils which has meant it is more difficult for the ELB youth councils to bring the voice of young people to local government. They would like if local councillors were easier to get hold of and had a quicker response time.

Young people, support workers and senior managers had ideas for the further development of local youth councils such as increased funding and taking part in specific skills based training. They were also clear on what advice they would share with others, for example, "*take your time... have a clear focus*… (and) "*make sure you are in an area that doesn't already have a youth council*".

The information gathered through this short study has been used to influence and shape the development of The Big Deal youth council guidance support pack. Further information on The Big Deal and the support pack are available on the website, www.thebigdealni.com.