Aberdeenshire Community Planning Initiative

VALUING young people
A strategy for engaging young people in decision-making in Aberdeenshire
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Foreword

Whilst many practitioners agree that involving young people in decision-making is important, many struggle with any meaningful implementation.

This strategy is designed to provide a framework for engaging young people which can be applied consistently across Aberdeenshire.

We are all aware of the stereotypical comments which are made against young people. Media hype and some high profile cases of inappropriate behaviour or worse gives an image of young people which for the most part is undeserved.

It is perhaps clichéd to describe young people as the adults of tomorrow but in fact, they are living in our communities now, and contribute to the economic and social development of our communities today.

Young people who shape the future of our society are aware of the fact that they are responsible for their actions. If we continue to disregard the important and relevant part they can play in deciding the future, we risk disenfranchising a large group in the community.

This framework highlights the benefits of involving young people in decision-making, describes what is meant by engagement and provides a generic framework that describes the steps that are necessary for young people to become involved in the decision-making process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Aberdeen Community Planning Partnership would like to thank the young people and partners who have shown commitment and forward-thinking in developing this strategy.
Introduction

The development of this strategy has been the direct result of lobbying by young people on Aberdeenshire Youth Forum.

It is not an adult perception of what young people want or an exercise to meet the Scottish Executive’s expectations. It is a real attempt to kickstart the engagement process involving young people.

A Youth Advisory group that represented young people from different community based youth forums, members of the Scottish Youth Parliament, Pupil Council and uniformed organisations came together with a sub-group of the Aberdeenshire Community Planning Board to develop this strategy.

The framework will begin the journey to a productive and meaningful relationship between young people and the wider community.
Purpose Statement

The Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership through this strategy will ensure that young people have their views taken into account and can influence decisions made about matters that affect them.

A STATEMENT OF VALUES

The Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership is committed to:

- Respecting young people as equal partners and including them in planning and decision-making processes
- Listening to young people and ensuring their views are taken seriously
- Having young people’s ideas valued.

OUR AIM

To ensure young people are key players in the decision making process through ensuring their voice is:

- Understood
- Valued
- Acted on.

OBJECTIVES

1. To support existing youth participation structures and improve mechanisms for young people to engage effectively with their communities, policy makers and service providers within the community planning process.

2. To establish a framework which is accessible to young people and supportive to partners ensuring youth participation in decision-making processes.

3. To ensure that engagement methods address the needs of young people and follow the National Standards for Community Engagement.
Benefits of involving young people in decision-making

There are a number of inter-related reasons for developing good processes for engaging with young people, ranging from practical considerations in good service design to statutory duties.

The benefits that involving young people in decision-making can have are highlighted in this section, from the perspective of the Council and partners, communities and young people themselves.

**FOR THE COUNCIL & PARTNERS**

- **Broadens the representativeness of decision-making**
  Young people make up a significant proportion of the community. They can bring unique perspectives and experiences to the table. They also bring innovative ideas and dynamic perspectives about the future.

- **Helps the organisations make better decisions**
  A broader range of views and experience can energise the decision-making process.

- **Helps the organisations improve their services for young people**
  Organisations can serve young people better if they have a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of this group.

- **Improves the image of the organisations**
  Creating a young people-friendly organisation inspires the confidence of young users and enhances the reputation and credibility of the organisation.

- **Helps attract young people as volunteers**
  Involving young people as decision-makers signals that the organisation is serious about dealing with young people respectfully and encourages young people to assume a variety of roles.

**FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

- **Builds self-esteem and confidence**
  Taking on responsibilities for guiding an organisation provides for leadership and is an important step in a young person’s development.

- **Develops important skills**
  Leadership, problem solving, consensus building and networking are among the skills that can grow out of participating in the decision-making process.

- **Provides experiences relevant to education and employment**
  Undertaking decision-making roles enables young people to plan their careers, build CVs and gain skills that will be valuable on the job.
• Gives young people a creative and productive outlet for their energy and creativity
  Young people are sometimes stereotyped as being cynical or apathetic. The responsibility that comes with decision-making will prove these stereotypes wrong. Inviteing young people to the table creates an opportunity for them to be appreciated for what they have to offer.

• Connects young people to other young people and their community
  Giving young people a stake in decision-making improves their understanding of citizenship and connection to other individuals and institutions within their community.

FOR COMMUNITIES

• Overcomes negative stereotypes about youth culture and creates new respect for young people
  It allows them to demonstrate their skills and commitment and put to rest the preconceptions and mistrust that can often cloud the relationship between young people and the adult society.

  Involving young people in decision-making also assists with the inter-generational partnerships that benefit the whole community.

• Strengthens community capacity and local democracy
  Giving young people a stake in decision-making builds a broader base of citizen involvement and creates stronger, more inclusive communities.

  Youth engagement also builds commitment to the whole range of organisations that serve communities in so many different ways.
What do we mean by engagement?

This young people’s engagement strategy has been designed to ensure that it can reflect the range of participation required to meet the needs of the young people, their communities and the Community Planning Partners.

The various levels of engagement are:

• The provision of information which keeps people informed about decisions, services and local events etc.

• Consultation
  This can be used when there is a decision to make about something or when there are a number of choices about the details. Feedback should always be given to participants as part of the consultation process.

• Deciding together
  When young people are involved in deciding which options to choose, but it is the council that will act on the decisions.

• Acting together
  This is when decisions are made by partnerships between young people or agencies and the council. The implementation will normally involve young people.

• Supporting independent youth initiatives
  When independent groups get help to develop and carry out their own plans.

Every type of involvement is important in the engagement process and different methods can be used depending on the activity and circumstances. Sometimes it may be appropriate to inform or consult on some activities, while at other times involvement of young people in much greater depth will be needed.

The aim of this strategy is to demonstrate where this type of engagement activity can make genuine improvements to services.
The success or failure of a youth engagement strategy will in part be determined by the willingness of partners to examine and if necessary change current practices. This section in the framework identifies what groundwork needs to be considered before the process of engaging young people begins.

Points for consideration prior to engagement:

• Review any existing policy & practice on inclusive decision-making
  Does the decision-making guidance recognise that young people are an important population group to consider?

• Be certain that members of your organisation are willing and able to collectively support the young people participating
  The involvement of young people in decision-making will not work without the whole-hearted support of everyone concerned; particularly those who have leadership roles

• Build understanding about the value of listening to the voice of young people
  Lay the groundwork carefully to help all parts of your organisation understand the value of inviting young decision-makers to the table

• Be prepared to treat young people as equal participants in the decision-making process
  Young people will quickly become frustrated and disaffected if they feel they are being patronised or denied equal status.
What young people say about the strategy.

“Something we can all understand.”
(MF aged 17)

“Makes us more confident to speak.”
(GJ aged 16)

“Gives us the opportunity to have our ideas listened to.”
(GH aged 16)

“Sometimes young people’s ideas are the best.”
(AE aged 14)

“Young people are the future and deserve to be heard.”
(ER aged 25)

“To make an investment in the future.”
(EL aged 20)
Areas to be covered in the planning of the engagement

• Plan your approach
   Establish a framework for the engagement of young people. Determine what kind of participation makes the most sense for your organisation - board membership, policy development, programme planning or evaluation - and how it can be matched with the particular skills and interests of the young people.

   Plan ahead for outreach, orientation, and training for existing board members, staff and volunteers and any other resources that may be needed.

• Be clear within your organisation about the expectations, responsibilities, scope of decision-making authority and other practical details of the role that you are inviting young people to take on.
   Organisations need to consider their own needs and choose the appropriate level of engagement to ensure success for the young people and the organisation.

• Make diverse selections
   Like all appointments, the selection of young people will be most beneficial if it is representative from an ethnic, class and geographic perspective of the community the organisation serves.

• Ensure that young people involved in decision-making are not isolated
   Invite more than one young person to participate to provide mutual support.

• If young people are being elected or appointed as representatives, ensure that reporting and accountability mechanisms are clear.
   To get full value from the participation of young people, organisations must have clear channels of communication and reporting to all involved members.

• Recognise and address legal and systemic barriers
   Young people under the age of 18 may not be legally eligible to vote but still may have important contributions to make to decision-making.

• Identify partners who will support your organisation to ensure young people can participate in the engagement/decision making process.
   There are partners whose core business is to work with young people and they can give advice, guidance and training.
Delivering the Engagement Process

• Ensure that the national Standards for Community Engagement are followed

• Create an environment that is welcoming in both physical and social terms
  Ensure that the physical space in which you meet is not intimidating and that all staff are prepared to be friendly and accommodating to the group of young people

• Be clear with the participants about the expectations, responsibilities, scope of decision-making authority and other practical details of the role that you are inviting them to take on
  Discussing expectations will ensure that the young people are prepared and well informed to make the decisions needed
  If appropriate, provide an overview of the organisation, what it does, and the role of any existing decision-makers or processes. Explain clearly the history and mandate of the organisation and why this engagement is taking place

• Schedule meetings/ events at a time that matches the availability of young people.
  Daytime meetings can create time conflicts that make it difficult for youth to participate effectively

• Make sure the location is not a barrier to participation

• Ensure transport to and from the venue is available, if required

• Provide refreshments and snacks
  Providing cold beverages, snacks or light meals if the meeting time coincides with meal times, goes a long way to ensuring active participation

• Provide enough staff support so that the participation of young people can succeed
  Dedicate staff resources to assist young people with understanding complex organisations.
Supporting young people’s ongoing commitment to decision-making

• Match the young people involved in decision-making with mentors
  Provide the time and opportunity for a relationship of trust to develop
  The mentor should be available to provide information and answer questions the young people/person has about the process, vocabulary and other issues as they arise

• Provide ongoing training to support young people to develop the skills they need to participate effectively
  Recognise that there is likely to be turnover in young people membership and that it may be necessary to replace the young people involved in decision-making more frequently than their adult counterparts
  Young people are at a point in their lives that brings change. They move from one educational institution to another or they enter the world of employment. They move out of the family home into their own residence. Their understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world they live in is in constant transition

• Conduct meetings sensitively
  Help overcome any possible power imbalances or feelings of intimidation by providing open and respectful leadership at meetings
  Young people must feel that their active participation is welcomed and respected and that they are not merely token representatives

• Manage meeting agendas effectively so that they are not too long or unnecessarily complex
  Young people can sometimes become frustrated and impatient about how long it takes to produce decisions and take action
  Streamline decision-making processes wherever possible.

• Recognise that the relative inexperience of youth can be both a strength and a weakness
  Young people can bring a fresh, new perspective to the table, but need time to develop an understanding of an organisation’s challenges
  Create a respectful decision-making environment that supports young peoples participation

• Evaluate your success in terms of the impact on the organisation, the young people and the community
  Get feedback from all the stakeholders about what engaging young people has meant for the organisation and the individuals involved
  Ensure that the contributions of young people are generously acknowledged both publicly and privately.
Connecting to existing structures involving young people

The success of engaging meaningfully with young people will require organisations to create a relationship with bodies of young people who can facilitate the engagement process. In time, services/organisations will need to consider new innovative ideas to create the structures to capitalise fully on the framework above.

Aberdeenshire Council has a well established group entitled the Aberdeenshire Youth Forum which will provide a useful launch pad for an improved engagement process. Initially the forum will provide the necessary contacts for any engagement with young people which is identified following the implementation of the framework.

Whilst this is a very valuable initial opportunity to engage a significant body of young people it is clear that other methods of engagement will need to be established. These new methods will evolve over time as each service/organisation within Aberdeenshire considers how best to apply the framework above.
Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership Protocol

Principles that underpin the strategy

• Respecting young people as equal partners and including them in the planning process as well as decision-making

• Listening to young people and ensuring their views are taken seriously

• Having young peoples ideas valued

• Commitment to the development of the partnership between young people and organisations

• Information should be shared within the partnership to support the engagement process.

Code of Practice

All partners will carry out the engagement process in line with the National standards for Community engagement. (Appendix A).

All partners will share the findings of any youth consultation with young people and the partnership.

All partners will where possible carry out joint youth consultations therefore reducing duplication and ensuring best value.

All partners will be committed to sharing resources, skills and good practice in this field.

All partners will monitor and evaluate whether the engagement achieves its purpose and meets the national standards for community engagement by using UNICEF checklist (Appendix B)

All partners to review the strategy and protocol annually.
Appendix A

National Standards of community engagement

IN Volvement

It is important to identify and involve the people and organisations that have an interest in the focus of the consultation.

- Aberdeenshire Youth Forum represents a network of youth services from the voluntary, uniformed and statutory groups
- There are Pupil Forums in each secondary school in Aberdeenshire
- There are a number of local youth forums and local action groups in each of our communities in Aberdeenshire
- There is a Young Carer’s Project
- Partners will have consultation groups or contacts for young people, which would be beneficial.

Supp ort

It is important to identify and overcome any barriers to involvement – timing, costs, addressing equalities issues.

- Workers with a good relationship with the young people who are to be involved would be beneficial, especially for those who are more vulnerable
- What practical issues should we take into account, for example availability and accessibility of transport, communication support, and cultural/language issues?
  
  Are there potential financial barriers to involvement and how can we overcome them?
- Should we offer some sort of reward for involvement?
PLANNING

It is important to gather evidence of the needs and available resources and use this evidence to design the purpose, scope and timescale of the consultation and the actions to be taken.

• Could young people’s views be systematically built into wider decision-making and planning processes at critical points?

• Can we move towards involving children and young people as partners in strategic decision-making?

• What is the purpose of the engagement and how will the outputs be used?

METHODS

It is important to identify and use methods of consultation that are fit for purpose

• The use of an on-line questionnaire through the Aberdeenshire Page of ‘Young Scot’

• Questionnaires to be used as a tool for 1-1 or small focus groups

• Peer research – young people who have been trained in research/consultation methods

• Art, Music workshop to gather views of young people

• Specialised staff will have a range of methods which can be used to ensure that the more vulnerable groups are included.
Appendix B

UNICEF Checklist

NAME OF ORGANISATION: ____________________________________________________________

PURPOSE OF THE ENGAGEMENT: ___________________________________________________

DATE: __________________________________________________________________________

Does the activity put the child or young person first? Please tick appropriate box.  YES [ ]  NO [ ]

What steps have been taken to prevent any form of discrimination? __________________________

How have the most disadvantaged and marginalized young people been provided with opportunities to participate and are their voices heard?
_________________________________________________________________________________

What evidence is there that young people are actively participating? ________________________

How have young people made a difference in decision-making processes? ____________________

How are young people kept up to date on progress? _______________________________________

What are the views of young people on the process? ______________________________________

Is communication in a form and language that young people understand? Please tick appropriate box.

YES [ ]  NO [ ]

What has changed as a result of the consultation? ________________________________________