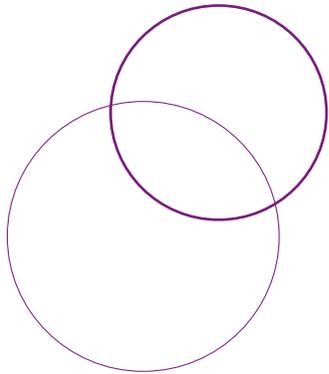


Bracknell Forest Council

A positive approach to youth engagement



For Children, Young People and Learning
with Special Education Needs and
Disabilities.



Introduction

One of the most important challenges to any council is how we listen to and support young people to achieve inside and outside of school. Growing up can be tough and we are determined to do more, using existing resources, to help the next generation to flourish.

Young people need to be a part of our communities and encouraged to contribute to positive social behaviour, crime initiatives and supporting the dispossessed.

A key principle of this approach has been to listen to young people and we have talked to and heard from many throughout the borough. Our conclusions and recommendations are rooted in what they told us. They have high hopes and aspirations for the future but need more help from us to get there – in school and in the community. The aim of this report is to inform decision makers and challenge you to adopt a new approach to support young people to become agents of their own destiny in our community.

Young people with Special Educational Needs face unique pressures but given the opportunity, are as capable as any other group of considering important social issues affecting the community and putting forward solutions. It is vital the council takes notice of what this generation is saying so that we can build a stronger community in Bracknell Forest.

For us to truly empower the next generation we must include young people as equal partners and a strategic voice.



Nikki Edwards
Director
Children, Young People & Learning



Cllr Gareth Barnard
Executive Member
Children, Young People & Learning

Foreword

Welcome to the Bracknell Forest approach to support our work on the active engagement of young people.

This approach really does give some useful tips on engaging with young people, recently at a Youth Council Meeting we reviewed its contents and still feel that most of it is very relevant to the way we should be working now.

In order to work together successfully, organisations must understand the importance of youth engagement, the process and have a vision that builds in engagement at the heart of its services.

By working together there is mutual respect and understanding for all.

This work has been developed with the support of young people. Their views and ideas have helped with the development of the approach and the action plan that sets out objectives and actions to ensure that young people are able to work as partners to shape and improve services locally.

We already have some great work going on in Bracknell Forest, but having an approach to active participation and engagement will allow us to move this work from good to great.

My experience of youth engagement has so far been through the Youth Council, and has given me and fellow members the opportunity to communicate and therefore work effectively with the organisations making decisions around services and projects on our behalf.

Through this approach I believe more young people will be able to get involved in work in various ways.

Let's take the good work we do and make it great.

Luize Razgulajeva
Member of Youth Parliament



Aims and Objectives

The approach to engaging young people has been developed to complement and further define the Council's and its partners' approach to engaging with people, expressed in the Bracknell Forest Partnership's Community Engagement Strategy covering the period 2013 -16. This strategy outlines how partners will work together to ensure local communities can take action and participate in whatever way they wish to influence service delivery, decision making and policy development. Guided by this blueprint, and by working together, we can share resources, expertise, contacts and local community knowledge.

The aim of this approach to engagement is to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of engagement activity and to enable young people to influence decision making and empower them to take action to tackle issues that affect them. This approach will support the Council and its partners to make better decisions and get policy and services to even better meet the needs of individuals and communities.

The approach has adopted the objectives laid out in the Community Engagement Strategy. The objectives identify how we are going to ensure that engagement activity is flexible, targeted and appropriate for the diverse needs of the communities in Bracknell Forest.

We will:

- Ensure young people have an equal opportunity to have their voices heard by increasing the accessibility of consultation and active engagement activity.
- Measure the impact of consultation on service development, commissioning and provision to ensure that it has a genuine influence.
- Ensure that good quality timely feedback is provided to those we consult so that they know how their views have made a difference.
- Improve communication between, and increase collaboration by, partners on engagement activity to make best use of limited resources.
- Increase community engagement skills among the Bracknell Forest Partnership's workforce to improve the quality of consultation and engagement activity with young people.

The work will link with the Bracknell Forest Partnership Community Engagement Protocol and toolkit.

The detailed action plan is available as a separate document.

What do we mean by engagement with young people?

Not all engagement needs to be the same. Sometimes it could take the shape of giving information or consultation, at other times young people and their families will need involvement on a greater scale.

It is essential to get a consistent definition and a shared understanding of participation by all involved in the implementation of this approach.

What is Participation?

Young people's involvement in individual decisions about their own lives, as well as collective involvement in matters that affect them.

A culture of listening that enables young people to influence decisions about services they receive as individuals on a day to day basis, as well as how those services are developed and delivered for all young people who access them.

It is not an isolated activity, but a process by which young people are enabled to influence change within an organisation.

It is not a hierarchy where the "aim" is to reach the top of the ladder.

(See Hart's Ladder of Participation on page 14.)



Levels of Engagement

Consultation

This can be used when there is a decision to be made where there are a number of choices. Feedback should always be given to participants as part of the process.

Deciding together

When people are involved in deciding the options to choose, but it is the organisation that will act on the decisions.

Acting together

This is when decisions are made in partnership between young people, families, agencies and/or the council. The implementation will normally involve young people.

Supporting independent youth initiatives

When independent groups get help to develop their own ideas.

Feedback is vital at all levels and is often forgotten. To complete the whole process we should make sure we let young people know what happened as a result.

(See Hart's Ladder of Participation on page 14.)



Benefits of effective engagement

There are a number of reasons for developing good practice and process for engaging young people, ranging from practical considerations in service design to fulfilling statutory duties.

The benefits of involving young people in decision making are highlighted in this section, from the perspectives of the council and partners, communities and young people.

For the council and partners

Broadens the representation of decision making

Children and 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. This can help the organisation make better decisions. A wider range of views, opinions and experiences will energise the decision making process.

Helps to improve services for children and young people

Better services can be created if organisations have better understanding of the needs of children and young people and their aspirations.

Improves image

Creating a vibrant child and young people friendly organisation inspires the confidence of young users and enhances the credibility of the organisation for the future.

Help attract young people as volunteers

Involving young people as decision makers shows that the organisations take young people seriously, treat them respectfully and encourages young people to assume a variety of roles.

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For young people

Builds self-esteem and confidence

Taking on responsibility, taking lead roles and being treated equally is an important step in a young person's development.

Develops skills

Leadership, problem solving, networking and consensus building are all skills that can grow out of being involved in the decision making process.

Provides experiences relevant to lifelong learning and employment

Supporting young people with experience to supplement their school lives, build for a career, support CVs and help with university applications are all results from including young people in the decision making process.

Give young people a chance to be creative and use energy in a productive way

Giving young people a place at the table will give them responsibility and help break down stereotypes held by many. We can create an environment where they feel appreciated.

Brings young people together creating friendships

Bringing young people together from different backgrounds can help to break down barriers; it can support new friendships and understanding of other groups in local communities.

For communities

Breaks down negative stereotypes about young people and helps to create new respect

In particular young people are able to demonstrate skills and commitment to the local community helping adults to understand that young people are part of the community and have lots to contribute.

Strengthens community bonds and local democracy

Including young people in decision making builds community cohesion. Young people's involvement helps to create stronger communities.

Youth engagement can also help community groups to develop and grow

Young people are a part of the community, not an add on. Including them more will help them feel a sense of ownership.



Foundations

In order to create the best climate for the success of young people's participation and engagement we will need to take a close look at our own organisations.

We may need to change our current practices, this section of the approach helps to identify what groundwork needs to be considered before the process of engaging young people and their families can truly begin.

Points to consider prior to engagement

Review any existing policy and practice

Does the current decision making guidance recognise that young people and, if appropriate, their parents/carers are an important population group to consider?

Be certain that members of your organisation are willing and able to collectively support young people participating in the processes that affect that organisation

The involvement of young people and families will not work unless it has the full support of everyone, particularly those who hold a leadership role.

Build an understanding about the value of listening to the voice of young people away from adult decision makers

Lay the groundwork carefully to help all parts of your organisation understand the value of giving young people a role as decision makers.

Be prepared to treat young people and their families as equal partners in the decision making process

It is very easy for young people and families to lose interest, become frustrated and disaffected when they feel that the engagement is patronising or tokenistic.

Planning

It is vital that the engagement of young people is planned. It should form part of our core work, we should aim to engage these groups as early as possible as meaningful partners.

Plan your approach

Establish a framework for active engagement.

Determine what sort of engagement best suits your service i.e. board membership, policy development, programme planning and evaluation. Plan an approach that suits the skills of the people involved.

Training will be an important part of this, for young people and adults alike.

Be clear about the expectations, responsibilities, scope and authority of active engagement and the role that you are inviting young people and, if appropriate, their parents/carers to take on

Organisations need to be very clear on their own needs as well as those of young people; an appropriate level of engagement should be chosen to create the best possibility of success.

Plan so people don't feel isolated

Invite more than one person to participate, they will at least feel more supported that way; remember that young people particularly may need the support of a worker too.

All young people should have an option to be involved

Don't use the same people. It may be easier because some are trained and meet your needs. A wide range of voices need to be heard to ensure that feedback is representative and robust.

When young people are elected or appointed as representatives, ensure that reporting and accountability systems are clear

To get full value from active engagement of young people, organisations must ensure they have clear channels of communication for all involved.

Identify partners who will support your organisation to ensure young people can participate in the active engagement process

There are services whose business is to work with young people - they can be there to help and support your work.

Delivery

We need to find a mixture of ways to engage with the many different groups who live in our borough, there is no 'one size fits all' approach.

Working with partners across the council will ensure skills and knowledge can be shared.

Create an environment that is welcoming in both physical and social terms

Ensure the space you are planning to use is not intimidating, that all staff know young people will be involved and that they feel welcomed.

Be clear about expectations

Discussing expectations will ensure that everyone is prepared and well informed about the active engagement process.

If needed, provide an overview of the organisation, including some history and the reasons behind active engagement.

Arrange meetings that allow young people to be involved

Daytime meetings can cause barriers for active engagement for many people. Good engagement should not rely on getting young people released from school or parents/carers from their responsibilities.

Location, Location, Location

Meetings don't always have to be around a table at the council's offices - try mixing things up. People are likely to be happier for you to meet at places where they feel more at home.

Transport

Think about how people will get there. You may need to supply transport.

Refreshments and snacks

Cold drinks and snacks go a long way to ensure active engagement. This is especially the case if meetings are held straight after school hours.

Provide staff support

Most people like to see a friendly face, someone they can run things past and check out their feelings – remember this when planning meetings or other forms of engagement.

Support

Match young people involved up with mentors

A mentor can be available to provide information and answer questions about the process. They can also support around other issues.

Provide ongoing training and support to young people to develop skills they need to engage in an adult environment

Recognise that there is likely to be a turnover of young people during your process, more so maybe than your adult counterparts.

To ensure that young people have the best opportunity to fully engage, offer training and development courses.

Conduct meetings sensitively

Help overcome possible power imbalances or feelings of intimidation by providing open and respectful leadership in meetings.

People must feel part of what is going on and that their active engagement is respected and not merely a token gesture.

Allow for the needs of all participants

Everyone at the meeting will have particular needs, but some need special attention. These include when participants have disabilities, language or cultural needs.

To create a process where young people can feel supported to engage we will need to ensure that we are able to support proper engagement. Some people will require extra support, but their views are vital to our services.

Manage agendas so that they are not too long or unnecessarily complex

Young people like to feel that things are moving forward. They can get frustrated at the time it can take to reach decisions.

Streamline the decision making process where possible.

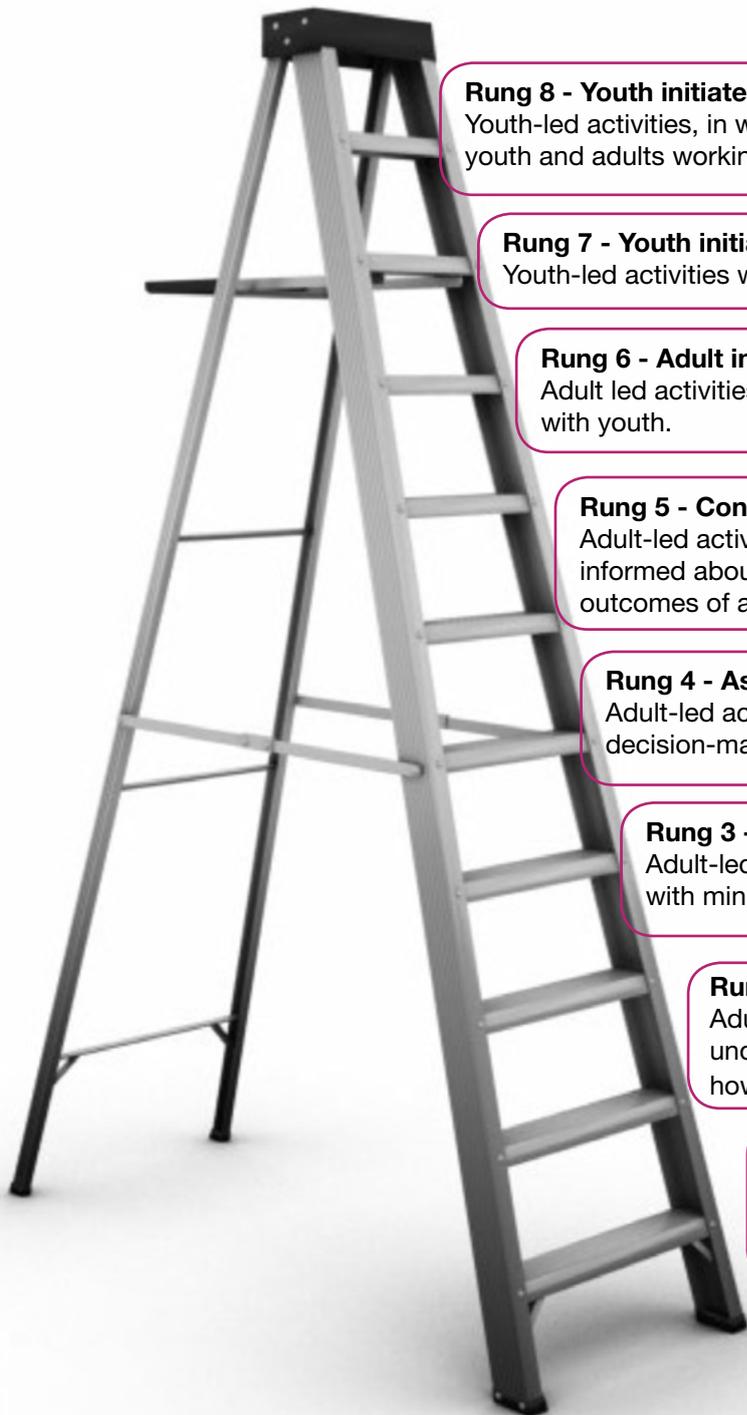
Recognise young people's experience

Young people bring fresh new ideas and new perspectives to the table. They also need time to develop an understanding of the organisation and its constraints.

Evaluate your success in terms of the organisation, the young people, families and the community

Know what is changing as a result of active engagement, get feedback and ensure this is shared and celebrated. Where possible share your success stories locally and, if possible, nationally.

Roger Hart's ladder of participation



Rung 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults:

Youth-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

Rung 7 - Youth initiated and directed:

Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

Rung 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth:

Adult led activities, in which decision making is shared with youth.

Rung 5 - Consulted and informed:

Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

Rung 4 - Assigned, but informed:

Adult-led activities, in which you understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

Rung 3 - Tokenism:

Adult-led activities, in which you may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

Rung 2 - Decoration:

Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

Rung 1 - Manipulation:

Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding of the purpose for the activities.

Adapted from Hart, R(1992). Children's participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Reserch Centre, as cited in www.freechild.org/ladder.htm

If you need this in an alternative format please contact Children,
Young People and Learning on 01344 ?