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| **REPORT TO:** | Children’s Trust Executive Board |
| **DATE:** | 26th November 2013 |
| **REPORTING OFFICER:** | Michelle Forder – Engagement and Participation Lead, Children & Enterprise |
| **SUBJECT:** | A case study on the strategic participation of young people within a local children’s trust |

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| **1.0** | PURPOSE OF THE REPORT |
| 1.1  1.2 | This report has been drawn from the findings of a research study into the strategic participation of young people at a local children’s trust, which was conducted in Halton. This study focused on Halton’s Children’s Trust, exploring how youth participation is viewed by children’s trust members, the extent that young people participate in strategic decision-making and the potential barriers of youth participation in this strategic setting. Data was collected from formal documents, a youth-led video and interviews with key professionals.  The key findings show that there is the desire from professionals to develop true youth participation in decision-making. However, there are also many barriers to overcome in order for youth participation to become embedded in the culture and workings of Halton’s Children’s Trust. Some of the barriers identified are adult attitudes, poor accessibility, missed opportunities and gaps in support. The paper contributes to the knowledge on localised strategic participation of young people, a concept increasingly discussed in light of current changes to children’s legislation and new inspection frameworks. This report offers the recommendations from the study for developed and improved participation in this environment. |
| **2.0**  2.1  i)  ii)  **3.0**  3.1  a)  b)  c)  3.2  a)  b)  3.3  a)  b)  c)  d)  e)  3.4  a)  b)  c) | **BACKGROUND**  What do we mean by participation?  Participation is used in many contexts. However, for the purpose of this report participation is more than simply taking part in an activity; it refers specifically to the involvement in the process of identifying needs, exploring solutions, making decisions and planning action (Hart, 1992).  There is a vast amount of associated terminology connected with youth participation. Terms such as voice, autonomy, social action, civic engagement, inclusion and decision-making are often used to describe various types of participation of young people within projects, communities or politics.  Meaningful participation, not only means listening and consulting young people but also to create opportunity for them to participate in decision making, enabling young people to be active citizens. Effective participation should enable and actively encourage children and adults to collaborate as equal stakeholders in the process from the planning stage through to evaluation (MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith, 2007).  **FINDINGS OF STUDY**  The view of youth participation  The documented data and interviews with participants showed that there was a desire for young people should be involved in decision-making and that youth participation was part of the children’s trust ethos. During interviews participants stressed how important youth participation is. However, when exploring further it seemed that youth participation was not high on the agenda of the children’s trust, for example the participation strategy had expired and youth participation was rarely mentioned at board meetings.  Generally there seemed to be a good understanding of what youth participation is. However, the term ‘consultation’ was continually referenced in documents, by young people and by key professionals when talking about participation. This suggests that there is a lack of a varied approach to youth participation and that consultation is the most popular method of collecting young people’s views. Consultation can be part of participation, but further actions such as: informing and giving feedback are needed for it to avoid becoming tokenistic participation.  Extent of youth participation  The examples of participation discussed by participants during interviews were also referenced in the documentation data. This showed consistency across the examples of participation discussed.  There are various examples of good practice in participation across the borough, such as the young inspectors, kite mark programme, the transport forum, the restructure of the youth provision and the youth-led video for the Children’s Trust. However, these examples are very much organised on an individual basis, resulting in sporadic pockets of youth participation. There is no evidence of how these examples are being developed, how they are related with other participative projects, or how they are linked into a coordinated structure.  Barriers to youth participation  The data suggests there is a struggle in engaging young people in participative activity at a strategic level. It is apparent that participation in the borough seems to run as a stop and re-start model rather than a continuum of participation development. This could be linked to the way commissioning has developed across the UK, where providers are changed in order to maintain value for money. Also young people who are participating at a strategic level will not always be able to do so, due to other commitments, leaving the borough or just getting older, therefore there is a need to continually recruit and train young people in order that youth participation is sustained. There may also be a training need for professionals in engagement and participation.  The opportunity for giving feedback to young people, who have been involved in decision making, has not always occurred. This can have a detrimental impact on levels of engagement and young people willing to participate in future. There have been occasions when young people have been involved in influencing outcomes such as the transport to a leisure facility. However, there have also been events and situations where young people could have been involved and have not been.  Reports of youth participation were missing from children’s trust minutes suggesting that participation is rarely reported at a strategic level. When decision-making is reported there seems to be a lack of information justifying how the decision was made and who was involved. There is a need for a quality similar to the rigour used in research to validate action or methods used in decision-making processes.  The children and young people’s plan contains the structure of Halton’s Children’s Trust (appendix 1), which shows the input to Halton Children’s Trust of parents, voluntary sector organisations and young people through Halton Youth Cabinet and Halton Children in Care Council. It is an important structure that should be shown; conversely there is no further explanation or structure given of how young people can get involved or how Halton Youth Cabinet or Halton Children in Care Council operate to ensure a representative voice. Similarly in interviews there were concerns raised around lack of structure and clear pathways for youth participation.  The findings point to an element of fragmentation where youth participation is concerned as mentioned previously, participation often takes place in individual pockets with a lack of joint working or coordination. There is a need for these individual projects to look at ways to work together with an integrated approach to youth participation.  Strengths of participation  There are also strengths around youth participation within the children’s trust. It was clear from the findings that there is a desire to develop and improve participation locally. Attempts have been made in the past such as trying to set up the youth shadow board. There is an ethos on the children’s trust board and sub boards to accept critiques of own practice.  In the borough there is a range of youth provisions provided by a number of commissioned and voluntary sector organisations, which could be utilised to strengthen and develop participation. Representation from those who access provision is good. However, young people who do not currently access those services may have valid reasons, which could be used to improve service and inclusion.  There has been the appointment of engagement lead workers in the borough, through health and the local authority, whose role it is to seek and promote involvement from children, young people and families, in decision-making. |
| **3.0**  3.1  a)  b)  c)  d)  e)  f)  g)  h)  i)  j)  k)  l)  3.2  a)  b)  c)  d)  e)  f) | **RECOMMENDATIONS**    Recommendations have been divided up into short term and long term actions.  Short-term action  Participation to be a set agenda item or meetings on the children’s trust and relevant sub groups, good practice examples should be fed back to group.  A participation sub group be implemented, including all participation lead workers in the borough. This group should act as a critical friend to Halton’s Children’s Trust on participation. This group should also look at ways to develop structure and coordination of participation of stakeholders.  Development and implementation of a new, updated participation strategy, through young people and professionals working together.  Develop a web page for youth participation on Halton’s Children’s Trust website, possibly including a ‘you said, we did’ wall. This page should be developed alongside local young people.  Redesign the ‘communication’ module in Halton Children’s Trust induction training so that communication is part of a wider training day on participation. This should be aimed at improving participation and engagement skills in professionals.  Establish new ways to include young people in decision-making through on-going discussions between professionals and young people.  Commissioning and policy teams in particular to take an active role in stakeholder involvement and having participation, not just consultation as a required action in any plans or changes around children and young people’s services, including feedback.  Include a diagram in the children and young people’s plan that organisations and partners can use to promote youth participation and show how young people would get involved at a strategic level.  Evaluate youth participation regularly using an evaluation tool such as the British Youth Councils Toolbox (2011)  Training needed for those who are acting as representatives for other young people to ensure that they take responsibility of speaking to other young people. A strong structure would also ensure the best representation possible.  To ensure Halton’s Children’s Trust is more accessible to young people, considering transport, times, venue and use of technology such as Skype.  Halton Children’s Trust to be promoted to all youth groups as a place they can take views and issues to for help and support.  Long-term action  Young people to take over the running of the participation sub group.  Young people to co-deliver training on participation and engagement.  A lead worker not involved within any one agency, to be assigned the role of coordinating youth participation. This person should be accountable to Halton Children’s Trust. Their role would be to ensure a large number of children and young people participate in decisions that affect them at a strategic level.  Implement strong structures that withstand change in providers and decreasing budgets.  Ensure outsourcing and commissioning processes do not mean that services do not work together for fear of competition, to be achieved through both training and the voluntary sector forum. It would be useful for commissioners to build in a degree of cooperation between providers into contracts.  Liaise with schools to discuss the possibility of participation with the children’s trust to function through school projects.  Training for young people on their rights to participate and the UNCRC need to be actively promoted, through schools and youth clubs, linking in school councils into a strategic structure. |
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| **4.0**  4.1  4.2 | **CONSIDERATIONS**  There are some considerations of the study that should be noted.  The document data collected was for the period March 2012 – March 2013, since then a recognisable difference in the focus of youth participation has been noted. Since the completion of the fieldwork for this study there has been a participation sub group set up and have met once.  This study was completed within a limited time frame of six months, if the research was to be completed again a longer time frame would give the opportunity to collect further documents to analyse, such as sub group minutes and individual reports. Also further views from young people may have supported the case study. |

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| **5.0** | **OVERALL CONCLUSION**  This study has given an insight into youth participation within Halton Children’s Trust. Meaningful participation is a process, not simply the application of isolated participation activities or events. The findings and conclusions identified are significant elements of the overall culture of youth participation in such a setting. By addressing the highlighted issues it is hoped that the attitude and culture will develop, bringing about an ethos that develop new ways of working with young people so that youth participation is embedded in every decision made. |
| **6.0**  6.2  6.3  **7.0** | **ACTION TAKEN**  The recommendation to set up a participation sub group (section 3.1, b) has now been set up and includes lead participation workers from youth cabinet, canal boat, Halton Speak Out, Halton carers centre, Cheshire police, Cheshire fire and rescue, Halton Family Voice, CCG, addaction and COY.  Figure 6.1 –Composition of group  The group has met once; the next meeting on the 4th November 2013 will see young people and parent representatives from each of the organisations attend. The group’s main role will be to act as a critical friend to Halton’s Children’s Trust on participation. The group will also update Halton Children’s Trust participation strategy (3.1, d).  This report will go out to relevant board meetings in order to promote the participation group and encourage partners to visit the group to gain advice when carrying out participation exercises.  **REFERENCES USED IN REPORT**  British Youth Council and Participation Works Tool Kit (2008). Available from: <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/files/webfm/files/resources/k-items/participationworks/diy_evaluation_toolkit/diy_evaluation_toolkit.pdf>  Hart, R (1992) Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship, Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.  MacNaughton, G. M., Hughes, P., & Smith, K. (2007). Early childhood professionals and children's rights: Tensions and possibilities around the united nations general comment no. 7 on children's rights. International Journal of Early Years Education. 15(2), pp.161-170. | |

**Appendix A – Halton Children’s Trust**

**Halton Safeguarding Children Board**

**Halton Strategic Partnership**

**Halton Family Voice**

**Voluntary & Community Sector Forum**

**Halton Youth Cabinet**

**Children in Care Council**

**IYSS Participation & Engagement Group**

## Children & Families Partnership Commissioning Board

Early Help & Support Strategic Group

**INTEGRATED OPERATIONAL DELIVERY**

## Halton

## Children’s Trust Board

## Children’s Trust

## Executive Group

## Specific Groups for Vulnerable Young People

**Health & Well Being Board**

**External links**