

YOUNG PEOPLE AND RESETTLEMENT: PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

Introduction

This practice guide is one of an ongoing series produced as part of the Beyond Youth Custody (BYC) programme, funded under the Big Lottery Fund's Youth in Focus initiative. BYC has been designed to challenge, advance, and promote better thinking in policy and practice for the effective resettlement of young people.

Participatory approaches involve young people in determining the services that are delivered to them. Participatory approaches enable young people to express their views, share decision-making and influence the delivery of services to ensure that provision reflects their interests and needs. Participatory practice is particularly important in all work with custody leavers because meaningful engagement in the resettlement process enables individual outcomes to improve. However, the development of participation for young offenders poses specific challenges and is partly dependent upon each organisation's ability and willingness to share decision-making with young people.

This briefing reports on research undertaken by Beyond Youth Custody on developing participatory approaches in resettlement services and considers the implications for work with young people leaving custody.

Contents

Introduction	1
What are participatory approaches?	1
Why are participatory approaches important?	2
Developing participatory approaches	2-3
Positive practice	4
Issues for the criminal justice system	5
Service delivery issues	5
Staff issues	6
A model of participatory progression	7
Summary	8



Why are participatory approaches important?

Participatory approaches can improve young people's outcomes, partly by helping to build trust and respect and developing young people's skills and confidence. But more broadly, the experience of inclusion and empowerment and especially the balancing of power relations between adults and young people foster better engagement. Young people value being listened to and their behaviour is likely to improve as a result. Furthermore, with more effective engagement, staff job satisfaction may also increase. Active participation can also facilitate the shift in a young person's identity that is necessary for them to engage fully with the service and the wider community (see *Engaging Young People in Resettlement: A practitioner's guide* for more information).

There are undoubtedly specific challenges for the development of participatory approaches within the criminal justice system, but it is nevertheless particularly important that agencies consider how young offenders are portrayed and work to foster recognition that (1) young people deserve a voice and (2) such participatory approaches benefit them, the services working with them and society as a whole.

Services can benefit enormously from the improved communication and greater mutual understanding that develop between service users and staff when participatory approaches are adopted. Developing services in this way also facilitates personal development opportunities for all concerned. In particular, participatory approaches build personal responsibility, trust and self-esteem for service users, ensuring that they feel valued and have ownership of their service. On a more strategic level, participatory approaches ensure more effective long-term service development and targeting of resources. Not only can these approaches give services a positive public image, but developing pools of skilled service users also provides organisations with a valuable resource.

Developing participatory approaches

The best known model of participation involves a ladder of increasingly inclusive approaches, ranging from 'manipulation' at one extreme to a scenario where the young person initiates decisions and shares decisions with adults at the other.

Table 1: Hart's ladder of participation (adapted from Hart, 1992)

	Level	Description	Participation/ non-participation
↑↑	Rung 8	Young person initiated; shared decisions with adults	Degrees of increasing genuine participation
	Rung 7	Young person initiated and directed	
↑↑	Rung 6	Adult initiated shared decisions with young people	
	Rung 5	Consulted and informed	
↑↑	Rung 4	Assigned but informed	
↑↑	Rung 3	Tokenism	
↑↑	Rung 2	Decoration	
↑↑	Rung 1	Manipulation	

At the bottom of the ladder, young people lack any involvement: their input is not sought and their perspective is unknown. They tend not to be informed of issues, but may be asked to 'rubber stamp' decisions already taken by staff or may be used as 'decoration', namely when they are indirectly involved in decisions but not fully aware of their rights, their possible involvement or how decisions might affect them. Tokenistic involvement allows young people to represent their peers by speaking at a conference or filling in a feedback form. There is no potential to exercise decision-making (other than potential withdrawal of cooperation), no sharing of rights or responsibilities, no reciprocity, no empowerment and no associated promise of change – all factors which would denote true participation.

Such tokenistic approaches are probably the most frequent kind of involvement for young people and may serve a useful purpose in certain contexts or provide young people with their first experience of communicating their views. However, solely providing structured opportunities to give feedback is too limited and there is a degree of consensus that the current approach to young people's participation within the youth justice system is inadequate.

So participatory involvement needs to extend beyond tokenism – to offer a range of opportunities for inclusion that may be experienced by different young people or indeed the same young person at different stages of readiness. In exploring how resettlement practitioners can develop more advanced participatory approaches, one of the first steps to consider is the two different aspects to participation:

At a strategic level: Participation may include having a role in selecting and training staff, contributing to agency policy and sitting on steering groups or advisory bodies. This approach can help to foster an inclusive ethos for projects which will help to overcome young people's initial resistance to engage in the first place (although service user involvement of this kind is more likely to involve young people who are already engaged with the service).

At an individual level: Participation might engage young people who may not wish to involve themselves in project development by giving young people a choice over the activities they can take part in, enabling them to make a genuine contribution to goal setting and share intervention planning with project staff. From an agency point of view, such an approach facilitates engagement; from the perspective of the young person, it can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility.

But it is crucial to remember that participatory approaches require more than providing young people with a list of options for them to engage with: they require that services constantly continue to evolve their practice to enable young people to participate in the way they want to:

'We as professionals often have an idea of what young people may like to do but this isn't always correct. It needs to be something they want to do and they have been involved in setting up. Their involvement is key as this gives them ownership and encourages their attendance.'
Youth in Focus practitioner

The following examples describe different types of participation that could be considered:

- The development of feedback/right to reply strategies – with designated consultation space, time and meetings
- Provision of participation skills training as preparation for actively engaging in young people's interest, action or advisory groups
- Young people designing research and acting as co-researchers
- Young people-shaped policy making, including the development of service user voice improvement plans and an external policy on developing a young people's voice culture
- Young people on management committees and appointment panels
- The development of young people as advisers/consultants for external agencies seeking to improve their engagement of, and service delivery to, young people
- Delegated decision-making as a means of supporting young people's ownership of resources, events, policies and practice

Where young people do not wish to involve themselves in project development, individual level participation remains important in order to maintain engagement and foster a sense of ownership and responsibility. This entails the young person having a choice over engagement activities, making a genuine contribution to goal setting and sharing intervention planning with project staff.



POSITIVE PRACTICE REACHING YOUR POTENTIAL (RYP) YMCA DOWNSLINK GROUP

What is the project?

This Big Lottery funded Youth in Focus project supports young people who have been in custody by providing a tailored and integrated package of support to reduce reoffending and other risk-taking behaviour.

How does it use a participatory approach?

The project has a strong focus on engaging young people in the design and delivery of its work.

1 Individualised budgets

As a holistic service, RYP seeks to develop young people's motivation through positive activities and the provision of individualised budgets. These support each young person's personal development by enabling them to access (or where necessary 'spot purchase') specific provision that is tailored to their needs.

2 Service user feedback into staff appraisals

RYP service users in the community are also given the opportunity to participate in resettlement workers' appraisals, thereby enabling the project to include young people's perspectives on effective interventions and appropriate appraisal targets within the development of their work.

3 Volunteer development opportunities

Another key strand of RYP's work involves developing service users as young volunteers by giving them a range of participation opportunities. A comprehensive volunteer training and induction programme is provided to ensure young people are equipped to: deal with challenges; make decisions about activity opportunities and the use of individual budgets; and participate actively in the steering group. Ongoing support and supervision are also provided for young people participating in any of the five autonomous teams, which are as follows:

- Volunteer activities team: working with staff to consult other RYP service users to find, plan, commission and/or co-deliver a range of development opportunities and positive activities.
- Volunteer digital and social media and marketing and promotion team: developing new marketing (including digital and social media) and promotional publications.
- Volunteer peer mentor team: working in the community as positive role models, providing inspiration and raising aspirations.
- Volunteer research and evaluation team: developing evaluation tools and interviewing service users to learn how they experience resettlement as a means of improving project practice. The team will also feed their research findings in to the Beyond Youth Custody research team.
- Steering group: volunteers from any of the above volunteer teams have the opportunity to sit on the steering group which guides team practice decisions.

Combined, this range of participation opportunities provides RYP with a youth panel which meets once a quarter to discuss project developments and propose solutions in relation to client feedback, the steering group and any other issues. Young people uncomfortable in a group environment (or unable to join a volunteer team for other reasons) can join a virtual youth panel in order to get involved in RYP developments and decision-making.



Issues for the criminal justice system

Whilst developing participatory approaches for any child or young person can be challenging, undertaking this work with young people who have offended has its own specific difficulties, not least because the justice system's focus on punishment conflicts with any commitment to participation. There can be debate about whether young offenders 'deserve' a say – although as many youth offending teams are now located within children's services or are strategically linked with their children's trust, this has focused additional attention on the need for participatory approaches with children at least.

But despite what is known about the value of participation, within the youth justice system young people are rarely involved in their own assessment. Even where they are, their feedback is unlikely to be used to inform the plans that are made for them. Whilst welcoming the opportunity to have their say, young people within the youth justice system have low expectations about their ability to influence what happens to them and parental involvement is similarly underdeveloped.

Without sufficient monitoring and independent scrutiny of the effectiveness of youth justice services to actively involve young offenders, there remain shortcomings in this field of work. This is an important issue because young people's self-assessments for youth offending teams typically provide substantial new information on the extent of their difficulties, the context of their offending and the degree of remorse they feel. So this lack of incorporation of young people's perspectives constrains the potential for statutory services to make their approaches more meaningful for service users.

Service delivery issues

There is a current lack of strategic direction as to how young people who have offended should have their views taken into account, and expectations generally fall short of enabling them to have a say in decision-making. The hierarchical structure of most organisations means that they often lack the cultural and relational infrastructure to recognise and support the value of participatory approaches. So it is critically important to communicate from a strategic level the benefits of, and dual intentions behind, developing participatory approaches, namely the contribution they make to crime reduction as well as to meeting young people's needs.

Participatory practice in the youth justice system lags behind practice being developed in social care, perhaps partly as a result of limited formats within the youth justice assessment framework (Asset) for seeking young people's views and the lack of an equivalent of the independent reviewing officer for children in care or other quality assurance role to ensure that their voices are represented. Youth justice complaints systems are also less independent than those within social care services. This is of course at least partly to do with how offending is perceived and how the role of both the youth and adult criminal justice systems has been constructed around punishment and making people accountable for their offending. Allowing a young person to determine their intervention can appear inconsistent with that function.

Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Have a clear strategic commitment to young people's participation?
- Involve young people in the development of participation strategies?
- Conduct systematic consultation with young people about staff and services?
- Scrutinise young people's feedback as part of management performance?

Staff issues

There may be questioning of the potential value of participation, arising from concerns that the conflict between the statutory enforcement and enabling functions of the youth justice system may inhibit young people's willingness to be open. Indeed, there are also a number of difficult decisions to make such as whether participatory approaches should aim to attract the young people who are doing well or those who are struggling to comply.

The voluntary sector has the potential to make valuable progress in this area. Resettlement projects can develop their own methods of assessing service users' needs that maximise inclusion of their views, but they also have the opportunity to learn and develop practice from more advanced practice elsewhere such as that in the looked after children system.

But it is important not to underestimate the difficulties of developing participatory practice with young people who are likely to have very little experience of, and considerable mistrust of, opportunities to shape what is happening to them. Practitioners will need to consider the impact of a young person's historical life experiences and their current personal circumstances at the stage when participatory opportunities are being offered. Young people resettling in the community have many demands on their attention such as complying with their licence, finding education, training or employment and dealing with often strained family and personal relationships. Due to their focus being elsewhere, they may need additional time and support to grasp such opportunities.

This work will require a lot of time, effort and persistence and practitioners will need to carefully judge young people's capabilities and not unintentionally set them up to fail. There will inevitably be questions about the appropriateness of young people maintaining long-term contact with resettlement services and the risk of them thereby retaining an identity as an offender. But finding ways to overcome such barriers are crucial because there are undoubtedly many benefits for practitioners of using participatory approaches: they can ensure more appropriate and responsive practice, thereby engaging even the more difficult-to-reach young people.

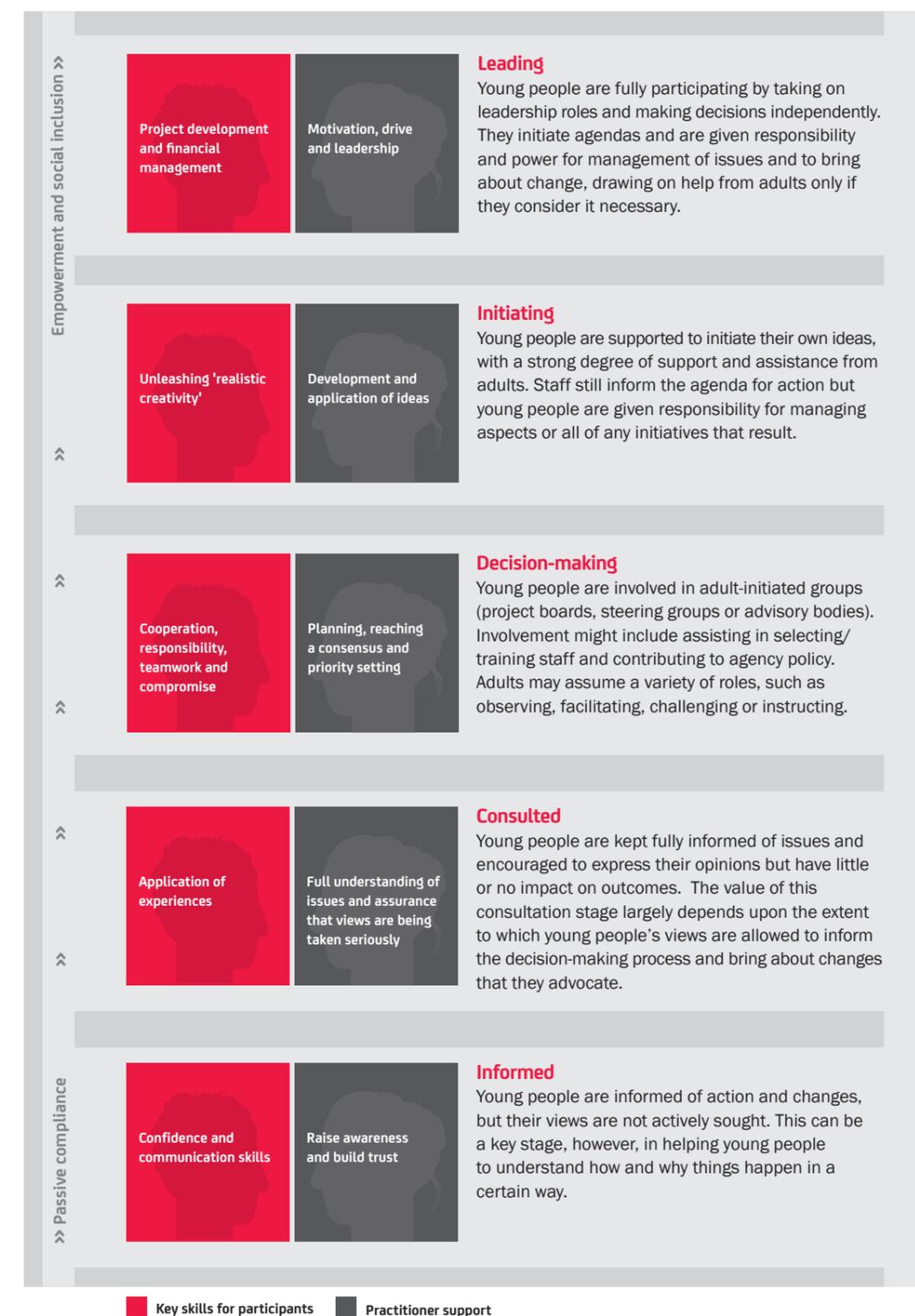
Considerations for practice

Does your project:

- Provide training and awareness raising on the subject of participation for staff?
- Allow staff opportunities to research and share effective practice from across the youth justice system and other sectors?
- Encourage responsive approaches to working with young people and reflective practice?
- Continuously develop methods of assessing young people's needs to maximise inclusion of their views in tailoring interventions?

A model of participatory progression

In order for young people to engage in genuine participation (extending beyond tokenism) they require knowledge to inform decision-making, and skills and confidence to communicate their views and experiences. The following diagram presents a way of considering the participatory journey for young people – incorporating the main participation stages as identified in the 'ladder' on page 2, but also considering the key skills that young people may need at each stage and the support that practitioners may need to offer them.



Summary

Young people's active involvement in their resettlement leads to better outcomes for them, greater job satisfaction for staff and more effective services. Genuine participation should be thought of in terms of young people's involvement in decisions that will potentially impact upon their life – including both individual decisions about their own lives as well as collective involvement in matters that affect young people more broadly. Genuine participation can contribute to a wider culture of listening that enables children and young people to influence decisions about the services they receive and how those services are developed and delivered for the future.

The Beyond Youth Custody team hopes that this practice guide is useful to you and would be interested to hear about your experiences of the issues raised here. Please feel free to contact the Beyond Youth Custody programme manager at beyondyouthcustody@nacro.org.uk to share your insights or discuss these issues.

This review has been produced by the Beyond Youth Custody partnership, consisting of Nacro, ARCS (UK) Ltd, the Centre for Social Research at the University of Salford, and the Vauxhall Centre for the Study of Crime at the University of Bedfordshire.

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