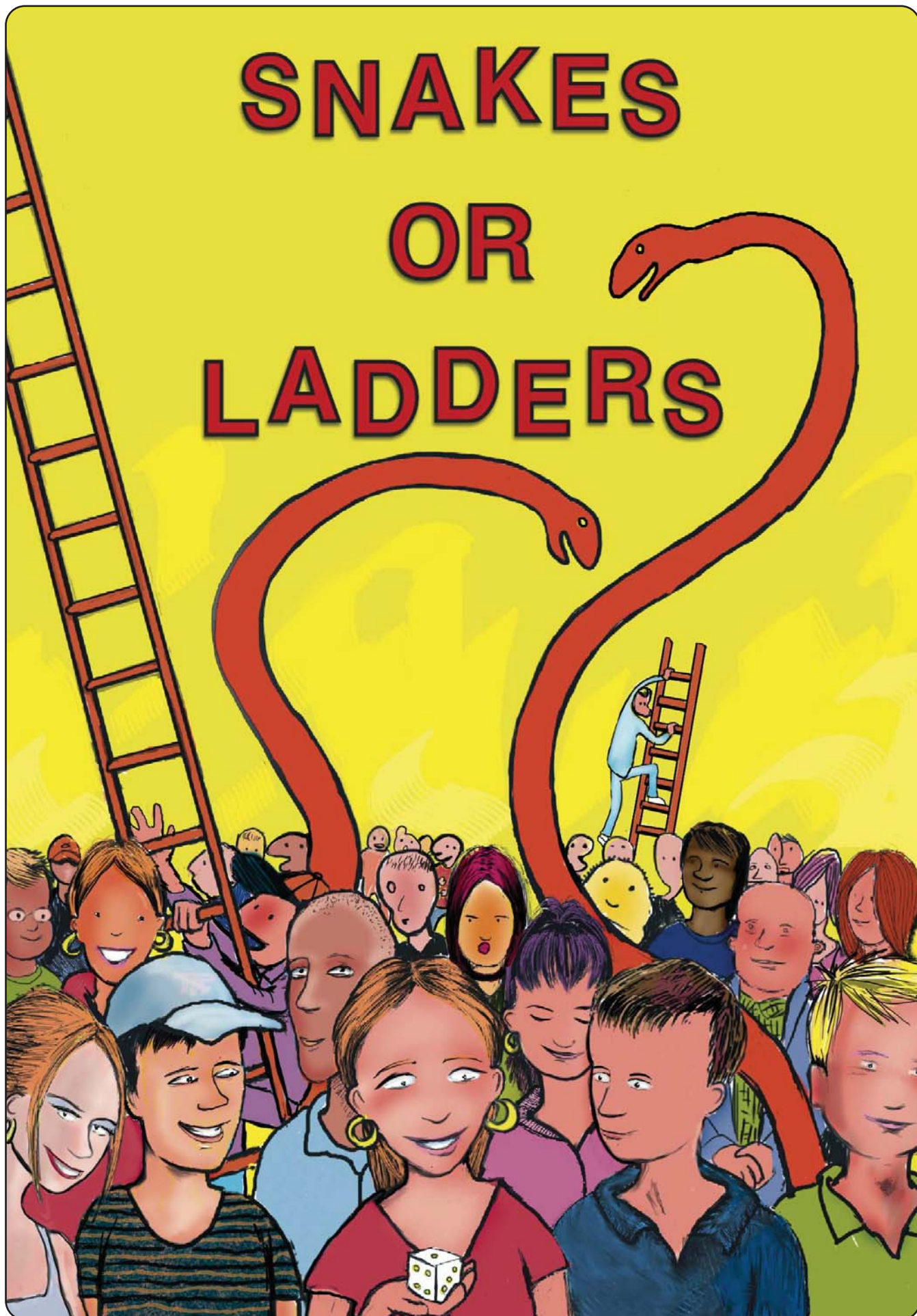


# SNAKES OR LADDERS



exploring how best to involve young people  
in decision-making forums

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**Acknowledgements** – There are several people and groups who helped with this research, including, Paul Hunter and the Pupil Council at St. Francis Primary School, Natasha McIninnie and the S1 & S2 after school attenders at Castlebrae Instep Project, Emma Kyles and FCUK club and the Join the Movement group at Café K, Karen Watts and the young people attending Bingham Community Fayre.

Special thanks to Scott Weatherstone, Raymond Swanney, Stephen Daily, Annie Sawyers, Leeanne Steele, Connor Douglas and Mariah Campbell at Huntershall Housing Cooperative and Dr. Ken McCulloch of Moray House School of Education, who all provided valuable assistance in the form of an advisory group.

Thanks also to the City of Edinburgh Council, who provided funding for the project.

Finally, thanks to Valeria Skafida, who assisted in the conduct of the research and the production of this report.

**Please note**, it should not be assumed that by contributing to the research, any people or organisations who have done so necessarily agree with the interpretations, views or conclusions noted within this report.

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*You must talk to young people, or else. Everyone else is either going or gone.*

*(HRH Princess Margaret 1930-2002)*

**Introduction**

This report details the results of a research project which focused upon young people and their relationship with local decision-making bodies such as Community Councils and Community Planning Partnerships; though its relevance should not be restricted to these types of forums.

Craigmillar Community Council commissioned the research in May 2006 and a range of consultative events were implemented throughout the remaining year. This report describes the process in full and notes the findings; there are four different sections to the report and these are briefly described below.

**Background (pages 4&5)** – This section puts the research in context and explains the reasons for conducting it.

**Research Process (pages 6 to 8)** – This section describes how the research was conducted.

**Main Findings (pages 9 to 11)** – This section details the main findings of the research.

**Main Learning (pages 12 to 13)** - This section details what can be learnt from the research findings.

## **Background**

It is commonly acknowledged that young people are not adequately represented in national and local decision-making arrangements. There appears to be widespread understanding that part of the problem arises from cumbersome and inaccessible decision-making processes.

Though there have been some well meaning initiatives developed over the past five years, designed to assist young activists to shape public policy i.e. the Scottish Youth Parliament, Youth Councils and Pupil Councils, often the structure and representative nature of such forums mirror existing adult structures and reproduce many of the same problems, leading to the exclusion of a large proportion of eligible young people.

The opinions noted above seem to be confirmed by research published in 2005 by Youth Link Scotland, who surveyed 3178 young people throughout Scotland on a range of issues; their findings noted that 60% of 11-16 year olds felt that the Scottish Youth Parliament makes no difference at all to their lives, this view was shared by 84% of 17-25 year olds who took part in the research (Machin, 2005).

Mirroring these developments, and in some ways inspired by the shortcomings of them, there has been a burgeoning interest in the development of participatory research based approaches as a means of engaging young people. These techniques aim for maximum youth involvement, they involve in-depth research and analysis of specific issues, they allow a much more informal approach to working with young people and often culminate in creative statements expressing both discontent and hope (see Lardner, 2001, for an in-depth description of these approaches).

However, whilst these approaches are highly successful in raising the profile of youth issues, all too often they fail to shift the opinion of decision makers because they offer participants no official place at the negotiating table when decisions are being made; whilst officials are more aware of the hopes and aspirations of young people, young people themselves do not have a vote when decisions are being made and there is the danger that policy proceeds in a manner unreflective of the time, effort and energy that has been given trying to influence it.

For some time now, the local Community Council in Craigmillar, Edinburgh, has been considering how best to involve young people within the work of the organisation. Emboldened by the City of Edinburgh Council's recent foresight to allow Community Councils throughout the city to each elect two young people to serve with full voting rights, Craigmillar Community Council commissioned this research to explore how this welcomed, but limited, extension of the democratic process might be broadened to be of value to the wider Craigmillar youth population.



*Craigmillar Castle overlooked by the Pentland Hills, photo by Julie Halliday*

The research was also viewed as an opportunity to explore how other organisations work with young people, to learn from the practices of other youth services, to look at what works and what doesn't. In doing so, it is hoped that the research findings will be of value and relevance to youth service providers in general.

Drawing upon the points noted previously, there is a number of assumptions that have informed the research process and findings, these are best acknowledged and explained here. Noting the perceived problems arising from the sole use of participatory research projects, it is accepted up front that meaningful participation does involve youth representatives elected to serve with Community Councils and with other decision-making bodies. The argument is that genuine participation is about more than just raising issues with the powers that be, it is also about being in a position to make decisions about how to address such issues.

However, it is also accepted that such representation will only be wholly effective to the extent that it is reflective of the wider youth population. If youth participation in decision-making forums extends only as far as elected representatives, then policy will likely still proceed in a manner unreflective of the wider youth population. It is assumed that engaging with the wider Craigmillar youth cohort is best achieved through the deployment of participatory research projects, which will help to inform the decisions made by elected youth representatives and the wider Community Council body. In a sense, there is an effort to try and negotiate between the best of both worlds.

The general aim of the project then, was to engage with young people living within the Greater Craigmillar community, and to ask them about their experiences of decision-making in general and to explore what conditions and criterion they feel organisations should adhere to when implementing models of participatory decision-making. This did not extend to actually judging different models of practice, it was felt that this would be too prescriptive, instead it was felt best to use young peoples experiences, thoughts and opinions to explore some of the fundamental ingredients necessary to successful work with young people.

Though the research has been limited to the Craigmillar area, the process and findings are both general enough to be of value to other Community Councils, Community Planning Partnerships and other organisations and institutions who make decisions about young peoples lives, and who care about how best to involve them in this process.

We hope you find the report informative and useful.

## **Research Process**

There were three parts of the research process that are worth commenting upon. These are noted below.

### Advisory Group

An advisory group was formed at the start of the project; this was used as a tool to help structure and manage the research work. The advisory group comprised 6 young people, three males and three females, who were all supported by Scott Weatherstone of Huntershall Housing Cooperative. The group met three times during the course of the project.

Advice was also sought from Dr. Ken McCulloch of Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh. Ken's academic interests include young people and practices of citizenship, youth sub cultures and young people and social class. In total four meetings were held with Ken.

The work noted above was invaluable. Ken's input helped to refine the theoretical ideas informing the research, and the young people at Huntershall raised many possible scenarios that helped to prepare research staff for work on the ground, indeed we would have made a mess of the research work without the foresight of the young people involved.

### Preliminary Interviews

Separate interviews were held with members of the advisory group to explore their understandings of terms and concepts such as 'participation', 'decision-making' and 'consultation', and what language they themselves would use to discuss such terminology.

This work proved valuable in terms of knowing what level to pitch the research at and what vocabulary to use to describe it. This was not only vital to the success of focus group sessions with other young people, it was also valuable in terms of the publicity we put together to advertise the work.

### Focus Group Sessions

Eight focus group sessions were carried out and were co-ordinated through four different youth service providers in the Craigmillar area - Castlebrae Instep Project, Craigmillar Capacity Building Project, Café K & St. Francis Primary School. The sessions were designed to explore two main questions, which are outlined below,

1. Do young people feel excluded from decision-making processes employed by youth services, public institutions and community forums?
2. What models of practice do participants feel would be most appropriate to assist young people to engage with decision-making forums?

It is worth pointing out that though the project was focussed primarily upon how bodies such as Community Councils and Community Planning Partnerships could engage purposefully with young people, due to young peoples limited experience of these type of

forums, it was necessary to approach the issue by asking them about their experiences of attending other youth services with whom they have much more experience and familiarity. As noted previously on page 5, it was also felt that engaging young people in this way would help to make the research relevant to such agencies.

Overall 54 young people took part; 30 female and 24 male, the youngest was 11 and the eldest was 17. Young peoples participation was entirely voluntary and they were approached through their attendance at youth clubs/services within the Craigmillar Community.

As a sample this group was reasonably representative, the age range, gender balance, ethnicity and social class were all broadly reflective of the demographics of Craigmillar. Though upon reflection, perhaps more effort could have been made to find out if the sample included enough young people from the travelling community; also, it is acknowledged that no work was done with young people who do not access any mainstream youth provision, though it is doubtful that this would have changed the results in any significant way, as the sample was generally representative.

As researchers, our experience of working with young people led us to believe that we would have to make the focus group sessions informal and participatory; we also acknowledged that they should include a level of amusement and banter. We felt young people spend enough time in structured/formal learning environments and that they would not volunteer for focus group sessions if they mirrored such conditions.

The focus groups were taken forward using a giant Snakes & Ladders board game, which is laid out on a large plastic sheet and has a giant inflatable dice. To play the game, participants themselves have to take up positions on the large mat. At the start of each focus group we explained to participants that we were going to play two versions of the game, one employing the normal game rules, and the other using rules we had made up ourselves.

Participants were then invited to play the game using the normal game rules; this helped to break the ice, refresh their memories of the game and have a laugh. After about 15 minutes, we brought this game to an end and explained to young people that we would be playing with new rules. We advised that the game would start normally, but that we would intervene during the game and make changes. We advised that when each participant completed the game, they would have access to a reward table, which included sweets, fruit, fruit juice and cake.

Five minutes into the start of the second game, we started to make arbitrary rule changes; we moved some young people on in the game, we allowed one or two to go straight to the rewards table, we also moved one



*Snakes & Ladders at Bingham Fayre*



Snakes & Ladders at Castlebrae Instep Project

We then asked young people whether this kind of situation happens in their general everyday life and specifically their participation within organisations who have a responsibility to work with young people. This discussion helped us to explore young peoples experiences of participation and to gain a sense of what worked and what didn't.

or two of the young people back in the game and put one or two into the 'sin-bin', from where they couldn't take part in the game at all.

At the end of the second session, we brought all young people together and rewarded them equally from the rewards table in order to ensure a sense of fairness & equality.

We also used this time to have a discussion with participants about their experiences of the game. We asked them to reflect upon the second game specifically and to state how it had felt being rewarded or punished due to rule changes. In every session we asked young people whether it was fair to conclude that decisions, which they had no input into, were being made about their participation and status within the game – some young people benefiting from these decisions, whilst others lost out.

## **Main Findings**

Drawing upon the research questions detailed on page six, the findings are summarised in two stages. The first section looks at whether young people felt that the Snakes & Ladders game was reflective of their experiences of participation with youth groups, community forums and public services. The second section is used to detail young peoples feelings about the types of participatory strategies/activities they would find useful.

### The voice of youth...

As noted previously, eight different sessions were held with youth groups. All but one of the groups felt that the amended Snakes & Ladders game did reflect their experiences of participation. This is a significant finding, this means that the vast majority of young people taking part in this research feel excluded from the decision-making processes employed by some of the services and institutions with whom they have contact. This answers the first of our research questions as detailed in page 6 of this report.

Most of the examples young people gave to demonstrate their strength of feeling related to services underpinned by a culture of discipline, this included sports clubs and contact with the Police; young people felt that there is a reluctance amongst some officers to take their views seriously when investigating issues related to anti social behaviour. Young people felt frustrated, as they have no official means to challenge these actions.

Most of the examples given however, related to frustrations about school, where young people felt their opinions are least considered. After further questioning, most participants comments centred upon the manner in which lessons are conducted and the manner in which teachers address them.

Specific examples of such perceptions included general everyday lessons which pupils feel are taught too formally and where teachers are perceived as acting authoritatively; young people felt that School would be better if lessons were conducted more informally and if teachers used positive body language to show they are interested in what pupils have to say. Two groups also spoke about PE lessons, where female pupils felt frustrated because they get made to do male centred sports.

The point to make in citing these examples, is that, on this testimony, pupils have little power to challenge these dynamics in any meaningful manner. Though they can try to address these issues direct with tutors, there seems to be no official process for these pupils to engage in constructive dialogue with tutors.

In order to restore some balance to these results, (it would be wholly unfair if what started off as a review of youth participation in decision making processes ended up as a heavy critique of local teaching practices) it is worth noting that, as anticipated, young people made no mention at all of either Craigmillar Community



*Local youth workers learn how to use Snakes & Ladders as an educational tool*



*St. Francis Pupil Council play Snakes & Ladders*

Council or Craigmillar Partnership. Though, it cannot simply be deduced from this that these organisations make policy that is unreflective of young peoples needs, it does tend to prove, as anticipated through this research project, that more needs to be done to engage young people.

Coincidentally, the one session where experiences differed was held with the St. Francis Primary School Pupil Council. We met with nine pupils from p4 to p7 who provided rich descriptions of their involvement in this democratic process.

It became clear during discussion, that the Pupil Council provides a very powerful learning experience in regard to participative democracy, the process seemed fairly rigorous and young people spoke enthusiastically about their experiences. The main detail is described below,

- Each class from p4 to p7 elects a class rep
- Anyone in the class can stand for election and the class vote for the person they want to represent them; sometimes voting extends over two or three rounds.
- The agenda of each pupil council meeting is set from the bottom up, each class rep asks their friends to write about the issues that they feel are important within the school context. Each class rep then takes issues forward to the pupil council for discussion.

Upon reflection, it would have been interesting to enquire what changes young people have managed to effect in school policy, it would also have been useful to see if the wider school population shared this view of the pupil council.

#### Cultures & Attitudes...

During four focus group sessions, participants gave examples of positive experiences of participation; such experiences occurred through attendance at a number of youth work organisations and whilst attending college; from these conversations we were able to start thinking about the ingredients essential to successful youth engagement. When young people were describing these experiences, it was striking that they mainly described an informal process where organisations promote a general participatory culture, which is underpinned by genuine participatory attitudes of staff. More information is provided below,

- Young people gave examples of involvement in planning the weekly activities provided by youth organisations. Participants in one focus group explained that they sit down with workers at a local organisation at the start of each term and discuss and plan activities and trips in accordance with the club's budget. Similarly, one group explained that the organisation they attend undertake constant consultation and evaluation work, which is then used to plan



*Focus group discussion with St. Francis*

activities and to refine the project's practice in relation to young peoples needs and expectations. When describing these approaches, participants displayed knowledge of different consultative techniques including, questionnaires, surveys and focus group discussion.

- Young people felt that their relationships with youth workers/college tutors were essential to successful youth engagement. Several groups talked at length about such relationships, they described how workers talk at their level and treat them with respect. Participants also talked about how supportive workers can be when they are facing tough choices and dilemmas, workers were perceived as being genuinely interested in young peoples affairs, helping them explore areas of concern and helping them to access appropriate services.
- Drawing upon these comments, participants also felt that workers have an important role to play when implementing any participatory initiatives. They recognised that workers are professionally trained and that this equips them with the skills to set up and administer participatory approaches, however, they felt that workers should be limited to this type of supportive role, they felt that it was important that young people only make decisions.

## **Main Learning**

There has been a number of key learning points from this research project; it is important to note that though this learning has been constructed using the evidence provided by young people, it also involves a degree of analysis and interpretation by researchers. Though we have tried hard not to stray too far from the thoughts, opinions and experiences of research participants, the points detailed below may reflect some of our own biases and prejudices.

Anyway, enough of such musings, the key learning points are detailed below...

1. Young people in Craigmillar have demonstrated that participation works best when the organisations involved are underpinned by a strong participatory culture. Though young people did not express it in such explicit terms, the work taken forward by the youth organisations they attend was underpinned by a commitment to view young people on equal terms as adults, as people who have the right to express and make decisions based upon their needs, opinions, experiences and interests. Where this culture is lacking, it may be that participatory strategies employed by decision-making bodies become decorative and tokenistic, as more of a PR exercise rather than a fundamental reality.
2. Drawing on the point noted above, participation seems to work best if it is informal and organic. Though young people mentioned knowledge of specific consultation techniques, these seemed to be rolled out naturally and as part of an ongoing process, rather than as part of some hyped up one off exercise. This seemed to make young people relaxed about their involvement in such processes; it also gave them genuine faith and confidence within the system.
3. A commitment to youth participation also requires adequate resources; our research has demonstrated that where organisations are engaging successfully with young people, it has involved substantial levels of committed staffing. Staff involved in this work all seemed to have a sound knowledge of the type of issues that young people face and a willingness to work patiently with them to help resolve issues. It would therefore seem imperative that organisations think about these issues up front, prior to any engagement with young people. Young people will quickly become disillusioned if there is not a consistency in staff or appropriate resources to see the project through.
4. Reflecting upon the research work, it seems that there is a tendency amongst us all to use terms such as ‘participation’, ‘consultation’ and ‘decision-making’ interchangeably, as if they all mean and refer to the same thing. However, though such terms are all closely related, they do refer to separate activities. Consultation and decision-making refer to specific techniques and practices used to include people within the democratic process; the term consultation relates to practical activities designed to explore local opinion, this may include activities such as facilitating focus groups or sending out questionnaires; the term decision-making is linked to the specific structures different bodies employ to conduct business and

make policy, such structures may be exclusive and allow elected or appointed representatives only to make decisions, or they may involve a degree of power sharing by devolving power to the wider population.

The term participation relates to ways in which people are included within the consultation and decision-making process. Different consultation and decision-making activities will obviously involve young people in different ways and will inevitably produce different results.

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