

How To

Understand and work with infrastructure organisations

This How To guide offers participation workers an introduction to voluntary and community youth sector infrastructure or network organisations. It provides information on local, regional and national networks. Through case studies the guide also looks at some practical methods of involving children and young people within infrastructure organisations.

Voluntary and community youth organisations and networks are generally not perceived to have direct contact with young people. In contrast to front line youth organisations, they are primarily seen as networks for organisations: for the adult volunteers or staff that work within them. However, they are now developing both their own youth participation practices and their role in supporting youth participation with their network members.

What is infrastructure?

Infrastructure is the system or networks that provide support and services to organisations working directly with children and young people.

Infrastructure describes the physical facilities, structures, systems, relationships, people, knowledge and skills that exist to support and develop, co-ordinate, represent and promote front line organisations thus enabling them to deliver their missions more effectively.

ChangeUp (2004)

What is an infrastructure organisation?

The voluntary youth and community sector has organisations that support this infrastructure at local, regional and national levels such as Councils for Voluntary Youth Services (CVYSs), Resource Centres, networks and umbrella organisations. Collectively they have come to be known as infrastructure organisations.

Infrastructure organisations are those

whose primary purpose is to provide infrastructure functions or services (support and development, co-ordination, representation and promotion) to front line organisations. They are sometimes called umbrella organisations, second tier organisations or intermediary organisations.

ChangeUp (2004)

What does an infrastructure organisation do?

Infrastructure organisations perform some or all of the following functions:

- Practical help (advice, information, training, consultancy)
- Acting as a voice for voluntary youth sector work
- Setting and disseminating standards and good practice
- Acting as an interface with funders
- Providing co-ordinating and networking opportunities
- Supporting the development of new and innovative work with young people

Infrastructure organisations – whether local, regional or national – also offer a platform for communicating directly with government and funders on issues of funding, policy and other strategic initiatives. These groups will often consult with infrastructure bodies in order to reach a wide range of organisations efficiently.



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Why involve children and young people?

Improving the lives of children and young people is the main aim for infrastructure organisations. By involving children and young people in their work, infrastructure organisations can ensure that they comply with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In particular, they will comply with Article 12 which gives children and young people the right to express their views and to have these views given due weight in all matters affecting them.

In addition, the Every Child Matters outcomes demand that all organisations that provide services to children and young people work together in more integrated and effective ways to ensure better outcomes for them. Involving children and young people in infrastructure organisations or networks also means that they will be driven by the needs of children and young people and led by them.

Listed below are a number of the benefits of involving children and young people:

1) Benefits for children and young people

- Participate and take up new and exciting opportunities and activities
- Get to have a real say in organisations, communities and in decisions that are made that affect them
- Feel like they can actually make a difference
- Develop and refine skills they have learnt working with their own projects or organisations
- Learn new skills, gain knowledge and develop confidence
- Strengthen their self-esteem, identity and sense of pride
- Help create positive change in their community
- Make new friends.

2) Benefits for local organisations

- Opportunity for local voices or agenda to be heard on a wider stage
- Networking opportunities
- Chance to find like-minded groups in other areas with similar aims with the possibility of joint working
- Further engagement of children and young people in groups as they access a wider range of opportunities
- Wider recognition for organisations that can have a positive impact on funding and sustainability
- Access to wider range of funding streams
- Opportunity to showcase work on a wider stage.

3) Benefits for infrastructure organisations

- Gain a greater understanding of the issues affecting children and young people today
- Learn from and appreciate the ideas, energy and skills of children and young people
- Understand the needs of children and young people today more fully
- Interact with children and young people in positive and constructive ways helping to overcome misconceptions and mistrust that often exist between generations
- Better, more informed planning and project decisions
- Better prioritisation of work according to what will have the greatest impact for children young people
- More effective and efficient targeting of resources
- Opportunities to develop children and young person-led solutions
- Access to funding which is only open to organisations that can demonstrate genuine user involvement
- Meet legislative requirements and current accepted good practice standards on youth participation and children's rights.

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4) Benefits for communities and our society

- Contribute towards a more active and inclusive community
- Help to create a culture of participation
- Provide a voice for children and young people who are frequently left out of decision-making
- May contribute to better social cohesion by ensuring that children and young people are included in planning and community decisions.

How do infrastructure organisations involve children and young people?

Participation can take many different forms and approaches; ranging from children and young people-led projects and community action, to participating in joint decision-making processes with adults around services. In the same way, the involvement of children and young people in infrastructure organisations can take many forms depending on what is right or relevant for that organisation or network and what it is trying to achieve.

In contrast to locally based activities, those offered by infrastructure organisations are more likely to require a longer term commitment. A common opportunity offered by infrastructure organisations is for children and young people to be part of a youth forum made up of children and young people from around a region or the country. Because of travel and cost factors forums will often meet on periodic residential weekends and keep in contact in between by regular email bulletins, telephone calls and web forums. Such residential events offer youth forum members an opportunity to get to know each other, share their knowledge and expertise and develop projects together. Such projects might include: planning an event; undertaking a piece of research; finding out more about the organisation they are part of; developing training courses; making DVDs; writing articles; and being involved in consultations.

At different times there may also be a need for different levels of participation. Some of the issues that might impact on the level of children and young people's involvement might be:

- Children and young people's interest in an issue or activity - this should be an informed choice made with an awareness of the impact that the issue will have on them
- Children and young people's ability to commit time – young people are often juggling education, employment, family commitments and a hectic social life! And many activities and meetings are still scheduled at times that young people are studying
- Timescale - often staff in networks are asked to respond to things in a timeframe which prevents them from consulting with anyone (adults or children and young people)
- Resources may impact on what activities can be carried out with children and young people and the extent to which they can get involved.

Different approaches for involving children and young people in networks

Below are a number of examples of the ways in which children and young people may participate in infrastructure organisations:

- Youth-led community action and projects
- Youth-led campaigns
- Use of creative and performing arts
- Involvement in representative structures
- Peer education
- Peer mentoring
- Volunteering
- Joint decision-making with adults
- Youth-led research
- Youth-led evaluation
- Involvement in policy setting
- Involvement in staff recruitment and tendering of work
- Youth-led grant panels

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The following grid gives some examples of how local, regional or national infrastructure organisations or networks involve children and young people. It also states why this involvement is important and gives examples of some possible activities for involving them:

What does a network do?	Why is involving children and young people important?	Possible activities – these are just to get you thinking. Share them and generate ideas with staff, your network and the children and young people in it
Practical assistance	Children and young people help to come up with creative solutions for offering practical support and, by becoming involved as volunteers, are able to feel more a part of the network	Pooling of children and young people's skills as a resource for the network, leading to a skills exchange between children and young people where they help out other projects. For example, a young DJ network that can be used by different projects
Voice (representation, promotion and negotiation)	By having children and young people involved in representing them, organisations gain credibility. Funders and other policy makers will be more convinced of the legitimacy of the work and other children and young people are more likely to be attracted	<p>Children and young people attend meetings representing the network and illustrate need based on their experiences of attending voluntary and community youth organisations</p> <p>Children and young people develop presentations (maybe using art or drama) showing the issues facing organisations in the network</p> <p>Children and young people act as advocates raising awareness about the network and recruiting new members</p> <p>The network can support the structure for children and young people to have a say on a county or regional level (eg Cumbria Youth Alliance, Gateshead Youth Council)</p>
Standard setting	Children and young people's perspective is essential when setting standards because, when they have a choice, children and young people will vote with their feet if a service is not good enough. In order to know what is wanted and what makes a youth project good, children and young people – the experts – should be asked	<p>Children and young people develop standards based on their needs and expectations from organisations and services</p> <p>Young assessors visit and interview staff, volunteers, children and young people to assess local service provision and organisations against standards</p>
Acting as an extension of the funder	Grants and funding will be allocated according to priorities of children and young people as well. Funding will go to projects that children and young people will be more likely to use	Young grant givers develop their own funding criteria, assess and decide on grant applications and monitor grant use (this may include visiting the projects)
Co-ordination and networking	Involving children and young people in planning networking events and as facilitators often leads to a more active, exciting and action-focused event which is more likely to encourage people, especially volunteers, to attend. By inviting children and young people as attendees you are more likely to attract their workers as well who prioritise face to face work above networking events. Finally, huge energy can be injected into projects when children and young people and workers from different projects get to meet up providing both children, young people and adults with fresh perspectives and ideas	<p>Children and young people involved in identifying themes for an event</p> <p>Children and young people help to plan programme and identifying speakers</p> <p>Children and young people help to run and facilitate sessions</p> <p>Young volunteers help with contacting organisations and event management before and on the day</p>

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How do you get your children and young people involved in infrastructure organisations?

- **What are the opportunities?**

Through involving a representative sample of children and young people in a forum or consultative group, infrastructure organisations are providing the opportunity for young people to have their views heard on a wider platform. The kinds of opportunities on offer can include: having their voices heard through government consultations; meeting with ministers and policy makers at events; travel (often overseas); invitations to conferences; delivering workshops at events; going to residencies; making films; and sharing experiences and knowledge with a diverse range of other children and young people. The only limit is the creativity of the children and young people.

- **Where can you find out about opportunities?**

Opportunities to get involved with infrastructure organisations are often advertised through organisations' e-bulletins and magazines, and also through other networks. It is worth registering with a range of networks in order to find out what current opportunities are available.

- **How do children and young people apply?**

Some organisations adopt a formal registration and membership policy where children and young people can join the project for a set time and then step down to make way for a new group. Others have a rolling membership where members can join at any time and stay part of the project until they reach an upper age limit.

The first approach works best when there is a finite project to complete with a limited number of roles, such as forming a management committee. One of the benefits of this time limited approach is that it can help form a very task focused group.

The second approach suits organisations looking to provide, with the children and young people, a wide range of

opportunities. These might include simultaneously developing a DVD project; developing a training programme; advising members of staff on strategy; and anything else that the children and young people might suggest. The benefits of this second approach are that children and young people are able to choose from a range of opportunities to get involved with, no matter what their age, interests, time constraints or other barriers. It also means that opportunities can be extended to children and young people who traditionally are not involved with infrastructure organisations – the 'hard to reach' or 'easy to ignore'.

- **How can infrastructure organisations provide a larger stage for local and 'hard to hear' voices?**

Through events, such as conferences, infrastructure organisations often invite local and 'hard to hear' voices to showcase specific areas of work through presentations and workshops. Publications, including online ones produced by infrastructure organisations, also offer an opportunity to showcase areas of work which might otherwise go unnoticed by those outside a project's local sphere.

- **What support will you need to give?**

There is often a lot of travel required for children and young people involved in infrastructure organisations. Where children or young people are under 16 or require extra assistance you may need to travel with them and possibly attend residential events and other meetings to support them. Particularly for younger members, you may need to help them read documents and prepare for meetings and events. Some infrastructure organisations involve children and young people for fixed periods of time so you may also need to help a member plan their involvement and give apologies on occasion.

- **What can the impact of involvement be – upwards and downwards?**

All the above opportunities can provide great material for a child or young person's CV. In addition to skills such as chairing meetings, presentation skills and learning to

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travel independently, participants will also have had less tangible skills development such as developing confidence and gaining access to new experiences and people. Taking up an opportunity with an infrastructure organisation can be particularly valuable where a child or young person has done as much as they can with a local group but still wants to be involved. By engaging on a wider platform they are able to use their experience and represent their group on another level.

However, because involvement with an infrastructure organisation often means less frequent, but longer meetings (often over the course of a weekend) it can sometimes be difficult to engage with and keep momentum going in periods when the group is not meeting. A good infrastructure organisation should maintain regular contact with children and young people who are involved as well as feedback on ongoing developments.

Case Study One Supporting children and young people to get involved in regional structures

The Children's Society

In May 2006, the Children's Society launched its Participation Strategy. This enabled the organisation to set out its vision and principles on how and why it is important for the whole organisation to involve children and young people in collective processes to influence and work alongside us in meaningful dialogue and opportunities. During the last 18 months, we have seen various new and creative processes to engage children and young people from all over the country.

Each initiative/ idea is developed into a project based on whether it is a one-off piece of consultation or an ongoing piece of participation work. An example of an ongoing piece of work is:

We wanted children and young people to influence the way a regional budget was spent. They were given an allocation and after a lot of preparation and discussion, they are now allocating funding to other groups of children and young people that apply for it.

One of the main challenges for this piece of work was bringing people together from different parts of the region at times convenient to them. To make them more accessible meetings were scheduled for school holidays, Saturdays and weekend residential. We have also made use of email and other forms of ecommunications to keep people involved when they cannot be there in person.

Language can also get in the way of effective participation and, in particular, the use of jargon and acronyms can make meetings hard to follow. Young people came up with the idea of a traffic light system when discussing finances that showed when something was going well or on time (green), was unclear (yellow) or going badly or late (red). Reducing and explaining jargon and acronyms ensured everyone was able to participate fully.

Another key challenge was to reinforce the need to build in longer timescales and provide early notice to enable those directly working with children and young people to plan into their preparation time and give children and young people plenty of advance notice of meetings and events.

The Children's Society is a national organisation in England and has championed the right for children and young people to be involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Based on its Christian values and its mission to be a social justice, campaigning organisation, children and young people have had the opportunity to have a voice in the work of the organisation and as a result this has influenced the work of the organisation. For more information visit www.childrensociety.org.uk

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How can you help to support the work of infrastructure organisations and networks?

By simply becoming a member of a relevant infrastructure organisation or network you are supporting their work and reinforcing the idea that organisations working together have greater influence. By joining a network you can be involved in the development of innovative working practices and help shape policy.

Common objections to involving children and young people in infrastructure organisations

It is not always straightforward to involve children and young people in infrastructure organisations and you may hear objections from different sides. If you are able to counter the following list of objections and misconceptions, you will help to build understanding of the aims of infrastructure organisations. In addition, you will also enhance the status of your children or young people's participation:

It is a network of organisations that does not work directly with children and young people

The network will improve the way it identifies areas of work, prioritises them and develops projects if children and young people are involved. Children and young people's involvement will mean that the network becomes better at targeting its work for maximum impact.

Children and young people are a key active part of voluntary and community youth organisations and their contributions, ideas and action can be a valuable asset to both your organisation and infrastructure networks. An infrastructure network should be able to demonstrate that everything it does will have a benefit for children and young people and involving children and young people will help to keep a check on this.

There is not the time, money or staff to involve children and young people

Increasingly money is being made available by funders specifically to involve children and young people in decision-making and to

support their participation in initiatives like local, regional and national networks.

Lack of money is not an excuse not to listen. A key element of any network is contact and visits to the organisations within a network provide an ideal opportunity to talk informally with children and young people.

There may be activities that can be developed in partnership with your member organisations which do not require extra resources and bring benefit to both the organisation, your network and the children and young people involved. For example, running a workshop at a conference can showcase the work of the group and advertise opportunities to a wider audience.

And remember, when children and young people become actively involved they are themselves a valuable resource and are often keen to take the lead on recruiting other children and young people.

Children and young people find adult meetings or work boring

A common comment from adults is that children and young people are not interested in the day-to-day business of being involved in an infrastructure organisation. But many of the adults attending these meetings also do not find them interesting, so having children and young people there should be seen as an opportunity for everyone to work to make them more interesting!

You can help keep infrastructure organisations on track by always relating their work directly to the issues in children and young people's lives. This will help to keep children and young people interested and the network relevant (remember that everything they do should ultimately have an impact on children and young people's lives). Now you just have to make it fun!

Children and young people do not have the knowledge and understanding to take part at a strategic level

Children and young people are the experts in their own lives and this is essential knowledge for strategic planning of services for children and young people.

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Often children and young people also have a focus on action and creating change which can also help to focus strategic decision-making on the real issues rather than wasting resources, time and energy on the politics between organisations.

Participation at this level is also a valuable opportunity for children and young people to learn skills that will be essential for their

participation and success in adult life.

Finally, never underestimate children and young people and their ability to judge a situation and act strategically. Often the problem is not that children and young people are unable to negotiate or advocate effectively but rather that they have not been given all the information about the adult agendas at play.

Case Study Two Getting involved in decision-making processes

Young Lives

As an infrastructure organisation that supports voluntary groups who work with children and young people it has long been a priority for us to involve children and young people in the decision-making process of our organisation and to enable our members to do the same.

How are young people involved with Young Lives?

Young people are involved with Young Lives, either directly or through our membership of voluntary and community sector organisations. Their involvement comes through regular meetings, virtually via email and other forms of ecommunications.

What type of opportunities do we offer?

We offer training in governance through Youth at the Table (see the Find Out More section on page 11). Shadowing staff members and trustees helps children and young people to understand the organisation better and get involved in decision making. We already have a young person attending our staff meetings and they are offering really useful suggestions about how we can improve the meetings. This process needs to be applied to our trustee board and the learning from that applied to future development.

What will children and young people learn from their involvement?

It is a long process with many challenges but it is definitely a worthwhile one. By involving children and young people in the organisation and encouraging and supporting our members to involve children and young people we are able to provide a) opportunities for individual young people to learn new skills and have new experiences b) enable groups of young people to work together to learn from each other and c) ensure, through the contribution they make to this organisation and our members, that young people are seen as an integral part of the community rather than a challenge to it.

For more information visit: www.younglives.org.uk

Tips for making it all work together

In this guide we have looked at some ideas for activities for involving children and young people in local, regional and national networks. Here are some tips for making them successful whatever the activity.

- Make it relevant to children and young people's lives. Often policy and strategy documents are so full of jargon and references to previous papers or initiatives it is difficult to see straight away what the intended impact on the lives of children and young people is.
- Explore children and young people's experience. The children and young people are the experts in their own lives. Learn from this expertise and how they experience day-to-day issues and services.
- Provide opportunity and support for further involvement. Many children and young people prefer action to just talking so it is good to have the door open for further involvement and support available if the children and young people are keen to lead their own action on a particular issue.
- Do not ignore ideas, suggestions or advice have been offered. Children and young people are giving their valuable free time to participate and if an organisation cannot or does not want to act on advice given then there should be feedback and an opportunity for dialogue about it.
- Timing, location and frequency of meetings should be planned and negotiated with children and young people. Education, part time / full time employment and family commitments mean that it is often tricky to find times that suit everyone.
- Make sure it is not tokenistic! Be honest with yourselves about how much the children and young people's opinions and advice will influence what happens. If the agenda is already set and in reality is unlikely to change then it will be tokenistic to raise expectations within a group of children and young people that their activity will have real impact.
- Make use of email, internet and social networking sites to keep in touch with children and young people. The size of local, regional and national networks means that involving children and young people in infrastructure organisations is not always straightforward. Young people will often jump at the chance to design a page for you on myspace, bebo or facebook!

Case Study Three Overcoming the challenges – a young person's perspective

Changemakers, Young Advocates programme

Steve was a Young Advocate on the Changemakers flagship Young Advocates (Y ACT) programme and was placed in the Children and Learners Department at a Government Office. Here his role was to support the implementation of elements of their strategy to involve children and young people in a youth-led way. Working in this way created a number of challenges both for Steve and for the Government Office.

As a large, fast-paced infrastructure organisation the Government Office could be perceived as a daunting place of work with an intimidating environment and a special language of its own. To address this potential barrier, Steve was supported by a mentor throughout his time at the Office and his work involved starting to make the Government Office's culture more young people friendly.

Throughout his time as a Young Advocate he worked on a number of projects including:

Introducing the newly appointed Director of Children and Learners to groups of children and young people across the North East.

Planning and presenting a film about how Government Office for the North East involves children and young people in the work that it does.

Gathering case-studies from young asylum seekers and refugees about their experiences of living in the North East.

Promoting the Involving Children and Young People strategy, internally and externally at Government Office.

A key part of Steve's work was to ensure his project was led by young people as far as possible. This presented a challenge to the Government Office who had specific outcomes they required from his work which were difficult to balance with Steve and other young people's priorities. With support from his mentor, Steve arranged a meeting between Changemakers, his mentor and a link at the Government Office to overcome this issue and a compromise was reached giving Steve more control over his project.

Steve worked with a range of existing groups and organisations who were involved in or affected by the Government Office's work around children and young people's services. His aim was to engage with children and young people from all over his region to feed into his work and that of the Government Office. He facilitated their involvement by visiting groups himself rather than asking them to travel to one central place at the same time. This ensured that he could reach as wide a group of children and young people as possible and use their input to develop practical solutions back at his home organisation.

Changemakers enables young people to play a positive and active role in society by giving them the opportunity to develop and manage innovative community projects.

Its flagship programme, Young Advocates (Y ACT) challenges, empowers and supports young people and organisations to work together to make a difference in their communities and to advocate and develop the youth-led approach in their organisation's strategy and practice.

Y ACT is founded on a three-way partnership, supported by Changemakers. The Young Advocate, aged between 16 and 25, is contracted and paid by Changemakers

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to work with a Host Organisation for around 20 days a year. The Host Organisation provides a Mentor to support the young person, reflect on the learning and develop the youth-led approach within the Host Organisation. For more information visit

www.changemakers.org.uk

Find Out More

This list of publications and websites should help you to find more detailed information and follow up areas of interest.

Publications:

Wright, L and Jeffs, T (1999)

Firm Foundations: A Report into the Infrastructure Provision for Voluntary Youth Organisations in England. NCVYS.

This report surveys current provision on the English voluntary youth sector and recommends strategies for the future.

Available from www.ncvys.org.uk

Wade, H and Badham, B (2003)

Hear by Right: standards for the active involvement of children and young people. The National Youth Agency/Local

Government Association. Hear by Right offers tried and tested standards for organisations across the statutory and voluntary sector to assess and improve practice and policy on the active involvement of children and young people. Available from

www.nya.org.uk

Participation: Spice It Up! Practical Tools for Engaging Children and Young People in Planning and Consultations. Save the

Children (2003)

Participation activities with a creative twist.

Available from www.savethechildren.org.uk

Youth at the Table. British Youth Council (2006)

Gives children and young people the right skills and knowledge to be effective members when involved in organisational governance, i.e. decision-making. Available from www.byc.org.uk

Websites:

http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_basis

The BASIS programme aims to improve the infrastructure support available to all voluntary and community sector organisations in England (accessed 4 February 2008).

<http://capacitybuilders.org.uk/>

Capacitybuilders is a non-departmental government body that exists to create a more effective third sector by improving support for third sector organisations (accessed 4 February 2008)

Includes the following publication:

ChangeUp: Capacity Building and Infrastructure Framework for the Voluntary and Community Sector Home Office Communications Directorate (2004)

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

Full details of the Every Child Matters: Change for Children approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19 (accessed 4 February 2008)

www.unicef.org/crc

The UNICEF website has the full text of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (accessed 4 February 2008)

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Participation Works enables organisations to involve children and young people effectively in the development, delivery and evaluation of the services which affect their lives.

The Participation Works How To guides are a series of booklets that provide practical information, useful tips and case studies of good participation practice. Each one provides an introduction to a different element of participation to help organisations enhance their work with children and young people.

Participation Works is an online Gateway to the world of children and young people's participation. Visit www.participationworks.org.uk to access comprehensive information on policy, practice, training and innovative ideas.

Participation Works

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