

# Advice for Local Councils on Creating a Youth Council

## Why set up a Youth Council?

Young people are the future of our communities and it is important that we, as parish and town councils, invest in them.

According to the Office of National Statistics, nearly a quarter of our national population is made up of people under the age of eighteen. They may not yet be able to vote yet but it is essential that these people are not ignored in our communities.

Fact: Article 12 of the UN Human Rights Convention states that young people, under the age of 18 have the legal right to formally express their opinions and for those opinions to be taken seriously. It places a legal responsibility on the decision-makers to consult young people about the things that will affect them and recommends that this be done through establishing youth based groups such as youth councils. For more information, please visit [www.article12.com](http://www.article12.com)

Despite all the bad press the vast majority of young people are social, not anti-social. As legislation increases to 'protect' society against the 'anti-social behaviour' of the young (and the role of parish and town council's will be increased in this area too), young people are finding themselves increasingly marginalised in their local communities. It is therefore important that young people are involved in the decisions made in the local community that affect them.

Quote: 'They (young people) are valuable not only as future adults but people who have a place in society now... Not involving children and young people has its consequences. It breeds discontent and resentment... It is only through having rights that young people learn to respect other people's rights' C. Willow (1997) 'Hear! Hear! Promoting Children and Young People's Democratic Participation in Local Government', LGIU

Facts: More young people are victims of crime than any other group in society. West Midlands police reported over 1 million calls from local residents complaining that young people were simply 'there'. New anti-social behaviour laws have demonised and marginalized the young in our society', West Midlands Police Chief Constable

Developing youth councils can act as a real means of incorporating young people into our communities and can lead to a more safer, vibrant and sustainable community for all residents.

## Who Benefits?

Not only do young people benefit from setting up a youth council but your parish or town council and the local community as a whole benefits.

Youth Councils enable Young People to;

- Voice their concerns
- Participate in local government
- Be empowered to take decisions and action to improve their local community.

Youth Councils enable Local Councils to;

- Truly represent the whole of the community they live in
- Become more vibrant, modern and dynamic
- Encourage young people to vote and become councillors when they are old enough
- Improve services to young people

Youth Councils enables the Local Community to;

- Become safer and more sustainable
- More vibrant and progressive
- Improve services and be more representative

## Setting Up a Youth Council

We have already established why youth councils are so important. The following section gives some step-by-step advice to setting up, developing and maintaining successful youth councils in your area.

### Representation and Membership

There is no set age range for youth councils. However, most encompass an age range of around 11-18 or 13-18 year-olds and these are both appropriate age ranges for local youth councils to adopt.

**Tips:** The 11-18 age range is very large and you may want to consider developing some sort of mentoring system between the older and younger members, or indeed between the town councillors and the youth councillors, to ensure that everyone develops their roles and does not lose interest.

It is important to have an inclusive membership whilst retaining some structure. You may want to develop some core membership through schools, youth clubs etc while still allowing for young people to turn up and become involved in the youth council.

You will need to establish how many youth councillors you feel would be suitable for the size of your community, whilst bearing in mind the number of people who would be interested in standing. It can be difficult to get young people to stand for election which is why it may be a good idea to get at least some of your representation directly through schools etc.

### Ownership

It is essential that the young people themselves choose who they wish to be represented by (and not the council or school teachers). It, therefore, may be useful to draw up nomination forms, along the lines used by the parish/town council themselves, and make them available to young people wishing to become youth councils (most likely through schools). It is then up to the people concerned to get themselves nominated by their peer group

### Age and geographical considerations

It may be useful to aim for a certain number of youth councillors per age group and ensure that these are spread across the geographical area you represent, in order to ensure fair representation. If you are having an election you may want to have different colour nomination forms for different age groups in order to make any nomination process simpler.

### Do we have an election?

Having an election ensures that the young people know that the parish/town council has not just selected young people to be youth councillors. However, many councils find that it is difficult to get enough young people to stand. Therefore, it might be useful to have nominations from certain schools, youth clubs etc. However, if it is done through the latter it is important that the nominations are made through other young people and not by teachers.

Although this may not be as desirable as having a direct election it will ensure that there is a core membership.

**Tips:** If you do decide to hold an election you may want to start by creating A Youth Electoral Register . This can be created by contacting all the local schools, community groups etc in your area. It is important to contact your Local Education Authority (LEA) to make sure that they are happy for you to collect this information (although there is unlikely to be a problem providing you guarantee that the register will not be given to any other source).

### **Renewing membership**

It is essential that mechanisms are put in place to ensure that membership is renewed and new young faces appear frequently. You may want to target membership on a yearly basis with core groups to ensure that new faces come through the ranks. This is where it may be useful to get school teachers and youth workers involved to ensure that the profile of the youth council is maintained.

**Tips:** You may want to advertise your youth council on the local notice board, libraries, press, web-site etc in order to ensure maximum participation. It is also advisable to run the youth council in accordance to the school year - perhaps launching the council in the autumn (not during exam time) Remember that young people are not apathetic but rather they feel that institutions do not represent them and they are powerless - make them feel that they can make a difference and your council will be a success!

### **Structure**

Most youth councils mirror the local government structure. The most popular type of youth councils are based around current parish or town council structures.

You can have a formalised structure that may mirror your actual parish or town councils structure or you may wish to adopt a more informal and flexible approach to meetings and communications etc. It is perhaps useful to consult the young people involved in what they would prefer their council to look like before you impose a structure on them. However, a mixture of formal and informal may be the best way forward. It is important that there is some formal structure so that the youth council can feed into the general workings of the council as a whole and is taken seriously as a component part of that local council with some real power and influence. At the same time some informal workings with regard to communication and style of meetings may be more appropriate and will keep young people more interested, informed and engaged.

**Tips:** A Youth Council should work in a similar way to a parish or town council Committee and should be considered a valuable component part of the council that is integrated into the formal decision making structure. Agendas and minutes should therefore be prepared by the council's administration in consultation with the Chair person of the Youth council or any other leading representative. An officer should be there to provide support, if requested and

providing all decisions made by the youth council are legal and within budget there should be no reason for the local council to intervene. All youth councils, like any other council meeting, should be open to the public and the minutes made publicly available. The minutes may contain recommendations and proposals that will need to be given due consideration, otherwise there is little point in having a youth council at all. It is also useful if councillors take an interest in the youth council and therefore ensure that there is a two way contact between the youth council and the actual council (but without being too intrusive)

### **Meetings**

It is important that there are enough meetings to ensure that decisions are agreed and the youth council is active but at the same time there should not be so many meetings that people lose interest and focus. Many councils meet once every two weeks or once every month. It is useful to have each meeting on the same day and at the same time so that people do not become confused or forget.

**Tips:** If your Youth Council decide to meet monthly to make decisions it would be useful to have some kind of communications means for the youth council between meetings (possibly via a web-based group). It may also be useful to have the meetings in a more informal setting, if appropriate, such as a youth centre, where the maximum number of young people will be encouraged to attend.

### **A Youth Council Constitution**

As with any organisation, it is essential that there is a clear aim and focus in order for the youth council to be successful. Therefore, councils may find it useful to set out some terms of reference, set of mission statements or youth council constitution. This will enable the youth council to work efficiently and achieve real results. The constitution can be similar to that of the actual council. By giving the youth council a real set of structures it will enable them to act as a properly functioning organisation with real power and responsibility over its own affairs.

A youth council constitution should include;

- A mission statement and set of aims
- The youth council structure
- Members of the council (including the executive committee or any other committees and their roles)
- How the youth council will operate (including how often it will meet etc)

Example: St Neots Youth Council have chosen to have a detailed constitution which enables them to have a clear focus and operate effectively. The youth council constitution is similar to that of any parish or town council constitution. Please go to link [www.snytc.com/files/docs/Ratified\\_Constitution.pdf](http://www.snytc.com/files/docs/Ratified_Constitution.pdf) to see St Neots Youth Council's Constitution.

# Empowering Young People through Youth Councils

## Give Real Power to Young People

It is important that your youth council is not just a talking shop but gives real power and responsibility to the young people involved.

## Financial Responsibility

It is important to set aside a budget for youth related issues (after all they do make up nearly one quarter of the population) and make sure that the youth councillors have a real input into how that money is spent.

Example: Weston-super-Mare Town Council set aside £1,000 per year for youth council projects in 2001. At the end of the 2001 financial year the youth council produced their own budget which was submitted to the town council for consideration. The youth council agrees how and what should be spent from their budget and it passes down through the normal town council expenditure processes, therefore, giving real power and responsibility to the youth council under the town council structure. A youth council should work in a similar way to a Town or Parish Council Committee, Linda Larter, clerk to Weston-super-Mare Town Council.

**Tip:** Giving a youth council its own bank account and cheque book can make young people feel truly autonomous, even though the parish/town council will need to keep at least one signature on the youth council cheque book. - ensuring that financial commitments are made only through consultation with the actual parish/town council

## Funding Opportunities

There are also funding opportunities for youth councils that you may want to encourage your youth council to tap into. It is important that councillors offer the youth councils other ideas (such as approaching business etc) and encourage their innovation.

Quote: 'Whetstone Youth Council in Leicestershire, a small group of dedicated teenagers, achieved far more than we could have expected. They proved to sceptics that, given the support and encouragement, young people can handle the responsibility. With three lottery grants to their credit and a variety of projects benefiting the whole community, their enthusiasm knows no bounds'

## Innovation

Young people may also have innovative ideas on how other services can be provided in the council that may not be seen to be specifically youth related. For example, the environment. You may also find that members of the youth council have hidden talents - such as IT, web-designing, photographic or journalistic skills, that may be of use to your council.

Fact: It has been known for councils to employ members of the youth council to develop their web-sites for a small cost or write articles in their local

newsletters. This helps both the council to develop innovative ideas and deliver more and the young people to gain valuable experience.

### **Youth Council Successes**

We have already established that it is important that young people have some real power and responsibility (preferably with a ring-fenced budget). But, what kind of things might a youth council be interested in? and what can it realistically achieve? Well that depends on the youth council and the facilities it already has available to them. Most young people say that there is not enough to do in their local communities. Developing a youth council can ensure that there are more facilities for young people and, more importantly that those facilities are tailored towards the needs of young people because they are set up by young people themselves. In addition, it creates a system of ownership and respect among the young people and ensures that the service is developed and sustained.

There are many issues that effect young people that the council may not even consider;

**Transport** - Young people (particularly in rural areas) often feel trapped through lack of transport to neighbouring towns/villages. A youth council could put pressure on local bus companies to change or provide more routes in order to meet young peoples needs and enable them to gain access to vital services in other nearby areas.

**Local Facilities** - In addition to access to existing facilities young people may want to create a graffiti wall, skate park, snooker hall or just a safe place to meet and hang out. Youth councils are often able to apply for certain grants to fund these facilities. They also represent their peer groups views and find suitable sites for various activities.

**Youth Club/Drop in Centre** - Much of the time young people just want a safe place to hang out with friends and socialise. They may also want somewhere to go to for advice and help. Youth councils are in a pposition to put together a plan detailing young people's needs and can apply for grants to achieve them

**Working for the Community** - Young people are conscious of the communities in which the live and want to improve the environment. They are often interested in conservation work, preventing vandalism, recycling projects and promoting the place in which they live

**Example:** Malpas Young Persons Parish Council (MYPPC) in Cheshire won the Home Secretary's Award for Young People in the Norwich Union Neighbourhood Watch Awards 2000. The Youth Council found that young people usually got the blame for vandalism within the village. To combat this they identified the main targets for vandalism and undertook a programme of repair and repainting. When the vandals struck once more they repainted again. The vandals soon got the message that their actions were unacceptable and graffiti in the village has now been reduced to a negligible level. The Youth Council also raised the problem of road safety in the village.

In particular they questioned why a lane that ran directly between the High School and a council housing estate was subjected to restrictions on use that prohibited cyclists from using it. The Youth Council met with the Highways Department and agreed with them a change of use that now allows cyclists to cycle to school away from the busy High Street, reducing considerably the potential for road traffic accidents. In addition to the Young Persons Award, MYPPC have also won a cheque for £1,000 to be spent on their community work.

**Tip:** Youth council's often have an idea of what they are generally looking to achieve but it might be useful for the parish/town council to give the youth council an initial project for them to get stuck into. This can often focus the youth council in its early days and prevent lost of loose discussion. It will also make the youth council feel that it is worthwhile. One idea might be to conduct a youth survey to see what young people want in the town and set some key tasks and objectives for the youth council.

## **Maintaining and Developing Successful Youth Councils**

As mentioned in section 2, it is important to renew membership in order to develop and maintain successful youth councils.

Quote: 'Redbourn Parish Council in Hertfordshire set up a Youth Council with assistance from the local youth & community services. We did not have enough interest to hold elections but did manage to start a youth council which ran successfully for a number of years. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in attracting younger members and once the group had matured and left for university the youth council folded. I would therefore stress the importance of ensuring younger councillors are regularly brought into the Youth Council to ensure its continued success', Diane Whiskin, Redbourn Parish Council clerk

Essentially, if the youth council achieves real results and leads to change in their local community it is more likely to keep its core membership base.

Here is some advice from Beverley Town Council and their very successful youth council:

- Do be prepared to commit financially
- Do provide support and advice when needed
- Don't try to dominate and be overbearing
- Do give them enough freedom
- Don't overwhelm them

## **Case Studies**

### **St Neots Town Council**

Hear from St Neots Youth Council which was set up in 2001.

[www.snytc.com](http://www.snytc.com)

### **Malpas Young Persons Parish Council (MYPPC)**

Hear about Malpas Youth Council which was set up in 1997 and has since set acted as a model for youth councils throughout Cheshire

[www.neighbourhoodwatch.net/neighbourhoodwatch/corporate/award/malpas.htm](http://www.neighbourhoodwatch.net/neighbourhoodwatch/corporate/award/malpas.htm)

### **Weston-super-Mare Town Council**

Hear from Weston-super-Mare's Youth Council, which has achieved many things since it was set up in 2001.

[www.weston-super-maretowncouncil.gov.uk/infopage.asp?infoid=297](http://www.weston-super-maretowncouncil.gov.uk/infopage.asp?infoid=297)

### **Whetstone Youth Council**

Hear from Whetstone Youth Council, the first youth council in Leicestershire.

<http://www.whetstone.org.uk>

## Useful Contacts/Publications

The British Youth Council (BYC)

[www.byc.org.uk](http://www.byc.org.uk)

Article 12

[www.article12.com](http://www.article12.com)

'The Totally Excellent Handbook', The Hampshire Association of Parish and Town Councils, 2000.

[Hampshire APTC](#)

'Youth Councils; a Brief Guide on How to Set One Up' Kate Parish, HMN Consultancy

### Local Democracy Week

In addition to setting up youth councils, parish and town councils should encourage their local community to become involved in local democracy and take an interest in the work of their local communities. Although we encourage this to be done all year round, Local Democracy Week is one way in which local councils can encourage young people and the whole of society to make their mark in their local communities.

<http://campaigns.lga.gov.uk/localdemocracy/home/>