



Youth Engagement

Overview and Scrutiny Committee Report

July 2010

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Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Acknowledgements

The Committee would like to thank the following for providing information and evidence either in person or by written response:

- Jon Wild, Senior Recreation and Sport Development Officer (Play and Young People)
- Philip Rolls, Recreation and Health Improvement Manager
- Paul Marston Weston, Head of Recreation and Health
- Pupils from Banbury School and Frank Wise School involved in the Councillor Shadowing Programme
- Members of the Bicester Youth Council
- Francesca Heffernan, Decision Making and Young People Worker, Oxfordshire County Council
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Executive Summary & Recommendation

As the Young People's Champion for Cherwell District Council, I have a particular interest in ensuring that the young people of this district have a voice. I know that as a Council we have a very successful programme of sport and recreation activities for young people delivered by excellent, committed and professional officers. This is all the more remarkable because youth services are a discretionary activity for this Council, with a limited budget and resources. I know that we should and could do more, especially with regard to youth engagement in local democracy.

This review was not about changing the voting age or recruiting teenage councillors but it was about determining whether this Council had the procedures in place to allow it to hear the views of young people on issues that impact on them.

I am pleased to say that as a result of our work my fellow councillors on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee now share my desire that this Council should build on these strong foundations and expand our youth engagement activities.

The Committee believes that promoting democracy and citizenship amongst the under 18 age group does have an important role to play in shaping and promoting a more positive image of young people within the community and it has very clear links to our corporate priority to be a district of opportunity for our [younger] residents.

This does not have to be a costly exercise for the Council. For a relatively modest investment we can make better use of the current resources and exploit existing systems and relationships. The Council already has an effective and valuable resource in the calibre of the officers working within the youth services team. Their commitment and the enthusiasm has allowed us to punch above our weight. But they have been working in a vacuum in so far as the Council has no clear policy or systematic approach for the democratic engagement of young people. We need to address that omission.

We believe that the excellent work conducted during Local Democracy Week should be extended to provide a sustained programme of activities throughout the year. And as not all young people are part of the traditional school system the same approach should be extended to include other forms of further education and youth employment.

It is essential that the Council does not treat this as a box ticking activity and bombard our young citizens with all manner of information and consultations. Effective engagement with young people must be centred on listening and responding to feedback on relevant topics and delivering tangible results in a timely manner.

We firmly believe that engaging our population at a young age is likely to see a more engaged adult population. If we are to see a rise in the number of people voting across the district and becoming engaged with the Council then socialisation at their formative stage is vital. Failure to do so will continue the trend towards a disengaged adult population not taking an interest in their community and ultimately leading to the dilution of community spirit and engagement in the political process.

Failure to make the necessary investment in this area now, even in these austere times, will have a profound impact on the future.

Our recommendation is simple:

That the Council should adopt a more pro-active and structured approach to youth engagement in local democracy and that the Young People's Champion and officers should be invited to develop a formal policy and action plan to achieve this.

Cllr Dan Sames

Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Young People's Champion
July 2010

Introduction

Objectives of the review

In the summer of 2009 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to conduct a scrutiny review on how the Council engages with young people. Such a review would be timely given the growing profile of democratic awareness and the emphasis placed on involving young people in decision making.

The Committee considered that undertaking such a review could assist the Council in gauging the effectiveness of its performance and delivery against national indicators: NI 110 (Young People's participation in positive activities) and NI 21 Dealing with concerns about anti-social behaviour and crime by the local council and police.

The Committee agreed the following terms of reference for the review:

1. To consider whether the Council has suitable mechanisms in place to actively involve young people.
2. To examine how the Council currently involves young people in its decision making, operation and provision of services, (including but not limited to consultation, communication and education).
3. To consider whether this follows best practice and is of a suitable standard.
4. To consider how the Council is contributing towards the promotion of citizenship locally and review the activities of Local Democracy Week.
5. To ascertain whether the Council is doing all that it can to ensure it is a suitable environment to enfranchise young people.

Gathering the evidence

The review was conducted on a committee basis as the members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that this approach was more appropriate than a Task & Finish Group study. The Committee met in July 2009 for an initial briefing and to review background documents. This was followed by further discussions to review 'evidence' in the autumn of 2009.

The Committee invited representatives from the local Youth Councils and the Youth Parliament to participate in a committee meeting on 9 February 2010. Pupils from Banbury School involved in the Councillor Shadowing programme also attended the meeting.

Context

Also, younger age groups are much less likely to see voting as a civic duty than older age groups and new analysis for us suggests the beginning of a cohort effect, i.e. a generation apparently carrying forward their non-voting as they get older¹.

Demographically young people represent an increasing proportion of the UK population but research shows that they are only half as likely to vote as older age groups and only 37% of young people (aged 18 – 24) voted in the 2005 general election.² Indeed the turnout for the next age group (25 – 34) was only 48% (a slight increase on 46% in 2001). This compares to a 2005 turnout of 75% for the over 75s.

This concern about increasing apathy amongst the general electorate and in particular the 18 - 24 age group underpins many of the national initiatives to promote democracy and citizenship amongst the under 18 age group.

But it is not just about voting...

There is also a clear need to re-connect people with politics, and vice-versa, beyond moments of (relatively) high political drama such as general elections³.

... it also about developing a culture of community involvement and local leadership.

The importance of involving young people in all levels of decision making and local democracy has been widely promoted both globally and nationally, from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child through to the implementation of Every Child Matters. The introduction of the citizenship curriculum in schools and the imminent introduction of the Duty to Promote Democracy are just two of the tools available to local authorities to address the situation.

Young people, crime and anti-social behaviour

Coupled with this apparent lack of interest in local democracy is the widespread perception that young people are engaged in anti-social behaviour. This stereotype of the under 18s as 'hoodies and hoodlums' is apparently fuelled by media hype and is a contributing factor to the high "fear of crime" ratings faced by many local authorities.

As background to the review the Committee viewed a DVD: The Youth of Today, a film produced by young people in south Oxfordshire who have teamed up with their communities to explore the reasons for the negative perception of young people.

The Committee also spoke to the Chairman of the Council's Task & Finish Group looking at Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour. That review had set out to establish whether young people congregating on the streets were engaged in anti-social behaviour or if this was perception. In the course of the review the Group went on walkabouts with street wardens in Banbury and Bicester; met with members of Banbury and Bicester youth groups; and spoke to representatives of the National Youth Agency. Officers from the Council's Safer

¹ Election 2005: turnout, How many, who and why?, The Electoral Commission 2005

² Ibid

³ Ibid

Communities and Community Development team had been involved in the review and had provided evidence and advice on the type and volume of anti-social behaviour in the district.

The Task and Finish Group had concluded that it was largely a question of perception and that in general the young people congregating on the district's streets were not engaged in anti-social behaviour. The challenge facing Cherwell would be to promote this message and at the same time reassure the public.

Youth Demographics in Oxfordshire

The 2001 Census recorded the Cherwell population of 10 – 19 year olds at 15,114 or roughly 11.5% of the overall population of the district.⁴ A further 13% (17,564) of the population were aged 0 – 10 years and, ten years on, it is this group who are effectively the subject of this report. Their teenage experiences of, and exposure to, local democracy as presented by Cherwell District Council will shape and influence their social and political engagement with their local communities as young adults.

⁴ Office of National Statistics, Cherwell Age Structure
<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=3&b=277085&c=OX15+4AA&d=13&e=13&g=480115&i=1001x1003x1004&m=0&r=0&s=1278506348015&enc=1&dsFamilyId=276>

Evidence

Cherwell District Council's Youth Services

During the course of the review, the Head of Recreation and Leisure, the Recreation and Health Improvement Manager and the Senior Recreation Development Officer (Play & Young People) attended meetings of the Committee to brief members on the Council's work in support of youth engagement.

The Committee learnt that the provision of an integrated youth support service for Oxfordshire is a statutory requirement placed on Oxfordshire County Council. Cherwell and the other District Councils have a statutory responsibility to act as a local authority partner and support the County Council in the delivery of the Oxfordshire Children and Young People's Plan.

The Oxfordshire Children and Young People's Plan is the single, strategic overarching plan for all services for children and young people in the county. This plan sets clear targets and priorities for all the Oxfordshire local authorities and partner organisations. The second version of the plan for 2010 - 2013 was under development during the course of this review and members of the Committee had the opportunity to comment on the draft document. The final version of the plan was published in January 2010.

However, the direct provision of services in support of young people by a district council is a discretionary activity. But Cherwell, like many other district councils, recognises the importance of providing local youth services which contribute to the national indicators 110:

NI 110 (Young People's participation in positive activities)

- This indicator is designed to measure young people's participation in structured positive activities. What young people do, or don't do, out-of-school matters. Research demonstrates that the activities young people participate in out-of-school have a significant bearing on their later life outcomes. Positive activities are a good use of young people's time because they provide opportunities to:
 - acquire, and practice, specific social, physical, emotional and intellectual skills
 - contribute to the community
 - belong to a socially recognised group
 - establish supportive social networks of peers and adults
 - experience and deal with challenges
 - enjoy themselves

Cherwell has a well established programme of health and recreation activities for young people including the Easter and summer holiday activity camps, Play Rangers and Youth Activators initiatives, and the Bicester and Banbury Bus projects. This is complemented by a range of projects that are centred on local schools, community centres and youth clubs / youth groups to develop youth engagement in the local community through youth councils and similar.

The Committee noted that in 2009/10 the overall youth services budget was about £130,000 and that this area would be the subject of a value for money review in 2010. On the basis of this information they agreed to defer any detailed consideration of the finances for youth services until the conclusions of that review were available. In the meantime they wished to put on record their admiration for the work of the officer team in delivering such a positive and extensive range of youth services within such limited budget constraints. The Committee reflected on the costs associated with supporting and promoting youth engagement. They acknowledged that there would be resource pressures on this type of activity but felt that this re-affirmed the need to make better use of the existing resources and exploit existing systems and relationships.

How Cherwell District Council engages with young people

As part of the review the Committee looked at which of the Council services routinely engaged with young people in the district. Based on the responses provided by the Heads of Service it emerged that in terms of the democratic process there was little or no systematic engagement with young people across the Council (See Table: 1 below). The Committee discovered that the main channels for contact with young people tended to be needs driven involvement in specific projects within the housing, community safety and recreation service areas.

Outside the Youth Services team and the Democratic and Elections team members who worked on Local Democracy Week there appeared to be little awareness amongst officers of the potential benefits of engaging with young people to inform service delivery.

Table 1 How Cherwell District Council engages with young people	
Service area	Engagement activity
Recreation & Health	Responsible for Local Democracy Week, Youth Councils and all other discretionary youth services such as play and recreation.
Urban & Rural	Some involvement of young people on specific projects e.g. pupils from Gosford Hill school contributed to the discussions on the refurbishment of street furniture in Kidlington.
Safer Communities & Development	- Primarily needs driven involvement. For example the Bicester Issues Group which looked at significant anti-social behaviour on the Bure Park estate. - Some NAG involvement
Environmental Services	- Schools education programme for waste and recycling - Climate Change Forum membership includes a pupil from Banbury Community College
Community Planning & Policy	- No routine or systematic engagement with young people. - Worked with specific schools to inform work on the sustainable communities strategy.
Communications	- No routine or systematic engagement with young people. - Survey group and public consultation age group is 18+ - Using new communications media (Facebook, Twitter) to reach young people
Democratic Services and Elections	Involved in delivery of Local Democracy Week activities
Planning	- Previously no routine or systematic engagement with young people - Future stages of LDF consultation will target young people, using Youth Parliament and Youth Councils
Housing	Primarily needs driven involvement through homelessness and other specific programmes.

The Committee was concerned that the Council was not actively engaging with young people in key areas such as Planning and Communications. We should embed engagement in such activities as a matter of course making it plain, simple and easy to understand and not obscured by meaningless council jargon.

The Committee considered that the Council's Heads of Service should be made aware of the work we currently undertake with young people and of the existing channels for

communicating and consulting with them. They should be encouraged to ensure that the involvement of young people is a mainstream consideration in their service delivery.

Local Democracy Week

The Council has participated in Local Democracy Week for several years, the main activities being a visit to Westminster hosted by the local MP and participation in the on-line game "I'm a Councillor Get Me Out of Here".

In October 2009 22 pupils from four schools in Banbury and Bicester visited Westminster to find out more about how democracy works. The visit was organised by Cherwell District Council as part of Local Democracy Week 2009. After a tour of the Lords and Commons, they had a chance to quiz local MP, Tony Baldry. He faced questions on a range of issues including young people being disregarded because they are not old enough to vote, the future of paediatrics at the Horton General Hospital, public sector spending cuts and MPs' expenses.

As part of Local Democracy Week the Council has encouraged its elected members and schools in the district to take part in the "I'm a councillor, get me out of here" on-line event. Each year a group of Cherwell District Councillors post a manifesto or 'blog' and engage in on-line question and answer sessions with local school children about a wide range of issues, both national and local. The Councillors are voted 'out' of the political jungle on a daily basis until one remains. Three members of the Committee had participated in the event in 2009 or previous years.

The Committee noted that Council staff were already developing ideas for new initiatives including a Cherwell Challenge (a team based activity for young people to take decisions and apply the democratic process to a series of case studies on budgeting, planning, housing and recreation) as well as a Councillor Shadowing programme.

The Committee concluded that the excellent work conducted during Local Democracy Week should be extended to provide a sustained programme of activities throughout the year. An example of this sort of approach might be a debate (or series of debates) between local schools, facilitated by the Council, on relevant topics such as changing the voting age.

The Committee felt that the Council should seek to encourage greater involvement from those councillors and officers who were school governors or active in the school parent/teacher organisations. They were aware that there were councillors who were actively involved in local schools and invited to speak about democracy but that this was somewhat ad hoc and driven by individual contacts and relationships. The Committee felt that the Council, through the Young People's Champion and officers, should aim to collate information about these activities and to promote a central point of contact, to offer advice, information and even materials.

The Committee acknowledged the financial constraints facing the Council, and indeed local schools, but felt that the sort of initiatives that had been identified would be fairly modest and should be possible to plan and implement for a relatively low cost.

Youth Councils

There are two Youth Councils in the district in the urban centres of Banbury and Bicester. These are relatively autonomous groups who set their own agendas and manage their own affairs, with guidance and support from the Council's Senior Recreation Development Officer (Play & Young People).

In November 2009 members of the Committee attended a meeting of the Bicester Youth Council, to observe the youth councillors at work and to talk to them about their interest in local democracy. The Committee members were very impressed by the maturity and commitment of the youth councillors and the professional manner in which they conducted the meeting. The Committee noted that Bicester Town Council was fully supportive of the initiative and ensured that relevant agenda/minute items from their meetings were referred to the Youth Council for comment. Officers stressed that it was essential to get this balance right and ensure that the issues referred to the Youth Council were on topic and relevant; in the past there had been problems elsewhere with Youth Councils being bombarded with large volumes of paperwork from the parent local authority.

The Committee learnt that officers from the Council had been working with representatives from Kidlington Parish Council and Gosford School and colleagues at Oxfordshire County Council to set up the new youth forum in Kidlington. The officers were also exploring the possibility of establishing a further youth council for the young people in the rural areas of the district.

The Committee felt that the Youth Councils were a somewhat under publicised and under utilised opportunity and resource for youth engagement. They agreed that the Council should promote their existence and encourage the District Council Service teams and the Town/Parish Councils to consider whether they could work with the Youth Councils on particular issues. The Committee recognised that it was essential that the Youth Councils should retain control of their own business and set their own agenda. It was essential that they did not become overloaded with information and requests for comments from the District or Town/Parish Councils.

They suggested that this closer relationship with the Youth Councils could be facilitated by inviting a local councillor to act as a link / liaison councillor for each of the local Youth Councils to alert them to issues of interest to young people and to support and mentor them on the democratic process.

Question & Answer session

In February 2009 the Committee held a question and answer session with officers from Oxfordshire County Council responsible for the provision of youth services and with pupils from Banbury School and the Frank Wise School. The pupils were all members of their respective school youth councils and were participating in the Local Councillor Shadowing programme.

The Committee used this session as an opportunity to find out more about the practical operation of a school council and the type of issues that they address, to hear about outcomes and achievements of the youth councils and to explore some of the frustrations and barriers facing young people seeking to engage in local democracy.

Specifically the pupils pointed out the risk of over reliance on internet based communications and information sharing. They explained that not all young people had unlimited access to the internet at home or at school and so it was important to continue to use more traditional

methods of communication such as newsletters and school notice boards. The Committee learnt that the County and District Council were in fact in the process of rolling out Youth Activator notice boards to secondary schools across the county. These boards provided information in the areas of Physical Activities / Arts & Culture / Health / Youth Clubs and were updated on a monthly basis. The Committee was also told about two county-wide websites which hold information about youth organisations and events for young people.

In addition the pupils said that they felt that the information about initiatives such as Local Democracy Week should be made available to parents as well as pupils and that there might be a better take up if there was more notice given.

The Committee felt that it was important to ask young people about the activities they want and the mechanism for doing this should incorporate a wide range of young people, not only those who are involved in youth/school council. As not all young people are part of the traditional school system the same approach should be extended to all forms of further education.