

Empowering young voices: the impact of children and young people's advisory groups on national organisations

November 2024

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Introduction and purpose of the research

Children in Scotland set up its children and young people's advisory group, Changing our World, more than six years ago. A range of other children's sector organisations have also established their own advisory groups as a way of embedding children and young people's rights and their voices in their work. We wanted to explore how these groups impact on organisations and how they carry out their work. This research project was carried out as part of a placement-based dissertation with Children in Scotland. We hope that the evidence and knowledge gathered will be useful for the wider third sector in delivering effective and meaningful participation of children and young people going forward.

Purpose of the research

The main objective of this research was to investigate how children and young people's advisory groups can impact the work of national organisations. Specifically, the research sought to explore three key aspects:

- **Cultural influence:** How do advisory groups change the internal culture of the organisations? Do they shift attitudes and values toward being more youth-focused?
- **Structural influence:** How are advisory groups integrated into the formal structure of the organisation? Are they placed at the core of decision-making processes, or are they more peripheral?
- **Strategic influence:** To what extent do advisory groups shape the long-term goals and strategies of the organisations? Are they involved in major decision-making, or are they only consulted on smaller issues?

By focusing on these three areas – culture, structure, and strategy – the research aimed to provide a clear picture of how well advisory groups enable organisations to incorporate the voices into their core operations and what is needed to make this happen well.



How the research was conducted

To gather a detailed understanding of how children and young people's advisory groups are impacting organisations, a combination of research methods was used:

- **Interviews:** Six in-depth interviews were conducted with staff members from three different national organisations. These interviews provided insights into how the organisations perceive the role and impact of their advisory groups.
- **Surveys:** An online survey was distributed to members of the advisory groups in two of the organisations. Fourteen young people, aged between 8 and 22 years, completed the survey. The survey aimed to capture their perspectives on their participation in these groups.

- **Focus group:** One focus group was conducted with an advisory group from one of the participating organisations. This allowed for more detailed discussion and exploration of the young people's experiences and views.

These mixed methods allowed for a broad, yet detailed understanding of how advisory groups are functioning within the organisations and how both staff and young people perceive their effectiveness.



Key findings

The research uncovered ten key themes that illustrate how children and young people's advisory groups are influencing national organisations. These themes offer a detailed look at both the successes and challenges of embedding youth participation within these organisations.

Impact on children and young people

1. **Child-centred empowerment:** Organisations are making concerted efforts to place children and young people at the centre of their work. Staff members across different levels in the organisations expressed a clear commitment to ensuring that young people's voices are heard and that their input is respected in decision-making processes. This empowerment of children and young people aligns with the broader goals of creating child-focused policies and practices, enabling organisations to stay relevant and responsive to the needs of children and young people.



"I think they listen but don't just listen they action as well. They make sure our voiced are used in the correct way to influence and challenge and action issues we believe are relevant to children and young people today"

Young person who contributed to the research

2. **Personal and professional development:** Participation in advisory groups has significant personal and professional benefits for the children and young people involved. Members of the groups reported improvements in their confidence, communication skills, and critical thinking abilities. Involvement in these groups provided opportunities for young people to engage in activities like public speaking, attending high-level meetings, and even co-chairing conferences. These experiences have helped young people develop valuable skills that extend beyond the advisory group itself.

Factors that influence the impact of advisory groups on organisations

3. **Leadership-driven participation:** The role of leadership is critical in ensuring the success of youth participation. When senior leaders support and encourage the involvement of young people, the advisory groups have more influence. Organisations where leadership actively promotes youth participation tend to see better integration of young voices in decision-making. This leadership-driven approach helps to make participation a core part of an organisation's culture.

4. **Advisory group position:** The structural placement of the advisory group within the organisation was seen as important. While staff generally felt that the groups were central to the organisation's work, some young people felt that their groups were more peripheral and not fully integrated. This highlights a disconnect between how adults perceive the group's role and how young people experience it. To maximise their impact, advisory groups need to be more formally embedded within the organisation's structure with a set role and ways for the children and young people to contribute to adult decision-making spaces (without simply placing children into existing adult structures).
5. **Inclusive and adaptive communication environments:** Creating inclusive and flexible environments for communication was a key factor in enabling participation. Organisations that offered multiple ways for young people to engage, such as online platforms, in-person meetings, or anonymous feedback options, were more successful in fostering open dialogue. This flexibility ensured that all young people, regardless of their communication preferences or comfort levels, could participate fully.

"I feel very included and valued by [organisation]. I feel this way because they make sure that my voice is heard by making sure I can contribute to discussions etc... they also make sure if there are any other opportunities that may be of interest to members of the advisory group I volunteer for they let us know of those opportunities and ask whether we want to be involved or not. They also try to remove any barriers that may stop us from participating for example travel (they cover our travel costs so we can volunteer). They also make sure we feel safe and comfortable during sessions."

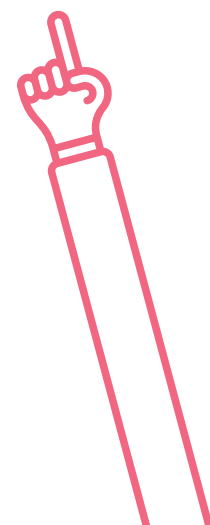
Young person who contributed to the research

Factors that influence the impact of advisory groups on organisations

6. **Internal influence:** Advisory groups were found to have a tangible influence on internal organisational matters. In several organisations, young people contributed to setting priorities, shaping strategic plans, and even participating in recruitment processes. For example, one organisation ensured that its advisory group had a direct say in its strategic plan, reflecting the group's priorities and suggestions. This internal influence demonstrates that young people can shape the direction of the organisation's work in meaningful ways.
7. **External influence:** Beyond internal decision-making, advisory groups also had a significant impact on external communications. Young people were involved in shaping the language and messaging used by the organisation to ensure it was accessible and relatable to their peers. In some cases, advisory groups helped decide how the organisation presented itself publicly, influencing external strategies such as conference themes and community outreach efforts. This external influence highlights the value of involving young people in shaping how organisations communicate with the world.

Challenges shared in the research

8. **Inclusivity and participation dynamics:** While the advisory groups were designed to be inclusive, there were still challenges related to participation dynamics. Some young people felt that their participation was not always as meaningful as it could be, particularly when the group's work was seen as



separate from the organisation's core activities. Ensuring that participation is more than tokenistic requires ongoing efforts to engage young people in all areas of decision-making, not just those traditionally seen as youth focused.

- 10. Structural and resource challenges:** A major challenge identified by both staff and young people was the issue of resources. Many organisations struggled with limited time, staff and funding to fully support the advisory groups. These resource constraints often made it difficult to provide the level of engagement and support needed to ensure that young people could participate fully and meaningfully. Addressing such structural challenges is crucial for the long-term sustainability of youth participation in these organisations.
- 11. Limited connection and knowledge sharing:** One of the final challenges noted was the limited connection between advisory groups and the wider organisation. Some young people expressed that they were not always aware of the broader work of the organisation, which made it difficult for them to feel fully integrated. Similarly, staff acknowledged that there was often a lack of knowledge sharing between departments, which could hinder the advisory group's ability to influence decisions across the organisation. Improving communication and connection between the advisory group and other parts of the organisation could help ensure that young people's voices are heard more widely and effectively.



Recommendations

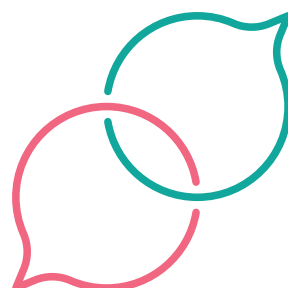
The research identified key areas for improving how national organisations can support and integrate children and young people's advisory groups. These recommendations are designed to ensure that young voices have a lasting and meaningful impact on the organisations they work with. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Improve communication between the organisation and the advisory group:

Organisations should enhance the flow of information between the advisory group and the broader organisation. Regular updates on organisational activities – beyond the specific projects that advisory group members are directly involved in – can help young people feel more connected and valued. Transparent and continuous communication ensures that advisory group members are fully informed and aware of the broader work and goals of the organisation. This increased communication will help advisory group members understand how their contributions fit into the bigger picture and foster a sense of belonging.

2. Create a safe environment through flexibility, adaptability, and choice:

To ensure meaningful participation, organisations should create a supportive environment by offering young people a choice in how they engage. Whether through in-person meetings, virtual sessions, or written contributions, providing different ways to participate accommodates the diverse needs, preferences, and schedules of young people. Additionally, staff should be trained to be adaptable and responsive to the needs of young



participants. By being flexible and offering options, organisations can create a more inclusive and safer atmosphere where young people feel comfortable expressing their views.

3. Establish priorities, but recognise that participation is a journey:

Embedding advisory groups within an organisation's structure is a long-term process that requires time and ongoing commitment. Organisations should set clear priorities for how they want to involve their advisory group but remain flexible and patient in achieving these goals. This means regularly reviewing and adjusting strategies based on feedback from both staff and advisory group members. Acknowledging that participation evolves over time will help manage expectations and ensure that the advisory group's role grows and strengthens gradually.



Reflections

This research highlights the significant potential of children and young people's advisory groups to positively influence national organisations. When young voices are taken seriously, organisations become more responsive, inclusive, and aligned with the needs of the younger generation. However, there is still work to be done. Greater investment in resources, better integration of the advisory groups into organisational structures, and sustained leadership support are all needed to ensure that these groups can reach their full potential.

Overall, the findings suggest that organisations can benefit greatly from involving young people in their decision-making processes. They can be an effective way to involve children and young people in decision-making processes. With the right support, communication and commitment, children and young people's advisory groups can play a crucial role in shaping the future of national organisations.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the children, young people and staff of the three organisations involved in this research.



Get in touch

If you have any questions about this research or about participation work with children and young people, please get in touch with Parisa Shirazi via email:

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