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From partner to butler: Defending young people's participation from local authority take-over

Summary

This case study shows how a council's narrow vision of voluntary action limited young people's participation in local democracy. It looks at how a participation and consultation strategy turned out to be mere words on paper rather than a tool to help young people work alongside decision makers through the democratic structure of an existing youth council. It concludes that the council wanted young people to comment on and support the council's agenda whereas the young people wanted to participate in democratic decision-making about issues that concerned them.

Case study

Voice Youth was established in Greenport ten years ago to support young people's empowerment within local decision-making processes. It works to remove barriers to their participation and improve relations between young people and the wider community. It also provides training and support for organisations committed to participatory practice. Starting as a local project, it has grown into an organisation with over fifteen staff including managers and a range of programmes across Greenport. These include a Greenport Youth Council which it set up and has serviced and supported for a number of years. From the start this provided seats specifically for a wide range of marginalised groups in the town.

Apart from an initial grant from the town council (at that stage provided without a contract), the Youth Council was initially funded out of Voice Youth's own reserves. When it sought to negotiate a clearer funding agreement with the council, Voice Youth was told that the council wanted to agree a single contract for this work and other

council-contracted work Voice Youth was doing, to be backed up by an improved contract management system. As it was by then too close to the start of a new financial year to work out these new arrangements, Voice Youth was offered a one-year contract for the Youth Council work with a promise of a consolidated contract for all its council-funded work from the following year.

In the run-up to signing the one-year contract, however, relations with key officers in the council became more complicated, to the point where they eventually soured in damaging ways. The downward spiral was set in motion by professional differences between Voice Youth staff and council officers. It was then accelerated further by a change of political control within the council: the party that took over was committed to creating a youth council for Greenport, a proposal which brought a hostile response from Voice Youth, Youth Council members and their supporters. Though the new council leader softened her position somewhat once in power, she nonetheless remained publicly critical of key features of the Youth Council's structure, in particular the priority it gave to representation for marginalised groups. She also made it clear that she would expect the Youth Council to reorganise its area-based arrangements in line with the 'area forums' which the council was planning to create.

During this period council officers also made it clear that, if Voice Youth's contract to run the Youth Council was to continue, young people would have to meet attendance targets and address and engage with specific council priorities and strategies. When Voice Youth restated to the council officer responsible for participation strategy that a core Youth Council principle was to focus on issues and priorities defined by the young people themselves, the responses in effect was: 'That of course is up to the young people – but all council funding comes with strings attached. If the Youth Council doesn't feel it can respond to what the town council is asking, it needs to find its funding elsewhere'.

The direct negotiations between the Youth Council and the town council leader which followed produced some compromises. Youth Council members were told, for example, that it was 'inconceivable' that their funding would be withheld and reassured that they would not be expected to work on council priorities. For their part, though refusing to give up seats for marginalised young people – something the new council leader still

refused to accept – the young people did agree to change the Youth Council's area structure. In doing this, they made clear that one of their priorities would be to be involved in the new area forums with a view to improving provision for young people. On this, the council leader asked them to trust her while she got the area forums up and running, after which she would come back to them. She also flagged up that the council's new 'integrated youth support strategy' was likely to bring changes to youth provision in the town and that the Youth Council would be consulted on this early in the process.

These discussions appeared initially to have helped halt the deterioration in Voice Youth's relations with the council. However, at this stage a new feature of the 'participation' landscape emerged: the appointment of a manager – one of the officers with whom Voice Youth had clashed during the earlier professional dispute – whose specific brief was to develop the council's own participation policies and practice. The new manager began to interfere with work already being done by the Youth Council, for example organising meetings with elected members and senior politicians and making commitments on behalf of the Youth Council without consulting them or Voice Youth. As the officer who, it became clear, would manage Voice Youth's new one-year contract he also began to operate on the assumption that his role allowed him to manage Voice Youth's staff. He attempted to bypass Voice Youth senior managers who were managing the face to face workers by directing both their day to day activity and the overall thrust of their work. In the process he resurrected the demand that the Youth Council concentrate on town council priorities.

Despite these tensions, Voice Youth secured its contract for the new financial year together with a reaffirmed promise of a consolidated contract for all its council-funded work for the year after – only to find itself under even more serious and draining pressures from town council politicians and officers. Over the following twelve months young people were increasingly bombarded, to the point of feeling bullied, with requests from council officers to get involved in anything and everything that came up from the council – from contributing to the town's recycling strategy to sitting on a variety of committees..

The stream of demands coming from the council also often assumed that the young

people were available during the day and that they would take time off school, college or work. When they refused, they faced criticism from council officers and elected members even though they had made it clear on a number of occasions that they could not do this on a regular basis. For their part councillors offered 'support' for the young people only when they needed them for PR photographs or to attend high profile events. Voice Youth staff were under constant pressure to get Youth Council members to respond to these demands and found themselves accused of failing to support the young people properly when Youth Council members refused to participate in day time meetings. Some of these, it turned out, had been called to demonstrate 'consultation' even though the actual decisions had already been taken.

Senior council officers and elected members also reneged on a number of commitments to the Youth Council which Voice Youth saw them as having made.

- Promised regular meetings with town council representatives never took place.
- The council's integrated youth support strategy was drawn up without a single member of the Youth Council being involved. Though Voice Youth asked for the evidence to support the council officer's claim when presenting the strategy paper that hundreds of young people had been consulted, none was ever received.
- Not a single Youth Council member was invited to contribute to the work of the area forums which, during their first year of operation, produced a range of written and agreed plans and priorities and allocated money from council budgets.

The council's attitude to and treatment of the Youth Council over this period is perhaps best captured by the story of the Youth Council base. To set this up, the Youth Council been given funding from the Youth Capital Fund – a bid which had had town council support including a promise to cover rent and running costs. However, as work on the building was being completed, the Youth Council was told that, far from being allowed to manage the building themselves as a Youth Council facility (as set out in their application), the premises were to be made available to all young people and the council would run it themselves, with the Youth Council being allocated only limited use.

While deliberately stopping short of making a formal complaint, Voice Youth had sought

to deal with its deteriorating relations with the town council and its staff by initiating discussions between its trustees and senior managers and senior council officers. In response to Voice Youth's probing about the council's long-term intentions, explicit assurances were given that there were no plans to end Voice Youth's funding or to take youth participation in-house; that the behaviour of officers would be dealt with; that Voice Youth would be fully involved in strategic work on youth participation in the town; and that a transparent commissioning process would be used for funding future youth participation work.

The hollowness of these assurances became clear one month later. At a meeting with the council contract manager Voice Youth was told that none of its contracts were to be renewed as the council had decided not to commission out any of the participation work. All future participation work was to be located in-house as part of the council's new IYSS strategy, to be overseen by a council-appointed multi-agency team and managed by the person about whose behaviour Voice Youth had previously complained. Though Voice Youth was offered posts within the new team the new arrangements meant that in effect its workers would be line managed from within the council by this same officer. These workers would also be working to agendas set by the town council, with all managerial control over funding for direct delivery removed from Voice Youth.

Most seriously, however, the new arrangements meant that the Youth Council would no longer be able to claim to be independent as it and all its sub groups, including those for young people from marginalised communities, were to become answerable to the town council and its officials. Given their experience of councillors' and council officers' behaviour over the previous year, these developments left Youth Council members both anxious and angry. Not only had they not been consulted but at a meeting with a senior officer only two weeks before, at which they made it clear that they wanted to remain independent and continue to work with Voice Youth, they had been given an unambiguous message about how the council saw its relationship with the voluntary sector and with young people: 'At the end of the day', they were told, 'this is the council's money – and we can spend it on what we like.'

In response to these events, Youth Council members and their supporters, both voluntary and statutory, mounted a campaign, collecting over thousand signatures for a

petition and dozens of letters of support from partner organisations and parents. A large number of young people and their adult supporters attended the council meeting at which these were presented and where they questioned councillors on their decisions. As a result, reduced funding for a further year was negotiated. Six months later, though, when all funding for the marginalised groups was withdrawn, these were forced to close. For the following financial year the contract was put out to tender with less than half the previous year's budget.

At this point, Youth Voice took a considered decision not to tender for the contract. In part this was because it regarded the council's approach as an insult to an organisation which had initiated the work in the first place, mostly with its own funding. It decided against bidding, too, because it concluded that neither the youth service nor the town council nor the elected members had the necessary commitment to young people's participation or saw it as a priority. It no longer wished to work under what it had experienced as the authoritarian managerialism imposed by the town council, with its insistence that the voice of young people must be sanctioned and controlled by the very organisation supposedly trying to empower them.

From these bruising encounters with its local council, Voice Youth has drawn a number of conclusions:

- A range of the council's own policies and public commitments have transpired to be mere words on paper, including its participation and consultation strategy, its standards for participation and its IYYS strategy.
- The council's vision for young people's participation and empowerment is extremely limited. Voice Youth's view is that the young people's role is to work alongside decision makers and politicians on the priorities and issues of the young people they represent. In contrast, elected members and council officers seem to assume it is the Youth Council's job to work for the council as a consultation and advisory group focused on council priorities and agendas and carrying out activities which meet these. Apart from the damaging practical consequences of such an approach, Voice Youth sees this approach as failing to offer young people an emancipatory or affirming induction into democratic processes or a positive experience of collective action.
- Part of this narrow vision for young people's participation is a rejection of

anything approaching authentic representation procedures and structures, such as the Youth Council seats explicitly allocated to young people from marginalised communities.

- The council's actions also demonstrate a narrow and damaging conception of the role of a voluntary sector organisation like Voice Youth and of how the council should relate to it. In part this was already being reflected in monitoring criteria being used to 'measure' Voice Youth's achievements: x number of young people attending, x number of meetings held, imposed deadlines met, reports written. Even more seriously however, this council's view of the voluntary sector and its role resulted – explicitly and unapologetically – in a voluntary sector organisation getting funding only if it agreed to carry out the council's policies in ways which the council decided. If an independent and assertive voluntary sector organisation such as Voice Youth refused to toe these lines, then on these grounds alone this council – at times adopting what were experienced as dissembling and manipulative tactics – was quite prepared to see the organisation go under. The fact that the organisation had for years been engaging and inspiring a wide range of young people to take on roles and activities they might never otherwise have considered seemed in the end not to count with key council staff or local politicians.

As a staff member from another Greenport voluntary organisation put it, the relationship between the sector and this council had become one of 'upstairs/downstairs', with voluntary sector organisations acting as butler.

This case study was researched and written by an independent researcher for NCIA. The researcher wishes to remain anonymous to preserve the confidentiality of the research participants. To preserve anonymity the names of the people, organisations and town have also been changed.

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