

The Door to Influence



“Democracy, participation and influence are all about power. If you take part and exert influence, you have the power to make a difference.”

From Ungdom och makt (Young People and Power)

The Nordic Council of Ministers

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For the sake of democracy

Each of the Nordic countries has a specific policy goal of encouraging young citizens to exert greater influence on all issues, not just those that directly affect the young. A youth-policy aspect permeates all social issues. It is important that young people participate and exert influence – both to improve their own lives and for the sake of democracy.

It only remains to implement this national vision at local level. What experiences can be drawn upon to achieve positive results?

So far, no systematic evaluation has been conducted of this work and no guidance is available. Despite strenuous endeavours to collate statistics and conduct evaluations, it has proven difficult to quantify the direct effects of projects. Descriptions do exist of youth councils set up by local authorities but hardly any studies have been conducted into the way in which young people have made an impact on policy or of whether the opportunity to participate and exert influence affects the political commitment of young people.

In autumn 2003, Elisabet Edfast-Ljungberg contacted researchers and authorities in all of the Nordic countries to collate a review of existing evaluations and reports. Her material forms the main basis for both the full report “The Door to Influence – a Study of the Influence Exerted by Young People in the Nordic Region” and for this document.

Based on research, government reports and evaluations of local projects, it is possible to identify obstacles, as well as opportunities, to young people participating in, and influencing, formal structures.

The introduction below describes the ingredients needed to pave the way for young people to exert influence and provides examples of strategies tried in the Nordic countries. Some of the examples are well known but bear repetition. Others will hopefully provide inspiration and examples of important criteria for success.



Criteria for success

Certain conditions need to be fulfilled before young people are able to exert influence. In the first place, politicians and local government officers need to understand what the concept entails and what role the influence exerted by young people is meant to play in local policy. Unless they are aware of why a project has been initiated, the message will be blurred and targets difficult to define.

Many local authorities have failed to define such a specific purpose. A variety of fora have been set up without making the intentions clear. The importance of young people exerting influence, and of them learning about the political system, is often stressed but this usually results in a confused attitude to the young. On the one hand they are seen as the future, full of vitality, energy and innovative thinking that will enrich and improve the political system. On the other hand they have to be trained to fit into the prevailing system.

If the main purpose of young people exerting influence is for them to learn the political system then there is a risk that the vitality and innovation hoped for will come to nothing. The opportunities to exert influence are concealed behind a closed door – unreachable unless you have cracked the political code, which was written by the adult world in the first place.

Participation is power

Real participation is important for everybody, irrespective of age. Interest and commitment are only maintained if people's own ideas and points of view really affect politics. This is particularly true of young people.

“What is the point of doing a job if nobody is interested in the result? Why talk about participation and opportunities to exert influence if nobody takes you seriously? The biggest threat to the idea of youth councils is that the decision-making bodies or local government officers behind them don't want to, or don't dare to, relinquish power. It is dangerous to call it participation and democracy if the result turns out to be mere window dressing. Sham democracy is hardly likely to lead to the desired results.”

*From the report Ungt grepp om samhällsfrågorna
(Young People's Grasp of Social Issues)*

For young people to achieve meaningful participation, the powers-that-be must allow them to help decide which questions are important. This is done in some places, but rarely consciously. Youth participation

is often little more than a smokescreen while the adult world gets on with the major decisions and instead of being a resource young people become marginalised. The door to influence is made of glass. Young people may get to peer in but they are left standing on the outside.

Youth issues affect many other spheres

It is important to recognise that youth policy overlaps with all sectors. It impacts on many different policy areas, not just the ones that the adult world deems to be the concern of young people.

If young people are always consigned to policy areas that are considered traditional youth issues, e.g. schools, culture and leisure, they will never exert influence in the political sphere.

If young people are always considered a special group with certain special interests there is a risk of them being shut out and marginalised.

If the rest of the world thinks that young people just want to, or are only able to, exert influence on certain questions, then there is a risk that young people may start to see themselves as a group with limited opportunities and act accordingly.

Continuity provides stability

It is important that the whole of the local administration supports the work on youth policy and makes sure that the targets really are transformed into practical activity. Far too often, youth activities take the form of projects. This has a negative effect on continuity, especially if the project is not exploited properly by councillors or local government officers. Young people come and go – especially because generations change – but even if the organisation changes, responsibility for youth policy has to be maintained and the policy needs to be properly supported by the local council.

Action plans are valuable working tools for everybody involved. They make the purpose of a project clear and are a valuable aid during the evaluation process. An action plan works best if it emerges from dialogue with young people and is used as a dynamic tool. Revise it regularly. Remove whatever has already been dealt with or is no longer considered as high a priority as it was when the plan was first formulated.

Adult support is crucial

It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that both a map and a compass are needed in order to navigate your way through the corridors of power. Equipped with those tools, young people may make it a fair bit of the way. Not all obstacles will have been removed from their path, however, if nobody knows how to read the map or knows in what direction the needle is pointing.

Young people need the continuous support of the adult world. In this sort of situation, the door to influence becomes a revolving one. It opens, but revolves quickly to spill young people back out again, reinforcing their image of politics as something boring and pointless.

The door is only open if young people are afforded support and help and when their opinions are taken completely seriously in all areas. Then they can take the big step inside. Only then does youth participation and influence become a resource that benefits democracy.

Formulate intentions and targets

- What is the point of the youth policy?
- How does it envisage young people exerting influence?
- What areas should it cover? What issues should young people have a say in, make decisions about and express opinions on?

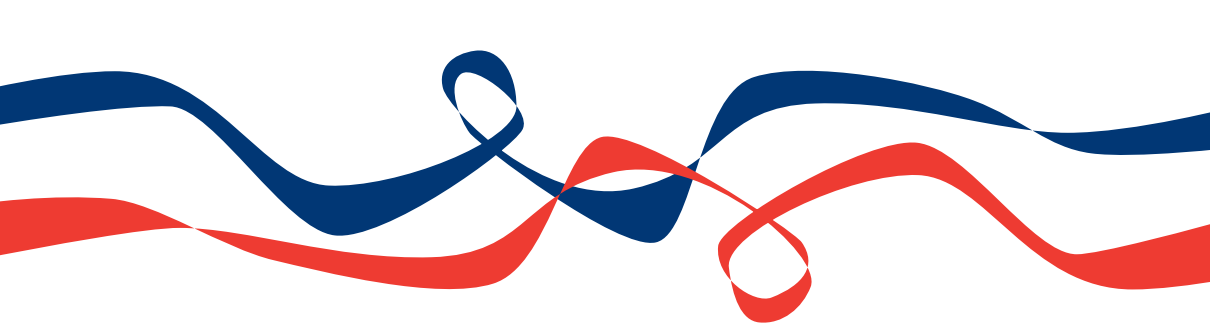
Make the purpose clear to

- Young people, so opportunities and restrictions in local authority decision-making processes are obvious.
- Local councillors, so they know exactly what role they want young people to play.
- Local government officers, so they implement the political decisions and provide support for young people.

Discussion points

- How much power is the adult world willing to share?
- What is the best way to find out what local young people think is important?
- Who/which body within the local authority is responsible for youth policy?
- Who/which body is responsible for evaluating youth policy?





Norway

In Norway, the potential for children and young people to exert influence has been an important issue for many years. A Children's Ombudsman, the first in the world, was appointed as early as 1981 to protect the interests of children and young people and to make sure that Norwegian law and administrative practices comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The right of children and young people to be heard and their right to gradual self-determination according to the UN Convention are embodied in Norwegian law.

At national level, the authorities have spent many years helping to improve the conditions under which children and young people grow up, e.g. by supporting a comprehensive programme of experimental projects and reforms and by developing new opportunities and services.

Approximately 340 out of 434 Norwegian local authorities run a Youth & Children's Council.

A summary reveals major differences between the work carried out by these different local authorities in terms of remit, opportunities for participation, areas of activity, degree of influence, opportunities for co-operation and results.

Some local authorities have placed less emphasis on influence and more on training in democracy. Other local authorities are convinced that children and young people need real influence and need to see the tangible results of their involvement both in the short term and in the long term.

Two principles have underpinned youth work in Norway:

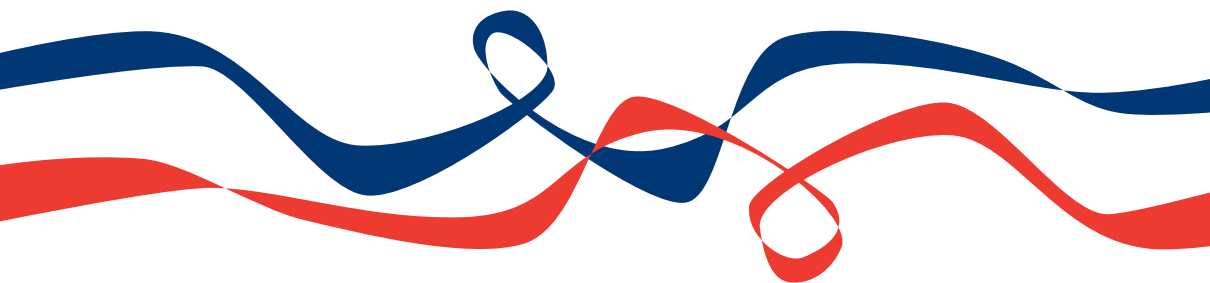
- Systematic implementation and annual reviews designed to refine the work.
- Making sure that all age groups have a chance to participate.

The summary also reveals that councils which devise their own form of participation for children and young people, i.e. do not just copy other councils, are the most likely to succeed. In particular, these are the local authorities where children and young people have funds at their disposal and the power to make certain decisions.

A future challenge for Norwegian youth policy is to embed participation and influence so deeply in local authority activities that it is seen as a natural part of its general work.

Example

- Every year, our day-care centre conducts structured interviews with five-year-olds and each child has the chance to present opinions about his or her everyday life in the centre. The opportunity is very much appreciated, both by children and staff. The results of these interviews then form the basis for the local council's policy for day-care centres.



- ❑ Our youth council has an agreement with the local newspaper to print a regular youth column and occasional pages covering youth issues. The paper is distributed free to pupils in local authority schools. The youth council also has airtime on the local radio station to inform the community about its work.
- ❑ Our children's and youth council usually appoints a co-ordinator for each project. The appointments vary from part-time to full-time. A booklet full of advice and tips has been published to support them in their work.
- ❑ Our local authority organises annual meetings at which representatives of the student councils present their needs to the politicians. The students have to justify why it is important, account for the costs and plan their own input. While the young people take a break, the politicians make decisions about what is feasible and how much money to earmark. The funds are then transferred to the appropriate student councils, which are in turn required to submit final reports.

Research

In 2000, the political scientist Marit Skimmel conducted a survey of children's and youth councils in Norway and examined their role in local democracy. Her study of 182 local authorities that run such councils reveals that the majority of them were initiated by the local authority and not by young people themselves – in other words most were organised from the top down by adults and not in response to young people's needs.

The motive for starting these youth councils was usually to inform children and young people, as a group of users of services. Almost as common a motive was to encourage political participation and provide training in democracy.

Many of the local authorities believed that children and youth councils can help cut down the number of young people who move away, i.e. that allowing children and young people to participate and influence their local community reduces their tendency to move away from their home base.

Discussion points

- Are the activities of the local children's and youth council driven more by the expectations of the adult world than by the needs of young people? What changes can be made?
- Does the local council want to create more space for young people to set their own agenda? How can this be done?
- How does the local council weight the influence of small children?



Denmark

Dedicated youth bodies are not a new phenomenon in Denmark. A number of youth councils were set up as early as the 1980s – often at the behest of politicians. Many of them had no independent powers, little or no financial/administrative support and they were wound up one by one.

In the 1990s, young citizens themselves reversed the trend and took the initiative to set up new councils. They felt the need to distinguish themselves as a group with particular needs and demanded the right to participate as a protest against protracted decision-making procedures.

A 2001 study of Danish youth policy revealed that a quarter of Denmark's local authorities already had a co-ordinated youth policy and a further 21 % were working on one. Almost half of the local councils have set up special youth bodies, the most common form being youth (town) councils. More than a third of these councils provide input on local issues that concern young people. Some of them enjoy the formal right to make proposals to local authority committees or municipal executive boards.

Denmark has a long tradition of referring Bills to youth organisations for formal consideration, in particular the Danish Youth Council (DUF), which is represented on various committees, e.g. on educational issues, human rights, consumer affairs and implementation of the UN Convention.

Example

- ❑ Our local authority has drawn up a youth profile and a political 'white book' (a form of consultative paper). The youth profile emerged from a questionnaire survey of everybody in the area aged 14–25. A working party was also established with representatives from the Training, Education and Youth Department and the Culture and Recreation Department. Local councillors were informed of the results of the questionnaire survey at a special theme day after which they decided on strategies for their youth policy.
- ❑ After several meetings between politicians and young people, our local council set up a youth secretariat. All the proposals raised during the meetings were written up in a catalogue and processed by a working party, which proposed a framework for a youth policy, including targets, priorities and action plans. The proposal was then processed by all the political committees and a new theme day held with the youth council. After two public meetings, the proposal was revised and the local authority came down in favour of a multi-sectoral youth policy.



- Several hundred young people take part in an annual culture event organised by our local authority with painting, dance and music. The event has its own budget and requires a high degree of planning. Members of the youth council and other youth groups do all the work. They are all involved throughout the whole process – from concept to implementation – and gain experience of co-operation and joint decision-making.

Research

Researchers Jimmie Gade Nielsen and Gitte Klintegaard have defined a number of success criteria for local Danish youth policy:

- Drawing up a youth policy ought to be considered a development process that may take a couple of years or even longer. During that time, the work ought to be regularly revised and adapted.
- Continuous dialogue between young people, local government officers and councillors ought to be planned as an integral part of the process right from the start. Young people should have the opportunity to discuss the expectations they have in relation to the formulation of the local authority's youth policy. All decisions along the way should be publicised so everybody feels involved.
- Once the youth policy has been formulated, it is important that the whole of the local administration supports it and implements it in practice.

Nielsen and Klintegaard also illustrate the problems that can arise for staff when a local authority appoints young people to run a youth council. They are often worn out by the different responsibilities – looking after young people's interests on the one hand and acting as administrators for the local authority on the other.

Discussion points

- Development processes take time. How much time should the local council devote to the process? How should the local council go about it?
- What is the best way to promote dialogue between young people and adults?
- Local authority decision-making processes are slow and young people are often keen to get started. How can that contradiction be overcome?



Finland

In Finland, youth policy is regulated by a 1995 Act of Parliament designed to improve living conditions and promote active citizenship amongst young people. As well as the Act, local and national targets have also been set for increasing the influence of all citizens, including young people.

Youth work, such as deciding on methods and measures to improve young people's living conditions, is the remit of local authorities. Youth services have been incorporated into the leisure and culture or education and training committees and the number of youth committees and councillors with special competences on youth issues has been reduced. The fact that youth issues often enjoy lower status than sport, for example, is another reason why youth services have been neglected.

"The central problem as far as local youth policy is concerned is the lack of status. Despite the fact that it is all about protecting the local authority's most important resource – the future inhabitants of the area – the youth service is often in poor shape compared with many other services."

*From the report Det Kommunala Ungdomsarbetet på 2000-talet
(Local Authority Youth Work in the 2000s)*

A number of local projects have been launched to support youth participation in local democracy and citizenship skills. Youth councils and similar forms of activity are of great importance. So are the student bodies in schools. Being involved and taking decisions are considered a natural way of socialising young people to participation in society. Schools can also help spread knowledge of local democracy by including models for it in the curriculum. The Ministry of Education and Alliansi, the national umbrella organisation for Finland's youth organisations, have prioritised democracy via the Internet. Their project lets young people influence their own lives and can be used in schools and youth centres.

Example

- ❑ Our local authority organises seminars at which councillors, local government officers and young people discuss the opportunities young people have in out-migration communities. Youth councils have been set up and young people have the right to be present at their meetings and at meetings of the sport and youth committees.
- ❑ In our youth council the young people work in project groups on various issues, e.g. public transport, education and training, leisure, IT and town planning.



- Our local authority runs open government days when children and young people visit the town hall, meet the people responsible for various activities and learn how the administration works.

Research

An evaluation of youth work in Finland points out that participation in democratic decisions is an important socialisation tool.

“To get young people to take part in decisions that affect them is an important part of social training.”

*From the report Det kommunala ungdomsarbetet på 2000-talet
(Local Authority Youth Work in the 2000s)*

The report ascertains that when local authority youth work is at its best, it coincides with positive prerequisites for improving young people’s living conditions and organising worthwhile youth activities. To pursue a positive youth policy you have to know about real living conditions and how to improve them. The preparatory work and the decision-making should also exploit the expertise found in many different sectors.

In another report, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities emphasises the importance of a multi-sectoral youth policy.

“Realising ideas and solving problems requires close co-operation between several different administrative bodies. Young people’s needs are not dictated by sectoral boundaries and cannot be solved within the framework of a traditional sectoral administration.”

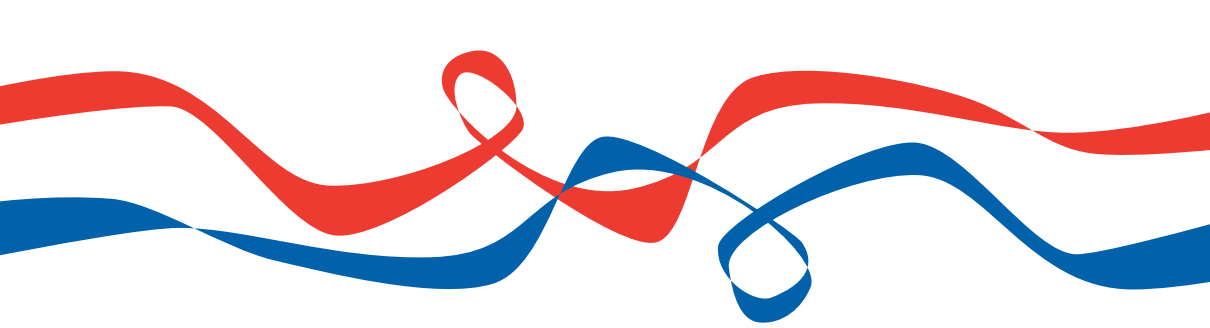
*From the report Ungt grepp om samhällsfrågorna
(Young People’s Grasp of Social Issues)*

In many quarters there is a perception that as long as there is basic agreement about the importance of young people taking part in local democracy then it is not important where the initiative comes from. In most Finnish local authorities the initiative has come from councillors, mainly the younger ones.

Researchers stress the importance of young people dispensing their own budgets and receiving proper support from their parents, local government officers, associations, town councils, teachers, student bodies and youth organisations. Media coverage is also stipulated as a success factor.

Discussion points

- Why is it important where initiatives come from?
- How can the media promote young people’s influence at local level?



Iceland

Iceland has no equivalent to the strategic documents calling for multi-sectoral youth policy at national level in the other Nordic countries. This is not to say that Iceland does not work on youth policy and does not promote the exertion of influence by young people. The importance of everybody having influence over their own lives and being responsible for the way they live is a basic attitude underpinning discussions about democracy and young people. The age at which people can vote is 18 but participation is encouraged earlier.

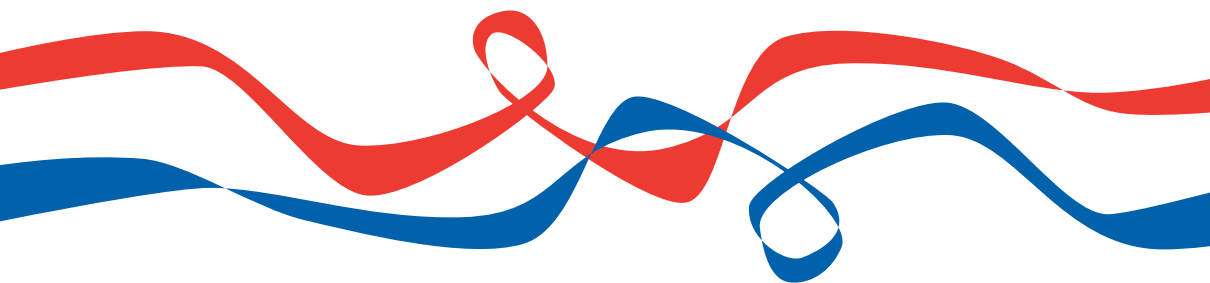
Iceland's first Children's Ombudsman was appointed in 1995. The Ombudsman is appointed by the Prime Minister and serves for five years at a time. The Ombudsman works to improve children's living conditions and looks after their interests, rights and needs by identifying problems and proposing solutions. The Ombudsman monitors the work of national and local authorities, individuals and associations.

Iceland has a five-member State Youth Council. The members are appointed by the Union of Local Authorities and by youth organisations. All the youth organisations meet together to elect their representatives from among the nominees. The chairperson and vice-chairperson, who have in-depth experience of work in youth organisations, are appointed directly by the minister. The term of office is two years.

Another example of initiatives to increase participation and influence is the establishment of Reykjavik Youth Council. The overall aim is to educate and train young people in democracy. After a year, members of the youth council receive a diploma. The goal is to focus greater attention on young people and on the issues they consider to be important. The work is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but is also inspired by the 2001 EU White Book. Reykjavik Youth Council nominates members to a secretariat, which in turn supervises local youth councils in each of the city's eight districts.

The members of the local youth councils are recruited from school councils. The Reykjavik Youth Council Secretariat helps draw up a framework for the work of the district youth councils in the coming year. The Secretariat does not take initiatives on specific issues but helps initiate debate in the district councils. In the first instance, this entails making the councils aware of their role and opportunities. The council members raise issues and make decisions, the Secretariat acts as a mentor. Each district youth council serves for a year, starting in the autumn. Each district council nominates two candidates to Reykjavik Youth Council.

The system of a city-wide youth council and district youth councils has functioned since 2001 and has been gradually refined. Reykjavik



Youth Council takes up issues raised by the local youth councils and refers them to the appropriate decision makers.

Several conferences and workshops have also been held on the position of young people in Iceland.

Council members have published articles about their work in local media. The Media Project has been particularly successful because it has made decision makers in Reykjavik aware of young people's capabilities and needs. One council member in Reykjavik put it like this:

“The best part is being part of this group of young people trying to make things happen and having fun while doing it.”

Discussion points

- How important is it to formalise youth policy?
- Do local youth councils need a national equivalent?



Sweden

Until a couple of decades ago, Swedish youth policy was restricted to areas concerned with schools, leisure and clubs and societies. In recent years, youth policy has become multi-sectoral.

The official view of young people has also changed – once considered passive, they are now seen as active participants able to influence their own lives. One catalyst for this change was the UN International Youth Year in 1985. Sweden appointed its first Minister of Youth a year later. A number of youth-policy propositions have also acted as guiding principles for Swedish youth policy.

The government presented the latest youth-policy proposition *Makt att bestämma – rätt till välfärd* (Power to Decide – Right to Welfare) in 2004. It proposes two new overall targets for national youth policy.

- Real access to welfare.
- Real access to power.

The proposition also suggests a new model for reporting results. These overall targets will be monitored and accounted for within the following five main multi-sectoral areas: learning and personal development, health and vulnerability, influence and representation, providing for oneself and culture and leisure.

At local level, special youth bodies have existed since the mid-1980s. They have many different forms and names. A common generic term is youth council. Another common means of effecting dialogue between young people and elected representatives is the Youth Parliament. Regular one-day or two-day meetings are organised at which young people present the issues they consider important.

Dialogue is also carried out through open fora or consultations, which are held less regularly than youth parliaments. These consist of discussions between young people with councillors as observers or between young people and councillors.

Many local authorities have appointed a local government officer as youth ombudsman or advocate. Their job is to support young people's initiatives and act as spokespersons. Certain local authorities conduct consequence analyses, i.e. they look at whether the policies have been implemented and whether they take account of young people's needs and points of view.

Many local authorities have some kind of youth-policy action plan in which they formulate targets for the type of youth policy they intend to pursue. The action plan acts as a management tool for local authority activities and as an aid to young people. Young people often play an active role in this planning.



Example

- ❑ Our local council runs a youth forum in which pupils from all the senior secondary schools participate. Young people are able to raise issues that are important to them. The forum is held each year and the questions are put to a panel of local councillors. The dialogue between young people, appropriate local government officers and local councillors is direct. The issues raised then form the basis for the work of a co-ordinating group consisting of local councillors, local government officers, police officers, student council representatives and youth council representatives.
- ❑ Our youth council comes directly under the executive board office, so youth issues assume central importance. The political guidelines stress the children's and youth perspective. The political majority formulates an overall checklist for the whole local authority for each term of office. Each committee and board conducts an annual review to account for progress on youth issues.
- ❑ Our local authority organises an annual children's hearing and youth forum at which children and young people discuss issues with councillors. The board draws up a checklist describing how it intends to provide children and young people with opportunities for participation and influence. The list will include matters such as encouraging local school boards consisting of pupils, staff and parents; combating youth unemployment; prioritising housing for young people, forging international contacts, etc. The checklist is consulted when committees make decisions and re-evaluated annually by councillors, local government officers, children and young people.

Research

Sociologist Adrienne Sörbom has suggested a number of success criteria for real influence and power:

- For young people to have real power, they need access to decision-making bodies.
- The politicians must decide how much power they are willing to share.
- Youth policy is not just about influence. Welfare and influence are synonymous.

Adrienne Sörbom stresses the importance of decision makers having a clear and unambiguous idea of what type of influence young people should have. Without such clarity there is a risk of young people beginning to mistrust the politicians.

She also underlines the importance of achieving clarity about the goals before the work begins. Do they see youth issues in terms of



activities for young people, as a form of user influence, or as their right as citizens to express opinions on any topic? When the roles are confused, it becomes problematic for the councillors and local government officers but particularly for the young people.

Elisabet Edfast-Ljungberg reaches the same conclusions in her study of youth councils run by Swedish local authorities.

Discussion points

- What type of forum is desirable in the local area?
- How do influence and power interact? What is the position in the local area?
- How do health and vulnerability interact with the influence of young people? What is the position in the local area?



Suggested reading

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Nordic youth co-operation

“The Door to Influence” is a Nordic Youth Co-operation Committee (NUK) publication. The Nordic Youth Co-operation Committee is the Nordic Council of Ministers’ advisory and co-ordinating body on all matters concerning children and young people. For example, NUK looks at how children and young people can play an active part in all aspects of Nordic co-operation. The committee stresses that all children and young people should be able to take part in Nordic co-operation, irrespective of social background and where in the Nordic Region they live. NUK is also responsible for publicising Nordic youth research and co-ordinating Nordic co-operation on youth and children’s issues on European level. NUK also runs two grant programmes, one for projects and one for co-operation between Nordic youth organisations. Further information is available on the Cirius website: <http://www.ciriusonline.dk> under “Programmes and Contributions”/”the Nordic Youth Co-operation Committee”. Applications are filled out and submitted on-line at: <http://www.ciriusonline.dk/visaktivitet.asp?Id=3631&Menu=316>



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