

Setting up a parish, town or community youth council



A guide for councillors, staff and volunteers
supporting youth councils in parish, town and
community councils



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Introduction

Over the past decade there has been a vast increase in the number of youth councils, cabinets, parliaments and forums funded and supported by local authorities. Increasingly local councils have recognised the need and importance of working with young people through parish, town and community youth councils.

The challenges to actively involve young people in local democracy and decision-making (from youth projects, school councils to local youth councils) are many and varied. Despite this, there is a clear appetite to effectively support the participation of young people in local democracy and decision-making.



Getting Started

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What is an ideal parish, town or community youth council?

A youth council is a democratic organisation created, run and developed by young people for young people. They exist to represent the views of young people at a local level, giving young people the opportunity to have a voice, discuss relevant issues, engage with decision-makers and contribute to improving the lives of other young people within their communities.

Why should my local council bother?

Nobody knows about the issues affecting young people better than young people themselves. Youth councils can act as a positive way of integrating the views of young people into the local community.

Why should the local council coordinate it?

As statutory bodies, local councils have (and exercise) the right to set a precept. It is part of this precept (i.e. the responsibility for a particular sphere of activity) that is devolved to the youth council. Other non-parish or community organisations do not necessarily have either the means of providing a budget or responsibility for community matters affecting young people such as playing fields, seating and village greens.

Are youth councils legal?

Yes! The youth council acts in the same way as a properly constituted committee of the council, providing the council has properly delegated powers for specific items.

What do youth councils need to be effective?

To operate effectively, youth councils need:

- Full support and 'buy in' of the adult council is a must
- Commitment to let the youth council have budgetary responsibility
- A clear idea of what young people can and can't do and thereby establishing boundaries for what impact they can have in decision-making processes
- A formalised structure in which to operate within
- A nominated adult champion to help lead and support the youth council
- A mechanism to measure the success of young people's involvement
- Projects to help raise the profile and influence of the youth council
- Access to meeting rooms/premises/equipment etc.
- And of course, a group of enthusiastic young people that look and sound like the parish that they represent.

Why do they need a budget?

Technically, they don't. A youth council could act purely as an advisory or consultative group, however, experience would dictate that those youth councils that have control of a specific budget are more successful than those who do not. Providing the youth council with a budget empowers young people, teaches a sense of fiscal responsibility and allows them to spend money on things they want, rather than things that adult councillors think they want.

Doesn't having a youth council limit the opportunity to a handful of young people?

Absolutely not! Exactly how the membership is defined will be up to the youth council itself. However, an inclusive and diverse membership is recommended, that reflects the local population but maintains some form of formal structure. A good starting point would be to seek membership from local school councils (where appropriate), but also other youth groups such as local Scout groups, youth clubs and especially those groups that cater for harder to reach young people such as LGBT and BME young people. Following this type of structure will help to ensure that the youth council is representative, and that youth activities are co-ordinated in an area by the representatives reporting back to their respective groups.

Case Study

Billericay Youth Town Council

The Billericay Youth Town Council (YTC), comprising of 20 members, was set up twelve years ago and elections are held every two years. Throughout this time the YTC have installed a skatepark and extended it, had regular 'Battle of the Bands' contests and Talent Shows and have also assisted the Town Council on a number of projects including the installation of Teen Playground equipment.

Approximately 18 months ago, and as a result of consultation, it was decided that a Multi Use Sports Area (MUSA) was required within the local park which is owned by the

District Council. An application for Essex County Council Youth Opportunity Funding was submitted and the YTC were awarded £20,000; the Town Council agreed to finance the additional amount required.

Members of the YTC met with a number of contractors and visited other such sites within the county resulting in them choosing the equipment and contractor. The work was subsequently undertaken and during May 2010 the Official Opening took place. The facility has proved a great success and is used constantly by all ages.

Should we hold elections?

In an ideal world yes, having an election ensures that the young people know that the youth council has not just been selected by adults. However, many councils will find this approach hard to administer and difficult to fund. Also, some young people may find it challenging to stand in a formal election without the appropriate support and training. Therefore, adopting the approach described above might be useful (i.e. to have representatives from schools, youth groups and such). However, if the latter model is adopted it is important that the nominations are transparent. Mini elections in each constituent group would be an acceptable compromise.

Why so formal?

It is important that a form of structure relating to how the youth council should operate is formalised. This could mirror the local council structure or the young people may wish to adopt a more informal and flexible approach to meetings and communications. However the decision on how to operate should be made by the young people themselves, with advice and guidance from adults.

It is necessary to establish within the structure some form of protocol so that the youth council can easily and effectively feed into the general workings of the council as a whole. This should also ensure that the young people's ideas and opinions are taken seriously as a component part of the 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.

Having a formal structure will also show the young people that it is necessary to put forward reasoned arguments and help them learn how to prepare convincing cases for certain proposals. A formalised committee structure with an agenda ensures that meetings reach some positive and constructive conclusions and that everyone gets the opportunity to present their case and take part in discussions.

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Top Tips for Setting Up a Parish, Town or Community Youth Council

The suggestions below are just some points to consider if you have been tasked with setting up a local youth council. It is by no means an exhaustive list, nor does it offer a 'fixed model' on how youth councils should operate - there are too many variables that make this near impossible.

Form a steering group

Form a small steering group of enthusiastic young people to work with while the initial groundwork is being done. Handing a 'pre-made' youth council over to young people will not work, young people need to be involved from day one, have ownership and feel empowered to take the youth council forward. You may want to contact local schools and youth groups in the first instance. At the same time, begin research into local youth councils, visit other youth councils, seek advice and learn from other councils.

Defining the role of the youth council

Working with the steering group and local council it is important to begin to define what exactly the youth council should do, its responsibilities and its boundaries. Establishing some clear objectives would be a good starting point. As the youth council progresses and matures, additional responsibilities and objectives could be assumed. It is also important at this point to decide whether the youth council will have a budget. If so, how much and how it will be administered.

Formalising the youth council

Now it's time to think about who will sit on the youth council and how they will be elected or selected. Think about the total number of young people to be involved, what kind of structure would be the most welcoming, what age ranges to include. At this stage, a draft constitution could be written. It's important to remember that a constitution should be organic and have the ability to be amended as the youth council grows and matures, it should also not act as a barrier to participation.

Get recruiting

It's now time for the steering group to think about the recruitment process: How to recruit young people; where they are going to target; how many young people are they going to recruit in total.

Case Study

St Ives Youth Town Council

The Youth Town Council held its first meeting in September 1999 and has since that time held regular meetings, generally on the second or third Wednesday of each month. The meetings are held in the Council Chamber at the Town Hall and commence at 4.15 pm.

The Aim of the Youth Town Council is to represent the young people of St Ives by organising the discussion and implementation of ideas and suggestions that would be of benefit to the community as a whole not just its young people.

The conditions for membership are similar to those for becoming a Town Councillor in that members should either live in or within three miles of St Ives or attend a school in the town.

Members range in age from 11-18 years old. At present there are seven members out of the maximum 16 which make up the full council.

Previously elections were held every two years (along the lines of parliamentary elections) but, due to dwindling interest in the Youth Town Council, elections have not been held for the past four years and new members have instead been directly co-opted.

Reinstating the elections system and launching a recruitment campaign for new members is to be considered. Such campaigns have been conducted several times in the past when membership fell. The Town Mayor and Members of the Town Council have occasionally offered their support by assisting YTC members in addressing school assemblies.

The main annual event organised and managed by the YTC is 'Battle of the Bands' where local bands are invited to submit demos with the best five being selected to compete at the event. These have generally proved to be very popular with local youth and have been well attended.

Sometimes the YTC receives and considers applications for financial aid from local charitable groups, or support for youth activities.

The YTC's annual budget, received from the Town Council, is currently £1200 pa. They have autonomy to spend this however they consider fit.

The YTC has become involved in wider community matters and is invited to send representatives to meetings of groups such as the St Ives and District Area Road Safety Committee, the Twinning Committee, the Town Initiative and the Police Community Safety Group. The Council has taken direct action on one occasion when a youngster was injured on some spiked railings near to the school. The YTC arranged with engineers from Royal Air Force Wyton to level the tops of the sharp railings so this sort of injury could not happen again.

The first meeting of new recruits

Hopefully, following a successful marketing campaign, you will have a room full of enthusiastic, passionate young people who want to get involved and find out more about the youth council. This is the point where the steering group would be disbanded and a youth council should be formed.

The first youth council meeting

It will take a while to get into the swing of things; this is the time where the youth councillors will need quite a lot of support. This is also the time that elections for Chairperson, Secretary and other key roles may want to be held. It's important to work with the young people to ensure that they are engaged and feel that they can contribute. The first meeting can be quite daunting; however, perseverance is the order of the day here. Holding the first meeting is a major milestone, so perhaps a small celebration event after the meeting might be appropriate. Make sure the launch of the youth council is press released, and if possible get the local MP to endorse it.

Now, get to work!

The youth councillors, with appropriate support, now need take the lead and get to work. You might want to think about training opportunities, meeting with other established youth councils and running some in-house activities to whet their appetite. The young people need to begin to develop relationships with local councillors and wider decision-makers.

To conclude

When establishing and working with a local youth council, it's important that young people always take the lead, are empowered and, arguably most importantly, that they not only feel like they are making a contribution, but *are* making a contribution to their local communities.

Acknowledgements



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Some of the content has been adapted from the Youth Council Handbook from the Hampshire Association Local Councils (HALC), the Advice for Local Councils on Creating a Youth Council from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the British Youth Council's own work.

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About BYC and How We Can Help

What we do:

The British Youth Council (BYC) is a charity run by young people for young people. We empower young people across the UK to have their say and ensure their voices are heard.

We inspire and empower young people aged 25 and under to have a positive impact through campaigning, engaging with local, national and international democracy, and as volunteers, decision-makers and leaders.

Our membership encompasses over 130 youth organisations large and small around the UK. We reach out to over 600 local youth councils and our networks reach into local communities and around the world.

Our training workshops develop young people's skills so that they can have a say and be heard, while our consultation services tap into the views and opinions of young people across the UK.

Online:

Our free online resource centre (www.byc.org.uk/resources) is packed with information and briefings to help with the running of your local youth council. We have tips on how to run meetings effectively, different roles that young people can take at meetings, how to campaign effectively and make a difference. There are also resources covering fundraising, campaigning and managing the media.

In person:

We run a range of events throughout the year to support local youth councils, from delivering training courses right the way through to our annual Conventions which bring youth councillors from different areas together. To find out what is going on and where, check out our online events listings.

We also provide in-house training for local youth councils. Have a look at the training pages of our website (www.byc.org.uk/training) for the latest training offerings. And if none of these do what you need, we do offer bespoke sessions tailored to your needs.

On the phone:

Whether you're establishing a local youth council or looking to develop an existing group, we offer support and advice to people looking to set up a local youth council. Give us a call on 0845 458 1489 or email: lyc@byc.org.uk.

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To find out more, please contact BYC:

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