Young People’s Participation in Public Decision Making: a Case Study

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Declaration

The work presented in this thesis is the original work of the author, except where specific reference is made to other sources. It has not been submitted in part, or in whole, for any other degree.

Kathryn Faulkner  
17th December '06

Kathryn Faulkner  
Date
Acknowledgements

Many people helped me to enjoy this PhD and I owe a great deal of thanks. Firstly I would like to thank Kay Tisdall and Ian Dey who have both been excellent supervisors, their comments have been invaluable and I couldn’t have asked for better guidance at every stage.

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My family have been a huge support to me, reading the whole thesis through at the end was truly a labour of love. I would like to thank them especially for their continued enthusiasm in my work and unwavering belief in me. Finally I would like to thank John with whom I am always so happy.
Abstract

Young people's right to participate in public decision making is increasingly being translated into practice in the UK. A large range of organisations and public bodies are working to involve young people in decisions about policies and practices, from day to day project implementation to long term strategic planning. Among the different types of participation projects this thesis is concerned with those where young people are involved in decision making over a period of time. Despite a number of good practice guidelines, the project literature suggests several seemingly intransigent problems in ongoing youth participation.

My aim has been to move forward understandings of ongoing youth participation projects through focusing on a single case study: a group of young people who were involved over a number of years in public decision making within a Scottish local authority. Using a flexible and iterative research methodology, my initial questions on constraints, facilitators and divergence of views amongst stakeholders, were refined over the course of the research. I used a mixture of methods, combining and comparing data from thirty-one interviews, notes from participant observations and project documentation. Carrying out data analysis alongside data collection was a key component of the design.

The substantive chapters of this thesis deal with the roles and relationships between young people and participation workers, exchanges between young people and decision makers and accounts of the history of the group. Concepts of representation and decision making between adults and young people receive particular attention. I argue that models and ladders of participation fail to adequately characterise decision making in ongoing participation projects in separating decisions from the relationships in which they are embedded. A central theme running through the chapters is how "being young" is constructed, represented and used. It is my contention that being young is of special salience within youth participation projects. Being young is the basis for involvement; yet what young people are capable of and what they need is not self evident or consistent. Throughout the thesis I examine the ways in which being young is interpreted in different ways in various situations by the project participants. I look not only at the context dependent meanings of being young but also at how these meanings are used as a resource through the life of the project. I conclude by returning to common problems identified in the literature and considering how the findings could contribute to new ways of thinking on these issues.
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<td>Action Group</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>CYPI</td>
<td>Carnegie Young People’s Initiative</td>
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<td>CYPURI</td>
<td>Children and Young People’s Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>DETR</td>
<td>Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions</td>
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<tr>
<td>DfEE</td>
<td>Department for Education and Employment</td>
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<td>DfES</td>
<td>Department for Education and Skills</td>
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<td>DoH</td>
<td>Department of Health</td>
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<td>FGE</td>
<td>Fourth Generation Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MYP</td>
<td>Member of the UK Youth Parliament</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non Governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>National Health Service</td>
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<td>UK YP</td>
<td>UK Youth Parliament</td>
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This research project was born out of a personal frustration. As a charity youth officer during the late 1990s I found myself swept up in youth participation. Involving young people\(^1\) in decision making within the organisation seemed to offer so much at so many levels. I read and heard that not only could it lead to better services, policies and allocation of resources but it was also a step towards meeting young people’s rights to be involved in matters affecting them. My job that had started out dealing with youth issues at a distance started to mean more face to face involvement with actual young people. They were given seats on the charity board, I was given the remit of supporting their involvement and together we looked for ways to include their input into decision making. It was an exciting change of work. Even over the time span of a couple of years their input appeared to be having real effects. Some of the most radically innovative ways of working seemed to me to have come from young people’s suggestions. At the same time it was an uncomfortable experience. I felt there were a number of problems, most obviously with the expectations of young people’s inputs, the relationships between adult and younger board members and their place in the decision making process. No matter how many good practice guidelines we turned to nothing seemed to offer real insights. The

\(^1\) There are various different definitions of children and young people. In this thesis I follow the Convention on the Rights of the Child in defining children as persons under the age of eighteen. I define young people, following the Carnegie Young People’s Initiative, as those aged ten to twenty-five years. Combining the terms, “children and young people” refers to persons under the age of twenty-five.
literature available seemed to stop at methodological advice. Yet I wanted to go beyond tinkering with methods to the issues beneath.

1.1 Commitment to children and young people’s participation in public decision making

At one level this thesis is about young people’s involvement in public decision making. By public decision making, I mean decisions that are not personal or private but are:

…those collective decisions organisations and public bodies make which govern their policies and practices
(Cutler and Frost, 2001 p.13)

Involving children and young people in public decision making has become increasingly popular over the last ten years. This is true in statutory and voluntary sectors, both nationally and internationally.

In the UK a catalogue of initiatives and policies have emphasised the place of children and young people in making decisions about policies and practices. Table 1a lists just some of those relating to England and Scotland.

Table 1a: Legislation, policies and guidance promoting children and young people’s participation in public decision making

<table>
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<td>Local Government in Scotland Act 2003</td>
<td>States that local authorities should consult and cooperate with communities of interest including young people.</td>
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<td>Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils’ Educational Records) (Scotland) Act 2002</td>
<td>The guidance places an obligation on local authorities to consult with children and young people in the development of strategies to improve access to education for pupils with disabilities.</td>
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<td>Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000</td>
<td>Places a duty on head teachers and local education authorities to have due regard to children’s views on significant decisions regarding their education. Education authorities should take account of pupils’ views in relation to the Education Improvement Objectives and School Development Plans.</td>
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<td><strong>Child Strategy Statement 2000</strong></td>
<td>Requires departments to consider the implications of policies, whether new or amended, for children and to decide whether this means consulting directly with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialogue Youth Programme. Modernising Government Fund 2000</strong></td>
<td>An essential element is the involvement of young people as full partners in developing every dimension of Dialogue Youth. Young people are meant to be involved in the planning and management of the programme in every local authority in Scotland.</td>
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**ENGLAND**

| **Children’s Fund Strategic Plan Guidance 2005-2008** | Participation is one of the underlying principles, along with prevention and partnership of the children’s fund. The guidance requires Children’s Fund partnerships to set out how they will act as champions for children and young people’s participation and how they will help local agencies stimulate participation. |
| **Youth Matters: Next Steps 2006** | Requires local authorities to involve young people in making decisions about spending priorities for activities as part of the Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund. |
| **The Children Act 2004** | Stresses the government’s commitment to involving children and young people in planning, delivering and evaluating policies and services relevant to them. |
| **Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say 2004** | Provides guidance the ways in which children and young people can be involved in and consulted on school issues. |
| **National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services. Core Standards 2004** | State that the views of children, young people and families should be valued and taken into account in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services. |
| **Getting The Right Start: National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services: Standard for Hospital Services 2003** | Requires health authorities, primary care trusts and the National Health Service (NHS) trusts to involve and consult people, including children and young people, who use their services. |
| **Health and Social Care Act 2001** | |
| **The Connexions Service Planning Guidance 2000** | Taking account of the views of young people is one of the key principles of the Connexions programme. Young people should be involved in the governance, design and delivery of the services in addition to being consulted about innovative ways to deliver it. Each Connexions service has a youth charter developed locally with the involvement of young people. |
Places a duty on local authorities to prepare community strategies with special efforts made to involve representatives from under-represented groups such as children and young people.

Local Government Act 2000

Local authorities are required to undertake best value reviews of all their services and should incorporate the wishes and priorities of local people including children and young people.

Local Government Act 1999

Provides standards to assess schools on the extent to which pupils have a voice in school matters.

National Healthy School Standard Guidance 1999

The cross cutting UK government department, the Children and Young People’s Unit (CYPU) established in 2000, immediately put participation in public decision making high on its agenda:

...the government wants children and young people to have more opportunities to get involved in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them or which they use (CYPU 2001 p.2)

In *Learning to Listen* the unit provided guidance for government departments on involving children and young people. Each department was encouraged to develop its own action plan detailing how they planned to include the views of children and young people in their work. The CYPU has since been dissolved and its functions distributed across the new Children, Young People and Families Directorate in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) but public participation of children and young people remains high profile. The DfES is currently funding an online gateway for practitioners, organisations, policy makers and young people to share information on ways to involve them in decision making (http://www.participationworks.org.uk).

In the last couple of years children’s commissioners have been established in all four nations of the UK. Each commissioner has made public commitments to involving children and young people in planning their work. A wide range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also working to integrate children and young people into organisational decision making. Some, such as the UK, Welsh, Scottish Youth Parliaments, Northern Ireland Youth Forum and Article 12, are run by young people themselves. Large national organisations such as Save the Children, the National Youth Agency, National Children’s Bureau and Barnardo’s are all similarly
explicit about the principle of youth participation; each of them either having specific policies or written statements on their commitment to involving children and young people in their decision making (Barnardo’s 2005, National Children’s Bureau 2005, National Youth Agency 2005, Save the Children 2003).

A recent mapping survey has shown that not only are there currently high levels of acceptance of the principle of involving children and young people in participation work in England but that participation practice has increased over time (Oldfield and Fowler 2004). Almost nine out of ten statutory sectors and three quarters of voluntary sector respondents in Oldfield and Fowler’s survey said the amount of work they did to involve children and young people in decision making had increased over the past four years.

Children and young people’s participation in public decision making is currently very popular. Alongside its popularity there seems to be a thirst for advice on how to make it work. As authors from the Carnegie Young People’s Initiative, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with the sole focus of promoting young people’s participation, note:

Organisations face particular challenges in moving from policy declarations of principled support for participation, to embedding that commitment in everyday practice. For many this is a journey they do not know how to begin, how to prepare for, what resources they will need, or what outcomes it will lead to.
(Cutler and Taylor 2003 p.4)

1.2. Structure of the thesis

The broad subject of this thesis is young people’s involvement in public decision making. In chapter two I explore the literature in this area, narrowing down my detailed review to focus on those initiatives working with young people over twelve years old and involving them in ongoing decision making. I discuss a range of issues identified by the literature covering these projects and argue that writing on the topic is largely descriptive. I note that there is a preponderance of good practice guidelines and a particular lack of focus on the diversity of views within participation projects. I
argue that what is needed is research that goes beyond description to relate observations to theory, and in doing this come to a better understanding of youth participation in public decision making.

In chapter three I take my conclusions from the literature and use them to justify a case study research design. I spend some time discussing the rationale behind selection of the single case and describing its features. The case I used in the research was a group of young people involved in public decision making for a number of years within a Scottish city council. I made use of three methods of data collection: interviews with eleven young people, seven participation workers, four councillors, four council officers and five NGO and partner agency representatives; participant observation of meetings and social events and collection of a variety of text documents. In chapter three I reflect both on the methods I used in the research and the relationships built during the research process.

While this thesis is about youth participation, at another level many of its conclusions are about “being young”\(^2\). Although unanticipated at the start of my research, meanings attached to “being young” in the context of youth participation projects have come to be a central concern. Through the thesis I develop the argument that “being young” assumes great significance in youth participation projects. “Being young” is the basis on which young people are involved. However what “being young” means is neither self evident or consistent. Instead the category can be seen to be context dependent and used in different ways, often as a resource, by various players through the life of the project.

I develop this argument through chapters four, five and six. Whilst what it means to “be young” is a thread connecting the chapters, I also raise and reflect on other issues relating to youth participation through these chapters. Chapter four focuses particularly on the roles and relationships between young people and the participation workers. I raise and discuss the tensions inherent in participation workers’ roles. On the issue of decision making, I argue that the balance should be

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\(^2\) I have put quotation marks around “being young” because I wish to indicate I am using the term not as a simple biological condition but as a constructed and contested concept.
interpreted within the context of other relationships built up between young people and participation workers. I detail the particular divisions of work between the two groups and examine the ways in which these were tied to conceptions of young people, what they could and could not do.

In chapter five I compare accounts of the history of the youth group. Young people presented the progression of the group in contrasting ways to how they spoke about the roles and relationships within it. In particular I argue that they stressed the competence and achievement of the group over time. I relate this to their desire to provide a counter narrative of young people and their capabilities, counter to popular images of young people and counter to images used at certain points in the participation project.

Having looked within the youth group and at versions of its history, the place of the youth group within the council is the subject of chapter six. I examine the ways in which the youth group was presented and presented itself within the council and to different stakeholders. Comparing the young people to an insider interest group I discuss the possible resources they had to offer decision makers within the council. I go on to look particularly at the interactions between policy makers and the young people themselves and how these too were tied to specific images of young people.

I conclude in chapter seven by discussing what can be learnt through a comparison of the substantive chapters. Different actors drew on a variety of ideas about what it meant to be young within the project, often within the same accounts. Comparing chapters highlights my conclusion that “being young” can be seen to be continuously actively produced and relational. The central concern of this thesis is on “being young” within a youth participation project, yet there are other conclusions to be drawn from my chapters. I return to some of the dominant problems identified in my literature review and discuss how the findings could provide new ways of looking at and addressing these issues.
Chapter Two
Reviewing the Literature

My aims in this chapter are to examine the literature relevant to young people’s participation in public decision making. I start by providing a broad overview of the different dimensions of youth participation and then concentrate my more detailed literature review on participation projects where young people have been involved in ongoing decision making processes, as opposed to one off consultations. Through an examination of the key concepts, I outline what I see as particular gaps in the literature, in both substantive and research design terms. I then go on to propose my research questions to address these areas.

2.1 Outlining the youth participation literature

Children and young people should be able to participate in decisions that affect them; that is the common conclusion from several quite different sources. First amongst these is the children’s rights perspective: Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
(United Nations 1989)
The CRC applies to children under the age of eighteen years. Adopted by the United Nations in 1989, it was ratified by the UK in 1991. Although the CRC is not justiciable, (i.e. children cannot use it to bring a case to court over violation of their rights\(^3\)) it can be cited in civil and criminal proceedings and the British Government has a duty to report on progress to the Committee on the Rights of the Child initially after two years and then every five years. The CRC has become an important lobbying tool for children's charities (Badham 2004; Willow 2002); barely a publication on children and young people's participation exists that does not make reference to the CRC and Article 12 in particular.

Outside of non-governmental publications and websites there is also a substantial body of literature discussing children's rights, frequently with special reference to their participation rights. Articles include those that argue for the legitimacy of children's rights (Archard 1993; Franklin 2002; Freeman 1998), that detail violations of children's rights (King 1997) and that link participation rights to children's citizenship (Cockburn 1998; De Winter 1997; Jans 2004). For example Roche makes the link between participation and citizenship succinctly as:

> Rights are not just about state-citizen relations but about how civil society should imagine itself; in this context the imagery of social conversation and participation is central to the rethinking of citizenship.
> (Roche 1999 p. 475)

There is ongoing lively debate in philosophical writing on the status of rights and whether they can apply to children (for example Archard and Macleod 2002). However outside the sphere of philosophy there are very few authors that argue against children's rights and their participation rights (Purdy 1994; Scarre 1989). One such writer is Pupavac (2001). She argues that children's rights are based on a negative view of adults that does not trust parents to act in children's best interests; furthermore, that rights regimes empower professionals over children's own families. Such criticisms of children's rights are however dwarfed by the number of publications that argue for children's rights, including the right to participate in participation in decision making.

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1 The European Convention on Human Rights is justiciable and applies to all ages, but unlike the CRC does not have an article specifically on participation in decision making.
decision making. The volume of this pro-rights thinking is due in part to the expanding academic field that has called itself the new social studies of childhood. During the 1980s and 1990s there was a distinctive change in sociological writing on children and childhood. Researchers started to become interested in children as competent actors in their own lives and in the ways in which childhood is socially constructed by society. Notable amongst these were the volume of contributions edited by Qvortrup (1994) focusing on childhood as a structural category of societies, work such as that of Mayall (2001b; 2002) emphasising children's agency and the interest within geography in children as social actors in space (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Morrow 1999). In 1990 James and Prout declared the emergence of a new paradigm in childhood sociology. They stated the central tenets of this paradigm to be that:

- Childhood is socially constructed rather than a biological fact and ways of understanding this period of human life vary cross culturally.
- Childhood is a variable of social analysis and therefore should never be divorced from other variables such as class, gender and ethnicity etc.
- Children's social relationships are worthy of study in their own right.
- Children are not passive subjects of social structure and processes but are actively involved in contributing and constructing their own social worlds.
- Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood because of the emphasis it can give to children's own voices.
- Proclaiming a new paradigm necessarily involves engaging and responding to the process of reconstructing childhood in society (Prout and James 1990).

An acceptance of children as competent social beings with a particular position in society, life experiences and views strongly supports the argument for including those views in public decision making. This argument has been made by several authors (Davis and Jones 1996; Hill et al. 2004; Matthews et al. 1999; Sinclair 2004). Other strands within the new social studies of childhood have linked participation to social inclusion (Morrow 2001; Stevens et al. 1999) along the lines that

Children traditionally have had little or no input into national and local policies, so greater social participation in ways that meet their wishes and felt needs is crucially contingent on their enhanced participation in decision making.

(Hill et al. 2004 p. 78)
The Economic and Social Research Council sponsored a seminar series in 2002 entitled “Challenging ‘Social Inclusion’: Perspectives for and from Children and Young People” the outcomes of which were given space in a special edition of the journal Children and Society (Vol. 18, 2004). It was notable that with the exception of Pupavac, mentioned above, all papers from the seminar series agreed with the basic principle that children and young people should be involved in public decision making.

Yet another link to children and young people’s participation in public decision making has been made in relation to concern over young people’s lack of interest in political matters (Barnardo’s 1996; Eldin 2003; Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Young people between eighteen and twenty-four are more than three times less likely to have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of interest in politics when compared to people aged forty-five and over (Parker 2000). Concern over political engagement of young people has been interpreted by some as part of the “moral panic” over young people’s behaviour in general (Griffin 2004; Matthews et al. 1999). While research on the political behaviour of young people between fourteen and twenty-four has shown low levels of interest in politics, in a study carried out by White and colleagues young people did demonstrate strong views on political issues such as education, employment and health. White et al. concluded that young people lacked the knowledge of how to engage with politics and saw it as a complex and alien subject (White et al. 2000). Such research has lent backing to those that argue increased political engagement is likely to follow from an increase in opportunities made available for young people to participate in public decision making (Roche 1999; Roker and Eden 2002; Wyness et al. 2004).

A final strand supporting the position that young people should be involved in public decision making comes from political changes to governance in the last twenty five years. These can be characterised as concurrent drives towards increasing consumerist conceptions of services and on democratic innovation in politics. The drive towards consumer choice, particularly within the health services, was a feature of health reforms under both Conservative and Labour administrations in the 1990s
(Bolton 2002). Added to this has been increasing emphasis since the election of the Labour government in 1997 on public participation. Newman traces the discourse of public participation back to themes of rebuilding trust between citizens and government, improving the policy process and enhancing the legitimacy of government and local government decisions (Newman 2002). Examples of such moves include the importance given to local involvement in area based initiatives such as the New Deal for Communities and Best Value programmes. These initiatives impose new legal requirements on local service providers to consult both more widely and in greater depth than they have in the past (Foley and Martin 2000). A range of policy documents push the importance of public participation in decision making (DETR 1998a; DETR 1998b; DETR 1999; DETR 2000; DETR 2001; DoH 1998; DoH 2001; Social Exclusion Unit 2001). Growing acceptance of children and young people's place in public decision making can be seen within this emphasis on public participation in general (Geddes and Rust 2000; IPPR 2001; Sinclair 2004).

This has been a very rapid run through the various literatures with a common message: children and young people ought to be involved in public decision making. It is worth noting that these literatures are diverse in origin even if their end points are similar. It is not my intention to examine these literatures in depth in this review, suffice to point out that the calls for youth participation are numerous, loud and various. Instead I would like to move beyond the literature that makes a case for participation in public decision making to look at that which deals with the substance of it. But what is the substance of children and young people's participation in public decision making, what is the phenomenon made up of? The actual ways in which children and young people participate in public decision making can be described along many different aspects. Kirby and colleagues (2003) have suggested dividing this diversity into six key dimensions:

- Content of decision making
- Focus of decision making
- Nature of participation activity
- Children and young people involved
- Level of participation
- Frequency and duration of participation.
Looking at these aspects helps outline the nature of the various ways children and young people participate in public decision making.

2.1.1 Dimensions of youth participation

Content of decision making

By content of decision making Kirby et al. refer to the particular sector that children and young people’s input into decision making takes place within. They note that levels of activity vary significantly by sector with

...considerable participatory activity around community development and urban renewal, and ... limited involvement of children in the juvenile justice system.
(Kirby et al. 2003 p.25)

As might be expected there is less information available in the sectors where children’s participation is less popular than where it is more common practice. The discrepancy in involving children and young people in decisions that affect them across sectors in the UK was noted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its report on progress in implementation of the CRC in the UK in 2002. In particular the Committee singled out the slow progress in incorporating the views of children in the areas of education and the law (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2002).

A number of different mapping surveys provide a picture of children’s involvement in the most popular sectors i.e. local government activity, education and health. For example Oldfield and Fowler (2004) carried out a mapping survey of statutory and voluntary sector organisations in England and found that within local government organisations, respondents from youth services and first-tier local authorities recorded the highest levels of participation work (97% and 95% respectively), while district councils reported lower, yet still high, levels of involvement (79%). Over four in five voluntary sector respondents (81%) said that their organisation currently involved children and young people in decision making.

In the education sector, a random sample of 200 state primary and 600 secondary schools carried out in England and Wales found that over a third had student councils
A more recent study in England carried out by the Department for Education and Skills (2005) found much higher numbers of 97% of schools and 98% of college reporting student councils. In Wales school councils will be compulsory in every secondary school from the start of the Autumn term 2006 (Welsh Statutory Instrument 2005). There have been no comprehensive surveys of student participation, beyond individual case studies, in Scotland.

In the health sector there have similarly been limited surveys of practice in involving children and young people. One exception is that carried out by Slopper and Lighfoot (2003) of all health authorities and NHS trusts, on the extent and nature of involvement of physically disabled or chronically ill children and young people in local health service development in England. They found that amongst seventy-five health authorities and 243 trusts responding, only twenty-seven decision making initiatives were identified. Over half of these were carried out in partnership between health services and other agencies, usually local authorities or voluntary organizations. They concluded that despite strong policy impetus the involvement of this group of children and young people in service development in the NHS was at an early stage.

Focus of decision making

Within each of the broad sectors, the focus of decision making may vary widely. Sinclair (2004) has made a threefold distinction between public decision making related to service planning or development, that which is about influencing policy be it centrally, locally or within an organisation and finally decision making involving children and young people either as research subjects or co-researchers in evaluating services. The Oldfield and Fowler (2004) mapping survey provides a more detailed list of the foci of activities but these can still be broadly divided into Sinclair's three sections as seen below:

- **Service planning/development**
  - Planning
  - Setting budgets
  - Assessing grant applications
  - Assessing contractors and suppliers
  - Developing frameworks for assessing services,
Developing complaints procedures
Promoting services to other children and young people
Training other children and young people (including peer education or mentoring)
Recruiting and selecting staff
Training staff
Training elected/board members
Organising events

Influencing policy
Developing policies, strategies, objectives
Campaigning for change in policy and provision
Helping secure money and resources
Developing youth charters
Working with wider community to improve relationships

Research
Researching the needs of children and young people
Mapping existing provision
Assessing services, e.g. mystery shopping

Nature of participation activity

The actual method by which children and young people can be involved in any of the decision making activities outlined above is perhaps the most varied of all the dimensions. For example the following methods can be identified from a range of publications (Borland et al. 2001; Cutler and Frost 2001; Kilgour 2001; Oldfield and Fowler 2004):

Table 2a: Participation methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written Methods</th>
<th>Verbal Methods</th>
<th>Visual and Dramatic Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Group discussion</td>
<td>Drawing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion box</td>
<td>Individual discussion</td>
<td>Role play/drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative writing</td>
<td>Question and answer session</td>
<td>Making video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graffiti wall</td>
<td>Steering group</td>
<td>Designing display</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>Relaxing/social activity</td>
<td>Photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive website</td>
<td>Citizen panel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public meeting</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Most frequently a combination of methods are used together rather than children and young people being only offered a single way to input their views into public decision making (Kirby et al. 2003).
Children and young people involved

Participation projects may be potentially open to all children or targeted towards specific groups (e.g. those of particular ethnic minorities, with mental or physical disabilities, in care etc). All youth participation projects by their nature however have at least an upper age limit. While the target age range may vary, it is clear that certain ages are more frequently involved than others. A survey of participation workers in England found that 45% were working with twenty-one to twenty-five year olds, 83% were working with eleven to fifteen year olds, 31% were working with six to ten year olds and 12% were working with under fives (Kilgour 2001). In a survey of Scottish public participation initiatives 19% worked with young people aged nineteen to twenty-five, 23% with seventeen and eighteen year olds, 24% with twelve to sixteen year olds, 19% with ages five to eleven and 15% with under fives (Dorrian et al. 2001). Fitzpatrick and colleagues (1998) carried out a review of twelve area-based regeneration initiatives in the UK involving young people and found that the great majority of projects worked with the age range fourteen to nineteen years. In Slopper and Lightfoot’s review of health authorities (2003), the most common age range, included in twenty-four of the twenty-seven initiatives, was twelve to eighteen years. It can be seen therefore that young people aged over twelve are significantly more likely to be the focus of involvement in public decision making initiatives than those of younger ages.

Level of participation

One of the most popular distinctions to make in youth participation projects is in the level of decision making power children and young people have. From an inspection of the various methods above it might seem that some would be potentially more influential than others, e.g. group discussions rather than email input, however the level of influence cannot always be inferred from the method used. Group discussions may be very influential in public decision making in some situations and not in others. Determining the level of decision making power young people have in
a project remains a key concern of both projects and young people involved, but very hard to achieve.

The most popular model used to look at the level of decision making power is Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation, which is itself an adaptation of Arnstein’s 1969 original ladder of citizen participation.

Figure 2a: Hart’s Ladder of Participation
(Source: Hart 1997)

According to Hart, levels one to three are non-participation with only levels upwards counting as degrees of participation. Hart’s ladder is ubiquitous in writing on children and young people’s participation. It has been made the basis for standards (Wade et al. 2002) and tools to help practitioners determine where the projects they are involved in stand in decision making terms (Shier 2001). The popularity of Hart’s ladder may relate to the fact that it seems to offer a simple way to classify projects in terms of decision making power. The ladder has been criticised however for the implication that levels of participation are arranged in a hierarchy with higher decision making power being better (Treseder 1997). Indeed tools such as that proposed by Shier and based on Hart’s ladder are quite explicit in the assumption that practitioners should want to move “upwards”. Shier has developed a model to complement Hart’s and described it as an additional tool, rather than a replacement. Shier’s model works by specifying openings, opportunities and obligations at each level of participation. He defines “openings” as the personal commitments that practitioners are willing to make. “Opportunities” occur, according to Shier, when the needs are met that enable the practitioner or organisation to meet the participation level, an example of this might be new skills or resources. Finally an “obligation” is
established when working this way becomes embedded within organisational practice.

Figure 2b: Shier’s Pathways to Participation
(Source: Shier 2002 p.111)

### Levels of Participation

1. Children are listened to.
   - Are you ready to listen to children?

2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
   - Are you ready to support children in expressing their views?

3. Children’s views are taken into account.
   - Are you ready to take children’s views into account?

4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
   - Are you ready to let children join in decision-making processes?

5. Children share power and responsibilities for decision making.
   - Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?

### Openings>Opportunities>Obligations

- Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?
- Is it a policy requirement that children and adults share power and responsibility for decisions?
- Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in decision-making processes?
- Does your decision-making process enable you to take children’s views into account?
- Is it a policy requirement that children’s views must be given due weight in decision-making?
- Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?
- Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?
- Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?
- Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

This point is the minimum you must achieve if you endorse the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Shier’s model rests on the assumption that movement should be progressive, onwards and upwards through the different steps:

By answering the questions, the reader can determine their current position, and easily identify the next steps they can take to increase the level of participation. (Shier 2001 p.110 emphasis added)
To counteract hierarchical views of participation Treseder (1997) and Kirby et al. (2003) have both proposed alternative forms of participation where the options, although similar in content to the rungs of Hart’s ladder, are arranged in a circle, as if equal. Both of their models start from Hart’s rung of level four upwards, hence not dealing with levels of “non-participation” at all.

Figure 2c: Kirby et al’s Model of the Level of Participation
(Source: Kirby et al. 2003)

Figure 2d: Treseder’s Degrees of Participation
(Source: Treseder 1997)
The issue of hierarchy is not the only problem with such models of decision making. More fundamental is the simplistic, compartmentalised nature of these models. Kirby et al. (2003) do acknowledge that power can change rapidly within an activity, and Kirby and Gibbs go further by saying:

These models suggest that each participation initiative or task can be assigned one level of participation. In reality, however, levels of decision-making power constantly shift within projects and within tasks. Even within child-led initiatives, for example, adults have a role to play, and this inevitably includes making some decisions...

(Kirby and Gibbs in press)

Not only can levels of participation shift on the micro scale within activities but they can also shift on the macro scale in terms of the life of a project. It is not clear either whether initiation or final decision making is the more important criterion to use in making the judgement.

Determining the level of decision making power is complex and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. For the moment, I wish to suggest that in classifying participation initiatives according to level of decision making power it is more useful to make a single broad distinction between consultation initiatives and those where young people are involved in a decision making process, that is where there is the possibility of some discussion over decisions being made. This division has been made before by both Borland et al. (2001) and Hill et al. (2004).

Consultation entails asking children directly about their views. Participation refers to the extent of children’s involvement in decision making. Consultation may be undertaken without regard to participation but may equally be accompanied by efforts to promote children’s involvement in decisions.

(Borland et al. 2001, Executive Summary, emphasis in original)

Hart views consultation and participation differently; according to Hart, consultation is just one form of youth participation (rung five) (Hart 1992). Despite the differences in their definitions of participation and consultation and whether consultation is a form of participation or not, Borland et al. and Hart do both distinguish between consultation and the decision making process. If, along with Borland et al., we take consultation to be no more than asking views, akin to rung five
of Hart’s ladder, then this is different in kind to a process that involves some kind of dialogue about the decision being made, i.e. Borland’s et al. definition of participation and rungs 6 upwards of Hart’s ladder.

Frequency and duration of participation

Frequency and duration of participation are often closely related to the number/decision making power axes in that smaller decision making groups of young people are more likely to be set up to meet frequently and over a period of time. Consultations on the other hand are most often single events. Even where they are made up of a series over time this rarely involves the same group of children and young people. This pattern has been confirmed by a number of studies; Fitzpatrick and colleagues (1998) noted the common scenario in urban regeneration schemes was for projects offering high levels of decision making power to young people to involve only a small number on an ongoing basis. Where larger numbers of young people were involved this was most often with a lower level of decision making power and in short term/one off events. This pattern was also commented on by Borland and colleagues in the review of techniques for gaining the views of children and young people they carried out for the Scottish Parliament (2001). A consensus emerging from the interviews they undertook with professionals experienced in consulting with children and young people was that although longer term structures frequently provided opportunities for higher levels of involvement in decision making, this was often only to smaller numbers of young people.

There are two broad categories of ongoing participation structures that have become particularly popular; these are youth councils/forums and youth involvement in decision making committees:

Youth councils

Mathews has described youth councils as:

...groups of young people who come together in committees to discuss issues relating to their communities.

(Matthews 2001 p.300)
He and others (Craig 2003) have noted that they are not new phenomena and youth councils were very popular in the late 1940s and the mid 1980s, both times increasing in number rapidly over a couple of years and then dying out around five years later. Matthews has categorised youth councils in the UK into three main structures. These are "shadow", where the group of young people mimics existing adult structures, for example, the Scottish Youth Parliament is made up of 300 members who meet three times a year and elect an executive of twenty members; "feeder", where the group is established specifically to feed into ongoing strategies, and "consultative", where smaller groups of young people feed into local initiatives on a case by case basis.

Another type of youth council or forum is that formed within schools. There has been a marked increase in the development of schools' councils in the UK over the last ten years (Alderson 2000b). Taylor and Johnson suggest that the enthusiasm arises from the links made between school councils and citizenship education (Taylor and Johnson 2002); Cotmore (2004) also makes links with the behaviour management agenda whereby pupils are encouraged to exercise responsibility for themselves and others.

Young people on boards/committees
Another popular way to involve young people in ongoing public decision making is through inviting them to join the committees or governing bodies. For example, YouthLink Scotland is the national youth agency for Scotland; there are fourteen members of the board of directors of which two are young people who are nominated and voted for by members of the Scottish Youth Parliament. Five board meetings are held a year plus a twenty four hour residential, Annual General Meeting and other working meetings. The young people have the same rights of voting on the board as the older members (YouthLink 2003).

Oldfield and Fowler (2004) revealed that including children and young people on decision making boards or committees was a very commonly used method in both the statutory and voluntary sector in their English survey. It was the most popular
way to involve children and young people in local, regional and national voluntary organisations (59% reported they did so). Statutory sector organisations reported higher use of consultation methods such as public meetings (74%) but involving children and young people as members of decision making bodies or committees was the most popular method for involvement in an ongoing way (44%).

My aim in this section has been to provide an outline of the key features of the literature on children and young people’s participation. I started with a brief discussion of the different literatures all supporting the concept that children and young people should be involved in public decision making. I have gone on to discuss the key dimensions by which such initiatives may vary. I would now like to look in more detail at the literature on particular types of participation initiatives: those where involvement is ongoing over a period of time.

2.2 Focusing on ongoing decision making projects

Authors on the art of writing a literature review agree that it is important to set boundaries in terms of what will and will not be included (Hammersley 2001; Hart 1998). To review the literature covering every one of the dimensions of participation initiatives described above would not be a useful task, for the field is too large and diverse. In carrying out a more detailed literature review I therefore decided to set some boundaries:

| Content of decision making: | Any |
| Focus of decision making: | Any |
| Nature of participation activity: | Any |
| Children and young people involved: | Over twelve years old |
| Level of participation and frequency and duration of participation: | Ongoing decision making project, not one off consultations |

In terms of age, there were two reasons for concentrating on those aged over twelve. My initial interest was towards teenagers as I felt comfortable and had prior experience of working with that age group; however the strongest reason was simply that this age was the most commonly involved, most participatory activities identified in the surveys involving young people over twelve. The other important
boundary I set was to concentrate on ongoing initiatives where young people were involved in a decision making process rather than one off consultations. Again part of my reason for this was because it was these projects that first drew me to the research. I was enthusiastic to examine the details of projects where adults and young people were working together over a period of time rather than engaging in short, even one off, encounters. I was more interested in the relationships between people than the success or not of particular methods for consultation. In addition it was these projects that seemed to offer particularly tricky issues for resolution combined with a less developed literature. Some authors have commented that involving children and young people in ongoing decision making, rather than consultations, can be more potentially challenging (Fitzpatrick et al. 1998). Spicer and Evans (2006), in their research on participation approaches in Children’s Fund projects, found projects usually favoured consultation, over ongoing involvement, as an easier option:

...whilst a number of partnerships have aspired to involve children in decision making processes, in practice they developed consultation activities since the approach was seen as quicker and less complex to implement than involving children directly in strategic decisions ... involving children in partnership management in particular was viewed as challenging orthodox, professional dominated approaches to decision making and potentially implied considerable shifts in power and responsibilities. (Spicer and Evans 2006 p.182)

Whilst potentially presenting great challenges, the literature examining the decision making process in ongoing youth participation projects is at the same time much less developed than that on consultation methods. This is because as well as reviews and discussions on carrying out public consultations with children (Stafford et al. 2003), there is an ever growing number of academic articles on techniques of working with children and young people and eliciting their views for research purposes (Alderson 1995; Christensen 2004; Cree et al. 2002; O’Kane 2000; Punch 2002; Smith et al. 2002). In Borland et al.’s (2001) review of consultation techniques for use with children and young people, they identified three basic approaches, namely research “on” children, research “with” children and empowering approaches “to” children. Whereas until recently most research was done “on” children as objects, they commented there is a “new and enthusiastic field” looking at approaches to working
with children and young people as active subjects who can engage with the research. Writers have pointed out that reflection on practice is far more common in the area of consultation than in ongoing participative projects (Kirby and Bryson 2002; Sinclair 2004).

Other key aspects of the scope of the literature review are given in the table below. I did not restrict the review to published or academic literature only since, as has been noted (Kirby and Bryson 2002), a great part of relevant writing on participation is in so called grey literature.

Table 2c: Boundaries of the detailed literature review continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period:</th>
<th>1990 onwards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sources:</td>
<td>Published books, journals, magazines, reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language:</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical Region:</td>
<td>UK only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The methods I used for my review were to start off with the publications I knew and follow up references from there. On exhausting these I used two databases (the Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts and the Social Sciences Citation Index) to search for additional relevant articles. I used the terms “participation”, “involvement” and “consultation” combined with “young people”, “youth”, “adolescent” and “child”. These search engines threw up over a thousand articles including large numbers on individual decision making by children in medical and legal contexts. I trawled through these articles to find those that were relevant to public decision making, and again snowballed from there until I reached saturation and was coming across no new references.

Setting the boundaries of the literature review at the national level included a very wide range of material. I decided not to extend this to cover the international literature on youth participation. I knew from my research budget that my study, whatever shape it took, would have to be a national one. I felt therefore it was more important to fully cover the national level literature that would provide the context for my research. From my previous knowledge of the international literature on
youth participation I felt that there were few issues, beyond those relating to culture, which were not also covered in the national level literature.

The literature I have defined can be divided into three broad sets: that which is based on research of some description on youth participation projects, articles which relate participation to theory and that which neither connects to theory nor research but makes general assertions, most usually in the form of good practice guidelines. All three literatures emphasise the significant challenges that commonly occur in ongoing youth participation projects. In the section below I draw out and discuss the major themes present in these literatures.

2.2.1 Who is involved

One of the most frequently mentioned issues in all three of the participation literatures is that of which young people are involved in participation initiatives. Concerns have been repeatedly raised that the most socially excluded groups of young people face significantly higher barriers to participation and are less often included in public decision making initiatives (Cavet and Sloper 2004; Cutler and Frost 2001; Dorrian et al. 2001; Green 2001; McNeish and Newman 2002). The absence of young people with disabilities has been commented on especially (Franklin and Sloper 2004; Khan 2001; Lightfoot and Sloper 2001) as has the lack of young people from ethnic minority groups (Cutler and Frost 2001).

A total of five mapping surveys have been carried out on young people’s participation in public decision making in the UK, three as part of the Taking the Initiative series commissioned by the Carnegie Young People’s Initiative (CYPI) and summarized in a final report (Cutler and Frost 2001). Each of the surveys has been careful to include questions on the details of which young people are involved in initiatives.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DETAILS OF PUBLICATION</th>
<th>NATION SURVEYED</th>
<th>SECTOR</th>
<th>AGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green, R (2001) Taking the Initiative; Promoting Young People’s Involvement in Public Decision Making. Northern Ireland Report Carnegie Young People’s Institute.</td>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>Statutory (including government departments, local authorities, health boards/trusts, education boards/higher education institutions) and voluntary sector organisations.</td>
<td>10-25 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All the surveys above noted, and commented upon, the gap in involving certain groups of children and young people. For example in Oldfield and Fowler’s (2004) survey two thirds of statutory sector and half of voluntary sector organizations said they found it difficult to reach specific groups of children and young people including black and minority ethnic groups, those not in education, employment or training, those they termed “disaffected” young people and those living in rural areas. However all of the surveys also noted the work being done to try and include a wider range of young people. The efforts of youth workers to target particular young people, although less visible in the surveys, has been commented upon particularly in publications that look at participation project case studies (Fitzpatrick et al. 1998; Kirby 2001; Kirby and Bryson 2002).

It is in the literature on youth councils and forums that the issue of who participates has been commented upon in most depth. Fitzpatrick and colleagues (1998) carried out a study of twelve area-based regeneration initiatives of which seven were youth forums. They highlighted several key issues relating to the issue of the young people that were being involved. They noted that although forums claimed to involve between fifty and one hundred young people, it was usual for only a core group of ten to fifteen young activists to be regularly involved in activities. Smaller groups were inevitably less diverse than the wider group; moreover the authors found that these smaller groups were not accountable to a wider constituency. Although in theory members of youth forums were meant to represent a youth club or school, Fitzpatrick et al. found no examples of feedback mechanisms operating in practice. They also commented on the tendency for forums to become close knit groups of friends which meant young people were reluctant to join because they thought the forums were cliquey; this tendency has been mentioned by other authors including
those writing on school councils (Taylor and Johnson 2002). Mathews has been the most prolific author on the issue of youth forums (Mathews and Limb 1998; Mathews et al. 1999; Matthews 2001; Matthews et al. 1999). His research paints a similar picture. In one study of sixty-three young people taking part in four youth councils, 19% said they felt like outsiders when attempting to take part (Matthews 2001). Mathews has been particularly insistent on the issue of representativeness, or rather not, of youth councils:

... young people who willingly give up their time to be members may not represent the diversity of the community at large. Often young people involved in youth forums are selected or self selected and even when elected it is impossible to claim that delegates are representative of the diversity of young people within a community. There is a danger that participation advances the interests of the vociferous, articulate and confident at the expense of others. (Matthews 2001 p.310)

Diversity and representation were the source of one of three main criticisms made in the recent evaluation of the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) by the Department for Education and Skills (2004). The report praised the UKYP on one hand for its diverse make-up, noting that in terms of representation it was doing markedly better than the UK national parliament, but on the other hand the evaluation criticized members of the UK youth parliament (MYPs) for being perceived as unrepresentative of young people as a population. The authors commented that

...the great majority of participants believe that MYPs are better educated and more articulate than “normal” young people...MYPs are perceived as largely middle class and well educated. (Department for Education and Skills 2004 p.7)

The report concluded that perceptions count and so it was vital that the UKYP find ways to appear more representative. The paradox demonstrated in the evaluation of the UKYP, whereby youth forums may be more representative than adult structures in practice yet receive greater criticism on the issue, is one that has been rarely discussed in the literature.
2.2.2 Decision making power

Another issue that receives much attention in all three literatures on youth participation is that of the balance of decision making power. Various studies have commented that young people who are involved in public decision making initiatives generally have little influence (Hill et al. 2004). Fitzpatrick et al. concluded in their study that young people had had a minor impact on regeneration initiatives, mostly limited to youth specific issues or contributing to existing projects rather than influencing new developments (Fitzpatrick et al. 1998). They found young people had succeeded in influencing the strategic focus in only two out of twelve initiatives. Lightfoot and Sloper's (2001) study of health services initiatives involving young people found that only just over half reported at least one change in service provision as a result of the work. The other half then had no evidence of even a single change from the young people’s involvement. Shenton (1999) carried out an evaluation of Investing in Children, a youth participation project in County Durham. She reported that although young people felt they were asked their opinions more often since the project started, very few felt that adult genuinely listened or that their views made any difference. In some projects their influence had been restricted to marginal issues such as the colour of school uniforms and the use of playground and they had not been allowed to contribute to the more substantive issues such as the school curriculum. The evaluation was a mixed bag with other projects that were part of the same Investing in Children initiative showing more positive results; for example a leisure centre was able to provide evidence of changes in policy and practice and had started to run a four week pilot scheme of activities targeted at young people on a Saturday evening.

There have been other reports of the positive impact in project terms of young people’s involvement, such the youth subcommittee in Bury council that won a budget to spend on youth specific developments, including new kick-about areas and improved services for young people (Geddes and Rust 1999). In the IPPR (2001) survey of local authorities, 68% of respondents felt that young people had some
influence on area decisions; however just over one quarter of councils responding felt that young people had very little influence at all, the highest figures for this response coming from district councils (30%). To summarise, while there is some evidence of young people’s participation having project outcomes, these are generally small scale and almost always on youth specific issues alone.

Looking at the issue of why young people may have insignificant decision making power, some studies have related it to young people being brought into adult designed projects and having little say in how they are involved. Cutler and Frost concluded that the results of the four nations CYPI mapping surveys identified the need for projects to be developed on young people’s terms rather than adults’ (Cutler and Frost 2001). Allard in a commentary on youth participation has asserted that

.. perhaps one of the reasons that participation is often unsuccessful or is not genuine is that young people are asked to contribute to a process over which they have no control and to which they have no input other than their own contribution.

(Allard 1996 p.165)

Allard makes a distinction above between projects that show “genuine” participation and those that do not. The search for “genuine” participation is often described primarily in terms of avoiding what must be one of the most popular terms in youth participation literature: *tokenism*. Hart places tokenism, along with decoration and manipulation on the bottom three rungs of his ladder, classing them all in opposition to “real participation” as “non-participation”. He describes tokenism as a situation where children have little choice about the ways they participate. More often tokenism is used to mean an emphasis on showing young people are being involved, rather than focusing on the effects of such involvement. A comment from the UK Youth Parliament sums this up well:

Some stakeholders are uncertain whether responses from Ministers translate into action ... the implication of this is that UKYP is functioning as a convenient gesture towards youth participation rather than having a real impact on the lives of young people...some stakeholders feel that this offers an opportunity for local authorities to “tick the youth participation box” without having to expend any real energy or thought into what is required for youth participation to be genuine, rather than tokenistic.

(Department for Education and Skills 2004 p.44)
There is universal agreement that tokenism is to be avoided and a very real pitfall of youth participation projects. In Matthews' (2001) study of youth forums, 25% of young participants complained of adults trying to steer the agenda, 44% said the forums “have no power” and over a quarter (27%) said they were tokens. Matthews has argued forcefully that

...there is a danger that adult dominated organization like a local authority may turn to a youth council as a political sop or as a means of fulfilling another performance indicator without sufficiently thinking through roles and responsibilities.

(Matthews 2001 p.309)

In such situations participation itself is the end goal, the performance indicator, not change as a result of a participatory process. Oakley has made the distinction between participation as a means and participation as an end (Oakley 1991). As “a means” participatory approaches are used to achieve effective project implementation, the idea being that participation is a good way to get things done. For example a youth participation project might be set up to involve young people in designing the local youth centre because they are more likely to know what the target population would find attractive, and hence ensure a popular and successful youth centre. Participation as “an end” however is about involving people in decision making as a goal in itself, regardless of whether it actually results in better decisions. Two possible potential ends can be distinguished. Firstly the end could relate to young people and the moral issue of them having the right to participate (Katz 2002). Secondly the end could actually be for the organisation, rather than the young people. Organisations which are concerned simply with demonstrating participation is taking place, with the benefit either to young people or projects being of secondary importance, could be described as using participation as an end. The concern being with showing participation is taking place rather than on what it achieves, therefore an example of tokenism. Fitzpatrick et al. seem to describe the second sense of participation as an end in their evaluation of youth forums in regeneration programmes:
When most youth forums were first set up their principal activity was to meet on a regular basis. In the absence of links into the regeneration process, many of these youth forums lacked a sense of purpose. They can be contrasted to most adult community forums which are generally set up to focus upon specific issues, such as housing conditions in a particular area. (Fitzpatrick et al. 2000 p.502)

The primary purpose of these youth forums then being purely the provision of a participatory project, not what the projects could gain by having young people’s input.

Several authors, including Mathews (1999), have argued that experience of tokenism is likely to put young people off participating again (Lansdown 2001). Kirby found just such an effect in her evaluation of one environmental project where few outputs were achieved; she commented that some young people were reluctant to be involved in future projects because of their sense of disillusionment (Kirby 2001). Similarly in a survey of school councils, Alderson found that young people who were not happy with their school councils were more likely to think teachers did not listen to them and their rights were not respected than young people who did not have a school council at all. She concluded that

...a council that is seen by students as token has a more negative impact than having no council (Alderson 2000 p.133)

It is interesting that while there is a much voiced concern with how much decision making power young people have in projects and on avoiding tokenism, there is also a paucity of studies actually examining the outcomes of young people’s involvement in project terms. Cutler and Frost (2001) concluded that a disappointing finding in all the CYPI national surveys was the lack of widespread systematic evaluation of the effects of participation on organizations and on their development. Oldfield and Fowler’s (2004) mapping survey revealed that formal impact evaluation was being used in less than 40% of statutory and voluntary organizations. The IPPR (2001) survey commented that although 77% of authorities surveyed were working with young people to involve them in public decision making, only 30% were evaluating
The most glaring gap in the evidence is the lack of evaluation of work undertaken, especially as regards any impact on service development from the involvement of young people. (Cavet and Sloper 2004 p.618)

Kirby et al. (2003) have reflected on the lack of evidence available on the effects in project terms of young people's involvement; they suggest that this may be because some organizations feel it is too early in the development of the work to measure outcomes or because it can be very difficult to make causal links between outcomes and the participation of young people. In addition they add

We also speculate that many agencies, having accepted the principles of participation, have viewed this process as an outcome in itself and have, therefore, concentrated efforts on reflection of the processes of participation rather than what may be achieved through this process. (Kirby et al. p.123)

There is some agreement with this speculation: McNeish and Newman (2002) have noted, amongst others (Kirby and Bryson 2002; Sloper and Lightfoot 2003), that there is a greater volume of writing on the impact on young people themselves than on the impact in project outcome terms.

2.2.3 Impacts on young people

There is widespread evidence that projects promoting young people's involvement in public decision making have benefits for the young people involved in terms of personal and skill development, enjoyment and confidence building. Young people report valuing being part of participation projects (EYSIP 2003; Kirby 2001): for example Matthews (2001) found that over 70% of respondents who had participated in youth councils reported enjoying themselves and finding it a positive experience. It is the development of self confidence and self belief has been most strongly emphasised (Geddes and Rust 2000; Kirby 2001; Save the Children 2002; Shenton 1999; Tooke et al. 2003). Hannam's study (2001) found that 94% of 200 students said participatory activities in school life made them feel they could improve things
and 98% that it made them feel more independent, trusted and responsible. Other comments from young people include coming to better understand local issues and political processes (IPPR 2001). In a discussion session for young people on boards and committees (EYSIP 2003), better understanding of how organizations run was raised as one of the most popular benefits of being involved in participation making processes. Young people commented that whereas before they found it easy to be critical, once involved it was possible to better appreciate the constraints under which decisions were made and services run. Other comments included participation projects helping to break down “them and us” dynamics between adults and young people.

Evidence shows that participatory projects can help change perceptions young people have of adults (Kirby and Bryson 2002). For example in the evaluation of young people’s involvement in a regeneration initiative, Kirby et al. (2001) found that young people who had been involved felt more positive about the area and other adult residents, young people reported this encouraged them to be “less cheeky”. In one area, the young people were pleasantly surprised that more of the residents were supportive of their ideas for a physical installation than they had imagined they would be.

Shenton is one of the few authors that has reported the difference in outcomes for those young people who were involved versus those who were not: she found that young people who had been part of the Investing in Children projects had positive views, reporting the impact in making them more confident and assertive, however those who had not been involved saw the projects in a less favourable light and had low expectations that young people would be listened to or taken seriously (Shenton 1999).

2.2.4 Impacts on adults

It has been noted that along with the lack of research on the impact of young people’s participation on organisations, there is a lack of detailed consideration of the impacts on the adults involved (Kirby and Bryson 2002). The two most common
observations made are that participation projects generally increase adult
commitment to undertaking more participatory work (Lightfoot and Sloper 2001)
and lead to more positive attitudes to young people. Attitudinal change was one of
the major findings in the evaluation of the *Investing in Children* initiative carried out
by Shenton. She concluded that adults who had been involved started to see young
people in terms of capacities rather than problems, leading to improved relations
between adults and young people (Shenton 1999). Khaleel found that teachers in
schools with councils felt they had better relations with pupils, especially those that
were school councillors (Khaleel 1993).

Far greater than the number of studies pointing to improved adult attitudes however
are those that document the various negative assumptions adults hold about young
people in the first place, and the ways in which this can affect participation projects.
For some authors these negative assumptions are of key importance:

> Probably the foremost barriers to participation comprise adults’ perceptions, including their images of children’s capacities, and their self-interest in maintaining their own position with respect to children.
> (Hill et al. 2004 p.82)

There is widespread evidence of adult negative assumptions towards young people in
participatory projects. For example, Matthews found the major reservation adults
expressed about youth councils centred on young people’s lack of competence and
perceived disinterest in taking part (Matthews 2001). In the urban regeneration
initiatives Fitzpatrick et al. studied they found that key adult decision makers
believed young people did not have the capacity for involvement. They concluded
that changes in behaviour and attitudes of adults were fundamental to the future
success of such participatory regeneration schemes (Fitzpatrick et al. 2000). The
study by Fitzpatrick et al. highlighted a frequently made point:

> …the process of involving young people in urban regeneration has been one of assimilation whereby only the young people have been expected to change, rather than one of insertion whereby the community and regeneration process itself has also adapted to ‘let in’ a new set of people.
> (Fitzpatrick et al. 2000 p.504)
Many studies and reflections on youth participation raise this question of who changes and who adapts in youth participation projects (Kirby and Bryson 2002; Lardner 2003; Prout 2000; Shenton 1999; Tisdall and Davis 2004). Adults have been described as resistant to change (Shenton 1999) and authors contrast the popularity in training on participation for young people and with the lack of training for adults (IPPR 2001; Oldfield and Fowler 2004). Research reports provide anecdotes of the need for young people to match up to adult requirements of behaviour; for example Kirby relates how one project of the regeneration initiatives planned a series of mediation events between young people and adult decision makers in the community. Young people were supported through group work until it was felt they had the ability to communicate their views and opinions. However at the mediation meeting

\[\text{... they [the young people] became disruptive and the Young Voice workers did not think they had the capacity to become involved in decision making directly with adults in their community.}\]

(Kirby 2001 p.13)

In this case the onus was on preparing the young people, training them to behave correctly and, when they did not, the opportunity was stopped until young people could reach the required standard. These anecdotes are not matched by cases of adults having to enter into young people’s environments or match up to their requirements. West argues that the question of training, and who receives it, is actually an issue of which forms of activity and knowledge are being privileged: those of adults over children.

The underlying basis for this is usually the unspoken assumption that children need training beforehand in order not to waste their or adults’ time, because the format of the meeting will use traditional (adult) conventions.

(West 2004 p.16)

Various good practice guidelines recommend training for adult support workers and decision makers; the content of this training however remains undefined.
Mannion and l'Anson (2004) conducted one of the few studies to have looked in more detail at the effects of youth participation on adults. They carried out research in a single case study arts centre where a group of young people provided advice to professionals over a period of time on how to make the centre more child friendly in terms of programming, communication and overall ethos. They looked especially at the effects that youth participation had had on professional practice and child-adult relations arguing that adults felt their practice, and ways of relating to children outside of work, had been transformed by the project. Furthermore they argued that adult notions of both child and adult identity were not stable but deeply connected to memories of their own childhood and their experience of trying through the project to engage with children in a participatory way. Mannion and l'Anson's study was unusual in concentrating on the effect of adults in the project; however it was based on only three adult interviewees and did not collect any data from the young people's perspective, although they were involved in the data collection process. The study showed the value of including adult perspectives in research on participation projects but was unable to add depth by comparison to the views of the young people involved.

2.2.5 Organisational issues

While recognising that adults need to adjust the way they work to include young people into public decision making, rarely do publications look beyond training to more fundamental changes that adults and organisations could make. An exception is the study carried out by Kirby et al. (2003) for the Department of Education. Their focus was organisational change and they argued that organisations that are serious about working participatively with young people need to recognise the scale of organisational changes required:

This is more than just sending individuals on training courses. It is about managing a process of change across an organisation, which may well face resistance, personal and organisational.

(Kirby et al. 2003)
Kirby et al.'s research centred on nine diverse organisational cases, chosen on the basis of demonstrating that they had listened to children or young people and changed their practice or service. Kirby et al. were interested in looking at the ways in which participatory processes were embedded within organisations. They used organisational change theories as a framework for their conclusions, drawing on the work of Pasteur (2001) which describes four stages of organizational change: unfreeze, catalyse, internalise, institutionalise. From their analyses, Kirby et al. identified three types of organisation according to position of youth participation within them:

- **Consultation-focused organisations** that use young people's views as a resource to inform service and policy development. The young people themselves have limited power over how their views are used or how they affect service development.

- **Participation focused organisations** where young people can influence decisions within the organisations; however their participation is usually add-on rather than integral and limited to certain contexts or projects. A feature of these organisations is that participation activities do not greatly challenge adult-youth relationships or lead to organisational transformation.

- **Child/youth-focused organisations** that place young people's involvement "at the heart" of their work and that involve young people in an ongoing basis in various ways. The difference between participation focused organisations is that there is a culture that assumes participation in all decisions that affect children.

Kirby et al. stressed that the edges between categories may be blurred as organisations are not static and may be in the process of crossing categories. Despite their cautions, the use of this threefold categorisation remains limited and it has not been taken up to any extent in further studies. In part this may be because the categorisation is overly simplistic. As I have already argued, even the level of decision-making can shift within tasks and between projects, so it seems over broad to be able to categorise whole organisations in terms of participation. Furthermore, individual practitioners can work in quite different ways, so that while one aspect of a project may be described as youth focused, another could be, to use their terminology, merely participation focused. Finally there is the issue of who is judging the organisation and through whose eyes the concepts are to be applied; there may be wide disagreement between and within groups of young people, staff and senior management on the issue.
Despite their simplistic threefold participation model, Kirby et al. added greatly to the literature on youth participation through their use of theory drawn from other fields and in their consideration of the scale and process of organisational change. They argued that change needs to happen at several different levels within organizations: at the level of senior management, grass-root staff and policy. They stressed that senior managers in particular have an important role to play in ensuring participation initiatives are agreed to and in directing institutional attention, resources and support to new ways of working. In their study participation workers commented that one of the biggest hurdles to developing participatory practice was when they were faced with lack of management support for participation. Kirby et al. found that all of their case study organizations had one or more “champions” of participation, which they defined as

...individuals who promoted youth involvement, created organisational changes and supported others to develop their practice.
(Kirby et al. p.63)

A number of publications support the need for champions of youth participation (Kirby and Bryson 2002, IPPR 2001). In Hannam’s pilot study of schools he judged the support of the head and senior teachers to be crucial in developing student participation (Hannam 2001). Geddes and Rust’s study of three local government initiatives to involve young people found that the commitment of leading elected members was critical to the advances that youth councils were able to make. However Geddes and Rust also commented that such personal commitment carried the danger of youth participation becoming the “pet project” of these champions rather than more widely integrated (Geddes and Rust 1999).

2.2.6 Participation workers

One area on which there is strong agreement in the literature is on the importance of adult staff working closely alongside young people in participation initiatives. Studies on youth forums are unanimous that the most successful are those with dedicated staffing support (Fitzpatrick et al. 1998; Matthews 2001). Every
participation project review highlighted a similar need for adult support workers (for example Shenton 1999; Geddes and Rust 1999, Save the Children 2002, Tooke et al 2003). In their study of young people's involvement in social action, Roker and Eden (2002) concluded that adult facilitators were crucial to the success and longevity of groups and where such facilitators were not available due to funding or staff turnover, youth groups were very likely to collapse.

Alongside the increase in moves to involve children and young people in public decision making there has been a growing number of specialist staff for whom this is the focus of their work. The CYPI carried out a survey of such workers in 2001; they found that there was a wide range of job titles given to these positions, the most common being Project Manager/Coordinator (11%), Youth Development Officer (4%), Project Worker (4%), Children's Rights Officer (4%), Youth Participation Officer (3%), and Participation Development Worker (3%) (Kilgour 2001). Kilgour used the term participation worker to encompass all of these with the following definition:

A Participation Worker is a paid employee responsible for ensuring young people are involved in public decision making. They may do this through a range of participation strategies, including, but not limited to, group work, forums, youth councils, consultation groups, committees, advocacy, media, and arts.
(Kilgour 2001 p.3)

She found participation workers had qualifications in a broad range of disciplines, with the majority having qualifications in youth and/or community work. The actual detail of the role of participation worker has rarely been directly discussed in the literature. Kilgour lists several job descriptions, for example the main duties of the job description of participation worker in a partnership between Lewisham Council and the Children's Society are given as:

- Involving young people in producing a newsletter for looked after young people in Lewisham.
- Enabling young people's views and ideas to contribute to service development.
- Developing young people's skills.
- Recording, evaluating and disseminating the work.
(Kilgour 2001 p.11)
However it is the detail of what is meant by “enabling young people’s views and ideas to contribute to service development” that is interesting. Kirby has made a more comprehensive list of the different elements of support she found to be essential in her evaluation of youth participation in regeneration projects. She found the work of participation workers included:

- Group work skills e.g. listening, talking and having meetings
- Developing opinions e.g. forming and expressing opinions, making informed decisions, recognising they already make decisions in their lives
- Negotiation and conflict resolution skills
- Self-esteem i.e. confidence, self-value, aspirations
- Self-efficacy i.e. belief in their own capacity to change things in their area
- Communicating with adults: telling them their views, using the telephone, writing letters, making funding applications, making presentations,
- Practical skills training: interviewing, making CD Roms, first aid, using computers
- Knowledge of their rights: enable children to gain a clearer understanding of their rights.

(Kirby 2001 p.20)

Kirby also detailed the work participation workers did in providing one-to-one support to young people involved in the projects, for example talking about their personal lives and problems and supporting young people going through difficulties such as becoming homeless. Such was the importance of this personal support that in two projects in her review the teams changed the local aims to include the personal development of young people and in one area the workers started taking on projects that were not about engaging young people in decision making but instead focused on personal agendas. Other project reviews have also highlighted the personal dimension to the work; in the evaluation of the Lambeth Southwark and Lewisham Health Action Zone the project manager commented

...certainly in our first year it really took us by surprise the extent of the personal and emotional support that we had to provide.

(Tooke et al. 2003 p23)

This worker also explained how if they had not provided this emotional support then the young participants would not have been able to continue their involvement. Both the regeneration initiatives and Health Action Zone project reviews have indicated that providing such emotional support is not necessarily straightforward, particularly in the balance between focusing time on personal support versus public decision
making. In the review of regeneration initiatives Kirby reported that in some projects where participation workers felt young people most needed development support they resented having to promote the regeneration agenda. However as she noted, the work was never set up with the intention of fulfilling a generic youth work gap. It therefore lacked the contact time that would be factored into concentrating on the youth work role.

Studies have pointed to other tensions that may face participation workers. One such is on how much guidance to give young people during decision making. In the review of the Saying Power Millennium Awards, workers commented that they found it extremely challenging to allow the young people to be creative and not step in themselves (Save the Children 2002). Kirby and Bryson (2002) have mentioned the variability in the extent to which participation workers can intervene in decision making. They note that some young people may prefer a higher level of worker input than others who prefer to make decisions themselves and delegate more tasks to the participation workers. Ashworth has commented on the delicate role required in providing support to school councils that ensured the councils were

...focusing School Council's energy on realistic projects
(Ashworth 1995 p.23)

while at the same time making sure not to prescribe what school councils could and could not talk about. The pressure to produce project outcomes can also have a significant effect on the ways in which participation workers work with young people in decision making. In the review of Health Action Zone projects participation workers commented that they found it particularly hard to balance delivery of a quality project on time with letting young people take the lead.

The relationship between participation workers and young people is widely acknowledged in the literature as being fundamental to the success of participation projects (Kirby and Bryson 2002). However there is very little written that really investigates the role in any depth. This is particularly surprising given that the few
studies which have paid particular attention to the role have indicated tensions worthy of further exploration.

2.2.7 Good practice guidelines

A large proportion of publications on participation are those offering advice on how to achieve good practice in working with children and young people in public decision making. There is a broad consensus on the advice offered; the table below summarises the points mentioned most often.

Table 2c: Good practice guidelines consensus points

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Point</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provide training and support for young people e.g. assertiveness training, negotiation and communication.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide training and support for adult decision makers to help them engage with young people and listen to their views.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide young people with jargon free information that is accessible to them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure hard to reach groups of young people are aware of and encouraged to be part of projects. Consider their specific access needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure meetings are accessible – at times and locations young people can comfortably manage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer a variety of different methods so young people have a choice of the ways they wish to engage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make participation voluntary and don’t expect long term commitment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allow adequate time for projects, results will not be achieved immediately.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Value the input of young people – take their views seriously and give clear feedback on the impact of their contribution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ensure there is clear and transparent communication about the limits to their involvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make sure there is the necessary financial commitment to the project.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Set up systems for reviewing and continuously improving the process of involving young people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have fun in the project, build in opportunities for socialising and social activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognise young peoples’ contribution and input e.g. certificate of achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide support to the project staff to develop their skills in working with young people.</td>
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There are a number of comments to be made about the various good practice guidelines. First to note is the sheer number of them, Appendix A lists the ones I was able to find reference to. This indicates the high demand for how-to advice, perhaps in response to the popularity of the new and, as the research literature emphasises, challenging practice. Second is the high level of agreement in what good practice guidelines say; although not all the points above are mentioned in every publication none of these was the focus of any debate or disagreement. Such agreement does not necessarily mean that the consensus is correct or that following these points will lead
to “successful” projects; rather the converse as it appears that while advice continues to be repeated so too do the range of problems identified empirically in project reviews. The consensus in good practice guidelines could rather be taken as indicative of the general lack of critical thinking in the field of youth participation, in particular the lack of appreciation of different standpoints and opinions on the same project.

The literature on project evaluations has moved forward significantly from simplistic notions of a one dimensional view of what works or does not in projects. Guba and Lincoln (1989) have characterised shifts in thinking on evaluation. They described first generation evaluations as being primarily concerned with measurement, second generation with description, third generation with judgement and argued that it was time for a fourth generation in evaluation that started from a position of recognising a range of views and values exist within projects. Smith and Cantley (1988) similarly have argued that there will be differences in opinions and interests between groups in an organisation or programme and there can rarely be a unitary notion of how successful a programme has been. Different groups of players may have conflicting interests and be pursing strategies that fit their particular perspective, with the result that

…on some criteria, given some meaning, and pursued by some group with some influence to some effect, the hospital or whatever, is in some sense successful. In other senses and from other perspectives it is not. (Smith and Cantley 1988 p.131)

The good practice guidelines on participation stand contrary to learning from evaluation theory in their overwhelming consensus and their assumption that there is unitary notion of what works. Meanwhile project evidence on the problematic nature of participation continues to stack up.

2.2.8 Diverse views on participation

The literature on youth participation is just one branch of a much larger literature on community participation, both nationally and in overseas development initiatives.
These literatures have been more critical of the concept of participation. For example it has been repeatedly pointed out that international community development participatory projects have been naïve about the complexities of power relations (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Nelson and Wright 1995). It has been argued that participatory initiatives are often based on an assumption of a bounded and homogeneous “community”, ignoring differences in resources and interests within (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Gujit and Shah 1998). Kapoor has argued that

... to privilege ‘what works and what does not’ is to downplay such important political questions as ‘what works for whom?’ and ‘whose interests are being served’? (Kapoor 2002 p.102)

A related criticism concerns whose knowledge is privileged in participatory initiatives and whose version gets accepted as being the model of social reality and why (Mosse 2001). The criticisms are varied; however many of them are based on the observation that participation projects are always about a range of very different stakeholders, often with quite different aims and interpretations (García and Way 2003; White 2000). It has been widely commented that participation is a very ambiguous concept; not only is it hard to be against it but the concept is vague enough to allow many simultaneous different understandings (Cornwall 2000; Newman 2002). It appears to offer everyone what they want:

...expectations of participation are often multiple, uncertain and variously defined by those in different roles and the aims are rarely made explicit. (Murray and Hallet 2000 p.14)

This observation can be extended to initiatives involving young people: there may be various different aims for youth participatory projects and the actors that take part in them. Shenton (1999) commented that there were a number of agendas being pursued by different stakeholders under the banner of the Investing in Children participatory initiatives. As already been discussed, participative projects may be set primarily to fulfil external requirements. In the Northern Ireland Carnegie mapping study, the great majority of statutory agencies said their reasons for wanting to involve children and young people in public decision making were primarily legislative. Almost
three-quarters (73%) of health boards and over half (54%) education boards cited Children's Service Plans as motivation for involving young people in decision making; half of local government responses identified Agenda 21 and Best Value as key motivators and half cited quality legislation (Green 2001).

The children and young people who become involved may have quite different aims in mind, certainly not linked to legislative requirements and often even unrelated in any way to the official goal of the project. All published studies that have looked at young people's motivations for becoming involved in participatory projects have shown that the most popular reasons are having fun and something to do, rather than any strong feeling about the issue or affecting change (Kirby 2001, Fitzpatrick et al. 2000, Roker and Eden 2002, Kirby and Bryson 2003, Tooke et al. 2003). As Roker and Eden (2002) note however, while the initial contact for the majority of young people may have been due to boredom, those who stayed involved in participatory projects commonly went on to develop strong commitment to the group and the issue involved.

There is also evidence of a diversity of viewpoints between different adults involved in participatory projects. Oldfield and Fowler (2004) found differences in attitudes to participation between senior managers and participation workers within the statutory sector in every statement they asked in their survey, for example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage of participation workers who strongly agreed</th>
<th>Percentage of senior officers who strongly agreed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are no decisions which children and young people (CYP) cannot be involved in, provided they are properly supported.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior managers in my organisation value the right of CYP to be involved in decision-making.</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation is integral to the work of my organisation.</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior managers understand practical implications of involving CYP in decision-making.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2f: Attitudes to participation amongst participation workers and senior officers.
Our services have improved as a result of CYP's participation.

(Source: Oldfield and Fowler 2004 p.16)

The survey results show participation workers had the most positive views of the benefits and role of participation in the organisation, with higher percentages agreeing with every statement than senior officers.

A number of studies have pointed to differences between young people and adults in perceptions of the ways that projects work. In one telling example from the Investing in Children project where young people were asked about the development of parks and play areas, service professionals reported their input really affected practice, but the young people concerned felt little had changed from their participation. The study concluded that although various staff members felt that they were working participatively with young people, the young people involved did not (Shenton 1999).

A much noted difference between young people and adults in participatory projects is that of expectations around timescale (Kirby and Bryson 2003). Geddes and Rust make the comment, typical of that in several project reviews, that:

Local authority councillors and officers have had to realise that while they are aware that change takes time young people are impatient to see things happen.

(Geddes and Rust 2000 p.49)

The issue of different timescales also relates to the length of time young people may commit to being involved in participation projects. While a year may not be very long for a working adult, as Tooke et al. note, young people’s lives change rapidly (Tooke et al 2003). Sustaining membership of youth participation initiatives is a frequently mentioned “problem” (Kirby 2001, Mathews 2001, Roker and Eden 2002); however it is only problematic in so far as young people’s involvement does not match up to that expected or desired.
2.3 Conclusions

The literature on ongoing youth participation projects can be described as both large and theoretically under developed. There are many repetitive good practice guidelines and a number of project reviews and mapping surveys. The literature points to a variety of interesting and seemingly intransigent problems in the practice of trying to involve young people in an ongoing way in public decision making. However, writing on the issues is overwhelmingly descriptive, mostly limited to highlighting problems and stopping at that. The lack of authors who have attempted to use theory to explain any of the patterns observed is striking.

Gilbert (1993) has argued that an important function of social theory is

...to define some patterns and give some meaning to the sorts of observations that social research continually make when investigating society.
(Gilbert 1993 p.11)

While the literature on youth participation projects succeeds in providing descriptions it fails in offering meaning or understanding. More often than not articles on youth participation projects conclude by offering advice, rather than any critical insight into understanding why. For example Matthews describes youth councils as frequently being tokenistic and concludes that

...to ensure that such outcomes are meaningful, the process must involve genuine communication. Young people need to be confident that their views will be listened to and taken seriously.
(Matthews 2001 p.313)

Reading this extract alone leads the reader to wonder about such questions as who defines outcomes as meaningful or not, what is meant by "genuine communication" and whether there is really such a simple link between the two. As the quote illustrates, within writing on youth participation "young people" are frequently deigned to need, or want one thing or another, rather than the social category of young people itself being broken down and examined. Do all young people need to
be confident that their views will be taken seriously? What do such assumptions tell us about how we think of the category of young people and what might be the effects of these assumptions? These few questions are meant to illustrate some of the angles that the new social studies of childhood have brought up but that have been missing from the literature on youth participation. While support for young people’s participation in public decision making may have benefited from the development of the new social studies of childhood, the literature discussing it has inherited very little in conceptual terms. There are limited discussions on the constructions of children or adolescents in such initiatives, on young people’s active roles in negotiating their place in participation spaces and in particular on the dynamic and relations between adults and young people in such projects.

The various different elements of the youth participation literature suffer from the common problem of not taking diversity of views seriously. A number of issues flagged up in the research literature would benefit from an approach that recognises views between and within stakeholders may be conflicting and variable and which explicitly compares and contrasts these opinions in relation to each other. In particular key issues to explore would include understandings of representation, decision making processes and project outcomes. The views of adults involved in ongoing participatory projects have been especially lacking and the roles of participation workers emerge from the literature as both critical to projects and much under researched.

**Research questions and approach**

Concluding the literature review I felt I had been sensitised to a range of issues that could arise within participation projects. I did not feel that I had been taken very far conceptually in understanding any of these issues in particular. This was the starting point for designing my research project and questions. I therefore decided that rather than constructing very specific initial research questions, I would instead start broad but with the intention of further refinement during the course of the research. I started with the following initial research questions:
• What are the constraints preventing adults and young people from achieving their aims in ongoing youth participation projects?
• What are the facilitators to adults and young people achieving their aims?
• How does the form of young people's involvement change over time?
• What is the similarity and divergence of views on these issues?

The first two questions were the most general and ones which I hoped to shape further through my engagement with research participants over time. The last two I constructed in response to two particularly significant gaps in the literature on ongoing youth participation projects. These were the lack of sufficient attention either to change over time or to diversity of views within projects.

The issue of change over time is integral to participation; attempts to measure and place participation on a scale have often floundered because they do not take change sufficiently into account. However few studies have looked beyond a snapshot of current practice. My focus on diversity of viewpoints was in large part a reaction to the preponderance of good practice guidelines and their advice on a single version of "what works". I felt that the literature needed a study on youth participation that started explicitly from a position of difference and being sensitive to the diversity amongst stakeholders found within youth participation projects. It was my fourth research question that shaped the way I wanted to go about answering the other three questions and in turn shaped the methodology of the research project.

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Chapter Three
Methodology

3.1 The case study design

The aim of my research project from the start was to move forward understanding of ongoing youth participation initiatives. I kept my research questions broad to be able to respond to the salient issues identified by actors. However there was an underlying element of comparison that was fundamental to the way I wanted to answer my research questions. By comparison I am not talking about comparison across several different projects but comparison within them. My intention was to structure the research design so that I could compare the views of different actors within a project and also to compare what people said in an interview situation with their actions in practice. It was this depth and contrast in different actor’s viewpoints that I had identified as particularly lacking in the research literature.

Defining a case study, Lewis has argued that:

In essence, we see the primary defining features of a case study as being a multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context (or in a number of specific contexts if the study involves more than one case). Those multiple perspectives may come from multiple data collection methods, but they may also derive from multiple accounts.

(Lewis 2003 p.52)
This description fitted very closely to the way I interpreted case study design and with how I wanted to carry out my research with its emphasis on diversity of viewpoints being given high priority from the start. Using a case study design was appropriate for a number of reasons. It would allow me to combine several different types of data: I would be able to ask people what they thought about young people and youth participation and to observe how they acted in different situations. Secondly, since one of my questions directly addressed change over time, I wanted to be able to observe some of those dynamics. The final reason was that prolonged involvement with a case over time would permit a flexible and responsive approach to my data collection.

Deciding on a case study design for my research required me to be very clear from the start on the ways in which I wished to generalise. What claims would I be able to make at the end of the PhD? How could I ensure my research would be more than just an interesting description? Possibly the most frequently made criticism of case study research has been on the possibilities for generalisation (Gomm et al. 2000). A single or small number of case studies are a poor basis from which to generalise in a statistical sense. Statistical generalisation is about making claims based on the extent to which a case represents the population from which it was drawn and a single or few cases could never adequately represent the diversity present. However, Yin (1994) has argued that this view of generalisation is an inappropriate one to apply to case study research. In Yin’s view case studies can be used to generalise but using an altogether different type of generalisation, one that is theoretical or analytical rather than statistical in nature. The difference is that instead of trying to generalise to other cases, the researcher looks to generalise the findings to theories. Through this analytical generalisation there can be better understanding of the phenomenon. Cases are then valuable for what can be understood from them and this is often because of, not despite, their detail.

Other authors support the idea of furthering understanding by focusing on the details of particular cases (Flyvbjerg 2001, Stake 2000). Flyvbjerg (2001) makes the argument that social science should not try to emulate the natural sciences in a search
for context independent predictive theories, but rather should concern itself more with producing context dependent knowledge. This means making greater use of case studies as detailed exemplars from which to better understand a phenomenon. For Stake (2000) similarly the purpose of case study research should not be to represent the world but to represent well individual cases. He argues that case studies provide the reader with experiences similar to those they use naturally to learn about the world first hand. This vicarious experience is the way in which people gain knowledge and amend their experiences. These arguments helped me define the way that I intended to use my own case study research. My plans were to consider a range of theories in relation to the detailed material of one or more case studies. In what way did I intend to do this? Blaikie, amongst others, has distinguished between four main modes of inference:\(^5\): inductive, deductive, retroductive and abductive (Blaikie 2000). In my initial research design I decided that the strategy that would most closely fit my aims and the state of the youth participation literature was that of abduction, in particular abduction as described by Danermark and colleagues (2002). They further the work of the American philosopher Peirce by stressing the idea of abduction as fundamentally a process of redescription or recontextualization. Abduction then provides new insights by relating data to theories which then lead to new ideas about the data and the theories themselves. Abduction as recontextualisation is:

... to observe, describe, interpret and explain something within the frame of a new context...
(Danermark et al. 2002 p.91)

I wanted use a range of theories to help further understanding of the case study data, and through that, lead to better understanding of youth participation in public decision making. It was this understanding of the phenomenon that was my priority, rather than furthering any chosen theory.

\(^5\) He calls them research strategies.
3.1.1 One or more cases?

Using analytical generalization placed an emphasis on understanding the detail of cases. They did not though point to either single or multiple case designs. Several authors on case study research have stressed the advantages of using multiple cases. Hakim (2000) has argued that the greatest proportional gain in confidence in the results of a case study project is achieved when the number of cases is increased from one to two or three. Simply put, more cases provide more data to relate to theory and therefore more evidence to use when the aim is to furthering understanding. According to Yin (1994) multiple case studies can provide more “compelling” evidence than single case studies. Schofield states further that where findings have emerged from a number of sites this increases the researcher’s confidence in applying the hypothesis to a new site. However he also notes studying more cases reduces the possibility of intensively studying each individual site (Schofield 2000).

My initial research plans were to study two projects, thereby enabling sufficient depth in each and with the possibility for understanding through comparison between them (Bechhofer and Paterson 2000). I decided to review the situation half way through my fieldwork timetable, taking into account my progress in the first case. Six months into my fieldwork my first case presented me with a dilemma. After observing youth group meetings, interviewing staff and young people it became clear there was a whole other component, a formal council panel6, within this first case that would benefit from a deeper investigation. I needed to decide either to leave this component out of the research and move on to another project or to go deeper into this single case and include a secondary aspect. I made the decision to continue within the single case primarily because, as I explain further below, I felt that there was a great deal more to be learnt from extending the case.

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6 I have called this the Advisory Panel.
3.1.2 Selecting the case

Since the case in the research project was being used for analytical rather than statistical generalisation, the goal was not to try to find a typical case but a strategic case. Authors talk about case study selection using various different terms. Typical cases could be described as those showing the attributes of a wider population (Rose 1991). Hakim (1987) has defined a strategic case as being that which can provide most evidence for use in explanation. Patton (1987) has defined a critical case as being a test case, being chosen as where a theory is most, or conversely least likely to be proven. He gives the example of the researcher saying, "If it doesn't happen there, it won't happen anywhere". I was not interested in finding a test case as I didn't have a defined theory to apply and prove or reject. My interest was more in finding a case which was strategic in terms of enabling me to best collect a variety of data, from a number of different stakeholders and so contribute to furthering understanding of ongoing youth participation initiatives. Stake (1998) has argued that the strategic selection of cases should be towards situations where it is possible to "learn the most", this directed my selection in both theoretical and practical terms.

Before I made any steps towards finding a first case I decided the following criteria would be crucial in my case study selection:

- Young people are part of an ongoing decision making process, it is not consultation.
- There is frequent and ongoing interaction between young people and adults, meeting up at least once a month.
- It is possible to travel to the project in under 2 hours.

From the start of this project my focus was on ongoing decision making initiatives, this was therefore reflected in my first two criteria. The third criterion was a purely practical reason given the amount of time I wanted to be able to spend at the project. I did not make the type of project, whether it was a local authority or voluntary organisation, local, national or regional, into part of my criteria because the nature of
young people’s involvement was my focus, not the type of organisation or the work that it did.

Having decided on the above criteria, my next step was to try to get as broad a picture as possible of which organisations would be eligible as case studies. I hoped to be able to use the results of a mapping survey on children and young people’s participation in public decision making in Scotland (Dorrian et al. 2001) to approach directly those organisations with high levels of involvement. However, I was not able to gain access to these questionnaires because the NGO that had carried it out had not originally asked for consent for third party access. Instead I compiled a list of possible organisations using key informant interviewing and snowballing. Initially I spoke with eight people involved in research, policy and practice in youth work in Scotland. I asked them which projects they knew of that might fit my criteria and who else would be good to talk to. I built up a list of names and organisations through these interviews and also through searching on the web and attending a youth work fair in one city in southern Scotland. During this process I started to approach recommended workers directly to find out the level of youth participation in their organisation. During a two month period I spoke to a total of thirty-seven people working with young people in six local authorities, twelve national and sixteen local voluntary organisations. Out of all of these only six projects seemed to fit my first three criteria.

Common reasons why the other projects did not fit were that they had come to an end or were just starting up, that young people only met infrequently or that only two or three young people were involved. Although I had not started off with the number of young people involved being a key criterion, during the snowballing process I decided that the case study should have involved at least three young people. I was wary of projects working with three or less young people because of the pressure then being put on all of them to be involved in my research. In a larger project with more young people involved it would be easier for some to feel they could opt out. A

7 In retrospect the fact that the research was carried out in a city council, rather than any other public body or non-governmental organisation did have certain implications for my findings as I discuss in my conclusions in chapter seven.
larger number of research participants would also mean individual views would be less identifiable.

I met with the workers of the six potential projects to have longer discussions and finally chose the first case to be the project that seemed to be strongest in each of my criteria and so would best allow me to answer my questions.

3.1.3 The case itself

The case which I decided to use to answer my research questions was a youth project within a city council in Scotland; I shall call the city Bepton. It was a youth group that was set up specifically to input into public decision making within the council that was my case. The Action Group (AG), I will call it, had a long history. It was first started up as a group of around ten young people aged between twelve and eighteen years. Four community education youth workers were given the role of supporting the Action Group in addition to their other jobs. The Action Group formally came to an end during the period of my research; it had been in existence for almost six years.

A visual record of the frequency of meetings and attendance is given in Appendix B. I put this together using my own notes and all the written records that I was able to access. Figure 3a below illustrates the key periods and changes during the life of the Action Group. I have numbered the years of its life, one to six, rather than date them, to minimise the possibility of identification.
From the inception of the Action Group until its second summer the young people were mainly involved in consultation type events, being asked their opinion on various issues by the council and other agencies. From then onwards they started to discuss how a youth council for Bepton might work and, following Council agreement in principle for a youth council to be set up, they worked more intensively on the setting up of the youth council throughout the following years. The launch of the youth council was in the December before the group wound up the following April.

In the second summer of their existence an Advisory Panel on youth issues was set up by the council and young people from the Action Group were invited to attend meetings. This panel consisted of members of council staff and local partnership agencies working in leisure, health etc. The Action Group were not the only young people on the Advisory Panel, young people from two local non-governmental organisations also attended meetings. The mandate of the Advisory Panel was to propose a ten year strategy for youth work in Bepton and when it made its recommendations to the full council in October of the same year it was asked to
continue to oversee the implementation of this strategy. It was this Advisory Panel that was critical in my decision to study a single case rather than two cases. Although I knew about it when I first started the research, I did not appreciate until later the significance of the Advisory Panel in the history of the Action Group. The reasons that I felt it was important to include the Advisory Panel in my research were because it was the forum where young people came face to face with policy makers, rather than being mediated by the support worker. I wanted to see their direct interaction with each other and this provided an opportunity for further participant observation. I also strongly felt, and continue to feel, that I would not be able to give an adequate account of the Action Group and its history without including the Advisory Panel within the research.

Coming back to my criteria, the Action Group seemed a good case to study because a number of young people had been working within the council for a long time. There had been weekly Action Group meetings and additional Advisory Panel meetings and events. Young people had been involved in consultations but also in taking the lead in their own project, the setting up of a youth council.

3.1.4 Accessing the case

Gaining access to both the case and the individuals within it was a multi-layered process where I had to persuade and present the research to different groups, all of which needed to agree. Although I had some control over presentation of myself and the research, for a large part I did not and relied upon the support worker 8 who worked with the Action Group.

There were three groups of people from whom I needed agreement for the research: the Action Group, the Advisory Panel and staff members from the council. After my initial contact with the support worker, she spoke to her manager about the idea of the research, and after further conversations we agreed she should discuss it with the Action Group themselves. They were interested and I was invited to attend a meeting

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8 As noted in chapter two, adults working with children and young people on youth participation projects may be given variety of titles. In this thesis I shall refer to participation workers as support workers as this was how all participants in the study referred to them.
where I talked through my research, closely following the information sheets (Appendix C). I gave each young person an information sheet to take away and decide whether they personally wanted to be involved. Just as I was not able to control how my research was discussed at the first Action Group meeting, nor was I able to present it to the Advisory Panel for their agreement. Instead I had to send along an information sheet (Appendix D) that was tabled in the agenda.

Both the information sheets for the Action Group and the Advisory Panel contain similar information. I stressed my previous work experience outside academia, went through the research questions, talked about research plans, feedback and possibilities for input into the research process. The notable difference was in the presentation of the information leaflets: the one for the Action Group is more colourful, shorter and with simpler language and the one for the Advisory Panel more professional looking. In the Advisory Panel information sheet I even listed my supervisors and attached a brief CV. Through both information sheets I tried to make the research appear non threatening through an emphasis on feeding back and coming up with constructive results. It is interesting to note that the two sheets reflect my own implicit assumptions at the time about the two groups and the differences between them. I was assuming that in order to gain access I would need to show how interesting and non academic the research would be for the Action Group, and to show my research seriousness and authenticity to the Advisory Panel. I produced both sheets without reflecting at the time on what they demonstrated of my own preconceptions of the audiences.

### 3.2 Methodology

My research design was influenced by Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) methodology for carrying out a Fourth Generation Evaluation (FGE). FGE is based on what Guba and Lincoln term “a hermeneutic dialectic process”. It is hermeneutic in that the researcher accepts participants are self interpreting and have their own constructions of the project, and it is a dialectic process in that there is ongoing dialogue as participants react to other people’s input and modify their own ideas. In the process
of a FGE, different stakeholders within a project are asked to identify what they think are the positive, negative and debatable issues in the project, called respectively the "claims", "concerns" and "issues". Questioning starts out very open ended but as more stakeholders are interviewed they are asked to respond to the issues that have been previously raised. The researcher collects information relevant to the emerging claims, concerns and issues from a variety of sources, including literature and theories, project documents and records and observations. The researcher's own developing ideas are fed into the ongoing circle of interviews for stakeholders to comment on (Appendix E). There is continuous data collection and analysis, so that after each interview the researcher uses the findings to help refine the agenda for subsequent data collection. In FGE the emerging constructions become both more complex and also more stable over time. Guba and Lincoln recommend bringing together stakeholder groups to discuss the emerging issues as the research proceeds. They also recommend holding a final negotiation on unresolved claims, concerns and issues between different stakeholder groups as a final step.

The key principles which I wished to take from FGE were that data are collected from a variety of sources, analysis proceeds alongside data collection and emerging ideas are fed into subsequent data collection. It was not just the responsive and flexible aspects of FGE that drew me to it, indeed other qualitative research methodologies can offer these elements too. What FGE offered which I felt was both different and integral to my research, was that it was explicitly built on comparison between different participants' viewpoints. Using the methodology I would ask interviewees to comment on issues raised by others and also on their own actions from my observations and records. In terms of its responsiveness, the methodology allowed me to build flexibility into my research questions, so that while starting out quite broad, they could be focused in response to the issues brought up by participants.

While taking these core elements from FGE, my design deviated substantially from carrying out an actual FGE. I never wished to carry out an evaluation. Nor did I try to bring participants to some kind of consensus on the issues. My aim was not to end up
with a resolution of the issues on which there was agreement or not, as in an FGE. Rather I decided to use the methodology to explore differences in viewpoints between research participants.

3.3 Methods

I used three main methods of data collection; these were carrying out participant observation, interviews and collecting documents from a variety of sources.

3.3.1 Participant observation

Participant observation has a long history in ethnographical research (Malinowski 1922, Whyte 1943, Willis 1977, Hayward 2000). Over time there has been increasingly more concern with such issues as the process of writing field notes (Van Maanen 1988, Emerson et al. 1995), the ethics of the practice (Murphy and Dingwall 2001) and the authority of the researcher (Hammersley 1992, Burawoy et al. 1991).

Lofland and Lofland have defined participant observation as:

... the process in which an investigator establishes and sustains a many-sided and relatively long-term relationships with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of that association.
(Lofland and Lofland 1984 p. 12)

The idea, expressed in the definition above, that researchers who carry out participant observation can represent a simple social reality in any way has been rigorously challenged. For example, Clifford (1986) argues that the products of participant observation are always "partial truths" in that they are one of a multiplicity of possible contested accounts. Grbich has given a more subjectively sensitive definition of participation observation as:

....a technique of unobtrusive, shared or overtly subjective data collection, which involves a researcher spending time in an environment observing behaviour, action and interaction, so that he/she can understand the meanings constructed in that environment and can make sense of everyday live experiences.
(Grbich 1999 p. 123-124)
Another issue on which there has been debate is on the role of the researcher as participant or observer (Savage 2000). There are many different styles of participant observation, ranging from a positivist orientation of observing actors with a minimum of interference to totally immersion in the social field (Tonkin 1984). Some authors have described participant observation with reference to a spectrum of roles, for example Gold (1958) distinguished between observer as full participant, participant as observer, observer as participant or complete observer.

I was able to draw on this rich literature in framing the particular way I intended to use participation observation as one of my methods. My aim in using field notes and participant observation was threefold. Firstly, participant observation adds depth and context to the research interviews. Analytically interesting and relevant scenarios and conversations take place outside of the research interview as well as inside (Mishler 1986). Secondly, participating in the research site, attending meetings, residential and social events, can help with the interview process itself. Heyl (2001) argues that establishing ongoing relationships with research participants can lead to a more genuine exchange of views in ethnographic interviews than occurs in one-off encounters. Moreover the mutual respect built up over time encourages research participants to explore issues with the researcher, rather than act simply as respondents (Beresford and Evans 1999). I hoped that by combining interviews with getting to know participants through participation in a variety of settings, both methods of data collection would benefit from each other. My third reason for using participant observation was that I hoped that the process of making observations, field notes and reflections would help me in taking a contemporaneous approach to data collection and analysis. Writing field notes can help to facilitate this process because it constantly involves interpretation and analysis, as Emerson et al. note:

The process of inscribing, of writing field notes, helps the field researcher to understand what he has been observing in the first place to participate in new ways, to hear with greater acuteness and to observe with a new lens...
(Emerson et al. 1995 p.10)
From my first experience with the project I made field notes of every conversation, meeting or interaction with any research participant. This came to a total of thirty-four separate field note records, broken down as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Interaction</th>
<th>Number of records</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phone calls</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals out with Action Group</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Group meetings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Panel meetings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential weekend trip with Advisory Panel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Council workers meetings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee with research participants</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Geertz (1973) has pointed out that writing field notes is not a matter of jotting down "facts" about "what happened" but involves active interpretation on the part of the observer, in deciding what is significant and what is not. I found that my approach to field notes varied over time. At the start I was concerned with trying to understand what was going on. Some writers on participant observation have advised writing down as much detail as possible of everything, especially the mundane (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), in fact I found that unthinkingly I concentrated my note taking on conversations relating to work and issues that seemed directly related to my research questions. On reviewing my field notes three months into the project, I decided to make more effort to record details of social, non-work related conversations and to try to include more details of non-verbal communication, expressions and movements. Although I did include more social chat, I found non-verbal communication a continual challenge to record, partly because I was so concerned with getting down people's words. Fine (2003) has argued that researchers carrying out participant observation should take care not to concentrate on particular individuals in their note taking and to be wary of making anyone a defining figure in the text. This advice I was able to follow, so that no particular character stood out in my notes.

The second of my participant observation aims was to achieve more relaxed and meaningful interviews and to encourage an attitude of discussion and dialogue between myself and participants on the research. It is important therefore to reflect
on the relationships I built with different participants; how did I present myself, how did they see me, and what was the effect of my participation on what I observed?

Reinhartz argues that all researchers both bring and create selves in the field and that:

The meanings related to those various selves are the basis of how the researcher is perceived. How the researcher is perceived, in turn will affect how she or he understands him or herself. And finally, this understanding will affect the way the study proceeds. (Reinharz 1997 p.18)

From the variety of attributes I brought to the field, such as being an English woman, aged twenty-seven, newly moved to Scotland, a student, doing a PhD, it was my background in youth work that I chose to particularly emphasise on first contact with the youth group and youth workers. At my very first meeting with worker from the Action Group, I explained my research with reference to having worked as a youth participation worker myself. She in turn advised me when first meeting the Action Group to stress my youth work background and her introduction of me to them referred to this part of my background repeatedly. This youth work positioning was undoubtedly important in helping me to secure agreement for the research as demonstrated by her repeated emphasis. Such an explicit youth work positioning led me to feel a fraud on occasions because I did not actually act primarily as a youth worker. Most encounters with research participants took place at Action Group meetings where they would be discussing the project, what they were trying to achieve and ways to do this. I balanced trying to observe and remember what was happening, with not being completely silent and commenting a few times. But generally I tried to make my comments as neutral as possible, asking questions for clarification rather than giving actual suggestions. In a non-research situation I would have been far freer with my opinions and taken a much more constructive role. Several times I felt very uncomfortable when I had thought of a particular problem with something the group were suggesting doing, but I did not raise it because I wanted to see how the discussion would develop.

I was able to get away with this minimal participation more at meetings than I could at social events. At meetings, especially at the beginning, I felt it was expected that I
sit and just listen because I was new to it all and trying to understand what was happening. Later on whenever possible I tried to offer to take minutes so that I could have a role that was useful, yet not too engaged in the conversation. This also allowed me to make jottings and to record what was going on in a way that was not too noticeable. Whyte in his ethnography on a *Street Corner Society* took on the role of minute taker for similar reasons:

I tried to avoid influencing the group, because I wanted to study the situation as unaffected by my presence as possible. Thus, through my Cornerville stay, I avoided accepting office or leadership positions in any of the groups with a single exception. At one time I was nominated as secretary of the Italian Community Club My first impulse was the decline the nomination, but then I reflected that the secretary’s job is normally considered simply a matter of dirty work – writing the minutes and handling the correspondence. I accepted and found that I could write a very full account of the progress of the meeting as it went on under the pretext of keeping notes for the minutes.

(Whyte 1943 p304-5)

At social events it would have been very unnatural to sit as silently as I did at meetings, so I engaged much more in conversations but still holding myself in check in certain respects. Usually I would have been much more open with my views on people and events, but instead I consciously restricted myself to questioning rather then offering my own opinions.

I am aware that I tried to minimise public note taking at social occasions. I waited to make jottings until I was alone, such as when people went off to get drinks or I could go to the toilet. Emerson et al. have reflected on the significance of open jottings at fieldwork sites:

... overtly writing jottings is a critical, ethnographic activity, publicly proclaiming and reaffirming the field worker’s research commitments and their status as outsiders ...

(Emerson et al. 1995 p.37)

In trying to minimise my note taking I feel that I certainly tried to avoid proclaiming my researcher status but equally I think I did this to prevent the participants feeling uncomfortable and watched. In retrospect I should have perhaps experimented more
with taking notes openly. However I am saying this with the benefit of hindsight, safe in the knowledge that I was able to conclude the research and establish relationships with research participants. At the time when I was not sure this was going to be the case it felt more appropriate to be circumspect with my note taking.

My identity as youth worker or researcher seemed to be variable depending on the situation and sometimes not entirely coherent, as is often the case with balancing identities in participant observation (Schiffman 1991). From the start of the research project I was clear in my head and my research proposal that I wanted to keep the research in people's minds as something that they could discuss with me. Rather than aiming, as some ethnographic work does, to encourage participants to forget about my role as an researcher (for example Hayward 2000) I wanted to have the research project as something open that they could ask about, feel part of and hopefully end up joining me in questioning the participation project themselves. I did consciously try to be open about the research by talking about my progress and bringing it up with people. However at the same time, I was also less consciously trying to reduce my research presence, by emphasising my youth work role and avoiding open jottings. It felt like I was trying to balance being accepted, trusted and making people feel comfortable with the original aims I had of transparency in the research process.

Fine and Sandstorm (1988) in contrast to Mandell (1991), have argued that it is never possible for adults to pass unnoticed in the company of children or young people. They simply cannot take on the role of being a child or young person. Instead researchers should seek to ask in what circumstances the differences between them assume significance and in what circumstance they do not. This fits with my experience that whilst my role seemed to alternate between being a youth worker and being a researcher, it was never being one of the young people.

In some situations I had no choice but to adopt a primarily youth worker role and let the research take a back seat. This happened especially on two occasions that I was asked to facilitate meetings, one with a group of nine young people and one with a mixture of twelve adults and young people. Both of these meetings would potentially
have presented interesting observation material, however as facilitator I ended up being the one primarily directing the meeting. Although it might initially seem as if these were two lost research opportunities, in fact I think they were both very significant in building relationships. The support worker asked me to facilitate the first young people only meeting because it was a mix of three different youth groups coming together and she said she wanted someone more independent than herself to lead it. Some authors, especially those writing with an explicitly feminist orientation, have argued that researchers should try to find ways to reciprocate and give back something to research participants for the time and information they have given (Skeggs 2001). While I agree with this, I do not see my facilitation of the meetings as entirely about "giving back" to the group. In actuality unless I wanted to significantly damage the relationship between myself and the support worker, who I was acutely aware could pull on the plug on the research, there was really no way I could have refused this request. I agreed to facilitate the meetings to maintain a good relationship with some degree of mutuality and in doing so was prepared to sacrifice what I could have learnt as an observer in those two situations. As it turns out I feel that the first young people only meeting became a significant turning point in the relationship between myself and the Action Group. Before the meeting I met up with two members of the Action Group (AG) and we went through the proposed agenda, discussing if and how they would also like to be involved in the facilitation. For the first time it felt to me that I was not holding back at all; I was putting suggestions for group exercises on the table, asking for their comments and ideas on how to run the meeting and taking a very active role in the discussions. The meeting itself was quite sensitive to handle as a facilitator because there were different groups of young people there with very different backgrounds who knew each other only a little. During the meeting it was notable to me that the young people from the Action Group were playing a very active role: when I asked people for comments on a question, and there was an initial silence, they were the ones that would start off with a comment; when I needed help putting up a flip chart, one of them would jump up and help me; when I wanted to start collecting in post-it notes from an exercise again they helped pass them to me and were the ones to start the discussion. I felt like I was supported by them in my role as facilitator and the next day I wrote a group
email to thank them for this. I think this was a significant event because we were working together, as a team, in a public situation. So while at the time I would have preferred not to play such an active role, I feel in retrospect that this opportunity had great benefit in building up trust with the young people involved in the research. This was useful when it later came to situations such as the interviews where I was then, to some extent, relying on the rapport that had been built up between us.

3.3.2 Interviews

Who to Interview

Deciding who to include in the interviews from the Action Group seemed straightforward when I started the research. I met ten of the young people through Action Group meetings and social events and agreed with them that anyone who wanted could be interviewed and involved in the research. During each of these interviews I asked the AG members who else they would recommend be interviewed that I had not met. From this I came up with a list of five other young people who they identified as important in the life of the Action Group. I confirmed from my attendance records that these were the five who had attended most Action Group meetings outside the group I did interview. I contacted those that were no longer in touch with other young people through email. Where they remained friends I asked individual Action Group members to talk to them about the research and ask if they would agree for me to contact them directly. I did not want to call any of these young people up cold without them having agreed that I should, as I felt that would put the young people on the spot. Of these five, only one young person agreed to be part of the research, one declined through a friend, one agreed but did not respond to any arrangements and two did not reply to emails.

When it came to the Advisory Panel there were three young people from a local NGO who had also sat on the Panel. I sent emails and information sheets to them through the NGOs asking to meet up to talk about the research (Appendix F). They did not respond and there was no further way I could contact them. It is interesting to reflect that every single young person I actually met agreed to be interviewed while
the majority of those I did not refused. This supports my view that personal relationships are integral to accessing young people in research.

I made the spreadsheet of attendance at Action Group meetings (Appendix B) to examine whether I needed to include more young people or not. In the spreadsheet the members of the Action Group I interviewed are coloured in black, those I did not in white and those who refused in dark grey. It is clear from the spreadsheet that I interviewed a particular group of young people from the Action Group: those that were most involved, who attended most meetings and events. However there is a spread over time with some being there from the beginning and others joining later on. Interviewing those members that could tell me most about the Action Group was consistent with my approach to the case study and to orientating myself to where I could learn most. I decided therefore not to expand my sampling of young people to include those that had only attended very few Action Group meetings.

The AG members I interviewed were aged between sixteen and twenty-three. Two were over twenty. Apart from the two oldest, all of the others had started attending the Action Group between the ages of twelve and fifteen years.

Deciding who to interview from the adults was easier because there were fewer individuals involved over the lifespan of the project. I interviewed almost everyone that had been involved. This included seven out of the eight support workers who worked with the Action Group over the five years. I started interviewing only the most recent support workers, but as the research progressed and the role of the support worker became more of a focus, I broadened this to include as many support workers as possible.

I interviewed all four council officers who had had direct contact with the Action Group. Of the Advisory Panel I interviewed all four councillors who sat permanently, and from each political party, and the five most frequently attending NGO and partner agency representatives. There was only one adult member of a partner agency that refused to be interviewed, she said she was too busy. This came to thirty-one interviews in total.
Table 3b: Breakdown of interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Group members</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support workers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council officers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO and partner agency representatives</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What questions to ask**

I designed my initial interview guide (Appendix G) for the AG members primarily to encourage them to talk about their experiences on the Action Group and to explore these ideas further rather than stick to predetermined set questions on issues I had identified myself. I did however have broad areas related to my research questions which I wanted to cover. I decided to start each interview by asking interviewees to draw or describe a timeline of their involvement in the Action Group and to note any particular positive or difficult times for them personally. This activity proved to be a good icebreaker and immediately set the tone of the interviews with the AG members talking at length about the issues that were most important to them during their involvement. It was very valuable in allowing me to start from what they brought up and to probe them then further on those issues before moving on to my own questions. It was also useful in providing me with concrete examples of incidents, thus ensuring my questioning was not on the level of abstract issues but on actual events. I found interviewees were easily spending the first thirty minutes of the interview on the timeline and in doing so were talking about some issues I did not have initially on my interview schedule. Following this I generally went on to talk about decision making in the Action Group, using a spectrum of decision making\(^9\) as a tool for them to refer to (Appendix H). I was not concerned too much with which box people described the decision making as being in, but rather I wanted to use it as a way to encourage people to talk about decision making itself.

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\(^9\) Although various spectrums for decision making have been put forward as discussed earlier (Hart 1997, Treseder 1997, Kirby et al. 2003, Wade et al. 2002) none of them was symmetrical so I made this spectrum using a logical progression.
I went on to ask the questions from my interview guide which had not already been covered in these initial conversations. This meant that inevitably people were not always asked the same set of questions as each other, my intention was to use the interview guide where I needed but to pursue topic brought up by individual interviewees (Rubin and Rubin 1995).

Evolution of the interview guide

Following my intention to further refine my questions as the research progressed, there were a number of issues that I added to my interviews (Appendix I) from themes I felt came out from previous interviews, my observations and the records I was reading of the Action Group’s involvement.

There were three main points at which I substantially altered my interview guide. The first was early on when I had carried out interviews with three young people and two support workers. At this point I decided that I needed to add more detail to the section on decision making and to add a whole section of questions on the role of the support worker in the Action Group. I also started to add some questions on the Advisory Panel. It turned out that I interviewed those young people with most experience on the Advisory Panel last in my series of young people’s interviews and by this stage I had added many more questions about the Advisory Panel from my observations of it.

Table 3c: Sequence of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progression in time</th>
<th>Research stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Meeting Action Group support worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Attended first Action Group meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January to June</td>
<td>Interviews with AG members and some support workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Feedback session with the Action Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July to October</td>
<td>Interviews with support workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October to February</td>
<td>Interviews with Advisory Panel adults and council officers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I decided to include adults from the Advisory Panel in the research I made an interview schedule for them reflecting the changes I had made so far to my questions,
but taking out the details relating to the Action Group that were not relevant to them (Appendix J).

There were also a number of questions which I added to specific individual’s interviews that related to comments I had heard them make either during my observations, or I had seen in the notes from Action Group minutes. Sometimes these questions related to things other people had said about them in interviews. For example, one AG member talked about another being particularly upset when the original date of the launch of the youth council was changed, so I made sure in his interview to ask him how he had actually felt.

**Carrying out the Interviews**

Interviews have often been compared to conversations (Burgess 1984; Riessman 2001; Rubin and Rubin 1995). In many ways I felt that the interviews were similar to non-interview situation conversations I had with participants. We discussed a variety of issues, moving on logically and naturally from one to another. I felt I was using many of the same conversational tools, such as nodding and agreeing, that I would use to affirm and stimulate discussion. During interviews my role was never just a questioner, mining for answers, but I was an active player in making meaning with the interviewee through the questions I asked, what I led on to next and the ways I responded. In this way my approach was very much in line with “active interviewing” described by Holstein and Gubrium (1995). They make the point that interviews are collaborative enterprises where knowledge is co-constructed:

The active view eschews the image of the vessel waiting to be tapped in favour of the notion that the subject’s interpretative capabilities must be activated, stimulated and cultivated.

(Holstein and Gubrium 1998 p.122)

In the interview conversations I would offer more to respondents than just questions. Frequently I made connections between one part of their interview and the next, sometimes between what they had just said and what I had heard in other situations. I brought up and explored contradictions when I saw them. In some situations I would offer interpretations, either my own or from other interviews for their comment. My
attitude was towards exploring issues with the interviewee. A question I asked in one AG member’s interview may help give an example of this:

*KF -* It seems to me that you are saying on one hand the support worker was the Action Group, she was the driving force and then on the other hand she didn’t influence any of the decisions, so how do those two things work together?

When an issue occurred to me I would ask interviewees about it in the interview. However I did not follow the advice for an active interviewer entirely. Holstein and Gubrium argue that rather than trying to prevent bias, the interviewer should try to understand how the meaning making process unfolds (Holstein and Gubrium 1998). While certainly giving value to this, there were particular ways that I wanted to make sure that the interview was about their opinions and experiences, not my own. I did try to avoid leading questions, assumptions and prejudicial language, but with an active attitude within this. My interviews were quite different from conversations in that they were not two way equal exchanges of opinions. My aim was to encourage the interviewees to talk and reflect and so I used a variety of probes, clarifying and explanation questions in order to do this. The interview was also very different from a conversation in the attention I gave to listening and picking up on what interviewees said.

Out of the different groups of people that I interviewed, the group that most stood out as different from the others was the councillors. I felt that the interviews with the AG members, support workers and adult members of the Advisory Panel were quite similar in terms of discussion of issues. However, councillor interviews were much less conversational than any of the others, with them giving speech like answers on issues, often diverging from the original question I had asked. Although some of the councillors did engage intently with the questions, they all shared the tendency to give me very general opinions as well. The problem of going off on tangents is one that has been recognised before in interviewing elites (Burnham et al. 2004).
Group Discussions

My plans, following FGE methodology, were to carry out three feedback group discussions: one with the young people on their interviews, one with the adults on their interviews and one with a mixture of both on the whole research results. The aims of the group discussions would be to feedback on the issues I saw them at the time and to give people a chance to discuss and comment further. I did not intend to use the sessions as member validation of my research findings. As Bloor et al. have argued strongly:

...to view end of study focus groups as a member validation exercise is to forget that focus groups are subject to methodological fragilities. Focus groups are not the Authentic voice of the people, they are simply one more social research method.
(Bloor et al. 2001 p.15)

I was committed to feeding back to the AG members, as I had said I would, at the start of the research and wanted to use the opportunity to deepen my early analysis rather than to test it. I put together three A3 sheets (Appendix K) that described the main themes coming out of the Action Group interviews as I saw them at that time. I contacted each of the AG members individually to invite them to the session, also offering individual feedback sessions with me if they preferred. At this point I went through any quotes I was going to use with them to check it was acceptable to do so.

Six AG members wanted to attend, on the day two could not make it and the final group was made up of four. The group session lasted two hours, I spoke for the first forty-five minutes using my notes (Appendix L) and then we discussed what they thought for the rest of the time. I emailed round all the AG members afterwards with a single sheet of some messages from all of their interviews (Appendix M).

My feedback session differed from more traditionally carried out focus groups in two important ways: the length of time I spent presenting at the beginning and also my involvement in the following discussions. I was a more active participant in the
group discussion than merely a “background figure” as recommended by writers on focus groups (Barbour 1999). A group setting for discussion differs immediately from individual interviews in that opinions are being given publicly and discussions should need to be interpreted in terms of group interaction and the result of dynamics, and even hierarchies, between participants (Morgan and Krueger 1993). For these reasons I made it clear to the AG members at the start that my aim was not to build a consensus about issues, or to change anything that had already been said to me individually, but to have a chance to discuss it further. Being aware of the limitations of focus groups in accessing individual views I gave participants a sheet at the end to record their thoughts on the group discussion (Appendix N).

I intended to carry out similar group discussions with support workers and council officers and discussed this idea at the end of my individual interviews with them. In contrast to the AG members, the response was overwhelmingly negative, one person put across a general feeling well:

I can't think of anything worse than sitting in a room with everyone having to go through it all. Just send me the written report.

Although the adult interviewees definitely wanted to know the final conclusions of the research, they did not want to have a mid-way feedback session all together. I therefore decided not to arrange such a session.

3.3.3 Documents

There were many different types of documents I collected from the project:

Table 3d: Types of documents collected

| Letters to the Action Group from the support worker arranging meetings and outings |
| Outlines of presentations the Action Group gave |
| Flipchart notes from some Action Group sessions |
| Powerpoint presentations the Action Group made |
| Printed copies of emails sent by support worker and AG members |
| Minutes of Action Group meetings |
| Letters from members of the Action Group to each other organising social outings |
| Invitations to the Action Group to attend events |
| Programmes for events the Action Group attended |
| Agenda and minutes of Advisory Panel meetings |
| Appendices of Advisory Panel meetings |
I collected these documents throughout the research period. My strategy was to ask everyone I interviewed if they had any written records they could share with me. This proved very fruitful with the support workers and several of them had kept minutes of the Action Group meetings. The largest cache of Action Group documents were those I retrieved as hard copies from files that the current support worker showed me. Although I asked many different people, there were apparently no electronic records kept of the work. I also searched extensively on the council website for documents relating to the Action Group.

For the majority of the documents I collected I was not able to follow either the process of their production, know for sure who produced them or see how they were used in practice, all of which are key issues when analysing documents (Prior 2003). By offering to take the Action Group minutes myself, in my desire to have something to do in participant observation, I also missed out on watching the production of minutes during the research period. The only documents I could follow with any confidence were the Advisory Panel meeting reports and agendas. These minutes were very sparse compared to the discussions during the meetings and were useful to me primarily in seeing how little I could know of what actually happened in previous meetings from looking at the minutes. My collection of documents at the end of the research period was haphazard and full of holes. I did not know which minutes of Action Group activities I was missing, but certainly there appeared to be many from comparing the records I had with number of meetings recorded by one of the support workers.

Despite this, the collection of documents I did have proved invaluable to me. Firstly they allowed me to make a timeline of dates and activities. Asking people about the history of the Action Group provided fascinating narratives but without the documents I collected, and the dates on them, I would have been very unsure as to issues such as when meetings and work actually happened. The second great benefit was in keeping a record of events and activities that people did not mention in their interviews. There were some activities the Action Group were involved in that no
one brought up in their interviews. Finally there were several instances where I found particularly interesting documents or records that I introduced into my interviews for discussion with the relevant people.

3.4 Ethical Issues

Reflections on the ways in which research with children or young people is different from that with adults has been the focus of much debate (Christensen and James 2000; Christensen and Prout 2002; Cree et al. 2002; David et al. 2001; Morrow 1999; O’Kane 2000). There have been several good practice guidelines published defining issues that need particular attention (Alderson 1995; Alderson and Morrow 2004). There have also been those who argue that a separate code of research ethics for research with children is based on a view of children and young people as less competent and more vulnerable than adults (Harden et al. 2000). Punch characterises these positions:

There has been a tendency to perceive research with children as one of two extremes: just the same or entirely different from adults.
(Punch 2002 p.322)

There were a large number of ethical and methodological issues that I tackled in a similar way in my research with young people and adults, for example the content of the questions, interviewing style, consent, recording and transcribing. However there were also some differences in the ways I worked with the young people. These were primarily in response to what I saw as potential power differences between myself and the young respondents, rather than based on any ideas of difference in communication or capacity.

3.4.1 Common ethical issues

The research process is a responsive relationship continuously being negotiated with all participants; this applies particularly to the issue of consent (Alderson 1995; David et al. 2001). Each of the people involved in the project, who I either observed or interviewed, was asked for their consent firstly as part of a group to the research
idea and then later on they were asked several times for their individual consent. I spoke one to one about the research with every interviewee when arranging dates for interviews and then at the interview itself I went through the information sheet again with them to clarify any questions they had.

In terms of participant observation, there were members of the Advisory Panel, both young and old that were not interviewees, yet I included them in my participant observation notes. These members were given full details of my research at the beginning of my involvement (Appendix D) and at the beginning of each meeting when people introduced themselves I took that opportunity every time to talk about my research and to confirm that people would be happy with me taking notes and observing them.

There were several incidents of AG members consenting informally to my presence through asking me along to events and making sure I knew about meetings. For example one social event that the support worker could not go to I turned up at the wrong place. I texted one of the young people who immediately texted me back:

we r in pizza hut, come!

Another AG member meanwhile came out of Pizza Hut to show me where to go. It would have been quite easy to ignore my text message had the AG members decided not to include me, quite understandably, in their final outing together.

Taking consent seriously as an ongoing process means being sensitive to the ways that people can refuse their consent both formally and informally. One of the former members of the Action Group agreed that I could contact him to discuss the research but when we did this he was not very keen to make the arrangements to actually meet. I wanted to give him some time to think about it and to talk to other people, so we agreed I would get in touch later to make a date. Later I tried to contact him four times in various ways with no reply. It is difficult to differentiate between someone being hard to contact and someone actually not wanting to be part of the research,
but my feelings in this case were towards the latter, so I did not pursue that interview any further.

All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and participants were asked for their permission to do this. I made clear that they could stop the recording at any time and discussed with them how they would do this. I offered to send the full transcript of the interview to all participants and stressed that the interview was still live in terms of them being able to add or change anything they wanted. Only one adult wrote back with changes they wanted made in their transcript

Table 3e: Interviewees who asked for their transcript

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee Group</th>
<th>Number that asked for transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action Group members</td>
<td>5 (out of 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support workers</td>
<td>2 (out of 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Panel members</td>
<td>1 (out of 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council officers</td>
<td>1 (out of 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillors</td>
<td>0 (out of 4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of the data, always a fundamental in social research (Masson 2004), I took a number of precautions both during the research process and in writing up the thesis. I kept all files in a locked filing cabinet or on password protected computer and I anonymised transcripts from the start. I kept a single sheet with the corresponding names in a separate location.

My methodology used the idea of interviews feeding into each other and a concern of mine was to ensure that participants would not be able to identify any viewpoints I brought up. I decided to address this dilemma in two ways. Firstly through only bringing up very general, rather than specific, issues in interviews when they had been raised by a number of interviewees already and secondly through discussing at length what confidentiality actually meant in this project with each individual interviewee. I emphasised that I would be generalising from their interviews but never revealing who had said what to me and that when it came to using final quotes
from them I would check first to make sure they agreed. It was interesting to note that on several occasions with adult interviewees I was asked about the results so far and even what individual people had said. I always sidestepped the question.

I have been very aware in the writing up of this thesis of continuing to ensure anonymity of respondents. When using interview or observation material I have therefore attributed excerpts to a category e.g. AG member, support worker, and put a letter or number to allow the reader to discern any individual patterns among participants and see that I am not always referring to the same few in making my arguments. I have not made use of pseudonyms because the numbers were so small that indicating whether the participant was male or female would have, in some instances, gone a long way to identifying them to fellow research participants. Where I have left out even the number or letter identifier this is because the circumstances that are being described would identify them to people who know the project\textsuperscript{10}.

3.4.2 Special attention to the research with young people

Wasserfall (1997) identifies two readings of reflexivity in carrying out research: weak readings cover the researcher’s continued self awareness of the relationship between herself and participants and the effect of this on the research and strong readings where the researcher goes further by actually trying to deconstruct some of her own authority in the research. I was more concerned with the strong reading of reflexivity in my work with the young people than with the adults. Not only was I in the position of being the researcher, I was also introduced to them as primarily a youth worker. Mandell has argued for the benefit of researchers with children trying to act the “least-adult” role to minimise power differences in the research relationship (Mandell 1991). In my case I did not try to consciously act like a young person, but I did pay attention to trying to downplay my association with youth work. This was not simple since I had had to stress it in order to gain access, and in some situations where I led meetings, I was acting more or less like a support worker with the young people. Robinson and Kellet (2004) have advocated for the value of

\textsuperscript{10} This is especially relevant to support workers, as they were employed at particular times in the Action Group’s history.
breaking down power relationships through interacting with research participants in a variety of settings. This was something that I did try to take advantage of since I met up with AG members not only in their weekly meetings and Advisory Panel meetings but also informally in a number of social outings. I also tried to distance myself in some respect from the support worker at meetings and emphasised the difference between us whenever I could to the AG members. This meant small things such as making sure to chat to the young people, rather than the support worker, before and after meetings and physically being very aware of standing and sitting with the AG members rather than alongside the support worker.

In terms of addressing power as a researcher, authors have identified many ways that they might exert power over research participants: through controlling the form and content of questioning, the progression of the research process and the presentation of the final results (Brannen 1988; Finch 1993; Murphy and Dingwall 2001). I tried to address the boundaries of my research project to make them more accessible and open for young participants primarily through extensive information sharing and ongoing dialogue on the progression of the research. It has been commented that research questions are the aspect of research design with children and young people that are least frequently opened up for comment by participants (Alderson 2000a). While my questions were not entirely open, I did discuss the types of questions I was going to ask them initially with the Action Group and brought up the research and the interview questions several times with them in informal situations as well. When arranging the interviews I offered them the option of being interviewed alone or with someone else, following the practice of several researchers with children and young people who have found they may prefer to be interviewed with friends (Highet 2003). All the young people elected to be interviewed alone: this could be related to having known me for a period of months before they were interviewed. In terms of information sharing, I offered to send summaries of what issues would be covered in the interview before we met, so that we would be in more similar positions regarding knowledge of the interview at its start (Mishler 1986). Half of the AG members took me up on this. I gave regular feedbacks on the progression of the research in Action Group meetings and sent out three email updates (Appendix O). Once I had finished
the period of interviewing the AG members I used a website instead where they could get updates on the research progress (Appendix P).

Of all of these ways discussed above, the only one I also applied to older participants was the website. In part this was also because of the progression of the research whereby my participant observation in informal situations with the AG members meant I had more opportunities to talk to them about the research, but also because I was less concerned with minimising power differential between myself and the older interviewees. There were however ways I tried to share information and discuss the research with older participants as well. At each individual interview with all participants I brought up the interview itself for discussion, seeing what they thought of the questions and taking suggestions for questions to include. I did receive some suggestions from this, but my feeling was that in general by the end of the interview people were tired and did not want another discussion.

3.5 Analysis

The first thing to note about my analysis is that it started from my very first participant observation session and the second is that there were different stages to it. These stages can be split into data reduction, description and explanation. The stages did not proceed from one to the other simply and linearly, rather but I went back and forth between them till the end.

I carried out the data reduction from the start, making the data more manageable and looking at what where the repeated themes and concepts, using N Vivo as a tool. When I collected any document, made any observation or carried out any interview I would try to code it shortly after. With the interviews this meant transcribing them soon after having carried them out. Although this felt difficult to fit in time wise, it was very useful in helping me to reflect continually on my own practice as an interviewer at the same time that I was planning and carrying out more interviews. Transcription inevitably means some loss of meaning in the reduction of a conversation and loss of tones, eye gazes, postures, pauses and gestures that were part of it (Emerson et al. 1995). Kvale advises that since there is no objective
transformation from oral to written, researchers should transcribe in the way they feel
will be of most use for the particular research purpose (Kvale 1996). I decided that
the conversation between myself and the interviewees was significant to my
research, as were the exact words and phrases they used to talk about the project and
their involvement. I therefore put in the time to transcribe completely all of the words
of each interview, but that since I did not plan to undertake detailed conversational
analysis I stopped at that level of detail. Even transcribing only this much was a
substantial investment of time, taking around seven hours for each hour of
conversation. It was a choice I would not change, since there was no substitute for
the degree of involvement I gained through such close listening to each interview.

I tried a mix of different approaches to coding: making some codes for the answers to
particular questions, others to themes wherever they came up. I did not start with any
prefixed codes but used what I saw in the data to make codes. Coding was very
useful in making me examine each interview early on and forcing me to identify and
start thinking about common themes. The familiarisation with the interviews meant I
could probe further when I heard particular issues being raised.

I also kept a journal as I went along to which I added any thoughts at all about the
research process, how I found data collection, coding, individual interviews as well
as analytical idea to explore further.

My first attempt at data description came with the Action Group feedback session
when I sat down to pull everything together that I had heard so far. At the time this
seemed very early to be doing it and I felt tentative about feeding back so soon, but I
wanted to do it while the interviews were fresh. In addition the AG members were
dispersing for the summer. It turned out to be one of the most valuable parts of the
whole research process. This was because not only did it force me to see where I was
with my thinking at such an early stage, but it also gave me the chance to discuss my
emerging ideas with AG members. It meant I approached the rest of my interviews
with the support workers, council officers and Advisory Panel members with a strong
idea of what I felt were the key issues from the AG members' interviews.
The final stage of developing more sophisticated explanatory accounts really only came when I started writing. For me the process of writing for my supervisors was an important part of analysis. It was when I questioned myself more thoroughly and went back and forth between the original data and my ideas. I started writing small pieces from the autumn of 2004, but was able to give more time to this once my interviews finished in March 2005. It was at this point that I went back again through every piece of material I had collected, re-reading it all. In total I read my entire collection of material: interviews, documents and observation notes at least three times in full, and more times for some parts.

Although the process of coding was very useful to me during the data collection period, I did become aware that it was becoming easy to decontextualise the material that I had coded and I needed to make sure I did come back to read full accounts too. During this stage the analysis process was very intense, Ritchie et al. describe it aptly:

... a mix of reading through synthesized data, following leads as they are discovered, studying patterns, sometimes re-reading full transcripts and generally thinking around the data...It also involves searching for and trying out rival explanations to establish the closeness of fit. In essence it is a stage at which the data is interrogated in a number of different ways. (Ritchie et al. 2003 p.252)

During the final stage of analysis and writing I found it useful to keep two sets of questions in particular in my mind from a framework for assessing qualitative research:

How well has diversity of perspective and content been explored?
- Description and illumination of diversity/multiple perspectives/alternative positions in the evidence displayed
- Evidence of attention to negative cases, outliers or exceptions
- Typologies/models of variation derived and discussed
- Examination of origins/influences on opposing or differing positions
- Identification of patterns of association/linkages with divergent positions/groups

How well has detail, depth and complexity (i.e. richness) of the data been conveyed?
I found Miles and Huberman's advice that the "outlier is your friend" (Miles and Huberman 1994 p.269) to be very apt as exploration of negative instances and exceptions to patterns were useful in helping refine my analysis.

I started off using primarily thematic analysis, picking up on salient themes coming out of all three types of material, interviews, observations and documents and trying to explore their nuances. In doing this I became concerned that thematic analysis, while illuminating in terms of looking across a range of responses on different issues, could lead to losing the meaning within an interview. I tried to draw out how and to what extent different issues were linked together in single accounts, but I felt that I also needed to do analysis explicitly comparing whole accounts. For this reason I combined thematic analysis with narrative analysis and have drawn on this particularly in chapter five.

3.5.1 Analytic progression

In terms of the progression of my thinking through the research, from carrying out the first interview I was forcefully struck by the primacy accorded by the AG members to the support worker and issues relating to their role. This was the section of my interview that the young people dwelt on to the greatest extent, talking about nuances on the relationships between them that I had not previous imagined. As well as adjusting my interview schedule to reflect this (Appendix I), my analytical thoughts were strongly influenced by the developing focus on the role of the support worker. I played with ideas of the ways in which the support worker could both facilitate and constrain young people's participation in the council. However very soon I found that I was getting confused by AG members' accounts. There seemed to me to be inconsistencies, not only in the way they talked about the support worker
but also in the comparison between talking about the Action Group itself and its place within the council. AG members commonly said in parts of the interview that the support worker was a friend, indistinguishable from the young people, yet later on in the same interview they might assert that support workers were quite different, defenders and protectors of the Action Group whose role could not be taken on by any of the young people.

In relation to the young people's place in the council, I similarly found it hard to reconcile stories the AG members gave me of the success of the Action Group, their fight for recognition and the capacity of the group with the more subtle and ambivalent ways they talked about what young people could or could not do within the Action Group and how they needed and depended on the support worker.

My interest in ideas about what young people could or could not do continued through my interviews with adult members of the project. On interviewing the support workers and council officers I was very aware of the contrasting ways they described the "right" way to work with young people and the differences in the support that they felt young people needed. However I still found few people's accounts to be coherent in presenting one picture of how they saw and acted towards young people.

My observational work in Advisory Panel meetings was key in my analytical progression. I was struck by the differences in the way the young people spoke and acted in comparison with Action Group meetings. I started to look at theories of performance, and Goffman in particular. Around this time I also began reading more on narrative analysis and conversational analysis. On re-reading my initial interviews I saw that what had been troubling me was trying to fit the data into my assumption that people's stories would be internally consistent. I had been assuming that everyone would have an unarticulated, yet nevertheless very real, model of young people, what they could and could not do, at the back of their minds. From this point onwards I looked very differently at my data and tried to actively work against my assumptions of underlying consistent models of childhood. I tried to search out and
explore the inconsistencies in the data rather than to reconcile them. In particular I started to pay more attention to the context in which people made comments, the ways AG members both accepted and rejected versions of what it was to be young and how "being young" was an important, if vulnerable resource for them.

3.6 Conclusions

I have gone into some depth in the description of the evolution of this research because so much of its design was iterative. Also because I want to try and provide as much of an audit trail as possible as to the way the results were produced and therefore hopefully strengthen the reader's confidence in them. Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity are tied to the positivist paradigm and instead should be replaced in qualitative case study research by credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These concepts are coherent with the way that I have already discussed using case studies to generalise analytically and with an emphasis on detail and context. I chose to examine a single, complex, case in great depth and to contribute from that to understanding of more general issues in youth participation in ongoing projects. In terms of the important issue of credibility, I hope that a number of factors will help convince the reader on this issue. Firstly by focusing on a single case I spent longer working with it, and was able to gain a greater involvement with its details, than I would have done by moving on to other cases. Secondly there was a degree of triangulation in my research design. My aim in using a variety of methods was primarily to use them to compare against each other, adding different dimensions to the research, not for classic triangulation to provide convergence on any single truth (Blaikie 2000). However the different types of data did allow me to compare key events and dates. Where different sources were inconsistent or conflicting with each other this was a very valuable source for me to explore and develop my analysis further. Finally the feedback session with the AG members, although its primary aim was not member checking, did help give me confidence that my interpretations had resonance with them as well (Miles and Huberman 1994).
My iterative research design felt very natural to me to carry out. I was continually reflecting on the research process and what would be the next steps. Each method of data collection was influenced by the progression of the others, so that not only were there instances when documents and my observations led me to ask new interview questions, but also conversely where I paid more attention to directing my observations as a result of themes coming out of the interviews. However there were also some clear limitations to taking this approach. Possibly the strongest of these would be that such an evolving process makes the starting point more crucial. Refining my questions and data collection in response to the issues coming out of the first few steps raises the question of whether the research would have gone in completely different directions if my interviews had started with different individuals. Three reasons make me think this would have not been the case. Firstly I did not make any revisions to the interview guide until I had spoken to three AG members and two support workers, rather than immediately making changes with the first person. Secondly, even though I added more questions to the guide I was actually very unsuccessful at cutting out issues. The result of this was that my interviews got longer and longer over time as I added more and more into them. However it does mean that although I was asking about new themes I still gave people the same chance to comment on previous questions too. If I were to carry out the research again I would make more effort to cut out some questions as I added new ones. I feel I did not successfully do that this time mainly because I was not confident enough. The final reason is that over time I got more used to make observations and these became longer and more detailed so I found I could cover much more of what I saw and heard. So again I was not cutting out detail but improving in noting it down as my ideas were evolving through the research.

The main limitations to the research process that I can identify relate to the case itself. I would have preferred to have started working with the Action Group when they were in the prime of their involvement, not at the tail end as it turned out. Involvement dropped off after the launch of the youth council and there were not as many Action Group meetings for me to observe as there would have been if the research had started a year previously. As my interest grew in understanding how AG members carried out “being young” I found that I was not able to draw on as
much observational material as I would have liked. If I were to start the project again with the analytical insights I have from the end of the project, I would have put much more emphasis on observations and the practice of “being young”.

Another issue was that of memory, in trying to include a longitudinal element I was asking people to talk about their memories of the Action Group and events one or more years previously. Many interviewees mentioned not being able to remember exact sequence of events clearly and this is something I had tried to take into account in my analysis. However this too had its advantages in some ways as it meant that people were removed in time from the events they were describing, allowing more of a possibility for reflection. In particular a much contested period of time around the change of the date of the youth council launch was something that benefited from time to cool down. I do not think that I would have been able to gain entry to the project during this period because it was so problematic for many people that having a researcher there would have been threatening. However a few months after this period when people had moved on to other work I was able to gain entry quite easily.

Returning to my research questions, the ones I started with at the beginning of the research evolved over time along with my interests in the project. My emphasis on change over time and divergence of views was ongoing. But I refined my interest in constraints and facilitators considerably. Rather than looking to describe and comment upon all of the possible constraints and facilitators for young people and adults in the project, I became particularly interested in the ways in which the category of young people was used in the project and in itself was both a constraint and a facilitator. I added to my original research questions on constraints and facilitators to include the following:

- What are the meanings attached to being a young person in a youth participation project?
- How do these meanings vary by situation and by context?
- How are young people presented and how do they present themselves?
- In what ways does being a young person facilitate them achieving their aims?
- In what ways does it constrain them?
Chapter Four

Support Workers’ Roles and Relationships

This first of my three empirical chapters looks within the Action Group at the roles and relationships between support workers and Action Group members. I decided to start with this aspect because I felt that it was important in a number of ways to understanding the Action Group as a case. Firstly in terms of my original research questions, the relationships between AG members and support workers could be interpreted as both facilitating and constraining. As I shall discuss, support workers and AG members set boundaries around what were appropriate roles for each to play. Secondly, starting with the support workers’ relationships with the AG members provides a good point of comparison to the following chapters in terms of the ways that AG members presented themselves and were presented. Finally it was the support workers and the nuances of their roles that were the source of the greatest changes to my research design and interview questions. I did not anticipate the extent to which AG members would focus on support workers in their interviews, returning time and again to different aspects of their relationships with them. The relationship with the support worker was of great importance to them and for this reason also I feel it is fitting to start with this subject.
4.1 Support workers' roles as youth workers
"If I'm a youth worker I have to do what feels right"

One of the most striking features of support workers' interviews was the extent to which all of them emphasised their identity as youth workers. Each and every transcript is peppered with the phrase "as a youth worker". Some went further in pointing out the difference between themselves and other members of staff who were not youth workers by training. In one case where the support worker had since taken on a management position, he was at pains to stress that he was still involved in face to face work with young people for a few hours once a week.

Their youth work identity can be seen in the way support workers talked about the work they did with the Action Group in terms of encouraging a positive group atmosphere, building confidence and providing individual support.

4.1.1 Encouraging a positive group atmosphere

Three aspects relating to the work support workers did in encouraging a positive group atmosphere can be identified from their interviews. These concerned keeping the group moving along smoothly, monitoring personal interactions between AG members and carrying out group developmental work.

In terms of keep the group moving smoothly, it appears that this often involved a fine balance between holding back, letting the group run itself and stepping in. For example:

...so they [an AG member] would say, "Can So-and-So chair for six months?" And we would be sitting there going well in the back of our minds we know that person can barely hold order for one meeting let alone six months. So we might say, "Well what about just having a weekly rota or something?"

Support Worker F

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11 All of the support workers had received youth work training.
In the situation above rather than simply telling the AG members his fears, the support worker showed himself trying to encourage their enthusiasm while suggesting an alternative that would enable the group to work. The support worker felt that “holding order” was an important function of the group to be protected and in the interview presented himself, rather than the young people, as conserving this.

The support workers presented themselves to some extent as guardians of AG sensitivities. They talked about intervening when there were “personality clashes” or where the young people might be upsetting each other without realising it. In this way support workers unanimously presented themselves as more sensitive to individual young people’s emotions in the group than the young people were.

Although there were elements of encouraging a positive group atmosphere mentioned in all support workers’ interviews, this was not given the same attention or invested with the same meaning by everyone. The majority of the support workers talked about their role in keeping an eye on group dynamics as something a good youth worker should naturally do; however two workers in particular talked about the work they did with the group as important in and of itself. They were explicit that they were carrying out “group work”, that is development work with young people in a group setting.

The way I saw it was that we were facilitating a group work process. This wasn’t just a group of young people that we were supporting to create a democratic process for young people in Bepton but also a bunch of young people that were growing and were experiencing adolescence and all the things that we do with other young people who form groups.

*Support Worker C*

Worker C was talking here about the “group work process” as something different from the fact the work happened to be done in a group and that the group itself was a crucial part of the development work he saw himself carrying out. Carrying out group work was part of his identity as a youth worker, as he later said

...we are group workers, that is what we do.

*Support Worker C*
The other worker who brought up the concept of group work stressed the significance of it for him:

The most valuable thing we did was to create a group for young people that didn’t have access to other youth services.

*Support Worker F*

For both these workers, their role was not just encouraging a positive group atmosphere but more than that, actually about working the group, using it as a means to carry out their youth work.

Group work has a long tradition within youth work. Jeffs and Smiths (2002) trace its development from middle of the nineteenth century through clubs and associations that were set up to provide more options than schooling as the primary youth work provision. They argue that for many years

...group work lay at the conceptual heart of youth work. The focus of youth work was on the group and the collective. Stress was placed upon the learning and growth that flows from the interaction and inter-play of relationships within the group.

(Jeffs and Smith 2002)

Jeffs and Smith in their 2002 article go on to lament what they see as a recent move away from group work towards individualization of services provided for young people. However group work does still have an important place within youth work practice as several guides on the issue attest (Brown 1986; Dwivedi 1993; Gibson and Clarke 1995; Preston 1987; Rose 1999). Stressing the importance of group work placed these support workers clearly within the youth work tradition.

4.1.2 Building confidence

The work done in building confidence, both individually and within the Action Group, was not mentioned by all support workers, but when it was it was particularly in relation to presentations that the Action Group made. For example one worker spoke about working very intensively with one of the AG members before he was due to give a presentation at a large conference. The worker remembered meeting every night for a week going over the script:
...so every time we talked about something that he didn’t understand we would spend a couple of hours talking about it, rather than me telling him what it was, talking about it so he understood.

Support Worker C

In the excerpt above worker C demonstrated his commitment to youth work and a learning practice of working with young people. His concern was not going over the script so that the AG member would give a polished performance on the day, but so that the AG member understood what he was doing and had the confidence that came from that rather than parroting words he was not really engaged with.

Again on the issue of presentations, there are both flip chart notes and handouts from Action Group meetings that address how to give a good presentation.

**Flipchart Notes from an Action Group Meeting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presentations:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• It is not what you say it’s the way you say it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Enthusiastic – glad to be here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Send a letter of invitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Keep it simple stupid – short words no jargon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chunking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The puddings of proof – believe it, understand it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You are never alone – it just feels like that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Time, attention drops after 15 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structure, beginning, middle end,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be yourself don’t change you voice too often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Know when to stop, less info is better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wit ought to be a glorious treat like caviar, never spread it around like marmalade (Noel Coward)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You are not an actor! Don’t try to be anyone but yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Questions – individual, budget, updated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Body language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bullet points from this flip chart relate to two main aspects of presentations: what should go in to it e.g. know when to stop, keep it simple, structure, use of wit, and how to deliver it e.g. be yourself, enthusiastic, believe it, understand it. Some of the bullet points on delivering a presentation address building confidence directly e.g. you are never alone, while others create confidence tangentially through putting the presenter at ease e.g. don’t try to be anyone but yourself. The fact that these points were both on a flip chart and given out on paper with the minutes of a meeting means
that it is likely that they were put together through a group discussion. Confidence was built then not only through the advice given in the bullet points but also through the group exercise of thinking about the issue of presentations together.

4.1.3 Providing individual support

All of the support workers talked about the importance to the young people of access to someone the young people could talk with about problems and issues in their lives. The support workers commented in a variety of ways that although there was a mix of socio-economic backgrounds, almost all of the Action Group had substantial personal issues they were dealing with.

There was a range of opinions on the importance of individual support. Of the seven support workers interviewed, four said they were heavily involved in giving individual support themselves and two recognised that their support worker colleagues had dealt with that side of the job. One support worker gave the opinion that this aspect was the most important part of the job:

...we had to provide individual work and that was what made it worthwhile for me. Not the long journey towards setting up a youth council.

Support Worker F

The others said it was a necessary and integral part of youth work. One support worker stood out from the rest in her opinion that personal support should not be part of their role and should come from a different source. My observations of meetings between this support worker and the AG members however provide examples of incidents where she did speak to individuals about issues going on in their lives:

I arrive at the meeting, the support worker and an AG member are sitting at the table talking. I pick up that they are discussing the fact that the AG member is seeing two girls at the same time.

Support worker – What do you think she would say about you seeing someone else?

AG member – She wouldn’t like it.

Support worker - Maybe you need to think about that.
Excerpt from notes of an Action Group Meeting

In this example the support worker appears to be playing a counselling role, that of starting from where the AG member is and asking him questions to get him thinking. She was not showing herself to be disinterested or unwilling to discuss personal issues as she had previously stated herself to be in her interview.

Support workers spoke of their role in providing personal support in two ways: in terms of their professional responsibility to address concerns they had about the young people and secondly that personal support often happened as part of the development of a relationship between the workers and the young people. This professional responsibility to help AG members deal with their personal lives was in relation to both sides initiating conversations. Support workers talked about their responsibility to respond to issues the young people wanted to discuss privately with them and also to raise issues where they thought there was cause for concern. In the excerpt below Support Worker B’s professional identity as a youth worker is ever present. Even at Pizza Hut, her concern for young people’s well being extends beyond the meeting and into their personal lives. To her it would be irresponsible as a youth worker not to address such issues.

You can’t just speak about the youth council all the time. Undoubtedly personal stuff will come up and you’ve got a responsibility as a youth worker to respond to that. Like if you notice that two girls go to the toilet after you’ve eaten at Pizza Hut or you notice that somebody has got bandages up their arms and things. Then I think you’ve got a responsibility to do something about that, you can’t let that lie.
Support Worker B

All support workers mentioned the importance of building a relationship with the members of the Action Group over time and talking about young people’s personal lives as a natural part of that. They talked about the importance of responding to the whole person, that in getting to know each other “stuff comes up”.

Sometimes adults who don’t work with young people don’t understand that young people tend to mix their personal lives. They find it difficult to separate personal issues with professional issues which is where my one-to-one would come in because they would come in to help write a report
and I would end up sitting with them as they told me about how they had broken up with their girlfriend or boyfriend.

Support Worker A

Here Support Worker A made an explicit comparison of what she felt young people were capable of in comparison to adults: namely that young people cannot separate personal and professional lives. Working with young people, in her eyes, then meant accepting that as fact.

There is general agreement in writing on youth work that individual support is a core function (Ingram and Harris 2001; Morgan and Banks 1999; Young 1999). Merton and colleagues (2004) carried out an evaluation of the impact of youth work provided by youth services in England. Their research included a documentary review of one third of all services, reviews of fifteen services and thirty case studies of practice. Their findings affirmed the importance of individual support:

Our research suggests that youth workers are often felt to occupy a special place in the world of young people – particularly those who are troubled by family conflict, school failure and community decline...they need help and guidance. The youth worker is often the only adult in their lives who is able to offer a reliable, consistent point of reference and support.

(Merton et al. 2004 p. 24)

Support workers’ preoccupation with youth work as an organising theme was not however reflected in the interviews with AG members. In one way or another, the AG members talked about the effects of the support workers’ roles in building confidence, encouraging a positive group atmosphere and providing individual support. However they did not do so in the same terms as the support workers. They talked more about the importance of the AG members and the group in achieving those effects and where they did recognise the particular role the support worker played they did not link this with a responsibility as a youth worker in the way the support workers did.

The AG members talked about the atmosphere in the Action Group in very positive terms. They emphasised the welcoming environment, several noting the feeling that you could “be yourself”, that the group just accepted you for who you were. They
felt that this atmosphere was created by the whole group, the AG members and the support workers together. Support workers may have felt this too, but none of them brought it up, whereas several AG members did. A few of the AG members did also credit the support worker with creating a “homely” feeling in the group.

In contrast with the support workers’ descriptions of maintaining positive dynamics, only a few AG members spoke about them “keeping the peace”. For example one said the support worker was there

...to make sure everyone had a say, to make sure that no one felt bad or make sure there wasn’t any slagging or anything like that.

AG Member 8

AG Member 8 was one of the few young people who did recognise and talk about the support workers’ active role in managing the group to ensure that people were not rude or upset each other. But AG Member 8, like the other members of the Action Group, also went on in the rest of her interview to emphasise the important role of the whole Action Group in creating a positive atmosphere.

**Individual support versus friendship**

Perhaps the greatest disparity between the way the support workers talked about their role in carrying out youth work and the AG members’ conceptions of the role was around the issue of personal support. While the workers stressed their professional responsibility to provide one to one support, the AG members did not mention the issue at all. This might have been because they did not want to bring up with me the specific personal issues they had spoken to the support workers about, but they did not even bring it up in general terms. This was something that I became more and more aware of during the interview process: that the support workers would stress the huge amount of work in providing personal individual support, but the AG members would never mention it. What they talked about instead was their friendship with the support workers and the importance of this to them. The quote below is typical:

She [the support worker] was a friend to us all more than anything else.

AG Member 9
Many of the AG members made the distinction above between being a friend and being a worker, stressing as AG Member 9 did, that the support workers were more than workers. The same phrase was used over and over again, "they weren't youth workers, they were friends", the implication being that work and friendship had to be divided, they could not be one and the same.

The majority of the AG members spoke about friendship in relation to one of the workers who was there for the longest period of time, but those with experience of the other workers talked about them being friends too. I brought up the fact that none of the AG members had mentioned personal support to me over coffee with one of the AG members. He seemed affronted by my suggestion that the support worker was playing a professional role in providing personal support. He went on to explicitly make the link between talking about personal issues and friendship, saying that for him the support worker was a friend, it was not about them providing professional support. This very much echoed a point made by one of the support workers on the subject of bringing up personal issues:

...that's what young people do, as friends, their friends are their family they are their mental, their counsel, their boyfriend, their girlfriend. That’s what they’ll do for each other.

Support Worker A

Although Support Worker A talked about providing support to the AG members as part of her role as a youth worker, she felt that they saw it differently. As young people she felt they did not see it as the worker providing support but just something that they did with people they had some sort of a relationship with.

So what did the AG members actually mean when they talked about the support workers as friends? A friend can cover a great variety of relationships from close confidants to acquaintances, as Pahl (2002) has noted, the range of meanings is such that

...the world “friend” is being forced to do too much work.

(Pahl 2002 p.412)
There appeared to be a range of conceptions of friendship with the support worker amongst the members of the Action Group. There were those with very strong ideas of friendship with the workers. These AG members kept in touch with some support workers after they left, talked about some workers being "real" friends and downplayed the support worker's paid role to a large extent:

…it really feels like everyone's friends there, it doesn't feel like a committee, so when someone leaves it's like well they're not really our friend. I know they're not thinking that, it's their job, they get paid to be there and if they get a different job they have to move away. So that's when it seems bit like "Oh."

AG Member 2

This comment shows AG Member 2 being aware himself of his own discomfort with the fact that the support worker was a paid role. He would rather have been able to sustain the image that the group was just a group of friends. Other AG members did not have such a strong conception of the support worker as a friend, three of the AG members did not use the term friend at all. But despite not using the actual term itself, even these AG members did each talk about the support workers using terms associated with friendship, such as care, trust and fun.

Sociologists writing on the concept of friendship have noted that, like other forms of relationships, the nature and meanings attached to it have varied culturally and historically (Allan 1998). Pahl and Spencer (2005) analysed sixty interviews, from teenagers to pensioners, on the topic of friendship. They argued that, although there could be no single agreed conception of the term, there were five core elements which defined the nature of exchange in a friendship. The elements they identified were affirmation, confiding/trust, emotional support, practical support and sociability/fun. They proposed that friendships, for a range of age groups, could be based on all five types of exchange or involve just one or two elements.

Elements of affirming, confiding and receiving emotional and practical support were covered much more in the support workers' interviews than AG members'. Support workers talked about receiving the confidences of both male and female members of the Action Group. Female friendships have commonly been characterised in terms of
sharing confidences (Griffiths 1995; O’Connor 1998). Some studies on young people’s friendship have commented on lower levels of shared emotional intimacy amongst boys compared to girls (Frosh et al. 2002; O’Connor et al. 2004). However others have shown that being able to confide and receive emotional support to be an important element in the friendships of both sexes (Morrow 2004). In terms of Pahl and Spencer’s elements of friendship, AG members spoke much more in terms of fun and feeling that the support workers really cared about them. This was the case for all AG members, whether they used the term “friend” to describe support workers or not.

**Fun**

One feature of the work of the Action Group that was commented on by everyone that had ever attended an AG meeting, was that it was not purely about work, there was lots of general chat and “having a laugh”. AG Member 7 expressed the general feeling amongst AG interviewees:

> We all just have a laugh in meetings, like you have serious time and then you have the bit where you talk about absolute crap and talk about stories about what you did at the weekend and things and I think that is really good.

*AG Member 7*

Enjoying yourself and talking about things other than work was mentioned both in terms of “going off on a tangent” during discussions and in terms of getting on with support workers. The element of fun was mentioned by AG members in relation to each and every one of the support workers. Support workers were described in a variety of ways for example as “really funny”, “friendly”, “really easy to talk to” and “bubbly”.

Fun was not just something that happened spontaneously in meetings with the Action Group, it was actually timetabled in through occasional outings to the plays or sport activities, but also in the agenda of some of the meetings. For example, in the agenda of one meeting more than one quarter of the total time was set aside to celebrating a birthday.
Several of the AG members did comment that this aspect to the work declined the nearer the group got to the launch of the youth council, when they said meetings were less fun and things got more pressing. But even in this period in my observation notes I recorded examples in every meeting of both AG members and support workers cracking jokes and talking about things not relevant to the work discussion. Such incidences were much longer in length after the launch itself. For example, at one meeting after the launch, there was a discussion of about fifteen minutes on which was the piece of music most played in the world and whether it was the one computers play on starting up or the music played at the beginning of screen advertising in cinemas. From my notes the difference in extent of the informal chat time in meetings was in every case determined by the support worker, depending on whether she cut in to bring things back to work, or instead joined in with the non work conversation.

AG members described a variety of techniques support workers used with them in meetings. These included games, such as each making up a rhyme about themselves or everyone moving to one half of the room if they agreed with a statement. All AG members, save one, said that they enjoyed all these games. The exception is interesting to look at because not only was he the only AG member who mentioned disliking a game but he did so in very emphatic terms. The game he described was called Rubber Chicken:

Basically apparently if it is getting a bit boring someone yells out, "Rubber Chicken!" Everyone has to jump up out of their seat and shake their arms and legs and then yell, "Rubber Chicken!" And sit down again. It's supposed to sort of lighten the mood if it is getting serious and stuff. I just found it horrendous [we both laugh] I don't do Rubber Chicken.

AG Member

This game was apparently used much more in the early days of the Action Group and with one particular support worker. I never witnessed it myself. The game was clearly meant to be fun, being described as for when "it is getting a bit boring". Other AG members must have enjoyed it more since the game relied on them shouting "Rubber Chicken". However this Action Group member did not find it fun. He later went on to complain that the youth worker who favoured Rubber Chicken seemed
keen that the Action Group was “very youth clubby” and he personally was not into that.

Caring

Many of the AG members stressed that support workers really cared about the Action Group, that it was more than just a job to them. This distinction between doing a job and going beyond your job because you care seems to have been of particular importance to several of the AG members. They gave examples to demonstrate this caring, such as giving personal notes to each of the young people when a support worker left, or being willing to help out with the work when the workers had moved on to other jobs.

With [the support workers] it didn’t seem like a job, it was like where they wanted to be and they wanted to help us and it wasn’t a case of I am helping you because I have to.

AG member 6

Support workers themselves preferred to link these examples of them going beyond their job to that being a necessary aspect of working with young people. Talking about taking on an extra piece of work, one support worker said

A big part of us thought, “Well we don’t have to do this because its not part of our job.” But when you have contact with young people, we weren’t prepared to let them down, it was too big a deal to them.

Support Worker A

Doing more than you have to is therefore part of a youth worker’s role in working with young people. The alternative would be letting them down which according to this support worker, would not be good youth work.

Reciprocity in friendship

Pahl and Spencer’s research on friendship described the five elements of friendship in terms of exchanges between friends (Pahl and Spencer 2005). It is important therefore to look at whether any of the support worker and AG member exchanges were portrayed as two way. In terms of affirmation, some of the AG members talked
about being sensitive to the workers’ feelings, in terms of not always saying exactly what they thought in meetings:

...if it was something that [a support worker] was really proud of and had worked a lot on I wouldn’t say, “Oh we don’t like that idea, it’s just not working at all.” But I would maybe say that to [names of two other AG members].

AG Member 2

A couple of AG members also talked in their interviews about providing practical support when new support workers started, helping them to “find their feet”. Although only a minority of young people mentioned giving such support to the worker, these were roles that were not acknowledged by any of the support workers in their interviews.

Neither the AG members nor the support workers spoke about the AG members playing a role in providing personal emotional one to one support for the workers. Nor did support workers ever talk about the AG members as friends, one actually emphatically voicing the opinion that:

You can never try to pretend to be anything other than a worker. That is always difficult when you try to be like a young person’s pal or buddy or try and make out that you are the same as them because you are never ever going to be the same as them.

Support Worker E

In this support worker’s opinion the worker’s role was quite distinct and different from that of the young people and to act otherwise was “pretending”, not being entirely honest with the young people. This reiterates the point made earlier that from the support worker’s perspective, emotional confiding was one way and took place under the professional remit of a youth worker. One of the other support workers made this implicit distinction when she spoke to me about keeping in touch with some of the Action Group members after leaving the job:

...for the ones that need more support as well I haven’t stopped contact, or they have kind of contacted me and I’ve kept that up as much as they are contacting me.

Support Worker
The description above is not about friendship but about providing support. Stressing that she only contacted the AG members in as much as they contacted her referenced her role as a good youth worker: sensitive and willing to act outside her contracted hours, but not acting inappropriately in actively seeking that contact.

There is one aspect of exchange in friendship however that the support workers did talk about: the element of fun and sociability. Many of the support workers brought up their enjoyment of working with the group, two of them specifically talking about the AG members being “supportive” to them because they were so enthusiastic and “up for it”. All support workers talked about genuinely enjoying the atmosphere in the meetings and getting on with the AG members:

I liked them as a group and as individual young people. I thought they were really brilliant and I got a real buzz out of being with them.

Support Worker C

The workers did not talk about getting on with the Action Group as something they had to do as part of their job but instead as something that made the job enjoyable to them, several saying they were sad to move on and leave the young people.

Tension between being a youth worker and being a friend

The tension between the support worker’s role as a youth worker and the young people’s perception of them as a friend was occasionally brought into relief. An example highlighting this was given in the AG feedback session when I asked for comments on how they felt about holding the support worker’s role as a youth worker and being a friend in their minds at the same time. One of the Action Group answered by describing a situation where it had become clear that the support worker was not acting as his friend and instead was acting as a worker. This happened in a meeting with another group of young people who had started saying that they felt the Action Group were talking too much and excluding them. After the meeting the AG member tried to talk about what had happened with the support worker:

AG Member - I was very surprised at [the support worker’s] attitude to the whole thing because she never ever said, “Oh that didn’t go its best.” No one was really honest. I was fine with [the other young people] not liking
me. ... And [the support worker] didn’t really seem to see it, she seemed to relish the fact that, “Now we can go off and build a great relationship!”

Another AG Member – Like, “Why don’t we have a team building, exercise?” Why don’t we not.

KF - You thought if she had been more of a...

AG Member - I think she was correct in one respect because she did take the professional line and that shows an illustration of where the line crosses, like you said it is difficult for them to be both. Well that is where it got crossed.

It seems the AG member was looking for affirmation that the meeting had not gone well, someone to sympathise with. What he felt he was getting from the support worker was the professional reading of the situation, she described the exchange in youth work terms: that there needed to be team building between the two groups of young people. She did not discuss it with him on the level that he would expect a friend to, admitting that really the meeting had not gone well. The distinction he made was that friends would confide what they really thought and so for him in this situation the youth worker, who he previously described as a friend, was not acting as one.

To summarise the arguments I have made in this section so far: support workers and AG members used very different discourses to describe the relationship between them. For support workers the discourse was predominantly about being good youth workers while for the AG members it was about being friends. I do not wish to portray the AG members as deceiving themselves in their interpretations of friendship. Rather to suggest that they did not see friendship as a function of the job in the way that the support workers interpreted relationship building within the remit of youth work. Support workers related their roles to the particular nature of working with young people, whereas AG members specifically downplayed the differences between them and the support workers through stressing they were friends more than anything else. These discourses provide a background from which to explore the issue of decision making.
4.2 Support workers’ roles in decision making

On the issue of decision making between support worker and young people in the Action Group, initial reactions to the spectrum of participation provided simple definite answers. Both support workers and AG members however went on to describe a complexity of roles in decision making that belied this simplicity.

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<tr>
<th>Adults make decision without any input from young people</th>
<th>Adults make decision, young people give their views which are taken into account</th>
<th>Adults and young people make decision together</th>
<th>Young people make decision, adults give their views which are taken into account</th>
<th>Young people make decision without any adult input</th>
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<td>A</td>
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The common reaction amongst AG members to the spectrum of participation was that the balance between the Action Group and a support worker was either at C, “adults and young people make decision together”, or D, “young people make decision with adult input”. There was a consensus that workers could give their input but the final decision belonged to the members of the Action Group. The AG members spoke about being “strong” in making their decisions, saying that decisions were led by the young people. There seems to have been a distinct rhetoric of young people making decisions in the Action Group:

Throughout it we were always told it is going to be done by you, you are going to decide everything. [One of the support workers] always told us, at least two of us, when any decision at all had to be made.

*AG Member 11*

In the example above AG Member 11 recounts what the group was told about decision making by the workers and goes further to back this up with her own evidence that indeed this was the case. What is particularly interesting about this quote is that AG Member 11 could not know that this was the case for every single decision, but she asserted it for all of them. This tells us more about the feeling being created in the Action Group: that of members making decisions, than about what actually happened. Other examples from support workers’ interviews provide a similar story of the support workers working to create an environment where the AG members felt they were making decisions. One support worker talked about spending
a lot of time emailing people to get their approval before moving on with a decision. Another support worker said:

Before I would make any decision about what I would spend the Action Group money on, even if was just a tenner to go and buy chocolate for the meeting, I would phone one of them and make sure. So when it came to the £3000\(^{12}\) that belonged to the Action Group they were the ones that were making the decisions.

Support Worker B

Asking for ten pounds to go and buy chocolate for a meeting is not a crucial strategic decision, but it is important as a demonstration to the Action Group that they were making the decision. Perhaps more significantly it was part of building a relationship of trust with the AG members; if they saw that the support workers were consulting them and putting decision making into their hands on such decisions as clear as spending money then this would build trust in the support workers’ decision making role in other situations.

Looking in more detail at the issue of trust, it can be seen that decision making between support workers and Action Group members was not as clear cut as the initial placing on the spectrum at C/D. Trust seems to have been key in relation to decision making in two particular respects in the Action Group; firstly, in terms of AG members trusting the support worker to represent their interests because the support worker was on their side and secondly, AG members trusting the support workers’ roles as “expert” sources of information on how things were and how they could be.

4.2.1 Trust - as one of the team

The members of the Action Group frequently referred to the idea of the group and the support workers acting as a team. They talked about all having the same aim and working together to achieve the same goal. AG Member 9 exemplified this feeling when she said:

\(^{12}\) The Action Group was given a budget of £3000 to spend annually from the second year of its life.
That is best way to describe it, as if we were a team, we weren't looking at how old this person was. We looked at the experience and stuff like that and we would always respect each other's experience, never really treated it as you are workers and we are young people. It was just a team.

*AG Member 9*

Other AG members made the point that it wasn't them and us, the support workers and the young people, but everyone was “on a level”. An important aspect of this team talk was the idea that the support workers were on the Action Group’s side. This idea came up in AG members’ interviews in a variety of ways. They talked about the support workers standing up for the young people, “fielding bullets”, fighting for their decisions to be accepted by the council. This imagery of fighting on behalf of the Action Group was used in reference to the whole period of the Action Group and in relation to all the support workers. AG members used this to prove the loyalty of the support worker to the group:

...she stood by our decisions when all were against us. Which for somebody that is getting their salary paid by the council, to stand up against what the council say because of what young people say, was a courageous thing to do. But she often did it.

*AG Member 5*

In this description the support worker was not just a fair weather friend, ready to back down when the going was tough but truly a supporter, on their side even when no one else was. What support workers themselves felt about being on the AG members’ side was more varied. An incident from my field notes gives an example of an AG member pushing a support worker to physically demonstrate their support for the Action Group and the support worker’s ambivalent reaction. The exchange took place in a pre-meeting to the Advisory Panel. The support worker had given the young people T-shirts that had recently been printed with the youth council’s logo on them. The young people put the T-shirts on then started to question why she had not as well:

*AG Member 2* - Why haven’t you got one on?

*Support Worker* - Because I am not officially there, only the people in the minutes wear the T-shirts, I’m not allowed to speak and I’m not in the minutes.
AG Member 2 - I think you should wear the T-shirt to show your support for us.

AG Member 3 - She shows her support in lots of other ways.

AG Member 2 - I know but you could still wear the T-shirt

Excerpt from notes of an Action Group Meeting

The support worker did not put on the T-shirt. By wearing a T-shirt the same as all the Action Group, AG Member 2 seems to have felt that the support worker would show all the other adults at the meeting that she was with them, in effect on the same side. However the support worker was obviously not as keen to do this. The reason she gave for not wearing a T-shirt avoided the issue. It is clear that she did not want to wear a T-shirt; my impression was that she did not want to be identified so strongly on the same side as the AG members wanted her to be. However from the AG members’ perspective, the fact that the support workers were on their side seems to have been particularly important to them.

AG members made a clear link between being part of the team, on the same side, and some of the roles that the support workers played in decision making with the group. One important aspect of this was the role the support workers had in turning their vision into a reality. Various AG members gave the impression of delegating to the worker the role of going away to try and achieve what the AG members wanted. They felt the support workers understood what they wanted to achieve and could help them try to make things happen “how we wanted it to happen”. In some cases this meant the group actually handing over responsibility for decisions to the support workers. One AG member gave the example of putting together a budget for the youth council launch:

...we knew she [the support worker] was tuned in to the same kind of things we were hoping. So we trusted her to go away and put together a budget and propose that and try and get the funding.

AG Member 1

Part of the group’s willingness to hand over parts of work was the feeling that the support workers understood their aim, as AG Member 1 said, was “tuned in”. The excerpt above also brings up another form of trust: that of being the expert.
4.2.2 Trust - as an expert

So they were there as equal members of the committee but as kind of expert members of the committee, they really knew what was going on. If we wanted to do something then they were right there for us to ask and say, “Can we do this, is this possible, would this work, who would we need to do to?” Or even vaguely, I mean sometimes we would miss the point a little bit and they would be like, “No, no, no hang on what about this side of it?”

AG Member 10

The AG members talked about the support workers in terms of team work and being on the same side as them, but a crucial aspect of the relationship was this idea, put across so well in the quote above, that the support workers were equal but expert. AG Member 10 brought up three specific ways that the support worker could be seen to be expert, firstly that they were the ones the AG members could ask “is this possible, would this work?” Secondly, they were expert in knowing “what was going on” and thirdly they could challenge the AG members’ thinking asking “what about this side of it?”

Expert in what would work

Over and over again the AG members repeated the same phrases in their interviews: that the support workers had more experience than them, they knew whether things would work or not. The support workers were the ones to turn to and ask, as AG Member 10 did above “is this possible?” An extreme example of this happening was when the Action Group first put together their ideas for the structure of the youth council. The support workers left the room for the AG members to work on it alone. The Action Group spent a few hours putting their ideas for the structure together then the support workers came back in and as AG Member 2 remembered it:

... just systematically took it apart. And huge huge flaws in it and if he [the support worker] hadn’t of done that there would have been no youth council so it was really important that he did that.

AG Member 2

AG Member 2 did not see it as a legitimate division of opinion by the support workers and the AG members over the proposed structure of the youth council, but rather that there were huge flaws in the AG members’ design. It was not a matter of
different ideas about how things could work but the fact that the support workers knew the structure would not work.

While all the AG members made the point that the support workers had more experience than them, many of the AG members also felt the constraining influence of such sources of expert knowledge. Talking about the same episode, AG Member 10 provided a contrasting recollection:

They [the support workers] just left us to actually do it on our own which I think was absolutely brilliant because it meant that there was no actual sort of input and no one sitting on the sidelines going “I don’t think you can do that.”

AG Member 10

In her view, without the support workers the AG members were freer to push the boundaries of what was possible. Members of the Action Group recognised that different support workers varied in how strongly they policed the boundaries of possibility, describing some workers as more open to new ideas, while other workers were quicker to tell them something would not work. The AG members spoke about strongly valuing workers that would take their ideas and see if they could work with them, rather than shutting them down before they had been tried.

As can be seen from the Action Group timeline (Figure 3a), there was a period of about a month or so just before the launch of the youth council when one support worker had left and the new one had not yet been appointed. The Action Group continued to meet, sometimes with council officers, but without an official support worker during this period. AG members' descriptions of this period, and how they felt without a support worker, highlight some of the very particular roles that the support worker played and the extent to which AG members could or could not take on these roles. The role of declaring whether an idea was workable or not was one particular role that young people were not able to take on. AG members spoke about their particular frustration during that period when

…it was very hard to tell exactly what was feasible and what wasn’t.

AG Member 1
There was agreement that AG members felt more “groundless” without the support worker to turn to and ask whether their ideas were possible. They do no mention any of the AG members trying to step forward to take on this role of expert in what would work.

**Expert in what was going on**

Another area of expertise the support workers were attributed with was knowing “what was going on”. There were several different aspects to this. At its most simple level was the fact that the support worker was working in the office on the job all week. When it came to Action Group meetings she or he had new information to bring to the group about what had happened to their ideas, what further developments there had been in progressing pieces of work and what requests had been made to them. A few of the AG members and the majority of the support workers recognised the dilemma this sometimes presented to the group when it came to chairing the meeting. All support workers mentioned a common intention that an AG member should chair the meeting, but this could be at odds with the situation where support workers knew more about the agenda points than the chair. Some of the workers dealt with this by arranging to meet up with the chair of the Action Group before meetings to run through the agenda with them, but they admitted this did not always happen. In the period before the youth council launch this dilemma was perhaps more marked as my observation notes demonstrate:

*Support worker* - Shall I chair? I wouldn’t normally encourage it in terms of youth participation but then I know all the things on the agenda that I need to update you on so whoever chaired would only have to be saying, “Over to you,” all the time.

*Excerpt from notes of an Action Group Meeting*

Part of this knowing “what was going on” with the work was context setting information, not only passing on a request to give their views or attend an event, but giving opinions on the request too. The AG members spoke about the support workers letting them know what they thought about requests and the support workers

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13 The chair seems to have changed regularly depending on which AG member put themselves forward to do it.
themselves talked about part of their role being to give background information that would help the AG members in their discussions. Support workers talked about their responsibility to "be honest" with the AG members, to give their point of view and said that bringing information in "cold" without context would be disempowering for the Action Group. For example:

I would be very very open about that, like, "Guys there is a conference happening ...and the councillors want a couple of young people to go along, I think it is a chance to show off and say they have got young people but alternatively I think we can get our youth council thing plugged in this, what do you think?"

Support Worker B

In this example the support worker does not simply transmit the information from the council to the group and leave it up to them to decide but gives her view on what is going on and how they could use the opportunity to their advantage.

Several of the support workers talked about their role in helping the group to strategise on achieving the youth council. Several AG members also brought this role up. Support workers gave examples of talking to the group about who would be sympathetic councillors to talk to and thinking through what different councillors' positions might be. Here there is a parallel with the support workers' position as arbiters of possibility discussed above; it seems they were also playing a similar part in which strategies might be possible or not, for example:

... [the AG members] would say, "We will get them [the chair of education] to a meeting" and we would say, "That is fine but you have got to have a meeting and know what you want out of that meeting, rather than just have a general chat about the idea."

Support Worker G

Here the support worker gives information on how things work in meetings: that the group needs to have thought through what they want the meeting to achieve.

Another dimension in the ascribed expertise of the support workers in knowing "what was going on" seems to have been in providing a general feeling to the AG members on whether things were going well or not and acting as an emotional lead. Many of the AG members spoke about support workers reassuring them that
everything was going well with the plans for the youth council. Some of the AG members differentiated between different workers' abilities to reassure the group, saying that some workers were particularly calm and made the group feel things were working out whilst others seemed less sure themselves. Despite the differential skills in reassurance, it did seem to be a role that only support workers could play. In the feedback group there was some discussion on why the support workers were taken seriously when they told the group things were going well or not, whereas AG members were not. The AG members in the feedback group agreed with each other that this was the case and:

...at the end of the day no one person in the Action Group can go, "Guys it is OK it will be fine," because we are all level to a certain extent.
*AG member in Feedback Group Discussion*

The reason they gave for this was because the AG members trusted the support workers' "experience and knowledge" and thought that AG members did not have that themselves.

The period of time without a support worker provides evidence of another aspect of knowing "what is going on" in terms of political dynamics in the council office. AG members talked about becoming much more aware of office politics during the period without a support worker than they had ever been previously. They spoke about being surprised at seeing how much was going on "behind the scenes". To a large extent the AG members did not seem to welcome this new flow of information. They talked about the support workers' previous role as a buffer being important because they did not "burden" the young people unnecessarily. The AG members used protective terms in describing the support worker shielding them from the politics, dealing with it for them while they concentrated on their work for example:

... like the political dealings they were never in our face before. So it helped us keep our better focus.
*AG Member 6*

There was a marked difference in access to information during this period without an official support worker. Some AG members attended more meetings with council officers than others and started to become the information link between them and the
rest of the Action Group. It is interesting to note that these members themselves started to take on the role of buffering information between the council and the Action Group in terms of deciding what was appropriate or not to be shared:

I couldn’t tell them [the AG members] about important mechanisms until they were formal, I couldn’t tell them until there was commitment there, I couldn’t tell them certain things that were said by people, certain rumours that I had heard, because it would have disrupted people unnecessarily. So I had to just be professional and it’s difficult to be professional amongst your peers, I mean how do you be part of the team when you are also hiding things from them?

AG member

When I suggested to this young person that it sounded as if he and other members were taking on the roles of the support worker, he was quick to reject it:

...it wasn’t about us supporting the Action Group, that would never happen, none of us were qualified to do that. What it was about was about negotiating about how the Action Group would be supported and that came down to us to say we need support.

Working without the support worker seems to have been exciting for some of the AG members as they moved into new areas of work and had access to wider sources of information. But the shadow of the support worker seems to have remained. This AG group member felt he would not be qualified to support the Action Group himself, implying that there were very marked differences between being a support worker and being an AG member. They were not all simply the same when it came down to it. This AG member, in common with others, had previously emphasised how the support worker was just like the rest of the Action Group.

Expert in challenging their thinking

The third area of expertise mentioned was that support workers played the role of challenging the Action Group members’ thinking. Support workers talked about their role in group decision making in very similar ways to each other: that they were there to get young people thinking. They talk about playing “devil’s advocate”, putting other points of view to them, getting the young people to justify their arguments. The AG members spoke in very positive terms about the group discussions they had and
the support workers’ roles in challenging them to think. AG Member 8 puts across
the feeling of a number of AG members:

...[the support worker] would like pose criticisms that could come up, that people could say, "What about this?" She would bring other arguments in that we hadn't maybe thought about which helped because then we could debate it more again. It was kind of fun.

AG Member 8

The support worker was giving them a chance in a safe environment to think through difficult questions that might be asked of them by council officers or councillors. By thinking through the different angles, various AG members talked about the group feeling more secure, that they felt they could argue for why they made a decision. Some of the AG members reflected in the feedback group discussion that they felt workers would not “let a slack decision go past”, the impression given being that the group’s confidence was increased by having a supportive worker challenge their thinking. Whereas the challenge from another adult might be intimidating, it was reassuring coming from a worker who they knew to be on their side. Other benefits of such long discussions during decision making given by the AG members included that everyone had a chance to have their say and when a decision was made, the group had reached it together and were all on board with it.

The importance to the AG members of discussing a decision can also be seen from the way that many of them talked about changes in decision making as the launch of the youth council got closer. The majority of AG members commented that there was much less discussion on decisions and that the process had become more support worker led. Instead of long discussions about how to achieve something, there were more instances of workers giving their suggestion and asking for the AG members’ opinion on it. The AG members gave examples of workers saying “would you agree to this?” or “there was a problem but here is the solution”. Although there was still the option for the AG members to discuss the issue, they said it was not the same as coming to the idea themselves as a group. The AG members commented that the suggestions given to them were good ones, “of course they worked”, because they felt the workers knew what was going to work, but the feeling given was that whether they were good suggestions or not was not the issue. The issue was more
that the AG members had liked coming to suggestions themselves, rather than agreeing to workers’ ideas. One AG member explained the feeling as being the difference between guiding and leading:

Guiding is letting us achieve our own results but showing us different paths of how to get there, leading us is feeding us ideas and showing us the way to do it

AG Member 6

The difference that AG Member 6 pointed out was that of where the ideas came from, whether they came from the AG members and were questioned and supported by the workers or whether they were instead suggested by the workers to the Action Group.

The reliance of the Action Group on the support workers to facilitate their decision making process was also raised in respect to the period when the group were without a support worker. More than half the AG members talked about feeling “lost” without the support worker, several of them commenting they did not know whether they could continue to function alone or whether they should just give up. These strong feelings could be linked to losing all of the support worker functions described, however the support worker who left linked it specifically to needing help in the decision making process:

…when I left a few of them were like, "Crap, how are we going to make decisions without you?" and I was like, "You just need to find somebody else, another worker that can play that role."

Support Worker

The support worker did not voice the alternative that the Action Group might simply be able to make decisions themselves as a group without a support worker. Instead there was a shared assumption between both support worker and AG members that the support worker was integral to the decision making process itself.

4.2.3 The same or more influence?

So it can be seen that the process of decision making was much more complex than allocating a place on the spectrum of decision making. In response to being asked
about the spectrum AG members provided quite definite answers that decision making power lay with the young people. However discussing decision making in more detail gave a picture of the support workers as experts and the AG members as reliant on them. This meant that a number of AG members actually gave seemingly contradictory statements in their interview on the issue of support workers’ influence in decision making. Having asserted the young people were the ones making decisions, when talking about specific instances they went on to describe the support workers as the ones with the expertise and influence:

...they are youth workers they know what's generally, most times they know what's the best way to go about things... So it doesn't feel like we have overall control because for us to go, "No that idea is wrong, don't do it," makes no sense.

*AG Member 2*

Such contradictions centred particularly on whether support workers had the same influence in decision making as other AG members. Several young people asserted in parts of their interview that support workers were just like any other member of the group:

*KF* - And is the support worker's contribution just the same as the young people or is it slightly different? Not in terms of what they say but in terms of the weight and how decision making is incorporated?

*AG Member 7* - I don't think it carries more weight, I think it is just that the Action Group has always had in discussion that everyone's opinion is really important and everyone tries to take on board what everyone is saying.

While at other points in the interview stating the reverse: that the influence of the support workers was not exactly the same as the other AG members:

... whenever we had discussion I have always really respected what [the support workers] have had to say and I think both of them coming from the council have had a really good understanding of how things are going to work.

*AG Member 7*

There were inconsistencies both between descriptions of decision making in practice versus assigning it on the spectrum and also in actual statements on whether the
support worker had the same or more influence on the group than the other AG members.

4.3 Support workers’ roles as council workers

The support worker roles described so far could all be said to fit within the remit of youth work. What is this remit exactly? Banks notes that there has been little academic writing on youth work and youth workers in general, attributing this to a strong current of anti-intellectualism and the high proportion of voluntary workers within youth work (Banks 1999). Youth work could not be said to qualify as a profession in Greenwood’s (1957) or Millerson’s (1964) terms, in that it does not have a formal code of ethics, professional association, controlled entry or state licensing. However several authors (Bradford 2004; McCulloch and Tett 1999; Smith 1999) have argued that while youth work may take different forms, with different emphases (e.g. therapeutic versus educational) there are some core characteristics that that remain present in all youth work. In Step It Up, a report that aimed to define the purpose of youth work in Scotland, Milburn and colleagues reviewed a range of material including Ministerial and policy statements, youth work reports and organisational documents; they carried out a survey of 218 hundred youth workers, 346 young people and held a series of consultations with youth workers, managers, voluntary organisation chief officers and youth groups. From this comprehensive review they came up with the following six key points:

The purpose of youth work is to:
- Build self esteem and self confidence
- Develop the ability to manage person and social relationships
- Create learning and develop new skills
- Encourage positive group atmospheres
- Build the capacity of young people to consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control
- Develop a “world view” which widens horizons and invites social commitment

(Milburn et al. 2003 p.13)

These points support the definition of youth work provided in the Occupational Standards for Youth Work in the UK which states:
The key purpose of youth work is to work with young people to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, and to enable them to gain a voice, influence, and place in society in a period of their transition from dependence to independence. (PAULO 2002 p. vii)

All the work the support workers did in managing group dynamics, building confidence, giving personal support, having a laugh, fostering trust, challenging thinking, giving opinions and feedback, could be understood to be within the remit described above of youth work. However, the support workers were not officially employed to be youth workers. The actual job title was Development Officer Active Citizenship and the purpose stated in the job description was

To establish in conjunction with young people from the Action Group and staff for the voluntary and statutory sectors a Youth Council. 

Job Description 1999

The primary role therefore of the job was actually to set up a youth council. In the job description the work with the Action Group is on the same level as partnership working with voluntary and statutory sectors. Furthermore from this job description it was the support workers, rather than the Action Group, that had to achieve the Youth Council.

All of the support workers brought up the pressure of producing an output in terms of the youth council. There was however a broad division between support workers in how they talked about this part of their work. This division corresponded to the time period that the support workers worked with the Action Group. Those in the early period of the work, before the idea of the youth council had received council approval, did not talk in the same way as those that came after. These early support workers commented that they had felt little pressure to turn what the young people were saying into a reality:

...it is easy for me to be able to say, "Yes that's right I disagree with that but you carry on." Because that is OK, because there is no reality in it yet, we haven't got to achieve that as a task. If there is a task that has to be achieved out of that and they want to go off in a different tangent then that is a different issue and I was never really put in that position. 

Support Worker
Several of the council officers talked about a key distinction between support workers and themselves being that the support workers were more concerned with carrying out a good youth work process, whereas they wanted to see outcomes. It would be easy to characterise the two groups this way, however it is clear from the support workers’ interviews that they were very concerned with their roles in producing an output.

As the pressure to produce the youth council increased over time the reactions of the support workers appear to have been to put a squeeze on three particular aspects of the Action Group decision making process. The first squeeze was in responding to new, untested ideas from the Action Group. AG members said that some support workers seemed to come down harder on the group in terms of saying what would and would not work and allowing them to try out ideas or not. The picture given by the AG members was not simply that workers became more and more firm the nearer the launch. In fact two of the workers who the AG members thought were amongst the most and least flexible in working with whatever ideas the young people made, came at similar times in terms of launch work pressures. So while the actual pressure on workers to turn AG members’ ideas into reality changed over time, the actual support workers’ responses to this pressure seem to have been more varied.

The second squeeze appears to have been in tightening the discursive decision making process itself. AG members talked about workers becoming more directive, giving them suggestions rather that the Action Group coming to its own conclusions. Support workers themselves said they had to try and get through the work, even if sometimes this meant taking a bit more “control of the reins to get the decisions made.”

The final squeeze can be seen in the way support workers talk about having to move on pieces of work without necessarily waiting to consult with the Action Group. Support workers in the period before the launch talked about the dilemma that they would have liked to have the input of young people but sometimes they had to just get on with work because it needed doing:
There were so many tasks, there was never an opportunity to let, for me to do nothing until I got clear instructions from young people, to let it fall on its face.

*Support Worker*

The sense given here was of the urgency of the work, that there were serious decisions to be made. The pressure to achieve an output can be felt. When support workers talked about moving on with the work it was always with the caveat that they would have preferred to have been able to involve the young people more, or work differently, but they had to get the work done:

In an ideal world I would not have liked to have worked like that, to have done that but I suppose at the time I kind of felt it was necessary.

*Support Worker*

Another aspect of the role that the support workers played as council workers was being responsible for AG members' performances. All of the support workers talked about the pressures they felt from other council officers over what the AG members did or did not do for them. A recurring issue was whether the AG members would turn up or not to various events. The support workers I observed frequently voiced a fear before any public event about whether young people would come.

When AG members did not do what was expected of them, support workers often felt blamed. For example one support worker related an incident where AG members on the Advisory Panel asked questions about something another council officer thought they should have been briefed on. The council officer spoke to the support worker the next day saying the Action Group had not been appropriately prepared by the support worker for the meeting. It was the support worker, not the AG member who received the feedback and criticism because the AG member did not perform as desired.

"You can over play the issue about it being young people, it is just people"

There may not have been a clear cut difference in concern for output over process between support workers and other council officers. There was however a notable division between the two on the question of what that youth work process should be.
Throughout their interviews support workers highlighted the particular nature of the work they did with the AG members in their role as good youth workers. They were also united in drawing quite clear boundaries in their interviews between the ways they worked with young people compared to other council officers. Several of them made references in their interview to council officers not being youth workers by training and the implications of this:

[That council officer] does not have a youth work background, she does things differently. She is more interested in targets and getting things done.
*Support Worker*

Others talked about council officers misunderstanding the nature of youth work, believing that the support workers were there to persuade young people of a particular course of action:

...it got up the communications departments’ noses a lot of times when they wanted quotes from young people and wanted young people to be there. And we just had to say, “No they don’t want to do it. It’s fine, you just have to work with it.” Because young people are saying no then I am not going to convince them otherwise.
*Support Worker B*

The necessity, or not, of personal one to one support was a key issue of disagreement between the two groups. All of the support workers except one made a strong case that this was integral to working with young people. The consensus of the viewpoints amongst the four council officers I interviewed was that the support workers put too much energy into this side of the work, often at the expense of focusing on achieving outputs. All council officers interviewed were of the view that personal support work should be given elsewhere, not through the participation project. As one put it:

I don’t think youth participation is about counselling
*Council Officer 4*

One council officer I interviewed was a trained youth worker no longer carrying out youth work. His interview was particularly interesting in combining the two discourses that could be seen in support workers’ and council officers’ interviews. At one stage of the interview he firmly stated that he wanted to see results, when he
wanted something from young people then he wanted it done. Then later at a different point in the interview we had the following exchange:

KF - What have you found most difficult?

Council Officer - Other people’s inability to understand that when you are working with young people you can’t just wheel them out and get them to do what you want. And yes they may not turn up, big deal, because they are young people.

This excerpt directly contradicted his previous statements about support workers making too many allowances for young people, that when they said they would do something, they should. In this excerpt he picked up the argument, more commonly used by support workers, that young people require working with in special ways because they are young.

4.4 Conclusions

For writing purposes in this chapter I have divided the roles of the support worker into three main areas: youth work, decision making and council work. As I hope this chapter has demonstrated these are false separations. In practice all three areas of work were closely intertwined and affected each other. For example the pressure to produce tangible outputs for the council affected the way support workers felt they could carry out youth work and curtailed the time and space they would have liked to give to decision making. Moreover support workers’ roles as youth workers had substantial implications for the decision making and outcomes of the participation project. Youth work roles, including managing group dynamics, building confidence, having a laugh and giving personal support, were surplus to the official job description. In addition the time and effort support workers spent carrying out this youth work was queried by council officers. Young has noted that this can be a common response to youth work:

Ask any youth worker about what youth workers do and they will tell you about two things – their relationship with young people and the youth work process. Both of which are not only elusive, but also tend to be regarded, by those outside of the work, as something of a hollow cry.

(Young 1999 p.4)
Yet the relationships built up through the youth work process provided the context for the participation work and decision making. Trust was fundamental to decision making, personal relationships and youth work. Trust has been emphasised in the literature advising how to carry out good youth work:

"...the development of trust is an important part of good youth work. Trust is the feeling that another will not fail them, a feeling that there is no need for defensiveness, and it is built over time, in small ways, though little tests."

(Gibson and Clarke 1995 p.49)

Little tests of trust might include getting approval for spending ten pounds of the budget. Disclosing personal problems, and relying on the support worker to keep those confidential, are perhaps larger tests of trust. In either case, building a relationship, particularly a friendship, with support workers entailed trust. Weber and Carter (1998) carried out ten in depth interviews with sociology class students from a small college in the United States of America on the creation and maintenance of interpersonal trust. They concluded that:

"The construction of trust is the construction of the interpersonal relationship, for one cannot have a friendship or love relationship that does not entail the accoutrements of trust. As our respondents stated, it was not possible to have a friendship with someone they did not trust, it would be a mere acquaintanceship."

(Weber and Carter 1998 p.11)

Trust was also key to understanding decision making in that AG members trusted support workers to represent their interests and to make certain decisions for them. More fundamentally they trusted them to frame their knowledge on the decisions they were making.

Models of decision making, such as the one I used in my interviews, and Hart's (1992) popular ladder of participation, divorce decision making from the relationships in which they are embedded. While they may seem useful tools they therefore fail to adequately characterise decision making that takes place in ongoing...
relationships. They also fail in other ways as the Action Group experience highlights. For example all models appear to pay insufficient attention to the issue of initiation of ideas. Some models, such as Kirby et al.'s (2003), do not include initiation at all. Other, such as Hart (1992) and Treseder (1997), include initiation inconsistently and, even then, do not clearly separate it from final decision making. Separating initiation from final decision making was of great consequence to the AG members, for them whether they came up with the suggestions themselves or whether they were in the position of responding to suggestions made to them strongly affected how they felt about the decision. When adults give young people a range of choices to decide between the young people could be said to be the ultimate decision makers but they did not decide on the initial options. From the interviews of the Action Group this was something that they were acutely aware of. Neither do spectrums of decision making recognise the importance of implementation in decision making. What a decision actually means is very much bound up with how that decision is implemented. The Action Group might have been involved in discussing and agreeing on a decision, but the way the support worker carried out that decision in practice could turn out to be the significant factor.

Support workers and AG members talked about their relationships with each other using contrasting language. Support workers constantly referred to youth work themes, while AG members preferred to talk about friendship instead. Both discourses played with ideas of what it meant to be young. AG members downplayed the distinction between workers and themselves when talking about friendship and team work. However this division was rebuilt when talking about decision making in the group. Here “being young” assumed great significance. AG members felt that only the support worker could take on the roles of facilitating a decision making process, knowing what was feasible and reassuring the group. The support workers were the experts and the AG members were only young people. This was brought out in particular during the period prior to the youth council launch, when the group were without a support worker. Although AG members started to take on roles previously only carried out by support workers, they did not accept that as young people they could ever fully replace the support worker.
Support workers were more consistent in continually stressing the differences between AG members and themselves. Their descriptions of their youth work role were intimately tied to particular presentations of youth and of what young people needed. They were unanimous that young people needed emotional support and were unable to separate their personal life from the participation project. Support workers presented themselves alone as being able to see the bigger work picture, manage group dynamics and guard individual feelings in the group. Indeed it could be argued that it would be difficult to sustain their role as youth workers without highlighting the differences between themselves and young people. Whilst these general presentations of young people within a youth work framework were in common, there were differences amongst support workers in the particular. Some argued more strongly of the need for individual support and group development work. Some had stronger, lasting friendships with the AG members. The Rubber Chicken exercise may have demonstrated that some support workers felt young people needed fun games to take part more than other support workers felt this. Young people responded more or less positively to these versions of “being young”, as in the example of one AG member forcefully rejecting the Rubber Chicken game and with it that support worker’s “youth clubby” way of working.

In their disagreements over the nature and extent of support provided to the Action Group, support workers and council officers can be seen again to be using concepts of “being young”. Support workers were unanimous in arguing that young people needed personal emotional support and a range of youth work interventions to participate in the project. They argued that ignoring this failed to recognise the special nature of working with young people. Council officers however used the argument that support workers were making too much of a fuss about the extra work needed and this was to the detriment of young people and the project:

... I think you can overplay the issue about it being young people, it is just people I would say. And their role is a serious role, I think we have to be careful that we don’t patronise young people as part of that process

Council Officer 3
Both groups can be seen to be laying claim to be acting in the best interests of young people, but differing depending on the meanings attached to “being young”. Young people themselves did not align completely with either version and used different elements of whether they were the same or different from other adults depending on the context. In some cases, as when describing friendships and team work, they certainly downplayed any division, stressing it was just about people not being young or old. However in other circumstances, such as discussing decision making, they were more attuned to the picture given by support workers of the division of work and the particular support they needed because they were young people.

A final point to make in relation to the support workers’ roles and relationships with the Action Group is to note the enjoyment associated with being in the Action Group. I did not talk to any of the young people who only attended once or twice, so I did select those that came back repeatedly and were therefore most likely to have enjoyed the experience. Nevertheless, as studies on ongoing youth participation projects have highlighted (Kirby 2001, Roker and Eden 2002), enjoyment is often the most significant factor in young people’s decision to be involved. The roles of the support workers, in having a laugh, making it fun and relaxed, as well as the personal relationship they formed with AG members, were integral to this enjoyment. Returning to the issue of facilitators and constraints to participation, the support worker can be seen to have facilitated young people’s participation at a basic but fundamental level of whether they continue attending or not.

This chapter has detailed a number of ways support workers described themselves facilitating young people’s involvement, for example through building confidence, carrying out group work, structuring discussions, playing devil’s advocate, providing information from the council and emotional reassurance. The very definition of their roles can though at the same time be recognised as constraining too. Being support workers with strong ties to youth work practice defined particular ways of engagement with young people. The AG members and support workers, while using differing terms to describe the relationships, were in agreement about the substance of the roles in practice. They provided a common picture, one that I was able to
observe myself, of the way the group worked with AG members and support workers each playing particular roles. Without the support worker some AG members took on some aspects, but they never did this when the support worker was in place. It was not that they therefore that they could not, but rather that there were particular roles for the support worker and young people within the Action Group. For example, AG members would not turn to each other to ask, “Can I chair?” , “Is this a good idea?” or, “Is everything going to be OK?” These were all questions for support workers; only they could answer them and have their answers accepted by the group. Support workers played especially crucial roles in terms of transmitting information. The flow of information both to and from the Action Group was not unmediated, support workers acted as gatekeepers in both directions. They decided what information was necessary or useful to the Action Group and they decided how to present it to them. They were also gatekeepers in the opposite direction in terms of how they presented the Action Group, its decisions and deliberations, back to other council officers. They were never absolute gatekeepers though, the Action Group did have opportunities to present itself to adults outside of the support workers and indeed to me in my research, as I shall go on to discuss in the next two chapters.
Chapter Five
Group Stories

In this chapter I look at the ways AG members presented themselves and the group to me through the use of stories. These were not just any stories, but stories relating specifically to the history of their involvement in Action Group. I compare AG stories both within the group and outwith to adult stories. AG member stories are analytically interesting, not only in their construction and coherence, but also in terms of the work they do in projecting an image of the group. Competence comes out strongly as a key component of this group image. Following a discussion of the concept of competence in various literatures, I reflect on the why and how competence came to be so important an issue for the young people in this project.

5.1 Success stories

At the start of all interviews I asked participants to draw and describe a timeline of their involvement with the Action Group project. Members of the Action Group told very similar tales of the broad features of their involvement. These stories can be seen essentially as success stories, recounting how the Action Group become increasingly more known and appreciated by the council. Their stories follow a common pattern. They describe: an initial period where the Action Group were used by the council and not taken seriously; followed by active intervention by the Group to challenge this; establishment of their own project to work on; a period of good
partnership, and a final highly charged period around changing the date of the youth council launch.

5.1.1 First phase: not taken seriously

Those AG members who were involved in the first year or so of the Action Group's life were unanimous in describing this period as one where the group was not taken seriously by the council. They talked in terms of the group being set up to make the council look good, for show, as a "knee jerk reaction to pressure from above" and purely so the council could "tick a box". Several AG members used the image of them being "wheeled out" as needed for various consultations during this time. A few also commented that the group was generally not paid very much attention, people in the council did not really know who they were and did not bother too much with what they were up to.

Their descriptions of this early phase of involvement contrasted with later periods where AG members spoke about the ways in which the group was both valued and influential within the council. They talked about the transition out of this early consultative phase mainly in terms of two key shifts. These were when the group moved from four support workers to a single one with full time responsibility for working on youth participation and when they started working on their own project, the youth council, rather than simply responding to other people's consultations.

5.1.2 "Stop, no more!"

All young people who were part of the Action Group at the time emphasised the significance of the shift from consultations to their own project. There was general agreement that working on planning the youth council gave the group much needed direction and focus. AG Member 5 put the feeling across of a number of members:

...it gave the Action Group a purpose, rather than just floating along being the council's young people to do what they want, it gave us a purpose. It gave us something to campaign, to lobby on.

AG Member 5

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It is very notable that many talked about the move from being used as a consultation group to having their own project as being brought about by the direct intervention of the Action Group itself. The AG members talked about the group becoming “fed up” with consultations and telling the council things had to change. They all spoke in terms of the Action Group talking to the council, how they “turned round to them”, saying “stop, no more”, even in terms of giving the council ultimatums:

...we were like, “Look, if something doesn’t happen, then we are giving up.”

AG Member 10

The language the AG members used was of the group laying down the law, being quite strong and direct with the council about what they wanted: less consultations. The importance of this transition seems to be a narrative that has been passed on within the group, as even some of those members that joined the Action Group much later on described this turning point in very similar terms.

When asked where the idea for the youth council came from, a minority of the AG members said it was always there as a long term goal in the council and support workers’ minds. However the majority were clear that it came from the AG members.

KF - So did the actual idea for Bepton youth council come from the young people?

AG Member 5 - Yes it did. The workers never planted that idea. Once it was said the youth workers flourished the idea and really encouraged us to push that forward.

5.1.3 Second phase: capable partners

The Action Group talked about the second phase of their involvement, when they were working on the youth council, very much in terms of a partnership with the council. The consistent picture put across was that the Action Group became recognised by the council as a capable group that could be trusted to deliver. This was something that they saw as happening gradually. Rather than focusing on their
learning over time, the AG members spoke instead about how the council came to recognise what the Action Group was capable of through interaction with them. That the council began to see the potential value in the Action Group, a value that had been there all along:

In order to get to the point where they would say, “Yes go away and do that.” Then it did change an awful lot, but that was because I think they saw us, it was because we actually interacted with them. Before we had been a group of young people, fair enough, and we had been in the back of their minds somewhere, but because we were at all the youth conferences, we were giving presentations, not only were we showing ourselves as fairly capable young people, but we were actually becoming known

AG Member 10

In the excerpt above the council is described as coming to see, bit by bit, that the Action Group were “capable young people” and altering their perceptions of them from just another “group of young people” to ones they could usefully work with.

Although they did not use the term partnership themselves, AG members put the image of a good partnership between the Action Group and the council across in several ways. One was by talking about the council coming to the Action Group, asking them for advice or to take on pieces of work and the Action Group invariably delivering what was asked of them. Almost all the AG members talked about the group giving the council “advice”. Giving advice is quite different to being simply asked an opinion: the implication is that they were not just a user group to provide data to use in making the decision but that they had special expertise. For example, in the quote below the council is portrayed as coming to the AG members for their advice on a name for a programme:

...the council came along to us and went, “OK we need a summer programme for young people.” So they got us down to city chambers and said, “Right, here’s sort of what we think,” and the mobiles came out and we were like that, “Inov8.”

AG Member 3

It is the AG members that were the decisive ones in this story. They immediately came up with a name for the council to use, a name that was accepted and in fact
used every year since. The council had done the leg work in coming up with the preliminary ideas but AG Member 3 described the council presenting these ideas to the AG members almost hesitantly, "Here is sort of what we think". The AG members then came up with a good name immediately. If you did not know AG Member 3 was talking about a group of young people from the way they were described you might almost think that they were a consultancy group or a team of advertisers hired by the council.

The Action Group as capable partners came across strongly in the way the AG members talked about their main project of the youth council. They spoke of the consistently positive signals they received from the council and the Advisory Panel that the Action Group was producing good work and they had their full support. With the exception of the few months around the date of the launch, which I discuss more below, the AG members never mentioned their plans for the youth council being held up to scrutiny by the council, of having to justify themselves, or even of being challenged to defend their thinking. There is a sharp contrast between the way they talked about the Action Group’s decisions on the youth council being accepted by the council compared with the way decision making was portrayed within the Action Group, with support workers playing devil’s advocate. The picture in respect to the council was one of the Action Group being trusted to deliver the youth council, of them keeping up their side of the work, reporting back from time to time, but essentially being given responsibility for the project. For example AG Member 1 put across a common description of the progression:

...we showed them our initial plans and they were going, “That looks good, that looks fine, we’re up for that.”

AG Member 1

Accounts emphasising that the Action Group were essentially left to work on the youth council portrays the council as trusting their competence to do so. The image given in AG members’ accounts was that Action Group not only giving advice on ideas for the youth council, advice that adults could accept or reject, but that the
youth council was to be actually planned by them, it was their project. In this way the Action Group put across a relationship with the council that was of partners with differing and complementary responsibilities.

The picture of the Action Group as a professionally capable group was put across not only retrospectively in their interviews with me, but also actually at the time of their involvement. For example, minutes of one Action Group meeting record that a draft press release for the youth council was presented to the group and

...it was agreed that the press release could be written better and therefore [an AG member] will come into the office on Wednesday to rewrite it.

*Minutes of an Action Group Meeting*

This is a very assertive comment and action: not only does it directly criticise the paid council officers who drafted the press release but it states the Action Group themselves will take over the job. It should be noted that this redrafting is not delegated to a support worker, but one of the AG members.

5.1.4 Alternative versions of the success story

The stories of the history of the Action Group given by the AG members varied considerably from the versions given by support workers, council officers and Advisory Panel members. These versions did not show the same degree of similarity to each other as those of the AG members'. What perhaps unites them most is that they were *not* the success stories of the Action Group. Instead they were a mix of reflections on how the Action Group benefited from the influence of external conditions. If any common theme can be distinguished it is that of serendipity, of "being in the right place at the right time", as several people put it.

Interviewees varied in which particular external influence they identified as being most important, for example whether it was the climate of increasing interest in youth participation, the influence of the national youth parliament, concerns about young people as problematic in communities or internal changes to the council that
allowed new structures to be set up. There was a common overall sentiment of the progression of the Action Group, from a marginal activity to the establishment of the youth council, as more down to a combination of events rather than the achievement of the group itself:

I think what then happened is interesting I think because it tells us something about how some things in local government, and I daresay in a wider political scene, happened by accident. Not just by design. It is not as if there was a logical plan developed from the days of the Action Group to the youth council to the Advisory Panel and so on. It just didn’t work like that.

Council Officer 4

On the particular issue of where the idea for the youth council came from, support workers and council officers were unanimous that it always present from the initial setting up of the Action Group, it did not come from the young people’s suggestions. The written records I have indicate that even before the Action Group was set up it had the remit of working on plans for a larger consultative structure. Minutes of an Education Committee held six months before the first meeting of the Action Group record that

A short life youth group is being established to produce proposals for a meaningful consultative structure between young people and the education services.

Minutes of Bepton Education Committee

Three months after the first meeting of the Action Group, before any record of a youth council being mentioned in the minutes of Action Group meetings, the Education Committee made a further decision to recommend

...continued support for the development of a Youth Council in Bepton

The council records do therefore seem to support the consensus amongst adult interviewees and contradict the AG members’ version of where the idea for the youth council came from.
5.2 Stories about and by the group

There are three very important features to note about the stories of the Action Group's history as given by its members. These are that the stories were remarkably similar to each other, very different from those given by adults in the project and about the success of the group. That the adults, including the support workers, gave such varied and differing versions of the history of the Action Group shows that it was not a case of there simply being one story to tell. It is remarkable therefore that all the young people did give similarly structured accounts. Such congruence in plot line, especially when at odds with other sources of evidence, can indicate that the story being given is a public version and closely linked to the way the group wants to portray itself. Polletta (1998) studied accounts of the 1960s student sit-ins of North Carolina where participants “told similar stories over and over again”. In this case the stories were about the spontaneity of the sit-ins, a spontaneity that was contrary to conflicting evidence documenting a high level of prior coordination. Poletta argued that the spontaneity narrative was central to an emerging collective identity of “student activist” and became the public version given by protesters, both who had attended the first and those who attended later sit-ins. In the Action Group too the same storyline and incidents, most notably of the group turning round and saying “stop, no more”, were told by both those who were there at the time and as well as those who joined later. Such strong similarity deserves some analysis of what might be the particular attributes that were being stressed in this group narrative.

Looking at what the key features of the Action Group storylines were, two stand out in particular: the group and its growing success over time. Starting with the importance of the group within the stories, it should be remembered that my initial question was a personal one about the interviewee’s own individual involvement and timeline. Yet the answers I received were predominantly about the history and success of the group. There were instances during these initial stories, but only in a couple of AG members’ interviews, where they talked about events or situations in terms of what they personally did at them, but the main character was undeniably the
group and how it progressed. Their accounts are peopled with "we" and "they"; who exactly was meant by either of these terms is somewhat elusive to determine in retrospect. I did not spend my interview clarifying who interviewees meant on this issue. Where I did ask, "we" referred to the Action Group and "they" to a non-differentiated "the council".

As the stories attest, group feeling was very strong. The previous chapter touched on this, but not only were the AG members close to the support worker, there were very strong friendships between AG members too. In their interviews the AG stressed the importance of these friendships, some stating they had made their best friends in the world through the Action Group. No-one referred to these friendships in terms of causing divisions in the group but rather only in terms of strengthening it:

We weren't so much a youth Action Group at that point, we were more than that, we were a group of friends.

*AG Member 9*

Jasper has argued that collective identity is strongly linked to emotional ties between group members.

...a collective identity is not simply the drawing of a cognitive boundary; most of all, it is an emotion, a positive affect toward other group members on the grounds of that common membership.

(Jasper 1998 p.415)

A number of features identified by studies on enhancing collective identity and group feeling could be seen in the way the Action Group functioned. For example Hirsch (1990) has argued that collective decision making, especially when involving lengthy debates, contributes greatly to the commitment of participants within social movements. He studied the 1985 Columbia University divestment protests and argued that the emphasis on reaching a consensus in decision making in group meetings meant that participants felt they owned the final decisions. The use of humour has also been widely documented as a means of creating and sustaining a feeling of belonging among group members (Holmes 2000; Terrion and Ashforth 2002). In the Action Group, as discussed in chapter four, having a laugh and lengthy
discursive group decision making were an integral part of meetings. In the sense that a number of functions increasing group feeling took place in Action Group meetings they could be described as belonging within what have been called in the social movements literature "free spaces".

Particular sorts of public places in the community, what we call free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue.

(Evans and Boyte 1986 p.17)

Free spaces have been defined in a number of ways, Fantasia and Hirsch have included within them such groups as book clubs, tenant associations, bars, unions, student lounges and women's groups (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995). Polletta (1999) argues that all free spaces share three features: they are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, they are voluntary and finally they generate cultural change that either precedes or accompanies political mobilization. Comparing the Action Group meetings to free spaces allows an appreciation of the role such meetings played in building group feeling and identity, for as Polletta notes:

Free spaces supply the activist networks, skills and solidarity that assist in launching a movement. They also provide the conceptual space in which dominated groups are able to penetrate the prevailing common sense that keeps most people passive in the face of injustice...

(Polletta 1999 p.3, emphasis in original)

The Action Group meetings do not fit all criteria of being a free space. While there was certainly conceptual thinking, it was not that of a radical group railing against injustice of the dominant. The Action Group were more concerned about how to work with the council than against them. Neither was the space entirely free in being only for young people, the support workers employed by the council were there. This does not though diminish the importance of those meetings in building the group feeling that is a key outcome of such free spaces.

A final aspect that seems to have been very important in creating a group feeling and was mentioned as such by many of the AG members was the residential that the
Action Group went on with support workers. There were only a handful of these in the entire Action Group history but they featured strongly in AG members' interviews as being where they really felt they “all bonded”. Support workers recount that such was the closeness of the group that at one residential they all decided to sleep in the same room together, even when they each had their own room.

5.2.1 Selling the group

I was not the only one to receive the positive history of the Action Group. Promoting the Action Group and its achievements to various people is what the AG members were accustomed to doing. In their interviews they commonly spoke about the work the Action Group had done to gain recognition in the council. They used expressions like “selling” the Action Group, agreeing to consultations as a way to get themselves known and talked about how they pushed themselves forward with the council. Almost all of the Action Group interviewed talked directly about the work that had been done in gaining a name and recognition:

…it was an awful lot of making contacts and building a reputation and doing everything we could to raise awareness at every opportunity.

AG Member 10

But what were they trying to sell about the group? This brings us to the second prominent theme of the stories given by AG members, that they were about the success of the group. More than simply success, these stories were about the success in terms of being recognised and then valued as competent partners within the council. The Action Group, from the accounts of the AG members, became a capable, dependable partner of the council which could be relied upon to deliver good results in its own area of work and which earned respect from adults in the council over time. The way AG members spoke about the Action Group and its success emphasised its capabilities, what they could do and achieve. It was quite different from answers to questions given elsewhere in the interview, and discussed in chapter four, about relationships with the support worker within the Action Group. For example quotes such as the one below are much more emphatic, with less room
for uncertainty, than in discussing the nuances of how AG members and support workers divided the work between them:

...there was nothing going to stop us, if we came to a brick wall there was nothing going to stop us getting through.

AG Member 5

A central theme of this thesis is exploring the varying ways AG members talked about themselves as young people, and the group, in relation to different contexts. This means that rather than looking for a single set of beliefs that could be identified as lying behind the interviews, I have tried instead to highlight how, and where, there are divergences between what interviewees say in one place and another. Some AG members were able themselves to reflect upon the differences in opinions they would give on the group depending on the situation. The public versions were marked in the way that they stressed the competence of the group. For example towards the end of one interview one AG member said

...a lot of times in the past meetings, we’ve argued that we should be taken into account, blah blah, we should be listened to and just do what we say but I really don’t think that is the best idea at all. I think that the adults, the workers there, it’s their job to know what’s best for young people in that area and I reckon they know a lot more about certain things than we do

AG Member 2

The stories of the history of the AG provide an example of a particularly uniform account of the group, which I have interpreted as being related to the image they were used to promoting of themselves and their history. However I do not think this was the only reason for these stories. As Reissman (1993) has pointed out, people may tell quite different narratives at different points over time. This means it is unwise to assume that an individual’s story will necessarily be consistent from one setting to the next, but also the timing and circumstances of that telling need to be taken into account. It is very likely that the timing of my research with the Action Group had a significant bearing on their interviews. This is because it came only a few months after a period of conflict between the AG members and council officers. This conflict focused to a great extent around the capacities of the AG members to do what they said they could and on their place within the council. The success stories
of the history of the Action Group in some way set the scene for AG members' accounts of this period of conflict, which I shall discuss next.

5.3 Changing the date of the launch

It became clear during the course of my interviews with the Action Group that the time around the launch of the youth council was extremely significant for them. Some AG members advised that I should make sure to include questions on it in my interview schedule, one launched into a lengthy narrative about it before I had even started my first question and many came back to it repeatedly during their interviews. Analytically I think this period around the launch of the youth council is particularly interesting to look at in detail because it illustrates the disparity in conceptions and constructions of what young people can and should be doing within the council.

This period provides the most striking differences in narratives between AG members, council officers and support workers. The bare bones of the stories, and the basic features on which there was agreement, are that during the summer the Action Group and the support worker were working towards the launch of the youth council. They were planning the publicity; deciding what should go on posters, in information packs for schools, on the website; putting together a constitution for the youth council; deciding what needed to go into election packs for young people who wanted to stand for the council and looking at what should happen at the launch of the youth council. The initial launch date they were working towards was in September. During the summer a number of things happened:

1. A new youth department was being set up within the council and new council officers were employed in that. During this time the Action Group support worker got a new job and left. The Action Group were without a full time dedicated support worker.

2. A number of publicity materials were printed, came to the attention of the new youth department officers and the print job was cancelled. There were several meetings between youth department officers and AG members about postponing the launch of the youth council. The date of the launch was put back two months.

3. The Action Group got a new support worker and started working toward the new launch date.
Beyond these basic facts there is much disagreement. In terms of sequence, I have grouped events above in three broad stages but it is not possible to go any further than this from the range of conflicting narratives. My concern though is not on what really happened or untangling and corroborating events, but rather on what people told me about this period. The tales of the period, particularly those of the AG members, are to a large extent emotional tales, as Sandelands and Boudens have argued:

A person tells a story about work and accurate or not about details, we know the feeling. The emotional truth of a story is evident.
(Sandelands and Boudens 2000 p.60)

The stories told by the AG members about changing of the date of the youth council launch are fascinating because they are so emotional. To the outsider such a date alteration could seem a minor delay in a larger project, the kind of change of plan that is common in many workplaces. Such a delay would not seem to justify either the depth or the emotion of the AG members’ narratives. My argument, developed below, is that their emotions may be understood once we appreciate that something altogether bigger was at stake than the matter of a few months postponement. For the Action Group the issue became one of their place within the council and ultimately whether they were the valued and capable partners that they had worked hard to present themselves as, or not. Their competencies and the way they should be treated featured strongly throughout their narratives.

In order to include both the detail and range of stories about this period of time I am going to look first at the description from one AG member and then discuss how this fits in with the others. I have chosen this member for in-depth analysis because it is one of the few accounts given in whole, rather than unfolding through my questioning. More importantly I have chosen it because it is particularly reflective while at the same time representative of a number of feelings that were present in many other of the AG members’ descriptions.
5.3.1 Defining the narrative

An issue on which narrative analysts disagree upon is that of the exact definition of a narrative. Reissman has summarised the basic properties of narrative on which there can be said to be broad agreement (2001). These are that narration is distinguished by ordering and sequence; narrators create plots from disordered experience and they structure their tales temporally and spatially. Labov has been one of the most influential writers on narratives; he assumes all narratives follow a chronological sequence (Labov 1972; Labov and Waletzky 1967) and always move forward. However as Mishler has argued (1986), narratives often include much more than a sequence of temporary ordered clauses. Squire agrees (2005), criticising Labov's description of narratives on the grounds that it restricts narratives to sequences of events, when in reality stories may more often bounce around, not move forward all the time and be fragmented through the course of an interview.

In my own experience, respondents rarely bounded their narratives of the changing of the date of the launch into single speech events; more often they would tell part of a story, leave it and then come back at different points in the conversation to pick it up again, elaborate further or retell it. In the following narrative extract I have therefore chosen to piece together several elements of what I have interpreted as a continuing narrative relating to the relevant phase. These elements were separated during the interview as the AG member told the story first and then returned to it several times to make new points and tell different aspects of it. Choosing which bits of the narrative to leave in or out is an important interpretive decision (Riessman 2001). I have included here, in sequence, the parts of the interview in which the narrating AG Member described events happening during the period of interest. There are other sections which I have not included, these are portions where he talked about the impact of losing the support worker during this period. The material from this has been used to carry out my analysis in chapter four. For reasons of brevity and clarity, I have also missed out those bits where the AG Member repeated the story without adding new elements to it. In reading the section below therefore it
is important to bear in mind that new paragraphs are where the narrating AG Member returned to his story at separate parts of the interview and three dots are used when portions of text have been cut out within the same segment of speech.

With the support worker leaving and no one to take her place, it seemed like folk weren’t sure what to expect of us but suddenly had to interact with us. And so there was this strange mixture of people kind of expecting us to just be able to do it as if we were paid youth workers and that kind of, “Well why did you not all focus really well on this, and why have you not got the data protection stuff all sorted?” It was like, “Well naively we thought that would be taken care of by someone who’s paid.” (Laughs) That’s like a key example because I was so so cross about that, because it was such a blindly obvious thing that had anybody ever expressed any kind of query about it to me, I would have said, “Right OK you do this, you do that, you do that,” because I know about data protection act and stuff.

KF - So what happened?

Right, so after the support worker had left, the materials went off to the printer and the first lot came back and they went, “We have to cancel the whole rest of the order or at least postpone it or stuff because we’ve not got a data protection statement. We’ve not got translation stuff on the back.” And we went, “Ok now we do know, I do know, the translation stuff we got told was in place and was going to happen, now exactly why that’s not on it we don’t know,” and they were like, “Well you should know.” And we were like, “Why should we know? That was handed to staff folk, up the chain of command, we said like OK on the back of this there will be the translation stuff and we were told yup that’s fine, we’ll put that on it. Like how are we supposed to know that we couldn’t actually rely on folk to actually get it on? (Laughs) We’re not the people who actually print this, we’re not the folk who actually sign it off. We don’t have the authority to sign it off. We don’t have the authority to do it.” And we were going, “Well can we not just put a sticker on the packs with the information on, because it is only a couple of lines and who is the data protection officer for the department anyway?” And they were like, “We’re not sure,” and we were, “Well can you find that out.” (Laughs) And they were like, “Oh no if we put a sticker on that will make it look less quality and less professional and stuff, we couldn’t possibly put a sticker on.”

But at the same time, I think they were aware that they weren’t dealing with folk that were paid employees that could kind of go, “Well you’ve not been doing your jobs right.” It was like well we weren’t paid employees (laughs) so it was half that but the other half of it was, “Oh well we’ll just sort of nod and smile sweetly and we won’t tell them and then as soon as we go out of the room we’ll say well that’s just not going to happen.” But to our faces they wouldn’t say it. Even though we’d simply say, “Look if it’s not.” At least I specifically would go, “Look if it’s not going to happen tell me, let’s look at what will happen.” They were like, “No you just show us what you’re wanting to happen.” And nobody would give a straight answer to anyone about anything. It was like everything became really entrenched and it became very kind of, you had to read between the lines. It was very hard to tell exactly what was feasible and what wasn’t and I think it was that uncertainty that upset a lot of people. Because it was like, no longer could we sort of go, “Ok what’s the sort of feasible time?”

For a month, it was just like the last thing you thought about before you went to sleep, the first thing you thought about when you woke in the morning. But you kind of were impotent to do anything about it because you didn’t have any power. You didn’t have
any control at that point. So that’s the stressful bits, when it was taken out of our hands but everybody was still kind of looking at us going, “Well why are you not fixing it?” And it’s like, “Well we’re not allowed to, if we try to do anything it will just be wrong.” (Laughs) ... I know there was this sense of frustration that on the one hand it seemed like we were always expected to be there and yet we couldn’t because sometimes you would go in the office and they would be like, “Sorry people have lots of other stuff and you can’t, there’s no desk you can’t sit here, you’re just cluttering up space.” (Laughs) And then there would be other times when it would be like, “You need to be here doing this.” It’s like, “Yeh well we have other stuff, people are at school, we can’t find anybody at this short notice.” So it was that sort of knackering. Kind of are we, are we not? It felt like we were always having to leap up and run to wherever you needed to run to but you never knew where that was going to be and then they might not contact you for a week and you might be going like, “What the hell’s happening.” (Laughs) Then there sort of started to be staff folk, whereas at least prior, in the real crisis sort of, there were no official staff dealing with us. That didn’t have that same feeling of, “Well what can I do, what am I allowed to do, I don’t know really know if I’m able to do this bit or not, I’m not sure if I’m allowed.” And that was the frustrating thing. But the two weeks, two or three weeks, I can’t remember exactly how long it was, it felt like years (laughs) but although it was really tiring it felt like it was never ending. It did your head in but it did your head in, in quite an exciting way, because it was, well for me, I found it was quite active, very active. At times you felt like you were hitting your head against a brick wall, but you at least had all kinds of things you had to be doing.

5.3.2 Interpreting the narrative

There are a number of different ways to go about applying narrative analysis to interview material. Rogan and de Kock have grouped narrative methodologies into three clusters: structural analysis, performative and literary analysis (Rogan and de Kock 2005). Structural analysis methods focus on the use of language, which words were chosen, how the narrative is put together and in what sequence. Performative narrative analyses look at what is being achieved in the narrative, the presentation of self-identity as a performance and positioning of others. Literary analysis is more about identifying figurative language, metaphors and visual images.

In my analysis of the story the AG Member gives of the date change of the launch I have tried to apply aspects from each of the three types identified by Rogan and de Kock. However it is the performative aspects that I find most useful. Langellier (2001) has argued that actors negotiate how they want to be known by the stories they develop. They perform a preferred self. Using this perspective, the AG Member’s narrative can be read as a story of competence and a conflict over views of
competence between the Action Group and the youth department officers. The AG Member talks about the officers in the youth department having high but flawed conceptions of what the Action Group were there for and could do. These conceptions were that the AG members would be able to work as if they “were paid youth workers”. He feels that the youth department staff were expecting the same actual level of output from the Action Group as they would from professional workers. But he is clear that this was the wrong expectation, the Action Group did not have the same authority to do things as youth workers would have done. They could not actually do the work, as he says, “we’re not the folk who actually sign it off”. The Action Group’s role did not extend that far and they had to rely on other adult staff to implement actions. In his narrative the Action Group are competent, in their particular role, not the one that he portrays the youth officers expecting them to fulfil.

He emphasises the competence of the Action Group, they had not only known about the translation needs but had even asked about it and were told it would get done. They had performed what was required of them and it was other adults that had screwed up, “how were we supposed to know we couldn’t actually rely on folk”. The Action Group were actually the more competent partners in some ways in this account. The narrating AG Member even stresses his own personal competence saying he would have been able to advise on how to do the data protection statement if anyone had asked because he actually knew about that. It was not just obvious how you do it, but “blindingly” obvious he stresses. The Action Group are then being challenged unjustly he feels, they are being charged with not doing a task that was never their’s to perform. His frustration comes across that it was a slur on their competence when it should not have been.

The narrating AG Member’s annoyance is further compounded by his feeling that the Action Group were being expected to behave as workers but then not being given the same degree of influence as workers. Annoyance at not being taken seriously during this period comes across in both his and other AG members’ accounts. They felt they were not being treated as competent partners in decision making. The AG Member
describes staff nodding and smiling to the group but then not really involving them in the decisions. He uses the term impotence and this comes over particularly strongly. From his point of view the Action Group were still capable actors, they could have played a part in rearranging the launch and sorting things out. As he says in his account, “Let’s look at what will happen.” He portrays the Action Group wanting to work together with the youth department to sort it out. But he feels the Action Group were not being allowed to play that role anymore, they were no longer being listened to.

There are two central characters in the story: the Action Group and “them”, the youth department officers. A few times the narrating AG Member does emerge personally from his narrative, as distinct from the group, but no other characters step out from the boundaries of the groups. In terms of structure, the first section is very much back and forth between the two groups, argument and counter argument the whole way through. Later on it becomes less structured as the order and sequence breaks down just as the situation seems to. The story is full of both emotion and energy and the feeling is of high tension. The AG Member uses imagery of having to “leap up and run” when called, that he could not stop thinking or worrying about what was going on, how “knackering” it was. His description that it was the “last thing you thought about before you sent to sleep, the first thing you thought about when you work” is both expressive and extreme, this was not a small nuisance, but a constant worry and preoccupation during the period. It is clear from the tenor of the narrative that this was not a minor event to either the narrating AG Member or the rest of the Action Group. The issue to them was not just about finding a workable date, but that Action Group members were not being treated in the way they felt they should be, both their place within the council and their competencies were being questioned.

Narrative types

Moving on to look at how this AG Member’s story fits in with other AG members’ in terms of storylines; I have found Frank’s concept of narrative types a useful one to employ. Frank has used the idea of narratives types in his analysis of illness narratives (1995). He describes narrative types as a way of naming
...the most general story line that can be recognised underlying the plot of particular stories...
(Frank 1995 p75)

In his work, Frank distinguishes between three common illness narratives. These are restitution narratives, where the teller describes moving from health, through sickness, back to health again; chaos narratives, where the story is more disorganised and ends without things getting better and quest narratives where illness is described as a challenge in which the teller ultimately transforms themselves. Frank's narrative types may be abstracted further to provide the three storylines of restoration, disintegration and transformation. While the Action Group narratives of the change of the date of the launch are not about illness, these three narrative types can be seen to have resonance with their plot lines.

Looking at the features of the Action Group's narratives of the period, all AG members start off with very similar introductions to their stories. These are a continuation of the success stories, with the Action Group working very hard at the beginning of the summer and things going well. There is a common reaction of shock when the problems with the launch are initially identified. All of the AG members commenting that at the time they thought the launch of the youth council was on track and would go ahead. From this point on the narratives diverge.

Two narrative types can be identified from amongst the AG members' interviews. The first type is essentially a narrative about taking over, a disintegration narrative. In this narrative type once problems are identified, the Action Group fights to keep the date of the launch, their fight is futile, working on the launch is taken over by the council and the result is a launch that in their view is unsuccessful. Five of the eleven AG members used this narrative type and all of them had a negative view of the final launch. They gave a common reason for this negative view: it was not what the AG members wanted.

The second narrative type is about Action Group achievement, a restoration narrative. It diverges from the first in that when problems are identified the Action
Group still remains a relevant player in planning the final launch. This narrative type was also used by five of the AG members. In these narratives there are problems and disagreements between the AG members and the council but the AG members are involved in looking at the timelines, agreeing things can not work in time and changing the date. AG members using this narrative type talked about having to “pull our fingers out,” start working really hard and eventually succeeding. They talked in positive terms about the final launch, that it was a high point and more than one commenting that one of the best things about their whole involvement was seeing it finally come to fruition.

Coming back to the two main narrative types identified, ideas of competence can be seen to be integral to both of them. In the restoration narrative when problems are identified the Action Group rises to the challenge and demonstrates their capabilities:

...we hit that brick wall and it just showed that we could actually do it because we pushed through that brick wall and said, “Right here we’ve delivered something so here you go.”

AG Member 3

The strength of force in this statement is quite clear, the group is strong, capable and delivers the final result to the council. In the disintegration narrative the Action Group competence is also stressed in that the final result was not a success because the AG members were not properly involved in it:

It [the launch] really didn’t work. And what I find unfortunate about that was that was what was decided upon by the adults when it was young people sitting at the side saying, “We know how young people socialise and we are experienced enough as a committee having done so many of these conferences.”

AG Member 10

Here AG Member 10 was reaffirming the AG members’ area of expert knowledge: they know about young people. When the AG members criticised the launch because it was not what young people wanted, they did so from the standpoint that they were most qualified to comment on and using the source of knowledge that was most difficult for others to challenge.
The two quotes show a distinct difference in sense of ownership. In the restoration narrative the launch is still something that AG members work on and can feel proud of, whereas in the disintegration narrative, the AG members are, as one commented “sitting on the side,” not really involved in it. Such marked differences in stories can be explained to some degree by the fact that after the period over the summer AG members’ attendance patterns and involvement diverged markedly. Some AG members did indeed continue attending Action Group meetings and working on the new launch, the majority of this group told the restoration narrative. Of those AG members telling the disintegration narrative, most of them dropped out of meetings, some officially leaving the group but others unofficially just cutting back.

Injustice

Having looked to some degree at the structure, plot lines and performative functions of AG members’ accounts I now want to look more at a core common theme, that of injustice.

The AG Member who narrative I have used was the only one to admit that the Action Group were in some ways at fault for having fallen behind schedule in their workplan. All the other AG members, while admitting in hindsight that achieving the date might have been overly optimistic, gave a variety of reasons for this that did not reflect on the Action Group’s own competence. Some AG members complained that the timing was just too tight to work on when they only met once a week. Others said that the Action Group simply did not have enough “manpower” to do all the work. Both these reasons leave the Action Group’s competence unchallenged, with the right resources and time then things would have been accomplished. By far the most common reason given, and put forward in narrative I have used, was that the Action Group was doing their bit, but the council was not:

It wasn’t really up to us to get everything launched, we were coming up with the ideas and then we needed the council to be 110% behind us ...I think I just felt like we are doing all this work why don’t you?
AG Member 7
The partnership was no longer working, AG Member 7 put across feelings of being puzzled and also let down by the council. She felt the council were not acting in the way the AG members thought they could expect and rely on them to. This period around the changing of the date of the launch was contrasted by AG members with the period of good partnership that proceeded it. AG members using both narrative types made frequent comment about how they felt valued before. AG members using the disintegration narrative in particular talked about feeling as if they were not being listened to anymore and because of this it did not seem like they could accomplish their goals in the way they had felt they could previously:

Before, whatever we said it felt it was being listened to, maybe it wasn’t and I’m just being naïve but whatever we wanted to achieve seemed achievable before and now it didn’t.

*AG Member 6*

There is substantial evidence that this was a highly emotional period for all the AG members involved. AG members using both narrative types spoke about being defensive, angry, upset, cut up, even “not being able to handle the emotional pain.” Harlos and Pinder (2000) carried out interviews with thirty-three working professionals on the issue of injustice in the workplace. They found that perceptions of injustice most often produced the strongest emotions in employees, to the extent that these emotions were easily recalled in high intensity even when they happened a long time ago. The high emotions associated with the period around the date of the launch seem to be produced to a large degree by a feeling of injustice amongst the AG members. Fine has defined injustice as a violation of a moral contract for goods, services, opportunities or treatment (Fine 1983). In this case I would argue that the violation that produced such strong reactions in the AG members was between the council’s actual and expected treatment of the Action Group as serious partners. The anger produced does not seem to have been the matter of actually changing the date of the launch itself, but rather the way that this was done. In fact this was commented upon by the support worker of the time and also one young person in their interview:

...they treated us like children and we weren’t children. I don’t know what it was. They just didn’t treat us like we had anything, like we were necessary but not important enough.

*AG Member 11*
This excerpt above shows both the frustration and injustice of being “treated as children” rather than influential partners. The AG members had gone from a position where they felt their contributions were valued and recognised, to feeling irrelevant, “not important enough”. This is not something to just accept, but to rail against, hence the significance of the incident for the AG members and the group’s identity.

5.3.3 Adult narratives

The incident did not feature as strongly in council officers’ interviews, a few of them not even mentioning it until I brought it up. When they did talk about it they were much less expansive than the AG members, not dwelling on it or elaborating to the same extent. This could be interpreted as the period not being as intensely emotional and significant for them as it was for the AG members, equally it could be that they wished to avoid talking about a period of conflict with AG members. Whatever the reason, the outcome is that I have far fewer comments about this period from the adults than I do from the AG members. The volume of material to analyse is much less.

From what I have it seems that there was a range of narratives given by the adults who were involved in this period of work. To some degree this relates to their quite different work roles and responsibilities. The consensus narrative given by the youth department officers was that the Action Group’s work and timeline came to their attention and was very unrealistic. The youth department had to step in, have some very difficult conversations with the group and get things back on track for a later launch date. There was general acknowledgement of the anger of the Action Group to this intervention. The anger was described as perfectly understandable because the AG members had been working so hard and were given a “dose of reality” that they did not want to hear.

5.4 Young people’s competencies

My argument has been that young people’s competencies: what they could do and be expected to do, were central themes in both the narratives they gave of the history of
the Action Group and the conflict around changing the date of the youth council launch. Competence is a broad concept, having established its salience in the Action Group’s experience, I would like at this stage to examine it further. Firstly I shall summarise key issues from the various literatures discussing children and young people’s competencies. Then I shall use these issues to further my analysis of the Action Group’s stories.

5.4.1 Competence in the literature

The social, emotional and mental competencies of children and young people have been a popular subject for debate in very diverse bodies of literatures, ranging from moral philosophy through psychological and legal studies to anthropology and sociology. In sociology in particular there has been a rapid growth in writing on the subject of children’s capacities and competencies during the last 20 years. James and Prout’s (1990) declaration of the emergence of the new social studies of childhood strongly features competence. Much of the research in the new social studies of childhood can be seen as working to demonstrate children’s competencies in explicit opposition to traditional biological and psychological writing on childhood development (Prout 2005). Lansdown (2005) has characterised the legacy of such traditionally biological staged models of child development to be an assumption that child development is a universal process, adulthood has normative status, goals of development are universal, deviation from the norm indicates risk for the child and childhood is an extended period of dependence in which children are passive recipients of adult protection, training, wisdom and guidance. Such conceptions of child development have been rigorously challenged through writings from the new social studies of childhood. Many research articles in line with the paradigm of the new social studies of childhood grew out of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Children 5 – 16 Research Programme in the 1990s. This focused specifically on remedying the lack of attention given to children as social actors in many UK social science disciplines. For example, in terms of their social competencies, Edwards and colleagues demonstrated the active role children play in parental involvement in their schooling, in some cases initiating and facilitating and in other cases discouraging and resisting such involvement (Edwards et al. 2000).
Butler and colleagues focused on children as active participants in the ongoing transition and reconstruction of family life following divorce (Butler et al. 2000). In James’ study of children’s understanding of the social organisation of time, she argued that children themselves emphasised the importance of social experience, rather than age, in becoming competent and responsible in deciding how they spend their time (James 2000). Other studies focused to a greater extent on children’s moral competencies. Holland (1999) showed a range of children’s complex moral perspectives and documented how they saw themselves going through a process of developing their moral competencies over time, from relying on a moral teacher to having greater moral independence in what they thought were right or wrong actions and behaviours. Many of these studies highlighted the incompatibility between children’s assigned incompetence, by various adults in their lives, and their competence in practice (e.g. in particular Mayall 2001b; Smart and Neale 2000).

The new social studies of childhood has illustrated the diversity of ways in which children can be seen as socially and morally competent actors in their own and others’ lives, indeed this has been characterised as something of a “trademark” (Haavind 2005). In particular such studies have been successful at demonstrating the importance of the contexts in which children demonstrate their competencies. Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, in their edited volume on the issue, argue that perhaps the most important contribution of new social studies of childhood to the idea of competence has been this recognition that competence is something that should be understood as applying to the particular rather than the general:

...the possession, or display, of competence is something that is established in situ, for this particular here-and-now occasion; and competence, its possession or the lack of it, is something that children themselves negotiate, argue about and struggle over in local occasions of activity, rather than being a function of the attainment of some specific stage of development.
(Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998 p.16)

This idea of looking at children’s competences in the particular and the concrete is in opposition to previous ideas from developmental theorists about emphasising the universal nature of acquiring competencies. It is perhaps a luxury afforded to social researchers to produce such studies on the complexities of defining competencies. In
law, medicine and rights literatures, conceptions of the competencies of children and young people have often run into difficulties because of a perceived need for producing general standards and guidelines (Lee 1999).

Looking at how children's competencies have been defined legally, in Scotland, England and Wales, a crucial piece of legislation has been the Children Act\textsuperscript{14}. In all three nations this made the welfare of the child a paramount consideration and emphasised that children's opinions should be sought on certain matters/decisions concerning their welfare. The Act was regarded by many as outlining a philosophy of empowerment for children (Hodgson 1990). However there have been criticisms of the extent to which children's wishes are incorporated in carrying through the Act in practice, focusing especially on the issue of competence. For example in the case of divorce proceedings, James and James have argued that one major limitation is that the Act only promotes consultation with, rather than decision making by the child (James and James 1999). Furthermore, although the Act requires courts in some situations to give regard to the "ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child", this is made conditional upon the court's assessment of the child's age and understanding. James and James conclude that:

\begin{quote}
\ldots although the court in principle must do more than pay lip-service to children's wishes and, other things being equal, a child's wishes may be used to resolve an issue, it is clear that the court (and not the child) is in practice the final arbiter of the child's best interests.
(James and James 1999 p.196)
\end{quote}

Smart and Neale (2000) have argued that the issue of competence can be brought up to counter children's expressed views in situations where those views go against professionals' opinions. In these cases there can be a tendency to assume that the children are being manipulated by an aggrieved parent. Competence is therefore never assumed, but has to be won and is open to contestation if there is adult disagreement.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{14} The Children Act was passed in 1989 in England and Wales and in Scotland in 1995.}
Problems with relying on adult judgement to define competence can be also seen in medical contexts. In England and Wales the landmark ruling on the issue of competence assessment in children and young people was that of Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority [1986] AC 112. The case centred on whether a fifteen year old had the capacity to seek contraceptive advice and to decide to take the contraceptive pill without the need for parental consent. The ruling found that when the child is aware of the nature and the consequences of a course of action, it is the child’s decision which counts. Competence in these terms is not determined by the specific age of a child, but by the nature of the particular individual at the time of asserting their choice. In medical terms then a child may be described as Gillick-competent for some purposes and treatments but not necessarily for others (Jones 2005). The Gillick ruling was again heralded because of its move away from definitions of age based competence to actually assessing individual children; however Freeman (2005) has traced a series of legal rulings since the case to conclude that it has been frequently undermined in cases involving the right to refuse medical treatment. He makes the argument, as others have done (Jones 2005), that assessing Gillick-competence requires a higher standard of insight on the part of children than the law imposes on adults, with the result that children can consent to treatment but cannot refuse it. The nub of the issue is that competence still relies on adults as arbiters of whether the children’s views are reasonable or not.

Alderson’s work has been often quoted on the issue of children’s competence in medical matters. She carried out interviews with 120 children, their parents and 70 health professionals on the issue of children’s consent to orthopaedic surgery (1993). Through the study Alderson was surprised by how many young patients showed the experience, ability and desire to be part of decision making, in her final analysis she concluded that:

...competence develops, or at least is demonstrated, in response to experience and reasonably high expectation, rather than gradually over time through ages or stages.

(Alderson 1993 p.198)

For the purpose of her study Alderson reviewed medical definitions of competence to consent to treatment. From these she defined the component elements as:
Being able to understand the proposed treatment
Being able to make a wise decision
Being free from coercion

These elements have resonance with writings from moral philosophy on the issue of assessing children's competence, especially in relation to the extent to which children may be attributed rights. Traditional philosophical arguments have centred on choice versus interest theories of rights. Advocates of interest theories of rights have argued that rights should principally protect the necessary attributes for well-being. Whereas choice theory advocates argue that being able to choose freely should be the core function of rights. There have been vigorous debates over whether the function of rights should be to protect the choices or interests of the right bearer (Brighouse 2002). Several authors have argued that the choice theory is incompatible with giving rights to children and that either the choice theory or children's rights should be abandoned. It is has been argued that children are not competent choosers because they do not grasp the long term ramifications of their choices:

They lack the requisite autonomy, in the moral much more importantly than the merely physical sense of the term. Their will is unformed or deformed, their judgement deficient or impaired.
(Goodin and Gibson 1997 p.187)

Others have argued that children make bad choices because they fail to reflect long term preferences and their choices are not stable (Brennan 2002). Arguments that children can make choices, but are not good choosers, have parallels with arguments that children have agency, but are not moral agents. Noggle has argued that children have simple agency in that they have the

...ability to engage in the rational, intentional and the deliberate pursuit of goals
(Noggle 2002 p.101)

Yet he argues that, unlike adults, children do not have moral agency. The difference between simple agency and moral agency being that moral agency requires more than simple agency, it also requires temporal extension and what Rawls calls the two moral powers: the sense of justice and a capacity for the conception of the good
Three components of moral agency may be distinguished from these arguments:

- Temporal extension - the ability to take one's long term interests into account and see oneself as persisting in time (Noggle 2002).
- Sense of justice – having a set of internalised norms of moral decency (Rawls 1993)
- Conception of the good - the ability to construct and act according to a relatively stable set of values, goals and fundamental concerns (Rawls 1993)

Philosophical arguments about rights and moral agency concern children in general. The Gillick-competence test concerns children in the particular. So it can be seen that at both levels, children’s competencies are continually open to adult question and must be proven before they are accepted.

5.4.2 Applying the concepts of competence to the Action Group’s stories

From the various literatures discussing the issue of children and young people’s competence, several issues can be seen to be strongly reflected in the Action Group experience. The first of these is that competence is best demonstrated in relation to the particular, in terms of both the individuals and the situation. Lee (1999) has argued that trying to apply general rules about children’s competence will always cause problems for social institutions and orders. He draws on Archard’s distinction between abstract knowledge of childhood and knowledge of particular children in trying to unpack what he calls the ambiguity of children in adult institutions:

In other words, childhood ambiguity only arises when we set ourselves the task of forming an answer to the question of children's status that is generalizable over time, across different contexts and between different children. The problem is that institutions make their decisions about particular children with one eye on the qualities of those children and the other on their own legitimacy. For a decision to be legitimate it must at least be open to being generalized over time, across different contexts and between different children.

(Lee 1999 p.465)

That children’s competence is to a large extent in the eye of the beholder is reiterated throughout the literature from different fields. Many authors stress that adults can be particularly bad at recognising this competence, especially in children they do not
know (Davies 2000; Lansdown 2005; Mayall 2001b). This is pertinent to the Action Group and their conflict with the new members of staff from the youth department over the issue of whether or not they were capable of doing the launch. The AG members described the new officers, who had neither formed relationships with the AG members nor interacted with them over a period of time, as thinking that the Action Group were not capable of pulling off the launch. Some, though not all, support workers who knew and had worked with the Action Group believed they could have done it.

In the Action Group narratives, the AG members’ evaluations of their own competence were higher than the youth department staff’s. Christensen (2001) carried out an ethnographic study of children’s agency in health care in Denmark. She showed that children’s subjective experiences of their bodies were not enough to qualify them to adults as knowing the truth about whether they were ill or not. When a child said she was ill this was only accepted on verification by persistence of symptoms, or more usually by a temperature recording. While children recognised they had to go through these adult tests, they expressed no doubt in their original judgement of whether they were ill or not. This adult confirmation of knowledge was missed by the Action Group when they lost their support worker. They said they could have got the launch done in time but in their accounts this meant nothing unless validated by adult opinion that this was true.

...we were like, “Yes but we can do this, look at this, look at this,” and it was just like, “No you can’t do this.” They were like, “I’ve done this, this and this and I know how long these things take, you need to get to the schools way before.” And we had, we had spoken to head teachers and everything.

AG Member 11

In the excerpt above, there is a collision of viewpoint between “we know you can’t do it” and “we know we can do it”. But whereas the youth department staff could be said to have had their previous experience and professional background to justify their knowledge that the Action Group could not make the launch, the Action Group had only their convictions. They no longer had their support worker to vouch for them and validate their assertion.
This leads on to another common issue relating to children and young people and competence, namely that of being incompetent until proven otherwise. In their success stories the Action Group describe themselves starting from positions of assumed incompetence and having to win recognition from the council over time. In their interviews they gave various examples of situations where adults who did not know them would treat them under a presumption of incompetence. For example, in the feedback session one AG member gave the following description of his experience with councillors he had not met before

...like in speeches and stuff whoever it was would take us in a go “what a fantastic job” and be really really patronising. And if you are doing a speech it is nice to be thanked but not to the extent that they did it and it was almost like you were like this kind of little pet, like “Wow they do speeches and everything, aren’t they great.” I got a signed picture of the council chambers, like job well done. No one else got one but I got one. (Laughter)

Feedback group discussion

It is revealing to look a bit further at why this story was so funny to the feedback group. It contrasts assumptions made by the adults in the story and the assumed shared knowledge of the AG members in the feedback discussion. The adults assumed the young people would not be up to doing the presentation, so therefore were very impressed when they actually did. The AG members on the other hand knew that that of course they were able to do the presentation, it was no big deal. The story caricatures the adults treating the young person like a “little pet” that could amuse and perform for them but not be given respect. Giving the young person a signed picture of the council chambers not only singles the young person out for special reward, but assumes that the young person would be impressed by this gesture. The AG member in the story is obviously above that and instead laughs at it. Other AG member gave examples of work that they felt the group was capable of carrying out but were prevented because of adults’ reactions to them as young people:
I think we would have been capable of making phone calls to schools and setting up times for us to come along for presentations but I think the problem would have been that schools wouldn’t have taken us seriously as a paid youth worker ... so sometimes I think it was more that we couldn’t as easily do more of the interactions because people were like, “Oh it is only young people phoning.”

*AG Member 1*

These examples given by AG members of the way they were treated to some degree because of adults’ primary reaction to them as young rather than anything else, are linked by a common theme of incompetence. In each example they were assumed not to have the needed capacity until proven otherwise.

5.4.3 Situating the Action Group’s stories

As has been commonly noted in narrative analysis, accounts do not exist in a vacuum but are situated both in personal and wider cultural narratives (Jones 2004). Abell and Stokoe argue that

...it is important to consider the rhetorical function of the cultural knowledge that is invoked by speakers in conversation. The analyst must ‘go beyond the data’ in order to explicate these rhetorical functions. It is not enough to argue that the categories and identities that are constructed in talk can simply ‘speak for themselves’...

(Abell and Stokoe 2001 p.433)

The stories that the AG members told about their involvement were situated in various ways. They were part of a research encounter, in the context of their long period of involvement in the Action Group and in shadow of changing of the date of the launch. In going beyond the data, I would argue that the AG accounts made reference to wider cultural narratives of youth and young people.

Moving away from the literature on children and young people to look more specifically at that concerning young people alone, there is a strong consensus that a key feature has been the construction of young people as problems (Macdonald et al. 1993). Griffin (1993) in her book on representations of youth in Britain and the USA identifies three main problematizing discourses: dysfunction, deficit and deviance. She traces these back to the identification of the period of biological adolescence and
moreover the dominant concept attached to it being the “storm and stress model”. Such has been the influence of this model that she argues

No young persons' life in Britain or elsewhere in the industrialised world can have remained untouched by the dominant notions underlying the storm and stress model of adolescence.
(Griffin 2004 p.12)

The notions underlying the storm and stress model have been referred to widely in writing on representations of youth (Finn 2001; Kidger 2003; Wilson and Huntington 2005):

This metaphor is used to describe an essentialized, ahistorical understanding of adolescence in which teens are inherently inclined towards experimentation, risk taking and uncertainty... In a series of rational explanations for this ‘irrational’ time, various experts have identified physiological changes linked to puberty, such as hormonal shifts, cognitive changes, such as the development of morality and abstract thinking... and the growth of identity, such as the development of a sense of self... All aspects of these changes apparently bring upheaval and unpredictability.
(Raby 2002 p.431)

Conceptions of young people as problems, undergoing a storm and stress model of adolescence, should not be separated from models of them as morally incompetent. The two are closely linked. If competency is broken down into several component issues (following Alderson 1993, Noggle 2002 and Rawls 1993), these could be:

- Having the ability to see oneself persisting in time
- Having a set of morals
- Having a stable set of values and goals
- Being able to understand processes and procedures
- Being able to make a wise decision
- Being free from coercion in making choices

Features of the storm and stress model may be seen within these components of competence. For example irrationality and risk taking, integral to the storm and stress model, run counter to being able to make wise decisions. An inclination towards uncertainty goes against the idea of having a stable set of values and goals. Furthermore the model of adolescence is presented as a time in which to develop a
sense of self and moral thinking, both key components in the ascription of competence.

The AG stories could be interpreted as stressing their competence, not only in response to the challenge that they felt occurred over the date of the launch, but also in response to wider cultural narratives of young people. I would argue that through their narratives the AG members were working to resist the common cultural narratives of young people as irrational, risk taking, immature and unstable. Their stories stressed their achievements as capable partners of the council who could be relied upon to deliver. An intention to work against common, negative, cultural conceptions of youth was declared outright by some AG members:

I like the opportunity to prove that young people could be articulate, did know what they were talking about, could affect opinion and were able to argue with adults. I mean I am a horribly argumentative person sometimes, too much so in fact, and we would argue with people, in doing that I knew that I was changing the stereotype of young people...

*AG Member 10*

Others did not state this directly but did instead make various challenges to negative notions of adolescence. There are examples where they rejected the idea that young people could not make wise decisions:

As long as there is a justification that we can trust, then of course, we are not unreasonable people, we don’t want our own way, we’re not children.

*AG Member 6*

In other interviews, AG members rejected a picture of young people as more concerned with having fun than with work:

I know lots of people might think a weekend away you’ll spend one day working and the rest party, but it’s not like that, it’s like you go for a weekend away and spend near enough the entire weekend working

*AG Member 3*

And they rejected the conception that young people are not responsible:
...[we were planning a conference] I said, “Well its maybe not a good idea to put it during school,” and she [a council officer] comes up with, “Yes, but young people want out of school and we can just write them letters.” And I just thought, “Oh my god, this is the attitude that we want to get away from, people just thinking oh young people just want to skive off school.”

AG Member 8

In each of the examples above, the AG member referred to a common conception of young people before going on to reject it. They serve to illustrate that Action Group members situated their stories, not only in relation to their particular experience in the council, but in relation to wider conceptions of youth. I do not wish to argue that all of the AG members in every part of their interview rejected such culturally popular models of youth. Far from it, this thesis is concerned with exploring when and in what ways AG members used various conceptions of what it meant to be young. My intention is to point out that in relation to their success and launch stories AG members worked hard to reject dominant conceptions of young people.

5.5 Conclusions

At the heart of this chapter is the question: why did the Action Group get so upset over changing the date of the launch? It is a question that is perplexing when the bare facts are examined. The change was only a matter of a few months and in addition many of the AG members agreed in retrospect that, although they did not think so at the time, perhaps things were a bit behind schedule. The high emotions attached to the period can be better understood however if we look beyond the surface issues to those underpinning it. That is if we recognise that the issue was not really about changing the date of the launch, but about AG members’ feelings of recognition within the council. In the three weeks around the time of the support worker leaving and the launch being postponed, it seems AG members’ ideas about the group and its place within the council were seriously challenged. The basic clash of views between the Action Group and the youth department staff seems to have been seen by the AG members as being about their competence to plan and deliver the youth council and in the value given to the AG members’ knowledge. The Action Group members felt that the abilities of the Action Group to achieve what they said were not recognised
in the way they thought they should be. They felt that their knowledge that they could do it was not given the same status as youth department officers' knowledge that they could not.

The conflict around changing the date of the launch seems to have been pivotal in the way the AG members thought about the group and its place in the council. Several AG members commented that they thought about things quite differently in the light of these events. In particular they came to see how little effect the group could actually have when it was, as one AG put it, "crunch time". Reflections, such as the one below, on the actual impotence of the group were given by half of AG members in their interviews:

...no matter how much we think we can influence, it's very limited what we can do because grown-up adults are the ones that can actually work it because they have written laws and they can act out the laws. We want to try and influence the law but we can only do it, it's like a pin dropping on more and more pins, it is just one pin.

AG Member 6

This comment is about the lack of power of the Action Group. It provides a startling contrast to the success stories given about how the group became valued and influential partners of the council. This seeming contradiction serves to illustrate that AG members gave different accounts of their influence during the same interview situation. What particular version was being given depended on what was being referred to at the time. In reference to the story of the Action Group's history, then the sentiment was achievement and success. While not rehearsed, these were group stories, given by the group and about the group. That underlying logic was one of proving the competence of the Action Group over time. It was a public account, one they were used to giving. However at other points in the interview, particularly in relation to changing the date of the launch, the AG members could interpret the group's actual influence as being rather less and talk instead about the injustice of their opinions not being taken into account.
Their interviews, and the stories they told in them, were clearly very much situated in the particular time that I carried out my research. Had I been involved before the summer perhaps there would have been fewer comments about the actual impotence of the group. Had I been involved two or three years previously where the group were being used primarily for consultations, and by accounts were feeling bored of being “wheeled out”, the stories might have been far less coherent or even about the success of the group at all. Carrying out the research when I did, when the AG members were accustomed to “selling” the group and its achievements, I received a more public and uniform account. I have argued that equally important in interpreting the Action Group stories is recognising that they were also situated in particular cultural representations of youth. AG members picked up and referred to common negative assumptions about young people. Their success stories, where they demonstrated themselves to be responsible, hard working and consistent, could be interpreted as providing a counter narrative to the more usual narratives of young people as irrational, risk taking and unstable. In an edited volume on the issue of counter narratives, Andrews identifies counter-narratives as:

...the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives.  
(Andrews 2004 p.1)

I have argued that a particularly strong, dominant cultural narrative that the AG members worked hard to resist, was that of the incompetence of young people. That competence should be such a critical issue for the AG members is not surprising when we look at its primacy within various literatures on children and young people. It has been a matter of long debate without resolution in many fields and is reinforced in the storm and stress model of adolescence.

Whole interviews were never in their entirety coherent counter narratives, rather AG members resisted some aspects in some places but used popular conceptions of young people, what they could and could not do in others. It was through their success stories about the group that the counter narratives were most clear.
Jones (2004) has argued that actors using dominant cultural narratives have less discursive work to do in order to establish the truth of their account compared to those using counter narratives. Returning to the issue of the launch, it can be seen that in the Action Group’s version of events, council officers were able to easily draw upon images of young people as professionally incompetent to make their case for a postponement. Without a support worker to confirm that they could indeed do it, the Action Group portrayed themselves as unable to match council officers’ arguments.

"Being young", and the meanings associated with it, was then a central, if implicit, reference point for AG members’ narratives. Both their success stories and those of the postponement of the launch used, and related to, notions of “being young” and what this meant, both to them and to others. Occasionally they commented directly on the implications of “being young” in relation to the Action Group and its work, but more often it was the background reference to the tales they told. The active work the AG members put in to present particular versions of the group and its history has been stressed throughout this chapter; I shall continue to explore aspects of presentation, in different contexts, in the next chapter.
Chapter Six

Presentation and Representation

The last chapter looked at the broad features of the Action Group's involvement with the council and discussed stories as a whole. Despite the difference in interpretations given to its history, there can be seen to be a clear difference over time from when the Action Group was first set up to where it was when I carried out my research. In this chapter I am going to look in more detail at the resources the Action Group tried to use to "sell" itself and achieve its aim of establishing the youth council.

6.1 The Action Group as an Interest group

In their work on the youth council the Action Group were trying to work within local government to achieve a certain policy objective. As such they fit Grant's description of an interest group:

...an organisation which seeks as one of its functions to influence the formulation and implementation of public policy, public policy representing a set of authoritative decisions taken by the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary, and by local government and the European Union.
(Grant 2000 p.14)
Grant’s definition is very broad\textsuperscript{15}, yet few other writers have offered an alternative, preferring instead to use the term, rather than define it. The policy making literature, in particular in its discussion of interest groups, would seem to hold potentially relevant insights to apply to youth participation projects, however few authors have made the link. An exception is Tisdall and Davies (2004) who looked at the case where a children’s charity had been asked by the Scottish Executive to undertake a consultation with children on special educational needs to inform the Executive’s policy review on the issue. In their case study the views of the children and young people were a resource belonging to the charity which it deployed strategically. It was the charity that had the direct relationship with the Executive and was the interest group, rather than the children. Although the children did meet face to face with the Minister and Executive officers, this was in terms of one-off consultations rather than through repeated interactions. The Action Group experience allows the links with policy making literature to be taken one step further because it was the young people themselves who were the interest group and were in direct and repeated relations with policy makers in the council.

Dowding has proclaimed that:

\begin{quote}
Policy network analysis has become the dominant paradigm for the study of the policy making process in British political science.
(Dowding 1995 p.136)
\end{quote}

A range of different concepts have been used, and argued over, in policy network analysis. Richardson and Jordan (1979), adapting the US literature to the UK, first used the concept of “policy network” and “policy community” interchangeably. Rhodes and Marsh (1992) distinguished between five types of network on a continuum from highly integrated policy communities to loosely integrated issue networks. Richardson went on to argue that the idea of a policy network was actually a more useful conceptual tool as it reflected the fact that few networks have

\textsuperscript{15} In particular Grant’s definition does not seem to exclude actors within the policy process, e.g. government departments, from being termed interest groups. Grant himself raises the question of whether the machinery of government can be regarded as an interest group and comes to the conclusion that they cannot because they have to aggregate the views of a number of pressure groups rather than acting as their representatives within the government machinery.
sufficient internal stability and insulation from other networks to enable them to be called “policy communities” (Richardson 1993). As can be seen, much energy has been expended on categorisation of concepts in policy network analysis (Dowding 1995). One of the most enduring concepts within policy network analysis has been that of the interest group as a continuing subset within broader classifications of communities, issue networks or policy networks. It is at the level of the interest group, rather than at the higher organising level of policy network or community, that I wish to focus. The reason for this is that it is the Action Group, rather than any policy objective or outcome, that is the subject of my case study.

Looking at the literature on interest groups, a high proportion of writing revolves around the issue of the distinction between insider and outsider interest groups. Although comments on the differentiated levels of access to the policy making process had been made by authors before Wyn Grant, he was the first to theoretically develop this division. In his 1978 working paper, and in subsequent publications, he distinguished between insider groups, who are regarded as legitimate by government and consulted on a regular basis, and outsider groups, who are unwilling or unable to achieve such a position and are not consulted regularly (Grant 1989; Grant 2000). This basic division has been both modified and criticised over time. Page (1999) surveyed 381 British interest groups, asking questions relating to insider or outsider characteristics. He defined insider characteristics as being in frequent contact with relevant government departments, being consulted on relevant statutory instruments and seeing some department reaction to objections they raised. From his survey he concluded that few groups could be classed as pure outsiders and the vast majority demonstrated one or more insider characteristics. Others have argued that outsider strategies are becoming more and more popular as interest groups operate in increasingly complex environments (Richardson 2000) and that groups can use different strategies in different stages of the policy-making process and for different purposes (Binderkrantz 2005).

Several authors have added to the original bipartite division. Grant himself distinguished between three types of insider: prisoner groups whose dependence on
statutory funding makes it difficult for them to break away from government, low
profile groups who place stress on behind the scene interactions and high profile
groups who aim to persuade government through appeals to public opinion (Grant
1989). Maloney, Jordan and McLaughlin (1994) have made an influential criticism
that Grant’s original division did not sufficiently separate group strategy from group
status. They defined strategy as a matter selected by the group whereas status could
not be decided by the group and was the legitimacy ascribed to the group by policy
makers. Following this logic, Maloney et al. suggested insider groups should be
further subdivided according to their status and quality of access, into core insider
groups, characterised by bargaining exchange relationships over a range of issues;
specialist insider groups, seen as reliable on specific issues and peripheral insiders
that have little influence. Maloney et al. also raised the issue of whether interest
groups could really be said to choose their strategies freely, rather than being
constrained by a range of factors. They concurred with Browne (1991) that the
relationships between groups and policy makers could be characterised as based on
market exchange principles, where the interest groups must have something
recognizable to offer decision makers. Authors have identified a variety of resources
that interest groups could be said to offer decision makers. Rose (1989) identified
three: the ability to organise and articulate demands, organizational cohesion through
members’ commitment to shared goals, and strategic location in terms of controlling
indispensable goods or labour. Maloney et al. add to this list economic significance,
size, knowledge and implantation power (Maloney et al. 1994). Grant has also
provided a list echoing both Maloney and Rose:

Table 6a: Interest group resources
(Source: Grant 2000 p.196)

| Internal group structures such as decision taking and conflict
reduction mechanisms |
<table>
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<tr>
<td>Marketing skills in terms of the attraction and retention of members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership mobilisation capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staffing resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sanctioning capability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choices of strategy</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Despite the criticisms, and because of the modifications, there are many useful ideas to be taken from the debate on insider and outsider groups. The Action Group was set up by Bepton council and involved in numerous consultations. As a group it was given seats on the Advisory Panel which had a remit to propose a long term youth strategy for Bepton (Minutes of Bepton Full Council Meeting May 2002). Using Maloney et al.’s terminology, the Action Group could be described therefore as a specialist insider group with access to decision making specifically on youth issues, rather than any other issue. Looking in more detail at the issue of status, it can be seen that the Action Group stories show that they felt their insider status was not given to them at the start of the group’s life but earned over time. It was however always ultimately dependent on the council: their support workers and all logistical support was paid for by the council. In this respect they could be described, following Grant (1989), as a prisoner group; I will come back to this issue and its implications in this chapter’s conclusions. In terms of resources it is clear that as a small group of young people the Action Group lacked a number of traditional interest group resources in terms of economic significance, indispensable goods or labour, mobilising potential or implementation power. That is not to say they were entirely without resources. I have looked in some detail in previous chapters at both the Action Group’s aims and group promotion and at the organising and decision making within the group, all of which could be identified as interest group resources. I would like in this chapter therefore to look in detail at the final resource that the Action Group as an interest group could be said to offer decision makers in the council, namely knowledge; more specifically its ability to give young people’s views. Knowledge can be a very strong resource, in Whitely and Winyard’s (1987) study of the British poverty lobby, decision makers and interest groups privileged knowledge above all other resources that groups could offer. In the Action Group experience, knowledge proved to be a particularly interesting and ambiguous resource as I will discuss below.
6.2 Giving young people's views

6.2.1 Being asked to give young people's views

The Action Group were continually asked to give young people's views by both the council and other organisations. Over half of all of the minutes I collected of Action Group meetings include at least one request for the views of the Action Group on issues such as health, education, council services, participation etc. For example the minutes of one meeting record that people from the Bepton Arts Council came to an Action Group meeting

...to obtain young people's views on what issues affect young people in the visual arts and crafts, how information should be given out to reach young people, how galleries could be made more accessible to young people and what classes would interest young people.

Minutes of Action Group meeting

This request is typical of a number from other outside agencies and the council itself. The request being made of the group is not to answer what would make the arts more accessible for them, which classes would they personally like to attend, but which classes would interest young people. This highlights an important point in terms of the resource that the Action Group were being asked to provide: it was knowledge not only of themselves but of young people in general. In many cases this was worded generally, as in the example above, in terms of giving "young people's views". In other cases the Action Group were more explicitly asked to be representatives of the young people of Bepton. For example in minutes and strategy documents of the Advisory Panel meetings they are referred to as the "young people's representatives".

To what extent could the Action Group adequately respond to these requests to be young people's representatives or to give "young people's views"? In Whitely and Winyard's (1987) study, policy decision makers were quite clear that it was not just knowledge that they valued, but knowledge that was of high quality and well
researched or else came directly from detailed case studies that the interest groups had access to. In order to assess the quality of the information that the Action Group could give on “young people’s views”, we need to look closely at the issue of representation.

6.2.2 Representation

Most authors on representation turn to Hanna Pitkin’s work where she first makes the distinction between “standing for” and “acting for” representation (Pitkin 1967). In her original work Pitkin actually considers two types of “standing for” representation, these she calls descriptive and symbolic. Symbolic representation emphasises the power of symbols to evoke feelings or attitudes, Pitkin describes it as a frame of mind, something that people believe in, such as the king as the symbolic representative of a constitutional monarchy. Descriptive representation she argues should be understood in terms of making a mirror of society. It is quite different from symbolic representation in that it actually contains information, in the way a map would. Furthermore it is not about authority, but rather depends on characteristics of the representatives:

...on what he is or is like, on being something rather than doing something... (Pitkin 1967 p61)

These two “standing for” meanings of representation Pitkin contrasts with “acting for” representation where personal characteristics are immaterial and what matters is that the representative acts in the interests of the represented and moreover is responsive to them. For Pitkin it is this responsiveness that is crucial, so that the individual is bound tightly to those he or she represents, with the extreme position being where ultimately their own opinions are of little consequence. Pitkin dismisses symbolic representation and argues against trying to attain descriptive representation because it would divert attention away from more urgent questions of what representatives actually do, rather than who they are. She argues that an emphasis on responsive representation is the way forward.
I would like to look at how Pitkin's established division between descriptive and responsive representation apply to concepts of representation in the Action Group. I shall come back to discuss symbolic representation later on in this chapter.

Rejection of representation by the support workers

There was unanimity in the support workers' interviews that the Action Group was not representative in either sense of being either responsive to, or descriptive of, other young people. The Action Group were not elected in any way by young people, did not gather the views or report back to any groups of young people and nor did they mirror the composition of young people in Bepton as a whole. Support workers stressed in their interviews how they worked with the group to ensure the AG members understood this and did not think of themselves as representatives of the young people of Bepton. It was something several workers mentioned bringing up with the group and minutes of a meeting in the second year do demonstrate this was something the group looked at:

...it was agreed that the youth Action Group is not a representative group. It was felt that although young people come from different areas they are not representing other people from their areas or the opinions of "minority" groups e.g. disabled young people, young people in care, black and minority ethnic young people etc.

Action Group Minutes

These minutes bring up and reject both notions of representation. They state that the Action Group does not contain a representative diversity of young people, it is not descriptive, nor do the AG members represent other young people from their area, they are not responsive to them.

The support workers held a common view that the council was keen to use the Action Group as a representative body of young people, especially in the responsive sense of representing other young people in Bepton; however the support workers worked with the Action Group to ensure that the members were clear themselves that they were not in any way representative. There was even an element of satisfaction in
the way that some of support workers talked about the Action Group resisting this temptation to be the council’s representative group of young people:

...[an AG member] continually said right till the end, “We are not a representative group,” when he got wheeled out and I don’t think the council liked this particularly...because they wanted them to say, "Oh look we have a voice of the young people of Bepton." So it became like it was a young person’s voice rather than The Voice. They wanted them to be The Voice.

Support Worker C

A concern with being The Voice, is about responsive representation, it is not about whether the group shares the characteristics of the wider population but that they share the same ideas as them. By using this expression Support Worker C also painted the council as expecting a one dimensional view of young people’s opinions, that there should be a single voice for young people rather than a multiplicity of voices, as there would be for adults.

Mixed views of the Action Group on representation

Members of the Action Group spoke in very similar ways to the support workers about the council wanting to use their views to represent those of all young people in Bepton. Several of them mentioned specifically that the council used the Action Group to be able to say they had consulted with young people. The feeling put across was cynical:

...like in council polls it would say a number of young people were consulted, it was always the Action Group. So it was the same young people all the time but just because they could say “and young people’s views are” because they had spoken to us.

AG Member 11

However from both their interviews, and the records in particular of speeches they gave, it is clear that the Action Group’s rejection of representation was not as straightforward as that depicted by the support workers.
There is evidence of the Action Group publicly adopting the mantle of being young people's representatives in a responsive sense in several of their documents and speeches. In a leaflet produced to recruit more young people in the first two years work, they are described as:

...a consultative body to represent young people's views

*Action Group leaflet*

This was not a description produced without their knowledge by council staff but a leaflet that the Action Group are minuted as having discussed and agreed upon. This exact description of the Action Group is repeated in several newsletters. There are also examples of the Action Group introducing themselves in terms of their representational ability, for example the transcript of one AG member's speech to a conference starts:

The first thing you will probably want to know is, who are we? Well the short answer is that we are the youth of Bepton, the long answer to that question is that [an AG member] and I are part of the Bepton Youth Action Group, the council's representative body for the views of Bepton's youth.

*AG Member*

This speech does not reject representation in either of Pitkin's forms, rather the reverse, it takes on both of them. A representative body for the views of young people is responsive representation while being the "youth of Bepton" implies a descriptive representation. Starting the speech by affirming both of these concepts is a strong device for justifying the views that come next. This is one of the few public statements where I have a record of young people using the concept of being representative in a descriptive sense of Bepton's young people. The more common description they used publicly was the responsive sense, they "acted for", knew and would give the views, of other young people of Bepton. For example another speech given by a young person from the group gave the most usual way of putting this across:

...the Youth Action Group will remain one of the groups of young people who will have no problem in telling the council (or anyone else for that
matter) if their programme doesn’t meet the needs of young people living in Bepton.

*AG Member*

No public statements produced by the Action Group rejected the notion of representation. In individual interviews however there was a mix of responses to both concepts of representation. The majority, but not all, of the AG members rejected the idea that the Action Group was representative in a responsive sense. This view was linked in all cases with the explanation that this was because they were not elected and anyone who wanted could join. A very few AG members did not reject the idea of responsive representation, but only in very unsure terms:

*KF* - People have mentioned representation through the Action Group a few times, I know the youth council is meant to be represent young people in Bepton, but does the Action Group?

*AG Member 6* - Yes I suppose, unofficially, has it been set in stone? It probably has before I came.

While the idea of responsive representation was for the majority rejected by the AG members, the case was more ambiguous with descriptive representation. In their interviews several AG members actually emphasised the degree to which the group could be said to mirror the composition of the youth of Bepton, for example:

I mean you did have people from pretty much all walks of life, like you had people that went to all different types of school...we had people from private school, independent school and at least three different state schools and that might be fair enough. That is fairly representative in terms of schools.

*AG Member 7*

Only one AG member actually directly brought up and criticised the Action Group in terms of not being representative in a descriptive sense:

...it was kind of you either chanced upon it [the Action Group] or somebody knew you and also was involved with it and said, “Oh do you want to come along” but it meant that you ended up with this sort of cluster of not very representative group, quite a strange group of people probably

*AG Member 1*
No other AG member gave a similar view of the Action Group being in some sense atypical compared to young people of Bepton. By far the most common view on the issue of representation was that the Action Group’s existence was based on trying to make a structure, the Youth Council, that would be representative in descriptive and responsive terms. When I brought up the issue of representation all AG members made the link immediately in their answer with the youth council being representative, whatever their views on whether the Action Group was or not. Several of them spoke about the Youth Council as if it was going to solve the deficiencies that the Action Group had on the issue:

I hope the youth council will be taken much more seriously [than the Action Group] because it is actually going to be representative of Bepton and young people

*AG Member 7*

In the statement above AG Member 7 made a direct link between representation and influence. The more representative, in both sense of the term, the group was, the more seriously it would be taken. This is something I will discuss more below.

### 6.2.3 Strengths of young people giving young people’s views

Despite the varied interpretations of whether the Action Group was legitimately representative, in responsive or descriptive terms, giving young people’s views was a resource the AG member did use and could be seen to have certain strengths for them.

Adults from each of the different positions I interviewed, the support workers, council officers, councillors and external agency representatives, all mentioned that there was a significantly increased impact from the Action Group giving young people’s views themselves, rather than those views being reported by adult staff members. It should be noted that this opinion was put across far more frequently by council officers and councillors, only a very few support workers brought it up; perhaps because this advantage was of more use to the council officers and
councillors than it was to support workers. Council officers and councillors made far more frequent reference in general to working with, and around, council systems in their interviews than the support workers who focused much more on the details of the youth work with the Action Group.

There were two ways in particular mentioned as to why the AG members as young people giving young people's views had added impact. The first relied upon a symbolic role: that it mattered more who could be seen to say something:

...the councillors could actually see young people saying, "No we want to have it," as opposed to council officers saying young people want to have something.

*Support Worker G*

Support Worker G was talking about a visual role for the AG members as young people in terms of the importance that the views were *seen* to be given by the user group, even if staff were to give the very same views.

Another aspect of this was that it meant the AG members could argue much more forcefully because the changes actually affected them as young people. For example below the councillor makes the analogy of the pressure which can be put upon decision makers by young people, but which could not be put in the same way by members of staff:

...to create the youth council [we] needed to create a head of steam...which needed to be driven by, or fed by, people who wanted it to happen. Now politicians and even officers can want things to happen but it wasn't for them.

*Councillor 7*

AG members could, and it was commented often did, argue passionately in a way that adult staff, who had to maintain their professionalism, could not. Implicit in the councillor's quote is the idea of ownership and the advantages it gave to their arguments. It is at this point that it is useful to return to Pitkin's original distinction between the two types of "standing for" representation: symbolic and descriptive. Up to now I have talked mostly about descriptive representation. In these examples
however, the AG members’ significance seemed intimately tied to their symbolic value, purely as young people, members of the relevant user group. Their significance did not depend on whether they were representative in terms of mirroring the diversity of the young people in Bepton or whether they knew their views, but what they stood for simply by being young. In Pitkin’s concept of symbolic representation it is not the accuracy that is important but the strength of feelings in those people who view it as symbolic:

Rather than a source of information the symbol seems to be the recipient or object of feelings, expressions of feelings or actions intended for what it represents. (Pitkin 1967 p.99)

The AG member’s symbolism as young people was important therefore only because the decision makers viewed it as important. Emotion is an important part of this symbolic concept of representation, whereas it has no place in either descriptive or responsive representation.

A second quite different strength, but the one that was mentioned most often, was that AG member’s views often had more impact because it was more difficult to challenge the Action Group or interrogate them in the ways that it was acceptable with members of staff:

Well they went to the full council meeting and talked to the whole council to get there to be a youth strategy. They did that. That was powerful, it was unbelievable, we could never have got away with that. We were council officers … Because they [the councillors] couldn’t have a go at them and if they did try to question them they were really limited in what they could do…But if we had put that forward they would have picked holes in it

Council Officer 1

The issue of why councillors were limited in the extent to which they could question or “have a go” at the young people is an interesting one to explore further since it was commented on by almost all of the adult interviewees from the Advisory Panel. Only two members of the Panel said they thought adults freely said what they thought to the young people on the Panel. All other interviewees commented on the
restrictions they saw, and personally felt, in face-to-face discussion with young people on the Panel. The problem seems to have been in how to disagree with young people. Panel members agreed that a major concern was not to appear negative in their comments. There were three main cited reasons for this, the most frequent being that they did not want to put young people off or stop them from talking more. Their aim was to encourage the young people to talk and so they worried that by disagreeing outright with them might prevent them from making comments in the future. The second reason to be wary of how they challenged young people was the fear that they would take their comments personally. Members of the Panel commented that young people were not used to professional disagreements in the same way, adults were "thicker skinned". The third reason to go "gentle" on the young people was that they would not be expected to know the same level of information as a staff member would.

The comparison between how you would treat a young person compared with another adult was frequently made by members of the Advisory Panel. There was general agreement that adults could "short cut the diplomacy" with each other, be more frank, even brutal. The comments then were not so much that it was not possible to disagree with a young person, just that the way to do it was different to dealing with an adult.

If [a member of staff] said ... that was very negative I would probably say, "Well you can't make that sort of comment unless you back it up with facts," and might be quite assertive in making that comment. If a young person said something like that I would probably ask them a question about the experience, where did that come from? So you are trying to get the same result, but I think it would be a different approach.

Advisory Panel Member 5

The Panel Member above made the distinction in both his question and the manner that he would challenge a member of staff and a young person. He would not demand the same evidence to back up their views, or act as assertively, although he would still challenge the young person, rather than let their comment lie.
6.2.4 Weaknesses of young people giving young people's views

Not all of the strengths mentioned above were unambiguously so, for example while some adults on the Panel commented that it was more difficult to challenge young people, that did not necessarily translate into their comments being taken more seriously. A few of the AG members used the expression "being treated with kid gloves" to describe their experiences on the Advisory Panel. This expression they linked to descriptions of their comments being sidelined or not properly addressed:

They [adults on the Advisory Panel] never say, "I disagree." They’ll just come up with an alternative or something like that, its generally like that really or they will say, "Thanks very very much but an alternative is," it’s that kind of idea, it’s a bit like kid gloves really when they talk to you sometimes.
AG Member 3

Even if the young people’s comments did make it into policy documents there was no guarantee that they would actually have effect, as one council officer pointed out:

I know of situations where councillors have sat there in a room with young people and gone along with something and not really believed it and I work with these guys, I can tell that they weren’t comfortable but they weren’t going to challenge it. So then it will go into some document and appear as an action point in a plan and nothing will happen. It just gets ignored.
Council Officer

In this case difficulty with knowing how to challenge young people could mean that the AG members did not have the opportunity to elaborate their arguments or extend the discussion further in a way that might have ultimately changed the adults’ minds.

However the major source of weakness mentioned in relation to the Action Group giving young people’s views related to the issue of representation. There was common complaint amongst adults on the Advisory Panel that the young people often brought up individual issues that were relevant to them personally, but not to a wider group of young people. Panel members complained about having to deal with
specific points from the young people when they, the Panel members, knew these issues were not important to other young people. In giving this view, Panel members always qualified how they knew the issues were not common to other young people in Bepton, for example:

...you have three young people all saying that cost is the issue but then all the surveys you know say it isn't, cost is at the end of the list, then you think, “Here we go again,” which is frustrating.
Advisory Panel Member 5

This member of the Advisory Panel showed that he had access to other sources of young people’s opinions in Bepton, even that he knew more about what young people thought on this issue. This very common sentiment that the young people’s views sometimes related only to themselves, can be seen in light of Panel member’s views on representation. While Advisory Panel members were not unanimous on the issue, the majority view was that the young people on the Panel should be trying to be representatives in the responsive sense of the term. Panel members talked about the responsibilities of the young people to consult with their peers and report back to them, several with the caveat that they thought this might be difficult and they hoped they were supported in doing so. Only two out of seven Panel members said they thought the young people on the Panel were there to be individual experts and had no duty to consult with other young people.

The extent to which the Action Group could represent, in any sense of the word, young people seems to have been an ongoing focus of criticism for them. In some cases this related to the Action Group’s own use of the term representation and their professed ability to give young people’s views. For example one member of the Advisory Panel described:

One young person whose strategy was if she didn’t like things she would say that young people that she had spoken to didn’t like them. And you just knew fine that she had never spoken to anybody about it (laughs)
Advisory Panel Member 3

The feeling of the quote is cynicism that AG members could add more weight to what was essentially their own opinion by holding it up as the opinions of other
young people. This panel member could not have known that the young person had
not in fact spoken to other young people, so his quote tells us more about how he saw
AG members using their position and the issue of representation to their advantage.

The Action Group’s privileged status to give young people’s views was not only
questioned privately in interviews, but seems to have also been frequently questioned
publicly. Staff and support workers reported in their interviews that they had
received ongoing criticism that the Action Group was not representative in a
descriptive sense. One example is interesting to look at in particular because of the
support worker’s response:

    ...at a meeting that was talking about socially excluded people and how
the Action Group wasn't representative and wasn't this and I was like hold
on a minute and just battered through all this stuff that the Action Group
had experience of. And I was like don't even go there, you don't know
the lives of these young people...
    Support Worker

This example demonstrates several things. Firstly that support workers, as well as
young people, had nuanced versions of representation that they might have deployed
at different times. This support worker emphatically denied the group could be
representative in the interview with me when talking about representation in the
abstract and described her work with the Action Group in agreeing that they were not
a representative group. However this example shows she did not always use the same
interpretation of representation in all situations. When the group was being
undermined by other adults she loyally leapt to its defence and described the group
as representative in descriptive terms: that they mirrored the same range of issues in
the lives of young people in general. Interestingly, the issues the support worker
drew upon to back up her argument were all personal issues that she knew because of
the one-to-one support work she had been doing with the AG members. The Action
Group themselves might not have known the same personal issues about each other.
They would not therefore have had access to the same argument in their own
defence. In this extract the support worker was also raising an interesting question of
the nature of descriptive representation: is it about being representative of internal or
external issues? Should it be about aiming to have a range of visibly diverse young people mirroring the diversity of young people in Bepton with an emphasis on ethnicity, gender and ability/disability or are other experiences just as important for example dealing with parental divorce, bulimia, bullying etc? In the support worker’s eyes, council staff and Advisory Panel members were too concerned with the diversity they could see or that could be proved to them rather than the issues going on in the AG members’ lives. One anecdote demonstrating this emphasis on visual diversity was a case where the Action Group were asked to decide on two of them to attend an award ceremony. The Action Group voted on two people whose names were given to council officers. Later on the message came back to the support worker that another name should be put forward because one of the AG members concerned came from a private school. This was one anecdote and not something that was repeated; however it does show the importance attached to looking like the right young people. Coming from a private school in this case was more important than whatever life experiences the young person might have been able to bring.

6.3 Showing they could be taken seriously

The basic point about the insider/outsider distinction is that an interest group has to be able to deploy certain political skills before it can be accepted as an insider group. It has to show civil servants that it can, and is prepared, to talk their language; that it knows how to present a case, and how to bargain and accept the outcome of the bargaining processes. (Grant 1990 p.29)

Returning to the insider interest group literature, an important part of the original insider/outsider distinction made by Grant was that insider groups had to pay a price for their insider status: they had to play by the rules of the game. It is interesting to look at the ways that this applied to the Action Group and how they demonstrated their worth as an insider group that could deploy certain political skills. The AG members did not talk in these terms, but a very dominant theme in their interviews was how they showed various adults in the council they could be taken seriously. This came across in a number of ways. They talked about proving they could “hold their own”, that they knew how to behave. The ways the AG members spoke about building confidence in their abilities often centre round the use of performance
metaphors, coming back time and again to showing adults what they could do, acting in the right way. For example, one AG member spoke about an Action Group meeting that was attended by one of the Councillors:

I think he was very impressed with it... but we had to really pick our words carefully, we had to act like politicians for certain aspects of it.

AG Member

The AG members were very conscious of controlling the impression they put across to adults. Erving Goffman was one of the first authors to write on the concept of impression management in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman used what he called “dramaturgy” or theatrical concepts to explain the social world. Much of his work on the presentation of the self was based on the concept that people are actors playing different parts in their everyday lives. He detailed the specific strategies that social actors use to present themselves in what they see as a favourable light and discussed ways that people keep, or fail to keep, up the façade that they feel is expected.

Although Grant, and others writing on interest groups, have not applied Goffman’s theories of impression management within their writings, there are strong conceptual links. The idea of the “rules of the game” is commonplace in the interest group literature, taken to mean as it does in Grant’s quote above, that there are certain ways that are acceptable to behave within political processes and others which are not. Playing by the rules of the game shows an appreciation of what these ways to behave are. Showing decision makers that the insider group can talk their language, know where they are coming from and bargain in acceptable ways could all equally be described, using Goffman’s terms, as aspects of impression management. Applying Goffman’s theories of performance and impression management can further the concept of playing by the rules of the game.

In relation to the Action Group, nowhere was the performance aspect more obvious than at the Advisory Panel which was the main forum for face to face meetings between young people and adult decision makers. Various features of the conduct of
young people at the Advisory Panel can be seen in terms of Goffman’s descriptions of front region and back regions (Goffman 1959). All of the AG members who attended the Advisory Panel meetings described them as very formal. Following this description, they also very commonly went on to compare Advisory Panel with Action Group meetings, making the contrast that Action Group meetings were more relaxed, less stuffy and not intimidating, commenting typically:

...[in Action Group meetings] I feel like I can relax more and be myself more.

*AG Member 8*

This AG member implied that she felt less herself at Advisory Panel meetings, more conscious of how she behaved than she was in Action Group meetings. The clear distinction made between Action Group and Advisory Panel meetings was a contrast that was brought up by AG members in their interviews and was not one I ever included a question on. The formal/informal divide calls to mind Goffman’s descriptions of front regions where performers are more acutely aware of the performance they are giving and back regions in which

...the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines...

*(Goffman 1959 p.115)*

Goffman described a characteristic function of back regions as being where teams prepare themselves and run through their performance (1959 p.114). While there were no preparatory meetings for the Action Group, this was a particular feature of Advisory Panels. Some time before the Advisory Panel meeting the AG members would meet up with support workers to go through the papers and discuss the issues that would come up. Action Group and pre-Advisory Panel meetings seem to have been a space where the AG members could discuss aspects of their performance, how meetings were going, what were the problems or generally gossip about things that happened in Advisory Panel meetings. There are several instances in my observation notes where AG members reflected on Advisory Panel meetings and also where they affirmed their status as good performers to themselves and each other by describing situations where they won an argument or made a point that no one else
had thought of. This was done both by the AG member involved and other AG members reminding each other of their performance. In the example below in one Action Group meeting, a member talked about how Action Group members said what they thought in Advisory Panel meetings and made points the adults could not argue against. Another AG member then backed this up with the example of a survey for young people in Bepton that was going to be put up on the council’s website:

**AG Member 6** - Like at the last Advisory Panel meeting where [AG member] asked about what they did for young people that weren’t into IT and you had to ask it twice and they didn’t really answer.

**AG Member 7** - But everyone there knew what was going on and got the point.

Here AG Member 6 was reminding the group of a good point made by one of the AG members at a previous Advisory Panel meeting. The member had asked a question about accessibility of the survey and whether it was enough to have it on the internet. AG Member 6 emphasized to the group that not only did the other member make a salient point but then was assertive enough to repeat himself when he was ignored. AG Member 7 then joined in to affirm the view that the AG member at the Advisory Panel meeting had put forward a good view, the rest of the Panel knew his point was good even if it was ignored by those Panel members who were trying to promote their survey.

Goffman argued that although front and back regions are often physically separated, any situation could be made into a back region and they can be separated merely by timing (1959 p.127). The Advisory Panel meetings provide examples of this happening as it was accepted that there should be “time out” that any young person\(^{16}\) could call during the meeting. Time outs are described in the minutes as being for the young people to take a break and talk to their support worker and other young people, ask questions and clarify what was going on. The description given by Goffman seems to match such situations perfectly:

\(^{16}\) The Action Group were one of three groups of young people that were given seats on the Advisory Panel, these rules for the meetings applied to all the young people there, not only the Action Group members.
A performer out in front can receive backstage assistance while the performance is in progress and can interrupt his performance momentarily for brief periods of relaxation...

(1959 p.115)

These time outs were strictly for the young people and support workers, out of bounds to all other members of the Advisory Panel. Other instances, both in the refreshments before and after the meetings, could also serve as back regions to discuss, prepare and reflect on performances to which other adults were barred. I found this out myself as my notes record:

One of the support workers is talking to a few young people by the sandwich table, I go over to chat to them and one young person turns round to block me joining the group saying, “This is a young person’s meeting.” I apologise.

*Observation notes from Advisory Panel meeting*

In this case the young people were not from the Action Group, they were from another NGO and did not know me so well. I was unknowingly attempting to transgress the division between front and back regions that had been set up prior to the Advisory Panel meeting. This boundary was being strictly policed by the young person in the group.

While having established that the young people’s conduct at Advisory Panel meetings can be seen in terms of a performance, it is interesting to move on to examine exactly what kind of performance was being given. Goffman argued that performers will accentuate certain activities while underplaying others to present an idealised version of themselves (1959 p.56). What attributes did the AG members feel were strategic to emphasise and in what ways were their performances moulded in response to different adults?

Looking at the performances on the Action Panel is not to suggest that outside of the Panel, or in Action Group meetings the AG members, or any of the actors, were somehow more authentic to themselves. Indeed as chapter four on the role of the support workers has elaborated, there were very particular roles and performances
being carried out. Rather I wish to look in detail at the particular ways the AG members felt it necessary and were encouraged to put themselves across in the Panel meetings in order to gain respect and influence.

6.3.1 Knowing how things work

A recurring theme coming from the interviews with adult members of the Advisory Panel was that young people were generally unrealistic and did not know how things worked or how long they would take. They frequently mentioned the disparity between young people’s suggestions and what could be achieved in practice. A common comment was that the young people might have nice ideas but would not have realised that their suggestion would either take such a long time to achieve or be ultimately impossible because of costs or feasibility. The role the adults portrayed themselves in was one of being the more grounded and realistic partners, those who knew the system and how things worked. They also talked about the young people becoming less naïve and unrealistic over time:

...they [the young people] would say, “Wouldn’t it be great if we could just do such and such in the schools,” and you could say, “Yes but the teaching unions would oppose that, it would be very difficult for us to get it through, we would like to do it and if you suggest it we can try but it might take three or four years you know,” and they began to get an idea where that comes from.

_Councillor 4_

This was typical of the illustration given to me by various adults on the committee as to how the young people came to understand why things could not just happen as easily as they wanted. In this excerpt the councillor described his role in sympathetic terms: not simply rejecting the young person’s idea out of hand but agreeing in principle but then taking the time to explain why it was not feasible in practice. The impression given by the councillor, and by other adults on the Advisory Panel, was of young people coming to understand the constraints better through the explanations of the adults who, as one Panel member put it, had a “better understanding of the machinery and systems”.

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However this conception that young people do not know how things work is one that AG members seemed to work actively to reject. Instead they were keen to portray a picture of themselves as knowledgeable partners from the start of their involvement in the Panel. My observational notes of Advisory Panel meetings provide examples of AG members and other young people on the Panel making explicit reference to council procedures and structures and such examples are also documented in Advisory Panel minutes from its inception. One such instance in the minutes records an AG member asking that the Action Group should be allowed to participate in a specific internal council cross party body on youth issues. The minutes record that there would be difficulties with this but they could attend in the first instance as observers. That a member of the Action Group raised the issue themselves, rather than responding to a request for them to join the group, showed them displaying their awareness of the structures and making reference to them in the Advisory Panel. In another example a presentation made by the Action Group to the Advisory Panel on their plans for the Youth Council included specific references to the links it would have with other decision making groups in Bepton, naming five relevant bodies it could feed into. By naming the bodies, the AG members were not only making their plans for the Youth Council sound practical but they were also proving that they were tuned into current policy developments in Bepton, they knew what was going on.

Another example of young people being keen to show their knowledge was described to me by a councillor in his interview. When discussing funding decisions the Advisory Panel would often split into smaller groups to make recommendations and then come back together to discuss as a big group:

...the bigger group would go, “Don’t agree with that,” [the decision the smaller group had made] and they would have to retell the story. But then you found sometimes that it was the young folk who were then saying, “Well actually the reason we have done this is because you need to know about this bit of information as well.”

Councillor 7

In this example someone had objected to a decision that was made during the smaller group work and a young person stepped in to explain why that decision had been
reached and the reasoning behind it. Here the role of having to explain why things were decided in one way or another was being actively being taken on by the young person, rather than referred to adults. The councillor went on to talk about the young people “jumping in” with such information, that they were especially keen to show off their knowledge and understanding of processes when they could.

Young people’s desire to be seen as knowing what was going on and on top of discussions can also be seen in their discomfort when this impression was disturbed. Several adult members of the Advisory Panel noted instances where this happened. They described situations occurring in the Panel meetings where adult members would occasionally have rapid discussion on a technical point of clarification:

...you get a kind of quick fire kind of boom, boom, boom between the youth services manager and the person [who asked a question], saying, “Oh no that went up to the PMQ\textsuperscript{17} early last Tuesday and they sorted that out and it is totally agreed and it is part of the health Jip you know.”

\textit{Advisory Panel Member 3}

The discussion detailed above was not for general debate in the group and signalled as such by its rapidity, “boom, boom, boom” and being peppered with jargon. The adults exchanged information in very technical terms, without concern for everyone following, as it was meant to be between them only. This kind of coded back and forth between adults did not pass the young people by though and Panel members noted young people being aware of these discussions. Rather than simply accepting that the adults should be able to talk in terms they did not understand and sitting back passively, they came across as frustrated and uncomfortable in these situations, so much so that the other adult Panel members noted and commented on it. Such exchanges were a disruption of the impression young people were trying to foster that they were up to date with what was going on and how things were talked about.

\textbf{6.3.2 Knowing how to behave}

Evidence from interviews and observations suggest that there were quite definite appropriate and inappropriate ways to behave and talk at Panel meetings. AG

\textsuperscript{17}In this quote PMQ is being used as an example of council jargon.
members and the other young people on the panel could be seen to be keen to show both their appreciation and ability to perform in acceptable ways.

Adult members seemed particularly preoccupied with the importance of responding to previous points, rather than making unrelated comments. They frequently commented in their interviews that to begin with they felt young people had difficulty sticking to the point of discussions and would instead express ideas on "everything and anything". This was something that they felt the young people improved with over time and with more involvement the young people would eventually start to listen and actually respond. This seems to have been something AG members and other young people on the Panel picked up on and tried to emulate. Notes from my observation of meetings provide examples of Action Group members making explicit references to ways in which their points link into the discussion, frequently prefacing comments with "this links to" or "referring to the point you made". I do not have any such examples of linking speech in this way from the Action Group meetings, where although comments did often follow after each other, they did not have an explicit bit of signaller speech attached to them. The AG members were not trying as hard in the Action Group meetings to signal "look, I am making a relevant point". My notes also detail examples of Action Group members being praised when they made succinct brief comments. In one example where a young person came to her turn to speak and instead said her point had already been made and she had no more to add, the chair of the Advisory Panel thanked her and announced to the whole group, adults and young people, that that was a lesson for others.

Another expectation in the Panel meetings seems to have been that members should not display too much emotion in the way they spoke. Adult Panel members talked about the difference between being assertive and being aggressive, noting that when young people started on the Panel they often spoke in a forceful, confrontational way. The impression given by their comments was that young people were complaining about issues in a way that was actually directed at the adult members:
One of the first meetings the chair was pulling his hair out at the end because all she [a young person] did was confront, confront, confront: "I want an explanation for this, or that" ...Now she has learnt to confront in a way recognising that there is a history.

Advisory Panel Member 5

This member of the Advisory Panel was talking not only about what the young person said, but also the way that she said it and how she learnt to challenge in what he saw as acceptable in both aspects. Other adults talked about young people learning how to put things across in a way that would make a difference and directly contrasted this with what they saw as young people's initial inclination just to have a "gripe" about something. Notes from my observations of Panel meetings provide some idea of the ways in which this kind of message about appropriate behaviour was put across to the young people involved. For example in one meeting a young person from another NGO remarked that she was shocked that a particular project has not been mentioned in the report, a little later she went on to say:

Young person – The project doesn’t get mentioned at all, we should say that we are outraged at that

Chair - It was shocked before now it is outraged! (Laughter)

Through his gentle joking the chair was conveying to the young person that her use of language was something to be commented on. If it were the sort of phrasing usually used in the Panel then he would not have cause to mention it. It is interesting to note that the young person's use of the word "outraged" is perhaps not one that she might have chosen in everyday language with her friends.

There are many examples in my observational notes of AG members and other young people using more formal language in Advisory Panel meetings than they did in the Action Group. For example in one meeting a young person argued that:

...this might look simple but it is actually quite complex. As well as coming to these meetings we have to take into consideration the other ones we go to. Something as simple as transport can be overlooked.

Observation notes from Advisory Panel meetings
This argument is unlikely to have been heard in an Action Group meeting, where my observation notes detail simple, direct and conversational comments. The point above could have been made simply as: “We go to lots of other meetings and costs can all add up”. Instead the young person put the point across in more formal, long winded way. The use of language was very subtle and young people did not always hit it on the mark in their efforts to impress, as was noticed and commented on by some Panel members. Several of the adult members pointed out that the young people spoke very differently on the Panel to the way they would with their friends. But their use of language was not always seamless. One Panel member gave the example:

He [a young person] started using language like, “I concur with that” what is that about you know? But actually that was his way of trying to say “I am understanding this more, I have the confidence to use language that I never used before.” Which was brilliant, it was also quite hilarious because we would never use “concur”.  

Councillor 7

The young person’s intention was certainly not that his use of the word “concur” should be picked up on, far less that it should be a cause for hilarity. In his effort to be taken seriously, this young person was using words he was not used to with the effect of a misjudged phrase that was noticeable to the councillor.

**Acting assertively**

Not all aspects of the way the Action Group spoke and behaved at Panel meetings can be interpreted as a response to the adults on the Panel. Indeed some aspects seem to have been as much about performing for each other as for the adults. One such feature was of the Action Group being confident and assertive in Panel meetings. The Action Group talked about this frequently in their interviews, using such descriptions of the group as being “loudmouths” and “strong minded”. Although individual AG members admitted they found Advisory Panel meetings formal, intimidating and difficult to speak at, this was only ever mentioned as a personal comment, specific to them. Not one young person talked about other members of the group being afraid to speak up. Instead the overwhelming picture
given was that AG members were confident and not afraid to challenge and argue back. There was a sense of pride in the way they talked about the Action Group being assertive, taking the more difficult road rather than just accepting what the adults said:

...we are not going to take any crap and smile and nod and say that everything is great... there are a lot of people in the Action Group who are going to say, “Well we don’t actually agree with that, so come up with a better solution,” whereas you might find other young people like say, “Ah well this is boring, just agree.”

AG Member 8

The image portrayed in their interviews was of young people who were not afraid of adults, who were not there just to do what the adults said, but to take them on and challenge them. In the above comment, the contrast between the Action Group and other young people highlights the path the Action Group could have taken but chose not to. AG Member 8 was not only talking about hypothetical young people but could be interpreted as making a direct comment on the actual other group of young people that sat on the Panel and were not portrayed as assertive by the Action Group. The attitude amongst the Action Group was that this speaking up, being confident, was what being on the Panel was all about. If you did not do that then you should not be there. One AG member put this feeling across:

I’m the quiet one, I pass a note and go, “Say that,” and that’s fine. It is quite daunting saying stuff but that’s what you are there for, so if you want to sit there and say nothing and be a useless member then that is fine.

AG Member 11

Saying nothing was not fine, her tone of speech was sarcastic at this point and she reinforced the statement by linking “saying nothing” with being a useless member. This AG member justified her disinclination to speak with the fact that she still put an opinion across by passing a note. But her view remained that AG members were there to speak up, the Action Group’s role was to give its opinions. This attitude came across again in the focus group discussion where the AG members started to criticise the way the Advisory Panel worked now that the Action Group had left,
bemoaning that the young people who had taken over were not as assertive, they did not “stand up for what they are thinking” in the way the Action Group used to. This they judged from a meeting where the two groups had been present and through comments they said they “had heard”. It was not clear how or from whom they might have heard this and perhaps tells us more about the importance of promoting the image of the Action Group as assertive, compared to other young people, than what was really happening now they had left.

Frequent contrasts were made by Action Group members between how they behaved, and knew how to behave, and what could be expected from other young people. A few AG members talked about how their friends could not understand why they would want to go and sit in a meeting for two hours. Several made the comment that they personally were willing to speak up at intimidating meetings but there was “no way” most other young people could be expected to. As well as making the distinction between Action Group members and other ordinary young people, they also often compared themselves to other young people that had been involved with the council: the young people from the NGOs and young people from the Youth Council. In both cases these comparisons were made to stress how much better the Action Group behaved or how much more they knew. For example, in the focus group discussion one AG member told the tale:

...there were two people who were almost at their first meeting and they got the giggles really really badly and it had to be stopped because they were just laughing and interrupting the chair, and we would never interrupt the chair.

AG Member 2

I too attended this particular meeting and while my notes do record two of the young people giggling, I also noted how this seemed to be studiously ignored by the rest of the Panel and eventually died down. AG Member 2 dramatized the incident in his retelling of the story such that the giggles were so bad the meeting had to be stopped. He was accentuating the difference between the way those two young people were behaving and the way the Action Group knew how to behave. Through their comparisons the Action Group stressed that they were not like other young people.
They would perform well when the same could not be expected from others. This sense of the Action Group’s distinction between themselves and other young people was noted by Panel members too:

I got a real sense that they were here to achieve results: “Don’t fob us off with all the usual stuff …don’t roll out the DJ workshops and the graffiti art cans, we are not interested, we are here to be on a committee, we are here to make a contribution, this is our line, this is what we want and we are not satisfied with this.”

Advisory Panel Member 3

The DJ workshops and graffiti art signify usual ways of engaging with young people, perhaps based on dominant cultural narratives of young people with short attention spans who need things to be fun. Advisory Panel Member 3 got the sense from the Action Group that they saw themselves as different. They did not want to be thought of as just another group of young people to entertain but young people who want to be taken seriously; being taken seriously in the way that adults take each other seriously by sitting on committees and acting professionally.

So it can be seen that some ways to behave were encouraged by adults in the Advisory Panel, whilst others came more from the AG members’ perceptions of what they should be doing. Adults in the Advisory Panel positively encouraged sticking to the point, making reasonable comments with controlled emotions; they discouraged complaining and aggressive comments. The AG members themselves seem to have been particularly keen, without noticeable adult reinforcement, to show that they could use formal language, that they were an assertive and confident group of young people and that they knew how to behave when other young people might not. For most of the time these different aspects of how to behave worked together, but occasionally they did not. One example seems to demonstrate the conflict that could occur between adult requirements for young people and the way the AG members themselves thought they should act. This seems to have occurred at an Advisory Panel meeting where several members of the Action Group attended who had not done so before and started asking detailed questions about the process of how meetings worked. These questions were thought inappropriate by the adults: not only did several of them bring this up in my interviews, commenting that the questions
were too detailed, about things that had been previous decided or discussed and they should know about; but the support worker also received feedback that she had not adequately prepared the AG members for the meeting. Such upset would not have occurred if the AG members had sat back quietly and let the meeting wash over them. However instead it seems there was a direct collision between AG members’ desire to act confidently and assertively at meetings, to keep up the impression of a confident Action Group and the adult requirement that young people on the Panel know how things worked and question and comment appropriately, on the right things at the right time.

6.3.3 A good performance?

There seems to have been quite different opinions amongst the various adults on whether the performances were beneficial to the Action Group in achieving recognition for the group and its goal of the youth council. In general the adults on the Panel praised the work of the Action Group and the way they came across in meetings. However, support workers, while seeing the advantages such performances could gain, were more critical of the ultimate effects on the AG members as young people.

The general view of all members of the Advisory Panel was that the AG members performed very well. Frequent comments were made that they were very good, excellent, impressive, very bright and switched on. A few adults also specifically commented that the AG members knew what they were talking about. Another theme from adult descriptions was that the AG members had a purpose, that of establishing the youth council, and were very focused in relation to this.

The support workers were quite adamant that the AG members behaved very differently in Advisory Panel meetings than out of them. They were also in agreement that this was in direct response to the pressures put upon them by the adult members of the Panel. In relation to knowing how things worked, they commented that the AG members would be expected to understand complicated concepts and jargon, for example to understand and be well versed in talking about issues such as
social inclusion. In relation to behaving correctly, the support workers commented that the AG members were expected to always have an opinion on everything, to act as if they were experts on “everything and all young people” and to able to give those opinions succinctly and articulately. The support workers talked about how they could see the AG members responding to these expectations:

They would just be like "blah blah" and sometimes when they didn't have a clue but they would try and pretend that they did and I would just say, "Oh I don't really know," but they were expected to come up with this really really bright answer and show how clever and there were some of them that completely thrived on speaking in public.

Support Worker B

In the excerpt above, the support worker did not simply give a negative picture of the burden of expectation on AG members. They do not come across as over-stressed by the need to come up with a “bright” answer, but instead actually “thrive” on it: jumping in with opinions on issues the support worker thought they did not know about. While the support worker herself was critical of the pressure on the young people to act in these ways, she acknowledged that some of the Action Group did enjoy giving the required performance, showing they could do it.

There was an interesting division between support workers in their views on the Action Group’s efforts to demonstrate they knew the system, the right language and ways to behave. Some support workers spoke about the advantages this gave the Action Group. They talked about the AG members learning to be “politically literate” over time and how this helped them be taken seriously. Support workers gave examples of conferences and events where AG members went along and by using the “right” language people really “sat up” and started to listen to them. As one support worker put it, learning how to do this was part of the tools of becoming effective advocates. It was accepting the reality of how to be taken seriously:

...if politicians are talking to young people in the language of young people they are not taking them seriously. They are looking down at them. If they are talking to them in the way that they talk to their neighbour, in political speak, they are taking them seriously and that is a language unfortunately that you have to deal with politicians.

Support Worker C
According to this support worker, learning how to act and behave in the way the politicians want is just the way things are. However other support workers voiced disapproval of the ways AG members learnt to act outside of Action Group meetings. Some support workers and staff spoke about AG members acting pompously and becoming full of themselves in Advisory Panel meetings. To the extent that several support workers questioned the value of their involvement:

What are we doing to young folk here, we are turning them into young suits, mini politicians. Is this healthy, is this desirable?

Support Worker F

This support worker worried that AG members were being too adult like in their quest to give the performance desired by the adults they interacted with, the implication being that by doing this they were losing some essence of youth. This support worker did not phrase it “putting them into young suits” as if they could remain young people within a more polished exterior, but his phrase was “turning them into young suits” describing the change as a real transformation. Several, but not all support workers, phrased very similar rhetorical questions during their interviews, as did two members of the Advisory Panel. Many members of the Advisory Panel put across a contrasting but related view that that they thought it likely the AG members would go on to be something in public or political life. But this is a very different take to that of questioning: “What are we doing to young people?” Both views comment on the high political competencies of the young people. However, instead of worrying that their learnt political skills are at odds with being a young person, these adult members of the Panel saw the same abilities as useful to them and their future careers.

6.4 Conclusions

In this chapter I have used the concept of the Action Group as an interest group to further understanding of the ways it tried to establish itself within the council. The interest group literature has provided a framework within which I have drawn on Pitkin to discuss the strengths of the Action Group’s resource of giving “young
people's views" and Goffman to elaborate on playing by the rules of the game in terms of impression management.

Thinking about the Action Group in terms of the literature on interest groups also helps to clarify the link between two very commonly made criticisms, not only in the Action Group project, but of young people in ongoing youth participation initiatives. These are that the young people are not representative, in terms of mirroring the diversity of young people in communities and that by being involved they become more like adults/politicians than young people. Striving for diversity in representation has become a strong discourse in children and youth participation literature (for example Lansdown 2001, McNeish and Newman 2002, Mathews et al. 1999, Hill et al. 2004). The recent review of the UK Youth Parliament provides examples of the youth parliament facing criticism for its composition:

Those MYPs [members of the youth parliament] at the moment are very bright and articulate and normal young people are not like that. At the moment there are no socially excluded young people involved in the UKYP. So it needs to address the issue of representativeness.

*Government Department Lead* (Department for Education and Skills 2004 p.38)

And for MYPs behaving too much like professional adults:

MYPs themselves may unwittingly be erecting barriers to inclusion. For example, one respondent said of an MYP who met with young homeless people that he used political jargon and wore a suit.

(Department for Education and Skills 2004 p.38)

The interest group literature can help illuminate the link between these two criticisms and in particular to understand the tension that exists between them. The Action Group may have fitted several of the features of an insider group in terms of having regular access to discussion and developments on youth policy issues; however it was in a particularly weak position in a number of ways. Firstly it was entirely tied to, and ultimately dependent, on the very group it sought to influence. It was the council that paid for the support worker, provided a room for the group to meet, gave them a budget, consulted them on youth issues and gave them seats on the Advisory
Panel. In this way the Action Group fits Grant's description of a prisoner insider group:

...who find it particularly difficult to break away from an insider relationship with government, either because they are dependent on government for assistance of various kinds (e.g. secondment of staff or office accommodation) or because they represent parts of the public sector...

(Grant 1989 p.16)

Grant does not elaborate on the implications of being a prisoner group, however other empirical researchers have looked at the trade-offs for these groups in more detail. Craig and colleagues (2004) carried out research with voluntary and community organisations that were involved in government partnerships. They looked specifically at the dilemmas that such organisations faced in striving to maintain their autonomy while increasingly operating as insiders and, in some cases, becoming prisoner groups. They detailed a number of restrictions that organisations felt as insider groups: these included having to maintain good relationships at all times as well as being very restricted in the use of certain high profile advocacy strategies, such as going public on policy disagreements or campaigning. Having to keep good relationships, and furthermore to actually please the council in order to remain in existence was something that was commented upon in various ways by individuals from the Advisory Panel, the support workers and AG members. The AG members who mentioned it did so in terms of the council being able to bring in and use other young people if the Action Group became too troublesome or difficult. This comment was made especially relating to the conflict around the date of the launch and some AG members' fears the Action Group might simply be replaced by other young people. One of the support workers illustrated this relationship of advocacy and yet dependency:

...if we [the council] had pulled out of it, it wouldn't have happened, you know. They might have met in [an AG member's] house a few times but that would have been it, it would have collapsed very very quickly. So basically we supplied the foundation, we supplied the parameters, we supplied the castle but we could also take the castle away from them. You
know if they are chucking bricks, to use an analogy, and one of the bricks was a bit bigger than we would like them to be, then just take it all away.

Support Worker C

While the council might have been under certain pressure to consult with a group of young people, as mentioned in the adult stories in the last chapter, it did not have to be that particular group of individuals. Grant and others have described how insider groups have to act in reassuring ways and play by the rules of the game to be taken seriously by officials and decision makers. The Advisory Panel meetings provide numerous examples of the ways in which the Action Group can be seen to have managed their behaviour in order to demonstrate that they could be taken seriously and keep up their side of the relationship. Proving they could act appropriately was not carried out in isolation but through interaction with the expectations, rewards and sanctions of different groups of adults. In their interviews the AG members emphasised in particular how they were able to act appropriately, sit through boring meetings, make the right comments while other young people could not be relied upon to do so. This could also be interpreted to some extent as them demonstrating their special worth and unique value as a group that could not simply be replaced by other young people.

Not only was the Action Group in a weak position in terms of being a prisoner insider group but also in terms of traditional resources it possessed and could deploy. It could organise and articulate demands, but it lacked the more significant resources of size of membership, control over goods or labour, economic significance or implementation power. The resource that the Action Group did have to offer was knowledge of “young people's views”. This ambiguous term could mean simply the views of the dozen or so AG members or the views of young people in Bepton. There seems to have been a very great mix of views on the issue of whether the Action Group was representative in either responsive or descriptive terms. The majority of Advisory Panel members thought the Action Group should be representative in terms of being responsive to other young people in Bepton. Support workers were united in their interviews that the Action Group could be neither descriptively nor responsively representational. The AG members themselves were more hesitant on the issue, for the most part denying that they were representative in a responsive sense but arguing
that they were representative in a descriptive sense of the diversity of young people in Bepton. At the final instance all AG members brought up the Youth Council as a way of resolving the issue. Public documents and speeches which were decided upon by both support workers and AG members however make claims for the Action Group being both descriptively and responsively representative. Looking at the representation of young people’s views as a resource for the Action Group as a prisoner interest group can help understand such high levels of ambiguity and contradiction on the issue amongst participants. Denying either form of representation would have severely weakened one of the Action Group’s scarce and potentially strongest resource to offer the council.

Combining this insight with the previous one, on the importance of acting in the right ways, it can be seen that AG members were acting under two opposing pressures. On the one hand in order to demonstrate how they could be taken seriously and act appropriately in meetings they were keen to stress how different they were from other young people, they could not easily be replaced. Yet on the other, to exploit their resource in being able to give young people’s views, they were trying to show just how similar they were. They were criticised for both claiming to be like other young people and also for trying to act differently from them. These two sets of criticisms came from very different sources, and can be seen to reflect the different sets of priorities of the adults that made them. It can be seen that the support workers were less concerned that the Action Group did not stand for, or act for, young people and more worried about them not being “true” young people, being made into mini adults. Youth department officers and councillors, however, never mentioned this worry about them being too adult-like and, instead, focused their criticism on whether the young people could be said to be representative. The different groups could be said to be concentrating on their own priorities: the council officers and councillors with the usefulness of the Action Group as an advocacy group and the support worker with the self development of the young people.

The Action Group was a particular case of an interest group in two other important ways. Firstly it is important to recognise that the Action Group were accorded a
number of privileges as an insider group that other interest groups would have had to earn: they were given seats on the policy making body, access to councillors, resources and support. This also sets them apart from other more traditional interest group trajectories (Whiteley and Winyard 1989, Binderkrantz 2005). However access does not necessarily mean influence, as Maloney et al. (1994) have argued. Opening up arenas to the Action Group did not guarantee that their views had impact, as was commented upon during the interviews. Secondly other interest groups would not receive the same criticisms for playing by the rules of the game in terms of acting like adults. Craig and colleagues (2004) documented how insider groups were keen not to be seen to be getting too cozy with policy makers and losing their critical edge. However, this is not the same as being criticised for acting too professionally or adult like; this seems to be a criticism that could only be made of interest groups of young people that have a particular value in “being young”.

Returning finally to the issue of representation, in her original work Pitkin dismissed the value of both descriptive and symbolic “standing for” representation and argued instead for increased attention to responsive “acting for” representation. The members of the Advisory Panel came closest to this point of view with their emphasis on how Action Group members should try to canvass the views of other young people in Bepton. However other actors, both older and younger, in the project seemed as concerned with descriptive “standing for” as with responsive “acting for” representation. Moreover this “standing for” representation seems to have been very much linked to visually being seen to mirror the composition of young people in Bepton. One of the support workers complained that adults who questioned the descriptive representativeness of the Action Group did so unfairly because they did not know the lives of those young people; they only looked at how they came across. Such an emphasis on visual representation suggests a concern with legitimisation, on proving that the right young people were being consulted. It also indicates that symbolic representation, skimmed over by Pitkin, seems to have had an important place in the project. We can see this from the importance attached to visual representation of young people and to them giving young people’s views. Tokenism is a popular word in relation to youth participation projects as I discussed in my
literature review. The literature on young people’s projects unanimously stresses that tokenism is to be avoided (Hart 1992). Tokenism has been described as when individuals are seen as symbols of their particular category rather than as individuals (Kanter 1977); it can be seen therefore as a description of symbolic representation. In harmony with the youth participation literature, the actual word tokenism was always bought up in interviews in terms of the project trying not to be tokenistic and moving beyond tokenism. However if we can move beyond the mere word “tokenism” it can be seen that there are several ways in which the AG members were able to benefit from their symbolic representation as young people. Council officers and councillors commented that young people’s views were seen as having more weight attached to them simply because they were given by young people rather than staff; not because the Action Group had canvassed other young people or knew their views, but because they could be seen to be saying it as young people themselves. Tokenism also played a part in the progression over time of the Action Group. The previous chapter documented how all actors were agreed that the Action Group started off being very inconsequential, only being consulted from time to time, however by the end of their involvement they were given space to speak at full council meetings, places on the council Advisory Panel and some degree of responsibility for setting up the Youth Council. From small tokenistic beginnings came real outcomes for the Action Group. The Action Group experience suggests that participation literature has been too quick to dismiss tokenism entirely and it can have some benefits, notably through what it leads to and the advantages young people can exploit through playing on their symbolic representation.
Chapter Seven
Conclusions

7.1 Returning to my research aims and questions

I started this research with a number of intentions. The most basic of these was to forward understanding of ongoing youth participation in public decision making. I wanted to add to the small body of literature that went beyond description and I wanted to do this through focusing on a single case study and relating its detail to a range of theories. I drew upon an eclectic range of theories to demonstrate the potential that exists for using different sociological theories to better understand the phenomenon of youth participation in public decision making.

My initial research questions were just that, a starting point. I always intended to refine them further through the course of the research. They were designed to be broad enough to allow me to respond to emerging issues in data collection. I built this responsiveness into my methodology whereby data analysis proceeded alongside data collection. The questions I started the research with were:

- What are the constraints preventing adults and young people from achieving their aims in ongoing youth participation projects?
- What are the facilitators to adults and young people achieving their aims?
• How does the form of young people’s involvement change over time?
• What is the similarity and divergence of views on these issues?

I was concerned from the start with comparison and saw the particular value of a case study design in allowing me to compare not only views of different actors in the same project, but also what people said and actually did. My expectations of diversity amongst actors were not however matched by my expectations of diversity of views within. By this I mean that I started the research with an unexamined assumption that actors would be consistent in the views that they gave me and that their comments would add up to a coherent picture of the ways they saw young people that I could analyse and even categorise. This was not the case. In particular I started to notice early on in the research that participants spoke about young people, what they could and could not do and how they should be involved, in often quite contradictory ways. The AG members, more than any group, presented themselves very differently in different sections of their interviews. This troubled me for a while as I tried to reconcile different versions. It is hard to identify exactly what made me stop trying to do this, the work I saw of AG members putting in to presenting themselves at Advisory Group meetings was key. This sensitised me to the construction and use of “young people” as a resource, rather than a fixed, defined concept in actors’ minds.

Somewhere half way through data collection I abandoned the idea of participants owning real, core and unchanging beliefs about young people and instead started to pay attention to context and the different ways in which they presented and spoke about what it meant to “be young”. I started to appreciate the ways in which “being young” was actively produced and reproduced and was fundamentally relational. I became interested in the ways in which the concept of “young people” and what it meant to be young was a resource that could be used by a variety of stakeholders: young people, support workers, council officers and councillors. What it meant to be a young person was of core importance to the participation project and in itself both

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18 Again I am using apostrophes here to show that I am referring to both “young people” and “being young” as constructed and problematic terms. I will assume the reader can keep this in mind for the remainder of the chapter and rather than pepper the rest of this text with apostrophes, I will only use them occasionally for special emphasis.
an important facilitator and constraint in varying ways. I therefore refined my research questions, adding the following:

- What are the meanings attached to being a young person in a youth participation project?
- How do these meanings vary by situation and by context?
- How are young people presented and how do they present themselves?
- In what ways does being a young person facilitate them achieving their aims?
- In what ways does it constrain them?

7.2 Being young in a youth participation project

Each of the chapters in this thesis could be said to give its own answers to the questions of what facilitates and constrains young people’s involvement in ongoing youth participation projects. Each contains a variety of stakeholders’ perspectives on a particular issue and stands alone in many respects. For example, in chapter four I examine the roles and relationships between support workers and AG members as young people and the ways these relations are presented by each. I look at how decision making needs to be understood within the context of these relationships and discuss the tensions of the support worker role. In chapter five I take stories as a whole and compare them to each other in terms of how key stages and change over time were presented by the AG members and adults in the project. In chapter six I look at the resources available to the Action Group and how they needed to present themselves in differing ways to win support within the council. However, it is in the comparison between chapters that a central theme of this thesis stands out. Each chapter may focus on a different aspect but they all make reference to the same core issue: what it means to be a young person in a youth participation project. This thesis is not about meanings attached to being young in general, but in the specific context of a youth participation project. I emphasise this distinction because it is my argument that being young is effectively salient\(^1\) within youth participation projects. When the central tenet, indeed the only qualifying factor, for being involved in such projects is being a young person then meanings attached to “being young” receive particular prominence.

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\(^{19}\) I borrow this term from Ridgeway and Correll (2004) who have argued, as I refer to later, that gender is effectively more or less salient in different circumstances.
In this thesis I have attempted to show that what it means to be young is neither entirely simple and naturally occurring nor constant but instead is continually constructed in a youth participation project. Young people themselves perform different versions of being young in different contexts and in relation to different groups of adults. Being young can be seen to be both a useful resource for adults and young people in a youth participation project in some ways but also a constraining factor in others.

7.2.1 Being young is actively produced and relational

Comparisons between the chapters highlight the contingent and relational nature of being young. In chapter four, conceptions relate particularly to the relationship between the support worker and AG members. In this context the help that young people needed was emphasised by both support workers and AG members. AG members presented a picture of reliance on the support worker who played an expert role in providing knowledge to the group. Although the AG members and the support workers stressed different aspects of work, they ended up with complimentary presentations of the work in practice. The ways AG members presented their capacities as young people in relation to the support worker was in contrast to the ways they presented themselves in relation to the council. In chapter five I analyse elements of the whole story of the Action Group’s progression. In comparison to chapter four, AG members presented a far more uniform account, a common public story where the key theme was their success and competence. In relation to the council and especially the issue of the launch, they resisted the idea that council officers were expert holders of knowledge.

I use the concept of performance particularly in chapter six. But young people could be described as performing versions of being young throughout the project. Performances were relational in that they were produced through interaction with different actors and circumstances: for example performing different versions of being young in the Action Group as opposed to the Advisory Panel. In relation to the support worker, the performance was about team work, mutual support, discursive
decision making, while in the Advisory Panel meetings the performance was concerned with demonstrating they knew the systems, language and how to behave correctly in meetings. Proving they could act appropriately was not carried out in isolation but through interaction with the expectations, rewards and sanctions of both adults and other young people. AG members themselves were able to reflect on the performances they felt obliged to give; for example in noting that they might say young people should be involved in all decisions but privately not really think that at all.

Within these broad themes, each interviewee had their own take on the exact way they described the importance of being young and what were the implications of that. Some young people broke down the division between adults and young people more often and to a greater extent than others. Support workers too, while showing professional similarities, presented nuanced versions of being young to the Action Group; versions that were accepted or rejected by individual AG members with varying levels of enthusiasm.

7.2.2 Competence as a core theme

Competence emerged as an integral part in the construction of being young in my thesis. It was a preoccupation for the AG members; in chapter five their stories can be seen to stress the group competence repeatedly and it was central to the presentations of youth members of the Advisory Panel. The literature on competence deals primarily with individual competence, however in the case of the Action Group it was group competence that was of more concern to AG members. The stories they told were of group success and achievement and final frustration when the group was not taken seriously, as they saw it, anymore.

I have argued that for young people, the issue of competence is of special prominence because dominant constructions of youth are based on incompetence. Young people needed to work particularly hard to prove themselves and to propagate a counter narrative, even within this youth participation project. When there was disagreement between council officers and AG members, such as there was over the
date of the youth council launch, the AG members portrayed the council officers as being able to easily pick up and use the dominant images of incompetent young people to their advantage.

The Action Group stories highlight that young people’s competence is always a vulnerable point for them. It can be recognised and thus affirmed, or instead denied them. It is too simplistic to say that those who know the young people best, the support workers in this case, will always affirm their competence. As the chapter on the support workers’ roles shows, this is not the case, neither do all support workers have the same view on what young people can or cannot do. However young people’s competence does seem to be tied to demonstration in practice.

Emotions were also closely linked to the achievement of competence in the project. In both chapters four and five young people were presented as incompetent by council officers for not being able to separate their emotions from their work. AG members themselves were aware of the importance of tempering their arguments with the accepted level of emotion, both on the Advisory Panel and in trying to keep the date for the launch of the youth council. Yet their involvement in the project was an emotional experience for many of the AG members. In chapter four their descriptions of the Action Group centred on concepts of friendship, teamwork and trust. Similarly they showed strong feelings both towards support workers and other members. Their reactions to changing the date of the launch in chapter five highlight their emotional involvement with the project. Emotional work played an important part in the Action Group, yet it was unacknowledged or even rejected as being appropriate by other adults involved in the project. Support workers were careful to present their relationships with the young people in a professional context despite the emotional work and relationships they formed.

7.2.3 Being young is both a constraint and a facilitator

Different groups of adults and young people used various conceptions of being young to their advantage in the project. In chapter four support workers presented quite a different idea of young people and the support they needed to that presented
by council officers. Support workers talked about the particular nature of working with young people, highlighting the emotional vulnerability and developmental aspect of their work. Council officers viewed requirements of the post differently, that the support workers were too tied to counselling young people. Both groups of adults can be seen to build up and use conceptions of young people to make their arguments, both relating their own versions of what young people need to the priorities of their respective jobs.

Using the literature on interest group resources in chapter six, I have argued that the Action Group had very few traditional resources to offer the council in exchange for privileged access to decision making. One of their strongest resources was their ability to give young people's views. They can be seen to have worked to use this resource, of being the expert holders of knowledge on other young people, throughout the life of the Action Group. The Action Group were also of value to the council in presenting themselves a reliable group of young people who knew council systems and could be depended on to behave in appropriate ways. Their two strongest resources therefore were about presenting particular versions of being young to adults.

However while being young was a resource that the Action Group could exploit in some ways, it was never an unambiguous facilitator. In chapter six I argue that the Action Group were especially vulnerable to criticisms over their representiveness. In particular the impressions they tried so hard to give during Advisory Panel meetings could be used against them by adults who then said that they were not typical young people. Such arguments can be seen as essentially disputes over what were the correct versions of being young. The Action Group members were always young by age, but clearly that was not the most important element of the definition; they still had to perform acceptable versions of being young to win approbation.

Their performances of being young in relation to the support worker and the Action Group were very different to performances in public arenas such as the council and the Advisory Panel meetings. Each performance had its own particular facilitators
and constraints. For example the relationship with the support worker appears to have been one of the greatest supports as identified by the AG members. In chapter four I look at all the other work outside of decision making that support workers were involved in. I discuss elements such as group developmental work, building confidence, establishing trust and working on one to one issues. However the roles played in decision making, whereby the support workers were expert holders of knowledge on what would or would not work, can also be seen as constraining the Action Group’s own input into decision making. The roles seem to have been so strongly assigned that AG members rejected the suggestion that they take on aspects themselves when they were without a support worker. The AG members who did take on some aspects of the roles quickly reassumed their previous position when a new support worker was put in position.

7.2.4 Generationing

The argument for looking at constructions of youth/childhood relationally has been made before. Alanen and Mayall could be said to have pushed relational understandings of childhood furthest forward (Alanen 2001a; Alanen 2001b; Mayall 2002; Mayall 2003). They both argue that childhood is relational, dynamic and actively constructed by both adults and children (Mayall 2001a). Alanen has called the process by which adults and children construct adulthoods and childhoods “generationing” which she defines as:

... the complex set of social (relational) processes through which some people become (or are “constructed” as) “children” while other people become (are “constructed” as) “adults”.

(Alanen 2003 p.41)

Alanen’s concept of generationing is distinct from the idea of generation as first considered within sociological thinking by Mannheim (1952 [1928]). Mannheim focused primarily on generation as cohorts with shared social and historical experiences. Alanen moves on from Mannheim’s ideas to argue that theorising on childhood would benefit from increased understanding of the ways in which
generation is both formed through, and dependent, on relationships. Alanen critiques existing structural work on childhood, such as that by Qvortrup, for being overly concerned with shared characteristics, such as age (for example Qvortrup 1994). She has suggested that researchers on childhood should move beyond “categorical analysis”, which she argues takes categories of people for granted and describes empirical relations between them, to “processual analysis” that instead studies the processes by which categories are constituted (Alanen 2003). Alanen makes links between gender and generation, remarking on the similarities in the way that both could be said to be constructed. The numbers of writers that have related these two areas of theorising, specifically in terms of using thinking in gender studies to illuminate the processes of generationing in children, are smaller than might be expected. There are authors who have made connections between children and women’s studies. For example, Mayall (2003) has argued that, for a variety of reasons, feminist writers have neglected theoretical advances in the new social studies of childhood. She has contributed to amending this gap through elaborating on the implications for women’s work and concepts of motherhood of the notion of children as active and competent moral agents. Others, such as Oakley (1994), have commented on the shared status of women and children as social minority groups, both historically constructed as incapable and less than adult. However few authors have taken Alanen up on her suggestion to use thinking in gender studies to illuminate the process of constructing or being a “child” or “young person”.

There is a very rich literature to draw on in gender studies on the subject of the construction of gender. This literature has been developed extensively over the last thirty years, following the establishment of the idea that differences between men and women are not wholly determined by biology and one is made rather than born a woman (de Beauvoir 1972). A central argument of the last twenty years has been that gender is a practice, a “recurring accomplishment” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Being a man or woman should not be thought of therefore as being achieved once and for all, but must be continually reaffirmed and publicly displayed. Such practices are seen as both situated and relational:
In one sense, of course, it is individuals who “do” gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production. (West and Zimmerman 1987 p.126)

There are a large number of debates within gender studies, for example on the distinction between sex and gender (Delphy 1993; Gatens 1995), the role of social structure (Connell 2002; Risman 2004) and on the nature of the subject who acts out gendered performances (Butler 1990). It is not my intention to discuss this literature and these debates in detail. Rather I want to underline further the parallels between seeing both gender and generation as to some extent actively produced, context dependent and relational. These parallels can also be seen in sociological writing on other aspects of identity construction. For example Walters (1990) has documented the ways that people of mixed ancestry switch and amend their ethnic affiliations, and in her summary of research on identity and social class Bufton concludes:

The relationships between the structural and cultural dimensions of social class, and between each of these and social agency, are contingent upon historical and social circumstances; these relationships can therefore only be specified in concrete, empirical contexts. (Bufton 2004 p.32)

This thesis is about meanings attached to being young, the structures, both social and institutional, in which young people act out certain versions of being young and the ways being young can be used as a resource by different actors. Within the project being young was just one type of social identity. The AG members could also be described in terms of their genders, class, dis/abilities and ethnicities. Indeed it has been repeatedly argued that identities should be looked at along multiple lines of difference, or “intersectionalities”. Brah and Phoenix have defined intersectionality as

... signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands. (Brah and Phoenix 2004 p.76)
The issue of intersectionality raises several points worth discussion in relation to this thesis. It should firstly be noted that I have not looked at being young in its intersectional context. This I would argue was primarily because being young assumed such great significance within the project that other identities were to some extent in its shadow. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) make the case that gender, amongst other issues, can be called a background identity with contextually variable effects. Gender then can range from being of minimal importance to being what they term “effectively salient”:

There is considerable evidence that the extent to which gender, as a background identity, biases the performance and evaluation of contextually central behaviours depends on gender’s salience in the situation. Salience, in turn, depends on the structure of the social relational context. The salience of gender in a setting probably varies continuously from being nearly negligible to being a central focus. (Ridgeway and Correll 2004 p.517)

It is my contention that in this youth participation project, being young was effectively salient. This was accorded such importance that it became the distinction that was used, exaggerated and played upon by various actors. Those called “young people” were involved in very particular ways; there were special meetings for them in the Action Group; in the Advisory Panel they were given pre meetings, opportunity to discuss papers in advance, signals for time out and fun outings that those classed as adults were not. The difference between being young and not being young was continually reinforced. In fact the difference in age between the youngest “support worker” and the oldest “young person” was only two years. Yet even that support worker had as strong, if not stronger, views on the special support that young people needed.

When I started the research I had not intended being young to become a central concern, it was something I was struck by through the research process. As I became aware this was the direction my thinking was taking, I did try to take account of other identities in relation to being young. On some issues I found this very difficult to do because the group was so small and I was concerned to maintain the anonymity of
respondents\textsuperscript{20}. Of all possible intersectional identities, gender seemed to offer greatest potential since there were about equal numbers of males and females. In my data collection I did particularly look out for the intersection between gender and age in the context of the participation project. There were aspects of being young that were certainly particularly gendered in the project. This was most obvious in relation to the young people's personal issues that they worked on with the support workers. These issues were often very clearly about being a young man or a young woman in the lives they led at home and at school. Support workers commonly covered issues around sexual orientation, body image and intimate relationships. However, what is perhaps more telling is that in the rest of the youth participation project, gender was most marked by its lack of salience, it appeared far \textit{less} important than the overwhelming distinction continually being made between being young and not being young.

My conclusion on the issue of intersectionalities is that I stand by my argument that meanings attached to "being young" assume particularly great significance in youth participation projects. Having said this if I had a chance to do the project again I would have liked to pay more explicit attention from the start to the ways in which being young intersected with other attributes such as being disabled, male/female or of particular socioeconomic status.

\textbf{7.3 Furthering the youth participation literature}

At the start of this thesis I noted that despite the huge number of good practice guidelines, youth participation in ongoing public decision making initiatives continues to present a range of seemingly intransigent problematic issues. I argued that the current state of the literature was largely descriptive, with very little use of theory. In this thesis I have drawn on literatures dealing with friendship, youth work, group identity, competence, interest groups, representation and performance. My intention was not to apply theories to observations for the sake of it, rather to

\textsuperscript{20} For example one of the AG members was a wheel chair user but I did not feel I could discuss issues relating to being treated as disabled and young without making her own personal experiences central to the argument.
contribute to better understanding of the recurring patterns in ongoing youth participation projects. In each of the three substantive chapters I have reflected upon the contribution of the theories I have used to the details of the case and discussed the contribution of the case study to those theories. In this concluding chapter I have spent some time elaborating a central concern of my thesis, that of the salience of being young within the project and on its implications. While being young has been a key concern, there are other insights from this research that also deserve development. At this point that I would like to return to some of the key issues I outlined in my literature review and discuss how this research can contribute to thinking on them.

7.3.1 Decision making

The balance of decision making power continues to be a popular subject for debate in discussions on youth participation projects. It is one of the areas where there has been some theorising with ladders and models being proposed (Hart 1997, Kirby et al. 2003, Shier 2002, Treseder 1997). In chapter two, the literature review, I argued that models that try to represent the balance of decision making lack utility because they are static. Decision making is dynamic: the balance of decision making power can shift within an activity as well as changing substantially over time. This thesis highlights the inadequacy of such ladders in other ways. Firstly in the Action Group experience it was the initiation of decisions that was accorded great value by the AG members. They argued on the importance of coming to ideas themselves rather than being presented with options by the support workers. None of the decision making models consistently separates initiation from final decision making. Neither do they distinguish adequately between decision making and implementation. This case study shows that in some cases implementation can overshadow all the delicacies of decision making, as however the decision was reached it was ultimately up to the support worker to push it through or let it lie.

Such reflections deal with the minutiae of decision making, a more fundamental point from the thesis, though, is that decision making between participation workers
and young people can only be fully appreciated when it is set within the context of ongoing relationships. These include individual and group relationships. Personal one to one support was a large part of the way the support workers described their jobs and resonates with the experiences from other participatory projects (Tooke et al 2003, Kirby 2001). Trust was not compartmentalised; rather trust built up through personal issues extended to trust in decision making. Decision making within the project could not be modelled without taking trust into account. AG members trusted support workers to represent their interests and make certain decisions for them. Moreover they trusted them to frame the decisions themselves. In terms of group relationships, decision making was set within the “group work” that the support workers were involved in. Their roles in building confidence and encouraging a positive group atmosphere also had implications in terms of the degree of respect and attention the young people paid to their views on decisions. Models and ladders of decision making decontextualise decision making, setting it outside of relationships. While they continue to do this they can never be truly useful in understanding decision making in ongoing decision making projects in particular.

A final point on the issue of decision making relates to the fragility of the decisions made by young people in youth participation projects. This thesis emphasises the importance of competence in relation to youth participation projects and conceptions of young people within them. The Action Group’s capacity as young people was always dependent on adults for validation and they were ultimately powerless to put their own project into practice without adult cooperation.

7.3.2 Representation

Common criticisms of ongoing youth participation projects, noted in the literature review, are that they do not involve a diversity of young people from different life circumstances and that the young people who are involved are more motivated and articulate than typical young people (Kirby and Bryson 2002). Although not necessarily phrased as such, these are both issues of representation. It is my argument that representation is always a critical issue for ongoing youth participation projects. In some cases the link with representation is explicit and young people have a
defined role as responsive representatives, reporting back and forth between their peers and the project. However in the majority of cases young people do not have formal representative roles yet representation is an ever present unacknowledged issue for them. Young people may be continually required, as was the case with the Action Group, to act as the source of other young people’s views beyond their own. They are then continually vulnerable to criticisms that the views they give do not really extend beyond the group. When young people learn more about the project and start to use their knowledge about systems and practices to further their aims, they are further open to the charge that they are no longer the “ordinary” young people who the project needs to be consulting with. The literature on interest groups has helped clarify the position that youth groups who are given access to decision making are put in. They are not in possession of traditional interest group resources and, moreover, are dependent on the policy makers for their very existence. As such, they are in a particularly weak position in terms of being able to deny their ability to give views beyond their own.

There are a number of practical implications for youth participation projects on the issue of representation. Firstly, accepting that representation is always an underlying issue means exploring exactly whose views young people are being asked to give from the start of youth participation projects. If young people are expected to give the views of young people other than themselves then questions should be asked about how they will go about doing this. Secondly, however much projects may want to say they have “the views” of young people this will always remain an unachievable aim. Much in the same way that individual case studies can enhance understanding of issues, individual young people have rich individual experiences to offer. Youth participation projects may do better to explore these individual experiences rather than require young people to present the views of a unified whole.

Authors writing within the new social studies of childhood have argued that society has been concerned for too long with children as “becomings”, on what they are not and what they will become, rather than on their present state as “beings” (Qvortrup 1994). Research in the new social studies of childhood tries to counter this tendency...
through its emphasis on childhood itself as a site for study. The Action Group experience turns this argument on its head. In this youth participation project it was “being” young that was of supreme significance and “becoming” adult like that was the risk. AG members who learned the systems and how to behave were charged with having moved away from “being” young. There is the danger that over emphasis within such projects on “being young” fails to recognise the learning and development that unavoidably accompanies young people’s involvement over time.

7.3.3 Young people as subjects in participation projects

Writing within the new social studies of childhood supports the case for children and young people’s participation in public decision making (Davis and Jones 1996, Hill et al. 1994, Matthews et al. 1999). However, one of the most fundamental contributions of this field, that of the recognition of the active role of children and young people in constructing their own social worlds, has not been sufficiently taken into account within the participation literature. Organisations and adults working within them have been criticised for not setting up adequate participatory structures, for not going about involving young people in meaningful ways or for not taking their contributions seriously but there has not been an equal emphasis on the active role of children and young people in engaging with these structures. The literature lacks adequate accounts of the role children and young people play themselves in shaping their own participation. For example Kirby et al. (2003) categorise organisations as being either consultation-focused, participation focused or child/youth focused organisations. They argue that change needs to happen within organisations at all levels through a process of unfreezing existing attitudes and practices, establishing catalysts for change, internalising new ways of working and finally institutionalising participation. Where is the role for children and young people in making these changes? Discussions on modifying the environment and adult attitudes and behaviours towards young people are about opening the door to children and young people, rather than exploring the ways and directions that they themselves push the project. In this thesis, young people have been a primary concern, not just in terms of simply recounting their views, but in my reflections on the stories they constructed of their experiences and on how they portrayed...
themselves, the group and the town council. I have argued that the AG members were continually engaged in projecting a group identity, that they themselves used ideas of being young in various ways to further their aims and that they both accepted, and at times resisted, the conceptions that were offered to them.

7.3.4 Participation workers

A final subject on which to reflect on the contributions of this thesis is that of the role of the participation workers. This thesis highlights a difference in opinion on the nature of the support workers' role, especially regarding personal relationships and support to the young people involved. Personal relationships with the support worker were central to the AG members' experiences. One to one support was not separate to the participation project in either the support workers' or the AG members' eyes; it was in the council officers' eyes. There were clear tensions for all support workers in carrying out youth work and carrying out participation work. Their ability to work as they would have wanted to as youth workers was limited by the need to produce project outputs. Yet it was the youth work that was integral to the way that participation work was done.

The role participation workers play as mediators of information both to and from young people also came out strongly. Support workers set the context in which decisions were made in terms of the ways they gave background information. They decided which information was important to know and which was not, what was too political and what was useful. They were the ones the Action Group looked to for a feeling of how their ideas were progressing in the council, whether "things would be OK". The support workers alone could provide this type of information and be taken seriously by the AG members. As such they also acted to some extent as an emotional lead for the group. In the other direction they were the ones with most contact with the Action Group, who presented back their ideas to their colleagues in the council. They could decide whether, and how much, to argue for the AG members' point of view or whether to go back and try to persuade them otherwise. Although some project reviews have pointed to the difficulties participation workers feel in balancing their role in decision making (Save the Children 2002), there has
been little discussion of their views on providing information, both on how and of what sort, to young people. This is an area worthy of future research.

7.3.5 Returning to the choice of case

In selecting a case study project in which to carry out the research I was quite explicit that my concern was with the type of participation, rather than the type of organisation. My aim was to find a project where participation was ongoing with frequent meetings between adults and young people. I did not further refine my search in terms of what the subject matter of the participation project was or whether the organisation was large or small, statutory or voluntary. At the time my reasoning was that I wanted to find a case where I could learn the most, and it was the dynamic between adults and young people that was of interest, not the actual subject matter of decision making.

I have argued that the various conclusions of this thesis, especially those concerning the salience of meanings attached to being young, are applicable to theorising on ongoing youth participation projects in general. I have emphasised that it is in situations where the very premise for being involved is “being young”, that what exactly “being young” means assumes great significance. I would therefore maintain that my original feelings that the subject matter for decision making and nature of the organisation were of lesser importance in case study selection, were to a large extent justified. This is not to say that there were no implications of my case study being a city council rather than a voluntary organisation. The first and most obvious effect was that of size. The case study project involved many actors in quite different positions. My thesis has to a great extent explored the differences in positions and opinions within the project. In particular the position of the participation worker and the issue of gatekeeping, being the information link both to and from young people, has been highlighted as significant. Statutory organisations such as councils are perhaps more likely to have such a range of players and layers between young people and other adults. However a clear division between statutory and voluntary organisations can not be made on the basis of size and numbers of people involved in
participation. NGOs could equally demonstrate both of these aspects, they do not even have to be particularly large to have dedicated participation workers or layers between young people and decision makers. For example, the Office of Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People has different layers of staff, some work directly with children whilst others interact with them only occasionally. There are two dedicated participation officers out of a total staff of fifteen (http://www.cypcommissioner.org/webpages/about_theteam.php accessed 10.06.06).

The Advisory Panel could seem to present a very particular situation with young people sitting and making decisions alongside adults such as city councillors. However again I would argue that the scenario of young people meeting face to face with adults who are not trained youth workers can be seen in the various NGOs that include children and young people in their board meetings.

Perhaps the greatest potential feature by which local authorities differ from NGOs is that they are democratically accountable. It would therefore seem likely that representation might have been a particularly sensitive issue. I would stand by my conclusion, however, that representation is always an underlying issue in ongoing youth participation projects, whether in statutory or voluntary organisations, as can be seen by the much voiced concern in the project literature of all types over what kind of young people are being involved.

7.4 Final conclusions

This thesis has offered a number of insights aimed at deepening understanding of the practice of ongoing youth participation in public decision making. Not all of them are related to the concept of “being young”, but it is this which could be said to be the dominant theme of the thesis. My preoccupation with the ways in which “being young” is used, constructed and represented by a range of different actors in a youth participation project is a thread connecting the three substantive chapters.

The thesis contributes to both the literatures on childhood and on youth participation. In terms of childhood theories, it advances understandings of the ways in which
"being young" is actively and relationally produced. In terms of the literature on youth participation it offers new ways of conceiving of problematic issues through seeing "being young" itself as a key facilitator and constraint. The primacy attached to "being young" varies according to different contexts. In youth participation projects, however meanings attached to "being young" are of particular salience and I would argue worthy of greater attention by both researchers and participants, whatever their age.
References


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Appendix A

Good Practice Guidelines on Youth Participation


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## Appendix B. Young people's attendance of the Action Group

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The table represents the attendance of young people in different years.
I moved up to Scotland in October last year. Before that I was a youth worker in a sexual health charity in London. Part of my job was supporting 6 young people who sat on the charity’s board.

To open up a youth participation project for discussion. Three broad areas in particular:

1. Differences in ideas within the project on issues such as what can be achieved and how the decision making process works. e.g. Why did you want to be involved? What did you think could be achieved?

2. Changes in the project over time. e.g. How have your ideas changed over time? How are things different now to when you were first involved?

3. Dilemmas, supports and constraints on both adults and young people e.g. what have you found to be the most difficult thing about being involved? What would you change if you could?

These include:
- looking at documents,
- observing meetings,
- carrying out interviews.

I would like to interview everyone that it is interested from the Action Group and Advisory Panel.

Towards the end of the research you would also be invited to a group interview to discuss findings so far.

Length - about an hour
Place and time - wherever suits you
Recording the interview - so that I don’t forget anything. You can stop the recording at any time.
Single or joint interviews - you can be interviewed alone or with another person from the Action Group if you prefer.

What you say will be kept strictly private between you and me, I will not tell anyone the details of what you said.

Later on in the year I will feedback general ideas from a number of interviews, but these views will never be linked to which person said what.
All names will be changed in the research report.
If I want to quote anything you said I will check with you that this is OK.

If I feel that you or any other young person is at risk of serious harm then I will not keep this confidential. I will discuss with you the best next steps of action and will pass this information on to the appropriate person.
Appendix D
Research information sheet for Advisory Panel

Proposed research with the Bepton Action Group

Kathryn Faulkner, PhD student, University of Edinburgh

Supervisors:
Dr. Kay Tisdall, Senior Lecturer, School of Social & Political Studies
Dr. Ian Dey, Senior Lecturer, School of Social & Political Studies

Summary – This research project would look at issues and opinions on the process of involving young people in decision making. Bepton Action Group would be one of two case studies for the PhD research. The proposed research methods include observations, interviews and use of documents, it is planned to be carried out in such a way that results are fed back regularly to participants.

My background – Before moving to Scotland last year I was a youth worker in a sexual and reproductive health charity in London, much of my job was working on sexual health issues but I also had the role of supporting 6 young people who sat on the charity’s board. I saw how involving young people in organisational decision making resulted in some of the most innovating and exciting outputs but I also experienced first hand some of the dilemmas involved when young people and adults work together in ways that are new to both of them.

Aims of my research – I would like to carry out research that opens up a youth participation project for discussion and debate and in doing so strengthens the project for the future. It is my experience that involving young people in decision making is not something that can be achieved perfectly but that the most effective projects are those that are continually reflecting on the process – how things are working out and what can be improved for the future. I hope that by offering my time as a researcher I can benefit a youth participation project by carrying out research that holds a mirror up to a project.

Research Questions – These focus on three areas:

➢ Participation projects are often made up of very mixed ideas and expectations about what can be achieved, how the decision making process works and the constraints and positions of different people involved. I want to explore some of the diversity and similarity in ideas held by younger and older folk in the project.

➢ Change over time – participation is a process that evolves as people get to know and react to each other, changing their ideas and attitudes, I would like to look at how the project and people’s ideas have changed over time.

➢ Trade-offs, dilemmas and constraints acting on both adults and the young people involved - All participants are in complicated positions
where a range of factors influences their room for manoeuvre and the options available to them, I would like to find out about what people feel about the positions they are in and how things could work differently or not.

**Data collection** – I propose to carry out the research through
- analysis of documents
- observation of meetings
- interviews

The research should take approximately 4 months. I would like to interview everyone that is interested in being part of the research from the Youth Action Group and Advisory Panel. Towards the end of the research those that are interested would be invited to take part in a focus group to discuss the findings so far.

**Collaborative approach to the research** – It is my intention to strengthen the research through making it as open a process as possible so that participants can join me in reflecting on the outcomes together. Rather than the traditional model of research of collecting data from interviews, taking it away and writing up the results, instead I would like to feed back my ideas as they are developing to those who have been involved. In this way participants can be part of the process of interpretation and have their say in what the results mean. There are two ways that I plan to do this:

1. Information sharing – providing continual updates on how the research is progressing on the internet, notice boards, monthly updates or group meetings – whichever combination of these ways people feel would be most useful.
2. Feeding back general themes to individual interviews and focus groups.

While being open to sharing information on the research and working further with those that are interested, I am very aware of being sensitive to the fact that many adults and young people have very limited time to give to the research and may want to be involved in a minimal way.

**Outputs** - I am very flexible as to what output would be most beneficial for the people that have been involved and ongoing youth participation in Bepton Council. My initial ideas are to write a report and a simple summary of the key issues by summer 2004. I will be writing up a fuller academic version of the research for my PhD in 2006.

I want to carry out research that is useful to the project and people involved and am open to input into my research design. I would be very interested in hearing any comments or changes that people want to make to my questions or methods. I would be more than happy to meet with anyone that wanted to talk more about the research before the next meeting. Please feel free to contact me for more information on an aspect, my email is k.m.faulkner@sms.ed.ac.uk.
Appendix E
The hermeneutic dialectic circle

The Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle
(within-circle process)

inputs to circle
other circles
documents
literature analects
observations
inquire's etic construction

more scope
structure selection
little articulateness

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R = respondent
C = construction

(Source: Guba and Lincoln 1989 p.152)
Appendix F
Research letter to the young people from the NGO on the Advisory Panel

Dear ***
I am writing to you in the hope that you will be able to help me out. I am a PhD student and my research is on youth participation. I am looking at the experience of the Bepton Action Group as an example of a participation project where young people were involved over a period of time.

For that research I am trying to interview people that worked with them and in particular people on the Bepton Youth Advisory Panel. Your experiences as a young person on the Advisory Panel at the same time as the Action Group will be really really valuable to my research.

I was wondering whether it would be OK to meet up sometime so I could explain more about the research, show you the questions I am planning to use and you could see whether you would like to be involved for an interview. If so could you give me a call on ******* or an email k.m.faulkner@sms.ed.ac.uk

There is more information about my research on the sheet attached, please let me know if you would like any more information before you decide or just to talk about it over the phone.

All the best
Kathryn
Appendix G
Initial interview guide

Before starting the recording
1. Go through the information sheet with them again, key points to emphasise are the confidentiality issues. Have they got any questions?
2. Show the tape recorder, have a trial run and play it back, check with them how it works, get them to turn it on and off when they want.
3. Emphasise that they don’t have to answer any questions they feel uncomfortable with.
4. Have they had a chance to look at the interview questions? What do they think of them, I’m not going to use them in order but just to guide me, are there any that they prefer I didn’t ask? Any they want to add? Not in such a way as to make it feel like a test.

Timeline activity
Ask them to draw on a sheet a timeline of their involvement.
Then go back and put two lines at difficult times.
Put two stars at good times.

Talk about why they are putting the stars and the lines where.

Background and personal aims
- How did you first get involved in the project?
- How did you hear about it?
- Why did you decide to get involved?
- What did you think you would be able to achieve?
- How have your ideas about that changed over time?

Project aims
- What do you think the project was hoping to achieve by involving young people?
- How does representation work? How representative are you – is this an issue, is it important? Do you represent anyone on the Action Group?

Effects of youth involvement:
- What do you think have been the most important successes of young people being involved in decision making?
- Do you think young people’s input has made any changes in the project – can you give me examples of ways it has affected decisions made and ways that it has affected the people involved and the way the project works?
- What effect has it had on you personally? Have you enjoyed it? Would you do it again?
What do you think have been the effect on the adults involved?

**Change over time**
- How has the project changed over time? What have been the most important changes?
- How are things different to when you were first involved?

**Show them decision making spectrum**
- Can you give me any examples of instances that are at any of these stages? i.e. were there ever times that the Action Group made the decisions and then shared them with adults? Where the adults made the decisions and shared them with the Action Group?
- Do you think this changed over time?
- What do you think the Action Group had most power over? What areas did you have least?
- Has this changed over time?

**Institutional constraints**
- What aspects of decision-making in the project can young people input into?
- What areas are not open to their input? What do you think of this?
- What do you personally find most difficult? Can you describe a situation you found particularly difficult or challenging?
- What have been the greatest difficulties with the way the project operated?
- Which changes would you make if you could, why?

**Facilitators**
- What has been the greatest support to you in your role here? Can you give me some examples?
- What have been the best things about how the project has been operating?
- What would you keep about the project and why?

**Relationships with the adults**
- Which adults in the project has the Action Group come into contact with?
- How have you found this?

**Social expectations**
- Do you think young people are expected to behave one way or another? If so how are they expected to behave, by whom?
- Do you have to present yourself in one way or another?
- Do you feel there are any unwritten rules about how you should behave in meetings?
- Is this the case for the Action Group meetings too?

**Thoughts about other people’s positions and opinions**
- Where do you think there would be the greatest divide in what people think about these issues?
• Do you think that most people on the Action Group would agree with what you have said or would they have quite different opinions? Who do you think would be most different in their thoughts?
• Do you think the adults on the Advisory Panel and the support workers would agree with what you have said? If not why not?
• What do you think the adults I interview will say about the project? What do you think they find difficult? What do they find supportive?
• Do you think they have a good idea of what you young people think?

Ending
• What do you think would be important to pass on to the new youth council?
• What would you have done differently?
• How old are you now and how old were you when you first got involved?

• Any other issues we haven’t covered?

After the end of the questions
1. Tell them what I am going to do next - carry out more interviews with the other members of the Action Group, start trying to interview the adults, keep observing meetings, follow up on the documents.
2. Tell them about information sharing - I am going to make an internet site and update it every 2 weeks on where I am.
3. Options for involvement in the research - do you want to meet up again with me alone/ with me and others so I can update you on what is happening and feedback? I could call you and let you know when we are all meeting and you could decide.
4. Shall I send a transcript? Do you want to meet up and go through it?
5. Can I come back to you again – for another interview, for a focus group later on in the research?
6. What did you think of the interview questions – should I add anything/change anything?
## Appendix H

### Spectrum of decision making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults make decision without any input from young people</td>
<td>Adults make decision, young people give their views which are taken into account</td>
<td>Adults and young people make decision together</td>
<td>Young people make decision, adults give their views which are taken into account</td>
<td>Young people make decision without any adult input</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Appendix I
Changes to interview guide

Additions to interview outline

Decision making in the Action Group
We can split decision making into those decisions made within the Action Group and then decisions between the Action Group and the council. Different decisions may have been at different places.
- Where would you put the Action Group in general and why?
- Where do you think they should be?
- How are decisions made in the Action Group?
- What is the support worker's role?
- What happens if a worker disagrees with an Action Group decision?

Decision making outside the Action Group
- That is in the Action Group, what happened to decisions that the Action Group makes when they go out into the council?

Role of the support worker
- What do you think the role of the support worker should be?
- What support do you think is needed?
- What was the role between the Action Group and other members of staff that didn't interact with them directly?
- What sort of information should they give to the young people? Should they hold back any information at all?
- Do you think different support workers had different styles of working with the young people?

Youth council
- Where did the idea come from?

Advisory Panel
- What are your thoughts on the Advisory Panel?
- How do you think decisions are made in the Advisory Panel?
- How much influence do you think young people have on the Advisory Panel?
- Do you think the balance of decision making has changed over time?
- What changes were made in the meeting to accommodate young people?
- How far do you think it is possible to make changes to the Advisory Panel?
- What do you think the expectations of the young people on the Advisory Panel were at the beginning?
- Do you think they have changed over time?
- Do you think the young people were treated any differently to other members of the Advisory Panel?
- Do you think young people have ever behaved inappropriately?
- How much debate was there between the adults and young people on the Advisory Panel?

**Extra additions to council officer interviews:**

**Action Group**
- Did you ever see an Action Group meeting, can you describe it to me?
- What do you think were the important differences between the Action Group meetings and adult meetings?

**Youth Council**
- One of the main things the Action Group were working on was the setting up of the youth council from your perspective how did you see their journey?
- Do you think the youth council would have been achieved anyway without the Action Group?
Appendix J
Advisory Panel interview guide

Timeline
Ask them to talk me through their involvement with the Advisory Panel
- How did you first get involved? Why did you get involved?
- What did you expect?
- How did you find it?

Social expectations
- What do you think the expectations of the young people on Advisory Panel were at the beginning?
- Do you think they have changed over time?
- What changes were made in the meeting to accommodate young people?
- How far do you think it is possible to make changes to the Advisory Panel?
- What are the main differences between this and other consultative committees?

Decision making
- How do you think decisions are made in the Advisory Panel? Was it like this when the Action Group were involved?
- What kinds of decisions do you think went where on the spectrum? Can you give me any examples of instances that were at any of these stages?
- How much influence do you think the Action Group had on the Advisory Panel?
- What do you think young people had most power over? What areas did they have least?
- Were there any areas that they could not input into?
- Do you think the balance of decision making has changed over time?
- What do you think the expectations of different people on the committee are, is everyone expected to have the same role? Are they all equal?
- Did the Action Group ever get in touch with you outside the Advisory Panel or make use of the contacts?

Youth council
- One of the main things the Action Group were working on was the setting up of the youth council from your perspective how did that journey work?
- Where did the idea come from?
- How did it first start get set up and how did it end up?
- Would the youth council have been achieved anyway without them?
Support worker role
- What do you think the role of the support worker was to the Action Group young people on Advisory Panel?
- What support do you think was needed?
- What kinds of information do you think should the young people be given to prepare for the Advisory Panel?
- Is there any information that should be held back from them?
- Do you think support workers should give their own views on issues to the young people? To what extent do you think they gave their views to the Action Group?

Interaction between adults and young people
- What do you think of the interaction between the adults and the young people on the Advisory Panel when the Action Group were involved?
- Do you think the young people were treated any differently to other members of the Advisory Panel?
- How much debate was there between the adults and young people on the Advisory Panel?
- Do you think this has changed over time?
- Do you think young people have ever behaved inappropriately?

Institutional constraints
- What have you personally found most difficult? Can you describe a situation you found particularly difficult or challenging?
- What have been the greatest difficulties with the way the Advisory Panel operated?
- Which changes would you make if you could, why?

Facilitators
- What has been the greatest support to you in your role here?
- What have been the best things about how the Advisory Panel has been operating?
- What would you keep about the Advisory Panel and why?

Effects of youth involvement:
- What do you think have been the most important successes of young people being involved in Advisory Panel?
- Do you think young people’s input has made any changes?
- What effect has it had on you personally? Have you enjoyed it? Would you do it again?
- What do you think have been the effect on the young people involved?

Thoughts about other people’s positions and opinions
- What do you think the Action Group will say about the Advisory Panel? What do you think they found difficult? What did they find supportive?
- Do you think the young people have a good idea of what the adults think?
Ending

- What do you think would be important to pass on to new young people coming on to the Advisory Panel?
- What would you have done differently?
- What is your background? Training? Do you have experience of working directly with young people?
- How would you like me to feedback to you?
  - Any other issues we haven't covered?
Appendix K: Group discussion feedback sheets

ROLE OF THE SUPPORT WORKER

Support worker

- Shares commitment
- Reassures
- Buffer from the politics
- Argue on our behalf
- Information link to council
- Has responsibility
- Brings issues to the Action Group
- Carries out the work
- Makes it fun
- Gets people down to work
- Some authority
- Cares
- One of us
- A friend
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults make decision without any input from young people</td>
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</table>

![Bar chart](image)
Changed over time

- Overall young people had more influence over time
- Changed in the period when support worker left
- became less in the period immediately before the launch

Was different for different decisions

e.g.
- Where to go on a social
- budget how much money is needed for the launch
- whether to attend a conference,
- how the structure of the youth council would be
- give opinion on publicity material
- who would give a presentation,
- who would attend Advisory Panel
## SUPPORT WORKER'S ROLE IN DECISION MAKING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manage the discussion</th>
<th>Give a view the same as everyone else had their say</th>
<th>Put forward counter arguments, point out problems</th>
<th>Give advice</th>
<th>Sometimes make a decision with the Action Group's agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I wouldn't say it had more weight just that it should be listened to as much as anyone else really...&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;...like pose criticisms that could come up, that people could say, &quot;What about this?&quot; Bring in other arguments in that we hadn't maybe thought about which helped because then we could debate it more again...&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;...usually the workers could tell us, it's a good idea, it's a bad idea on the timescale&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;We'd go, &quot;yeh we trust you to go and make the decisions for us because we don't really want the stress of having to make those decisions&quot; things like trying to negotiate the exact budget.&quot;</td>
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</table>
What happens if the support worker disagrees with the Action Group?

- Can’t remember that happening ever
- The support worker’s opinion is valued by the group so it is very unlikely the group would go completely against them
- The Action Group should trust the support worker’s opinion and go with what the support worker thinks
- The support worker should go ahead with the group’s decision

Agreement on the need for adult involvement in decision making because:
- adults have more time to put into researching the decision
- it’s their job
- they have more experience of how things work
- they have the responsibility
- the Action Group can’t actually set up the youth council on its own
HOW THE ACTION GROUP WORKS

GENERAL COMMENTS

Everyone mentioned the social aspect of the Action Group:

- Friendship
  "We were a close knit group"
  "We've come to know each other on a personal level, so it's like if something goes wrong personally with someone we will always be there to support them"

- Team feeling
  *if I could pick a team to do any job I couldn't think of anyone else*

Many people (more than half the group) mentioned:

- There was a supportive atmosphere, you could be yourself, "you felt welcomed there"

- Group bonding - residential, supersaturdays and social outings were important to get to know each other, feel bonded

- People would chat and have a laugh in meetings. Go off topic and talk about other things.

-_decisions take a long time_
  "sometimes we go round in circles"
  "we would sit for like an hour discussing the same thing and then an hour later we still wouldn't have come to a decision"

- structure: some members more involved, more in the office, had more information about what was going on than others

- Games:
  - rubber chicken,
    "it also kind of meant that it would get to a stage and then you would never get beyond it because you would stop and then have to re-start if you see what I mean"
  - ice breakers, name games
  - go to one half of the room if you agree with the statement - good way to get everyone's viewpoint

A few people (2 or 3) people mentioned

- It seemed important that the meetings were structured and debating rules were in place, you put your hand up when you want to speak
- It seemed easier to get people talking about interesting bits than the boring but more important issues
- It took a while to pick up what was going on for new people joining
  "It took me about 6 months to understand what was going on at meetings"
  "It was all going over my head"
INTERACTION WITH THE COUNCIL

Communication with the council
Few ways to communicate with them:
- through support worker
- through Advisory Panel
- through talking people in the office

Interaction increased over time - built up a relationship
- Action Group became more known
- more respected
- got more attention
- taken more seriously

"...it's been around for ages so the longer it stay in position the more it gets respect and like the council respect its existence..."

"...they knew who we were, we knew how they worked ...basically it was getting to know each other."
At the beginning people not really sure what Action Group did.

Didn't pay them much attention
Let the Action Group get on with it

First launch date, came and went, nobody bothered

Became important to the council

It was an actual council aim, it was actually taken on by the council so were they to fail in it... so there was an awful lot of pressure from that point

People started to look at how the youth council would affect their work

EARLY DAYS

Increase in attention

Financial recognition over time

Influence on Advisory Panel increased

Increase in influence

To begin with weren't asked views on council work

The council said this is what is going to happen, this is what the format will look like, this needs to be done

Building up to the launch, felt like had a lot of influence they seemed to do what we were saying, everything seemed feasible

LAUNCH
A critical time

What people think happened

Interaction with council changed
No longer the support worker as link between Action Group and council

People dealt more directly with the Action Group – both sides not used to working with each other
It seemed like folk weren’t sure what to expect of us but suddenly had to interact with us

People kind of expecting us to just be able to do it as if we were paid youth workers

Decision making relationship changed
Felt they had already made their plans.
All of a sudden there were all these obstacles

“We needed the council to be 110% behind us... they were committed to the project but I don’t think that they really needed the council to be launched in September as much as we were.”

How people felt
Lots of talk about “fighting” - stay otherwise they will have won

Emotions – to different degrees
Very defensive to it because they were coming in and ripping what we had done over the past year and a half to shreds.

Frustration at not being able to do anything about it

Changed perspectives
“I’m quite sceptical of the youth Action Group and the youth council, I think that came from that summer”

Learned more about:
1. how things worked in the council outside the Action Group

2. the role the support worker had played
It became clear that her role was much more political than we thought

3. the extent of the Action Group’s influence in the council
It was kind of a false illusion of power to say we can make it, we can insist that it has to be this way”
Appendix L
Notes for group discussion session

Introduction

- Go through session outline, including timing and food.
- What the aim of the session is:
  - Feedback to you before you all disperse, so can have an idea of what sort of things I’ll be working with (This is not going to be the final analysis, just where I am at right now, what ideas I am going to be working with and sharing later on with other people in the project).
  - A chance to comment and maybe explore some of the idea further.
  - Really important to remember the situation here –
    - Setting, what people have said to me individually is important. I’ll use your comments to modify my ideas but being aware that you have all spoken to me individually so some people might have said things they wouldn’t say in the group. I don’t want to change or leave out a lot of what people have said in that situation.
    - Not about agreement. It’s also important to say that you didn’t all agree with each other on everything so sometimes there is a range of opinion. You personally don’t have to agree with everything that I go through, but we can discuss here why not. We are definitely not trying to come to one agreement in this session.

- Go through informed consent, turning the tape recorder off, leaving at any time, don’t have to answer questions, can have a break when want it.
- Confidential - Go through the agreements we have for the session (like ground rules) I know you have all done group meetings a million times before but not with me and not in a research setting like this so I want to make sure we all have the same understanding about confidentiality about what each other says, letting each other speak etc.

- Quotes:
  - I have not used all of them.
  - Please don’t try and identify who said what:
    - I’m going to use quotes from what you have said to me from time to time. It’s really important that during the session we don’t get sidetracked into asking or trying to work out who said what, that’s not the point. Every quote reflects a general feeling anyway, it’s just the one I have chosen to illustrate it. It will start making people feel vulnerable if we go down that
road at all, so try to not do it. I’ve been through all the quotes but might not have ended up using them all in the end.

Any questions?

1. CHANGES OVER TIME

Broad changes over time – from responding to own project

The Action Group started off responding whenever asked:
People mentioned the idea that the Action Group had to “sell itself”, “make its name known”, impress people:
We basically sold ourselves, for want of a better word…. It was like the support workers that sold us, like there is this group set up, like new kids on the block sort of thing and got us on to consultations,

Everyone agreed an important change was when the Action Group had its own project to work on – the youth council, rather than just responding.
it gave the Action Group a purpose rather than just floating along being the council’s young people to do what they want

2. HOW ACTION GROUP WORKS

Friendship in the Action Group came up in the interviews as really important. When people were asked what was the best thing about the way the Action Group worked it was the most frequently mentioned thing.

People talked about the Action Group in terms of a team – either saying it directly or talking about pulling together, having a common aim.

Different members of the Action Group would play different roles – some would do more presentations, some on the Advisory Panel, some got more involved in the day to day.
Members went into the office different amounts, so knew more or less about what was going on.

3. ROLE OF THE SUPPORT WORKER

Everyone spent a lot of their interview talking about the support worker’s role in the Action Group, mentioning it without me even bringing it up. Seems to have been very important to the way the Action Group worked, so I am going to spend some time going through the key aspects of that role.

Related issues are in the same colour, sizes of circles don’t mean anything
I've grouped issues together:

- **Just like another member**

One of us – talked about the worker being part of the group, like the other young people there:
She was a young person to us, she was just another person…we never really looked at her being an adult and she never really looked at us being young people

As a friend - came up a lot:
(when different workers left) it really feels like everyone’s friends there, it doesn’t feel like a committee, so when someone leaves its like well they’re not really our friend, I know they’re not thinking that, its their job they get paid to be there and if they get a different job they have to move away and so that’s when it seems bit like Oh.

**Shares commitment**
Cares – it is more than just a job to them:
...we knew that they cared... it didn’t seem like a job, it was like where they wanted to be and they wanted to help us and it wasn’t a case of I am helping you because I have to.

- **Protective, looks after**

Reassures:
When she was under stress in the council she always reassured us that everything would be fine, she always reassured us that the situation would be fine, she always provided a pragmatic solution to the young people that, that their dream of a youth council wasn’t going to go down the drain

**Argue on our behalf:**
She would fight for us...she would make sure our views were at least heard

- **Authority**
A couple of the Action Group mentioned the authority of the worker has in the group:
They should be like able to, like really able to talk to you and like make all the young people there feel like really comfortable and be like, I don’t know, like be a young person in the group. But obviously like have authority but not obvious authority with the group

I think it is more felt to be a kind of respect ... I think that support workers should provide an environment where everyone feels comfortable talking with friends but also know where to draw the line like in abusing that
Get people down to work:
you knew that you could go and have a riot and you knew that when it was coming
down to work, it would come down to work

You need somebody there to sort of not be the boss but sort of move stuff on. Not be like a
teacher. Not "move to the next point" but "right, we need to move on"

- More recognised parts of job/job description

Carries out the actual work that the Action Group makes decisions on:
I think that rightly or wrongly we didn’t do a lot of the actual phoning around
organising things, we made speeches and put in the hours to consult

Information link/brings issues to the Action Group:
Usually adults lead the discussion and they are working on emails about things that
they are raising at the meeting, so without the adults really the Action Group can’t
really operate

- Reactions to the support worker leaving – can see how crucial she was to
  the group

  Dramatic reactions:
  the day she left I was like Holy Shit.
  It shook the Action Group majorly
  Felt lost

- Does the Action Group need to know the office politics – should the
  support worker let them know or keep if from them?

  Mixed opinions:
  - Yes – without it they have an unrealistic picture of how much decision
    making power they have.
  - No - the politics just “tie you down”.

  The support worker should be a buffer from the politics:
  She was a buffer and a protector of us I think from the worst of council politics kind of
  back stabbing style stuff … it wouldn’t be helpful to pass that all straight on to us
  because a lot of was about people clarifying their power in an office environment and
  stuff which isn’t really something you want to burden the youth Action Group with

DECISION MAKING IN THE ACTION GROUP (as opposed to outside it
which I’ll talk about later)

In the main period:
Actually more complex than my spectrum, in two main ways:

- **Changed over time**
  - Overall young people had more influence over time:
    *Technically in the early days, adults made the decisions and young people gave their views and they were taken into account then as we got it going on further I would say that adults and young people make the decision together.*

  - Changed in the period when the support worker left: *because we didn't have anyone else to take a youth work role who could ... spend the time to go "ok how are going to handle this lets discuss and work out what we are going to do"*

  - became less in the period immediately before the launch

- **Was different for different decisions**
  Two extremes:
  - Where to go on a social - E
  - budget how much money is needed for the launch – A, go away and do it with approval

then discussion on:
- whether to attend a conference,
- how the structure of the youth council would be
- give opinion on publicity material
- who would give a presentation,
- who would attend Advisory Panel
- what needs to be done next, what research

**SUPPORT WORKER'S ROLE IN DECISION MAKING**
Actually more complex than the spectrum, the support worker could play a variety of roles.

**What happens if the support worker disagrees with the Action Group's decision?**

- Can't remember that happening ever.
- The support worker’s opinion is valued by the group so it is very unlikely the group would go completely against them.
- The Action Group should trust the support worker’s opinion and go with what the support worker thinks even if the Action Group disagrees:
If they went I know you’ve said no to this decision but I really think" I would trust them, I would go “ok well I don’t really think it is a great idea but I trust you to make this decision and carry it out”

- The support worker should go ahead with the group’s decision even if the support worker disagrees:

So if they are making a decision, even if it is a wrong one, the support worker can give his opinion and tell them the different ways in which they could approach an issue. But if the young people decide to take the wrong one and the support worker knows full well they have chosen the wrong one, then he has to go with it I think if it is the group’s decision

Agreement on the need for adult involvement in decision making
Everyone agreed that E on the decision making spectrum would not be a good idea:
I would be quite horrified really if it was E and that probably sounds strange but it would be a very very bizarre council where a group of young people had the final say about spending that much money on stuff

Because:
- adults have more time to put into researching the decision
- it’s their job
- they have more experience of how things work
- they have the responsibility
- the Action Group can’t actually set up the youth council on its own

4. INTERACTION WITH THE COUNCIL
Communication with the council
Few ways to communicate with them:
- through support worker,
- through Advisory Panel,
- through talking people in the office.

Mostly through the support worker - send ideas up and wait for a response:
it was like… having a bit of putty and putting it into one piece and trying to fit it through a hole but it didn’t work so you had to take it back and kind of shove off some corners or whatever and eventually it did fit

Interaction increased over time - built up a relationship
- Action Group became more known
- more respected
- got more attention
- taken more seriously:
  its been around for ages so the longer it stay in position the more it gets respect and like
  the council respect its existence

  they knew who we were, we knew how they worked ...basically it was getting to know
  each other

look in particular at:
  • change in attention
  • change in influence

Advisory Panel
I think at the start they were supposed to just sit there and go “oh this is interesting,
thanks for letting us sit in on this committee” but by the end of it they had actually
become quite important members

The first time that I actually felt that we had been listened to was the design stage of the
packs..., before that I didn’t feel that it was, we had had debates and stuff, but it wasn’t
actually going anywhere.

Building up to the launch, everything seemed smooth and easy
Then critical period in August

1. Everyone talked about this period, though with a range of involvement, for
   some people it was really really important, very difficult others did not find it so
difficult.
2. It was all building up to the launch, felt valued before and things seemed
   achievable before, suddenly they didn’t anymore.
Things has been happening smoothly up till then, more than half mentioned
that it seemed like had effective decision making power:
Thing that we wanted happened and if they didn’t we got a reason
But then:
We were given all the power to take it forward and we were taking it forward and then
we hit that brick wall
3. The distance changed between the Action Group and the council without the
   support worker.

Interaction with the council changed
A lot of interaction had been mediated through the support worker as the link
between the Action Group and the council.

Now there was no longer that link.
People dealt more directly with the Action Group – both sides not used to working with each other:
*It seemed like folk weren't sure what to expect of us but suddenly had to interact with us*

*People kind of expecting us to just be able to do it as if we were paid youth workers*

**Decision making relationship changed**
Felt they had already made their plans:
*All of a sudden there were all these obstacles*

*we needed the council to be 110% behind us… they were committed to the project but I don’t think that they really needed the council to be launched in September as much as we were.*

4. How people felt

**Lots of talk about “fighting”:**
*stay otherwise they will have won*

**Emotions – to different degrees**
- too angry to walk away
- disheartened, what’s the point
- wanted to leave
- really angry
- upset

*very defensive to it because they were coming in and ripping what we had done over the past year and a half to shreds.*

Frustration at not being able to do anything about it

5. Changed perspectives
A few people mentioned that it gave them better insight into how things really worked in ways that the Action Group hadn’t been exposed to before. They saw different aspects of the support workers job, how she had worked between the Action Group and the council, and it changed their views of decision making:

*I’m quite sceptical of the youth Action Group and the youth council, I think that came from that summer*

**Learnt more about:**
1. how things worked in the council outside the Action Group
2. the role the support worker had played
   It became clear that her role was much more political than we thought

   - in decision making it is hard to know who has the final say:
   I believe that the support worker probably had hardly any say a lot of the time in the
   final what would actually happen

3. the extent of the Action Group's influence in the council
   It was kind of a false illusion of power to say we can make it, we can insist that it has to
   be this way

   Even through this period, the youth Action Group did have influence – the
   youth council ended up more like the Action Group's vision than any one else at
   the end.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

General
   - What's your general impression?
   - What stands out from the presentation?
   - Are you surprised by anything?

Timeline
   - Not very much discussion on the period after the launch, what are you
     feelings on it?

How the Action Group works
   - Structure seemed to evolve over time with some people more involved
     than others. When I was writing this down I thought maybe you
     wouldn't like hearing that, that you want to want to think you were all
     the same, equal - is that true? Do you?
   - Why is it important that you are all the same, different people did have
     different amounts of information and involvement?

Role of the support worker
   - Do you think all the support workers you had would be like friends?
   - Would you think they were like one of you as well? How much was that
     specific to particular support workers?
   - What would you say are the main differences in the way different
     support workers treated you? Would this diagram hold up for all people
     in the role of support workers or would it look different for different
     people?
• Looking at these different roles which do you think is the most important? Can you rank them?
• I would like to look more at this concept of authority in the Action Group – did the support worker have authority? Who had more or less? Why did you feel they had authority? Where did that authority come from?
• Decision making – which of the boxes in the spectrum happened most frequently?

Other questions
  o Around what is to be a young person as opposed to an adult, what are the differences, what allowances need to be made or not. It seems to me that quite often the Action Group talk about themselves in opposition or in similarity to adults e.g. we are either like them in this way or we are not like them in this way. Always in reference to adults, so I thought it might be interesting to have a discussion looking at how they create the boundaries around what it is to be a “young person” what are the special capabilities that make them different from the adults, why should they be treated differently e.g. we’re only young people, we’re not professional, it’s not our job.
  • What do you think are the differences between adults and young people in the way projects are run?
  • What do you think have been the main differences you have seen in the Action Group time?
  • Are young people just as capable in everyway as adults?
  • In what way should they be treated the same, in what way should they be treated differently?
  • What allowances should be made?

Ending
  v I’m going to type this up and make a transcript again, if anyone wants it let me know.
  v Future research plans...
  v I am going to ask you to do this short written evaluation of the session and their interview and the research process, this will be anonymous.
  v You can continue to look at my website for the progress of the research.
Appendix M

Notes sent to Action Group

Final messages from the Action Group

What effect has it had on you personally?
- Gave me confidence
- Made friends "I made some of the best friends in my life"
- Made me feel I can achieve things if I want to
- Made me aware of youth services and youth rights
- Learnt about lobbying
- Gave me so many opportunities
- Taught me new social skills
- Showed me what is possible if you stick with something
- Made me more less scared about adults
  
  "...like before if an adult said something that I knew was wrong I don't think I would say anything but now it's kind of like well we've got opinions and views and we should be entitled to express them. So it's made me more kind of brave in terms of being able to stand up to an adult"

- More worldly about how things work

What changes would you make?
- Starting work on the youth council earlier, so would have had more time
- Membership goes up and down
- People not attending meetings
- Be more organised
- Space to meet
- No changes

"If what happened hadn't happened, we wouldn't have been where we are today"

What effect will it have on adults?
- They have enjoyed working with us
- Learnt to take a lot more notice of young people
- They will have a more positive view of young people, see that they can work hard and change things
- They may have been surprised at what we did

Messages to the youth council:
- Prioritise and don't lost sight of what is key issue. Focus on achieving that rather than trying to achieve everything. Don't get bogged down by the details.
- Don't give in, be determined, stand up for yourself.
- Use the support available for you e.g. support workers, the council, other members.
- Continue challenging the structures.
- Don’t let anyone tell you things are impossible.
- Remain democratic and a youth run organisation.
- Keep young people interested.
- Be organised.
- Be confident.
- Enjoy it!
Appendix N
Comments on the group discussion

Feedback Session Feedback....

What did you think of today's session?
- I found it good to see other people's view points. It will be interesting to see the adults' views (whether they feel the same).
- Very good – excellent summary of interviews – rather amazed at how well the different strands have been drawn together and how clearly they were illustrated on the A3 sheets.
- Informative, gave us an idea of the future of the research.
- I thought today's session was really interesting to get the feedback of the Action Group, the way in which you went through the info was really good as you got through everything quite concisely (I get bored fast but wasn’t in your pres! What a compliment).

Did you feel you said what you wanted to?
- Yes people were open, it cleared up some questions. Got things out in the open.
- Yes plenty of opportunity and good atmosphere for sharing opinions.
- Yes because I felt comfortable with Kathryn and the rest of the group were my friends. Most of them already know my views through conversations.
- Yeah – would have been interesting to have had more of the interviewed present in order to get a wider spectrum of the perspectives but the small group worked well too.

How did you find the one-to-one interview you had previously?
- Good, enjoyed looking back seeing what we had all been involved in, found the questions useful.
- Very good – put at ease and not rushed, well structured so everything I wanted to say was able to be said in natural progression.
- Very carthartic to express what I thought to someone who wouldn’t judge and was neutral.
- Tiring, surprisingly so. But good, think may have rambled somewhat and doubt that I made any sense but it was good.
Appendix O
Email updates to the Action Group

January
Hi there,
Just a short email to let you know I haven’t forgotten about you all – I’m was waiting for my supervisors comments on my interview questions and I’m starting my first interview with one of you next week. So I’ll be in touch with you individually to make times to meet up later in the next two weeks or so. Hope that’s OK?
Have a good weekend
Kathryn
PS oh yes and I’ll see anyone that going at the residential there – they’ve got me facilitating one of the session (oh dear)

April
Hello,
So the exciting research news at the moment for me is that I have finally received my Disclosure Scotland form now (!) - the official form saying I am OK to work with under 18 year olds. It seemed to take a long time, even though it wasn’t actually that slow after all. What it means that I can now start doing interviews with those of you that are under 18 years who I couldn’t before– so I’ll be getting in touch soon. I’ll carry on keeping you updated and feel free to get in touch if you want to talk about anything or get more details.
Take care
Kathryn

June
Hi everyone,
So it’s the summer break, but that doesn’t stop the research, here I am hard at work. Well not too hard…so the latest to update you on is that there was a feedback session at the end of June. We talked about the results of the interviews with the Action Group so far. Now during the summer I am working on interviewing all the different adults that have been involved. I’m attaching a document I gave out at the feedback that those of you who couldn’t make it might like to see it to. It is just a one page sheet summarising some of the more general things you said.
Then the other thing to tell you is that I have been working on my technical abilities and now have a very simple little website. Because I’m concentrating on the other bits of the research now (other than with you guys) there will be less to update you on through email but anytime you want to see what I’m up to, and where I am with the research, you can go and look on the website. I’ll be updating it quite regularly when there is new progress to report. The address is:
http://homepages.ed.ac.uk/s0231698
Have a great summer!
Kathryn
Appendix P
Research Website

Youth Participation Research Project

Kathryn Faulkner

University of Edinburgh

Summary

This research project aims to look at the process of involving young people in decision making. It uses observations, interviews and use of documents, results will be fed back to participants throughout the research process.

Research Questions

- What are the dilemmas, supports and constraints on both adults and young people that help or hinder them from achieving their aims?
- How has young people's involvement changed over time?
- How similar or different are views of young people and adults on these issues?

This website is intended mainly to provide people who are involved in the research with an update on progress

Progress Update

Interviews

Interviews with members of the Panel

I have not started these yet, I am planning to do some observations of meetings first

Interviews with staff

I have carried out a few interviews and am planning more with both support workers and other members of staff

Interviews with young people
I have carried out eight interviews so far and am arranging more. I would like to talk to as many young people that have been involved over the last 18 months as possible.

Documents
I have collected some of minutes of the young people's meetings and am planning to start looking at committee meeting minutes too.

Observations
I have been attending various meetings with the young people involved and taking notes on ideas to follow up from these.

Further Information for Research Participants

If you would like more information on anything I would be happy to talk more or meet up, you can get in touch with me at:

k.m.faulkner@sms.ed.ac.uk

Updates to website

Progress Update

Interviews
I have carried out interviews with:
11 young people
7 support workers
4 council workers
9 Members of the panel

Documents
I have collected documents on the young people's involvement and the minutes of advisory panel meetings

Observations
I have been attending various meetings with the young people involved and taking notes on ideas to follow up from these.

Further Information for Research Participants

I have currently stopped working within the project and am concentrating on writing up at the moment.