

Growing a stronger youth council



What young people told us about having a voice,
getting involved in community life, and how we can help them
to grow the skills, confidence and connections that they want,
in the way that they want.

October 2019



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Introduction: What really matters

We think that our youth councillors are remarkable.

We've had the great honour of hearing our young people find their voices, watching them grow in confidence, being challenged by their questions, humbled by their generosity and inspired by their enthusiasm. The simple, honest concern that they show for one another, and the openness with which they feel able to speak, are a reminder to us every day of what local democracy is really about.

We feel lucky to have spent time in their company.

But what we have learned over the past year is that our young citizens don't want to be remarkable. They want democracy to be a normal part of growing up, for every young person. They want others to have the same opportunities that they have benefitted from. And they want to help make that happen.

Children and young people have told us that we need to create steps along the way, so that they can begin to learn and can grow their understanding in a way they feel comfortable with.

We have realised that the youth council is a key stage on that journey towards understanding local democracy and being involved in civic life.

We meet young people at a formative time in their lives, when they can begin to speak out and can speak up for others. We can help them by making sure they have the support, skills, confidence and understanding that they need to do this.

Our young people want to be connected. We can help them by valuing and nurturing the relationships that we grow.

Our youth councillors have told us clearly that they value having a relationship with ward councillors. This helps to improve understanding and to ensure that young people's voices are listened to and can have impact in their communities.

Our schools have an essential role. They are the safe spaces where our young people feel most able to get involved. We need to grow the confidence of teachers (along with officers and parents) so that we can help our young people to have the positive experiences that they want, in the way that they want.

We've learned that we also need to think about the steps before and after being a youth councillor. With the help of our active primary schools, supportive partners and friends at the University of Huddersfield, we can join the dots of that journey.

By giving young people a democratic education and by enabling them to feel safe to talk and to act together, we are growing the active citizens of the future.

This really matters for our local democracy. And it matters to our young citizens.

Meet our Young Commissioners

Evie Whittingham



Being a Youth Councillor has completely changed my perspective of the world. I have found an interest in democracy and politics that I never knew I had, developed my social skills, planning skills and confidence. As well as showing me that I can have a say in what happens in my local area. I have become a Young Commissioner to make sure that young people in Kirklees continue to have the same amazing opportunity that I have had, to spread what I have learnt in my time as a youth councillor and to further develop the skills and knowledge that being a member of Kirklees Youth Council has taught me.

Matthew Moran



I believe I can make a great contribution to the Young Commissioner team, as I give a different angle to many issues. I come from a sporting working class background (instead of an academic or creative one) and many people, especially the youth from this community, are believed to be disenfranchised and to not care about politics. I personally believe this is due to methods of outreach. I think that having someone from this community benefits the team, as I'm able to explain the best way to reach members of that community.

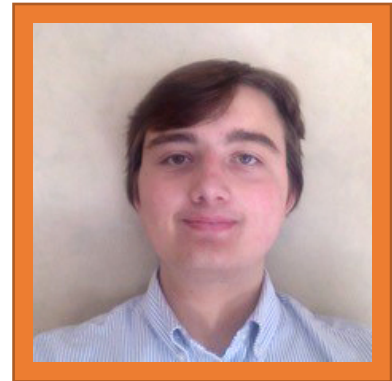
Vaneeza Ahsan



The Kirklees Youth Council has served us well - from giving us bags of skills to the ability of having a 'voice'. So I feel compelled to offer back some deeper commitment and to give this project my highest priority. It's my upmost privilege to be a Young Commissioner. I've developed an understanding of young, capable, opinionated individuals. Paired with my training and qualifications, this drives me to contribute ideas to the project. I want to represent other young people with their valued views and work towards an enhanced Kirklees Youth Council.

Stanley Lawson

I want to take the opportunity to work with as many partner organisations and young people as possible, to engage with and represent the views of young people in Kirklees. A group of varied young people from across Kirklees are best placed to engage with the evidence and to look at ways of better involving young people in active citizenship. I have had experience representing young people on Kirklees Youth Council and elsewhere, and want to be part of the 'Growing a stronger youth council' project.



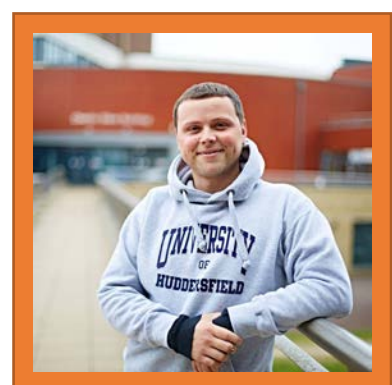
Waris Slahuddin

It's important to listen to young people because they are the future and their wants and needs matter. Also any political decisions made could affect them. This gives youngsters the impression that their opinion is valued, that they are supported, giving them confidence and a voice. Being a youth councillor is important to me because it has helped me gain confidence, leadership skills and problem solving skills. This has given me the confidence to share my opinion during any discussions. I hope to make a positive contribution and a positive change.



Jonathan Stephen - Independent Commissioner

In my role as President of the Huddersfield Students' Union, I was fortunate enough to work with an eclectic range of students, developing projects, supporting students to access relevant and appropriate support, as well as campaigning for and supporting students to make change(s). I am particularly passionate about equality, diversity and inclusion and ensuring there are networks for liberation groups including BAME, LGBTQ+, Trans, Disabled and Female students, to form safe spaces and influence change for themselves and their peers.



This is one example why engaging youth in democracy is so important to me, in supporting the younger generation to exercise their democratic rights and strive for a society that represents us.

What we did and how we did it

Celebrating 10 years of Kirklees Youth Council

To celebrate our 10th anniversary, Kirklees Youth Council have been taking some time to reflect on the experiences of our past and current youth councillors. Our youth council helps young citizens in Kirklees to learn about local democracy, to gain skills and confidence, to become active citizens, and to have a voice.

We wanted to celebrate the fantastic achievements of our youth councillors so far, and to involve more young people in planning for Kirklees Youth Council's future.

So we asked lots of people to share their ideas for how we can grow an even stronger youth council over the next ten years.

Who participated

Over 1,800 people have shared their views, ideas and experiences with us during our engagement. We used a variety of ways to engage people who have a stake in the future of Kirklees Youth Council, with a focus on children and young people in Kirklees.

Over 1,700 children and young people in Kirklees have talked to us about being part of local democracy and civic life.

- 1,524 children and young people aged 11 to 18 took part in our survey. Over 95% of these young people had not previously taken part in any Kirklees Youth Council activities.
- 331 children and young people in schools and community organisations took part in 21 evidence gathering sessions suitable for their age and setting.
- 72 people joined us for our 10th anniversary celebration event workshops.
- 46 past and present Kirklees Youth Councillors shared their experiences of participating in Kirklees Youth Council.
- 132 young people participated at two busy Calderdale and Kirklees Careers apprenticeship events.
- 41 young employees from Kirklees Council shared their ideas.
- 240 young people at a Kirklees Duke of Edinburgh Award Ceremony were invited to participate.

We have also heard from councillors, the Leader of Kirklees Council, the Mayor of Kirklees, the leaders of our local political groups in Kirklees, local organisations, parents and carers, teachers and 13 other Youth Councils from across the UK.

Our principles and approach

How we worked together

We have supported a group of Young Commissioners to lead this work on behalf of the young citizens of Kirklees. Our Young Commissioners were responsible for:

- Representing the views of young people in Kirklees.
- Helping to plan and co-ordinate the engagement activities.
- Encouraging young people, schools and partners to get involved.
- Reviewing the evidence gathered throughout the process.
- Making recommendations, based on the evidence.

Our Young Commissioners were supported by a wider team of current Kirklees Youth Councillors, who also helped to design and deliver our activities.

What's up for change?

Participants could influence many aspects of Kirklees Youth Council, including:

- Purpose and values - what the youth council is for and what we believe in.
- Structure and format - how Kirklees Youth Council is organised and governed.
- Reach - who can get involved, and on what basis.
- Activities - what kind of thing the youth council does.
- Relationships - how we connect with young people, Kirklees Council, groups etc.
- Influence - the youth council's status and ability to take or influence decisions.
- Reporting and sharing - ways of communicating about what we do.
- Funding and other resources - how Kirklees Youth Council is supported.

Why we're doing this

There were some key reasons why we wanted to do a range of engagement activities. In particular, we wanted to be able to:

- Hear directly from young people - to understand what young people want and what they feel about being citizens.
- Understand what difference the youth council can make to young people's lives.
- Hear from a wider range of young people, including those from different localities across Kirklees and from different communities of interest.

- Make sure that young people have ownership of what happens next.
- Respond to some of the Kirklees Democracy Commission's recommendations.
- Strengthen our existing relationships, develop new ones and build trust.
- Grow the youth council - raise awareness and get more people interested.
- Support the personal development of our youth councillors by helping current and future youth councillors to organise engagement activities, debate their findings and co-design the next stage of the youth council's work.

Our key principles

The young citizens participating in Kirklees Youth Council have been a key part of our work to understand how we can grow a stronger local democracy in Kirklees.

Our youth councillors who took part in the Kirklees Democracy Commission had a really positive experience, and made valuable contributions.

Building on this positive relationship, our approach to engagement was based around these key principles and ways of working for Democracy in Kirklees:

Everything starts with the citizen

We wanted to put our young citizens at the heart of this work. We achieved this by creating and supporting the Young Commissioner role, and by working closely with our wider team of youth councillors who helped us to design activities for children and young people, led our anniversary event and shared their own experiences.

Working in the open

As we designed our activities and gathered evidence, we shared our experiences live online wherever possible, via @kirkdemocracy on twitter. We also used a range of online tools and platforms to promote our activities throughout the year.

Evidence led

We gathered a huge amount of evidence to help our young citizens decide what should happen next. We used a range of different approaches to do this, choosing the right method for each circumstance.

Working in partnership

We want our youth council to be useful and relevant for young citizens across Kirklees, so it was important that we involved lots of organisations and individuals who work with young people. Working in partnership also helps us to be clearer about our overall offer for young citizens in Kirklees, and to create clear pathways for involving young people in local democracy and active citizenship.

The Kirklees Youth Survey

Kirklees Council officers worked with a group of Kirklees Youth Councillors to develop the Kirklees Youth Survey. The aim was to gather broad insight from children and young people across Kirklees, so the survey had to be suitable for any young person.

We gathered ideas from our young citizens about what questions to ask, and worked with them to gradually refine these into a concise survey that they thought would work best. Our young citizens chose the age range, the title for the survey, what data to collect, and how we would share it with schools and with young people directly.

We tested the survey with groups of young people who had no prior knowledge or experience of Kirklees Youth Council. Our youth councillors and Young Commissioners then helped to engage their peers in completing the survey. We also contacted schools directly and shared the survey with many other organisations.

The survey results were analysed by Dr Tom Loughran, a Leverhulme Research Fellow from the University of Huddersfield, who provided us with some key headline findings.

Over half of the children and young people who participated in our survey (853) chose to complete a paper copy rather than the online version.

198 young people supplied an email address and asked to receive updates about Kirklees Youth Council's future activities.

Our engagement activities

Our evidence gathering sessions with children and young people have involved a range of different engagement methods including self-guided group discussion, role play, scenarios, support from ward councillors and local democratic education. We captured insights and ideas at each session, and some groups also completed a paper copy of our survey.

Our 10th anniversary celebration event was hosted by Kirklees Youth Councillors and opened by the Mayor of Kirklees. Four young people then shared their personal experiences of being a member of Kirklees Youth Council. Afterwards everyone took part in two out of four workshops of their choice. The workshops, designed to follow the themes in our survey, captured ideas and insights from children, young people, councillors, teachers, parents and community organisations.

Youth councillors had self-guided group discussions, answered questions provided for them, took part in our celebration event workshops and shared their views on video. Some youth councillors have also supported our Young Commissioners at evidence gathering sessions, and taken part in group discussions with Kirklees Councillors and the Mayor of Kirklees.

At two busy Calderdale and Kirklees Careers apprenticeship events, young people were asked one question from our survey: "Have you been taught anything about politics or democracy in school?" Using a ballot style answer paper, they chose from four options, ranging from "Yes, everything that I need to know" to "No".

Young employees from Kirklees Council learned about our aim to grow a stronger youth council at various events. Some young people were willing to talk us about their ideas, others preferred to complete our survey.

Young people at a Duke of Edinburgh Award Ceremony learned, from the event organisers, how they could get involved and help to grow a stronger youth council. Some young people chose to complete our survey on the evening, others chose to do it at a Duke of Edinburgh activity centre in the following weeks.

Written evidence

Some of the Youth Councils from across the UK kindly responded to our email invitation to help us grow a stronger youth council. They answered five questions which covered what kind of format they have adopted and what works well, how they have influenced a local decision, how they encourage local democratic education with their members and other young people, and anything else they wanted to tell us that could help us to plan for our youth council's future.

We asked all the local political group leaders in Kirklees (including the Leader of Kirklees Council) for a written response to four questions:

- Can you share examples of good practice in terms of connecting with young people in Schools? What works and what doesn't?
- What can Councillors do to encourage schools to introduce young people to our local democracy?
- How can young people be a meaningful part of the Councillor decision making processes?
- What can you do to help grow our youth council?

We received responses from each group.

We also received responses from parents and carers, and a written contribution from Jonathan Stephen, President of the University of Huddersfield Students' Union (2018 to 2019) on behalf of Educating Kirklees.

Kirklees Youth Council: the story so far

Kirklees Youth Council was established in 2008 in response to a request for a youth voice platform from local councillors and young people. Its aim is, and always has been, to help young citizens in Kirklees to learn about local democracy, to gain skills and confidence, to become active citizens and to have a voice.

Our format

During the early years the youth council operated more formally than it does today. We started out with a model that was designed to complement Kirklees Council's decision making structures of the time. This involved a set number of seats, a set age range and elections held in schools every two years. We maintained this approach for a number of years.

Although our principles remain the same today as they were in the beginning, the way that we do things has evolved. Youth councillors have been at the heart of each stage of the youth council's development journey. They have taken part in ongoing conversations about what works for them and what doesn't - and the more we learned, the more we changed the way that we do things.

Some of the challenges youth councillors have told us about in the past include:

- Youth council structure, activity and the pressure of being elected.
- Additional responsibilities at home and school.
- Various lengthy and formal meetings.
- Not having enough information about our local democracy.

Using their insight and ideas we have explored different ways of addressing these challenges. Over the years we have:

- Replaced elections with a range of membership alternatives.
- Adopted a school-based model.
- Explored different ways of developing relationships with local councillors.
- Created an accredited local democratic education package.

Our activities

Kirklees Youth Councillors all share similar experiences of developing relationships, sharing their views with decision makers and the personal development that takes place during their time with Kirklees Youth Council.

Our activities have been wide ranging and have included:

- A successful campaign to ban the mosquito device (which emits a high-pitched tone only audible to people under 25, and is designed to disperse young people) from Kirklees Council buildings.
- Taking part in a European youth exchange to Strasbourg.
- Providing oral evidence for the British Youth Council's Youth Select Committee, exploring the role of the education system and the national curriculum in equipping young people with skills for life.
- Sharing Kirklees Youth Council's local democracy peer-to-peer training package with the Minister for the Constitution.
- Taking part in the Kirklees Democracy Commission's public engagement and evidence gathering activities, and speaking as part of a Full Council debate about the future of our local democracy.

Our relationships

In 2008 Kirklees Youth Council started from the beginning in terms of developing relationships with others and we are proud to say that some of those early connections continue today. We have worked hard to create and maintain relationships with all of our stakeholders, particularly children, young people and our councillors.

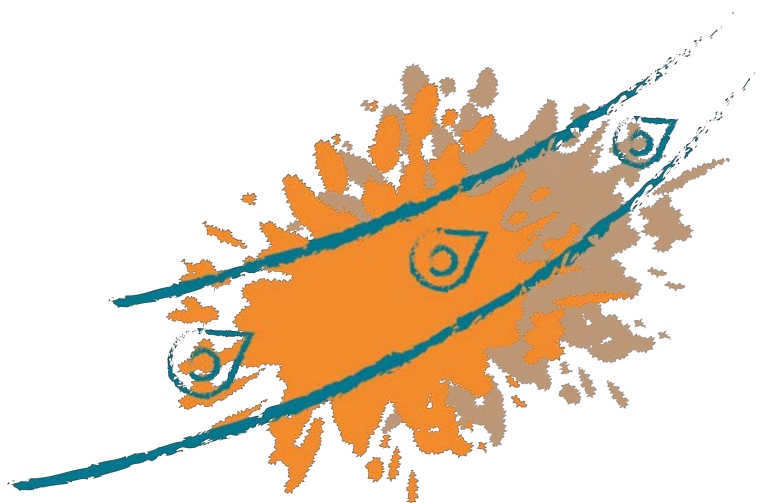
As with most relationships there have been ups and downs. As individuals come and go, and services change, new relationships have to be formed within the youth council and beyond.

Kirklees Youth Councillors value the relationships they make with each other and many remain friends long after their involvement with the youth council comes to an end. They also value the relationships they have built with Kirklees Council officers, who continue to help them develop as young citizens by providing ongoing support in the following ways:

- recognising personal achievement
- work placements
- references
- networking opportunities

More recently our relationship with ward councillors has strengthened due to our participation in the Kirklees Democracy Commission and our involvement in the ongoing practical work to grow a stronger local democracy in Kirklees.

Growing young citizens



Starting a journey

Growing young citizens

This is for everyone

Our past and present youth councillors have consistently told us that being part of Kirklees Youth Council has given them a valuable opportunity to develop, both personally and as young citizens. They feel strongly that the same opportunities should be available to all young people in Kirklees.

Our youth councillors are clear that everyone should have a voice and believe that they can make a difference. We heard this same sentiment echoed by other children and young people in Kirklees during our engagement sessions.

To find out how we can create the kind of opportunities that our young people want, in the way that they want, we have gathered ideas and experiences from over 1,800 people.

We've heard from over 1,700 children and young people in Kirklees about having a voice, getting involved in their community, and being part of local democracy. We also heard from local organisations, councillors, teachers, young employees, parents and other youth councils in the UK.

To make sure that we heard what matters to young people across Kirklees, we helped our youth councillors to design their Kirklees Youth Survey, which was available online and in print. 1,524 children and young people aged 11 to 18 in Kirklees took part in this survey. Over 95% of respondents had not previously participated in any Kirklees Youth Council activities.

We are grateful to Dr Tom Loughran from the University of Huddersfield who analysed the full survey results and shared some key headline findings.¹

The results tell us that:

- Young people mainly want real world spaces (as opposed to virtual ones) in which they can interact and engage with each other on issues that matter to them.
- There is no 'magic' online platform for engaging young people in Kirklees. The young people who get their local information online use a wide range of different platforms, and a third of young people do not get this information online at all.
- Young people's sense of voice matters. Young people who feel they can voice their opinions are significantly more likely to engage in community activities and to believe they have a higher level of knowledge about the decisions that affect them.

¹ You can find out more about the Kirklees Youth Survey results in our Summary evidence pack. We are also publishing the full survey data on the Kirklees Democracy Commission website: www.DemocracyCommission.org.uk

- Political education clearly makes a difference. Young people who say they have been taught something about politics or democracy are more likely to believe they have a higher level of knowledge about the decisions that affect them. They are also more likely to feel that they can express their opinions.

We have explored these findings in more detail in other chapters of our report.

The questions that our young people developed for the Kirklees Youth Survey gave us a starting point for our conversations with young people across Kirklees.

In our engagement sessions, we have talked with children and young people about whether they feel they have a voice, whether they'd like to get more involved in their community, whether they'd like to learn about local democracy and what role Kirklees Youth Council could have in supporting our young people.

This has helped us to understand the personal experiences behind the survey results, and to listen in depth to what our young people want.

Something that grows with us

We have learnt that becoming an active young citizen is a journey that involves different stages and opportunities for progression. Young people want to be able to continue on their personal journeys, with a particular focus on developing their confidence.

They want to be able to share their views on issues that matter to them, with confidence.

Children told us that they want to learn how decisions are made and who they are made by. They want to know how they can get involved so that they can help their communities.

They were very clear that their level of participation should be step-by-step, at a pace that suits them, and largely takes place in their school or on special occasions in the community, alongside other schools. They helped us to understand that they would like support when they engage with others and that we should respond to their individual needs, help them to prepare and support them throughout the experience.

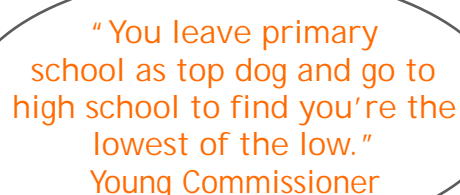
We asked our survey participants (aged 11 to 18): "What do you think our Youth Council should do?" The three most popular responses were:

- 74% Help young people to have a voice
- 57% Be a safe space for people to talk
- 54% Help you to learn new skills and be more confident

In our engagement sessions, the activities children said they want to participate in include:

- Learning about our local democracy.
- Discussing current affairs and sharing their views.
- Meeting directly with elected members.
- Developing new skills, such as fundraising, to enable them to support their local communities.

Young people want us to value the skills, knowledge and experience that our children have developed by year 6. They want children to be able to continue their journey as active citizens when moving into year 7. When reflecting on their own experiences of this transition stage, our youth councillors said they had felt devalued and deskilled. They would like to play a key role in supporting children and schools.



"You leave primary school as top dog and go to high school to find you're the lowest of the low."
Young Commissioner

We heard similar suggestions from participants at our Kirklees Youth Council 10th anniversary celebration event, where children, young people, councillors, teachers, parents and community organisations took part in workshops to share their experiences and ideas.

When we asked "What can we do to help more young people feel listened to?" we learned that we must pay attention to the transition from primary to secondary school. One participant said: "Teachers treat year 7 students like babies, yet when they are in year 6 at primary school, they have a lot of responsibilities."

Our engagement with 11 to 16 year olds, however, indicates a growing level of confidence, eagerness to interact with others and a continued desire to learn new skills.

When asked what kind of activities they would like to take part in, nearly half of our survey respondents (48%) expressed a preference for community activities that allow them to meet up with other young people.



"We don't mix outside of school. By getting rid of youth clubs you have changed our future communities."
Nature's Footprints member

We learned, in a number of our engagement sessions, that young people are concerned about the limited opportunities they have to meet others outside of their school and immediate community. They shared views on the reducing numbers of youth clubs and told us about the impact this has had on them, personally and collectively.

A young person at Shelley College suggested that schools could develop relationships with each other and create opportunities for students to meet, share ideas and learn from each other.

42% of our survey respondents told us that they would like to be part of a school project that helps their community. Young people want life skills that can be learned, tried and tested whilst running their own projects. They would like a stronger focus to be placed on providing a range of practical opportunities that are age-appropriate and interactive.

We heard a powerful message from young people that politics doesn't have to be boring!

Children and young people would value additional activities, such as democracy roadshows, workshops and a dedicated "Democracy Day" (similar to a sports day) in their school.

Young people told us that they would like to develop a lifelong and positive attitude to citizenship. They would like to learn how to use their voice long before they are able to vote. They want to take part in activities that support their local communities, beyond the polling booth, once they are of voting age.

We learned that some young people want to continue their step-by-step journey of active citizenship throughout primary and secondary school (and beyond). Others want to be able to dip in and out of these activities, whenever it is relevant for them.

Unless the opportunities for participation exist at each stage of a young person's development, we cannot meet the needs of either. Our Young Commissioners feel strongly that local democracy is something that should always be there with you as you grow up, and that your understanding of local democracy (and your confidence in participating) should grow along with you.

A positive experience

Our past and current youth councillors have helped us to think about how the activity of Kirklees Youth Council could change, so that more young people can have the positive and flexible experience that they want. Their knowledge of what has or hasn't worked well in the past, and their enthusiasm for listening to what other young people have to say, have been invaluable in helping our Young Commissioners to make their recommendations for the future.

We know that many of our young people have not heard of Kirklees Youth Council, and of those that have some believe that it isn't for them. They told us that "politics doesn't affect us" or "it's for young people who are already interested or involved in politics."

Our youth councillors have helped us to further understand these common misconceptions, held not only by young people, but by adults alike.

They told us that generally speaking, their motivation for taking part in Kirklees Youth Council was not because they were already engaged in local democracy and politics.


Most said that their involvement in the youth council was usually down to one teacher who values active citizenship and who offered encouragement and ongoing support.

Our youth councillors said that it wasn't until they learned something about our local democracy, including how they could influence decisions that affect them and the communities they live in, that they began to fully engage with youth council activity.



"When I signed up for Kirklees Youth Council it was because I just wanted to be heard and listened to."
Youth Councillor

Our survey results also indicate that we need to actively promote Kirklees Youth Council. Over half of participants (52%) said "no" or "not sure" when asked whether they had heard of Kirklees Youth Council before today.



"People don't know what the youth council actually does."
Young Commissioner

If the youth council is to be a valuable experience for young people across Kirklees, we know that we need to address the image of the youth council as a matter of urgency. We need to improve understanding of what Kirklees Youth Council is, and demonstrate how young people can personally benefit from participating.

Stakeholders at our 10th anniversary celebration event offered some suggestions about how we can do this effectively, including:

- Highlight the benefits to participating, such as how it can support young people with employability.
- Encourage youth clubs and other groups that work with young people to promote it as a core part of the work they do.
- Support Councillors, MPs and decision makers to promote it in schools and in their local area.
- Place importance on 'word of mouth' as a way of sharing information about the youth council. Throughout our engagement process children and young people have told us that they generally prefer to receive information this way, from a trusted adult or their peers.

In order to create good outcomes for the young people who choose to participate, young people have told us that it's important we start by getting the foundations right - by providing a positive introduction to Kirklees Youth Council. This includes being clear with young people about what's involved before they commit to taking part, and offering an engaging activity to begin with. Our current youth councillors share similar views.

Many of our current and past youth councillors have commented on the usefulness of their induction training and how important it was for their personal development.

The training is a two day learning programme that provides young people with an introduction to local democracy and skills to represent others.

They strongly believe that this offer should continue. However, they also told us that they didn't know what to expect in advance, and they would like other young people to get clearer information before the programme begins.

"The difference the youth council has made for me is building confidence in what you're talking about. Those first two days made us so informed that we had the confidence to speak."
Youth Councillor

"The initial induction training was really good and we did learn a lot about democracy."
Youth Councillor

During our wider engagement activities, we heard that young people would welcome opportunities to learn the basics about local democracy. Our Young Commissioners have recommended that all future youth councillors should be provided with a standard, accredited, training package to ensure they are fully equipped to carry out their role.

Those who have already taken part feel that the role of Youth Councillor should be taken seriously. They say we should offer support and encouragement to all young people who want to participate in the future. Our youth councillors told us that recognition is important to them, as it helps them to feel valued. Young people told us that they want to be able to have a record of how they've contributed, to help with their ongoing personal development.

13 other UK youth councils have kindly shared information with us about their format and activities, including what works now and what has (or hasn't) worked in the past. They were keen to tell us that embedding awards and celebrating the achievements of young people works well for them, and that we should consider this when planning for the future.

Young people who have taken part in Kirklees Youth Council told us that they would also have benefited from staying involved with the network after their role came to an end. Our Young Commissioners have valued their role and believe it should be developed as an offer for experienced youth councillors who want to continue to support other young people.

"For me personally, it was a confidence boost in general and something to do. My mum kind of pushed me in honesty, and I'm glad she pushed me."
Young Commissioner

"There needs to be something after Kirklees Youth Council to keep people involved. We want to keep growing our connections and friendships."
Youth Councillor

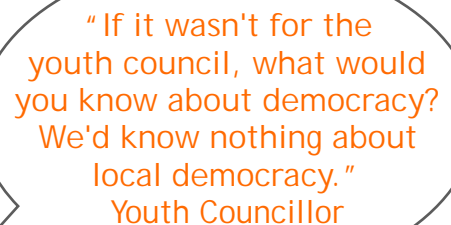
A key part of the journey

Our Young Commissioners have looked at the experiences of past and current youth councillors, reviewed the Kirklees Youth Survey results in detail, listened to the views of children and young people during our engagement sessions, and have reviewed all the other evidence that we've received.

Based on our evidence, they have concluded that being an active young citizen is a journey that involves stages and progression. They acknowledge that not all young people want, or are able, to be involved 100 percent of the time.

Some young people have told us that they have to prioritise finding a job or a volunteering opportunity. Others have additional responsibilities at home, so are unable to commit to anything more than keeping up to date with local democracy online. Some have been honest enough to tell us that a basic understanding of local democracy is enough for them. They will then know how to voice their opinions and seek support should they ever need to.

Our Young Commissioners fully support the ongoing work in Kirklees to create "Civic pathways for young citizens", which is in response to the recommendations of the Kirklees Democracy Commission. This wider work involves Kirklees Council and local partners working together to provide information and co-ordinated options for young people, to support them in participating in local democracy and civic life.



"If it wasn't for the youth council, what would you know about democracy? We'd know nothing about local democracy."
Youth Councillor

Our evidence shows that Kirklees Youth Council can provide valuable opportunities to engage our young citizens in local democracy, at a crucial stage in their journey to adulthood. By connecting the activities of our youth council to activities for children and for school leavers, we can join the dots and create an unbroken pathway through which our young people can grow in confidence and grow as active young citizens.

Our recommendations about growing young citizens are:

- Kirklees Council should actively promote the purpose and activities of Kirklees Youth Council, make it clear how everyone can get involved, and share stories about what the benefits of participating are for young people.
- Young people aged 11 to 16 in Kirklees should have the opportunity to become youth councillors. In addition to this, younger children and school leavers should have opportunities to participate in local democracy activities, in a way that encourages active citizenship.
- Kirklees Youth Council should offer a range of activities that together provide opportunities for young people to progress through stages or levels of participation, growing in skills and confidence along the way. This means including simple, interactive activities for younger participants, core learning activities for youth councillors, and advanced activities for school leavers.
- Kirklees Youth Council should provide a standard "Introduction to local democracy" learning package as part of youth councillor recruitment.
- Kirklees Youth Council should help young people to gain and demonstrate skills that can be part of their CVs. This should include some form of accreditation or award system. We recommend exploring:
 - offering AQA accreditation for "Understanding how to participate in local democracy"
 - a way for participants to easily log their activity
 - other forms of offering reward or recognition
- Kirklees Council should provide clear information on the options for young people to continue participation in local democracy at age 16. This should include opportunities for work, learning and volunteering, along with advice and encouragement for first time voters. This information should be available through any point of contact with young people (not just via Kirklees Youth Council).
- Kirklees Youth Council should develop the current Young Commissioner role, to offer an ongoing opportunity for experienced youth councillors after they leave school. This role could include delivering local democracy training, offering support and advice for new youth councillors, and being an advocate for young people in decision-making processes.

Growing safe spaces



“The youth council is safety in numbers”

Growing safe spaces

Democracy friendly schools

A clear message we have received during our engagement is that Kirklees Youth Council should enable young people to have voice and be a safe space to speak up on issues that are important to them. It's clear from the evidence we've gathered that for children and young people in Kirklees, the place where they would feel safest taking part is at school.

According to Dr Tom Loughran, University of Huddersfield, the Kirklees Youth Survey results tell us that:

- Young people primarily desire real world spaces (as opposed to virtual ones) in which they can interact and engage with each other on issues that they care about.
- Of the respondents who named the spaces where they feel comfortable speaking up, 85% said "at school".
- 57% of all respondents told us that they get information about what's happening in the area where they live from school.

We also heard from a range of stakeholders that they are eager to see opportunities for everyone to talk about politics and democracy openly and safely in schools.

Our participants have suggested that support needs to be provided for teachers and young people if we are to see a long term cultural change in our schools. They acknowledged that there isn't much room on the curriculum for additional activities. However, they suggested that by using citizenship lessons creatively and providing opportunities such as democracy clubs, debating platforms and councillor surgeries, we could begin to create a positive change.

To help us co-ordinate our activities, youth councillors, other youth councils and councillors all recommend that we secure the support of a dedicated adult within each participating school. Kirklees Youth Council relies on its relationships with others to reach young people. If we do not have a relationship with a particular school, then we cannot easily involve the young people within that school community. We believe that teachers have a key role in helping Kirklees Youth Council to grow.

Some of our councillors told us they would like to encourage Kirklees Youth Council to seek the support of ward councillors and let them know whenever we encounter any difficulties in building relationships with local schools. In a meeting with our Young Commissioners, several councillors said they were keen to help broker relationships with local schools, to help improve outcomes for children.

Other youth councils shared similar experiences to Kirklees Youth Council in terms of the challenges of engaging with all the different schools in their area. Most asked that we share our report findings as they were eager to learn new engagement strategies themselves.

Our Young Commissioners acknowledge that schools who engage in future youth council activity would need to commit some staff time and other resources. They also understand that this can become a barrier for some.

So they are keen to see us offering whatever incentives we can to schools, as they know that schools are the key to unlocking opportunities for so many of our young people to participate in local democracy.

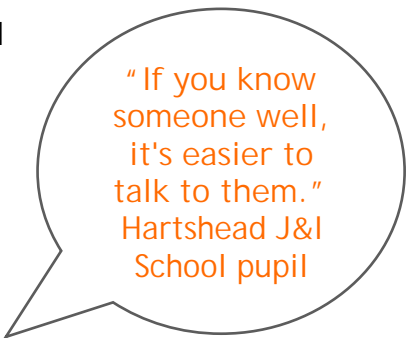
We strongly recommend that schools in Kirklees should be given all the support and encouragement they need to become "Democracy friendly".

Our local democracy menu

In terms of activity, we heard directly from children and young people that they would like to learn about local democracy at school from teachers and their peers.

We've explored this topic in more detail in the "Growing understanding" chapter of our report.

In addition to learning about local democracy, children and young people want to take part in a wide range of related activities that will help them to develop as young citizens.



"If you know someone well, it's easier to talk to them."
Hartshead J&I School pupil

Children and young people have told us they want the following activities in schools:

- Debating opportunities, with support from teachers to make sure that learning takes place safely.
- Engagement activities centred around issues that matter to them.
- Opportunities for peer to peer learning.
- Mostly interactive activities.
- Some bite-sized activities.
- Similar experiences for young people in each school.
- Using events such as the General Election to teach them about democracy.
- Community projects - 42% of survey respondents told us that they would like to be a part of a school project that helps their community.
- Sharing their views with the wider community. This is particularly important as it is a way to share positive stories about active citizenship and the chance to teach adults what life is like in Kirklees for young people today.

Youth councillors have told us how important it is that projects and campaigns are seen through to the end to achieve outcomes, maximise learning and provide them with a sense of achievement. They were keen to share stories about the course of projects changing as learning took place.

However, they also shared frustrations that some activities were not completed.

By providing schools with a range of activity options, training and resources we believe that we can address these concerns.

We are particularly grateful to the youth councils who responded to our call for evidence. They have told us how they implement a wide range of formats and approaches to representation that best suits their area. We have learned that there does not appear to be a one size fits all approach to engaging young people and supporting them to become youth councillors.

Similarly, local young people provided us with lots of suggestions about how young people could be selected or elected to become a Kirklees Youth Councillor in the future.

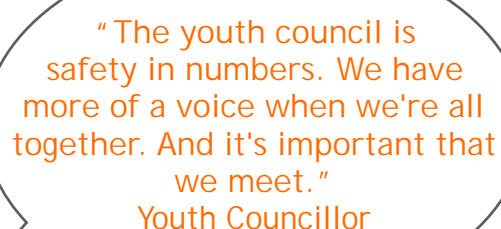
We want to empower all our schools to become democracy friendly, and after consideration our Young Commissioners don't feel that imposing a set method for selecting participants would help with this. We have considered the time and resources that would be needed for some of the suggested methods. We also acknowledge that some schools already have different ways of encouraging pupil voice that they may wish to develop further, such as school councils, mock elections and pupil parliaments.

So for these reasons we are recommending that each participating school should be able to enrol or elect young people in a way that best suits their setting. All participants aged 11 to 16 who complete our introduction to local democracy training would then become Kirklees Youth Councillors. Younger participants would be able to join in our wider network.

By offering a menu of local democracy activities, including age-appropriate activities for primary schools, we would enable all schools to have the opportunity to get involved. We would also begin to create a coherent pathway from primary to secondary schools. This would help each school to become democracy friendly, whilst taking into account the different activities that our children and young people would like.

Bringing young people together

What is unanimous amongst all of our stakeholders is that Kirklees Youth Council should provide opportunities for all representatives to take part in joint activities. Our youth councillors have told us how much they value the opportunity to get to know young people from across Kirklees, and we have seen friendships grow amongst our participants. Young people tell us that they want to be able to meet other young people outside of their school.



"The youth council is safety in numbers. We have more of a voice when we're all together. And it's important that we meet."
Youth Councillor



"We should connect with other schools to see if others have similar issues."
Upper Dearn Valley Navigators member

In his written response², Cllr David Hall suggested that a "Federation of school councils" might work better than a central youth council. Having looked at what young people in Kirklees would like, our Young Commissioners feel that a combination of youth council activities in schools and some joint activities organised by Kirklees Youth Council would give us the best of both options.

We know that we need to be much better at co-ordinating activities with schools, if we are to provide the kind of opportunities that our young people want. Having a network of key contacts (one in each school) would help with sharing information. Some of our participants have also highlighted the need for supportive headteachers and school governors.

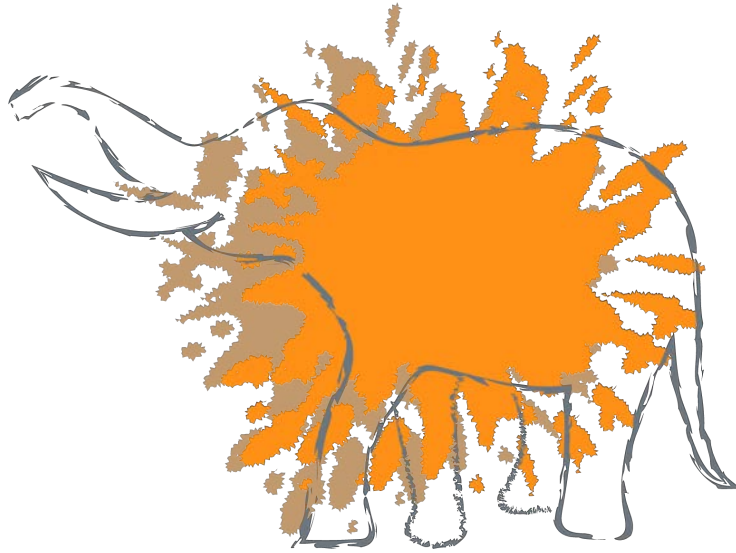
Our Young Commissions feel that it's important to share information regularly with schools. This should include information about joint activities that young people can participate in, but also information about what other local schools are doing. This would help our youth councillors to feel part of the wider Kirklees Youth Council network.

² We have included all the written responses we received from local political group leaders in our Summary evidence pack.

Our recommendations about growing safe spaces are:

- Kirklees Council should develop a Democracy friendly schools scheme in Kirklees. We know that young people want activities in schools, where they feel safe and supported. We should give schools all the encouragement and support needed so that they are able to commit to being a Democracy friendly school. Each participating school should have a key contact who takes responsibility for co-ordinating activities.
- Kirklees Council should offer an incentive for becoming a Democracy friendly school. This could include recognition and a small financial contribution towards staff time. We feel this would be a good investment given that schools have such a key role to play in engaging our young people in local democracy.
- Kirklees Youth Council should provide a menu of activity options for Democracy friendly schools. This should include a core local democracy training offer for high schools (which all youth councillors must complete), activities suitable for primary schools, and ideas for projects to encourage active citizenship.
- Kirklees Council should empower schools to enrol or elect young people as youth councillors in a way that suits their school community best. Our aim should be to have a network of youth councillors across all high schools in Kirklees, with representatives also participating in joint activities.
- Kirklees Youth Council should provide opportunities for youth councillors to meet young people from other schools. It should be a safe space in which young people can talk openly.
- Kirklees Council should have clear, ongoing and co-ordinated communication with schools about local democracy activities. This should include head teachers, key contacts and governors. We should explore easy ways of giving regular updates to school communities, such as providing a presentation slide showing what other young people are doing, which can be shown in school assemblies.

Growing understanding



Democracy is like an elephant

Growing understanding

Democratic education makes a difference

Throughout our evidence gathering we have heard persistent messages from children and young people about local democratic education. Young people have told us that they would value a standardised learning offer that provides them with the foundations on which they can build their knowledge and experience.

We asked participants in our survey whether they had been taught anything about politics or democracy in school:

- Only 15% of participants said “Yes, everything that I need to know”.
- Almost half of participants (48%) said “Yes, but not enough”.
- 37% of participants said “No” or “Not sure”.

When we asked what Kirklees Youth Council should do, 40% of survey respondents told us that we should help them to learn about local democracy.

Dr Tom Loughran’s analysis of our survey results indicates that being taught politics made a small but significant difference to young people’s attitudes towards engagement.

Those who have received at least some politics education are more likely to feel confident that they have a higher level of knowledge about the decisions that effect young people (28%) than those who had not received politics education (19%).

Likewise, young people who have learned something about politics or democracy are also more likely to feel that they can voice their opinions (75%) than those who have not (65%).

Our past and present youth councillors have told us that even when young people do receive some democratic education at school, this is very likely to be focussed on national politics and doesn’t necessarily help our young people to participate in local democracy.

Children and young people have told us that they want to learn about:

- How politics affects them and the benefits of sharing their views.
- Our local democracy and how Government works.
- The role of a Councillor and Member of Parliament.
- How decisions are made.
- How to share their views on local, national and international issues.



“Democracy...
I don’t even know
what that means.”
Batley apprenticeship
event participant

We heard overwhelming evidence that children and young people believe that local democracy education should be taught in schools. Young people also told us that they access many community activities where local democracy education, social action and conversations with decision makers could take place successfully.

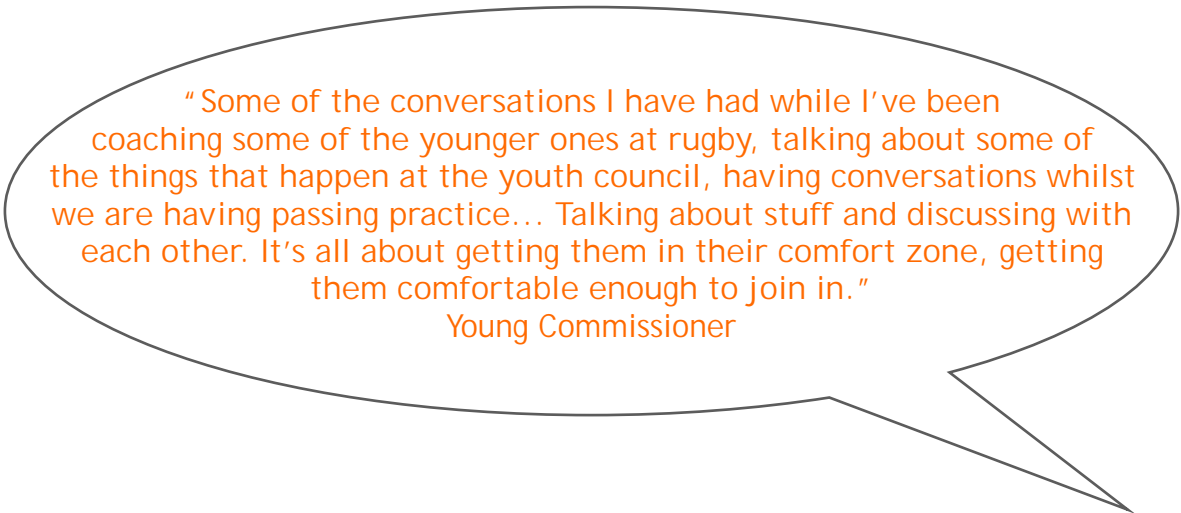
We learned from various stakeholders, including other youth councils, that in addition to teachers, youth workers and community leaders there are a number of others who can deliver local democratic education to children and young people.

They include:

- Young people - peer to peer.
- Local councillors.
- University students.
- Colleges.
- Careers advisors.
- Parents and carers.

Of the 848 different activities that our survey participants told us they get involved in, almost half (47%) are sports activities, 17% are youth clubs or youth groups, and 14% are community activities (including charities, volunteering, campaigns and politics).

Our Young Commissioners discussed the potential opportunities for sharing informal learning about local democracy in these settings, such as talking with other young people at sports clubs, in uniformed organisations and through their community networks. They feel that with some guidance this could be a useful and manageable activity, and would be a good opportunity for our existing youth councillors to stay involved.



"Some of the conversations I have had while I've been coaching some of the younger ones at rugby, talking about some of the things that happen at the youth council, having conversations whilst we are having passing practice... Talking about stuff and discussing with each other. It's all about getting them in their comfort zone, getting them comfortable enough to join in."

Young Commissioner

Having the confidence to participate

We have heard from our youth councillors that learning about democracy helps to grow their confidence and inspires active citizenship - it helps them to feel valued and able to take an active role. This chimes with what local citizens told the Kirklees Democracy Commission, that "we can't get involved if we don't understand how democracy works." We know that growing confidence and familiarity really matters for the participation of citizens of all ages.

"It's like the elephant in the room. Democracy is always there. But we don't want it to be the elephant - we want it to be seen as the norm."
Young Commissioner

Many youth councillors in our discussion workshops were keen to focus on the induction training they received when joining Kirklees Youth Council. They told us that they greatly value the two day "introduction to local democracy" and "leadership skills" training that was provided by Kirklees Council.

"Local democracy education should be for all."
Youth Councillor

Unfortunately, due to funding issues the accreditation element of this learning offer was dropped in recent years. Our Young Commissioners strongly recommend that this is reviewed. Accredited training forms part of a young person's portfolio, which can be used to demonstrate their learning and positive contribution to the community. As well as being of practical use, we know that this recognition also has an impact on young people's sense of personal achievement.

We acknowledge there are groups of children and young people that we need to pay special attention to if we are to be inclusive, as young people want us to be. As part of our engagement we involved organisations who support children and young people with special educational needs, LGBT+ young people, children in care and care leavers, to make sure that we heard from diverse groups.

"Some people have been marginalised from all kinds of power throughout their lives, and those are exactly the young people who we want to reach."
Young Commissioner

"Teachers seem to think they will get told off if they talk about politics, or say something that could be interpreted as being politically biased."
Youth Councillor

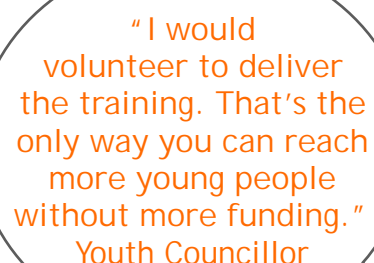
Our evidence clearly demonstrates that we need to work closely with schools and other organisations to make sure that as many of our young people as possible have access to local democratic education. We have heard that growing the confidence of those who support children and young people is also important in this respect. This particularly applies to teachers, who need support to overcome the fear of being seen to influence young people's political views.

Our Young Commissioners are keen to engage as many people as possible who work with young people, and they recognise that pressure on time and resources is a key barrier. We have considered how we can best support those who are willing to deliver local democratic education in their setting, and we would like to introduce a “train the trainer” offer, to be delivered twice a year in manageable bursts.

Echoing young people’s desire for schools to facilitate political discussion and learning, our Young Commissioners believe that we should particularly aim to engage newly qualified teachers in this training.

We understand that children and young people respond well to peer to peer learning opportunities. Young people have expressed concerns that adults do not always understand their perspective or “know what life is like for young people in Kirklees”. By supporting young people to deliver sessions to other young people, and children, we can address some of these concerns.

We have seen our Young Commissioners grow in confidence as they have supported other young people to take part in our engagement activities. Our youth councillors have told us how they would value the opportunity to deliver local democracy training to others. They are eager to share their knowledge, develop life skills and recognise that it is one way to address resource issues.

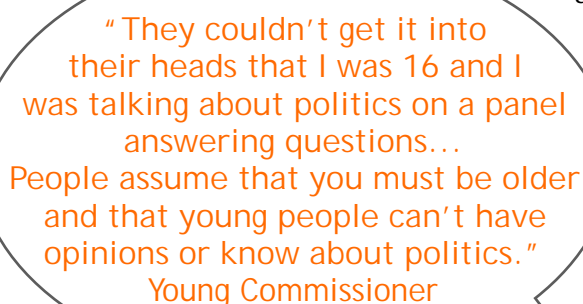
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“I would volunteer to deliver the training. That’s the only way you can reach more young people without more funding.”
Youth Councillor

We also recognise that some young people, who wish to become a member of Kirklees Youth Council, may not attend a participating Democracy friendly school (including those who are home schooled). We recommend providing additional training twice a year to accommodate these young people.

Telling positive stories

A recurring theme throughout our discussions has been that our young people don’t want to be left out of the local democracy story. Our children and young people are doing good things in their local communities - and they want this to be recognised.

A speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the bottom right, containing orange text.

“They couldn’t get it into their heads that I was 16 and I was talking about politics on a panel answering questions... People assume that you must be older and that young people can’t have opinions or know about politics.”
Young Commissioner

Young people told us they are concerned about the way they are perceived by others older than themselves. They believe there is a misconception that young people do not contribute positively to their communities and they are not interested in politics.

They suggest that sharing positive stories about the great things that young people do will help to educate adults and will help to inspire active citizenship amongst their peers.

Our recommendations about growing understanding are:

- Kirklees Council and partner organisations should work together to increase access to local democratic education. Schools, colleges and the University of Huddersfield have an important role to play. However, we should also make sure that everyone has the opportunity to learn about local democracy. We should explore options for involving more people, such as:
 - making learning activities available online
 - working with youth organisations such as uniformed groups and sports clubs
 - finding the right person to deliver training in each setting, so that young people hear information from someone who they trust and can relate to
- Kirklees Council should develop a local democracy “train the trainer” offer to support key contacts in schools and other organisations in delivering our “Introduction to local democracy” training. This would enable more schools and settings to participate in Kirklees Youth Council, and would help teachers and others to feel more confident talking to students about democracy. We would particularly like to see Newly Qualified Teachers participating. The offer should be open to anyone who works with young people in Kirklees and the training should be available for new participants twice each year.
- Kirklees Youth Council should continue to offer local democracy training directly to young people where needed. This should include sessions twice a year open to young people who are not currently in a participating school.
- Kirklees Council should share positive stories about how young people contribute to their local area - and encourage other organisations to share their positive stories. Together we should educate adults about what great things young people do.

Growing relationships



"We are there for each other"

Growing relationships

Connecting with our councillors

We cannot stress enough how important relationships are to our young citizens. The relationships that our young participants grow with each other are clearly very important to them. We have also acknowledged how important our relationships with other people and organisations are for Kirklees Youth Council, both now and for our future development. Amongst these many valuable relationships, having a strong relationship with our Kirklees Councillors is particularly important to our Kirklees Youth Councillors.

One of our Young Commissioners explained there is a common misconception that young people prefer to interact with others using technology, when in fact, they are going back to more simple ways to connect with people. This is something we also heard from young people who participated our group discussion as part of the Kirklees Democracy Commission engagement. They particularly wanted to be able to meet their local representatives to discuss ideas and issues, rather than sharing their views online, which they felt was opening themselves up to criticism.



"Where young people demonstrate an interest I will support them to get involved. It doesn't take a lot of effort to support them if they are curious about our local democracy."
Cllr John Lawson

At one time, Kirklees Youth Council struggled to engage councillors in our work, but the more our youth councillors have had direct contact with ward councillors, the better this relationship has become.

We have witnessed the developing trust and mutual understanding that took place when our Young Commissioners met with Kirklees Councillors during our recent engagement activities. The few hours they spent sharing experiences and ideas was more productive than previous attempts to communicate through briefing notes, emails and written reports.

Young people who have participated in Kirklees Youth Council have described how they would have benefited from similar experiences, to help build stronger relationships with their ward councillors and beyond. They also suggested developing the existing relationship with local MPs.

Feedback for young people has been a recurring theme throughout our engagement. One youth councillor told us how important it was to have received feedback directly from Councillors and MPs at an annual Kirklees Youth Council meeting. This message was reiterated by participants at our 10th anniversary celebration event.

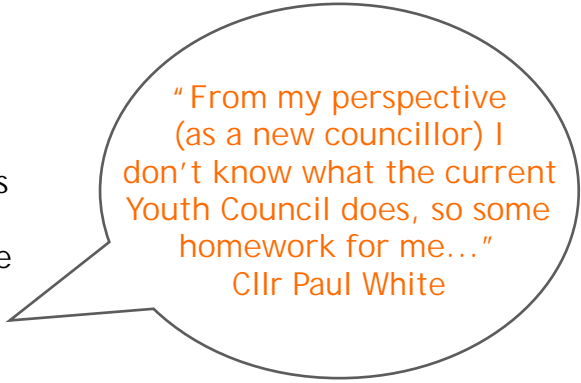
Our Young Commissioners were also keen to include the Mayor of Kirklees in the engagement process, as a result of having supportive feedback from then Mayor Cllr Gwen Lowe at a previous meeting.

They wanted to share experiences and explore ways of developing a relationship with each serving Mayor and Deputy Mayor, in a way that our young people are comfortable with. Other youth councils also suggested growing these kinds of relationships.

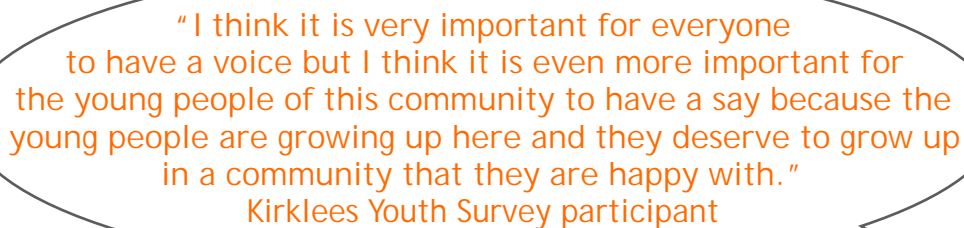
Young people want to learn about the role and function of a Councillor directly from councillors themselves, and would value opportunities such as:

- mentoring
- shadowing
- work placements

Equally, we learned that Kirklees Councillors need to be able to understand the role and function of Kirklees Youth Council if they are to have a successful working partnership.



"From my perspective (as a new councillor) I don't know what the current Youth Council does, so some homework for me..."
Cllr Paul White



"I think it is very important for everyone to have a voice but I think it is even more important for the young people of this community to have a say because the young people are growing up here and they deserve to grow up in a community that they are happy with."
Kirklees Youth Survey participant

The place, not the politics

The kind of relationship that our young participants most want with their councillors is one that's focussed on their local place and the difference they can make there. Schools have an important role in strengthening this relationship.

Over the past two years we have supported a number of councillors on visits to local schools, and visits by local schoolchildren to the Council Chamber. Our Young Commissioners asked Kirklees Councillors to share examples of what they think has worked best in terms of involving schools in local democracy.

The activities councillors think have been most successful are:

- Councillors delivering sessions in primary schools.
- Small group meetings with young people.
- Introducing local democracy using a mock election process and suitable resources, such as a ballot box or polling booth.
- Talking about the role of a Councillor and answering questions.
- Taking the politics out of it.

- Using the 'Meet your Councillor' pack, which Kirklees Youth Council provided to all councillors in October 2017.³

Children clearly enjoy their visits to the Council Chamber, which can be in a number of formats. A session that we received particularly positive feedback about involved children from the Colne Valley meeting their ward councillors and learning some basics about local democracy. Importantly, the children were

encouraged to discuss local issues they care about prior to the visit, which they then debated and voted on during the visit, to choose a project to work on. Ward councillors then offered to work directly with the school to help the children develop their project. This can turn a one-off visit into an ongoing relationship.

"Younger people actually care about the places where they live."
Nature's Footprints member

"We need a group of young people to represent us."
BBG Academy participant

We have heard from Kirklees Councillors that visits to primary schools work best. Our Young Commissioners feel that councillors should continue with this focus, and that our youth councillors can play a greater role in being advocates for young people in our secondary schools. Our youth councillors can be a strong point of connection between ward councillors and young people aged 11 to 16.

"I enjoy my visits into the primary schools: always well-received by the staff and pupils."
Cllr David Hall

"We have done a number of school visits... I enjoy these and I feel it helps demystify what a councillor is and helps young people know we exist and have a role."
Cllr Andrew Cooper

"I find that at a younger age children are a lot more responsive and it's also pretty encouraging because they know what's going on in their community."
Cllr Sheikh Ullah

"We can all try to reach out to everyone within that ward, including young people."
Cllr Alison Munro

³ Launch of the councillor toolkit for schools:
<http://www.democracycommission.org.uk/launch-of-the-councillor-toolkit-for-schools/>

Our Young Commissioners want to support councillors and young people to connect with each other. They suggest that Kirklees Youth Council can help to broker the relationship between councillors and young people in their wards by:

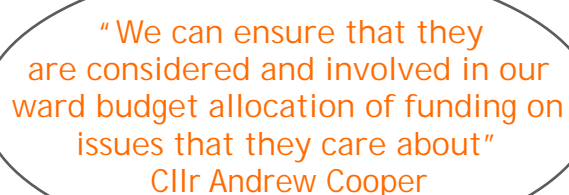
- Providing councillors with resources to help them engage with children and young people, including an updated version of the 'Meet your Councillor' pack. Participants also suggested that we create a similar pack for MPs.
- Supporting Councillor Surgeries in local schools.
- Creating additional opportunities for young people to meet with councillors on an issue basis, or in friendship groups.
- Developing ideas for community projects with local schools.

By working together to engage with and listen to other young people in the school, this will help to grow the confidence of our youth councillors and will also help more young people to have an awareness of their ward councillors.

As we have highlighted in other chapters of our report, young people want to take part in a school project that helps their community.

Some of our evidence suggests that young people want to work on a shared project, campaign or issue, with one focus at a time. Others have suggested it is important that young people design activities based on issues that matter to them.

Our Young Commissioners have evaluated the evidence and come to the conclusion that the majority of young people expressed a preference for being involved in something they care about. They think that it is important to encourage schools to work together to support young people to become active citizens in the ways that young people want.




"We can ensure that they are considered and involved in our ward budget allocation of funding on issues that they care about"
Cllr Andrew Cooper

We know that our past youth councillors have sometimes found it difficult to complete community projects in their schools. Lack of funding and support have affected young people's ability to do something practical and helpful for their community.

Our Young Commissioners feel that councillors can help to overcome some of these barriers by working with young people to develop their projects and by helping them to access sources of funding. We know that some of our ward councillors are already actively trying to do more of this, as a result of growing a stronger relationship with Kirklees Youth Council.

Young people have told us that they also want connections beyond their school. We feel that ward councillors have a role to play in connecting Kirklees Youth Council with the wider community in their wards. This could be by involving local groups and organisations in school projects, or by helping to promote the youth council when making contact with other young people in their wards.



"We should also encourage councillors to visit youth organisations such as scout groups and cadets. You reach different kinds of people then."
Young Commissioner

"It has given her more confidence, helped her voice her opinions and given her a better outlook."
Parent survey participant

Keeping in touch

Without parents and carers we would not have been able to engage young people in Kirklees Youth Council activity. We would like to thank them for their support, trust and contribution to our journey over the past ten years.

During our engagement we asked parents and carers of youth councillors for feedback using a short survey. They told us that being a part of Kirklees Youth Council was a good experience for their child.

In terms of what the youth council should do in the future, the most popular responses were to help young people:

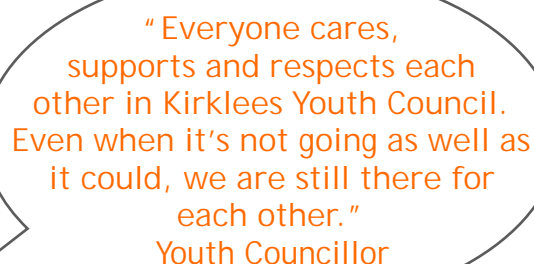
- Have a voice.
- Learn new skills and be more confident.
- Learn about local democracy.
- Have debates about issues they care about.

However, we received only a few responses to our parents survey. So that we could hear from more parents and carers, we asked our current and past youth councillors to share insights about whether being part of the youth council had any impact at home. They told us how they have shared their learning about local democracy with their parents, many of whom are not well-informed about local democracy.

Parents' engagement with Kirklees Youth Council at the moment is quite low. We know that if we are to broaden our reach we need new approaches for engaging with parents and carers in the future. Our Young Commissioners recommend that we need to:

- Describe Kirklees Youth Council clearly.
- Introduce the Kirklees Council officers who will be working alongside young people.
- Outline the benefits of participating.
- Share progress updates.
- Encourage and support parents and carers to become active citizens.

Past and present youth councillors passionately describe how they have made lifelong friendships with others in the network. They have been eager to tell us how they have formed relationships with young people from parts of Kirklees that they “never knew existed” before their involvement in Kirklees Youth Council.



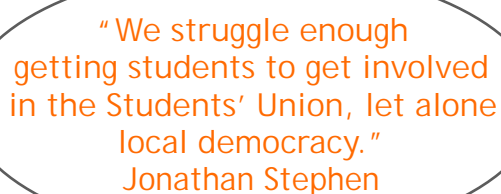
“Everyone cares, supports and respects each other in Kirklees Youth Council. Even when it’s not going as well as it could, we are still there for each other.”
Youth Councillor

For this reason, and many others, they have urged us to create a form of Alumni Network for young people, so that more of our youth councillors can keep in touch after the age of 16.

We have already described how the transition from primary to secondary school has a particular impact on young people’s engagement. We also need to think about what opportunities there are for progression as part of local democracy and civic life when our young people leave school. Our work with Young Commissioners has brought this issue into sharp focus. They are engaged, generous and thoughtful young citizens who are actively looking for ways to continue their participation.

Our relationships with local colleges and with the University of Huddersfield are important for creating more coherent civic pathways for our young citizens. We are grateful to Jonathan Stephen, who joined our team of Young Commissioners as President of the University of Huddersfield Students’ Union (2018 to 2019). He took part in some of our group discussions, and has provided a written response about work he is currently involved in to encourage active citizenship amongst students.⁴

Jonathan has shared his thoughts and suggestions on behalf of Educating Kirklees, which is a conference looking at how to help University and sixth form college students be more engaged. He has highlighted issues including the relationship between Kirklees Councillors and students, how we could nurture young people who are interested in becoming councillors, and the need for a physical space where young people can meet, participate in extra-curricular activities and develop life skills. This would be a safe space to foster democratic engagement.



“We struggle enough getting students to get involved in the Students’ Union, let alone local democracy.”
Jonathan Stephen

⁴ Jonathan’s written response is included in our Summary evidence pack.

Young people who have taken part in Kirklees Youth Council have commented that we have become disconnected from wider national organisations. They want us to develop relationships with other youth councils and re-establish connections with the UK Youth Parliament and the British Youth Council. Although we are very much focussed on local democracy, we know that some of our young people also want the opportunity to get involved in national and international issues that affect young people.

We heard directly from youth councils across the UK that it is important to become members of these two national organisations and to develop relationships with other bodies, such as Young Citizens, the League of Young Voters and the UK Parliament Education Outreach Team, as an additional way of educating and engaging young people.

We would like to say thank you to all the organisations who have taken part in our engagement activities. These connections have been vital for helping us to understand what our children and young people want, and what we can learn from other people's experiences. We very much hope that we can keep in touch and grow these relationships in the future.

Our recommendations about growing relationships are:

- Kirklees Council should encourage Kirklees councillors, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Kirklees, and local MPs to meet with members of Kirklees Youth Council and to support their activities.
- Kirklees Council should encourage and support collaborative working between councillors and youth councillors in our wards. This could include:
 - developing ideas for community projects with local schools
 - providing an updated version of our “Meet your councillor” pack, to support councillors in talking to young people
 - involving youth councillors in organising and running councillor visits and surgeries in schools
 - shadowing and mentoring opportunities
- Kirklees councillors should work with Kirklees Youth Council to explore sources of funding and support for projects in their ward. Youth councillors would like to be able to access small pots of funding to act on the ideas of young people and their wider community. This could include:
 - councillors contributing funds from their ward budgets
 - providing funding directly to schools to fund community action
 - supporting young people to crowdfund in their community via Growing Great Places
 - accessing other funding schemes (current local examples include “You and Your Community” and “It’s up to you”)
- Kirklees Council should encourage schools to work together to support young people to become active citizens in their community. This could include designing or participating in a community activity.
- Kirklees Council should keep in contact with the parents of youth councillors to offer information and reassurance. Parents should receive clear information about who will be working with their young people (ideally with photos), what kind of activities they will be participating in, and what the benefits are. Participating schools could share this information. Parents should also be given the option of joining the Kirklees Democracy email list.
- Kirklees Youth Council should keep track of direct and indirect contacts, to create a clearer picture of who we are reaching and what the impact of Kirklees Youth Council is. We should encourage all organisations who are involved to share information about their activities (including which community projects youth councillors are involved in, and how many people have participated).

- Kirklees Youth Council should create an alumni network which young people can choose to join at age 16. This should enable young people to keep in touch with each other, to find out about the latest opportunities to get involved and to share learning. As a starting point, our former youth councillors should be invited to join this network and encouraged to share ideas for how it will work.

Growing a stronger voice



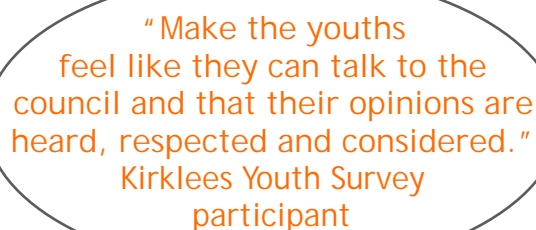
"The voice is meant to go
up from young people,
not down from the council."

Growing a stronger voice

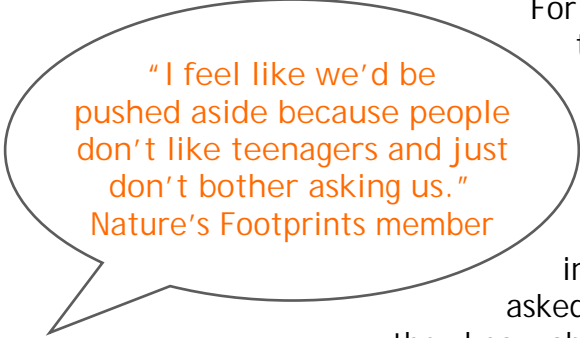
Being part of the conversation

One of the key headlines of Dr Tom Loughran's analysis of the Kirklees Youth Survey results is that young people's sense of voice matters.

Those who felt they could voice their opinions were significantly more likely to engage in community activities and to believe that they had a higher level of knowledge about the decisions that affect them than those who did not. They were also more likely to have heard of Kirklees Youth Council.



"Make the youths feel like they can talk to the council and that their opinions are heard, respected and considered."
Kirklees Youth Survey participant



"I feel like we'd be pushed aside because people don't like teenagers and just don't bother asking us."
Nature's Footprints member

For participants in our survey, expressing their voice seems to matter slightly more than whether or not they feel this voice is heard. This is consistent with other parts of the survey, where young people express stronger preferences for places to interact with other young people than for getting involved in things like campaigns. We also asked our participants to rate how much they feel they know about decisions that affect young people. The most popular response was 5/10 (21%). A further 40% chose scores below this.

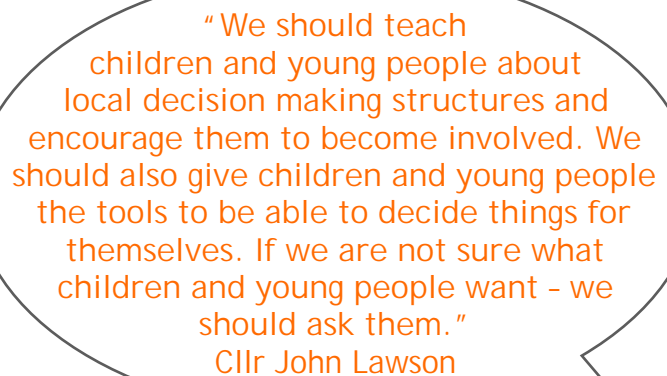
In our engagement sessions, children and young people have told us that they want opportunities for discussion and debate. Things they asked for include:

- Schools to create space for debate and to facilitate it.
- The opportunity to discuss current affairs.
- Opportunities to debate in school and in the community.
- To talk with decision makers face to face at school.
- To share their views.
- To learn new skills such as public speaking and how to listen to each other.
- Everyone to be given the opportunity to voice their opinions.

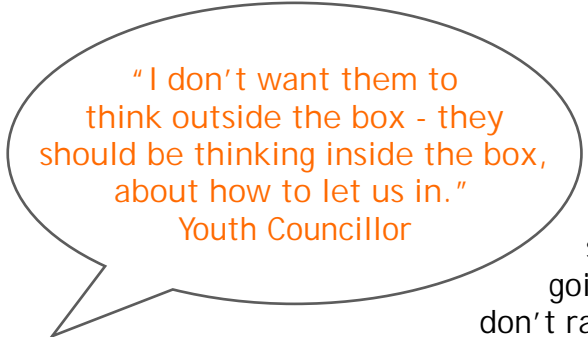
Our conversations with past and current youth councillors have shown us that having a safe space to talk and to learn about local democracy is the starting point for their journey to being active citizens. Once our youth councillors understand how the decisions that affect them are made, they then are no longer satisfied with just speaking up - they also want to know that they are being listened to.

They have told us that they want to be part of the conversation, and part of deciding what happens as a result of it.

To have a voice in local decisions, our youth councillors recognise that they need effective working relationships with ward councillors. Before they are able to work in partnership with councillors, some young people told us that they need to build more trusting relationships. They want reassurance that their positive contributions will be taken into account when decisions are made about issues that affect them.



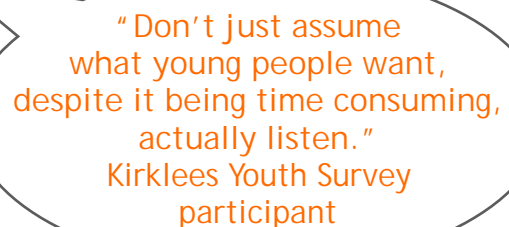
"We should teach children and young people about local decision making structures and encourage them to become involved. We should also give children and young people the tools to be able to decide things for themselves. If we are not sure what children and young people want - we should ask them."
Cllr John Lawson



"I don't want them to think outside the box - they should be thinking inside the box, about how to let us in."
Youth Councillor

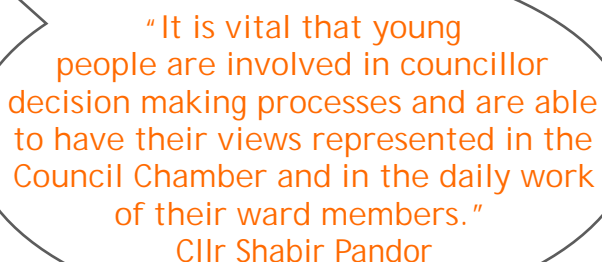
Although relationships are improving, some of our youth councillors told us that they think there's a feeling of disconnect between young people and councillors, especially at a local level. They went on to say that young people assume they aren't going to be taken seriously, therefore they don't raise their issues and things go left unsaid.

During the course of our engagement we heard that children and young people are often asked for their views on a range of issues, but on many occasions they are not provided with feedback about what's changed as a result. This acts as a barrier for future engagement as young people feel left out of the decision making process.



"Don't just assume what young people want, despite it being time consuming, actually listen."
Kirklees Youth Survey participant

In terms of decision making, our young people have told us that they want to know where they fit in. Councillors discussed this with our Young Commissioners, and both agreed that Kirklees Youth Council would benefit from having a designated Kirklees Council Cabinet lead. This would help young people to feel supported by Kirklees Council, and would provide a platform for sharing issues and ideas that cannot otherwise be addressed on a local level.



"It is vital that young people are involved in councillor decision making processes and are able to have their views represented in the Council Chamber and in the daily work of their ward members."
Cllr Shabir Pandor

Young people who have taken part in Kirklees Youth Council have also highlighted the need for an allocated budget. They told us that a lack of resources has sometimes prevented them from completing projects or travelling to meetings and has impacted on team building.

Our Young Commissioners would like to know what budget is available so that they can have a voice in what activities Kirklees Youth Council does, and can continue to be part of planning for the future. They were equally as eager that we spend money sensibly and where possible work in partnership with others who can help.

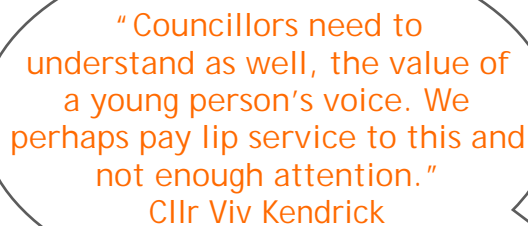


"We need more resources and support to work things through to completion".
Youth Councillor

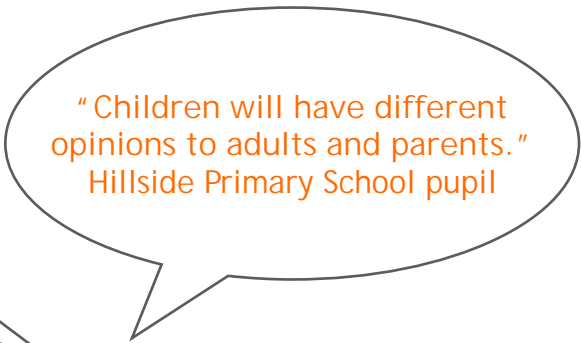
Tasks, not tokens

Building, and maintaining, meaningful relationships with councillors has been high on our young citizens' list of priorities throughout our engagement. They have been far less inclined to suggest new formal structures and procedures as ways for young people to participate in local democracy. Instead they have placed importance on being active citizens.

We need to consider how to involve young people in local decision making, in a way that is consistent with this.



"Councillors need to understand as well, the value of a young person's voice. We perhaps pay lip service to this and not enough attention."
Cllr Viv Kendrick

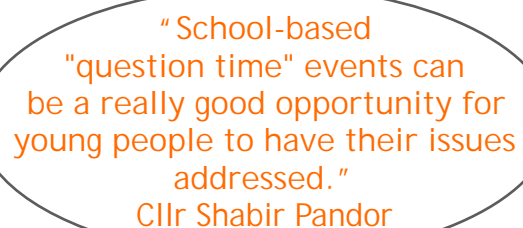


"Children will have different opinions to adults and parents."
Hillside Primary School pupil

It is equally important to young people that they develop confidence. We heard on many occasions that formality can act as a barrier for many young people. By developing relationships with councillors, our young people feel that they can have more meaningful conversations, and that their views will be represented when decisions are being made.

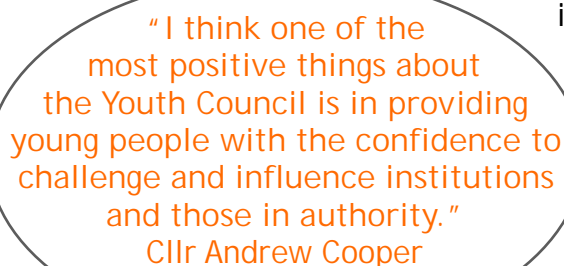
Other youth councils told us that they include young people in:

- The commissioning process.
- Council meetings and scrutiny panels.
- Question and answer sessions with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet.



"School-based 'question time' events can be a really good opportunity for young people to have their issues addressed."
Cllr Shabir Pandor

Our Young Commissioners have considered ways of involving young people in decision making conversations and processes, without creating unnecessary formality, and have discussed this with councillors. Ideas we received from Kirklees Councillors included involving youth councillors in working parties, having shadow debates on topics that Kirklees Council are debating, and inviting young people to public meetings in their ward.

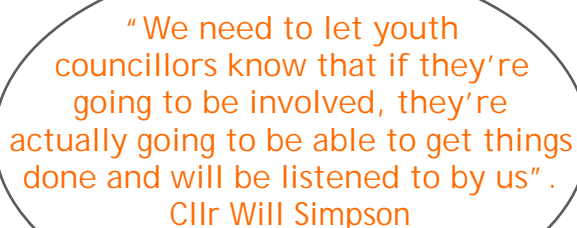


"I think one of the most positive things about the Youth Council is in providing young people with the confidence to challenge and influence institutions and those in authority."
Cllr Andrew Cooper

This discussion led to Kirklees Youth Council being invited to have a representative on the Kirklees Climate Emergency Working Party. We see this as a positive step forwards, as we know it is this kind of opportunity for direct involvement that some of our young people want. Youth councillors who participated in the work of the Kirklees Democracy Commission have reflected on what a positive experience that has been, noting that they have "changed some of the outcomes".

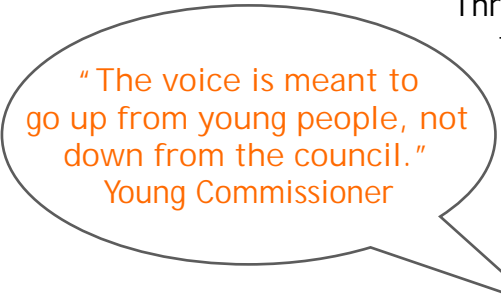
Where young people have developed confidence, we recommend that they should have opportunities to provide feedback directly to councillors on relevant issues, and to be involved in the "doing" of local democracy. Our young citizens have been very clear that they want direct involvement.

They have told us that they do not want token gestures or to be figureheads. On a personal level, they just want to be included. They want to know that the door is always open for them, and that they are not shut out until they are old enough to vote. Our young people want to be part of decision making, not ceremony.



"We need to let youth councillors know that if they're going to be involved, they're actually going to be able to get things done and will be listened to by us".
Cllr Will Simpson

Giving responsibility, taking responsibility



"The voice is meant to go up from young people, not down from the council."
Young Commissioner

Throughout our engagement activities, we have seen that young people are willing to take responsibility. They want to manage their own projects to help their community, they show a keen sense of responsibility for each other, and they have told us that they want to be part of decision making. They are willing to do the work and are keen to give something back to support other young people.

Participants at our 10th anniversary celebration event, and other youth councils, told us that it's important to get the support of council officers. We recognise the important role officers have, either directly or indirectly, in enabling young people to become active citizens.

If we are to give our young people more responsibility in terms of decision making, we also need to take responsibility for making sure that we can support them to participate. This means making sure that we can give enough time to supporting our young people, that the information they're being asked to consider is clear and easy to understand, and that we can make the experience meaningful for them.

We want our Kirklees Council staff to feel confident and enthusiastic about involving young people. We want to support them to understand the role of Kirklees Youth Council and encourage them to enable more young people to be involved in local decision making. We also note the reflections of some of our councillors, that we should perhaps think of our role as corporate parents in the widest sense, with a responsibility for all our young people.

Finally, we would like to say a sincere thank you to all the Kirklees Councillors who have shown interest in, and support for, the work of Kirklees Youth Council. We know that this means a huge amount to our young citizens.

Our Young Commissioners would like to see all of our Kirklees Councillors actively engaging with young people in their wards. So they have one final request for our councillors: please help us to grow a stronger youth council by supporting and encouraging each other to get involved.

Our recommendations about growing a stronger voice are:

Kirklees Council should have a designated Cabinet lead for Kirklees Youth Council, so that young people know who they can approach with issues and ideas, and so that there is a clear route for involving youth councillors in policy development.

Kirklees Council should allocate a budget for Kirklees Youth Council and share this information with youth councillors.

Kirklees councillors should look for opportunities to involve young people in Kirklees Council's decision-making processes where possible. This could include:

- young people being invited to participate in working groups
- hearing from youth councillors as a "sounding board"
- asking young people to give input on relevant issues

Kirklees Council should provide clear processes for involving young people in decision-making, so that this can become a familiar, easily-manageable part of how we work together.

Kirklees Council should provide training and encouragement for council officers, so that they feel confident in working with young people. If we want to enable young people to be more involved in local decision-making, it's important that we also have more officers who are able to offer support.

Kirklees councillors who have already shown a keen interest in working with Kirklees Youth Council should actively encourage and support their colleagues to get involved.

Why do we need to grow a stronger youth council?



We know that people have very different views about our youth council. Some feel that it's already doing so well there is no need to change things, whilst others feel that we shouldn't have a youth council at all. But that's just what the adults think.

What we committed to do, in response to both challenge and support, is to make sure that our young citizens have the strongest voice possible in what happens next. So we've focused on what children and young people in Kirklees think.

By working closely with schools and local organisations, we have made sure that as many young people as possible had the chance to share their views. We asked questions that our young people could understand. Only after we heard what young people think did we ask how our youth council might find a place in their lives.

What we have discovered is that Kirklees Youth Council can (and does) have a place. And it has the potential to support many more of our young people with the activities that they want to be part of, in the way that they want to participate.

If we each have a pathway to being involved in local democracy and civic life, the youth council can be there at a key stage of that personal journey and stop our pathways from being broken. Thanks to the openness of our participants, and the thoughtfulness of our Young Commissioners, we now have a better understanding of how Kirklees Youth Council can be there for everyone, when they need it.

We need to grow a stronger youth council. By helping our young citizens to learn, grow and discover democracy, we will strengthen active citizenship in Kirklees.

What happens next?

Jacob Stelling



As a Kirklees Youth Councillor, Jacob has made sure that the young people he represents have a voice. He is an active campaigner for young people's democratic education and has been keen to share his learning about local and national democracy. He brought parliament into the classroom at Shelley College by hosting a visit for Chris Skidmore MP, then Minister for the Constitution, to demonstrate his peer-to-peer learning programme. Jacob then introduced over a thousand of his peers to democracy during school assemblies.

He has given speeches, facilitated Active Citizens workshops, participated in a Q&A panel, spoken in a Full Council debate and designed young people's engagement activities. He won a Diana Award for his work to promote local democracy.

Jacob says: "It was a spur of the moment decision to just turn up and see what it was like. It honestly has changed my life forever. We've got a good thing, so let's develop it and make it even better."

Georgia Power



Georgia told us that in year 10 at high school, she had an awful attendance and was pretty much considered to not be in education. She wasn't badly behaved, just too scared to go to school. She would have panic attacks and hide away, she self harmed, and she was reliant on her eating disorder to get her through the day. Things began to change for Georgia when she was introduced to Kirklees Youth Council and asked to help redesign a CAMHS (child and adolescent mental health services) leaflet. Georgia says that because Michelle from the youth council team was patient and didn't give up on her, she gradually gained some confidence.

She made new friends and started looking forward to the new experiences on offer, such as an internship at the Department for Communities and Local Government. 10 years on, Georgia is a Nottingham City Councillor, with a lead on mental health issues. She says that participating in Kirklees Youth Council changed (and probably saved) her life.

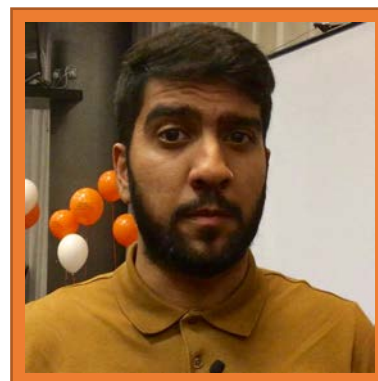
Her message to current youth councillors is "It's one of the best things you will ever do. I have no idea where you will end up, but everything you learn from Kirklees Youth Council will help get you there".

Khizar Akbar

Khizar told us that being part of the youth council was “far better than what I had imagined”. He had anticipated getting involved in talks and perhaps a few odd discussions here and there. He was pleased to find that it was very much about his own voice as a young person who could represent his local community. He got involved in a number of activities to help put forward young people’s concerns, such as a democracy day where the youth council partnered with the University of Huddersfield. He is particularly proud of being involved in the initiative for a Young Carers Card and organising a young carers conference for the first time in Kirklees.

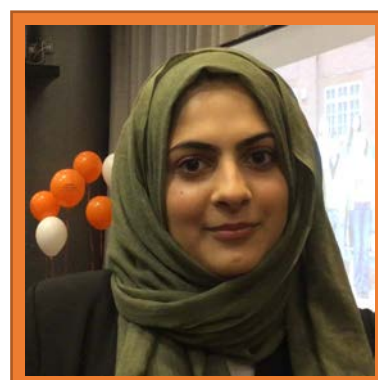
This raised awareness about the significant issues that our young carers can have.

Khizar’s advice for young people is: “Get involved and get your voices heard. The best way to do that is through an organisation such as the youth council”. Khizar is now studying for a masters degree in Politics and International Relations.



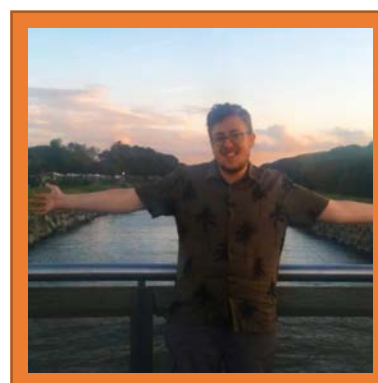
Aishah Naim

Aishah says that one thing she really took from Kirklees Youth Council was the sense of belonging it gave everyone: “We were all working together for the betterment of young people across Kirklees. Even to this day, I’ll still call Michelle if I need something, like a reference for a new job. One thing I hope for the future of the youth council is, I want to see a Prime Minister come out of the youth council. That’s what I want.”

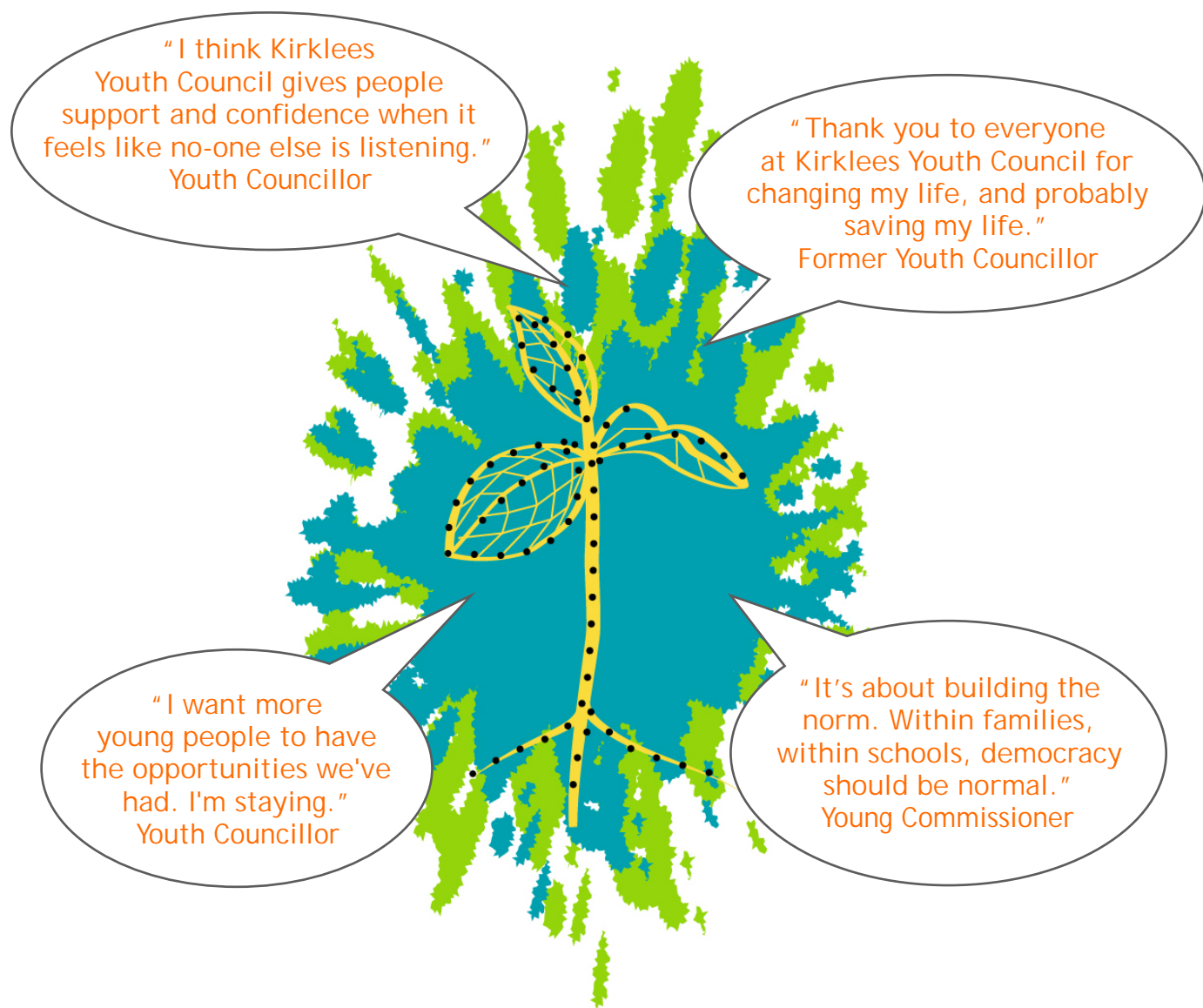


Chris Wainwright

Chris made a video for us, to reflect on his personal journey. He says it was a huge thing, as a young person lacking in confidence, to be told that others believed in him. He wants to see us empowering the leaders of tomorrow, so that our young people can tackle challenges such as climate change. He says this has to start at a grassroots level, by helping young people to be involved in local democracy, have confidence, develop networking skills and speak out about the changes in the world that they want to see. Chris told us that his voice as an activist was “10 years in the making” and that he started to find it by being part of Kirklees Youth Council.



Watch our videos at: www.DemocracyCommission.org.uk





Find out more and get involved at:
www.DemocracyCommission.org.uk



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