



How to connect young people with decision-makers

Proudly supporting youth social action

#iwill



Department for Culture, Media & Sport



COMMUNITY FUND



THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH VOICE

Part of YMCA George Williams College

Introduction

This guidance helps practitioners to work with young people to engage people in positions of power in order to influence the decisions which impact young people and their communities.

The guide offers practical guidance should you be:

- Looking to identify the right decision-makers to connect with;
- Seeking to explain decision-makers' roles to young people;
- Engaging and approaching decision-makers or their teams for a meeting;
- Meeting with decision-makers; or
- Following up with decision-makers after the meeting.

This guide mainly focuses on situations where young people seek to connect with decision-makers. However, the advice may be useful when decision-makers approach you to meet with young people.

Following this guidance and adapting it to your context should help you to:

- More easily connect with decision-makers;
- Reduce risks of unethical or tokenistic activity; and
- Proportionately manage safeguarding risks.

Why this is important for effective youth voice activities

Youth voice activities support young people to form and express their views and share them to create positive change in their lives and for others in their community. Often, young people must persuade decision-makers to change current policies, behaviours, or approaches.

Evidence from the #iwill Fund 'Evaluating Youth Voice' research project showed that young people are motivated to engage and remain involved in youth voice activities when they have contact with decision-makers in positions of power and influence. Effective youth voice activities can open doors to corridors of power for young people who are often excluded from decision-making. It can also provide contact with those who make decisions that affect young people. Our evidence suggests that when young people engage in youth voice activities which they believe have a credible link to decision-makers who can enact change, they are more likely to get and stay involved.



Benefits of engaging with decision-makers

A positive process of connecting young people and decision-makers is more likely to result in:

Young people being heard: they can directly offer their views to people in power. Those who have the power to change will hear their views, wishes and experiences directly.

Young people being motivated: increased access to decision-makers can motivate young people to be involved. Engaging with decision-makers can be a memory-making and significant life experience for young people.

Decision-makers being influenced: those with the power to make decisions will be more aware of, and hopefully willing to adapt to, the views of young people.



Challenges when engaging decision-makers

For practitioners who are supporting young people, this process of engaging with decision-makers can create unique challenges.

Your knowledge: along with young people, you may face barriers to engage decision-makers. You may not have immediate access or understanding of the individuals to contact.

Resistance: some decision-makers may not value young people's perspectives or be resistant to listening to young people and avoid engaging with young people. This and wider time pressures may lead to engagement with young people being deprioritised.

Tokenism: some decision-makers may seek engagement for their own benefits, such as positive publicity. This can lead to tokenistic activities that do not truly enable young people to be heard.

Disagreement: some decision-makers may disagree with young people's views. Some could express this in a manner which is challenging for young people to experience.

Challenging behaviour: both decision-makers and young people may be nervous about their meeting. They may not have much experience of being in one another's company. Decision-makers may behave in ways young people find exclusionary or intimidating and young people may display challenging behaviour.

Overcoming perceived differences: decision-makers and young people may have very different social and cultural backgrounds. Initial perceptions and mutual fear of 'the other' can be difficult to overcome. Finding common groups and breaking down perceptions or prejudice may be necessary for an enriching discussion and engagement.

Disappointment: young people may have high expectations of their engagement and the scope of change. Young people's views may not persuade decision-makers who

need to weigh the views heard with other considerations. This can frustrate young people and discourage them from youth voice activities.



What do we mean by decision-makers in positions of power and influence?

By decision-makers in this context, we mean the individuals or groups with the power to create the change young people seek. Sometimes they may be very senior roles, other times it may be a middle manager who has ability to influence decisions. Much will depend on the focus area of your youth voice activities and the interests of young people.

		When this may be relevant	Learn more
Internal to your organisation	Members of the Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people seek a change to a policy or strategy of the organisation To build accountability to young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If your organisation is a charity, the Board are trustees. Learn about their role on the NCVO website
	Chief Executives or Directors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people seek to change how the organisation delivers its work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See the model role description of a CEO by ACEVO
External to your organisation	Local service leaders such as Directors or Commissioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people seek better or changed services 	
	Local decision-makers such as Councillors. They are politicians who volunteer their time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people seek to change a local policy 	Details on the different types of councils are on the gov.uk website. Learn more about the work of Councillors on the Be a Councillor campaign
	National political representatives such as MPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people seek to change a national policy 	Learn more about MPs on the UK Parliament website
	National decision-makers such as members of the Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people seek to change a Government policy 	A full list of Government ministers and their responsibilities is on gov.uk .

Identify the right people

Often, finding out who makes what decisions can be unclear or confusing. Always lead activities to ensure you identify the right decision-maker. Never rush who to approach. It makes it easier for decision-makers to excuse young people and can be disheartening to young people.



Potential activities

Root cause: with young people, go through the process of discovering the underlying key causes of problems to identify appropriate solutions and who is responsible for them. This can be delivered as a workshop to produce ‘a tree’: the trunk is the problem, the leaves are the symptoms or consequences, and the roots are the causes. See examples on the [Compass website](#) or how it's been used by the [Uprise Youth Tobacco](#) movement.

Power mapping: with young people, try to research and map the key stakeholders for the issue they are passionate about. You then map them across two axes: how much power each individual on your list has over the issue and how strongly they agree or disagree with the young people. Learn more and access clear instructions on the [Beautiful Trouble website](#).

Jane works with a youth homelessness charity and supports a youth panel – all previously homeless. The group agree that a big issue is barriers to healthcare. Initially, they want to meet with GPs to make registering easier. After undertaking a power mapping exercise, they identified that it would be better to influence the Integrated Care Board (ICB) which commissions local GPs. If the ICB changes its expectations, all GPs in the area would be impacted.



Top tip: *the decision-maker may feel like a ‘big fish’ to you and the young people; we might assume they have the ability to influence. However, the decision-maker may feel like a small fish in a bigger pond; they may feel constrained to change decisions. Never assume who can decide what and encourage an open dialogue about the change sought and constraints for change.*

Plan before you approach

Inform your line manager: in some organisations, there may be protocols for who has permitted access to decision-makers or who can represent the organisation to external decision-makers.

Check your history with the contact: ask internally whether the organisation has ever had contact with the decision-maker. What took place? When? Was there any learning from the connection? What was the follow-up?

Map potential contacts: ask internally whether an individual has a direct relationship with the decision-maker, either professionally or personally. Could this initial link help with the approach? Have any of the young people previously met these decision-makers, perhaps through another youth voice activity? Does anyone have a family member who may be in contact with them?

Managing any difference between your organisation and the young people's views

Your organisation may have an independent relationship with the decision-maker. They may commission your organisation, be involved in funding decisions which impact your organisation, or you may be involved in lobbying them to change their policies. At points, the corporate views of your organisation and those of the young people you work with may differ. While your focus should be to enable young people to be heard, you need to be clear that their views may differ from the policy position or lobbying the organisation's staff are engaged in. It should be explicit that the young people share their perspectives, some of which may overlap with the corporate view of the organisation, but they do not necessarily represent the organisation's views. They speak for themselves.

James is working with a group of young people in care who would like their local authority to end out-of-area placements immediately. However, his organisation has a policy position agreed by the Board that out-of-area placements are currently necessary but should be gradually phased out. James meets with the organisation's Head of Policy and agrees that ethically they should support the young people to be heard. Young people are informed about the organisation's views but encouraged to share their perspectives. The Head of Policy agrees to capture and incorporate the views in their next policy briefing.



Making the approach

Clarify their responsibilities: research in advance to check you're contacting the right decision-maker for the issue.

Find the right contact details: a personal approach is best wherever possible. Decision-makers, like Councillors and MPs, will often have websites with clear ways of contacting them. For others, you will need to research to get the right contact details.

Be flexible: avoid fixed options for when or how to meet. Be clear about when your group meets and whether you are inviting them to meet you or if you could visit them.

Get out and about: visiting a decision-maker at their place of work can be an interesting and eye-opening experience for young people. While these trips require additional planning and risk management, they can expose young people to new spaces and support their sense of self-confidence and the value of being heard.

Explain the group: always explain the group, how many young people participate, and their backgrounds to decision-makers. Do not assume that decision-makers will understand jargon or terms commonly used by youth organisations to describe the young people you work with.

Preparing decision-makers before they meet young people

Check expectations: be clear with the young people and the decision-maker about the expected space and format. Does the venue you are going to have a dress code? Are there any minimum rules on security or what to bring? How much time is available? Will the decision-maker have dedicated time to this group, or may they have other parallel commitments?

Share your risk assessment or safeguarding expectations: depending on the event and space, you may have the primary duty of care for the young people while they are meeting with the decision-maker. With this:

- Ensure that the decision-maker (or their staff) are aware of any expectations for safeguarding; including that you will be supervising the group;
- Ask them for any risk assessments for the venue
- Share key information about potentially sensitive topics or areas of known distress or trauma for the group
- Set any parameters on the use of imagery and consent. Be clear on who should take any photos or videos and how they should be used
- Consider any top tips about how they can best engage young people.



Explain your role: it's important that decision-makers understand that your role is to support the young people to be heard and that their views may not reflect yours or your organisation's viewpoint. Be explicit about what preparatory work the young people have done before meeting the decision-maker and how they have formed their own views on the issue. It's especially important when meeting internal decision-makers to clarify your role.

David is a local Parish Councillor. He is invited to the Annual General Meeting of a local youth organisation and will meet with young people. He arrived direct from work in a suit. David expected this to be a very formal event, but it was in a youth centre. He was the only person in a suit and overheard some young people make disparaging remarks. He felt over dressed, a bit embarrassed, and uncomfortable. He emailed after stating that he wished the organisation had told him the format in advance.



Brighter Futures is a youth work charity running various youth centres. Raj supports a Youth Panel to help steer their work. The young people are upset by planned closures of youth centres. They request a meeting with the Chair of Trustees. After chatting with the CEO, Raj works with the young people to write a request for a meeting. Raj follows up with an email which explains his role, what information the young people want and some suggested location/time to meet. Raj makes clear that the young people will be sharing their perspectives and Raj will separately engage in the staff consultation process.



Preparing young people before they meet decision-makers



Managing expectations for a meeting: some decision-makers can be very difficult to arrange meetings with. You may not be able to meet with the same decision-maker on multiple occasions. Inform young people of the likelihood for it to be repeated. Try to have as many young people as possible attend. Much will depend on the space as decision-makers may request to meet with a certain number of young people/a small group.

Prepare, prepare, prepare: work with young people to help them consider the key issues they want to raise, what questions they want answers to, and whether they will be asking the decision-maker to do something.

Managing expectations about the meeting: remind them that the decision-maker may not necessarily be as informed as them around issues, may disagree with their views, or not give them the response they are hoping for.

Make it inclusive: try and plan to ensure the group consider how everyone can be involved in the meeting. Sometimes decision-makers may be less familiar with inclusive facilitation and may allow some to dominate. Ask the group to consider what they can do to ensure everyone is heard in the meeting, including giving others space if they have already spoken.

Make it personal: encourage young people to be honest about why these issues are important and what they want to be changed. Try and support them to be clear about what you are asking decision-makers to change. Encourage them to share the research and experiences of peers as well as their own personal experiences.

Top tip: *promise less; deliver more. Young people can feel motivated and engaged by the contact with decision-makers. You should focus on the engagement process rather than just whether the decision-maker will make the change the young people want. Change won't always happen overnight.*

During the meeting

Stay impartial: there are legal and regulatory obligations on schools and charities to remain impartial. You should be thoughtful about supporting young people to be heard while ensuring that your organisation is not perceived as engaging in partisan activities or you are influencing the young people's perspectives. Young people should always receive a balance of information about different issues and never endorse political parties while acting as a participant or leader within your organisation.

Stay legal: charities must follow specific rules about how their resources can enable or support children and young people to lead their own campaigns, especially where they become 'agents' of your charity with stricter regulatory obligations. Stricter rules about

engagement with political decision-makers can apply, especially when an election is due.

Stay safe: some decision-makers may not be aware of the expected boundaries of behaviour with young people. They may unwittingly share information about their lives or act in a way young people find uncomfortable. More rarely, but sadly has occurred, is engagement in inappropriate contact with young people. Always supervise activities and ensure young people know how to share any concerns.

Stay youth focused: you may have strong views on the issues young people discuss. Your focus must remain on supporting young people to be heard. Avoid overstepping your role to facilitate the conversation and express your personal views.



After the meeting

Send immediate thanks: send a thank-you note or email to the decision-maker and their team within 24-48 hours after your meeting. Express your organisation's thanks for their time, attention, and willingness to discuss the issues you raised. Make clear that you will then be working with the young people to follow-up, including mentioning any pledge or commitment they made. Request any feedback from the decision-maker about the contact.

Debrief: always enable young people to reflect on the engagement and their perspective of what was useful or helpful. Summarise the key points discussed during the meeting, highlighting any commitments or actions the decision-maker expressed. Were there any points or arguments they didn't have a chance to share during the meeting fully, or did they have additional supporting evidence that could strengthen their case?

Keep the door open: youth voice is an ongoing process, not a one-off event. Building a long-term relationship with the decision-maker and their staff helps future cohorts of young people to have access and contact.

Learn More

- If you work in or with schools, read the **Department for Education guidance** on Political Impartiality in Schools to learn more about existing legal requirements and good practices.
- If you work with a charity, always follow the **Charity Commission's** Campaigning and Political Activity Guidance for Charities (CC9) when campaigning or engaging in political activity, including during elections and referendums.
- Oxfam has respected guidance on **Teaching Controversial Issues: A guide for teachers**. While aimed at schools, it can be adapted for a wider range of spaces where practitioners seek to develop young people's skills to discuss their own values and ideas.
- For practical activities to explore power with young people, adapt activities from A New Weave of Power, People & Politics published by **Practical Action**.
- The **Funding Youth Activism website** includes resources for those supporting and funding youth-led change and engaging with people in positions of power.
- For a longer read on how young generations campaign and engage with decision-makers, read this BBC News piece on **Gen Z How young people are changing activism**.

About this guide

This guidance has been produced as part of a project that captured youth voice's impact within the #iwill Fund. During 2021-2023, a Young Evaluators Panel of young people from across England steered the collection and analysis of data on how young people are heard within the #iwill Fund and other youth voice activities. A participatory process allowed other young people, practitioners, funders, policy makers and academics to review their findings. A final report of their findings is available on the Centre for Youth Voice website.

The Centre for Youth Voice team has drafted these guides based on the learning generated through the project, the views of young people engaged in the project and wider good practices. All scenarios are hypothetical composites informed by examples provided by young people, practitioners and the team's experiences. Links are provided to learn more but they do not constitute an endorsement or approval by YMCA George Williams College and we bear no responsibility for its accuracy, legality or content.

About the Centre for Youth Voice

At YMCA George Williams College, our vision is for a just and equitable society that invests in support for all young people to learn, grow, and explore their relationships with the world around them. Established in 1970, the College works to provide transformational support to practitioners, funders, and policy makers across the sector, to improve the quality and impact of provision and outcomes for children and young people across the UK. This support is characterised by safe spaces, high quality socio-emotional skill development opportunities, and relationships with trusted adults.

As part of its work, the College hosts three Centres of Expertise. The Centre for Youth Voice at YMCA George Williams College advocates for and supports a stronger role for the voices of young people in evaluation and continuous quality improvement. Underpinned by the belief in participation of young people in the decisions that affect them, the Centre for Youth Voice develops and shares relational, structural, and practical approaches to embedding the voices of young people, and directly supporting them to develop their research and evaluation skills.

About the #iwill Fund

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