This briefing summarises a research project on the views and experiences of 11–19 year olds in the London Borough of Southwark, focusing on youth consultation and involvement. Its findings and lessons will be useful for all community safety practitioners who are considering or working on youth involvement strategies.

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This research was commissioned by Southwark Housing. For more information on the full report and the work of Southwark Housing, contact: Marion Knight, Southwark Housing, Municipal Offices, 9 Larcom St, London SE17 1RX; 020 7525 1219.

Nacro’s community safety mailing and work
This briefing is part of Nacro’s free mailing for community safety practitioners. If you do not already receive this mailing and would like to add your name to our mailing list, please write to Crime and Social Policy Mailing at the address below.

The mailing is just one part of our work on community safety. Nacro works with local people, practitioners and inter-agency partnerships to reduce crime levels, lessen the fear of crime and regenerate communities.

Our research, our work with Government and our experience of delivering services at a local level give us an excellent national perspective on what works in community safety and how to adapt and apply this at a local level. Community safety practitioners from a range of community safety partnerships use this expertise at every stage of partnership development. For more information contact Nicola Chamberlain at the address below.

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Registered office  
169 Clapham Road London SW9 0PU

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Introduction and background

Nacro has recently completed a research project on youth involvement commissioned by Southwark Housing. We researched the views and experiences of young people aged 11–19 living on targeted housing estates in the borough around a range of issues concerning community safety, local services, consultation and involvement in local decision-making. This briefing has a narrower focus than the study as a whole: here we concentrate on what we have learnt about youth consultation and involvement, and the lessons for all community safety practitioners.

A number of recent developments have served to give youth consultation a much higher profile than it has sometimes had in the past. Best Value initiatives and recent regeneration activities have highlighted the importance of consulting young people, for example, as has the work of the Government’s Social Exclusion Unit. The current research was undertaken primarily to support the Council’s strategic planning around housing, community safety, and youth issues (and to inform the development of the Council’s Youth Strategy, Community Safety Strategy and Housing Strategy).

Nacro has also undertaken extensive work on this issue recently: Taking part, published by Nacro in collaboration with the LGIU, is a guide for practitioners on promoting young people’s involvement in community safety. The current research was undertaken against this background and will, we hope, be of use to those who are putting such initiatives into practice on the ground.

Aims of the study

- To describe young people’s lives
- To discover young people’s concerns and experiences
- To identify effective methods of consulting young people
- To find ways of involving young people in planning and provision of services
- To inform the development of services appropriate to young people

The area

The research was carried out on targeted housing estates in the north of the borough. It is a deprived neighbourhood: on the DETR Index of Local Deprivation, the wards within which the estates are located are among the worst five per cent in England.

The research

The research involved three key strands of work:

1. **Analysis of existing data** held by the Council and other agencies or groups, concerning crime, drug use, race issues, deprivation and need, satisfaction with local services, housing, and education

The other strands focused on 11–19 year olds who either lived on or visited regularly the targeted housing estates in the north of the borough. The strands were:

2. **Survey** (compiled using face-to-face interviews) of 307 young people aged 11-19, from a range of selected housing estates

3. **Five focus groups**, involving 27 young people from specific local community groups

Focus group participants ranged from 11–19 years old, with most being 14-16. The focus group sample was broadly similar to the survey sample in terms of ethnicity and current patterns of activity, but a higher percentage were male (70 per cent).

Of the 307 young people interviewed as part of the survey:

- 159 (52 per cent) were female.
- 139 (45 per cent) were male.
- 140 (46 per cent) were aged under 14.
- 115 (37 per cent) were aged 14–16.
- 50 (16 per cent) were aged 17–19.

Of the 295 survey respondents for which ethnicity was known:

- 62 per cent were white.
- 21 per cent were Black (African/Caribbean).
- 4 per cent were Asian.
- 9 per cent other.
- 4 per cent don’t know/unanswered.
Consultation and involvement: what the young people said

Focus group participants provided a great deal of feedback concerning consultation:

- Young people from one estate had been consulted on local decision-making on a previous occasion. However, their perception was that any outcomes were not communicated to them and that they did not receive any feedback as to why their ideas were not carried out or how their contributions were received by other groups within their community. The result was that they did not have faith in or expectations from the consultation process.

- One of the focus group discussions took place with a group of young people from an ethnic minority. They were less aware of local decision-making processes and how they could be involved.

- The younger participants expressed surprise that their views could count and that the council might have an interest in consulting with them.

- Many of the young people were interested in participation in a possible youth council and were eager to find out more about it.

- There was reasonable knowledge of and considerable curiosity about the Tenants’ Associations on the estates. This indicates that there might be value in involving young people at this level.

Interviewers went on to ask the young people whether they were interested either in finding out more about the Council’s proposed consultation plans, or in taking part in such activity.

- A clear majority of the young people (63 per cent) expressed an interest in finding out more about the Council’s future consultations, and almost half (48 per cent) expressed a clear interest in actually ‘taking part’.

- There were no apparent differences by age or gender, in expressions of interest in either ‘finding out’ or ‘taking part’.

- Respondents tended to express an interest in being consulted about specific issues, however, with only 9 per cent claiming that they would not be interested in being consulted about ‘any’ issues.

- 50 per cent of survey respondents were interested in being consulted about local employment and training schemes for young people.

- Percentages for the other categories included: changes in the services provided by local schools (26 per cent); leisure or youth services for young people locally (63 per cent); ‘how to deal with crime and vandalism locally’ (37 per cent); and ‘redevelopment of your housing estate’ (41 per cent).

Focus group results (see above) suggest that those young people who did not want to get involved felt that there was no point – that nobody would take any notice of their views.

Young people’s comments on specific consultation and involvement methods

Survey respondents were asked to comment on what they considered to be the best way for them to ‘have their say’ about particular issues. The most common suggestions were:

- some form of meeting, either with council representatives, exclusively for young people or with the Tenants’/Residents’ Association
- council mailings including newsletters
- questionnaires

Other less popular suggestions were:

- a Youth Council
- one to one interviews/ conversations
- a vote
- telephone calls
- an interactive website
- incentives such as cash
- school visits
- television advertising
- visiting youth facilities
- petitions

Five respondents stated that they would rather go straight to the Council and have their opinions heard. Two considered that it might help their cause if they were to become involved in the estate’s Residents’ Association and go through those channels.
General conclusions

Young people expressed high levels of interest both in being kept informed about developments in their areas and in taking part in consultation exercises. Many even went so far as to express gratitude at the suggestion that the Council might be interested in consulting them, and a large number of young people actually supplied the researchers with contact addresses for the Council to use for that purpose. This willingness to become involved could clearly be quite an asset.

The research data also reflected cynicism on the part of some young people, however, which should serve to remind service providers and policy-makers that meaningful consultation can also generate expectations that need to be managed carefully. Some young people commented that ‘nothing will happen anyway’. Unless consultation and involvement has a visible effect, such cynicism will be proved right and future exercises will be met with apathy.

There are also clear implications concerning those young people who expressed a desire not to be involved. It would be a mistake to focus only on those who seem to be the most likely candidates for consultation and involvement. There appears to be an overlap between those who are most cynical and least likely to express an interest in involvement, and those who are most marginal to local provision in the first place.

Lessons

It is clear from our research that young people want to be involved in local decision-making and could be a valuable resource for community safety partnerships. To get maximum benefit from this, partnerships need to have a clear and coherent consultation and involvement strategy.

The Social Exclusion Unit’s Policy Action Team on Young People refers to three key questions that should be asked by partnerships planning youth consultation:

1. Who is the consultation aimed at and why is it being done?
2. For how long is the consultation expected to continue?
3. How will feedback and comments be dealt with?

There are also a number of ‘organising principles’ for how to consult and involve young people:

- A consultation strategy needs to be ongoing and dynamic in order to harness the views and experience of young people effectively, and combat existing cynicism. Mechanisms should be designed and implemented for feeding back the results of consultation to young people, and for collecting further responses concerning more recent developments and their direction. Youth consultation should be regarded as a self-renewing process, not a single event or series of events.

- ‘Young people’ is not a homogenous category. An effective consultation strategy will need to ensure that it is sufficiently flexible to accommodate this diversity and reach even the most difficult and marginalised groups. Such a strategy will require more resources: the easiest to reach groups of young people are also usually the cheapest to canvas, whilst involving marginalised groups usually requires specially designed consultation tools that can be more difficult to implement. (We have prepared a matrix of consultation methods for use with young people that evaluates their strengths and weaknesses. This is available from the Nacro website: www.nacro.org.uk/templates/publications/briefingListing.cfm)

- There needs to be constant review of any strategy. This review should cover not only which young people are actually engaging with the process, but also their expectations concerning the consultation, their involvement in it, and the results or perceived benefits of involvement.

Given the strengths and weaknesses of any particular consultation tool, it is also usually best to design a package of measures for each consultation exercise, to ensure that key aspects of young peoples’ views on an issue are not being missed.

Nacro in action: involving young people

Nacro publishes a guide to community involvement (Putting the community into community safety) that examines individual consultation and involvement measures in more detail than is possible here. A new edition will be available in mid-2001. (To obtain a copy, price £5.00 plus £1.00 p&p, write to Cynthia Sutherland, Publications Dept, Nacro, 169 Clapham Road, London SW9 0PU.)

For nearly 20 years, Nacro has been running youth activities projects that aim to engage young people living in disadvantaged areas. To find out about existing services or developing new ones contact Kathryn Quinton, Nacro, 169 Clapham Road, London SW9 0PU; t 020 7840 6458; e kathryn.quinton@nacro.org.uk