

1. YOUTH PARTICIPATION

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The purpose of this report is to inform the Council of structural difficulties encountered with the current Youth Council system of youth participation and recommend ways to strengthen youth participation within Christchurch City Council.

BACKGROUND

In late 1999, the Youth Advocate raised concerns regarding the need for the Council to clarify the role and status of Youth Council. Subsequent to raising these issues investigations were undertaken of other means of youth participation which could be introduced independent of, or in addition to a Youth Council. Discussions had also been held with Ministry of Youth Affairs staff and local authority representatives from various parts of New Zealand and Australia regarding the effectiveness of youth councils and the various structures that are operating in different places.

In addition, a committee was set up to examine issues around the current Youth Council structure and in particular its status within Council. This committee was made up of elected member representation, existing Youth Council representation, and staff representatives from the Policy and Community Relations Units.

The last time this committee met, a request was made for the Policy Unit to look into the issues that had been raised and to compile a report. There are now two reports available - the first being "A Review of the Christchurch Youth Council" prepared by Sarah Wylie, Social Research Consultant and published in December 1999, and the second being a report prepared by the Policy Unit, Christchurch City Council in 2001.

When examining Youth Council issues, it is inevitable that there will be individuals (current or ex Youth Councillors) who may feel that their input is being undervalued or criticized. This is certainly not intended. It is simply necessary to decide whether or not a form of Youth Council is the most effective use of a youth participation budget, and if so, what structure should be adopted.

CONFUSION OVER THE YOUTH COUNCIL'S STATUS

Confusion over the status of the Youth Council has caused considerable difficulty for staff who are expected to administer and support it. This has had a flow on effect to Youth Councillors themselves, who receive different messages from different people regarding expectations, boundaries and the amount of support they can expect from within the Council structure. According to the Christchurch City Council Legal Services Manager, the Council is akin to a company and the Youth Council is not legally part of that body. Therefore, in legal terms, the Youth Council is currently an unincorporated body and no more entitled to access internal Council services than any other unincorporated body within the city. On one occasion, when the Youth Advocate attempted to access advice from a Council Unit on behalf of the Youth Council, this request was turned down on the grounds that the service was not available to groups outside Council.

OPTIONS FOR YOUTH COUNCIL STATUS

The report provided by Sarah Wylie (1999) makes it clear that if Christchurch is to retain a Youth Council it must either:

- have a legal standing within Council, or;
- become an independent community group.

Various options are put forward both in the Sarah Wylie report and the Policy Unit's report, and it is strongly advised that the implications of any desired option are explored fully with Council's Legal Services Unit. A staff member from the Ministry of Youth Affairs cautioned that if a Youth Council is part of Council (for example a special or standing committee), it has the potential to embarrass Council by its actions or public statements if these are at odds with Council expectations. This comment was not designed to engender negativity toward the model, it was simply pointed out as something that should be debated at the time of selecting a model.

In 2001 the Youth Advocate and the Chairperson of the Community Services Committee, met with representatives of the Lower Hutt Youth Committee. This group had chosen not to be part of the Council structure because they believed that a Youth Council within the Council structure could not provide a neutral base from which to speak or from which to lobby. This Youth Committee provides a strong youth voice in their region. They receive funding for administrative support from Council but they are independent. These young people considered that this independence was crucial for them to be able to lobby Council or any Government organisation. They saw Youth Councils within Council structures as being very constrained and controlled by their closeness to Council. Another concern which has been expressed about Youth Councils operating from within Council structures, is that they can easily become a leadership and political training ground for a very small group of young people and that other young people from the local authority area are rarely involved.

UNDER THE CURRENT STRUCTURE WHAT GENERAL PROBLEMS HAVE BEEN EXPERIENCED FOR THOSE CO-ORDINATING THE YOUTH COUNCIL?

Currently young people aged 13-25 are recruited and after a new recruitment there tends to be a very diverse group. Young people are involved in the selection process. The diverse group provides for an excellent range of opinions and experiences to be expressed, and diversity within the Youth Council is highly valued. The downside of such diversity is that young people from schools, the workplace, tertiary institutions, those who are unemployed, and young parents, have their discretionary time at different hours of the day. This means that arranging meetings and training sessions is extremely problematic. Over many years the organisation of team building and training opportunities has resulted in extreme frustration, low turnouts, wasted time by Youth Council volunteers, wasted staff resources, and wasted financial resources.

Young people who join the Youth Council have different agendas for doing so. Some are passionately interested in making the city a better place for other young people. Those who take up the opportunities on offer such as membership of the Canterbury Youth Worker's Collective become well networked, keep abreast of youth issues (outside their own specific sphere), and are therefore in a strong position to add quality input to Council decision-making or other forums.

Unfortunately not all have this level of commitment and this means that the same small pool of Youth Councillors tend to be sought every time Youth Council input is requested. This has, at times, been very taxing on committed and hard working Youth Councillors.

An ongoing problem has revolved around Youth Councillors committing to tasks or attendance at various meetings or events, then not turning up. This usually results in very unimpressed people calling the Youth Advocacy office to complain. When aware of promised input staff now ring Youth Councillors prior to events to remind them of their commitments and minimise the embarrassment caused by no shows. It is important to stress that although this can appear as extreme unreliability by some Youth Councillors, another side is that the people who tend to be selected as Youth Councillors are young people who have very full lives and they tend to be involved in many things outside their Youth Council role. Some have genuine difficulty balancing all the things they are trying to do. One ex-Youth Councillor recently commented that he felt that it was impossible to have a cohesive Youth Council when different members had such a wide range of other activities and commitments to balance.

At various stages over the last few years staff have worked very hard to co-ordinate Youth Council training and activities, and to keep Youth Councillors well informed. For over a year a monthly newsletter specifically for Youth Councillors was produced whereby Council items of significance to young people were included, as were the various requests that came in for Youth Councillor involvement. This initiative was introduced to ensure information got out to Youth Councillors in a timely manner. It took considerable time and energy, yet the level of youth participation happening as a result of this staff time commitment did not change.

Another significant issue has been matching requests for Youth Councillor involvement with Youth Councillors interested in what is being requested. It has been frustrating for staff when rather than a request for a young person interested in a particular area, the request is most definitely for a Youth Councillor. With in excess of 70,000 young people to draw on in the city and it seems inappropriate to focus so much time, energy and expectation on so few. Some Youth Councillors have resented putting voluntary hours into things that have held no interest for them. This is a shame when the Advocacy Office is more than happy to assist staff, elected members and community organisations to find young people who are interested in the issue requiring input.

OTHER YOUTH PARTICIPATION POSSIBILITIES

- **Database:** Schools and youth organisations could be canvassed for young people's interests and for their preferred methods of input and consultation. This information could then be entered into a database providing a comprehensive resource. Appropriate media advertising could also be used to recruit young people for the database. This information could then be utilised to assist Units of Council with their obligations under the Youth Policy, and to assist young people to participate in Council activities. Young people with a genuine interest in a particular area could concentrate their input into that area. This should provide quality youth input and a much more favourable experience for the young person. For example, if the Leisure Unit wanted to consult with mountain bikers, we could refer to the database to find young people who had indicated an interest in mountain biking. If Parks and Waterways wanted a young person to have input into the planning of a new park a check could be made of the database for young people who have indicated interests relevant to the request. Conversely, there are young people with a strong interest in (for example) the political process, we could discuss this with the Policy Unit and the Secretariat to develop ways of increasing their knowledge about, and interest in, local government processes.
- **Special Interest Forums (already happening):** These are held on an "as necessary" basis and are often organised in partnership with other organisations. Examples include: Global Voice; The North West Summit; Actionworks Employment Forum; the Sport and Active Recreation Youth Forum; the Aranui Youth Forum and the St John's Youth Symposium.
- **Youth Roundtables (already happening):** These are held two or three times a year, but should the Youth Council not be retained, they could be held more frequently. A roundtable is an opportunity for a group of young people to discuss issues of relevance to them with Council staff and/or elected members. The young people may be a geographical grouping or they may have a special interest in common. Information that comes out of a Youth Roundtable is distributed to relevant staff, elected members and if necessary relevant individuals and organisations outside Council.

CONCLUSION

The staff and financial resources that go into the Youth Council concept have, to date, produced a variable level and variable quality of youth participation. There is the possibility that this could be improved but to do so would take a great deal of dedicated staff time and the staff that can be drawn on are already working at saturation levels. At the 2001 Community Development Conference held in Auckland the co-ordinator of one North Island Youth Council which appears to be working well, admitted that between .5 and .8 of his week is dedicated to Youth Council alone. He also stated (after the public forum) that this particular Youth Council was made up of secondary students with high academic ability and proven leadership qualities rather than a true representation of youth from the region, as the latter would require far more time to manage effectively.

If the Council wishes to support a Youth Council in the city, it has a fundamental choice to make between:

1. a group which is legally part of the Council structure and
2. a group which receives financial support from the Council but which operates independently (possibly under the umbrella of a well respected and neutral body such as the local branch of the New Zealand Association of Adolescent Health and Development).

A comprehensive database would provide the opportunity to involve far more young people in the Council's activities and ensure that activities and personal interests were appropriately matched.

A mix of youth participation options is currently already happening within Council but could be improved significantly if the current level of effort put into the Youth Council was redirected to the database concept. It is the view of Advocacy Office staff who have been heavily involved in Youth Council liaison and co-ordination that a combination of the following would provide a basis for increasing and improving the level of youth participation throughout the Council, and be more meaningful for the young people involved:

- A comprehensive database comprising interests of young people and their preferred method(s) of involvement such as email consultation, membership of planning groups, attendance at consultation meetings.

- Youth Roundtables: Five per year.
- A youth voice outside the Council with the Council providing financial assistance for administrative support and with a regular slot for this group to discuss youth issues with the Children's and Youth Committee and the Youth Advocate. This community based youth voice could possibly come under the umbrella of a broad spectrum and neutral youth organisation in the city.
- Special Interest Forums: As necessary.
- Special Interest Focus Groups: As necessary.
- Appropriately Targeted Submission and Feedback Processes: As necessary.

COMMITTEE'S CONSIDERATION

At the meeting of 11 April 2002 the Children and Youth Subcommittee considered the following recommendations provided by the Youth Advocate:

1. That the line budget item "Youth Council" be redirected to encompass wider youth participation initiatives and renamed to reflect this.
2. That an approach be made to the local branch of NZAAHD (New Zealand Association of Adolescent Health and Development) to determine whether or not they would be prepared to act as an umbrella group for a "youth voice" in the city.
3. That the current Youth Council be disestablished and the current Youth Councillors provided with participation opportunities in accordance with their interests.
4. That a comprehensive youth database be developed as a tool to help in directing interested young people toward relevant participation opportunities.

Following discussions the Children and Youth Subcommittee recommended to the Community and Leisure Committee:

1. That the Community and Leisure Committee receive the report and that the Children and Youth Subcommittee and staff meet with young people and appropriate youth organisations to determine the most appropriate model for the Youth Council to operate outside of the Council, but with the Council's support.
2. That a comprehensive youth database be developed as a tool to help in directing interested young people toward relevant participation opportunities.

At the meeting of the Community and Leisure Committee on 6 May 2002 the Children and Youth Subcommittee's recommendations 1 and 2 were put to the Committee and declared **lost**.

The Youth Advocate's recommendations 1-4 were amended to include an additional recommendation:

5. "That John Harrington of the Youth Workers' Collective be included in discussions on the future of Youth Participation."

Recommendations 1-5 were then put to the meeting and declared **carried** by 6 votes to 4.

- Recommendation:**
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4. That a comprehensive youth database be developed as a tool to help in directing interested young people toward relevant participation opportunities.
5. That John Harrington of the Youth Workers Collective be included in discussions on the future of Youth Participation.