

BEST PRACTICE PAPER

**CONSULTATION BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL CHILD
POVERTY STRATEGIES**

This paper aims to share the findings of a **research study** exploring how Local Authorities are consulting children and young people in preparing their local Child Poverty Strategies, and the extent to which this amounts to 'participation'.

The findings will **support good practice** by assisting practitioners who are responsible for the planning and delivery of consultations with children and young people for child poverty strategies, and those developing or updating local Child Poverty Needs Assessments and Strategies to ensure this consultation is meaningful and capable of effectively drawing on the experiences and views of those residents for whom strategies are developed and implemented.

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I THE RESEARCH STUDY

In order to examine how Local Authorities are consulting children and young people in preparing their local Child Poverty Strategies, and how participatory this is, a small scale qualitative research study¹ asked the following **research questions**:

1. What consultation methods are being employed, and what are the factors that influence decisions about consultation methods?
2. What do those involved consider to be the purpose of consultation in this context?
3. Which children and young people are being consulted?
4. What are the issues of focus, and how are these determined?
5. What are the individual benefits for children and young people as a result of their involvement in the consultation process?
6. What influence do the expressed views of children and young people have on the Child Poverty Needs Assessments and Strategies produced?
7. Are there any factors that prevent children and young people from having greater influence over local policy development more broadly?

1.1 Research Sample

A qualitative research study examining consultation processes and outcomes across all Local Authorities was not possible because of time and resource limitations. Instead, a sample of local authorities in England was selected for inclusion in this research study. The sampling approach limits the generalizability of the findings: being neither representative (Ruane, 2005), theoretical, or purposive (Silverman, 2001), it does not enable statistical generalisation. However, it does enable 'analytic generalization' (Creswell, 2000) - linking findings from this sample to existing theory around children's participation - with the rich, in-depth, context-specific qualitative data generated (Creswell, 2003) therefore capable of developing our understanding of consultation in this context.²

The following **inclusion criteria** sought **Local Authorities** in England that had:

- i) undertaken some consultation with children and young people since the Child Poverty Act 2010 duty to consult came into effect (May 2010);
- ii) published their Child Poverty Needs Assessment; *and*
- iii) published or nearly finalised their Child Poverty Strategy.

A final requirement was participants' informed consent to participate in the study.

The study focused on consultation activities undertaken in **four Local Authorities in England**, details of which appear in **Table 1**:

¹ Details of the research methodology appear in Appendix 1

² See Appendix 1 for further details of the research methodology

Table 1: Details of Local Authorities included in sample

| Local Authority | Proportion (%) of children in 'poverty' ³ | Professional roles of adults interviewed | Rural/Urban | Geographical location |
|-----------------|--|---|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 10-13% | 'Respondent 1'-Developed CPS 'Respondent 2'-Commissioned to undertake consultation 'Respondent 3'-Undertook some consultation | Rural | East Midlands |
| 2 | 26-29% | 'Respondent 4'-Co-wrote CPNA and CPS 'Respondent 5'-As above | Urban | South East |
| 3 | 14-17% | 'Respondent 6'-Facilitated consultation; developed CPNA 'Respondent 7'-Developed CPS | Rural and urban | West Midlands |
| 4 | 10-13% | 'Respondent 8'-CPNA Lead Author | Rural | South East |

Research Participants comprised:

- **8 adult interviewees** (across all 4 Local Authorities) who had developed local Child Poverty Strategies and/ or Child Poverty Needs Assessments, or who undertook the Local Authorities' consultation (**Table 1** provides details of adult respondents' professional responsibilities)
- **4 young people** in focus group (in 1 Local Authority only). **Table 2** provides details of young people involved in the research study

Table 2: Young people involved in research:

| Young People | Gender | Age range (years) | Ethnicity | Disability |
|--------------|--------|-------------------|---------------|------------|
| 1 | Male | 13-14 | White British | None |
| 2 | Female | 13-14 | White British | None |
| 3 | Female | 13-14 | White British | None |
| 4 | Female | 15-16 | White British | None |

³ Calculated as the number of children living in families in receipt of Child Tax Credit, Income Support or (Income-Based) Job Seeker's Allowance whose reported income is less than 60 per cent of the median income, divided by the total number of children in the area. 2009 data is available at http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/child_poverty.htm. Bandings, rather than exact child poverty figures, are used to preserve Local Authority anonymity.

2 POLICY CONTEXT

The research has significant policy relevance, forming part of an **increasing emphasis on children and young people's 'participation' in public policy**, programmes and practice (e.g. *Every Child Matters* [DfES, 2003], *Children Act, 2004*).

Article 12 of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)** requires signatory governments to “...assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (Art.12.1). It is therefore incumbent on Government to ensure that consultation in this context satisfies Article 12 of the Convention.

The **Child Poverty Act 2010** also places a statutory duty on Local Authorities to prepare a joint local Child Poverty Strategy (*Child Poverty Act, 2010*, Part 2, S.23) setting out plans for alleviating child poverty and, in so doing, they ‘*must consult such children, and organisations working with or representing children, as the authority thinks fit*’ (S.23[6][a]). **Government guidance** expanding on this duty is non-statutory, and therefore it need not be taken into account by Local Authorities when planning and undertaking consultation. Whilst it provides limited guidance on how Local Authorities should consult children and young people, leaving this to Local Authorities to determine (Child Poverty Unit, 2010: 4.3), it nevertheless suggests that Local Authorities should *act on* their views, with Child Poverty Strategies showing ‘how they are informed by and seek to address issues raised by children, [and] young people...’ (ibid: 3.16, emphasis added).

Previous research suggests there has been slow progress in discharging the statutory duty to consult children and young people in the development of local Child Poverty Strategies. Nelson and colleagues (2011) found that five of the nine top-tier Local Authority case study areas in England included in their study had not involved children and young people in *any* consultation or participative activities as part of the development of their Child Poverty Strategy, despite recognising the importance of this, which indicates consultation is not regarded as an ‘integral component of strategy formation’ (ibid: 20).

Whilst Article 12 of the UNCRC requires this consultation to amount to ‘participation’, no academic research had comprehensively examined how Local Authorities are consulting child and young people and with what results. This study therefore sought to respond to an **existing gap within the research evidence**. It also included the perspectives of both decision-makers and young people, countering a notable absence within this research area of children’s perspectives on consultation and participation (Laybourn et al, 2001; Stafford et al, 2003).

2.1 ‘Participation’: What are the key principles and requirements?

Over the last two decades, children’s participation in public decision-making has gained public recognition, been formalised within institutional structures, and been increasingly emphasised in local and national public policy, programmes and practice (Tisdall et al, 2008). Accompanying this have been various research studies examining children’s participation in local and national policy and programme development, and a body of literature theorising ‘participation’ as a concept. Whilst its relationship with ‘consultation’ is contested, and its purpose and methods debated, a review of the participation literature suggests a number of requirements for engagement activities with children and young people to be considered ‘participatory’:

1. Inclusivity - participation activities should account for diversity among children as a group (Combe, 2002);

2. Representativeness - participation activities should facilitate the representation of divergent views;

- 3. Multiple participation approaches** - participation activities should cater to varying skills (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Tisdall et al, 2008) and capacities (Sinclair, 2004);
- 4. Clarity about the purpose of participation and anticipated benefits for children** (Combe, 2002; Sinclair, 2004) - those facilitating participation activities should ensure honesty about the level of power-sharing available (Kirby et al, 2003);
- 5. Child-led agenda** - participation activities should focus on issues concerning children, not those dictated by adults (Badham, 2004);
- 6. Capacity for change** - there must be the *potential* for children to influence decision-making (Lansdown, 2001);
- 7. Actual influence on decision-making** (Treseder, 1997; Cairns, 2001) - participation activities should not simply involve children providing their views (Cairns, 2001), which requires rigorous evaluation (Combe, 2002; Kirby et al, 2003; Sinclair, 2004);
- 8. 'Transformative'** - participation activities should involve approaches that take a 'positive view of children's capacities' (Hill et al, 2004:88) - challenging 'the dominant discourse that represents children...as lacking the knowledge or competence to... (participate) in policy debate' (Edwards et al, 2004:104) - treating children as experts on their own lives (Clark and Moss, 2001);
- 9. Feedback** - C&YP should receive feedback on decisions taken and how they influenced these (Franklin and Madge, 2000; Franklin and Sloper, 2006, 2009; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009), representing a 'dialogue' and an ongoing process rather than an isolated event, which requires resourcing (Franklin and Sloper, 2006).

2.2 Consultation V's 'participation'

The participation literature distinguishes between consultation and participation. Whilst 'consultation' involves seeking children's views and experience (Hill et al, 2004; Bragg, 2007; Lansdown, 2001) - a form of 'passive participation' (Kirby et al, 2003:30) with limited influence (Cairns, 2001) - 'participation' requires a degree of power-sharing, (Matthews et al, 1999) enabling children to actually *influence* decision-making (Treseder, 1997; Cairns, 2001; Sinclair, 2004). As such, it is an 'active participation', which enables children to 'believe, and have reason to believe, that their involvement will make a difference' (Kirby et al, 2003:30).

Consequently, 'consultation' *can be*, but is *not necessarily* participatory (Bragg, 2007), 'a means of enabling children to participate (or) a substitute for participation' depending whether children's sought views are responded to or taken into account (Hill et al, 2004:83).

The participation of children and young people experiencing poverty in the development of local policy designed to alleviate child poverty is of particular importance: participation in decision-making for individuals experiencing poverty can form part of a politics of empowerment (Lister, 2004), and the extensive negative impacts of poverty on children is well documented (see, for example, Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005), with frequent calls for the participation of the most vulnerable children in policy development (Eurochild, 2009; Ridge 2009).

Nevertheless, a number of factors create practical challenges to good practice around children's participation. Insufficient time and financial resources have been identified as barriers to children's meaningful participation in policy development (Spicer and Evans, 2005) and, more specifically, in the development of local Child Poverty Strategies (Nelson and colleagues, 2011).

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Range of consultation methods used

A broad range of consultation activities were undertaken across the four Local Authority areas. However, only three methods appear more than once across Local Authorities, with **surveys, focus groups, and engagement of youth fora** (Youth Parliament and Youth Cabinet) **representing the dominant methods employed.** Table 3 identifies the consultation methods employed within each Local Authority.

The peer research approach taken in one Local Authority stood out as a novel consultation method amongst these Local Authorities. Youth Workers working within the Local Authority's Youth Service were trained by an external consultant with expertise in community research approaches and supported to train a small group of young people to act as Peer Researchers. These young people subsequently devised and undertook consultation activities with other children and young people and reported their findings, feeding into the local Child Poverty Strategy. A commitment from the Child Poverty Lead and relevant Cabinet Members to incorporate recommendations arising from this work was identified as integral.-.

Table 3: Consultation methods and young people involved in consultation activities

| Local Authority 1 | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| Consultation methods | Number | Age (yrs) | Gender | Targeting |
| i) Peer Researcher project | 6 | 15-17 | 2 Male 4 Female | 1 YP in care |
| ii) Question on poverty in <i>national survey of young people</i> * | 1,000 | 11-18 | Unknown | Unknown |
| iii) Peer- led interactive activities with other youth groups (methods facilitated by Peer Researchers) ⁴ | 95 (total included in the various activities) | Not known for all young people engaged: 2 x 11-14 8 x 15-16 14% 11-14 51% 15-16 23.5% 17-18 | Incomplete information: 21.5% Male 66.7% Female 4 male 6 Female | Unknown |
| iv) Multi-methods workshop at event ⁵ targeting vulnerable young people* | 20 | Unknown | Unknown | 'Vulnerable groups': young parents, in care, black Asian and minority ethnic, lesbian, gay and bisexual |
| Local Authority 2 | | | | |
| Consultation methods | Number | Age | Gender | Targeting |
| i) Engaging Youth Parliament* | 15 | d/k | d/k | d/k |
| ii) Question ⁶ on a survey across Local Authority area* | 2617 votes | d/k | d/k | d/k |

⁴ Peer researchers' methods included discussions at a locality forum, a focus group with youth council, an online survey, young people standing in the room to represent views on specific questions; drawing visual representations of poverty; ranking exercises of what is most important to Young People, for example having two cooked meals per day.

⁵ This consultation workshop was incorporated into this already planned event by peer researchers. The event had sought to enable vulnerable young people to raise questions and challenge elected Council members, since these groups were not involved in a more universal process already established.

⁶ The question asked what respondents' families do not always have enough money for. The voting process referred to formed part of the election process for the Local Authority's Youth Parliament.

| iii) Radio show debate and phone-in | 6/8 texted in | d/k | d/k | d/k |
|---|---------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| iv) Focus group with teenage boys | 6, 7 or 8 | 15 | Boys | d/k |
| Local Authority 3 | | | | |
| Consultation methods | Number | Age | Gender | Targeting |
| i) Focus groups and one-to-one interviews | 97 | 12-19; Majority 14-16 | Broadly 50:50 Male/Female | Young people accessing 'Positive Activities for Young People' services, ⁷ disabled children, NEET ⁸ , looked after |
| ii) Convince Me approach ⁹ | 4/5 | d/k | d/k | d/k |
| Local Authority 4 | | | | |
| Consultation methods | Number | Age | Gender | Targeting |
| i) Initial scoping through a youth club | 10 | 11+ | d/k | d/k |
| ii) Chain Mail_activity ^{10*} | Approx. 5,000 | Nursery to secondary school-age | d/k | d/k |
| iii) Engagement with Youth Cabinet to seek views on how to consult* | 6 YP | School years 10 & 11 (14-16) | d/k | d/k |

Reliance on existing participation structures and consultations processes (for example consultation Youth Parliament and consultation for a Local Authority's Children & Young People's Plan), rather than those developed specifically for consulting on child poverty, was evident across three of the four Local Authorities. These methods are asterisked in **Table 3** and suggest that Local Authorities take a pragmatic approach to selecting an appropriate consultation method, as does the fact that respondents frequently reported that **limited financial resources and timescales** for completing the consultation process (rather than a judgement regarding the appropriateness of methods) influenced the choice of method:

"...largely pragmatism, it was the timescale we had to do it in, the resources available to us...making the most of the network and relationships and the groups of young people that we work with already" (Respondent 8)

3.2 Representativeness: the young people involved in consultation

If Child Poverty Strategies are to comprehensively respond to the common experiences of child poverty within local areas, the consultation should involve children affected by poverty (Nelson et al, 2010), alongside other children and young people. In the Local Authorities that participated in the research, there was a considerable **information gap in demographic details**, and there was a conspicuous **absence of information regarding whether those consulted experienced (income) poverty**. Information regarding the young people involved appears in **Table 1**.

A **concern for representativeness** was clearly evident, although respondents frequently considered this to have been undermined by an over-representation of young people already engaged in Local Authority participatory activities:

⁷ This a pseudonym for a partnership between the Council and the Police, which provides positive activities for young people in deprived areas of the Local Authority.

⁸ 16-18-year-olds Not in Education Employment or Training, accessed via the Connexions Service.

⁹ This a pseudonym for a process involving young people who were initially consulted receiving pitches from Local Authority Officers about proposed priorities for the Child Poverty Strategy, which assisted in refining Officers' priorities to four themes.

¹⁰ This is a pseudonym for an activity that formed part of this Local Authority's wider consultation with young people for its Children and Young People's Plan. All young people in the area were invited to take part, and were asked one question about how life could be improved for them in their area, with responses provided considered for their relevance to child poverty.

“I think the proportion of children and young people we spoke to who were already engaged with things like Youth Parliaments was probably higher than...numbers out in the county” (Respondent 1)

The research found that those children and young people that were consulted were **overwhelmingly teenagers**, with 14-16-year-olds particularly over-represented and **young children rarely included**. Boys and disabled children were also less frequently involved. Whilst respondents did not explain this, it is possible that the additional time, creativity and resources required to consult disabled children and young people may be responsible. Franklin and Sloper (2006) found that the participation of disabled children in local Social Services service development was inconsistent and lacked embeddedness, identifying insufficient time, training and skills development for those promoting disabled children’s participation as specific barriers. **A targeted approach** was evident, with geographic areas and specific groups of children and young people *targeted*. However **a clear rationale for why specific groups were targeted was rarely articulated**, with groups instead frequently described as ‘on the fringes’, ‘vulnerable groups’, or having ‘additional needs’. Only two of the eight adult respondents comprehensively explained why certain groups were targeted.

3.3 Purpose of consulting

The primary motivation for undertaking consultation as expressed by respondents, was **to increase understanding by accessing children’s unique perspective on child poverty, leading to improved policy and services**:

“...you can therefore write a better strategy, you can more effectively pool resources and spend money and time to alleviate the consequences of child poverty, or to reduce it in the area, because you’re better informed” (Respondent 2)

This assumption is apparent in the government’s non-statutory guidance, which suggests that consultation enables Local Authorities ‘to assure the quality of their proposed strategies, in so far as they are relevant and responsive to the needs of children and parents in their local area’ (Child Poverty Unit, 2010: para.4.3).

For adults, including young people’s ‘voices’ was also expected **to increase the persuasive power of Child Poverty Strategies**, engaging partner agencies in implementing local action plans and **increasing their impact**:

“we felt that people would listen more, sometimes, to the actual voices of children. Sometimes it does make more of an impact” (Respondent 3)

Similar views were expressed by two young people, who considered increasing understanding of young carers’ needs to enable service improvement to be adults’ primary purpose for consulting:

“...to find out more about what we (young carers) like and how to improve things so we get access to that sort of stuff” (Young Person 1).

Young people were primarily motivated by a desire **to get their voices heard**.

“...I said ‘I’ll do it’, because I want to get my voice heard” (Young Person 1).

These responses indicate that young people were involved in order to *impact* decision making.

3.4 Issues of focus and how these were determined

Consultation activities had a **broad focus**, encompassing access to services, opportunities for skills development, financial opportunities and support, the impact of low income on young people, sources of aspirations, financial education, and:

“things like substance misuse and domestic violence and kind of issues in the home which lead to children and young people having a lack of choice and a lack of opportunity in what they’re able to do in life. (Respondent 2)

These clearly extended beyond the ‘children’s issues’ to which young people’s involvement in public decision-making. Various reasons for this broad focus were proffered: to facilitate a young person-led agenda; to consult on poverty covertly within a wider existing consultation process. However, the potential for stigmatising young people presented a particular challenge when determining the issues of focus, and avoiding possible stigma arising from consulting *explicitly* on poverty was a recurring explanation for a broad focus:

“it was asking questions about things that you knew were risk factors (for poverty) without sort of explicitly saying, you know, ‘so what’s it like living on benefits, then?’” (Respondent 6)

This suggests a need for improved guidance on how to avoid stigmatising those experiencing poverty while consulting in this context, a need also evident in the Government consultation on draft statutory guidance relating to new Local Authority duties (Department for Education, 2010).

Adult and child respondents felt that both adults and children had had a role in determining the issues of focus within consultation activities. Where adults determined the issues of focus, they were significantly influenced by nationally available child poverty data, resources and guidance, including the Munro Review, Children’s Commissioner research and the Child Poverty Community of Practice. Children were sometimes unaware that the broad focus of consultation was on child poverty, which may arguably limit their ability to fully determine the focus.

3.5 Individual benefits for children consulted

Local Authority respondents identified many benefits for children involved in consultation - including skills development, improved confidence and personal development - except where involvement was one-off:

“In terms of the young people they (peer researchers) consulted with...I’d say that the benefits to them of being involved are a lot less tangible ...Ok, you could argue that they’re having a say in how services are shaped and delivered locally, and.... It’s debatable how much they really get out of that, I think.” (Respondent 2)

Respondents considered **children’s empowerment** to be the primary benefit of the consultation process. However, there was widespread recognition that feelings of empowerment are cemented when expressed views have some influence on decision-making, which was problematic given the lack of feedback to young people.

There was a widespread reliance on **anecdotal, evidence of benefit**, for example verbal feedback and a case study, **rather than more robust evidence**:

“I haven’t got anything evidence-based for this, but I mean, anecdotally, and just kind of my gut feeling.” (Respondent 4)

Whilst no comprehensive explanation for a lack of more rigorous evidence arises from the interview data, one respondent highlighted the cost of more robust approaches to measuring the impact on young people’s self esteem as prohibitive. Given public sector financial austerity, and studies suggesting adequate resourcing as a requirement for children’s participation (McNeish, 1999), this explanation appears convincing

Significantly, focus group data suggested receipt of a voucher as the only benefit. **Young people did not feel empowered or that they had secured these individual benefits**, again equating benefits with securing influence:

“to be honest I don’t think I did (benefit personally). Yeah, I got my ideas out but I didn’t think nothing of it...I don’t think anything really happened” (Young Person 1).

This finding may have been influenced by the fact that focus group participants were involved in the kind of one-off (focus group) involvement considered less likely to benefit children individually, or by having not received feedback to demonstrate their influence.

3.6 Children’s influence on Child Poverty Needs Assessments and Strategies

Whilst adults’ views on the extent of this influence varied, all **adults** involved in the research – and with a role in consultation or Needs Assessment or Strategy development - expressed the view that **young people’s expressed views had had some influence** over local Child Poverty Needs Assessments and Strategies. Various examples of influence were highlighted, including increasing the emphasis on apprenticeships, skills development and affordable transport, and countering a narrow central Government policy focus on Early Years.

“I think that this strategy might not have had as strong a skills presence without the (consultation) work that we’ve done”. (Respondent 1)

However, a contradictory finding suggests young people’s influence on policy development may have been minimal, since their **expressed views validated, rather than influenced, pre-existing issues of focus:**

“...it had some influence, but I think with all of these things, you come into them with somewhat of a preconceived idea of what the issues are, and you look for validation of them.” (Respondent 6)

Young people consistently reported feeling that their **expressed views had had no impact** on services or their daily lives:

“It might have made people think about it (our views), but I don’t think it encouraged them to do something about it” (Young Person 1); “... they haven’t really reacted” (Young Person 3).

Despite adults highlighting feedback as important, a theme emerging strongly was the **lack of feedback to young people** on whether and how their expressed views had influenced policy and service development:

“what I haven’t done is got back to them and said ‘right, here we are several months down the line, just to say, these views you expressed were particularly important and this is part of the work that we’re going to look at as a result’. (Respondent 4)

The noteworthy exception was peer researchers hearing how their work had influenced policy development, which suggests feedback may be more likely when consultation activities are substantive and ongoing. A further explanation was that it was necessary to wait for the strategy to have an impact before feeding back to young people about their influence.

Nevertheless, since young people felt strongly that they *should* influence council decision-making affecting them, this lack of feedback left **young people uncertain of their influence:**

“we wouldn’t really know if it’s influenced them or helped in any way because they didn’t really tell us, so we’ve just spoken to them, and it’s only really them or whoever they’ve spoken to in connection with them, that really know if it’s influenced them.” (Young Person 4)

3.7 Barriers to Children & Young People having greater influence over local policy development more broadly

Interviews and focus group discussions provided an insight into those factors preventing or limiting children's influence over local policy development, which represent barriers to influence.

Adults generally expressed a confidence that **children did not lack the skills necessary to influence**, and that children's differing capacities instead demanded creativity from adults in the approaches used:

"I think definitely young people have got the skills and competences and even from quite a young age you can pull out helpful views." (Respondent 8)

However, the **view that children's ability to influence** child poverty strategy development **might be limited by their age and inadequate understanding** was also apparent:

"you've got to be realistic about what you can achieve. So for example you wouldn't involve children at a primary school level...you wouldn't expect them to think about certain aspects of what we can do about child poverty. (Respondent 2)

It is possible that adults' assumptions about young people's capabilities may in part explain the limited influence on policy development presented here, particularly given that various authors have identified such assumptions as barriers to children's participation (Jenks, 1995, 1996; Matthews et al, 1999; Hill et al, 2004).

The data also suggested that a **culture of non-participation** can limit children's influence in policy making:

"...the idea of actually asking a child... 'What do you think would be a good thing to do to improve your life?' is still fairly fledgling." (Respondent 5)

This was evident in **children's feelings of powerlessness in influencing adults' decisions**:

"...we're kids and I think if we were adults, they'd listen to our ideas more. The older we are the more they think we're mature enough." (Young Person 1)

Organisational factors were identified as presenting the biggest barrier to young people influencing policy development, with slow, bureaucratic, decision-making processes among the organisational factors cited:

"you get bogged down in the bureaucracy, and the internal politics and budgets and, recruitment" (Respondent 1)

Organisational time, resources and creativity, as well as **a commitment to young people influencing** policy development were the most important **organisational requirements** to emerge:

"you need to put in the time and resources...being flexible and ensuring that you take a creative approach, whether that's using art, music or stories, or social media...in a way that is appropriate and starts with young people. (Respondent 8);

"there needs to be that continued commitment...to make sure that recommendations are seen through, to understand that children and young people have been involved for a reason." (Respondent 3)

Together, this builds a picture of the organisational context within which this consultation is being undertaken and the many challenges that exist for adults developing and undertaking consultation.

4 CONCLUSION: CONSULTATION AS 'PARTICIPATION'?

The research evidenced a keenness among Local Authority Officers for children's voices to be evident in local Child Poverty Strategies and for local responses to child poverty to be influenced by the views of young people. However, it also highlighted a challenging organisational environment within which consultation activities and strategy development are being planned and undertaken, including increased financial pressures, bureaucracy and time pressures. Despite this, some interesting and innovative consultation methods were apparent.

Considering these findings alongside the requirements for participation identified within the literature, **consultation practice within this context does not amount to 'participation'**. It lacks the required representativeness – with an under-representation of younger, disabled and male children and young people, and an over-representation of individuals already engaged in participation processes – it provides insufficient opportunity for child-led agenda-setting in determining the focus of consultation, and the evidence of children's influence on decision-making and feedback are frequently lacking.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

A number of policy and practice recommendations are made on the basis of these research findings. These recommendations are of relevance to Government, and Local Authorities who are planning, undertaking or commissioning consultation activities and those developing or updating Child Poverty Strategies. They are also of interest to colleagues within voluntary and community sector organisations contributing to this consultation or tackling child poverty locally:

1. Local Authorities should *utilise a range of consultation methods* to ensure methods facilitate the involvement of young people experiencing poverty, because over-reliance on formal participation structures risks involving more affluent young people;
2. Government should *commit on-going funding to Local Authorities to support this consultation*, because financial and time constraints currently influence the choice of consultation methods more than perceptions regarding their appropriateness for securing the views of children and young people experiencing poverty;
3. *Government Guidance should assert representativeness among those experiencing poverty as essential, and suggest a rationale for targeting groups of children and young people*, responding to the fact that consultation currently lacks inclusivity and representativeness and there is insufficient clarity on which young people should be targeted and why;
4. *Government Guidance should more explicitly direct Local Authorities towards ensuring consultation leads to improved policy and services by facilitating children's influence* (i.e. this being its *purpose*), and Officers should clearly articulate the purpose of consulting children and young people;
5. Adults involved in the consultation process should *provide children with opportunities to decide on the issues of focus*, as this may facilitate insights important for policy and service development;
6. Government guidance should *outline non-stigmatizing approaches to consulting children on child poverty-related issues and explicitly encourage children's role in agenda-setting* – because possible stigmatisation is a central challenge when consulting on child poverty, and can result in children being left unaware that consultation relates to poverty;
7. Those consulting should *rigorously evaluate whether and how children benefit from involvement in consultation processes*, routinely ask children whether they have benefited, and consider remunerating children for their involvement, particularly where their role in consultation activities is substantive;

- 8.** Local Authority Officers should *ensure Child Poverty Needs Assessments and Child Poverty Strategies reflect children's expressed views, treat feedback as integral to the consultation process, and provide interim feedback and on-going dialogue where the pace of policy development or implementation is slow. Government Guidance should stipulate the importance of demonstrating how children's views influence Child Poverty Needs Assessments and Child Poverty Strategies;*
- 9.** Adults, involved in delivering the consultation, should *ensure their own views of children's capabilities do not themselves serve to limit children's influence over Strategy development, instead utilising age-appropriate consultation activities and securing the necessary strategic-level commitment from local partners and stakeholders to children's influence over policy development;*
- 10.** *Government Guidance on the consultation of children and young people in Child Poverty Strategies, should be made statutory - requiring all Local Authorities to take account of it when planning and undertaking consultation - and expanded to provide direction on the areas highlighted above, since it is currently having little influence over consultation practice in this context.*

For further details on the research presented in this paper, please contact Chloe Grant on 07852 200 981 or Ade Sofola, 4 in 10 Strategic Manager at Save the Children on 020 3215 3468 or via email at a.sofola@savethechildren.org.uk

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7 APPENDIX I: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A **qualitative research design** was utilised to produce 'rich description' and a 'deeper' understanding of the participation process and outcomes (Silverman, 2000), and **focus groups** and semi-structured **one-to-one interviews** were employed as the most appropriate tools for exploring the views and expressed motivations of C&YP, and adult decision-makers' respectively (Cronin, 2001; Fielding and Thomas, 2001). A short open-ended questionnaire was also completed by focus group participants to capture 'minority viewpoints' (Stafford et al, 2003:362) and reduce the risk of focus group dynamics silencing young people's voices (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999).

Data analysis procedures involved full transcription of recorded interviews, enabling initial familiarisation with the data (Fielding and Thomas, 2001) and multiple readings. All quotes relevant to the individual research questions were grouped into a table and systematically and rigorously considered to identify themes and concepts' (ibid.), with all examples of identified themes gathered and compared with the existing literature and theory to develop explanations and interpret meaning (Creswell, 2003).

Various strategies were employed to increase **validity**, or accuracy: a transparent and systematic analytic process (Silverman, 2001); 'reflexivity' through placing my own values within the research and clarifying my motivations for the study (Creswell, 2003); the provision of rich, detailed descriptions that enable comparisons during study replication (ibid.); extensive use of quotes to support findings (Opie, 1992); a short questionnaire with focus group participants to enable data triangulation (Creswell, 2003); and recording and fully transcribing all interviews to support accuracy in data interpretation.

A clear sampling rationale, triangulation of focus group and questionnaire data (ibid.), a well documented research procedure, pre-testing (piloting) of interview schedules for ambiguity (Silverman, 2001) and systematic transcription of interview data (Silverman, 2000) all serve to increase the **reliability** of the study and its finding.

Ethical considerations required all research participants to be provided with information 'that might influence the decision to participate' (Ruane, 2005:19) and to sign to indicate their consent and parental consent to be secured for young people. I offered participants confidentiality and anonymity (Sieber, 1998) to avoid negative repercussions from participating and encourage candour within the interview situation - replacing individual and place names with pseudonyms - and audio and hard copy data were securely stored and password protected. Ethical approval was secured from the University of Bristol and a Local Authority Research Governance Board.

Time and financial constraints and difficulties accessing research participants have impacted the methodology, producing **study limitations**. The sampling approach limits the generalizability of the findings, being neither representative (Ruane, 2005), theoretical, or purposive (Silverman, 2001). As with qualitative research more generally, it does not therefore enable 'statistical generalizations' about processes and outcomes of consultation across the wider 'population' (Curtis et al, 2000) of Local Authorities in England. However, 'analytic generalization' (Creswell, 2000) - linking findings from this sample to theory - is possible, with the rich, in-depth, context-specific qualitative data generated (Creswell, 2003) therefore developing understanding of consultation in this context.