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CHILDREN ARE CITIZENS TOO!

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

PLANNING FOR CHILDREN

AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN

NEW ZEALAND TODAY.



Top: Students from Mayfield Primary.
Bottom: Creating Box City.

In recent years there has been growing interest in children and young people at both international and national levels. In 1993 New Zealand ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In doing so it committed itself to acknowledging children's rights and to giving children and young people the right to be heard on matters that affect them. The Convention requires all organisations, agencies and professions including planning, to recognise the rights of children and young people, where relevant, in their work. New Zealand, however, has a mixed record on addressing the rights of children and has been strongly criticised for its poor performance with regard to the implementation of the Convention. The following censure comes from Robert Ludbrook, both a lawyer and advocate for children:

It would be hard for the government to point to any change since ratification of UNCROC, which can be demonstrated to have enhanced the rights and interests of children in this country as well giving practical effect to the principles of UNCROC. On the other hand, there are many examples of the rights of children being ignored, overridden or diminished as a result of government action or inaction. New Zealand's children are victims of tokenism and hypocrisy" (Ludbrook, 2000, p. 123).

Of late the New Zealand government has become increasingly sensitive to such criticisms and seen the need to react positively to the growing agenda for children being promoted internationally. Thus, 2003 saw the release of two significant government documents setting an agenda for the inclusion of children and young people in community life as required under the Convention. The two key documents are: *New Zealand's Agenda for Children: Making Life Better for Children*, Ministry for Social Development (2002) and *Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa*, Ministry of Youth affairs (2002).

These have been followed by the release of guidelines on children and young people's participation:

- *"Keeping it Real": A Resource for involving*

young people; Youth Development Participation Guide, Ministry of Youth Affairs (2003)

- *Involving Children: A guide to engaging children in decision-making*, Ministry of Social Development (2003)

- *Toolkit for child and youth participation in local government decision making processes*, Ministry for Social Development (2004)

- *Whole Child Approach*, Ministry of Social Development (2004).

In 2003 a team of researchers from the Universities of Otago and Auckland were awarded a research grant to find out the extent to which the needs and views of children and young people are considered by planners working in local government. The intention of the research was to target planners working in 'core' planning sectors, mainly in Development Planning, and Policy Planning. The aim of which was see how the wider agendas concerning children and young people initiated at central government level were transferred into decision making by planners in practice. A study carried out by the Ministry of Social Development earlier in 2003 found that participation initiatives involving children and young people were widespread across most local authorities. The question for the research team in this research was, how much of this activity was based in planning? In this paper we present a brief summary of our findings.

WHY DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE MATTER?

Public participation in planning is universally acknowledged as a good thing by local government and by planners and is required under the Resource Management Act though the Act itself does not include any definition of what 'public' is. Children and young people have not generally been included as 'public' for purposes of participation even though they generally constitute between 30 and 40% of the population. Children and young people are vital members of the community and there are a number of significant reasons why planners should give particular consideration to children and young people in planning:

- They have the right to be included
- They are valuable members of the community now and in the future
- There is a legal and moral imperative to aid their participation
- The local environment can help or hinder their development
- Young people should be partners in community development
- Everybody learns through their participation
- They provide new perspectives and ideas
- Environments that are better for children and young people are better for everyone
- They have different needs and perspectives from those of adults.

The inclusion of children and young people in the planning process provides planners with a win-win situation. According to Driskell (2002, p.35) benefits accrue to the children and young people concerned, the wider community and to planners themselves. Benefits to children and young people include: new ways of seeing and understanding their community; new networks of friends and role models; opportunities to learn about democracy and tolerance; active engagement in environmental and social change; and the strengthening of confidence, self esteem and identity. The community benefits from their creativity and enthusiasm. Constructive alliances are forged between the different generations, overcoming prejudices and mistrust. Planners are better in touch with the needs and issues of the communities they serve and will make more informed and effective decisions. They can educate young people in policy and decision-making and engage them in sustainable development; implement the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child in their localities; and create child friendly, humane environments.

To achieve these benefits it is essential for planners to clarify what it is that they want from the participation process at both the pragmatic and the conceptual level. Conceptually planners need to consider the relationship they wish to have with children and young people, the role that children and young people will play and what suits the circumstances best. Pragmatic concerns include identifying the approach to be taken, the process or method of participation, and the outcomes to be derived. In our research planners certainly were grappling with all these issues.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

A questionnaire was sent to all city and district

authorities in New Zealand. Where possible, separate questionnaires were sent to policy and development teams/groups or departments. For smaller councils one questionnaire only was sent. Overall a 72% (58 planners) response rate was achieved from contacted councils. A telephone and web search was undertaken to identify appropriate planners in the local authority to whom the questionnaire could be sent, ideally one in policy and one in development control/consents. Policy planners were disproportionately represented in the planners responding, illustrating that policy planning is where most of the activity relating to the participation of children and young people is occurring. There were a number of authorities who did not complete the questionnaires and conversations with planners in some of these authorities suggests that where 'nothing' was perceived to be happening planners felt reluctant to complete the questionnaire. This seemed to be a particular concern for a number of regulatory planners who felt that the survey was not in their direct area of operation. Overall, however, the response from the questionnaire survey was overwhelmingly positive, with almost all planners responding that they were keen to see children and young people included in planning and to know how to improve practice.

In the second stage of the research 11 authorities were selected for case study interviews. These were selected because they had an interesting approach or project, had taken actions that would be of interest to the wider planning community and were representative of the diversity of authority types. All those authorities approached for interviews and to act as case studies agreed to take part. The local authorities concerned entered into all the interviews positively, they were eager to share with the wider planning community their hopes, their initiatives, their successes and their challenges. We are indebted to the interviewees for the frank and often critical way in which they engaged with the research as it is only through realistic and sometimes painful analysis of our own experiences both positive and negative that real progress can be made.

SURVEY FINDINGS

In our survey we addressed 5 key topic areas with regard to children and young people: policy and plans, development planning, information and resources, the importance of children and young people, moving forward and a final additional

consideration was the relationship between council size and initiatives.

Policy and plans

Of the 25 planners that stated that their councils do involve young people in policy creation, nearly half described their involvement as 'direct input' (46%), which includes participation through youth councils, forums and workshops and representation on policy development groups. Indirect methods of involvement (32%) by contrast included surveys, consultation and different forms of need assessments. The remaining responses (22%) fell under the category of 'part of wider community' and in effect means that there are no policies specifically for children and young people. This was the least specific of the three categories as frequently 'involvement' was merely a general reference to the fact that children and young people as members of the public had the right to be included as part of the wider community. In most instances this approach on the part of planners and local authorities is unlikely to result in any meaningful participation.

Development planning

With reference to development planning the majority of planners (66%) said that they give specific consideration to the impacts of developments on children and young people. When asked to name the types of developments where special consideration is given to children and people, the most frequently mentioned types of development were recreational (43% of all development types mentioned), these included development of cycle ways, sports facilities and skate parks, with skate parks mentioned most often. Educational developments were next at 23%, and referred to developments relating primarily to schools and childcare centres. Comparatively little mention was made of developments such as transport which can have significant impacts on children and young people's ability to get around and on their independent mobility relating to their ability to walk to school, the cinema, or the shops. Similarly limited mention was made of retail, entertainment developments, or housing - all of which have significant impacts on the lives of children and young people. With regard to recognising and designing for children and young people's needs the most frequently mentioned issues were: safety issues, design, and access, with others such as cost, space, location, and avoiding conflict, also receiving mentions. An identified area of deficiency was the lack of guidelines; only 8% were able to mention any guidelines as being

available to them on how to include children and young people.

Planners involve children and young people in a range of ways, often using more than one method, for example: consultation and submission processes, project design and construction, youth councils, focus groups etc. Design competitions are commonly used, as in the design of covers for the district plan or for skate parks. Schools are frequently used to access children in the consultation process. Of the 19 planners who worked with children and young people 16 found the process to be successful and in 10 cases it influenced policy, demonstrating the importance of involvement. Where planners have worked with children and young people they have overwhelmingly found the process to be a positive one.

Information and resources

The level of access to resources varied markedly across councils. A total of 26% of planners stated that their councils have a dedicated child/youth officer; interestingly a small number did not know if their council had one. Of those councils who have a child/youth officer, 67% said that they have some form of contact with them, but contact was neither regular nor general. When asked where in the council planners go for advice the most frequent responses were (in order of frequency) community planning group, safer communities, youth council, recreation officer, and youth officer. Outside the council the most frequent sources of advice were schools, Ministries, youth groups, youth workers, and community groups. Overall there seems to be limited use made by planners of those council officers with specialist experience of children and young people. Where advice is sought it tends to be on issues associated with recreation and safety. There was no mention, for example, of seeking advice from those working in housing, transport or architecture and only two mentions of iwi as a source of advice.

The importance of children and young people

When asked about those areas of planning that they considered to be important to children and young people some interesting responses emerged: 7 planners said 'no areas', 2 said 'all areas', 7 said activities specific to children and young people and 3 said 'the same as everyone else'. Planners reiterated the importance of recreation, education and traffic as significant areas. Many planners did express concern about what they perceived to be the need to redress the low priority given to

children and young people in planning, as one planner stated: "They have no voice/power in the political process, yet 'live now' and 'will take responsibility' in the future".

Planners were asked if they felt the need for special initiatives for working with young people - 72% agreed that there was a need, primarily around the issue of 'how to consult'. A further question then asked planners if they felt comfortable addressing issues for children and young people - 53% said planners in their department felt comfortable addressing issues involving children and young people. Of those planners saying they did feel comfortable reasons included: "planners are comfortable working with all sectors of the community", "most are parents", and "it is only a small part of what they do". Some planners seemed surprisingly complacent about their ability to work with children as the following quote indicates: "None have been directly involved in planning for children and young people, however, I'm sure that they are reasonably comfortable in dealing with children".

Planners identified a range of problems they do or could experience in working with children and young people, these included a lack of resources, lack of skills and particularly, potential difficulties in relating to young people. Planning processes were mentioned also as a difficulty, mainly that processes are too long, and the difficulty of getting children and young people to participate was a major concern. A small number of planners had reservations about young people's ability and maturity, but also there was concern that planners should not disappoint children and young people.

Moving on

In the final part of our survey we asked 'what type of help would be most useful for planners working with children and young people?' Two responses stand out in the number of times they were mentioned by planners: training and good practice guidelines. Interestingly, planners did not seem to have high awareness of or use resources that are available - either within their own authority or available from central government.

Council size

The issue of council size was one that was of interest to the researchers as it has often been suggested and certainly the more publicised council initiatives with children and young people suggest that larger councils, usually city councils have an advantage and are able to undertake activities not possible in smaller councils. Our findings show that smaller councils are indeed less likely to have a dedicated child/youth officer and

less likely to have a specific policy. Nonetheless, nearly 70% of councils with a population of 10,000 to 49,999 and 43% of those with a population of up to 9,999 agree that children and young people should be considered in planning developments. Whilst lacking specialist officers, small councils benefit, for example, from close relations with their community, particularly with local schools - and having a relatively small number can easily access their young people. We found councils of all sizes working with and on behalf of children and young people. Size can be a factor in terms of resources, but councils of all sizes are able to give consideration to and undertake successful planning initiatives with children and young people.

THE CASE STUDIES

In the second part of the research we undertook in depth interviews with planners and local government officers in 11 authorities, in which the motivation to get involved with children and young people, local government/planning structures, projects undertaken, and the lessons learnt were discussed. Unfortunately space does not permit us to explore these findings here but they are available in the full report, copies of which have been sent to all participating authorities and are available from the University of Otago (Department of Geography). Perhaps the most important outcome from these interviews is the fact that where authorities had engaged with children and young people, the experiences encouraged further and closer interaction in the future. This - was regardless of the type and scope of the engagement, for example, in developing a skate park or preparing the community plan; or regardless of how successful the outcomes were for both planners and the children and young people involved. While many planners indicated that they found the experiences challenging, stressful and a steep learning curve, many also found that it demystified the process of working with young people and opened their eyes to the positive gains to be made from developing these relationships.

PLANNING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WORKSHOP

The research was followed up at a workshop at the NZPI conference in Invercargill. Attendants at this workshop were unanimous in their agreement that children and young people should be involved in planning processes. They were also able to list

a range of initiatives already being undertaken within their local authorities. Initiatives included using libraries as drop in centres, youth councils, a safer community council and environmental awards. Whilst these initiatives were valuable they were not indicative of sustained interest in children and young people across local authorities. In the final part of the workshop participants were asked to consider issues around engaging more actively with children and young people in the future. During the ensuing discussions participants raised a number of concerns and made a number of pertinent observations on working with children and young people such as: 'let them see action - not be ignored', 'get into the real issues', 'explain decisions and the reasons why' and 'engage, engage, engage - don't give up!'. As in the survey the workshop revealed real interest on the part of planners in working with children and young people and a strong desire to develop better processes and methods for achieving involvement.

CONCLUSIONS: ARE PLANNERS WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

Overall, unfortunately, our research concludes that children and young people are not a significant concern to planners currently working in local government. There are some initiatives being undertaken by concerned planners to redress this situation but these - are fairly small scale and not typical of planning as a whole. Few regulatory planners consider children and young people to have special significance. The intense and risk-averse nature of planning under the RMA seems

to leave little scope for more innovative and socially oriented planning. Policy planners and those working on issues seen to directly affect children and young people, such as recreation and community development, do pay more attention to children and young people, but generally any initiatives here take place outside the statutory planning process. Actions and initiatives on the part of central government and even at higher levels within councils are not seen as particularly relevant for planners in their daily work. Rather, for planners, initiatives tend to come from within planning and from direct contact with interested councillors, and council officers.

To end on a more positive note, planners are keen to be involved, they want to develop practices that are inclusive of children and young people and to forge new partnerships. The purpose, powers and decision-making processes of local government have been radically reformed with the passage of the Local Government Act 2002. Councils now have the mandate to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural well being of their present and future communities and are required to give consideration to the views of all the community. The Local Government Act thus provides planners with forceful support for involving children and young people more meaningfully. For as our planners have already discovered, children and young people have the originality and energy to contribute fresh ideas and different perspectives to the practice of planning.

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