



TAP INTO TEENS

Today's youth need to be listened to, kept active and made to feel their needs are catered for. Here, Terry Simpson, clerk at Ringwood Town Council in Hampshire, tells how an innovative initiative is giving its teenagers a voice

“Young people are 25% of the present and 100% of the future.” That is not a saying from a famous academic or international politician. It was a statement made by the late Cllr Danny Cracknell, an independent district and town councillor who invariably topped the polls and was chairman or town mayor of Ringwood for seven out of ten years between 1997 and 2007 (for two of the ‘missed’ years he was ill). Those who worked with Danny will have lost count of the number of times he reminded us of the percentages, so much so that the statement now underpins a huge amount of our work.

Why was he so passionate about young people? By trade he was the ‘travelling washing machine repair man’. His job put him in direct contact with people from all walks of life and ages in Ringwood. He was a good listener and heard first-hand about the issues that concerned residents as they chatted to him while he worked. He learnt about the young disadvantaged, and yes, we had those in comfortable Ringwood, and set about providing them with interesting diversions. He set up the Cheetahs, a group for teenagers

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that built and raced grass track cars. And they ceased to cause as much trouble as they had previously.

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were not ‘old enough’ to understand.

Our recent discussions with young people brought forth comments such as “councils don’t know what we want and don’t talk to us”, and “they don’t take any notice of what we want, they go to a meeting and decide what they think we want”. In short, our young people resented “coffin dodgers” (their phrase, not mine) making decisions with long-term consequences with little or no input from those most affected, i.e. the young. Questions such as “you (us older people) have a house, why won’t you let any be built for us?”

Starting the conversation

For years, town councillors had worked with young people on individual projects. They did not adopt a big glossy policy document or set down rules governing how they should do it. They just met youngsters informally on their own patches, ‘on their turf’, finding out about their problems and identifying the solutions.

Young people have hugely influenced the design and layout of our facilities. On a recent project to update a skate park they took part in discussions with suppliers and then chose the supplier and the equipment.

But we felt we were missing something because there was no continuity or involvement in issues that affected their long-term futures. Remember, councillors knew that young people were 100% of the future. Moreover, only two councillors had children of school age. Most were not in daily close contact with teenagers and it was impossible for them to know about their hopes, aspirations and fears.

We wanted young people involved, not just consulted, at the point that decisions were taken. And that was long before the Big Society.

We looked at lots of models. Although every one provided opportunities that were not there before, not one put young people at the table where the actual decisions were made. They also had one other significant drawback: they

all needed resources that we did not have to support them.

But following a project we undertook with a local secondary school we realised that there is no age bar on the appointment of any expert to advise councillors before decisions are taken. Only a fool makes a decision without all the relevant information and who are the best people to give information about young peoples’ views? We therefore asked the school to nominate two students to act as advisors to each of our committees. For legal reasons, the

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formal appointments have to be made by the council and although the scheme is now in its fourth year we have never considered refusing a nomination.

Student advisors receive the same papers as councillors, except they want them by email. They are fully involved at all meetings and stay when we have to move into a private session. We have live examples of where students have influenced decisions. They have also prepared and submitted reports direct to committees. They are now an integral part of the way we work and make decisions. Oh, and it costs virtually nothing to operate.

The scheme has been featured in this magazine, the Local Government Association’s *First* magazine and NALC’s *Whatever, yeah?* booklet and at workshops at NALC’s Localism in Action conferences in Bristol and York.

Machiavelli said: “Learn to see things as they really are, not as we imagine they are”, which brings us back to coffin dodgers and Danny’s point about who is important.

For more information about our student advisor scheme visit: www.ringwood.gov.uk.