NYA Engagement Network:

Effective Practice Guide

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How to use this guide

This guide aims to provide effective practice guidance and examples of what works for those involved in projects related to enabling young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) to have their say and influence provision.

The research is based on the National Youth Agency (NYA) Engagement Network, which was commissioned and funded by the LG Group. The National Engagement Network Pilot finished in June 2011. It will now be for local areas to decide whether they want to set up local networks and the NYA will continue to offer support to the areas that do. The NYA will continue to host Engagement Network resources on its website (www.nya.org.uk). The NYA also maintains 'Supporting Services for Young People' Community of Practice – an online resource that supports collaboration across local government and the public sector and is freely accessible to councils and their partners. If councils require further support they will still be able to work with NYA on this.

The guide is laid out as a number of questions in order to help practitioners decide how best to set up their own Engagement Network or similar project. The term network is used throughout for consistency; however, it should be interpreted broadly as the effective practice highlighted in the guide has applications to those who want to set up any project in which young people who are NEET are encouraged to have a voice. The questions are as follows:

Throughout the guide we have illustrated the key messages using examples from networks and the young people involved. The case studies identified have undertaken a range of different activities in their networks and have used different techniques and strategies to maintain the involvement of young people.

This guide aims to inform:

- **practitioners working to engage young people**

- **local policy makers who make decisions about provision for young people**

- **lead members for children's services and other elected members with responsibility for children and young people's issues.**

1. What was the Engagement Network Pilot?

The National Youth Agency (NYA) developed the Engagement Network, at the request of the LG Group (then Local Government Association), to build on the work of the LG Group's Hidden Talents programme, which examined more effective local solutions to re-engaging young people who are NEET and helping them to become involved in shaping local provision for young people. The Engagement Network was designed to put NEET young people at the heart of assessing and developing local support and provision to re-engage young people in learning.

The National Engagement Network Pilot finished in June 2011, although local networks could continue with the support of the NYA if they decided to. It will now be for local areas to decide whether they want to set up local networks and the NYA will continue to offer support to the areas that do. The NYA will continue to host Engagement Network resources on its website (www.nya.org.uk).

What were the aims of the Network Pilot?

- To involve young people in the innovative process of challenge, reflection and planning.

- To offer young people genuine opportunities to have their voices heard.

- To strengthen local infrastructure supporting provision for young people who are NEET.

- To create new relationships and share accountability across the local authority, and its partners, including young people.

- To share expertise and good practice locally and nationally.

The ultimate aim of the network was to support young people to progress to positive and fulfilling destinations.

What did the Engagement Network Pilot look like?

The National Engagement Network worked with staff in 11 local authorities to facilitate and maintain a group of young people who are currently or have previously been NEET to undertake a local project. Young people involved ranged from 16 to 23 years. Some of these young people became engaged in employment, education or training while involved in the network. The network allowed the young people to explore the current support and provision for young people who are NEET and gave them opportunities to feed back to local decision makers.

An important aspect of the Network Pilot was that young people were allowed to lead the networks and local authorities were given the flexibility to undertake the project using whatever methods they felt appropriate in order to gain the information they needed on the services available to young people. Methods adopted by the areas included the young people collecting information through:

- conferences for young people

- surveys and interviews of young people who are NEET

- interviews with providers

- 'mystery shopping' providers.

All networks allowed the young people to feed back to local policy makers including those who have responsibility for commissioning services. This was mainly done through presentations delivered by the young people.

Context of the Engagement Network

All of the individual networks have been set up and run in the context of very challenging circumstances, beyond the control of the network and which cannot be ignored. The issues being faced may limit the impact networks could otherwise have had. Examples of challenges faced by networks include:

- **restructuring of services for young people including Connexions and Youth Services**

- **readjustment of service priorities**

- **budget cuts**

- **loss of jobs and key staff**

Despite these challenges, staff are positive about their involvement in the Engagement Network, and while the future of the networks cannot be guaranteed due to the issues listed above, staff are keen to continue the networks in the future if at all possible.

2. What works in engaging young people?

Points to consider

- **Conveying a clear message about offering an exciting opportunity which enables young people to voice their views to local decision makers is essential to engage participants.**

- **Making young people feel they are special and valued in taking on this important work helps to engage and motivate them.**

- **Working with a variety of statutory and voluntary partners is vital to reach and bring in young people to the network.**

- **Incentives do not need to be big and costly. Small incentives make a real difference to the young people. However, financial incentives are of real value for recruiting young people in the first instance.**

Those who managed and delivered the local networks (including Connexions Personal Advisors, Youth Workers, LA team staff) identified several approaches which work in recruiting young people. These are discussed below.

Due to a lack of funding in most areas, traditional incentives, such as money or vouchers are not being offered to the young people to encourage participation. Instead, network staff have developed other ways of encouraging young people to participate. In particular, network staff have presented young people with a number of reasons as to why they should be involved in the network which are seen to be very effective at encouraging participation.

Examples of selling points which attract young people and mean something to them focus on:

- offering them something different

- letting them have their say and express a view

- helping them to progress by reducing or removing barriers

- making them feel special.

[How] we sold it to them was really where they came from … we said it was a tool that would help them move on and overcome some barriers.
[Network staff]

Effective engagement messages being used by network staff are that participation:.

- offers young people the opportunity to work on a national project alongside others and share their vision and views on how to improve provision for young people like themselves

- gives young people the opportunity to have a voice about local provision for young people including sports and leisure facilities, education and training courses, and transport services

- enables the young person to champion the cause of young people and make a difference by giving them the chance to put forward their ideas and suggestions directly to local policy makers and elected members

- lets the network staff work with young people to reduce and remove barriers and obstacles which are preventing them from moving forward

- makes the young person feel special and values their involvement and input.

You've been chosen – not everyone can do this. Because of the type of young people [involved] this really worked. They feel that they are special and this shows in the amount of time they've taken to do this.
[Network staff]

They [network staff] said it was a big responsibility so I thought, yeah, I want to do this.
[Young person]

Some effective techniques for engaging young people were reported to be:

- offering networking

- explaining the purpose of the scheme

- offering incentives

- providing transport

- building on partnership working and previous relationships.

Some interviewees reported that the network presents a good opportunity to help others like themselves and to hear other people's views 'to better your future'.

As well as providing these selling points, it is also important to provide the young people with a clear idea of what the network is and what they can achieve from the outset. This can be challenging as the brief of an Engagement Network is purposefully broad in order that individual networks can execute it as they choose. It is also meant to be shaped by the young people themselves, and so it can be difficult to be too prescriptive upfront. However, it is important that young people are aware of what the network is trying to achieve and understand how this will happen, as otherwise they may not engage in the first instance.

Other ways of encouraging young people to participate in the network involve offering **incentives** of different kinds such as help with writing CVs and looking for employment, team building activities, cooking meals together, offering the young people tea and toast when they arrive, going on residentials, and driving lessons.

Where the budget allows, financial incentives can make a big difference to the recruitment process. In one network, young people were offered high street shopping vouchers for attending sessions, with the amount varying depending on the tasks and the length of the meetings. The staff believe that being able to offer these financial incentives has really helped them to recruit and maintain the involvement of the young people.

Holding meetings in a **central location** which is easy for the young people to access can help to facilitate engagement. Similarly, helping with **transport**, such as providing bus tickets for young people or picking them up from their house in a minibus, is another way of facilitating engagement. **Timing** sessions in line with young people's availability is also important in encouraging participation. For example, in one network the young people who were previously NEET had all moved into education or employment and as such the project staff had tailored the meetings around their new circumstances and had moved the time and day of the meetings so that the young people could still attend the project.

Partnership working is the key to engaging young people. Engagement Network staff note that working in partnership with and drawing on the expertise and local knowledge of other agencies and groups such as the youth service, Connexions, youth councils, voluntary organisations and training providers are instrumental in making and maintaining contact with young people. For example, in one area a network partnered with a local college who was running a course for young people who were NEET.

It should be noted that in a number of the networks, the young people were already known to the network staff and had developed a relationship and a level of trust with them. If there are opportunities to build on existing relationships between suitable young people and network staff, this should be considered as a way to encourage participation and reduce the amount of initial staff time required in building up relationships with the young people.

The following case study shows the methods used to engage with and recruit young people onto a network in Bradford.

Bradford Engagement Network

The network in Bradford works in the context of high unemployment rates in the town and few training opportunities for young people. The research project aims to look at what affects young people who are NEET in Bradford. It also aims to build confidence and develop teamwork and communication skills.

The network staff found recruitment 'really hard' initially and the first group of young people that had been identified by Connexions failed to turn up at the first session. After this set-back, the staff widened their approach and asked other agencies, such as training providers, to help identify young people who could take part. These young people were told about the project through emails from the agencies they worked with. After taking this approach they had a group of 12 young people which has subsequently reduced over time to eight through young people leaving to enter education or employment.

The young people initially wanted to come because it offered a different type of training and different opportunities from those currently available to them. Young people were particularly attracted to the project because it sounded interesting and 'it looked good'. Incentives, such as offering driving lessons and help with transport, also worked to get young people involved in the network initially and once involved they stayed because they enjoyed what they were doing and liked taking responsibility for their own network:

"[The project was] not what I expected... [I] thought it would just be training and a driving lesson but it was better...[I] thought it would be boring but we've been able to lead it ourselves."
[Young person]

3. What types of activities are effective in keeping young people engaged and helping them to have a voice?

Points to consider

- **Supporting and enabling participants to own and shape the network agenda so that it represents interests is central to keeping young people engaged and helping them to have a voice in the local community.**

- **Making network activities interactive so that young people work together in developing their ideas and presentations to decision-makers helps to energise them and maintain their involvement.**

- **Offering opportunities that combine fun activities and skills development engages and motivates young people.**

- **Engagement is a continuous and ongoing process.**

Key activities reported to be effective at keeping young people engaged are; ownership, interaction, flexibility, creativity, development of skills and provision of 'fun' activities. These are explored in more detail below.

Ensuring that young people have a stake in setting the direction of the network which represents their agenda is critical to maintaining their involvement and to giving them opportunities to articulate their interests. Young people respond positively to having this level of **ownership**.

… she [network staff] said to us it's our project, you can do what you want with it.
[Young person]

Making the sessions and activities **interactive** stimulates young people's interests and motivates them.

[What I have found] most useful – the socialising really. That it is OK to talk to people even if they look different or intimidating.
[Young person]

Flexibility ensures that network activities meet the changing needs of participants.

I could see it was getting quite tiresome in some respects … so we thought that we would need to capture it to keep the young people so we had to change the project again and got them working on filming which they really enjoyed… [Network staff]

Using **creative and innovative methods** to deliver sessions and activities is effective in sustaining young people's interest. An illustration is a hub tent with IT kit which was used to interview young people about their needs and local services and for participants to record their individual stories.

They enjoyed the hub things because it was a bit different to a normal paper-based questionnaire, bringing some multi-media in. They had to inflate this igloo thing and get people to come in. [Network staff]

The hub was good – you ask questions and the computer says them and someone answers. It looks really good because it is a … computer. We then filmed it all. [Young person]

Another example is a group who interviewed three training providers which they filmed and made into a DVD with the support of a freelance film maker. The participants devised the questions through group work, did the interviewing and worked on the editing of the film. They also took roles within the filming and rotated these jobs (for example, camera person, boom person and interviewer). The film was part of their presentation to decision makers.

Enabling participants to develop **skills** maintains their engagement with the network. Participants appreciate being challenged and learning new skills, including research skills in devising and conducting questionnaire surveys of young people who are NEET and preparing and delivering presentations of their findings to local decision makers.

The presentation was the most useful because I can use those skills [again].
[Young person]

Although it [the network] aims to give them a voice, you have to be realistic that this might not actually happen, people might not listen, so you have to give the young people other experiences and skills as well.
[Network staff]

It [the network] builds confidence as well because a lot of jobs now require you to do presentations in front of complete strangers.
[Network staff]

A balance of **fun activities and rewards** alongside worthwhile activities helps to maintain participants' interest and motivation. An example is the provision of a residential where young people participated in team-building exercises and fun activities (paintballing, kayaking and canoeing) before analysing their survey results and preparing their presentation to decision makers. Participants said that this experience helped them to 'face their fears and try new things'. Another illustration is a group of network participants going bowling after intense activity making a DVD. Another network is offering young people a fun day out at the end of the project as a way of keeping young people engaged throughout the project. This balance of activities is appreciated by the young people, as illustrated below.

Fun. You get qualifications at the end

It isn't a strict working environment and we can have a laugh.

… it's been good. It's quite interesting and it kept me going. I like to be kept busy.

It is important to note that there is a need for constant re-engagement of young people throughout networks such as this. Network staff are constantly using techniques noted in section 2, such as offering incentives of different kinds and calling the young people to ensure they attend sessions, in order to keep the young people engaged throughout the life of the network.

The case study opposite illustrates how one network maintained the involvement of the young people in their group.

Wigan Engagement Network

The Wigan Engagement Network is delivered jointly by staff in an integrated support team led by Connexions, supported by the Youth Service, local training providers, and CRIS, a third sector organisation. The network focuses on vulnerable groups of young people.

Initially, five young people were recruited but one progressed to a college course leaving a group of four: three women and one man aged 18 to 19. Network staff said that the young people's continued involvement would not have been achieved without regular telephone and text contact. Staff also maintained their involvement by responding to the needs of the young people. For example, by moving sessions around when they were becoming bored of certain activities.

Network activities take place at a local community centre and the central Connexions Centre which are accessible for the young people. The group undertook a number of interviews with local providers which they filmed and used to create a DVD.

The group enjoyed working together to make a DVD about local training provision. They decided which training providers to visit, devised survey questions, interviewed training providers, and made and edited the DVD with the support of a freelance film maker. Making a DVD has been a key activity which has engaged and motivated the young people.

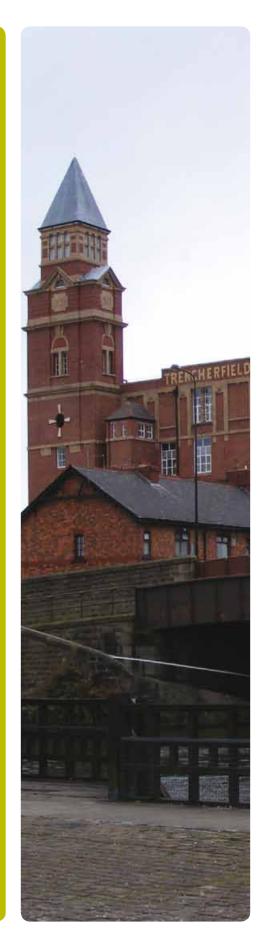### ... having the creative media side was a bit of a wow factor...
[Network manager]

Showcasing the DVD at a presentation, the young people welcomed the opportunity to express their views which they said had helped to increase their confidence and develop their public-speaking skills. They really valued having their voice heard:

I don't know if it will change people but they're listening, aren't they?
[Young person]

The DVD presentation has been shown to the lead elected member responsible for Children's Services and also presented to the NEET scrutiny committee (elected members) who found the contents very useful as it related to current issues in Wigan.

4. What type of support is effective in enabling young people to influence and shape provision?

Points to consider

- **Supporting those in the network works best when it comes from both staff and from the young people within the group. This means providing an environment for the young people that is both supportive and friendly.**

- **The essence and defining principle of an Engagement Network is that young people lead it as far as possible. Staff can build confidence by providing support and guidance while allowing the young people to lead their network.**

- **A successful network hinges on young people feeling that they are making a difference and that their voices are being heard. The elected member and other key decision makers play an important role here and should be included in the network wherever possible.**

The type of support being received by the young people throughout the Engagement Network is seen to be very important in helping young people to have a voice. Both young people and network staff identified different types of support that is effective in helping the young people. These can be summarised as:

- peer support

- support from staff

- the role of the policy makers and elected members.

The important aspects of each are described below.

Peer support

Developing effective group dynamics so that the young people can work well as a team and learn from one another is an important aspect of the network. This is often facilitated through team-building activities including cooking together, outdoor activities and residentials. Bringing together people who do not know one another is also seen as important for the network as this enables the exchange of different viewpoints and ideas and allows the young people to learn from one another.

A network should also create an atmosphere where young people can speak their mind, share ideas and listen to one another without being concerned about the reactions of others. One young person involved in a network felt that this positive atmosphere was the main reason he carried on attending his network.

Everyone has a positive outlook and you could speak your mind and give your ideas and no one would put you down.
[Young person]

Support from staff

An important aspect of the network is the friendliness and approachability of the staff running the networks. This is particularly relevant in the early stages of the network if the young people are unfamiliar with the network staff.

Because of the complicated circumstances being faced by some of the young people involved in the networks, the young people appreciate the staff being flexible and responsive so that activities can be altered to suit the changing circumstances of those involved.

The staff are good, they are laid back. They let me work around my son.
[Young person]

The role of the network staff works particularly well when they provide support to the young people but do not tell them what to do. The young people therefore feel in control and responsible for their own Engagement Network but are also boosted by the confidence of knowing there is support and guidance available to them if they need it.

…They [network staff] have let us do it ourselves. They have given us advice but not told us what to do.

[Young person]

The young people appreciate receiving extra support from the network staff. This included support with aspects that are outside the scope of the Engagement Network such as talking through their future plans, help with CV writing and support with interview techniques.

Continuity of staff is an important factor. This is particularly true of networks where there is less ongoing contact with the young people and as such staff may need to drive the network forward at particular times in order to keep the momentum going.

The role of the policy makers and elected members

As well as the support provided by the staff and the young people themselves, securing the involvement of policy makers and elected members in the network is also important in helping young people to feel they are influencing local support and provision. Allowing the young people to present or feedback their findings on services within the area provides them with a voice that they may not necessarily get through other projects of this nature.

In the case-study areas, the young people involved in the networks have made or will be making presentations to 'decision makers' within their area. The impact of this on the young people has been very positive. They feel as though they have a voice that is being listened to, and are confident changes would happen in the future. This makes them feel more valued and also helps develop new skills and build confidence.

I think getting straight to the point to the managers at the presentation [was the biggest achievement of the network] – we spoke directly to the source so things may actually get done.

[Young person]

The following case study illustrates how the support of both the young people and the network staff is important in networks.
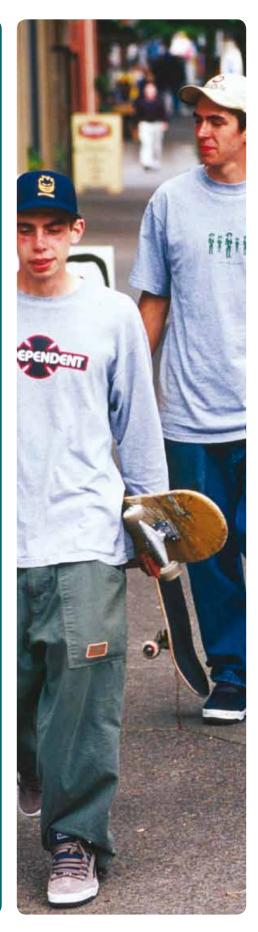
Bexley Engagement Network

Bexley is seen as a leafy borough of London, however, there are pockets of deprivation and youth unemployment, and a lack of work-based provision for school leavers. The main focus of the network is to undertake a mystery shopping exercise of different providers in the area. The staff believe that it is important to balance having fun and undertaking worthwhile tasks in each session and plan the sessions accordingly. The staff have worked hard to keep the group engaged, which has been both time and resource intensive. Despite all eight young people re-engaging in education or employment while being involved in the network, all the young people are still engaged as the staff tailored the project to their change in circumstances and moved the date and time of the sessions accordingly.

The group of young people are from different areas and backgrounds and include young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, those who have been involved with the Youth Offending Team and care leavers. Despite these differences and not knowing one another at the beginning of the network, they have worked well together and have had opportunities to discuss current issues in the news such as immigration. Bringing together young people from different backgrounds has enabled them to learn from one another and get a good understanding of what is going on in the local authority.

The young people are able to have their say about the network and provide views on how the findings should be communicated. The young people get on well with the staff and they enjoy being able to share their views and feel they are being heard. They plan to undertake two presentations of the findings one to the elected member and the second to the managers of the services that were involved in the mystery shopping.

In the future, the staff would like the young people to become an advisory group. While keeping the same young people engaged for the near future, they would hope to start recruiting new young people from September which would provide the network with 'fresh voices'.

5. How does an Engagement Network make a difference to young people?

Engagement networks provide opportunities for young people to convey messages about support and provision for those who are NEET to key decision makers in their area. This is what sets apart the Engagement Network from other activities aimed at re-engaging young people who are NEET. The fact that young people have been given this opportunity through the networks has been seen to be beneficial to the young people involved in building confidence and helping them to feel valued.

However, in order for a network to get to the stage of enabling young people to confidently and eloquently present their messages to decision makers, including elected members, it must first:

- **offer young people opportunities to meet and work with other young people in their area**

  By bringing together young people in a network, those involved had undertaken a research project that allowed them to collect information to present to decision makers. Often the young people do not know one another before joining the network and therefore it presents an opportunity to work and collaborate with people they may not necessarily have chosen to do so. The young people felt they had learnt a lot from one another.

- **provide activities that help to build or boost confidence**

  In order for the young people to present their findings, young people need a certain level of confidence. Network staff help young people to gain confidence throughout the networks by undertaking a range of different activities and team-building exercises, by allowing young people to take up different roles and tasks and by allowing the young people to lead the network and take ownership of what they are doing, whilst providing ongoing support. Many of the activities the young people undertake are new to them and take them out of their comfort zone.

- **allow the young people to do something innovative or different and gain skills**

  By using creative and innovative methods, not only does this engage the young people in the first instance, it also helps to keep them motivated throughout the network and to help them build skills they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to gain. The young people in the networks visited were particularly motivated by multi-media activities.

The guide draws on NFER research commissioned by the LG Group

Acknowledgements

If you are interested in setting up a Local Engagement Network, please contact the NYA on nya@nya.org.uk.

Providing independent evidence to improve education and learning.