Success Factors for Forums on Influence and Participation

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Forums on influence and participation can function in different ways. Here we summarise how a forum’s work might look and what obstacles and opportunities there are. There are a number of aspects that are very important to the success of a forum on influence and participation.

The Ombudsman for Children in Sweden has studied how different forums on influence and participation work and the experience gained from them. Here we have briefly summarised a series of points that are important to the success of a forum on influence and participation.

**Adults must express their motives clearly**

- Politicians and decision-makers must be aware of their own values. According children and young people influence and participation is to a great extent a question of changing one’s attitudes.

- Express your motives clearly. In order for the young people to be able to feel they trust them, decision-makers must be very clear about what is meant by influence and participation. Is it a question of handing over power so that the young people can decide over some things or are they actually to be allowed to influence different decisions that are taken in the municipality? Or is it merely a question of raising young people to be democratic citizens through influence and participation? A dialogue around these issues can serve to clarify the role of the forum and the involved parties’ view of how much influence and participation the forum will give the young people. If these points are not made clear, there is an obvious risk that mainly the young people will misunderstand the opportunities they have to influence and participate. This might eventually lead to a mistrust of decision-makers, which in turn may express itself in an unwillingness to be active in the forum itself.

- Be clear about the aim of the forum. It is to a great extent the adults who construct the premises and set the norms for the scope that children and young people are actually given. This means that it is decision-makers who, consciously or unconsciously, have a notion of what the forum is to do and what role it is to have.

**The will and commitment of the municipal leadership are all-important**

- There must be a political will for the forum on influence and participation to have legitimacy and be able to function in all branches of activity in the municipality. An overarching decision to have a forum on influence and participation should be taken in the municipality. This decision should lead to drawing up objectives for the forum. The
young people should be involved in the process to increase the legitimacy of the objectives.

**Structures are important**

- Locate the forum directly under the municipal or city executive board in order to clearly show the intention of having a forum on influence and participation. It also gives legitimacy to the forum’s activities and sends a signal that it is a matter for all municipal activities.

- Identify and develop forms and procedures that enable the forum to exert influence within the framework of existing activities and decision-making. In order for the forum to be used in the right way, it is important that decision-makers and municipal officers at different levels discuss how the forum can function as a channel for capturing young people’s views and opinions.

**A youth coordinator is important**

- Provide support in the form of a youth coordinator or some equivalent function. The aim of such a function is to support the forum on the basis of the young people’s wishes.

**Time and resources are basic prerequisites**

- It is important that children’s or young people’s groups are given sufficient time to become acquainted with and understand the tasks that they will be influencing. It is important to explain which decisions and matters may take time and which can be dealt with relatively quickly.

- A prerequisite for independent work is that financial, material and human resources are available for the youth councils’ activities. Such resources might for example comprise premises of its own, a meeting place just for the young people’s purposes. This physical environment should have the necessary technical equipment to allow the young people to communicate with the world around them. Another prerequisite that may be very important is that the young people have their own budget. Some municipal authorities have allocated financial resources that the young people have charge of themselves. Some examples of what such a budget can be used for include parties, concerts, attending external courses, meeting other young people, and awarding scholarships or other prizes to associations or people that the young people consider deserve such appreciation.
Provide the young people, the decision-makers concerned and other players with the knowledge they need

- A prerequisite for a young people's forum being able to function is that the young people have knowledge and information about the forum’s role and how it works. In order for the education efforts to be effective, the young people should be involved in both the planning and the implementation itself.

- Give the young people knowledge of how the municipality functions and how the forum can influence decisions and other matters.

Create a dialogue and develop positive communication between the forum, the decision-makers and other players involved

- Use spoken and written language that the young people can understand. Avoid using terms and words that can be misunderstood. Both the written and spoken language can act as master suppression techniques, meaning that the young people are not given the opportunity to influence or participate.

- Let the young people themselves control the form their meetings take. Build up a positive relationship by participating on their terms. Some examples of different types of meetings or methods that have been used include café meetings, speaker’s corners, and open space meetings.

- Allow the young people to draw up their own agendas. Be awake to the issues and matters that the young people want to emphasise. Help the forum to locate the documents and other records it asks for.

- Explain how far a particular matter has come in the process in order to give the young people the opportunity to understand the democratic process.

- Create interest in participating in the forum by appreciating the young people who show that they wish to participate instead of keeping to a strict representative system.

- Make positive examples known. Very often, the general picture that is spread is that it is not worthwhile to try to influence anything. This picture is often the one given by the media and sometimes by young people who have in fact experienced that this can be
the case. Such a picture does not inspire any desire in young people to be active. To counteract this, the municipality can make positive examples known, where children and young people have been able to influence their situation or have succeeded in getting their proposals accepted.

- Give feedback about the decisions. All too often, even when children and young people have been given the opportunity to communicate their views and opinions to decision-makers, they are not given any feedback about how the proposals or ideas they put forward are being dealt with. In many cases, the young person is not given any explanation as to why a particular decision took the form it did. In order for children and young people to have a reasonable chance to understand these complex processes, it is vitally important that they receive some response to their involvement. Adults have a responsibility to report what decisions have been taken, or not taken, and to explain in such a way that children and young people understand.

- Involve schools in the forum’s activities. This may take the form of using schools as recruitment bases or as channels for the forum to capture or disseminate views and opinions.

- Provide some form of proof that a young person has participated in the forum. This might be some form of merit award that can be used in different ways.

**Follow up the forum continuously**

- Perform regular follow-ups of how the forum is working and do not be afraid to make changes if prerequisites change.

- If necessary, the municipal auditors can follow up the role and activities of the forum in relation to the objectives set for its activities.
Success factors for forums on influence and participation at a glance

• Adults must express their motives clearly
• The will and commitment of the municipal leadership are all-important
• Structures are important
• A youth coordinator is important
• Time and resources are basic prerequisites
• Provide both the young people, the decision-makers concerned and other players involved with the knowledge they need
• Create a dialogue and develop positive communication between the forum, the decision-makers and other players involved
• Follow up the forum continuously

Source: Framgångsfaktorer för inflytande forum