



Young Mayors Program

Lessons from the United Kingdom

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WHAT IS A YOUTH COUNCIL & A YOUNG MAYOR?

Local government is an important and appropriate level for young people to actively engage in issues facing their communities.¹ When properly supported, such participation can enable them to develop a sense of active citizenship and to build and share their skills and community connections.² Youth councils affiliated with local governments act as forums to represent the views of young people and provide a formal opportunity to facilitate youth engagement in the community.

Youth councils are often led by a Young Mayor; a young person, usually 12 – 18, who is elected by the youth council or other young people to represent them. There are Young Mayors in place across the world and hundreds of thousands of young people have taken part in elections to put them into office.³⁻⁵

THE BRITISH YOUTH COUNCIL

In the United Kingdom, a long-standing network of youth councils have enabled young people to campaign for change and make their views heard in the decision-making process. Established in the 1960s, the British Local Youth Council Network is among the oldest and most effective systems for youth representation in local government in the region.⁶ Currently, there are 620 active youth councils that work with all levels of local government across the UK.⁷

The British Local Youth Council Network is one of many programs run by the British Youth Council, a charity organisation driven by a vision to empower every young person to create

social and political change. The organisation has been highly successful at equipping young people with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to become active citizens and leaders within their own communities, increasing youth leadership and representation at a local and national level through the youth councils and young mayors programs, and using these initiatives to increase the visibility and recognition of youth voice in decision-making.⁸

WHAT ARE THE 'KEY INGREDIENTS' FOR A SUCCESSFUL YOUNG MAYORS PROGRAM?

Emerging from research into 26 youth councils from the UK and a research report released by the Young Foundation,⁹ we have established seven 'key ingredients' required to operate an effective Young Mayor program:

1. Investment and support of the council (elected and staff)
2. Financial control or influence over a portion the budget
3. Established formal structures of governance
4. Dedicated staff member to organise and support elected youth
5. A formalised Local Authority wide democratic election process
6. Access to meeting spaces and equipment
7. Structures to continue consulting with the wider youth community

BENEFITS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES

Youth leadership has benefits for the individual young person, their peer group and society more broadly.

Young Mayor programs ensure that young people are more informed and involved in local decision-making. They can see that they are being listened to and that their concerns are being acted on. This has the dual benefit of (1) increased youth representation in decision-making, which gives voice to the issues that affect young people, leading to better-informed decisions,¹⁰ strengthened accountability and improved youth services,³ and (2) wider youth engagement with community issues, which helps foster a civic identity at a young age and can lead to greater participation in the democratic process.²

In Bristol, the city's first Big Youth Vote gave young people the chance to vote for 28 new members of the Youth Select Committee and [saw 8,800 eligible young people vote](#) at polling stations in 57 secondary schools and youth centres across the city. Youth turnout has steadily increased with each youth vote, with over 11,000 young people casting a ballot in the most recent election.

Young people also gain new skills and develop valuable experiences and connections. Young Mayors programs offer opportunities for young people to learn and improve their diplomatic skills, public speaking, campaigning and knowledge of the role media plays in democracy.⁹



Participation in democratic processes, such as voting, encourages young people to be curious and question the way governments operate, the way elections are conducted, and the way candidates create their platforms. Most importantly, it teaches young people how to hold governments accountable to their constituents.⁸

A youth cabinet model has been used widely and successfully in the UK, with thousands of young people engaging with their local councils to ensure their voices are heard and their priorities are being reflected in their councils' strategic plans (examples from [Bristol](#) and [Lewisham](#)).

Finally, provision of the Young Mayors fund gives real power to young people to influence change in their community, as well as teaching valuable skills about financial management and community consultation.¹¹

Lewisham Council in the UK has been running a [Young Mayor's program](#) with success since 2004. Their Young Mayors oversee and administer £25,000 budget. [Kensington and Chelsea Youth Council](#) also has a budget of £40,000 per year to fund projects and programmes planned and run by young people.

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