

Understanding youth  
participation in local  
Government  
A Qualitative Study

**FINAL REPORT**

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<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Background.....	8
1.2 Aims and scope of the research .....	8
1.3 Research design and methods .....	9
1.3.1 Sample design and selection.....	10
1.3.2 Conduct of interviews and group discussions.....	10
1.3.3 Analysis.....	10
1.4 Profile of the sample .....	11
1.5 Presentation of the findings.....	12
1.6 Coverage of the report.....	12
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND POLICY CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 The policy context.....	14
2.2 Policy initiatives addressing youth participation.....	15
2.2.1 Modernisation of local government.....	15
2.2.2 Central government initiatives .....	16
2.3 Conceptions of politics and politicians.....	17
2.3.1 Conceptions of local government and politics.....	17
2.3.2 Conceptions of local government representatives .....	18
2.4 Levels of political knowledge, interest and participation .....	18
2.4.1 Political and civic knowledge.....	19
2.4.2 Levels of political interest.....	20
2.4.3 Levels of political activity.....	21
2.5 Explaining political disinterest.....	24
2.6 Explaining political apathy.....	25
2.7 International comparisons and lessons .....	27
2.8 Encouraging interest and participation in politics.....	27
2.8.1 Education and Politics.....	28
2.8.2 Other initiatives .....	28
<b>3 YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONCERNS AND VIEWS ABOUT THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT .....</b>	<b>31</b>
3.1 Young People's Concerns.....	31
3.2 How and why do these concerns arise? .....	38
<b>4 IMAGE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT .....</b>	<b>39</b>
4.1 Awareness and understanding of local government .....	39
4.2 Images of those involved in local government.....	41
4.3 Views about the local council .....	42
4.4 Views about the importance of local government.....	44
4.5 Sources of information about local government .....	45
4.6 Factors influencing young people's awareness and views of local government.....	46
<b>5 INTEREST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT .....</b>	<b>49</b>
5.1 Levels of interest in local politics and government.....	49
5.2 Explaining disinterest in local government.....	50
5.2.1 Lack of awareness and understanding about the role of local government.....	51

5.2.2	Lack of salience of local politics in young people’s lives .....	52
5.2.3	Disillusionment with politicians and the democratic process .....	53
5.2.4	Assumption that the system works.....	53
5.3	Relationship to national political interest.....	54
5.4	Explaining interest in local government.....	55
5.5	Views about future levels of interest .....	56
<b>6.</b>	<b>PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT .....</b>	<b>58</b>
6.1	Awareness and definitions of participation .....	58
6.2	Experiences of different types of participation .....	60
6.3	Views about ways of participating in politics .....	61
6.4	Explaining non participation in local government.....	63
6.4.1	Barriers to participation in local government.....	63
6.4.3	Contributory factors .....	65
6.5	Groups of young people for whom it is perceived to be harder to get involved.....	66
6.6	Explaining voting behaviour .....	67
6.6.1	Reasons for not voting.....	68
6.6.2	Reasons for voting.....	70
<b>7</b>	<b>EXPERIENCES OF LOCAL AUTHORITY YOUTH PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES .....</b>	<b>71</b>
7.1	Explaining participation .....	72
7.2	Impacts of participation .....	75
<b>8.</b>	<b>ENCOURAGING YOUTH PARTICIPATION .....</b>	<b>77</b>
8.1	Should young people participate? .....	77
8.2	Young people’s recommendations.....	78
8.2.1	Informing young people in an interesting and accessible way .....	79
8.2.2	Changing local government representatives .....	81
8.2.3	Creating more opportunities for participation.....	82
<b>9.</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>85</b>
9.1	Solutions?.....	87
	<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>91</b>
	<b>APPENDIX I: TECHNICAL APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>95</b>
	<b>APPENDIX II: TOPIC GUIDE.....</b>	<b>99</b>

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## **Understanding youth participation in Local Government**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report presents findings from a qualitative study investigating the views and behaviour of young people aged between 16 and 25 in relation to local government and politics. The subject of youth participation in both local and national politics has been an ongoing concern in the UK and elsewhere since the early 1990s. In this context The National Centre for Social Research was commissioned by DTLR to investigate the reasons why young people are not participating in local government and consider what, if anything, could be done to increase their participation. The research involved interviews and group discussions in six different local authorities across England. A total of 94 young people took part in the study.

Evidence in this report confirms that young people are concerned about a range of issues. Many of these relate to the local and national political agenda although they often are not perceived in this way. Even though the young people seldom mentioned national or local politics explicitly as a concern, a number of the issues such as the availability of local leisure facilities fall under the jurisdiction of the local authority and/or national government.

#### **Interest in local government among young people**

With the exception of those young people who were actively involved in local authority youth participation initiatives, young people displayed very low levels of awareness and understanding about the role and responsibilities of local government. There was a lack of understanding as to what local councils do, where they are based and their relationship to central government. There also appears to be confusion about the difference between national and local government. Despite this lack of awareness, young people often report rather negative images about the quality of their local authority and its personnel. It seems that in these circumstances young people often draw on the views of others, such as family and community members or the media in forming their opinions of local government. Also, it is clear that perceptions of national politics colour and shape those at the local level, often in a negative way.

A number of factors appear to underpin young people's disinterest in local government. The most notable are a lack of understanding and awareness of local government, the perceived salience of local government in young people's lives and evidence of a general disillusionment with politicians and political systems. This disillusionment with politics confirms much existing knowledge relating to the reasons for young people's lack of interest and disengagement from the national political arena. The evidence collected in this study suggests that disillusionment with politics driven by images from national politics can significantly influence young people's attitudes towards local government.

One of the questions this research set out to explore was why an interest in issues relating to the local area rarely translates into an interest in local government. Based

on the research evidence a lack of awareness of the specific powers and responsibilities of the local authority seems to prevent young people making the link between local issues of concern and the responsibilities of local government. Even in cases where young people had clear concerns about local issues such as reducing crime, vandalism and the streets being kept clean, local government was not always seen as related to these issues. Young people were often '*more bothered about the area than about politics*'. This failure to perceive these two things as being related seems to be a key factor in explaining lack of interest in local government among young people.

In addition, the disillusionment with politicians and the democratic process expressed by the young people may also go some way towards explaining this. It is possible that interest in either local or national politics is to some extent dependent on a degree of faith in the efficacy of our democratic processes and acceptance of these as a way of effecting change. Without this there is little incentive for young people to take an interest in local government and politics because there is not seen to be anything that can be done to influence local issues.

Comparative levels of interest in local and national government varied. Some of the young people who were not interested in local government did have some interest in national politics. This was often seen to be more interesting than local politics because of the greater power wielded by central government and the wider scope of its actions. More exceptionally, some of the young people were only interested in local government. This view tended to be held by young people who made the link between local services and local government. They felt that local government was more relevant to the issues affecting the lives of themselves and their families because its actions determined the availability of local leisure facilities and other such services.

The young people often felt that their level of interest might increase with age as they develop an interest and more of a stake in their local area. Factors such as starting work, becoming resident somewhere permanently, owning a house and having a family were all thought to bring about increased responsibility which would prompt more of an interest in issues such as tax and the cost of living. In particular, becoming a parent was seen as creating new reasons to be concerned about the safety of an area and quality of local facilities and services, such as nurseries, schools and local parks.

### **Participation in local government**

Discussion about ways of participating in politics reveals that young people generally feel powerless and excluded from the political process. The evidence presented provides clear messages as to why young people do not participate in local government. Alongside lack of interest and understanding about local government, young people often do not know how to participate. Even when they are aware of methods in which they can take part they often see little point in doing so. Existing methods of participation in local government are perceived by young people to be ineffective as they are unlikely to have an impact or effect change in local decision-making.

Young people who were actively involved in local government differed from their inactive counterparts in a number of ways. In particular these young people did not

share the disillusionment and cynicism about getting involved expressed by those who had not participated. Those who were participating felt that it was important for young people to express their views about their local community and that these views can have an impact and influence local decision making. Whilst a range of factors are relevant to explaining why some young people get involved, this faith that existing ways of participating can effect change seemed to be particularly motivating for the young people.

Participation can have a range of beneficial impacts for both young people and their local authority and community. The experience of taking part can increase young people's levels of interest in local government. It can also have effects upon young people's confidence and self-esteem and perceptions of their own capabilities. Youth participation initiatives were also valued for providing mechanisms for young people to feed their opinions to the local authority.

### **Suggestions for encouraging young people's participation in local government**

Interestingly, young people generally appreciate the importance of participating in local government and politics. There was broad agreement with the notion that it is important for young people to take an interest and become involved. To substantiate this, young people suggested ways of encouraging participation aimed at addressing the factors that were identified as causing their lack of interest and engagement.

- **informing young people about politics**

Young people suggested a range of ways in which their understanding of local government might be increased. This included teaching politics at school, through the media, posters, leaflets, pamphlets and newsletters, text messaging, the internet and local groups or events.

- **making politicians more representative of and accountable to young people**

Young people felt this might happen in three main ways. Local councillors and officers should represent a cross section of the community in terms of age, ethnicity and socio-economic group. Secondly, local representatives should take more interest in young people and do more to understand the nature of their needs and concerns. Thirdly young people felt there was a need for local authorities to deliver change in response to young peoples issues and concerns, such as the lack of leisure facilities

- **creating more opportunities for young people to participate in the political process**

This study has shown that one of the most potentially effective ways of increasing interest and involvement is by creating greater opportunities for young people to participate in politics at the local and national level. Favoured methods were Youth forums, drop in centres, question and answer sessions with local councillors. Most importantly however, these initiatives need to offer genuine opportunities for young people to express their views and influence local authority decisions.

These suggestions highlight the potential to stimulate interest and involvement amongst some, but perhaps not all, young people. Ultimately the impact that these participatory initiatives will have, however, depends upon the degree and manner in which young people believe their interests and concerns are being heard and responded to. In order to participate effectively they will also need to be equipped

with the skills and confidence to communicate with local politicians. They will also need to develop a clearer understanding of the policy process and appreciate the boundaries and limitations of their endeavours. Unrealistic expectations that are not met may only serve to increase apathy and cynicism about youth participation in the community.

That said, it would be unrealistic to assume that young people will be queuing up to take part in these different schemes and initiatives. A balance needs to be struck between empowering and engaging young people without pressuring them to become involved. Young people seem keen to ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms for their involvement but decisions about participation will be balanced alongside their other interests, activities and commitments. Finally, it important to recognise that it will take at least 10 to 20 years before there may be measurable impacts of the range of different activities being undertaken.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

During the 1990s media speculation and academic debate have been increasingly exercised over the alienation of young people from British political life. The notion that young people have low levels of political interest, knowledge and behaviour in relation to national politics (and the reasons for this) has been well documented (e.g. White, Ritchie and Bruce, 2000; Park, 1999; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995; Furnham and Gunter, 1987; Mardle and Taylor, 1987; Stradling, 1977).

With respect to local politics research that exists seems to confirm the national picture (Pirie and Worcester, 2000; Chivite-Matthews and Teal, 2000; Rao and Young, 1999). As this evidence is predominantly quantitative in method, it can only provide a limited understanding about whether the explanations to account for this are also similar. In this context the Department for the Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) commissioned a qualitative study to investigate the reasons why young people are not participating in local government and consider what, if anything, could be done to increase their participation. The Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre for Social Research has undertaken this research.

## 1.2 Aims and scope of the research

Two age cohorts of young people were involved in the research – those who were eligible to vote aged between 18 and 25 and those who would form part of the next generation of first time voters, aged 16 and 17. The primary focus of the research was young people who are not participating in either local or national political processes. However, in order to generate comparative evidence a small number of young people were also included who had engaged in a range of different participatory methods (ranging from voting, signing a petition, taking part in a protest or demonstration, to taking part in a youth forum or parliament).

The central aims of the study were to investigate the reasons why young people are not participating in local government and consider what, if anything, could be done to increase their participation. In meeting these objectives four broad areas of investigation were pursued, which involved:

- Understanding the perceptions young people have of local government and the salience of local politics and local issues within their lives;
- Investigating the nature of young people's political interest and engagement in local politics;
- Identifying the factors which influence and shape their interest and /or participation in local politics;

- Pinpointing the ways in which young people could be encouraged to take more interest in, or be more engaged with, politics.

As is evident from these aims the purpose of the study was to try to isolate the way young people view the world of local politics. In practice, however, this proved difficult to achieve as young people did not always distinguish between local and national politics.

A more overarching objective of the research was to consider how attitudes towards local government and politics and barriers to participation vary for different groups of young people. Consequently, the sample was designed to include young people from a broad range of different types of background. In addition a small number of young people from different ethnic minority groups were included to shed some light on attitudes towards local government for these groups of young people. However, the small numbers of young people involved make it impossible to provide any specific analysis of barriers and facilitators to interest and participation in local government among ethnic minority young people. Explaining the lack and interest and engagement among young people from these groups requires specific dedicated research.

### **1.3 Research design and methods**

The research was qualitative in design and employed a combination of individual/paired interviews and group discussions. These were carried out in three iterative stages each of which was carried out following preliminary analysis of the previous stage:

- Stage 1 was designed to yield in-depth data about the views, experiences and behaviour of young people. A total of 16 single and 19 paired (composed of two friends) interviews with young people aged 16 to 25 years were conducted. These interviews were evenly spread across six different local authorities. The preliminary analysis of this stage provided individual accounts and perspectives on the issues central to the research. It also identified the issues that were to be explored in stage 2.
- The purpose of stage 2 was to consolidate and refine understanding about the views, experiences and behaviour of young people. Six focus groups were held, one in each of the local authorities selected in stage 1. The use of focus groups provided the opportunity to expose young people to those with differing views and experiences, thereby enabling reflection and consideration of the factors, which act as facilitators and barriers to participation, and strategies for encouraging participation. Three of the focus groups were held with young people aged 16 to 20 years and 3 of the focus groups were held with young people aged 21 to 25 years. This evidence was then combined with the findings from stage 1.
- Following preliminary analysis of the previous stages an 'expert' seminar was held with key policy representatives, educational advisers and representatives of other interested bodies. The seminar was designed to provide a forum to

discuss the findings arising from the research, and consider some solutions to raising the interest and engagement of young people in local politics.

### **1.3.1 Sample design and selection**

A cross section of young people, aged between 16 and 25, from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances and living in different English regions were consulted. A total of 94 young people took part in the study.

As this was a qualitative study, the rationale in selecting the young people to take part in the study was not to select a statistically representative sample of all young people, but to ensure diversity of coverage across certain key variables. The sample of young people was therefore purposively selected in order to ensure diversity across a range of criteria including age, gender, ethnicity (to a limited degree), employment activity, highest educational qualification, socio-economic group and participation in local politics. Diversity in terms of the type of local authority and regional location was also ensured as the young people were selected from 6 different local authorities across England: Nottinghamshire County Council, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Tynedale District Council, Cambridge City (District) Council, North Somerset Unitary Council, and Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council.

### **1.3.2 Conduct of interviews and group discussions**

Qualitative research permits understanding from the respondents' perspective, using their terminology and language, thereby ensuring each issue is explored in a relevant and meaningful way. In order to achieve this all interviews and group discussions were exploratory and interactive in form so that questioning could be responsive to the experiences and circumstances of the individuals involved. They were based on a topic guide (see Appendix 2), which outlined the key themes to be addressed and the specific issues for coverage within each.

While topic guides help to ensure systematic coverage of key points across interviews, they are used flexibly, to allow issues of relevance to individual respondents to be covered in greater or lesser detail. The subject coverage was similar for the interviews and the group discussions, although there were inevitable limitations to the depth of individual exploration that could be achieved in the case of the latter. Where required, a range of visual and written stimuli was available to use in order to stimulate discussion of different topics in both interviews and group discussions. These were available to explain what a local council is, to identify the ways in which young people can participate in the local political process and to help generate suggestions for encouraging the participation of young people in local politics.

### **1.3.3 Analysis**

A set of verbatim transcripts was produced from the tape recordings of the interviews and focus groups. Analysis was undertaken using 'Framework' a

qualitative analytic method developed at the National Centre for Social Research (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Further details of the design and conduct of the study can be found in Appendix 1.

#### 1.4 Profile of the sample

As can be seen from the profile of the sample (table 1.1), with the exception of gender, there is a relatively even distribution across all the sample variables. Any deficiencies occurring in the sample distribution arose from various design and recruitment considerations, which limited our control of the sample selection. For example, with the exception of age and gender it was not possible to control for the

**Table 1.1 Profile of the sample**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Depth Participants</b>	<b>Group Participants</b>	<b>Local authority participators</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	25	23	4	52
Female	24	16	2	42
<b>Age</b>				
16-17 years	15	15	4	34
18-21 years	15	13	2	30
22-25 years	19	11	0	30
<b>Current Activity</b>				
FT education	21	16	5	42
Employed	12	10	1	23
Unemployed/government programme	16	13	0	29
<b>Parental Social Class</b>				
I/II	11	15	2	28
IIIN/IIIM	16	10	2	28
IV/V/Other	20	13	2	35
Not recorded	2	1	0	3
<b>Methods of participation engaged in<sup>1</sup></b>				
-Voted in local election	7	3	0	10
-Signed petition	4	7	0	11
-demonstration/protest	6	1	0	7
-Schools council	2	1	0	3
-Youth group/club	4	4	6	14
-Contacted local council	0	0	6	6
-youth forum/parliament	24	18	0	42
-Not Participating				
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
White	41	33	5	79
Bangladeshi	4	3	1	8
Indian	0	2	0	2
Black Caribbean	3	0	0	3

<sup>1</sup> Young people were asked to report all methods of participation they had engaged in. For this reason the column totals more than 94 (i.e. the number of participants in the research).

Mixed race	1	0	0	1
Other	0	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>94</b>

characteristics of friends recruited for the paired interviews. Also, non-attendance by group participants distorted the overall balance of sample variables. Lastly, we had to rely on local authorities to recruit young people who were participating in local authority initiatives as they would have been too difficult to recruit via a household screen. This method also limited our control over the selection of the sample.

## 1.5 Presentation of the findings

The findings reported are illustrated by the use of verbatim quotations, examples and case illustrations. Where necessary the details of the contributors or their subjects have been moderately changed to protect anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used for all examples and case illustrations.

Adopting a qualitative approach has made it possible to demonstrate in considerable depth the different ways in which young people view and participate in local politics; the factors which shape and influence differing individual perspectives; and the way in which these operate. It has also provided the opportunity for the young people in the sample to generate their own ideas and solutions for engaging their participation in local politics. The purposive nature of the sample design as well as the small sample size, however, means that the study cannot provide any statistical data relating to the prevalence of these views, experiences or behaviours.

## 1.6 Coverage of the report

The report consists of six further chapters. **Chapter 2** presents a review of relevant literature relating to the political views, experiences and behaviour of young people and the policy context in which this study was conducted. **Chapter 3** maps some of the issues that were of concern to young people and the nature of their views about the local area in which they inhabit. **Chapter 4** displays the range of images that young people held about local government and its elected representatives. Their levels of awareness and understanding about the role of local government are also discussed. **Chapter 5** considers the different levels of interest that young people reported about local politics, and the factors, which have shaped or influenced these differing perspectives. **Chapter 6** examines the young people's experience of participating in local politics and their views about different processes of engagement. It also reports on the perceived barriers and facilitators to participation. **Chapter 7** considers the experiences of young people who had been involved in local authority youth participation initiatives. **Chapter 8** discusses the importance of involving and engaging young people in local politics. It then identifies a range of solutions suggested by young people to encourage their participation. The report concludes, **chapter 9**, by reflecting on some of the key messages from the research. It also identifies a number of solutions based on the evidence from the expert seminar and the views of the young people.



## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND POLICY CONTEXT**

This second chapter reviews the contemporary political research that has considered the attitudes and behaviours of young people in relation to politics. While we intended that this should primarily concentrate on the local political scene, much of the research in this field, has confined its focus to attitudes, knowledge and/or behaviour in relation to politics in general and does not provide specific evidence relating to local government. Where research has considered both national and local politics the latter has often had only a subsidiary role. Studies which have concentrated on local politics tend to have been based on the views and behaviour of all age groups and not just young people. In view of this dearth of research, particularly in the qualitative arena, this chapter will also draw relevant evidence from studies that have considered how the young view and engage with national politics.

In order to set the literature in context we begin this chapter by reviewing the policy background in which this study was commissioned.

### **2.1 The policy context**

The subject of youth participation in both local and national politics has been an ongoing political and policy concern in the UK and elsewhere since the early 1990s. The more recent decline in voting (across all age groups but particularly amongst young people) at local and national levels has raised the prominence of this issue and resulted in debates about the importance of encouraging youth participation in political life. In this context the case for youth participation has often been associated with concerns about the future health of democratic practice in Britain (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1994; Geddes and Rust, 2000). As local government is responsible for a wide range of young people's concerns and interests (such as education, and leisure facilities) it has been seen to have a pivotal role to play in stimulating and engaging the interest and participation of young people in politics. As a consequence a number of arguments have been advanced in favour of actively encouraging youth participation in local politics.

The alienation of young people from political life has also been part of a broader discussion about whether this can contribute to social exclusion and a civic breakdown within local communities. Those in favour of the participation of the young in local politics have argued that it will encourage a young person to be a 'good citizen' as it will foster an interest in and commitment to the local community. By heightening a sense of social responsibility it is also suggested that it may help to reduce the social exclusion of marginalized groups (Willow, 1997).

Another reason advanced for encouraging youth participation is because children and young people have a strong stake in the local community through their use of local services, such as schools, transport and leisure facilities (Geddes and Rust,

2000). It is therefore argued that their participation in local politics will result in more relevant and focused decision making and service provision.

The personal benefits resulting from participation are cited as another justification for the encouragement of youth participation. It is argued that young people will be personally enriched as they gain new opportunities, skills and insights through participation in local politics (Willow, 1997).

Finally, there are also strong legislative and political grounds for consulting with children and young people on the issues that concern them. Article 12 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child grants direct rights to people under 18 years, which include participation, protection and social provision. Furthermore, prior to the introduction of a Minister for Young People and the Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) the UK was alone in Europe in having no parliamentary committee or body responsible for cross-governmental policy on young people (Coles, 2000).

In spite of the growing lobby in favour of the participation of young people, some concerns remain about the appropriateness of consulting children and young people. Underpinning these concerns are questions about the capability of children and young people to engage in reasonable and rational decision-making. There are also debates about whether children and young people should be taking on such responsibilities during their teenage years. A more thorough review of the arguments against participation can be found in Matthews, Limb, Harrison and Taylor (1998).

## **2.2 Policy initiatives addressing youth participation**

The following sections outline a number of different policy initiatives, which are targeted at encouraging the interest and participation of young people.

### **2.2.1 Modernisation of local government**

The Government's modernisation agenda, outlined in the White Paper Modern Local Government – In touch with the People (DETR 1998) and subsequent legislation in 1999 and 2000 set out to address the increasingly low levels of participation in local government. There were two central principles enshrined in the legislation, which was targeted at increasing the participation of the whole community. The first required local authorities to introduce clearer and accountable constitutional structures and processes, such as directly elected mayors and cabinet style executives. The second principle placed an obligation on local authorities to improve their service delivery through a new 'Best Value' framework so that they make services more responsive to the needs of the public. In addition, the Local Government Act 2000 required councils to prepare community strategies for promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well being of their area. The involvement of local people is central to these community strategies (LGA, 2000). More recently the introduction of e-government (outlined in DETR, 2001) has required local authorities to provide their services in electronic forms by 2005. These initiatives are intended to make government more accessible, however, they are aimed at the electorate as a whole and not just young people.

In response to these policy directives local authorities have responded in a variety of ways to try and improve levels of participation. Some of these initiatives have an electoral focus which, for example, involve experiments with different types of voting procedures, such as those that will be piloted (electronic polling booths and counting systems as well as online voting) in the forthcoming local elections in 2002. Other initiatives employ traditional methods of consultation such as satisfaction surveys, public meetings, consultation documents or service user forums.

In order to specifically reach young people, local authorities have experimented with an array of innovative methods of research and consultation. These have resulted in a combination of permanent decision making structures being established (such as youth councils and parliaments) as well as temporary initiatives to involve young people for a limited period of time (such as youth elections and citizens' juries). According to an LGA and IPPR survey, just under a half (46%) of all local authorities in England and Wales are either involving young people in decision making or planning to do so (IPPR 2001).

In addition there is now a joint initiative of LGA and NYA (2001) to increase children and young people's active involvement with local authorities and their participation in local democracy. Better Government with Young People is in its first phase and has developed a set of standards to guide councils on how they involve and engage children and young people in local democratic processes.

### **2.2.2 Central government initiatives**

#### ***The Children and Young People's Unit***

A key reason for the appointment of a Minister for Young People (currently John Denham) and the establishment of the Children and Young People's Unit in 2000 was to encourage young people to become more involved in some of the policy decisions that affect them. The Unit has the task of developing and communicating the Government's over-arching strategy for children and young people. As part of this they are promoting and carrying out consultations and partnerships with children and young people. For example, they have recently developed a young person's agenda for democracy.

#### ***The introduction of citizenship education into the school curriculum***

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum, politics has only been covered in an ad hoc manner, as the 1998 Education Reform Act did not require schools to have any central responsibility for civic and political education. After the 1997 General Election an Advisory Group on education for citizenship and democracy in schools was set up. It identified three key strands to effective education for citizenship: social and moral responsibility; community involvement; and political literacy (Crick et al, 1998). The Crick report also stressed that public bodies, such as the two Houses of Parliament and local authorities, must work in partnership with schools and colleges to help deliver citizenship education.

In 1999 it was announced that citizenship would become a compulsory subject for 11 to 16 year olds in the autumn of September 2002. This will include learning about proportional representation, the operation of parliament, resolving moral dilemmas, and ways to participate in community service. At Primary School, it was proposed that citizenship lessons will be part of existing courses in personal, social and health education (PSHE).

#### ***Other programmes and initiatives***

In addition there are a number of initiatives and programmes across central government, which are targeted at young people and require their involvement in their design, implementation and evaluation. These have arisen from, for example, the crime and disorder legislation of 1998, the introduction of the Connexions Service, various programmes to widen access to education at further and higher education levels, the New Deal for Young People and the New Deal for Communities. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there are related or separate policies being pursued to involve young people in decision making.

Otherwise there are broader programmes of constitutional and electoral reform which will have implications for the involvement of the whole community and not just young people.

### **2.3 Conceptions of politics and politicians**

Much of the research evidence in this area has focused on politics in general without specific reference to local government. Based on this evidence it seems that the images young people have of national government and its representatives have coloured their views of local government and politics. Prior to this present study, however, there is lack of knowledge about how young people conceptualise local government and politics.

#### ***2.3.1 Conceptions of local government and politics***

Research considering the images young people have of the political world has demonstrated that they seem to spontaneously equate the term 'politics' with national rather than local politics. Bhavani (1994), for example, found that young working class people, aged 16 years equated the word 'politics' with British party politics. Local politics was also notable in its absence from the accounts young people, aged between 14 and 24 years, gave when asked to report their images of politics (White, Bruce and Ritchie 2000). These young people either had no conception of what politics is, or they conceived of it in terms of national government and party politics. In addition to the latter description the more interested and knowledgeable young people also broadened their conceptions to cover what politics attempts to achieve and the issues it addresses. Seldom, however, have young people specifically been asked about their images of local government.

Where research has specifically sought to investigate how young people conceptualise local government there is evidence to suggest that they do appear to

distinguish between the different tiers of decision making. But, there is confusion about the nature and role of each level and the relationship between the different tiers of government (IPPR, 2001). This small qualitative study (based on 6 discussion groups), however, did demonstrate that local government was perceived to be much closer to home and was felt to have a greater bearing than national politics on the young respondents' everyday life.

### **2.3.2 Conceptions of local government representatives**

Research with young people has explored their images of politicians in general without specific reference to councillors or other local government representatives. Qualitative research (see for example, White, Bruce & Ritchie, 2000, Richardson, 1990, Bentley and Oakley, 1999) has demonstrated that politicians are generally viewed as being inaccessible to and unrepresentative of young people. It has also shown that politicians are generally viewed as being untrustworthy and self interested. Survey evidence has confirmed some of these findings. For example, MP's were viewed as one of two groups young people least trusted or respected (Pirie and Worcester, 1998, 2000). Anwar found that young black people were concerned about the limited number of black politicians and their inability to relate to the predominantly white politicians in Parliament or the issues they raise (Anwar, 1999). As these studies have not specifically explored views about councillors and other local government representatives it is not clear how far this evidence can be generalised.

There is, however, survey evidence about the way the public views councillors but this relates to the whole population and not just young people. It demonstrates that councillors are increasingly viewed as out of touch with and lacking an interest in the views of the public (Young and Rao, 1995, 1999). These negative perceptions have also been borne out by qualitative research (Lowndes et al, 1998) which found that officers and members of local councils were considered to be inefficient, self interested, remote and inaccessible.

## **2.4 Levels of political knowledge, interest and participation**

Research in this field has been driven by increasing concern (among media and academic commentators) about whether the decline in reported disaffection of young people with politics represents a new 'generational' phenomena (i.e. whether the young are now more disenchanted with politics than their predecessor generations); or whether the political 'life cycle' theory still has some currency.

The notion of a political, 'life-cycle', was originally conceived by Butler and Stokes (1969), who argued that political interest and activity would increase with age and responsibility. Today's young, it is argued, like the generations before them, will acquire interest in politics, with age as it starts to have more relevance in their lives (Heath and Park 1997) once they become 'stakeholders' as taxpayers and mortgage holders (Jowell and Park 1998). These 'life-cycle' explanations have also been borne out in qualitative studies, which demonstrate that interest increases with financial and familial responsibilities (see for example, Richardson 1990, White, Devine and Ritchie, 1999, White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). The lower levels of interest and

activity reported by young people today should be attributed to the changing social and economic environment in which young people now live, rather than a generational shift. As entry into the workplace is increasingly deferred, there has been a prolonged dependence on parental support. It is, therefore, suggested that this has delayed the onset of financial and familial responsibilities and, hence, the age at which people begin to become interested in politics (Kimberlee, 1998).

Generational theories are based on the notion that some attitudes are formed early in life and are relatively stable over time (Alwin and Scott, 1996). Denver (1989) argues that more important than a person's age is their formative experience of politics, with each generation being influenced by different social and political events. Several writers have claimed that a new kind of political generation is emerging, with young people rejecting conventional politics in favour of channelling their attention and energy to single issues, such as the environment, human and animal rights (e.g. Dubois, 1980; Mort, 1990; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995). Commentators have suggested that they have a distinct political agenda because of wider societal changes as opposed to political alienation or apathy (Inglehart, 1990; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995). They therefore conclude that today's young people fundamentally differ from their predecessors in terms of the way they engage with the traditional political process.

Park in two studies of Young People's Social Attitudes has been able to test out the generational theory. She found evidence that a very slight generational shift may be occurring but she urges caution in the interpretation of this evidence (Park, 1999).

So, without further reliable longitudinal data to substantiate this one way or the other it seems premature to jump to conclusions about whether a generational shift has occurred and the reasons for this.

This next section considers existing evidence about the degree to which young people are knowledgeable, interested and participate in politics. Again the focus of much of this research has been on politics in general although a few studies have specifically considered these issues in relation to local government and politics.

#### **2.4.1 Political and civic knowledge**

Research shows that young people have very little knowledge and understanding about politics. For example, school leavers, aged 15 to 16 years, were found to be only able to recognise leading political figures, have weak constitutional knowledge and have difficulty identifying issues that separated parties. They also lack the basic information required to make political choices (Stradling, 1977). Furnham and Gunter (1987) found that young people, aged between 10 and 22 years, generally know who leading political figures are, but lack understanding about how the political system actually works. Contrasting evidence raises doubt about whether young people do know who their political leaders are, as ten per cent of 16 to 24 year olds could not name the Prime Minister, fifty four per cent could not name the Liberal Democrat leader, and sixty per cent could not name the Conservative leader (British Youth Council, 1998). Low levels of knowledge are not just an issue for young people, as 65% of adults aged over 18 years felt that they knew 'just a little' or 'hardly anything' about the way Parliament works, and 69% felt the same about the British Constitution (MORI, 1995).

The Young People's Social Attitudes survey has been able to identify factors that relate to political knowledge among young people. Based on their assessment of a short knowledge quiz (based on a number of statements that teenagers answered true or false to) political knowledge was predictably found to be linked to political interest. Also boys were found to be significantly more knowledgeable than girls (Park, 1999). In contrast with previous findings (Park, 1995) political knowledge did not seem to increase with age and education (Park, 1999).

In terms of local government the knowledge base of young people is even lower. Pirie and Worcester (2000) found that only 9% of young people felt they knew a great deal or a fair amount about their local council (as compared with 28% of the general population) and 88% (compared with 71% of the general population) claimed to have just a little, or hardly any knowledge about their local council. Knowledge of Parliament was only slightly higher with 81% of young people (as compared with 64% of the general population) who claimed to have little or hardly any knowledge of Parliament.

Other research which confirms these findings shows that across the population, the 18-24 age group are least likely to say that they know the name of their local council (Bromley et al, 2000, Chivite-Matthews and Teale, 2000). Also, Atkinson and Boyle found (1996) that 52% of young people under 25 did not know that councils provide the main services in the area. Bromley et al found (2000) that, with the exception of street cleaning and road and pavement maintenance, young people were found to be the most likely to lack awareness of which services their local authority was responsible for. They are also the least likely (36%) of all the population to have had contact with the council about a service area.

#### **2.4.2 Levels of political interest**

Generally quantitative methods have been employed to gauge levels of interest in national and local politics, usually within a broader study of young people's attitudes. Such measures of interest, of course, will depend on the context in which questions are asked and the reference points used by young people in making their judgements.

While studies have found differing levels of interest the evidence clearly points to young people having low levels of interest in politics. For example, Mardle and Taylor (1987) found that less than ten per cent of those aged 15 and 16 years reported an interest in politics; 24% of 12 to 19 year olds claimed to have 'some', and 10% claimed to have quite a lot, or a great deal of interest in politics (Roberts and Sacdev, 1996); and Park found 18% of 18-24 years claimed to have quite a lot or a great deal of interest in politics (Park, 1999).

In terms of interest in local government similarly low levels are reported (Pirie and Worcester, 2000, Bromley et al, 2000). Rao and Young (1999) demonstrated that nearly three quarters of young people under 24 admitted to having no interest at all in local politics. Also, when interest in politics 'generally' and 'local politics' is compared it is clear that local affairs come a very poor second. It is evident,

however, that irrespective of the measure, political interest increases with age (Bromley et al, 2000, Young and Rao, 1999, Atkinson and Boyle, 1996).

Research, based on measures of politics in general, has identified certain groups of young people who are more likely than others to be uninterested in politics. These include young unemployed people, people from ethnic minorities and low educational achievers (for example, Banks and Ullah, 1987). Different studies have revealed consistent, although not striking, differences between young males and females, with adolescent males displaying greater interest and engagement in politics than females (see for example, Pirie and Worcester, 2000). Interestingly, Park found these differences in 1995 but not in 1999. In this latter study Park demonstrates associations between interest in politics and educational aspirations.

Qualitative research has shed light on how young people are judging their levels of interest. For example, a recent study found that young people could be classified into five groups corresponding to differing levels of interest in politics (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). Two of these lack any interest in politics and are united in their dislike and boredom of politics. One group, however, reports being indifferent to politics whereas the other group is more cynical about politics and actively avoids anything to do with the subject. A third group is selectively interested in politics and seems only to engage with politics when it relates to an issue, which is of concern to them. A fourth group is generically interested, taking a passive involvement in general current affairs and issues, which are personally relevant. A final fifth group are highly interested and display a commitment and active interest in politics.

While this study provides further evidence about how young people assess their levels of interest it does not reveal anything specific about local politics.

### **2.4.3 Levels of political activity**

Given the decline in turnout at national, local and European elections the focus of most of the literature has been on electoral rather than other forms of political participation. Before considering this evidence we begin by focusing on literature that has considered the participation in non-electoral based methods. This research suggests that the depressed turnout at recent elections does not seem to have had an impact on the public's willingness to engage in other forms of political participation such as signing a petition, contacting the local MP, going on a protest or demonstration (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd, 2001). The evidence of some of these forms of participation, however, may not be evident amongst young people. Those aged 35-44 were three times as likely to have written to a councillor or been to a meeting than were those under 25 (Atkinson and Boyle, 1996).

In terms of work, which has specifically tried to measure the levels of participation of young people between the ages of 16 and 25, there is a paucity of research evidence providing conclusive findings. Either the research is qualitative by nature or it is based on survey evidence that, for reasons of method or scale cannot be extrapolated to all young people. For example, work estimating the proportion of 17 and 18 year olds in Nottinghamshire that had participated in some form was based on a very low response rate (32%) and a very small sample of the population (Wring et al, 1998). More than forty per cent of respondents to the 2020 Vision survey said that

they had had no involvement in any political activity in the last three years (Industrial Society, 1997). However, it is not clear how these young people were judging this.

Other research has challenged the image of young people as alienated and disaffected by uncovering a high level of voluntary and campaigning activity amongst 14 and 16 year olds (Roker et al 1997). Bhavani's (1994) ethnographic study raised the possibility that young people were involved in activities, which could be deemed as 'political activities' but that they themselves would not define them as taking part in politics. Similarly, some of the participants in a study by Richardson (1990) had been involved in activities or committees at school, but rarely saw this as political activity.

White, Ritchie and Bruce (2000) found in their qualitative study involving a cross section of 14 to 24 year olds that irrespective of levels of interest in politics, young people across the sample had engaged in a range of different activities, which were concerned with politics. Even members of the low interest groups had sometimes voted or taken part in some other activity, like signing a petition or joining a protest or demonstration. It would seem, however, that because of their rather narrow conception of politics young people were sometimes unlikely to perceive their actions as being political. Perhaps this explains why only 2% of 16 -24 year olds report having "taken an active part in a political campaign" (Pirie and Worcester, 2000). This research emphasises the need to further understand how young people interpret and respond to survey questions measuring political activity.

Other authors have suggested that young people are increasingly participating in unconventional spheres of activity (e.g. Mort , 1990; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1994; Jaques, 1993). Dubois (1980) argues that young people's interest in single issues has encouraged them to participate in what she calls "ad-hoc" groups which focus on such things as environmental issues, the defence of human rights, as well as identity politics around issues of gender, race and sexuality. It has been suggested that new social movements allow young people to be more proactive - and provide them with more incentives for participation and involvement - than traditional party politics. This has led some to believe that not all young people are politically alienated and even suggest that they are at the forefront of forming a 'new ' kind of politics (Crook et al, 1992).

However, others claim that activism and protest are mainly engaged in by the most highly educated and are not generally seen as an alternative to formal political activity by young people (Bynner and Ashford 1994). Similarly, other work has found that young people had not been active in collective campaigns nor had they felt deeply about issues. Even where concern was expressed about different issues there was reluctance to become involved in organisations as young people were concerned about being associated with the kind of people who were active in these groups (Richardson, 1990).

### **Voting behaviour**

Turnout in local government elections in this country is one of the lowest in Europe and it appears to be on the decline. The average turnout<sup>2</sup> in England from 1976 to 1996 was 41% (LGA, 2001). Turnout fell to record levels in the local elections held between 1998 and 2000 (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd, 2001). In 1998 the turnout at the local elections dropped to 28.8% (DETR, 2000) and in the 1999 elections an average turnout was reported of just 32% with some areas achieving only 10% of eligible voters (LGA, 2000).

According to survey data 59% of 18 to 24 year olds say they rarely or never vote in council elections. Even though young people aged 18-24 years are reported to be particularly unlikely to exaggerate the frequency of their participation in local elections (Bryson, Stratford and Rao, 2000) the idea that 41% of young people are voting does suggest there is some degree of over reporting occurring. In contrast, Bryson, Stratford and Rao (2000) found that 28% of young people reported voting in their last local election.

A number of factors have been shown to have a bearing on people's propensity to vote in local elections.

*“For instance, the nature of the local area and its political circumstances matter. The more marginal or competitive the political make-up of an area, the higher is the likely turnout (International IDEA, 1998; Hoffman-Martinet et al., 1996). Individual differences between voters also matter: as noted, the younger one is and the less educated, the less likely one is to vote. Higher income groups are more likely to vote than are unemployed. Finally, people who are relatively new to an area are less likely to vote in local elections than are those who are more established (Jones and Cullis, 1986; Shields and Goidel, 1997). But the differences in attitude seem to have as important an influence as demographic factors on the propensity to vote. People who are more interested in local affairs are nearly three times more likely than the least interested to vote in local elections (Rallings and Thrasher, 1996)” (Rao and Young, 2000, page 48).*

This work also demonstrates marked gender differences within age groups. While the youngest women lag behind even the non-participatory youngest men, women between the ages of 25 to 44 are much more inclined than their male counterparts to vote in local elections. This would seem to be an area which would benefit from further exploration.

At the 2001 General Election turnout fell to its lowest level since 1918. A little fewer than three in five people in Great Britain (59.1%) voted (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd, 2001). According to a MORI survey (for the Carnegie Young People's Initiative) conducted a week after the general election it is estimated that the turnout fell to about 40% among young people. Pirie and Worcester cite evidence of a decline in

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<sup>2</sup> Actual turnout figures are likely to be even lower since it is widely accepted that not all the people who are eligible to vote are on the register (LGA,2001). Also there is a tendency for surveys to be more successful in reaching those who have voted than those who have not (Heath and Taylor, 1999 as cited in Park 1999).

voting at general elections among 16 –24 year olds between the 1972 and 1997 general elections. In 1972 43%<sup>3</sup> of the age group said they had voted at the last general election and in 1999 30% said they had done so. Another study reports a slightly higher proportion (44%) of 18-24 year olds who say they voted in the 1997 election (Park, 1999) but the different age groups of the samples may account this for.

## 2.5 Explaining political disinterest

Qualitative studies have provided greater understanding about why young people appear to lack an interest in politics. These, however, have often been carried out with particular subgroups of young people, such as young working class people (Bhavani, 1994) or, more tangentially, in broader studies about citizenship (Richardson, 1990); and social exclusion (Bentley and Oakley, 1999). Reasons identified in these studies for a lack of interest include a lack of time, the complexity of political issues and not knowing what to believe (Richardson, 1990). Also it was found that until the fundamentals of life, such as home, jobs and the future, were more secure it was not possible to take an interest in politics (Bentley and Oakley, 1999). Bhavani (1994) found that politics is seen as boring and difficult to understand, but found it difficult to separate whether politics is boring because it is difficult to understand or whether it is difficult to understand because it is boring.

A key explanation for why young people report low levels of interest in politics is the narrow way in which young people view politics and its association with images of endless party political squabbling. This image, combined with the low salience of political issues, and the difficulties young people perceive in trying to grasp such a 'complex' and 'dull' subject, leave them alienated from political matters (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Bhavani, 1994; Leonard and Katwala, 1998; Bentley and Oakley, 1999). Other explanations include: a lack of trust in politicians to tell the truth, to keep their promises, and be accountable for their actions; the lack of opportunities for young people to engage in the political process until the age of 18; and the failure of politicians to be responsive to the needs of young people (White, Bruce and Ritchie; Bentley and Oakley, 1999).

While it seems reasonable to assume that a number of the barriers to political interest apply equally to local and central government most of the research evidence is based on studies that have confined their focus to national politics. Survey evidence, however, suggests that the reason for low levels of interest in local politics is that it does not have any relevance in their lives because of their low awareness of what councils do and the services they provide (Atkinson and Boyle, 1996). The local political scene, however, has been shown to have a pivotal role to play as many of the issues that young people are concerned about are tied up with their local area (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). Furthermore, 65% of 15 to 24 year olds report feeling very or fairly strongly attached to their local communities (even if this is a lower figure than that for the rest of the population (Pirie and Worcester, 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> Pirie and Worcester draw attention to the fact that around half would have been too young to do so.

## 2.6 Explaining political apathy

A number of different explanations have been given for why young people do or do not participate in politics. Most of these are concerned with voting in general (whether national, local or European elections) rather than involvement in other political processes.

A key reason identified is the limited number of opportunities for young people to participate in the political process (see for example White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). For young people below the age of electoral eligibility this barrier is more apparent. An NOP poll found that sixty one per cent of 18 to 30 year olds believe that there are not enough opportunities for them to get involved in politics (1998).

Another explanation given is ignorance or lack of knowledge about the opportunities available and the processes involved in participation (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). With specific reference to voting lack of knowledge was cited as a reason for not voting because a young person did not know how to make an informed choice (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Kimberlee, 1998). Kimberlee (in his story of young people in Bristol) explained that having no idea of how political institutions work can lead to humility and lack of confidence about voting. Bynner and Ashford (1994), found in their survey of 16 to 20 year olds that political apathy was commonly associated with negative experiences of the education system, low levels of attainment and poor employment prospects.

Observers have also pointed to age, the decline in trade unionism and broader social change as reasons for decline in voting among the young (Harrison and Deicke, 1998; Marsh, 1989). Crewe et al (1977) explain that the younger the elector the less likely they are to vote because they are less exposed to the social networks in which the norms of voting are well-established and are therefore isolated from the community pressure to vote.

The other type of explanation given is concerned with young people being apathetic and uninterested, or consciously deciding to not participate. Jowell and Park (1998) suggest that a plausible reason for the lack of participation is that young people feel they have better things to do with their time, such as finding partners, homes and jobs. White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000) found that a key factor deterring voting was lack of interest and relevance of politics within the lives of young people others have claimed that the disinclination to vote is more about ignorance of and cynicism with politics than the physical difficulty of voting (Bentley and Oakley, 1999). Also, not identifying with those who participate has been found to be another reason for non-participation (Lowndes et al, 1998).

Richardson (1990) argues that in some circumstances young people refrain from participation because they perceive there is a lack of interest in their views. So even when young people acknowledge that there are opportunities in which to participate they refrain from doing so because they believe their views will either be accorded little status or ignored (White et al., 2000; Lowndes et al., 1998). Sixty three per cent of 16 to 24 year olds report that the national government rarely, or never, listen to young people's views (British Youth Council, 1998). A Mori poll (2001) found that

49 per cent of 16-24 year olds felt their views were not taken seriously because of their age.

Bhavani (1994) found young people commonly believe that there is no point voting as it is unlikely to bring about a change in circumstances for themselves. Consistent with this, seventy one per cent of 16 to 21 year olds thought that the way they vote would make little or no difference to their lives (Pirie and Worcester, 1998). Similarly, Bynner and Ashford (1994) found that one fifth endorsed the view that 'none of the political parties would do anything for me.' In addition, one sixth of respondents believed it did not make any difference which party is in power. A finding that was also echoed in the qualitative research carried out by White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000) where young people could not see the difference between the Conservative and Labour party. These young people also reported that there did not seem to be a point in voting when they believed that they were unable to affect the outcome of the election, such as when the party they were supporting was unlikely to win in their constituency.

A final set of explanations given is to do with registration issues connected with the transient nature of young people between 18 and 25. Wilkinson and Mulgan (1995) reported that electoral registration started to become a serious issue in the 1990s, as millions of young people slipped off the register because of the council tax, homelessness and general mobility issues. In the 1991 census, twenty one per cent of 21 to 24 year olds were not registered. Pirie and Worcester (2000) found in their survey that 40% of 18-24 year olds reported that they were not registered to vote. The British Youth Council research found that fifty eight per cent of 16 to 19 year olds and twenty five per cent of 20 to 24 year olds reported ignorance about registration. Anwar (1998) reports that higher levels of non-registration are to be found among ethnic minorities.

Explanations for not voting in local elections can be found in survey evidence. Pirie and Worcester (2000) report that the lack of relevance of local politics and particularly the failure of councillors to meet their concerns or address their needs is the real reason why young people do not vote at local elections. They conclude that young people aged 18-24 care less and know less about the whole procedure and activity of local voting. Even though a small minority cite inconvenience (either in terms of getting to the polling station or in terms of the hours when it was open) Pirie and Worcester do not see this as a key explanation.

Atkinson and Boyle (1996) argue that for many citizens, awareness and knowledge of the council are stimulated by experience of, or contact with, the services it provides. In this way, they speculate, that young people are one of the sections of the population whose use of council services tends to stand at a relatively low level and as a consequence will result in a lack of commitment to the local area and a desire to vote. They also point to the transient nature of these young lives as further explanation of why they are not forming a tie with their local area.

## 2.7 International comparisons and lessons

Even though it is widely acknowledged that electoral decline is evident in local or sub national elections across most of Europe they still record far higher levels of turnout than are found in British local elections (DETR, 2000). Other liberal democracies, (such as Italy, Austria, Sweden and Denmark and Germany), which are broadly comparable with Britain (i.e. where voting is not compulsory), still manage to report an average turn out in excess of 70%. Exceptions to this are Greece, Luxembourg, Belgium, Cyprus (and some Australian) states where voting is compulsory. Only in the United States where voter registration is voluntary can there be found similarly low levels of turnout as in Britain. It would seem that the single distinguishing factor between Britain and these other countries in the European Union is the method of electoral system used. Britain is virtually unique (with the exception of countries outside the EU, such as Canada, New Zealand and the United States) in using First Past the Post. Whereas other countries in the EU use a variety of proportional representation systems (PR), which vary in terms of the choice, they give to voters and how votes are translated into seats and may therefore affect the levels of voter turnout (DETR, 2000). Other factors that may have a bearing on differing levels of turnout seem to include extending the practice of postal voting (such as in Sweden, Finland and Norway), introducing early or advance voting whereby the election in effect takes place over several weeks.

With reference to young people, Wilkinson and Mulgan (1995) argue that the political disconnection of 18-24 year olds cannot be attributed solely to the peculiarities of the British Parliamentary system or to having one party in power for so long (their research was carried out in 1994/5) They argued there were parallels in almost every industrialised country:

*“In Germany there is mounting concern about falling political participation: a recent survey found young people are 50% less likely to join parties, and whilst there was a 77.5% turnout rate in the 1990 Bundestage elections, amongst people aged 18-25 the rate dropped to just 62.5 per cent. France too has been exercised by youth alienation”*

Wilkinson and Mulgan also indicate that the concern about youth apathy extends to Australia, America and Canada. For example, a publication by the Aspen Institute records that only about one third of those aged 18 to 24 voted in the 1996 presidential election and less than one fifth voted for Congress in 1998. Wilkinson and Mulgan cite a poll that indicates that in Canada 18-21 year olds were three times less likely to vote than those aged over 50. Geddes and Rust (2000) report the trends of ‘disconnection’ of the young from politics are evident in many European and other countries

## 2.8 Encouraging interest and participation in politics

A number of initiatives have been proposed to encourage interest and participation in politics.

### **2.8.1 Education and Politics**

Denver and Hands (1990) found that studying politics appears to be associated with increased participation at a general election. Young people themselves have also suggested that it would be helpful to have some sort of political education at school (Bentley and Oakley, 1999, White, Ritchie and Bruce, 2000). There is also survey evidence to suggest (93% of 15 –24year olds) that the overwhelming majority of young people are in favour of the idea of being taught about being a good citizen at school even if there is some lack of clarity about what the content should be (Pirie and Worcester, 2000).

Richardson (1990) found there were different views amongst young people as to what the content of such education should be. Some thought the purpose should be a means of understanding the nature of representative government and the role of individuals in society. Others proposed that the teaching should be more party politically orientated, introducing students to differing political views and issues, whereas others opposed this because of the potential for indoctrination. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority commissioned a MORI survey with school pupils aged 11 to 16 years old. They found that only twenty eight per cent wanted more emphasis on politics at school. Instead, they wanted more advice on how to deal with personal relationships and managing money. However, focus groups held by the British Youth Council found there was strong support for teaching about democratic practices and institutions, the law, rights and equal opportunities (1998).

Various studies have found that young people have different views on whether citizenship education should be taught as a separate lesson or incorporated into the curriculum. Most thought that participative approaches in teaching and an emphasis on personal experience would be best. Among the creative methods suggested for teaching citizenship were drama, mock elections, role-plays, active learning, peer education, debates involving local councillors or MPs, specialist speakers, designing a school Citizens' Charter and visits to community organisations, council meetings or courtrooms (British Youth Council, 1998, White, Bruce and Ritchie,2000).

### **2.8.2 Other initiatives**

Wilkinson and Mulgan (1995) argued in favour of the need to reconnect young people with politics and restore trust by making politics more accessible and meaningful. In addition to lowering the voting age for young people they also suggested a number of ways for making voting more accessible. Some of the participants in the 'Real Deal' project called for politics to be advertised and marketed, by using animation to help communicate political messages (Bentley and Oakley, 1999).

There have been initiatives introduced in past elections to encourage young people to register to vote, such as Operation Black Vote, Rock the Vote and the 'M-Power' campaign. The Ministry of Sound also made ten videos that were displayed at cinemas during the 1997 election campaign, seeking to make a link between the single issues like racism, homophobia, homelessness and the environment with the formal political system. More recently, in 1999, the government held mock European

elections involving schools and colleges, with the aim of educating young people about the new European electoral system, European Union and European Parliament.

The government's current programme of electoral reform involves finding new methods to remove the disincentives to vote, making voting easier and streamlining the casting and counting of votes. Among the package of suggestions being considered are a move to more frequent elections, holding elections on different days of the week, setting up polling stations in local shops or post offices, allowing those who prefer to do so to vote by post rather than at the polling station, and introducing electronic balloting. This has stimulated research in this area although there is not much evidence that specifically relates to young people. Also, only postal voting appeared to significantly increase local turnout in the pilots carried out in Britain during the 2001 local elections (Rallings, 2001).

Rao and Young (1998) found that younger people seemed to be the most open to the innovations proposed. Based on their analysis and Chivite-Matthews and Teal's secondary analysis of the data (2000) they found that young people expressed the strongest preference for weekend (41%) over Thursday voting, although 46% did not mind either way. Young people also seemed to be among the most positive about postal voting, with 45% of 18-24 year olds opting for this, however, 55% report that the polling station is the fairer alternative. They were also more open than the rest of the public to moves to electronic ballots, but as only 22% indicated a preference for electronic methods, 18% for a ballot paper and 60% do not mind either way it was not an overwhelming endorsement. Rao and Young stressed that even if a proportion of these young people did indicate that these methods would make them more likely to vote their positive views may not necessarily translate into behaviour. We know from other research that young people emphasise the importance of voting and having the right to vote but this does not necessarily mean they turn out to vote (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000).

Pirie and Worcester (2000) reported that making voting more convenient will only result in a tiny increase in the numbers who vote. They found that when young people were offered a variety of suggestions (such as keeping polling stations open for 24 hours, being able to vote at the weekend instead of a Thursday, to voting by post or on the telephone, or at shopping centres, to voting from home or from work by digital television or the internet, and to voting at train stations) 18-24 year olds were slightly more inclined than the rest of the population to think they might make a difference. However, once this evidence is considered alongside the tiny proportion who cite inconvenience as a reason for not voting (only 3% said they cannot get to a polling station because it was too inconvenient with another 3% saying the opening hours of the polling station were inconvenient) they argued that these initiatives were unlikely to make much difference.

The view of the 'M-Power' campaign was that it was parliament and politicians that were disconnected from the young. The Real Deal participants welcomed greater openness and honesty among politicians and felt that it was the politicians who should start to take an interest by talking to people living in different circumstances. There was however caution that politicians should be wary of appearing self-consciously 'hip' (Bentley and Oakley, 1999). Leonard and Katwala (1998) argued

that political parties have become divorced from people's lives and that they need to change in order to attract more young members. They suggested a range of reforms involving the way in which meetings are held and the range of activities involved. Kimberlee (1998) argued that while party reforms were welcome they should be introduced alongside teaching politics at school and involving young people in decisions that affect their lives, for example, through local councils and youth forums.

MacDonald and Coffield (1991) also suggested that it is not young people and their supposed lack of interest which needs remedying but a political system that does little to involve the mass of people of all ages and provides little in the way of real choice. These findings were endorsed by qualitative research with young people which emphasised the need for politics to be delivered in a way which was more relevant and meaningful to young people. Also, it was suggested that politicians should become more accountable and responsive to the needs and concerns of young people. A final change recommended was that there should be more opportunities for young people to get involved in the political process (White Ritchie and Bruce 2000).

### **3 YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONCERNS AND VIEWS ABOUT THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT**

At the start of the interviews and group discussions, young people were asked to generate a list of issues which were of interest or concern to them. In order to help stimulate this discussion they were also asked to reflect on their views about their local area. This data was collected for contextual purposes as well as to generate relevant examples which could be used to stimulate views about participation. This chapter reports on the wide range of issues that were raised and shows how and why they became matters of concern.

The issues raised were predominantly connected with the young person's personal circumstances. As a consequence they commonly related to the current activities and life stage reached by the young people. Certain concerns were confined to particular age groups, life stages, current activities and locations. For example, the experience of participation in a local authority forum seemed to result in young people having a more objective perspective about an issue, primarily because they had gained a greater understanding and awareness of the issues facing local authorities.

In contrast, other concerns had broader relevance and applicability and were shared by young people irrespective of their age or locality. In these cases, however, their perspectives on these issues and the breadth of focus that was reported often reflected differing ages and experiences. For example, issues which often tended to be solely rooted in the personal and local worlds for the youngest sample members started to assume a more abstract and national (and sometimes global) perspective with age and the experience of participation in a local authority initiative.

Even though young people seldom mentioned national or local politics explicitly as a concern, a number of the issues raised fall under the jurisdiction of the local authority and/or national government.

#### **3.1 Young People's Concerns**

##### ***Provision of social and leisure facilities.***

A recurrent concern was the lack of social and leisure facilities. The precise nature of this concern varied according to the age of a young person, their life stage and where they lived.

Young people aged 16-19 years consistently focused on the lack of youth clubs and leisure facilities such as bowling alleys, ice rinks, skate parks, BMX tracks and shopping centres. In urban areas, young people aged 16-17 were particularly concerned about the lack of opportunities for trips to the countryside and camping weekends. In more rural areas, there was concern about the lack of city-like facilities, including good music venues, pool halls, and cinemas.

In some areas, however, the existence of youth clubs and leisure facilities was acknowledged. The issue for these young people was that they seemed to attract local 'trouble makers'. As a consequence, it was quite common for young people to report that the local youth club had closed down, or they had stopped attending them, for this reason.

The lack of social and leisure facilities was also believed to have contributed to the levels of crime and antisocial behaviour in local areas.

*"They've shut down all the youth clubs ....and like now people are stealing cars and that."* (female, 16 years).

*"Youngsters don't know what to do with themselves and you get fights and things happening in the streets and its more safer staying in really."* (male, 25 years)

Young people aged 16-18 years, in all areas, commonly identified the need for safe alternatives to pubs and clubs. It was felt that safety could only be ensured at supervised locations, as unsupervised hang-outs such as arcades were perceived to attract drug dealers.

Young people in the 20 plus age bracket felt themselves too old for youth clubs, but were, nevertheless, concerned about the lack of other social and leisure facilities that were affordable and safe. In smaller more remote locations, or outside the city there was felt to be a lack of accessible and varied cultural and leisure facilities. One young woman living in a small town complained of the absence of: *"even simple things like museums and art galleries and – different clothes shops, different clubs, different pubs"* (female, 25 years).

Young people of all ages and in all areas were concerned that public amenities, such as swimming pools were not being kept clean, hygienic, free of litter and vandalism. Lack of clean and safe facilities was a common complaint for young parents.

*"I feel very, very strongly [that] there aren't many places for... parents and children to go – not really, not anywhere you can feel comfortable or even feel safe – the local park is vandalised, there's a constant group of people there – you know, making it feel very uncomfortable"*. (female, 25 years).

In contrast, young people who were involved in youth participation schemes did not seem to share this concern. They reported that young people often exaggerate the lack of leisure facilities. Indeed, these young people maintained that they are not in short supply, it is just that most young people choose not to frequent them. There was also a sense that irrespective of the level of facilities offered there would always be complaints about the inadequacy of the provision.

### **Drugs and Alcohol**

There was widespread concern about the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse in local areas. This concern was primarily driven by an appreciation of the negative effects that substance misuse can have on the lives of young people, their families

and local communities. For example, one twenty four year old young man felt that drugs were "*ripping the community apart*" and ruining the lives of young people.

*"It's like their killers aren't they, that's end of it, it's like their just destroying people's lives, it's just mad..."* ( male, 16 years).

Young parents were additionally concerned that their children might become involved in drugs when older.

In addition, the detrimental behaviours associated with substance misuse were also felt to have a broader negative impact. For example, excessive alcohol consumption and drug use was widely linked with crime, either aggressive behaviour and fighting or thefts and vandalism. This also contributed to fears about personal safety and resulted in young people worrying about going out alone at night.

It was widely felt that the lack of leisure and social facilities had indirectly contributed to under-age drinking and drug taking because young people did not have other activities to occupy themselves with. Amongst young people in the older age range there was a view that youth clubs could also have an educational role to play, for example, by running workshops and providing information about the potential dangers of drugs and alcohol to young people.

Whilst young people widely focussed on the negative aspects of drug use, some young people felt that drug use ought to be decriminalised, because it would take the drugs trade out of the hands of criminals. Also it was felt that the regulation of drugs would make them safer.

### ***Crime and Personal safety***

Concerns were voiced about the high levels of crime particularly in urban areas. These concerns primarily related to violent crime but there were also reports of muggings, burglaries, vandalism and joy-riding in each local area. These perceptions were either based on young people experiencing crime themselves, for example, after being followed or chased by gangs, or, through hearing about reports of crime from others and through the media. For example, young women reported that hearing about others who had been raped or mugged had not only created a perception that there was a lot of violent crime in the area, but it had fuelled their fears about personal safety. A lack of faith in local policing strategies had also contributed to perceptions about the level of crime.

The issue of personal safety and the ability to go out alone at night was a recurrent concern for young people of all ages but particularly young women living in urban areas. In these circumstances, young people consistently said that they did not like going out at night alone for fear of being attacked. Others in rural and urban areas felt at risk when they were out at night because they felt it was easy to get caught up in potentially dangerous situations. Young parents were additionally concerned that their own children might end up being victims of crime. However, some young people in urban areas felt safe in their immediate localities, even if they believed them to be dangerous areas, because they were familiar with the people and the area.

In urban areas, it was widely felt that improved street lighting and more CCTV were required in order to ensure young people felt safe to go out at night.

### **Education**

With the exception of young people who had left school at 16, education was a key concern and one which was repeatedly raised by young people of all ages and across all areas. A wide variety of issues were raised. Underpinning these concerns was an appreciation of the importance of education and their educational success to their career advancement and progression.

For the 16-18 age group, key concerns related to current experiences of further education, including the way young people were treated by teachers. For example, one young woman said she had chosen to leave school at 16 because she was being picked on by her teachers. There was also concern about being used as 'guinea pigs' for new courses and exam systems, such as the new AS Levels. As much of the fieldwork was carried out shortly before the publication of GCSE and A Level results there was anxiety about forthcoming exam results.

Amongst 18-25 year olds, concerns about education were widely linked to current or recent experiences in higher education. A key concern for these young people was the cost of higher education following the abolition of student grants and the introduction of tuition fees. Young people spoke of struggling with their courses as a result of having to do paid work to finance their degrees. There was also criticism of teaching and assessment methods in universities. One young person disliked having to do assessed group work, because some members of the group did not 'pull their weight', and this was felt to have a detrimental effect on everyone in the group. Young people in this age group also expressed concern about the constraints placed on their freedom to choose and change courses. A particular issue seemed to be the lack of guidance available to help young people select an appropriate course.

Aside from these more personal concerns there were also issues raised about government policy on education at the national level. These issues were expressed most commonly by 22-25 year olds and by those young people who were involved in youth participation schemes. Their concerns included the lack of respect for the teaching profession on the part of politicians and the media, and the growing pressure put on teachers as a consequence of the increased paper work they are required to produce. Teachers were widely seen to provide important role models for children and to be instrumental in helping local children reach their potential. There were also concerns about the lack of funding for schools. This too was felt to be making teachers' jobs ever harder and causing education standards to fall. The lowering of education standards was a particular concern for young parents, who would soon be sending their own children to school.

### **Employment**

While the issue of employment was raised by young people of all ages it appeared to be a recurrent concern for 20-25 year olds. The young people in this age group appeared to find employment a more pressing concern than 16-20 year olds, perhaps because some of these young people had financial support from parents.

Young people of this age commonly complained about the insecure nature of the labour market and the few opportunities and limited choices for young people leaving education. It was recurrently said that higher education qualifications had not enabled young people to get a job in their chosen field, or one which they considered well-paid. Consequently, young people felt they would have to move, for example to a larger town, in order to get the job they wanted. These young people also reported concerns about the lack of careers advice available and how this had made it difficult for them to make decisions about which direction to pursue and where to find an appropriate job.

Amongst all age groups there was concern about low pay which had often resulted in young people having to work long hours in order to be able to support themselves. Long hours were felt to impact negatively on quality of life, particularly for those with children.

### **Money**

Money, or rather the lack of it, was another issue raised by all age groups, but particularly for those who were starting work with student debts or those with their own children. Young people with student debts seemed daunted by the prospect of paying off their debts, largely because they were commonly working in relatively low paid jobs, having been unable to find work in their chosen fields.

Young people with children commonly said they found it difficult to 'make ends meet', and struggled to buy clothes for their children or find the cash to take them swimming or to the cinema. The high cost of living was commonly emphasised in relation to transport, leisure facilities and housing costs.

In terms of local and national policy, money was discussed in relation to the high levels of income and council tax that young people are required to pay. Underpinning this view was a perception that young people receive a poor return from taxation. In addition there were specific concerns about taxpayers' money being spent on benefits and housing for asylum seekers and teenage mums.

### **Racism**

Racism and racial tension were a particular concern for white and ethnic minority young people of all ages living in areas with high ethnic minority populations. The race riots in West Yorkshire were consistently mentioned and appeared to have brought the issue to the front of young people's minds. However, young people's concerns were firmly rooted in their local situations. The key concern was fighting between white and ethnic minority gangs. As a consequence of the locations where the fieldwork was held these were reported as fights between Asian and white gangs, and also between different Asian gangs. The tension and fighting was felt to threaten young people's personal safety and impact negatively on the local area, with some areas being viewed as 'no-go':

*"it's like you only have to walk up the street and look, look at their car and they'll stop and try and start a bit of an argument or something..... I walk four miles down to the next petrol station rather than go to the one that's 500 yards from me house" (male, 22 years).*

Young people from minority ethnic groups were commonly concerned about the level of attacks by white people on their community and other communities. They also felt that this was less widely reported than attacks by Asians on whites. Another related concern was to do with the way in which the police treat members of ethnic minorities. There was a common perception that the police harass members of ethnic minorities. Conversely, white young people consistently felt that when Asian youths attacked whites, it was not treated as racist or dealt with, with the same severity as white on Asian attacks.

Racial tension was most widely discussed in terms of the negative impact it had on the local environment and personal safety. However, less commonly there was concern about racism as an issue of social inequality, particularly amongst those young people who were involved in youth participation schemes. There was a feeling that racial segregation of local communities exacerbated racial tension and that the situation would improve with greater intergration.

### ***Policing strategies***

Young people were also concerned about the nature of policing strategies in their areas. A key issue was the lack of policing in all areas and the impact this had on levels of crime and particularly their personal safety. There were also concerns that the police were preoccupied with catching people for speeding than dealing with more serious crime such as burglary and violent crime. When they did tackle these areas it was felt that the police were unable to solve these crimes. For example, one young person who was concerned about the number of murders committed locally felt,

*"The police seem to think they're drug related, they've not arrested them for most of them – you know, cos they haven't even caught anybody, which is not a surprise – they seem to be great at catching motorists and not – not very good at catching anything else"* (male, 23 years).

As has been noted above, there was also concern about police racism and harassment of ethnic minorities.

### ***Housing***

Housing was a recurrent concern for young people in the 22-25 age bracket. Young people in the younger age range did not mention housing as a concern, perhaps because many still lived in the parental home, or in university accommodation.

The concerns of 22-25 year olds were associated with problems finding accommodation as well as the quality of the housing they were living in. There were reports of long waiting lists facing young people seeking council accommodation. This had stimulated concerns about the shortage of local authority housing at the local and national levels. It was felt that the shortage was being exacerbated by the privatisation of council housing and the demolition of council blocks to make way for private housing developments. Furthermore as a consequence of the shortage of housing there were additional issues relating to

overcrowding in inner city areas. This was a particular concern for ethnic minority young people.

For those who were already living in council accommodation there were additional worries about delays in the council carrying out repairs. Finally, housing was also a particular concern for one 16 year old, who had been forced to move 4 times in the past year. This suggests that housing can become an issue for young people of all ages when they lack housing security.

### **Transport**

Young people were consistently critical of public transport. Across all areas and age groups, the reasons for this were broadly the same, although the concerns were most strongly voiced by young people living in rural areas. Many preferred to drive, cycle or walk because they found using public transport a frustrating experience - young people described unreliable, infrequent services, with limited hours of operation, limited routes, low standard of cleanliness and hygiene, and high costs. In the 22-25 age bracket, young parents found it particularly hard to manage on public transport with their children and often resorted to paying for taxis.

Those who had their own transport were concerned about a lack of parking spaces, high levels of traffic congestion, the poor quality of the roads and the high cost of petrol.

### **International issues**

International issues did not arouse widespread concern prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. After this time, the bombing of the World Trade Centre was commonly mentioned, along with concern about the likely repercussions. Young people interviewed at this time, in contrast to those interviewed before this date, said that international politics was generally more interesting than local politics. However, this seemed likely to be a temporary state of affairs brought on by the blanket television coverage of a major event.

Concern was also expressed about the what might happen to Britain if it did not integrate fully with Europe. Also at the national and global levels, there was a worry about international relations, in terms of the plight of people living in the third world, and "*relations between people*".

### **Exceptional concerns**

Other more exceptionally raised issues seemed to have more of a national focus. One such issue was the environment, where concern focused on increased damage to the environment and levels of pollution and the need for improved recycling facilities. Another concern was with animal rights, specifically in terms of opposition to hunting and animal testing. It is interesting that both these issues which are so often associated with young people were not widely cited as concerns.

There was also some concern voiced about the criminal justice system. This was expressed in different ways, including the failure of the prison system to rehabilitate prisoners, and the need for tougher sentences for benefit fraud. Otherwise there was anxiety about the high levels of teenage pregnancy amongst young people aged 16-

18. It was felt that more should be done, for example through schools, to provide better sex education. Finally, there were some concerns that were specific to local areas, such as foot and mouth which was raised by young people in rural areas, who were aware of the devastating effect of the epidemic on the livelihoods of local farmers.

### **3.2 How and why do these concerns arise?**

The concerns discussed above most commonly stem from young people's direct experiences; they are issues which impact on young people's daily lives. As such, they tend to arise from the experiences of young people, their friends, work and school or university colleagues and other family members.

Typically, young people's concerns were confined to personal and local issues. However, sometimes their experiences led to a concern about national issues. For example, a family member's poor experience in hospital had led to concern about the state of the NHS, or the experience of working in the local benefits office had led to more generic views on asylum seekers and benefit fraud. This process occurred across all age groups.

Not surprisingly the media was the other key way in which young people became aware of issues which did not affect them directly, although these were less likely to be widespread concerns. One young person's view of such issues was that: *"They're not dead important at all they're just things you get told about, aren't they?"* (female, 21 years).

Another stated: *"if it doesn't directly affect me....I'm not particularly bothered with it. You get all this stuff about global warming, for example, yeah it's important but it doesn't actually affect me really....I'm not really that bothered by it. If it affects me directly then, yes, then I'm bothered"*. (male, 23 years).

Young people in the 22-25 age bracket commonly showed concern about more abstract political issues. Young people of this age were more likely to have had experiences which led them to see how their personal concerns fitted into the local, national or international picture. These life experiences included having families of their own, having been to university, and specific experiences involving the workplace or housing.

On the whole, young people from higher social classes, and those who were involved in youth participation schemes, were more likely to express concerns about abstract or remote political concerns such as social equality, human rights or international relations. This related to their greater appreciation and understanding of political matters.

## 4 IMAGE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This chapter examines young people's images, awareness and understanding of local government. It provides insight into the types of individuals young people imagine become involved in local governance. It will also explore the factors which influence their views about local government and politics. The way in which young people viewed their local authority and its representatives will also be discussed.

With the exception of those who reported being interested and engaged, young people in this sample displayed very low levels of awareness and understanding about the role and responsibilities of local government. There also appears to be confusion about the difference between national and local levels, particularly in terms of who it is that represents young people at the local tier. Despite this lack of knowledge about the council, its role or its members, young people still had strong views about the quality of local government and its personnel in their area. It seems that where young people lack any awareness or contact with their local council they draw on the views of others, such as views of family and community members, or media representations of local government.

### 4.1 Awareness and understanding of local government

The levels of awareness and understanding of local government displayed by the sample covered a whole spectrum, but can be grouped in four main ways.

The first was a complete blankness as to who the local authority were, where they were based and what it was that they did or were responsible for. Some young people commented that they had no idea about this and never had any reason to think about such things. Young people in this group were often unable to identify the picture of the town hall shown to them in the interviews. One young woman who worked next door to the town hall had no idea as to what the function of this building was despite walking past it every day. Comments such as *'its all a blur'* or *'it means nothing to me'* were frequently expressed by this group when asked for any images of what occurred inside the town hall. When asked about the relationship between the local authority and central government young people were not always aware that this was how government in this country was structured. There was evidence of a large amount of cloudiness as to what the different roles and responsibilities of these bodies were.

A second, and more common response was that the local authority or 'council' were a decision making body with responsibility for the local area, but there was a lack of clarity about what this involved or meant more specifically. Sometimes young people were conscious of the basic function and role of the local authority, but displayed little awareness beyond this for example of its relationship to central government. This was reflected in the difficulty some young people experienced in describing what the local authority actually did beyond vague notions such as

*'keeping us lot happy'*. Primarily local government was associated with *'stuffy'* debates, meetings and discussions about the local area.

A third type of response was to equate local government almost exclusively with local service provision such as cleansing, rubbish collection and environmental maintenance. As one young person put it *'The local council are just people who come round in transit vans and clean up and things like that'*. The protective clothing worn by local authority staff such as road-sweepers and dustbin men created a vivid and predominant image. References to *'men in fluorescent coats'* were a common response given by young people when asked what their image of the local authority was. It was imagined that inside the town hall clerical and office workers would be organising and supervising this service provision. Young people who held this view tended to lack any conception of the local authority as a governing body, its wider responsibilities outside service provision or of its relationship to central government.

*"Local government don't have much responsibility at all, just to make sure the waste is taken away, the repairs done on time and that the rent is paid"*  
(male, 24 years).

Finally, some of the young people demonstrated a much greater degree of awareness and understanding surrounding the role and function of local government. These wider conceptions were found among those with higher levels of interest in politics and with higher levels of educational attainment. Unsurprisingly, the young people who demonstrated the greatest levels of understanding about local government were those who had first hand experience of this through participating in their local authority in some form. Local governance was perceived as the management and maintenance of the local area and responsibility for providing services, facilities and for making spending decisions and allocating funding where it was needed. A wide range of local facilities were associated with local government such as parks, swimming pools, leisure events, residential care homes, alongside services such as rubbish collection, street lighting, road works and recycling. In addition, local government was also associated with setting and delivering policies in relation to health, social security, housing, crime, education and the police. These young people often had clear images of the clerical work, debates and public meetings that occurred within the town hall.

Unlike the other three groups, young people who were more aware, also displayed understanding of the relationship between central and local government. There was recognition that central government had ultimate decision-making authority but some powers had been delegated to the local authority. Local and central government were seen to have different areas of responsibility. Central government dealt with the *'big issues'* such as the NHS and tuition fees, which the local authority then had to implement locally in hospitals, schools and colleges. As one young person put it

*"Local government is about breaking things down, taking the big national things and bringing them down to a more local and relevant level"* (male, 16 years).

## 4.2 Images of those involved in local government

Amongst all of the young people except the most aware and active in local politics, there was evidence of a lack of clarity as to who was responsible for local government. Some young people mentioned councillors, mayors or local MPs, but others were unsure as to which individuals headed local government. Very few of the young people knew which party controlled the local authority or who any of their local councillors were. It was common for young people to mention their local MP when talking about who was in charge of the local authority.

When young people were asked to describe the types of people that they imagined might become involved with local politics it was clear that they perceived these people to be very different to themselves. Also, the consistency with which some characteristics were cited suggests the existence of some strong images. Age was a recurrently mentioned characteristic. Young people repeatedly imagined individuals who were involved in local government and politics to be *'old'* which was usually defined as middle-aged and above. When young people actually knew who these individuals were this impression was based on the imagined age of actual councillors and the mayor. For others, however this view was based on the assumption that only older people would have the life experience and social standing necessary to become involved with local government and to know what was best for the local area. As one young person put it, *'They've lived more and know what it's about'*.

Being *'professional'*, *'posh'*, *'rich'* or *'from the upper classes'* were other characteristics the young people attributed to those who were involved in local government. It was imagined that these types of people would think they knew what was best for the rest of the population and this might prompt them to become involved in local government. In addition, some young people commented that the well-spoken accents and smart dress of people who were involved in the council suggested these characteristics. This point was made most frequently by young people from the lower social class bands. They often felt, as expressed by one young woman, that such people were from the *'other side of the track to me'*.

People who were involved in local government were also imagined to be intelligent and knowledgeable about politics. They were perceived as people with qualifications who had received a good education. Having a degree in politics was sometimes mentioned specifically. Intelligence and qualifications were viewed as necessary to equip people for carrying out local government work and duties. The possession of qualifications was sometimes linked with social class as it was felt that people from more affluent backgrounds were more likely to have these attributes.

Some of the young people felt that the individuals who became involved in local government were people with significant interests in the local area such as businessmen or *'conservative landowners like Jeffrey Archer'*. These people and their interests were thought to be likely to be particularly affected by council decisions and so might get involved to protect these. It was also felt that these types of people would know powerful people who would be able to assist them in obtaining positions of responsibility within the local authority.

Other young people felt that individuals who cared about others and were committed to improving the local area might become involved in local government or politics. A genuine desire to make a difference was believed to motivate some of the people who became involved in local government.

The young people who had participated in local government in some way often had very different or much broader views about the types of people who might become involved in local government. These types of experience often left young people feeling that *'anyone'* could become involved in local government and this type of activity was not only restricted to a particular type of person.

### **4.3 Views about the local council**

Despite differing levels of awareness about local government, young people generally had an extremely poor and negative image of their local council and its personnel. The main areas of criticism voiced by the young people are outlined below.

#### ***Remote & inaccessible***

A common criticism was that councillors were remote and inaccessible to the local community. Consequently, it was felt that *'It's their own fault that no-one knows who they are'*. Young people did not know who to approach or how to go about contacting their local politicians. More generally the difficulty experienced in finding anyone to contact or speak to in the council was recurrently mentioned. Council buildings were described as often closed. When they were open they were felt to be, confusing and difficult to navigate your way around. Young people commented on the bureaucracy involved in trying to get things done, such as to register a change of address, or organise repairs. In these circumstances communicating with the local authority was perceived to be excessively difficult.

#### ***Inert and ineffective***

A frequently expressed criticism was that *'nothing ever gets done'* and it was felt that *'everything they do takes a long time'*. There was some suggestion that some responsibility for this inaction lay with local authority staff who were criticised for *'sitting on their arse all day and drinking coffee'*. Young people also commonly reported that their local authority tended to focus on *'things that don't really matter'*. A lack of activity around areas of local life that were perceived to need attention such as the roads, quality of council housing and lack of facilities for young people, was often cited.

#### ***Incompetence***

Another criticism centred around the perceived incompetence of the local authority. In many of the areas young people had a strong impression that the council wasted money on unnecessary projects, made promises which were not kept, made mistakes and tended not to do things properly. The comment that they *'spend money on ridiculous things'* was not atypical and young people in all of the areas included in the research gave examples of these types of projects. These included the installation of a one way system in a busy town centre which was perceived to have increased

congestion, putting in ineffective traffic lights that had to be removed and creating expensive buildings which turned out to have inadequate foundations and be unsafe to use. Some of the older members of the sample wondered what it was that the money they paid in Council Tax was used for. Young people often also gave examples of perceived blunders or ill-considered schemes which had had significant impact on their own lives. This is highlighted by the case below:

One young woman had lost her job when the hairdressers where she worked was forced to close after the lease expired. The council had refused to renew the lease because the block in which the property was situated was due for demolition. After a period of unemployment she found another job, although this was much further away from her home and involved expensive bus fares. Consequently, she felt very angry when - after it had been empty for five months - the council's plans changed in relation to the block in which she had previously worked, and they began re-letting the properties and moving businesses back in. This left her feeling that the council sometimes made decisions without good reason and gave little thought to the implications for the people whom these decisions affected.

#### ***Out of touch with the local community***

The local authority was often felt to be out of touch with local people. Young people gave numerous examples of projects in their region which did not concur with the wishes of the local community, such as the installation of a roundabout at great cost when improving the beach was a priority among local people in the hope of generating tourism.

Essentially, the perceived unresponsiveness was felt to be because of a lack of consultation about the wishes and needs of the local community. There was a strong view that 'council workers need to get out from behind their desks and find out what tax payers want from their council, as well as finding out first hand what local problems existed'. This was believed to be particularly important in areas with multi-cultural populations, such as Tower Hamlets, where it was felt this diversity created a greater need for consultation to ensure the authority fully understood the views of the whole community.

#### ***Self Interested***

The perceived lack of local authority activity around local problems was frequently explained by self interest and a lack of motivation to help ordinary people. It was felt that local councillors' did not care about local problems, otherwise they would have done more to resolve them. Local councillors were perceived to be '*only bothered about their own wage slips*' and the local council to be only interested in doing something if issues generated media attention, or involved people who were important.

The charge of self interest was also sometimes levelled at local authority staff who were perceived as unwilling to help others. Surprisingly, it was said by one of the ethnic minority groups that they preferred to speak to a white council worker, rather

than someone from their own ethnic background, as they felt it was more likely to have effect.

*“ If you can explain the situation to someone else rather than [someone from your own ethnic background] I think it stands a better chance of getting done... I've no idea why it is like that... they've got the job and they're sitting there, they don't want to help other people...when it comes to their own people they don't treat them well I've seen it with my own eyes”* (male, 25 years).

#### **4.4 Views about the importance of local government**

Young people were asked for their views on whether there was a need for local government and how important they felt the local authority to be. Views on this point varied considerably, although overall young people with no image or conception of local government tended to see it as being much less important than those who had some awareness of the role and function of this body.

Some of the young people felt quite strongly that local government was of little value and was unnecessary. Reasons for holding this opinion varied. For some, the local authority was a waste of money and it was felt that central government could fulfil these functions. This was sometimes linked to the idea that there was too much government in the United Kingdom, and it was unnecessary to have a separate local authority in every area of the country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people who felt local government was unimportant tended to be those who were least aware of the role and responsibilities of the local authority.

In contrast, however, the importance of local government was articulated particularly clearly by young people with most understanding of the role of the local authority. This group were unanimous that it was necessary to have a local authority and that this fulfilled an important and crucial function. Primarily, it was felt to be important to have some decision making by an authority at a local level. National policies which applied to every part of the country in a uniform way were not perceived to be the most effective way to govern as they failed to take account of local variation and circumstances. Young people did not feel that central government could be expected to make decisions about every area, however, because *‘they've got bigger things to deal with’* and they did not possess the local knowledge needed to make the best decisions for the area.

*“Unless they've lived through it, unless they know what's going on like if Tony Blair has never come here, he can't make a decision on what to do really he can't say well we're gonna close that school down or whatever if he's never been here... it's not fair, it's not right”* (male, 16 years).

Decisions that were made locally were associated with better government and getting the best for the local area. The local authority was therefore perceived to be important and valuable to the local area because it possessed the local knowledge required to make these decisions.

Some young people spoke of local government being important because of specific functions that were felt to be vital. Different aspects of local authority jurisdiction were highlighted in different areas covered by the research. The perceived value of local government's role in maintaining order was highlighted most often in Calderdale where it was commented that without a local authority situations such as the recent racial tensions and rioting may have escalated into more severe disturbances. Responsibility for awarding planning permission was emphasised as an important function of the local authority in Tynedale. It was felt that this prevented the erection of ugly buildings and protected the character of the local landscape. Awareness about this issue seemed to be fairly high in this area due the local authority's consistent rejection of applications from 'McDonalds' restaurant to open a number of branches.

The association of local government predominantly or exclusively with local service provision could lead to different views regarding its importance. Some young people concluded that this was not a very important role. One young person, for example, felt there was no real need for a local authority and that it was *'just there for emergencies'* such as when problems developed with council accommodation. Others, however disagreed with this point and argued that if it did not exist then the area would be *'in a right mess'* because there would be no rubbish collection or road works. It was pointed out that the invisible nature of much local government activity can mean that it is taken for granted and its importance is not recognised. It was felt that much of the maintenance of communal areas and rubbish collection, for example, *'goes on without me thinking about it'*. As a result these things appeared less important than they actually were and some young people acknowledged that if these tasks were not carried out, the role of the local authority might feel a lot more important.

Some young people developed this point and said that local government was important because the local issues with which it dealt directly affected the lives of people who lived in that area. This view was expressed by young people who had most understanding of the role of the local authority. The infrequency with which this view was expressed, however, is surprising as it suggests that very few of the young people in the sample felt that the activities of the local authority had a direct impact upon their lives in this way. This point will be returned to in Section 5.2.3 as it is relevant in explaining the levels of interest in local government displayed by the young people.

#### **4.5 Sources of information about local government**

A wide range of different sources of information about local government were mentioned by the young people although some knew about many more of these than others.

The local media was frequently cited as providing news about local authority activity and local politics. Local television and news programmes were often viewed as an easily accessible source of information. For some this was felt to be a preferable way to access this information as it was easier to absorb than printed media which had *'too much writing and not enough pictures'*. Others however didn't think that local news provided much detailed information about local government.

Other young people obtained information about the local authority from local papers such as *'East End life'*, or the *'Hexham Courier'*. These were sometimes felt to be interesting to read because of familiarity with the places and areas being discussed. Some young people mentioned the letters page specifically as a good source of information about local issues and council activity. Others remembered seeing council plans for the development of local areas published in their local paper. Local radio stations were also mentioned by some who felt these broadcasted fairly informative debates and phone-ins about local issues.

Some young people were aware of and had read council newsletters which were posted to them on a regular basis. These contained information about local projects and council schemes such as the opening of new facilities or plans to turn a disused pit top into a park. Others recalled receiving letters and leaflets from local councillors themselves which provided details of councillor surgeries where local people could go and discuss issues with their local representative face to face.

Additional sources of information about local government were cited by young people living in local authority accommodation. It seems that the experience of living in this type of housing itself can be a source of information itself. The starter pack given to tenants when they move into a council property was mentioned as providing a guide to how the council worked and who to contact about repairs and other issues.

Unsurprisingly, young people who had participated in the local authority in some way were aware of more sources of information than those who had not. These young people mentioned meetings of local councillors which were open to members of the public to go and observe. In addition, youth workers responsible for running participation projects and initiatives were felt to be well informed and provide a useful source of information.

#### **4.6 Factors influencing young people's awareness and views of local government**

A number of factors clearly affect the levels of awareness and understanding of local government and politics demonstrated by the young people. The first of these was the degree of attachment a young person felt towards where they lived. This was often underpinned by the length of time a young person had lived in an area and whether they were planning to remain in an area. Young people tended to feel more attached to the local area when they had lived there all their lives. They also placed a high value and attachment on their local area if they were planning to remain living there in the future. Young people who were relatively new to an area as they were attending college there and or had moved for work or family reasons sometimes lacked an attachment and an awareness of local government and politics within that area.

A second factor was the level of contact that the young people had had with the local authority and nature of this experience. Young people who lived in local authority

accommodation often had a particular view of local government and associated it very closely with service provision. These young people often had a significant amount of contact with the local authority and its representatives. One young woman, for example had been closely monitored by the local authority after complaints about noise levels in her flat, and received almost daily calls and visits from council representatives for a time. Others regularly visited their local area housing office to pay rent, report problems with their property or the estate or to discuss other problems or work that needed doing. These types of experiences sometimes resulted in a lack of any conception of the local authority outside its capacity as landlord and housing provider.

The way in which local government and the provision of local authority housing were sometimes seen to be synonymous was particularly evident in an area where the management of local authority housing stock had been recently transferred to a housing association. In this area a number of references to the “*council being taken over*” were made.

Whether or not young people had ever participated was obviously a significant factor affecting views and awareness of the local authority. Young people who had participated had often had first-hand experience of the workings of the local authority through attendance at meetings and other contact with local authority representatives. This had obviously contributed to their comparatively high levels of awareness and understanding about local government. This point will be considered further in section 6.6 which discusses the impacts of participation in local government upon young people.

As is evident from this chapter young people were able to describe what they thought about the council much more easily than what they thought it was. It is interesting that even when young people felt they knew very little about the council, its role or its members they still had strong views about the quality of local government in their area and the people involved. This raises the question as to where these opinions and images of local government come from.

It seems these are derived from a range of sources a number of which have already been suggested in this chapter. Many of these perceptions appeared to be based on young people’s observations of local authority activity around them, or lack of this. This was informed by young people’s perceptions of the quality of council services, information boards, or posters detailing planned works or developments, or, more negatively, through aspects of the local environment which were perceived to need attention but had not received this.

The views of family and community members has also clearly influenced some young people. This was evident in the way they mentioned the views of their parents or other people they knew when discussing their images and views about the local authority. This was particularly apparent among young people who lived in local authority accommodation. This group often commented that information could be gained from the ‘*gossip on the estate*’. Young people had often frequently heard neighbours and other residents talking about their dealings with the local authority and voicing their opinions of the council and its staff.

As indicated in the previous section the local media was also a source of information about local government which young people were aware of. The portrayal of the local authority and its representatives in the media seemed to have influenced some young people's views. Some young people commented that the local papers always showed the local authority in a negative light. Sometimes, particularly negative stories had remained in young people's minds. For example, young people in one area referred to a recent newspaper article which had reported on how local councillors still weren't attending council meetings six months after being elected.

Sometimes young people's views of local government appeared largely unrelated to the actual qualities or characteristics of their particular local authority, but seemed to be determined by the wider political arena. National media coverage of politics and images of national politicians had left some young people with very negative views about politics and politicians. This seemed to have entirely shaped some young people's views about local government and the local authority in the area in which they live. This suggests that general disillusionment with politics can clearly affect or even determine young peoples' view and image of local government. This may be one factor explaining why some young people who knew very little about their local authority or its members were still able to express strong negative views about local government.

## 5 INTEREST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

With the exception of those who were or had participated in local government and politics, young people generally reported very little interest in local government. This sometimes contrasted somewhat starkly with the interest young people demonstrated in a range of issues of which some were related to the local area in which they lived. One of the questions this research set out to explore was why it is when young people are often concerned about issues related to their local area this rarely translates into an interest in local government. This chapter will show that alongside other factors such as a lack of understanding of the role of local government and the implications of this for its perceived salience, young people's disillusionment with politicians and the democratic process may go some way towards explaining this. It is possible that interest in either local or national politics is to some extent dependent on a degree of faith in the efficacy of our democratic processes and acceptance of these as a way of effecting change. Without this there is little incentive for young people to take an interest in local government and politics because there is not seen to be anything that can be done to influence local issues.

This chapter explores levels of interest in local government and politics across the sample. It provides further understanding of the reasons for disinterest in local politics and will contrast these with factors motivating an interest. Young people's levels of interest in local government and politics are also compared to their views of and interest in national government and politics. The views of the young people about how their levels of interest will change in the future will also be discussed.

### 5.1 Levels of interest in local politics and government

The level of interest in local government displayed by the young people covered a whole spectrum. Overall, however, this can be classified into three broad groups.

- No interest
- Some degree of interest
- Highly interested

These classifications only relate to young people's level of interest in local government and there were young people in each group who had some interest in national politics, and also those who did not. Comparative levels of interest shown by young people in local and national government are discussed in Section 5.3

#### ***No interest***

This group appear to take no notice of local politics and government and were often emphatic in expressing this. For example, some young people used phrases such as '*100% not interested*' and accompanied this with facial gestures implying distaste and tedium to emphasise the point. Many of those who lacked awareness and understanding of the role of the local authority as described in Chapter 3, were in this group. Local government and politics was not something they ever thought

about, considered or discussed with family or friends. Indeed some young people described how they actively sought to avoid such conversations. One young man, for example would always leave the room if his family began discussing local government. Another young woman whose partner often tried to start conversations with her, about the council when this appeared on the local news said she *'would always tell him to shut up and put Hollyoaks on'*. As might be expected, it was unusual for young people in this group to have had any experience of participating in local government.

### ***Some degree of interest***

There was a substantial group of young people who displayed some amount of interest in local government. This was a very broad group and included young people who reported they had some interest, young people who had expressed interest on specific occasions and young people who were inconsistent, or seemed unsure about how interested they were. Most of these young people tended to have a degree of awareness of the role of the local authority as a decision making body, but often lacked any broader understanding of its role and specific responsibilities. This vagueness was sometimes reflected in comments such as *'I am a bit interested although I don't know which bit'*.

This degree of interest was demonstrated in conversations about the local authority with family and friends, watching the local news and reading leaflets from local councillors when these were delivered to their homes. The interest of some had been more sporadic and occurred as a result of a specific local issue which they had strong views about, for example local authority plans to build a skateboarding area in a local park, or attempts by the council to reduce drug dealing on an estate in which the young person lived. This level of interest was also reflected in some experiences of participation. However, these tended to be occasional, one off activities such as signing a petition.

### ***Highly interested***

Some of the young people displayed a relatively high level of interest in local government. Young people in this group perceived themselves as interested, had well formed views about local government and were able to cite a range of behaviour which reflected this interest. These young people tended to have the greatest awareness and understanding of the role of the local authority and its relationship to central government. This interest was often reflected in some experience of participation. This highly interested group included most of those who were participating in local government via local authority initiatives. It also included other young people who had participated in other ways in the past, such as in schools councils or youth groups. The high level of interest evident among this group was also manifested in behaviour such as discussions about local government with family and friends and efforts to keep informed about local government activity via the local media and council mailings.

## **5.2 Explaining disinterest in local government**

The ability of young people to explain why local government was not of interest to them varied. The comment that *'politics is boring'* was ubiquitous in the research

among those young people who were not interested. Some of these found it difficult to explain their disinterest beyond this, however, and could not identify what it was about local government that turned them off. This was particularly common among those with the least image and awareness of local government. Others, however, were able to explain why they found local government boring. Those who were involved in local authority initiatives often had much to say on this point. These young people were often aware of the disinterest common to their peers and had sometimes given this issue previous consideration as part of the activities in which they were involved.

There were a number of broad factors which appear to underpin young people's lack of interest in local government. The most notable of these seem to be the lack of understanding and awareness of local government, and the implications of this for the perceived salience of local government in young people's lives. Also, there is clear evidence of a general disillusionment with politicians and the democratic process.

### **5.2.1 Lack of awareness and understanding about the role of local government**

The lack of awareness and understanding of local government evident among some young people described in Chapter 4, appears to be a key factor in explaining their disinterest in local politics. Some of the young people recognised this and pointed out that their lack of understanding about the role of the local authority made it very difficult for them to develop an interest in this. This does not seem surprising as it would be difficult for a young person to be interested in the activities of local government if they are unaware that there is a decision making authority in the area in which they live. Even those young people with some awareness of the basic role and function of local government, still felt that the lack of any more detailed understanding about the workings of the local authority prevented them from developing an interest. It seems that lack of awareness of the specific powers and responsibilities of the local authority can prevent young people making the link between local issues of concern and the responsibilities of local government.

One explanation for this lack of awareness and understanding was felt to be found in the perceived lack of basic information about local government. Young people often felt that they had never been provided with an understanding of what the local authority did and what its responsibilities were. A related factor was the low profile of councillors and senior members of local authorities within the community.

Young people felt they also lacked information about what their local authority was doing. Local councils were not felt to circulate much information or news about their activities, policies and plans. Comments such as '*you don't hear about it or know what is going on*' were frequently made. Local government was perceived to be very 'quiet' in comparison with central government which had a much higher profile and about which information was constantly available in the media.

### 5.2.2 *Lack of salience of local politics in young people's lives*

The perceived importance of local government and magnitude of the issues with which it deals, can affect levels of interest. The view of some young people, given earlier, that the local authority was not important was sometimes highlighted as a reason for lack of interest. In particular, narrower conceptions of local government equating it predominantly with local service provision often meant that the issues local government dealt with were viewed as mundane and localised in comparison with those dealt with by national government. As a consequence of this, these issues were sometimes seen to be uninteresting.

Some young people were not interested in local government not because they felt it to be unimportant *per se* but because they didn't feel it was important to them. It was commonly said that young people have other priorities such as getting qualifications and planning for the future. Others felt that being young was a time for '*living life*' which did not leave time for things such as local government.

*"Everyone is always going on about live life whilst you're young... We always say that don't we?(to friend) We worry about that we're not enjoying ourselves enough 'cos everyone is like 'oh worry about that when you're older, you've got to enjoy life whilst you're young'" (female, 24 years).*

Some of the young people suggested that their disinterest in politics was a feature of their life stage and that this might change as they grew older and this issue is considered in section 5.5

The low salience of local government to some young people seemed particularly apparent among those young people living in difficult circumstances. For example, one young person who was homeless, pointed out that he had far more pressing issues to contend with in his life such as working out where he might stay each night. Another young woman who had been brought up by a lone parent described how life had always been dominated by '*struggling to get by*' and '*how they were going to live*' and there had been '*no time to think about things like politics*'.

As suggested by earlier literature, the salience of local government to young people was also affected by a lack of awareness as to how it affects young people's lives (Atkinson & Boyle, 1996). Young people frequently commented that '*local government doesn't relate to me*'. This perception that local politics lacks relevance to young people's lives can underpin feelings of boredom in relation to local government. Being interested in local government seems to depend on a perception of something as being relevant or relating to one's own life. Even in cases where young people had clear concerns about local issues such as reducing crime, vandalism and the streets being kept clean, local government was not always seen as related to these issues. Young people were often '*more bothered about the area than about politics*'. This failure to perceive these two things as being related seems to be a key factor in explaining lack of interest in local government among young people.

The relevance of local government to some young people's lives was also affected by their levels of attachment or interest in their local area. The reasons for this lack of connection, or at its most extreme, dislike of environment in which they lived were

discussed in the previous chapter, and were felt by some young people to explain their low levels of interest in local politics. In addition, young people who were planning to move often saw little reason to take an interest in the government of this area.

### **5.2.3 Disillusionment with politicians and the democratic process**

The evidence collected in this study suggests that wider disillusionment with politics driven by images from national politics can have significant repercussions for young people's attitudes towards local government. A lack of trust in politicians to tell the truth, keep their promises and be accountable seemed to be instrumental in turning some young people off local government. It was felt that politicians do not make a difference and that very little in society changes no matter which political party is in power at either the national or local level. This perceived inability of politicians to change things appears significant in alienating young people from local government and can lead to a reluctance among young people's to engage with these individuals. This was frequently reflected in the view that *'its not worth listening to their promises'*. This general disillusionment with politics confirms much existing knowledge relating to the reasons for young people's lack of interest and disengagement from the national political arena.

In addition to the belief that politicians do not make a difference, young people also felt there was little opportunity for them to influence local government decisions and change things. Feeling disempowered in this way can prevent young people from taking an interest *"You think 'what's the point?, they will just decide everything anyway. So if you can't do anything about it why bother thinking about it?"* This point was made by young people from all age groups, however in particular some of the 16-17 year olds pointed out that there seemed to be little point in them taking an interest given that they were not even yet able to vote.

### **5.2.4 Assumption that the system works**

A much more exceptional and passive explanation was that there is no need for young people to take an interest in local government because the existing system appears to work well. This was sometimes linked to the low profile of local government and lack of news or information from the local authority, both of which were perceived to suggest that things were running smoothly. This point was mentioned most frequently by young people who lacked awareness of local government and its activities in their local area. There was an assumption that the individuals in charge of local government knew what they were doing and would make the right decisions. As a consequence some young people saw no reason why they should pay any attention to local government. This group thought that they would have heard more about local government if the system was not working well. It was not clear, however, if information of this kind would have actually prompted them to take an interest. Young people who took this view also did not seem to have a particularly strong sense of civic responsibility. They often felt that it was not up to them to worry about local government as other people were paid to do this and so these people should *'get on with it'*.

### 5.3 Relationship to national political interest

There was no clear relationship between young people's levels of interest in local government and their levels of interest in national government and reports included all possible permutations.

Some young people did not perceive either form of politics to be interesting in any respect. They displayed very little difference in their attitudes to local and national government and tended to see anything to do with politics in the same negative light. These were often the young people described in Chapter 4 who had the least awareness and understanding of local government. Reasons for this disinterest were primarily a lack of information and understanding and distrust of politicians and the democratic system as have been described above. These reasons applied equally to their lack of interest in both national and local government.

Alternatively, some of the young people who were not interested in local government did have a degree of interest in national politics. This was often seen to be more interesting than local politics because of the greater power wielded by central government and the wider scope of its actions. The issues at the heart of national politics were felt to be much larger and more significant than those dealt with by local authorities. The war in Afghanistan which was ongoing at the time of the research, was compared with issues such as traffic lights, road works and rubbish collection to illustrate this point. The lower profile and visibility of local politics was also sometimes cited as a reason for it receiving less interest. It was felt that the greater visibility of national politics, reflected in its constant presence on television or in the media made it much easier to develop interest in this form of politics.

More exceptionally, some young people were only interested in local government which they saw as more interesting than national government. Young people with this view were part of the small group of young people who made the link between local services and local government. They felt that local government was more relevant to the issues affecting their lives because its actions determined the availability of local leisure facilities and other such services. By contrast, the issues with which national politics deals were felt to be more distant. An alternative view expressed by one young man who was active in a local authority youth parliament was that local government was more interesting because '*you can do more*'. He felt that there was more scope to influence things available at a local government level than in national politics.

Among the young people who felt that local government was more interesting and relevant than national government were some of those who lived on local authority housing estates. It is possible this experience had contributed to their awareness of the relevance of local government within their lives. That said, however, other young people who lived in these circumstances were among the group described in section 5.2.2 who did not feel the activities of local government affected them.

A final group were those who displayed equal interest in both local and national politics. These young people often had most knowledge and awareness about local government and included some of the young people involved in local authority initiatives. Whilst these young people were interested in and committed to working

with the local authority they were often equally, if not more, interested in national politics and some of these hoped to become involved in this arena in the future.

#### 5.4 Explaining interest in local government

Even though this was not the focus of this study, this section will consider the characteristics of young people reporting an interest in local government in an attempt to understand the factors which are influential in the development of such views. Some of these factors simply represent the opposite end of the spectrum to the reasons for disinterest which were covered in section 5.2, although there are also some additional factors pertinent to explaining the behaviour of this group.

One characteristic shared by those who were most interested in local politics was a commitment to trying to change things in society for the better. Young people with this view appeared to have some faith in and respect for existing political processes. This group often believed that opportunities existed to get involved and to influence local government and this was a reason given for taking an interest. They did not share the disillusionment and cynicism reported by their disinterested counterparts which was described earlier. Some of these young people had become interested in local government and politics when they had reached the age at which they received the franchise, because they felt that the right to vote was an important opportunity to choose the individuals who govern. They had begun to take an interest in politics at this point as they wanted to try and use their vote in an informed way.

Another trait which was in direct contrast to some uninterested young people, was the clear sense of civic responsibility articulated by those with an interest in local government. It was felt that in a democratic society citizens have a responsibility to take an interest in government to make *sure 'they are doing their job properly'*. Local politics was felt to affect the lives of everyone and so it was felt to be wrong or '*dangerous*' to ignore it.

Young people with an interest in local government tended to have an understanding about the purpose and responsibilities of local government. This was often cited in explanation for their interest in this area. It was felt that '*if you know about something in-depth then you are going to have more interest*'. Some young people who had recently become interested in local government attributed their previous disinterest to a lack of understanding about '*what it was and how it worked*'.

In particular, the experience of participating in local government can be significant in creating and increasing young peoples' understanding and interest. As indicated above, some young people who had once had little interest in local government had become significantly more interested as they began to understand more about the workings of the local authority as a result of their participation. The effects of participating upon young people will be considered in more detail in Chapter 7.

While family background is not reported as a reason for interest, the experience of being brought up in a family where there is some level of political discussion and interest also appears to have a bearing on levels of interest. Those young people who expressed most interest and awareness in relation to both local and national politics described how they often discussed politics with their parents at home. Those young

people who were participating most actively in their local authority frequently had parents who were interested in and regularly discussed politics and the actions of the local council.

*“My mum and dad are interested in politics, they’ve always talked about it, which has obviously helped, and the TV programmes they watch, I sometimes watch ...like Have I Got News For You, and I find that amusing, so I took a bit more of an interest in it...sometimes I’d read their newspapers...I suppose my social group happens to be quite politically aware...(it’s) mostly (because of ) my parents,though I think” (female, 17 years).*

## 5.5 Views about future levels of interest

Young people varied in their views of whether their interest in local government was likely to change as they grew older. Those with no interest in local government who seemed particularly turned off from both local and national politics often felt that this was not likely to change. Others felt, however, that their level of interest might increase with time. This was particularly the case for those young people who had already had some degree of interest in local politics and government. This group sometimes presumed that they might become more interested if, for example, they had more understanding about the activities of local government. A number of reasons were given in support of this view.

Some young people commented that their perceptions would change or they *‘would look at things differently’* or *‘understand more’* as they grew older which might cause their interest in local politics to grow. It was felt that people became more politically aware as they grow older and become more conscious of the area in which they live and issues affecting it. Some of those who were interested felt that it was their growing awareness that had brought this interest about and they expected this interest to continue in the future as they continued to mature.

Young people frequently recognised that they might develop more of a stake in their local area as they became older and that this might prompt an interest in local government. Starting work, becoming resident somewhere permanently, owning a house and car and having a family were often cited in this context. These things were felt to bring about increased responsibility which would prompt more of an interest in issues such as tax and the cost of living. This situation was felt to be different from some young people’s current lives where they were often supported by their parents and had not put down roots in any particular area.

Going to university was viewed as likely to increase interest in politics generally although young people were less clear as to whether this might affect interest in local government specifically. It was envisaged that becoming a student would create different concerns and priorities. This point was corroborated by some young people with experience of this. They felt that going to college *‘makes you more aware of how politics affects you’*. Some of the young people who were participating in local authority initiatives were planning to study politics and this was expected to increase interest levels as more understanding was acquired.

Having children was felt to be particularly likely to raise levels of interest in local government. Becoming a parent was seen as creating extra reasons to be concerned about the safety of an area and quality of local facilities and services, such as nurseries, schools and local parks. Young people felt that when they were bringing up children they would want to know that they were growing up in a reasonably safe environment and that there were local facilities of sufficient quality available for them to use. The experiences of those young people who already had children supports this point as they often felt that this had increased their awareness of the impact that the local environment has upon their and their children's lives.

There were a small number of disinterested young people who saw no reason why they might become more interested in local government in the future. These tended to be the most disengaged people who had little awareness and understanding about the role and responsibilities of the local authority. Some of these young people commented that they gave the local authority little thought and did not know anybody who had any interest in, or talked about this. They, therefore saw little reason to suspect they would become more interested. There was no desire for this interest to increase among some of these young people who also said they felt the area of politics and local government was '*not my sort of thing*'. The younger people in this group, did not expect the right to vote to have any impact upon interest levels because they did not see this as particularly important and were not interested in having the opportunity to vote. Occasionally young people with this perspective commented that they might become more interested for negative reasons such as '*you become more boring as you get older*'.

## 6. PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

This chapter explores in depth the views and behaviour of young people in relation to participation in local government. It will consider how young people define 'participation' and what they see this as involving. The forms of participation that young people were aware of and had experienced will be discussed, followed by their views about the efficacy of these different methods. The full range of reasons explaining why young people do not participate will also be considered. A final section will discuss reasons given by young people for their voting behaviour and any differences in inclination to vote in national and local elections.

Discussion about ways of participating in politics reveals that young people generally feel powerless and excluded from the political process. The evidence presented provides clear messages as to why young people do not participate in local government. Alongside lack of interest and understanding about local government, young people often do not know how to participate. Even when they are aware of methods in which they can take part they often see little point in doing so. Existing methods of participation in local government are perceived by young people to be ineffective as they are unlikely to have an impact or effect change in local decision making.

### 6.1 Awareness and definitions of participation

One of the questions this research set out to explore was what 'participation' in local government means to young people. This question was felt to be difficult to answer and was often something young people had not considered. Some young people could cite the types of activities they defined as participation, but found it difficult to explain why they defined them in this way. Unsurprisingly, those young people with most awareness of local government and politics tended to provide the most sophisticated definitions.

Young people's awareness of ways of getting involved in local government varied. At one end of the spectrum, young people said they did not know of any ways of taking part. These young people were sometimes unable to define what they thought participation in local government meant. This question frequently received rather blank looks and responses such as *'I haven't got a clue'*. As might be expected, this more uncertain response was most evident among those young people who had the least understanding and interest in local government.

Others could only think of single examples of participation but were unable to discuss what the term implied in a more conceptual way. Signing a petition was one of the most common ways of expressing views that young people were aware of and had experienced. Young people were also relatively aware of demonstrations and protests. More unusually, surveys were mentioned as a form of expressing views and participating, because the reported findings would express their views. Some young people were aware that views could be expressed via a letter to a local MP or

councillor, although this was less commonly cited than the other ways of getting involved.

Young people with more awareness about local government and particularly those who had participated, knew of a wider range of ways of getting involved and expressing views than those who had not participated. Almost without exception, the only young people who were aware of youth participation initiatives were those who were involved in these.

Views as to the level of activity implied by the term 'participation' varied. Some young people had a very broad view of participation and saw it as including passive action such as simply taking an interest or *'being part of the local community'*. Others felt that participation involved more proactive action, although there was variation in opinions as to what this action actually was. As a result, whether different types of activity were viewed as participation or not varied. For some young people participation was simply expressing a view, as might be done through signing a petition or writing a letter to the local authority. Others disagreed and felt it implied doing something more than simply expressing an opinion. Participation was felt to imply an action which sought to change something such as influencing the behaviour or attitudes of other people, or raising awareness. Holders of this definition were unsure if passive activity which could be done almost unconsciously such as voting, or signing a petition constituted participation. It was felt that participation required some degree of conscious effort such as that which might be involved in protesting or organising a petition. A more exceptional definition was with local activism, one young person saw participation as being primarily about *'workers for the community putting forward ideas'*.

Other young people linked definitions of participation to whether the activity they were involved in related to a single issue or was a 'bigger statement' with broader implications. Young people with this view often expressed some uncertainty as to whether an activity such as signing a petition could be defined as participation as these were felt to relate to single issues. However, voting was viewed as such because this action was felt to have wider implications.

An alternative definition of participation related to the duration of an activity. Views varied as to whether some ways of expressing an opinion such as petitions, protesting and voting actually constituted 'participation' as they felt this term implied something more ongoing as opposed to a one-off activity. Action that was ongoing, such as becoming a councillor, was viewed to be one of the highest forms of participation.

One area around which there was some uncertainty was the dividing line between participation in local government and participation in the local community. Whilst some young people saw some types of activity such as voluntary work or work which aimed to improve the local community as participation in local government, others were less sure and felt this type of activity was *'more about improving the area than about politics'*.

One form of contact with the local authority which was not seen as participation was that relating to local authority accommodation. As suggested earlier, the young

people who lived in council accommodation had contacted the council on a regular basis to report faults, enquire about services, complain, arrange payments and exchange various information. The reason for not viewing this as participation seemed to be because contact in these cases was with the council in its role as service provider which was perceived differently to its governance function.

## **6.2 Experiences of different types of participation**

The sample was selected to include different levels and types of experience of participating in local politics and government. As the figures given in Chapter 1 illustrate, roughly half of the sample had not participated in any form. The young people who had not participated tended to be those with least interest and awareness of local government and ways of taking part. More rarely, there were some young people with some interest in local or national politics, or both who never got involved. One such young person described himself as '*an armchair militant*'.

Young people's experiences of these different ways of getting involved are discussed below.

### ***Signing a petition***

Signing a petition was one of the most common ways in which young people had participated. This action was often related to national political issues such as animal cruelty or tuition fees. Some young people had also signed petitions addressed to the local authority regarding a specific local issue about which they felt strongly. Interestingly in the light of young people's expectations that having children might increase their interest in local issues, it was often those who were parents who had signed local petitions in the attempt to improve the local area for their children. Examples of this included petitioning the local authority to put down a safe floor surface in the play area of a local park and to install speed bumps on a particular road after a child had been killed by a car. Other young people had been involved in petitioning campaigns relating to other types of local issue, such as the awarding of a night-club licence, requesting the installation of security cameras in a particularly '*rough*' area and to prevent a McDonald's restaurant being built.

### ***Surveys***

A number of young people had completed surveys asking about their levels of satisfaction with the local authority. In particular, those who lived in local authority accommodation had sometimes contributed to surveys evaluating resident's satisfaction with the management of the estate on which they lived.

### ***Protest marches or demonstrations***

Some young people had taken part in protests about specific local issues. For example, in Calderdale one young man had been involved in a protest against the petrol bombing of houses belonging to members of the Asian community. Another young man had protested outside a local councillors house about '*issues that needed sorting out in the local area*'. Young people had more frequently participated in protests which related to national political issues. The most common of these was

tuition fees and some of the young people had taken part in protest about these organised through colleges and universities. Other examples were 'Gay Rights' and 'Reclaim the Streets' protest marches.

#### ***Schools Councils***

A small number of the young people had been involved in a schools council. In some instances this had involved deciding how to allocate resources within the school and how to spend budgets.

#### ***Youth groups***

A small number of the young people had been involved in youth groups. These were usually attached to local youth clubs, youth centres or schools. Sometimes these involved channels through which young people could express views and communicate these to external bodies which included the local authority. This type of communication was usually facilitated by resident youth workers.

#### ***Contacting the local authority***

Some young people had contacted their local authority to express a point of view. This was usually in the form of writing a letter. The types of issues behind this activity were complaints about the lack of maintenance in a local park or the quality of local facilities.

#### ***Attending council meetings***

A small number of young people had attended council meetings relating to a local issue about which they had strong views. Most of the young people who were participating in local government through local authority sponsored initiatives had attended council meetings as part of these.

#### ***Local authority youth participation initiatives***

A small number of young people who had participated in local authority initiatives designed to involve young people were purposely included in the sample. These forms of participation are obviously more exceptional and these experiences are discussed separately in Chapter 7.

### **6.3 Views about ways of participating in politics**

Young people's views of different ways of participating depended on the perceived potential of a method to persuade the local authority to listen and respond to the message being delivered. One way in which methods were assessed was by their potential to generate attention and put pressure on the local authority to implement change. Sometimes judgements as to the potential of different methods to do this varied. For example, some of the young people felt that petitions would influence the local authority or government because they would be worried that about losing votes if they ignored these. Other young people were more dubious about the power of petitions to persuade and felt that these did not tend to be very effective unless the petitioners had media support.

Protesting was also viewed as a useful method in raising the profile of an issue. This was not thought to be a particularly effective way of influencing change, however, because it was felt that the government or local authority were unlikely to take much notice. The perceived lack of success achieved by national protests such as those associated with the recent fuel crisis was mentioned by some young people in explaining their lack of faith in this method. It was also felt that for a protest to have any hope of success required a large amount of support from other people and that it was difficult for a single individual to influence change by this method. There was also perceived to be danger inherent in this method because protests might degenerate into rioting and violence. Some young people were not keen on this method because they were worried about being arrested.

Young people's views varied as to the effectiveness of contacting the local authority. Some young people felt that these individuals '*must get hundreds of letters every day*' and so might not pay these any attention. There was also a view that this was not a particularly effective method for young people to use because letters from young people might not be taken seriously and councillors might '*dismiss it as some child ...who can be fobbed off*'. Others disagreed and thought that with persistence this method could be effective. It was felt that you could keep writing letters and telephoning the council '*until they are forced to listen*'. This might sometimes involve contacting increasingly senior local authority figures until reaching a level where the council took notice. There were also felt to be additional steps that could be taken to increase the efficacy of this method such as contacting the media to harness additional support and increase the pressure placed on the local authority.

Some thought that methods involving some form of face to face discussion and debate were more effective than those which did not. Thus some young people felt that protesting was far less effective than meeting with local authority representatives face-to face

*"I think councillors... they'd rather talk to you...you know see how intelligent or how mature you are,(how) intelligent you are, (it's better to) talk to them you know instead of protesting...(and) just shouting abuse or whatever"* (male, 16 years).

Attending a council meeting was considered to be a fairly effective way of expressing views and influencing local authority decisions by some young people because it offered this opportunity to '*say your piece face - to - face*'. Local authority youth participation initiatives were also viewed as effective in helping young people's views to be heard for the same reason. They were thought to provide a forum for the expression and communication of young people's opinions. This was viewed to be particularly important for young people under eighteen because these initiatives provided one of the only ways open to them to express their views.

*"If...under 18's can't vote, it's saying that a major section of society has absolutely no say whatsoever in (their) future. ...without Youth Participation there is actually nothing you can do – there's nothing. [Youth participation is] society saying to you: 'Yes, this is a democracy, you can do something about your life' ..."* (male, 16 years).

Forms of participating which were not perceived to influence the local authority were not viewed by young people in a positive light. Some of the young people who had given views in surveys carried out by the local authority did not perceive these as a particularly effective way of influencing things because *'nothing happens as a result'*. Some of the young people also included discussions with local councillors in this category as it was felt that because they were young, their views would not be listened to or taken seriously. Some of the young people imagined they would be patronised by comments such as *'we'll see what we can do'*.

## **6.4 Explaining non participation in local government**

Explanation of why young people do not participate in local government is to found in a range of factors relating both to the young person, the image and profile of local government and views about opportunities for involvement. Of these, some appear more fundamental than others. The fact that some young people are not interested, do not know how to participate and see no point in participating, for example, appear central in explaining their lack of participation in local government. However there are also additional contributory factors affecting whether young people participate in local politics, such as peer group pressures, levels of confidence and images of the types of people who do participate in local government. These seem unlikely to prevent participation in themselves, however they undoubtedly add weight to these other more principal factors.

### **6.4.1 Barriers to participation in local government**

Many of these factors echo the discussion of why young people are not interested in local government provided in Chapter 5. To minimise overlap, factors already described will not be covered in great detail.

#### ***Interest and salience***

The widespread lack of interest in local government among young people described in the previous chapter is obviously a key factor in explaining non-participation. Importantly whilst lack of interest was frequently cited by the young people as a reason for not getting involved, it was often as a consequence of other factors, such as lack of understanding about local government, the perceived relevance of local government to them and knowledge of ways to participate. This suggests that for some young people a lack of interest is not the main barrier to participation.

That said however there were those young people for whom lack of interest seemed a more paramount obstacle to participation. As illustrated in section 5.2.3 salience is one of a number of factors that underpins lack of interest. Some young people felt that local government was not interesting simply because it was not perceived to be very important or because they had other priorities. It is this lack of interest which appears to be the main reason for the non participation of this group as this left them with no incentive to get involved. As one young person put it he was *'not bothered enough about the issues to get involved in this way'*

***Lack of understanding about local government***

Lack of understanding as well as being important in explaining lack of interest in local government among young people is also a key factor in explaining lack of participation. Chapter 4 discussed how lack of understanding can affect levels of interest and this can affect young people's propensity to get involved in their local authority in similar ways. Whilst lack of understanding makes it difficult for young people to develop interest in local government, it makes it equally if not more difficult for them to become involved.

***Low awareness of how to participate***

Lack of awareness and information about the opportunities to participate in local politics has been cited as a barrier to participation among all age groups in the literature (Lowndes et al 1998). This has also been shown to be a reason why young people do not take an interest and get involved in national politics (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). The evidence collected in this study suggests this is also an obstacle to the participation of some young people in local politics and government. The low levels of awareness of how to express views or get involved in local government among some young people was outlined in section 6.2 and for this group this is a key factor in explaining their lack of participation.

Some young people did not think there was anything they could do to get involved. This was a particular issue for young people under the age of 18 who were not entitled to vote. For others, a major obstacle to getting involved was not knowing how to go about this. Young people commented that they would have no idea who to contact at the council about their views and that the local authority never publicised any events or initiatives they were holding that allowed young people to take part. Some young people pointed out that they did not move in social circles where participation in local government occurred and that they did not *'know anyone who's ever done anything'*. It was sometimes suggested by young people that if they had more awareness of how to get involved this might encourage them to do so. Some of the young people gave examples of occasions in the past when they would have taken some action, or got involved if they had known how they could do this.

***Scepticism about existing methods of participation***

A lack of faith in the efficacy of existing methods of participation is another key factor explaining the non participation of young people in local government. This view was expressed by young people across all of the age groups in the sample. Sometimes this was as a result of scepticism about a particular method of participation. In others it was to do with a belief that attempts at influencing local government decision making would not work. There was therefore felt to be little point in getting involved. *'Its not out of laziness, people just know that nothing will work so why bother?'*

Some young people had sometimes considered trying to express their views to the local authority, for example by writing a letter, but had decided not to do so because they felt sure this would not make any difference. This belief was sometimes based on past experiences of expressing views, or knowledge of those attempted by others which were not felt to have been successful. For example, one young man commented *'My mum tried and she couldn't get anywhere with the council and she's 40 –*

*odd with a respectable job'* and so felt that there was little chance he could have any impact.

***'No one ever listens to young people'***

Even where opportunities did exist young people were sometimes reluctant to participate, because they believed that local government representatives were not interested in the views of young people. As a consequence they felt their views would not be listened to. This view was expressed even in those areas where local authorities had been running various youth participation initiatives for some time. Local authorities were often perceived to treat adults and young people differently and whilst the views of adults were perceived to carry weight it was not thought that those of young people were seriously considered. This was because young people thought older people did not trust them to be able to make intelligent or serious decisions. It was presumed that, as a consequence of their lack of life experience, older people view the decisions of young people as immature and unstable.

***No perceived need to get involved***

Young people's view that the current system works well enough and that there was no real need for them to get involved was given in section 5.2.4 as a reason for lack of interest in local government. This same point is equally if not more relevant to explaining lack of involvement. Some young people *'assume that the local authority knows what it is doing'*. Even in a situation where they opposed a local authority decision, some young people said it would not occur to them to get involved. This was because they would assume that research had been conducted to establish a course of action and so would not think to question this. Others felt they should not have to get involved because other people were paid to take this responsibility.

**6.4.3 Contributory factors**

An additional group of factors are also important in explaining non participation by young people. However, as previously noted, these are less central than the factors discussed above.

***Peer pressure***

The desire to fit in with the crowd and avoid standing out or looking different prevents some young people from participating in local government. Young people felt that as politics was not included in the interests and hobbies of their peer group, they would be perceived as 'weird' if they took part in local government and politics. Young women in particular mentioned that they would feel *'really embarrassed'* if their friends saw them on a demonstration or collecting signatures for a petition. Young people who lacked confidence seemed particularly affected by this factor. This was particularly acute for some young people, for example, one young woman who had been bullied at school described how she was now reluctant to do anything which might draw attention to herself. This view, however, did not seem to be based on any antipathy to the idea of getting involved in itself and young people said that if their friends were saying *'lets all go see a councillor'* then they would be happy to do this.

Some of the young people who were participating in local authority initiatives mentioned peer group pressure as preventing other young people becoming involved in this way. Some had experienced this barrier first-hand when trying to recruit other young people to join participatory activities. There was a view that apathy was fashionable among young people and this feature of society worked subtly to prevent young people becoming interested or involved.

*“it’s not – not at all fashionable to, to actually be interested in anything ...  
It’s just a society where it’s not desirable for them to be interested in it, so they won’t be. If it’s a society where... you’re respected for getting more excited about things and interested, then you’re more likely to be so”*  
(Male, 16 years).

#### **Images of those who do participate**

Young people’s images of the types of people who become involved in local government can also be a barrier to more active forms of participation such as attending council meetings or youth groups. The image of the people who run and participate in such activities - outlined in chapter 4 - as well educated, well spoken and middle class can be alienating for some young people. This barrier was particularly mentioned by young people who felt they were from a very different background and that they would not feel comfortable in this type of environment.

#### **Confidence**

Lacking confidence was a related reason explaining why some young people do not get involved in more active forms of participation, such as meeting a councillor or attending a youth forum. Some young people seemed to shy away from the very idea of participating in these activities and said that they *‘wouldn’t be able to deal with these things’*. This was sometimes because they felt they would find it very hard to stand up and express their views in a group environment, in case they were challenged by others. The fact that some of the young people imagined those who were involved in local government to be more educated and from a higher social class than themselves which was discussed in Chapter 4 also affected young people’s confidence about participating in these type of activities.

### **6.5 Groups of young people for whom it is perceived to be harder to get involved.**

Young people generally felt that there were some groups of people for whom it was particularly difficult to get involved in local government. People from poor or deprived areas were felt to face particular barriers to getting involved because *‘councillor’s don’t listen to poor people on estates’*. It was felt that the needs of this group might be overlooked whilst people from better off areas had more influence and tended to *‘put their foot down and get things done’*. There was a view that social status affected whether people’s views had any influence. It was thought that the views of the *‘poorer classes’* such as benefit claimants, those in care, the homeless and unemployed would carry less weight than those of people from better circumstances because these groups were perceived as less important by the local authority.

Becoming a local councillor was thought to be particularly difficult for these disadvantaged groups because they did not have the same social networks as more affluent people and council positions were perceived to be gained as a result of '*who you know*'. A very different view, however was expressed by one young person who was active in his local authority and aware of numerous youth participation initiatives designed to involve young people from deprived areas. Because of this he felt that it had become '*harder to get involved if you are affluent*'.

Young people had differing views on whether it might be more difficult for people from ethnic minority backgrounds to participate than other groups. Some thought that those from ethnic minorities did face particular barriers as a result of language and cultural differences. Among the young ethnic minority people however it was often felt that these barriers applied mainly to older people in their communities. This was because younger people were more likely to have been born in this country and be familiar with the language and culture. Indeed some of these young people living in local authority accommodation did not find it difficult to communicate with the local authority and often had done so on behalf of their parents when this was necessitated by accommodation issues.

However some young people disagreed entirely and expressed the view that '*taking part in politics is nothing to do with ethnic background, it's whether you are passionate about something*'. In areas such as Tower Hamlets and Calderdale it was pointed out that there were Asian representatives within the local authority whom the Asian population '*knew they could go to*'. One young Black Caribbean man felt that if he was to visit his local councillor, his ethnicity would increase his chances of being listened to rather than reduce them because of politicians' fear of being labelled racist.

There was a view that it was easier for intelligent people and those who had been to university and studied politics to get involved because they would have a greater understanding of how to do this. As might be expected this view was particularly evident among young people who did not perceive themselves as intelligent or knowledgeable and who had not continued in post-compulsory education.

A much more exceptional view made by one young person was that it was easier for men to get involved because '*they are able to understand politics more*' than women. The young woman who made this point said that she felt this because all of her male friends knew much more about politics than she or her female friends did.

Finally, there were some young people who did not see any particular barriers to getting involved in local government faced by any section of society. It was felt that if people felt sufficiently strongly about something then they would and could get involved.

## **6.6 Explaining voting behaviour**

Voting in both local and general elections was one form of participation looked at specifically by the research. Young people were asked about their voting behaviour in the interviews and the reasons underpinning this. Of those young people who were old enough to vote, some had never voted, some had voted on a few occasions

in either local or general elections, or both, and some had regularly voted in elections since they had reached the eligible age. However, the voting behaviour of some of the young people proved very difficult to establish. A number of young people were confused about the differences between local and general elections and which of these they had participated in. For example, it was common for young people to say they had voted in local elections and then cite the names of local MPs they had voted for.

Voting in local elections was less common among the young people than voting in general elections. Very few of the young people had voted regularly in local elections. Those who had were often the same young people who were participating in local politics in other ways. In some cases young people who had voted in local elections had not made a conscious decision to do this but did so simply because the date of local and general elections coincided.

Many of the reasons for the lower inclination to vote in local as opposed to general elections are similar to those given earlier in explanation for differences in levels of interest in these two forms of politics. One of the main reasons young people gave for this was that they understood less about local government. Young people rarely knew who their local councillors were, which policies they supported, or even what the main local political issues were and felt that this made it difficult to vote. This situation was often attributed to the low profile of local government and its members which was discussed in Chapter 4.

Another reason that some young people were less likely to vote in local elections than national elections was because of the view, described earlier, that local government was of less importance than national government because it had less authority and because of the perception that *'local politicians don't do much'*. Because of this some young people felt that it did not particularly matter whether they voted in local government elections or not, or who they voted for.

A much more exceptional view was that there was more reason to vote in local elections than general elections. This was because it would be easier to vote for 'local people' rather than MP's who were perceived to be far removed from the local area. This perspective, however, was held by one of the young people under eighteen, so it is impossible to know how this view will be reflected in later voting behaviour.

### **6.6.1 Reasons for not voting**

Lack of understanding was a predominant reason given by young people for not voting. This took two main forms. Firstly, some young people had never voted because they felt they had little understanding of politics. At its most pronounced this meant that the very idea of voting was dismissed by some young people as almost inconceivable, as exemplified in comments such as *'I ain't got a clue about all this political stuff'*.

A second type of understanding young people felt they lacked surrounded how to vote. This included practical information such as how to register to vote, where to go to vote and what to do at the polling station. This lack of understanding meant that some young people were reluctant to try and vote because they were fearful of

making a mistake. In particular the need to make a decision between different parties or candidates was felt to be particularly difficult for some young people who felt that they *'wouldn't have a clue about who was trying to do what'*. Some young people felt quite strongly that it would be wrong for them to try and vote in these circumstances. This was because they did not have the necessary level of knowledge to carry out this task with the informed decision they felt it required. They therefore worried about voting for the wrong person. Some felt that they would acquire this understanding as they grew older and expected they would begin to vote in time.

Another more exceptional way in which lack of understanding can affect voting behaviour is through a lack of understanding of the principle of universal suffrage. This was demonstrated by one young man who said he had not voted because he thought his mother did this for him.

An additional factor which explains young people's decision not to use their vote is the cynicism they felt towards the democratic process referred to earlier in this report. Some young people said they did not vote because it did not change anything and they perceived it to be a waste of time. This was related to the view that there was very little difference between the two main political parties and that little was likely to change whichever one gained power. This feeling was relatively new for some, who had already voted in one election and had only come to feel like this over time. These people described themselves as having *'lost faith because nothing ever seems to change'*. Some young people mentioned the growth in political disengagement and apathy among young people in this context and felt that because of these factors, *'everyone has just got a bit disheartened'*.

Other young people felt there was little incentive for them to vote because they did not feel they had any affiliation with any of the political parties and their candidates. This point was made particularly in relation to national politics, where it was felt that the main parties did not seem to *'know what they are doing'*. Some of the young people with more awareness about politics said they did not see any point in voting because they did not feel that any of the political parties policies reflected their views. Current policy on drugs decriminalisation was sometimes referred to in this context as one example of a policy area in which the views of the main political parties were perceived to be far removed from those held by the majority of young people.

A much more exceptional reason given for not voting by one young man, which could be termed *'conscientious objection'*, was his antipathy towards the political system in Britain. Whilst he was relatively well informed about politics and had some degree of interest he said that he was morally opposed to capitalist democracy and did not vote because he refused to be part of the system.

There are of course, a wider range of factors affecting voting behaviour and impact upon participation in politics more generally. Many of these have already been discussed in this report. They include the perceived lack of relevance of politics to young people's lives, images of national government and lack of faith in politicians.

### **6.6.2 Reasons for voting**

One of the main reasons given for voting regularly was that it was important to participate in our democratic system. Some young people pointed out that the essence of our political system was representation and voting was a key aspect of this. It was also felt that voting provides an opportunity for people to express their views and this opportunity was important and should be taken. Some young people felt quite strongly that those who do not engage in democracy and refuse to vote have no right to complain about things as they have forfeited their 'voice'.

A related reason given for participation was the appreciation of participating in the democratic system. Some of the young people enjoyed the ritual of attending the polling booth and supporting a party to see if they would win an election. For some of the young people this was related to the belief that voting was a way of changing things. However, enjoyment of taking part was not necessarily dependent on a belief in the efficacy of the voting system, as some young people expressing this view also said that they did not really think that voting made a difference, but that they still enjoyed doing this nonetheless

Young people's appreciation of the struggle for universal suffrage has been found to be a reason for their decision to vote in national elections (White, Bruce & Ritchie) and this study suggests that this factor applies equally to voting in both and local government elections by young people. Some of the young people commented that not voting would be an insult to those who had fought and died in order to gain the franchise. It was felt that the occurrence of this struggle placed some responsibility on succeeding generations to exercise their right to vote.

A more unusual explanation for voting suggested by some of the Bengali young people was that voting had become a routine, almost habitual, activity in their communities. One young man, for example, described how the local Bengali community voted always for the Labour party and that this had become an established pattern of behaviour which no one ever questioned. He felt that he himself had also adopted this behaviour and it seemed that this activity had almost become almost unconscious as he found it very difficult to explain either why he voted or why he voted for the Labour party.

Finally, a more negative reason for voting was given in one instance. In one area where local and general elections had both occurred on the same day one young woman had 'voted by mistake' in a local election perceiving it to be a general election.

## 7 EXPERIENCES OF LOCAL AUTHORITY YOUTH PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES

In order to provide a comparison to the preceding discussion around non-participation, it is useful to consider the experiences of those who were active in local authority youth participation initiatives. This chapter will consider the type of activities these young people were involved in, the reasons for their involvement in these activities and the characteristics of this group. Whilst this information is of course only based on a small number of individuals, it does shed light on what motivates young people to get involved and how they differ from their inactive counterparts.

It is interesting that those young people who were active in local government do not seem to share the disillusionment and cynicism about ways of getting involved expressed by those young people who had not participated. Those who were participating felt that it was important for young people to express their views about their local community. Moreover they also clearly felt that these views can have an impact and influence local decision making. Whilst undoubtedly a range of factors are relevant to explaining why some young people get involved, this faith that existing ways of getting involved can effect change seemed to be particularly motivating for the young people.

The activities organised by the local authorities in which the young people were involved took various forms. One common aspect was that they were all involved some element of representation. Participators were usually involved in representing other young people and presenting their views to interested parties such as the local authority and police. Details of these specific projects are given below:

### ***Youth empowerment project***

Two of the young people were involved in a youth project which ran a drop in centre staffed by a youth worker. These young people were involved in organising residential weekends and discussion groups where young people discussed particular issues and then fed these back to the local authority.

### ***Youth parliament***

Three of the young people recruited via the local authority were representatives of their regional youth parliament

### ***City wide action group***

One young person attended a city wide action group organised by the local authority. This involved organising events for young people and meeting with local councillors to provide views on proposed changes or policies.

The young people who had been involved in these type of initiatives were generally very positive about these experiences. They had often provided young people with opportunities to express their points of view and contribute to local authority decision making. However although infrequent, some criticisms were expressed

which highlight that these initiatives can quickly be perceived as tokenistic by young people if they are not felt to provide genuine opportunities to contribute and express views.

Youth participation was not always thought to provide an opportunity to influence things. As with council meetings, some of the young people, involved in these felt that local authority representatives did not always listen to the views of the youth representatives. For example one young person who had attended council meetings in connection with his membership of the Youth Parliament had noticed that comments he made did not appear in the minutes and this had made him feel that *'there is no point in saying anything'*. A young woman who had been at the same meetings agreed that when attending council meetings *'it was made clear that we were to sit at the back and keep quiet'*. These experiences had led to some cynicism about the motivation of the local authorities in organising these initiatives and some young people commented that they had only done this *'to look good'*.

## 7.1 Explaining participation

Unsurprisingly, some of the reasons for getting involved given by those young people who were active in local government simply represent the opposite end of the spectrum to the reasons for not participating which were covered in the previous chapter.

### ***Belief in the importance of young people's views being expressed***

One of the clearest characteristics shared by the young people who were actively participating in local government was a belief in the importance of the expression of young people's views. This was particularly emphasised by the active participators from the younger age groups who could not yet vote. This group often saw youth participation as the only opportunity available to them to express their views.

*"I think it's a major thing to be able to vote. I mean by saying...that anyone under 18 can't vote, it's saying that a major section of society has absolutely no say whatsoever in my future other than through the schemes which are now starting. Without Youth Participation there is actually nothing you can do – there's nothing ..(youth participation) is saying to you: 'Yes, this is a democracy, you can do something about your life'"*  
(male, 16 years).

Other young people were motivated by the wish to represent others. They often felt that it was difficult for some young people to be heard and get involved because they lacked information and awareness. Consequently, they were keen to try and help the views of other young people to be heard by the local authority.

*"I'm very interested in having people's views presented, like to give people a voice, cos I felt for quite a long time I didn't – couldn't get what I wanted to say across to anybody, and I thought if I could do that for other people that would be excellent, you know, so that's the main reason why I went in for it, because it's not – it's not really political, it's apolitical, it's – it's called a parliament, but it's mainly about getting people represented and making*

*life better for everybody, which I think's really important" (female, 17 years).*

This belief in the importance of young people *'having a say'* was reflected in some participants' attempts to get other young people involved. Members from one youth parliament for example were particularly concerned about the difficulties faced in recruiting members because they felt very strongly that it was important for young people to get involved and have a voice. This was sometimes linked to broader concerns about youth apathy and the disengagement of young people from politics and the implications of this for the democratic system.

***Belief in the possibility of expressing views and influencing local government decisions***

Disillusionment with the idea that it is possible to influence local government decisions has been highlighted as a central factor in young people's lack of interest (Section 5.2.2) and lack of participation (Section 6.4). One important way in which those young people who were involved were very different to their inactive counterparts was in their belief in the possibility that they can have an impact. It is difficult however to establish whether these views had developed as a result of the experiences of participation or whether they had driven young people's involvement in the first place. It seems most likely that both factors are relevant and that those who get involved have less cynicism than those who do not. However, as section 7.2 demonstrates, the impacts of the experience of participation upon what young people feel they can achieve should not be underestimated.

***Commitment to changing things***

Another characteristic shared by those who were actively participating in local government was a commitment to trying to change things. The focus of this desired change varied. For some it was a result of the wish to help other young people.

Vikram, (21) represented other young people and their views through his work with a youth parliament that he had been involved with for three years. In describing why he participated in this way he spoke of how he understood the issues faced by young people growing up on deprived estates where there were high levels of crime, violence and drug use, because he was from such an environment himself. This meant he felt well placed to represent these young people and *'stand up for them'* in his discussions with the local authority and other bodies with which he sometimes worked.

***Knowing how to get involved***

The other main way in which those who participate differ from those who do not is in their awareness of ways in which young people can get involved. Obviously, much of this information had been acquired by these young people through their experience of participation. However, they had all become sufficiently aware of the existence of youth participation initiatives in their local area in order to get involved initially. Some of the young people had seen these advertised or had been told about them. In other cases word-of-mouth among young people seemed to have played an important role.

*“He (friend) told me about it and I thought oh it sounds good I’ll go in for a day or two and see what it’s like and once I started going in I liked what we talked about...youth, drugs, alcohol, we just debate basically between us what young people do and how it can be avoided or what can be changed and I like the idea of going... you’ve got a say within a... small community. We all have a debate and come to a conclusion...(and they) take it to the council...what we say is actually getting taken to council” (male, 16 years).*

### **Parental influence**

Having parents who were interested in politics and who talked about politics at home was cited by some of the participating young people in explanation for their involvement. Some of the young people who had become active in local politics felt that much of this was attributable to parental support and encouragement and recognised that it would be much harder for young people to get involved if they did not have this environment at home. However, not all of the young people who had been involved in local authority initiatives had had this type of background which suggests this is not essential in order for young people to get involved. Indeed, one young man who said his mother had had no interest whatsoever in local politics described how she had become more interested as a result of him telling her about his activities

### **Self confidence**

The role of confidence as a factor in non participation has been discussed in the previous chapter. Young people who had become involved seemed much more confident in their views and opinions and their own ability to express these than those who cited lack of confidence as a reason for not participating.

It may be that other factors mentioned as barriers by those who do not get involved, such as young people’s peer group environment, are also relevant in explaining participation. The influence of peer group, however, was not mentioned by the young people who had participated as a factor in explaining their participation. It is difficult to know therefore whether the peer group of those who do participate is different to those who do not. There is some indication that both groups of young people experience the same peer group pressures. Some of the participators, for example had also been called names at school. It may be that young people who get involved are less fearful of encountering peer group derision. This could be due to other factors which have already been cited such as confidence. It also might be those young people who got involved in local government were less tolerant of the attitudes of their peer group than other young people. For example, some commented that they sometimes found other people at school frustrating and ‘very immature’ and it was ‘impossible to have a decent conversation with them’.

In addition, knowledge about local government was not cited as a reason for getting involved by young people. However those who had become involved clearly demonstrated greater awareness and understanding about local government than did their inactive counterparts. It is difficult to establish how much this is a reason for getting involved. As will be covered in the following section, some of this awareness is undoubtedly obtained as a result of the experience of participating.

## 7.2 Impacts of participation

Although not the focus of this study, the experiences of the young people who were involved in local authority youth participation initiatives provides clear evidence of some positive effects resulting from young people's involvement in local government. This suggests that participation can have a range of beneficial impacts for both young people and their local authority and community.

Participation can significantly increase young people's levels of interest in local government. This is for a number of reasons. The experience of getting involved and growth in understanding about the local authority had increased some young people's levels of interest. Some of the young people had not been particularly interested in local government when they had first become involved but this had significantly changed as they had become more informed. In addition, through participation some young people had realised or come to believe for the first time that they '*had a say*' and that their views would be listened to. This experience was found to be extremely motivating for young people and had significantly increased the interest levels of some in the whole area of local government and politics.

Craig, (16) had never been interested in politics when he was younger. He had not had much awareness of his local authority outside his impressions gleaned from living on a deprived estate. He had first attended a youth project when a friend told him about this and felt that this experience had significantly affected his levels of interest in local government and attitude towards getting involved. For the first time he felt that he had a voice and that his opinions were listened to and could have effects. "*Because we've got a say you become more interested, my say can count for something. If you say you want something done they'll...probably look into it whereas if you didn't have a say no-one would get interested because they, they can't do anything about it...so that's basically what I'm going down for*". Craig was sure that his interest in local politics would be sustained and was considering studying this subject in more detail if he was successful in gaining a place at university.

The experience of participation can also have effects upon young people's confidence and self esteem and perceptions of their own capabilities. This was particularly the case when young people had made suggestions which had been taken on board and put into practice by the local authority. This is reflected in the description of the effects of this experience by Craig who was mentioned above and his friend who had contributed towards the restructuring of the local authority in their area.

*"Yeah I think you feel proud you know that you know what you've said like other people agree with like adults, people in power agree with so it's been proud you see been proud You feel clever as well you know yeah"* (male, 16 years).

*"You feel accomplishment ...when I started going at 14 and they come back to you and say 'yeah we're gonna do that', you're thinking well it's our idea, we're clever enough to put the idea together and we're clever enough to get it accomplished... I'm communicating with the adults... I can't really explain but you do feel that little bit cleverer I have said something to the adults and they have taken it on and you feel, you feel more grown up,*

*and it's a brilliant feeling just to know that (what) you're saying has been taking into account" (male, 16 years).*

In addition, youth participation initiatives were felt to help young people's views to be heard. This was because they provided mechanisms for young people to feed in their opinions to the local authority and helped them to be listened to. In particular membership of these groups was perceived by the young people to add credibility to their views and give these increased weight:

*"I feel the name ... if you ring up the Council and say 'We're from Tower Hamlets Youth Parliament' they are more likely to listen to you than if you just phone up as a young person" (female, 20 years).*

The experience of participating had provided some young people with their only opportunity to discuss local political issues with other interested young people. One beneficial aspect of these initiatives may be that they provide young people with a forum for discussion which is free from derisive peer group attitudes they experience elsewhere when expressing interest in politics. This was particularly appreciated by some. For example, one young woman found the youth parliament she attended particularly inspiring because she could talk freely about local political issues and know that *'no one will make nasty comments like they do at school'*.

Finally participation can also influence perceptions of how accessible local government is to people from different backgrounds. This point was not specifically mentioned by the young people, but was evident from the interviews with some of those who had participated. These types of experience often left young people feeling that *'anyone'* could become involved in local government and this type of activity was not only open to any one type of person. This contrasted with the more exclusive view of local government expressed by some of those who had not participated. As discussed in Chapter 4, some young people felt that those who got involved were very different to them because they were well educated and from more affluent backgrounds. This suggests that participation may have the potential to broaden people's views about groups in society who can get involved in local government.

## **8. ENCOURAGING YOUTH PARTICIPATION**

Young people made a number of suggestions for encouraging youth participation in politics. These attempted to address the factors that were identified as causing their lack of interest. They were therefore concerned with three related themes: informing young people about politics; making politicians more representative of and accountable to young people; and creating more opportunities for young people to participate in the political process. Among the suggestions put forward were initiatives that are already in place, or in the case of citizenship training, about to be introduced. Others, however, were new ideas and their feasibility will be discussed in the final chapter. A key starting point for this discussion is whether young people believe it is important for them to take an interest and participate in local government and politics.

### **8.1 Should young people participate?**

Irrespective of individual views and behaviour, there was broad agreement with the notion that it is important for young people to take an interest and/or become involved in local government and politics. Underpinning this view seemed to be an appreciation that local politics does currently affect young people, or will do so in the future. While this suggests that there may be a potential to stimulate an interest and an involvement amongst young people it would be naive to overplay the importance of this. Among the young people who expressed this view were those who in the same breath reported that they were neither interested nor likely to participate in local politics. A few respondents, however, were more ambivalent about the importance of young people participating in either local or national politics.

Not surprisingly young people who reported having an interest in local politics and/or who had participated in some way, commonly emphasised the importance of young people getting involved in politics. Indeed, young people who had participated in local authority initiatives were among the most vocal advocates of youth participation. This was often as a result of them experiencing positive impacts as a consequence of their endeavours.

The reasons for why young people think it is important to participate broadly correspond with the arguments that are articulated by commentators, academics and policy makers (as noted in chapter 2).

A key defence for participation was that it provides an opportunity for young people to express their views and to try to bring about change. Also, it was argued that young people have a civic responsibility and duty to get involved in local politics, particularly for those who had reached the age of electoral eligibility. For some, this duty was underpinned by a belief that young people have an important stake and investment (in terms of it being where they live, the services they use, the council tax they pay) in their local area. In addition there was felt to be favourable consequences from youth participation for the local council as young people informed local decision-making and the management of services for their age group.

More exceptionally, there was also a view that participation in local politics may help to stimulate further interest and activity amongst young people. It was explained, that this could occur because the very act of participating in some way might help to enable a young person to appreciate the relevance and importance of politics within their life. This point is substantiated by the evidence from the young people who had been involved in local authority youth participation initiatives. For the same reasons, it was argued that interest at the local level might also help to alleviate apathy at the national level.

The importance of young people participating in local government was, however, sometimes felt to be contingent upon views about the following issues:

The potential to make an impact was closely connected to the degree of importance attached to participation. Young people who questioned whether they were going to be 'listened to', 'taken seriously', or have their views 'acted upon' were less favourably disposed to young people participating. A further distinction was sometimes drawn between participation in local and national politics. In this way it was argued that it was more important to be involved in local politics because there was a propensity to make more of an impact and be more effective within the local arena. In contrast an alternative view was that participation in national politics was just as, and possibly even more important, than for local politics.

The degree to which young people could participate in an informed way was another issue that divided the views of respondents about the importance of participation. In circumstances where young people lacked experience and knowledge about politics, it was not felt to be important for them to get involved. Indeed in some cases it was felt to be better for these young people to stay away from politics.

The age of the young person was also felt to have a bearing on whether it was believed to be important to participate. For example, it was argued that it was more important for those who were eligible to vote. A contrasting view was that it was more important to kindle the participation amongst young people of 15 or 16, or even younger, in order that they will be adequately prepared for when they can vote.

## **8.2 Young people's recommendations**

Young people made a number of suggestions for encouraging young people to participate in politics. These attempted to address the factors that were identified as causing their lack of interest. They were therefore concerned with three related themes: informing young people about politics at the local and national levels; making politicians more representative of and accountable to young people; and creating more opportunities for young people to participate in the political process. More exceptionally there were young people who felt nothing could be done to stimulate their participation. Underpinning their response was a concern that young people who were preoccupied with other interests and activities should be left to pursue these rather than being encouraged to focus on politics.

### **8.2.1 Informing young people in an interesting and accessible way**

The need to inform young people about local and national government and politics was a key and recurrent suggestion made by young people of all ages. Irrespective of the source of information considerable emphasis was placed on making sure that the information conveyed demonstrated that politics is fun, interesting and (most importantly) relevant to young people. It was also said that there was a need to communicate information about politics in a simple, clear and accessible manner but without appearing to patronise young people by emulating the forms of communication, such as through the use of cartoons, that it is felt that young people will identify with.

The aspects of politics that young people wanted to be informed about included a range of the following items:

- The role and structure of local government and its relationship to central government. In each case they wanted to understand the nature of the responsibilities and sources of funding that each tier has;
- Explanation about the different political parties and their policies. At election times they wanted to be given a summary manifestos of each party. More exceptionally, there was an interest in hearing about the history of each political party;
- Regular updates through general news bulletins about what is going on in the local area in terms of the activities of the council and the events being held;
- How young people can participate in local politics; explaining what methods are available, when there are opportunities to participate; and what young people have to do in order to participate. A related issue was the need to be informed about the skills required to participate; namely how to debate and share ideas;
- Among the more interested members of the sample was a request to know about alternative political systems;
- Finally some young people wanted to be directed to sources of information about other political institutions and bodies as well as political issues.

Young people identified a number of different channels for informing them about politics:

#### ***Teaching politics at school***

School was a popular suggestion for imparting information about politics at the local and national levels. While the importance of teaching politics at school was emphasised by young people of all ages and backgrounds, a particular need was raised by young people from minority ethnic groups whose parents had not been brought up in England. In these circumstances, there was perceived to be an even greater need for young people to receive education through schools, as parents were less likely to be providing any information about English politics at home.

There were, however, young people who did not raise the idea of education as a solution although it is not clear whether they were opposed to the notion or not. Others did voice opposition to it being taught at school. Their objections seemed to found on their belief that the subject was just too boring to engage and stimulate the interest of students. Faced with the prospect of having to study politics a 22 year old young man reflected that he would not have attended the lessons. There were also some young people, who were not necessarily opposed to the idea, but did express concern about whether teachers would be able to teach the subject objectively. Another issue related to whether there would be time to teach politics in addition to the number of subjects that are already being taught. Implicit in this view was a concern about the increasing workload and pressures facing both teaching staff and students.

Views, however, were divided about how and when politics should be taught. Judgements about the appropriate age to introduce political education tended to focus on compulsory education and ranged from as young as 8 years, to between 11 and 16 years. There was also some discussion about the appropriateness of making politics a core or voluntary subject at GCSE level, or incorporating it into an existing course or PSHE. Also at further education level there was discussion about having politics A-level as an option. The advantages of starting at a younger age were sometimes emphasised in circumstances where a GCSE might be offered as an option. It was argued that if young people were to opt for politics GCSE then they would need to know about the subject prior to year 10 when choices and decisions were being made. Otherwise they would be unlikely to opt for it.

Aside from formal lessons there were other suggestions made about how politics could be taught. These included: having weekly discussions in assembly or other classes about local news; using a schools council to demonstrate how politics can operate in practice; using drama as a method to convey political issues; field trips to the local town hall or the Houses of Parliament; arranging meetings with politicians, political leaders and local councillors either at school, or in other locations.

In addition to compulsory and further education, suggestions were also made about continuing the opportunities for those who enter higher education.

### ***The media***

Television, papers and radio were all identified as another important way of delivering information about local and national politics. In order to maintain their interest it was said that it should focus on the issues, which are of concern to young people. In terms of presenting local issues and events, local papers, radio stations and news bulletins were all cited. Whatever the source, the emphasis was placed on choosing appropriate programmes and outlets that will appeal to young people, such as on Radio 1 in the case of radio broadcasts.

Not surprisingly, television was an obvious choice because, it was said, most young people engage with this medium. Specific suggestions about the format of the programme related to it being a discussion programme and not just a series of news bulletins providing information, although there was a recognition that these were

also of use. It was additionally suggested that young people should either be involved as a participant or have some role in presenting the programme. Other suggestions involved inviting politicians onto game shows.

#### ***Other printed and visual media***

The use of posters, leaflets, pamphlets and newsletters were among the other suggestions for conveying messages and information about local politics. It was assumed that these would largely be written and produced by local councils. They would provide an opportunity for wider access and keeping people informed about specific activities ongoing in local neighbourhoods. Design and production was again highlighted as being of importance and an emphasis was placed on the need for fun and colourful imagery. Also, short sentences arranged in bullet pointed formats were recommended in order to attract attention and encourage people to read.

#### ***The internet***

The Internet was perceived to be another important information resource for most young people. While there was recognition that not all young people had access to it, a suggestion was made that local authorities could provide free access for young people. Suggestions for how to use the Internet included sending circular emails with information about politics, local events and elections. It was also suggested that local councils could set up their own websites to provide information for young people. Also the potential for accessing useful political information, such as the different manifestos of each political party before voting, was recognised. There was, however, concern voiced by one young person who had experience of trying out various sites connected with politics and had found them very boring. In his view there was a need for access to short manageable chunks of information rather than reams of text as he found. Also it was suggested that there is a need to provide good navigation routes to other sites of interest.

#### ***Mobile phones***

Like the Internet, text messaging on mobile phones was another popular suggestion for conveying short messages about local news and events, as well as informing young people when elections are being held.

#### ***Local groups and events***

More exceptionally, a suggestion was made that youth clubs and other youth forums would be another way in which information about local politics could be conveyed to young people. Related to this, was the idea that local leisure and social events, organised by the council, would also provide another means of imparting some level of information and awareness about local government and politics.

### **8.2.2 *Changing local government representatives***

In addition to receiving more information young people had a set of recommendations for changing local government representatives. Three areas of change were required:

A clear message conveyed was that local politicians should be elected who are more representative of the local people in the community. It was therefore said that local councillors and officers should represent a cross section of the community in terms such as age, ethnicity and socio-economic group.

Another recommendation was concerned with local representatives being more available and accessible for young people to meet within the local community. Related to this idea was the suggestion that local representatives should take more interest in young people and do more to understand the nature of their needs and concerns. It was felt they should be more proactive about initiating meetings, such as by visiting young people in their homes, work, school and college environments, instead of expecting young people to seek them out.

In addition to meeting and listening to young people it was additionally felt that local representatives needed to deliver change in response to their issues and concerns, such as the lack of leisure facilities. Related to this idea was a final suggestion for them to become more accountable for their actions and promises.

### **8.2.3 *Creating more opportunities for participation***

The final package of suggestions put forward was concerned with creating more opportunities for young people to participate in the political process. These ideas related to changing existing mechanisms and processes for participation, such as electoral reform, as well as introducing new ways for young people to take part.

A range of different participatory methods was discussed. These ranged from signing a petition, contacting a local official to joining a youth group or forum. Of these the preferred methods were ones where young people perceived they had a real potential to inform and influence local decisions. In order to achieve this they tended to prefer those which, at some point, would bring them into direct contact with local councillors and officers. Youth forums of different types, a drop in centre, and a question and answer session with local councillors were the suggestions which were most favoured. They also expressed the need for more research and consultation to be carried out with young people.

There were additional conditions that were raised in connection with these new methods of participation. A key concern was that there should be regular and ongoing opportunities and not just around election time. Also the case was made for participatory initiatives to be located in safe accessible locations. Finally as already mentioned young people wanted to be equipped with the information to enable them to participate.

In order that young people should feel drawn to participate in these new forums it was suggested that an incentive should be given. It was also said that youth groups should not be labelled as political if they are to attract young people initially. Once they have been established, however, it was felt that there was a need to make it clear that they were connected with politics in order that young people can start to appreciate the salience of political issues within their lives.

### ***Electoral reform***

Discussion about electoral reform focused on two issues: the age when people become eligible to vote and the methods available to vote.

#### ***Changing the age of electoral eligibility***

Suggestions about changing the age of electoral eligibility primarily focused on lowering rather than raising the age. Views were divided about whether it should remain as it is or whether it should be lowered to 16 or 17 years. Interestingly, young people of all ages supported both views. This contrasts with previous qualitative evidence where greater support for lowering the age limit came from those younger than 18 years (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). More exceptionally, it was suggested that the age should be increased to 21 years if there is to be any change to the age.

While proponents of lowering the voting age drew parallels with other freedoms that young people have at 16 the key issue seemed to be whether young people at this age are mature and responsible enough to vote. Those in favour of the idea felt that young people of 16 or 17 were sufficiently mature and responsible enough to vote. Opponents, however, felt that 18 was a more appropriate age as young people have acquired maturity and confidence at this age and as a result have clearer views about life. It was also said by some of these young people that if 16 year olds were able to vote they would just copy the way their peer group acts, or follow their parental role models.

On the question of whether lowering the voting age would boost turnout amongst young people there was a sense that it might indeed help to stimulate interest in politics and this was another reason advanced in favour of a change. Others, however, were rather more sceptical about this idea and felt that unless young people are going to be educated about politics, and imbued with a sense of importance about voting, then it would produce little or no difference to turnout amongst this age group. For them, it was felt that the inclination to vote stems from education about, and interest in politics and not the other way around.

#### ***Changes to the way people vote***

Discussion about alternative ways to vote was concerned with making voting easier and more accessible by, for example, voting on line, by telephone, or by post. While there was some support for these methods as they were perceived to be 'less hassle' than going to the polling station, it was not clear that they would necessarily make a difference to whether young people will vote or not. For this reason, it was occasionally suggested that the only way to improve turnout would be to make voting compulsory and impose a fine on those that fail to comply.

A few people specifically indicated that being able to vote on line, by phone or post would make a difference for some people, such as those who are busy at work, or who cannot be bothered to go to the polling station. An additional advantage of e voting was that reminders could be emailed to young people on polling day and this, it was argued, might help to increase turnout. Others, however, reported being happy to go to the polling station and were indifferent to these other options.

Reservations about voting on line were reported by those who were concerned about issues to do with confidentiality and whether this system could be open to fraud. Also, rather surprisingly for this age group there were concerns about computers being too complicated to use. In addition it was felt that it would be less easy to check that an individual's vote had been counted. A final issue was to do with this method being viewed as more impersonal than going into a booth at the polling station. It was said that voting might cease to be seen as a participatory activity or as being part of a community if people do not make the trip to the polling station.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter will assess the feasibility of different proposals for stimulating participation of young people in local government. The conclusions presented have been informed by an expert seminar that was held with key policy representatives, educational advisers and representatives of other interested bodies (see acknowledgements for a list of participants). This took the form of a two hour workshop which was designed to provide a forum to reflect on the issues raised by the research and consider some solutions to raising the interest and engagement of young people in local (and national) politics. In order to set the context for this discussion we begin by drawing together some of the key messages that have been conveyed in the report.

The subject of youth participation in both local and national politics has been an ongoing concern in the UK and elsewhere since the early 1990s. The more recent decline in voting (across all age groups but particularly amongst young people) at all elections has raised the profile of this issue. Research has recurrently demonstrated that young people report depressingly low levels of interest, knowledge and engagement in politics. Evidence now suggests a slight decline in the political interest and engagement of today's young. But, further longitudinal data is required to substantiate whether a generational shift has really occurred. The notion that young people acquire interest in politics with age and life circumstances still seems to hold true for many young people. Any observed decline in their interest and participation may be due to broader social and economic changes. These are delaying the transition from young people to independence and adulthood and as a consequence the age at which political interest and engagement is activated.

Much of the evidence that exists in this field has been based on general studies of politics and fails to distinguish between views and behaviour at the local and national levels. Where research has attempted to do this much lower levels of interest and engagement are reported at the local level (although this finding is not unique to young people). As this evidence is predominantly quantitative in method, it can only provide limited understanding about explanations for why young people lack interest and refrain from participation in local politics.

In this context a qualitative study was carried out to investigate in depth the views and behaviour of young people aged between 16 and 25 with respect to local government and politics. With the exception of those who report being interested and engaged, young people in this sample displayed very low levels of awareness and understanding about the role and responsibilities of local government. At one extreme they do not seem to be aware of the existence of their local council and its representatives. There also appears to be confusion about the difference between national and local levels, particularly in terms of who it is that represents young people at the local tier. Despite this, young people often report strong and rather negative images about the quality of their local council and its personnel. It seems that where young people lack any awareness or contact with their local council they draw on the views of others, such as family members, or media representations of

local government. Also, it is clear that perceptions of national politics colour and shape those at the local level, often in a negative way.

Young people reported varying levels of interest and participation in local politics and cite a range of differing explanations as having motivated and influenced these. It is also clear that levels of interest and participation at the local level do not always relate to those at the national level. Young people sometimes found local politics more interesting and relevant than national politics. In addition they sometimes perceived their participation to be more important at the local level as it was felt that there is greater potential for them to be heard and to make an impact. In contrast, and perhaps less surprisingly, young people who displayed a lack of interest and reluctance to participate at the local level did sometimes report being interested and engaged, in terms of voting, with national politics. These differences need to be taken into consideration when considering how to encourage the interest and participation of the young in local government and politics. These findings also emphasise the need for future research to do more to distinguish between the way the public view and engage with local and national politics.

Evidence in this report has confirmed that the issues that concern young people relate to the local and national political agenda, although they often are not perceived in this way. Lack of understanding and the low salience of local government within young people's lives goes some way to explain why for some young people this connection is not made. For others, however, there is an appreciation that the issues they are concerned about relate to local politics. The reason why this does not result in engaging an interest and engagement in politics seems to be more to do with their disillusionment with politics and democratic processes. It would seem that interest in either local or national politics is to some extent dependent on a degree of faith in the efficacy of our democratic processes and acceptance of these as a way of effecting change. Without this there is little incentive for young people to take an interest in local government and politics because this is not seen as a way of influencing local issues.

It is interesting that young people generally appreciate the importance of them participating in local politics. To substantiate this, their suggestions to encourage participation attempt to address the factors that were identified as causing their lack of interest and engagement. They were therefore concerned with three related themes: informing young people about politics; making politicians more representative of and accountable to young people; and creating more opportunities for young people to participate in the political process. This suggests that there is a potential to stimulate an interest and an involvement amongst some, but perhaps not all, young people, although the solutions that will work will need to take account of individual differences. For example, young people who lack an understanding and appreciation of the salience and importance of local politics may be encouraged to participate once they have a greater understanding. However, others who are more cynical about the impact which they can have on the political process will need to have more than information to overcome their apathy.

## 9.1 Solutions?

The importance of youth participation in local government seems to be increasingly recognised and a number of potential benefits have been identified as resulting from this. This includes strengthening British democratic practice, fostering and encouraging a commitment to local communities, as well as personal benefits for young people themselves. There are also equally important legislative and political grounds for consulting children and young people about the issues that concern them and the services they receive. There is therefore good reason to encourage and stimulate their engagement irrespective of whether there is agreement about the so called 'democratic deficit' amongst young people. It is also clear that local government has a pivotal role to play in stimulating and engaging the interest and participation of young people because it is responsible for delivering so many of the services that directly affect them.

Moving now to consider possible solutions to encouraging youth participation in local government.

One obvious solution to encouraging interest and participation is to inform young people about local government and politics. Undoubtedly, this will go some way towards enabling young people to appreciate the salience of politics within their lives. However, salience in itself may not be sufficient to motivate the participation of the young in local politics. Evidence collected in this research – particularly the accounts of those young people who had participated in local government – highlights the clear relationship between awareness, understanding and interest. It is also encouraging that young people themselves acknowledge the need for this to happen and have identified a number of different sources for delivering this.

The introduction of citizenship education this autumn (2002) will, therefore, have a crucial role to play in the development of political understanding and literacy in these formative years. While there are good reasons for ensuring a considerable amount of flexibility in which citizenship training is implemented, there are concerns that this may result in an uneven approach across the board. Schools have, up until now been teaching politics in a rather ad hoc way. There is a danger that without further guidance schools will vary in the degree of energy and commitment of time and resources allocated to it. Also, while it makes sense to distance citizenship training from political education at some point the word 'politics' will need to be introduced, if the negative connotations associated with this are to be overcome.

It is evident from the suggestions made by young people that in order to engage and arouse their interest this training needs to be lively, fun and interactive. They recommended field trips, discussion groups, having speakers, and the use of schools councils as being possible options. It is therefore clear that in order to attract the interest of young people any kind of political training will need to do more than just deliver information. Giving them some kind of practical experience, such as running and financing some aspect of their school will help them to appreciate the way in which politics operates, albeit on a very small scale. Not only will this help to arouse a sense of responsibility and build their skills in negotiation and management, but it may also help to manage their expectations about what can be achieved through participation. Establishing links with the local council and other

parts of the community through, for example the pursuit of an issue they care about will also help to give young people a voice, as well as to demonstrate the relevance and salience of local politics within their lives.

Ultimately, however, the success of this new part of the curriculum will depend on there being adequate resources and training to support teaching staff that are already overburdened. There will also need to be greater coordination and communication about how different subject areas within each school are approaching this. In this context it needs to be remembered that citizenship education will only amount to a couple of periods each week and, as such, will take time to evolve and make an impact. An additional issue, which is worth further consideration, is whether the age at which citizenship training is being introduced should be lowered to primary education. Young people also suggested this an option.

Citizenship education is only one way in which young people can be informed about politics. It should operate in tandem with the many other channels of communication such as the media and the Internet or through political parties and interest groups. A number of the suggestions that young people raised have been discussed in the previous chapter. It does, however, seem worth re-emphasising that, whatever the medium, information needs to be appropriately geared towards and accessible for young people. This means not only recognising the different age, developmental and life stages of young people but also their family circumstances, socio economic background and ethnic origin. In the case of the latter, for example, young people from minority ethnic groups may be receiving fewer or different cues about politics from their parental and family home. This may also be the case for young people brought up in other circumstances, such as those who have been brought up in care.

As has been made clear the responsibility for increasing the interest and participation of young people also rests with politicians. Young people made it clear that they want to have greater access to their local representatives. They will also want to see them visiting and integrating themselves into the local community. Also, if their interest is to be stimulated, and in some cases, their trust rebuilt, they will want to know that local politicians understand and appreciate the issues that they are concerned about. They will also want local councillors and officers to be selected who represent the different socio-demographic backgrounds of the local community.

This study has shown that one of the most potentially effective ways of increasing interest and involvement is by creating greater opportunities, such as through youth forums and groups, for young people to participate in politics at the local and national level. Furthermore where their participation in a local authority initiative is heeded or has an impact it seems to have profound effects on the levels of interest, understanding and wider propensity for young people to get involved. It also may have wider implications as young people share their experience with their peer groups and stimulate their involvement.

The Government's modernisation agenda for local government has charged local authorities with developing initiatives to stimulate the participation of the public in the political process. These have included procedural methods to increase voter turnout as well as consultation exercises to facilitate the participation of local people

in decision-making. Despite the legal and political imperatives for councils to involve children and young people it is clear that there are variations in the degree to which this is occurring across the country. While a number of local councils should be commended for actively pursuing a range of innovative methods to involve young people others need to be encouraged to do more. Also, it is interesting to note that Best Value reviews are only targeted at those over the age of 18 years.

There needs to be a more even approach adopted by local authorities across the country to set up initiatives, encourage young people to get involved and to equip them with the skills to participate. However, in order for these initiatives to be a success there is a need to devolve some real power and financial responsibility to young people. This will mean that these initiatives will need to have realistic timescale and be adequately resourced.

There is now a wide body of research evidence about how to consult and involve young people. Perhaps greater dissemination of the benefits of participation and case studies of good practice would help those authorities who have been slower to bring about change in this area. Young people also need to be informed about what local authorities are doing as this research shows that even in authorities where there is a high degree of activity young people often lack an awareness of this.

Other more specific initiatives that could be considered by central and local government involve lowering the age of enfranchisement to 16 years. Also lowering the age from 21 to 18 when young people can hold political office as an MP or a councillor. But it is clear that these changes will only make a difference if they are harnessed to a programme of education which will inform young people about national and local politics.

That said, it would be unrealistic to assume that young people will be queuing up to take part in these different schemes and initiatives. A balance needs to be struck between empowering and engaging young people without pressuring them to become involved. Young people seem keen to ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms for their involvement but decisions about participation will be balanced alongside their other interests, activities and commitments. It should be remembered that the electorate as a whole is increasingly be asked to vote in more and different elections using a range of different and sometimes quite complex systems. They are also being asked to take part in more research and consultation. This is also likely to increase as a consequence of further constitutional reform. Ironically, these moves towards greater participation may be in danger of resulting in what might be termed democratic and civic overload.

Ultimately the impact that these participatory initiatives will have, however, depends upon the degree and manner in which young people believe their interests and concerns are being heard and responded to. In order to participate effectively they will also need to be equipped with the skills and confidence to communicate with local politicians. They will also need to develop a clearer understanding of the policy process and appreciate the boundaries and limitations of their endeavours. Unrealistic expectations that are not met may only serve to increase apathy and cynicism about youth participation in the community. This is an area that needs careful thought and management. Positive impacts will result if young people have

realistic expectations about what can be achieved and if they see tangible outcomes from their involvement. This will, however, depend on the authorities who engage their participation investing a degree of trust and faith in young people making decisions and controlling some of the resources.

There is now a large body of research evidence to emphasise the importance of youth participation in politics and suggestions for how to stimulate and encourage this. The attention now needs to concentrate on the implementation of this evidence. Any further research should concentrate on specific groups of young people who have been largely neglected from the current literature, these being young people from minority ethnic groups and young people with disabilities.

Finally, it is important to recognise that it will take at least 10 to 20 years before there may be measurable impacts of the range of different activities being undertaken. Also, thought needs to be given to how the impacts of these various initiatives are assessed and evaluated. While electoral turnout will be an important measure there is also a need to recognise that there will be other less easily quantifiable outcomes from youth participation in local government, such as engendering some level of civic renewal within local communities.

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## **APPENDIX I: TECHNICAL APPENDIX**

This appendix provides further details about the study design and conduct. A copy of the topic guide can be seen in appendix 2.

### **Research Design**

As noted in Chapter 1 the study was designed to be qualitative in form, in order to permit full and detailed exploration of young people's perceptions of local government and politics. The aim was to ensure young people considered their views about politics in ways that were meaningful to them; and to facilitate the exploration of underlying factors which influenced their levels of political interest and engagement.

A combination of individual and paired interviews and focus groups were used in the research. In depth interviews were used to explore attitudes and behaviour at an individual level. These allowed detailed examination of young people's images and perceptions of their local authority and decision making around whether or not to participate in local government. A series of in depth interviews were carried out as a first stage of the research. These were useful to test the topic guide and illustrate any difficult issues around discussing local government with young people, which had implications for the conduct of the groups.

Previous work carried out with young people at the National Centre for Social Research has shown that young people seem more at ease when being consulted if they are with a friend. As a result, many of the interviews were paired (i.e. composed of two friends).

Focus groups were used to explore the range and diversity of views and experiences that young people have relating to local government. In particular, exposing young people to perspectives of others, within a group setting, helped to refine views and stimulate discussion about subjects which were not always seen as being of interest to the young people. The group discussions afforded participants the opportunity to discuss views about local government, share any experiences of participating in this and to offer suggestions as to how young people might be made more interested and motivated to take part.

The research design used had a number of clear limitations. As discussed in Chapter 1 the small number of young people from ethnic minority groups included in the research makes it impossible to explain specific barriers to interest and participation for this group. This research has done no more than make a number of suggestions around this area and this is a subject which needs thorough exploration and research. In addition, there was no scope within this study to include other groups of young people who might face particular barriers to interest and involvement in local government such as young people with disabilities. Again, this work should be conducted in order to establish a body of evidence which explains interest and participation among all groups of young people.

## Sample design and selection

The study involved young people living in the UK between the ages of 16 and 25. It covered those who were in education, training, employment or unemployment. As this was a qualitative study, the rationale for sample selection was not to select a statistically representative sample of young people, but to ensure diversity of coverage across certain key variables. These are given below

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity (to a limited degree)
- Current activity (whether young people were in full time education, employed, unemployed or participating in a government programme)
- Parental social class
- Experiences of participation (including young people who had never participated and those with experience of a range of other types of activity)
- Educational attainment

In addition to the variables identified above, the sample included a range of different types of household composition across the age groups. They included young people living in the family home, living with unrelated adults, with partners and those who were living alone.

The majority of the young people were selected by experienced recruiters drawn from the National Centre's survey interviewing panel using a household screening questionnaire. Eligibility for the research was determined according to whether the young person fitted the specified quotas that prescribed the distribution of the sample. In the case of paired interviews one young person was initially recruited and then asked to nominate a friend who would also be willing to participate in the research who was the same age and sex. Other than these two variables, no quotas were set for the second respondent or 'friend' in the paired interviews. This was because we felt it would be difficult to for the young person to find a friend who additionally matched our quotas in parental social class, current activity, educational attainment and ethnicity.

The remaining minority were recruited via local authorities. Contact was made with youth participation workers involved in organising different initiatives within local authorities in the areas covered by the research. These individuals asked eligible young people to participate on our behalf. This ensured the inclusion of young people who were currently or had been participating in local authority initiatives (such as in a youth forum or parliament).

## Conduct of interviews and group discussions

Considerable thought was given to how best to conduct interviews with young people about a subject which did not greatly interest them! Young people were told that the study would be about the interests and concerns of 16 to 25 year olds and their views about the local areas in which they lived. With the exception of those

young people who had engaged in a youth forum or parliament, care was taken to avoid mentioning local government and politics. It was felt that this was a necessary precaution if the study was to ensure the inclusion of people who are neither interested nor participating in local politics.

Prior to the mention of local government and politics, the discussions and interviews started by inviting young people to generate a list of issues which were of concern to them. These included any issues which the young people said mattered to them and were defined as being important. These were then used at different points throughout the groups and interviews as a basis for comparison. A way in which they were used was to investigate why young people may hold strong views about local issues but lack any interest or desire to take part in local government and politics.

One area of the research expected to be difficult was in asking the young people to generate suggestions for increasing interest and involvement in local government among young people. It was recognised that young people might find this difficult as this might not be something they had ever given much thought. Consequently a series of sheets listing possible ways of increasing interest and involvement were drawn up to stimulate ideas and discussion.

Members of the research team carried out the interviews and the focus groups, each of which lasted around an hour and a half. The interviews were conducted in respondents' homes and the focus groups were carried out in a neutral setting, such as a community or leisure centre. A respondent payment of £15 was given to each participant. All interviews were tape-recorded, with permission, and transcribed in verbatim to allow detailed analysis.

## **Analysis**

The analysis of the interview and discussion material was undertaken using 'Framework', a qualitative analytic method developed at the *National Centre for Social Research's* Qualitative Research Unit (Ritchie and Spencer 1994) and used in all the Unit's studies. Framework is currently used with Excel 97 or later versions of this computer programme.

This method involves ordering and synthesising verbatim data within a series of thematic charts or matrices constructed in Excel worksheets. It has a number of stages. First, verbatim transcripts were produced from the tape recordings of the interviews and focus groups. Second, key topics and issues, which have emerged from the data, are identified through familiarisation with tapes and transcripts. A series of thematic charts are then devised, and data from each group and interview is summarised and transposed under each thematic heading. The context of the information is retained and the page of the transcript from which it comes noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or to extract text for verbatim quotation.

This method of analysis is highly flexible in that headings can be changed or amended as required. It also allows an individual case to be followed through or for

comparisons to be made between cases. Interpretative analysis is carried out from the summarised material.

A total of seven charts were devised for analysis of the depth interviews and group discussions. The thematic framework was divided into the following charts:

Chart 1: central chart mapping socio-demographic characteristics

Chart 2: Issues of concern

Chart 3: Image of government/politics

Chart 4: Interest in government/politics

Chart 5: Political activity and participation

Chart 6: Voting: views about voting and voting behaviour

Chart 7: Views and experience of participation in local authority initiatives

In this way the experiences, views and behaviour of all young people have been explored within a common analytical framework which is both grounded in and driven by their own accounts. The completed charts enabled the researchers to carry out a number of different analytical tasks including:

- Tracing individual attitudes and experiences of local government and politics
- Displaying the full range of views and behaviours described by respondents
- Comparing and contrasting the views of different young people or groups of young people in order to detect patterns or associations which occurred among individuals and groups within the study population – such as between those young people who have and have not participated in local government

## APPENDIX II: TOPIC GUIDE

### P6022 Youth Participation in Local Government

#### Aims:

To explore:

- Why young people do not participate in local government
- What, if anything, can be done to increase participation and by whom.

Specific areas for exploration:

- Image and perceptions of local government and salience within their lives
- Understanding of how local government operates
- Views about and contact with local government officials
- Interest in local politics and factors which motivate and demotivate their interest
- Views about the ways in which young people can participate in local government
- Experience of participation
- Factors which have influenced their engagement or disengagement in local government
- Views about the importance of young people taking an interest and participating

### APPENDIX A 1. INTRODUCTION

- about National Centre
- aims of study - *to find out about the things which do and don't interest young people and the ways in which young people can get involved in what is going on in their local area*
- being carried out with people aged 16-25 in England
- study funded by DTLR (Department for Transport, Local Government and Regions)
- research will be used by government and organisations with an interest in the views of young people
- introduce tape recorder/ reassure them about confidentiality

- go through ground rules (*no right or wrong answers/ don't talk at once*)
- remind them about length of intv/discussion

## **APPENDIX B**

### **APPENDIX C 2. BACKGROUND**

- Age
- Household composition (and current activity of household members)
- Nature of current activity; length of time undertaking activity; reasons for choosing activity
  - if in education which subjects enjoy best and reasons for choosing
  - if in work; nature of activity and reasons for choosing etc
- Spare time activities; whether any voluntary work or anything to help family

## APPENDIX D 3. ISSUES CONCERNING YOUNG PEOPLE

*The aim of this section is to briefly map the issues that are important to young people and investigate the salience of local issues within their lives*

- What sorts of things are they interested in/or care about (*try to focus on things they care about rather things they enjoy*)
  - way in which issues are of concern
  - reasons why they care about these issues
- What do they think about their local environment
- What's good/bad about it
  - what local leisure facilities are like (eg library, parks, swimming pool, youth clubs, places to go)
  - whether feel safe
  - what transport is like
  - cleanliness

## APPENDIX E 4. IMAGE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT/POLITICS

- Who do they think is responsible for what goes on/providing services in their local community  
**PROBE:** - *If 'the council' raised explore perceptions of what/who this is ' what this means etc*
- What comes to mind when they hear the word 'politics'; what sorts of subjects/areas does it cover;
  - Thinking beyond the government & parliament what comes to mind
- What image do they have about politics in their local area
  - what areas does it cover
  - and reasons why they see this as being local politics
- What is the role of local government /how important is it
  - explore whether and how they distinguish between local/national responsibilities; views about the differences
  - is there a need for some decision making to be made at the local level
- Where does local politics take place

**Show picture of local town hall**

- Whether they recognise this building
  - what do they think goes on inside their local town hall
  - who is in there/what are they doing
  
- What sorts of people get involved in local politics/become local councillors
  - what makes a good/bad local councillor; reasons why
  
- How do they find out about what is going on in the local community; e.g.:
  - Discussions with family & friends (*what is discussed*)
  - School (*what is taught*)
  - Reading or watching national/local media (*what do they read/view*)
  
- How effective are these sources of information

**APPENDIX F 5. POLITICAL INTEREST**

- How interested are they in politics; reasons why/why not
  - what interests them
  - how do they show their interest/ lack of interest
  
- How important are the things that go on in their local community to them
  
- How important/relevant to them are the matters dealt with by the local council; reasons why
  - What difference they make to their life
  
- How important is local politics  
**PROBE:** (*explore any differences in attitudes towards importance of local area, local council responsibilities and local politics*)
  
- How interested are they in local politics
  - reasons interested/not interested in local politics
  - how do they show their interest/lack of interest

**PROBE:** why interested in local issues but not local politics

- How does their interest in local politics compare with interest in national politics; reasons for (any) differences

### **WHERE INTERESTED**

How did they become interested in LOCAL Politics

- What has made them take notice or become interested in politics
- Whether anyone or anything has stimulated their interest

- Has their interest in politics changed at all over time; in what way; LOCAL OR NATIONAL; and reasons why
- Whether their interest in LOCAL politics is likely to change in the future; in what way; reasons why
- What sorts of people take an interest in politics (e.g people of their age, older people)
  - reasons for difference between themselves and people who are interested
  - how do they show their interest

### **6. Political activity and participation**

What does 'taking part' in politics mean

- what activities does this involve
- What are the ways in which people of their age can take part in politics
  - views about these methods
  - how they compare with methods open to other people

*Refer back to the topics and issues which are important to them listed on flip chart and use these (where appropriate) to explore their views*

### ***Expressing views***

- How easy is it for people of their age to express their views
- What options are available to young people to express their views (e.g at home, school, with friends, in local community)
- How would they go about expressing their views in the local community; reasons for choices
  - what options are available to them
  - views about these methods
  - do these methods differ to those available to other people
  - whether anything prevents them expressing their views

### ***Changing things***

- How would they go about trying to change something in their local community; reasons for choices
  - what options are available to them
  - views about these options
- do these methods differ to those available to other people
- whether anything prevents them doing this
- can young people change things

### **USING AN ISSUE WHICH IS OF INTEREST**

- What they would do to try to influence local decision makers
  - reasons for choosing this method
  - views about how this would compare with other types of activities (eg surveys, demonstrating, signing a petition, joining an interest group, voting, joining a political party, youth forum, attending a local meeting, speaking/writing to a councillor)

### **Taking part**

- Have they personally ever tried to take part in local politics
  - what did they do
  - reasons why they have/have not
  - what options are available to them (ie through school, family, local authority)
  - views about these options
- whether anything prevents them from taking part
  - what options are available to them
    - views about these options
  - whether anything prevents them doing this
- What sorts of people take part in local politics
  - reasons for difference between themselves and people who get involved/take part
  - are there any groups for whom it is harder/easier to take part in local politics (e.g. people of their age, women, ethnic minority groups)

## **7. Views about voting**

- What does/will having the opportunity to vote mean to them; whether they think it is important to vote; reasons why/ why not

### **FOR UNDER 18'S**

- How will they feel when they become eligible to vote; reasons why  
**PROBE:** - when will they become eligible

- will they vote; in what way; reasons why/why not

- If there was a Local election tomorrow how would they vote; reasons why/why not;  
**PROBE:** how would this compare with a general election; reasons why
- How would they decide how to vote; reasons why  
**PROBE:** - anyone/anything that would influence them; who/ what  
- in what way would it influence them; reasons why

***FOR OVER 18'S - check whether eligible to vote in last local/general/European election***

- Whether they have ever voted and when; in what way
- Reasons why they voted/ did not vote on each occasion

Eg - in the 2001 general election  
- in a local election:  
- in the June 1999 European election  
- and in previous elections

- (FOR VOTERS IN LOCAL ELECTION) How did they decide who to vote for; reasons why  
- anyone/anything influenced their vote; who/ what was  
- this; how it influenced them; reasons why
- If there was a Local election tomorrow would/how would they vote; reasons why;  
- how would this compare with a general election; reasons why
- How would they decide how to vote; reasons why  
- anyone/anything that would influence them; who/ what  
- in what way would it influence them; reasons why

**8. Encouraging political participation**

- What does 'participation' in local politics mean
  - are there different ways or levels of taking part (*explore range of different levels and extents of participation if these are perceived*)
  - what are the best ways or forms of participation

- How important is it for people of their age to participate in local politics; reasons why/ why not
- What needs to happen to encourage people of their age to get involved in local politics
- How might the options available to people of their age to participate be improved (revisit responses in section 6)

**GIVE OUT SHEET WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR ENCOURAGING THEIR PARTICIPATION AND ASK THEM TO COMMENT ON THESE.**

- What would need to happen to encourage them personally to get more involved in local politics; reasons why
- Explain to them the objectives of the research and ask them if they have any other comments to make

*Before completing the interview/discussion seek their permission:*

- *to use any techniques that they generate*
- *re-interview at some point in the future (if gained, sign form and collect full contact details for them (address, home/mobile tel) and 'link person' such as a parent*

**Thank respondent for their time, pay £15**