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Involving pupils in school design

A guide for local authorities and architects

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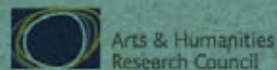
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Date: 2009

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Pupil participation

About this guide

This guide has been written for local authorities and architects involved in the design, refurbishment or construction of school buildings and estates in the UK, such as those funded under the Building Schools for the Future, Primary Capital and Academy programmes.

The following pages provide an introduction to:

- the statutory requirement to consult pupils in school design projects in the UK;
- the benefits of involving pupils in school design and refurbishment;
- key tips and lessons learnt from recent attempts to involve pupils in school design projects.

The guide is based upon evidence from a major research project undertaken in 2007-9, investigating how pupil participation in school design was taking place.

The team used methods such as participant observation, and interviews with school-users, stakeholders, local authorities and architects and the design and refurbishment projects of ten diverse schools in the East Midlands, over a 24 month period. These developments varied in scale from complete reconstruction to modest refurbishment.

This guide is based on evidence gathered during the research project. We have produced it (and a companion one for teachers) because many of the LEAs and architects we consulted said that such a guide would be useful. We have illustrated it with quotations from interviews with pupils, staff, architects, governors and local authorities.

A full set of guidelines for all stakeholders is available from the project web site at: <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/d/699>

This includes a set of ideas for activities and techniques that schools may wish to adopt when developing a participatory strategy.

All change! Developing 'schools for the 21st century'

During the last decade, the UK Government has instituted three 'flagship' programmes of school building (re)development.

- Academy Schools (2002-present). A programme to "challenge the culture of educational under-attainment and to deliver real improvements in standards... in areas of disadvantage" by replacing schools "facing challenging circumstances" with an 'Academy'.^[1]
- Building Schools for the Future (BSF) (2004-present). A strategy to refurbish or rebuild all English secondary schools "to a modern standard over the next 10 to 15 years",^[2] by investing around £2.2 billion per annum in school buildings, estates and infrastructure.^[3]
- Primary Capital Programme (PCP) (2008-present). A strategy "to ensure that primary schools and primary-age special schools are well equipped for the 21st Century... [via projects] to rebuild, remodel or refurbish at least 50 per cent of schools" by 2020^[4] via investment of around £500 million per annum.^[5]

The aim of these programmes is to develop '21st century' school buildings and estates. As such most, schools in the UK will undergo some form of redesign, reconstruction or refurbishment over the next decade.

The statutory requirement for pupil involvement

Section 176 of the Education Act 2002 requires all UK schools and local authorities to demonstrably consult with pupils 'in the exercise of any function' relating to a school's conduct (See box 1). This statutory requirement should apply to any kind of redesign, refurbishment or reconstruction of a school's buildings or estate. After all, such activities are important events in a school's life, 'function' and 'conduct'.

Background

Box 1 – From the Education Act 2002^[6]

"176 Consultation with pupils

(1) It shall be the duty-

- (a) of a local education authority, in the exercise of any of their schools functions, and
- (b) of the governing body of a maintained school, in the exercise of any function relating to the conduct of the school, to have regard to any guidance given from time to time by the Secretary of State (in relation to England) or the National Assembly for Wales (in relation to Wales) about consultation with pupils in connection with the taking of decisions affecting them.

(2) Any guidance under this section must provide for a pupil's views to be considered in the light of his age and understanding".

The Education Act 2002 also requires all UK schools and local authorities to consider the DfES (2004) guidance document Working Together: giving children and young people a say when preparing to consult with pupils.

This guidance stresses that consultation should not be tokenistic, but should take the form of meaningful 'pupil participation'. Box 2 shows the DfES (2004) definition of 'pupil participation'.

Box 2 – Defining pupil participation^[7]

"By pupil participation we mean adults working with children and young people to develop ways of ensuring that their views are heard and valued and encouraging them to:

- become more active participants in their education, including planning and evaluation of their own learning;
- participate in creating, building and improving services to make them more responsive to their needs and those of the wider community;
- make a difference in their schools, neighbourhoods and communities;
- contribute to a cohesive community;
- learn from an early age to balance their rights as individuals with their responsibilities as citizens;
- develop, through the way they are involved, the knowledge, understanding and skills they will need in adult life".

Pupil participation of this kind should be central to any projects funded by the UK Government's school-redevelopment programmes (see box 3).

Box 3 – The expectation of pupil participation (our emphases)

i). In Academy school projects:

"We want Academies to be at the heart of their communities, and expect them to be established in consultation with local stakeholders."^[8]

ii). In Building Schools for the Future projects:

"[a]s the real clients of any improvements to school buildings, pupils and staff need to have an active role in the development of the design brief – from the masterplan for the whole school to the detail of what is needed in each room."^[9]

iii). In Primary Capital Programme projects:

"[t]here is now much good practice on how to involve and build the skills of schools, pupils and local communities. School building projects are an opportunity to involve the pupils and the local community in the design process."^[10]

Interacting with
this guide...
please write on me!.. any
thoughts you have about
pupil participation while
reading this guide...
please get scribbling in
the margins!..

Why pupil participation is worthwhile

"GETTING THE PUPILS INVOLVED WAS CRUCIAL."

"I'd say pupil participation has been a big success."

It is clear, from our research, that pupil participation in even modest school design and redevelopment projects produces numerous positive outcomes, such as...

Pragmatic improvements to the spaces and day-to-day running of school buildings.

Pupils are frequently aware of issues and opportunities which are unseen by adult onlookers in school environments. Given time and appropriate opportunities, they are usually willing and able to articulate these so contributing tangibly and positively to design and redevelopment.

"Pupils are the people who use the school on a day to day basis... they've got the knowledge. For all of our so called intelligence, us teachers can miss simple things... when it comes to thinking about the design." (Head teacher)

"Our experience is... that pupils come up with really perceptive ideas, that can genuinely improve a space. And a lot of things that come from the pupils are mostly cost neutral. They are not asking for the earth – they are very realistic in what they want." (Architect)

School buildings with local 'character'. New school buildings may have an 'identikit' appearance if they are built to the same plan and with the same materials. Working with pupils can bring a distinctive, local 'stamp' to a school redevelopment project, thereby creating links between a school building and its local community.

"Getting the pupils involved was crucial – they're the ones who've really helped us to bring a local 'stamp' to the project." (Head teacher)

"When pupils are involved then that's a kind of bridge between the building and the users and they go home and tell their parents, so you're starting to get a bridge into the community too." (Teacher)

Greater user satisfaction with school environment. Time and again, teachers report that satisfaction with a school building is measurably increased when users are given roles and responsibilities in its development. Working with pupils can result in them feeling more comfortable and 'at home' in their school.

"I think if when you start there's a pride there, we'd have to instil the pride, so there's a job to be done in terms of pupils having an ownership of those buildings and looking after them." (Teacher)

"I've found that the equipment that they've picked and they've chosen, it's in the same condition it was when we bought it, but they're very careful with it because it was a project they worked on." (Special needs teacher)

Fostering a culture of trust and collaboration. Involving pupils can result in bonding and effective collaborative work between groups of pupils, and between pupils and staff at a school. This can be the catalyst for enduring bonds within the school and its extended community. Teachers frequently described this in terms of the 'ethos' of their school, and a more positive, responsible, community-minded outlook amongst users of their school's buildings and estates.

"The whole [redevelopment] project has been a kind of...bonding exercise really. It does encourage everybody to be enthusiastic about every aspect of a school... It has brought people together." (Head teacher)

"In terms of the ethos of the place, I'd say [pupil participation] has been a big success." (Teacher)

"When you have opportunities for staff and pupils to work together on a project like this, you immediately notice the atmosphere changing – like breaking the ice." (Architect)

Reduced vandalism and 'anti-social behaviour'. Teachers frequently report that pupil involvement results in fewer incidences of vandalism and 'anti-social behaviour' – with a corresponding reduction in maintenance and repair costs.

"We've found that if pupils are proud of their school, if they feel they've had a say in it, they won't trash it." (Teacher)

"To be part of it, for any child really, they feel they have some ownership, a stake in it and want to look after it better and maintain it better." (Teacher)

"Giving the pupils something new, something they have a stake in – it's treating them with respect. It's saying 'we trust you'. Our pupils have responded magnificently. They really take pride in it." (Head teacher)

"Basically – there's no graffiti in the corridors anymore!" (Teacher)

Additional opportunities for teaching and learning. Pupils' engagement in redevelopment provides opportunities for all year groups in subjects as diverse as design, numeracy/mathematics, philosophy, construction, creative writing, drama, history and geography.

"We see teachers turning pupils' excitement about a [school redevelopment] project into learning exercises, and you get interesting things coming out of that. We see some very, very good examples of that, where teachers have used the building project as a teaching vehicle." (Architect)

"We've started to link [the school redevelopment project] into the curriculum in all sorts of ways – numeracy, design... learning about the history of the building and looking at old photos and maps." (Teacher)

"[The new school building] already an inspiration for the curriculum because it's about imagine, explore – getting [pupils to] imagine the perfect school, exploring the possibilities – it does lend itself to all sorts of projects on the curriculum. We've talked about the metaphor of new building, re-birth and community. It lends itself quite well to philosophy lessons for example... creative writing, even drama... with the notion of change." (Teacher)

Enhanced design literacy. Specifically, many teachers and architects reported that they had observed increased interest and engagement with design issues.

"I think the students involved got a lot from the [design your school] day... From our school, the art department actually saw the whole day as a way...to come up with ideas about how they can develop gifted and talented students. So there were benefits on a classroom and teaching level..." (Assistant Head teacher)

"[Involving pupils in school design] gives them a bit of an insight into different parts of the process – design, budgeting, strategic decisions... It expands their knowledge and hopefully helps them to understand things in a different way." (Architect)

"[Involving pupils in school design] gets pupils exciting – at the end [of a pupil participation project] there will always be at least one who will come up and say 'I'd really like to be a designer when I grow up'." (Architect)

Raising learners' self-esteem. Teachers and parents/carers frequently reported that they had observed tangible changes in young people's self-esteem and confidence as learners as a result of pupil participation activities.

"The input [into the development project] made him [son] feel important. He'd come back and tell me what they were talking about in school: they had discussions... I really noticed a difference." (Parent)

"[A group of disaffected students] realised perhaps for the first time that they could have a voice and they could come up with ideas and that people could listen to them." (Deputy Head teacher)

"The non-academic kids who will never achieve academically but may achieve lots of other good things." (Architect)

Familiarising pupils with new school environments. Pupils become more familiar and comfortable with their new environments. This was especially beneficial in special educational contexts.

"You see a psychological impact of consultation as you start to involve children: it has engendered a sense of ownership, and there was no shock for pupils of moving into new environment, because they already knew a lot about the new building, were prepared to move." (Head teacher)

"Changing to a new school site can be a big upheaval, but when you've given [pupils] an opportunity to look at the plans and think about the new build, and even have a say in it, it is not such a big step for them." (Architect)

"Because they're familiar with the plans, pupils have got a clear picture of what to expect in their heads." (Teacher)

"It expands their knowledge and hopefully helps them to understand things in a different way."

"THERE WERE BENEFITS ON A CLASSROOM AND TEACHING LEVEL."

Tips for local authorities

"The biggest obstacle is the system,
not the children."

(Local Authority Officer)

"IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO GET A
PERFECT PICTURE AS NO ONE PERSON
HAS ALL THE KNOWLEDGE
ALL SCHOOLS ARE DIFFERENT AND
REQUIRE A DIFFERENT APPROACH"

(Local Authority Officer)

In this section, we present a range of 'lessons learnt' about the planning for pupil participation. These lessons are presented as two sets of 'top tips': for local authorities and architects.

For local authorities

- Prescribe a formal 'minimum standard' of pupil participation to be met by all school redevelopment projects. For example decide on the regularity of pupil consultation and the number of students to be invited to attend planning meetings. Stakeholders should be expected to demonstrate how they meet this minimum standard, on an ongoing basis, at key stages of each project (e.g. business case, design brief, design proposals, decision-making fora, post-occupancy evaluation).
- Agree a working plan with the designers/architects about when, where and how consultation should take place.
- At the very outset, audit local examples of successful participation in past projects. For example if a school involved students in decisions on playground features or other small scale projects. Pupil participation in forthcoming redevelopment projects should build upon the existing participatory infrastructure.
- Work with schools, communities and policy-makers to establish a set of 'local design values' encapsulating what matters, and what is distinctive. For example the use of local stone, or brick. Ensure that these values are fed into all school redevelopment projects, especially at the design brief stage.
- Ensure that all schools and stakeholders are clearly briefed on the proven benefits of pupil participation.
- Provide opportunities for representatives of schools which have recently undergone redevelopment to share their experiences with representatives from schools about to undergo the process. This could take the form of regular workshops and/or an online mailing list or discussion board.
- Contact officers from other local authorities responsible for overseeing pupil participation in school redevelopment. This will enable you to build on the expertise of local authorities which have already undertaken a number of school redevelopment projects.
- Define a person, or several persons, within the local authority the role of 'pupil participation champion'. This role should be responsible for overseeing, fostering and facilitating pupil participation. Ensure that adequate time/resources are dedicated to enable this role to function meaningfully via regular liaison with each school redevelopment project. This role should also link pupil participation projects to other salient ongoing agendas and agencies within the local community (e.g. Children and Young People's Plans, extended schools, youth parliaments, statutory services for younger people, Sure Start children's centres, Connexions, etc.).
- Pupil participation can take all concerned out of their 'comfort zone': pupils may be cynical about consultation processes, teachers may be disinclined to give over decision-making powers to pupils, and adult experts may be unused to receiving feedback from young people. The local authority 'pupil participation champion' should be prepared to mediate between these groups, and facilitate activities which bring together diverse, and possibly conflicting, interests.
- Provide templates and training opportunities to support pupil participation in practice. For example, teachers and architects could benefit from training in participatory consultation techniques, whereas pupils could benefit from training to support them in making effective contributions to these techniques.
- Ensure that examples of good practice in pupil participation are recognised and rewarded. This could take the form of certificates, awards or 'good news' items in local media.
- Document examples of good practice in pupil participation. Ensure that this recognises all forms of pupil participation activity – everything from small, manageable activities to larger 'landmark' project.
- Ensure that all pupil participation projects are evaluated shortly after completion. Use this evidence base and portfolio of lessons learnt to inform the next project, and so on.

- Collate an archive of innovative teaching/learning materials developed by schools around redevelopment projects. Share these materials with school about to undergo redevelopment.
- Pupil participation works best when it tackles modest, everyday issues within a specific context. Don't build up the expectations of students beyond what is realistic. If there are no funds for a swimming pool, tell them so at the outset.
- Develop a set of 'ground-rules' for contractors working on school redevelopment projects, to ensure that their work is sensitive to the specific needs of a school building (e.g. specifying that contractors should consult with schools to ensure that noise from construction does not interfere with examinations).
- Do not create superfluous, unstructured, ill defined meetings which are just tick box exercises, and which do not lead to real engagement or participation.
- Create an audit trail to assess the level and extent of pupil and teacher participation in the project.
- Create a portfolio of different solutions to known problems (such as toilet areas) to provide pictorial material for brainstorming.
- Give a realistic time frame for pupil and staff participation.

"There is a growing awareness that at all levels, even at appointment level, we need to be listening to... accessing student voice, pupil voice and see how we integrate this into the process and actually talk to students, talk to children to see what is it that we want from a new building, how we want these new buildings to perform."

(Teacher)



Tips for architects

"Try to be as clear as possible and not speak in your architectural voice; try to explain it simply and not use difficult language, and try to be approachable."

(Architect)

"Architects are not skilled at working with children, so ask the experts for help - ask the teachers... ..or the children".

(Architect)

Tips for architects preparing for pupil participation projects

- Work closely with school users and stakeholders to carry out an initial scoping exercise at the outset of the project. Use this to identify issues and spaces within the school which really matter to users of the building. Identify any features and spaces which are particularly problematic and which can be realistically addressed via the design process. Also identify any features of the school which are particularly well-loved and distinctive. Spaces that matter should be central to pupil participation projects during school redevelopment, which should, in turn, feed strongly into the design process.
- Spend time getting to know the school and how it is used and the people in it – not via a conducted tour.
- Clearly brief school users on how they can most usefully contribute to the design process. Establish very clearly what kinds of information you need (or not). For instance, there is sometimes a preconception amongst teachers and policy-makers that pupil participation is principally useful in designing ornamental features in a school. By contrast, our research suggests that many school architects find this kind of assumption frustrating as it produces information which is essentially superficial and unnecessary. Much more valuable information is obtained when pupils are approached as experts in the everyday issues and needs within a school.
- Seek guidance from school staff and users regarding existing forms of pupil participation (for example school councils). Use this existing infrastructure as a basis for pupils' participation in the design process.
- Seek guidance from the relevant Local Authority regarding existing good practice in pupil participation within the local area. Use appropriate local exemplars to inform your approach in the present project.
- Ensure that pupil participation is not a one-off 'smash and grab' activity: such an approach invariably produces little usable information, and produces a problematic 'distance' between architects and school users. Pupil participation should be an ongoing, iterative process, in which school users have faith that their ideas and concerns are valued.
- Share your enthusiasm with school pupils and staff. Be willing to talk about your job, techniques, tools, motivations, career and – especially – your top tips for pupils interested in pursuing a design-led career.
- Ensure that pupils and staff can see tangible evidence of how their contributions have added to the design process. Provide accessible forms of feedback to enable this.
- Make participatory activities inclusive. Ensure that pupil participation activities do not solely involve a small group of staff (e.g. only the senior management team) or pupils (e.g. only 'gifted and talented' pupils or School Council members). See separate guide on a range of participatory techniques at <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/d/699>
- Consult with staff and pupils to establish the most effective ways in which to foster participation. Develop a range of participatory activities, such as design workshops or focus groups, to cater for the diverse groups and needs of school users, based on this initial consultation. Prepare to be very accommodating and patient throughout the participation process, and especially at this initial stage: be mindful of the fact that design process will be happening in a context of pressures timescales, high workloads and conflicting interests within the school environment.
- Be open about the design process – the constraints, the time lines, what will be possible in order to manage expectations and gain meaningful information.
- Provide opportunities for pupils and staff to see your other projects and talk to users of them.
- Always thank pupils and staff for their contributions to the design process. Consider giving small tokens of appreciation (e.g. certificates, stationery, copies of plans) for their contributions.
- Provide resources, support and guidance for pupils and staff to conduct activity-based, collaborative exercise in relation to the school's key design issues. (See online guide for a set of example activities.)

- Try to avoid activities which present pupils with a totally blank canvas – this can be intimidating and unproductive. Also avoid putting individual pupils 'on the spot'. Rather, facilitate activities which enable pupils to work collaboratively and gradually in relation to a small number of specific issues as identified in the initial scoping stage.
- Evaluate your pupil participation activities, and their outcomes. Share your findings and experiences with other schools and/or architectural practices about to embark on a school redevelopment project.
- Don't applaud participating pupils just for being pupils participating!
- Hi-tech design tools and projects may not be the most effective for fostering pupil participation: some of the best ideas come from conversations around simple pencil sketches.
- Understand, and try to disprove, young people's frequent cynicism about participation projects: many young people feel disenfranchised within school contexts, and are used to their voices and needs going unheard.
- Do not 'showboat', architecturally or use terminology which the students will not understand.
- Help young people – especially those who may feel disenfranchised within school – to have belief in their ideas and opinions.
- Be generous in providing materials and experiences which can afford valuable teaching/learning opportunities. Discuss how your work, and pupil participation in the design process, might be embedded in curricular activities (e.g. in lessons as diverse as design, citizenship, art, sciences, numeracy, English, history, etc.).
- Provide opportunities for pupils to learn about the broad spectrum of professions available in relation to design, architecture, construction, logistics etc. Consider offering opportunities for work experience, career advice, field trips (e.g. to projects previously designed by your practice), or workshops and assemblies relating to design careers and/or the design process.
- Note that the design literacy of pupils and staff can be limited or clichéd: it may be useful to provide an introductory guide to design processes and jargon.

"From my experience working with the children... they will come up with things which are familiar. 'What would you like in a school?' - They'll come up with all the things they recognise from a school. What they want to do is come up with the things they haven't seen before because they have had the creative experience which would enable them to ask well, do we need a classroom?.."

You almost need to educate them first into a decision-making process, before you allow them to engage or encourage them to engage in the decision-making process."

(Local Authority Officer)



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- 1 DfES [Department for Education and Skills] (2007) *Schools to make a difference*. http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/what_are_academies/?version=1
- 2 DfES (2004) *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*. London, DfES, p.8.
- 3 DfES (2004) *Building Schools for the Future: a new approach to capital investment*. London, DfES, p.2.
- 4 DfES (2006) *Every Child Matters: primary capital programme*. London, DfES, p.7.
- 5 DfES (2007) *Better Buildings, Better Design, Better Education: a report of capital investment in education*. London, DfES.
- 6 DfES [Department for Education and Skills] (2002) *Education Act 2002*. London, DfES, p.105.
- 7 DfES (2004) *Working Together: giving children and young people a say*. London, DfES, p.2.
- 8 DfCSF [Department for Children, Schools and Families] (2007) *Academies: FAQs*. <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/faq/?version=1>
- 9 DfES (2004) *Transforming Schools: an inspirational guide to remodelling secondary schools*. London, DfES, p.6.
- 10 DfES (2006) *Every Child Matters: primary capital programme*. London, DfES, p.53.

Useful resources for pupil participation projects

MacCabe, A. and Horsley, K. (2008) *The Evaluator's Cookbook: exercises for participatory evaluation with children and young people*. London, Routledge.

An excellent 'cookbook' of practical activities for involving younger people in decision-making, providing pragmatic details about the appropriateness and logistics of each activity.

Kirby, P. and Bryson S. (2002) *Measuring the Magic? Evaluating and researching young people's participation in public decision-making*. London, Carnegie Young People Initiative. http://cypi.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/files/2643_MeasuretheMagic_001.pdf
Provides guidance and tools to evaluate the effectiveness of participation projects involving younger people.

School Works (2001) *School Works Tool Kit*. London, School Works. http://www.school-works.org/docs/toolkit_online.pdf
A useful 'how-to' guide for those approaching the process of involving pupils in a school redevelopment project.

School Works (2005) *The A-Z Sketchbook of School Build and Design*. London, School Works.
An accessible guide providing evidence-based 'food for thought' intended to inform and prompt reflection around school redevelopment projects.

Sorrell Foundation (2008) *The Pupils' Brief*. London, Sorrell Foundation.
Identifies a range of common issues and concerns commonly held by pupils about their school spaces.

Sorrell Foundation (2008) *Joined-up Design for Schools*. London, Sorrell Foundation.
Provides examples of previous projects which have involved pupils in school design.

Cool Crew Come to School – A post occupancy evaluation toolkit for all stakeholders in Primary Schools.
For details please contact Michelle Newman by e-mail aa3202@coventry.ac.uk



with thanks...

