**Get Talking: Managing to Achieve More through Creative Consultation**

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**Abstract**

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how public policy and service strategy can be influenced by meaningful public engagement (Bovaird, 2007, Boyle and Harris, 2007) using the Get Talking model (Emadi-Coffin, 2008) to co-produce services in times of austerity. Get Talking, an approach to Participatory Action Research (PAR), was used to engage young people in the development of Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service’s (SFRS) Children and Young People’s Strategy.

**Design/methodology/approach**

The authors adopt a case study approach, building on qualitative methods including focus groups and semi-structured interviews, to demonstrate how creative approaches were used by public sector staff to engage young people and partners in strategy development. To reflect the nature of Get Talking, creative consultation tools were used to facilitate the focus group activity. Initial research was followed by semi-structured interviews to identify the impact of the resulting strategy on the organisation.

**Findings**

Using Get Talking as an approach to policy development provided SFRS with insight into the needs of young people. This resulted in a more relevant strategy being developed and a cultural shift in how the organisation works with young people. Engagement with the Get Talking process had a positive effect on staff, providing them with a sense of ownership over the resulting strategy, enhanced the reputation of SFRS with partners and improved relationships with young people through demonstrating that they were valued partners in coproduction. While the approach was well received by all parties, challenges of using Get Talking in a public service setting resulted in pragmatic adaptations to a traditional PAR approach.

**Practical implications**

Staff who consult using PAR principles and creative consultation tools, require a resource investment of staff time, which is rewarded by the development of a targeted strategy to meet the needs of service users. The impact of using PAR to develop organisational strategy can be maximised through working in partnership with organisations and recruitment and training of a small team of community researchers.

**Originality/value**

The research adds to the body of literature particularly the work of Bovaird (2007) and Ledworth and Springett (2010) as it demonstrates the benefits of using participatory and creative methods of engaging young people in strategy development for public services and identifies the practical implications of using PAR in large scale public sector organisations.

**Keywords**

Get Talking, Participatory, Community, Engage, Creative, Coproduction

**Introduction**

The degree of confidence in politicians and the belief that citizens can influence decision making on the political stage has been steadily falling since Almond and Verba’s Civic Culture study in 1963 (Seyd, 2013). While Britain’s ratings were the highest in Europe at that time, a third of the people in Seyd’s study claimed that they did not trust the British government, compared to just one in ten in 1963. Equally, between 2003 and 2013 the proportion of people who said they were interested in politics and those who felt that they could make a difference in how the country is run through involvement in politics fell significantly (Stoker, 2013). These growing levels of disillusionment with the current political system were reflected in 2016 when 52% of the electorate voted for Britain to leave the European Union in the Brexit referendum. People living in working class communities with low levels of educational attainment and lower incomes, and those who were ‘politically disillusioned’, were most likely to support the choice, with the vote surpassing 70% in eight local authorities in the UK (Goodwin and Heath, 2016). In Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, the location for the case study at the heart of this chapter, 69.3% and 65% of people respectively voted in favour of leaving the EU.

While political disillusionment is having a significant and irreversible impact on the political landscape in Britain and across the world, Seyd (2013) suggests that political reform of regulations and increased accountability of politicians can only go so far in changing public scepticism. He argues that political reforms will only increase levels of trust in the political system if accompanied by more citizen power and a direct voice in political decision making. Despite policy attempts to decentralise decision making and give more power to communities through initiatives such as the ‘Big Society’ introduced in 2010, a concept designed to give citizens, communities, and local government increased power (Cabinet Office, 2010) these attempts were seen by many as a cover up for austerity measures (Butler, 2015, De La Croix, 2015). Indeed, the final Civil Exchange audit published in 2015 found that since the Big Society was introduced, Britain is a more divided society and “fewer people feel they can influence local decisions, disenchantment with the political system remains widespread and communities are less strong” (Slocock, 2015, 6). The need to engage with publics and challenge the culture of top-down thinking in British decision making about local services is therefore more important than ever. Public engagement has therefore become a priority for organisations and institutions across the UK (McLaverty, 2002; Edwards, 2014). Public policy and service strategy are no longer devised through top-down processes and meaningful public engagement is seen as central to coproduced services (Bovaird, 2007; Boyle and Harris, 2007).

The terminology used to refer to public engagement and coproduction as a means of involving publics in decision making, policy setting, and service planning and delivery can be confusing and is often used interchangeably. Rowe and Frewer (2005) refer to three types of public engagement: Public communication, a one-way stream of information from an organisation to the public; public consultation, where information is gleaned from the public about an agenda item determined by the organisation; and public participation, a two-way deliberative dialogue which leads to an in-depth understanding of the public’s perception of the issue. These reflect to some extent Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, a framework which describes the ways in which communities can be involved in decision making, with partnership, delegated power, and citizen control offering the greatest equity of power in the relationship between government and its citizenry. However, there are also benefits of this approach for public managers and services. In times of austerity, public participation is a means of ensuring legitimacy with the public and maximising support for policies (McLaverty, 2002).

Coproduction has also become increasingly important to delivery of public services in the UK in the face of an “unprecedented set of challenges” (Boyle and Harris, 2007, 3). In coproduction, public service delivery is “an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours” (Boyle and Harris, 2007, 11). The benefits of this approach include an equalization of power relationships between service providers and service users and the opportunity to collaboratively explore creative solutions for service planning and delivery (Bovaird, 2007). Mere involvement in coproducing services has led to the transformation of service user attitudes to their own levels of responsibility in accessing a service and can, conversely, result in professional recognition of the social value of the service beyond the cost implications (Needham, 2007). Coproduction is considered beneficial to those individuals who want to be involved in ‘small politics’ but do not have trust in the politicians or political institutions (Bovaird, 2007).

However, there are limitations to the coproduction model of public service planning and delivery, including wealthier individuals being generally more likely to take up opportunities to co-produce services, while people who would perhaps most benefit from the process and products of coproduction are the least likely to participate (Bovaird, 2007). Equally, there is an ethical question of whether people from more disadvantaged communities should have to ‘participate’ to access services.

**Engaging young people**

The need for young people to be active participants in public sector planning has been acknowledged (Greig, Taylor and MacKay, 2013). Hine (2009) argues that policies affecting young people are too often written from an adult perspective, in which young people are generally measured against an ‘ideal’ version of young people. She states that,

Those who work with or develop policies for young people need to take a different view and look at young people’s actions from the perspective of young people themselves…[which] would facilitate the development of policies and practices that better engage with young people and this in turn would produce more desirable outcomes for both adults and young people. (Hine, 2009, 28)

However, current public service engagement with young people is set in the context of diminishing resources of young people’s support services. Between 2010 and 2016, British government reduced income to services for young people by an estimated £387 million (BBC News, 2016). Historically, local government Youth Services were open access, centre-based and street-based services, delivered by trained and qualified youth workers. Participation in decision making is a fundamental principle for youth work (Jeffs and Smith 2010) and young people are actively encouraged to participate in planning and delivery of youth services. However, with the demise of open access, voluntary services for young people and access to spaces where young people can both learn about democracy and participate in decision making about their service delivery has been significantly reduced, particularly in England. In addition, the continued drive towards outcomes is making the measurement of long-term impact of youth work difficult (Melvin, 2016).

Budget cuts in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire have had a detrimental impact on Youth Services in recent years. The Stoke-on-Trent City Council have a reduced level of Youth Service provision after budget reductions of 71% (£5.3 million) between 2012 and 2014 alone (Sentinel 2014). Staffordshire County Council Youth Service was closed completely at the end of 2014, instead commissioning voluntary sector organisations to run some programs on short term contacts. While there are some excellent examples of young people’s participatory projects (Staffordshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2015, 2016; Uprising, 2016), the recent shifts in youth work towards commissioned services, short-termism, and targeted outcome-driven interventions have threatened participatory practice as an integral part of the work.

**Engagement via Participatory Action Research**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a model of research that aims to redress the balance of power between researchers and those being ‘studied’ in creating social change, requiring an “equal and collaborative involvement of the ‘community of research interest’” (Walter, 2009, 1). PAR is used in a broad range of contexts and practices (McIntyre, 2008) and has demonstrated positive impact in the fields of public health (Berkeley and Springett, 2006, Boutilier et al, 1997) and community development, particularly in developing countries (Cordova, 2011, McTaggart, 1997, Olaseha and Sridhar, 2005). PAR does not involve a clear, linear process, but one which involves a continual cycle of questioning, dialogue, action, and reflection which requires a mutual relationship and collective commitment to research and action (McIntyre, 2008). Given PAR’s contribution to the redistribution of power and its focus on action and creating change that is meaningful to communities, it can be argued that PAR has a crucial role to play in enhancing the public’s participation in the development of policy and coproduction of services.

*Get Talking*

Get Talking is a model of Participatory Action Research that was developed by the Creative Communities Unit (CCU) at Staffordshire University and Kate Gant of Creative Health CIC (Emadi-Coffin, 2008). The Get Talking approach was designed initially in partnership with a local SureStart Centre and subsequently developed into a training programme for residents living close to Staffordshire University to take a structured approach to community consultation and action. Local people were recruited to the programme by involving them in semi-structured interviews about their aspirations for their community, with the aim of generating interest in taking action. The training programme was delivered by university staff in conjunction with a community-based participatory action research team initiated and led by the participants in the programme. This model enabled university staff to support and mentor the participants throughout the research process and model the research process in the delivery of the sessions taught. As such, the Get Talking training programme became synonymous with ongoing support for community researchers.

Since its inception, the Creative Communities Unit have adopted the Get Talking approach to work with a range of community groups and organisations. The approach has been particularly successful with small community groups or organisations where the community research team can have influence over the research question and the action taken. In some places the legacy of these projects is still felt in community and asset development ten years later, as is the case in the area surrounding Staffordshire University. For larger scale evaluation projects, the approach has required significant adaptations. In these situations, the needs of the funders and the scale of the programmes have restricted the community researchers’ abilities to direct the research in any meaningful way. The funders’ requirements for large quantities of quantitative data about the communities of interest was also at odds with the participatory and qualitative nature of the Get Talking approach.

*Get Talking Principles*

The Get Talking training programme, and therefore the research delivery, promotes a model of community-led research that reflects the principles of PAR; a process employing a set of creative consultation tools in involving local communities, listening and learning, cross checking, and action planning. It is driven by a team of community researchers who are trained and supported through the research process by a team of practitioners and academics who strive to challenge the traditional power relationships between researchers and ‘the researched’. The principles underpinning Get Taking support this by ensuring research is participatory, involves members of the public who are often excluded from the research process, is transparent and flexible, and leads to action.

Participation is fundamental to PAR, so that participants “share in the way research is conceptualised, practiced and brought to bear on the life-world” (McTaggart, 1997,6). Participants in Get Talking become ‘community researchers’ (Feuerstein, 1988, Ledworth and Springett, 2010) who concurrently investigate live research projects and develop skills and confidence in conducting research. The role of the professional and academic researchers in this setting becomes that of research coaches (Whyte, 1991, cited in Walter, 2008). Get Talking community researchers are therefore involved in all stages of the research process, from project planning to deciding on which consultation tools to use, collection and analysis of data, cross checking for accuracy, and action planning.

Get Talking also aims to ensure that groups typically excluded from the research process are actively encouraged to participate and take an active role. Groups such as children and young people, older people, people from minority ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities, and people from low socio-economic background are least likely to be included as either researchers or as participants (Larson, 1994, Christensen, 2004). As such, redressing this imbalance helps to ensure that power is redistributed through the research process and the expertise of participants is recognised as being as valuable to our understanding of a topic as that of practitioners and academics.

Honesty is another principle underpinning the Get Talking process. Transparency in research has been categorised as (1) data transparency, in which access to raw data should be available; (2) analysis transparency in information is made available about how the data has been interpreted; and (3) production transparency, in which clarity is available on how evidence and data has been chosen for inclusion in the research (Moravcsik, 2014). Get Talking’s involvement of community researchers throughout the process ensures data, analysis, and production transparency through a collective approach to each stage of research. In addition to these categories, however, Get Talking also ensures honesty and transparency through the use of accessible language and clear reporting of findings to the wider community.

Finally, the Get Talking approach is flexible, having the capacity to adapt in response to the findings and reflection on the implementation of action. Furthermore, because Get Talking aims to work with people who are often excluded from the research process, how and when the group meets to train, conduct the research, and collectively analyse findings must also be responsive to the needs of the group.

*Get Talking Techniques*

Get Talking employs a broad range of collaborative facilitation techniques, emphasising the desire to move towards action (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013). Consultation tools include diagrams, maps, photographs, ranking, scoring, and semi-structured interviews. Get Talking also uses consultation tools that are creative and, in some cases, artistic. For example, we have used acrostic poems to gather feedback from audience members of a poetry performance, a wish tree to understand the public’s aspirations for art in a city centre, and maps to identify areas of change in a geographical community. The tools used are influenced by the types of questions being asked and responses required, such as the use of a map to encourage reflection on a geographical community, or a voting exercise to ask community members to prioritise concerns about a specific issue. In the past, we have used Word Clouds, Scrabble words, Lego graphs, and Jelly Babies to represent percentages of people. These types of tools provide imaginative and original ways of engaging people in the research process. By adopting these tools the researchers remove many of the challenges of engaging wider communities as research participants and generate deliberative dialogue around the topics being explored.

Creative tools are used at all stages of the Get Talking process. After an initial planning stage with key stakeholders and the recruitment of community researchers, the team are trained in the Get Talking approach, introduced to a range of creative consultation tools demonstrated through the delivery of the course, and together plan the research questions and methodology for ‘listening and learning’ to the community of interest for the research project. The creative tools are usually developed by the team to reflect the activity or issue being researched, although in some cases existing tools have been adopted. This is followed by a period of team analysis, in which a ranking exercise using ‘sticky walls’ and paper signs help the community researchers to visualise the findings. Cross checking is essential to ensure accuracy of findings and often involves presenting the findings back to community members and asking for their interpretation of them. Once findings are compiled, the team collectively identify the actions required to address the research findings (Gant and Rowley, nd).

One of the largest public sector organisations that have adopted the Get Talking approach are Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, who used the approach to engage young people to develop a Children and Young People’s Strategy. This is the case we will study herein.

**The Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) Get Talking with Young People Process**

Public Services in the UK have endured several years of sustained austerity. Fire and Rescue authorities in England have faced average total budget reductions of 28% between 2010/11 and 2015/16 (Public Accounts Committee, cited in Public Finance, 2016), resulting in losses of almost 7,000 frontline jobs, as well as equipment and buildings. Further cuts are expected in the next four years. Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS), covering Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, employ 1,051 staff (Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, 2014) and house 33 Community Fire Stations across the region. During 2016/2017 they absorbed a budget reduction of £1.46million, and expect total cuts to amount to £5million by 2020 (Fire Industry Association, 2016). As Boyle and Harris (2008) argue, these unprecedented challenges require a significant shift in how public services are planned and delivered. It is therefore increasingly important that SFRS find ways of keeping costs to a minimum (Fire Industry Association, 2016). With the cost of a crew attending a fire being in the region of £2,000 (Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, 2016), fire prevention is an effective way of minimising expenditure. The coproduction of services may be one way of ensuring children and young people and the wider community both understand and are invested in fire prevention efforts (Bovaird, 2007).

The SFRS Prevent Agenda recognises that “prevention is more effective and cheaper than cure” (Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, 2016). Because children and young people are sometimes perpetrators as well as victims of fire related incidents and road traffic collisions, preventative work with them can be instrumental in reducing such incidents (Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, 2014). Therefore, in 2013, the Chief Fire Officers’ Association funded SFRS to develop a Children and Young People’s Strategy to identify how they can best work with young people in their Prevent Agenda. A panel of internal staff was assembled to lead development of the strategy. They were concerned that the proposed consultation methodology of distributing questionnaires to children and young people would be ineffective in ensuring that their views were accurately represented. The group felt that those most in need of preventative intervention would be unlikely or unable to take part in the research and that a creative approach to children and young people’s consultation would be more effective in garnering participation. Furthermore, direct engagement could provide a more in-depth understanding that would help SFRS develop a strategy that was both responsive and of value to local communities. Therefore, SFRS approached CCU at Staffordshire University for technical assistance in using the Get Talking approach to consult with young people in developing the SFRS Children and Young People’s Strategy.

In the following subsections, we discuss each stage of the process of training and supporting SFRS staff to engage young people across the region. While the stages are presented here in a linear chronological format, it is important to note that the training programme and consultations were delivered concurrently.

*The training programme*

Following a discussion with a member of the SFRS Children and Young People’s advisory panel, the CCU proposed a programme of training and mentoring which would support six members of staff and one young person from the Prince’s Trust who worked as a volunteer and cadet for SFRS. The senior managers in the organisation accepted the proposal to invest in a new approach to consultation with communities, recognising that the skills developed would be transferable to other work with young people and other publics in the region. Seven representatives of SFRS joined a further six people from other organisations and community groups to learn about the Get Talking approach and how it could be used in their settings. These included artists, volunteers for a large-scale arts programme, and a self-employed community worker.

The course was accredited as a Staffordshire University Continuing Professional Development module and was delivered in six sessions over three months. Following an introduction to the module, the Get Talking training programme covered principles of ethical and participatory research, stakeholder analysis, interviewing techniques, using creative consultation tools to involve participants, team approaches to data analysis, cross checking findings, and action planning for change. The assessment for the module involved reflection on a piece of research and a presentation to peers in the group.

Being part of a larger group for the training element of the programme benefitted both SFRS staff and those from other organisations. The SFRS presented the group with a large-scale, active case study to illustrate the process of Get Talking. The other group members, being more removed from the case study than the SFRS staff, brought a different perspective to the analysis of the findings.

*The consultations*

During the period of training and planning for the consultations, it became apparent that SFRS had limited time and resources to support young people to become community researchers and to expect them to talk to their peers and give feedback on findings. Instead, the community researcher role was fulfilled by the six SFRS staff members and one young person who were being trained in Get Talking. This was a pragmatic decision based on the competing demands of the training programme, the need to consult widely in a restricted timeframe, and the existing workloads of the SFRS. While the team were keen to share the role of community researchers with young people, the decision not to do this meant that the consultation process delivered on time.

The SFRS team conducted 15 consultation events across Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, two with SFRS staff and 13 with children and young people, enabling them to listen to approximately 50 SFRS personnel and 200 children and young people. SFRS worked in partnership with a broad range of organisations to help them gain access to children and young people, including Youth Services in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, and an organisation who works with young offenders and young people at risk of offending, and smaller voluntary sector organisations who offer drop-in sessions for young people. This approach gave SFRS access to higher numbers of young people than they engage through their day-to-day work; and more importantly access to those who would be, generally, least responsive to more traditional consultation techniques such as questionnaires or an open call to participate. Finally, this approach also leveraged the trust of the young people already involved with partner organisations (Jeffs and Smith, 2010).

The consultation sessions for SFRS personnel and young people mirrored each other to help the community researcher team to compare findings between the two groups. The team were keen to identify how current SFRS perceptions of need reflected those of actual need from young people. Therefore, the method used to collect data was the same in each case, only the focus of the question was different. Each event was facilitated by two SFRS staff, at least one of whom were participants in the Get Talking programme. While most of the activities required some literacy skills, the Get Talking training highlights the importance of inclusion. Therefore, the community researchers always worked with young people in small groups and offered to write participants’ responses for them, making it unnecessary for individuals to declare that they were unable to write their response. The following questions were asked using these consultation tools.

*On the one hand, and on the other.*

The first topic explored was how young people felt about their geographical area. To do this, participants were asked to draw around their hands onto a sheet of paper. They were then asked to write (if possible, and supported to do so if not) inside one of the hand outlines the things they liked about living in their area. Once completed they were asked to think about their concerns. Staff were asked the same questions, but in relation to young people. While community safety and antisocial behaviour were found to be significant for young people, fire was low on their list of concerns, a result that was surprising to SFRS staff.

*Aspirations tree*

Participants were presented with posters of a tree and were asked to identify their aspirations for the future. They used sticky notes to place their aspirations in the branches of the tree. Some young people included career aspirations, some listed hobby type goals, and others listed less tangible aspirations, such as happiness. They were then asked what could get in the way of them achieving their aspirations, and listed these barriers on the trunk of the tree. Finally, each young person was given a ladder and asked to identify on the ladder the support they needed to overcome the barriers to achieving their aspirations. The SFRS community researchers found these quite broad questions helpful in identifying some of the challenges young people face and to encourage young people to consider ways in which SFRS can support them beyond the young people’s initial expectations of what SFRS should provide.

*Outlines*

For the final exercise, participants were asked to draw around one of the group members on to a large sheet of paper and then to draw a line down the middle of their outline. For the young people’s events, the fire personnel took a fire helmet along to the session and placed it on the head of the outline. On the left-hand side, the young people were asked to list what a Fire Officer’s role entails and the qualities they required to fulfil their jobs. On the right-hand side, they were asked to list they ways in which they would like SFRS to work with them, including how they would like to be communicated with. In separate events held for SFRS personnel, SFRS staff were asked to reflect on their own perceptions of young people and to list the ways they believed young people would want to engage with them.

Because the training and consultation exercises were being run concurrently, this meant that at each stage of the process the SFRS were able to discuss and reflect on their learning with staff from CCU who also acted as mentors and were able to challenge and support their practice.

*The analysis of findings and strategy development*

Immediately following the completion of the consultations with children and young people, the findings were analysed by the SFRS, with support from their peers who were also enrolled on the Get Talking programme. Team analysis of findings is an important stage of the cross checking process, ensuring that the understanding of findings is shared within the team.

Following PAR protocols, the SFRS intended to further cross check these findings with the young people who had contributed to the initial consultations. Arranging consultations through the Youth Service enabled SFRS to tap into existing groups of young people and work with them face to face using creative tools. This link with the Youth Service made the initial consultations easier to manage and arrange and helped to overcome some of the barriers in relation to Data Protection and Safeguarding whilst ensuring that the young people were kept safe. However, it also posed challenges later in the process. SFRS did not hold any contact details for the young people and neither SFRS nor the Youth Service were able to commit resources to arrange follow up sessions. Some relevant staff and young people had moved on by this stage. Therefore, SRFS were unable to cross check their findings with young people involved in the original consultations. As a result, the findings were analysed by the SFRS community researchers and forwarded to the Children and Young People’s Strategy lead who used them to influence the design of the strategy.

*The evaluation stage*

An evaluation was arranged twelve months after the initial training and consultations to determine if using the Get Talking methodology had actually informed the development of the SFRS Children and Young People’s Strategy and contributed to the co-production of services. Within the context of the cost savings purpose of the Prevent Agenda and austerity cuts, we wanted to measure the impact of the project in terms of adding value to the staff, the organisation, the partners, and the community. However, as action researchers, we were more crucially interested in whether young people were able to inform the strategic direction and practice of a large scale public sector organisation. Therefore, this is the evaluation element we focus on herein. To reflect the PAR methodology, the evaluation research was designed as a two-way learning opportunity through open-ended conversation and experiential exercises (Andersson and Shahrokh, 2010).

The first focus group was held with six staff members and one young person who had taken part in the Get Talking training and who had all delivered consultations with young people. There were also two managers present who had an active role in securing funding for the initiative and managing the staff during the period of consultation. The aim of this focus group was to evaluate the effectiveness of the training and to identify the learning that had taken place while executing the approach. The participants mapped out and explored elements of the project and identified where additional support or clarification was required. To reflect the nature of the Get Talking approach and the consultations with young people, creative exercises were designed to draw out the challenges of the approach, how staff had overcome them, and to highlight the learning that had taken place during the training and consultation. These included a timeline and objects to evaluate the stages of the process, fire and water templates to help participants identify challenges and strategies used to overcome them, and a ladder diagram to identify the learning from the initiative for individuals and the organisation.

The second focus group involved ten SFRS managers to assess the wider impact of the Get Talking approach on the organisation and where additional training and mentoring could be of value. Because this group had been removed from the planning and delivery of the consultations, the session began with an overview of the Get Talking process and was followed with a series of participatory activities using creative tools. We used a dart board diagram to identify the impact of the approach on the development of the strategy, the staff involved, the organisation (SFRS), young people, partners, and communities. We also used a series of photographs to help illustrate and reflect on the different stages of the process.

At this stage of the evaluation, two semi-structured interviews were completed; one with a senior manager in SFRS and one with a manager from the Youth Service. The questions were designed to understand the impact of using the Get Talking approach to develop the strategy at the managerial level.

**Follow-up evaluation**

During May 2016 follow-up evaluation was completed to further determine the impact of adopting the Get Talking approach on the SFRS staff, as well as the main differences between the Get Talking approach and strategies usually employed in policy planning and the implementation of the Children and Young People’s Strategy. We explored how creative approaches to consultation were learned and used by SFRS managers and their organisational partners to engage young people in strategy development, identifying the benefits, challenges, and impact of the Get Talking approach. Creative consultation in the form of a mini focus group with SFRS staff and managers was carried out, although the session was poorly attended with only two members of staff, one of whom was new to their role. Therefore, semi-structured individual interviews were also conducted with these members of staff to consider the impact of the Get Talking approach at this stage. An additional semi-structured interview was also carried out with a Director to check the findings from this phase of the project and provide a strategic overview.

As discussed earlier, there were challenges relating to contacting young people after the initial consultations. Our reliance on three layers of agency (SFRS, the partners, and the young people) and, in most cases, the need for parental consent, meant that we were unable to talk to any young people directly in the evaluation research stage.

**Findings**

SFRS analysed the findings from the consultations with young people and developed their Children and Young People’s Strategy accordingly. However, they, and we, were keen to identify the benefits and challenges of using the Get Talking approach to policy planning. This section discusses the findings from the evaluation with specific emphasis on the perspectives of the staff involved in the project as community researchers, managers in SFRS, and partners. We consider:

* how findings from the consultations have been implemented in the SFRS Children and Young People’s Strategy;
* the impact on how SFRS delivers their Prevent Agenda; and
* how the approach will influence future SFRS planning programmes.

Throughout we draw on examples from the young people’s consultations to illustrate how SFRS responded to their opinions in the development of its Children and Young People’s Strategy.

**SFRS Community Researcher Perspectives**

The data collected from the SFRS staff involved in the Get Talking programme and the delivery of the consultations can be themed into three categories: Their learning about how the Strategy could best suit the needs of young people; their learning about engaging young people through Get Talking and using Get Talking as a tool for consultation; and their own perspectives on the process of using Get Talking to develop the Children and Young People’s Strategy.

*SFRS learning about how the strategy could best meet the needs of young people*

SFRS community researchers indicated that the findings from the young people’s consultation sessions highlighted a broad range of concerns for young people, including anti-social behaviour and community safety, which were less related to the issues of fire and road safety than initially expected. Staff argued that this strengthened their need to embed partnerships with other agencies at the heart of the Children and Young People’s Strategy.

The honest conversations with young people that resulted from using creative tools and focusing on face-to-face consultations with young people challenged some of the assumptions made by SFRS about how young people would want to communicate and engage with them. For example, prior to the consultation sessions, SFRS staff had assumed that children and young people would want increased engagement through social media. However, this assumption was challenged by young people at the listening and learning stage, as they explained that they felt valued and heard in the face-to-face engagement of the consultation process, which ultimately built a trusting relationship with SFRS. The SFRS staff questioned whether their research would have produced similar findings if other consultation methods had been used. As a result, face-to-face working with children and young people has become a central feature of the Children and Young People’s Strategy. During our follow-up evaluation, SFRS personnel told us that they find it easier to respond quickly to requests for educational visits than before the children and young people’s consultation was carried out: “We are able to send crews out to schools more easily. Educational requests get a faster response time… [because as a service] we value face to face [work].” The use of Get Talking as an approach to strategy development has therefore changed the way SFRS engage with children and young people.

*SFRS learning about using Get Talking to engage with young people*

SFRS staff recognised that the new approach to consultation was a long-term commitment that had opened a dialogue with young people and had initiated an ongoing relationship. They understood that making young people feel that they had an important role to play in the development of the strategy was an important part of this process. SFRS staff explained that through conversations during and immediately following the consultation session, young people felt valued by the approach adopted by SFRS to seek their opinion. As one staff member involved in the consultation sessions pointed out, young people were enthusiastic about their approach and commented, “it is great that the Fire Service is taking time to come and talk to us”. The staff involved in the consultations argued that that this approach received more honest responses from young people than traditional questionnaires would have elicited.

The SFRS staff also valued having the young person who was a cadet and volunteer involved in the consultations. She brought a young person’s perspective to the design of the creative tools, gained the trust of the young people at the consultation sessions she was involved in, and helped to cross check some of the findings.

The emphasis on face-to-face contact with young people during the consultation process combined with the use of creative tools provided young people with an equitable opportunity to have their voices heard. SFRS staff reported that the young people involved in the consultations stated that they preferred the Get Talking approach to consultation to an anonymous questionnaire and SFRS felt they received more in-depth and pertinent feedback. They also felt that they gained insight into the opinions of young people who they would not have otherwise heard from if they had used more traditional methods.

*SFRS Community Researchers’ perspectives on the process of using Get Talking*

The main impact for staff of using the Get Talking approach to develop the Children and Young People’s Strategy was that they felt a sense of ownership over the process and the resulting strategy. Staff within the organisation acting as community researchers and participants in the consultation sessions recognised that the development of the strategy was a collective effort and an ongoing process. The staff who delivered the consultation sessions felt a strong sense of pride in how young people have influenced their way of working. As one service manager argued, “I like being able to say “[this is] what young people said we should do” as opposed to “[this is] what we think we should do”.” There is a recognition within SFRS from both staff involved in the process and managers that staff ownership of the process and its results has helped the Strategy become a ‘living document’, rather than one that is isolated from practice.

Staff involved in the Get Talking training and consultation sessions indicated that this sense of ownership and continuing commitment to a new way of working was enhanced by SFRS’s investment in resources of both staff time and ongoing support. They recognised that leadership was vital for the success of the project and they valued the training and a coaching relationship with representatives from CCU.

The team experienced some challenges in the delivery of the Get Talking approach, particularly in implementing a cyclical process to produce a strategy within a tight deadline. They stated that Get Talking had raised as many questions as it answered but a lack of time and the need to produce findings to inform the strategy meant that many of these questions remain unanswered. This led to a perceived lack of direction at times and feelings of frustration and anxiety that they may omit a piece of vital information in the design of the policy.

Although the challenges of implementing Get Talking in a public sector organisation are evident, the team were clear that they had developed a set of clear skills and knowledge as a result, in particular the use of Get Talking as an ethical and flexible approach to working with communities and the ability to design consultation tools that are suited to the needs of specific groups. They were also able to reflect on how a team approach to the consultation process and analysis of findings had enhanced their ability to reach a broad number of young people in a short period of time.

***Management Perspectives***

The main finding from manager interviews was that SFRS used a more participatory approach to consultation for their Children and Young People’s Strategy than they had for other policy design efforts. Managers told us that by adopting this approach they not only ensured their strategy was based on young peoples’ perspectives, but they also felt it enhanced their reputation with organisational partners as SFRS were seen as demonstrating a real commitment to understanding the needs of young people and taking seriously their views on how they wanted to engage with SFRS.

The social value of the work was considered a strength of using this approach; one which has had an impact on the culture of how the organisation develops policy and works with communities and with children and young people in particular. As one senior manager stated,

[It has] given us an ethos, during management cuts which have been an emotive issue, to consider options and undertake massive public consultation. The public have shaped outcomes. We listened to lots of options and changed them as a result… This method of working (consulting) is now almost ‘business as usual’.

Managers of SFRS felt that they were in a strong position moving into the next financial year because of their strengthened relationships and innovative practice with communities and partners. This was supported by staff confidence in adapting their practices to meet new challenges and tailor their programmes to meet the needs of local communities.

In the two years since the Get Talking programme was implemented, the ethos of engagement and involvement of children and young people in decision making had been adopted more widely across the service. For example, the Get Talking methodology was used to inform the SFRS Cadets’ programme, a programme for young people aged between 14 and 17, with opportunities for graduates of the programme to continue as volunteers. Young people had an active involvement in decision making about how the programme was developed. From the research interviews with staff and managers, it is evident that they had confidence in the approach as a means of both benefiting young people and meeting their objectives for the Prevent Agenda. The staff involved in the initial consultations also had confidence in their own skills to deliver the methodology in the future, and managers were keen to ensure others in the organisation benefit from the investment: “We need to look at ways of ‘infecting’ other staff with these skills.” While a relatively small number of staff were involved in the initial round of training, the number of those who understand and endorse the ethos has grown. The Get Talking methodology has also given SFRS increased confidence to engage with people in a more inclusive way. This has resulted in a broader reach for SFRS within communities, including the development of more opportunities with people with learning disabilities.

***Partner Perspectives***

One of the main findings of the Youth Service manager interview was that SFRS’s commitment to active participation and engagement with young people was commended as good practice and an approach that benefited young people engaged in the process. The interviewee believed SFRS recognised that young people in the area were best placed to inform them on how to develop their strategy in a way that was meaningful to local communities.

This approach has helped to empower young people and enable them to have a say and shape service development, working towards what is important. Professionals try and keep on top of changes and emerging trends but really, in these circumstances, it is the young people who are the professionals.

Furthermore, the process of contacting children and young people’s organisations, arranging times to carry out the consultation session, and informing partners of their aims and objectives had a positive impact on SFRS’s reputation with partners. Through better understanding the work of SFRS, partners were able to plan services to complement, not duplicate, activities. As the partner interviewee stated, “It … helped to develop mutually beneficial relationships. The young people’s views informed our planning for summer activities. The feedback was useful and we were able to work together and involve [other] partner agencies.”

**Where theory meets reality – a pragmatic solution**

SFRS had high aspirations of using a model of PAR and creative consultation tools to involve young people in the development of a co-produced strategy. The approach was far removed from any other they had used in the past and required a higher level of resource investment than more traditional approaches. They were keen to ensure that young people’s contributions to the strategy were not tokenistic and felt that using Get Talking could achieve this. However, implementation of this model as an approach to policy planning in a public sector organisation such as SFRS was not without its challenges and compromises were reached in terms of what we understand PAR ideally to be.

Nonetheless, the PAR principles underpinning the Get Talking approach were instrumental in shaping a pragmatic approach to the SFRS consultations. Staff have clearly benefited from taking an active role as community researchers both in terms of their ownership over the resulting strategy and their confidence to use the approach with communities. Equally the careful consideration given to consultation tools ensured they were both attractive and accessible to young people, and the partnership approach to working with young people who were considered ‘harder to reach’ resulted in including those who were typically excluded from policy planning. While the team were unable to complete the cycle of Get Taking by cross-checking findings with young people and the actions were referred to a third party to develop within the strategy, action was clearly taken as a result of the findings.

Whilst one ambition for SFRS was to develop a participatory approach to consultation with young people, their main objective was to develop a Children and Young People’s Strategy that was influenced by the perspectives of young people. A pragmatic solution was found in which the SFRS found a new approach to working with young people that was perhaps not in line with their original ambitions for a fully coproduced policy, but was far from their original starting point. Ultimately, they produced a Children and Young People’s Strategy that was informed by young people who had traditionally been unable to contribute to policy development, and in the process enhanced their relationship with partner organisations across Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. In addition, the results have also impacted their current Prevent Agenda and created a cultural shift in how SFRS responds to communities and plans programmes.

We therefore conclude that children and young people’s consultation has potential to influence how large scale public sector organisations can work in partnership with local communities to influence policy design and this case study provides useful learning for other organisations wishing to do the same. Although the approach is not without its challenges or risks, using the principles underpinning PAR and the tools and techniques adopted in the Get Talking approach in particular can produce positive outcomes for organisations and communities. While we recognise that large scale public sector organisations may need to adapt the Get Talking approach to enable its delivery, pragmatic adjustments can still result in useful consultations and produce steps towards coproduction in austerity-ridden services.

To maximise the impact of using a PAR approach, organisations can work with partners to increase engagement with communities through their existing relationships. This approach reduces the time required to gain access to publics and works through the trust already established between partners and community members. A partner approach to consultation has been found to be mutually beneficial to all parties. Although enlisting a full team of community researchers may not be practical for some organisations, working with one or two trained members of the community to support staff to consult widely can be a great benefit. This can enhance relationships and build capacity within communities and organisations. The approach clearly has resource implications but the investment can lead to increased motivation for staff to engage in a different way and produce policies that are shaped by communities. To enhance these positive outcomes, staff and managers at all levels of the organisation need to embrace a new approach to community consultation that challenges the balance of power and provides opportunities for shared learning.

At a time when participatory approaches in decision making about local services are more important than ever (McLaverty, 2002, Edwards, 2014, Seyd, 2013), Get Talking can assist in the creative transformation of public services through engaging communities in a meaningful way to influence policy design. However, public sector managers need to be aware of potential tensions between the underpinning principles of PAR and the existing cultural practices within large scale organisations. Where public sector organisations are willing to challenge existing practices, local people can have a meaningful engagement with public policy design, ultimately restoring citizens’ trust in public services and strengthening civic culture.

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