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Young Disabled Champions rule: Birmingham City Council

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Brief description

The Young Disabled Champions are a group of young people who are ambassadors for children and young people with disabilities in Birmingham. They work very effectively to ensure all young disabled people have a voice, are listened to and influence strategic decision-making and processes across the city. This is one of seven case studies which forms part of Ofsted's survey, '[Critical issues in the provision of youth work for young disabled people](#)', published in January 2013.

Overview – the provider's message

'Enabling children and young people to have a voice, be listened to and effect change is of paramount importance to the Rights and Participation Service of Birmingham City Council. We take great care to understand the individual needs of our Young Disabled Champions group so that we can make sure we provide them with the right support to carry out their important work. Providing practical help, such as transport and administration services, is just as important as coaching to develop confidence and promote assertiveness, and advice to understand the relationship between local and national politics. The Young Disabled Champions take great pride in their roles because they know they are listened to and can see how they make a real difference to the lives of other young disabled people.'



Lisa Carter, Head of Rights and Participation Service

The good practice in detail

Birmingham's Young Disabled Champions don't just have good ideas; they make sure the ideas become reality through careful planning, effective campaigning and shrewd negotiation. Members make a real difference to the lives of other young disabled people by representing their interests and concerns, and ensuring they have a voice which is heard. This group of highly motivated young people have overcome the barriers created by their disabilities and focus on helping others to do the same. They make very effective use of their facilitators who provide expert guidance and support. During the last few years they have had significant influence and have participated in a number of projects. Highlights include: launching Anti-Bullying Week at the Council House; co-facilitating transport consultation workshops in three special schools; creating guidelines for deaf awareness with five schools for deaf young people; and planning, designing and building a sensory garden called 'Rights Makes Sense.'

Lisa Carter, Head of Rights and Participation Service describes the Young Disabled Champions as a 'reckonable force.' Lisa and her team have worked with the group to develop formal structures and processes to help them get things done, such as chairing meetings and note-taking, and organising transport and refreshments. Beyond the practical arrangements Lisa's team focuses on supporting each individual member to develop confidence and understand some of the wider implications of the principles of fairness, values of democratic processes, and the long-term rewards of planning and following a project through to its conclusion. Their work has led to many successful initiatives, such as the design and creation of a sensory garden for the enjoyment of disabled children and young people who live in residential care.

The sensory garden

The Young Disabled Champions worked with the Parks Department and the Rights and Participation Team to prepare their winning bid for funding to develop a sensory garden for disabled children and young people in residential care. They successfully pitched for a grant of £2,000 from UK Youth and Starbucks and the funding has been used to develop a beautiful garden which combines tranquil space for relaxation with stimulation from bright natural colours, rich textures and evocative fragrances. A feature of the garden is an area where children can record their hopes and dreams.



Keys to the success of the sensory garden initiative:

- Opportunities were skillfully created for young people to make a significant and lasting contribution to improving the quality of life for others.
- The Young Disabled Champions were a very effective advocacy and campaign group.
- The value of motivating young people by empowering them was recognised and was a strong focus in harnessing the group's energy.
- The Young Disabled Champions used the individual and often unique experiences they face as young disabled people to make a difference for others.

Supporting the local community

The Young Disabled Champions have assumed increased responsibilities for local political matters, such as the Safer Birmingham initiative and supporting the training of staff and other professionals to raise awareness of the barriers faced by young disabled people. They have actively campaigned to stop bullying by offering training sessions for staff, young people and professionals. For example, they provided training to police officers to help them understand the effects of autism and guidance on communicating with people who have the condition.

Lisa and her team emphasise the crucial importance of working with young disabled people on developing new skills and interests through their involvement with the group. Their confidence increases as they develop effective advocacy skills and represent other young disabled people at local and national events, such as Birmingham's Voice is Power and the Youth Parliament.

The young disabled people are proud of their achievements. They feel listened to and can see improvements to services as a result of their participation.

Provider background

The Rights and Participation Service ensures that children and young people are involved in strategic decision-making with [Birmingham City Council](#) and have a specific role in providing an advocacy service across Birmingham to children and young people in care. This includes coordinating Voice is Power, Birmingham Children and Young People's Parliament, the Children in Care Council and the Young Disabled Champions.

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