



THE RUNNYMEDE RESPONSE TO:

The Independent Review of the Office of the Children's Commissioner

October 2010

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About Runnymede

Runnymede is a social policy research organisation focused on race equality and race relations. We work by:

Identifying barriers to race equality and good race relations
Enabling effective action for social change
Influencing policy at all levels through providing thought leadership and robust evidence.

Runnymede has been active in the field of education for many years. Within our current education work we devise and promote practical strategies for use in the classroom and, at community level, we aim to address and support the specific needs of minority ethnic young people. Further we focus on identifying, sustaining and augmenting improvements in race equality and social cohesion in the changing terrain of education policy and practice.

Our Response

We welcome the opportunity to provide responses to the Independent Review on the role of the Office of Children's Commissioner for England. We believe that the role itself is an important one, given that it raises the profile of all matters that do or may affect children and gives prominence to their opinions. It is particularly noteworthy that the Children's Commissioner aims to promote and represent the views of those who are vulnerable and whose voices are less likely to be heard. These children will often include children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and those from refugee, asylum-seeking and Traveller backgrounds. In this respect, we consider the role to serve an important purpose.

Research commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner that will contribute to the 2010 National Participation Strategy¹, highlights that work clearly remains to be done with regard to enabling children to play more participative roles in the way decisions are made about them and to be consulted and involved in work which may ultimately affect them. This project reported that 50% of all children surveyed felt listened to always or most of the time. In the absence of targets set for organisations to include the views of young people, less emphasis may then be placed on ensuring children are listened to. In making the voices of children and young people central to its remit, and indeed through this, making the importance of their views of high public profile, the Office of the Children's Commissioner has done much to promote the participation of young people. If the role is to be reduced or removed, this important profile and work will be lost.

Our specific concern however, as shared by the author of the above cited report, is that while work to improve the participation rates of all young people is continuing and doing so successfully in many cases, only children from some groups either feel able to, or are elected to participate in school councils, or other forums for children and young people. These children who are usually those deemed to be 'well behaved', 'clever' or 'popular', do not always include children covering a broader spectrum of groups, and representing the differences in life experience, class background, age, gender, ethnicity and disability that exist among children.² Children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds are also less likely to participate in groups or organisations set up to represent young voices.

There has also been limited evaluation of the contribution of children's involvement in decision-making, enabling an accurate assessment of the full impact of the Children's Commissioner on the lives of children, difficult. Evaluation is essential to assess which children and young people are being consulted. It is hoped that this Independent Review will include such evaluation of the way children may have been involved in work with the Children's Commissioner, together with an assessment of which types of children may have benefited and how.

Given that much work remains to be conducted in order to ensure inequities in the participation of children in decision-making are avoided, we would certainly recommend that additional energies be put into addressing this issue, rather than removing the role of the Children's Commissioner altogether.

We would like to thank you for your time and for having the opportunity to contribute to this review.

Sincerely

Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard
Senior Research & Policy Analyst

¹ Davey, C (2010) *Children's Participation in decision making: A summary report on progress made up to 2010*, Participation Works
http://www.participationworks.org.uk/files/webfm/files/npf~/npf_publications/A%20Summary%20Report_jun10.pdf

² Davey *ibid*