

In the two years since the Article 31 Action Network was set up, there has been a growing commitment within the arts and cultural industries to consult younger users and make services more child- (and family-) friendly. Many different approaches have been tried with varying degrees of success. **Harry Shier** explains how Young Consultants are contributing to the development of our arts and cultural institutions.

Consulting children

The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in Bournemouth, housed in an elegant Victorian mansion overlooking the bay, is undergoing an extensive redevelopment programme. The local authority hopes that, when it reopens, it will be interesting and attractive to children and young people. To help them achieve this goal they called in a team of expert consultants. Unusually, however, the team of consultants they recruited were aged 8-11 and still at primary school.

The team were all experts in identifying what works for children and what doesn't, but, not surprisingly, they had no previous experience of acting as consultants to a major cultural institution. The first part of their project, therefore, was an induction workshop to prepare for their consultancy role, and work out what kinds of things they needed to investigate when they visited the Gallery and met the management. Thus prepared, and fully equipped with consultant's checklist and hard hat (the latter because the Russell-Cotes is currently a building site) the team made a fact-finding visit to the Russell-Cotes site, where Education Officer, Sandy Wilderspin, conducted a guided tour of the unfinished facilities. After this the team adjourned to Bournemouth Town Hall, where Senior Arts Officer, Victoria Pirie, was grilled ruthlessly on her plans for a child-friendly gallery.

The Council staff then withdrew so that the Young Consultants could consider their findings and decide on their recommendations to management. For the final stage



Play•Train

Young Consultants at work at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth, April 1999

of the process, the team moved to the Council Chamber, where they were joined by three local Councillors as well as the Arts and Museums Officers, to present their findings and recommendations, and discuss these with the adult decision-makers. Although this meeting with management marked the end of the Young Consultants' work on the project, their adult facilitators from Play•Train, who had been taking detailed notes throughout, then had the task of turning the results into a more formal written report, which will serve the local authority as a planning tool in future stages of the Russell-Cotes development.

This is just one fairly typical example of an Article 31 Children's Consultancy Project. It was part of the Article 31

Children's Consultancy Scheme, a new national initiative which enables children to become expert consultants, and advise all kinds of arts, recreation and cultural institutions on how to make their services and facilities more child-friendly.

The scheme takes its name from Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which sets out every child's right to play, leisure and recreation, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Following successful pilot projects at Walsall Museum and Art Gallery and the Victoria & Albert Museum, the scheme was launched late last year. Already seven projects have been completed and another five are about to start, with more in the pipeline. As well

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as the Russell-Cotes project described above, projects in the arts sector have included:

- a team of Young Consultants from Stirling advising the management of the macRobert arts centre on how to improve its facilities and programmes for children;

- a team of Young Consultants based in Leeds carrying out research for West Yorkshire Playhouse, leading to a keynote presentation at the recent 'SPARK' conference on creative activities for children after school.

- a team made up of Young Consultants from inner-city Birmingham and rural Herefordshire advising West Midlands Arts on the drafting of its new regional 'Policy for Learning and the Art's. So impressed was the policy group by the Young Consultants' presentation, that they asked them to come back in May and make another presentation to the full board of West Midlands Arts.

The scheme is co-ordinated by Birmingham-based Play•Train, a specialist development agency concerned with children's participation, play and creativity, under the auspices of the Article 31 Action Network. It has funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust and the Grantham Yorke Trust, which will enable Play•Train to subsidise up to half the cost of each children's consultancy project for the first two years. After this, when evaluations have demonstrated the long-term value of this approach, the Network has plans to introduce an 'Article 31 kite-mark'. This will be a badge awarded to those agencies that commission children's consultancy projects and act on the results. It will thus enable these agencies to demonstrate that "we listen to children, and we can prove it". Our long-term goal is to see the Article 31 kite-mark proudly displayed (or eagerly sought after) by every self-respecting cultural institution in the UK.

We don't claim that the Children's Consultancy approach is the only way to consult children. It may not be feasible in every case, and is seldom the cheapest method.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 31

1. Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. Member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

It does, however, have a number of special features that make it worth considering where a real commitment to change exists.

- The children undertake a programme of work, exploring the issues that concern them, consulting others and discussing their ideas before they are expected to come up with recommendations. This avoids the pitfall, common with more superficial survey techniques, where you ask children to tell you what they want and all you get is an ill-thought-out and unrealistic wish-list.

- The children may also undertake their own research in the form of one or more fact-finding missions to explore other facilities or cultural opportunities. To help them with the West Midlands Arts project, for example, our team of Young Consultants made a day-trip to Worcester to find out what cultural activities one particular city had to offer children out of school, before they sat down to consider their recommendations to the Regional Arts Board. This answers the often-heard criticism of children's consultation, that "children don't know what they want because they don't have enough experience of what's available".

- As part of every project, we seek to arrange a face-to-face report-back meeting between the Young Consultants and senior decision-

makers from the client agency. The true value of each project lies less in the formal recommendations that the Young Consultants present, more in the subsequent dialogue between children and managers, exploring the children's thinking around key issues and giving managers an insight into the children's perspective. Thus the Children's Consultancy approach doesn't just tell managers "what children want" - the usual outcome of a consultation exercise - it gives them a new perspective on working with children, and a deeper understanding of how children perceive and relate to the services and programmes on offer.

- Finally, there are enormous benefits for the Young Consultants themselves, which are missing from most other approaches. By taking up the challenge of becoming consultants, the children make a real commitment to the project, and through their involvement we see them grow in knowledge, awareness, responsibility, communication skills and, above all, confidence and self-esteem. On completion of their projects, we find children who, only a few days ago, had no concept of what a consultant was supposed to do, eagerly volunteering to come back for follow-up work, and putting themselves forward as candidates for future projects.

In this context it is important to emphasise that the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme is not an education project and has nothing to do with arts in schools or the national curriculum. All the Young Consultants volunteer to carry out the work in their own time after school or at week-ends, and are thus able to undertake the projects as young citizens in their own right, without the pressures and constraints of the school curriculum.

We want arts organisations to see children as more than just the consumers of their education and outreach programmes. The United Nations Convention states that they have the right to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. They are citizens as well as pupils, and the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme is one way we can help to make this right a reality.

Joining the Article 31 Action Network is free and members will receive the newsletter 'Article 31 News' every three months. The Article 31 Action Pack (Play•Train, 1995 ISBN 0 9519013 1 1) is available from Community Insight, Pembroke Centre, Cheney Manor, Swindon SN2 2PQ: £11.45 + £1.50 p+p. The Leeds Young Consultants have made a video of their project called 'Our Time' which is available for £2.75 from Sam Perkins at West Yorkshire Playhouse t: 0113 213 7295.



Harry Shier is Article 31 Co-ordinator at Play•train, an independent voluntary organisation specialising in children's rights and creative work with children out of school
t: 0121 766 8446
f: 0121 766 8889
e: team@playtrn.demon.co.uk
w: www.playtrn.demon.co.uk/a31ccs.htm