

Letting children have their say

Children are citizens as well as pupils. The Article 31 Action Network gives them the chance to have a say in the services which are provided to them. Harry Shier introduces this children's consultancy scheme

All over the UK, groups of children are becoming specialist consultants, advising senior managers of leisure and cultural organisations on how to make their facilities more child-friendly, and their services better for children.

In Leeds, children advised on improving the quality of after-school play facilities, in Bournemouth, on re-designing an old museum to make it more child-centred, in London, on improving parks and open spaces, and in Birmingham, on a new regional policy for learning and the arts. These are just a few examples of recent projects from the "Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme".

Projects taking place during the next few months include:

- a group of Traveller children in Somerset becoming consultants to advise on how play services can be made more relevant to their needs
- a team of Young Consultants advising the British Waterways board on how to use the canal network as a setting for children's arts and creativity
- a team made up of children from both Protestant and Catholic communities in Belfast evaluating the city's Old Museum Arts Centre and "Young at Art" children's arts festival.

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 ten projects have been completed and another four are about to start, with more in the pipeline.

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.

What is Article 31?

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states

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.

Kite-mark

The next task is to evaluate the impact of the projects that have been completed. After this, 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".

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.

Article 31 Action Network's special approach

Many different approaches have been tried with varying degrees of success. 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. It does, however, have a number of special features that distinguish it from other types of child consultation.

* 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



Consultants in action

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. This answers the often-heard criticism of child 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-

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makers from the client agency. The true value of the project lies less in the formal recommendations that the Young Consultants present, more in this dialogue between children and managers, exploring the children's thinking around key issues and giving managers 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.

New projects

Looking ahead to the year 2000, PLAY•TRAIN is seeking support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to fund up to twenty new children's consultancy projects in museums and arts galleries throughout the UK.

Do you know of a local museum or gallery that could benefit from a better understanding of children's views and needs? If you do, please put them in touch with PLAY•TRAIN and we will tell them how to join the HLF scheme.

The Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme is not an education project, but is concerned specifically with the child's right to participate. 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 on their own terms, without the pressures and constraints of the school curriculum.

The United Nations Convention states that all children 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.

About the Article 31 Action Network

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.

For full details of the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme, contact PLAY•TRAIN, 31 Farm Road, Birmingham B11 1LS; tel. 0121 766 8446
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Website: www.playtrn.demon.co.uk/a31ccs.htm

Joining the Article 31 Action Network is free and members will get the newsletter *Article 31 News* every three months.

- The Leeds Young Consultants have made a video of their project called *Our Time* which is available for £2.75 from West Yorkshire Playhouse. Contact Sam Perkins on 0113 213 7295.
- *The Article 31 Action Pack* (published by PLAY•TRAIN, 1995, ISBN 0 9519013 1 1) is available from Community Insight, Pembroke Centre, Cheney Manor, Swindon SN2 2PQ. It costs £11.45 + £1.50 p&p.