

Report from the Assistant Director, Partnerships and Early Intervention

Options for the future of the Children and Young People's Champion

Summary

1. This report invites Members to have an exploratory discussion about the future of the Children and Young People's Champion, now that the present incumbent's term of office has expired. Should Members want to recommend changes, these will be put to the Executive in due course – and ultimately to Full Council, if they involve changes to the constitution.

Background

2. The post of Champion for Children and Young People for the City of York was established in 2006, through the Constitution of the Council, as a Member appointment. This followed an earlier Scrutiny review which had concluded that young people's opinions were given insufficient weight in decision-making.
3. The first Champion, Cllr Scott, was appointed for a one year term of office during the school year 2006 – 07. 1,600 children and young people were involved in a process of selection that started in April 2006 and was completed during the summer term. The selection process was undertaken through school councils, making use of the annual primary and secondary school council conferences as an opportunity to debate the issues and vote on the candidates. The opportunity to participate was also extended to all secondary schools in the City through a DVD and small resource pack. Four secondary schools involved their wider school community in this way.
4. At the end of Cllr Scott's term of office there was considerable debate at this Working Group about the future of the role and the method of appointment. The case for making the Champion an "independent person", rather than a Councillor, was considered. There were also a number of options for either "selecting" or "electing" the Champion. In the event it was decided to maintain the role as a Member appointment, not least because this is enshrined in the Constitution. A method was devised of staging a kind of hustings event in the Council Chamber at which the two candidates set out their case and answered questions; this was filmed, and the DVD was issued to all schools. A slightly increased number of young people voted compared with the first time and Cllr Alexander was duly elected for a period of two years. This has now expired.

5. Cllr Alexander's appointment has undoubtedly raised the profile of young people's issues within York. He has helped to campaign, amongst other things, for the youth festival which is being planned for the summer, and for the Youth Council with its associated membership of the UK Youth Parliament. These latter roles have rapidly acquired a high profile. However, their arrival has introduced a new dynamic and means it is pertinent to review once again the role of the Champion as an elected Member.

Consultation

6. We have sought the informal views of some members of the Youth Council in preparing this paper. They have expressed the view that they are unsure about their relationship to the Champion, and that they have a preference for the role, if it continues, to be clearly defined as "non-political". This is not intended as a criticism of the present incumbent.

Options and Analysis

7. The options are very similar to those that this Group considered in 2007, except that the Youth Council and the Members of the UK Youth Parliament have now arrived on the scene. This paper will briefly set out the options for the nature of the role, and then for the method of appointment if the role continues.
8. There are three main options for the role itself:
 - **No change.** This is the simplest option in terms of short-term mechanics, in that it would not require an amendment to the constitution. However, we would need to organise some sort of election or selection process, with its associated costs, once the General Election is over. If we go for this option, it is suggested that we will need to define more clearly the nature of the role, and its relationship to the Youth Council and to the Executive Member.
 - **An independent person.** Some people have argued that we should look for an independent person to fulfil this role, someone "above politics". The analogy has been drawn with the Children's Commissioner for England. However, it is not clear how we would go about selecting such an individual, especially as we have no budget for advertising, nor for remunerating the individual once appointed. This option would require an amendment to the constitution.
 - **Looking to others to fulfil the Champion role.** Under this option, we would no longer seek an individual Champion from within the ranks of the Council's elected Members. Instead, we would acknowledge the new role played by the Youth Councillors, and especially the Member/Deputy Members of the UK Youth Parliament, in advocating young people's views. We would need to place more emphasis on the Youth Councillors' relationship to the Executive Member, and to members of this Committee (ie, the YPWG). This option would require an amendment to the constitution in due course, but there would not necessarily need to be any rush over this.

9. As the purpose of this paper is to provoke an exploratory discussion, we have stopped short of a recommendation. In fact officers' views are divided on the subject. We do feel that the arrival of the Youth Council has met one of the original aims of the 2005 Scrutiny Committee, ie giving more prominence to young people's views. However, there still arguably needs to be someone (or more than one person) "inside the system" who can help to represent those views at all of the relevant decision-making forums. If not a separate "Champion", this role could be fulfilled by the Executive Member, or by the Director of Adults, Children and Education.
10. A further variant which might appeal to members of the YPWG would be to regard all members of this Committee as *de facto* "Champions" of young people's issues within the Council, with its meetings serving to act as the main conduit for young people to convey their views to Members. The attraction of this option is that it would help to refresh the purpose of the YPWG at the same time.
11. If members nevertheless want to continue to seek a Champion from within the ranks of the elected Members, we will need to organise an election or selection process. The past two Champions have been elected directly by the children and young people of York, although it has to be said that the organisation of the process presented problems on both occasions. It is difficult to find a format that is lively, engaging, fair to all candidates, and workable across over 60 schools and colleges. It is also quite costly to prepare ballot papers, election materials and (if necessary) a DVD – anything up to £5,000 which we can ill afford at the present time.
12. Officers would like to suggest an alternative which was not available on the last two occasions: an election or appointment by members of the Youth Council, who would in effect form an electoral college. This would neatly match the process for the Older Person's Champion, who is appointed by the Older Person's Assembly. The details can be discussed further if the principle is agreed – for example we could run a hustings event in front of the Youth Council, with the ballot taking place immediately afterwards.
13. Such a process would be relatively easy and cheap to set up, and it would have the advantage that there would then be a greater sense of "ownership" of the Champion by the members of the Youth Council. One disadvantage however is that the Youth Council consists only of those over 11, whereas the Champion is intended to represent all children and young people. To overcome this we could contemplate using the Conference of Schools Councils, but this would be much more complicated to organise.
14. Members' views are sought on all of these points.

Corporate Priorities

15. The issues discussed in this paper are consistent with the Council's objectives to encourage children and young people to become active citizens, and to consult them about decisions that affect them.

Implications

16. Depending on whether Members want to continue with the Champion role in its present form, and (if so) the method agreed for selecting him or her, costs will be incurred of around £5,000. There is no specific budget for this **financial** implication; the costs would have to be borne by Young People's Services.
17. There are no **Human Resources, Equalities, Crime and Disorder, IT or Property** Implications.
18. Some of the options would require an amendment to the Council's constitution in due course (ie a **legal** implication) – this will need further consideration.

Risk Management

19. There are no specific risks associated with this report.

Recommendations

20. That the Young People's Working Group discuss the options identified in this report for changing or maintaining the Champion role, and for electing or selecting an individual to fulfil it. The outcome of the discussions may need to be forwarded to the Executive for a decision.

Reason: To ensure young people's views are taken into account in Council decision-making.

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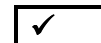
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Report Approved Yes Date 5 April 2010

Wards Affected:

All



For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Previous YPWG discussions on this topic, especially at the meeting of 12 July 2007

Annexes: None