



GROWING UP IN CITIES CANADA

Capable Cities in British Columbia: Key Informant Report

Compiled & Written by Kevina Power

Communitas Social Research & Consulting Group

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Concept & Editing by Doug Ragan, Environmental Youth Alliance/Centre of Excellence

For Youth Engagement

&

Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, International Institute for Child Rights & Development

Introduction

“The inclusion of children and youth represents a new frontier in municipal policy development”

*Louise Chawla,
International
Coordinator of
the Growing Up
in Cities*

*Wells District
Zeballos
Smithers
Sidney
White Rock
Vancouver
Nelson
West Vancouver
Port Coquitlam
Slocan Village
Maple Ridge
Abbotsford
Surrey
Maple Ridge
New Westminster
Courtenay
Fraser Valley
Pemberton
Langley (City)
Langley (Town)
Williams Lake
Victoria
Kelowna
Prince George
Penticton
Salmon Arm
Fort St. John
Sechelt
Vernon
Nanaimo
North Vancouver*

This report describes a key informant research project entitled *Capable Cities in British Columbia*. The purpose of this report is to present emerging trends concerning youth civic engagement from the perspectives of those currently working, or attempting to work with young people in their community’s municipal system.

Ten key informants living and working in local municipal processes informed this research project. Throughout the article, the voices of those informants are presented to provide a richer context for analysis and to understand the issues that are unique to communities across British Columbia. The analysis describes the issues in relation to the size of the municipality.

Methodology

These interviews used the *Municipal Involvement* survey developed by the *National Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement* and the *Environmental Youth Alliance*. This tool was first tested two years ago at the Union of BC Municipalities conference and recently modified by the *International Institute for Child Rights and Development* for use in the *Growing Up in Cities Canada* Project.

Key informants were identified through telephone contact of municipal offices. Contact was made to identify communities in BC that were either working with, or wanting to work with children and youth. Thirty-three individuals representing 31 communities informed this analysis. Twenty municipalities were selected for in depth, semi-structured telephone interviews, using the survey instrument. Informants were probed to uncover more qualitative data regarding their thoughts, ideas and experiences with youth engagement. Twelve representatives from 11 other municipalities completed the survey individually. The informants averaged approximately three years of experience working in the municipal

system. Forty five percent of the informants have five or less years of experience.

Forty four percent of all informants were municipal councillors and 32% were senior level employees. Fifteen percent were junior municipal employees, and 9% identified themselves as other (Youth Advocate Mentor, Adult Youth Ambassador and Youth Advisory Volunteer Coordinator).

The communities selected reflect the diversity of BC municipalities in terms of population size and geography. Communities ranged in size from a very small village of under 300 persons to a large metropolitan community of over a half a million. Six communities consulted were defined as 'small' (< 10,000), 15 were 'medium' sized (between 10,000 and 75,000) and three were 'large' (>75,000).

Twelve communities were selected from south west BC and two from the Sunshine Coast, four on Vancouver Island; four in the southern interior; and five in northern BC. This project does not include indigenous communities' governed by Band Councils within its scope.

Key Findings

All communities reported that they felt it was important for children and youth to participate in municipal affairs.

“It is most important that the activities that young people participate in have meaning, that young people have the control to make decisions and that they have a connection to the community”.

Municipal Councillor, Slocan Village, BC

The survey participants report being very aware of the policies and programs dependent on youth involvement and geared towards their needs and interests in their communities (78%). Twenty two percent felt they were familiar with some programs and policies and were able to contribute to this project.

All informants report feeling that it was important to involve youth in municipal affairs, however many offer different perspectives on what involvement looks like:

- Almost all informants (97%) agree or strongly agree that involving youth in municipalities meant that young men and women are consulted regularly on issues that relate to them.
- Sixty four agree or strongly agree that young people should be involved in overall municipal budget applications, while 36% are unsure or do not agree.
- A majority of respondents (70%) mention that young people could be involved by allocating an annual budget controlled by youth on youth specific projects.
- Approximately 61% agree that involving youth meant having young representation on all municipal portfolios. Those that didn't agree feel that young people would not enjoy many of the issues that municipalities deal with.
- Seventy two percent did not feel that involving young people took too much time or financial contributions.
- All informants (21%) agree or strongly agree (79%) that involving youth means acting on youth needs by engaging them in designing initiatives.

Over 80% mention that they would like to see tools developed that will help their municipality in engaging young men and women effectively.

What is a Child/Youth Friendly City?

"A child and youth friendly city is a city that engages youth in answering this very question; a city that provides funding for youth initiated, community collaborative projects; a city that seeks out and acknowledges different knowledges, participation styles and experiences."

*Youth Advisory
Coordinator, Victoria*

"A big piece we need help with is advocacy! This would really help us as municipal staff!! We would like to see some steps to help us be good advocates."

*Junior Municipal
Employee, Sechelt*

The informants of this project were asked to describe their definition of what they thought a child and youth friendly municipality would be like. From their perspective, the most common theme associated with a child- youth friendly city is the notion that young people are valued partners in all municipal affairs. Rather than identifying a small group of token youth and assume they speak for all, a child-youth friendly community consistently engages all of its citizens, regardless of age.

The project informants offer many compelling qualities of child/youth friendly municipalities:

- ▶ In a youth friendly community, young citizens are invited to offer their unique perspective of their community and how they see the community's future unfolding. Participatory processes are in place to ensure that all people are able to tell their story and voice their opinion in a way that is comfortable for them.
- ▶ Youth friendly communities see young people mentoring their peers and assisting them to build their capacity to become active citizens. Mechanisms of support exist for all people, from the youngest to the oldest, and are accessible and safe. Parents, guardians, and families encourage young people in driving their ideas forward and the community advocates for those who are unable to speak for themselves.
- ▶ There are opportunities to play and have fun in child and youth friendly communities. The opportunities available are varied and appropriate for all members. The community nurtures cultural and ethnic diversity, and encourages the community to learn from one another.
- ▶ In youth friendly communities, decision-makers financially support youth-driven initiatives and allow young people to take responsibility for designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating their ideas. The municipal process has incentives

“A youth friendly city has mechanisms to support young people in developing their voice. Young people are seen as valuable partners in the city’s planning and development process.”

*Youth Advocate
Mentor,
Vancouver*

available for young people to become involved and to actively engage in the process.

- ▶ Young men and women are driving processes that make their community a better place to live. Leadership opportunities such as this are commonplace in youth friendly cities.
- ▶ Parents, guardians, and families are encouraging and supportive of youth organizing. Young men and women feel supportive and free to make their own decisions.

From the perspective of municipal employees, the most important thing about involving young people in decision making roles within municipal processes is not that young people are given a place on council, or on a youth advisory board, but that the activities that they participate in have *meaning*, that young people have the *control to make decisions* and they have a *connection* to the governance process and the broader community. |

Current Efforts to Include Children and Youth

“It definitely is important to involve youth, but time is an issue. When you end one program, you jump in and begin another. Capacity to evaluate and ask for feedback is sometimes an issue”

Senior Municipal Employee, Salmon Arm

“It’s important and it’s worth it. Because of the amount of consideration it does require time. It can limit the things that municipalities can do.”

Senior Municipal Employee, Fort St. John

The project informants were asked to rank their municipality’s effort to include children and youth in municipal affairs at present. Fifty three percent report that their community is doing good or very good in including youth in municipal affairs. One informant believes their municipality is doing excellent. A significant percentage (39%) of individuals report that their community is not engaging their young population in decision making processes often enough.

Typically, those informants representing medium and large municipalities saw themselves as doing a fairly good job in their efforts to include young people. Individuals representing these communities report they are working to include more and more young people in different ways and through different departments. Those informants representing medium to larger communities had less years experience than those from medium to small cities, and mention working in youth development previous to working with their municipal system.

Informants in small communities rank their municipalities the poorest for including children and youth. In view of this finding, more research is needed to better understand the reality of small municipalities. The smallest municipalities contacted for this project did not have the capacity to offer services to their young citizens. All young people living in these small communities are travelling outside the municipality to go to school. This was noted as being a barrier for them to include them in municipal affairs. When asked about ways of engaging young people, small communities would like to see more collaboration with neighbouring municipalities and/or band councils in order to better engage young people in their community.

Respondents from one medium sized community mention that while there are creative ways to engage youth that does not take a lot of money, it does take an ability to connect and relate to young people in order to make it meaningful. Respondents request training to develop this ability. They would like to learn more about practical tools for engagement.

One question included in the survey asked, “In your opinion, are there types of activities where children and youth should not be included?” There results are as follows:

[Table One: Results for Question of Appropriate Activities |

Activity	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Not sure
Community Centre program design	88%	-	12%
School Curriculum development	73%	6%	21%
Research	77%	3%	20%
Program evaluation	71%	6%	23%
Policy making	68%	6%	26%
Neighbourhood planning	74%	23%	3%
Municipal elections	62%	3%	35%

In every case, over half of all informants thought it appropriate to engage young people in affairs associated with municipal system. The table above is useful as it shows that although informants generally are not against involving young people, that are not sure how or what it would require to involve them effectively.

Municipal Snap Shot

“The development of a City of Victoria youth council has just been formally approved by Council. This project is youth initiated and youth led. We are currently negotiating the terms of reference for the youth council and identifying the mechanisms through which the youth council will provide feedback to the city on youth-related issues and how the city will act on that feedback. Most in kind support is coming from community partners that I have sought out, and we are receiving meeting space, staff resources and food support from local community centres and schools. The city has said they wish to support the development of the project, but has not shown us how they plan on doing that. At this point, there is no funding formally within the city’s budget to consult with youth or to support the development of the project, (though we will hear whether a special projects grant is available for us in late June – 2 months after the formal approval of the project); staff we are connecting with are over worked with other responsibilities and the City is currently renovating so there is no meeting space at city hall. Right now, the support from the City for the council is in voice and intent (they are very enthusiastic), not in action (there is no follow up or tangible effect -yet- of that enthusiasm). This indicates a need for more rallied support from the city, training for staff and councillors on youth-friendly practices and participatory organizing. We do have 3 key City Councillors who are doing a great deal to support this project by advocating for us on Council and with staff as well as attending youth council meetings. I’ll keep you posted on our developments and would love to hear from you about best practices/strategizing on how to energize the city and get a stronger commitment for support from them.”

Chelsea?? Volunteer Youth Advisory Working Group Coordinator, City of Victoria

Providing Youth with Opportunities to Make Decisions

“A youth friendly city supports young people in the development of their assets. They give them the tools they need to be active informed citizens.”

Municipal Councillor, Nelson

“Young people should be invited to get involved in processes that interest them. It is also important for them to be able to understand what they are getting involved in.”

Youth Ambassador Adult Support, White Rock.

The majority of the municipalities (71%) report that they offer opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making. Less than half of all respondents (39%) utilize a children/youth advisory council as a method of engagement, while 77% mention that young people participate on various committees. All communities who mention Youth Advisory Councils were medium to large in size. The Youth Advisory Committees reported directly to the mayor and council. As one respondent from a medium sized community said, “This council is valued as much as any other committee that reports to council. They advise on issues that affect them and are given directives to research on behalf of council”. In one large and another medium sized community, the Youth Advisory Council assumes the role of mayor and council for one day a year. They research and bring forward issues that are meaningful to them, debate these issues themselves and in one case are televised for the general public to see. These meetings are also counted as a regular council meeting for the record.

Thirty nine percent of municipalities surveyed support a child and youth committee linking child and youth service providers. When asked if youth people sit on these committees, most informants are positive that some older youth participate but that the committee did not require youth representation. Many of these communities are not formalized, integrated networks of young people and services providers, but rather ad hoc and reactive meetings responding to an immediate issue affecting the community. Many of these committees may not be meeting on a regular basis and in some cases, the young people attending do not necessarily know why they are there.

Some municipalities are coordinating one-time child/youth consultations (59%) on arising issues that affect youth in the community. For example, one respondent explains that when their community suffered a suicide of a young community member, the municipality held a consultation to hear how the event impacted other young members of

“Certain youth from some marginalized communities are harder to reach, or require significant changes in how the city relates to them in order to create the sense of a safe space when interacting with the city (due to un-youth friendly and prejudiced beliefs). Training for city staff is needed not only in youth-friendly practices, but in anti-oppressive communication in general to address other forms of discrimination including racism, homophobia, disablism, colonialism, sexism etc.”

*Youth Advisory
Coordinator,
Victoria*

Communities are very interested in learning more about how to engage marginalized groups of young people in meaningful ways.

the community. This proved to be an effective way for the community to mourn the loss together.

Forty one percent report coordinating on-going consultations with youth as a means of engagement. The respondents further mention some attempts to do this were inadequate because there was no follow up completed once the event was over.

Only 30% of all municipalities report using a mentoring or ‘buddy’ system, and many of those were ad hoc practices. In one large municipality, a Youth Advocate Mentor was employed to act as a point person for young people to help them navigate entry into the municipal system. The mentor helps young people bring issues forward that are important to them and works to ensure their voices are heard. In this case the mentor works independent from the municipal departments and reports directly to the mayor and council. In another large municipality, a councillor reported that they, themselves, acted as the mentor for groups of young people wishing to enter the system. This councillor stated that he supported their ideas by advising them on how to best present them.

Few informants (12%) mention that young people are employed in their municipal system. When probed, it was revealed that the majority of these positions were for summer co-op students over the age of nineteen. In two of the large communities the informants spoke of employing young people on an ‘outreach’ team. These young staff members were responsible for reaching out to other young people in order to inform them about things going on in the city and to entice them to get involved.

Many of the respondents mention that they want to learn more about engaging youth populations who are marginalized from the general population (i.e. GLBT, at-risk, and indigenous young people). Engaging with marginalized communities of young people was something that all communities reported having trouble with. Some mention that they know of groups of identified GLBT, street-youth, at-risk, and cultural/ethnic groups, but they do not necessarily think that they engage them in meaningful ways. All expressed they would like help in this area.

How do decision makers Access Young People?

"We are doing things a little differently now. We used to have a youth committee when we had a Leisure Commission. We disbanded that and we are now traveling out to community groups and organizations and asking for their input as needs arise. When we need to talk to youth specifically, we contact schools and other community agencies working directly with youth. We started to outreach in November and are set to continue in May this year."

Senior Municipal Employee, Prince George

All informants mention they use schools to access children and youth. In two small communities, once a year younger children from the elementary school visit the municipal hall and the administrator explains what the office does. However, the purpose of this visit is to provide one-way education to the young people. The informants from these communities mention they do not purposefully engage these youth in dialogue about what they would like to see happen in their community during these visits. However, they further say that they would not engage in dialogue of this sort if it should come up.

Community centres, youth organizations, and youth workers were also highly utilized by communities as a way to access young people. Eighty percent of all key informants mention community organizations that they partner with to access young people and 74% specifically speak about youth workers. Municipal employees rely on gatekeepers in the community who are trusted by young people and who work with them on a daily basis through recreational programming or after school activities. For example, a respondent from a large community mentioned that it was important to show respect to these people because they have taken the time and energy to build strong connections with young people and to bypass them would be inappropriate. Connecting with gatekeepers also allows for legitimacy of the engagement attempt.

Formal presentations and advertising are not much used by any municipality. Even websites were mentioned as not being very accessible for young people. In the two larger communities, and one medium, they mentioned how they have a separate website or webpage designed by young people in their attempt to make contact with young people. One large community was in the process of re-designing a site that has been evaluated by young people and will include things that they would like to see and learn about in their city.

Two communities find it difficult to access youth. However, after in depth conversation, these informants reveal that their municipality does

Municipalities use schools to access children and youth, yet many communities mention that they do not provide presentations within the schools.

not deliver direct services to their youth population, which made accessibility problematic. In both cases, secondary school aged youth was attending school and recreational programming in a neighbouring larger area.

One large community is currently undergoing a unique process that warrants mention. They are accessing young people by offering them financial support to become more engaged with their community. These grants are available to young people wanting to be engaged in the area of recreation, play, sport and culture. Money is also available for organizations that want to partner with young people to assist and mentor them in becoming more engaged in their community.

How do children and youth access decision makers?

“The design of youth friendly city cannot be a cookie cutter approach. It is important to look at the unique culture of each municipality and design processes that are suitable within the context of the city.”

*Municipal Councillor,
Nelson*

From the perception of the informants, young people are accessing decision makers through informal processes and presentations. One informant from a medium sized community states, “They have access to decision makers in the same way that any other person does. They can write a letter, send an email, or stop us on the street”. This does not play out the same way in larger communities, according to an informant. This person feels that mayor and council need to be more proactive in the youth community; “in order for decision makers to be accessible they should go where young people feel comfortable, instead of waiting for youth to contact them” (Youth Advocate Mentor, City of Vancouver).

Municipalities are rarely using TV or radio to access young people (24%). In the cases where participants mention this method, televised council meetings count as their access attempt to young people. In reflecting on this question, some informants notes that this was not the best way to use media and that if they had capacity, they would like to be more creative.

Existing Barriers for Including Young People

“A stigma still exists for young people with regards to decision making skills. Both adults and young people need training. Adults need education regarding the power that young people have in affecting change. Young people need training about how to harness the power they have.”

Senior Municipal Employee, West Vancouver

We do have a youth commission here, where young people actively do programming that build skills and gets their peers more involved in the design of things”

Junior Municipal Employee, Abbotsford

While most informants say that they are familiar with the child and youth participation policies and programs operating within their municipality, informants from the large communities mention that it was sometimes difficult to coordinate with the many different departments of people on how young people could enter into the department to become involved. While it may be easier to navigate smaller municipal systems, many of the communities surveyed did not involve youth in areas other than parks and recreation. Generally, informants consider providing services geared towards young people as a form of engagement. Most value the process of evaluation and are looking for an effective form of community engagement for all residents, including young people. |

|The biggest barrier to including children and youth in municipalities reports the informants is funding and lack of resources. Rarely do communities have the appropriate capacity to create sustainable processes that will last more than short-term. |One respondent notes that the typical interest timeframe of a young person, who has many things happening for them, does not last more than one to two years. This person mentions that they would like to see how mentoring could help younger youth transitions into decision making roles of their older peers.

Respondents from the smaller communities mentioned that times are tough for them with respect to funding in many areas and it causes frustration for all community members. They are witnessing many of their younger citizens having to leave home to find opportunities for employment elsewhere.

A lack of understanding by children and youth on how municipal process works is also a barrier reported by participants. One person mentions that apathy on the part of young people is a problem in their city. This does not necessarily mean that young people are uninterested in participating in the governance system; rather it means that sometimes the expectations of young people are not in line with the reality of the processes that exist.

“For children 12 and under, no problems, but older young people it is. It’s harder to target and get there attention. It’s easier to target parents to get younger youth involved.”

*Junior Municipal Employee,
Penticton*

It would be beneficial for children and youth to receive education about how decisions are made in municipal processes at an early age.

“Small communities need access to funding in order to better engage our younger citizens”

*Municipal Administrator
Zeballos*

Many respondents, especially from large municipalities mention that many young people get frustrated when the process doesn’t meet their idea of how things should work. This frustration often disengages the young person from the system and ultimately further alienates them for participating in the future. One respondent from a medium sized municipality mentioned that on one occasion a group of young people built a bike jump on a city-operated park. When the city realized that the jump was dangerous and had the potential of hurting others they decided that the jump needed to change in the interest of safety. When a city councillor met with the group of young people, they didn’t understand why the jump had to be altered or taken down. When they realized the time it would take to work with the city they decided to build the jump further from the community.

Sixty seven percent of the informants cited time as a barrier to child and youth participation. The informants reported that time was an issue for young people because, from their perspective, many young people may not have enough time available to learn about the process because of the many other things that are going on for them. For adults the issue was about taking the time to mentor them to make good decisions. When probed, it was noted by many of the respondents that working with children and youth are only one aspect of their municipal duties.

Half of the informants report that proper training was a barrier for them. These informants were from medium and small communities. They felt they lacked particular training about how to engage younger generations of people in practical and appropriate ways. Through the interview it was also discovered that both small communities share facilities with near by band councils and the respondents felt that they lacked training in how to effectively communicate and partner with their neighbours.

Forty one percent of respondents feel there was a lack of interest of children and youth to get involved in municipal affairs. These respondents were from medium to smaller communities. One respondent mention that many of the young people in their community did not feel

that the process was something that they would enjoy being involved in as it was currently operating. A significant amount of informants (44%) see their system as being youth un-friendly.

A lack of understanding of children and youth by local government staff was cited by 41% of informants as a barrier. These informants report that it was difficult to relate to the young people in the community because of the generation gap. One informant mentions that it would be interesting to receive education about youth culture and what it means to be a young person in today's world. On a positive note, only 21% of informants say that lack of staff interest in involving children and youth was a barrier.

Are Youth Consulted on Municipal Affairs?

Rarely are young men and women being consulted on issues relating to urban planning, sustainability, and transportation.

"Sometimes consultation processes work, sometimes they don't. The important thing is that we learn from them and apply our learning in the future, instead of making the same mistakes again."

*Youth Advocate
Mentor, Vancouver*

Most informants (90%) say they would like children and youth to be involved in particular issues that directly affect them and some report they are sometimes doing this well. Informants from two larger communities say they consult youth on almost every issue that affects children and youth, except for transportation, sustainability and urban planning. Medium sized communities believe they are doing some consulting youth on employment and child/youth violence.

Informants report consulting youth on leisure, recreation and tourism-related issues (over 70%) the most. Informants from the small communities report rarely consulting with children and youth on issues that affect them in a consistent and proactive way. This is primarily due to the particular barriers that communities of this size experience engaging youth. They mention that it was particularly difficult to identify youth who are interested in spending time in their current consultation process. However, when probed, it came to light that the process of consultation was not offered in such a way that attracted young people to get involved.

In general, all informants say their municipalities only rarely consult children and youth on urban planning, transportation and sustainability issues. In one case the informant from a medium sized municipality

mentioned that young people from their Youth Advisory Council are also participating on the municipal 'Visions' committee, which looks at issues of sustainability and commerce in their community. Recently, the central urban planning department of a large city consulted a young group of people, along with the owner of city property, and they generated ideas together about the future of the city space.

What Ages are Municipalities Engaging?

The future of many communities lies in how they engage their young people today.

“A community who nurtures the interest of their young people will see their young people sustaining the community in the future.”

Municipal Councillor, Slocan Village.

Almost all informants said there were no areas of municipal affairs that children and youth should be excluded from as long as they are interested in being involved, and are willing to engage in the process.

Young children below the age of ten are primarily involved within municipal systems as recipients of services (Swimming, community center programs, etc). Parents and family members are the individuals that municipal staff target to for feedback for this age group. Thirteen to sixteen is where cities see young people visiting community centers with their friends, typically after school hours. When municipalities offer creative things to do for young people and their friends, city staff are able to gather more information about what works and what doesn't when it comes to meaningful engagement.

Cities are noticing that young people aged 17 or more are not being engaged as their younger peers. Many respondents note that it is difficult to reach out to this group because of the many things that they see are out there for them. When asked to identify some of these things, most survey participants mention school pressure and other social events with friends as possibilities. In one case, an informant believes that drugs and alcohol may play a role in their lack of interest and engagement.

What Tools Would Help Municipalities Engage Young People?

Tools such as experiential workshops would be extremely beneficial for communities in helping them to learn more about young people.

All informants feel that tools to help them engage children and youth would be helpful and useful. Training videos were thought to be less effective tools because of the limited opportunity for participation. Experiential methods such as workshops/seminars are mentioned as particularly effective when engaging younger community members.

All informants mention that best practices would be helpful to them in designing more participatory processes within their municipal system. All informants mention that providing practical strategies to engage youth in municipal governance and outlining community resources would be extremely helpful as well.

Sixty one percent of informants mention policies should be developed that direct municipalities to engage children and youth in the issues that directly affect them. One respondent was additionally interested in how she could become a better advocate; “How do I increase the political will in my community so that young people won’t be overlooked? How can I assist young people in getting their voice heard?” (Junior Municipal Employee, Maple Ridge).