

The Challenge of Youth Engagement in Local Government:  
Exploring the Use of Youth Councils in Amherst and Halifax Regional Municipality,  
Nova Scotia

by

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## **Abstract**

Youth councils are an increasingly popular tool that both government and non-governmental organizations use to inform policy and program development, to increase the participation of young people, and to improve the connection of youth to their communities and to civic life more broadly. In this thesis, the youth engagement experiences of local governments in Amherst, Nova Scotia, and Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia are examined. Both municipalities initiated youth councils in recent years in an attempt to consult on issues affecting youth in their communities. The two communities have experienced varied degrees of success in implementing these strategies. In broad terms, youth councils operated more successfully in the smaller, more self-contained community of Amherst than in the more sprawling urban municipality of the Halifax area. The divergent experiences of these two municipalities inform a discussion about the merits of youth councils as a tool for engagement for local governments. It is concluded that while youth councils can be both effective in terms of achieving immediate objectives, success is not easily reproduced in all scenarios and depends to a large extent on the characteristics of the community itself, the level of support from adults and facilitators, and the ability of the councils to meet their objectives and thus achieve legitimacy among stakeholders, creating a positive feedback loop which engenders further effectiveness.



## **List of Abbreviations Used**

AYTC	Amherst Youth Town Council
CBRM	Cape Breton Regional Municipality
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
HRM	Halifax Regional Municipality
HRMYC	Halifax Regional Municipality Youth Committee
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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# Chapter 1

# Introduction

A cursory review of any writing on the subject of youth engagement in civic life reveals a decided pessimism about the future of democracy in Canada. This pessimism is not altogether unwarranted. There is certainly ample research to support the fact millennials – that is, those born between 1980 and 2000 – are less likely than their parents and grandparents to participate in formal aspects of civic life. One of the most cited measures of this phenomenon is voter turnout, and among young people, it has been steadily decreasing since the 80's (Barnes 2010). The most recent federal election in 2011 saw only 38.8 percent of eligible 18-24 year olds turn out to cast a ballot (Elections Canada 2012). The 2009 provincial election in Nova Scotia had a turnout of 20.3 percent in the same age group (Elections Nova Scotia 2013). And municipally, the numbers tend to dip even lower.

While research on youth disengagement in general is not hard to come by, it tends to survey broad macro-level trends at the national or international level. Little work has yet been performed on youth disengagement at the local levels in Canada. This is not to imply that local governments don't see youth disengagement as an issue; on the contrary, citizen engagement broadly and youth engagement specifically are common matters of concern for all levels of government. Engagement activities aimed at addressing these issues take a variety of forms, and one popular and common approach is to introduce a youth advisory council (hereafter referred to as 'youth council').

Youth councils are bodies attached to adult institutions which serve the purpose of providing advice to adults on the needs and interests of young people, while sometimes also undertaking project and volunteer work. Such youth councils, committees, or 'youth town

councils' are an increasingly common means of connecting a community's youth with the apparatus of local government, yet little empirical work has been done in the Canadian context to date to survey this trend or to determine its effectiveness with regards to engagement and policymaking.<sup>1</sup> These youth councils may very well be a way for lawmakers and bureaucrats to reach unengaged youth, promoting local government to younger generations while gathering information about the interests and needs of younger generations. Further research and analysis is needed to determine just where youth councils ought to fit in the toolkit of youth engagement practitioners, and this thesis is intended to provide a starting point.

This study examines the engagement of young people in local government in Nova Scotia through the use of youth councils. Broadly, the thesis explores the effectiveness of youth councils as a mechanism for youth engagement using established best practices for youth engagement as evaluation criteria. The thesis addresses three broad themes: general operations and structures of youth councils, how youth councils impact youth engagement, and how they impact municipal policymaking. All are important areas of examination, because as I will argue later, youth councils are often touted for their ability to not only better inform government, but also to provide youth with more opportunities, experience, and knowledge of government institutions. This thesis will examine how the actual mechanisms that we use to engage youth impact not only the youth themselves but also the larger 'adult' structures within which they are often contained.

The thesis begins with an examination of local government as a site of citizen participation. This is discussed within the context of theories of deliberative democracy and their

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<sup>1</sup> The Federation of Canadian Municipalities carried out a survey of its members in 2013 to establish what activities communities were undertaking to engage youth. The results were not available prior to the completion of this thesis, however, it will doubtless serve to establish a baseline of data about youth engagement in local government.

influence on the regime of citizen participation in policymaking. The thesis then explores the issue of youth disengagement from political life and argues that it is an issue which affects and thus deserves attention from local governments. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of commonly stated best practices for citizen engagement, particularly for local government. Chapter 3 explores youth advisory councils as mechanisms for youth engagement in local government, looking at literature examining their use in the United Kingdom and the United States. Using these comparative experiences, the thesis establishes a set of ideal characteristics of youth councils in the context of local governments. Chapter 4 analyzes two specific case studies of youth councils which have been used in municipal governments in the communities of Amherst and Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia. Chapter 5 then draws comparisons between the two cases and to the literature to explore whether youth councils might be effective tools of youth engagement within the context of local governments in Canada.

### **1.1 Setting the Scene: Youth Disengagement in Canada**

Each election invariably raises the spectre of youth disengagement from formal political institutions. Much research has been done to chronicle the downward trend in voting and other phenomena such as diminishing political party participation among young Canadians (eg: Barnes 2010; Menard 2010; MacKinnon et al 2007; Howe 2010; R.A. Malatest and Associates 2011). Young Canadians are also documented to be less knowledgeable about politics than their elders, and this phenomenon shows signs of being linked to cohort differences rather than typical life-cycle changes (Howe 2010). What this means is that younger generations, for reasons which are complex and not entirely clear at this stage, are failing to ‘turn on’ to formal political life as they grow into adulthood. While young people have always participated at lower rates than older adults, past generations tended to grow more politically active as they aged (Howe 2010).

However, those who have come of age since the 1980s are less and less likely to do so, despite being connected to the community in a myriad of other, less traditional ways (MacKinnon et al. 2007). Levels of volunteerism among youth, for example, remain high (Howe 2010). This lack of participation in formal politics is acting as a drag on overall participation rates, particularly at election time, which in turn could have serious ramifications for the quality and health of Canadian democracy (Howe 2010). Aside from voting, if fewer Canadians show interest in political life over time, this could lead not only to less legitimate governments, but also a smaller range of candidates to choose from.

Examining the reasons why youth participate in fewer numbers than older adults is not the intended purpose of this thesis, and many other academics have already done extensive work on the topic. Rather, this thesis is intended to explore the effectiveness of one particular type of youth engagement strategy which is being deployed to mitigate the problem of youth disengagement. Given the wide coverage of this problem, particularly around election times, it is worth considering how it is that communities are using their limited resources to respond to this lack of participation. It is important to understand the impacts that engagement exercises are having on their intended recipients and associated communities in order to ensure effective use of resources as well as to avoid unintended consequences, such as disempowerment and greater distrust of political institutions.

## **1.2 Definitions**

‘Youth’, ‘young people’, ‘children’, and ‘young adult’ are often used interchangeably but may have similar or different meanings depending on the context. The time at which one becomes an adult differs depending on the country or culture. There typically exists a legal ‘age of majority’ in most countries (often 18), but reaching this age doesn’t always mean that a young

person is fully incorporated into adulthood, nor does it mean that their vulnerability no longer exists. The United Nations defines ‘children’ as those ages 0-14, and youth as those ages 15-24 (UNESCO n.d.). Within the context of discussing formal political activity, people often use ‘youth’ to refer to 18-24 year olds, as they are the youngest demographic who can legally vote and run for office in most jurisdictions. Yet the crisis of participation extends to those in their late twenties and early thirties as well (Howe 2010). Furthermore, many of the activities undertaken by communities to engage youth, such as in one of the case studies covered in this thesis, may extend to youth as young as 13, and often target youth who have not yet acquired the right to vote. There are clearly different considerations in terms of tactics for engaging young people based on emotional maturity, as well as stage of life (such as whether they are in high school or university). What is considered a ‘youth-friendly approach’ may vary depending on the age of the youth. However, the challenge of disengagement, as well as broader societal perceptions of youth as disengaged and disinterested extend to those in all these age groups, implying that we can at the very least, draw a boundary between ‘youth’ and ‘adult’ that demarcates a difference in how each group experiences political life and how they engage with their community. Also, since much of the literature is focused on youth under the age of 24, for the purposes of this paper I will be using the term ‘youth’ to refer to individuals between the ages of 13 and 24, inclusive. ‘Children’, (those under the age of 13) are also of interest to many people doing engagement work, but they are not the chief concern of this paper. It should be noted that since most countries use 18 as the age of majority, ‘children’ in a legal sense refers those lacking in the formal rights of adulthood and who require additional protections and rights as a result. Additionally, the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines ‘child’ as those under the age of 18 and its statutes thus apply to this group. However, it is recognized that older

children, who are often referred to as ‘youth’ and will be in the context of this thesis, are ‘adults in training’ and thus should be introduced to various aspects of the adult world over time.



## Chapter 2

## Literature Review<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 Why Local Government Matters

Canadian local government is an understudied and undertheorized field. Municipal government has long been viewed as primarily focused on service delivery rather than political debate and representation, which is perhaps why academia has yet to substantively explore issues of public participation in Canadian local government (Tindal and Tindal 2009). The subservient role of municipal government to the provinces, as rendered by the Constitution, has created an image of municipalities as service providers who don't have the ability to make serious policy decisions (Tindal and Tindal 2009). This emphasis on formal powers clouds the degree to which municipalities actually do have a great deal of importance within the context of federalism, despite being so-called 'creatures of the provinces'.

Canadian local governments are at the bottom of the hierarchy of Canadian federalism. Lacking constitutional recognition, Article 92(8) of the Constitution Act 1867 gives provincial governments the authority to oversee all aspects of municipal matters (Government of Canada Department of Justice 2014). While in reality, much of the work of running communities is delegated to local authorities, provincial governments have been known to flex their constitutional powers when the need arises (such as in the case of the amalgamation of Toronto in 1998) (see Milroy 2002). The power to control municipalities is "jealously guarded" by the provinces, and thus constitutional recognition is unlikely (Dewing and Young 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of this chapter were adapted from three papers written in 2012-13: *Youth Engagement in Local Government: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How To Do It Well* for POLI 5602; *Youth Councils in the United Kingdom and the United States: Deliberative Democracy or Tokenist Exercise?* for POLI 5301; and *Is Child Participation in Development 'Over-theorised?' Reflections on children as actors in development and the discourse of children's right to participation* for POLI 5340.

Municipalities thus have a highly institutionalized relationship with the provinces, and a somewhat ad-hoc relationship with the federal government.

The standard role of municipalities is to provide services related to roads, sidewalks, waste disposal, public transit, parks and recreation centres, water treatment, and so on (Tindal and Tindal 2009). Yet even within the purview of service delivery, municipalities are doing more than ever before. Increasing financial strain on the federal and provincial governments has led to ‘downloading’ of responsibilities onto municipal governments as a result of austerity measures, and this downloading has tended to not come with additional funding arrangements. Thus many social services (such as those related to immigration settlement and public housing) are now dealt with by municipalities in many provinces (Tindal and Tindal 2009).

A greater degree of control over public services thus potentially changes the degree to which Canadians are impacted by decision making at the local level. To ignore urban government in particular is to ignore the institutions which govern approximately 80 percent of Canada’s population, and these urban communities also generate most of the country’s GDP (Bradford 2002).

Service delivery is important and comprises a great deal of the activities that keep local communities operating, but it is also important to explore municipal government within the context of their role as representatives. In slightly more abstract terms, we can think of municipal governments, large and small, as the nerve centres of our everyday lives. And as Bradford (2002) argues, quite simply, place matters. Bradford summarizes this ‘place perspective’ as one that “sees local places not in nostalgic terms of traditional, homogenous communities, nor as mere locations on a map, but rather as dynamic locales where larger flows and processes that structure daily life are given concrete meaning” (6). Similarly Meric Gertler (2001) argues that cities are

the physical spaces where people, ideas, and capital converge, meaning that local governments have an enormous role to play in managing this convergence (as cited in Bradford 2002). Putting aside the economic role of cities, local communities are simply where things happen in the most tangible sense. Work, play, education, opportunity, innovation, ideas and struggles are often constituted geographically within the confines of a local space (Bradford 2002). While the internet has created a global community, we still experience much of our lives within the boundaries of our local communities. Thus, we should also critically engage with the processes which govern those communities. Tindal and Tindal (2009) argue that it is time to see the role of municipal government as primarily “to provide the means by which a local community can express and address its collective objectives” rather than simply as a service provider (3). They argue that local governments are political as well as administrative, and can serve as a space for public debate and struggle related to issues which are very real and very important. Besides, service delivery is not an apolitical process. Municipal governments are often responsible for making decisions regarding service delivery which might serve to empower or disempower certain groups. To provide a youth-centric example of this, municipal governments control two areas which intersect with the lives of youth in many ways: transportation and recreation. Decisions about how and where to provide these services and how accessible they should be have a great deal of impact on the lived experiences of youth, particularly those who live in urban regions with many different communities vying for public resources.

According to Tindal and Tindal (2009), it is precisely local government’s proximity to the people that it governs that makes it best suited to discuss many of the issues that concern citizens. Also, most local representatives are not members of parties, and represent relatively small geographic areas, making them relatively accessible. The potential thus exists for

meaningful dialogue to occur within local governments – if people are made aware of the importance of doing so.

## **2.2 Deliberative Democracy and the Right of Youth to Participate**

The idea that citizens ought to participate in local government can be connected at least in part to the growth in support for methods of deliberative democracy at all levels of government. The growing emphasis on citizen engagement reveals the strong influence that deliberative methods have had over the last twenty years. Broadly, deliberative democracy is a form of political interaction whereby people, preferably those who are being personally impacted by a particular policy or issue, share ideas and reflect upon the ideas of others in order to come to a decision. Unlike the traditional pluralist model, these interactions are not framed as a zero-sum game based on adversarial relationships and competition, but rather, on cooperation and compromise. People must be willing to submit to the ideas of others and potentially have their minds changed. This differs from classical pluralism, which assumes interests are fixed prior to entering the political sphere (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009; Weinstock and Kahane 2010). Furthermore, it is grounded in the concept of the ‘public good’ rather than self-interest. Policy, says Cohen (2003), should not be determined in a competition between groups pursuing their self-interest. Instead, “public explanations and justifications of laws and policies are to be cast in terms of conceptions of the common good” (343). Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009) agree: “Deliberative democracy is grounded in an assumption about individuals that stresses their capacity to reflect upon their own preferences, values and judgements in light of their participation in political dialogue with other individuals” (216). The group is meant to come to a consensus on what to do on terms that are acceptable to the entire group. The outcome is then

considered to have greater democratic legitimacy because it was deliberated on by the people who will be impacted by it (Monpetit et al. 2004).

Deliberative methods differ from conventional systems of citizen-government interaction, in which politicians do most of the deliberation and external actors must use what resources and influence they can garner to persuade those politicians one way or the other. Adding a mechanism by which decision makers liaise directly with people provides the so-called ‘will of the people’ with a degree of influence and importance. It is this privileging of the will of the people that adherents of deliberative democracy believe will help to solve the so-called ‘democratic deficit’ being experienced in much of the industrialized world.

Cohen (2003, 346) identifies five aspects of a deliberative democracy, which I will summarize here:

- It is an “ongoing and independent association, whose members expect it to continue into the indefinite future.”
- The institutions through which citizens deliberate have been structured through deliberation and are set up to allow deliberation to continue going forward.
- It is understood that citizens are diverse, and have differing and sometimes conflicting ideas and values. Even though they are all committed to using deliberation to resolve problems, they are aware of the “divergent aims” of the group members and “do not think that some particular set of preferences, convictions or ideals is mandatory.”
- Deliberation is the source of an outcome’s legitimacy, therefore political and legislative decisions should be able to be traced back to a deliberative process.
- Citizens recognize the deliberative capacities of other citizens and thus are expected to use deliberative methods during interactions.

In order to work, deliberative democracy must adhere to a set of guidelines. For one, it must be equal, open to everyone and anyone impacted by the policy, adhere to a standard of open exchange of information, and citizen participants must be equally free to shape the direction of the conversation as those participants in government (Hunold 2001). In other words, power ought to be shared. As Hunold (2001) puts it, “Deliberative democracy requires that citizens participate on the basis of equality with administrative offices and technical experts. In practice, this means that all participants of policy deliberations should have the same chance to define issues, dispute evidence, and shape the agenda” (157). Furthermore, citizens must be willing to accept the views of others, “at least in principle” (Weinstock and Kahane 2010, 2). The idea is that “citizens must evince ‘reciprocity’ in their dealings, putting forward arguments that can be expected to move the democratic process toward consensus” (Weinstock and Kahane 2010, 2).

Deliberative democracy is a move away from past emphasis on the role of experts and elites in shaping policy, giving the average citizen a chance to have more direct influence on the process (Monpetit et al 2004; Weinstock and Kahane 2010). Cohen (2003) argues that “When properly conducted, then, democratic politics involves public deliberation focused on the common good, requires some form of manifest equality among citizens, and shapes the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good” (344). Deliberative democracy is also a recognition of the growing cynicism of the public towards the policy making process, both within bureaucracies and legislatures. As Laforest and Phillips (2006) point out, deliberative democracy is meant to help relieve some of this cynicism by introducing bottom-up measures into the process (76). This has gradually evolved over time away from traditional town-halls and public forums into more deliberative methods. Groups like the OECD (2001, 2009) have even released multiple policy briefs with tips

on how to best engage citizens in policymaking which encourage active citizenship and open dialogue. Participation and citizen engagement have thus become rather trendy ideas in the study of policymaking.

One of the weaknesses of the classic pluralist theory is its assumption that interests can be adequately represented within the interest group model. While later forms of pluralist theory have attempted to address this, they still fall short with regards to understanding and accounting for the different levels of access that people have to the policy apparatus. A rapidly growing dissatisfaction with the political system in much of the industrialized world is indicative of a growing awareness of citizens' lack of true power over the decisions that govern us. According to Mouffe (1999), "liberal democratic societies are ill-prepared to confront the present challenge, since they are unable to grasp its nature. One of the main reasons for this inability lies in the type of political theory currently in vogue, dominated as it is by an individualistic, universalistic, and rationalistic framework" (745). Deliberative democracy is one attempt to address that.

But the idea of deliberation also has its shortcomings. It can read as a simple and naïve perspective on how to 'do' decision making without marginalizing anyone or allowing power dynamics to interfere – which is ideal in theory but immensely difficult to navigate in reality. Another one of the most common critiques is the sheer logistical challenge of ensuring all people are included in the process (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009, 217). On a large scale and in a heterogeneous context, it may prove unattainable to give all actors a voice. Proponents would argue that it is not necessary to have every single person at the table, and that using a greater number (and thus hopefully a variety of) citizen representatives will suffice (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009). This is perhaps part of the motivation behind using a device such as a youth council as a means to connect with the opinions of young people – talking to all young people (or

even being able to realistically have all young people respond to a government survey) is unlikely to succeed. Finding a broad cross section of citizens with a range of experiences should provide the diversity required to ensure that the outcome is seen as legitimate.

Another common critique of deliberative democracy relates to the potential loss of power to bureaucrats and legislators (Turnbull and Aucoin 2006). Critics argue that one of the potential ramifications of deliberative democracy is that governments will be required to implement the will of the people, even if it goes against their judgement of what is most prudent. But it is not necessary for deliberative democracy to operate in this manner. A system that requires governments to implement the will of the citizenry simply changes the balance of power from the state to the citizen, but that is not necessarily the goal of deliberative democracy. Arguably, the idea is not to take *all* the power away from government and give it to someone else, but to share it, and to allow citizens a voice when they ask for it. Government should always be at the table during deliberations, and their perspective given its due weight. Citizens, in turn, must be willing to respect the judgement and expertise of government, given that government is willing to do the same for them. So, in such a system and within the context of a youth council, governments would not be expected to indiscriminately apply the wishes of young people to their policies. It is simply expected that through deliberation with the young people, they could come to a mutually agreeable solution that everyone can live with. As Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) point out, deliberative democracy is not meant to replace representative democracy, but rather, supplement it.

Critics of deliberative democracy often charge that the theory assumes that diverse interests can be satisfied through deliberation, when in fact there are many values held by people which they are unable or unwilling to compromise on. Hunold (2001) gives the example of



abortion, which is an issue that many people refuse to have their minds changed about. Nonetheless, he says, part of the importance of deliberation is that it helps both sides to at least gain clarity on what it is that the other side believes and wants. This, in and of itself, is a fruitful exercise, even if it cannot lead to reconciliation. Weinstock and Kahane (2010) point out that compromise, rather than consensus, may be sufficient. In order to do this, however, the deliberative democratic discourse needs to determine “morally acceptable compromises from the ones that threaten participants’ integrity” (6).

So as deliberative methods become more popular, they may emerge in the form of an actual structure, such as an advisory committee of citizens. A frequently cited example of deliberative democracy at work is that of the high-profile Citizen’s Assembly used in British Columbia to determine the best method of electoral reform (Lang 2007). Engagement experts like Don Lenihan of the Public Policy Forum have advocated for deliberative methods in the development of stronger public policy and use examples like the policy engagement exercises undertaken as a part of New Brunswick’s Poverty Reduction Initiative in 2008 (Lenihan 2012). The government’s engagement strategy resulted in respectful, thoughtful dialogue resulting in progressive policies which were supported by members of the legislature across the ideological spectrum.

The emergence of youth-oriented participatory structures within governments as instances of deliberative democracy at work remains under-theorized, particularly in the North American context. There are exciting possibilities for the impact of these structures on youth civic engagement. Youth are still in the process of learning to become citizens, therefore, deliberative democracy may not pose the same challenges for them that it could for adults. As Weinstock and Kahane (2010) point out, “Deliberative democratic citizens must be disposed to

seek agreement with other citizens, possess deliberative traits that facilitate this process, and adopt a questioning, potentially critical, attitude toward their own conceptions of the good” (7). This is not the typical way in which we operate in the political sphere nowadays, so it would take time to educate adults on this method. Youth, on the other hand, are unlikely to have much experience in the political sphere and thus fewer expectations about how it ought to operate and how they should behave within it. There may, therefore, be an opportunity to socialize them with deliberative methods early on.

The idea of using deliberative methods to engage children is relatively recent and reflects the changing status of children and youth in Western society. Deliberative democracy is often discussed only with reference to those who have formal political rights. Yet in recent years, involving children in the world of adult decision-making has become more common, and often justified within a rights-based framework. Fuchs (2007) writes that "as part of a broad movement for political, economic and social internationalism, the founding of transnational organizations related to children was a reflection on the new social challenges generated by the development of the modern industrial society" (394). Lowden (2001) and Ansell (2004) explain that there are three general viewpoints on the place of children in society. First is the 'protectionist' approach, which sees children as vulnerable and immature, in need of protection by adults. Both psychology and sociology have mapped the development and socialization of children, often pointing out ways in which they are deficient in comparison to adults. According to Matthews and Limb (1998), "they promote a view that children are not only incomplete but also passive (non-actors) in creating their futures. In effect, children are little more than adults-in-waiting" (67).

The 'liberationist approach' takes almost the complete opposite view and frames children as "an oppressed minority group, deprived of all civil rights" and in need of empowerment (Lowden 2001, 103). This perspective sees children as important and valuable assets in the community development process, with a unique perspective which is often missed by adults (Ansell 2004; Edwards 1996; Hart 1992). This approach reframes children as competent rather than immature, and calls on adults to treat children as mature beings with legitimate thoughts and ideas, in order to imbue them with the confidence and abilities necessary to realize those ideas (Lowden 2001).

A third perspective, and one that is perhaps the most dominant, combines the two, arguing that there must be protections for children in addition to structures of empowerment. Cohen et al. (1992) characterizes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as embodying this pragmatic compromise between the two perspectives (as cited in Reynaert et al. 2009).

The CRC emerged in 1989 as one of the United Nations' most successful internationally binding treaties. All but two states - Somalia and the United States - became signatories. Fuchs (2007) as well as O'Neill and Zinga (2008) argue that the CRC, despite its flaws, has shown itself to be a resilient and generally well-crafted document which was created collaboratively between stakeholders both inside government and outside. It contains 54 articles which protect a variety of political, economic and social rights. These rights can be broadly divided into "3 Ps": provision (food, water, healthcare, education, etc.), protection (from conflict, from labour, from abuse, etc), and participation (Reynaert et al. 2009). Reynaert et al. (2009) point to Article 12 – the participation clause, as an aspect of the CRC which has particularly captured the imaginations of academics and practitioners. It is this clause which differentiates the CRC from

its predecessor, the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959), which focused only on provision and protection.

Article 12 says the following:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1989).

Clause 1 asserts the right to participation, weighted on the basis of the child's age, maturity and experience, revealing a combination of protectionist and liberationist tendencies. Clause 2 lays practical groundwork for how this should be interpreted in an institutional setting. As a binding treaty, countries are required to abide by the CRC in the formulation of national policy and to take action on matters which impact the wellbeing of children (UNICEF Canada 2013).

Edwards (1996) remarks that today, few would accept that anyone, regardless of their age, race, gender or ability, should be denied the right to participate in issues impacting their lives. Yet children are perhaps the last group for whom it is acceptable to discriminate against in matters of participation, on the basis of assumptions made about their maturity, ability, passivity, dependence and vulnerability (Edwards 1996). The legitimization of the children's participation movement through its institutionalization in entities such as the United Nations has thus permitted numerous national and international actors to take up the cause and promote it vehemently. Fuchs (2007) has observed that the concept of children's rights has now become an international norm. The adoption of the CRC and its subsequent use to justify and legitimize

action in the realm of children's participation seems to provide evidence of this (Fuchs 2007). The move to include youth in the governance of communities is thus not only motivated by a crisis in youth participation, but also by theories of deliberative democracy and new international norms of children's participatory rights. What is less clear is whether structures like youth councils are effective at providing spaces for deliberative democracy while also allowing youth to realize their right to participation.

### **2.3 Citizen and Youth Engagement in Local Government**

As previously established, an increasingly routine aspect of the job of a public administrator or representative is to consult and engage with the public. It is no longer considered acceptable for politicians and bureaucrats to make public policy totally divorced from the input of the citizenry (Laforest and Phillips 2006). There is thus a need to provide opportunities to combine deliberative or participatory democracy with the traditional representative model (Wilson 1999). Yet much cynicism surrounds the project of public participation – as Wyman, Shulman and Ham (1999) point out, people generally feel that there is less engagement than there should be, and “much of the consultation that does occur between the government and its electorate is merely ‘window dressing’, lacking in legitimacy” (1). This is perhaps endemic of a larger societal dissatisfaction with levels of accountability and trustworthiness in our government (Abelson and Gauvin 2004).

It's easy to be flippant. Negativity about politics is hardly a new trend. A degree of suspicion towards political leaders is arguably necessary for the sake of a robust democracy, but some trust during the policy process is important. Representative government inherently entails trust between the citizen and the politician, wherein the citizen gives up the right to govern themselves in exchange for being relieved of the burden of constant decision making about the

future of the community (Laforest and Phillips 2006). There are two views on the role of the political representative – that of trustee, and that of delegate (Tindal and Tindal 2009). Whereas a trustee is expected to gather the views of their constituents but to ultimately use their best judgement, a delegate is expected to act in accordance with the wishes of their constituents. While the idea of the representative as trustee makes sense, (given the amount of decision making the average representative is expected to perform, having a direct democracy model would be untenable), it is apparent that many Canadians view the delegate model as more legitimate. In 2012, the non-profit organization Samara released a study which asked Canadians to rank the roles of Member of Parliament in order of importance. ‘Representing the views of constituents’ placed second in importance (Samara 2013). This provides evidence of something that has been anecdotally observed over the years: Canadians believe that it is important that their views be represented, and that the public should play a role in policymaking in some capacity. Since according to Samara, those interviewed gave MPs a score of 46 percent on how well they represent the views of their constituents, it is clear that the public doesn’t feel confident in the ability of their representatives to speak on their behalf. Canadians feel it is time to speak to government directly and it is not enough anymore to simply leave it to the ‘experts’.

Laforest and Phillips (2006) likewise point out that all of this is representative of a shift in focus away from ‘traditional actors’ such as interest groups and political parties, and towards more emphasis on the role of the individual in the political process. According to Laforest and Phillips, “Rather than assuming that elected officials will serve as trustees for their constituents from one election to the next, citizens are expected to have access to the policy process at various points and on a regular basis” (67). While parties often serve to aggregate interests under the banner of a common ideology, the realities of the Westminster parliamentary system often causes

the needs of the party to override the will of each representative's constituents. This creates a tension for the representative as they find themselves torn between trustee and delegate models of representation.

Canadian local governments thus pose an interesting alternative because, with a few exceptions, they do not have party systems. While this can make discussion and deliberation more complicated, it also potentially opens up access points to the policymaking process that don't exist at the provincial and federal levels (Tindal and Tindal 2009). It means that consultation and engagement with the public can by-pass partisanship and potentially lead to tangible impacts on policy outcomes. Furthermore, it provides a space for both individuals and groups who may not be able to access a more tightly controlled provincial or federal system. Theoretically, the individual can also play more of a role in a local government system due to increased proximity and relative degree of access to decision makers. Both the individual citizen and the individual politician can hold more sway over decision making if they can bypass the party and caucus system. It also, however, leaves the door open for the interests of the powerful and wealthy to access policymaking, particularly because election finance is so under-regulated at the municipal level (Tindal and Tindal 2009; Young and Austin 2008). It is thus important for local governments to make spaces for citizens to ensure that those without ready resources at their disposal can still make their needs known.

Specific categories of citizens may require specialized attention in order to ensure their full participation in the process of consultation and engagement. Youth are often identified as a group in need of such engagement, and declining voter turnout rates are often cited as evidence of their waning interest and involvement in governance and political life (Barnes 2010). This decline in voter turnout is well documented and widely discussed (Barnes 2010; Menard 2010;

R.A. Malatest and Associates 2011; MacKinnon et al 2007; Howe 2010; Horgan 2011; Ibbitson 2011, etc). Additionally, voter turnout rates decline even lower the more local the form of government, indicating a serious lack of engagement with municipal governments. These turnout numbers do not necessarily mean there has been a similarly steep decline in other community-oriented activities, as higher numbers of youth still participate in such activities. Yet according to Howe (2010), “it does not, however, alter the essential conclusion: there is a sizable block of young Canadians, too large by any reasonable yardstick, whose disinclination to be involved in public affairs extends across a broad range of civic and political activities” (3). Some local governments have responded by directly engaging youth in their communities through various mechanisms, such as youth councils. This implies that government are beginning to view the trustee model of representation as inadequate in addressing the needs and interests of youth. Spaces are therefore being created within these governments to allow more direct connections between youth, public servants, and politicians. These spaces may be easier to manufacture at the local level due to the lack of party apparatus and smaller, less complex bureaucracies in comparison to higher levels of government.

#### **2.4 Why Youth Are Disengaged from Local Government**

The reasons for youth disengagement are still being debated, but there are several trends which have been confirmed by multiple researchers. One is that Canadian youth have far less knowledge of politics and civic institutions than past generations (MacKinnon et al. 2007; Howe 2010; Milner et al. 2007; Menard 2010). We know that there is a strong link between political knowledge and participation (Galston 2001, Howe 2010). Howe (2010) argues that just a basic amount of political knowledge would be enough to improve voter turnout, (though it is certainly not the only piece of the puzzle). Countries where citizens have more knowledge of their



political institutions and processes also have not seen their turnout diminish to the same extent as in Canada (Howe 2010). Crucially, knowledge is not only linked to better participation rates also linked to critical capacity, which is in turn integral to a more robust and healthy democracy, one in which citizens are able to hold elected officials to account (Howe 2010).

Other explanations are more generational in focus. MacKinnon et al. (2007) in their synthesis paper on the state of youth engagement in Canada, argue that young Canadians are less interested in formal institutions, more impatient with partisan politics, and choose to participate in other ways than through formal political channels. One might extrapolate from this that young people today are looking for a different sort of political involvement than their parents were – one that has personal meaning and produces more clear-cut links between people and their elected officials (MacKinnon et al. 2007).

This effect is supported by the observation of a so-called ‘cohort’ effect on voter turnout. Propensity to participate can be impacted broadly by two different factors – the year that one was born, and one’s age. In his discussion of youth disengagement in the Canadian context, Howe (2010) differentiates these as ‘cohort’ and ‘life cycle’ factors. Research also shows that young people have always participated in fewer numbers than older generations – this is the ‘life cycle’ effect. Young people usually start to vote as they grow into adulthood and take on more responsibilities. This engagement tends to peak in the later years of life and decline as people near the end of their lives. The life-cycle effect thus explains youth disengagement as the result of the transient, mobile, and variable nature of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood as well as the self-regarding nature of most youth. Historically, by the time youth reach their mid-twenties they would have had jobs, settled into family life, and began participating in civic life more fully (Howe 2010). Yet youth nowadays experience longer period of transience and get

settled much later than past generations, just one sign that there are substantive differences in generations or cohorts. A person's 'cohort' often impacts how and to what extent one is politically socialized. Different generations can exhibit different ways and means of political participation on the basis of when they were born and came of age. Since the 80's, researchers have observed a general decline in voter turnout, driven in large part by the decrease in youth turnout. This is being driven by the cohort effect, because young people are not beginning to participate as early as older generations did, if at all. This is creating an overall 'drag' on participation numbers (Howe 2010).

A third possible explanation has to do with the degree of integration between young people and their communities. Howe (2010) points to the weakening of social integration and the separation of youth from adults as an important piece of the puzzle. Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, labour laws and educational requirements have kept young people sequestered in communities mostly made up of other young people (Camino and Zeldin 2002; Howe 2010). According to Camino and Zeldin (2002), this has perpetuated negative attitudes from adults about youth. Howe (2010) also says it has essentially encouraged behaviours in young people that they are already predisposed to, namely individualism and apathy. Howe says that young people are more inward looking or 'self-regarding' and defer less to authority. He argues that we can observe "weaker regard among the young for relevant social norms that have sustained participation in the past – the sense of obligation to keep up with current events, the belief in a civic duty to vote in elections, the desire to be connected to one's community by being engaged in these ways" (264). Howe then suggests that the solution to this might be to better integrate young people into adult communities in ways that will encourage them to become more effective participants.

## **2.5 Benefits of Youth Engagement in Local Government**

In support of this notion of better integration, MacKinnon et al. (2007) also state that “When [youth] are given venues for meaningful participation, they have a lot to contribute and exhibit deep concern about their communities and country” (5). Youth and their communities could thus stand to benefit from the increased availability of such meaningful spaces at the municipal level. There are some obvious and highly tangible benefits to including young people in the process of policymaking. These can be separated into two general categories – benefits to the youth, and benefits to the community.

Youth who take part in participatory exercises or structures are gaining skills they will require as adults. On a practical level, such skills are often requirements of success in the workforce and academia (Brennan et al. 2007). Some of the oft-cited skills include interpersonal or social skills, self-esteem and confidence, public speaking ability, leadership skills, problem solving skills, and decision making ability (Brennan et al. 2007; Molloy et al 2002; Percy-Smith 2010). Instilling such leadership and communication skills will not only benefit young people in their future careers, but will provide wider societal benefits as they move into the workforce and contribute to various components of public and private life.

Additionally, it has been shown that youth who are engaged in governance tend to know more about it – an obvious connection, but an important one (Howe 2010). Taking part in an engagement exercise can give youth the experiential learning about formal institutions as well as informal political interaction that is necessary to produce continued participation in the future. Engagement can thus correlate to democratic literacy, creating voting adults with more knowledge of the institutions and structures which govern our everyday lives, better critical thinking skills, and more ability to discern between various political options (Howe 2010;

Galston 2001; Brennan et al. 2007). This has broader consequences, as democratic literacy improves the overall quality of public discourse and debate and creates a healthier, more informed democracy. It also makes it more likely that these youth will participate in formal political actions such as voting or joining political parties (Galston 2001, 223). This means that such engagement activities could be integral to reversing the slide in formal participation in our governance institutions and structures which has resulted from aforementioned cohort-related changes. In short, engagement in governance helps youth to understand the responsibilities that accompany citizenship and follow through on those responsibilities in substantive ways (Hart 1992; Zeldin et al. 2007).

Broadly, youth engagement can have positive benefits to the larger community. Some academics have argued that youth involvement in structures which are traditionally comprised of adults can enhance the productivity, innovation, and general effectiveness of organizations (Zeldin et al. 2007). Even more broadly, the input of young people has the potential to impact the policy decisions of local politicians and bureaucrats in ways that produce more ‘youth-friendly’ outcomes. Marlowe and Portillo (2006) argue that the experiences of new immigrants, people in religious or ethnic communities, and women have been shown to provide input to government that may not have been otherwise accounted for. For example, coming from a cultural context in which one is expected to care for one’s elders would impact the degree to which one prioritizes spending in related areas (Marlowe and Portillo 2006). A similar argument can be extended that the involving of youth in policymaking would produce policies that are more ‘youth-friendly’.

This especially crucial when one considers that young people are underrepresented by politicians – very few politicians at any level of government are under the age of 30. This means that few policymakers have the tangible, lived experiences that youth possess. Of course, one of

the primary differences between youth and other groups is that everyone has been a youth, and therefore adults may feel they have enough understanding of these experiences to be able to make policy for them. This is imprecise for a few reasons. First, young people are not homogenous, and thus the experiences of youth belonging to different ethnic groups or different socioeconomic categories are likely to be variable and diverse. Even having one ‘youth’ councillor or youth representative cannot account for these differences. Second, generational changes must be accounted for. Youth today have to navigate a very different social, cultural, technological, and economic context than their parents did. It is thus inaccurate to assume that the experiences of young people are static over time.

Communities are also arguably better off if the young people who live in them are ‘well developed’ and integrated in positive ways. Writers on the topic of youth engagement approach it from a psychological perspective which argues that integration of youth into the community can produce many positive outcomes in terms of healthy development. It can teach them about healthy conflict resolution and the importance of leadership, but most importantly, it teaches them that they are valued and that they can be constructive, integral members of the community (Brennan et al. 2007). This can in turn potentially lead to less participation in criminal or destructive activity and improve the educational and economic indicators of the young person. Nova Scotia’s own Child and Youth Strategy supports this perspective, accepting that there is a connection between positive youth development and diminished crime (Nova Scotia Department of Community Services 2004).

Communities may have more ‘selfish’ reasons for youth engagement. ‘Endangered’ communities may wish to engage youth in order to keep them connected to the community and to ensure the long-term sustainability of that community. Local governments, particularly those

situated in rural or remote communities often share this imperative. Institutions of governance such as legislatures may see their survival and legitimacy as questionable without buy-in from future generations, making engagement exercises as much about the improvement of youth as it is about ensuring that a particular system of governance can continue to operate effectively going forward.

If there are strong benefits to youth participation in governance more generally, why should young people become engaged in local governance specifically? As Molloy et al. (2002) identify, municipal government can and does impact youth. As argued earlier, it is the form of government most closely related to the day to day lives of all citizens. While many Canadian youth spend a great deal of their time in school (a provincial concern), school boards are elected at the municipal level. School boards, in turn, have a great deal of control over the daily functioning of schools, in turn impacting the experience that youth have while attending school. Within the specific purview of municipal government are recreational services which are heavily utilized by young people. Halifax Regional Municipality, for example, oversees 22 recreation centres and provides numerous recreation and leadership activities aimed at young people. Recreation is strongly linked to healthy living and provides youth with productive, positive ways to spend their leisure time. Much of the concerns that youth have about safe spaces to ‘hang out’ in their communities could be addressed by their local governments. Finally, local governments often oversee policing and community safety initiatives. Youth are all too often a demographic which interacts in negative ways with law enforcement. Building and sustaining a healthy, productive relationship between youth and local governments could in turn help to inform law enforcement policies and perhaps even build less acrimonious relationships between the two groups.

## **2.6 Barriers to Youth Engagement in Local Government**

As established above and argued by Molloy et al. (2002), it is not for a lack of relevant concerns and linkages that young people are failing to engage or be engaged by local governments. There are, rather, a number of structural, attitudinal and logistical barriers that prevent youth and adults from being able to collaborate in local government settings.

One of the biggest issues underlying any youth-adult collaboration is the often unresolved power dynamic (Percy-Smith 2010; Cavet and Sloper 2004; Hart 1992; Ansell 2004). As established earlier, there is an ongoing debate about the proper place for children and youth in a society which tends to be contextual to a specific culture or even a specific family unit. This tension between youth as vulnerable and youth as agents of change can send mixed signals to both youth and communities about the benefits of engaging youth. McGinley and Grieve (2010) point out that society presents different depictions of youth, simultaneously portraying youth as troublemakers and also as community members with the right to participate in matters affecting them. This creates an "ambiguity in the social status of young people" (McGinley and Grieve 2010, 255). Camino and Zeldin (2002) point out that this has led to the manifestation of negative attitudes towards youth as well as a belief that youth are highly dissimilar to adults to the point that working together would not be fruitful. Additionally, among those adults who do recognize the importance of youth engagement, there can be a tendency to swing too far in the other direction and ignore the important differences between youth and adults and attempt to fit youth into an inflexible, adult-oriented model of engagement (Camino and Zeldin 2002). Ultimately, youth engagement initiatives which began with the best of intentions may become subsumed by the adult world. "Even if adults work very hard to relinquish their power within the 'process', it is within the adult-centric structure that all children's participation comes to be recognized, so

that any participatory project, however politically resistant may be its intent, is eventually drawn into the status quo” (Malone and Hartung 2010, 33).

Matthews and Limb (2003) as well as McGinley and Grieve (2010) argue that adults often also have concerns and doubts about the competence of children, perceive youth to be disinterested, and often want to only give youth the ability to participate in discussions surrounding pre-selected, ‘youth-friendly’ issues. As previously established, participant control over the agenda is integral to a truly deliberative exercise. If adults are controlling the agenda and the topics that are up for discussion, the youth don’t truly have any control over the process, and the parameters of discussion have already been defined. Adults may find it challenging to accept that youth could have frank, mature and open discussion without having to be told what they can and cannot talk about (Cavet and Sloper 2004). This is not to say that adults cannot provide direction and structure to the conversation, but that doesn’t mean that adults ought to designate certain areas off-limits either.

However, engagement exercises must be careful not to assume that youth are as developed and experienced as adults. Camino and Zeldin (2002) have characterized this as the ‘denial of difference’, and it often occurs when organizations set up youth engagement activities to mirror or copy adult structures (Matthews 2001; Matthews and Limb 2003). For example, model parliaments, shadow councils, and advisory committees are all examples of initiatives that governments often implement which are comprised of youth interacting within the confines of an adult structure, often ‘play-acting’ the roles of adults. Academics are of a mixed mind about the benefits of this approach. On one hand, it provides practical training and education for young people to help them understand these structures in an experiential way, which can help to demystify them and provide an access point that youth can use to increase their comfort with



government and politics. On the other hand, these structures can be foreign, intimidating, and boring. As Percy-Smith (2010) points out, adult engagers may need to go to where the youth are, rather than compelling youth to come into adult structures. He argues that we may be able to get a better sense for the realities of young people by observing their behaviours and actions in the spheres that they live and play in on a regular basis than we can by putting them into a boardroom and asking for their opinion. Percy-Smith (2010) argues that “construction of spaces for participation (socially, culturally and aesthetically as well as physically) directly influences whether and how people participate and in turn how individuals can influence that space” (109). Society needs to do a better job, he says, of looking at how spaces for youth participation are constructed and maintained, and how the power relations between youth and adults impact those spaces. He argues furthermore that society is too focused on consultation and not enough on empowerment, evaluation, and self-reflection. Representative democracy means that we emphasise asking people’s opinions and then expecting government to deal with those issues, rather than empowering people to help in the delivery of solutions, or to participate in a process of reflection which would reveal deeper societal issues (Percy-Smith 2010). This emphasis on shared responsibility for delivering solutions to public problems is supported by many advocates of public engagement, such as Lenihan (2012).

A number of barriers relate to the lived realities of many youth, who may lack the time, transportation, or education to participate in youth engagement activities at the local level. For one, many youth simply lack interest in and awareness of the importance of local government. For example, a recent survey of 16-25 year olds in the United Kingdom revealed low levels of participation, knowledge and interest in local government (Molloy et al. 2002). There was a lack of understanding of the difference between different levels of government, what functions each

level performs, and a lack of awareness of how issues of stated importance to the respondents could be addressed by local government. Many of the respondents indicated some level of awareness of the existence of local government, but had a very rudimentary understanding of what it entailed, (and often thought first about service delivery). Local governments were often also described by the youth as useless, self-interested, inaccessible, and ineffective. Finally, many of the youth interviewed indicated a lack of interest in local government, and this feeling was the most common among those who had the least knowledge of this form of government. This is underpinned by the fact that earlier in the survey, the youth were asked to list issues of importance to them. Many of the stated issues, such as the existence of recreation facilities, transportation, affordable housing, crime and safety, drugs and alcohol, the impact of policing strategies, employment, and racism, are all issues which might feasibly be addressed at the local level. So while we lack comparable Canadian data regarding the attitudes of youth towards municipal government, we do know that one measure of engagement, voting, is low among voters aged 18-24 at the local level. It is not difficult to imagine that youth are similarly disengaged from local government in Canada as they are in the UK.

Finally, Ménard (2010) argues that youth who live in communities fraught with poverty and violence may develop a distrust of adults which extends itself towards adult structures of governance. This may in turn contribute to a deeper disillusionment and disengagement from participating as adults (Ménard 2010). They may also lack supportive adults in their lives who might enable them to participate in engagement activities. Lack of consideration of these structural barriers may lead to overrepresentation of more privileged youth in engagement activities.

## 2.7 Best Practices for Youth Participation in Local Government

Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) as well as Laforest and Phillips (2006) have argued that the traditional understanding of what it means for citizens to participate has changed in the last few decades, away from consultations and towards more collaborative and deliberative practices. So while “most, if not all federal departments in Canada have incorporated citizen consultations into their policy processes,” not all are necessarily ‘doing’ engagement well (Turnbull and Aucoin 2006, 1).

So what is the difference between consultation and engagement? Many have offered their interpretations over the years, and each varies with regards to the specific details. A common thread is that engagement involves power-sharing (Turnbull and Aucoin 2006; Laforest and Phillips 2006; Arnstein 1969; IAP2 2007; Tindal and Tindal 2009). One of the most popular conceptions of engagement came from Arnstein (1969) as a way to discuss community development. Arnstein conceived of a ‘ladder of participation’. The bottom rungs signify participation which is relatively shallow and even manipulative, where power is wielded solely by the government and sometimes used to convince

the public of the wisdom of the government’s choices. The ladder moves through stages of increasing information giving, consultation, partnership, and finally citizen control. The middle rungs constitute some form of citizen involvement, but also often entail a degree of ‘tokenism’ (Arnstein 1969). Disadvantaged citizens have the right to advise, but it “retain[s] for the powerholders

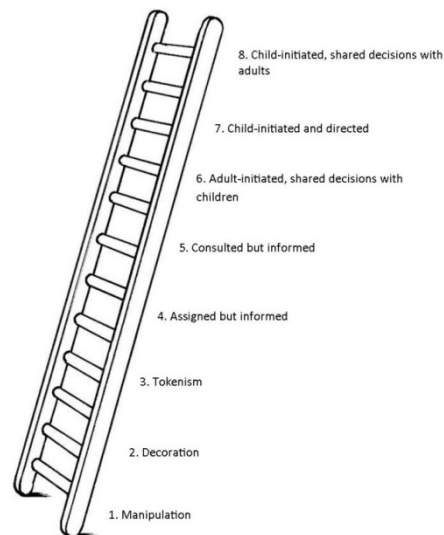


Figure 2.1 Hart's Ladder (1992)

the continued right to decide” (Arnstein 1969, 217). Hart (1992) later adapted Arnstein’s ladder to apply to the situation of children and youth (Figure 2.1). The primary difference between the two is that Hart’s ladder conceives of a role for adults in guiding the process – Hart’s top rung involves power sharing, whereas Arnstein’s top rung sees citizens having total control. Hart’s ladder has been extremely influential in the conceptualization of youth engagement practices over the last few decades.

The International Association for Public Participation (2007) has created a participation spectrum which condenses and amends Arnstein’s ladder down to five steps, summarized in the following table as “promises to the public”. While formulated to apply to the general citizenry, they can be extrapolated to apply to youth as well:

<b>INFORM</b>	<b>CONSULT</b>	<b>INVOLVE</b>	<b>COLLABORATE</b>	<b>EMPOWER</b>
We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

*Table 2.1 IAP2 Participation spectrum, 2007*

As is apparent from the above chart, there are increasing degrees of citizen involvement in each step. Informing is a relatively passive activity, where the flow of information is one-directional, from government to citizen. The flows of information between citizens and government increase gradually as one moves up the spectrum until reaching the ‘empowerment’ stage, at which point power is held primarily by citizens. Put into action, this would typically

include a type of direct democracy in which citizens deliberate and decide on a course of action alongside policymakers, and government implements that decision (Tindal and Tindal 2009).

As Tindal and Tindal (2009) point out, while these techniques move from passive to active levels of engagement, each has an appropriate time and place to be utilized. Just because something is a relatively passive activity does not make it useless or inappropriate. It is important, however, to ensure that there is a balance between the various types of participation to ensure that there are empowering activities being implemented in addition to information being provided. This is similar to Hart's (1992) ladder, in that the hierarchy of the ladder does not necessarily demarcate degrees of 'better' engagement, but rather, different scenarios which may have an appropriate time and place to be used.

It is clear the term 'engagement' is contested and contextual, and perhaps better thought of in stages than as a static or rigid state of being. At its most literal, engagement refers to being aware, involved, and cognisant. In the context of this thesis, it refers to awareness and involvement within the realm of governance. A simplistic understanding of this might simply see engagement as a synonym for participation – such as when citizens take part in formal political activities like voting. Camino and Zeldin (2002) for example, argue that engagement in the context of civic life involves “being able to influence choices in collective action” (214). In the context of governance, this would entail forms of action intended to influence various political actors.

However, as pointed out by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing report on democratic engagement (2009), engagement differs from participation in its emphasis on power-sharing. The report argues that democratic engagement takes place when:

Citizens participate in political activities, express political views, and foster political knowledge; governments build relationships, trust, shared responsibility and participation opportunities with citizens; and democratic values are sustained by citizens, government and civil society at a local, national and global level (17).

Engagement is therefore about more than simply influence. Lenihan (2012) views it as the highest level of possible interactions between government and the public, one in which the people take a degree of ownership over public policy and help deliver solutions to the problems facing their communities. All these definitions reveal recurring themes of trust, reciprocity, commitment, and power-sharing (Canadian Index of Wellbeing 2009).

How then, do these values reveal themselves in various youth engagement initiatives? In the below chart, I have arranged a variety of possible youth engagement activities into the IAP2's typology of participation types. Some are repeated in more than one category, as they could change in the degree of passivity depending on how they are implemented.

Type of Participation	Activity
Informing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information publications (online and print)</li> <li>- Resource centres</li> <li>- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube)</li> <li>- Telephone hotlines</li> </ul>
Consult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community outreach activities</li> <li>- Electronic bulletin boards</li> <li>- Feedback boxes</li> <li>- Focus groups</li> <li>- Participatory television and online webinar software</li> <li>- Public hearings</li> <li>- Public meetings</li> <li>- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)</li> <li>- Surveys</li> <li>- Telephone hotlines</li> </ul>
Involving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community outreach activities</li> <li>- Mediation sessions</li> </ul>

	- Workshops
Collaborating	- Youth advisory groups - Youth assemblies/parliaments
Empowering	- Youth juries - Recall initiatives - Referenda

*Table 2.2 Youth engagement activities on the IAP2 Participation Spectrum*

As is apparent from the table, most of the participation activities that local governments typically undertake fall under the category of either informing or consulting. Those that are in the ‘upper’ categories are certainly implemented, but they require more time, more effort, and more resources to carry out, which constitutes an obvious barrier. This is hardly an exhaustive list, and most notably, consists of activities and mechanisms which are controlled and mediated by the adult world. There is not much space for youth-initiated and youth-led activities in present governmental structures, as governance institutions are thoroughly controlled by adults.

So does it matter? Should local governments spend scarce resources on workshops to engage young people when they could produce more brochures instead? Tindal and Tindal (2009) point out that as activities move from consultation towards engagement and empowerment, they provide more avenues for interaction between citizens and government that engage the public in real decision-making and implementation of those decisions. This can in turn improve the legitimacy of these policies. This policy is ‘better’ because it has been developed in consultation, therefore it doesn’t have to be “unrealistic or unreasonable” (Tindal and Tindal 2009, 331). A truly deliberative process would ensure that participants have all the information needed to come to a consensus, so chances are good that both sides can come to an agreement that they can agree with.

This right for youth to be involved in decision-making is an integral part of youth engagement. Unless power is shared, engagement exercises are essentially futile. As Laforest

and Phillips (2006) suggest, if the move towards deliberative forms of participation is an attempt to relieve cynicism about past consultative mechanisms, a lack of deliberative qualities in these exercises is undermining the process. If part of the impetus to engage is to restore citizen trust in government and to enhance the legitimacy of decisions, consultations without implementation of citizen input undercuts the entire exercise, and are essentially a waste of resources. This is no different when working with youth – if youth are as turned off by politics as studies suggest, then engagement exercises which are superficial are unlikely to turn the tide. Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) indicate that implementation of the feedback that citizens provide is crucial to the institutionalization of public participation in our government. Not only must participatory practices be a regular, routine part of the policy making process, but it must make a substantive difference to policy outcomes. As Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) say, “it is necessary for established policy actors to recognize and embrace the value of the public’s contribution” (4). When engaging youth, therefore, implementation is a key component of a successful strategy.

It is somewhat rare to find concrete examples of youth engagement exercises resulting in policy changes or program implementations. In a review of the United Kingdom’s experience with youth participation, Cockburn (2010) says that “there is little evidence of children and young people making an impact at a central government level in England. Children and young people’s views are invited at the ‘consultation’ stage and examples of children’s views are cited in government reports, but there are no significant examples of children initiating a policy change at the heart of government” (307). A widespread lack of evaluation of various youth engagement strategies makes it very difficult to quantify or even simply link engagement activities with policy outcomes. What evidence does exist is anecdotal and usually context-specific.



At this point most of the criticism has been levelled at government, but Tindal and Tindal (2009) maintain citizens (in this case, youth) also have a responsibility when participating in engagement activities. They must come to the table having informed themselves of the issue, but not having yet made up their minds. Deliberative processes work best when people's minds can be changed and when respectful dialogue can be had. Tindal and Tindal (2009) remark that this poses some challenges, since "citizens have traditionally participated because of conclusions they had already reached" (332). This can make processes such as those listed above fruitless and frustrating. This is challenging because youth must be convinced to participate almost for the sake of participation, and to leave their preconceived notions at the door.

Canada does not have a strong record with deliberative engagement, though there have been promising forays. The Citizens' Assembly which studied electoral reform in British Columbia is an oft-cited example of an extremely well-facilitated, deliberative process, in which citizens were given a large degree of power, and they took that power extremely seriously and did excellent work as a result (Lang 2007). However, similar examples of power-sharing in the Canadian context are hard to come by, let alone with youth. Wyman, et al. (1999) did a scan of the Canadian experience with government-citizen engagement exercises, and found that generally, it was much easier for government to engage citizens than vice versa. In other words, government tends to hold the reins of power and can choose whether or not to invite citizens into the process. If citizens are not invited in, it is very difficult for them to gain access, as most individuals and groups lack the requisite time and resources to force their way in (Wyman et al. 1999). This is particularly truthful when considering young people, who tend to lack the resources of adults when it comes to trying to get the attention of government. If it took a group of committed adults nearly two decades to have the Sydney Tar Ponds cleaned up, a cynic might

also wonder what real change youth have of accessing government (see Wyman et al. 1999). Furthermore, it is not possible to speak broadly about the impact of youth engagement and consultation exercises on government policymaking, as there has not been much study to date on this topic.

We can narrow this discussion down even further by focusing on what it takes to do engagement with youth well, within the context of local government. Some of the points below can be applied across all age groups, but some are age-specific and respond to the specific challenges of youth engagement which were identified earlier. Many communities (including Halifax Regional Municipality) are beginning to develop their own list of best practices in an effort to better inform their engagement activities going forward. Below is a summary of some of the key points from these discussions:

- ***Recognize diversity and context***

As McKinnon et al. (2007) point out, youth are not a homogenous category, and thus attempts to engage them should be similarly diverse in their approach. Many of the current structures for participation, as discussed above, may not be culturally or even personally relevant to youth from particular backgrounds. For example, there may be a more engaging and relevant way to engage an Aboriginal youth which speaks to their culture and methods of community governance. Are board rooms and town halls truly the best way to entice these young people into local government policymaking, or as Percy-Smith (2010) suggests, ought we to go to where the youth are?

- ***Get adults involved in supporting and facilitating***

Youth are capable of leading, but they need help. Any effort to involve young people has to tread a careful line between providing guidance and providing autonomy. Many successful

programs give young people the ability to oversee or direct particular areas of influence. For example, the Manitoba 4 Youth Advisory Council associated with the Province of Manitoba has allowed their members to plan and facilitate a leadership conference and select the winners of a provincial health award (Government of Manitoba 2011). In the municipal context, this could entail having youth plan events or facilitate recreation programs for younger youth.

- ***Provide access to information***

Youth can't participate if they don't know what the issues are or even how the system works. For this reason, there must be a two-part approach. Firstly, children need better civics education, and this education must extend to learning about local government. Howe (2010), Galston (2001), McKinnon et al (2007), Molloy et al. (2002), and countless others have identified civic education as a crucial component of instilling knowledge and interest in political life in younger people. In addition to the formulation of this basic knowledge, youth must be given regular information about issues. For example, if young people are being invited to a consultation or advisory group, the facilitators must ensure that the group has adequate information before participating (Sheedy 2008; Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2007; OECD 2001). This information could be provided via a number of mediums – social media, Facebook, websites, print handouts, and so on. Town councils should also be very open with their meetings and meeting minutes. They should avoid in camera discussion as much as possible, provide live streams of their meetings, and ensure that minutes are posted promptly after meetings. Municipalities should also strive to have detailed websites complete with municipal charters and by-laws, policies, budgets, and any reports performed by staff. Openness and accountability is expected of all levels of government, but it is often the case that local governments (particularly smaller, rural ones) have difficulty keeping up with these activities. Nonetheless, such basic

informational activities should be prerequisites of any modern local government, particularly given how technologically simple it is to disseminate this information.

- ***Be clear, be honest***

The best way to avoid making youth cynical about the process is to avoid misleading them about what their role in the process is (OECD 2001; Matthews 2001). Local governments must be clear and upfront about the degree of involvement they are looking for –is the activity a consultation, or an empowerment exercise? Sheedy (2008) says that governments need to be realistic about their capacity to do certain activities, because once a tactic is selected, governments have to stay committed to it. “Determining what the department or organization is capable of, (at the organizational and broader government or societal level), is essential in order to choose methods and ensure that citizens are not “turned off” by false promises” (Sheedy 2008, 21). Matthews and Limb (2003) agree, arguing that adults need to be upfront from the start about where the youth are situated in the decision-making apparatus to prevent disappointment and frustration.

- ***Provide staff with adequate training and preparation to interact with youth***

Not all adults are used to working with young people. They may not know how to relate to them, which language to use, or which tactics work best. The documents provided may be in language or format that is unclear or alienating to young people, or the structure of the meeting may be too formal or intimidating (Matthews and Limb 2003). Alternatively, a lack of understanding of the group that one is working with could lead to youth being treated more like children than is necessary. Matthews and Limb (2003) remark that adults often feel as though they need to protect youth from certain issues, perhaps as a result of underestimating the degree to which youth are already aware of and impacted by those issues.

- ***Go where the youth are***

Some of the challenges of youth engagement, as articulated in a previous section, relate to the problems inherent in trying to slot youth into adult structures where they may not feel most comfortable or effective. Percy-Smith (2010) recommends going to the youth, rather than bringing the youth to government. Bringing youth into government is relatively easy, but the benefits that government can get from interacting with people in their own environment are much greater. Public servants are more likely to get an accurate understanding of the lived realities of youth using this methodology. It also solves many of the barrier-related issues identified in the previous section. This may mean interacting with youth in a variety of different ways outside of the traditional, institutional methods.

- ***Provide resources to help youth access government***

Wyman et al. (1999) have argued that a serious barrier to public participation is that the public does not have the resources to access government, therefore they have to hope that government invites them to the table. They recommend that government actually provide community resources, whether financial or in the form of a publicly-funded community advocacy group, to help citizens bring their concerns to government. It is hard to imagine that government would want to support initiatives that are likely to bring them more headaches, but if they are serious about the rhetoric of public participation, it is worth considering. At the very least, providing tools to help build civic capacity in youth would be a good start. This could involve civic education, experiential learning programs, internships which encourage youth to learn about the political process, and programs to encourage community volunteerism (Howe 2010). A youth council could also fall into this category. Such tools might entail partnerships with the provincial Department of Education, but municipal government's role overseeing school

boards as well as their connection to community recreation programs should provide ample space to do such activities and provide such resources.

- ***Provide enough time***

Depending on what a local government wants to do, a participatory process may take a day, or it may take a year. There are two important considerations with regards to timing – one is that there must be enough of it, and the other is that it must begin at the right time (Sheedy 2008). In other words, it must not begin too early, before government knows what it wants and what it is looking for and before momentum has really started, but it also can't begin too late that youth can't make a substantive contribution to the policy. This is part of the planning process, and should not be overlooked.

- ***Follow up and keep communication constant***

This is an area of participation where the ball is often dropped. Youth need to know what came of their contributions. This is particularly important if the process is ongoing – they need to know what has been happening in between meetings in order to stay engaged (Sheedy 2008).

- ***Follow through on commitments***

It is crucial that government take the results of deliberations under serious consideration, and implement them if possible. If local government makes a commitment to youth that they will do something, they should do it. Assuming that they have done their research and determined that the policy is within the realm of reasonable, responsible action, then not following through may be perceived as an act of duplicity, and all the good work that has been done up to that point risks being undone.

- ***Make it fun***

This one is self-explanatory. Many practitioners of youth engagement identify the need for activities to be enjoyable in order to keep youth wanting to come back. This is a principle which could and should also be applied to adult exercises! On a more serious note, if the activity presents an opportunity for fun and socialization, it imbues the exercise with more energy and commitment from the participants.

With this list of ‘best practices’ for youth engagement in local government in mind, we turn now to the study of a specific mechanism for youth engagement – the youth council.

## Chapter 3

## Youth Councils

Youth councils are commonplace in Canada but no definitive estimate has yet been made as to their numbers. In the United Kingdom, a comprehensive survey in the late 1990s tallied over 400 such councils. A quick Google search for similar councils in Canada reveals dozens of similar examples at all levels of government as well as in the non-governmental sector.

Youth councils are typically set up to serve as advisory bodies to governments and organizations and can serve a number of different functions. The youth involved can range in age from very young children to young adults. More typically, however, youth councils involve the membership of junior high and high school aged youth. The general intent of these councils is to have young people discuss and deliberate particular issues of relevance to the organization that started the council. The actual process of deliberation may vary from a formal simulation of a legislature or town council process to a simple round-table discussion. The issues discussed vary depending on the group; if the group is set up to mirror a town council, for example, they may discuss a myriad of local issues. Other groups are set up to discuss particular policy areas, such as the environment, health, recreation, and so on. The youth are selected in a variety of ways, but tend to be chosen to sit on panels on the basis of their involvement in the community, and if the group is based on a certain issue, the youth may be selected on the basis of their experience or interest in that area. Most groups also make a concerted effort to select youth from a variety of demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

These groups exist both within government agencies, local and regional governments, and in non-governmental organizations as well. They vary tremendously in terms of structure, composition, purpose and effectiveness. Some groups are purely intended to serve a consultation



purpose, where others may take part in the planning and implementation of programs and activities. Some groups are given considerable responsibilities and may be in charge of overseeing a particular fund, conference, or program. Others take a more passive approach to participation and use the groups to solicit their opinions on documents and policy directions. The structure of these groups depends greatly upon the adults who are organizing and facilitating the group and the extent to which the body that is overseeing them is comfortable with sharing power and delegating to the young people.

### **3.1 Unpacking the Youth Council**

Youth councils are commonly used by governments around the world as a means to engage young people in a particular constituency. They have become particularly common in the United Kingdom but are popular in the United States and Canada as well. It seems that as more and more governments face issues of youth apathy and disengagement, youth councils are emerging as a means to connect law-makers to younger generations. It is certainly worth noting that such councils are unique examples of governments not only reaching out to support and connect with an underrepresented demographic, but actually formalizing that relationship in the form of an official body and perhaps attempting to institutionalize youth engagement. Turnbull and Aucoin (2006) in their examination of public engagement relay Samuel Huntington's definition of institutionalization, which is "the process by which organizations acquire value and stability" (Huntington, 1969, as cited in Turnbull and Aucoin 2006). In the context of the public policy process, we might consider an organization that has substantial ability to influence the process to have value. This, in turn implies that youth councils which are integrated fully into policymaking in ways that involve sharing power with all components of the representative and

bureaucratic wings of government can be considered institutionalized (Turnbull and Aucoin 2006. 3).

The degree to which a council does or does not embody these criteria is likely varied and dependent on the people running the council, the culture of government, the resources available to it, and a number of other small mitigating factors. It does raise some questions about what we might look for in an effective council, noting that they are very similar to the criteria for best practices in youth engagement identified in the previous chapter. When applied specifically to youth councils, we can ask a number of questions. Is the youth council a regular component of the policy development process? Are its suggestions and criticisms given ‘due weight’ alongside the interests of business, other levels of government, and interest groups? Is the youth council used by all departments and units within a government, or just specific ones (for example, does the Department of Finance utilize the council in addition to departments that deal more with youth issues, such as those dealing with family services, education, and recreation?)

There are other criteria which should be considered which are contextual and specific to youth councils themselves. Many of the studies done to date on youth councils as participatory structures have come from the United Kingdom where such councils are immensely popular, particularly in local government (Matthews 2001; Matthews and Limb 2003; Percy-Smith 2010). However, evaluations of the councils have provided mixed feedback regarding their overall effectiveness as participatory tools. There are a number of factors which could impact the degree of effectiveness of an advisory council. These criteria are drawn from the literature on best practices for youth engagement and child development as well as from previous studies that have been done in the United Kingdom on youth councils.

### ***3.1.1 Structure and organization***

The effectiveness of a youth council can be determined before the first meeting, in the early stages of formulating the group's structure and mission. Unfortunately, this is also often a stage that predates the involvement of youth, meaning that the youth may be entering a group that has pre-determined boundaries and objectives.

An important component of any organization is its mandate, which must be clear and well defined in order to provide the group members with direction and purpose. However, oftentimes advisory groups are thrown together with the loose mandate to advise, or to simply discuss issues. This can create ambiguities with regards to the group's objectives. Matthews (2001) found in his interviews with members of youth councils in the UK that belonging to a group without a clear set of objectives contributed to a negative experience on the council. Matthews and Limb (2003) point to the need for documents like terms of reference to clearly establish the role and purpose of the council. Such documents can be either forgotten about entirely or composed hurriedly and without the degree of care needed to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the group. Matthews and Limb (2003) say that "all too often, the process of putting in place opportunities for young people to come together to discuss issues affecting their lives was thought sufficient in itself" (177). Evidence from their study, however, indicates that youth are quick to pick up on this lack of planning and may begin to suspect tokenism (Mathews and Limb 2003).

Attention should also be paid to the actual format of the youth council itself: its rules, its level of formality, and its meeting place. The literature equivocates as to the appropriateness of incorporating youth into adult structures, which most councils are attempting to emulate. However, as Matthews and Limb (2003) point out, many youth are disinterested in formal

political institutions. This finding is echoed by MacKinnon et al (2007) with reference to Canadian youth, where they argue that while modern youth are politically active in new and different ways than their parents, "[youth] are impatient with traditional ways of engaging politically – they are turned off by political parties and partisan politics and dislike hierarchical approaches to organization and mobilization" (5). Some councils, particularly those which model themselves after adult legislative bodies, follow formal meeting structures found in Roberts' Rules of Order and sit in board rooms. In Matthews and Limb's (2003) survey, the youth provided mixed responses when asked if they preferred this environment. Some indicated the formality increased the sense of importance of the council and the work they were doing, while others found it intimidating. As Matthews and Limb (2003) point out, the world of adult decision making is slow, rife with confusing rules and red tape, and not very transparent. Youth often lack the skills and resources to navigate this world, and this leads to further marginalization and feelings of helplessness. So while participating in formal adult spaces might help 'prepare' youth to fulfill similar roles as adults, but could also alienate them if the structure proves too rigid or induces cynicism. It may thus be the case that differences in how the space is constructed influence whether an 'adult' structure ends up being oppressive or empowering.

### ***3.1.2 Role of adults and role of youth***

A second important component of organizational structure relates to the roles held by the youth and adults respectively. Adults have a great deal of ability to influence the activities of the council and can be alternately restrictive or empowering. For one, adults are almost always responsible for establishing the council, and provide it with organizational support, facilitation, and financial resources. This creates an instantly imbalanced power dynamic. Thus the group should be structured in order to correct this imbalance (such as by elevating the youth to

leadership roles and having the adults sit without a vote). Many councils often involve adults in the discussion, whether as ex-officio members, facilitators, or presenters of information. How the adults interact with the youth can greatly influence the experience that the youth have. In turn, how adults interact with youth is informed by their own personal perception of the role of youth, or of the capacities of youth (Matthews and Limb 2003; Cavet and Sloper 2004; Brennan et al. 2007; Richards-Schuster and Checkoway 2009). If, for example, an adult in the room has the belief that young people are intellectually inferior to adults, they may not give their opinions as much weight as they would to that of an adult colleague. If adults don't believe that youth have the capacity to lead, they may not feel comfortable letting the youth lead meetings, or spearhead projects on behalf of the council. This discomfort may, in turn, frustrate the youth participants and make them less interested in participating. The literature is in strong agreement that adults matter - and in the context of a council, they serve as gatekeepers, teachers, mentors, enablers, facilitators, and cheerleaders (Brennan et al. 2007; Hart 1992; Camino and Zeldin 2002; Watts and Flanagan 2007, etc.). Various adults hold the power to create or disband a youth council, to give it more or less power and authority, and to give it a position of legitimacy and respect. Furthermore, adults ensure stability and continuity for the council, presenting a sense of security and allowing the organization to continue on into the future after the present members have moved on (Matthews and Limb 2003).

This power speaks to the need for adults who are involved in councils to be prepared and even trained in how to interact with youth (Matthews and Limb 2003). Adults who don't interact with youth when they are in a position of equality rather than in a position of deference may treat them as they would another adult, rather than as an adult in training. Many organizations have

developed guidelines for groups on being 'youth friendly', which could be used as a starting place for any entity looking to start a youth council.<sup>3</sup>

Adults are not the only important players in these councils. The membership and composition of youth councils can greatly determine the outcomes of the council's work. Many councils are set up with the intent to be diverse and representative, as their role is often to advise on behalf of their age group. However, not all groups are able to achieve this goal of being representative. Matthews and Limb (2003) found that many of the councils in their study were homogenous in nature, and argue that "there is a danger that...local authorities opt for those who are easily reached - well-off, well educated, articulate, young people - thus obfuscating the voices of a significant contingent of others" (183). A similar observation was made by McGinley and Grieve (2010) in their study of youth councils in Scotland, in that youth who are already engaged show more interest in participating in councils, whereas the 'outsider youth', whose needs are presumably more pressing than the engaged youth, are left out of the process. Ideally, adults working with youth councils would make a concerted effort to ensure balanced representation, but this can be difficult. Extra legwork must be done to bring those 'outsider' youth into the fold, thus it is doubtless tempting to simply accept the resumes of those youth who have already eagerly applied for a spot on the council.

### ***3.1.3 Benefits and challenges of youth council membership***

Matthews (2001; with Limb 2003) has performed survey research on the experiences of the youth who have served on these councils in the UK, and has found variation in the degree of true deliberation that occurs. Many youth pointed to improved communication skills, confidence, and understanding of various issues in their communities as benefits of the council.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, HRM's Toolkit for Youth Engagement, developed in partnership with Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development: <http://heartwood.ns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ToolKitIntroduction.pdf>

In general, youth seemed to enjoy being a part of an institutionalized structure that gave them a regular forum to discuss their thoughts and ideas while mimicking the structure of an adult decision-making process and communities. This seeming commitment to the open exchange of information and dialogue implies a deliberative nature, yet there are also many instances where such groups may lack the necessary components of a deliberative structure. While some groups have done a relatively good job of being deliberative, there is no uniformity in the application of these principles across all groups. A significant number of youth in Matthews' (2001) study noted that their experiences on councils entailed unclear or ambiguous goals, and a lack of youth ownership of the council (308). In the first instance, not having a good sense for what the group was meant to accomplish led members to feel like they were tokens as opposed to true participants. As Matthews and Limb (2003) point out, youth are often quick to pick up on instances of tokenism and this can breed resentment, potentially undermining the group's goals and objectives, fostering cynicism, and damaging the level of trust between adults and youth.

The second issue identified by Matthews (2001) and Matthews and Limb (2003) related to how adults controlled the agenda and were too heavy-handed in controlling the process and the conversation. As identified in my earlier discussion about deliberative democracy, and as Hart (1992) points out, the idea of power-sharing is essential to a truly deliberative engagement exercise. However, there may be varying degrees of youth ownership depending on the council. Ownership, in this instance, refers to the ability of the participants to both set and control the agenda of the group. This ability seems to be dependent on the extent to which the adults overseeing the group are both knowledgeable of the importance of power-sharing and committed to using it as a truly empowering participatory exercise. Sometimes, adults may keep control over the council because they do not believe youth to be capable of leading or controlling it

(Cavet and Sloper 2004; Brennan et al 2007; Camino and Zeldin 2002). This lack of ownership, in turn contributes to the aforementioned perception of tokenism.

This is not to say that there are not also many benefits to implementing youth councils. Matthews (2001) found that many participants of youth councils in the UK reported increased confidence and improved self-esteem. They also reported that they appreciated having a structured avenue to share their opinions and to interact with decision makers about issues affecting them. Matthews and Limb (2003) found that their respondents also reported an increased understanding of local issues and the attainment of various life skills (179). Generally, many respondents indicated that the youth councils were enjoyable and 'invigorating' and led to the creation and implementation of many local projects, events and facilities (Matthews 2001, 308).

Broader questions about the effectiveness of the structure of youth councils themselves should be posed. The literature on the experiences of these councils is normative in nature and rarely disputes the premise of youth participation in policy making, but notes that there are wide disparities in the degree of effectiveness and democratic nature of the groups. Very little information is provided about the impacts of such groups on policymaking within the local government with which they are affiliated. This lack of clear impact opens the model to accusations of tokenism. As we have already established, in order for a deliberative democracy to work there must be a clear connection between the deliberative exercise and a policy outcome. Citizens must be able to see their discussions leading to results. It is unclear to what extent youth advisory councils are having a true impact on policy outcomes – it would require further research and tracking several groups over a period of time. The lack of clear and obvious outcomes is enough to be cautious about enthusiastically embracing these groups. McGinley and Grieve



(2010) argue that rather than empowering youth, youth councils have a tendency to simply enable the status quo: "Evidence from these studies points to a continuing lack of participatory opportunities for many, the validation of those already capable of being involved, the continuing discrimination against those who could potentially benefit most from this structure and the lack of rigorous evaluation of youth councils as an effective medium for bringing about change" (258). Such maintenance of the status quo can be observed in youth councils which consist mostly or entirely of youth who aren't representative of the demographics for whom policies and programs are being developed. These issues of underrepresentation and inaccessibility also imply that by their nature, councils cannot be truly deliberative structures. Youth councils also do nothing to challenge adult structures that may be problematic or restrictive – the act of participating in a council provides legitimacy to the adult structures that it mirrors, and those structures may themselves be disempowering or marginalizing.

By combining what has already been established about best practices in youth engagement, as well as the criteria discussed in this chapter, we can formulate a list of evaluative criteria to analyze youth councils with:

- The councils has clear objectives and mandate – engagement is clearly valued and incorporated into all activities and discussions;
  - Adults associated with the council provide support and facilitation and seek to make the environment youth-friendly;
  - The council is sensitive to diversity and awareness of different experiences of youth.
- Furthermore, the councils is committed to representation of different demographics of youth;

- The youth have access to education, training and resources to prepare them for their roles and are provided with enough information and feedback to be able to participate fully;
- Adults exhibit transparency and honesty about their expectations for the council and are honest in dealings with youth;
- Both adults and youth show commitment to implementing change, following through on ideas and actions;
- The experience is enjoyable for everyone involved.

We will revisit these criteria in Chapter 5 to analyze the experiences of two youth councils in Nova Scotia. If youth councils are neither empowering youth nor improving policy, is there a role for youth councils at all in the youth engagement pedagogy? Is there a circumstance under which they can be effective tools of consultation and empowerment?

## **Chapter 4                      Engaging Young People in Nova Scotia: Two Case Studies**

As established in the previous chapter, Nova Scotia is by no means alone in pursuing the youth advisory council model as a mechanism for youth engagement. This model is being used by local, provincial, and federal entities across the country, both governmental and non-governmental.

The background context for Nova Scotia's efforts to pursue youth engagement is worth exploring. In 2004, there was a high profile accident involving an at-risk youth who stole a car, got into an accident and killed a young mother (Nova Scotia Department of Justice n.d.). The tragedy prompted the provincial government to open an inquiry into the state of services for children and youth in Nova Scotia. The resulting Nunn Commission Report recommended the creation of a comprehensive child and youth strategy which would help prevent similar incidents through better coordination of programs and services across government departments, municipal governments, and the non-governmental sector. One important aspect of the strategy entailed increased engagement of young people in a way that would "promote shared accountability" (Nova Scotia Department of Community Services 2004). The strategy identified the importance of "helping young people become part of the solution" by developing outlets for them to apply their energies, passions and ideas in constructive rather than destructive ways (Nova Scotia Department of Community Services 2004, 14). The strategy also declared its intent to support local community approaches to engaging young citizens, asserting that "Young people will get involved if the right opportunities exist for them to do so" (Nova Scotia Department of

Community Services 2004, 19). The 2004 incident and the resulting report show how crime and juvenile delinquency can be strong motivators for adults to provide engagement opportunities.

The strategy's stated next steps entailed a number of initiatives to engage young people in their schools and communities. One of the suggested action items was to set up a Provincial Youth Advisory Network to add to pre-existing youth advisory councils within the provincial government and thus provide a more diverse assortment of voices to inform government policy. Presently, this network exists as the "Leaders of Today" network, housed by the Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development and supported financially by the provincial government. The network serves as a means to bring together youth, youth-serving organizations, and government in order to "amplify youth voice" in Nova Scotia. At least once a year the network gathers for a weekend retreat to share ideas and progress on various programs and initiatives. The province also has its own Youth Advisory Council, connected to the Department of Education. Additionally, a number of Nova Scotia communities have their own youth councils, including the towns of Amherst, Parrsboro, Oxford, Membertou First Nation, and Cape Breton Municipality is looking at implementing one in the near future. This list is not exhaustive, but shows that such councils are being introduced around Nova Scotia.

#### **4.1 Local Governments in Nova Scotia and Engagement**

It is not difficult to see why communities in Nova Scotia might be interested in experimenting with the youth advisory council as a method of engaging young people. Nova Scotia is facing an aging population resulting from an exodus of young people from the province due to high unemployment (Taber 2012). Between 2006 and 2011, Nova Scotia experienced the smallest degree of population growth of any Canadian province (Statistics Canada 2011). Halifax Regional Municipality has experienced a population increase, but many other parts of the

province have seen populations either stagnate or decline (Statistics Canada 2011). Like the rest of the country, Nova Scotia faces an aging population, but at a more rapid pace. Nova Scotia's median age is 43.7. The Canadian median age is 40.3 (Statistics Canada 2011). So in addition to seeing youth engagement as an aspect of creating a more informed and participatory generation, local governments in Nova Scotia may also see youth engagement as a way to better connect young people to their communities, and hopefully keep some of them at home.

## **4.2 Methodology**

As identified in the literature review, organizations often cite two broad rationales for setting up a youth council. While often articulated differently, these rationales can be characterized as those that claim to provide benefits to youth themselves, and those that provide benefits to the organization or community. What is less evident is the extent to which these benefits, which are attributable to youth engagement exercises in general, are actually experienced by participants and hosts of youth councils. In other words, do youth councils work as a means to engage young people? Do they provide benefits to young people, and do they provide benefits to governments and communities? If a community wanted to organize the ideal youth council, what would its characteristics be? Or put quite simply, *what does an effective youth council look like in practice?*

I chose to address this question by carrying out case studies of communities in Nova Scotia which have used youth councils. A lack of previous studies on the subject matter made primary research necessary. After a review of the existing landscape, three communities were chosen: Amherst, Parrsboro, and Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). However, a lack of responsiveness from the Town of Parrsboro meant that in the end, only Amherst and HRM were used in the study.

To examine youth councils within the confines of this thesis, I attempted to concentrate on two claims about youth councils – that they improve the democratic engagement of young people, and that they improve public policy by providing more input to government. Therefore, this project initially sought to address two specific questions with regards to youth councils:

1. What impact, if any, do youth councils have on the development of public policy in the government units to which they are attached?
2. Does membership on these councils have any impact on the political engagement of the youth participants?

There are obvious challenges associated with researching both of these questions. With regards to the first question, it is difficult to draw clear linkages between advice and policy outcomes in the policy making process. Decision makers often have many sources of ‘inputs’ which influence them in different ways (Easton 1957; Howlett and Ramesh 2009). The intent, then, was not to provide evidence for or against a link between the work of youth councils and policy, but rather, to simply show examples of linkages which might substantiate the argument that youth councils can be used to improve the quality of policy. Similar challenges arise with regards to the second question, as level of engagement can be influenced by a myriad of inputs, one of which could potentially be involvement in activities such as youth councils. As such, in both instances it is not possible to make definitive statements regarding the impact of youth councils on these things, only to show that some connections, whether positive or negative, may exist.

In developing my research questions, I also sought to address more general claims about the benefits and challenges of youth councils. The intent was to unpack how the participants and facilitators of youth councils felt about their experiences on the councils with relation to things like organization, interactions with other stakeholders, and influence on their knowledge and

abilities. The motivation for addressing these claims comes from a review of the literature, as covered in the previous chapter. I wanted to dig deeper into the experiences of specific youth councils in the Canadian context and see to what extent they perpetuate or deviate from the stated benefits and challenges identified in the previous chapter.

There were several goals associated with performing these case studies. Firstly, the project was intended as a ‘starting point’ for thinking about this method of youth engagement in the Canadian context, as no study has yet been done on this topic in Canada. Secondly, it was intended to add to the literature on youth councils and to see what additional observations can be drawn out about their effectiveness as a model of engagement. To this end, the study was guided by the question: Can youth councils be effective tools of youth engagement by providing benefits to both the community and young people?

In order to address this, it was necessary to communicate directly with both the facilitators and participants of the youth councils chosen for my case studies. In HRM, the youth council was known as the Youth Committee (HRMYC). In Amherst, the council was called Amherst Youth Town Council (AYTC). Amherst was selected because of all the communities which have youth councils, it had the best online web presence, and was able to provide preliminary information before the interview process began. The group’s facilitator was also very cooperative and communicative. I also wanted to provide rural and urban examples of councils in order to be able to compare the unique challenges that might arise in communities of differing sizes. HRM was selected on the basis of being the only urban region in Nova Scotia with a youth council. HRM consists of both urban and rural communities, but for the most part its population lives in urban communities and the activities of the committee took place in downtown Halifax, which I believe qualifies it as a primarily ‘urban’ council. HRM was also

selected due to a previous professional connection between myself and the youth council's facilitator, which contributed to a smooth interview process.

Each committee had a facilitator who was also an employee of the town or municipality. The facilitator's jobs involved managing their community's youth councils by helping to select the members, plan meetings, and act as a source of advice and knowledge. For the purposes of this thesis I have kept the names of the facilitators anonymous, and will instead identify them as the 'facilitator'. Each facilitator was interviewed by me for approximately one hour about their role with the committee, the committee's history and structure, the benefits and challenges of the committee as they have experienced it, and finally, their perception of the impacts of the committee on policy in the community as well as the engagement of its young members.<sup>4</sup>

After the interview, staff members were asked to forward an online survey to youth over the age of 16 who were past or present participants of their respective councils.<sup>5</sup> The survey, approximately 30 questions long, asked about the youths' overall experience, their perception of its impact on their communities and local governments, and their perception of its impact on their own engagement with and interest in politics and civic life.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, response rates for the survey were very low despite repeated reminders and the incentive of a draw for a \$50 Visa gift card. The final response rate was three youth per town. For this reason, it is not possible to quantify the results and thus the responses should be interpreted as the results of an interview, providing extra insight but not necessarily unequivocal proof.

In order to more fully document the story of each council, the group facilitators also sent me relevant documentation related to the council, including terms of reference, application forms, council motions, annual reports, and meeting minutes. I used these, in addition to the

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<sup>4</sup> Interview questions are located in "Appendix A: Interview and survey questions"

<sup>5</sup> Recruitment materials are located in "Appendix B: Recruitment materials"

<sup>6</sup> Survey questions are located in "Appendix A: Interview and survey questions"



interviews with the facilitators, to get a better sense for how the councils came to be, how they are structured, how they operate, and what kinds of activities they do. What follows are summaries of the results of these interviews and document reviews.

### **4.3 Amherst Youth Town Council**

#### **4.3.1 *About Amherst***

Amherst is a town of approximately 9500 residents, 200 km northwest of Halifax on the border of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Settled in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Amherst is relatively economically stable and serves as an economic hub for the surrounding Cumberland County. Its position at midpoint between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick has allowed it to establish itself as a transportation hub for imports and exports between the two provinces. The Town is served by a mayor and six at-large councillors. Like much of rural Nova Scotia, Amherst has an aging population but its population has been relatively stable over the last 20 years (Statistics Canada 2011, 2006).

#### **4.3.2 *Formation***

Amherst Youth Town Council (AYTC) was formed in 2009 after discussions about the strategic direction of the town council led councillors and staff to believe that youth engagement was lacking in the community. A staff member did research and found that many other communities were using youth councils as a means to both engage young people in activities as well as to get their input on local issues. The group was formed initially under the name “Youth Advisory Council” but later became the Amherst Youth Town Council after staff and members felt the name did not have enough direct affiliation to the Town of Amherst. The council is still functioning as of 2014.

### **4.3.3 *Goals and objectives***

There are a number of components to the AYTC's mandate. Firstly, it is intended to serve an advisory capacity. This has been accomplished through the identification and presentation of issues impacting the town's youth to the town council. Second, the AYTC is to serve as an educational tool to help its members grow more aware of the duties, responsibilities and workings of local government. Third, the AYTC members are framed as ambassadors for youth in the community, advocating on behalf of youth "through researching issues and presenting constructive solutions" (Town of Amherst 2011). Finally, the AYTC is mandated to participate in community events, and in doing so, has attempted to portray a more positive image of the town's youth (Town of Amherst 2011).

### **4.3.4 *Membership and selection***

The group was initially limited to seven members, and the first year saw the group struggle to receive that many applications. The AYTC grew substantially in size and profile since then, and it is presently comprised of twelve members. The Town of Amherst received over 30 applications from youth interested in joining in 2012. Respondents to my survey reported being attracted to apply as the result of personal interaction with friends who had been on the council, or staff members at town hall. All three cited the inclusion of the experience on their resume as a motivator for applying, as well as the hope that they would be able to influence town council in some way. Some respondents indicated they hoped to be able to address important issues in their communities, because their friends were on the council, and they thought it would be fun. Only one of the three respondents applied because they wanted to learn about municipal government:

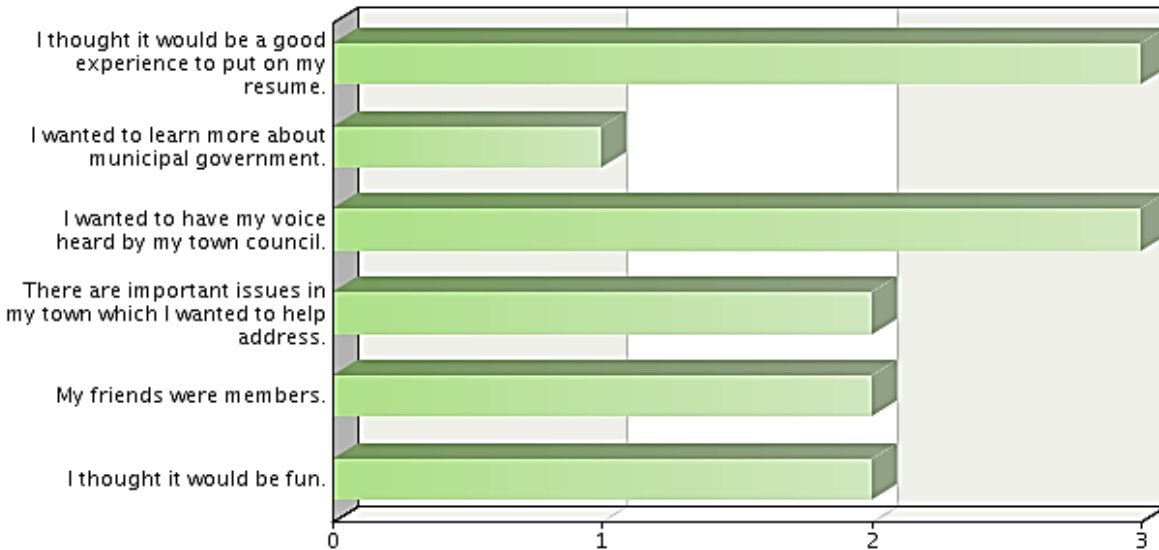


Figure 4.1 *Why did you decide to join the council? Please select all that apply.*

The selection committee consists of the group facilitator, another town staff person, and a member of the local police force. The general criteria for membership are that the youth must be in grades 7-12 and residents of the Town of Amherst. However in November 2013 the town council approved an amendment to also allow up to two members who are residents of Cumberland County and not the Town of Amherst. According to the group’s facilitator, the selection committee are not necessarily looking for youth who already have leadership experience, but rather youth who have a demonstrated interest in the council and its activities. Because the minimum age to join the group is quite young, experience criteria would exclude that younger age set. According to the group’s facilitator, “It’s good to see they have already shown an interest, [but] when you start the students at about grade seven or eight they don’t necessarily have that. It is sort of a committee to grow their leadership skills, so they don’t need that. They’re going to get it from being on this committee.” However, it was noted that many of

the youth who have joined the committee often already have some degree of community involvement, whether as volunteers or as members of local sport leagues.

#### **4.3.5 Structure**

The AYTC is structured so that two of the youth serve as Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson. These positions are elected by the youth themselves. The council also has two ex-officio (or non-voting) adult members: the group facilitator, who is a full-time staff person at Town Hall, and either the mayor or an appointed councillor. The group meets at least every other month except for in the summer months.

#### **4.3.6 Activities**

AYTC's primary role is to serve in an advisory capacity to the town council on matters which affect youth. A recurring thread in the framing of the group, however, is that the AYTC exists for the purpose of creating youth ambassadors in the community. When asked about the group's role, the group facilitator felt the primary job of the AYTC was to "raise the profile of youth" in Amherst, and this is echoed by the council's policy and terms of reference (Town of Amherst 2011; 2012). This framing of the youth council establishes the group's activities as a means to an end, namely, to lessen the stigma of youth as troublemakers and to instead highlight the good work that youth can do if given the right opportunities and support. The group's facilitator remarked that the AYTC has received regular coverage in the local media, and that having more stories about positive things the community's youth are doing has been important to changing the rest of the community's perception of young people (see Mathieson 2012; Turner 2013; Cole 2012).

Although advising is the primary objective of the group, the activities and events that the AYTC undertakes are where the group got the most attention. Twice a year, the AYTC assists

the Amherst Food Assistance Network with their food drive, and are involved in all steps of the drive, from the initial collection of food to the delivery. The group also participates regularly as youth leaders in an event called “Cops for Kids” with the local police force, which sees children ages 8-11 take part in a mini police academy to learn how and why police officers do their work. The AYTC has also been involved in various events related to physical activity, such as an Amazing Race, intended to raise awareness of the various recreation locations available in the community. The facilitator remarked that “we tried to use youthful, fun interactive ways to engage them so that they know how to positively engage with their community. So it's creating awareness of local government but it's also [raising awareness] of their community and ways that they can develop positively.”

#### **4.3.7 Benefits**

The three past participants of the AYTC rated their overall experience on AYTC with a 10/10. All respondents felt that they gained important life skills, improved their confidence, ensured a youth voice on town council, and participated in projects that benefited the town. They also reported that they had the opportunity to influence decision making, and that they learned about municipal issues. Networking was also cited as a benefit; all respondents felt that they had the opportunity to interact with local leaders and businesspeople, and made new friends in the form of other council members. Fewer respondents indicated that they learned about municipal government structure, but this was still a relatively strong benefit.

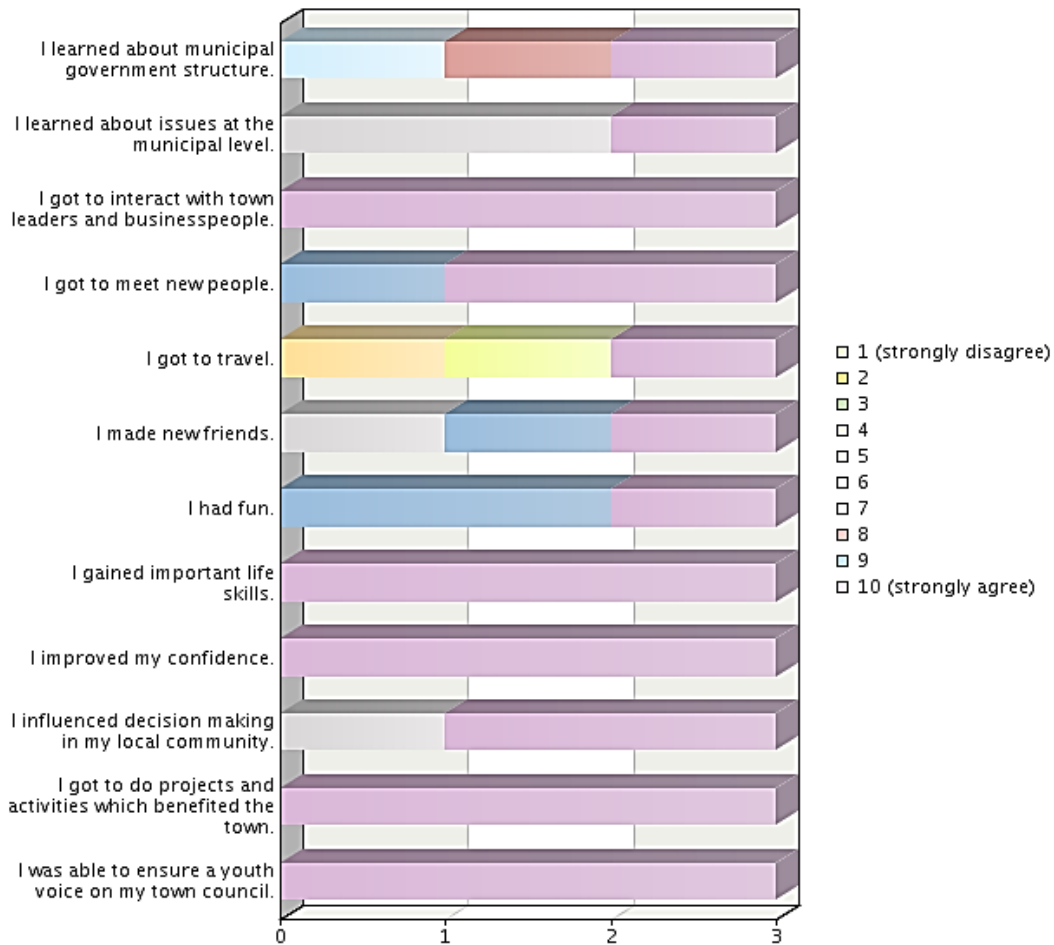


Figure 4.2 Please rate the degree to which you agree that Amherst Youth Town Council provides these potential benefits, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

Similarly, the facilitator of AYTC identified improvements to resumes and scholarship applications as a crucial takeaway for participants. She pointed out that whereas it's not possible to directly link participation on the council to receiving scholarship money, it was undoubtedly helpful for several participants.

In keeping with the youth's responses, the facilitator also reported various types of personal and professional growth. AYTC allowed for a formative leadership experience, particularly in the case of youth who had served multiple years on the council. The facilitator

related an anecdote about a young man who overcame his fear of public speaking while a member of AYTC:

*One youth who just graduated in June, he had been on the council since it began, he was the very first applicant. He came and was a very frightened boy, we'd have meetings with town council and he would barely even be able to speak, he would be so nervous. And now he's sitting at meetings reaming out stuff about policy this, policy that, and [became] excellent at public speaking.*

She added that while some youth do enter the council with a talent for public speaking already, the experience helps those who don't. This relates to another benefit of the AYTC – it has prepared its members for membership on adult groups and committees. This preparation is achieved not only through the aforementioned practice in public speaking skills, but also through practical experience in committee structure and Robert's Rules of Order. The facilitator also articulated that the group has contributed to improved communication ability – even seemingly minor things such as email etiquette: “I work with some youth that don't even know that when I send out an email they should respond and say 'Ok',” she said. “So it's teaching them how to communicate whether it be for events, whether it be for meetings. To stay involved when you are involved with a project, you have to continuously communicate. And you know, we know that as adults but they are kind of learning that as youth.”

The group's size and constant project work also lends itself to two other practical experiences – team work, and event planning. The facilitator said that even though many of the youth on the council have participated in team sports before, they have been learning how to

navigate group work. “It's a time that they are learning to work with other youth who have different interests,” she said. She remarked that she has been generally pleased with the respectful tone that the group members have taken with each other. The significant number of events that the group takes on each year has prepared members for how to handle event logistics and promotion.

A crucial component of AYTC’s mandate is to educate youth about municipal government. The group’s facilitator felt strongly that the experience should be as fun and interactive as possible. Various local government departments have given presentations about their units to the AYTC each year, which the facilitator argued is better than asking the youth to read about each department online, on their own. The facilitator has also organized field trips to various municipal government sites. She said that “I keep trying to push [AYTC as] a fun interactive setting to learn about municipal government. I'm not...cramming it down their throat all the time but they are definitely picking it up without even knowing it.”

#### **4.3.8 Challenges**

The AYTC respondents and the group’s facilitator were extremely positive in their evaluations of the council. When presented with a series of points on which to evaluate their council experience, the youth respondents rated almost every point a 6 or higher:



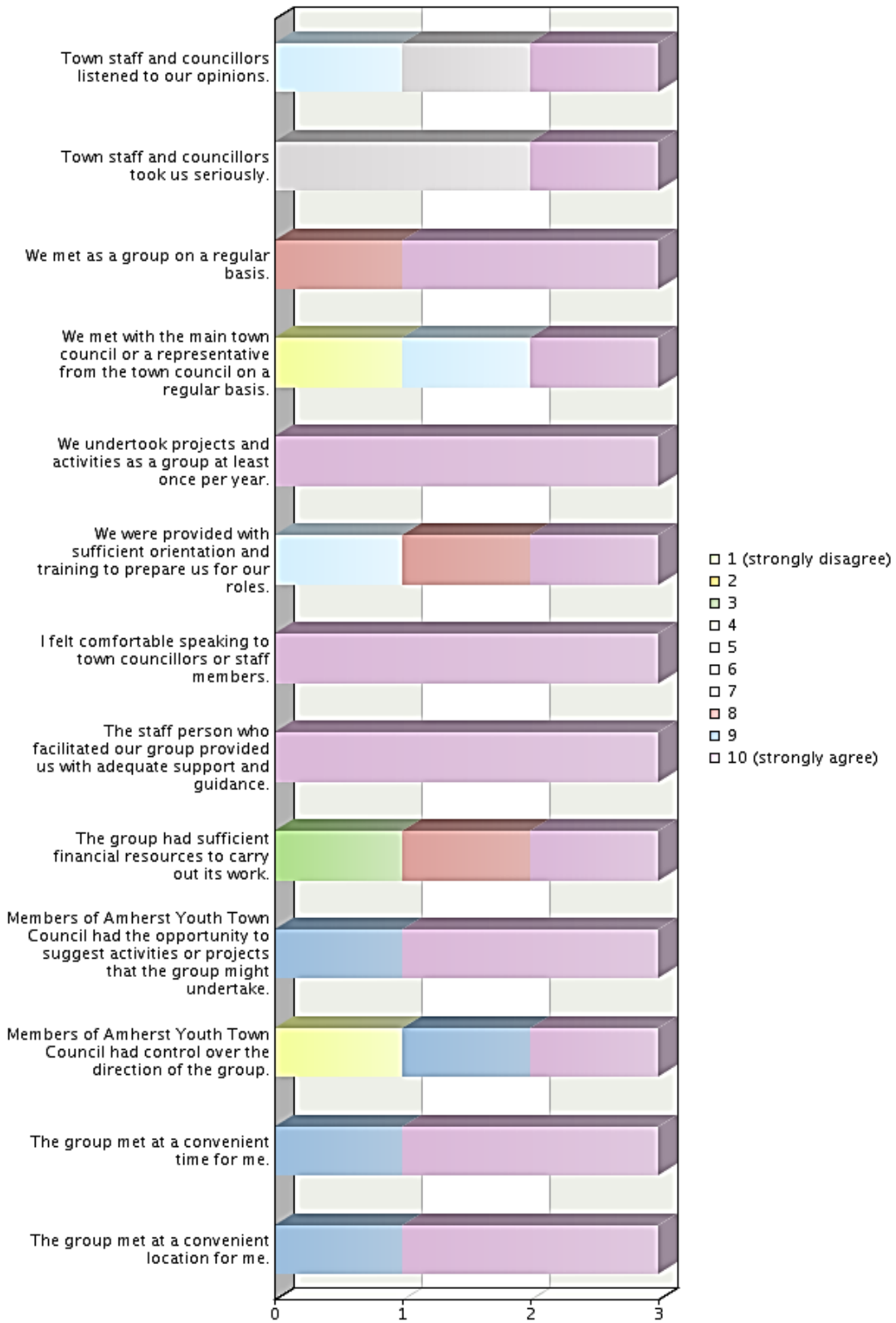


Figure 4.3 Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

Clearly, although a few people rated some points lower than others, there is an overall general trend that the respondents had a highly positive experience on AYTC.

The group facilitator identified a few minor challenges, such as branding the council in the early days of its inception. She reported that it was a struggle in the early years to communicate the council as a fun experience rather than something that would be boring. The name “Amherst Youth Town Council” was adopted in 2012 for this reason, and the facilitator felt it has improved the group’s image.

#### **4.3.9 *Impact on policy***

The AYTC has had regular contact with the main Amherst Town Council. Firstly, this contact has taken place through regular AYTC meetings, as a member of Amherst Town Council or the mayor is mandated to attend these meetings and provide information back to the town council on the activities of the AYTC. In addition to this, the AYTC invites the full town council to two of their meetings each year. The youth will ‘take over’ the council during these meetings, sitting in the council members’ chairs and leading the meeting. The ‘real’ town council then sit as members of the public. Then the AYTC will present a series of ‘call to action’ items, which can be reports on projects they have worked on in the past, ideas for future projects, or recommendations regarding town policies. The facilitator remarked that it is not uncommon for the youth to make recommendations regarding town policy, although was not able to provide examples of policies that had changed as a result. She did however, point to the construction of the town’s skate park as having been spearheaded by the AYTC, as well as a new ice skating rink. She commented that “it's not necessarily [through] policy but [through] different initiatives in the community...that we're really seeing change. It is a meaningful experience because council is hearing them and then saying ‘Ok, if you want to do this, make a proposal to us, and

give us an ‘ask’ of what kind of dollars you'd need for that.’ So they're also learning that aspect of it, of how to attach budgets to different projects and how to work through stuff from start to finish.”

The facilitator noted that the youth often found the various constraints on their work to be a challenge:

*They all came in bustling with "Let's do this this this and this", and I'd have to kind of be the devil's advocate and say "Well there's a policy on this" or "There's a policy on that." It's kind of frustrated them I think, being youth. It would frustrate adults probably, kind of making them feel like they can't [accomplish anything]. It's not that they felt they couldn't make change, but they just realized what kind of stuff they need to do...to make the change. [Now they understand] that they have to act in accordance with different policies and do things the right ways. It's kind of a joke for the old members that when [new members] come in and they ream off all the things they want to do, the old members are saying, "Well there's a policy on that."*

Of the three respondents, two of three agreed or strongly agreed that their input made a difference in Amherst Town Council’s decision making, pointing to the skate park as an example. Another youth remarked that the AYTC was involved heavily in general event planning: “When collaborating with Amherst Town Council for large events, we worked side by side and had a fair amount of say in what went on (for the youth related stuff).”

The respondent who was less enthusiastic about their impact on Amherst Town Council pointed to a generation gap that they felt made communication and trust more difficult: “The

members of council overlook our ability to get the job done. It is very difficult to get anything done, especially with youth and young adults. They were all a bit older and did not understand how difficult it was, in a small town, to have youth attend first time events.”

The group’s facilitator did not feel that there was much of a generation gap with regards to how the AYTC interacted with town council, or if there was one, it has been outweighed by the generally positive interactions between the youth and the councillors. She repeatedly remarked that the interactions of the AYTC with not only their own town council, but also with MLAs, MPs, and various community leaders through the various events that they organize has imbued the youth with a sense of importance and self-worth:

*Anything they're invited to by Town Council and it's not just the youth council that's there, they know [the councillors] all by name, they are high fiving them, they are interacting with them...They've had [interactions with] provincial and federal [politicians], and that of course makes them feel wildly important...It's not just them being at an event, their presence is really encouraged there. Various organizations that are aging such as the Lion's Club have been very supportive and know them all by name when they're at different events. It is a small community but some of these kids they didn't know before. Everyone's interacting quite well with them and making them feel really important.*

#### **4.3.10 Impact on engagement**

Survey respondents were asked to rate their engagement in their community and their engagement in politics both before and after joining AYTC. The youth varied with regards to how engaged they were in their communities beforehand, with one respondent rating their

engagement 1/10, the second 7/10, and the third 10/10. However, when asked about their engagement after joining, one rated their engagement 8/10, and the other two rated 10/10, implying an increase in overall engagement.

Perhaps most striking is that when asked to rate their level of engagement in politics before joining AYTC, all three respondents rated their engagement low (1/10, 3/10, and 5/10 respectively). However, when asked to rate their level of political engagement AFTER joining AYTC, all three gave themselves higher scores: two rated their engagement with a 6/10, and the third with an 8/10. While this is not an extreme improvement, and while not necessarily indicating causation, it does imply a degree of increased awareness and engagement with politics in general. This is further supported by the fact that all three respondents indicated they strongly intend to vote at the next possible opportunity.

Aside from engagement in formal political activities, the respondents indicated an increased level of interest in a variety of things, including the news and current events, extracurricular activities through their school, and volunteering in the community. However, only one respondent indicated they became more interested in government and politics:

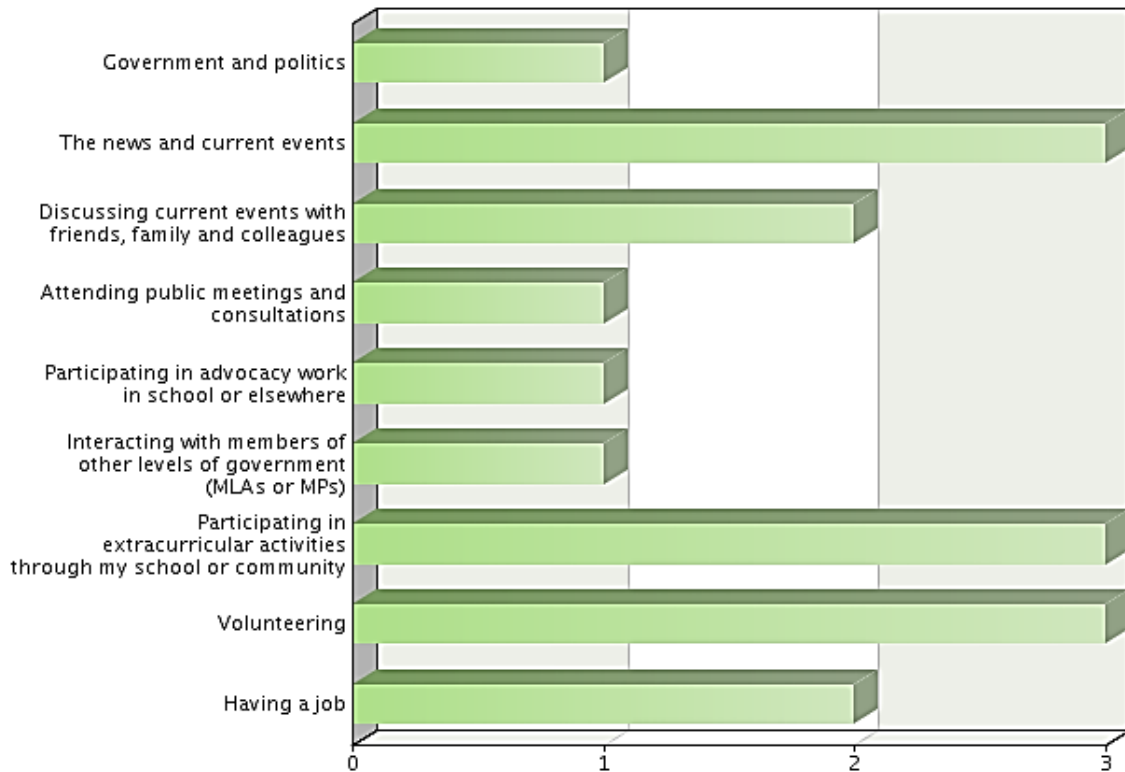


Figure 4.4 *Which of the following activities do you feel that you became more interested in as a result of your participation in Amherst Youth Town Council? Please check all that apply.*

The group’s facilitator noted that at the end of meetings, there was often time to discuss current issues or events. She has observed some youth going home after the meeting and reading up on the day’s discussions so that they can contribute more fully at the next meeting. She saw this as evidence of an overall sense of engagement with the broader world of politics.

#### **4.4 Halifax Regional Municipality Youth Committee (HRMYC)**

##### ***4.4.1 About Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM)***

HRM is the result of a municipal amalgamation that occurred in 1996. The merger saw the previously independently governed municipalities of Halifax, Dartmouth, Bedford, and a myriad of small communities in the surrounding Halifax County combined into one regional municipality governed by a regional council (Halifax Regional Municipality 2010). HRM

stretches over approximately 5500 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 390 096 (Statistics Canada 2011). This represents approximately 42 percent of the total population of Nova Scotia.

Amalgamation saw the creation of 22 districts across the municipality, but this number was recently reduced to 16 at the time of the 2012 election. The council controls an operating budget of approximately \$821 million (Halifax Regional Municipality 2013a).

#### **4.4.2 Formation**

Halifax Regional Municipality introduced its youth council in 2007 after hosting a 2006 leadership conference with over 300 young people from the municipality. The city's staff heard that young people wanted more opportunity to interact with staff and councillors, so the idea of starting a youth advisory committee emerged. In 2010 the committee began to wind down after facing numerous challenges, and was officially abolished in 2013, to be replaced with a new youth engagement strategy for HRM. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

#### **4.4.3 Goals and objectives**

The committee's terms of reference make it clear that HRMYC was intended to serve primarily as an advisory group. The terms state that the group "shall review, evaluate and make recommendations to Regional Council regarding issues pertaining to youth", initiate discussion on youth issues as identified by the committee members, and undertake other duties as assigned.

#### **4.4.4 Membership and selection**

To be eligible to sit on the committee, youth had to be between 13 and 19 years old. They were appointed for one-year terms. Originally the committee was intended to have 12 members, two from each of the original six community councils in HRM. This number was expanded to 15 after staff found that there were often two or three members missing at meetings due to transportation issues. In the first year only 12 applications were received. In future years, the city

advertised in the *Chronicle Herald* newspaper as well as through guidance councillors employed at schools in the Halifax Regional School District. Guidance councillors were requested to identify youth they felt would benefit from such an experience and who would be able to provide helpful insights. After they began advertising more aggressively the committee received about 20-25 applications per year.

The committee membership was intended to be diverse both culturally and academically. While the application form asked for experiences and references, the group’s facilitator looked to balance the youth who already came with leadership experience with those who had less experience but more potential to benefit. There was concern that without a diverse range of young people from various cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, the committee would not be able to accurately represent young people’s interests to the regional council.

The three youth respondents to the survey indicated that they heard about the committee primarily through the encouragement of friends or family and through newspaper advertising. They applied mostly because they hoped that the experience would be a good experience on their resume and because they wanted to address issues in their communities:

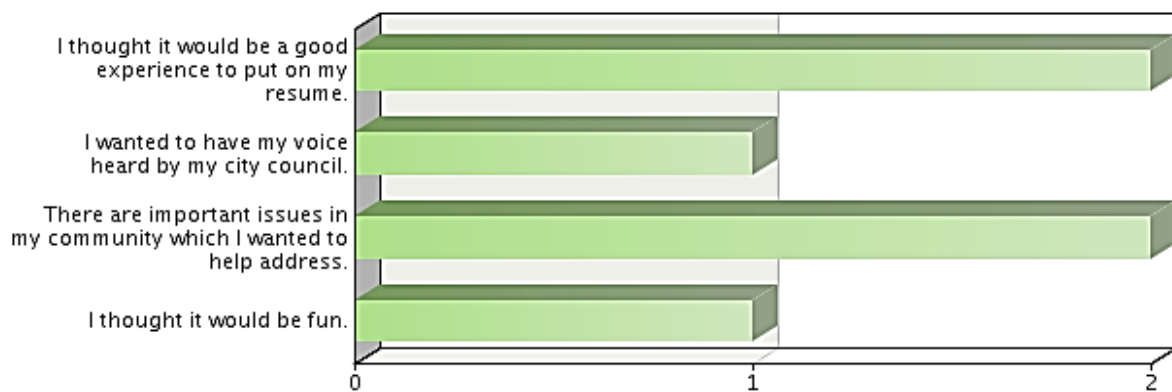


Figure 4.5 *Why did you decide to join the committee? Please select all that apply.*



#### **4.4.5 Structure**

One of the most important structural components of HRMYC was that it was set up as a standing committee of HRM Regional Council. This meant that it fell under the purview of Administrative Order One, a procedural document that dictates how Council and its committees are to operate. This meant the committee had a relatively strict and inflexible structure. Like any other municipal committee, two members of city council were required to sit on the youth committee. The group met approximately once a month at a high school in urban HRM. These meetings were always subject to weather as well as to the availability of the councillors. A significant number of members had to travel from the outskirts of the city, and frequent inclement weather meant that meeting cancellations happened on a regular basis. According to revised terms of reference documents which were produced around the time the group stopped meeting, there was a plan to have the group meet twice a month, once formally and once informally for project work, but this never occurred.

Like AYTC, HRMYC elected a chair and vice-chair from among the youth membership. Quorum was set at seven members. The group facilitator was a Community Developer on staff within what was then known as the Community Development Department. The group facilitator sat as an ex-officio member and provided procedural advice to the youth and acted as a liaison between the group and city hall.

The youth respondents had mixed opinions about the efficiency of the meetings, with the respondents rating the organization of HRMYC's regular meetings with a 5/10, 7/10, and 9/10 respectively.

#### **4.4.6 Activities**

Similarly to AYTC, HRMYC slanted more towards project oriented work as opposed to advising, though they did from time to time produce reports to council on various issues. For example, they produced an evaluation on the renovations that were done to the Captain William Spry Community Centre. The group's facilitator notes that generally speaking, the issues that the youth were concerned with fell under the mandate of the city's recreation department as well as transportation. The original intent of the group's founders was to have other government departments and regional council present the HRMYC with issues, and this did take place from time to time, particularly when the HRMYC members requested to know more about a particular topic. However, after the first year it became apparent that there just wasn't enough advising work to go around and the group's activities shifted to comprise 25 percent advising and 75 percent project work. In the absence of issues to discuss, the group would brainstorm particular issues that they wanted to work on and would then develop projects around those. One of the biggest projects was the creation of the "Youth Guide to HRM", an online resource for young people. The HRMYC was also instrumental in the creation and maintenance of hrmyouth.ca, a website for the municipality's youth which regularly posts events, opportunities, and resources. The committee also hosted several gatherings for student councils, which were intended to provide opportunities for networking between student leaders and the HRMYC.

#### **4.4.7 Benefits**

The respondents were mixed in their evaluation of the overall experience, with two giving it a 6/10 rating and one a 10/10 rating. The HRMYC's benefits were similar to those experienced by the AYTC. Firstly, membership on the committee provided helpful experience to add to resumes and scholarship applications. The group's facilitator remarked that he is still

acting as an employment reference for many former group members. Like the AYTC, the facilitator of HRMYC saw a great deal of improvement in the confidence of the group members from the beginning of the year to the end. The youth respondents all indicated moderate to high levels of improvement in their confidence and general life skills such as communication, public speaking, and teamwork. Leadership development was one such benefit, particularly for those youth who had the opportunity to serve as committee chairs. This was also reflected in the level of knowledge the youth had about how to run professional meetings. At the beginning of the year, the facilitator would have to step in often, but by the end was able to take a back seat. The meetings also facilitated networking and friendship building among the participating youth.

Also, although it was not an intended outcome, the HRMYC contributed to better understanding of the structure of local government and the duties of councillors and staff among the participating youth. The youth respondents indicated moderate improvements in their knowledge of municipal structure as well as pertinent municipal issues.

Other reported benefits related to networking and socialization, with all respondents indicating that they met new people, made friends, and had fun. However, they were less enthusiastic about the degree to which they were able to mingle with and impact regional councillors and city hall staff.

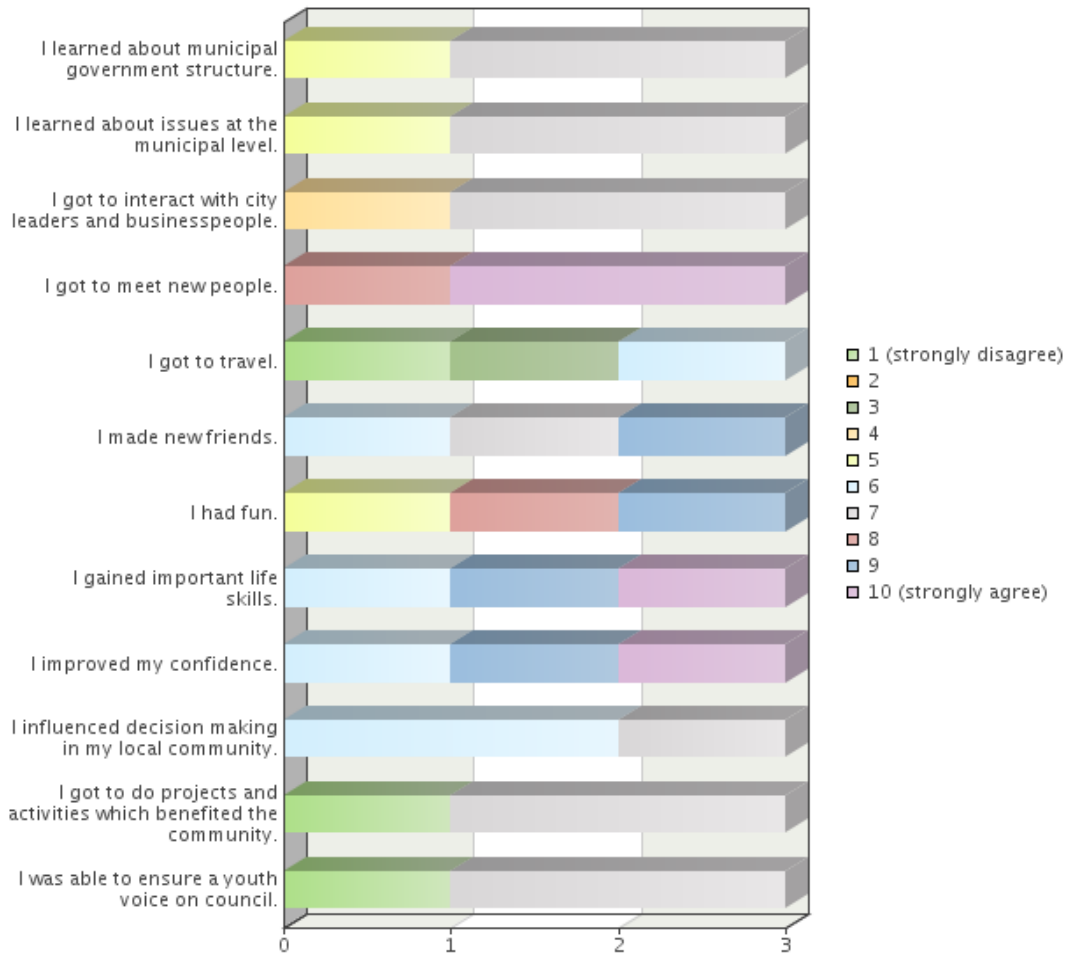


Figure 4.6 Please rate the degree to which you agree that HRM Youth Committee provided these potential benefits, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

#### 4.4.8 Challenges

The challenges that HRMYC faced were not insignificant and contributed greatly to the decision to disband the committee. Firstly, the group's facilitator expressed frustration that the group was not utilized to the extent it was intended. Even when they did manage to accomplish projects, the municipality rarely called on the youth in an advisory capacity. The facilitator found himself going around to 'rustle up business' for the committee among various departments and

groups. This dampened the group's momentum and made it difficult to give the committee a sense of purpose and the feeling of making an impact.

The lack of momentum brought about by lack of work was compounded by the high turnover that the group experienced. A report issued to council in April 2013 about the group estimated this turnover was as high as 75 percent each year (Halifax Regional Municipality 2013b). The facilitator did not offer many reasons for this turnover. It led to difficulty in initiating and sustaining long term projects. In addition, when the committee did bring on new members it took a long time to get the new members fully initiated and comfortable in their roles. According to the report, springtime was a particularly difficult time to hold meetings due to exams and extracurricular commitments. Because the committee had to adhere to Administrative Order Number One, this meant they were often unable to meet quorum and had to cancel meetings. Other meetings were often cancelled due to inclement weather, and with meetings only occurring once a month, this meant there were sometimes long stretches in between meetings. With such frequent cancellations and lack of regular contact between members, it was understandably difficult to construct a cohesive group and have them work together towards completing projects. It is possible that the lack of engagement with the HRMYC from other government departments was due to this infrequent meeting schedule.

The frequent cancellation of meetings also speaks to another challenge of the HRMYC – the geographic distance between its members' communities. HRM is a geographically sprawling municipality comprised of multiple urban and rural communities. With the committee's commitment to community representation, this meant that the members of the group sometimes had to travel between 30 and 60 minutes to attend meetings. Some lacked access to regular, timely transportation, while others would be stymied by poor road conditions. While HRM did

its best to subsidize travel for those coming from further away, this still represented a barrier to participation and to group cohesion.

Relatedly, the group facilitator spoke to the differing priorities and interests of the youth committee members, largely due to the fact that they all lived in different communities. This made it difficult to develop a sense of purpose and passion for particular issues, or to be able to relate to the issues being discussed at Regional Council. The group facilitator remarked that there was some “friction” between the councillors and the youth over the issue. “The youth couldn’t really grasp the understanding of talking regionally, which is what the councillors wanted,” he said. “So they would talk about examples happening specifically around their school, around where they live.” The youth were much more interested in and knowledgeable of their immediate, local communities than HRM as a whole.

While relations between the councillors and youth on HRMYC were not overtly negative or toxic, they were strained, and didn’t match the level of friendliness and comfort between councillors and youth in the AYTC. The facilitator provided an example about a time when a councillor rudely shut down a youth member of the committee. “I was spending more time trying not to get in trouble and calm councillors than I was able to actually move forward with youth development stuff...it was enough to frustrate me,” he said. Not all interactions between the councillors and youth were negative, however, and he remarked that often the councillors were very supportive. On one occasion, the mayor participated in a meeting of the committee, which the facilitator describes as one of their best meetings ever. “For whatever reason the mayor sat back, shut up, he didn’t talk, he didn’t do anything. He only gave input after everyone was done talking. The youth left that meeting feeling so energized and ready to go, it was unbelievable. So, it was definitely taken seriously because the mayor took it seriously, and he definitely funnelled

it down through the system a little bit.” Though it may seem counterintuitive that the youth found this type of meeting energizing, it is likely indicative of the power dynamics present in the committee. If the youth noticeably enjoyed an opportunity to be actively listened to, it implies that the other meetings were likely mostly dominated by the adult councillors.

Unfortunately, however, these types of ‘listening’ meetings were few and far between. The facilitator attributes some of the issue to a generation gap, and he felt it was outside of his mandate to address it with the councillors. Relatedly, the youth respondents indicated that they rarely or never had the opportunity to meet with city councillors and staff, indicating a level of disconnect between the HRMYC and Regional Council.

In the few instances when the group did participate in advising, there was little feedback from Regional Council to the HRMYC about their work. For example, the HRMYC produced a small report about transportation issues in Musquodoboit Harbour. “Well the youth were excited, it was great, it was actually successful. However, Council didn’t respond to it. There’s no information coming back at [the youth], so they felt very defeated by that. You kind of have this build-up to something great, and then you don’t get any kind of response back from anybody. Which is not Council’s fault, it’s just the way the process is. It kind of went into a report, it’s there, who knows where it is now?” This lack of communication was doubtless discouraging, both for the youth and the group’s facilitator.

The facilitator attributed some of the lack of success of the group to its lack of ability to be flexible and fun. As a result of its status as a standing committee, it was subject to Administrative Order One, which significantly constrained how the group could operate. This impacted things like meeting frequency and attendance, as already mentioned, but also impacted the general ‘feel’ of the group. The April 2013 staff report remarked that “the Youth to date do

not feel the Advisory Committee was open and conducive to informal honest and open feedback. Youth feel somewhat intimidated in the more formal setting” (Halifax Regional Municipality 2013b). The facilitator reflected that the group may have been more effective if it had been a working group rather than a standing committee. He remarked that he would have found value in having meetings even if not all members could attend and might have been able to increase their frequency without the administrative constraints. “I think [the committee] was kind of set up to be like ‘hey, these guys need to be treated like adults’,” he said. While the final report acknowledges the need to ‘train’ youth in adult structures, the committee was not deemed to be a good method for doing so.

Finally, the committee ended up not being as diverse and representative as was originally intended. The group’s members were slanted towards youth who were already engaged, and thus not only were the benefits to the members less salient, but the feedback being received from the group was less broad in experience (Halifax Regional Municipality 2013b).

The group facilitator expressed a sense of regret about not being able to make the committee work but acknowledged that many of the issues facing the council were structural and not the fault of councillors, staff, or the youth. Indeed, the youth respondents overall felt that they were well trained and supported by the group’s facilitator and had sufficient financial resources to do their work. And it should also be noted that while HRM has decided to disband the youth council, they have not abandoned youth engagement altogether. While still formulating a precise strategy, they have decided that a more effective approach is to send staff to engage with youth in their local communities, through schools and recreation centres, rather than to bring youth to staff through an advisory committee. For example, in late 2013 HRM staff went to various community events involving youth, and surveyed youth from across the municipality



about concerns, needs, and opportunities for youth engagement. They are using this data to improve the municipality's youth programming. HRM staff have also formed an internal youth engagement committee to continue the process of data collection and to discuss trends, challenges and opportunities for youth engagement in the municipality.

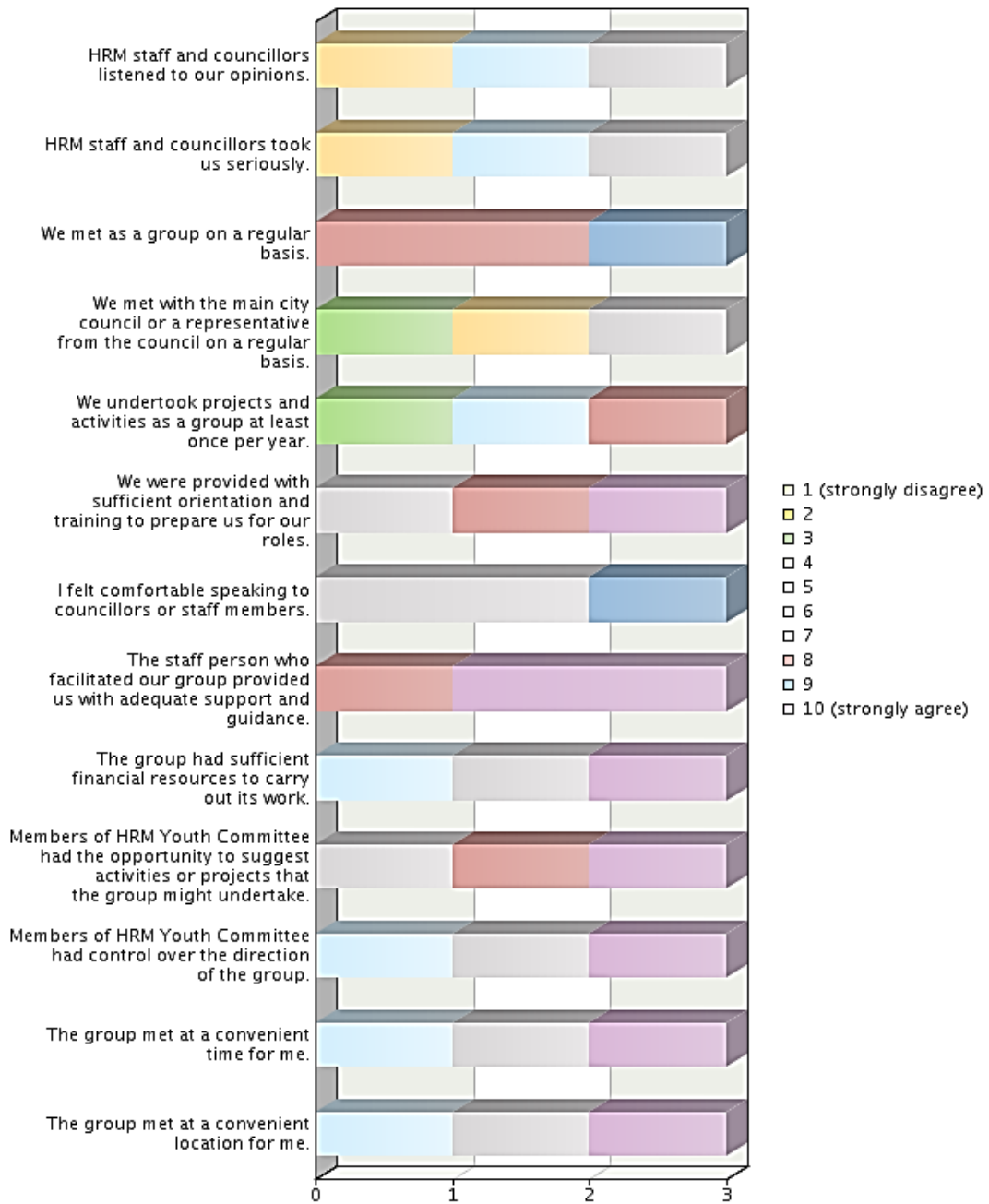


Figure 4.7 Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

#### **4.4.9 *Impact on policy***

Impact on policy was not nonexistent, but is difficult to identify, particularly due to the lack of feedback from Regional Council to the HRMYC. The group facilitator pointed to consultations on transportation and recreation centres as areas in which the committee was able to have input.

The youth respondents were somewhat ambivalent regarding their interpretation of the impact that HRMYC had. They had neither strongly positive nor negative impressions of the degree to which they were listened to and taken seriously by HRM Councillors. Of the respondents, one somewhat agreed that they made a difference in decisions made by HRM Regional Council, one strongly disagreed, and one selected 'N/A'. The respondent who felt they did impact council indicated that it was because they were “able to advise the Council on youth related matters, such as community programs.” The respondent who felt strongly that they did not have an impact stated that “although the committee had many great ideas, we were unable to carry through with them. Each time we tried to reach out to the HRM councillors, we were unsuccessful.” This sentiment is supported by the facilitator’s observation of a disconnect between the HRMYC and the HRM councillors.

#### **4.4.10 *Impact on engagement***

The group facilitator felt that there was not an insignificant amount of impact on general democratic engagement among the youth members. He points to an example of one member who made connections through the council and has gotten involved with provincial party politics in the time since. However, since many of the members of the group were already ‘engaged’ youth, it is difficult to judge how much the committee itself contributed to overall engagement. Of the three youth respondents, two indicated that they were “very strongly” engaged prior to joining

HRMYC, and one indicated they were already moderately engaged. This is supported by HRM staff's anecdotal observation that many of the youth on the committee were already engaged. However, the respondents indicated a more moderate interest in politics prior to joining HRMYC and a strong interest after joining. They felt that there were a number of areas in which they had become more interested as result of their HRMYC experience:

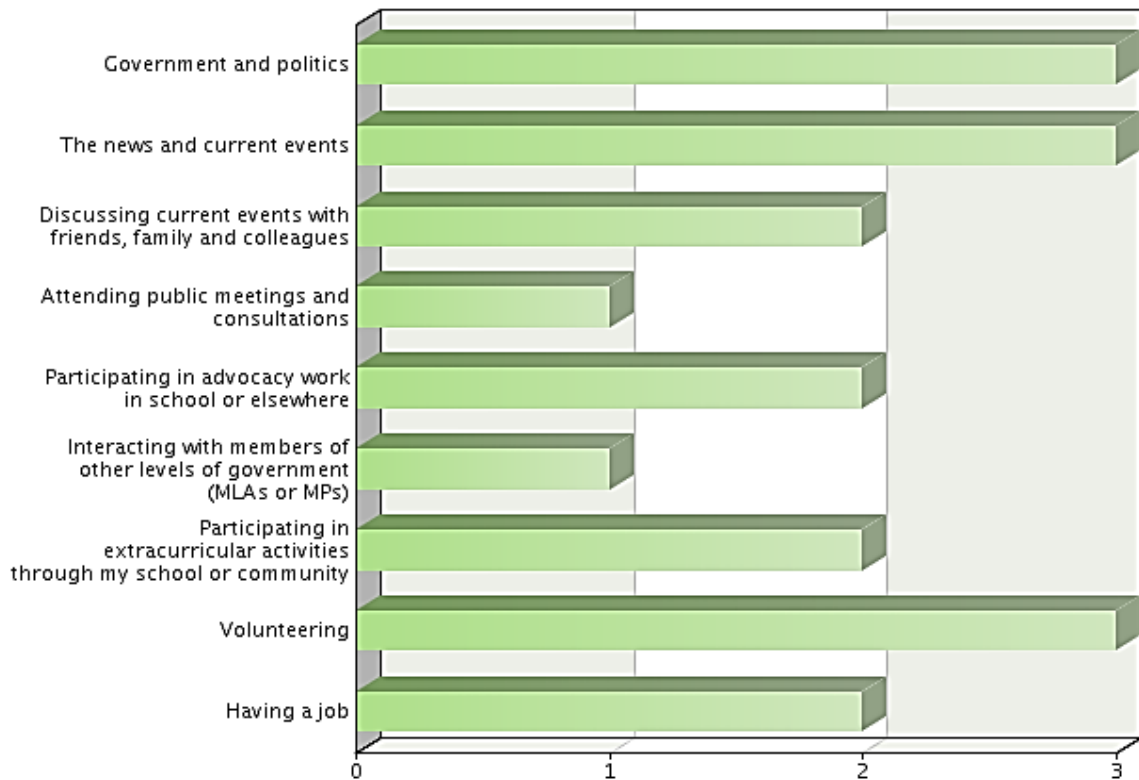


Figure 4.8 *Which of the following activities do you feel that you became more interested in as a result of your participation in HRM Youth Committee? Please check all that apply.*

Despite some methodological challenges in collecting the above information, a clear picture of both councils emerges from the reflections provided by both the group facilitators and the youth participants. It is clear that Amherst has had a much more successful experience using

youth councils than HRM did. To discuss why, we must compare the two case studies with one another and with our criteria on youth council effectiveness.

## Chapter 5

# What Makes a Successful Youth Council?

## An Analysis

### 5.1 Comparisons Between Amherst and HRM

The results of the interviews, surveys and document analysis presented in the previous chapter clearly reflect different outcomes for the AYTC and HRMYC. While initiated with similar intentions and organized in roughly the same manner, the results provide strong evidence to suggest AYTC has been a successful youth engagement strategy for the Town of Amherst whereas HRMYC was a failure for Halifax Regional Municipality. The varied experiences of these two communities implies that it is not the format of the youth advisory council itself that is necessarily ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather, its execution, and more specifically, how it is executed within the context of the local community in which it is situated.

Before returning to the best practices established in Chapter 3, we will look at a few crucial differences between the two groups.

#### 5.1.1 *Community size and cohesion*

Amherst is a relatively small community whose local government of seven elected representatives are responsible for less than 10 000 residents. By comparison, HRM’s sixteen councillors and mayor are responsible for serving over 390 000 citizens, roughly one-third of the population of Nova Scotia. Amherst’s small geographic size and similarly small population no doubt contribute to a higher degree of interconnectedness. One can presume that this could also mean a greater deal of proximity between elected representatives and their constituents.

Youth in Amherst live in similarly close proximity. The town is served by one junior high and one high school, and all members of the AYTC would go to either one of these schools. The

youth would play on many of the same sports teams, attend the same events, visit the same recreation facilities, and so on. The community groups that the AYTC interacts with, such as the Lions Club or the local police force are the only such groups in the community. What this means is that the community that the AYTC provides advice on and volunteers for is more or less the *same community for each member*.

HRMYC had no such experience. Up until 1996 all the constituent communities of HRM were governed separately, and community identity remains rooted in these individual communities rather than for HRM as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Also, the mandate of HRMYC required broad community representation, meaning that the committee was not supposed to consist of members from the same local communities. Therefore, the members of HRMYC went to different schools, accessed different services and recreation facilities, interacted with different community organizations and leaders, and had different attachments to different neighbourhoods. HRM is demographically more diverse, both rural and urban in composition, and its different communities experience a myriad of different issues often necessitating varied and contextual responses. The group facilitator's observation that the members of HRMYC cared most about their local schools and neighbourhoods is telling. It speaks to a fundamental interest on the part of the youth participants in their immediate community, friends, neighbours and family. HRM could not get the HRMYC members to speak to HRM as a whole because *HRM is not their community*.

The proximity between the members of AYTC and their community produces a sense of obligation to members of AYTC to participate and perform their duties. While the group's facilitator did not report much if any renegeing on duties, the group's success rate at completing

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<sup>7</sup> This may be reflected by the fact that HRM has recently launched a branding initiative to attempt to provide the region with a sort of identity – see <http://www.definehalifaxregion.com/>

projects might be attributable to their proximity to those they are serving. A failed food drive or public event has more personal ramifications in a town of 9500 than a community of 390 000.

The Amherst youth may also see the issues in their towns as far more personal in nature than the youth in HRM. A rural youth working on a project in urban Halifax may understand and appreciate the significance of their work, but may not feel personal attachment to the cause.

Furthermore, proximity to a community in addition to the relative homogeneity of that community makes it easier to identify pressing need in the community, prioritize, and act upon it.

Diochon (2004) speaks about the connection between networks and community development in the context of entrepreneurship and innovation in Maritime communities. She argues that there are “informal organizational arrangements” which often impact community development. These arrangements are described as “non-prescribed social structures and processes that define how things get done” (93). Such social structures might be seen to be quite visible in the instance of Amherst, where the community is smaller and people are more familiar with one another. Diochon (2004) argues that “when formal and informal business and social relationships overlap, they are likely to produce a widespread and timely exchange of information and resources...” This implies that in communities where there are such informal organizational arrangements, ‘getting things done’ might be just easier. We know that civic engagement in general is often impacted by the level of social capital in a given community, namely, what Putnam (1995) refers to as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (para 7). Indeed, communities with more social capital also tend to exhibit higher levels of civic engagement and generally more cohesive, comfortable lives (Putnam 1995). While quantifying the level of social capital found in Amherst or HRM would be possible through further research,

it was not possible within the constraints of this thesis. Yet one can hypothesize that social capital might be higher in Amherst due to its smaller size and more closely knit familial and non-familial networks. HRM, along with being much more diverse, stratified and populous, is also comprised of several communities which up until sixteen years ago were distinct and separate communities. The challenges of implementing any engagement strategy across several communities versus a relatively unified community like Amherst are apparent. As is indicated in the results, many challenges that led to the disbandment of HRMYC are related to the community's size and the lack of reciprocity and obligation between the members of the council. One might imagine that levels of reciprocity and obligation would be higher on the AYTC where goals are more similar, where stakeholders are personally known to each other, and where the community that they are trying to improve is the same. It is possible, then, to hypothesize that social capital is an important determinant of the success or failure of a youth council, or really, of any youth engagement strategy. While a community like HRM might have more financial and human resources to implement an engagement strategy, what it lacks are intangibles like tightly woven social networks, connectivity, and the sense of obligation that is wrought by proximity. As Diochon (2004) puts it, “When supportiveness, trust, and cooperation are the principles upon which participation in activities is based, they help instil a strong collective identity in which people perceive their actions to be mutually linked. Not only does participation create a sense of ownership and responsibility, it also fosters greater commitment” (94).

### ***5.1.2 Adult facilitation and commitment***

As previously established, the literature on youth participation in governance and community development emphasizes the role of supportive adults in facilitating and enabling youth action. Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation summarizes this idealized relationship as



constituting a form of power sharing. Power sharing was evident in both the AYTC and HRMYC case studies, but to highly varied extents.

Both groups were youth-led in nature, with youth chairs elected from among their peers to lead the meetings. Adult elected officials had membership on both committees, but in the case of AYTC, these adults are ex-officio members without voting rights. This means they sit as observers and contributors, but the direction of the council is ultimately determined by the youth. HRMYC's status as a standing committee automatically gave the councillor members voting rights, which while not enough to overpower the youth, still added a different power dynamic. This dissimilar dynamic was evidenced by the comments from each facilitator about the relationships between the youth and the adult councillors. In the case of AYTC, the youth and councillors have a collegial, friendly, and comfortable relationship. The facilitator's comments as well as the youths' feedback indicate that they enjoy a degree of mutual respect and recognition, which the facilitator felt had improved the confidence of the youth.

In the case of HRMYC, the adult-youth relationships were slightly less positive. There was less proximity between the youth and councillors, due to the limited number of meetings and the unlikelihood of interacting with each other outside of the meetings. This meant a less comfortable relationship, as well as less opportunity for the youth to be mentored or encouraged by the adults, and less opportunity for the adults to be impressed by the youth. The group's facilitator commented that the adults perhaps needed more training and awareness of how to be youth friendly, but there was no such opportunity built into the council structure. The less connected relationship is understandable given the broader structure of HRM and the vast number of committees and commitments that councillors are obligated to take part in. This again

speaks to HRM's disadvantage as a large community attempting to utilize this method of youth engagement.

However, the councillors are not the only adults that the youth interacted with. The most important adults in a youth council structure are the group facilitators. As the primary contact point for the youth as well as the connector between the youth and the adult community, their level of commitment, knowledge, sensitivity and patience can greatly impact how successful an experience the council is (Matthews and Limb 2003; Matthews 2001; Hart 1992). In both communities, the facilitators demonstrated high levels of commitment and personal investment in the groups. The facilitator from Amherst recalled that she jumped at the opportunity to run the youth council when she first learned it was being implemented. The facilitator from HRMYC similarly displayed a high degree of interest in and commitment to youth development and engagement. The youths' high ratings of the group's organization and training indicates a level of satisfaction with the work of their facilitators. If these adults were not so knowledgeable and skilled at facilitation, it is probable that the youth would not have rated their experience on the councils so highly.

But while a bad facilitator can break a council, it appears that a good facilitator does not necessarily make one. While the facilitators demonstrated many components of the 'best practices' of adult-youth relationship building, it was not the only crucial building block. AYTC has another 'outer group' of supportive adults, consisting of the town council and staff as well as community leaders which seems to have contributed greatly to the group's success. HRMYC enjoyed much less 'buy-in', as evidenced by the disconnection between councillors and the committee, as well as the lack of support of the HRMYC by other departments within HRM. As the facilitator for HRMYC pointed out, this lack of support from other departments made it much

more difficult to imbue the committee members with a sense of purpose and to make the group seem worthwhile.

### **5.1.3 Outcomes and goals**

Finally, the differing successes of AYTC and HRMYC may be in part attributable to the divergent abilities of the groups to achieve the goals set forth in their terms of reference. HRMYC's objectives were primarily related to advising HRM's departments on matters affecting youth, and identifying issues important to youth that HRM should be aware of. The AYTC has a much broader assortment of objectives, ranging from advising, to improving the image of youth in the town, to participating and assisting with events. AYTC's objectives appear ambitious, but they have also had more success at achieving these goals than HRMYC. As identified by HRMYC's facilitator, the group's involvement in advising became limited after a while and they often didn't have enough work to do. Attempts to add extra duties were often thwarted by extraneous difficulties like geography and weather. The group was eventually disbanded because HRM did not feel that it was meeting the objectives of the group within the format of a standing committee.

AYTC, on the other hand, has been able to participate effectively in multiple community events each year, receives positive coverage in the media, and is generally well-received by the members of the community and town council. While improvements can always be made, it is clear that AYTC is much closer to meeting the objectives laid out in its terms of reference than HRMYC ever was. This sense that the AYTC is impacting the community positively and 'getting things done' has no doubt increased the youth's and the community's level of commitment to AYTC. A similar positive feedback loop is perceivable in the experience of HRMYC. It is perhaps possible that the group's relative lack of success in turn impacted the

commitment of the adults surrounding the structure, which then negatively impacted the group's ability to make achievements going forward. As discussed previously, if an adult is not supportive, it often hinders the ability of the group to reach its objectives, which then renders it tokenistic. Matthews and Limb (2003) say that "To a considerable extent, the legitimacy of a youth council depends upon how significant adults within the context of local decision-making perceive the purpose and efficacy of the organisation." If the adults do not actually believe the council can or should make a difference or actually strive to meet its objectives, the council will be missing a crucial component needed to achieve said objectives. Youth, in turn, are likely to pick up on this tokenism, which Matthews and Limb (2003) argue often breeds resentment and withdrawal, further limiting the potential success of the group.

In short, because AYTC has been able to translate its objectives into a few initial successes, which was in turn made possible by the support of a few adults, they were able to engender further community support and legitimacy among all stakeholders, which has reinforced their position in the community and ensured a degree of sustainability and longevity. HRMYC's lack of ability to show it could meet its objectives may have contributed to less support and legitimacy among its stakeholders (youth and adult) and undermined its sustainability.

## **5.2 Further Analysis**

To wrap up the analysis of the two councils, we now return to our previously established best practices to determine the extent to which each group did or did not fulfill these criteria. The first two criteria (clear objectives and mandates; adult support) are dealt with in the preceding sections. We will therefore only examine the remaining criteria.

- ***The council is sensitive to diversity and awareness of different experiences of youth. Furthermore, the councils is committed to representation of different demographics of youth.***

Neither council did a particularly effective job of tailoring the youth council experience to speak to the diverse experiences of youth, outside of a commitment to having diverse membership. HRMYC particularly struggled with this, as they often asked their youth participants to step outside of their community and speak to HRM in its entirety, something that runs the risk of decontextualizing youth. To their credit, they have since recognized this problem and it is partly why their new youth engagement strategy entails interacting with youth in their individual community contexts.

- ***The youth have access to education, training and resources to prepare them for their roles and are provided with enough information and feedback to be able to participate fully***

Both did provide formal and informal learning and training opportunities. This was accomplished by giving the youth actual presentations on various topics related to local government, as well as allowing them to take leadership roles on the council and on projects, which in turn provided training in a number of ‘soft skills’. AYTC also appears to have a more direct commitment to educating the youth about local government by having regular presentations and field trips, as opposed to HRMYC, whose educational component was more an unintended consequence than a direct objective.

AYTC has done a much better job of information-sharing than HRMYC. As discussed in the HRMYC case study, information compiled by the council would go into the ether and youth rarely received feedback. AYTC’s model provides for more reciprocity in information sharing,

with youth getting the opportunity to interact directly with Town Council and thus get responses to their ideas and initiatives.

The youth council is, in itself, a sort of resource helping youth to access the local governments in their communities. However, crucially, it is not open to everyone. Therefore, while HRM and Amherst both committed resources to form these councils for the purpose of connecting youth to government, they cannot be seen as a solution to the problem of lack of access. Also, the degree of access to government that each youth council had was varied. As articulated by the facilitators in the case studies, AYTC has enjoyed more access to government through regular meetings and projects than HRMYC did.

- ***Adults exhibit transparency and honesty about their expectations for the council and are honest in dealings with youth***

It is not possible to judge the extent to which the youth who participated in both councils were or were not misled about the council and their role in it. It is clear from the youth respondents that they fully expected to be able to influence policy in their respective communities by becoming members of these youth councils. It is unclear whether staff and councillors in either community were fully prepared to let this influence take place, though the evidence suggests that AYTC is much more successful than HRMYC at getting projects approved by council. It is also possible, however, that it is easier for AYTC to accept the influence of youth in a smaller community with a smaller operating budget and fewer citizens to appease. HRM has far more stakeholders to consider, and thus the concerns of youth had to be balanced alongside those of a much larger group of citizens.

Both councils experienced some degree of deviation from their original mandates. It is likely that both councils started off fully intending to do the work they set out to do, but were

waylaid by other circumstances. AYTC has done a much better job of providing detailed Terms of Reference with clarity on the expected role of the group. HRMYC was in the process of amending their Terms of Reference to more accurately reflect what the group evolved into, but these were never fully used as the group ceased to be. As discussed in the results, HRMYC had to amend their group's mandate as a result of not being utilized regularly in an advisory capacity.

- ***Both adults and youth show commitment to implementing change, following through on ideas and actions.***

In terms of broader commitment to the engagement mechanism of youth councils, it is clear that Amherst is more committed than HRM, which has now abandoned the idea entirely. Looking specifically at both cases, Amherst appears to have more commitment to incorporating its youth into various components of its local governance. While questions of impact on policy were posed in both the interview and survey portions of the study, not many specifics were provided. AYTC was able to show a few more instances of actual projects which received funding and support, which they credit the youth council for. HRMYC pointed to instances where they were able to provide recommendations on policy areas, but lack of feedback from council means it is difficult to know how much the youth report impacted the eventual decision. We can look at the satisfaction of the youth respondents as a measure of this, as we might expect to see a degree of cynicism about the council if it was felt that their opinions were not being taken seriously. There was slightly more cynicism in the case of HRMYC than in AYTC, probably attributable to the lack of communication between the youth council and the Regional Council. AYTC's better relationship with Amherst Town Council no doubt has provided the youth with more confidence that their opinions are being taken seriously, and that their voices are being heard. This study, therefore, fails to shed much more light on the question of whether

youth councils actually ‘make a difference’ in terms of policymaking. It remains a tenuous and ambiguous connection, at best, but one that should be explored further.

### ***5.2.1 Impact on democratic engagement***

Another question that I focused on in the study was the question of how youth councils impact overall engagement with government and politics. This question was not able to be definitively answered either, as my sample of youth respondents was too small. However, there was some indication, both from the facilitators and from the respondents, that they felt their overall connection to and understanding of politics and government structures was improved as a result of their participation in the youth councils. It is probable that the youth who participate in these councils are already prone to be engaged, and indeed, this dynamic was identified by staff in the 2013 report to HRM Regional Council regarding the abolition of the HRMYC (Halifax Regional Municipality 2013b). However, it is positive that even if the councils are not always producing the results that youth hope to see, they are possibly contributing to increased confidence in the democratic process on the part of the youth participants. Even if the youth participants are already prone to be engaged, these exercises may solidify their confidence in democratic institutions, legitimizing the world of formal politics and thus engendering a sense of civic responsibility going forward (Zeldin 2007).

### ***5.2.2 Adult structures in youth environments***

A point worth returning to is the appropriateness of incorporating youth into adult structures. As the April 2013 report to council from HRMYC noted, the committee’s structure was less than appropriate for the style of interaction that young people were most interested in. On the other hand, however, there is an imperative in ‘training’ youth to fulfill adult roles. Indeed, Howe (2010) argues that it is in part the fact that youth are kept so sequestered from



adults throughout their childhood and adolescence that keeps them from fully grasping and engaging in their democratic obligations as adults. A youth council, particularly one like HRMYC which was structured the same as the municipality's other standing committees, could allow youth to try on adult shoes and become confident enough in these roles to be inspired to continue with them as adults. However, as Percy-Smith (2010) and others caution, incorporation of youth into adult structures can serve to marginalize some, while potentially perpetuating existing inequalities as well as ineffective strategies of governance and engagement. However, it seems that location matters. Perhaps it is possible that in smaller, more cohesive communities, these challenges can be worked through and addressed in order to form a council that is empowering rather than marginalizing. AYTC shows signs of being a model for an empowering council due to its ability to both encourage the personal growth of its participants and by enriching the community through the participation of these youth.

### **5.3.3 Evaluation**

This study as well as the study of other youth councils across Canada is difficult because of the lack of rigorous evaluations performed of these groups. Of my two case studies, only the HRMYC had any sort of evaluation of its activities, and this was done in order to justify closing down the committee and not to improve it. Evaluation is a key component of improving programming and engagement activities, and it makes these groups more difficult for outsiders to analyze. As they continue to grow in popularity, more evaluation of youth councils and local government youth engagement strategies in general should be performed in order to better determine what is working, and what requires improvement.

#### **5.3.4 *Youth councils and deliberative democracy***

A final question that must be addressed is how youth councils fit into theories of deliberative democracy. Unlike more classical theories of the state such as pluralism or Marxism, which see interests as fixed by pre-determined factors like class, group affiliations or economics, deliberative democratic theory assumes that interests are not fixed and can shift on the basis of deliberation (Dryzek and Dunleavy, 2009). Thus, the quality and quantity of deliberative exercises can impact policymaking. In my case studies, both the youth and adults referred to the significance, as they saw it, of incorporating the voices of youth into local governance and decision making. This suggests that stakeholders in both communities believe that interests can be shaped and decisions made on the basis of engagement exercises with different community actors. Hearing a variety of opinions appears to be at least perceived as crucial to good policymaking by these local stakeholders. This, therefore, suggests that deliberative theories have permeated best practices in local level governance.

However, it is apparent that youth councils, by their very nature, are not deliberative. Youth councils are exclusionary, requiring an application and selection process. Even if a community does believe in the importance of deliberative methods, youth councils are unlikely to be able to deliver deliberative democracy in the sense that it was originally intended. My study thus suggests that deliberative democracy is valued by local governments, but that communities are using the wrong tools to achieve it.

## Chapter 6

## Conclusion

In late 2013, Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM) announced that it was taking steps towards introducing its own youth town council, proposing that it would be a unique opportunity for youth in the area to have their voices heard (MacIntyre 2013). While no specifics have yet been announced and no money attached to the project, it presents an interesting opportunity for a thought experiment. CBRM, like HRM, is the product of a 1996 amalgamation which saw the large urban region of Sydney combined with numerous smaller, rural communities to form one central regional municipal government. The area of land covered by CBRM is about half that of HRM and its population is roughly a third that of HRM. It is not difficult to imagine that similar challenges will be faced by CBRM as were encountered in HRM in the implementation of a youth council.

CBRM is likely to discover that putting an effective youth council together is not as easy as passing a piece of legislation. As I have discussed at length in previous chapters, there are many characteristics that must be in place before a youth council can fulfill its objectives. As is apparent from the case studies, AYTC is a much more effective youth council than HRMYC. This is because AYTC has high levels of support from adults and the surrounding community, a good organizational structure and clear objectives, a history of accomplishments, and produces educational and skills-building outcomes for the youth participants. This can be contrasted to HRMYC, which despite the best intentions of the adults involved, enjoyed less support, less success implementing projects, and less ability to have their advice heard by council as a result of being embedded in a rigid, even obstructionist administrative structure.

Crucially, however, it seems that one of the biggest determinants of the success of a youth council has less to do with how the council is structured in terms of administration and more to do with where it is situated geographically. Indeed, HRM itself seemed to contribute to the failure of their youth council: the sheer size of the community and subsequent geographical distance between council members, the relative lack of social capital, and a lack of community identity which made running an effective youth council much more challenging. I would therefore hypothesize that youth councils are most effective where they are most locally situated: attached to local as opposed to provincial or federal governments, accommodated by strong local networks and supportive adults, where community identity is stronger and priorities are easier to set. It is of course possible that even in small communities there could be challenges, if populations were more diverse and interests more divergent. However, even if issues are more difficult to identify in these situations, these communities are still likely to have high levels of social capital and concurrently high levels of commitment to one another. This commitment sustains things like youth councils, which are entirely voluntary in their initiation and operation. It will be fascinating to watch the development of CBRM's efforts to set up a youth council with these considerations in mind.

The evidence presented in this thesis indicates that youth councils can be effective tools of youth engagement and youth-friendly policy making, provided that they are appropriate for the community and adhere to best practices for youth engagement within the context of local government. They are not deliberative bodies, nor are they representative bodies, either in terms of being elected by or being a demographic mirror of the population at large. Despite these provisos, they show some potential to produce positive outcomes in terms of personal

development, democratic engagement, and the implementation of programming and youth-friendly policies.

It is unlikely that a government or organization would start a youth council with dishonest motives. Such exercises invariably start out with the best of intentions, and not all of them succeed. This is the general experience of engagement; it is a trial and error process. Broadly speaking, youth councils are evidence of an ongoing tension regarding the role of the child in society, as both vulnerable and possessing latent powers and abilities that only require the right opportunities and education to unlock (Matthews and Limb 1998; Lowden 2001; Ansell 2004). Yet as the experience of AYTC reveals, when the exercise is done well and those latent powers are unlocked, there is the potential for engagement exercises to be empowering for both youth and their communities.

## **6.1 Future Research**

This study reveals how much we still have to learn about youth engagement, youth councils, and engagement at the local level. To date, there is very little literature about youth or even community engagement at the local level in Canada. As our country faces demographic shifts and increasing urbanization, it is an issue which municipalities will doubtless be grappling with for years to come.

I suggest the following questions be addressed in future studies on this topic:

- Is public policy made measurably better because of consultation and engagement?
- Are adult spaces of engagement ever appropriate for children? Can the power dynamic ever be overcome? Can these models ever really represent the lived experiences of most youth?

- How does participation in youth councils affect democratic engagement of youth as they mature into adulthood? What about other types of youth organizations, such as model parliaments?
- How can we think about engagement in terms of community capacity? What characteristics can be found in communities that are more effective at engaging their citizens? Are successful engagement exercises partially predicated on community characteristics, or can any community learn to engage? Which engagement exercises are most appropriate for which communities?
- How can local governments reach more youth than just those involved in a youth council? How can youth councils avoid only engaging those who are predisposed to be engaged?

There is much more work to be done in this field, and indeed, in the entire area of local politics in Canada. This thesis has provided a starting place for thinking about how best to engage youth through local-level engagement strategies, as well as how best to welcome youth into adult institutions in order to hear their voices and improve the quality of life for youth as a result.

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## Appendix A: Interview and survey questions

2. What is your present age? (OPEN ENDED)

3. I identify as

- Male
- Female
- Other

4. What is your present occupation?

- I'm a student
- Unemployed / taking time off
- Employed

IF SELECTED 'EMPLOYED':

5. What is your job? (OPEN ENDED)

6. What are your future career goals?

7. How many years did you spend on Amherst Youth Town Council?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5+

8. Please rate your overall experience on Amherst Youth Town Council, with 1 being "Very negative" and 10 being "Very positive."

9. How were you recruited to join the council?

- A teacher or staff member at my school encouraged me.
- I saw an advertisement (online, in a newspaper, on a poster, received an email, etc).
- A town councillor or staff member from Town Hall reached out to me.
- A member of my family encouraged me.
- A friend encouraged me.
- A current or past member of Amherst Youth Town Council encouraged me.

10. Why did you decide to join the council? Please select all that apply.

- I thought it would be a good experience to put on my resume.
- I wanted to learn more about municipal government.
- I wanted to have my voice heard by my town council.
- There are important issues in my town which I wanted to help address.
- My friends were members.
- I thought it would be fun.
- I don't know or don't remember.

□ Other (OPEN ENDED)

11. On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being 'Very disorganized' and 10 being 'Very organized', please rate the overall organization of Amherst Youth Town Council's regular meetings.

12. On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being 'Very disorganized' and 10 being 'Very organized', please rate the overall organization of Amherst Youth Town Council's projects and activities (eg: fundraisers, social events, etc).

13. This question will evaluate the benefits of belonging to Amherst Youth Town Council. Please rate the degree to which you agree that Amherst Youth Town Council provides these potential benefits, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

- I learned about municipal government structure.
- I learned about issues at the municipal level.
- I got to interact with town leaders and businesspeople.
- I got to meet new people.
- I got to travel.
- I made new friends.
- I had fun.
- I gained important life skills.
- I improved my confidence.
- I influenced decision making in my local community.
- I got to do projects and activities which benefited the town.
- I was able to ensure a youth voice on my town council.

14. Are there other benefits you experienced which are not listed here? If so, please indicate them here: (OPEN ENDED)

15. This question will evaluate potential challenges you might have encountered while you were a member of Amherst Youth Town Council. Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

- Town staff and councillors listened to our opinions.
- Town staff and councillors took us seriously.
- We met as a group on a regular basis.
- We met with the main town council or a representative from the town council on a regular basis.
- We undertook projects and activities as a group at least once per year.
- We were provided with sufficient orientation and training to prepare us for our roles
- I felt comfortable speaking to town councillors or staff members.
- The staff person who facilitated our group provided us with adequate support and guidance
- The group had sufficient financial resources to carry out its work.



- Members of Amherst Youth Town Council had the opportunity to suggest activities or projects that the group might undertake.
- Members of Amherst Youth Town Council had control over the direction of the group.
- The group met at a convenient time for me.
- The group met at a convenient location for me.

16. What skills did you feel you either acquired or improved as a result of belonging to Amherst Youth Town Council? (OPEN ENDED)

17. How often did you have an opportunity to meet or interact with Amherst town councillors each year?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Regularly

18. How often did you have an opportunity to meet or interact with Amherst town staff each year?

- Never
- Rarely
- Occasionally
- Regularly

19. Please rate the degree to which you agree with the following statement, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

**I would recommend to a friend to join Amherst Youth Town Council.**

20. Please rate the degree to which you agree with the following statement, with 1 being "I strongly disagree" and 10 being "I strongly agree."

**My participation in Amherst Youth Town Council made a difference in the decisions that were made by Amherst Town Council.**

IF ANSWERED 6 OR HIGHER:

21. If you feel that your participation in Amherst Youth Town Council made a difference in the decisions that were made by Amherst Town Council, please provide some examples of times when the Youth Town Council made such impacts. (OPEN ENDED)

IF ANSWERED 5 OR LOWER:

22. If you feel that your participation in Amherst Youth Town Council DID NOT make a difference in the decisions that were made by Amherst Town Council,

please provide some examples of times when you feel that the advice or ideas of the Youth Town Council were overlooked. (OPEN ENDED)

23. Rate your personal level of engagement and interest in your community PRIOR to joining Amherst Youth Town Council, with 1 being "Very disengaged" and 10 being "Very engaged."

24. Rate your personal level of engagement and interest in your community AFTER joining Amherst Youth Town Council, with 1 being "Very disengaged" and 10 being "Very engaged."

25. Rate your personal level of engagement and interest in politics PRIOR to joining Amherst Youth Town Council, with 1 being "Very disengaged" and 10 being "Very engaged."

26. Rate your personal level of engagement and interest in politics AFTER joining Amherst Youth Town Council, with 1 being "Very disengaged" and 10 being "Very engaged."

27. Which of the following activities do you feel that you became more interested in as a result of your participation in Amherst Youth Town Council? Please check all that apply.

- Government and politics
- The news and current events
- Discussing current events with friends, family and colleagues
- Attending public meetings and consultations
- Participating in advocacy work in school or elsewhere
- Interacting with members of other levels of government (MLAs or MPs)
- Participating in extracurricular activities through my school or community
- Volunteering
- Having a job

28. Were you old enough to vote in the last federal election in 2011?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

IF ANSWERED 'YES':

29. If you were old enough to vote in the last federal election (2011) did you do so?

- Yes
- No
- Don't remember

30. If there has been an election in your province or municipality in the last three years, were you old enough to vote in it?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

□

IF ANSWERED YES:

31. If you were old enough to vote in the last municipal or provincial election did you do so?

- Yes
- No
- I don't remember
- There was an election, but I was not eligible to vote due to residency requirements.

32. Rate the likelihood that you will vote in the next municipal, provincial, or federal election, with 1 being "Very unlikely" and 10 being "Very likely."

33. Overall, what would you say was the best thing about your experience with Amherst Youth Town Council? (OPEN ENDED)

34. Overall, what would you say was the most challenging thing about your experience with Amherst Youth Town Council? (OPEN ENDED)

35. Do you have any suggestions of other ways your community might try to engage young people, aside from Amherst Youth Town Council? (OPEN ENDED)

36. Thank you for completing the survey! If you would like to be entered into a draw to win a \$50 Visa gift card, please enter your email below. Your email will be stored separately and will not be associated with your responses to the survey.

## **Appendix B: Recruitment materials**

### **EMAIL TO STAFF:**

Dear [Staff by name]:

I am a graduate student in the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie University. You might recall that we spoke earlier regarding the activities of [GROUP NAME]. I am writing today to request your participation in a study of the effectiveness of youth advisory councils. I have two requests:

- 1) I am hoping that you might be available for an interview about [GROUP NAME]. I am particularly interested in hearing your thoughts in regard to its impact on both the community and on young people. When would it be convenient for me to speak with you, either over the telephone or in person?
- 2) I am seeking past participants of [GROUP NAME] to have them complete a brief online survey about their time on [GROUP NAME]. These youth must be current or former members of the group, over the age of 16 and have served within the last 1-3 years. Will you forward my survey to them? I am hoping to have surveys from at least 10 youth who served with [GROUP NAME].

A letter of consent is attached which has more information about the interview.

Thank you, and don't hesitate to get in touch with any questions. I can also be reached by phone at (902) 449 5454.

Regards,  
Katelynn Northam  
MA student, Political Science  
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Katelynn.northam@dal.ca  
(902) 449 5454

## Study: Youth Participation in Public Policy Development in Nova Scotia

### INFORMED CONSENT

Dear [STAFF]

I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by myself, Katelynn Northam, a student at Dalhousie University, as part of my thesis for a Master of Arts in Political Science. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconvenience, or discomfort which you might experience. Participating in the study might not benefit you, but we might learn things that will benefit others. You may discuss any questions you have about this study with me.

Many municipalities are looking for new ways to engage young people in the political process, and have thus created youth advisory councils. My study will examine if youth advisory councils are an effective way to engage youth in the democratic process, and to ensure that youth's voices are heard in local decision making.

I'd like to speak to you about your experiences facilitating the youth town council in your community. In short, I want to know if [GROUP NAME] helped youth to become more engaged, and if its activities effected decisions that were made at town council. Generally, I am looking for insights as to the benefits and challenges of this form of youth engagement.

I am the only researcher working on this project, aside from my supervisor who may review my notes and drafts. My study consists of two components. The first part comprises individual interviews with yourself and two facilitators from \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. The interview takes just under an hour and can be carried out at a time and location most convenient for you. I will audio record the interview to ensure accuracy. The audio recording will not be downloaded to a computer or published. No research assistant is engaged to hear a recording. The digital recorder (and any notes arising from the interviews) will be kept confidential, handled carefully, and stored for five years, as per Dalhousie University policy.

The second component of the study is an online questionnaire with past participants of groups from these three municipalities. I am seeking your cooperation to reach past participants from [GROUP NAME]. **Specifically, I am looking to connect with youth who were members of [GROUP NAME] in the last 1-3 years and who now are over the age of 16.** I will ask you to forward the hyperlink to my survey to those participants with a preamble explaining the survey. This online survey for youth only takes about 15 minutes to complete. It asks youth questions about their time on [GROUP NAME]. The preamble to the survey will explain the study and the rights of the participants.

The risk of potential adverse effects from your participation in this study is minimal. My questions relate to the council itself and your reflections on the work that it has done. Your participation will provide facilitators, like yourself, with useful research that can be used to

evaluate best practices going forward. I will also be able to provide you with the results from your specific group's past participants, which can be used for internal program evaluation.

While I will be identifying the communities involved in the study, I will not use your name (instead identifying the facilitators by numbers). It may be known that you participated in the study, but it will not be apparent which comments are yours. I will use direct quotes when appropriate, but they will not be attributed to you by name. If there are comments or points of view that you prefer to be confidential, please tell me so during the interview. They will be used as background information only.

I am available to discuss any questions that you may have about the study. I am available at (902) XXX-XXXX or at [katelynn.northam@dal.ca](mailto:katelynn.northam@dal.ca). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Louise Carbert, at [louise.carbert@dal.ca](mailto:louise.carbert@dal.ca) or 494 2396.

If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, you may also contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca).

Regards,

Katelynn Northam  
MA student, Political Science  
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

**Study: Youth Participation in Public Policy Development in Nova Scotia**

**INFORMED CONSENT - SIGNATURE PAGE**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to take part in this study. However I realize that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to my remarks being audio recorded for use by the researcher, as per the terms laid out in the informed consent letter.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to my remarks being quoted directly in the final thesis, as per the terms laid out in the informed consent letter.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**EMAIL TO YOUTH (forwarded by staff)**

Dear [Interviewee by name]:

I am a graduate student in the Department of Political Science at Dalhousie University. I am doing research on youth engagement, and I am contacting you because you were a member of Amherst Youth Town Council at some point in the last few years. I want to learn more about your experiences with AYTC and am hoping you might help me by filling out a brief survey!

As you probably know, many youth today do not participate in political life, and often feel that governments don't care about youth issues. Some communities, such as yours, have tried to get young people involved through youth advisory councils. My study will look at whether youth advisory councils, such as the one that you belonged to, are a good way to engage youth and to ensure that youth's voices are heard in local decision making practices.

So, you are probably wondering why you should participate in this survey. Firstly, if you fill out this survey, you will have the opportunity to enter your name in a draw to win a \$50 Visa gift card. Also, it is a great opportunity for you to reflect on your experience and also provide feedback to your hometown council.

Clicking the link will take you into the survey, which will contain more information about the study. **The survey is completely confidential and should take no longer than 15-20 minutes to complete.**

I sincerely hope you will consider filling it out. The survey will be available until Friday, August 16<sup>th</sup>. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Thank you for your consideration,

Katelynn Northam  
MA student, Political Science  
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Katelynn.northam@dal.ca  
(902) XXX XXXX



## **Study: Youth Participation in Public Policy Development in Nova Scotia**

### **INFORMED CONSENT (Survey Preamble, online)**

I invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by Katelynn Northam, a graduate student at Dalhousie University, as part of her thesis for her Master of Arts in Political Science. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconvenience, or discomfort which you might experience. Participating in the study might not benefit you, but we might learn things that will benefit others. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Katelynn.

Many youth nowadays are disengaged from government and from our political system. Some communities have seen the value in having a youth voice represented within municipal government, and have responded by creating youth advisory councils (often known as Youth Town Councils). This study will examine whether youth advisory councils are a good way to engage youth in the democratic process, as well as whether they ensure that youth's voices are heard in local decision making practices.

The survey will ask about your experiences as a member of Amherst Youth Town Council. This survey will only take 15-20 minutes to complete. If you fill out this survey, it will provide the researcher with data to conduct an evaluation of youth advisory groups as a form of youth engagement. It will also provide useful research that your home community can use to improve Amherst Youth Town Council going forward.

Please read the following criteria to determine if you are eligible to take this survey:

- You must have been a member of the group within the last three years (2010 or later).
- You must be at least 16 years old at the time of taking this survey.

You must meet both criteria to take this survey.

The risk from your participation in this study is minimal. The questions will only be about the council itself and your reflections on the work you did during your time as a member. However, should you experience any discomfort while taking the survey, you are free to discontinue your participation, or to contact Katelynn with questions or concerns.

This survey is confidential and you will not be asked to provide personal information. I may quote your responses, but you will not be personally identified at any point in my notes or in the final thesis. The data will be kept confidential, handled carefully, and stored for five years, as per Dalhousie University policy. At the end of the survey you will have the option to provide your email address in order to be entered into a draw to win a \$50 Visa gift card. However, this email address will not be connected to your survey results and will only be used to contact you in the event that you win the draw.

Any questions you have about the survey can be answered by Katelynn, either before or after you fill it out. She is reachable by phone at (902) XXX XXXX or by email at [katelynn.northam@dal.ca](mailto:katelynn.northam@dal.ca). You may also contact her supervisor, Dr. Louise Carbert, at [louise.carbert@dal.ca](mailto:louise.carbert@dal.ca) or at 494 2396.

If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, you may also contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca).

(TICK BOX] I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to take part in this study. However I realize that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.