

How Young People can Shape Environmental Policy in Urban Spaces

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Abstract

Younger generations have become increasingly disillusioned with mainstream democratic politics in established democracies. Although young people are interested in politics and engaged in many issue-based forms of participation, it is hard for them to realise the fruits of their labour at the national level. Local democracy may provide a better opportunity for engaging effectively in the issues that affect young people's everyday lives. This article examines how Public Value approaches work in practice for young people whose voices are usually excluded from the policy-making process. It draws on participatory research with young Londoners from traditionally marginalised groups. The research was co-produced with the Greater London Authority and the London Mayor's Office, and involved a complex large-scale multi-stage qualitative research design. In 2019, young peer researchers conducted 30 semi-structured interviews and led a world-café style event involving nine focus groups with 90 youth participants. These were followed-up with four focus groups of 25 young Londoners in 2021. In addition, eight qualitative interviews were conducted in 2022 with London policy-makers, to explore understandings of environmental issues and pathways to engagement with local and civic authorities on these matters. Our research reveals that although policy-makers face important structural challenges, such as the concentration of power and resources in Westminster, they have the potential to move beyond tokenistic engagement with young people. In particular, the results show that how civic and local authorities can build efficacy and trust through initiatives that provide opportunities for deliberation and the co-creation (co-production and co-design) of public policy.

Introduction

The 2021 United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP26) closed with an agreement on efforts to reduce carbon emissions and address a potential catastrophic global warming. Without commenting on the nature of the agreement, two points are clear. First, compared to their older

contemporaries, younger generations are more concerned about, and politically active on, the issue of climate change (Barford et al. 2021; Henn et al. 2022). Second, the implementation of environmental policy agreed at COP26 will largely need to take place at a sub-national level with the support of emerging adults, who will need to adapt their behaviour for countries to hit Net Zero goals (Kythreotis 2021; Sloam 2020). The aim of this article is to investigate how, by harnessing youth support for action on climate change, we can achieve sustainable public policy in the places where we live.

During COP26, there were many insightful narratives concerning young people's leadership of grass-roots initiatives across the world. In contrast, there is a relative absence of research on how young people are engaging with local and civic authorities on these issues, or how the voices of under-represented and marginalised groups of young people can be amplified to ensure a just transition to a Green economy.¹ This article helps to fill this research gap. It examines *youth engagement in environmental issues*, shedding new light upon how – in which spaces and under what conditions – it can shape sustainable local environmental policy.

The practical benefits of youth engagement in public policy are beginning to be recognised on every plane of governance: from the United Nations (2018) to the OECD (2020a), to local councils and city authorities across the UK (Local Government Association 2023). In the context of the COVID-19 recovery and the Green Transition, it has become more generally accepted that the voices of young people (including those from traditionally marginalised communities) are integral to the development of future-oriented, sustainable public policy (OECD 2020a; Sloam 2023). But how can civic authorities move beyond mere *tokenism* and effectively engage with younger generations? This article addresses this question from both sides of the equation, through research co-produced with the Greater London Authority and the London Mayor's Office. This involved a complex large-scale multi-stage qualitative research design. This included interviews and focus groups conducted by young peer researchers with 145 young Londoners from traditionally marginalised groups, and a series of eight semi-structured interviews with officials in civic authorities and civil society actors in London.

Examining the value of a Public Value approach to policy-making (Ansell and Torfing 2021) that advocates active participatory methods, the article begins by providing context by focusing on young people's participation in the environmental movement. There is then an examination of Public Value and how this offers the backdrop for the benefits to be gained by creating meaningful opportunities

¹ Youth Councils provide a potential channel to convey young people's views to local environmentally-focused policy-communities (Augsberger et al. 2024). However, these are often criticised for their narrow social membership that does not reflect the diversity of local youth populations, and for offering only 'tokenistic' forms of political participation (Freeman and Aitken-Rose 2005; Taft and Gordon 2013).

for young people's engagement in local environmental policy-making. Following that, we offer an analysis of the role of place and the city as a site for rejuvenating democracy (whilst recognising the many challenges this might entail). The article then discusses how the fieldwork with young Londoners and policy-makers across the city was conducted. The results explore young people's perspectives on environmental issues and environmental policy-making, and efforts by London's civic authorities to amplify youth voice in this area. They indicate that young people lack optimism that their voices carry much weight in local environmental policy-making; this sense of pessimism is compounded by the views expressed by local authority and civic leaders, who would like to involve young people in such dialogue and decision-making processes, but who remain unsure how to initiate such engagement. Nonetheless, there is measured optimism that emerges from the research at a general level – that young people are very motivated to engage in such conversations and processes. Our research suggests that providing opportunities for young people to learn about environmental issues and incorporating the development of civic skills and the co-design of public policy are especially important in generating effective youth participation.

Young People, Political Participation and Environmental Activism

Young people have become disillusioned with mainstream electoral politics over several decades (Henn et al. 2018). In most established democracies, youth voter turnout and membership of political parties has declined significantly (Sloam and Henn 2019),² and younger generations have turned to alternative forms of political participation: from the ballot box to the streets, to the Internet and social media (Norris 2002; Castells 2015; Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

Opinion is divided on the extent to which we should be concerned about these developments. Indeed, there is an on-going debate on whether or not young people are becoming politically apathetic, or whether they retain an interest in politics but are feeling increasingly alienated from the institutions and processes of electoral politics because of their distrust in politicians (eg, Dahl et al. 2019; Henn and Oldfield 2016). Furthermore, some authors have pointed to the negative cycle of low youth electoral turnout and party membership (Patterson 2009; Van Biezen et al. 2012) – parties and politicians are more likely to neglect groups that do not vote, potentially feeding further disillusionment amongst young people. However, others emphasize the positive influence of *engaged citizens* and issue-based forms of participation (Dalton 2015; Sloam and Henn 2019).

² Although notable exceptions include the 'youthquake' at the 2017 UK General Election, where veteran left-wing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn inspired the highest rate of youth support in a quarter of a century (Sloam and Henn 2019).

Regarding issue-based participation, the role of place is central. Several scholars have highlighted the significance of ‘everyday politics’ in shaping youth civic and political engagement in the cities, towns and neighbourhoods in which they live (Bang 2005; Boyte 2010; Li and Marsh 2008). According to Wray-Lake, ‘youth learn to be political by forming attachments to their communities and accessing opportunities in the settings of their everyday lives’ (2019: 137). This is confirmed by the large upturn in local volunteering in many countries in recent years (Dalton 2015; Department for Culture Media and Sport 2021).

Yet, on closer inspection, the picture is not so promising. First, there are large inequalities of participation between those young people with high levels of educational attainment and those from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds when compared with their contemporaries from less advantaged backgrounds (Sander and Putnam 2010; Dalton 2015). Second, the rate of youth interactions with politicians and officials is very low when compared to that of older generations (Sloam 2014a), so that local politics (as well as public consultations in local areas) tends to be dominated by older, more affluent, male and white citizens (Tonkens & Verhoeven 2019; Intergenerational Foundation 2020).

Intergenerational inequalities of political participation have been exacerbated by recent global events. Evidence indicates that successive waves of crisis (Sloam and O’Loughlin 2022) – the 2008 banking crash and subsequent austerity in public spending, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change – have had a profound impact on younger generations, serving to make their lives more precarious (Bessant et al. 2017; Cowie and Myers 2021; OECD 2020b). These waves of crisis have precipitated corresponding waves of political protest; these include expressions of outrage at financial inequalities and corruption after the 2008 financial crisis (Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish Indignados and many more), at racial discrimination and oppression in all its forms (Black Lives Matter), and at the lack of progress on action to combat climate change (#FridaysforFuture) (Sloam 2014b; Castells 2015, Della Volve 2022).

A significant body of literature has emerged to explain the climate strikes and youth environmental activism that has taken place since 2019 (Pickard 2019). For example, Grasso and Giugni’s *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Movements* (2022), as well as special issues of the *Journal of Youth Studies* (Sloam et al. 2022) and *Frontiers in Political Science* (Henn and Pickard 2023), provide invaluable investigations of common trends and individual case studies from a wide range of perspectives. These shed light on who, why and how so many young people became involved in environmental activism over such a short space of time (Boulianne and Ohme 2022; Flanagan et al. 2022 Pickard et al. 2022).

Of course, not all young people are environmental activists - some young people are not civically or politically engaged or simply have other political priorities (Arya and Henn 2021). There is also a large group of young people who feel overwhelmed by the scale of the climate crisis, and research indicates that this can lead to a sense of fatalism, anxiety (with implications for mental health) and inaction (Hayward 2020; Hickman et al. 2021). Indeed, the experience of COP26 was a negative one for many young people. Climate protestors continued to scorn the efforts of national governments for not going far or fast enough. For instance, at a rally outside the Conference venue, youth activist Greta Thunberg told fellow protestors: 'Change is not going to come from inside there. That is not leadership - this is leadership' (BBC News 2021). The inclusion of the voices of young people (other than to provide emotional pleas for action) in complex negotiations between national governments, international organisations, large companies, and even large environmental campaign groups, was always a high bar to clear.

Published research indicates that political engagement at the *local* level on different issues has the potential to generate a greater sense of efficacy amongst young participants than is the case at national and international levels, as they are more likely to achieve tangible change within their communities (Brady et al. 2020; Wray-Lake 2019). Despite the absence of empirical evidence, we might reasonably expect them to feel equally predisposed to engage with *local environmental* issues. Furthermore, it makes sense that these 'micro-territories of the local' (Harris and Wyn 2009) are likely to be more appealing for those from less privileged backgrounds. Indeed, our own research for this article has found that traditionally marginalised groups of young people do not always feel represented by the global climate movement, which – in the words of one of the interviewees quoted below – 'has a very white face'. In this article, the focus on urban environmental activism provides a more level playing field for young people from diverse backgrounds.

Public Value and Young People's Engagement with (Local) Public Policy-making

To address the opportunities for young people to engage meaningfully in local environmental policy-making – and to assess the potential barriers and value in doing so - this article draws on public policy literature to provide a theoretical framework for this study. Ansell and Torfing (2021) emphasise how, in recent decades, the dominant New Public Management approach has been challenged by ideas of Public Value, which recast the role of the citizen as an active participant in the making of public policy. From the perspective of youth engagement, many public bodies now support efforts to integrate youth voice into the *co-design* and/or the *co-production* of a more inclusive and sustainable public policy. According to Ansell and Torfing, what they describe as 'co-creation' in governance, aims to:

‘construct a new interface between the state and the public sphere that harnesses both the public sector’s attempt to engage citizens and relevant stakeholders in an open-ended problem-oriented dialogue and the efforts of citizens and stakeholders to engage public authorities in community-based problem-solving strategies’ (Ansell and Torfing 2021:7).

Yet genuine co-creation with citizens – including young people from traditionally marginalised groups – is not always easy to achieve. For instance, Abels (2007) has observed that such active collaborative processes often use non-representative selection methods, and this may be problematic, essentially deepening structural inequalities within such participatory efforts. Elsewhere, authors have cautioned that such processes may be tokenistic - often limited by their scope and substance, and re-producing existing power relations (Farr 2013; Monno and Khakee 2012; Osborne et al. 2016). In this article we explore the extent to which this takes place in practice, and investigate the hurdles that are placed (however unintentionally) in the path of open-ended and problem-oriented dialogue.

To do so, we employ Hart’s (1992) seminal UNICEF report, which characterises youth engagement with policy-makers as a ‘ladder of participation’ (drawing on Arnstein 1969). The lowest steps of the ladder, ‘manipulation, decoration and tokenism’ are described as de facto ‘non-participation’, where children get no real say in the policy-making process. Genuine participation (‘degrees of participation’) involves, at the bare minimum, information exchange and consultation and, at best, young person-initiated policy and shared ownership of the decision-making process. Whilst not all policies that affect young people can involve the highest degree of participation, the ladder is helpful in shining a light on when and how young people are involved in the policy process.

From a young person’s perspective, we investigate the mechanisms for effective public value or participatory approaches through the concepts of *internal* and *external* efficacy (Balch 1974). Operationalizing *internal efficacy* requires a focus on young people’s belief in their ability to participate effectively. Operationalizing *external efficacy* requires a focus on young people’s belief that by engaging with policy-makers, they can make a difference by informing and shaping policy. In this regard, we feel that the onus is placed on policy-makers to pro-actively ensure that young people develop the skills, knowledge and opportunities for engagement that are necessary to enable effective participatory governance.

Youth, Sustainability and the Promise of Urban Democracy

The points made above are important because evidence demonstrates that youth participation can increase the *quality* of public policy. According to Elinor Ostrom (2009), Nobel Prize-winner for

economics: ‘There is no reason to believe that bureaucrats and politicians, no matter how well meaning, are better at solving problems than the people on the spot, who have the strongest incentive to get the solution right’. In general, it is young people who have the most to gain by solving environmental problems in the places where they live - since by definition, this generation will be expected to outlive their older contemporaries and to experience environmental degradation for longer (Swim et al. 2022). But to what extent do cities offer opportunities for youth participation in policy-making?

There is a large body of work – heavily concentrated in the United States – on the promise of urban democracy. Archon Fung (2009) in his seminal work on civic participation in Chicago, highlighted the ways in which civic groups can influence public policy in their neighbourhoods. Whilst the need to strengthen and democratise local government in the UK has been recognised for some time (Phillips 1996; Stoker 1996), there is little empirical literature on this subject. Most studies have focused on the work of local action groups or broader social movements to improve public services – for example, to save local green spaces or skate parks from closure (Sloam 2019) – rather than policy interactions with local or civic authorities. The few existing studies of youth engagement with local authorities concentrate on the liminal existence of children in an adult world (Weller 2006).

We have discussed above how policy-makers and academics have increasingly recognised the justice and utility of strengthening youth voice. Nonetheless, doing so does not come without potential drawbacks. For instance, evidence indicates that there is unequal engagement with, and participation in, urban democracy and that this problem is a feature that is present in all countries. According to Tonkens and Verhoeven (2019: 1596), ‘Research on civic engagement consistently shows that citizens active in urban neighbourhoods are not representative... Middle-aged, higher educated, white men are often over-represented.’ Conversely, the voices of young people – especially those from poorer communities and ethnic minority backgrounds – are often ignored (O’Toole et. al. 2013). In London, for example, the *urban renaissance* after the 1990s (often deliberately) excluded young people from poorer communities, as illustrated by the gentrification of large parts of Newham in the run-up to the 2012 Olympic Games (Kennelly and Watt 2012).

Brady et al. (2020) provide one of the few comparative studies of attempts by civic authorities to engage young people – in their case, ‘marginalized urban youth’ in London, Belfast and Dublin – in decision-making at the city level. Although they point to some successes in youth engagement through a wide variety of initiatives, such as deliberative forums, volunteering, and expression through the arts, they also identify some areas of particular concern: youth ‘alienation’ from institutions, ‘capacity and resource limitations’, ‘challenges of inclusion’ and ‘ritual rather than real engagement’ (Brady et al. 2020: 1). With regard to the latter point, it is evident that *tokenistic* inclusion of young people is

common and that genuine two-way interactions with tangible policy outcomes are rare (Loebach 2020; Sloam 2020). In this sense, a change of mindset is required amongst policy-makers – from ‘civic participation’ to ‘civic empowerment’ (Wray-Lake and Abrams 2020).

The evidence underpins the importance of interconnected policy areas for the everyday lives and politics of young people. This is highlighted in Carmen Sirianni’s (2020) seminal study, *‘Sustainable Cities in American Democracy’*, which investigates environmental policy in American cities over several decades and across many policy areas. In this work, the author highlights the linkages between explicitly environmental policies, such as air and water pollution, and other policy areas, such as public transportation, housing and agriculture, as well as the value of citizen participation for the purposes of building ‘a more robust civic Green New Deal’ (Sirianni 2020: 306). Helpfully, these interconnections have also been recognised by the United Nations in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which link poverty and hunger, health and well-being and decent work, to more traditional environmental issues such as clean water, clean energy and pollution. Reflecting on sustainability allows us to identify vicious circles (for example, poverty leading to poorly insulated housing and environmental waste) and potential virtuous circles (for example, the insulation of houses, leading to lower heating costs and less use of fossil fuels in heating homes). The academic evidence also supports the quest for greater youth participation, as ‘both a maker and a marker of the progress of city or country to meet the challenge of sustainable development’ (Malone 2015: 18).

Yet, there has been an apparent failure in cities to measure and evaluate initiatives to meet these objectives for youth participation. Cities have made great strides in measuring some environmental targets such as pollution (Holden et al. 2017), but ‘in most cities and countries, we have little idea of the priority issues for young people’ that relate to these wide-ranging goals (London Sustainable Development Commission 2019). Only recently has the academic literature begun to examine what youth participation in cities’ sustainability policies might look like in practice. Nissen et al. (2020), for example, explore common lessons from initiatives in seven cities in the global North and South. Moreover, work is also emerging on mechanisms through which youth participation might be more effectively achieved, such as through deliberative exercises with young people and policy-makers (Ataol et al. 2019; Brady et al. 2020; Sloam 2020).

This article addresses these gaps by investigating the views of young people in urban areas on environmental issues, their interactions with policy-makers, and the potential for ‘civic empowerment’ regarding climate issues. To analyse this complex relationship between youth, sustainability and (local) democracy, we focus on the views of young people and policy-makers in London by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do young people (from disadvantaged backgrounds) understand environmental issues within the context of their own lived experiences within their communities and across London?
2. To what extent do pathways exist for young people to influence environmental policy-making in London, and what are the main barriers to effective youth participation?

Methods

The research adopted a complex large-scale multi-stage qualitative research design that involved focus groups and interviews with young people and with local civic leaders from across London.

Data collection

Data collection for this co-produced case study took place between 2019 and 2022 and involved close collaboration with the Greater London Authority – in particular, with the young people working part-time in the Mayor of London’s Peer Outreach Team. The research was founded on participatory research with these young peer outreach workers, who were aged 16 to 24, mostly female, overwhelmingly from racially minoritized backgrounds, and largely from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, approximately half of the young Peer Outreach Workers (POWs) were care leavers compared to less than two percent of young people nationally. Interviews with 30 of these young people were conducted in Spring 2019. We asked POWs to reflect on top issues facing young people in the UK (YouGov 2019), to prioritise the issues that were most important to them and then to connect them to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on challenges that could be addressed locally in London. These interviews generated the themes that were then discussed with 90 participants in a world-café style-event in Summer 2019. The event involved nine focus groups, which were facilitated by the young POWs, and incorporated creative methods (such as Lego building) to stimulate conversations. The focus group participants were recruited through the GLA-run *Young Londoners Participation Network* and contained a disproportionately large number of young Londoners from traditionally marginalised groups: over half from low-income areas and approximately two-thirds from racially minoritized backgrounds.³ We obtained an approximately equal mixture of young men and women (43 to 47). One sixth of the sample were aged 16 or 17 (15

³ The qualitative analysis fed into a set of questions for a representative survey of 16-to24-year-olds in the Capital (N=2,002), fielded by *Survation* in Summer 2019 (London Sustainable Development Commission 2019).

in total), a half (46) were aged 18 to 21 and a third (29) were aged 21 to 24 (London Sustainable Development Commission 2019).

In 2021, a further round of four focus groups with 25 young people was conducted, led by a new cohort of GLA POWs. These groups were designed to address young Londoners' views on the environment and action on climate change in the context of the upcoming COP26 Summit. Finally, in March 2022, the research turned to policy-makers, exploring their attitudes towards engaging young people in environmental policy-making and their reflections on any such initiatives that they had implemented. Eight semi-structured interviews were held with these policy-makers, including senior officials based within relevant local authority departments, members of prominent local environmentally-focused social action and civil society groups, and GLA officials responsible for environmental matters across London.

Interpretation and Analysis

To interpret the voices of young Londoners, we adopt a narrative approach, following the work of O'Loughlin and Sloam (2022), which pays attention to the role of 'plot', 'affect' and 'efficacy' for understanding the everyday politics of young people. In this study, the approach focuses our attention on: a) who or what young people hold responsible for the (environmental) challenges they face (*the plot*); b) how they feel about or identify with a particular (environmental) issue (*affect*); and, c) whether they believe that they can make a difference (to influence policy or change) (*efficacy*). We also looked at how young people's perceptions and attitudes altered over time, with the greater prominence given to environmental issues in the run-up to the (2021) COP26 and the climate strike movement, through comparison between the first and second waves of qualitative research. Regarding policy-makers, this approach was less appropriate. Instead, we focussed on the views of these expert practitioners on the opportunities for, and the barriers to, effective youth engagement.

Results

One of the main themes to emerge from the 2019 interviews and focus groups was that whilst young Londoners cared about the environment, it was not their most pressing concern. One female focus group participant (aged 19) summarised a generally shared view that, 'it is a very ignored issue, because in London now there are more serious issues that we focus on that are life dependent... like housing, or poverty, or crimes.' The one exception, confirmed in our later survey, was air pollution, which was ranked fourth in terms of youth issue saliency – just below *housing*, *crime* and *mental health*

as priorities for government in our subsequent survey (London Sustainable Development Commission 2019). The focus groups themselves provided a platform for the young participants to think deeply about environmental issues with their peers. A female participant (aged 18) had built a Lego model, which depicted: ‘a person and their little boat and they’re trying to get away from all the trash and pollution that we have created... to a greener space where everything’s clean and the environment is looked after’. Indeed, the narratives of the young Londoners we spoke to were often constructed in a deeply personal and *affectual* way – for example, being upset with the impact of pollution on a family member’s asthma.

Young Londoners expressed different attitudes to the environment depending upon their social class and where they lived in the city; they also connected the environment to broader issues associated with ‘poor and ignored’ neighbourhoods. For example, participants talked about a lack of recycling and of their concerns about rubbish on the streets in what they described as ‘shit neighbourhoods’. Poverty and underfunded public services were seen as the driving forces behind the challenges they faced – and that poorer places in London were being ignored and left behind by local and national power-holders. Regarding environmental issues, one young man (aged 18) commented: ‘you’ve got the Boris bikes⁴, which are great, but they’re only for a certain area... They need to bring it to South London... where people do actually need this transportation’.

Environmental issues were often quite explicitly linked to the other key priorities. With respect to crime and personal safety, one young woman (aged 21) complained that ‘bus stops are closing, buses are passing by in neighbourhoods that are deemed as unsafe or deprived in a way’. Mental health was often mentioned: ‘the environment is a big part, because it is constantly adding and decreasing to either our emotional state or our health and the way we function as a society’ (female, aged 19). Linked with this, young Londoners placed a high value on parks and nature – typified in a comment from one participant that these offered ‘a space with your community that really de-stresses you’ (female participant, aged 18).

The visualization of the world café discussions by an artist who attended the event (Figure 1) illustrates the points above. First, environmental issues were linked to local or city-wide issues and challenges. Second, environmental issues are connected to a whole raft of other challenges that young Londoners face in their everyday lives – from ‘overpriced public transport’ to ‘mental wellbeing’ – and that

⁴ This hire scheme was launched by the Mayor of London – Boris Johnson – in the capital in 2010 to encourage greater bicycle use and reduce motor vehicle traffic (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-53577750>).

solutions to these challenges relate to trust in institutions (e.g. ‘politicians need to come out to our communities’), and social investment (e.g. in youth clubs and community centres).

Figure 1: Visualization of World Café-style Focus Groups with Young Londoners in City Hall



Power, powerlessness and efficacy

Yet, most of the participants felt a sense of powerlessness with regard to environmental issues – either they did not know how to engage or did not believe that their own actions would make a difference. Moreover, the few who were already engaged in community activities felt frustrated by the lack of support from civic authorities. Interestingly, young people’s sense of efficacy was closely related to the issue of *scale*. When thinking about action and solutions, young Londoners emphasized the need to participate in projects and initiatives in their communities to: ‘make a change’ through participation

in community projects through, for instance, youth work and mentoring. For example, they presented various ideas for solving what they saw as a London-wide housing crisis, including ‘community-led self-build projects’ for affordable homes using recycled materials, such as those led by the *Rural Urban Synthesis Society* in Lewisham (female, aged 24).

The world café event in 2019 provided a valuable forum for the discussion of environmental issues – and potential solutions to what they considered to be an area of escalating concern (Figure 1). Many of the young Londoners told us that they had never had an opportunity to think and discuss these issues before. The results offered a wide array of suggestions for individual action, civic engagement and intervention from local authorities and the GLA. The ideas for tackling environmental issues were varied, ranging from boycotting companies with low environmental standards, pressurizing London authorities not to invest in those companies, introducing new schemes for growing your own produce within the community, becoming involved in maintaining local parks and communal gardens, through to building more dedicated cycle routes in the city. These deliberations strongly indicate that events such as these can build efficacy and generate solutions that might prove beneficial for civic authorities to adopt.

The impact of the climate strike movement and the 2021 COP26

By 2021, environmental issues were much higher up the agenda. In the wake of the climate strike movement and in the run-up to the 2021 COP26 Summit in Glasgow, the environment had become the top issue for young adults in the UK (YouGov 2021). In this context, we ran several focus groups with a new wave of GLA POWs. It was immediately apparent that news regarding the climate strikes and COP26 had stimulated more thought and momentum regarding youth engagement. It was also apparent that the young Londoners we spoke to had more nuanced views about the scale of any response to climate change, being much more aware of global issues, yet still tied to local solutions.

We wanted to re-examine young Londoners’ sense of efficacy on environmental issues and whether they felt they were being included at any level in the run-up to the UN Conference. Typical answers to a question about whether young people felt they had a say were: ‘Not really, but I think we can still play our part’ (female, aged 22) and, ‘we have a say through our actions’ (female, aged 24). Interestingly, one young person (from a racially minoritized background) mentioned that it made them feel like their community was not wanted in the conversation. In relation to COP26 and the climate strikes, it was mentioned that the protests have a ‘very white face’. So, even the youth-led climate strikes were seen to be somewhat less inclusive for those young people from traditionally marginalised groups. When thinking about climate change and who was responsible, young Londoners

also spoke about Western countries seeming to ‘blame countries in the global South for pollution as they try to develop’ (male, aged 23). So, just as poorer Londoners (many from immigrant backgrounds) feel they are being ignored and dictated to on climate change, they felt the same was true at an international level. This suggests that the exclusion of young (minoritized) voices from climate change discussions represents a major problem both in the UK and at an international level.

Regarding public policy in London, conversations addressed congestion charges for driving cars in the city. The participants recognised that something had to be done to address the problem of pollution in general and also around schools, and how it affects children’s and young people’s health. One young participant drew the support of others when they highlighted how they understood why congestion charges were good for the climate crisis, but they worried about the impact upon the elderly or those who suffer with disabilities where mobility becomes more difficult. So, although public policy to protect the environment might be well-intentioned, the POWs wondered whether it discriminated against those that were less well-off, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, many participants agreed with one young Londoner who expressed their general support for the T-Tax⁵ introduced around the London South Circular highway that had helped lead to massive reductions in pollution levels, but who was also concerned that many ordinary people might not be in a position to afford the associated additional costs involved. Another commonly shared concern was that, whilst encouraging people to reduce their reliance on cars was welcomed, public transport costs remained very high. Indeed, free travel for under 18-year-olds on London public transport was suspended in 2020 as part of the UK Government’s pandemic deal with *Transport For London*.

The young people we spoke to in 2021 presented a number of general ideas that were relevant to the wider climate debate at the time, as well as offering more specific ideas for implementation at a local level. At a general level, they advocated: making sustainable solutions affordable, a greater regulation of large companies with respect to such matters as pollution, the promotion of schemes to support saving and sharing of energy in housing, and more public conversations about climate change. At a local level, their suggestions included: providing free shared plots of land to low-income households to grow food, implementing car restrictions to deal with pollution, investing more in public transport to lower the costs for young people, developing more community-based projects (e.g., to save electricity while the city is sleeping), tree-planting initiatives, and getting school children involved in these projects. These findings again suggest that were civic authorities to engage with young people more intensively, there are many practical ideas that might be integrated into environmentally-focused public policy; that creating the means and spaces to deepen youth civic engagement in

⁵ The expansion of London’s Ultra Low Emissions Zone.

environmental policy-making might provide opportunities to harness the creativity of London's youth population in local solution planning processes.

How the local policy community engages with young Londoners on environmental issues

Finally, we wanted to look at the issue of youth participation in environmental policy-making from the perspectives of local policy-makers. This was approached through an analysis of the initiatives at GLA level and in certain London boroughs, and through discussions with policy-makers – eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with civic leaders and with those engaged in environmental policy and youth engagement across the Capital.

In recent years, civic authorities have seen a large increase in mandatory duties to promote action on climate change in addition to the increased expectations of citizens and voters for action. At the GLA level, this was illustrated by the decision by the Mayor of London to take the politically high-risk decision to expand the low-emissions zone, which entails significant additional costs for motorists within the Capital. Yet, despite the relative enthusiasm of younger generations for action to protect the environment, the London policy-makers we spoke to were unanimous in their view that civic authorities in London had been slow to engage. However, they also believed that the willingness to engage (the *quantity* of engagement) had taken-off in recent years, even if the interactive nature of these initiatives (the *quality* of engagement) was often not appropriately designed.

At the GLA level, a whole raft of initiatives had been put together as a response to the climate strikes and in the run-up to COP26. When asked, 'Can you talk about any initiatives you have developed to engage young people in policy work (with particular reference to environmental policy)?', the two interviewees from the GLA environment team highlighted the work the Authority had undertaken with and for children on pollution, leading to a network of air pollution sensors installed at hospitals, schools and in local communities. They also pointed to several initiatives to promote environmental issues in schools to coincide with the UN Conference. The centrepiece was *Climate Kickstart*, which engaged 66,000 London children in a variety of activities during the first week of COP26 (1-5 November 2021).

Whilst these new initiatives for school children are certainly to be welcomed, and some of the programmes encouraged children to start their own projects (e.g., *Generation Earthshot* to recognise outstanding youth-led ventures), there was little sense of engaging young people in environmental policy-making at the GLA level. On the one hand, this is understandable given the Authority's primary role in setting the broad framework for policy. On the other hand, members of the GLA's own Peer Outreach Team reported on 'how hard it is to engage with or influence the Environment team as a

young person' (even from within the Authority). They complained that youth engagement was 'tokenistic at best' when it came to policy design. Finally, these London-wide initiatives focussed almost entirely on school-age children (primary and secondary), missing out on the opportunity to engage with the large population of pro-environment young adults.

At the borough level, the picture is sporadic. Although a small number of councils have developed schemes to engage with young people, serious effort to connect beyond the promotion of education about climate change in schools were few and far between. Almost all the local policy-makers we interviewed recognised this deficit but found the realities of reaching out to young people very complex and extremely challenging. For example, one borough councillor with responsibility for environmental policy, 'found it hard to fill the places for the Youth Community Reference Group set up to discuss environmental issues'. They conceded that many of the engagement opportunities for young people were, 'as with youth councils, eventually filled by young people who are not altogether representative of young people in the borough'. Consequently, the question of which young people end up engaging in environmental discussions remains an important and persisting challenge.

Council policy-makers struggled to achieve what co-ordinators in the Peer Outreach Team referred to as 'genuine engagement' for a number of reasons. According to one of the team with particular experience of working with a London borough council: first, 'they do not commit to youth engagement over a sustained period of time'; and second, they are reluctant to cede control over policy-making to young people, so that 'the big decisions have already been made before the consultations have begun'. One interviewee – the leader of a civil society group working with young people in one of the borough councils – summed it up succinctly: 'Councils are not set up for genuine citizen engagement. They like decision-making processes to be neat. They do not like messy decision-making, and – when young people are involved – it becomes messy, if they allow them a proper voice'.

However, many of the problems surrounding youth engagement were attributed to contextual issues beyond the control of the GLA or of any individual council. In particular, the issues of inequality and poverty as well as the lack of public services that were emphasized by the young Londoners in our focus groups, were viewed by the local policy community as impediments to a more effective youth engagement strategy in environmental policy. Referring to the congestion charge expansion discussed previously, one interviewee from the central Government's Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (focussed on London) believed that:

'The Mayor rightly introduced greater congestion charges, because he had to protect children's lungs, but he does not have the means of mitigating the effects on poorer groups. The GLA and the boroughs do not have the resources to deal with the structural

issue of poverty, which would be needed if we really want to take youth engagement on environmental matters seriously. Greening policies can actually lead to the embedding of these inequalities, as poorer young people are pushed out of their neighbourhoods.’

In the wake of COP26 and the legislative commitments by the UK Government to reduce carbon emissions, many London boroughs are in the process of updating their sustainability strategies – although with widely varying levels of breadth and depth. As noted by one London borough councillor, these ‘strategies have tended to focus on economic development – for example, through Green jobs and upskilling – and achieving economic gains for young people. And, the community engagement dimension sometimes gets left behind, because it takes time and is often run by different departments.’ Co-ordination of (youth) citizen engagement in environmental policy is, therefore, a horizontal challenge within local authorities and the GLA. The focus on economic development in areas of high poverty given the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, is perhaps understandable. However, this also hampers youth engagement and arguably may reduce the overall quality of public policy.

Institutional structural barriers

The institutional dislocation of environmental policy from community engagement and youth outreach was observed in all of the London councils that we considered, as well as in the GLA. For example, a peer outreach co-ordinator in the GLA noted that the Environment team are ‘somewhat cut off from the Community Engagement teams and the peer outreach teams, who have the expertise of engaging with young people – especially those young people who do not come from privileged backgrounds’. This expertise is also crucial for understanding both the connections between environmental policy and other economic and social problems facing young people (e.g. mental health and green spaces, the cost of public transport and low-polluting travel), and for providing a more holistic and inclusive approach to environmental policy-making. As one civil society interviewee emphasized: ‘You have to engage with young people with experiences of the problems you are dealing with and the knowledge of how different policies may work – or not work – in their neighbourhoods’.

With these conversations, we conclude that the promise of urban democracy for environmental policy is very much unfulfilled in London. However, the next few years offer opportunities – recognised by all of our policy community interviewees – to gain the support and involvement of young people, if civic authorities are able to find inclusive ways of engaging with them over a sustained period of time. Schools are an essential venue for engagement. But schools have many other learning priorities, and so should not be relied upon so heavily (or indeed almost exclusively in some cases). Furthermore,

environmental policy-makers can learn lessons from other policy areas, such as violence and crime reduction, where there are many positive examples of youth engagement. For example, in 2022 the *London Assembly Police and Crime Committee* engaged intensively with the young people from the Mayor's Peer Outreach Team on tackling the tens of thousands of incidents of children going missing in the Capital each year. The final report led to concrete recommendations – many of those drawn from evidence provided by the Peer Outreach Workers from their lived experiences – to address the causes rather than the symptoms of the problem (London Assembly 2023). Adopting such an intensive and inclusive approach to youth participation on key environmental issues, would require a change in mindset from those charged with leading environmental policy – so that young people's views are properly integrated into policy-making processes.

Conclusion and discussion

In this article, our starting point was to look beyond youth participation in environmental politics at the national and international levels, and instead to examine youth engagement in environmental issues at a city and community level. We addressed Public Value approaches to policy-making, employing participatory methods with young Londoners and interviews with London policy-makers. Our main aim was to consider the ways that local and civic authorities already - or could, in the near future - harness the energy and imagination of young people into the crafting of sustainable local policies and initiatives to address the gathering crises of the climate and the degradation of the environment. Our findings make for sobering reading; young people lack confidence that their voices count for much in conversations about how best to address the climate emergency, whilst policy-makers seem unsure regarding how to engage with young people on such matters. So, there was a significant deficit in both internal and external efficacy.

Regarding the research questions, it was clear that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds viewed environmental challenges and solutions as relating to their local environment and to a host of other issues – in their terms, relating to poverty and a lack of public services. And it was clear to see that there is a long way to go to build trust in institutions and a sense that young Londoners can make a difference by influencing public policy in their local areas.

However, the data also offer some basis for measured optimism. Not only are young people keen to engage in dialogue with local policy communities about environmental and climate-related issues, civic authorities and wider policy communities are also becoming increasingly cognisant of the need to develop structures and processes for strengthening youth voice in policy-making. The optimism regarding youth engagement in local democracy is supported by findings from the Hansard Society's

Audit for Political Engagement (2020), which recorded that almost half (46 percent) of 18- to 24-year-olds in the UK wanted to be more involved in decision-making in their local area (compared to 41 percent of all adults and just a quarter of over 65s). Intriguingly, the figure is even higher (55 percent) for young people without a degree qualification, who would usually be less likely to become civically or politically engaged.

But our research also highlights the fact that engagement with young people on local environmental policy-making needs to be carried out in appropriate ways. The young Londoners we spoke to expressed a deep sense of powerlessness in the face of what they saw as overwhelming and interconnected issues, and the vast majority of them believed that – as young people – their voices and actions to preserve the environment would not be heard nor make a difference. To instil a sense of efficacy in young people, policy-makers must ensure they establish genuine two-way engagement followed up by concrete and visible action.

When involving young citizens in sustainable environmental policy-making, education and awareness-raising on environmental concerns are key. Our young participants identified a lack of education, information, and awareness as common problems when it came to environmental issues, many saying they felt relatively uninformed about environmental issues in general and particularly about ways to bring about change at the level of local government. Additionally, the findings indicate that environmental concerns are not uniformly distributed among young people. In particular, social class and where they live each matter with respect to how they prioritise and contextualise environmental issues.

The findings present clear challenges for Public Value approaches to policy-making that advocate co-operative governance within the context of persisting *unequal participation* (between younger people and older people as well as between young people from better-off and disadvantaged backgrounds) and *meaningful participation*. With respect to the former challenge, there is a clear tendency amongst local and civic authorities to pursue youth engagement through forums that attract young people who are from more affluent backgrounds (who are already more likely to engage) rather than pro-actively seeking out young people that might need more support in learning to engage effectively with officials and policy communities. A second challenge is that local and civic authorities tend to orient towards less *messy* forms of participation (such as consultations that have no clear outcome or discussing the implementation of policies that have already been agreed) that can be found towards the lower (*tokenistic*) end of Hart's (1992) participation 'ladder'.

To move towards genuinely inclusive and *meaningful* forms of youth engagement, civic and local authorities must build youth participation into the design of policy-making processes. In

environmental policy, this would include concerted efforts to reach out to young people – to ask for their views, priorities and solutions – through schools and via collaborations with youth sector organisations. In London, the Mayor’s Peer Outreach Team has tried to achieve this through the setting up of a Youth Participation Network, involving 450 local and city-wide youth sector organisations. Furthermore, initiatives to promote youth learning and action, such as the *Climate Kickstart* initiative discussed above, should be sustained on an annual basis rather than treated as one-off events. In London, we recommend that meaningful youth participation in policy-making could be achieved by a change in institutional culture: by bringing young people into GLA policy teams and encouraging them to conduct peer outreach; and, by providing training for officials in how to work with children and young people as partners (GLA 2021).

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