

Executive Report

Cabinet - 1 October 2024

YOUTH COUNCIL UPDATE

Name of Cabinet Member	Councillor Shanika Mahendran Economy, Sustainability and Innovation
	Councillor Joe Hearnshaw Children and Young People
Report sponsor	Peter Brown Head of Democratic Services
Report author	Peter Taylor Electoral Services Manager

Exempt / confidential / not for publication	No
Council Plan reference	Not in Council Plan
Wards affected	All wards

Executive summary

This report offers an update to Cabinet on the work of the Youth Council during its current term (February 2023-25), alongside plans for school elections in February 2025, the MK Youth Summit on 8 November 2024, and work undertaken in response to recommendations about ‘participation and youth voice’ arising from the National Youth Agency Peer Review in February of this year.

It has now been two years since Milton Keynes Youth Council transferred from Children’s Services to Democratic Services. Initial work has principally focussed on a smooth transition and the delivery of a revised framework for school elections, the introduction of a Youth Mayor and an updated Youth Council constitution.

The transition has been successful and enabled a more representative Youth Council, more transparency around Youth Council meetings and work, and an enhanced profile via the role of Youth Mayor. During their 2-year term, the Youth Council has focussed its work on Mental Health and Wellbeing, and Youth Crime, alongside positive work to help a number of services across MKCC better understand the perspective of young people. Improvement work is ongoing and after elections, there will be a focus on the efficiency, impact and voice of the Youth Council.

1. Decisions

- 1.1 That the plans for Youth Council elections in February 2025 (set out in section 3.3 - 3.5 of the report), be agreed.
- 1.2 That the agenda and arrangements for the MK Youth Summit at Unity Place on 8 November 2024 (Annex A), be noted.
- 1.3 That the Youth Council's Draft Report for 2023-25 (Annex B) be noted, any feedback offered and the final report referred to Full Council in January 2025.
- 1.4 That in respect of the 'participation and youth voice' recommendation of the National Youth Agency Peer Review, Cabinet:
 - a) note the existing relationships and work already undertaken; and
 - b) offer any additional observations as to how the Youth Council can work more closely with elected members.

2. Reasons for the decision

- 2.1 To update the Cabinet on the work of the Youth Council and to consider the engagement with the voices of young people in the formulation of policy.
- 2.2 To ensure the Cabinet endorses the proposed approach for school elections to the Youth Council in February 2025.

3. Youth Council elections

- 3.1 The revised Youth Council constitution sets out that elections are held every 2 years and are next scheduled for February 2025. Elections based on new arrangements in 2023 were very successful, with 75% of secondary schools having contested elections, 161 candidates standing, and over 12,000 votes being cast, representing a turnout of over 95%. The makeup of the Youth Council is undoubtedly now more diverse and representative of young people in Milton Keynes. Over 60% of Youth Council members are from black, Asian or ethnic minority groups.
- 3.2 The Youth Council is made up of:
 - a) Youth Councillors directly elected from secondary schools with each school being allocated a number of seats based on the school population size;
 - b) Mentors (those who have previously served as Youth Councillors but may exceed the upper age limit during the two year cycle); and
 - c) Co-opted members who represent specific groups, such as SEND, home schooled or those who attend school in neighbouring local authorities (but live in MK).

Moving forwards, there is also an ambition to increase co-opted membership to include our looked after children population and those working with the Youth Justice Service.

- 3.3 Elections will be held week commencing 2 February 2025 with the votes counted and results published by Friday 7 February 2025. Lisa Thompson (Democratic Participation Officer) has started engaging schools via the Chairs of MK Secondary Schools Heads, in order to identify assigned point of contact for each school, agree polling areas / days / times, and provide basic resources for local awareness (lesson / assembly plans).
- 3.4 Nomination forms along with a consent from parent / teacher approval form and a short manifesto statement must be received by 16 January 2025. Lisa Thompson will then support candidates and schools with their campaigns and linked democratic engagement work, including the promotion of key messages such as registering to vote.
- 3.5 In order to familiarise young people with UK voting practices, traditional polling station voting arrangements using ballot papers, ballot boxes, and polling booths staffed by the democratic services team and school leaders will be utilised.

4. Youth Participation Summit

- 4.1 Traditionally, the Youth Council (and previously YCAB) have held an annual youth conference to showcase their work or engage young people in important issues. In 2023, the annual conference was held as part of the 250-year commemoration of Amazing Grace in conjunction with Cowper and Newton Museum.
- 4.2 This year, the Youth Council will be holding a more ambitious summit, to engage young people across a range of existing groups, including the Children in Care Council, SEND Youth Forum, parish council youth forums, school councils, student unions and other youth participation groups. The summit will be held at Unity Place and delivered by Youth Councillors, supported by Lisa Thompson (Democratic Participation officer), Alicia Porter (Senior Inclusion Practitioner for SEND) and Richard Lee (Participation and Engagement Team Manager).
- 4.3 The theme of the summit will be collaboration with the aim of recognising the important role young people play in society and will provide a platform for a collective voice from young people and explore the opportunities for collaborative work moving forward. The programme (attached at Annex A) features a keynote speech from Chris Curtis MP who was a former YCAB member, alongside a number of speakers, question time panel, and key skills sessions.

5. The work of the Youth Council

Draft Report

- 5.1 Attached at Annex B is the draft report of the Youth Council for the 2023-25 term. It sets out the campaign work undertaken by the Youth Council since February 2023, which were selected based on the national and local outcomes of the Make Your Mark Ballots in 2022.

- 5.2 Separate reports with recommendations from the Youth Council will subsequently be published on the two campaign themes of Mental Health and Wellbeing, and Youth Crime.
- 5.3 The Youth Council has grown in influence and reputation, with officers and stakeholders increasingly consulting and engaging with the Youth Council in key areas. This has included structured work with Thames Valley Police, anti-social behaviour and health colleagues, consultation on the new City Plan and, engagement with MKDP about the future of CMK Market.
- 5.4 Other highlights include collaboration on the recent Wolverton Street Sessions event and leadership of democratic engagement in schools, including remarkable results for the 2024 Make Your Mark Ballots (over 10,000 responses in Milton Keynes) and a focus on registering to vote at 16 during your vote week (100+ additional 16-year-olds registered to vote).
- 5.5 The introduction of a Youth Mayor has been a very positive step. It has resulted in greater visibility and engagement for the Youth Council and enabled a figurehead to articulate and promote the views of young people. Since the role was created there have been over 30 events where the Youth Mayor has formally attended. This has been a combination of Civic events (alongside the Mayor / Deputy Mayor) but also where event organisers have invited the Youth Mayor via a dedicated web portal in order to reflect the involvement of young people or hear about the work / priorities of the Youth Council.

NYA peer review

- 5.6 In February 2024, the National Youth Agency undertook a peer review of Youth Services at MKCC, which also considered the work of the Youth Council. Broadly the review recognised the Council's commitment to its Youth Council, but felt there was more to do to ensure that the voice of young people results in influence or change:

MKCC prioritise young people's participation and youth voice. There is an excellent commitment to the Youth Council across council departments. Resources are invested in the children in care council and developments have commenced to implement a representative SEND youth forum. It was clear that MKCC leadership and management value the views and opinions of young people and that they can influence decisions and change. However, young people in the youth forum felt that they did not always see this influence and change. This was particularly noted by NYA young assessors.

- 5.7 As part of the actions plan arising from the peer review, a range of work has been undertaken by colleagues in Children's Services, which includes an emerging MKCC Youth Strategy. However, we are keen to continue to improve links between the Youth Council and decision makers at MKCC. As part of the routine of Youth Council meetings, young people have a standing agenda item where they review the Council's Forward Plan of Executive Decisions and Calendar of Meetings. This helps identify areas of interest for the Youth Council and enables dialogue with meetings or officers.

- 5.8 Broadly, there have been very positive interactions between the Youth Council and decision makers, and Youth Councillors have attended and contributed regularly at Full Council, Cabinet, Corporate Parenting Panel and Children’s Scrutiny meetings. A wide range of Councillors have also attended Youth Council meetings and events, whilst the support and leadership of the Youth Democracy Champion, Mayor and Deputy Mayor and Leaders of Opposition Groups have been beneficial.
- 5.9 Sometimes however, it can be too late to meaningfully engage with decision making and we want to explore how we can:
- a) support and further improve dialogue between the Youth Council and MKCC Councillors;
 - b) facilitate discussion between the various youth voice groups to work more effectively together to engage with decision making; and
 - c) ensure that where engaged the Youth Council are informed of any changes and can understand their influence / impact.

This will be particularly important for future campaigns, as a significant amount of effort and resource goes into this work – it is important therefore that the outcomes and impact are commensurate.

6. Implications

Financial implications

- 6.1 There will be resource implications for both the delivery of school elections and the Youth Summit.
- 6.2 School elections require a significant amount of officer time to organise and count, whilst there are some costs of printing ballot papers (around £300-£500, via internal print room) which will be met from the existing democratic participation budget.
- 6.3 The costs of delivering the youth summit are also modest, have been carefully managed (forecast at around £1,500) and can be met from both the democratic participation budget and funds allocated from the Youth Democracy Champion’s discretionary budget. Venue and refreshment costs have been sponsored / subsidised by Unity Place.

Other implications

- 6.4 There are no legal implications, arising from these decisions. There are safeguarding and equalities implications, but these are not materially different from those previously considered, when the Youth Council transferred services. For example, appropriate safeguarding arrangements are in place for the supervision of young people, and these decisions do not present barriers to participation or disadvantage any protected groups. As part of this work new guidance has been issued to Ward Councillors and the Youth Council about any work they undertake together and how that should be structured / supervised.

7. Alternatives Considered

Campaign work

- 7.1 Youth Council campaigns are undoubtedly important to Youth Councillors. They enable young people to have their say on important topics, but they require significant officer support from Democratic and Children's Services (campaign groups regularly meet outside of formal Youth Council meetings). Whilst it is not proposed to withdraw support for this work, given the Council's financial position and the need to ensure capacity and efficiency, campaigns for the next Youth Council term need to be carefully managed to ensure that they are well scoped and focused, involve collaboration with other youth forums and can deliver the desired influence and change.

Directly elected Youth Mayor

- 7.2 The Youth Mayor is currently elected from within the membership of the Youth Council, reflecting MKCC's existing governance arrangements. Officers and the Youth Council have considered the option of a directly elected Youth Mayor and have reviewed arrangements for some Councils that operate this model. However, whilst there would undoubtedly be engagement benefits, the financial and officer resources required to deliver such an ambitious project would be significant.

School elections

- 7.3 As opposed to holding school elections, the Council could operate a different model where young people apply and are selected either by officers or Councillors based on agreed criteria. However, this may result in a less representative Youth Council, and does not have the benefit of all secondary school pupils being able to participate and vote in elections.

8. Timetable for implementation

- 8.3 Youth Council elections will be held prior to February Half Term with the new Youth Council taking up office in March 2025. Campaign work will be identified and scoped in the spring of 2025, based on Make Your Mark 2024 results.
- 8.4 The Youth Council's draft report will be finalised and presented to full Council in January 2025, including any outcomes from the Youth Summit.

List of annexes

- Annex A Agenda and arrangements for the MK Youth Summit at Unity Place on 8 November 2024.
- Annex B Draft Youth Council Report for 2023-25

List of background papers

- NYA - Milton Keynes City Council Youth Services Peer Review