



**partnerships for schools**  
building schools for the future

This case study looks at the role of students in Knowsley in the design of the seven new Centres for Learning and their work with Selected Bidders. Students were trained in the DQI process to give them critical skills to assess design ideas.

This project was winner of the 'Innovation in student engagement' local authority prize in the *Excellence in BSF Awards 2008*.

### Key project information

**Local authority:** Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

**School type:** Seven Centres for Learning (four community and three faith secondary schools)

**No. of pupils:** 8,100 paces

**Project cost:** £250m

**School open:** September 2008

## Student voice in Knowsley: listening to, and acting upon, the views of young people

### Project description

The Knowsley BSF programme plans to demolish all 11 of its secondary schools and replace them with seven brand new learning environments. With such dramatic changes to where and how students learn envisaged, Knowsley placed significant emphasis from the earliest days on the need to ensure that students were an integral part of the design and decision making process

In 2001 Knowsley established an independent Schools' Commission to look at the future of education in the borough. This inclusive and consultative approach included substantial work with students. The outcome, the Future Schooling in Knowsley programme, arose from the Commission and is the strategy that directs local BSF and primary school investment. The principles of consultation, engagement and co-design have been a continuous part of the process and are now regarded as the main way of doing work on capital investment.

The philosophy underpinning Knowsley's engagement strategy was that it should move beyond consultation

to student ownership and co-production - and that there should be clear and unambiguous evidence of the views of students directly influencing final designs. The practice developed under BSF has now been adopted by individual primary schools, special schools and youth facilities in the local authority area.

### Knowsley's engagement strategy

The Knowsley approach - which is being used beyond BSF and is now deployed across all areas of education capital funding - is characterised by the following:

- Early engagement with representative student groups ;
- A three-day Design Festival and inspirational architecture visits in June 2005 with School Works involving 150 students from across all secondary schools working alongside a mix of other stakeholders such as police and fire services, psychologists, parents, learning mentors, school governors;
- Best practice visits in the UK and abroad in early 2006, with young people visiting Amsterdam;

# Student voice in Knowsley

- Students are trained in DQI methodology (November and December 2006);
- Intensive engagement between students and three shortlisted bidding design teams. (January to March 2007);
- Students are part of 12 stakeholder focus groups that formally assess three competing designs using DQI methodology. This assessment accounts for 15% of the overall evaluation, a decisive figure in the contract award;
- Students act as design champions in their own schools, carrying news of progress through to School Councils;
- Post award of contract, working alongside teaching staff on customising designs for individual Centres for Learning through the Reviewable Design Data sessions (summer 2007 and ongoing).
- Commitment by local authority and Transform Schools to pursue student-centred 'Post Occupancy Evaluation' methodology;
- A commitment from the local authority to annually fund £1,000 per centre per learning homebase/ learning village (4 per centre x 7 centres) delegated to students to customise their learning environment.

## Student engagement in three key areas

1. 150 students were engaged in a three-day Design Festival where they spoke about their own schools and what they wished for in a new school. The key finding was that they felt their school buildings 'disrespected them and their efforts' and compared unfavourably to other public buildings. They observed that they did not feel there was anywhere in the school they could truly call their own. All too often they felt afraid in schools, and thought that the use of technology did not match their lives outside of school. The Design Festival report was issued to each of the BSF bidders with a strict direction to ensure that designs reflected the concerns of young people.

2. This was supplemented by a programme of awareness raising by taking students on best (and sometimes worst) practice visits to new schools in the UK and Europe. As part of each visit students undertook DQI-based assessments to ensure that a clear picture would emerge as to what was wanted and what was not wanted. The visits included projects put forward by shortlisted bidders as best practice. The report on visits was also issued to bidders.

3. Emerging from this approach Knowsley decided that the natural conclusion of this work was to designate a proportion of the bid submissions to end users through 12 Focus Groups involving 150 people. The student element formed a major part of this. All

were trained in Design Quality Indicators methodology by an external company (White Young Green) and worked with three shortlisted bidders design teams over four months. The final design submission was then formally evaluated by the all Focus Groups using DQI methodology. Given that contracts such as this can be won by narrow margins, allocating 15% to stakeholder and student voice was potentially decisive in the award of contract. Consequently bidders took the process seriously and young people were able to follow through on their ideas from the Design Festival. It is worth noting that students worked independently within the focus groups and were given equal status with focus groups of headteachers, governors, parents, etc. Students fed back that they welcomed this responsibility and were happy not to have views overshadowed by others. For their part the bidders were at first nervous and unsure but over the design period relationships developed and friendships were made. The product of the process was that each of the three competing bidders' submissions gained over 80% DQI approval ratings from stakeholders.

## Student ideas reflected in designs

Students were very receptive to the proposal to establish homebases for year groups – 'schools within schools' so to speak. They were particularly supportive of the ability to eat food at serveries in each of the homebases rather than be subjected to the daily scrum of a school dining room.

Students were strongly supportive of space within the designs where they could relax and socialise with friends. Each learning centre has large tiered stairways where groups can gather. Students were of the view that these improvements would dramatically improve school life and reduce poor behaviour and increase engagement in learning.

In addition to students being heavily involved in the design process, Knowsley also undertook to engage with them further on the appointment of all of the principals. Students were part of the interview panels and also were involved in questioning the applicants.

The experience of Knowsley in this area demonstrates clearly that meaningful engagement of young people in the process, backed by a decisive vote, can drive up design quality during the competition phase. All of Knowsley's three shortlisted bidders achieved over 80% satisfaction for their designs and we are now reaping the reward for this approval as the new buildings are rising across the borough.

# Student voice in Knowsley

## Personalised learning

The introduction of WiFi was met with huge approval, as was the commitment to a 1:1 ration of devices to pupil. The potential of mobile ICT was an ongoing feature of the debate between teachers and students. Many teachers, reflecting perhaps on the responsibility for organising and managing a large school, looked to environments in which learning could be supervised effectively. Students,

on the other hand, were strong advocates of the 'learn any time, anywhere' potential of mobile ICT, and of spaces being able to flex and adapt to work with smaller groups if necessary.

Students were also strong advocates of extended opening hours, saying they welcomed the opportunity 'drop-in' on weekends and evenings.

## Key contact

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