



# THE GRIT IN THE OYSTER

Final report of the evaluation of INVESTING  
IN CHILDREN

By

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is of an evaluation of the work of Investing in Children over the period 2000-2003. It is based on conversations, interviews, focus groups, reports and data analysis describing the work of Investing in Children from the point of view of its different stakeholders. The evaluation was designed to be an exercise in learning: to discover from the work of Investing in Children principles of good practice in working with young people to enhance their participation in the civic life of their communities.

The key conclusions set out in the report can be highlighted as follows:

1. Investing in Children is a successful project that has met most of the objectives it was set up to achieve.
2. Investing in Children has been managed in ways that have enabled it to learn a great deal from its own practice. Its work has been open to inspection and widely reported. Colleagues have, in the main, felt well supported and the project has opened up new ideas and ways of working with young people. Central among these is the need to build up frameworks of dialogue through which the voices of young people can be heard.
3. Investing in Children has developed a model of working with young people that is innovative, that strives to be inclusive and which enables those who participate to develop their skills and responsibilities as citizens. Young people engaged with Investing in Children have valued the way it helped them develop skills, understanding and confidence.
4. The work of Investing in Children challenges many features of the ways in which services to young people are delivered. By taking the experience of young people seriously and encouraging them to research and deepen their understanding of the issues that concern them, the project has been an agent of change and service development in County Durham and Darlington.
5. Despite its success, there are several questions that the project has no clear answers for: How inclusive has its work been? How sustainable are its achievements? How well understood are its working methods? How can its work be continued within the complex changes in the policy environment in which services to children and young people are currently being delivered? How far is the current working philosophy of Investing in Children dependent on its current employees? Would the approach of the project be sustainable beyond the involvement of key members of the current staff team or then project's current senior managers and partners?
6. Investing in Children must develop beyond the immediate context of its work if it is to be sustainable in the longer term. It must continue with its methods of partnership working but extend significantly its membership of both regional and national networks - particularly in relation to research and professional development - of practitioners in this field.

7. Investing in Children is an organization that tests the practices and procedures and values of a wide range of organizations that provide services to children. Discussion is needed about how best Investing in Children can itself be tested so that it continues to develop in innovative ways.

## Acknowledgements

In undertaking this evaluation I have relied on the support of many people. I am particularly indebted to the staff team of Investing in Children for their open-ended willingness to help, to provide reports and analyses and to facilitate my work in every way. I have benefited from the work of consultants, young people and the contributions of many people from organizations throughout the region who are in contact with Investing in Children and who have shared their views about it with me.

I have been very conscious throughout this work of the creative tension between evaluation and consultancy, between learning and advising. I hope that we found the right balance and this report can be read both as an evaluation and as document to prompt further reflection and change. That would be in keeping with the spirit of dialogue that informs this project.

It would be invidious to single out particular individuals for my thanks. I want everyone to know that I have gained greatly from my work on this project and will value the experience greatly. All its errors of interpretation and points that could be improved by further debate and analysis, are my responsibility.

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## 1. Introduction

Investing in Children is a County Durham and Darlington-based project that was set up to create opportunities for young people to engage actively in all the decision-making processes in the public services that shape their lives and on which they depend. This report is an evaluation of the achievements of the project to date. The broad conclusion derived from this work is that Investing in Children is a successful, innovative project that has pioneered a model of active citizenship that engages young people and from which they gain a great deal. The work of Investing in Children has been a catalyst of change in many areas of service provision for young people. The working methods of the project have been largely consistent with the principles of engagement and social inclusion on which it is built.

The principal weaknesses highlighted in this report centre on the need to achieve a better balance between operational 'busyness' and reflective practice, between getting the job done and thinking strategically about how to focus better and sustain this kind of work in the future. In the creative excitement of its work, insufficient attention has been given to some fundamental questions: how inclusive is the project? Does it engage with all constituencies of young people throughout County Durham and Darlington? How far are its working methods dependent on the skills and commitments of the existing staff team and the political patronage of its key supporters – both groups whose membership could change? How successful has Investing in Children been in securing the active support and understanding of a wide range of partners and organizations so that its work can be sustained in the future? How successful has the project been in helping those it has worked with to sustain the changes they achieved?

The evaluation has been conducted to be formative in its conclusions and to contribute directly to the way Investing in Children is developing. In many ways, the process of doing the evaluation has been more important than the writing up of its conclusions. Throughout the work of the evaluation it has been possible to feed back to the Investing in Children staff team and other stakeholders, emerging conclusions and to receive comments on these. In this sense there is nothing in this report that will be new to the people who have participated in the evaluation process.

The report is intended, however, as a contribution to the wider public debate about how best to enable young people to engage in decision-making and secure their rights as citizens. Investing in Children has achieved much, even when some of the projects associated with it can be said to have been unsuccessful. The process of working with young people in innovative ways has led to analyses of their experience that could not have been gained in any other way. Investing in Children has opened up small windows on the world of young people in County Durham that have a much wider relevance beyond the county and the North East of England. It is one of the key aims of this evaluation to draw out these implications so that they can be further evaluated in a wider, national context.

## 2. Origins

The origins of Investing in Children are in the statutory obligation placed upon local authorities in England and Wales to develop and publish a Children's Services Plan. The Chief Executive of Durham County Council convened a seminar in 1995 to discuss this and from it emerged a working party, chaired by the Director of Social Services, to agree a shared philosophy among the key agencies in the County that provided services for children.

This led to a Statement of Intent that formed the basis of subsequent discussions that led, in 1997 to the setting up of Investing in Children. Departments within the County Council – Social Services and Education – as well as the Health Authority committed funds to develop Investing in Children and a range of other agencies later added their support. These included district councils, the police and major voluntary organizations. The full list of the members of the Partnership is included in Appendix One.

The Statement of Intent was derived from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is an important statement for all those who work with Investing in Children. It is as follows:

*Our aim is to work in partnership with children and young people to promote their best interests and enhance the quality of their life. We will achieve this by:*

- consulting with children, young people and their families about decisions affecting their lives and the development of services.
- promoting partnerships between individuals and agencies to address young people's issues.
- developing accessible children and young people and family services that promote dignity and independence and which do not discriminate or stigmatise.
- ensuring that, when making decisions on policies and services, consideration is given to their potential impact on the lives of children and young people.

This statement is more than fine-sounding words on paper. It was and continues to be extensively discussed within Investing in Children and it forms the basis of discussion among partners and the participating organizations that commission work from the project. Perhaps more importantly, it was discussed and evaluated by young people themselves. This was facilitated through a project undertaken with the help of Durham University Community and youth Work Studies Unit managed by Fiz Shenton on behalf of Investing in Children. (1999) Her work built on the underlying principles of the project and used young people as researchers. At that stage the conclusion was a little bleak:

As a general view most children and young people felt that they were asked their opinions more often than they used to be. However very few felt that adults genuinely listened to what they had to say or that their opinions made any difference to the adults, or had in any way

influenced the decisions and actions that adults would have made.” (Shenton 1999: 37)

Consultation with young people is a key principle of Investing in Children and the process has been a continuous one. Further work involved the setting up of three national conferences in conjunction with the National Children’s Bureau during which further work was done to explore how young people can engage in the decision-making that affects their lives. Young people wrote the results of the conferences up themselves and published them in a booklet, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. (2001) The results of this and other multi-faceted consultations have been further reported on by Liam Cairns, the Co-ordinator for Investing in Children. (2001)

The key conclusions to emerge from this process of consultation are that young people do not accept that adults always know what is in their best interests. They are acutely aware of the ways (often inadvertently but often, too, with deliberate intent) service providers discriminate against them and that they would welcome chances to be properly consulted.

When young people are consulted about how they experience the normal settings of their everyday lives – at home, in school, on public transport, shopping or using a range of public services – a picture of discrimination and of disrespect emerges that adults have only a dim awareness of. The working methods of Investing in Children enable adult providers of services to go beyond their ordinary measures of service evaluation and appreciate much more vividly the perspective and experience of young people.

People with voices that are not normally heard have been given an opportunity to articulate what they have come to know and understand about being a young person in County Durham. The challenge then becomes one of discovering how best to change and improve services so that young people experience better quality support and feel engaged with those trying to help them. This report will show that it has been much easier to help young people articulate their experience into a sound understanding of how public services work and could be improved than it has been to effect and sustain changes in those services and in the attitudes that inform them.

The Statement of Intent is the vehicle that project staff employ to emphasise the essential elements of the Investing in Children approach. The project, for example, aims to be inclusive and universal, embracing the needs and interests of all young people. It aims to create opportunities for young people to engage in policy-making and, above, all it seeks to promote dialogue between young people and the adults who control the services they need.

Dialogue has become a very important idea within the project, one that goes well beyond the narrower one of mere consultation. Through dialogue, all parties can come to a new understanding of how services should change to meet the needs of young people. Because dialogue depends upon different groups listening carefully to one another, each can learn from one another. New ways of doing things can be discovered. The power of professional gatekeepers of services can be challenged. Both policies and institutional practices can change. In this sense, dialogue is *reflexive* i.e. it helps people and groups to think about issues e.g. transport problems,

or problems in the field of sexual health, in a systematic way. By the same token, however, it changes everyone's perceptions of what those problems are and, at least in principle, opens up new ways of dealing with them that might not have come into view. From this angle, Investing in Children is not merely a model of consultation; it is a mechanism of change and of policy development.

### **3. Evaluation as Learning**

These ideas will be discussed later in this report. For the moment it is sufficient to note the importance of The Statement of Intent as the document providing the underlying rationale for Investing in Children. By the same token, it sets out some high standards against which to judge the success of the project. How well does Investing in Children consult with children and young people? Are all groups consulted, all voices heard? The project seeks to be socially inclusive. Has it succeeded in being so? How effective are the partnerships it seeks to promote? How far have public agencies working with young people developed their policies in line with the Statement of Intent? Put differently, has Investing in Children been an effective mechanism of change to improve the quality of services and opportunities available to young people in County Durham?

This evaluation of Investing in Children began in 2000. The basis upon which it was undertaken was agreement between the evaluator and the Management Committee of the project that evaluation is a process of learning and not of inspection. A key role for the evaluator has been to encourage key constituencies within Investing in Children to reflect on what they have come to know from their work and in so doing arrive at a clearer view of the strengths and weaknesses of the project as a whole. This approach has prompted detailed reflection, data gathering and discussion among the staff team, key stakeholders, young people and the consultants who are employed by Investing in Children to work with groups of young people.

The conclusions drawn from this process will be examined in more detail in subsequent sections of this report. For the moment it is important only to highlight that this evaluation was not an inspection of Investing in Children. Its work is under constant inspection by a range of public agencies. Nor is it a cost-benefit analysis of the project. A very different approach would have been needed to achieve such an evaluation. It is an attempt to capture what has been learned from the work of Investing in Children and to present that both to those who manage the project and to a wider audience concerned with children's rights. The aim has been pragmatic: what works with young people? How can their *demos* - their views of themselves as agents able to take some control of their lives and to contribute to public debate about their needs and their rights – be strengthened? What needs to change to achieve this? What are the implications of the work of Investing in Children for the groups and organizations and services that have engaged with it? What impact has involvement with Investing in Children had on those young people who have worked closely with it? These questions have no straightforward answers. Answers to them have been sought through discussion and through regular opportunities for feedback so that the interpretations set out here have themselves been derived through a process of dialogue and shared analysis.

The conclusions set out in this report were set out in an interim evaluation discussed with the Stakeholders Group that is part of the management framework of Investing in Children. Indeed, throughout the evaluation, there has been a continuous dialogue, including formal evaluation sessions, with the Co-ordinator and other key staff, including consultants, as well as stakeholders and young people, about emerging conclusions. In this way, the evaluation has developed along with the work of the project and has, indeed, contributed to how that work has developed.

In this sense, the evaluation has been *reflexive*. Ideas emerging from it have been translated into practice and the project has changed as a result. People and groups are helped to think about issues e.g. transport problems, or problems in the field of sexual health, in a systematic way. By the same token, however, it changes everyone's perceptions of what those problems are and, at least in principle, opens up new ways of dealing with them that might not have come into view. From this angle, Investing in Children is not merely a model of consultation; it is a mechanism of change and of policy development. Its work highlights an important feature of an open society: all social interventions generate new questions and problems that require further debate and analysis. There is never a point at which we know how best to promote the human rights of young people for every development in policy and practice raises its own new challenges for the rights agenda.

The hope is that this report will be commented on by a wider range of colleagues, practitioners and policy-makers to enable a wider community of practitioners (c.f. Wenger 1998) to build on what has been learned from it and to take its work further.

#### **4. The Context of Investing in Children**

The evaluation had been carried out over a period of time when at both a national and international level, discussions concerning the role of young people have been particularly prominent in the field of social policy. A range of issues in education, youth justice, health and safety and the quality of life in communities touch directly the needs, interests and behaviour of young people.

The international debates are embedded in a wider discourse about the changing nature of citizenship in a globalizing world and in the context of changes in the nature of local communities and civil society. UNESCO, for example has placed education for citizenship at the heart of its strategy and policies for sustainable development. In an inter-dependent, dangerous world there is a need for people to think and act on a global scale. (UNESCO 1998) There is an active debate, too, about what this should mean in the context of local communities and against the need to build stronger frameworks of civil society. Active citizenship and the development of strong communities rich in *social capital* are key ideas forming international debates about how to promote socially inclusive, modern societies.

In the UK these themes are evident in discussions about how to combat social exclusion and how to promote active and responsible citizenship. The Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998) (The Crick report) in the UK, argued the importance of active citizenship and of the need to nurture the skills and confidence of young people to become engaged with the decision-making that affects their lives. Only in this way

could young people be expected to feel a responsibility for what is taking place in the communities in which they live.

Behind these concerns there is a growing realization that many young people feel disengaged from their wider society. In the UK, young electors are much less likely to vote in elections than older people. A whole range of problems associated with young people e.g. substance misuse, educational failure, rising teenage pregnancies, but particularly inter-communal issues connected with racist behaviour or vandalism, have been attributed to the exclusion of young people from the normal political processes of their society. The theme of citizenship has emerged in discussions about young people because it offers ways forward to engage them responsibly in the public life of society. The promotion of responsible citizenship has come to be seen as a *sine qua non* of the achievement of social inclusion.

This particular view of youth citizenship has to be put in context for it is important to keep in view that profound changes that have altered the relationship of young people to the wider society. Over two decades at least, youth labour markets have altered. Few young people – perhaps still too many – leave school to go to work. Most find themselves in transitional roles as trainees or students. Young people’s dependency on parents or services has become greater. Unlike previous generations, young people are under enormous pressure to be consumers and to build personal identities around this role. Those who fail to do so are in jeopardy of experiencing both personal failure and social exclusion. For too many young people from socially marginalized communities the constraints of their lives offer few real chances to be successful in legitimate ways. The pressures to succeed *illegitimately* are enormous. It is against this kind of diagnosis of the problem that the promotion of citizenship becomes a vehicle to bring many young people back into society and to encourage them to act responsibly (Blackman, S and France A 2001).

These long-term, profound changes in the economic and political status of young people create an entirely new challenge for prevailing views and debates about the nature and meaning of citizenship. There are enormous forces at work that *de-politicise* people and which reduce their ability to participate effectively in the civil life of their societies. At the same time there are far more opportunities than perhaps ever before for people to be aware of what is going on around them, to communicate and to become organized to press their views for change through the political systems of their communities and the wider society.

The challenge for Investing in Children was to work out what all this meant for young people, for they are newcomers to the field of politics and public policy. In the main, they are newcomers without power and because they are such a diverse group of people it is difficult to generalise about them. Their willingness and ability to participate as effective citizens is something to be traced out against a detailed knowledge of the circumstances of their lives in different communities. Investing in Children has provided many opportunities to do that. A criticism of the project that can be signalled at this point and developed later, is that Investing in Children has not been well organized to draw out from its practice what it has learned in this respect. It is vital therefore, to situate this evaluation against the context in which Investing in Children actually works. It is only when this is done that the wider relevance of its achievement can be assessed.

County Durham is a semi-rural area with a legacy of social deprivation and in some areas below average educational attainment and high levels of youth unemployment. Indices of deprivation show that in the year 2000, 56% of the wards in County Durham were ranked amongst the top 20% of the most deprived wards in England in Wales. (Learning and Skills Council County Durham 2002) These features of the County impact severely on the life chances and quality of life of young people and their communities. Durham County Council and other Partners to the Investing in Children project are determined to pursue their agendas of local regeneration and social inclusion and to overcome these historical legacies.

In the County, as in Britain as a whole, these complex issues have become focused in a wide debate about the roles of young people as citizens and about their need for education in citizenship to enable them to become responsible and active members of society. Investing in Children is a project with citizenship at its centre. Through partnership with young people, Durham County Council, Darlington Borough Council and the other agencies who have committed to Investing in Children, aim to make the services they provide responsive to the needs of young people in ways that promote their dignity, independence, their interests and enhance their quality of life. Investing in Children was set up to promote these particular objectives and they represent challenging criteria by which it should be judged.

#### **4. The Investing in Children Model**

Investing in Children has been based on a key premise: young people know about their own world. They are the ones best placed to judge whether they are being treated in ways that respect their human and civil rights. Programmes to strengthen their rights and improve their participation in decision-making must be based on a solid understanding, shaped by young people themselves of how they experience the services offered to them. Young people, with appropriate help when necessary, can be their own best advocates. They can research the problems they face and they have the advantage over many adult researchers in doing so; they can relate much more easily to young people their own age and gain insights and understanding from them that adult researchers might be denied. (A full list of research reports written by young people is included in Appendix 2. )

The development of this understanding has been hard won. At its inception, Investing in Children had no clear model of how to work in partnership with young people. Nor were there specific programmes of work to be done. No one knew at that stage the range of issues that would emerge as being of significance to young people and around which their work would develop. Liam Cairns, the Investing in Children Co-ordinator, captured this in a paper reflecting on the project (2001). He writes:

We had a fair idea of the adult agenda – for example, concerns about the health and safety of children in relation to substance misuse or sexual behaviour, educational achievement, youth crime etc. What we did not know was whether children and young people themselves shared this agenda, or whether another set of priorities existed.

So we set out to create opportunities for children and young people to make a contribution to the debate. (2001:352)

The staff involved in its formation were guided by some well-founded principles about children's rights, the role of young people as researchers and the need for social change to improve their roles and opportunities in society. The key staff involved (and it should be noted that decisions on whether to appoint them or not involved young people as advisers on appointing committees) came with both extensive experience of and well-developed commitments to youth work and principles of informal learning. Investing in Children has the imprimatur of their commitment and working methods. Liam Cairns, the Co-ordinator, revealed something of this commitment in an interview on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2001. He explained:

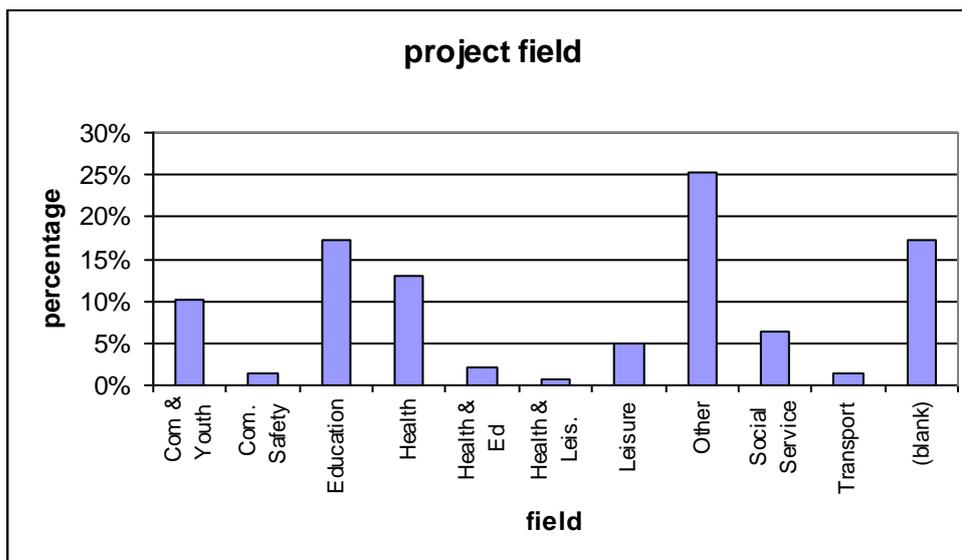
Investing in Children has been earning its right to exist, believing in something no one else did. We had to demonstrate to a sceptical audience the gains to be made from involving young people.

At a previous interview, discussing the progress of the evaluation (March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2001) he revealed something of the drive that animated the project staff: 'We must be harder on ourselves. We were set up to achieve significant political change'. Such views form part of the organizational culture of Investing in Children.

The practical development of the ideas on which the project was founded occurred through an action-based approach in which staff of Investing in Children tried to be responsive to the needs of particular groups of young people working on different projects. All projects are managed in similar ways: young people are paid for their involvement and all their expenses are met. Groups of young people are supported in their work by consultants – some drawn from the staff team, others recruited as part-time staff. All meetings are run openly and democratically. Groups take responsibility for their work and the work covers a wide range of different issues. All projects have open agendas; they will develop in whatever ways the work seems to demand development.

Projects cover a wide range of issues. The staff team were asked to classify them all according to their project field, with the following results, (Table 1) indicating a wide spectrum of coverage.

Table 1

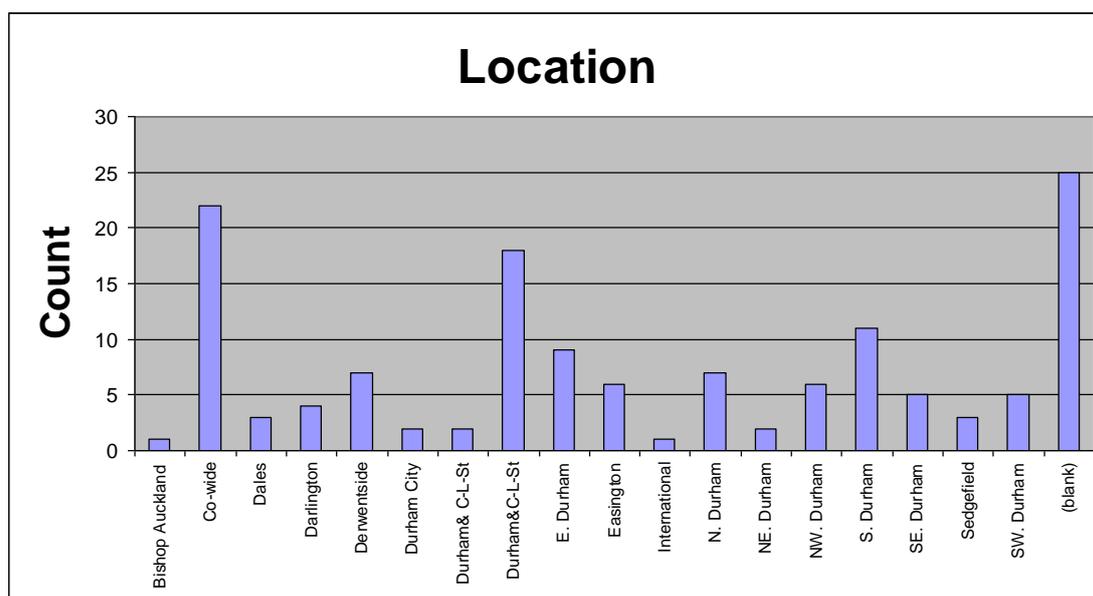


No conclusions can be drawn from this data about the sites where citizenship issues are most acute; the data only describes the range of settings in which such issues arise, highlighting a key point. Young people experience problems that prompt them to think about their rights as citizens in all domains of their engagement with the society and communities in which they live. Citizenship is not an issue confined to the narrow domains of either political education or representative politics; as is the case in adulthood, it touches all aspects of young people's lives.

The range of issues on which the project has worked is vast. The full range cannot be adequately described here. All the work is documented, however, in regular Investing in Children Newsletters that are widely circulated around the schools and colleges and other public service organizations in County Durham and Darlington. The project publishes the results of its projects and these are accessible to a wider national audience. The range of issues covered include all aspects of how young people encounter the world around them; how they experience the public services – education, health, law and order; how safe they feel in their communities – Investing in Children has done important work on bullying and community safety e.g. on the safety of some play areas. It has explored leisure services, library services, transport, health care for young people and how young people are treated in shops. Significant work has been done on many aspects of how people are treated in schools – with important work done on school meals and on health in education - and about the quality of advice and support they are given by bodies such as Connexions. This work is well reported and accessible.

As Table 2 indicates, the projects are widely distributed throughout the County. Staff were asked to classify the projects according to location with the following results:

Table 2 Location of Projects



From the point of view of coverage, this data suggests that there are some geographical biases in the work of Investing in children. More work might have been done in Darlington and in the south west of the County in the Bishop Auckland area. Since this data was collected, significantly more work has been undertaken in Darlington. Certainly, there has been no systematic attempt within the project to target young people in areas of greatest social deprivation within the County or in Darlington. The distribution of projects reflects more the local initiatives of groups of young people or the managers of organizations that seek help from the project.

Projects worked in different ways. Some used theatre, some were built around conferences; others organized surveys and all were infused with a sense of fun. In none of them were the conclusions of the work known beforehand. Some projects worked well; others did not. Nor was it possible to foresee which groups would succeed and which would not. In this sense the working model had to be constantly discovered and re-discovered.

In addition, staff from the project have kept abreast of an indeed part of national and international initiatives in the field so that work done in Durham can be related to a much wider framework of analysis and debate. Nationally there have been many initiatives to promote active citizenship among the young. Local Education Authorities throughout the country are promoting the development of consultative councils, youth parliaments, to hear the voices of young people. Schools throughout the country (with different degrees of commitment and success) have developed School Councils to represent the interests of pupils in the management of schools. Both approaches exist in County Durham and Darlington. Staff and young people from Investing in Children have attended conferences and seminars to keep abreast of these developments. It is one of the strengths of the project that this is the case. The work being done in County Durham and Darlington has become widely known in the field of youth citizenship. Through well-designed project reports and regular

Newsletters schools and many other public agencies throughout County Durham are kept informed of the work being done. Young people from Investing in Children have travelled to the continent of Europe, to the USA and to a conference in Cyprus to talk about their work. Papers have been published by the Co-ordinator in professional journals in youth work and at international conferences. (See e.g. Cairns, L (2002) Cairns, L Kemp, P. Williamson, B.( 2003))

Investing in Children is unique in its commitment to inter-agency partnership working and in the enabling role it plays in supporting young people as researchers and campaigners. The work of the project has developed under two broad headings: project work with young people and the development of a membership scheme in which participating organizations are assessed to judge how far they respect the rights of young people in the way they develop and provide services for them. Members of Investing in Children are entitled, following successful assessment, to display the Investing in Children logo. The membership scheme is a means to spread the children's rights message, to prompt change in organizations and achieve real improvements in the quality of life of young people. It is a feature of the work of the project that can, on occasions, lead to conflict and disagreement when organizations are judged not to have met the membership criteria.

By August 2003 there were 80 successful membership sites, 63 applications for membership. The staff team were asked to evaluate each membership site and allocate them into one of three categories: Category A = successful site that embraces the values of Investing in children; B = site that meets the criteria but is unlikely to attach very much significance by this; C = sites that meets the criteria but is reluctant to engage in future work with Investing in children or around its principles. When the staff team classified the membership sites by these criteria, the following results emerged: 33 sites (42 per cent) were judged to be in category A; 29 (37 per cent) in B and 16 (20%) in C. Further discussions highlights that a scheme's classification reflects whether the staff teams involved chose to be or were required to be.

Some projects – some schools, youth centres and social service organizations in particular, experienced the Investing in Children process of assessment as too onerous, yet another inspection process on top of others they were engaged in. One well connected Head Teacher in County Durham reported to me, that some schools thought that Investing in Children was a disruptive project. Investing in Children staff, as well as key members of its Management Committee are very conscious that the project needs to work diplomatically with key service providers in local authorities, especially those with direct responsibilities for young people. Some senior managers see the approaches of Investing in Children as too confrontational and too insensitive to the operational and legal responsibilities of the services they manage.

The staff team of Investing in Children feel strongly that the assessment process does sometimes expose poor working practices and that members of some organizations feel threatened by this. This is unfortunate, though perhaps unavoidable and it certainly highlights the difference between two models of practice in this field of young people's rights. A consultative, representative model of how to involve young people in decision-making does not lead to situations where mainstream institutions or their managers feel challenged to change what they do and how they work. Investing in Children almost invariably will challenge them for it brings into the open

perspectives that might otherwise remain in the shadows expressed as grumbling and dissatisfaction rather than as something to be openly debated and changed.

The Investing in Children staff team does not regard the membership scheme as the most important part of what they do, however. Of far greater importance are the projects in which groups of young people, with the help of a consultant, work on issues and make recommendations for change.

Investing in Children is a project that requires high levels of participation. It is not about the development of structures of representation. It is much more about social change, about making a difference to the lives of young people. Its work is based often on issues that young people themselves have identified, either directly, or through organizations that represent them, that subsequently ask Investing in Children to work on a problem. For these reasons, it is not possible to identify a precise, Investing in Children model of practice. The project is in any case so flexible in its working methods that any model would change in response to new project initiatives.

This is, of course, both a strength and a weakness. The strength lies in the project being able to respond flexible and creatively to work with groups of young people. The weakness has been that through the sheer 'busyness' of its staff and young people, there has been insufficient time and attention given to careful, reflective analysis of achievements and failures. The project has, however, articulated some general principles and continues to discover new way of working.

The elements of the approach include the following operational propositions:

- Young people know about their environment;
- The experience of young people of public services (including, of course all other services open to the public such as shops and transport) is often one of discrimination and exclusion;
- In the absence of legitimate ways to express their concerns, some young people will express themselves in other, often illegitimate or dysfunctional ways;
- With appropriate help to articulate what they know and to contribute to the improvement of the services open to them, young people will act effectively, responsibly and very creatively;
- Active involvement as citizens is an open-ended learning process from which young people gain a great deal of relevant knowledge and experience on which they will be able to build as they grow older;
- Active citizenship is reflexive i.e. it leads people to develop new ideas and new actions and through this process public services can be helped continuously to improve and change. There is no point at which this process comes to an end.
- Active citizenship is a learning process through which young people develop new friendships, a new sense of possibility in their lives and experience a great deal of fun;

- The work of Investing in Children is constant and endless. As each cohort of participants passes through into adulthood, the cycle of work begins again and afresh with the following generation;
- The working methods of Investing in Children are not always comfortable for key gatekeepers of public resources for they bring into public view the weaknesses of services and challenge current management practices.
- The Investing in Children model is labour and resource-intensive and requires a staff team that supports its underlying principles and modes of working. Staff are needed who can listen to young people, who can be trusted by them, who are prepared to live with uncertainty and, above all, who can let go their inclinations to control and direct so that young people are required to take on responsibility themselves. A consequence of this, for which staff development and support is crucial, is that the adults have to learn to live with failure, for some projects do not work well.

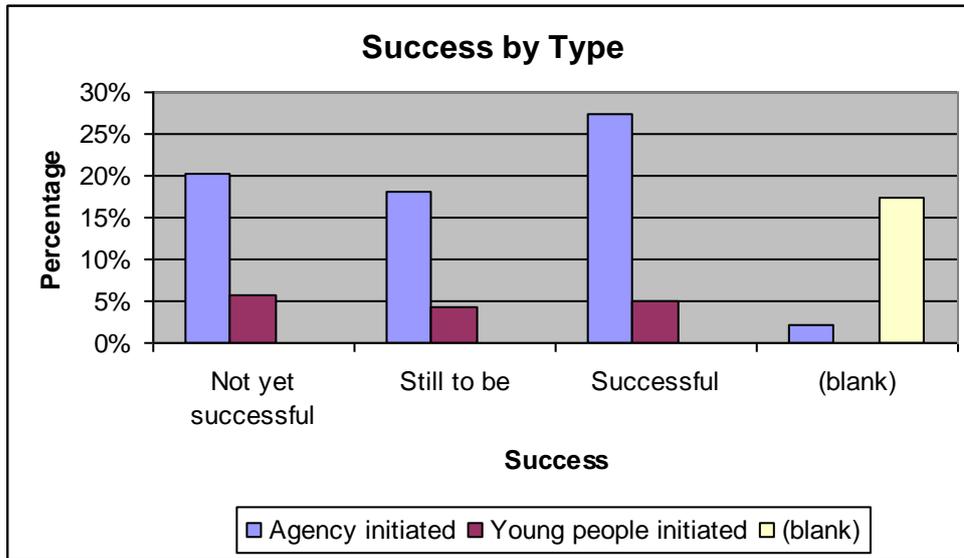
## **5. Achievements, Failures and Lessons Learned**

This model of working has mixed results. It is possible to identify projects that have been hugely successful e.g. the work of the Transport Group in developing a subsidised fare scheme for bus services throughout the County. (See Cairns 2001) Other projects have barely got off the ground or have been difficult and costly to sustain. But how can achievement – success and failure – be measured? This is not a question with a straightforward answer. The work of Investing in Children has to be evaluated over different time scales and against many different criteria. The experience of young people working with the project is something that needs to be evaluated over a very long period of time. It is clear that some of the activists will look back on their involvement as one of the most important formative periods of their lives in which they developed the skills and confidence on which to build their careers and develop their lifelong skills and commitments as citizens.

The evaluation of Investing in Children cannot be a target-driven assessment of achievements against plans. The success or otherwise of the project very much depends upon whose standpoint is taken and over what period of time the project is assessed. Young people are likely to evaluate the project differently to some of the older people in the organizations that have been assessed. Success from the perspective of the project may not match the perceptions of some of the partner organizations.

Nevertheless, when the staff team were asked to assess all their projects using a proforma designed by the evaluator, the following results (set out in Table 3) emerged. Of 139 projects assessed, the great majority (67%) were classified as having been initiated by agencies, compared with 15% started by young people themselves.

Table 3: Project Evaluation x Origin of Project



The projects were classified into those initiated by outside organizations asking Investing in Children to investigate a problem and those by young people themselves. Over 25% of projects were assessed as successful; a further 20% were not yet successful and over 15% were still to be evaluated. Those projects that were initiated by agencies seem on this evidence more likely to succeed than those that were done in response to approaches from young people themselves.

The model is one that is responsive to need. This sets up a tension within the staff team between responsiveness and strategic planning. It is very difficult to plan the priorities of Investing in Children since the project has to be in a permanent state of being responsive to issues that arise in the lives of young people that cannot be anticipated beforehand. This leads to ‘busyness’ that can prevent reflection and strategic planning. Work overload is a real danger. The staff team have little time to consolidate their achievements, build up strategic networks with service providers and groups of young people and to plan for the medium to longer-term future of the project.

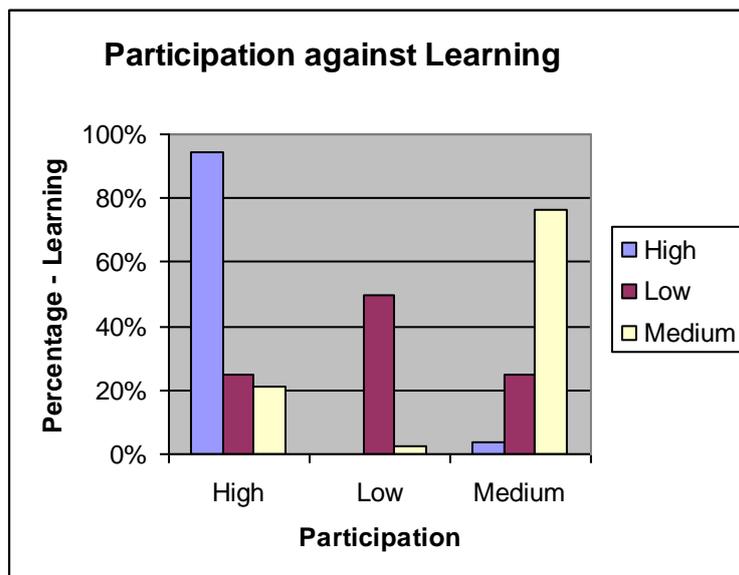
The idea of the successful project has many facets. A key one concerns whether the young people involved had gained in understanding from their participation. Investing in Children clearly operates within a shared discourse of youth citizenship in which active and successful participation is something to be built up over time through a process of learning. The Director of Social Services in County Durham, Mr Peter Kemp, a key sponsor of the project, noted, for example, in his contribution to a development seminar for partners and stakeholders, in November 2001, that the work of the project was a ‘political process’. It was a ‘long journey’ in which young people need preparation for engagement. Through dialogue young people can set agendas for both change and learning. The adults involved must learn, too, to listen to young people. Above all, there must be a prospect for change. Public services, he argued

must implement the UN vision on children’s rights and be prepared to engage in dialogue with young people.

At this same seminar, a group of young people presented their views on what they believed Investing in Children meant to those involved. The key notes in their report stressed the way it improved their confidence to have ‘scary phone calls with people in power’. It improved their skills and understanding; it helped them to challenge ideas; to prove stereotypes were wrong’. The idea of learning that is shared within this project is therefore a broad one.

The staff team assessed each project with this in mind, with the following results. Table 4 relates staff assessments of the level of participation of members in the work of different groups with assessments of how much the young people learned from their participation. Learning was understood to cover the growth of understanding of the problems involved, skills in researching and presenting evidence, competence in working in groups and confidence in doing the work – all crucial to any credible idea of active citizenship.

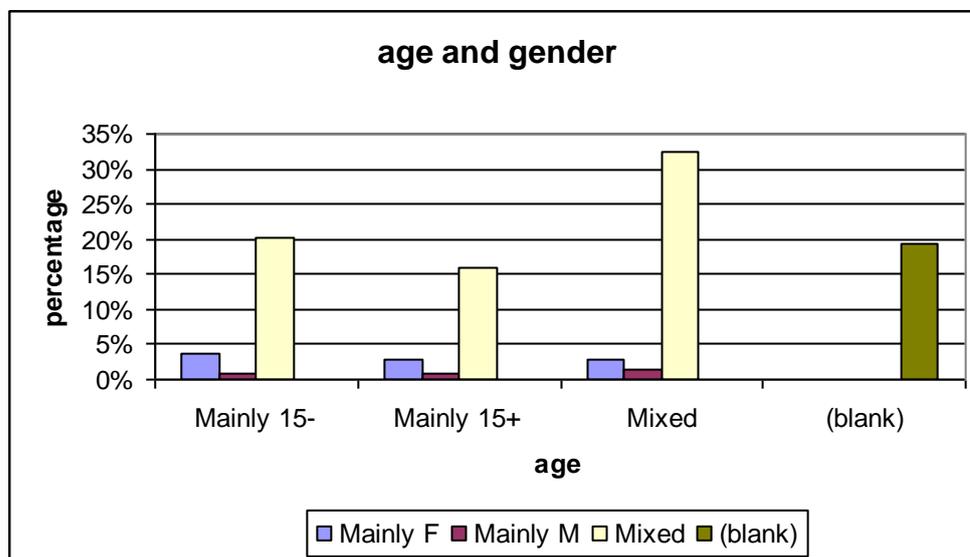
Table 4



The table indicates that in those projects where participation was judged to be high, learning was similarly assessed. This is an interesting and not unexpected assessment and one that has implications for how projects that seek to help young people with the development of citizenship skills need to work. The rule seems to be: secure high levels of participation. If this can be done, young people will learn and develop as citizens.

Investing in Children seeks to be inclusive and to run its projects and do all its work in ways that are consistent with principles of equality of opportunity. With respect to the gender mix of the projects it has stimulated, these goals have been achieved. Table 5 sets out the composition of the groups.

Table 5: Group Composition



There are few single gender groups. On the other hand, the project does seem to appeal more to older children. There is an issue here for questions about human rights and citizenship are not age specific.

There is no data on the social or ethnic background of young people engaged with Investing in Children. The staff team members are conscious of this as an issue and insist that their project is open to all; that they have direct experience of bringing young people together from different parts of County Durham and many of the young people have come from areas of social deprivation e.g. East Durham. A Head Teacher from one of the schools that has worked closely with the project pointed out, on the other hand, that “Liam Cairns wanted a cross section of kids. But we both failed. Those that rose to the top were the bright ones – though not exclusively. Somehow there’s a filter”.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, if there is a filter, it is not a fine one. Investing in Children has worked successfully with young people with learning difficulties and with those in Looked After Care (LAC) system. In each case, the project has found innovative ways to enable these young people to articulate their views. The conference organized in April 2000 at Durham County Cricket Club, to explore the Quality Protects initiative is a case in point. It used video presentation, art workshops and drama to explore key issues in the lives of cared for children. The process completely elides the differences between research and consultation. The conference established clearly that children in the LAC system do not feel respected; their opinions are rarely sought; they needed and wanted a wider range of services and they had many ideas for improving the quality of their living environment.

Another Investing in Children project concerned the needs of Travelling People. This project established that these young people are isolated on static camping sites. They

lack play equipment and opportunities to travel by themselves. They live in a world where suspicion about Social Services is high, where communication skills are poor and where parents are very protective of them. Investing in Children has worked with a group of travellers to enhance (through Sure Start) play facilities and through the Community Fund to find funds to meet transport needs. Other examples of this innovative, probing, knowledge-productive work are readily available.

Investing in Children staff regard their working office environment as a place accessible to young people. They would like to think that the project is widely known among young people and that everyone is welcome to use its services and support. It is not clear, however, that this is how the project is seen. Newsletters are sent out regularly to all schools, but no one is sure who reads them. One Head Teacher said that the project was not widely known throughout his school. A group of Investing in Children researchers undertook a survey of 17 groups, interviewing about 85 young people, on behalf of this evaluation. They concluded that some of the Investing in Children activists very much felt part of a wider Investing in Children team, but those young people who did not regularly visit the office did not see it in that way at all. Many young people equated Investing in Children with the consultant with whom they had worked. One researcher commented that the Belmont Library group tended to see Investing in Children as themselves! Their work had no wider frame around it.

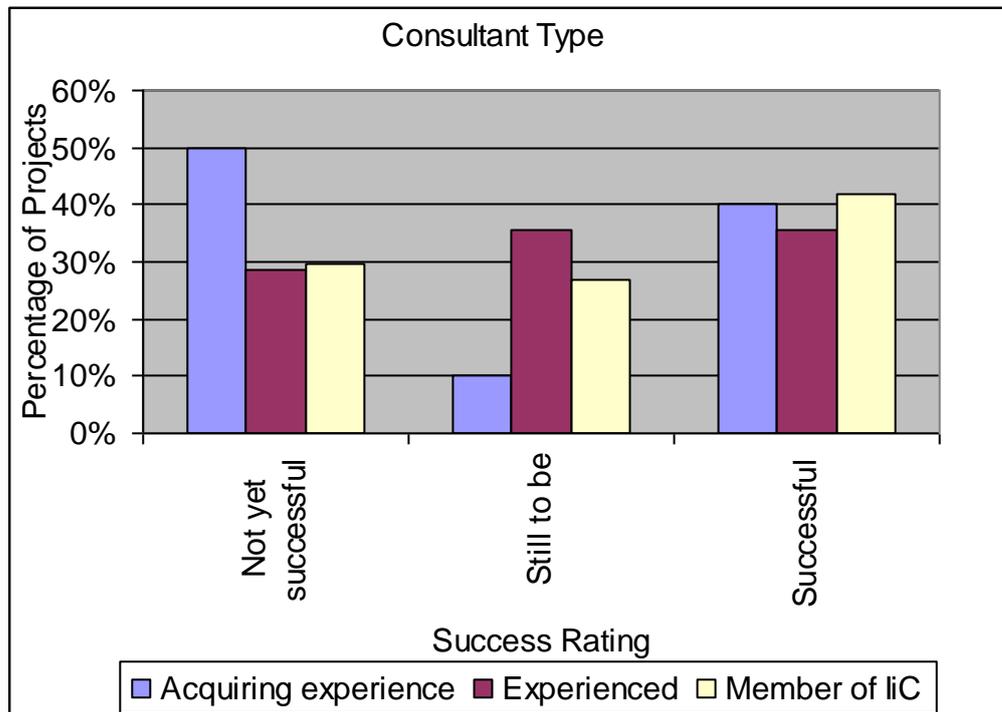
This particular research group saw the visibility of Investing in Children as being low. On the other hand, their results suggest it is an accessible project. They noted that young people in County Durham are very likely to feel disengaged from politics, even apathetic. They are sceptical of the prospects of change in their schools and communities – indeed, of all adult-controlled environments -and are not very likely to make a fuss about the things that worry them. Most are resigned to the conditions under which they live. They are fatalistic. Many feel insecure about committing themselves to projects and feel uncertain in the company of adults.

On the other hand, the researchers insisted, many are keen to be given a chance to be involved. Investing in Children, they insisted, encouraged many different forms of involvement and expression and that those who came into it gained a great deal. The group acknowledged that when they began this work they expected to find that Investing in children appealed to only those who were well educated. They found this not necessarily to be the case, though it is easier for those who stay in education beyond age 16 to be involved. They also noted that those who were less able to participate in discussions in groups were the ones most likely to drop out of projects.

The researchers came to one firm conclusion: the success of any project was heavily dependent on the working relationships established between members of groups and the consultant allocated to the project. This brings into view a crucial element of the Investing in Children model: the role of consultants.

As explained, as part of the evaluation, the staff team were asked assess each project against a number of criteria. When the success of projects (as assessed by the staff team) is mapped against the experience of the consultants involved, the results are as follows in Table 6.

Table 6. Project Success x Consultant Type



There is just the hint a conclusion here: projects that are successful are more likely to be those that have worked with experienced consultants or members of the staff team working as consultants. The young researchers who evaluated projects for this report, noted that some consultants were ‘idolised’ by the young people and a small minority were thought of as hopeless. Whatever form then relationship takes, it is clearly a crucial one for the success of a project.

A team of consultants was brought together as part of the evaluation to discuss their work in September 2002. From a total of 25 working for the project at that time, 11 (9 women and 2 men) were able to attend. Their backgrounds are diverse – in health work, IT, marketing, and theatre, community development – though all had experience relevant to work with young people.

They agreed as a group that they believed they had been recruited because they shared the quality that they believed Investing in Children was looking for: a sense that what happens to young people “Is not fair”. They shared the ethos that young people should be treated as equals and that in this society they lack power and a voice.

They noted that Investing in Children generated problems for themselves that they had not encountered before. The language of Investing in Children is political. It concerns rights, needs, power, authority, and responsibility and encourages young people to ask questions, to campaign and to challenge decisions. This approach, they felt, could generate conflicts with staff members from mainstream institutions. One consultant reported feeling ‘attacked’ by colleagues in community education, Sure Start and Health! There was a shared perception among them that Investing in Children had an ambiguous reputation. This echoed the comments of the research

group of young people. Interviews with some members of Durham Young People's Council had revealed, they felt, a prevailing negative view of Investing in Children. "Why do they hate us?" this young person asked.

Consultants who cannot work within this 'political' model are likely to leave early or, indeed, be asked to do so. Those who can work like this experience new challenges, new learning and enjoy working with young people as equals. As a group, they do not feel they have had the support they need to keep working in this way. A key tension they experience is that between providing leadership to a group and letting go control of the group's work so that Investing in Children principles are respected. This amplifies another tension: between consultants seeing themselves as facilitators of the work of groups and/or as agents of change in public services and other organizations. What is the work of Investing in Children? Is it to support the work of young people so that they experience personal development, acquiring the skills of participation and citizenship? Or is it about changing society and is therefore something to be judged against such criteria?

The consultants drew several conclusions but a key one relevant at this point is that Investing in Children could do more to propagate a better understanding of its methods of working throughout its partner agencies and client groups. This would help the consultants enormously. It is a point that echoes with a finding of the young people's research group: Investing in Children needs to be more widely known so that young people have a better understanding of what would be expected of their involvement with it.

Both reports highlight that Investing in Children faces a rather complex challenge in becoming accessible to all groups of young people and of securing their involvement in its work. High levels of participation are likely to be secured when the projects is well known, when expectations are clear, when there is a prospect of change, when projects are well-lead, when their work is varied and, above all, when groups are successful. These conditions are not unique to Investing in Children. They apply to any project promoting the rights and meeting the needs of young people. Anything less than this runs the risk of tokenism rather than a full acknowledgement of the citizenship of the young.

## **6. Conclusions**

The positive outcomes that emerge from the evaluation of Investing in Children include the following:

- Investing in Children is highly valued by the young people who have participated in it. They experience personal growth and development and are committed ambassadors for the scheme;
- Consultants who continue to work with the project find their work productive and enjoyable and typically feel they have learned a great deal about innovative youth work. The spin-off effects of Investing in Children on the development of staff teams able to work with young people in non-judgemental, innovative ways has been a valuable if unintended outcome;

- Investing in Children projects have been very successful in improving services across a very wide range of public provision. This is true in respect of public transport, health, use of leisure facilities and many aspects of the management of schools.
- The research work undertaken to support some of the initiatives has contributed in significant ways to a more general body of knowledge about the problems under review. Through its Newsletters, networking and conferences, Investing in Children has come to national and indeed international prominence. The staff team have published aspects of their work for a wider professional audience.
- Investing in Children has been able to achieve the wider goals set for it by the partnership and has in this way played an important role in enabling Durham County Council, Darlington Borough Council, The Primary Care and other Trusts, and all the other partners to achieve their policy objectives in relation to the citizenship roles of young people.
- Investing in Children is valued by most of its user organizations. More than half of its projects are judged successful in that an Investing in Children Award is given to the participating organizations. This signals steady progress in achieving the social agenda that is part of its remit.

These conclusions have been drawn from many conversations, seminars and conferences in which key stakeholders – the staff team, young people and partners agencies – were given opportunities to state their views. They are based, too, in keeping with Investing in Children principles, on a survey of the opinions of young people that was undertaken for the evaluation by a group of young people. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses to be addressed. Among these are the following:

Investing in children has been a busy, responsive project but there has been no way until recently to evaluate how effective this work has been in reaching all constituencies of young people throughout the County Durham and Darlington (both in terms of place of residence, gender, ethnicity and social background) or in ensuring that all domains of public policy were being covered. As part of the evaluation, the staff team analyzed the distribution of their projects, their success and failure and identified several key gaps in their work.

- Public sector organizations were the focus of most of the work of Investing in Children;
- The survey showed, contrary to hopes, that most of the projects undertaken – some 83% - were initiated by agencies and not by young people;
- Investing in Children appeals to both girls and boys but is likely to be more attractive to older (15yrs) young people;
- The geographical distribution of projects reflects more the professional networks and partnership links of the project than any strategic calculation of need or demand for this kind of activity among young people.

- More evidence is needed on the social background of those involved to assess whether Investing in Children is truly socially inclusive.
- While individual projects may be successful in initiating changes in how a particular service is provided, Investing in Children is in no position to ensure that service improvements will be sustained over time. It is inevitable that young people will grow up and move away, that the personnel of particular services e.g. schools or health centres or police divisions, will change and that the outcomes of the Investing in Children project may be forgotten or ignored. More generally, Investing in Children is not well positioned to ensure that its work has a sustained impact on policy development over longer periods of time.

Investing in Children has been to date a successful and innovative organization . It has established itself as well-known project, both nationally and internationally. It has established innovative working methods and a significant proportion of its projects have to be judged as innovative, indeed radical in their approach and achievements. To an admirable degree, the working methods and achievements of the project have been brought into the public domain and have become part of a wider public discourse. Investing in children has been a knowledge-productive project whose work rightly deserves to be widely known.

A key weakness to date is that Investing in Children has not been able to consolidate its activities, articulate effectively what has been learned from its work or develop its work strategically. This situation is changing rapidly as the different strands of this ongoing, shared evaluation have been acted upon. For instance, the Business Plan that was written for the project for the period 2003-6 contains an explicit analysis of the project's overall approach. This acknowledges that 'Probably the most significant development over the last three years has been in our **thinking**.' (Business Plan 2003-2006: 03) The report highlights the importance of participation, dialogue and the development of a capacity to take part in decision-making

There remains much to do. The archive of reports that have been written under the auspices of this project deserves to be more widely known and accessible. Work such as this can only be done successfully if the project can create space and time to reflect on achievements and learn from its own practice.

Investing in Children meets a real need in County Durham and Darlington. Applications for membership remain buoyant with currently about 80 applications under consideration either for new membership or membership renewal. The project is a cost-effective way of developing innovative work with young people and improving the quality of their lives. At any point in time there are between 300 and 500 young people working with the project who work with between 20 and 25 consultants. It will have a lasting impact on the lives of all those involved. The key challenge is to broaden the involvement of different groups of young people and to develop a more strategic framework of management of the project as a whole.

Investing in Children has justified the funding awarded to it and is for the moment secure in its new offices and supported in its remit by its key stakeholders. The weaknesses identified in this report are being addressed. The Investing in Children ‘model’ works. Complacency would be dangerous. The young people who undertook research for this evaluation carried out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) of Investing in Children. Their conclusions, in summary, were as follows:

Table 7 SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS	Research-based change agent; participation is formative – building knowledge and skills as well as friendship and fun;
WEAKNESSES	Publicity and visibility is poor; no guarantees of change and consultant vary in quality and effectiveness
OPPORTUNITIES	Extend the reach of the project; involve more young people; become a better agent of change
THREATS	Funding uncertainties; some consultants do not follow IiC principles; adults dominate groups

There are significant messages in here for the project and others that the young people did not themselves identify. One that stands out, and holds true for young people and consultants alike, is that the project has not brought groups together as often or as effectively as it might have done, to share views, good practice and build up a stronger sense of what the key issues county-wide were on the children’s rights agenda.

The consultants highlighted ways in which the project could help them. They felt they needed greater clarity in their remit and targets for particular projects. They would welcome a consultants’ forum to evaluate their work. They look forward to better, inter-project communication. Consultants feel a need for better staff development, for opportunities beyond the informal ones that currently exist, to take stock in a systematic way about what they have come to know about children’s rights. One consultant expressed it like this: ‘Investing in Children needs to step back to clarify the “bigger picture” within which they were all working individually’. Above all, consultants would like to feel re-assured that their projects will continue to be successful and that the changes they secure can be sustained.

Such changes could easily become part of sustainable programme of development within Investing in Children. On the other hand, there are important national changes taking place in the management and provision of children’s services and staff changes within the senior management teams of County Durham and Darlington and within the project itself, that will certainly bring with them changes in how the project works.

The challenge is to find the appropriate management framework that enables the project to thrive and for its working methods to become more widely known. These are relevant not only to projects of this kind. They are relevant to many organizations

that work with young people. Indeed, it is likely that the human rights of young people will only be acknowledged when mainstream institutions such as schools and public services change their ordinary working practices and listen more carefully to the voices of young people.

The advantages of doing so are well worth having. There is no question that many of the organizations that have worked with Investing in Children feel that their services have been improved significantly by doing so. This is true for public transport authorities in County Durham, for library services, the Police Service, several GP surgeries, Leisure Centres and schools. It has not always been easy and there is no question that Investing in Children has attracted its critics and perhaps some enemies who would blame the project for lack of objectivity and for straying too far beyond its responsibilities.

What remains true, however, whether individual projects have been successful or not, is that they invariably become out of date as both times change and young people move on. Investing in Children can cope with this by developing new projects. There is no shortage of work, only of time within which to do it. What is lacking, however, is a strategic ability to build on achievements and help a wide range of organizations improve their services to young people.

To achieve wider strategic objectives, Investing in Children needs to consider how best to solve four problems:

- How can the project develop to sustain the missionary spirit of those who brought it into being? The current Director of Social Service, Mr Peter Kemp, said during the Stakeholders Group meeting in March 2003, that he valued ‘anarchic non-conformity’ and the challenging character of Investing in Children. Can the project sustain this spirit and the political support that currently lies behind it?
- How can the project work in a long-term, developmental way with the organizations they engaged with to improve services and enhance the involvement of young people? Where should its balance be: as a project assisting the personal development of young people or an agency of change in the community?
- How can the work of Investing in Children be extended beyond County Durham and Darlington to engage with those agencies e.g. other Local Authorities, Regional Development Agencies, Government Offices, Health Trusts and national voluntary bodies, whose work impacts directly on the lives of young people in this region and within each district of the County?
- How can Investing in Children strengthen its long-term resource base and its capacity to respond to needs and demands? How can it retain its spontaneity and avoid becoming yet another programme?

These are questions relevant to the medium term future of the project. The answers need, however, to be found in the short term so that the time and space and leadership can be created to put in place what is needed to secure the project’s future. At the moment, the project is pre-occupied with its current workload. There is a need to

create headroom for some developmental management and creative new thinking about the future role of Investing in Children.

How best to create the management structure that will deliver the new leadership required is something the Stakeholders Group should consider as a matter of urgency. A reconstituted framework for the management and planning of Investing in Children could then bring into view a number of possibilities for the next phase of development.

Ideas that stand out for consideration include the following:

- Closer work between Investing in Children staff and the staff training and development resources of client and partner organizations. Investing in Children has learned a great deal about how those who work with young people can be helped to do so more effectively. This knowledge should be much more widely available and disseminated through staff development programmes. Investing in Children is well placed to nurture the growth of a *community of practice* in the field of young people's rights.
- Closer working links with social researchers among university staff in the region and nationally. The work of Investing in Children has major implications for most of the institutions with which it is in contact. In the course of that work, Investing in Children has exposed many questions e.g. about sexual health, substance misuse, attitudes to education, equal opportunities, changes in family life, youth culture, the management and provision of all major public services to young people, that require further research and analysis. Investing in Children is not a research organization in any conventional sense. But its work does inform research and its discoveries require more. This is not a process that can be left to chance. There has been much discussion in the field of higher education policy in the past decade to promote stronger links between universities and employers. There is a strong case here for close links with higher education to build a strong, evidence-based research platform to develop the kind of work and professional development that has gone on within Investing in Children.
- Closer engagement with public policy in the fields of youth citizenship and social inclusion. Investing in Children has been in the privileged position of developing a close-up understanding of how public services impact on young people. Across the spectrum of its projects there are insights and proposals on how best to develop those services so that they improve. Many of the changes identified in the research projects from young people are of a kind that require a change in attitudes or in mind sets. Adult providers of services do not always see how their service can be offered differently. Investing in Children has provided telling examples about how that can be done. The challenge is to mainstream these ideas into policy development and to reinforce them through carefully designed programmes of change management with key constituencies of professionals. A hallmark of Investing in Children is the involvement of children and young people at every stage in the research process. This is a model on which to build in the improvement of public services and opens up the prospect of new models of change and development.

- The development of a more knowledge-productive strategy of evaluation. Evaluation is a necessary requirement in all organizations, a way of remaining accountable and efficient. Investing in Children has helped shape a model of evaluation that is **reflexive** i.e. it has found a way to act upon emerging conclusions from the evaluation. The work of Investing in Children will need to be under constant review and evaluation in ways that enable evaluation to be a developmental process. To achieve this the work needs to be put on a firmer footing. It needs to be broadened out so that it becomes, **structurally reflexive** i.e. commented on by a wider range of stakeholders, analysed in a more systematic way with a much stronger research base. It needs to be more detailed. The debriefing and reflection needed for each project needs strengthening and the conclusions more widely reported.

These ideas are inter-dependent. A stronger research base will improve current practice and the credibility of the change programmes that emerge from it. Investing in Children has to remain a professional organization guided by a clear value commitment that can work collaboratively with a wide range of service providers. Those who manage it have a responsibility to enable it to develop in this way. There would be real danger ahead if Investing in Children were to become marginalized as a campaigning organization. Its real strength lies in its ability to be a catalyst of change within organizations that are themselves willing and keen to change. That strength, however, can only be sustained if Investing in Children itself is prepared to change to create a more strategic approach to its own work and to its relationship with partners throughout the region.

None of this is achievable without a firm foundation of continuing good practice within Investing in Children itself or without changes in its management that will create the headroom for such ideas to be explored. Both conditions can be met and both need careful, supportive management.

In the Spring and Summer of 2000, young people from Investing in Children and the National Children's Bureau organized a series of national conferences on the theme of young people and participation in decision-making. The conferences brought together over 500 people, many young people and many adults with responsibilities for public services. Their report of those conferences – **The Emperor's New Clothes** (2001) – can draw this report to an appropriate end. Reflecting on the achievements of the adults who attended, the authors used the format of a school report and noted the progress of three groups of adults.

Overall, the adults 'show promise, but could do better'. The first group of adults identified were those characterised by the attitude: "Yes, but we know what's best for you'. They caused real anger because their work in practice did not appropriately engage young people. The second group 'passed the theory' but 'struggled with the practice'. The third group were from agencies 'who weren't sure they were doing it right, but who had adopted the view that the only way to find out what works was to have a go.'" (2001:23) This was the group that seemed to the young people the one that accorded them the greatest respect.

Investing in Children is clearly a project in this third category. Lest its staff and partners ever become complacent about their work, they would do well to re-read the

conclusion of the report. Participation is not an end in itself. This idea ‘sometimes plays into the hands of those who want to appear to be doing the right thing and involving young people, but who also want to retain the power of adults to make decisions. The danger is that everyone gets to have a say, and then the adults with power make whatever decision they would have made in the first place.’ (2001:24)

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**INVESTING IN CHILDREN PARTNERS**

**Durham County Council**  
**Education Department**  
**Social Services Department**  
**Arts, Libraries and Museums Department**  
**Environment and Technical Services Department**

**County Durham Health Authority**  
**Children and Young People's Council**  
**Durham Police**  
**Durham Probation Service**  
**Children North East**  
**Chester-le-Street District Council**  
**Derwentside District Council**  
**Durham City Council**  
**Easington District Council**  
**Sedgefield Borough Council**  
**Teesdale District Council**  
**Wear Valley District Council**  
**Save the Children Fund**

**County Durham Foundation**  
**Durham Business and Education Executive(DBEE)**  
**The Julie Graham Children's Charity**  
**NSPCC**  
**Local Agenda 21**  
**County Durham Careers Service**  
**The WasteWise Project**  
**NCH Action for Children**  
**The Children's Society**  
**Barnardo's North East**

**Durham Police Authority**  
**County Durham TEC**  
**DISC**  
**North Durham Health Care NHS Trust**  
**Durham City Youth Project**  
**Early Years Development & Childcare Partnership**  
**FCA North East**  
**Include**  
**Learning and Skills Council**  
**Darlington Borough Council**

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