



Gateshead Youth Assembly election night - young people having a voice.



Photo credit Gateshead Youth Council. Above: Valerie Ender, Sue Adams and members of Gateshead Youth Assembly. 2016-2017.

A group of young people met in the council chamber of Gateshead civic centre for their annual election night on Friday. Gateshead Youth Assembly, run in partnership with Gateshead Youth Council and Gateshead Council, is a democratically elected body of young people who meet on a weekly basis to provide a voice for 11-18 year olds across the borough.

Every year Gateshead Youth Council hold an election night to welcome new members onto the youth assembly and to congratulate outgoing young people. Since 1999 they have been paving the way for youth politics in Gateshead.

Madeleine of Whickham School, has been on the Youth Assembly for two years. She said: "Gateshead Youth Assembly brings young people together to talk about important issues." "Since joining GYA I have understood the importance of young people discussing concerns that affect them."

Valerie Ender is coordinator of Gateshead Youth Assembly, and was recently shortlisted as lifetime achiever in the National Diversity Awards for her work with young people. She recognises the pressure everyone is under due national Government cutbacks and stretched services, but also the valuable impact Gateshead Youth Assembly has on its young people, some who return year after year.

Ender said: "Gateshead Youth Assembly gives young people the opportunity to meet other young people they'd never meet, and to practice skills through a variety of projects in a safe environment. If something doesn't work, it's not a personal failure - it's just a learning curve and having a safe space to do so."

In previous years the Youth Assembly had a £10,000 development budget, but this has now been completely cut. This also limits the youth work hours available to spend on Youth Assembly development from thirty seven to just four hours a week. In recent years they have relied heavily on volunteers to keep going.

Ender explains: "The election night was a lovely event. It was completely delivered and hosted by young people - the only time adults spoke was to present certificates."

Issues that the young people have chosen to focus on this year are child poverty, bullying and cuts to youth services. At a recent event the young people developed a list of benefits of being involved in a Gateshead Youth Council project that included 'increased self esteem' 'developing resilience' and 'developing political awareness'.

Sue Adams, whose three children have all been part of the Youth Assembly said: "Through GYA my three children have blossomed and

gained confidence, but also had lots of fun, gained social skills and unearthed qualities we didn't know they had. I am thankful for every second and everything they have done with the Youth Assembly”

Gateshead Youth Assembly demonstrates what can happen when you give young people support, opportunities and a voice. Meeting once a month to discuss current issues, they grow in confidence, going on to challenge the status quo both locally and nationally.

