

# THE YOUTH COUNCIL

*By Anita Westerholm*

*"And in my own life, in my own small way, I've tried to give back to this country that has given me so much. That's why I left a job at a law firm for a career in public service, working to empower young people to volunteer in their communities. Because I believe that each of us – no matter what our age or background or walk of life – each of us has something to contribute to the life of this nation."*

*Michelle Obama*

We can all contribute to society. For young people it is not always so easy to be heard, and that is why the community and municipality have an obligation to build structures and create possibilities for the young. One way to achieve that is to arrange a youth council or forum, where young people together can voice their opinions and also be a part of making the society better.

Here is a short introduction to the youth council in Raseborg, how it came about and how it works today. Not forgetting a perspective on the future, because it can always work even better and get more young people to participate.

## BACKGROUND

When Raseborg was founded in 2009 one could read in the statutes for the city that a youth council would be founded. The idea was that young people's voices would be heard and that the young people would be involved and have an ability to affect their surroundings and "everyday life". This was the starting point and from here the work started.

In autumn 2009 Raseborg's first youth council was elected. The election was arranged in such a way that the officials at youth clubs went to the schools in Raseborg and informed the pupils about the "youth council idea" and then

interested pupils in age 13–17 were allowed to stand for a seat in the youth council. Everybody who stood for election was elected and the youth council consisted of about 20 persons.

## THE YOUTH COUNCIL DEVELOPS

The forms of the youth council have developed during the years. It has been important to develop the youth council together with young people in Raseborg. The youth secretary, who works at the city Youth office (Ungdomsbyrå) is the person responsible for guiding and coaching the youth council.

The way Raseborg's youth council is elected has changed through the years. Currently the youth council is elected by the Youth parliament. Every year in November/December the youth council hosts the Youth parliament. Both the youth council and the Youth parliament are politically and religious non-aligned organisations.

Every person between 12–17 years, resident in Raseborg is invited to the Youth parliament. Politicians and officials are also invited to the Youth parliament. The idea with the Youth parliament is that the young people in the city have the opportunity to discuss with and ask different questions of each other and the poli-

ticians and officials. The Youth parliament ends with the election of the next youth council. The youth council has a one-year mandate.

### **SOME EXAMPLES OF WHAT THE YOUTH COUNCIL HAS ACHIEVED**

Most of the time it costs money to host an event. Every year the youth council in Raseborg is given some money for its activity. The municipality supports us and the amount varies depending on the economic situation. Some money goes to the members of the youth council, as payment for participating in the meetings. This expenditure, however, is very small as a whole. It is not intended that Members are not intended to gain financially through their participation in the youth council; they are compensated for travel costs and phone bills.

Some money is used for bus expenses, while young people will be transported from one part of the municipality to another to participate in an event organized by the youth council.

One of Raseborg's youth council's most popular events is the Battle of the Bands. Every year the youth council hosts a band competition for young talented people. Six to ten bands participate and then a jury appoints a winner; second and third prizes are also awarded.

Besides this, the youth council organizes meetings for a council of student bodies. The youth council thinks it is important that pupils from different schools in Raseborg meet each other and discuss what is good and what is bad in schools. They can exchange ideas and tell the others what works in their school and how they successfully implemented their ideas.

Other things the youth council does, is visit schools and share what the youth council does and asking for ideas about what the youth council should do. It is essential that the members of the youth council know what young people in Raseborg want. The contact between youth councils and the youth in the town is very important. It is no idea to work for something that



nobody wants. In addition to this, the youth council make statements when the youth consider a question as significant. The statements can be published both in the local newspaper and on the local radio and also be sent to the administration and politicians.

### **RASEBORG'S YOUTH COUNCIL TODAY (2014)**

In the end of 2013 the youth council for 2014 was elected at Raseborg's Youth parliament. Fifteen young persons aged 12–17(18) residing in Raseborg are now working for their and other young people's opinions and rights. A big difference between 2009 and 2014 is that a lot of people now know what Raseborg's youth council is. During the years the youth council has been seen and heard in the local newspaper and on the local radio, which has been very good for the youth council's visibility. Now Raseborg's inhabitants know much more about the youth council. Both the local radio/newspaper and the youth council have contacted each other. It's important for a youth council to be seen and heard in media and social media. It is through them that the youth council can convey their opinions and make them visible.

The following text can be read on Raseborg's homepage; "The Youth council in Raseborg works for young people's well-being and interests. The Youth council acts as a link between the decision-makers and Raseborg's youth. We organise different types of events for young people and have the chance to influence the issues that affect us".

This sounds really good and yes, Raseborg's youth council's situation is alright but perhaps not this good. One can doubt if the youth council really acts like a link between the decision-makers and Raseborg's youth, at least one can

challenge how this works. It is not yet possible for the youth council to choose a representative of its own to the different boards in the city, like the board of education or the board of culture. But the youth council is working at it and we are sure this will happen soon. This is already reality in many other cities in Finland.

Challenges for the youth council and the supervisors are reaching out to all young people in the municipality, regardless of language and age and keeping everybody in the youth council active and inspired. It is very important that everybody feels comfortable and therefore is it essential that everybody is allowed to speak his/her native language or at least one language he/she masters. In Raseborg meetings and events must be bilingual, held in Swedish and Finnish.

The other challenge, to keep the members in the youth council activated, is hard to handle. One cannot decide that another person has to be interested and take his/her responsibility and so one. In this case the supervisors' role is very important. They have to push and support the youth council but simultaneously we have to remember that it is the young people who have to do the job. During the years it has happened that the youth council has decreased from being 20 active members to only six active members. If that happens, one must not give up. Instead one has to focus on those that still are active, presumably they are very dedicated.

### **IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER**

It is very important to remember that the youth council evolves all the time and every progress is a step in the right direction. Do not let the setbacks put you down. You cannot create a very well-functioning youth council in a trice, it can take years before you have found routines you are satisfied with, and even when you have



found those routines you will notice that there is something else to change, and that is good and fine. Let the youth council develop and stand up for it. You have come far if you

1. decide to establish a youth council
2. believe in what you want
3. have found a group who has a similar vision

Then the work and the fight for what you want can start. Try to let people know your ideas and do not give up! Your voice is important!

