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# Board diversity

Young people at the heart of decision-making

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Image courtesy of Contact. Afreena Islam, Daughters of The Curry Revolution. Photograph by Tamsin Drury.



**CONTACT**



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## Board diversity

### Young people at the heart of decision-making

Contact has been around since 1969. It has always had a strong focus on young people but in the mid-90s, during a major rebuild and redesign phase, it re-drew its governance structure to put young people at the heart of decision-making, and a commitment to diversity at the heart of its mission and vision.

Since then, young people aged 13-30 have genuinely led at Contact. They work alongside staff in deciding the artistic programme, and in making all staff appointments. They also act as full board members.

The result is an outstanding, diverse and accessible artistic programme for everyone. 70% of our audience are under 35, and 30 - 40% are Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic.



Image courtesy of Contact. Young Identity.

## Decision-making methodology

Every major decision at Contact is made jointly by staff and young people. When we are recruiting for staff or board members, all candidates are interviewed by a staff panel and a youth panel. Both panels have equal weight and if they don't agree then we do a second round of interviews or re-advertise.

We want to represent different communities at Contact and ensure that there are always a range of local voices around the table. We strive to be authentic in that. We avoid having to ask the question about is our work diverse enough by putting diversity at the root of decision-making.

The staff and youth panels usually agree. When they don't, it tends to be because a candidate has underestimated the youth panel's influence. If they don't take the young people seriously, they don't have a place at Contact.



Image courtesy of Contact. Contact Young Company, The Shrine of Everyday Things.  
Photo by Joel Chester Fildes

## **Young people as board members**

We have two defined spaces for young people on the board and we are always thinking about who else could join.

Our young board members need to be over 18 as it's a legally responsible role, and are supported in this. They can serve a full term on the board, so they might be 19 when they join, but in their mid to late 20s when they step down.

Young board members are recruited locally from our participation programmes so they already have a relationship with Contact and a real understanding of our community.

## **Succession planning**

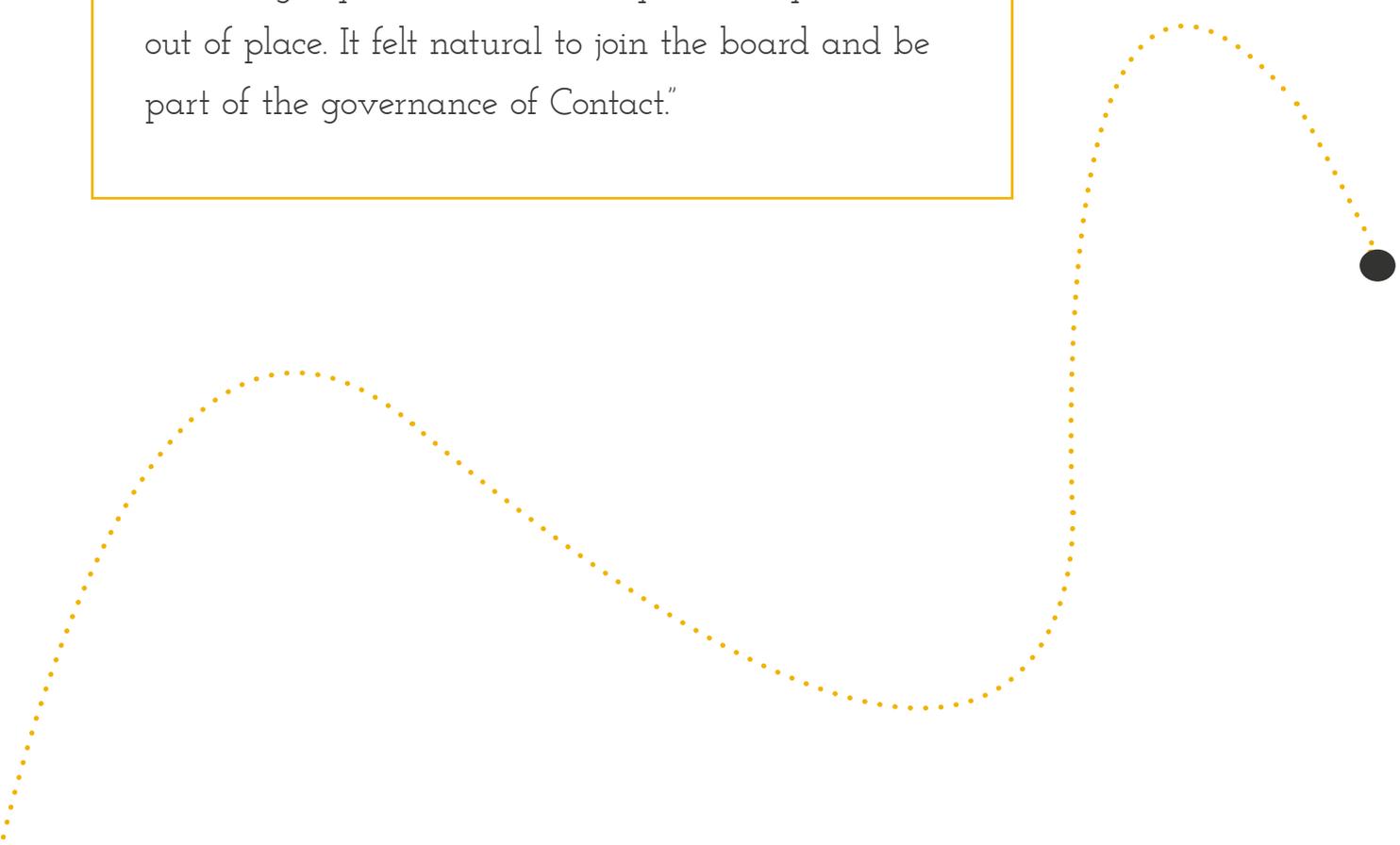
At most board meetings we have more young people presenting or observing. This gives the opportunity to see what board meetings are like and makes the running of the organisation transparent. Likewise our young programming team, Recon, are part of every programming meeting.

It's important to us that young people get to know the board at Contact individually and realise that they could be part of it. Often young people emerge who show a particular interest in how the organisation works and how decisions are made, so we encourage them to think about joining a staff appointment panel or the board.

## Reece's story

"I've been involved with Contact for 15 years. I went to a school local to Contact and did a play here and became an active participant. I got involved in Young Identity creative writing workshops. They originally took place in Moss Side but it wasn't always safe there. The previous director of Contact, John McGrath, gave us space to meet and showed an interest in what we were doing.

Six years ago I was invited to apply to become a board member. It was the opportunity that made me want to join the board. There was total transparency and the Chair showed a genuine interest in taking Contact in the direction young people wanted it to go in. Contact is a real part of my community. It's one of the few places where I can bring my friends and family and they don't feel out of place. It felt natural to join the board and be part of the governance of Contact."



## Representing the local community

Being part of the local community is really important for Contact. 50% of our audience come from within two miles of the venue and most walk here.

Contact is not the Artistic Director's theatre. It's young people from the community's theatre, so it's important that the community have ownership over what happens. That means being part of decision-making at board level, and ensuring that young people, as members of that community, are fully represented. What's brilliant is that we see that reflected in our programme and our audiences.



Image courtesy of Contact. Media Drop Workshop. Photo by Joel Chester Fildes.

## Recommendations and reassurances

**Talk to Contact** — we are increasingly being asked to do board-to-board and exec-to-exec sessions to share our experiences with other organisations. We delivered Arts Council England's 'Power Through Diversity' event in 2016 exploring diversity and governance, and both Reece and Afreena Islam, another young Contact board member, often talk nationally about their roles.

**Have at least one young person on your board** — as an absolute minimum, there should be at least one young person on your board. If you are receiving public funding and serving a community that includes young people then they should have a voice. They will bring new ideas and insights to your meetings.

**Young people are responsible** — we've spoken to organisations that are worried about discussing finances and confidential matters with young people in the room. The young board members at Contact take it really seriously. If there are ever breaches of procedure, it is never by the young people.

**Let young people from a wide range of backgrounds see what governance meetings are like** — giving young people the opportunity to see and participate in decision-making allows them to see what it would be like to be part of a board or management team, and to see themselves in those roles in future.

**Find your own methodology** — we recruit young decision-makers from our participation programmes so they are already involved with Contact. That works really well for us, but our methodology is not a blueprint for other organisations. You need to develop your own processes that work in your context.

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