

Children and Young People's Participation Strategy 2021-25

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DEFINITION OF PARTICIPATION

This strategy has been created to help improve opportunities for children and young people to be heard, and have more influence over the decisions which affect their lives and the world they live in. We call this process participation. The words engagement, involvement, active citizenship, co-production and co-creation are sometimes also used to describe the same process.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the principal aims of the Nottingham City Children's Partnership is to empower children and young people to participate meaningfully in decision-making, in all aspects of their lives. Sharing views, expressing opinions and articulating ideas for change are qualities that make children and young people safer, healthier, happier and better skilled for life.

As a Partnership, when we listen to the views of children and young people and involve them in decision-making, we learn more about what we have to do to support them to achieve good outcomes in life. We can design and deliver services that more closely meet their needs, and we can more openly share power and responsibility with them. This helps children and young people develop the skills and experience they need for their adult lives. Participation is at the heart of a successful childhood, and a successful adulthood too.

The setting and context for participation changes depending on where the child is and what their needs are at the time we listen to them. Their individual, social and public participation needs require different understanding and approaches.¹

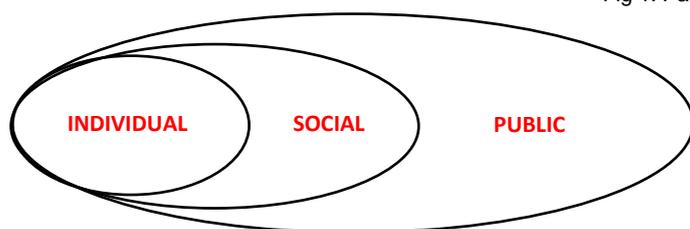
Participation can take place

- at individual level, for example as with a child in care making their wishes and feelings known to the services that work with them, and taking part in planning for their own care and support
- in social environments, for example in a youth group, where young people can be encouraged to share their opinions and ideas for change, and empowered to create new activities and projects led by the young people themselves
- in more formal group settings and meetings with organisations, for example through co-creative activities which bring children and young people into the heart of the development of services and strategies, policies and plans

Our strategy aims to ensure each child has opportunity for meaningful participation across all three contexts, depending on the needs and aspirations of the individual when and where we listen to them. We should be able to demonstrate through clear evidence the impact their voice has on shaping decisions made about their life, and on improving services for them.

1. A more detailed description of these participation settings can found in Appendix One

Fig 1: Participation settings



As the above model shows, the setting for participation may vary. But wherever and whenever participation takes place it is always underpinned by the same ethos and commitment to the child's right to be heard, enshrined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. Participation is therefore everyone's responsibility. Thankfully, the skills we need to enable and empower a child to have their say are not hard to learn, nor do they take years to acquire! We can all be participation workers, whatever our role and whatever our organisation.

Since the inception of the Children's Partnership, our vision for participation has been for Nottingham to be a city where all children, young people and families are listened to and involved in the decisions that affect their lives.

While this vision is still compelling, we recognise that there has been uneven progress towards achieving this goal, with particular challenges around maintaining a culture of participation in the workforce, applying consistent processes to support the voice of the child and evidence its impact on outcomes, and ensuring participation of the most vulnerable children and young people.

Making meaningful involvement in decision-making a lived reality for young citizens is a challenge to all public and voluntary sector partners. This strategy lays out how we can respond to this challenge in Nottingham City, using the motivation and combined capacity of the Children's Partnership partners.

A strong participation culture contributes to the goals of the new Children and Young People's Plan, Strategic Council Plan, and underpins the transformation of our services for children and families in the City. It will also make a major contribution towards our goal of becoming a UNICEF² Child-Friendly City. But most importantly, it will improve the lives of the children and young people we all serve.

2. AIMS OF THE STRATEGY

The latest version of the strategy addresses the current and future needs for children and young people's participation. We want the culture of participation already in place to grow and thrive, and act as a driver for other positive outcomes for the children and young people we work with and serve.

Using a whole-partnership approach, this strategy aims to:

- Better understand how to support participation of vulnerable children and young people and improve practice to keep all children and young people safe and well
- Increase the range and depth of participation activity by children and young people, giving them more opportunities to have their say and leading to greater impact in the way that services and organisations respond to their needs and aspirations
- Increase use and availability of technology and improve the culture of virtual contact to complement face to face contact to extend the range of opportunities for participation
- Instil a greater sense of responsibility by all partners and at all levels of leadership, management and delivery, that participation is everyone's business, and participation culture is integral to the success of their mission
- Apply participation values and principles to all aspects of Children's Partnership work, so that empowering the voice and involvement of children and young people is giving high priority throughout our work
- Enable partners to better share planning and resources for participation, to increase the capacity of the partnerships to respond to demands for participation work

3. DRIVERS FOR DOING PARTICIPATION WORK

Participation drivers come from a range of legislative, policy and best practice imperatives.

Foremost, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and young people have a right to have their say. Their views need to be taken seriously in all matters which affect them, and government organisations should actively engage them in decision-making. The UK Government is a signatory to the Convention, and this ethos underpins a range of national and local level drivers.

Participation objectives features commonly in the work, plans and organisational cultures of our partners. Good participation and engagement is essential to evidencing good services, that are acting in the best interests of children and supporting them to achieve positive outcomes. The refresh of the Children and Young People's Plan has a priority around being Heard and Included, including 'Creating opportunities for participation, engagement and co-production', to help support this in the Children's Partnership.

External inspection and review criteria are used to analyse and assess the efficacy of voice of the child work. Some of this is best practice-based rather than statutory, however some work is statutory such as the Children and Families SEN Act which places a requirement to involve children and young people with special educational need and disabilities, and their families and carers, in the development and delivery of the local offer.

More broadly for the Partnership, here is a significant focus in the City on increasing participation and inclusion of under-represented and marginalised communities, supporting work to tackle discrimination and disproportionality, and ensure better community cohesion.

One of the guiding principles of the UNICEF Child Friendly City programme is participation in decision-making by young citizens. Children and young people participation in the design and delivery of Nottingham's Child Friendly City plan is central to its success.

4. WHAT IS WORKING WELL

Participation has been a feature of the Children and Young People's Plan since its inception, and over the past decade we have developed a very positive culture around engaging and involving children and young people in decision-making. In

refreshing this strategy, we know that some things have worked well and need to continue to be taken forward.

The Participation in Governance Programme, an annual calendar of group and social participation events and activities, has given the Children's Partnership a range of forums through which to engage children and young people, and involve them in conversations about both operational issues and wider strategic change and visioning.

Within the programme, standing groups such as Youth Cabinet and the Children in Care Council, and assemblies such as Youth Council and Primary Parliament provide an important stage for consultation and co-production work, and they provide partners with a rich source of both qualitative and quantitative information. These groups input into not only Children's Partnership work but also Council Plan and citywide partnership agendas, covering a broad range of themes.

The Children in Care Council is a monthly group for care experienced young people which has co-produced numerous processes to improve the voice of the child with children's social care services. They developed the Children in Care and Care Leavers charter, which in turn led to the annual Have Your Say survey for Children in Care and Care Leavers. The results of this survey are used to identify areas for improvement in the Corporate Parenting action plan. Members of the Corporate Parenting Board meet periodically with the Children in Care Council to explore these key themes together.

In addition, members of the Children in Care Council and Youth Cabinet contribute to recruitment and selection of SLMG-level staff, and also take part in social worker training activity and assessment, helping quality assure the Children's Partnership workforce.

Since 2020, bi-annual Youth Leadership conferences run by the Youth Cabinet have expanded the network of peer-led youth leadership across the Children's Partnership, bringing together young leaders from education, community, faith and work sectors to share in discussion and problem solving, alongside a broad range of partners.

With regard to widening ways for children and young people to have their say, we have introduced new platforms for participation which use digital tools, including the Mind of My Own app for Children in Care and Children in Need. The strategy for Mind of my Own has recently been refreshed and a new cohort of workers trained in how to use it. Meanwhile, during the lockdown digital platforms such as Teams and Zoom have facilitated one-to-one contact and group meetings. This has removed barriers to the acceptance of the merits and functional ease of virtual engagement, and a recognition that for some young people virtual is a more practical (and preferred) medium for participation. Children in Care living outside the local area, and children and young people with disabilities are just two examples of those who have been able to take part who might otherwise have not done so, due to digital tools,

Other Children's Partnership partners have also firmly embedded the voice of the child within their work and established a strong culture of participation throughout their organisation. From the outset of the programme, Small Steps Big Changes placed participation values at the heart of its work with families. Parents and carers helped shape the programme's planning, delivery and governance structure, and children's views are used to shape the development of the programme. As Small Steps Big Changes moves into the final phase of its ten-year-long journey, we need to ensure that the progress made in establishing a culture of participation in early years' services endures beyond the funded work currently in place.

The development of citywide learning engagement platforms in recent years has greatly broadened the scope of opportunities for engagement in participative learning, both in and out of school. The Challenge Cultural Education Partnership, the Festival of Science and Curiosity and the annual RSE Day³ programmes are all premised on enabling and empowering children and young people to have their say and express themselves through cultural enquiry, artistic creativity, scientific curiosity and self-awareness. Such programmes make a profound contribution to the capacity of children to articulate their views, experiences and ideas for change, and are a valuable resource for the Children's Partnership.

3. Relationship and Sexual Health Education Day

5. OUR COMMITMENTS

To improve opportunities for the participation of children in need of help and protection, we will:

- Bring oversight of internal processes for participation by Children in Care, SEND and Children in Need under a single management process, sponsored by senior officers within Children's Integrated Services.
- Better link children and young people's voice to practice improvement by improving feedback and recording on case file and increasing auditing, increasing involvement of CYP in 'practice weeks', and improving internal diagnostic activity.
- Strengthen links to SEND participation providers, refresh the Your Voice for Care Leavers group, and develop opportunities for participation within Youth Justice Service, following inspection.
- Develop creative models within the Reviewing Service to encouraging meaningful participation in reviews and better recording, feedback and action
- Use the voice of young people to shape culture and language of care, through joint work between practice forum and CiC Council
- Review advocacy contract arrangements to try to maximise the participation resource for Child Protection cases

To improve our partnership culture of participation to give young people a voice in decisions that affect them, we will:

- Set up a Partnership level steering group, to enable partners to share practice and oversee progress of the Participation Strategy and own actions for their own improvement initiatives
- Improve the range of participation process available to vulnerable children and young people, including more options for virtual engagement using digital tools and platforms, and improving the level of workforce support for this
- Strengthening oversight and reporting arrangements for commissioned work including SEND and Young Carer participation

- Continue to strengthen the role of partners in delivery of our shared corporate parenting responsibility.
- Strengthen partnerships for participation, including links to schools through DSL Network around voice of the child and work with VCS to support wider representation and diversity of voices
- Support and promote participation-based approaches in citywide learning engagement partnerships, including the Challenge Cultural Education Partnership, Festival of Science and Curiosity, and RSE Day
- Support and contribute to the development of Nottingham's Child Friendly City plan
- Support the Workforce Strategy objectives for co-productive partnership working and work with regional local authority partners through the East Midlands Regional Participation Leads Group, contributing to the Regional Improvement Plan
- Report annually to the Children's Partnership Board on the outcome of the strategy, and celebrate the work done by children and young people to influence decision-making across the Partnership.

APPENDIX 1

Types of Participation

Participation is the meaningful involvement by citizens in the decision-making processes which affect their lives. This definition, and the typology of participation described in this strategy has been developed by the East Midlands Regional Participation Leads Group and agreed by the Regional Directors of Children's Services. The three types of participation are:

Individual participation - where a child is involved in the planning and design of their own service plan or pathway plan, including for example care pathways, personalised budgets, personal education and health plans. Ensuring the individual child is supported and empowered to have a say in decisions about their life and can meaningfully influence the way in which they receive services is the bedrock of good participation practice. This type is most relevant to participation in targeted and specialist settings, and the focus of most participation work in Children's Integrated Services and those partner agencies working with vulnerable children and young people. Children in care, children with disabilities and children in need all have the right to be heard in their journey with our services. It is our job to ensure they have lots of ways to have their say, wherever they are, and use their views to shape the best possible decisions about their care and support. Evidence impacts on individual outcomes, but can also be aggregated to inform operational and strategic decision making.

Social participation – engagement in participation in settings where children and young people find themselves day to day, for example in community-based youth and play provisions, at school or college, or in community-level services; or through specific social action projects or volunteering programmes, where young citizens are involved in activities and programmes. This is particularly relevant to Children's Partnership play, youth, education and voluntary sector partners who engage and serve the needs of children and young people at community level. Outcomes of social participation can impact on operational decision-making, and help develop understanding of strategic needs too.

Public participation - typically through involvement of children and young people in organised groups or forums that promote self-led decision-making; through participation in surveys and consultations; engagement in activities linked to quality assurance and improvement of services, such as recruitment and selection, worker training or peer-led inspection; and representation on formal boards and committees. Shaping and informing decision making through co-productive activity, with potential to make both strategic as well as operational impact, and contribute to organisational governance.