



Children and Young People's Participation Strategy

**Listening and Acting on the Voice of Children and
Young People**

Revised July 2010

An Inclusive Approach

Darlington has a diverse community and we are committed to serving every member of the community to the best of our ability.

The Consultation and Engagement Strategy is a partnership document that has had regard to equality and diversity issues that may impact on any members of our community for any reason, but particularly because of their age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity, religion or belief.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, through article 12, stresses the need to 'assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

It is from this starting point that the Children's Trust has developed this strategy and action plan to ensure the active engagement and involvement of children and young people (across the whole 0-19 age range) in decision-making processes which will impact on the design, delivery and management of those services delivered to children and young people across the Borough.

This strategy sets out a clear vision and aim and articulates core principles and values which should underpin all work engaging children and young people in decision-making processes. It forwards a model for all agencies and services to utilise and outlines an action plan which will be reviewed and revised on an annual basis.

The intent of the Trust is to establish a child and young person focused culture of participation and engagement where children and young people are involved on an on-going and regular basis and there is an automatic assumption that they should and will be listened to about the decision which affect them.

The strategy has been reviewed in 2010 and amended and renamed following input from a range of partners through two sessions which utilised the outcome based accountability framework to shape discussions and decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

The profile and practice of Children and Young People's participation has increased dramatically in recent years, fuelled by a wealth of policy drivers and cross-sector initiatives and an appreciation of the benefits of this active participation in decision-making for children and young people themselves (individually and collectively), for service providers (across all sectors) and for the wider community at large.

Darlington has developed a wide and diverse range of practice in this area and development of the Children's Trust now provides an opportunity to ensure a coherent strategic approach is owned and adopted by all agencies and departments. The underlying purpose of this strategy is to offer a framework which can build on established and emerging practice and ensure that all provision to all young people is shaped by their involvement and active participation.

The strategy is written at a point in time but with an appreciation and expectation that it will be a fluid document, open to monitoring, review, amendment and development as actions are achieved, policy and practice developed and new targets and expectations set.

It is of no surprise that one of the key Every Child Matters outcomes is 'Making a Positive Contribution' – a wide-ranging outcome but with children and young people's voice and influence central to it and with an expectation that active involvement and participation in decision-making can influence the other four key outcomes.

This Strategy underpins the ECM outcomes and is fundamental to the achievement of Darlington Children Services' vision, which is '*to improve the outcomes and maximise the life chances of all children and young people in Darlington by delivering effective, high quality, integrated services*'.

Although focused on children and young people it recognises that adult members of the community will also participate in a range of mechanisms and forums to enable their own input to decision-making processes – and that adults, parents, families have a key role in supporting and enabling the voice and participation of children and young people (irrespective of age or ability). Equally many agencies and organisations can also play a key role in either supporting or advocating on behalf of children and young people. However, the centrality and importance of the voice and engagement of children and young people in decisions which affect them remains.

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND TO THE STRATEGY

1.1 Local Needs and Priorities

There is evidence of good and successful examples of children and young people being actively involved in decision-making processes by partners across all sectors. An agreed strategy will drive this practice and fully utilise the outcomes of children and young people's participation in driving wider strategic planning and development of services. In 2006 the Borough Council, and subsequently the Children's Trust, adopted the Youth Participation Strategy with a focus on young people aged 11-19.

There is a significant local commitment (by practitioners, senior Officers and elected members) to facilitate and support children and young people's participation. This is particularly evident in the decision by the newly re-structured Children's Trust to develop this consultation and engagement strategy (to encompass the full 0-19 age range) and for all Trust partners to sign up to making it happen across all agencies.

The development, adoption and implementation of the Strategy is timely as a key priority within the Children and Young People's Plan is to 'increase the engagement of children, young people, their families and carers in the design and delivery of services'.

The Council's Community Engagement Strategy and the Local Strategic Partnership's Sustainable Community Strategy recommend that children and young people's engagement in both strategies (and their component parts) will ensure that children and young people now, will grow and develop into the active local citizens of the future.

The strategy has been reviewed and refreshed in 2010 and reflects the continued need to, and commitment for, engaging children and young people in decision-making processes.

1.2 The National Policy drivers

The participation of children and young people in decision-making is underpinned by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by the Government in 1991). The Article states that children and young people have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them.

A raft of recent legislation and policy guidance has stressed the government's desire to see children and young people positively and actively involved in decision-making. For example, the Children's Act (2004) established the role of the Children's Commissioner for England and included in the statutory guidance on Children's Trust that 'the voice of children, young people and their families should be heard at all levels in order to inform local design and delivery of the arrangements'.

The recent publication 'Influence through Participation – a critical review of structures for youth engagement' (Sept 2007) lists the impact on legislation/policy guidance on all sectors to promote and enable children and young people's participation, for example:

- Local Education Authorities having to refer to guidance on pupil consultation
- Courts ensuring they have regard to the thoughts and wishes of children when making decisions about them
- General duties on Local Government on consulting young people on the Children and Young People's Plan, the provision of 'positive activities' and strategies like the Homelessness Strategy or Crime and Disorder Strategy, and

- Youth Opportunity and Capital Funds involving young people in the key role as grant givers and decision makers.

The recently released 10 year strategy (Aiming High for Young People) continues this policy thrust with a section on 'empowerment' and a raft of proposed programmes.

At the time of refreshing the strategy there have been no firm policy proposals on children and young people's participation although the Coalition government, through its concept of the Big Society, is promoting community engagement and empowerment.

1.3 The benefits of active participation

There are significant benefits to the participation of children and young people in decision-making.

For children and young people this includes:

- Services being tailored to the wishes and needs of the children and young people who use them
- Services become responsive to children and young people's needs
- Development of skills, confidence and knowledge/understanding
- Engendering a sense of responsibility for themselves and others

For organisations and agencies this includes:

- That service provision reflects the actual requirements of users rather than assumed need
- Services working more effectively for all stakeholders
- Ongoing input enabling services to react to changing needs
- Support to innovation and creative approaches.

For the wider community this includes:

- Promoting the active engagement of children and young people within communities
- Promoting an understanding and respect of different stakeholders, and
- Stimulating an interest in wider democratic processes (both locally and nationally)
- An increase in the rapport and relationships between children, young people and adults

These benefits do not come without some risk and challenge, for example:

- The issue of representation amongst children and young people
- Raising expectations and creating realistic and meaningful parameters
- Making language and decisions accessible etc.

Whilst these and other issues should not be an excuse for opting out, they do need to be considered in planning and in delivery.

SECTION 2: VISION, PRINCIPLES AND KEY OBJECTIVES

This section provides a vision and aim for the engagement of children and young people, together with an initial set of key underlying principles to guide practice which all partners are invited to subscribe to.

The section then outlines an initial set of key objectives to advance the development of consultation and engagement of children and young people. Each objective will have a series of key actions. Whilst the vision and aim may remain static, the key objectives will need to be subjected to regular monitoring, evaluation, amendment and addition.

2.1 The Vision and Aim

The vision for the children and young people's consultation and engagement strategy is:

'To enable children and young people (individually or collectively) to be active decision-makers in the design, delivery, management and/or evaluation of service provision, through the development of systems, processes and actions where all agencies demonstrate a commitment to principles and activity.'

The aim of the children and young people's consultation and engagement strategy is, quite simply, that service provision to children and young people is effective, appropriate and relevant as a result of their feedback, opinions and views.

Both vision and aim are supportive of the wider vision for all services, as set out in the Children and Young People's Plan 2008-2011, 'to improve the outcomes and maximise the life chances of all children and young people in Darlington by delivering effective, high quality, integrated services'.

2.2 Underpinning Principles

Clearly any Consultation and Engagement Strategy, for such a wide age group, needs to recognise that differing approaches will be required for the differing age groups – there is no 'one size fits all'.

However any strategy should operate to some common overarching principles and the Children's Trust has already agreed that these will include:

- A transparent and honest approach. This is essential to ensure that children and young people's participation is genuine and meaningful (including the extent of involvement and degree of impact possible on decisions and outcomes)
- Participation should be relevant and voluntary
- Participation needs to take place in child/young person-friendly and enabling environments (timing and location of meetings; accessible language and information; valuing contributions and views). Participation should be an attractive concept and process for children and young people
- Participation should provide for equality of opportunity for all as children and young people, like adults, are not an homogenous group
- Effective and confident adults are essential if participation is to be encouraged and made meaningful
- Participation must promote the safety and protection of children and young people
- Participation should occur at the earliest stage/opportunity and should occur at all levels
- Follow-up and evaluation should be built into the process from the start (children and young people need a prompt response to their contributions and should understand the outcome of their participation).

2.3 A Culture of Participation

Research identifies three types of organisation:

- Consultation focused: views of children and young people are sought to inform decision-making by adults – children and young people do not make decisions
- Participation focused: participation activities are developed – young people influence certain decisions rather than being just asked for opinions and preferences
- Child/young people focused: children and young people are involved on an ongoing and regular basis and there is an automatic assumption that children and young people should and will be listened to about decisions which affect them.

The Children's Trust has agreed that it should strive to a child/young people focused culture of participation. This is clearly a long-term aim which this strategy (and its key objectives and actions) will facilitate.

2.4 Frameworks and Standards

Following the outcomes based accountability workshops, participants agreed that the National Youth Agency/Local Government Association Standards – Hear by Right – should become a central feature of the revised Children and Young People's Participation Strategy. This is reflected in the core objectives below and in the commitment to self-assessment against the standards and the monitoring of change and impact through completion of What's Changed Logs.

2.5 Key Objectives

2.5.1 Hear by Rights standards are adopted at a corporate level by all Children's Trust statutory partners

To maintain the centrality of the Hear by Rights standards to the refreshed Participation Strategy.

Non-statutory partners will be encouraged to adopt standards and self-assess as well.

2.5.2 Hear by Right self assessments are completed by statutory partners and assessments collated and analysed to identify common issues/areas for development

On adoption of the standards all partners are encouraged and supported to complete a self-assessment of their agency/organisation against the standards.

Common issues/areas might include job descriptions, competency frameworks, common induction, or common processes and approaches.

2.5.3 All key agencies to develop a programme of activity with children and/or young people

Plans to be age specific and built on good practice and/or reflective of the skills and experience of each agency. Plans should also ensure that they are inclusive and secure the involvement of more marginalised groups.

The development of pan-Trust actions and activity, coordinated by the Participation Standing Group, can follow as a result.

2.5.4 All agencies to maintain What's Changed Logs

This is crucial if we are to demonstrate that intent and activity is having an impact on the services and provision to children and young people, that services change and adapt in direct response to the participation of children and young people, and children and young people themselves are able to recognise, validate and endorse that changed has occurred.

SECTION 3: ACHIEVING THE OBJECTIVES, MEETING THE PRINCIPLES

3.1 The Model

Whilst the strategy must be all encompassing it is vital to recognise that each agency, department or provider will be at a different starting point or have differing skills and experiences within its staff team; and that the children and young people who make use of each service will also have their own skills, experiences and abilities.

The following model of 'Building Blocks of Effective Involvement' (from The Active Involvement of Young People in the Connexions Service – a Guide for Managers, 2001) offers a manageable framework for any agency with an initial starting point and graduated levels, achievable as both agency and children/young people develop.

Building Blocks of Effective Involvement

Involvement in Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership of decision-making bodies • Active participation in decision making processes
Involvement in Service Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement in staff recruitment and selection • Involvement in staff training • Membership of monitoring/inspection teams • Produce publicity/communication materials
Involvement in consultative exercises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting young people about: needs; quality of the service; improvements etc
Creating an empowering service user environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional relationships where children/young people are partners in service provision rather than having it 'done' to them • Reflective and anti-discriminatory practice • Children/young person friendly environment (physically and emotionally)

3.2 Action Plan

The action plan will be;

- Further developed as part of consultation with key stakeholders including young people
- Developed with clear milestones, timescales and lead officers/staff, and
- Supportive of agency specific action plans.

3.2.1 Hear by Rights standards are adopted at a corporate level by all Children's Trust statutory partners

Actions:

- Updated strategy and plan to be reported to Children's Trust Board (September 2010)
- Lead officers identified and in place

- Awareness/capacity building support sessions delivered to lead officers

3.2.2 Hear by Right self assessments are completed by statutory partners and assessments collated and analysed to identify common issues/areas for development

Actions:

- Assessments/mapping undertaken across all agencies
- Children and young people engaged in the process
- Results fed back to the Standing group
- Headline summary and action plan produced

3.2.3 All key agencies to develop a programme of activity with relevant children and/or young people

Actions:

- Agencies supported to have plans in place
- Standing group to establish an audit process to monitor development and implementation
- Standing Group to support named lead officers
- Updates on plans to Standing group on a quarterly basis

3.2.4 All agencies to maintain What's Changed Logs

Actions:

- All What's Changed Logs to be collated by the Standing group
- All What's Changed Logs to be reported annually to the Children's Trust Board via the Children and Young people's Plan
- Develop/deliver guidance and training for lead officers and practitioners

3.3 Resources

Whilst it has often been argued that consultation and engagement with children and young people should be 'built-in' rather than 'bolted on' many of the possible actions outlined above will be reliant on a staffing or financial resource to implement them.

Any detailed action plan will be properly and accurately costed and resources identified and secured.

3.4 Management Information and Performance Measures

The initial Consultation and Engagement Strategy (2008) adopted the three performance indicators from the original Youth Participation Strategy (2006):

- Numbers of young people participating in T3
- Number of groups supportive of and supported by T3/Participation Network, and
- Percentage of young people who believe that their participation has made a difference.

Following the outcomes based accountability workshops, the following indicators were identified as additional to the three above. The Participation Strategy Standing Group will set year on year targets and monitor accordingly:

- Percentage of Children's Trust partners adopting Hear by Right standards
- Agency progress against standards – number of Hear by Right self-assessments completed
- Number of agency plans of action in place

- Number of What's Changed Logs completed
- Qualitative assessment of action plans and of the impact of children and young people's participation on service design and delivery.

3.5 Young People's involvement in the Strategy refresh

As part of the outcomes based accountability workshops young people from the T3 group were involved in a discussion focusing on the benefits of participation, existing groups and networks and what would improve their ability to shape services for young people. Their responses supported the core values, principles and model of the Strategy and the need for agencies to be designing and implementing programmes and projects to engage children and young people in decision-making processes.

Additionally the focus group survey of young people (Nov 2009-March 2010) evidenced that young people have knowledge and experience of a range of modes for getting their views across or heard; have ideas and suggestions on how this can be improved; and have a challenge for adults/service providers to listen to what children and young people and saying and to show, through action, that their voice is being heard.

3.6 Governance Arrangements

The Children and Young People's Participation Strategy is monitored by the Children and Young People's Participation Standing Group. This Standing Group is part of the Children's Trust framework and reports regularly to the provider Forum and will report annually, on the progress of the strategy and action plan, to the Children's Trust Board.

The Standing Group is made up of representatives from all Children's Trust partners and meets on a bi-monthly basis. The group will function most effectively if membership is established and sustained across all key partners.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

A National Association of Connexions Partnerships document 'Building a Culture of participation' (2005) offers 6 concluding statements applicable to the emerging Children's Trust Children and Young People's Consultation and Engagement Strategy.

It states that:

- Children and young people have the right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives – both public decisions and personal ones and we need strategies for both
- Meaningful and sustainable participation requires organisations to change, it cant just be added on
- Participation is multi-layered and is a process, not just a series of activities
- Listening must influence change – listening on its own is only half the story
- Acting on young people's views has positive outcomes – for services, for organisations and for the young people themselves, and
- The organisation needs to be clear about its reasons for undertaking participation, and the sort of culture it is trying to develop.

SECTION 5: REFERENCE LIST

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Children's Act (2004)

Influence through Participation – a critical review of structures for youth engagement (2007)

Aiming High for Young People (2207)

Hear by Right (2008)

The Active Involvement of Young People in the Connexions Service – a guide for managers (2001)

Youth Participation Strategy (2006)

Building a Culture of Participation (2005)