

Engagement and Participation with children and young people Guidelines

Children First
Northamptonshire



Northamptonshire
County Council

CHILDREN FIRST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Participation and Engagement Guidelines

This document sets out our statement of purpose for effective participation and engagement with children and young people, it is intended to guide everyone in Children First Northamptonshire. Our aim is to ensure effective participation of and engagement with children and young people aged 0-19 years of age and up to 25 if they have a disability or if they are care leavers, to ensure they are consulted about their views and wishes, can shape and inform the services they are receiving and the development of services. This should support the objectives and values of Children First Northamptonshire

Our vision

The vision is that every child in Northamptonshire **will live in a safe, stable, permanent home, nurtured by caring and responsible families and strong communities.** Within this vision our aim for Participation and Engagement is that Northamptonshire is a county where the children and young people we are working with feel that their right to have a voice is encouraged, valued, respected and acted upon. Northamptonshire aims to be a centre of excellence for person-centred thinking and practice.

Our Values – Our Vision is supported by a set of values.

Our values apply to all our work with and for children and families. This includes ensuring effective participation and engagement with children and young people, this should be reflected in our attitudes, our practices and our use of resources. The detail of our participation and engagement activity, our priorities and plans are kept under regular review and progress reported and shared.



Legislative Framework

The legislative framework states that children and young people should be, and have the right to be, involved in the decisions that affect them as individuals. The details of the legislation and guidance can be found in Appendix A. This is important to remember and to comply with but it does not in itself ensure the effectiveness.

Principles

A number of key principles, research and academic statements are included below as background to our commitment to effective participation and engagement and our approach to supporting and promoting this in our work.

It is important to remember that children and young people are a diverse group and that the engagement methodologies and terminologies must be age appropriate and appropriate for the communication styles and abilities of the children and young people. One approach and style will not be effective with all children and young people. It may be relevant to ask the child or young person what works best for them. In planning participation and engagement with young people, our approach is to ensure children and young people input to the design and planning of the participation.

All children and young people regardless of how they communicate have numerous rights, including the rights;

- to have their views taken seriously
- to freedom of expression
- to have access to appropriate information
- to have dignity, independence and active participation in their community.

These rights are enshrined under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which the UK government signed in 2007, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

“The best providers use innovative approaches to make sure disabled children take part in planning their own lives and the way the services are delivered. This helps children to be assertive, to make choices, exercise control over their bodies and lives, and be safer.

Make it a priority for children to have experiences that build their sense of self, confidence and self-esteem.

Children are empowered by learning new skills, being supported to communicate their wishes, and being involved in decisions about their daily lives. If children participate in decisions about their care and have good self-esteem, they are more likely to be able to keep themselves safe”.¹ *Extract from Social care commentary: protecting disabled children Ofsted and Eleanor Schooling CBE October 2017*

ChildrenFirst Northamptonshire [procedures on line](#) provides the overview of the procedures for participation.

The Voice of the Child

Children and young people have told us what is important for them and how their voice should be heard. They have said that when we are working with them we should:

“Get to know us; spend time with us and give us your attention”
(this is especially important if they have communication problems or a disability).

¹ *Social care commentary: protecting disabled children Ofsted and Eleanor Schooling CBE October 2017*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-commentary-october-2017>

“Don’t get us to repeat our story over and over again”
“Keep us at the centre of the decisions you make”
“Be honest with us and explain in a way we can understand “
“Let us make some decisions about our own life”
“Don’t make assumptions about our thoughts and feelings”
“See us and not our disabilities”

Skilled staff build relationships with children at their own pace” *Ofsted and Eleanor Schooling October 2017*

When working with children and young people we must ensure that:

- Children and young people feel listened to.
- Children and young people are supported to develop their own story about what is happening in their lives.
- We can see the experience(s) of children and young people from the point of view of children and young people.
- We are creative in our use of resources and tools for engaging children, bringing the child’s voice into the assessment and the planning with and for children and young people.

Signs of Safety and resources and tools

Children First Northamptonshire has adopted the Signs of Safety approach. The Signs of Safety ‘Three Houses Tool’ encourages workers to invite the child’s voice through pictures of ‘worries’, ‘good things’ and the ‘house of dreams’. This becomes a powerful tool for showing adults what children are saying about their life, including any worries and the dreams they have. It is an effective method of enabling parents to review or rethink their beliefs and ideas about what is best, based on the voices of their children. The Signs of Safety resources are available [here](#).

The voice of the child can be a catalyst for change in the family by enabling the child’s voice to be heard and understood within the family. For example the **three houses** (good things, bad things, dreams) is a child’s version of the Signs of Safety principles that can help to capture their experience. **Words and pictures explanations can be** used for parents to explain what has happened and what is happening to the children.

There are a range of models, tools and descriptors of participation, engagement, involvement and consultation. Children First Northamptonshire promotes the use of the different levels and types of involvement as appropriate to the purpose and situation. Participation activity will range from collective and group events and activities, surveys and research to individual one to one assessment and engagement across all services. Children should be involved as far as possible in planning and designing the activities. It is expected that **all services** embed effective ways of listening to, engaging and working with, children.

Levels of involvement can range from a low level, for example such as information sharing, through to high level child led initiatives. This is discussed in the Save the Children’s report (Appendix 2) and illustrated in figure 1. The levels are not intended to be prescriptive but an awareness and understanding of these levels to supports good practice and promotes effective listening to the voice of the child.

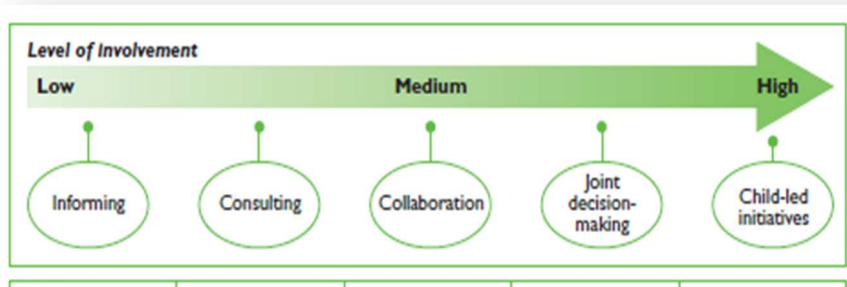


Figure 1

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation (figure 2) describes the levels of participation as rungs and suggests that the lowest rungs are manipulative, using young people as decorative and tokenistic and are not participation.

Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation

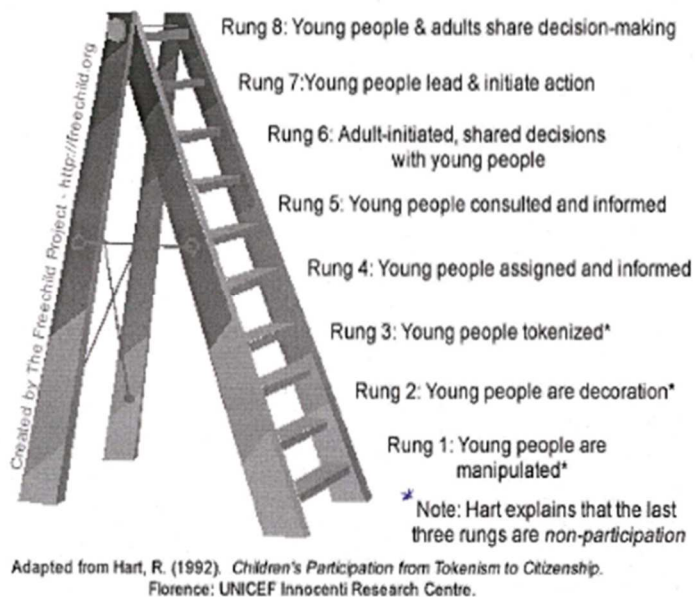


Figure 2

What we mean by Participation and Engagement

We are committed to promoting and enabling active participation of children and young people and their families wherever possible, recognising that the extent of participation will depend on the situation.

Participation² – processes and activities by which people join together and develop knowledge for action and change³ and where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change⁴. Participation of children and young people can be focused on decisions that relate to them as individuals or as a group. Participation can be an on-going process of engagement or involvement.

²Save the Children practical guide to participation
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/putting-children-centre-practical-guide-childrens-participation>

³ Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2009

⁴ Treseder 1997 Degrees of Participation
<https://www.researchgate.net/figure/44674474-Treseders-1997-degrees-of-participation>

Engagement⁵ – Youth engagement is a central principle of youth development. Young people are more than passive recipients of external influences; instead they are actively involved in shaping their development by interacting with the people and opportunities made available within their environments. Through youth engagement, communities can do a better job of creating the services, opportunities, and supports that young people need to develop in healthy ways. Youth engagement offers community leaders the expertise and partnership of young people, helping adults fully understand what it is like to grow up in a rapidly changing world. Youth civic engagement is also critically important to prepare young people to be active citizens in a democracy.

Consultation – this is the involvement of young people in the development of projects, programmes and service developments. Consultation tends to be based on proposals put forward and in this way is different to participation which can be from the beginning of the process. However the term is often used interchangeably as a form of participation.

In the everyday work of practitioners there should be evidence of the Child’s Voice throughout all processes and interventions, including Early Help Assessments, Single Assessments, Section 47, CiN and CP Plans, Children in Care Review social work reports, Care Plans and Personal Education Plans. The thread of the Child’s Voice should run through all recording; creative activities should be used to listen to children and young people – documentation of this can be held in Capita, CareFirst / CareStore and all systems. Learning and development resources support effective engagement and participation.

Principles for Effective Participation⁶

Principles that guide are approach, activities and content are as follows:

Develop trusting and positive relationships

Teach young people to use strategies and methods to acquire information and knowledge and to use that knowledge to make decisions.

Empower young people by recognising their experience and expertise

Respect their leadership activities

Build mutually respectful relationships with adults and young people

Involve young people in all stages of the process from defining the problem to gathering and analysing data for decision making

Include young people-in the evaluation process

Why it works well

- **Young** people benefit by gaining skills, knowledge, self-esteem, and connectedness.
- Young people are able to direct improvements in their lives and life chances and have a sense of purpose and ability to impact on their own lives and the lives of peers, family and community.
- Personal social and political development through experience of participation and engagement and the exercise of their rights and responsibilities
- Young people can learn from the experience of understanding other points of view and group decision making
- **Adults** benefit by enhancing their own competence, learning to better understand and value young people and by increasing their commitment and energy to their organisations.
- **Organisations** benefit by improving their services and effectiveness, gaining community recognition, improving their reputation. and attracting funders

⁵ http://www.actforyouth.net/youth_development/engagement/

⁶ Flors 2008 Declaration of Principle for Youth Participation in community research and evaluation

- Enhances relationships and increases the organisation's relevance to children
- Assists organisations to effectively target funds and services
- **Communities** benefit by improving quality of life, coordinating youth services, and authentically embracing diversity by representing young people.

What can stop effective participation?

- Young people are busy and may not have time to be involved
- Young people have disabilities and additional needs that are not considered in participation
- Adults consider young people and children as passive recipients rather than active producers of information
- Adults believe that evaluation in a process that requires special expertise
- Adults do not want to share their power with young people
- Insufficient capacity of those involved in working with children and young people
- Insufficient resources to support participation

What happens when children and young people are not listened to?

- Children are less safe and less happy
- Their feeling of well-being is reduced
- Children become less visible and the adult view or needs can dominate
- Assumptions are made about children's lives
- Knowledge about children is limited to their relationships with adults

Participation and Engagement Planning and Implementation

Children First Northamptonshire have a number of children and young people participation groups; **Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Council and Shooting Stars who meet** on a regular basis. The agenda setting and priorities for the groups' participation activities, in addition to their own programmes of fun and learning activities, are managed by the young people themselves. The work of the groups and further details about the groups can be found on [Young Northants](#), a web platform for young people hosted by Northamptonshire County Council.

The groups have developed many resources for practitioners regarding the role and benefits of effective engagement and these are included in our learning and development resources. We continue to work with our children and young people to ensure that we use methods and approaches for communication, consultation, engagement and participation that are what young people tell us will be effective for them. This includes developing greater use of social media opportunities.

There are also other groups of children and young people, including Young Healthwatch, Youth Councils/groups within Districts and Boroughs and school groups of elected young people – all of whom the Children First aim to work with to have their input to improving current services and understanding children and young people's needs as service-users for future development.

Participation and Engagement Activities and Practice

Children First Northamptonshire has an established Participation and Engagement Group with representation from across service areas. The group develops and supports the participation and engagement planning and implementation across the organisation.

The Participation and Engagement Plan and the priorities are outlined on the Children First intranet pages, progress with these are reported within our service plan quarterly reporting framework and the changes and improvements as a result of engagement with children and young people are reported here and on [Young Northants](#).

In summary the Participation and Engagement Group:

- Manages the annual plan for Participation and engagement to support the Children First Northamptonshire Business Plan
- Promote good practice when working with children and young people
- Ensures coordination within the organisation to make the best use of Participation and engagement, to work effectively with partner organisations
- Links with and supports other groups overseeing participation and engagement, for example the Young Northants Steering Group and the SEND Participation Group
- Produces an Annual Report to ensure feedback and accountability
- Promotes effective Participation and Engagement across the organisation
- Supports the Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Council and Shooting Stars groups to enable to views of young people to be heard and acted upon within Children, Families and Education Service.

Appendix 1 describes the Voice of the Child Practice Standards that outline the processes and principles that we expect all Children, Families and Education employees to understand and use.

More detailed training is available for participation and engagement activities /resources and the groups we have in place to support effective participation and engagement with children and young people.

The work of the group, the participation and engagement reports, resources, guidance and templates, a range of guidance documents and resources to support effective participation and engagement can be found on the ChildrenFirstNorthamptonshire intranet pages.

[Appendix 1](#)

Voice of the Child – Practice Standards

Our vision is that Northamptonshire is a county where its children and young people feel that their right to have a voice is encouraged, valued, respected and acted upon. Our safeguarding and child protection processes demonstrate the voice of the child and our universal services ensure children’s viewpoints are considered.

These practice standards are promoted within services through our management and practitioner’s approaches, tools and practices.

What should practitioners do?

- Take time to know the young person you are working with, what they enjoy, what their concerns are as well as what their ambitions and aspirations are
- Document the child or young person’s journey - from needing help to receiving help

- Record the child or young person's wishes and feelings Record the child or young person's **journey** through Children's Services
- Adhere to the recording with care policy and guidance
- Observe and record the child or young person's behaviour and experiences
- Ask other professionals for their knowledge of the child or young person - as they may have significantly more contact with the child
- Evidence the Child's Voice throughout all processes, including Early Help Assessment Single Assessment, Section 47, all family support and social work activities; CiN and CP Plan Review and throughout Looked After Children Care Plan Review, EHC plans, Personal Education Plan.
- The thread of the Child's Voice should run through all recording; creative activities should be used to listen to children and young people – documentation of this can be held in Capita, CareFirst / CareStore and all systems
- Examples of Direct work includes– three houses, creative working, feeling cards, bear cards, eco grams, pictures and words, postcards, life story work, books, drawings, genograms, All about me booklet, one page profiles.

The Child's Voice: What Does Good Look Like? (practice-led)

- Making the child or young person central to the story being told; make sure they feel important
- The child or young person should "jump off the page"
- Child-centred thinking is paramount
- No child is too young to have a voice; involve the child regardless of age or level of ability.
- Use creative methods to involve the child or young person, meeting their learning and developmental needs and preferences
- Co-production of plans assessment and reviews is encouraged; children and young people can participate in producing essential documents about their lives
- Involving the child or young person is a continual process that needs reviewing as the child changes and develops
- The child or young person shouldn't have to tell their story over and over again. Practitioners must take responsibility to read what has already been written
- Ownership and commitment is required across all services and structures, including managers, social workers and family support staff
- There should be shared understanding of the Child's Voice across all agencies
- Other agencies will spend more time with the child and they need to be involved and recording the Child's Voice
- Don't rush or cancel contact with the child; even if you only have limited time, focus on them
- Children and young people do not need to know how busy you are, or how many other meetings you need to attend
- Manage how you will leave a child or young person after a hard moment
- Draw a picture of the child or young person's day to capture what their day is like
- Consider developing a One-Page Profile of the child / young person - this can include what the child looks like, their likes and dislikes, their personality, their fears and what makes their day good. The format should be more than a form to fill in.
- Have a real understanding of what makes a child or young person's day good or not so good. What is a good start to their day? This links to their specific likes and dislikes
- Enable choice for the child or young person - where do they want to meet their worker?
- Feedback from the child or young person on the value of being included and involved is essential. This can also support professional and practice development
- Record the journey the child has travelled - their achievements and attainment is more than standard (national) indicators. Be careful with the recording and ensure that, if there are negatives, these are balanced with positives.

- Be careful not to use language that ‘blames’ the child for things that are beyond their control – for example being exploited by adults or peers.
- If the Child’s Voice is well evidenced, handovers between and amongst social workers and other services is improved. Endings are important and need to be planned for
- Documents to be shared with young people should be produced in an easy read format for children and young people to be easily able to understand

Appendix 2

Relevant Legislation

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The following are guiding principles derived from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

- Children have the right to be listened to, to freely express their views on all matters that affect them, and the right to freedom of expression, thought association and access to information.
- Measures should be put in place to encourage and facilitate their participation in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Participation should promote the best interests of the child and enhance the personal development of each child.
- All children have an equal right to participation without discrimination.
- All children have the right to be protected from manipulation, violence, abuse and exploitation.

The principles recognise the potential of children to enrich decision-making processes, whose perspectives add value to the process of change. Thus authorities have a statutory obligation to ensure that their services for young people have accounted for the opinion of the young person. Participation is a legal requirement of the work Local Authorities undertake.

Working Together 2015 (currently being revised)

A child-centred and coordinated approach to safeguarding

Key principles

Effective safeguarding arrangements in every local area should be underpinned by two key principles:

- safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility: for services to be effective each professional and organisation should play their full part; and
- a child-centred approach: for services to be effective they should be based on a clear understanding of the needs and views of children.

A child-centred approach for working together and safeguarding is promoted.

- Effective safeguarding systems are child centred.
- Failings in safeguarding systems are too often the result of losing sight of the needs and views of the children within them, or placing the interests of adults ahead of the needs of children.
- Children are clear what they want from an effective safeguarding system:

Children have said that they need:

- Vigilance: to have adults notice when things are troubling them
- Understanding and action: to understand what is happening; to be heard and understood; and to have that understanding acted upon

- Stability: to be able to develop an on-going stable relationship of trust with those helping them
- Respect: to be treated with the expectation that they are competent rather than not.
- Information and engagement: to be informed about and involved in procedures, decisions, concerns and plans
- Explanation: to be informed of the outcome of assessments and decisions and reasons when their views have not met with a positive response
- Support: to be provided with support in their own right as well as a member of their family
- Advocacy: to be provided with advocacy to assist them in putting forward their views

The Children Act 1989

This Act requires local authorities to give due regard to a child's wishes when determining what services to provide under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, and before making decisions about action to be taken to protect individual children under section 47 of the Children Act 1989. These duties complement requirements relating to the wishes and feelings of children who are, or may be, looked after (section 22(4) Children Act 1989), including those who are provided with accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and children taken into police protection (section 46(3)(d) of that Act);

Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 protects children, young people and adults against discrimination, harassment and victimisation in relation to housing, education, clubs, the provision of services and work.

The public sector equality duty in Section 149 of the Equality Act requires public bodies, including local authorities, schools and hospitals, to take active steps to eliminate discrimination and to do positive things to promote equality.

The Childcare Act 2006

"To have regard to the views of young children in the design, development and delivery of early childhood services"...

"school governing bodies in England and Wales to involve children in the development of school behaviour policies"

Children and Families Act 2014

This Act brings changes to the law to give greater protection to vulnerable children, better support for children whose parents are separating, a new system to help children with special educational needs and disabilities, and help for parents to balance work and family life.

Children and Social Work Act 2017

Corporate Parenting Principles

Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 requires that local authorities must have regard to a set of corporate parenting principles when exercising their functions in relation to looked after children and care leavers (former relevant children).

The corporate parenting principles set out seven fundamental needs for looked after children and care leavers, as follows:

- to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people
- to encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings
- to take into account of the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people
- to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners
- to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people
- for those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work

- to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

Local Offer Guidance. Section 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 requires local authorities to consult with relevant persons, which means care leavers and organisations or people that represent care leavers. Local authorities should consider how best to engage and consult with as many of their care leavers as possible. We expect local authorities to work with their care leavers to co-produce a local offer that is meaningful and reflects the needs, views and wishes of the care leavers they are responsible for. It may also be useful for Personal Advisers to seek the views and ideas of the care leavers that they support and work with on a regular basis.