**Practice Note for all Practitioners,** Managers **and Staff:**

**Children and Young People’s Participation**

Children and Young People’s Participation is defined as ‘the means by which young people realise their right where they join with adults to make decisions’ (Sandwell’s Children’s Participation Strategy 2019). Children and young people should be afforded every opportunity to contribute to their assessments, plans all aspects of our interventions with them. Sandwell’s ‘How Can I Help You?’ 4x I’s Participation Strategy was developed in 2019 alongside children and young people in Sandwell. It is based around the four components of: **Invest, Inform, Involve and Influence** when working with children**.** Children’s Participation is important which is why it is one of the three key principles in our Practice Framework and Model. This sits alongside the other principles which include the Child’s Journey and Knowledge and Skills Statements.

In Sandwell, when we refer children’s participation, it is informed by their views, understanding their experience and ensuring that they influence and shape interventions and services. By providing children and young people with opportunities to be listened to and using their views to shape their assessments, plans and reviews, we are more likely to meaningfully engage them and build trusting relationships. In doing so, we will have a better understanding of what life is like for the child and young person, by listening to their journey from their perspectives, which means we will make a positive difference to outcomes for our children and young people.

This practice note will develop practitioners understanding of what we mean by children’s participation in Sandwell and the legal context that underpins this informed by feedback from children and young people in Sandwell. The note outlines why children’s participation is important by linking it to local and national research. Finally, how applying the Practice Framework and Model supports inclusivity of children and young people, whilst improving the quality of children’s participation through supervision, alongside good practice points and further reading.

**What ‘Children’s Participation’ mean in Sandwell?**

Children’s Participation is a term used to describe how we go about **creating meaningful engagement** when working with them. Sometimes children participation is also referred to as how we have incorporated ‘the voice of the child’ when we are working with them. For children participation to be meaningful, it needs to include certain elements. This includes **wishes and feelings that capture a child’s own words, views and communication from their perspective**. This means that we capture the views of children with additional needs, who communicate through different methods such as Makaton and behavioural responses. Referencing their communication passports helps to support their participation. The case recording of the child’s voice should stand out so that it is clear what the child has said or communicated and is sometimes recorded in blue on the children’s files. In Sandwell, this is more than referring to what a child directly says, but also considering other factors such as the way in which they communicate with you both verbally and non-verbally.

**In addition to this**, children’s participation needs to include understanding their lived experience which means seeing the events that have happened in their life from their point of view or what life might be like for them when unborn. This includes; what a child sees, hears, thinks, feels and experiences daily that impacts on their personal development and welfare whether that be physically or emotionally. This means that the lived experience of children of all ages can be captured including those that as unborn children.

Next, as practitioners **it also means that we work in a way that recognises that children’s participation is underpinned by legislation, practice guidance and standards** (see Practice Note about ‘the 3 Basics of Practice’). This legislation that recognises the need for children to participate and have the right support some of which includes:

* The **Children Act 1989 updated in 2004**, highlights that a child’s welfare is paramount, in which ascertaining their wishes and feelings form part of the welfare checklist (Section 2/3 CA2004).
* The **Children and Family Act 2014.**
* Other legislation includes; **Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** which states that children and young people have a right to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions considered. (See Appendix - Know Your Rights: A Guide for Children and Young People.
* **Working Together to Safeguard Children (revised in 2018)** highlights the need to complete direct work with the focus on children’s experiences.
* The importance of the child’s voice is also found in many of our laws like the **Human Rights Act 1998** and, more recently, the **Children and Young Persons Act 2008**).

**Why is Children’s Participation important?**

Children’s participation is important as it means that we are more likely to achieve better outcomes which make a difference to their lives. Children want to be respected, to have their views heard, to have stable relationships with practitioners built on trust and to have consistent support provided for their individual needs. Our Participation Team regularly consult with children and young people in Sandwell, who have consistently told us that they want to be involved in decisions that are made about them. Some of their views include:

* Get to know us; spend time with us and give us your attention
* 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

Subsequently, this feedback from our children and young people informed the ‘How Can I Help You?’ Participation Strategy developed in 2019. The importance of understanding the voices of our children through direct work and observations will ensure that the right type of service will be delivered through collaborative working with our children and young people. If children and young people are not listened to, they are likely to feel disempowered and their feelings and their wishes are not prioritised.

Findings from local and national Serious Case Reviews, now referred to as Child Safeguarding Partnership Reviews, highlight that understanding the voice of the child was often lacking throughout

our involvement. Lord Laming’s enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié in January 2003 detailed that professionals did not get to understand what a day in the life of Victoria was like as they did not ask her questions about it and when they did speak to her, an interpreter was not used to communicate with her in her preferred language.

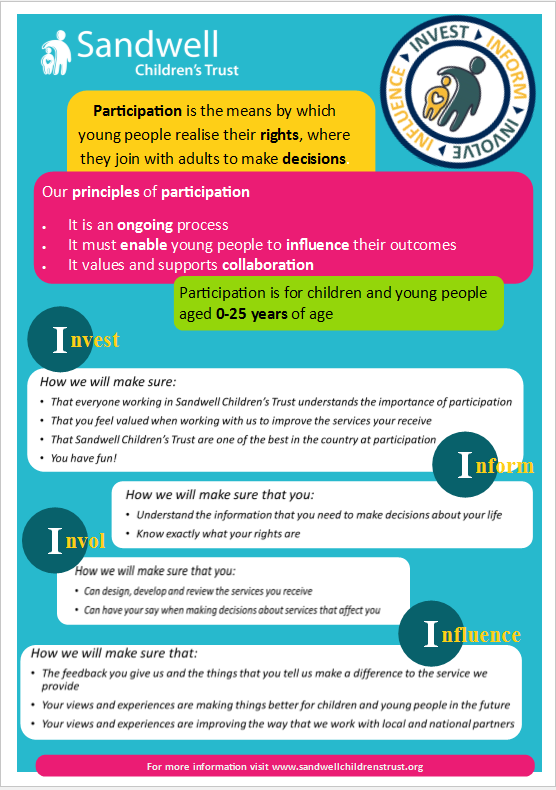
Ofsted’s thematic report (2010) into learning lessons from Serious Case Reviews found not enough importance is given to listening to ‘the Voice of the Child’ and in too many cases:

* Children are not being seen frequently enough by professionals involved or not asked about their views and feelings
* Parents and carers preventing professionals from seeing and listening to the child
* Practitioners focusing too much on the parents
* Agencies not interpreting their findings well enough to protect the child.

In Sandwell, we are committed to ensuring that we focus on children and young people’s participation which is why it is a principle within our Practice Framework and Model.

**How does using the Practice Framework and Model ensure Children’s Participation?**

Children’s Participation informs the work that we do by ensuring that when we undertake assessments, plans, update and review them that our practice is child centred. At the same time as when we follow the processes, we should always think about how we are going to ensure that the Voice of the Child is heard by considering their identity, culture, background and experience and ensuring that they are kept at the centre of our Practice.



Children’s Participation is one of the overarching principles in our Practice Framework and Model which means that it needs to underpin all the work that we do. This includes our Participation Strategy (image left), which encourages us to think about how children/young people/young adults participate and are involved in the work we undertake with them. It has been developed with children and young people, which reminds us that we listen to, and act upon the voices of our children and young people in Sandwell.

Using this every time we think about our work with children and young people helps us to reflect upon the way that we **invest** time in them, **involve** them in processes about them such as assessments and plans and the work we do with them, keep them **informed** about what is happening for them and enable them to **influence** decisions, by promoting opportunities to contribute to what is happening. In doing so, it promotes collaborative working with children and young people where they are supported to influence decisions that are made about them. This includes children of all ages from 0-19 years (or up to 25 if they have a disability or are a care leaver.

Throughout the next four sections, we will explore how using the 4 x I’s, which is Principle 2 of our Practice Framework and Model strengthens Childrens Participation through every stage of the work that we do.

**INVEST** Enabling children/young people/young adults to talk about their life, what is good and how difficult experiences may have impacted on them, takes time. Spending quality time with them to build, develop and maintain trusting, effective, relationships and understanding your role as a practitioner is important (see Practice Note on Relationship Based Practice). Through all our work with children and young people, by considering their specific identity and background which helps us think about how we can, work with them in ways that enable them to be involved. Practitioners will often work with young children and babies whose experience needs to be understood through observations often whilst being cared for by their caregiver.

Using the Social GGGRRAAACCEEESSS (John Burnham, 2013) supports us to recognise the importance of using a practice approach which recognises and is responsive to the uniqueness of each child and young person that we work with. When we first meet children and young people and undertake assessments we should spend time building an initial rapport with them, getting to know them and explaining our roles and responsibilities, so they are clear from the onset who we are and why we are involved. Some of our children and young people have experienced a long journey through Services and by understanding where they have been and where they are at now will help us to work with children and young people by understanding what their lived experiences are (See Practice Note on The Child’s Journey).

Using the Relationship Based Practice Building Blocks will support practitioners to consider the stages of their relationship with children, young people and families, what is needed to form, maintain and sustain trusting relationships with them. Thinking about how we build and maintain relationships with our children is an essential part of how we develop engagement.

Adopting a Trauma informed approach means that we consider how we invest time in the relationship in a way that recognises the experience of the child or young person. Using Impact Chronologies supports practitioners to have a better understanding of significant events that have occurred in their lives, as for some young people, they may have been very young when they first became known to services and may not remember the reasons why. By using the Practice Framework and Model to understand their journey through services, exposure to adverse childhood experiences, we are more likely to offer the right level of support.

Working more robustly with multi-agency partners, being part of reflective supervision with your Team Manager, learning from quality assurance activity such as audits, enable practitioners to evidence that they are ‘investing’ into our children and young people in Sandwell, thus feeling valued when working with us to improve the services they receive.

**INVOLVE –** Practitioners must work with children and young people so that they can design, develop and review the services they receive and have their say when making decisions about services that affect them. This means that they are involved at all the stages of the work we undertake with them in terms of their assessments, developing their plans and updating and reviewing them.

Understanding the child and young person’s unique identity within the context of their family and community supports us work with them to identify how they are involved in the work we are undertaking with them. For example, thinking about children and young person’s age and stage of development, whether they disability which affects their communication, so that we can adjust our practice to enable the child/young person to express their views using their own communication style and language. It is essential that that we understand how they communicate to ensure we adopt an inclusive approach by using creative methods to capture their voice and understand their lived experience.

It supports us to observe children and young people’s interactions with their primary carers physically, emotionally, socially as we recognise that they can communicate in a range of ways. In some circumstances, it means ascertaining their views where they may not be able to articulate these verbally due to age or disability. By recording what we see and hear in a factual way, for example for babies and toddlers is supported with the knowledge of what might be expected at their age and stage of development. Ultimately, we need to put ourselves in that child’s shoes and think ‘what is life like for this child right now?’.

Where we need to consider a child’s, communication needs and/or whether English is a second language, children/young people/young adults should be encouraged to participate in the work we undertake them by engaging with them in a way that their voice is understood. This might involve using Makaton, communication boards, an interpreter, as this should not be a barrier to involving them in their assessments, plans, reviews, and direct work.

Our Practice Framework and Model helps us to develop our skills in exploring the child and/ or young person’s culture and identity to develop our cultural competence. Communication and body language can be different for each child, means that we offer services that are tailored to the needs of each individual child/young person. Using a child or young person’s Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) if applicable and speaking to their parents, carers and professionals who have a better understanding of the child’s needs helps us to talk to children in a way they can understand.

Strengthening children and young people’s involvement enables children and young people to express their views using their own narratives, as we are more likely to obtain an accurate account of their day to day life experience, through first-hand accounts shared in a language they feel most comfortable. Our Practice Framework and Model reminds practitioners to make any adjustments to practice to consider a child’s language, culture and identity as developing an understanding of this supports and shapes the work that we do with them.

**INFLUENCE –** Practitioners should ensure that the feedback children and young people give us and the things that they tell us make a difference to the services we provide.

It is essential that children and young people’s wishes, and feelings are sought in relation to the concerns we have for them e.g. worries about their parent’s behaviour, such as parental substance misuse. This is also the case when things are going well, e.g. their day to day life at home or how they are getting on at nursery, school or college. Through working with children in a meaningful way, they are empowered to identify the things that are going well for them and build on their resilience to influence and develop safety plans, which encourages a strengths-based approach to our work with children. This also enables children and young people to know that their views and experiences are being used to make a difference to their lives.

By strengthening our relationships with children and young people, when we say we will do something, by actioning this in a timely manner and letting the young person know the outcome means that they will start to trust us.

They are more likely to confide in us and see how their views can shape the decisions that are made about them. The experiences of our children and young people help us shape what is happening for them now and their future. By using the information, we get from complaints (formal and informal), feedback from young people through Mind of My Own and through the positive interactions with our staff will influence the services we provide.

**INFORM –** Working in collaboration with children and young people so that they understand the information they need to make decisions about their lives, by providing them with an understanding of their rights is important. By being open and transparent with children and young people about their rights, using language and information that makes sense for them will encourage our children and young people to learn more about legislation and policies that encourage children to be able to express themselves in ways that are best suited to them (See Appendix - Know Your Rights: A Guide for Children and Young People) This ensures children are aware of their rights as well as access to complaints procedures and advocacy.

Practitioners can strengthen collaborative working with children and young people by planning their meetings with them at a time and venue they agree with. If children and young people are unable to attend their meetings or it is not appropriate, steps should be taken to ensure children and young people are able to share their views about the support provided. They also need to be informed of decisions as soon as practicable after they are made, and an explanation for the decision given, together with the opportunity to make a comment and express their views. This ensures that children and young people are kept fully informed at all stages of our involvement.

In most circumstances, children and young people will usually let us know if the help and support that is being provided is making a difference in their lives. Through implementing the 4 x I’s within our work with children and young people reminds us that children and young people are at the centre of all interventions and at the heart of our practice, and will be supported at the right level and at the right time, to evidence meaningful change to the child or young person’s circumstances.

**Using reflective spaces such as supervision to consider Children and Young People’s Participation**

Using reflective supervision with our Managers provides opportunities to reflect on the quality of children and Young people’s participation when we are involved in their lives. This also involves thinking about the quality of the relationship that has been developed particularly between the practitioner and child or young person considering their identity including their gender, culture, sexuality and disability which has supported an enabling relationship to be developed.

In other circumstances, where children and young people’s participation needs to be strengthened and or where there may be some difficulties with engagement, it helps us to think about what we need to do to improve the situation. Using the reflective questions within the Practice Framework and Model specifically focusing on children and young people’s participation helps us to focus specifically on this principle. These can be found on page 45 of the Practice Framework and Model Booklet. These reflective questions can be used to support your self-reflection as a practitioner before you have a Supervision with your Manager or can be used with some of the other questions such as those relating to Relationship based or Trauma Informed Practice. Reflective discussions with professionals that have developed relationships with children and young people such as Conference Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers are important too.

Encouraging attendance at Practice Learning Workshops and practice notes (see further reading) provides practitioners with additional skills and strategies to strengthen the voice of the child. It can also provide opportunities share good practice examples and to consider where there may be some barriers in working effectively with children and young people.

In summary, ensuring that Children and Young People’s Participation as part of the work is more likely to result in successful outcomes which are informed by their own experience and perspectives. Through applying our Practice Framework and Model, children and young people will be afforded a good quality service that places them at the heart of everything we do with them.

**How can it be evidenced on the child’s file?**

* The child’s views can be recorded on their files in blue to ensure this stands out.
* Pictures, activities and creative direct work can be uploaded straight to the Child's file with permission.
* Records of what a child says should be in their own words where appropriate, based on their individual’s needs. If you want to record your interpretation it needs to be clear and evidenced based.
* When recording your observations of a child’s behaviour it is important to provide the context such as events leading up, how it was received by the family, are there patterns to be aware of and what is the impact of this. Professional opinion is important, but it needs to be clear that it is yours.
* A child should contribute to their assessment, plans and attend reviews where it is appropriate. This collaborative relationship contributes to co-produced work and increases favourable outcomes.
* Using Mind of My Own or Mind of My Own Express to obtain the child’s voice and upload their statements to their files, ensuring these are used to shape any interventions with them.

**Good practice points:**

* Use the Child’s Journey as a tool with them to develop an understanding of the child’s lived experiences, capturing information about them, their feelings views and experiences.
* Remember that each child is unique and their participation and the direct work needed should be created based on their individuality and how best they engage in line with any developmental needs and or disabilities.
* Take time to get to know the child and /or young person you are working with, what they enjoy, what are their concerns and what are their ambitions and aspirations as a way of thinking about how best to creatively engage them
* Evidence the child’s participation throughout all stages of Assessment, Planning, Reviews and Updating Plans.

**Further information and reading:**

* Practice notes relating to the Practice Framework and Model, Strengths based Practice Relationship Based Practice, Trauma Informed Practice and The Child’s Journey, Cultural Competence and many more are available on the Learning and Development page.
* The Practice Framework and Model Booklet, Practice Standards and Process Maps need to be referenced to ensure that the help and support we provide is consistently good and outstanding.
* Practice Learning Workshops regarding Voice of the Child and Direct Work and Interventions with children and young people.
* Ofsted (2010). The Voice of the Child: learning lessons from serious case reviews. A thematic review of Ofsted’s evaluation of serious case reviews from 1 April to 30 September 2010. London: Ofsted.
* Laming (2003) The Victoria Climbie Inquiry: Summary Report of an Inquiry. Stationery Office Books.

**Appendices**



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