

# Participation and Engagement Strategy for Children and Young People



*Ensuring children and young people's voices are heard and shape the work of the  
West Berkshire Children and Families Service*

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## 1. Vision

1.1 Our vision is that West Berkshire is a district where children and young people feel that their right to have a voice is encouraged, valued, respected and acted upon. Our safeguarding practice, looked after children's work and targeted intervention processes demonstrate the voice of the child, and children's viewpoints are considered and acted upon.

## 2. Aims

2.1 West Berkshire Council is committed to finding ways for children and young people to become genuine partners in our work. We want to embed a culture which recognises and values the importance of their voice acknowledging that this involves all our staff. To do this we aim to;

- Support children and young people to have a voice, embedding this in every day practice
- Listen to children and young people, not as an 'add-on' to programmes or work but foundational to our ways of working
- Create processes and practices that establish and utilise good lines of communication between those who provide services and those who use them
- Identify the ways children and young people would want to be involved in commissioning and delivering services that impact their lives
- Build on our successes and remain committed to embracing new and emerging approaches to meaningful participation and engagement
- Do this in a culturally competent manner, being sensitive and responsive to individual needs
- Create opportunities for young people to play meaningful roles at an operational level and in decision making structures
- Ensure our workforce is equipped with the right skills to develop and improve participation and engagement for the range of children that we work with.
- Require organisations we commission to involve children and young people in planning and reviewing their services.

2.2 This strategy document will set out how we will achieve our vision and aims. This strategy sits alongside the councils [Consultation Policy](#) and the [Consultation Toolkit](#) and [Key Resources](#).

## 3. The Framework of Participation and Engagement in West Berkshire

3.1 When we are seeking the involvement of Children and Young People, the 'participation ladder' gives some idea of the range of engagement available:

- **Partnership** - Organisations deciding to work together in partnership with young people to carry out decisions or plans.
- **Participation** - Encouraging new idea and suggestions, opportunities for joint decision-making.

- **Consultation** - Offering options for consideration and listening to opinions but not seeking out new ideas.
- **Market Research** - Information gathering to help inform decision making.
- **Communication** - Telling people what we plan to do.

3.2 We are committed to enabling children and young people to participate from a strategic level through to their involvement in their individual plans. Below are the core principles we agree to adhere to when working with children and young people:

- We will have mechanisms to understand satisfaction with the existing services delivered
- When creating new services we will ensure we engage with a targeted cohort of children and young people
- We will learn and develop following feedback from complaints and complements received
- We will ensure that the voice of the child is sought, listened to and recorded at all key stages of involvement and activity
- We will provide advocacy when needed
- We will consider cultural needs and the requirements of specialist need
- We will ensure that any consultation and engagement aligns with Council/directorate priorities and the process follows the council's consultation policy
- We will ensure that results consultations and any subsequent decisions are fed back to participants
- We will ensure that consultation is evaluated and any learning used to improve future consultations

#### 4. **Me – the individual child or young person:**

4.1 There are key factors that will determine if individual voices of children and young people are heard:

##### 4.2 **Having a strong relationship with a lead Professional**

Children and young people need to be actively encouraged to express their views to someone they trust. Their social worker, or other lead professional, is frequently best placed to ensure they are asked about their wishes and feelings. Therefore professionals require the knowledge and skills to communicate with children and to understand the significance of what they are being told. Social workers will be provided with tools and resources that support them to hear the wishes and feelings of the children and young people they work with and training on engaging and communicating with children and young people to support the development of those relationships.

4.3 The quality of the relationship between child and professional is crucial. Children who have experienced abuse and neglect can find it hard to have trusting relationships with adults, so social workers and lead professionals need to be persistent and reliable in helping build this trust. Frequent changes in social worker or infrequent visits reduce opportunities to hear children's views and understand their experiences. Those working with children and young people

should have the skills, time, resources and commitment to hear and evidence the voice of the child shaping their outcomes.

#### **4.4 Understanding their rights and the processes that can support participation**

If children and young people are to participate fully in decisions being made about them, then they need to be aware of their right to be heard and to know how to influence what happens to them. We will explain their rights to consent and confidentiality (and the limits on those rights) in order to encourage them to share their experiences. We are investing in technology to enable young people to participate in meetings, reviews and plans in an interactive way through mobile technology.

#### **4.5 Understanding their case and options for the future**

In order for children and young people to contribute effectively to decisions being made about them, they must understand their situation and options for the future. For looked after children, the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is crucial in this regard. It is important that written communication is clear and jargon free to help children understand what is happening to them, we have created materials with young people for young people to support their understanding.

#### **4.6 The quality of recording and reporting**

How the child's voice is recorded and reported is important. Recording children and young people's views is important for two reasons. Firstly, it ensures that their voice is at the heart of decision-making about their future and can be referred to in case conferences and supervision. Secondly, views about the quality of services and individuals' experiences can be gathered through thematic case audit and used in service design and improvement. Our social work practice standards clearly set expectations how the voice of the child should be recorded in assessments, plans, meetings and general contacts.

### **5. Me and Peers**

5.1 Young People should have an opportunity to make decisions which affect them and their peers through a number of different formats and communities of interest, for example:

- School Council
- Peer Mentoring Network
- Newbury Youth Council
- Children in Care Council
- Special Interest Groups (Young Carers, Teenage Parents Group, etc)

5.2 We will support children, young people and staff to have information about how to create decision making groups where young people are joint partners in delivering actions for themselves in their communities of interest such as supporting schools to run effective school councils. Links between individual groups and mechanisms for the young people in these groups to access key decision makers within the Council should be embedded and maintained. See

the [Consultation Toolkit](#) and [Key Resources](#) for ideas and resources to support this activity.

- 5.3 We will seek feedback from children, young people and parents on the service they received. This feedback will be aggregated to drive specific service improvement and development. In addition topic specific feedback will be sought to enable the service to consult with children, young people and their parents when changes and developments are being planned.

## **6. Me and Services**

6.1 Participating in service design and improvement can be daunting for children and young people. The aims, language and procedures of commissioning and evaluation are unfamiliar. We will maintain dialogue and support understanding as to how they can contribute and can see the impact of their contribution on what happens next. These matters have all been identified as crucial in sustaining meaningful engagement. Involving children and young people in service design should not be seen as a set of discreet processes, rather, their involvement should be built into the work of local organisations.

6.2 Children and young people should be given the opportunity to give honest and open feedback about any services that they receive. This means making the process easy and accessible for young people and support to make a complaint. Services which are delivered or commissioned by the Council will be expected to involve young people in all aspects of the delivery of their service, including:

- Recruitment of staff
- Commissioning
- Service design
- Training
- Needs analysis
- Evaluation and monitoring

## **7. Me and West Berkshire**

7.1 As residents of West Berkshire Council children and young people should have opportunities to be involved in decision making about issues which affect all children and young people in the area as outlined in the [Consultation Policy](#).

7.2 Formal mechanisms for contributing to service design. The Children in Care Council provides a forum for looked after children to influence the services they receive, monitoring progress on promises made in the children in care pledge, arranging social activities to get more young people involved in giving feedback, attending Corporate Parenting Panel and addressing other strategic forums to raise key issues for looked after children.

7.3 The Children in Care Council also takes a lead on other participation activities including recruitment of key staff. Opportunities for other vulnerable groups to be involved in service design include disabled young people in helping scrutinise

arrangements for transition to adulthood and involving children on child protection plans in providing feedback on services.

#### 7.4 Opportunities to meet senior decision-makers

Contact with senior decision-makers is an important factor in ensuring that children's views influence strategic as well as operational decision making. Opportunities include: Corporate Parent Panel, formal invitations to attend different board meetings, contributing to training of new elected members on the children in care pledge, less formal arrangements, such as an 'open door' policy and the LCSB youth engagement event.

#### 7.5 Direct influence on the shape of services

Children and young people can contribute directly to service design. This might include young people taking the lead on design or talking to other children and young people and representing their views.

Young people can also participate in designing information used with their peers to make sure it is suitable for their needs. For example the booklet for young people entering care was shaped by young people.

#### 7.6 Involving young people at this level ensures:

- **Better services** - targeted to meet children and young people's needs.
- **Cost effectiveness** - services designed by and with young people.
- **Gaps identified** - young people can identify gaps in services being provided.
- **Perspective** - a young person's perspective keeps it relevant to current young people.
- **Creativity** - young people can bring fresh creative ideas.
- **Being valued** - young people who are listened to feel valued by the organisation and can therefore act as advocates and champions.

### 8. Involving young people in evaluation

8.1 The views of children and young people about the services they receive should be at the heart of any evaluation. Involving children in evaluation requires skilled management to ensure that their voices are heard. Participation work itself needs to be evaluated to ensure it is having the required impact. Further details about planning, organising and analysing evaluation can be found in the [Consultation Toolkit](#).

8.2 Feedback: Providing evidence of participation requires advance planning to ensure data is collected routinely as part of the process. The information collected should be both quantitative and qualitative. This combination of different forms of information will provide a rich source for analysis of both the process and impact of participation work

8.3 Quantitative data: Aggregating the feedback from children and young people about their experience provides rich data which helps shape service improvement. Other performance data routinely collected about services for children and families can also give insights into how well the organisation listens

to children. The most basic building block for listening effectively is a trusted relationship with a professional or carer, therefore, data on social work vacancies, turnover and changes in placement is also used to indicate whether children have a chance to build such relationships.

8.4 Qualitative data: provides decision-makers with direct insight into the views of children and young people, giving more detail and context than quantitative data. Qualitative information can help understand the quality of the child's experience. Direct quotations from children and young people are a powerful and persuasive driver for change.

8.5 Speaking directly to children and young people and asking for their views on how they were treated is the most immediate way of gathering this information. We recognise it is important that senior leaders have direct contact with children receiving services and the chance to speak to them informally. Professionals who know children well, child protection conference chairs and IROs all hold important information on children's views about the services they receive. So making opportunities for staff to give feedback on children's experiences and views is important.

8.6 Case auditing considers whether children's views are being recorded on case files and taken into account when making decisions. The process of auditing supports: improvements in recording, such as an explicit space in assessment forms for recording the child's views, professionals to reflect on their own practice, opportunities for children and families to give feedback on their experiences

## **9. Governance Arrangements**

9.1 The Children and Families Service has overall strategic responsibility for ensuring that the principles of this strategy are adhered to. Progress on the outcomes of this strategy will be reported to the Children and Family Leadership Team and in doing so review the mechanisms and forums that are in place so that they are fit for purpose. Service Managers will have responsibility for:

- Ensuring that dedicated leads provide operational oversight of the activities in each service.
- Developing and embedding participation and engagement activities with children and young people in their services areas in accordance with the principles and outcomes in this strategy.
- Monitoring progress on the intended outcomes set out in this strategy.
- Evaluating the quality of participation and engagement across the teams.

9.2 Strategic leaders need to be able to assure themselves that the child's voice is at the heart of their work with children and families.

9.3 The strategy will be reviewed at the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Children and Families Leadership Team.