

Listening To Young Children Strategy

**Newcastle Children & Young People's
Strategic Partnership**

Adopted January 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

Children and young people are valued citizens in Newcastle. We are committed to promoting opportunities to engage children and young people in decision-making processes and to give them as much influence as possible.

Our vision is that Newcastle is a city where its young citizens feel that their right to have a say is encouraged, welcomed, valued and respected. In December 2005 we adopted a radical and challenging Participation Strategy for the city as we aim to promote genuine dialogue between adults and children and young people and make change as a result. This has begun to make an impact and we are seeking to positively build upon this within the city council. In November 2006 we adopted another exciting and innovative Engagement Strategy for children and young people to enable us to deeply embed the culture, practice and principles of children and young people's active participation and engagement in how the council operates.

With the Listening to Young Children Strategy we are making a firm commitment to ensuring that the views, opinions and experiences of our youngest citizens will be heard. Newcastle City Council is proud of its reputation as a leading authority in participation work with children from birth to five. Historically Newcastle had the only Children's Participation Worker's post within a Sure Start local programme nationally and was the first to appoint a dedicated Listening to Young Children Officer. Newcastle was also the first place to carry out a Participatory Budgeting pilot with children under 5 internationally. Indeed officers have spoken at national events hosted by 4Children and National Children's Bureau to share learning and good practice. The work taking place in Newcastle was mentioned in the National Children's Bureau guidance on the Childcare Act, the work really does make a difference.

The Listening To Young Children Strategy seeks to further build on this work and ensure Newcastle continues to lead the way in this field and is ready to fully meet it's obligation to gather the views of young children when planning and delivering early childhood services, once the Childcare Act takes effect in 2008.

2. WHY DO WE NEED A LISTENING TO YOUNG CHILDREN STRATEGY?

In recent years, both locally and nationally there has been a wide range of initiatives to involve children and young people in active participation. However, few refer specifically to young children (those aged from birth to five). Every Child Matters states that children and young people (0-19) should be making a positive contribution and be engaged in decision-making processes. Penny Lancaster points out that "The ECM agenda acknowledges that in order to provide effective services we need to take into account the direct views of children in addition to the perspectives of parents,

professionals and other significant adults who are automatically consulted”. The Early Years Foundation Stage makes reference to the requirement to listen to young children.

Section 3(5) of the Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on Local Authorities to have regard to the views of young children from birth to 5 when providing early childhood services. This will enable early childhood services provided in Local Authority areas to meet their obligations under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 12 states that children have a right to give their views on matters that affect them, and that these views are given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. As a result the Education Act 2002 has been amended to incorporate the views of children aged under 5.

Taking part in decision-making is often equated with the ability to speak; as a result young children have largely been overlooked. The Partnership recognizes that young children are skilful and competent communicators from birth. Young children communicate all of the time through sounds, movement, actions and speech. Recognizing children’s many languages emphasizes the importance of visual communication for young children. Young children articulate their feelings, perspectives, and concerns through a range of subtle and explicit ways, through their sounds, talk, play, drawings and actions. While the Participation Strategy makes reference to all children and young people from birth to 19, there is a clear need for a specific approach to involving under 5s. This strategy seeks to outline how Newcastle Children’s Services will meet its obligations under the act and ensure our youngest citizens are heard along with their older peers.

There have been a number of important global, national and local policy and legislative developments to foster children and young people’s active participation. These generally apply to all children and young people from 0-19.

These underpinning strategies include:

- UN Convention of the Rights of the Child
- Children Act 2004
- Birth To Three Matters
- The Foundation Stage Curriculum
- National Service Framework for children, young people and maternity services
- Youth Matters Green Paper
- Joint Area Reviews

- Health and Social Care Act 2001
- 10 Year Childcare Strategy
- Childcare Act 2006
- The Newcastle Plan for Children and Young People
- Participation Strategy for Children and Young People
- The Newcastle Children and Young People’s Engagement Strategy

3. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LISTENING?

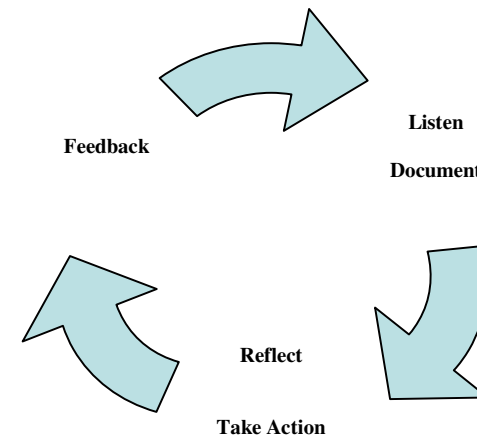
Research suggests that 55% of communication is non-verbal; only 7% is verbal (words only) and 38% is vocal (including tone of voice, inflection and other sounds) (Source: National Children’s Bureau). This means that listening must be defined in its widest possible sense. Listening to children is an integral part of understanding what they are feeling and what it is they need from their early years experience.

Listening is

- An active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings
- Not limited to the spoken word, but includes all the senses and emotions
- A necessary stage in participation in daily routines
- Participation in wider decision making processes

Listening is a cycle

As with all participative approaches there is a spectrum of involvement including everyday listening by those who regularly work with young children, giving opportunities for decision-making routines and activities. Young children can also be involved in consultation about a particular issue, event or opportunity. The key to all situations is creating change and how we demonstrate change to young children. There is no point in listening to the views of young children unless we are prepared to make changes and act upon the listening. Listening in this sense, which is seen as a cycle is a continuous and ongoing process.



This strategy refers to children aged from birth to five. Key distinctions need to be drawn when listening to babies and pre-verbal children, as well as toddlers and young children who use verbal forms of communication.

4. UNDERLYING VALUES & PRINCIPLES

Research into effective participation strategies and building a culture of listening show that whatever methods are used, there are certain principles, which provide the foundation for listening. Our values, attitudes and professional approaches are as important to finding the most appropriate methodologies. The following draws on the values & principles set out in 'Participation Strategy for Children & Young People in Newcastle', 'Listening as a way of life series', 'Children Now Participation Charter', NCVYS Principles for Participation' &, 'RAMPS framework'. The following ten values and principles are the foundation for this strategy.

- **Respect** for those we are listening to and a belief that young children are important and worth listening to, respect and belief that children are the experts in their own lives, respect for privacy and the right not to participate too
- **Rights based approach**, starting from the basis that children are human beings and citizens now with human rights that they can and should exercise, the strategy seeks to promote the specific right to have a say in decisions that affect them, Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- **Equality**, working with children of all abilities, backgrounds and ages, regardless of chosen methods of communication, including babies and those children who are regarded as having communication or other difficulties
- **Valuing** all forms of communication equally, which requires us to be open, receptive, willing to learn and responsive to children's chosen methods of communication, offering a wide variety of participative opportunities on an ongoing basis
- **Honesty** about why we are listening and clarity in explaining this to young children appropriately. Honesty in feeding back the outcome of listening, to ensure children understand their views are valued, taken seriously and acted upon. Explanation about when and why if a change hasn't been possible.

- **Time**, effective listening takes time, and at a time which suits children not adults, it is not possible to rely upon direct questioning with young children and building a listening culture needs to be developed and sustained
- **Imagination & creativity**, using all of our senses to listen to children, and being creative in developing fun and varied ways in which young children can express their thoughts and feelings, taking into account the range of ages and abilities
- **Multi-method approach**, recognizing the 100 languages of children and ensuring we use a range of approaches to capture children's ideas and expressed interests
- **Collaboration & Partnership Working**, working with parents, carers, practitioners and key decision makers, challenging power imbalances between children and adults
- **Change**, listening is a culture and not a one off consultation activity which leads to change in children's lives, we don't just listen but act together to create change in a reflective and ongoing way

5. WHAT DOES LISTENING MEAN TO YOUNG CHILDREN?

Listening to Babies

Listening to babies refers to work with young children from birth to 18 months old.

The National Children's Bureau published on behalf of the Sure Start National Unit, a series of 6 guides including a guide on 'Listening to babies'. Within it Diane Rich clearly states, "Effective listening to babies entails respect and a belief that they are worth listening to". Listening to babies and young children in this context is essential to provide environments in which children feel safe, confident and able to express themselves in a variety of ways.

Listening to babies begins with the recognition that children from birth are confident and skilful communicators. Babies communicate all of the time through the sounds that they make their movements, actions and signs. The role of the adult is essential to 'tune in', recognize, document, interpret and act upon each child's communication. Listening to babies is also about listening to parents and key members of staff who know their babies best.

Listening to Young Children

Listening to young children refers to those aged between 18 months and five years old. Most work on listening to young children to date has taken place with this older age group. Perhaps this is because many of these children have verbal forms of communication and are perceived as being more able to express views and opinions? This strategy, however, is clear that young children from birth can and do communicate. As a result a listening culture in which the views of both babies and young children are sought will be developed.

A further distinction also needs to be made between listening to young children in a routine way on a day-to-day basis to inform the development and delivery of services and wider more strategic decision-making processes. Again the role of the adult is key, to document, record, analyze, check back and inform strategy developments at both a local and national level.

6. WHAT DOES LISTENING MEAN TO PARENTS & CARERS?

Using a multi-method approach to listening to young children ensures that parents, carers, practitioners and significant adults are involved in the listening process. This does not mean that adults dominate or direct the process. Adults are key people in young children's lives as expressed by the young children themselves in the case studies above. Parents and carers are the people who understand their children the most and are key to 'tuning' into the lived experiences of young children and their chosen methods of communication. Key distinctions do have to be drawn, however, between when parents and carers are offering their own views and when they are commenting on the communicated views of their child. This is why a multi-method approach is so important bringing together various strands rather than relying on the views of parents, carers or practitioners alone.

Often parents and carers themselves will feel disempowered from decision-making process. If parents and carers weren't listened to as children, then they may need support to listen effectively to their own children. The Sure Start '*Listening as a way of life*' series produced a guide on Supporting parents and carers to listen www.ncb.org.uk.

7. THE CURRENT SITUATION

In December 2005 Newcastle City Council and the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership adopted a Participation Strategy for Children and Young People. With the aim to promote genuine dialogue between adults and children and young people and make change as a result. This has begun to make an impact and we are seeking to build positively upon this within the city council. In November 2006 the City Council adopted the Engagement Strategy for children and young people to enable us to deeply embed the culture, practice and principles of children and young people's active participation and engagement in how the council operates.

The current situation has both strengths and weaknesses. To date most of the participation work in the city has focused on the 13-19 age range, which is reflective of participation activities on a national level. The development of the Children's Fund in 2002 brought with it some innovative and nationally recognized participation activities with the 5-13 age range, coordinated in Newcastle by The Children's Society, Voices Project, which is a real strength. There has also been some excellent work with the 5-13 age range through the Play Service in Newcastle. The recent developments with the development of a Play Strategy and Big Lottery funding bid for play have resulted in an opportunity for children in this age range to further engage. Until recently, however, there were only a few examples of strategic participatory activities with young children, with only one Children's Participation Worker post created in 2005 at Sure Start Armstrong Children's Centre, which is a weakness in Newcastle.

A large amount of participatory activity has taken place in both the statutory and voluntary sectors, which the participation strategy hoped to coordinate more effectively. A large amount of consultation has taken place but there are fewer examples of participatory processes where change has occurred as a result. This was noted by inspectors during the JAR inspection in 2006. The situation is beginning to change and there is evidence of change highlighted in the Participation Matters newsletter (July 2007).

One of the real strengths in Newcastle has been the collaborative nature of the work, such as the example of the case study below 'What Matters to Us'. The children and young people's priorities included those identified by young children, especially around playing outdoors and road safety, and these are reflected in the Newcastle Plan for children and young people.

Newcastle was unique in the creation of a dedicated Listening to Young Children Officer post in 2006. A Children's Champion network was also established to coordinate the work across the city with the under 5s. While the post has not been sustained, the champions network remains as a legacy.

8. THE ROLE OF THE CHILDREN'S CHAMPIONS

A Children's Champions Network was developed in 2005-6 to share good practice and information about participation work with young children. Champions were not responsible for delivery of all of the participation work in their team or children's centre locality, rather they disseminated and sign post information, good practice, training and contacts. They also act as vocal advocates for young children's participation and ensure young children's views are heard and acted upon. They continue to carry out their main duties, and come from a range of professional backgrounds.

The Children's Champions initiative aimed:

- To build participation of young children into everyday practice
- To move the work on from consultation
- To embed participation in each setting/team/locality
- To plan for children's full involvement

The group has drawn on all 10 Children's Centre localities; as a result there are representatives from the statutory, voluntary and private sector service providers. Children's Champions have also represent significant areas of children's services such as the Play Service, Extended Schools team, Early Education and Childcare.

Many of the Children's Champions group have undertaken a training course on listening to young children delivered by Penny Lancaster (previously director of the Listening to Young Children project at Coram Family). As a result there are now many more documented examples of young children's participation across Newcastle. Including evaluation of services such as baby social, toy libraries, crèche and play groups (Sure Start North Moor). The development of Children's Centres (Sure Start Armstrong) and the physical design of outdoor areas (Sure Start Cowgate & Blakelaw). There has also been a participatory Budgeting pilot exploring how young children can make financial decisions (Sure Start Walkergate). A mapping of young children's participation took place in March and September 2006 to audit what activity had already taken place and what was still to be achieved.

As part of this strategy the role of the children's champions is being reviewed, and new nominations sought to extend the network. Locality based networks will developed to ensure that the Children's Champions are able to support one another and identify how they can contribute to the strategy, and these will build on existing networking opportunities so as to reduce the demands on Champions time.

9. EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE IN NEWCASTLE

Newcastle's reputation nationally is based on some of the best practice examples that have been documented in the city. These include:

The Baby Tent. This is an example of how listening to babies can result in concrete changes. The baby tent was developed by Sure Start Armstrong in response to observations of babies at family events, and created a space where they could be freed from their buggies to play in a safe space.

[<link to full example>](#)



Walking with Children

Another project within Sure Start Armstrong was 'walking with children'. This project captured the young children's perspective on their local neighbourhood, using a combination of methods including disposable cameras. The children's likes and dislikes were discussed with them, and a list of actions developed for services to address their concerns.

[<link to full example>](#)

Participatory Budgeting

Walkergate Children's Centre adapted the U Decide pilot process to make involvement in decisions about budgets and resources accessible to young children. A group took part in observations of babies in the centre, identified appropriate equipment for an outdoor area, bought equipment they could afford with their budget and helped install it so that babies could play outside like older children in the centre.

[<link to full example>](#)



To access supporting materials, reference resources and publications about Listening to Young Children in Newcastle and elsewhere, contact the participation unit on 0191 277 1250. Materials are available for loan, or to use within the unit to develop a project or idea.

10. ACTION PLAN - What we will be doing

A FULL ACTION PLAN WILL BE DEVELOPED TO COMPLEMENT THESE ACTIONS.

Our strategic approach:

The Listening to Young Children Strategy seeks to build on the work that is already taking place in Newcastle: to develop a culture of listening to young children that is supported and sustained throughout Early Year's provision and services; to ensure that the views, opinions and experiences of young children are part of the existing Participation and Engagement Strategies for children and young people in Newcastle; and importantly ensuring that young children's views influence decisions that are taken and that evidence of change is collected and shared.

There are three key elements to the action plan

- Workforce development & capacity building
- Developing coordination
- Sharing good practice & measuring impact

These are all aimed at embedding participation as part of the culture of services for young children. Participation will only make a real difference if it becomes part of the mainstream delivery of services to young children and their families. The strategy is not seeking to develop a team of experts who will deliver participation, but to develop the skills needed within all settings to deliver change and support children to have their voices heard.

What is vital to success in all three areas is strong leadership and commitment from a senior management level. Programme and senior managers will need to fully endorse the strategy and support their staff to deliver it, and identify the resources required to deliver the strategy. Partners also need to reflect on how they can support and encourage the voice of young children within their services and collectively within the city.

Workforce development and capacity building

The role of the adult to tune into the ways in which young children communicate is essential to the success of this strategy. We will ensure that workforce development in Newcastle recognises and supports this.

In house capacity to deliver training will be maintained and developed.

A range of training opportunities will be available appropriate to staff playing different roles within the Early Years Training Programme, using materials from the Coram Family Listening to Young Children course.

Training will both challenge and question the role young children play in our society as well as equipping staff in the most appropriate methodology for listening to young children.

Appropriate staff networks will be developed and to coordinate, support, sustain and embed the work including the Children Champions network.

Job descriptions should include reference to listening to young children and emphasis will be placed on the relevant elements of the common core.

Working with the Workforce Reform strategy a toolkit will be developed to support workforce develop with good practice examples and ideas for practical steps settings can take.

Specific actions:

- Develop a practitioners group to support the children's champions role
- Develop trainers network to deliver training and workshops across services
- Include 'Listening to Young Children' training in the early years training programme
- Embed 'Listening to Young Children' training in induction training for all staff
- Toolkit to support participation of children in recruitment and selection
- Embed listening to young children approach within parenting support

Developing coordination

Networking will be essential for the strategy to build on best practice and support the development of listening to young children in all settings formal and informal.

Newcastle is part of the NCB led 'Young Children Voices Network' pilot programme. This provides an opportunity to identify and share good practice nationally, and to give a focus to the development of better coordination locally

At a strategic level effective linkage with the participation strategy is required to access resources and expertise, share learning from work with young children and ensure that young children continue to be included in citywide participation initiatives. Links to the Engagement Strategy will also be developed to ensure that young children's voices are heard within the political process in the city.

Within localities, networks for children's champions will be developed to give practitioners an opportunity to support one another, share good practice and develop initiatives. All settings will be invited to identify a champion to attend network meetings. Links will be developed in to the locality networks and partnerships to ensure learning and appropriate actions are taken forward. This should include both formal and informal settings to ensure we reach as many children as possible and give them the opportunity to be heard.

In developing the strategy an Early Years Participation Steering Group has been established with cross sector representation. Membership of the group will be reviewed to ensure it is able to manage the delivery of the action plan and provide leadership and support to practitioners. The group will ensure that there is a representative with a young children's perspective on the Participation Steering Group, and the 'What Matters to Us' working group. Through this linkage we will be able to ensure that young children's issues are fed into the participation strategy's activities and brought to the attention of the partnership, and that where possible young children will be included in initiatives of the Participation Unit.

Specific actions:

- Participation Unit established
- Early years rep on PSG and WMTU working group
- YVCN pilot
- Contacts into engagement strategy
- Champions networks in each locality

Sharing good practice and measuring impact

Listening to young children is unfortunately still a relatively new concept. We all still have a lot to learn about how we create a culture of listening and create change. Many Early Years professionals instinctively listen to the young

children in their care. What we lack is routine documentation, capturing how we listen, what has been expressed and what has changed as a result. There are some excellent examples of well documented and professionally published pieces of work and we should seek to develop this approach. Mapping and baseline information from children will allow us to measure the success of the strategy as well as Early Year's services in Newcastle. Documentation and practice sharing events will enable learning around listening to young children to be shared both locally and nationally. We will seek to promote examples of good practice that are identified locally, regionally and nationally and ensure that they are recorded and shared in a manner appropriate to this.

The partnership has identified good practice through encouraging organisations to apply for and gain Investing in Children membership. Five early years settings currently have this recognition. We will build on this and encourage others to develop it.

The qualified teachers in Children's Centres and PSHE coordinators in nursery schools will be tasked and briefed to collect information on current activities around listening to young children and recording these as updates to the audit of activity on a regular basis. As a team they will take responsibility for a minimum level of mapping, to include examples of changes that have resulted from young children's participation. Other practitioners working with young children will also be given the opportunity to contribute to mapping good practice.

Building on the mapping we will develop a range of measures for reach and impact of the strategy to ensure performance can be evaluated.

Specific actions:

- Continue to encourage documentation of projects, and collate a mapping of practice examples
- Maintain an under 5s section in participation matters
- Hold practice sharing events
- Develop a library of good practice examples
- Continue to develop liC membership programme with early years organisations
- Develop performance measures for participation work with under 5s

Resourcing

The action plan identifies a minimum level of activity to maintain a strategic approach to listening to young children. Where additional resources can be identified these will be used to add value to the existing action plan. As it stands the actions will require a small level of resources to be delivered. These include time for professionals to take part in networks, appropriate resources to document and publicise our best practice, training resources and some central administrative functions. Securing the support of partners will be crucial to delivering the strategy, and a relatively small contribution in kind from each setting will make most of the actions achievable. Where additional resources are required, these will be identified within existing resources of the partnership, the Early Years Childcare and Play Service and the Participation Unit.

12. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Newcastle has been at the forefront of developing the Listening to Young Children approach in recent years. The Childcare Act 2006, and the development of the Early Years Foundation Stage have now made listening to young children a duty of the Local Authority, and we are well placed to evidence that we meet this obligation. This strategy outlines how we will embed, develop and share the good practice that exists in a variety of settings.

The strategic approach is consistent with the Participation Strategy and continues work that was developed by Sure Start Armstrong and later the Listening to Young Children officer. A steering group has overseen the adaptation of the original draft strategy to the current situation. It seeks to develop the capacity across services for young children's voices to be heard effectively in service development.

The strategy depends on contributions from networks at different strategic levels, and the support of the Participation Unit, the qualified teachers network and the 'children's champions', an informal network of practitioners.

The main themes of the strategy are:

- Workforce development and capacity building.
- Developing coordination, communication and networking
- Sharing good practice and evidencing impact.

The main actions are intended to be deliverable within current resources and with the support of the participation resources available across the partnership.

Workforce development and capacity building:

- make use of in house trainers to deliver LTYC training within the early years training programme
- Develop staff networks including the 'children's champions' network
- Work with the workforce reform strategy to ensure listening to young children is embedded as a core requirement
- Develop a toolkit to support workforce development

Developing coordination, communication and networking

- Work alongside the participation resources of the partnership to include under 5s within the participation strategy
- Taking part in the national Young Children's Voices Network pilot led by NCB
- Expand steering group and develop the children's champions network and the role of the QTs in identifying and sharing good practice.

Sharing good practice and measuring impact

- continue the recent mapping exercises
- publicise examples of good practice locally and through the national network
- expand liC membership among early years settings
- develop measures for the reach and impact of the strategy

Resourcing

Much of the action plan can be delivered within existing resources of the partnership, the Early Years Childcare and Play Service and the Participation Unit. Additional resources to support coordination will be sought, and these will add value to the approach taken.