



Consultation practices used in planning Children's Services

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1 About the research

As from April 2006 all local authorities (LAs) were required to prepare and publish a Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) that will be reviewed annually. The plan is intended to be a strategic document, planning the coordination and development of services to deliver and improve outcomes for children. It is expected that in order to meet this aim, service end-users (i.e. children, young people, parents and the wider community) will be consulted about decisions affecting them and have a role in planning the development of Children's Services.

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to conduct a study examining the consultation practices used in developing the CYPPs. Data was collected via an e-mail questionnaire (46 per cent of all local authorities in England responded), telephone interviews with 30 LA officers and in-depth case studies in seven local authorities.



A specific focus of the study was to examine the extent to which consultation practices had evolved since the first plans were produced. The research also gathered views on which approaches to consultation were felt to work particularly well.

2 Successful approaches to consultation

LAs were encouraged to think of any activities or approaches to consultation which had proved to be effective. The following featured in their list of nominations.

Consultation and participation strategies

By developing and working to a consultation strategy, interviewees described how it is possible to map out the activities that are taking place in a locality, think about how the information is going to be used and generally ensure that consultation is a more systematic and planned activity. By monitoring what is happening, they felt it was possible to identify gaps in consultation such as which end-users are being overlooked. Overall, the existence of a consultation strategy was said to produce a much more coordinated approach, with a cross agency commitment to consultation.

Young people as action researchers

Several authorities had found that young people themselves can prove very effective as 'action researchers', 'youth consultants' or 'junior inspectors'. Involving young people in the process of consultation was said to open up avenues for reaching a wider sample of end-users (that might not be accessible to adults undertaking consultation). At the same time, young people involved in the experience can develop a range of skills such as listening, communicating and report writing.

EXAMPLE: Young People at the Centre (YPAC) was developed in order to make more effective linkages between young people's engagement in their communities, educational attainment and the citizenship curriculum in schools. A group of young people in target neighbourhoods were trained in action-research techniques. They used these techniques to gather evidence from their peers about what would help improve their educational attainment, life skills and personal development outside of the formal school structure. In response to the views of young people, a number of events were organised including a community-focused fun day, sports development opportunities and a public speaking event.

Consulting through panels/groups/forums

Sometimes interviewees commented that rather than creating new consultation opportunities, they had capitalised on existing groups of end-users who meet on a regular basis. Interviewees mentioned tapping into groups such as youth councils and primary school newspaper clubs in order to gather feedback from young people. This was deemed effective because it made use of existing networks, saving time and effort. As well as involving established groups of end-users, a number of authorities also noted groups that were specifically set up for the purpose of consultation, for example a young persons' scrutiny panel.

Conferences

Four LAs had found conference events to be a successful approach to consultation, providing opportunities to enquire on particular themes such as teenage pregnancy, drug use and with specific groups of end-users such as an annual conference for children with learning difficulties.

Conferences can also provide an opportunity for services to hear first hand the views of young people, and interviewees described how key services and decision makers were present at events.

EXAMPLE: An annual conference is held for up to 250 young people aged 13-19. This event gives young people direct access to key decision makers in a variety of ways. Focus groups on topics chosen by the young people are held and a main panel of key decision makers have a question and answer session. Evaluation forms are collected and collated after the event and evaluated by the planning group which is a multi-agency group with over 20 organisations represented. These then inform the following year's conference.

Surveys

Some interviewees highlighted surveys as a successful consultation strategy. The value in this particular method centred on its potential to assemble evidence from a much larger population of end-users. Hence, survey consultation can identify strong messages for service planners, voiced by high numbers of end-users. Online surveys were adopted in some authorities and proved popular as they were quick to administer, analyse and can be easily repeated. However, surveys may not necessarily reach all types of end-users and other approaches may be required if a truly representative consultation is to be achieved.

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Face-to-face consultation

In contrast to large scale surveys, there was also support for more direct consultation methods. Engaging in face-to-face dialogue with end-users made it possible to explore their thinking, make further enquiries and really understand their viewpoint.

We spent some time with a group of hearing impaired young people and were struck by their frustration with service provision and the fact that they generally felt ignored. I think by doing it we probably reached groups that we had never reached before and it has challenged a lot of our assumptions.

(LA representative)

Consultation tool kits

In an effort to promote consultation and embed it into the every day working practices of services, some authorities had created consultation tool kits/packages/standards. These materials (some available online) take organisations through the consultation process, providing them with the tools to consult with end-users on a local basis. This can provide another layer of consultation activity, although those deciding to use them may need additional support and advice.

Appointment of staff with a consultation remit

In relation to good practice, five authorities mentioned various ways in which there were now staff with designated remits for participation and consultation e.g. dedicated participation officers and the appointment of a commissioner for children. These developments signal an increasing prioritisation for consultation in authorities, with staff in place to coordinate activities and to ensure that consultation becomes an ongoing and everyday activity.

Having a dedicated unit means that there is base of consistency and there are people who have got responsibility for it... if we weren't here, participation would be bounced around and possibly get lost within the services, because the council is very big and there are many



different areas. With us here, we keep it on the radar... I like to know that people can contact us if they need some support in consultation, participation and governance.

(Member of staff from a consultation unit)

3 What difference does consultation make to policy and practice?

The most common way in which service end-users had impacted on policy and practice was through the development of different LA targets and priorities, as indicated by three-quarters of LA survey respondents. This corresponded with the focus of the consultation – to identify and/or agree priorities and/or targets for the CYPP. Alongside this, examples of other impacts included:

Greater emphasis on particular groups of end-user: Consultation with specific key groups shed light on their particular needs. As a result, services were tailored such as language classes for BME groups, play facilities for young people and help for looked after children to open bank accounts.

Development of new strategies/policies: A large scale survey revealed that young people wanted more leisure facilities. To facilitate this, the Local Authority has developed a Play and Leisure Strategy.

Changes to working practices: A consultation was undertaken with looked after children (LAC), looking at why they tended to do less well in education. Acting on the messages received, LAC now have greater access to computers, extra tuition and quiet places to do homework.

Influencing the commissioning of services: Under the Children's Fund arrangements there is a young people's panel that makes decisions on how the Enjoy and Achieve budget should be used. They design the criteria, assess application and allocate the money (their decisions are ratified by an adult board – for legal reasons)

Re-location of teams/services: Following comments from service end-users on service location, services have been re-organised to work more on an area basis, thereby increasing access.

Budget changes: e.g. Young people found the local bus service to be very expensive. Through feedback from the youth council the local authority has been prompted to invest in a fifty pence bus fare for anyone in education or training.

4 How consultation practices have evolved

Who is being consulted: Three-quarters of LA interviewees indicated that there had been changes in who they had consulted since the original CYPP was developed. The most frequent change noted was more extensive and focused consultation with children and young people in general, and a greater focus on the younger age group, including the 0-5's, primary children and those under the age of 13.

The methods used: Just under half of LA interviewees indicated that there had been changes in the methods used for consultation since 2005/06. The three most common changes included: more emphasis on qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and one-to-one discussions, and a move away from quantitative methods; greater use of technology such as online surveys and audience response pads; and more continuous, ongoing consultation methods so that the 'voice' of service end-users is embedded within practice.

Mechanisms for feeding back: Only one respondent to the survey indicated that their LA had not fed back to service end-users following consultation in any way. The top three ways in which

service end-users were informed of the outcomes of their consultations were: the production of written materials such as publications and booklets; direct/targeted feedback to the individuals or groups consulted with; and information posted on websites. The majority of interviewees commented that there had been no changes in feedback methods since the consultation activities undertaken for the first CYPP in 2005/6. Indeed, feedback from consultation activities was seen as a particular area of weakness for around half of the LAs and was identified as an aspect to be improved upon.

We are going to sit down and think about what they want and we're going to do something about that, rather than just doing a normal survey, where you find out what people want and leave it at that. We want to actually make a difference, that was the whole point of the survey. Feedback is one of the most important things, so they know we are still paying them attention.

(Young person involved in designing a consultation survey)

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5 Looking ahead...

Having described their consultation practices, LA interviewees were asked to consider how processes could be improved to make consultation more effective. The most frequently suggested developments included:

- widening the range and numbers of end-users consulted with, e.g. involving vulnerable groups and younger children
- employing new methods of consulting with end-users e.g. more qualitative methods, use of technology
- consultation becoming standard practice, rather than an add on
- ensuring consultation is meaningful for participants, e.g. giving feedback on outcomes
- appointing personnel with a dedicated consultation remit.

Reflecting on the findings from this research, we would like to conclude by highlighting some further themes for consideration:

Survey respondents found it difficult to report the actual numbers of end-users they had consulted with. In order to properly monitor consultation activities and evaluate the extent to which end-users are involved, **Local Authorities may wish to keep a central record of this information.**

Ensuring adequate and targeted feedback was identified as an area for development by some interviewees. **This is an important stage of the process as it completes the circle of consultation, informing the community of what has happened as a result of their input.** This can be achieved through a variety of channels, but as with all elements of the consultation process should be monitored and reviewed. This would help ensure that feedback has maximum coverage and reaches those directly involved in consultation, as well as the wider community.

It was recognised amongst interviewees that a range of activities is required if consultation is to tap into a representative sample of the population. Surveys can potentially reach larger numbers, but may exclude more vulnerable groups, unless specifically targeted. Focus groups and interviews are potentially more labour intensive and generate a smaller set of views, however, the depth and quality of this information was noted. A far reaching consultation involving all key groups therefore would require considerable investment and **the creation of dedicated posts to coordinate consultation activity may help improve the efficiency of the process.**

Generally, communicating the impact of consultation activity is paramount if it is to become embedded into the working practices of Local Authorities. Case studies revealed that consultation with children and young people can produce surprising and powerful information which can really help inform the direction of services. **Only by publicising the value of this work will consultation become an accepted, wide spread practice throughout local authorities.**

Contact details

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More information

For more information and to view the full report, visit www.nfer.ac.uk.



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