

THINKING ABOUT MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN & FAMILIES

A guide to five key principles for community engagement and three ways to meaningfully involve children & families in local service planning



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Visit <https://foundations.org.uk/our-work/reports/family-hubs-planning-framework> to download the other Family Hubs Planning Framework resources.

About Foundations

At Foundations, the national What Works Centre for Children & Families, we believe all children should have the foundational relationships they need to thrive in life. By researching and evaluating the effectiveness of family support services and interventions, we're generating the actionable evidence needed to improve them, so more vulnerable children can live safely and happily at home and lead happier, healthier lives. Foundations was formed through the merger of What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF).

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INTRODUCTION

Getting started

Meaningfully involving children and families in service planning can help develop services that better meet local needs. Meaningful involvement will often be a combination of collecting feedback, conducting consultation, and engaging in co-creation. This briefing will support you to:

- understand different ways of meaningfully engaging families and local communities
- review your current approach to understanding the experiences of families
- develop improvement plans for your family engagement activities

What's in this resource?

This resource:

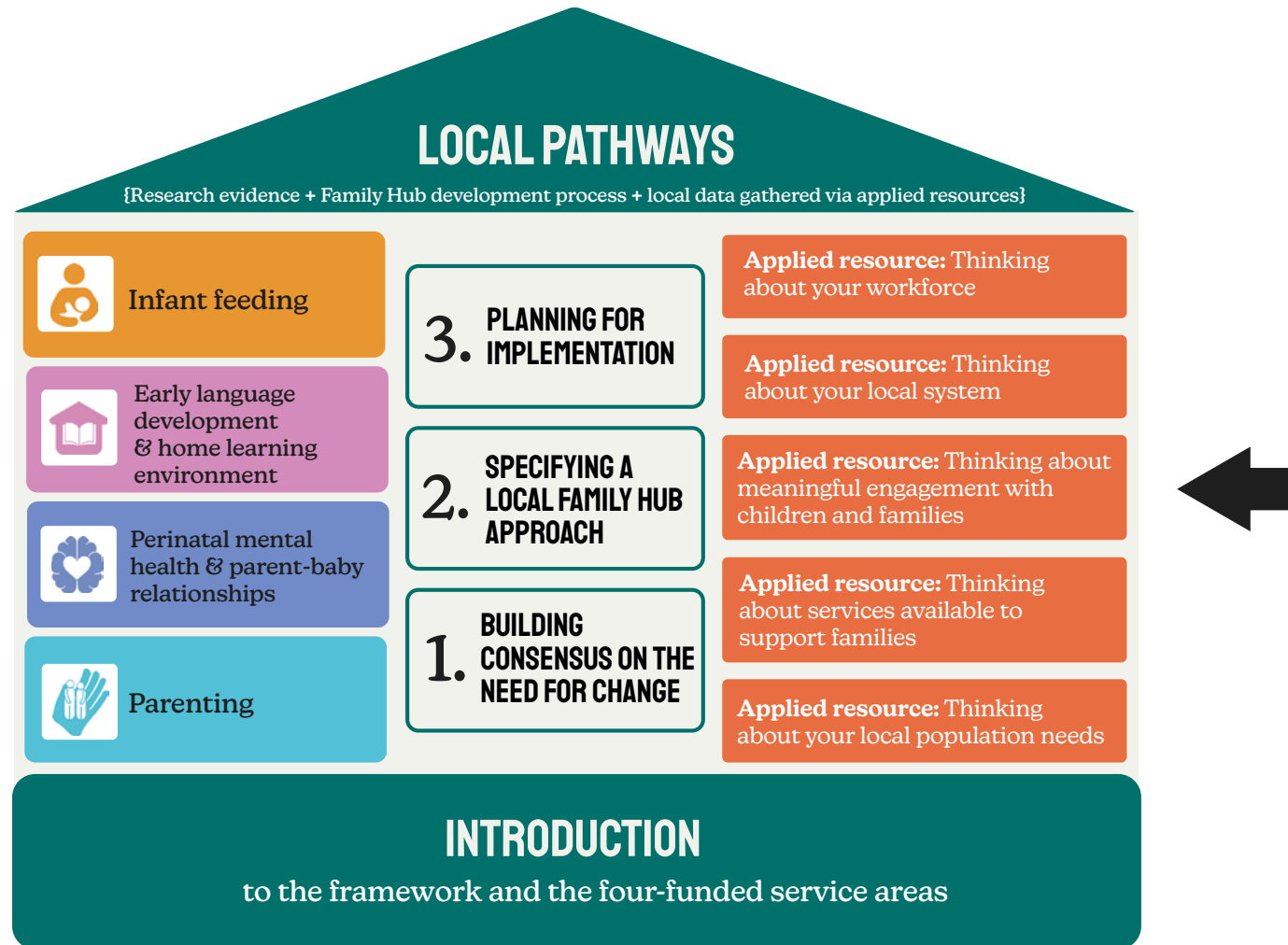
- sets out the five guiding principles for meaningful engagement
- explains the different purposes of feedback, consultation and co-creation, and the amount of time and effort they involve
- includes a template to review your current approach to engaging children, young people, and families
- includes a template to share learning from past engagement activities, consider amendments to current activities, or specify plans for future activities.

This resource doesn't look at how to build community partnerships or relationships with community and voluntary sector organisations. However, having these links can support meaningful engagement with members of the community.

Understanding the views and voices of children and families is one part of a contextual assessment. Moreover, engaging with children and families might help you to develop a local Family Hub approach that is responsive to community needs and priorities.

Figure 1

The overall structure of the Family Hubs Planning Framework alongside the processes necessary for planning and implementing the Family Hub model in your local area.



The arrow shows where this guidance on meaningful engagement with children and families sits within the wider framework of resources.

Why engage children, young people and their families?

When planning or changing services, you may want to engage with children and families because:

- collaborating with community members to understand children's and families' experiences and priorities is important in an evidence-informed approach to planning – alongside other local data and research findings.¹
- involving community members throughout the planning process, may lead to better decisions meaning local partnerships may have greater positive impact on their communities.²
- listening to children and families allows you to understand priorities and emerging trends that your monitoring data may not yet include.
- putting children's and families' experiences at the heart of service delivery can make those services a better fit, more acceptable to the community and better able to reach people who may need them, which leads to more effective early interventions and other support offers.³
- involving children and families in the decisions that affect them, if done right, is fairer and more empowering than deciding for them.⁴

More specifically, meaningfully engaging with children, young people and their families could help inform service planning and decision making for the following reasons:

- Community members have **unique insight into the strengths and weaknesses** of current service provision.
- Regularly engaging with children and family members allows them to **express concerns early on and suggest improvements**, so you can deal with urgent challenges.
- It can help you review **how local support works for people from different backgrounds**.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT'?

In this resource, meaningful engagement with children and families refers to ways of engaging families and young people in local service planning that is accessible, inclusive, safe, impactful, and transparent, whether this is through feedback, consultation or co-creation.

1 Sorrentino, M., Sicilia, M., & Howlett, M. (2018). Understanding co-production as a new public governance tool. *Policy and Society*, 37(3), 277–93.

2 Sorrentino, M., Sicilia, M., & Howlett, M. (2018). Understanding co-production as a new public governance tool. *Policy and Society*, 37(3), 277–93.

3 Greenhalgh, T., Jackson, C., Shaw, S., & Janamian, T. (2016). Achieving research impact through co-creation in community-based health services: literature review and case study. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 94(2), 392–429.

4 Tyler, T., Boeckmann, R. J., Smith, H. J., & Huo, Y. J. (2019). *Social justice in a diverse society*. New York: Routledge.

McIntosh, I., & Wright, S. (2019). Exploring what the notion of 'lived experience' offers for social policy analysis. *Journal of Social Policy*, 48(3), 449–67.

- Incorporating everyone’s views helps you design a support system that **does not marginalise particular groups of people**.
- Involving community members in decision-making makes those decisions more transparent and can increase trust in local governance, because working together requires better communication. When everyone understands the ‘ins and outs’ of the change process, it **can prevent disagreements later on**.
- Being involved gives people the chance to make positive changes in their communities and **share ownership of local programmes**.
- Being involved gives community members a better understanding of the challenges of service planning and can improve their awareness of what support is available. This knowledge may **help them make informed decisions about accessing support** or recommending services to others.

For all these reasons, engaging families is a key principle of the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme.⁵ Meaningfully engaging with children and families is crucial for achieving the programme’s delivery principles because it can help you review and improve:

- access to services
- the connection between different types of services
- the relationship between service providers and community members.

The success of your approaches to engaging families will depend on how well they are set up.⁶ Finding the best place to start and choosing the most appropriate way to work with community members can feel overwhelming. To help with this, in this resource we explain the most important things to consider when creating meaningful opportunities for engagement in your local area.

Making engagement meaningful

This resource draws on relevant frameworks and models, including:

- Treseder’s degrees of participation⁷
- Lundy’s model of child participation⁸
- Shier’s pathways to participation⁹
- Hart’s ladder of children’s participation¹⁰
- Arnstein’s ladder of participation.¹¹

5 See: Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education (2022), Family Hubs and Start for Life programme briefing, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1096786/Family_Hubs_and_Start_for_Life_programme_briefing.pdf

6 Greenhalgh, T., Jackson, C., Shaw, S., & Janamian, T. (2016). Achieving research impact through co-creation in community-based health services: literature review and case study. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 94(2), 392–429.

7 Treseder, P. (1997). *Empowering children and young people: training manual*. London: Children’s Rights Office and Save the Children.

8 Lundy, L. (2007). ‘Voice’ is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>

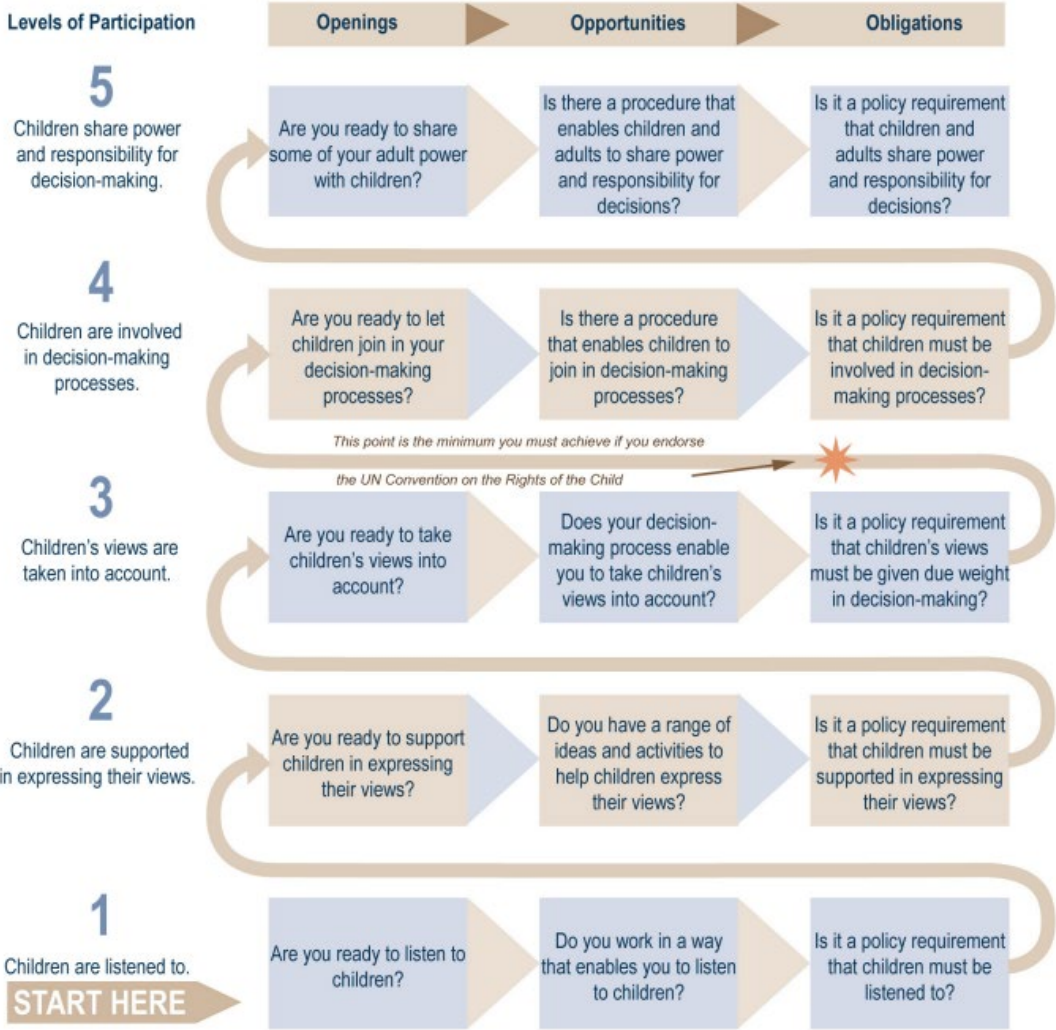
9 Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–17.

10 Hart, R. (1992). *Children’s participation: from tokenism to citizenship* (no. 4). Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

11 Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of planners*, 35(4), 216–24.

Shier’s ‘pathways to participation’ model includes five levels of child participation. To meet the standard set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, involvement should happen at (or above) the third level. This means children need to be listened to, they need to be supported in sharing their views and their views need to be taken into account.

Figure 2. Shier’s pathways to participation



Harry Shier (2001): Pathways to participation: openings, opportunities and obligations. In: Children and Society Vol 15.

The bottom rungs of Arnstein’s and Hart’s ladders identify approaches to avoid. These include ‘using’ community members (for instance, by pretending an initiative was inspired by children or parents when it wasn’t); ceremonially including children, young people or family members (for opening sites/events they haven’t co-developed); and including community members on boards without empowering them to participate.

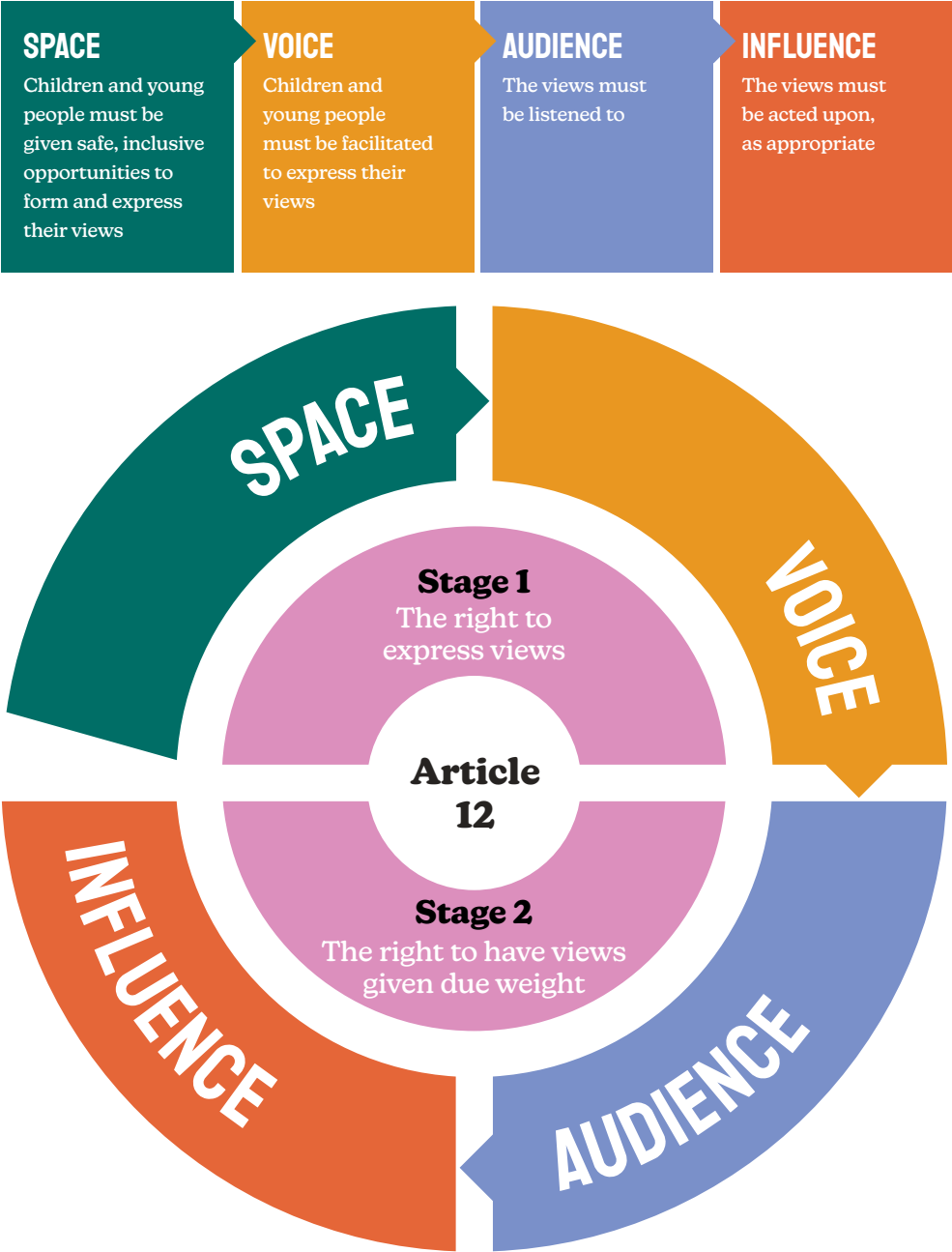
In general, when local areas speak about “using” family experience, stakeholders might want to question this language. More importantly, they might want to question the purpose of the activity in question, the target group participating, and how they were involved. It is helpful to reflect on why and how engagement is conducted to develop better ways of working for and with children, young people and their families.

Lundy’s model of child participation focuses on good practice for creating a meaningful relationship when involving children in planning processes. This model is centred around space, voice, audience and influence.¹²

Figure 3

Lundy model of participation

This model provides a pathway to help conceptualise Article 12 of the UNCRC. It focuses on four distinct, albeit interrelated, elements. The four elements have a rational chronological order



Adapted from:
https://hubnanog.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/5587-Child-Participation-Framework_report_LR_FINAL_Rev.pdf

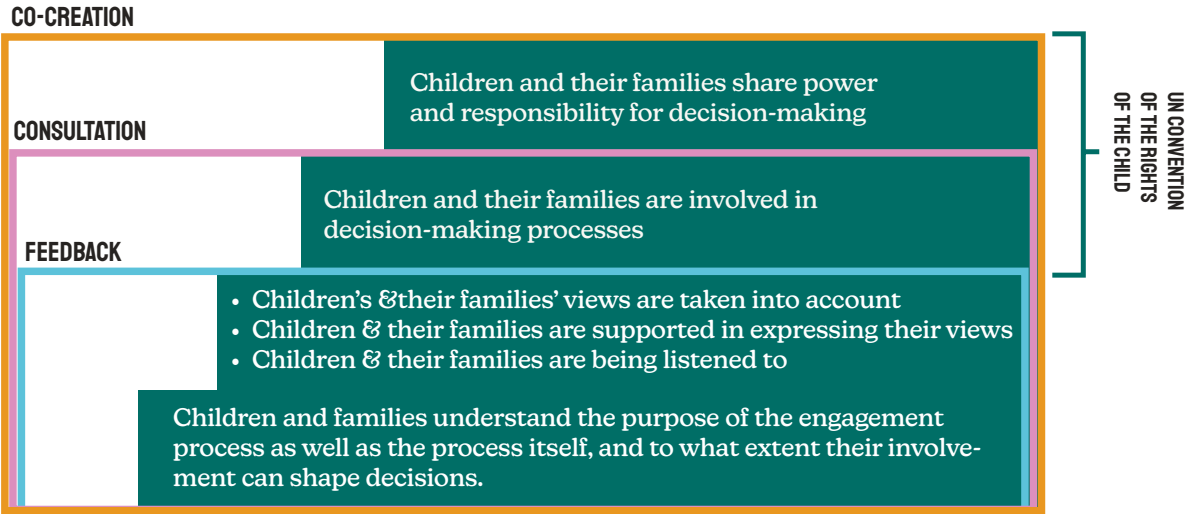
¹² Lundy, T. (2004). An integral theory of participation.

All these models and frameworks highlight that when engagement is done well, it is empowering for children and families. However, if it is not done thoughtfully, engagement can end up being tokenistic or exploitative.

Figure 4 sets out how Shier’s pathway to participation links to the three approaches to meaningful engagement – feedback, consultation and co-creation – described in this resource. It also shows where the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child fits in.

Figure 4

Pathways to participation and the three approaches to meaningful engagement



<p>Feedback: asking for feedback is the least time-intensive of the three approaches. A large number of community members may be able to give feedback on their experience, which can give you a broad picture of perspectives in the community.</p> <p>Helps to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify issues to address. 	<p>Consultation: usually takes longer than providing feedback, but does not need as much involvement as co-creation. A wider group of families and young people than can be involved in co-creation may be able to join the consultation sessions.</p> <p>Helps to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate ideas • Prioritise issues to address. 	<p>Co-creation: sometimes called co-production – needs a big commitment to the process and a lot of motivation to be involved. Therefore, this type of engagement usually involves a relatively small action group.</p> <p>Helps to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate specific suggestions for change with a good fit.
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When planning for change, it is good practice to involve the people you expect to benefit from that change. Depending on individual decisions, this might mean involving children, young people, mothers or fathers (including caregivers and legal guardians), or whole families. It is important to ensure community members understand how they will be involved. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that participating in engagement opportunities can be a burden on families and young people, so offering incentives might be appropriate to thank participants for their time and efforts. To enable meaningful

engagement and put families' experiences at the centre, you will need to take a thoughtful, reflective and transparent approach.¹³

The below sections highlight some key principles to keep in mind when engaging children and families; and how these relate to feedback, consultation, and co-creation. The last section includes templates for you to reflect on the strengths and limitations of your current engagement activities.

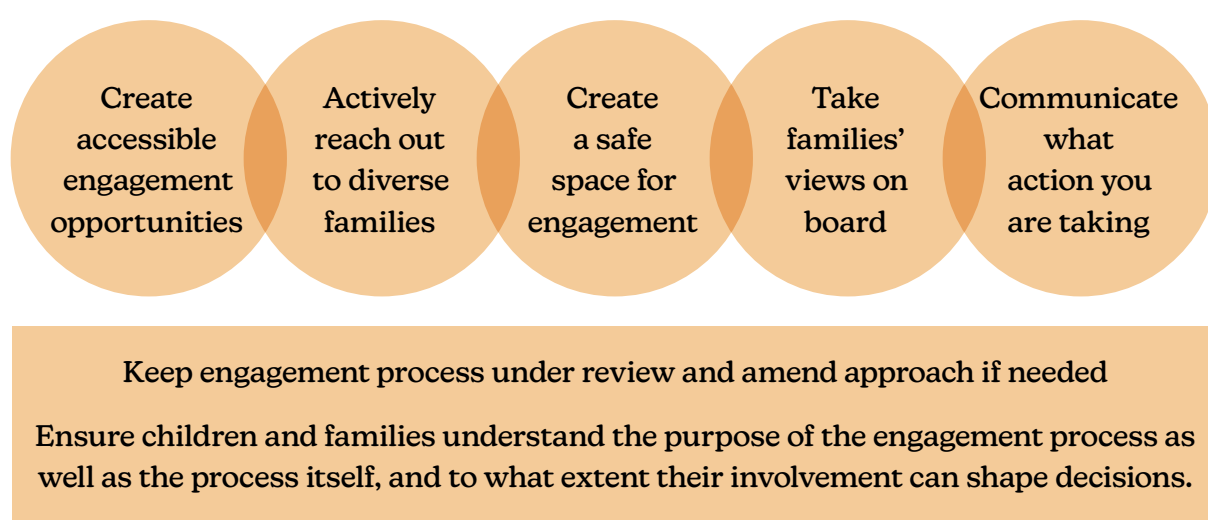
¹³ Stewart-Weeks, M. (2014). Two cheers... for co-design and co-production. *Public Administration Today*, 38, 6-11.

FIVE KEY PRINCIPLES FOR MEANINGFULLY ENGAGING FAMILIES & YOUNG PEOPLE IN PLANNING DECISIONS

This section sets out five key principles that apply to any engagement work involving children and families.

Figure 5

The five key principles of engagement work involving children and families



1. Create accessible engagement opportunities

Make sure families can take part in your engagement work. Make sure they can access appropriate information and any support they need to share their views.

First, consider where you hope to engage families and young people, in terms of time, place and medium. If you can, prepare by exploring the socio-historical context of the families you want to engage – the better you understand community members' priorities and values, the better you'll be placed to set up accessible engagement opportunities (e.g., cost-of-living crisis, societal norms, cultural expectations). For instance, you might consider how current or historical events can shape the sensitivity of discussions had with families.

Take time to think about what might prevent groups or individuals from participating. Examples include physical, visual or auditory barriers, the cost of childcare or travel, language barriers, cultural expectations and work patterns. Put measures in place to help

overcome these barriers (such as one-to-one support, translated forms, an interpreter, or women-only sessions).¹⁴

You may need to do a range of activities to make sure all families and young people have the chance to participate.¹⁵

Consider:

- What questions are you going to ask?
- What kinds of issues might families and young people mention?
- What support can you offer to families who discuss challenging situations?¹⁶

Work with your safeguarding team to ensure any concerns are escalated when appropriate. Make sure the people who are facilitating the engagement have had recent safeguarding training and are familiar with your procedures.¹⁷

Communicate clearly what you want families to give their views on and how these will inform your planning.¹⁸ **Encourage participating families, children and young people to ask questions about the process at any time and give them plenty of opportunities to do so.**¹⁹

2. Actively reach out to diverse families

Make sure all families and young people are encouraged to take part.

Creating engagement opportunities that feel welcoming to children and families who are often marginalised is a challenge. You will need to make sure that no one feels out of place when they are participating in your engagement work.²⁰

Actively reach out to families with diverse personal characteristics, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, health, access needs or impairments, ethnicity, religion, partnership status and pregnancy.²¹ Specific invitations to various diverse groups send a clear message that the experiences and views of all community members' matter.

Consider working with community groups, faith organisations and charities that might already have trusting relationships with community members.²² Working with community partners can also help you revisit the accessibility considerations.

¹⁴ See: <https://getyourselfactive.org/guide/accessible-engagement>

¹⁵ Bowling, A. (2005). Mode of questionnaire administration can have serious effects on data quality. *Journal of Public Health*, 27(3), 281-91.

¹⁶ See: <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/ethical-considerations-associated-with-qualitative-research-methods/pages/8/>

¹⁷ See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2>

¹⁸ Linden, S., & Hall, C. (2020). Discussion note: ethical considerations relating to public consultation and engagement executive summary. http://www.policingethicspanel.london/uploads/4/4/0/7/44076193/lpep_discussion_note_-_ethics_of_public_consultation_sept_2020.pdf

¹⁹ Kadam, R. A. (2017). Informed consent process: a step further towards making it meaningful! *Perspectives in Clinical Research*, 8(3), 107.

²⁰ Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Millard, L., & Moore-Cherry, N. (2016). Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student-staff partnerships. *Higher Education*, 71(2), 195-208.

²¹ Smith, N., & Dropkin, D. (2018). Access and inclusion. In P. Buxton (Ed.), *Metric handbook: Planning and design data* (pp. 41-51). London: Routledge.

²² Sadler, G. R., Lee, H. C., Lim, R. S. H., & Fullerton, J. (2010). Recruitment of hard to reach population subgroups via adaptations of the snowball sampling strategy. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, 12(3), 369-74.

3. Create a safe space for engagement

Make sure families can openly express their views in a judgement-free space.

Facilitators' ability to listen actively is key – whether their role is to encourage people to give feedback in surveys, hold a consultation or support co-creation.

This means, facilitators need the skills to:²³

- Pay active attention to the families and young people they're engaging
- use body language to signal openness and interest
- affirm their understanding of families' views
- paraphrase statements to confirm understanding
- ask follow-up questions, such as 'what do you mean when you say...?'
- avoid interrupting speakers.

Facilitators also need to be able to build rapport quickly.

You may also want to consider:

- if there may be a power imbalance between the facilitator and the people they are engaging
- the demographic characteristics of the facilitator, such as age, gender or ethnicity
- whether they've previously interacted with the parents or young people whose voice is sought.²⁴

If families and young people are working with facilitators, they are familiar with, it may help them to share their views. However, working with practitioners who have supported them may inadvertently lead to parents and young people filtering their views.

4. Take families' views on board

Take action as a result of engaging families.

There are different ways of engaging families and young people, not all of which are meaningful. When planning engagement work, make sure the purpose is clear from the beginning, and you have a clear vision how this engagement can make a difference, and who is in a position to take action based on families' views.

To achieve genuine engagement, you need to make sure families and young people understand what project they are involved in and how their involvement might make

²³ Topornycky, J., & Golparian, S. (2016). Balancing openness and interpretation in active listening. *Collected Essays on Learning and Teaching*, 9, 175–84.

²⁴ Bird, M., Ouellette, C., Whitmore, C., Li, L., Nair, K., McGillion, M. H., Yost, J., Banfield, L., Campbell, E., & Carroll, S. L. (2020). Preparing for patient partnership: A scoping review of patient partner engagement and evaluation in research. *Health expectations : an international journal of public participation in health care and health policy*, 23(3), 523–539. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13040>

a difference. From the outset, communicate with families and young people about where, when and how their views may influence your planning.²⁵

- Be open and transparent about the entire engagement process.
- Communicate families' views to someone who is responsible for listening and able to take action.²⁶

Avoid the following forms of non-participation:²⁷

- Manipulation – using families and young people, by pretending the initiative was developed with families and young people
- Decoration – using families and young people by putting them on public display during an event, performance, or other activity organised for a specific purpose, without them fully understanding the purpose of their involvement.
- Tokenism – making symbolic efforts to engage with community members, such as including one person on a conference panel to 'represent' the community

5. Communicate what action you are taking

Make sure families and children understand the impact of their involvement.

Children and families who take part in your engagement work are investing their time and energy into it. Their insights are invaluable to your planning.

Respect their contributions by keeping families and young people in the loop.²⁸

- Summarise the insights you gained and communicate this to participants, inviting them to comment on any conclusions.
- Be transparent about how and why you have made relevant decisions, inviting participants to comment on any proposed actions.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Keep the engagement process under review and change your approach if needed.

Ensure children and families understand the purpose of the engagement process as well as the process itself, and to what extent their involvement can shape decisions.

25 Linden, S., & Hall, C. (2020). Discussion note: ethical considerations relating to public consultation and engagement executive summary. http://www.policingethicspanel.london/uploads/4/4/0/7/44076193/lpep_discussion_note_-_ethics_of_public_consultation_sept_2020.pdf

26 Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>

27 Hart, R. (1992). Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship (no. 4). Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

28 Jackson, K. T., Burgess, S., Toms, F., & Cuthbertson, E. L. (2018). Community engagement: using feedback loops to empower residents and influence systemic change in culturally diverse communities. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 9(2), 1–21.

APPROACHES TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

This section sets out three approaches to incorporating the views and experiences of the community into your planning decisions in a meaningful way – through feedback, consultation and co-creation.

Each approach has a different purpose. It might be appropriate to use one approach or a combination of approaches to address different issues at different stages of your planning cycle, depending on your needs and capacity.

Feedback:

- Allows you to learn more about:
 - how existing services are working
 - what families and young people like and what could be improved
 - where there are gaps.
- Consistently collecting feedback from service users can help you identify areas to improve and examples of good practice.

Consultation:

- Allows you to explore priorities and views in the community before you make plans or act on those plans.
- Regular consultation sessions can give your local area a better sense of changing priorities and urgent issues.

Co-creation:

- Allows you to develop plans, services or resources that are accessible and responsive to community needs.
- Once you have identified the priorities for change, working with the community to develop these plans helps to make sure the outcome is a good fit.

Figure 6 shows one way you could combine the different approaches:

Figure 6

Example of how to combine the three approaches



Feedback

What is feedback?

Feedback is a statement of opinion about something. For example, a family's experience with a particular service or their journey through the support system.

Collecting feedback can help you to reflect on what aspects of your support system people like and what aspects you might change.

You can collect feedback by asking people to fill in survey forms, either online or on paper. You can also collect feedback by holding interviews and focus groups. These may work better when you want to get feedback from young children or other people who would find it difficult to complete a questionnaire independently.

Why feedback may be right for you:

- **Makes it easy for people to give their views.** The feedback collected through surveys can be informative even if the survey is relatively brief. This means participants do not need to invest a lot of time and effort to take part.²⁹
- **Tests your perceptions.** You may have certain views about services in your local area or how easy it is to navigate your support system. However, people in the community will have an inside view on how your support system works. They will have experienced first-hand whatever challenges and issues there are. This insight allows them to pick up on risks and issues that other people may not. Collecting their feedback is an ideal way to test your perceptions, understand the perspective of community members and identify where improvement may be needed.³⁰
- **Builds a positive relationship.** Listening to family members' feedback, including informal and unsolicited feedback, means recognising that their views and experiences matter. When people feel their views are valued, they might be more likely to use a service again or recommend it to others. Collecting and responding to feedback can help build a more positive relationship with community members who access services.³¹

29 Kost, R. G., & da Rosa, J. C. (2018). Impact of survey length and compensation on validity, reliability, and sample characteristics for ultrashort-, short-, and long-research participant perception surveys. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, 2(1), 31-37.

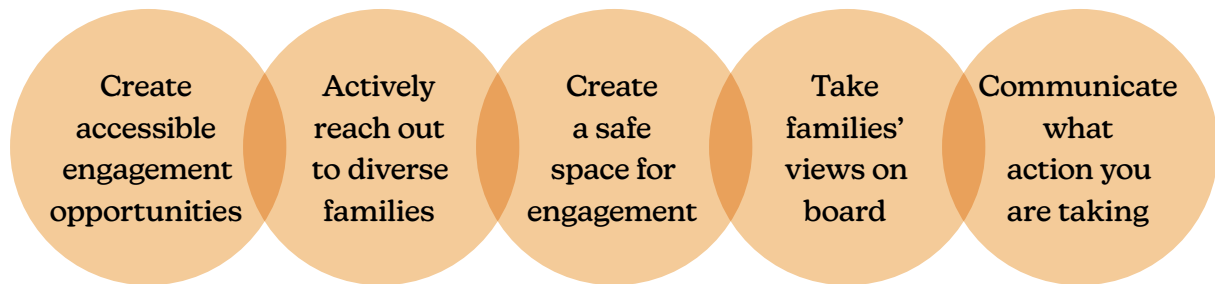
Rolstad, S., Adler, J., & Rydén, A. (2011). Response burden and questionnaire length: is shorter better? A review and meta-analysis. *Value in Health*, 14(8), 1101-1108.

30 Hardavella, G., Aamli-Gagnat, A., Saad, N., Rousalova, I., & Sreter, K. B. (2017). How to give and receive feedback effectively. *Breathe*, 13(4), 327-33.

31 See: <https://evidence.nihr.ac.uk/themedreview/improving-care-by-using-patient-feedback>

What to consider when gathering feedback

When reviewing how your area engages with feedback from children and their families, or when planning to gather feedback from children and their families in a meaningful way, be reflective about the design of your process.



Keep engagement process under review and amend approach if needed

Ensure children and families understand the purpose of the engagement process as well as the process itself, and to what extent their involvement can shape decisions.

Here are some things to consider – linked to the five key principles in the graphic above – when collecting feedback to support local service planning.

- **Creating accessible engagement opportunities might mean:**
 - translating the feedback survey into languages spoken by people in the community
 - offering one-to-one support with completing the survey
 - thinking creatively about engaging children and young people, as well as adults with special needs
 - giving families and young people enough time to provide feedback.
- **Actively reaching out to diverse families might mean:**
 - when collecting feedback on services, inviting all users to provide feedback, and providing relevant support if needed
 - when collecting feedback on the system, making sure to get opinions from across the community. For example, by working with schools, GPs and a wide range of community organisations to support your outreach.
- **Creating a safe space for engagement might mean:**
 - making sure that people can provide feedback, privately – without any other families seeing their feedback form or over-hearing a conversation
 - making sure you can follow up on any safeguarding concerns.
- **Taking families' views on board might mean:**
 - presenting the collected feedback to someone with the authority to make decisions
 - reviewing where follow-up engagement is needed and putting this in place. For example, if you have identified an area to improve, you might want to consult community members about what action to take or involve them in co-creating solutions.

- **Communicating what action you are taking might mean:**
 - explaining what feedback you have received, how you have incorporated it, and what your next steps are in the same places where you advertised the opportunity to provide feedback (for instance, on a poster or during an information session)
 - involving any facilitators who gathered the feedback in communicating the explanation to the participants.

For more considerations, see the [key principles section](#).

Potential pitfalls

Here are some ways to avoid pitfalls when gathering feedback.

Pitfall	How to avoid it
<p>Feedback could be misleading if the views of a specific group are presented as general community views. Those who complete the survey may not be representative of the wider community.</p>	<p>Reflect on who is (and who is not) providing feedback.³²</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively reach out to minority and vulnerable groups. • Make sure you get enough feedback from all groups who are affected. • Look at whether different groups of people are giving different feedback. <p>If feedback includes specific suggestions, consult people about possible changes before making a decision.</p>
<p>The feedback exercise could be seen as insincere if it does not inform your next steps. Families and young people invest their time in sharing their views with you.</p> <p>When you gather feedback, some people might assume you will make immediate changes based on their comments. They might feel disappointed or even alienated if they don't see this change.</p>	<p>Be transparent about when you will review people's feedback, how you will make decisions, and how you will let people know what you have done.³³</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the overall results of the feedback you have received. • Explain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who is considering this feedback (this must be someone with the responsibility to listen and the ability to take action – for instance, a decision-making board or panel, or a senior leader) • how they will make a decision • whether there are more ways to get involved (such as consultation or co-creation). • Once a decision has been made, explain what was decided and how you arrived at this decision.

³² Booker, Q. S., Austin, J. D., & Balasubramanian, B. A. (2021). Survey strategies to increase participant response rates in primary care research studies. *Family Practice*, 38(5), 699–702.

³³ See: <https://organizingengagement.org/principles/transparency>

Consultation

What is consultation?

Consultation is a process of seeking children's and families' opinions when planning how services will be delivered in order to develop services that are better suited to the children and families they support. It is usually best to involve children and families as early as possible in this process.

- The earlier children and families get involved, the clearer their understanding of all the issues: the desired outcome of the consultation; limits on the impact of their own involvement; how much time they will need to commit; and their rights and responsibilities in the process.
- The earlier you learn about children's and families' views, the more you can centre your planning around a better service experience.

You can hold consultations face to face at a set time, or online or through paper-based forms over a longer period. As such, consultation is similar to feedback. However, feedback is often used to understand where change is needed, with limited dialogue built in about potential changes. You can consult families and young people to hear opinions on where change is needed, but you can also consult community members to hear their ideas for new initiatives, or to learn about children's and families' preferences. Consulting children and families before implementing plans gives you the chance to sense check your proposals for initiatives and strategies, helping you develop stronger proposals.

Consultation is most meaningful if the views of families and young people are used to brief or inform your planning process – this can best be achieved if you consult them several times over the course of your planning cycle.

Why consulting families and young people may be right for you

- Allows you to involve families and young people in planning decisions. Taking part in consultation sessions usually involves more time and effort than providing feedback, but less than taking part in co-creation. It still helps you design support offers around families' needs.³⁴
- Allows you to learn about families' views before you implement changes. This is important for prioritising different options, and it can prevent you from making changes that aren't in line with community priorities. Consultation can help avoid delivering services that are inappropriate or not well suited to the local population.³⁵
- May lead to children and families across the community to identify with local support services. Rather than designing services or change plans for community members, families and young people have the opportunity to have a say and shape services

³⁴ Pollock, D., Alexander, L., Munn, Z., Peters, M. D., Khalil, H., Godfrey, C. M., ... & Tricco, A. C. (2022). Moving from consultation to co-creation with knowledge users in scoping reviews: guidance from the JBI Scoping Review Methodology Group. *JBI Evidence Synthesis*, 20(4), 969–79.

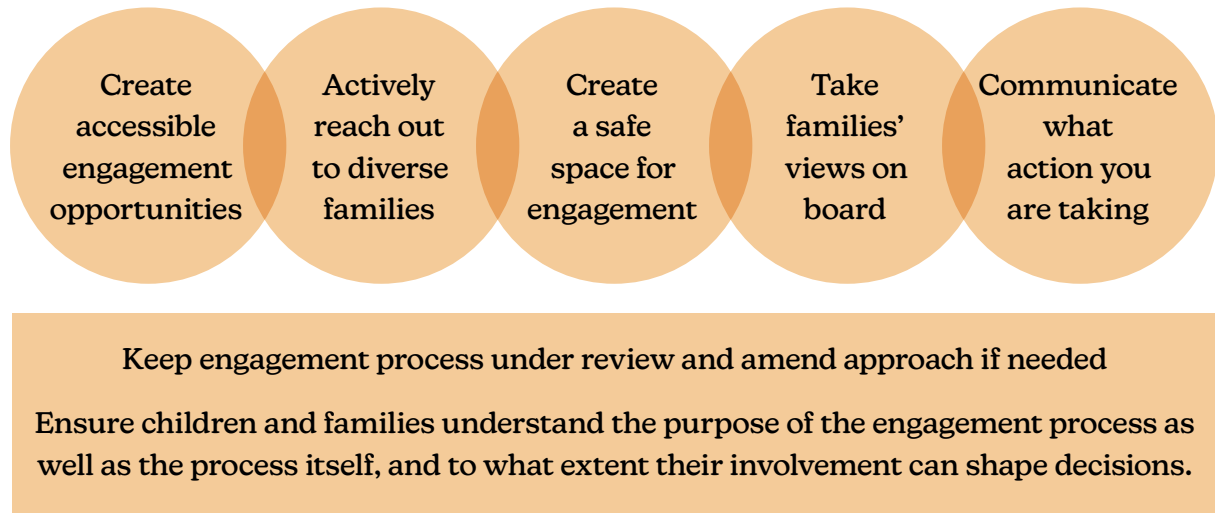
³⁵ South, J., Stansfield, J., & Mehta, P. (2015). A briefing to community-centred approaches for health and wellbeing. Public Health England. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-and-wellbeing-a-briefing-to-community-centred-approaches>

Their perspectives are valued, and they can feel an ownership of the support that is made available.³⁶

What to consider when consulting children and their families

When reviewing how your area facilitates consultation sessions, or when planning to consult children and their families in a meaningful way, be reflective about the design of the process. How you carry out a consultation depends on who you are consulting.

Here are some things to consider when consulting children and families.



- **Creating accessible engagement opportunities might mean:**
 - considering where, when, how, and how often you engage with families and children
 - removing barriers that could make it difficult for people to take part in a consultation, and offering people different ways to take part if needed
 - considering how you recruit children and families for consultation. Practitioners and service providers may be able to help you reach families and children who have received services. Consider working with schools, GPs, faith organisations and so on to invite views from people who haven't previously accessed support.
- **Actively reaching out to diverse families might mean:**
 - completing an equality impact assessment to identify groups who may be affected by the proposals
 - making sure the group of families who are consulted is representative of the diversity of people in the local area or among the families who will receive the service in question
 - working with third-sector organisations to help you engage with the people you want to reach.
- **Creating a safe space for engagement might mean:**
 - considering the space where you interact with families and children, and taking measures to make sure people feel safe and welcome – using a community centre

³⁶ Ibid

or school building may help people feel welcome, and offering drinks and snacks can help create a friendly atmosphere

- offering ad-hoc support to families and young people who discuss challenging circumstances, or signposting them to support – for example, it might be appropriate to invite mental health providers or refuge staff to attend consultation sessions
 - ensuring you follow up if there are any safeguarding concerns.
- **Taking families views on board might mean:**
 - making sure those directly involved in service planning and provision consider the views of children and families who may use the service
 - establishing procedures or systems for taking children’s and families’ feedback into account, where appropriate and as much as possible
 - reviewing where follow-up is needed and putting this in place – for example, you might hold more consultation sessions to explore issues that have been identified or involve members of the community in co-creating solutions.
 - **Communicating what action you are taking might mean:**
 - giving families, children and young people the background information they need, including how decisions are made, what level of influence families and young people can have on the final decision, and the challenges local authorities face when implementing services
 - contacting families in a friendly, timely way to tell them how their views were considered in service planning.

For more things to consider, see the **key principles section**. The considerations for gathering feedback are also relevant for consulting families and children.

Potential pitfalls

Here are some of the pitfalls to avoid when planning your consultation activities.

Pitfall	How to avoid it
<p>Consultation could become tokenistic if local decision-makers and service providers don't incorporate community members' views and priorities when planning and delivering local services. Asking families and young people to invest their time to share their views with you without genuinely considering those views makes the engagement work a mere 'tick-box exercise'.</p>	<p>Take children's and their families' views seriously and act on them, where appropriate. Good-quality consultation requires a significant amount of time, resources and planning.³⁷</p> <p>It may help if you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • don't view consultation as a one-off process, but seek families' views at various stages (for instance, to collect ideas, prioritise ideas and review proposals) • create opportunities for clarification and follow-up • review who is taking part in your consultation work and actively reach out to underrepresented community members who may be affected by your decisions.
<p>Consultation could lead to feelings of alienation if there is a disconnect between the views that participants express and the decisions that are made.</p>	<p>Respect the time and effort families and young people invest in the consultation. To avoid them feeling disappointed about the results of their involvement, make sure you:³⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are clear about what level of involvement you expect • explain the decision-making process, including when decisions are made, who will be involved in making them and what information they will consider • encourage community members to ask questions about the process • are open to reviewing the process in light of people's comments or concerns.
<p>Consultation might not give you a clear and unchallenged steer - when conflicting views arise, it can be difficult for planners to know which ones to prioritise.</p>	<p>Minimise the potential for opposing views to lead to conflict by:³⁹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making sure staff members who are facilitating consultation sessions are trained and supported to mediate strong differences of opinion • give decision-makers full information about (opposing) views in the community • consider holding more consultation sessions to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different options • consider holding consultation meetings where you explain your decisions and how you arrived at those decisions.

³⁷ HM Government (2008). Code of practice on consultation. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100807/file47158.pdf

³⁸ Attree, P., French, B., Milton, B., Povall, S., Whitehead, M., & Popay, J. (2011). The experience of community engagement for individuals: a rapid review of evidence. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 19(3), 250-60.

³⁹ Cavaye, J. (2004). Governance and Community Engagement: The Australian Experience. In W. R. Lovan, M. Murray, & R. Shaffer (Eds.), *Participatory governance: Planning, conflict mediation and public decision-making in civil society* (p.

Co-creation

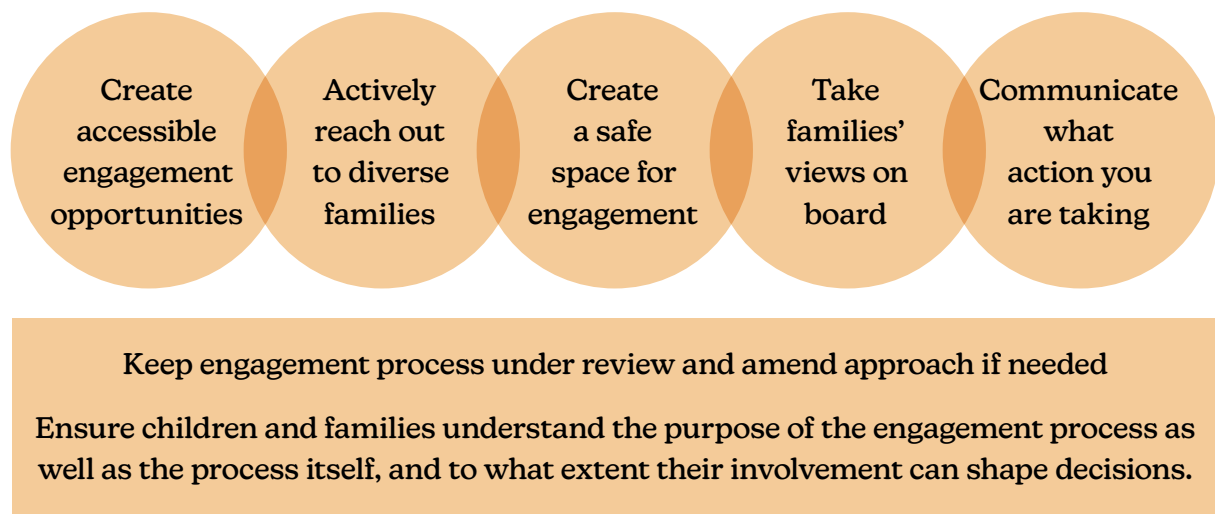
What is co-creation?

Co-creation – sometimes called co-production – is a collaborative process where children and their families are actively involved in making decisions and share the power and responsibility for making them. The decision-makers work closely with children and families to identify the problem or need, explore solutions, and make and review plans.

Why co-creating with children and their families may be right for you

- **Helps deliver services that are well-suited to the population.** Members of the community themselves take part in designing and delivering the services.⁴⁰
- **Gives you unique insights into local needs and how to meet them.** Families and young people can help to identify problems and develop creative solutions that are acceptable to community members. This makes co-creation especially useful when you are trying to overcome newly identified or complicated problems.⁴¹
- **Families have direct ownership of local service provision.** They may feel better supported and can access or recommend appropriate services when needed.⁴²

What to consider when co-creating with children and their families:



When reviewing how your area facilitates co-creation sessions, or when planning to co-create children and their families in a meaningful way, be reflective about the design of the process.

85-102). London: Routledge.

40 Yu, E., & Sangiorgi, D. (2018). Service design as an approach to implement the value cocreation perspective in new service development. *Journal of Service Research*, 21(1), 40-58.

41 Darlington, E. J., Pearce, G., Vilaça, T., Masson, J., Bernard, S., Anastácio, Z., Magee, P., Christensen, F., Hansen, H., & Carvalho, G. S. (2022). How can we promote co-creation in communities? The perspective of health promoting professionals in four European countries. *Health Education*, 122(4), 402-423. <https://doi.org/10.1108/HE-02-2021-0033>

42 Bovaird, T. (2007). Beyond engagement and participation: user and community coproduction of public services. *Public Administration Review*, 67(5), 846-60.

Here are some things to consider when co-creating solutions with children and families:

- **Creating accessible engagement opportunities might mean:**
 - thinking carefully about how to recruit children and families for co-creation – such as, ensuring families are briefed on the co-creation process using child-friendly language
 - compensating families for the time and effort they will need to give to co-creation processes.
- **Actively reaching out to diverse families might mean:**
 - completing an equality impact assessment to identify which groups will be affected by the changes
 - making sure the group of families that takes part in co-creation is representative of the group that will eventually receive the service or support that is being created
 - working with third-sector organisations to support and encourage families to get involved
 - working with third-sector organisations to review lessons learned from any past co-creation with different groups of families.
- **Creating a safe space for engagement might mean:**
 - reflecting on the co-creation setting and the group dynamics
 - making sure that facilitators are trained to enable culturally sensitive and ethical co-creation
 - empowering children and families by showing them that their knowledge and experiences are respected and valued
 - signposting people to available support and escalating any safeguarding concerns.
- **Taking families' views on board might mean:**
 - actively involving children and families in designing the co-creation process
 - giving children and families the opportunity to influence decisions throughout the planning process – from defining the issue, to developing the plans for change, to reviewing the outcomes and deciding the next steps.
- **Communicating what action you are taking might mean:**
 - proactively and regularly sharing information about processes, activities, decisions, and outcomes at the right time, in the most relevant format and in the most appropriate way.

For more things to consider, see the [key principles section](#). The considerations for gathering feedback and consulting families and children are also relevant for co-creation work.

Potential pitfalls

Here are some pitfalls to avoid when co-creating solutions with children and families.

Pitfall	How to avoid it
Some processes that are labelled ‘co-creation’ or ‘co-production’ could actually be tokenistic – for example, involving a single community representative on a decision-making board	<p>If community members aren’t participating in making decisions, you may be ‘consulting’ them rather than ‘co-creating’ with them.⁴³</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be transparent with people about what involvement you are looking for. • Be clear about why you need children and families to be involved, how decisions will be made, and what level of involvement or influence they will have in the process. • Be clear about the actual level of influence that children and families will have. Do not overclaim this.
There is a risk of exploiting people who take part, especially if they are not compensated for the time and resources they invest.	<p>Respect the time and effort families and young people invest in the work of co-creation. To avoid them feeling disappointed about the results of their involvement, make sure you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure people you are hoping to involve understand the level of involvement and time commitment you need from them. • Respect participants’ time and energy by running your co-creation activities in a sensitive, time-efficient way. • Let people decide what co-creation activities they want to engage in, for example, whether they would like to be involved in certain aspects of service design and delivery. • Compensate people for their time and expenses in an appropriate way.⁴⁴
There is a risk that co-creation is seen as an add-on. Where co-creation is an after-thought, it is unlikely that local areas are prepared to invest the required time and resources to make the process meaningful	<p>Minimise the potential for opposing views to lead to conflict:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are different ways of engaging children and families. Feedback and consultation typically are less resource-intensive than co-creation and may still serve your purpose. When co-creation is the most appropriate approach, it is important to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide the right resources for the co-creation work • allow enough time for the work • start the co-creation work from the beginning of the project or work programme⁴⁵

43 Baum, F., MacDougall, C., & Smith, D. (2006). Participatory action research. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 60(10), 854–57.

44 Black, K. Z., Hardy, C. Y., De Marco, M., Ammerman, A. S., Corbie-Smith, G., Council, B., ... & Lightfoot, A. (2013). Beyond incentives for involvement to compensation for consultants: increasing equity in CBPR approaches. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*, 7(3), 263–70.

45 Löfman, P., Pelkonen, M., & Pietilä, A. M. (2004). Ethical issues in participatory action research. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 18(3), 333–40.

REVIEWING CURRENT ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

At an early stage of your Family Hub planning, you could review current community engagement work that your team or others in your partnership are doing.

Whether you're developing plans for future activities to engage children, young people or families, or considering changes to your current approach, or whether you want to share learning regarding successful engagement across or beyond your partnership, you'll want to review what is taking place already.

You can create an overview of engagement activities, either by working individually or with the help of colleagues and other stakeholders across your local area

You can use [template 1](#) in the appendix to create a brief overview of existing activities. You can include both past and current efforts in this overview, as there may be useful learning in both.

If you are running a face-to-face workshop to map current engagement activities, you may wish to create post-it notes with the various activities that you can arrange on flip charts. Alternatively, you could list the various activities in an Excel file or large table.

DISCUSS CURRENT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE

Looking across the various examples collated above, consider discussing:

- the availability of data and current engagement practice,
- the purpose of activities, and appropriateness of methods,
- how meaningful current engagement activities are.

Having a shared understanding of those key themes will enable you to discuss areas for potential development.

Availability of data and current engagement practice: In your local area, what is available now that will help you learn from the experiences of families?

- What data, from across your Family Hub partnership, is currently available to help you understand the experiences of children, young people, and families?
- What are the key messages from children, young people, and families that you have gathered from your community engagement work?
- What is your engagement work telling you about:
 - what is working well?
 - what needs to be improved?
 - what you should prioritise, and why?
 - what potential solutions might look like?
- How robust is this information?
- How are these key messages informing your Family Hub planning?
- How are children, young people and their families (for example, parents and caregivers) involved at different stages of your planning process?

Meaningful engagement: Does your engagement meet the five principles of meaningful engagement outlined in this resource?

- How confident are you that your engagement opportunities are accessible, reaching families that reflect your local population, and held in a safe space?
- How well are those who facilitate family engagement equipped to do so?
- How does the engagement inform planning decisions? Who makes the relevant decisions, at a service level and at a systems level?
- How are children & families kept in the loop throughout the process?
- How do you keep children and their families engaged for the whole process?
- How do you let them know what impact their involvement has had on planning decisions?

Purpose & methods: In your local area, for which purposes are you currently engaging families and young people?

- Do you use a combination of feedback, consultation and co-creation to meaningfully reflect children’s and families’ views and priorities throughout your service planning and delivery?
 - For what purposes, if any, are you collecting feedback?
 - For what purposes, if any, are you consulting families and young people?
 - For what purposes, if any, are you working with co-creation groups?
- Do you feel the current level of engagement is right for your purposes in each case?



PAUSE AND REFLECT: FEEDBACK

Reflect on each type of engagement by asking the following questions:

- Are any services using feedback to improve how support is designed and delivered? How are they doing this?
- Who is providing feedback? Does this reflect the diversity of the community you support?
- What is this feedback telling you – at a service level and at a wider systems level?
- How well do you understand the experiences of children and families who are already receiving support?
- How well do you understand the experiences of children and families who are trying to access support?
- How does the feedback you collect inform your planning decisions?
- How do you tell people what impact their feedback had on your planning decisions?
- How consistent is your approach to gathering feedback from children and families? (i.e., how consistently do you apply the practices for collecting feedback families? Has there been variability in the frequency of feedback collection, the diversity of families from whom feedback is collected, or methods for incorporating families’ views into decision-making?)
- Are there any other areas where it might be appropriate to get feedback or strengthen approaches to gathering feedback?
 - Are relevant organisations across the partnership collecting feedback?
 - Are providers collecting feedback on relevant interventions?
 - Are you as a partnership collecting feedback on the system of support, that is regarding people’s experience seeking support, and their journey between providers and services?



PAUSE AND REFLECT: CONSULTATION

Reflect on each type of engagement by asking the following questions:

- Have any services or organisations (or the partnership as a whole) consulted children and their families?
- How often do you consult children and families in your planning process?
- Who is taking part in consultation? Does this reflect the diversity of the community you support?
- How well do you understand the views and priorities of children and families?
- How well do you understand the reasons for these views?
- How do you incorporate their ideas and comments into your planning decisions? Does this happen at a service level or at a wider systems level?
- How well do you understand the possible trade-offs associated with your proposed changes, and how these would affect different people in the community?
- How do you let people know what impact their comments and ideas had on your decisions?
- How consistent is your approach to consulting children and families? (i.e., how consistently do you apply practices for consulting families?)
- Are there other areas where consulting children and families might be appropriate, or where you could strengthen approaches to consultation?
- Are relevant organisations across the partnership consulting children and their families on the right topics and at the right time?



PAUSE AND REFLECT: CO-CREATION

Looking at all the examples shared by different stakeholders, consider the following questions:

- Are there examples in your area where you co-created solutions with children and families?
- In your area, how regularly do you co-create with children and their families?
- Which groups of families and children take part in co-creation opportunities most often? Does this reflect the diversity of the community you support?
- How do you involve children and families throughout your change process?
- How involved are children and families in decision-making?
- How do you keep children and families engaged throughout the process?
- How do you involve children and families in developing strategies or designing support offers?
- How do you make sure community members feel fully supported to contribute to the ongoing work and can contribute?
- How consistent is your approach to co-creating solutions with children and families? (i.e., how consistently do you apply practices for co-creating with families?)
- Are there other areas where co-creating solutions with children and families might be appropriate, or where you could strengthen your existing approaches?
- How are children, young people and their families (for example, parents and caregivers) involved at different stages of your planning process?
- How well are those who facilitate family engagement equipped to do so?
- How confident are you that your engagement opportunities are accessible, held in a safe space and reaching families that reflect your local population?
- Does the range of families engaging with opportunities to get involved reflect the diversity of the community you're serving?
- What is your engagement work telling you about:
 - what is working well?
 - what needs to be improved?
 - what you should prioritise, and why?
 - what potential solutions might look like?
- How does this information inform planning decisions? Who makes the relevant decisions, at a service level and at a systems level?
- How do you keep children and their families engaged for the whole process?
- How do you let them know what impact their involvement has had on planning decisions?

After you have explored these topics, you may want to summarise whether you have:

- Any examples of good local practice that you can learn from to inform further engagement work;
- Any examples of promising approaches that serve an important purpose but need to be reviewed or strengthened
- Any gaps in your current understanding of, and approach to including children's and families' experiences throughout your service planning.

Consider sharing this overview with stakeholders across your area and schedule a session to discuss next steps.

NEXT STEPS

Action planning

You can use [template 2](#) in the appendix to think about ways to strengthen a current engagement activity; to share lessons learned from a past or ongoing engagement activity, or to plan future engagement activities.

The template includes a space to describe activities and space for your reflections.

Depending on your purpose of using the template, you can use the 'reflections' space differently.

If you want to strengthen a current approach, consider:

- What are the key strengths and limitations of this approach?
- How do you know?
- How could you strengthen this activity?

If you want to create a case study to share learning, consider:

- What are the key strengths and limitations of this approach?
- Where there any challenges in relation to the key principles, and (how) were they overcome?

If you want to think about new activities, include your reflections on these questions:

- What are the risks, and how can you mitigate them?
- How will you monitor whether your plans work?

Potential areas of development

Depending on where you're at in your planning process, and what you have discussed regarding your current family engagement work, you may wish to consider:

- The strengths and limitations of individual approaches, and ways to improve your engagement activities, focusing on the five key principles:
 - Make activities more accessible;
 - Find new ways to reach out to the target group;
 - Enhance how families can share their views, ensuring there is a safe space to do so;
 - Embedding families' voices in your wider work;
 - Ensuring participants are looped in throughout the process.
- Lessons learned to inform further engagement work, e.g. who has engaged a specific demographic group in your area in the past, and how?
- Ways to strengthen your engagement practice across your local area; for instance by planning additional engagement activities to reach specific target groups; or by planning additional engagement activities at different stages of your planning cycle; or by developing initiatives that apply different engagement types.

Looking across your current engagement activities, you may wish to consider what the strengths and limitations are overall, and what kinds of improvements could help you meaningfully integrate the perspectives of children and families in your planning.

To inform your forward planning, you may wish to clearly describe what issues or gaps there are within the current approach. This will help you specify what actions are needed to improve your approach.

Consider sharing your plans with stakeholders across your area, and invite comments, questions and suggestions. If you have existing service user forums, or parent advisors, ensure they have a say regarding potential amendments to engagement activities.

Figure 7

Planning your next steps

Issue	Action	Aim
Gaps or lack of clarity in the current approach or activities	Add or strengthen engagement activities, each of which should be meaningful and support a joined-up approach	A consistent and coherent meaningful approach to engaging children and families
Example: Not incorporated at key points of your planning cycle	Priority action 1 [insert]	Understanding community experiences and priorities
Not accessible	Priority action 2 [insert]	Designing services that better meet local needs and expectations
Not reaching a diverse range of people in the community	Priority action 3 [insert]	Prevent and reduce poor outcomes, while promoting and supporting healthy child development and better outcomes
Not used consistently across the partnership	[insert]	
Not reaching those trying to access (as opposed to receiving) services	[insert]	

REFLECTIONS

By following the steps in this resource, you should now have a more thorough understanding of the reasons you engage children and their families at different stages of your planning process, and whether the way you involve them draws on the strengths and avoids the pitfalls of the available approaches.

- Do you feel you now have a better understanding of why and how you can engage with families to strengthen your Family Hub approach?

REFLECTIONS [CONT.]

- Do you have a good overview of your current position across the Family Hub and have you shared this with your stakeholders?
- Are you clear on the difference between feedback, consultation and co-creation? Do you know when each of these might strengthen your local Family Hub approach and what the pitfalls are?
- Have you identified where you are not learning about the experiences and needs of some people in your local community?
- Have you identified where you are not involving children and their families in designing services?
- Do you have some clear next steps for developing meaningful engagement across your Family Hub?

APPENDIX: TEMPLATES

1. Engaging children and families: Overview of current engagement activities [\[Download\]](#)
2. Engaging children and families: Assessing your engagement activities against the five principles of meaningful engagement [\[Download\]](#)