Children, Young People, Parents and Carers' Participation in Children's Fund Case Study Partnerships

National Evaluation of the Children's Fund

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The Children's Fund was set up, in part, as a catalyst to move forward interagency co-operation and child and family-led preventative services in local authorities. It is, therefore, part of a long-term strategy aimed at strengthening communities and families as places where children and young people can develop as healthy, responsible and engaged citizens.

This report summarises key emerging lessons from the first round of case study work with six Children's Fund partnerships undertaken by the National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF). The report is not an account of what works across all 149 Children's Fund partnerships across England. Instead, it offers some early evidence to enable partnerships and policy makers to reflect on learning relating to a key aspect of the work of the Children's Fund, that is children, young people, parents and carers' participation.

Executive summary

Background

1. The Children's Fund is a complex response to the building of resilience among children and young people which focuses on prevention and is embedded within broader national strategic developments in the reconfiguring of services.

2. The participation of children, young people, parents and carers in the development of Children's Fund activity is one of the guiding principles of the initiative. The Children's Fund Guidance states that children, young people and their families should be actively involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of preventative services.

3. Whilst considerable participation activity is currently in evidence across a range of organisations across the UK, children and young people's views have had limited overall impact in decisions about public services. Challenges to effective participation include the need to invest considerable time and resources, ensuring children and young people are representative of different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and that they are genuinely empowered through their involvement.

4. A number of distinct 'models' of the rationales for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation and the corresponding strategies and activities they are adopting are identified in the report, based on data collected in the case study partnerships.

The six case study partnerships

5. Six of eighteen longitudinal case studies have been completed. In these NECF is examining the structures and processes which have produced collaborative and participatory preventative work. These cases sit alongside another set of studies which are exploring the development of practices in work with specific target groups.

6. The evaluation is using Activity Theory as a framework for collecting the evidence and its analysis in the eighteen partnership case studies.

The purposes, strategies and activities for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation in the case study partnerships

7. Rationales for participation among strategic and service provider stakeholders and among children, young people, parents and carers can be categorised as follows:

> Informing the development of Children's Fund programmes at strategic level and informing Children's Fund service planning and delivery through consultation and through co-configuration, in a way that more directly involves children and young people in the shaping of services;
> Increased political engagement, citizenship and social inclusion of children, young people, parents and carers;
> Building the resilience and capacity of children, young people, parents and carers. The aim here is to empower children, young people and families through participation which is seen as an approach to the prevention of social exclusion.

8. Strategic and service provider stakeholders tend to emphasise the purpose of participation as being to inform Children's Fund programme development and the planning and delivery of Children's Fund services.

9. Some strategic stakeholders' and service providers' understood participation as leading to improved children and young people's citizenship, social inclusion and engagement in the community as well as personal and social education and development.

10. Children, young people, parents and carers perceived the benefits of participation as their personal and social education and development. Hence, their focus was on empowerment and building their resilience and that of others.

11. Partnerships' strategies and activities broadly correspond with the predominant rationales for working on participation in evidence at strategic and service level. However, individual partnerships have adopted multiple rationales and multiple strategies and activities for working on participation and their work on participation is developing on an ongoing basis, hence this area of activity is subject to rapid change.

Children, young people, parents and carers' participation in practice in the case study partnerships

12. Children's Fund partnerships have faced a number of challenges in developing their work around children and young people's participation. These stem from expectations of the Children's Fund at national level; factors relating to partner agencies' history and commitment to the participation agenda; and the challenges of developing participatory activities in diverse communities.

13. Partnerships demonstrate considerable commitment to develop participation as a key aspect of their work. However, stakeholders were conscious of the pressure to meet government objectives within short timeframes with relatively limited resources.

Partnerships have balanced ideal forms of participation with those that are achievable within timeframes and resources.

14. Directly involving children, young people, parents and carers as equal members in the management of partnership boards challenges traditional approaches to strategic decision-making and has the potential to involve considerable shifts in the balance of power and responsibility. Some resistance to engaging with the participation agenda has been experienced by some partnerships. Some partnerships have not involved children, young people and parents/carers in strategic decision-making processes since it was viewed as too challenging and time-consuming. These partnerships focused their participation activities more at project level.

15. In partnerships in which children, young people, parents and carers were actively involved in strategic decision-making at board level, stakeholders emphasised the importance of being clear about the limits of their involvement. Feeding back to children and young people about the impact of their participation was also seen as important.

16. Conventional, professional styles of meetings and the use of inaccessible language were seen as barriers to children, young people, parents and carers' participation. A number of partnerships adopted measures to ensure that the language and structure of meetings were more accessible to children, young people, parents and carers and this facilitated their participation.

17. Despite the challenges, there were several examples of promising practice in participation at Children's Fund project level, including moving towards co-configuration, where children, young people, parents and carers are involved as equal partners in developing responsive services according to their needs and aspirations. Some service providers facilitated children and families' participation in the management, planning, delivery and evaluation of services.

18. Providing training and organisational capacity building in participatory practice to develop skills and help to build cultures of participation among Children's Fund projects has been an important focus of activity for some partnerships.

19. Relationships based on trust and familiarity over time developed between project workers and children, young people, parents and carers. These have a positive influence on levels of participation that could be achieved and sustained.

19. Ensuring children and young people are representative of differences in gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic and home background and geographical area continues to be a challenge to partnerships.

Mainstreaming the participation agenda

20. Partnerships have different interpretations of the mainstreaming of participatory work. These can be categorised as follows:

Sustaining current participatory activities within the mainstream;
Embedding good participatory practice in organisations;

Influencing organisations' cultures of children, young people, parents and carers' participation.

21. Strategies and mechanisms adopted by partnerships for mainstreaming elements of their work on participation include:

Key individuals/'champions' who promote participatory practices both within and beyond partnerships to develop the agenda within the mainstream;
Broader, local authority-wide approaches such as establishing multi-agency structures and the development of 'toolkits' of good practice in participative techniques;
Projects that have enabled children, young people, parents and carers to sustain their participation or to become project workers;
Demonstrating effective participatory activities through monitoring and evaluation.

22. Potential challenges to mainstreaming participation include a perceived lack of clarity regarding how mainstreaming fits with the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* and how Children's Fund priorities such as participation can realistically be pursued in a sector that has budget shortfalls.

Key messages and learning

23. A number of key challenges to working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation emerged from the case study partnerships. These are listed below.

A range of participation strategies have been developed at strategic and service levels, but overall participation work has not been a key focus of case study partnerships.
Differing rationales for children, young people, parents and carers' participation exist within case study partnerships which influence the approaches to participation adopted at strategic and project level.
Time, capacity building and resources are needed for children and young people, parents and carers to effectively participate in Children's Fund strategic and project level processes.
Ensuring that a diverse group of children and young people are involved in participation activities, in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, disability, socio-economic and home background and geographical area has considerable resource implications.
A range of approaches to mainstreaming children and young people's participation have been adopted.
Systematic evidencing of good participatory practice is important for the mainstreaming agenda to move forward.
There needs to be more clarity about the involvement of children, young people, parents and carers and the role of the Children's Fund in the development of Children's Trusts and other strategic partnerships in children's services.

Children, Young People, Parents and Carers' Participation in Children's Fund Case Study Partnerships

Introduction

The National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF) aims to understand the processes, structures and multi-agency collaborative arrangements that create the conditions for successful preventative services for children and young people who are at risk of social exclusion and for effective participation of children and young people. This work centres on the detailed analysis of eighteen Case Study Children's Fund Partnerships.

The Children's Fund aims to facilitate the incorporation of practices for children, young people, parents and carers' participation within partnerships and to promote participation in sustained, systemic ways in local authority areas. In this report[1] we highlight practices and approaches to children, young people, parents and carers' participation adopted in the first six case study partnerships. Key lessons are drawn out that will contribute to the future development of children, young people, parents and carers' participation strategies. We distinguish between approaches to participation, strategies and activities at both strategic and Children's Fund project levels. A number of distinct 'models' of the rationales for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation, and the corresponding strategies and activities they are adopting, are identified in the report, based on data collected in the case study partnerships.

While the participation literature demonstrates an array of understandings of participation, this report adopts a broad definition, ranging from consultation with children and parents to the 'direct involvement of children [and parents] in decision-making about matters that affect their lives, whether individually or collectively' (Hill et al. 2004: 83).

We gathered evaluation evidence at several layers of activity in each of the six partnerships. These include the partnership board or its equivalent, programme managers and key Children's Fund staff, service providers and children, young people, parents and carers' themselves. We are also examining interactions between these layers of activity and are locating them within the wider context of health and social welfare services, structures and policies in local authority areas. Our work is primarily based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of these layers, together with observation of services. Appendix One provides more detail on the methods used in this work. The structure of the report is as follows:

> Chapter One of the report places the Children's Fund's approach to children, young people and parents' participation in the broader context of policies for children, young people and their parents and carers' participation in the UK, and clarifies key terminology in use.

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[1] Two additional NECF reports complement this one. The first, *Collaborating for the Social Inclusion of Children and Young People: Emerging Lessons from the First Round of Case Studies* focuses on collaborative working in the six case study partnerships and the second, *Prevention and Early Intervention in the Social Inclusion of Children and Young People*, focuses on prevention in those partnerships. Both are available from www.ne-cf.org

Chapter Two develops preliminary models of approaches to children, young people and parents' participation by highlighting the ways stakeholders in case study partnerships have understood and defined participation and relates these understandings to the strategies and activities partnerships have adopted. These understandings are then contrasted with children, young people, parents and carers' views of the purposes of participation.

Chapter Three focuses on a number of issues that arise from the experiences that the case study partnerships have had of working on children and young people's participation in practice. We examine children, young people, parents and carers' engagement and degrees to which they appear to have been empowered through their participation in Children's Fund activities and processes. We also identify the factors that influence the representativeness of the children and young people who participate.

Chapter Four examines the potential challenges and opportunities for mainstreaming Children's Fund activities, precipitating changes in mainstream practices and promoting the ethos of participation within mainstream agencies.

Chapter Five outlines key learning points for policy at local and national levels that surface from our work on participation in the first six case study partnerships.

CHAPTER ONE

The context for children, young people, parents and carers' participation

This section reviews recent developments in thinking about children, young people, parents and carers' participation. The drivers towards increased participation and reasons for involving children and young people are described. The section then considers the current policy context and direction of the participation agenda on children and young people's participation within government and service delivery agencies. Finally, the direction and emphasis of children, young people, parents and carers' participation adopted by the Children's Fund initiative as a whole is examined.

1.1 Drivers towards increased participation

Since the late 1990s there has been a growing acceptance in the UK that children and young people should be more involved in making decisions about matters that affect them. The acceptance of the principle of children and young people's participation has been influenced by a number of major factors as follows:

> The consumer movement which developed in the 1970s emphasised the engagement of users to give consumers more power in exercising choice and in influencing the nature and quality of the goods and services available to them. The influence of users in respect of public services has been given more emphasis by the UK Government's Modernising Agenda and increasingly the role of 'user' has extended to include children (Sinclair, 2004). The acceptance of the principle of children and young people's participation is part of a much broader policy move towards ensuring that the voices of service users are heard in decision-making at all levels of the service delivery process, in order to make services more responsive and to enable a more collaborative approach to decision making.

> The New Labour government is encouraging 'active citizenship' and more participative approaches to local governance. Indeed, children and young people are receiving training in citizenship (DfEE, 1999; see also www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship) and in some cases are being involved in developing and delivering change through Area-Based Initiatives, such as the Single Regeneration Budget, New Deal for Communities, and Health Action Zones (DoE, 1995; Barnes, Matka and Sullivan, 2002).

> The adoption and ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) by the UK Government in 1991 has extended the Rights agenda to include children. The Convention recognises children and young people's right to participate in all decisions that affect them, as individuals in their own right. Rights to participation are, however, balanced by an acknowledgement that children and young people may be vulnerable and therefore have rights to protection and provision of services.

Over 400 voluntary and statutory agencies in the UK have formally adopted the UNCRC and some local authorities use the UNCRC as the planning framework for all their children's services. The rights of children and young people are also confirmed in the Human Rights Act (1998), which incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law and came into force in the UK in 2000 (Willow, 2002).

There is a growing understanding of the active role that children and young people can play in shaping their environments. Instead of being seen as recipients of welfare services and passive objects of research, children and young people have been recognised as social actors and active participants in their worlds from the 1970s onwards (James et al. 1998). An alternative approach to thinking about childhood has been advocated, which acknowledges children and young people's competencies, including those of very young children, and therefore their capacities to be involved in decision-making about their lives (Kirby et al., 2003).

Research and policy documents widely recognise that there are important political, legal, social and moral reasons for promoting the greater integration of children and young people in their local and wider communities (Craig, 2000; Willow, 2002; Sinclair, 2004). Sinclair and Franklin (2000) summarise the reasons for involving children as:

> *... to uphold children's rights; fulfil legal responsibilities; to improve services; to improve decision-making; to enhance democratic processes; to promote children's protection; to enhance children's skills; to empower and enhance self-esteem.*

1.2 Current policy context and direction

In recent years, Government commitment to increased children and young people's participation, combined with its legal responsibilities to fulfil the requirements of the Children Act for England and Wales (1989), UNCRC (1989) and Human Rights Act (1998), has led to a series of legislative and policy measures to ensure that children and young people have a say about their neighbourhoods, education, health and social services, as well as many other local authority and national policies and services.

A recommendation of the Policy Action Team 12 report on Neighbourhood Renewal was that young people should be put 'at the centre of policies that affect them, organising services round the needs of young people' (Home Office 2000: 68). Similarly, the *Children and Young People's Unit* identified children and young people's participation as part of its core strategy as a cross-departmental unit:

> *The Government wants children and young people to have more opportunities to get involved in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them or which they use (CYPU, 2001a: 2).*

All central Government departments are required to produce Action Plans detailing how they intend to involve children and young people in the decision-making of their department. At local level, a set of standards, *Hear by Right*, has been developed by the Local Government Association/ National Youth Agency for the involvement of

young people in Local Authorities, endorsed by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (LGA, 2004). The *Hear by Right* Standards are:

> *... designed to help councils to secure the long term and sustainable active involvement of young people in local democracy and encourage continual improvements in their activities (Wade et al., 2001).*

As part of the broader policy move towards 'user involvement' and 'user participation' in health and social care, there is also increasing recognition of the importance of listening to parents and carers, and an expectation that professionals will work in partnership with parents and families (Morris and Shepherd, 2000; Morrow and Malin, 2004; Mitchell and Sloper, 2001). Morrow and Malin (2004) suggest that parental participation can be seen as a central tenet of UK government policy, as demonstrated by the Children Act (1989) and is apparent in initiatives such as *Sure Start*, *Early Excellence Centres* and the *Foundation Stage Curriculum* for young children. Governmental commitment to the principle of participation therefore extends to both 'service users' and 'carers' and recognises the different perspectives each may bring to decision making.

Research reports and policy documents acknowledge the rapid increase in activities related to children and young people's participation, as well as revealing the breadth of activities, in the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) across the UK. Many national initiatives and policies have emphasised children and young people's participation as a key element including: Agenda 21 programmes, the *Single Regeneration Budget*, *New Deal for Communities*, *Children's Fund*, *Connexions*, *Local Strategic Partnerships*, *Children's Services Planning Guidance* and the *Local Government Act*. Willow (2002) outlines 21 major government initiatives that encourage children and young people's involvement in service and policy development at local level.

VCS organisations such as *The Children's Society, National Children's Bureau, Barnardo's, British Youth Council, Save the Children* and the *National Youth Agency* have also been involving children and young people in participation projects and developing good practice. Some organisations run by or with children and young people have also developed, such as *Article 12, UK Youth Parliament*, and *Children's Express* (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Organisations run by or with children and young people

Article 12 is an organisation run for and by children and young people aged up to 18 years, which have reviewed how well the UN Convention's Article 12, 'children's right to express their views', is put into practice in the UK, amongst other activities (Article 12, 1999).

The *UK Youth Parliament* is a non-party political national forum, made up of over 400 elected members aged 11-18, that aims to give young people a voice that will be heard by local and national government and services providers working with young people. (see www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk)

Children's Express is a child and young person-led team of reporters aged 8-13 who conduct interviews on issues of concern to the young people and editors aged 14-18. Children's Express publishes reports widely in newspapers and magazines (Alderson, 2001).

1.3 Challenges to working on children and young people's participation in practice

Despite widespread commitment, achieving effective participation in the design, delivery and evaluation of services in practice presents policy makers and service providers with considerable challenges. In terms of the representation or inclusion of children in decision making about community or school affairs, 'initiatives have remained local, scattered, *ad hoc*, fragile and experimental' (Prout 2000: 309). There is also concern that despite the diversity of participation activities being implemented across the UK, children and young people's views have had limited impact on public decision-making. For example:

> *… the evidence from existing evaluations is that [young people in participatory projects] are still having little impact on public decision-making, although this varies across contexts and between different types of organisations. Few evaluations have looked at the quality of the decisions made (or influenced) by young people* (Kirby with Bryson, 2002: 5).

Academic literature suggests there is still considerable uncertainty about *how* to involve children and young people in a way that is effective and brings about lasting change. In their review of the involvement of children and young people in promoting change and enhancing the quality of social care, Danso *et al.* conclude that:

> *… despite the expansion of participation activity, there is much still to learn – about making participation inclusive and meaningful to children and young people; about ensuring participation is not simply an end in itself but as a means to change; and about the importance of evaluating the impact of participation – on children, on professionals, on decisions and on services* (2003: 13).

Particular challenges identified in the literature include the lack of feedback given to children and young people following consultation on their views, so that they may never know if their views have led to change in policy or practice (Dorrian *et al.*, 2000; Tisdall and Davis, 2004). Other challenges include concerns over the representativeness of children and young people involved in participation activities from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and the extent to which children and young people become genuinely empowered through their involvement. There is also some recognition that the views and experiences of children and parents/carers may differ and that it is important to seek children and young people's views directly (Alderson, 1990).

Different forms of participation are often viewed in the literature as better than others. Arnstein's (1969) concept of a 'ladder' or 'hierarchy' of participation is frequently referred to, to depict the degree to which people participate. Arnstein's work was adapted by Hart (1992) to represent different levels of empowerment or control children have over decision-making processes. More recently, notions of hierarchy have been criticised and a more complex understanding has developed which recognises that people may want to participate in different ways for different purposes. Shier (2001), for example, proposes a *pathways to participation* model that is helpful in thinking about how and why people engage in participatory activities in different situations.

Other challenges stem from different stakeholder organisations' 'cultures' of children and young people's participation. A categorisation of this developed by Kirby *et al.* (2003) is summarised in Box 1.2. This offers a useful framework for thinking about how organisations are involving children and young people. These organisational cultures also relate to different perceptions of the purposes of children and young people's participation.

Consultation-focused organisations, for example, hold a more limited view of the purpose of involvement to inform service development, while *participation-focused* organisations and *child/youth-focused* organisations embrace a broader perception of participation as encompassing the empowerment and increased social inclusion of children and young people. The authors argue that these types should not be viewed hierarchically for the following reasons: each can be appropriate within different organisations or settings; the boundaries between them are blurred as organisations move between types at different times and for different purposes and; there may be differences between the ways in which different departments in the *same* organisation operate.

This emphasis on challenging organisational structures, mechanisms and cultures in order to embed participation in practice appears to move the debate on participation forward from a narrow focus on assessing the degree of children and young people's participation, to the need for a more systemic, organisational approach to achieving change. Kirby *et al.* (2003) identify four stages that may be necessary in order to change cultures and institutionalise participation in organisations (Box 1.2).

> **Box 1.2 Organisational cultures of participation**
>
> In *Building a Culture of Participation*, Kirby *et al.* (2003) emphasise the need for organisations to change in order for children and young people's participation to bring about change and be sustainable. The report identifies three different cultures of participation to characterise the ways organisations are involving children and young people:
>
> **Consultation-focused organisations** – consult children and young people to inform services, policy and product development
> **Participation-focused organisations** – involve children and young people in making decisions within participation activities that are time-bound or context specific. Often a sample rather than all relevant children and young people are involved.
> **Child/youth-focused organisations** – children and young people's participation is central to these organisations' practices and they establish a culture in which it is assumed that all children and young people will be listened to about all decisions that affect their lives.
>
> Kirby *et al.* also identify four stages in the process of changing cultures and institutionalising participation in organisations:
>
> '**unfreeze**' existing attitudes, procedures and styles of working;
> '**catalyse**' change through the use of champions of participation, through developing a vision for children and young people's participation and through partnership working;
> '**internalise**' change through communicating and developing a shared vision and understanding of participation;
> '**institutionalise**' by mainstreaming practice (*ibid*: 8).

1.4 Children, young people, parents and carers' participation in the Children's Fund initiative

The participation of children, young people, parents and carers in the development of Children's Fund activity is one of the guiding principles of the initiative. The Children's Fund Guidance states that children, young people and their families should be actively involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of preventative services and that an 'ongoing dialogue' with them should be established (CYPU, 2001b). Furthermore, the Guidance indicates that the local community should be consulted about the services and support they consider would be beneficial for children and young people in the community (*ibid.*). The document recognises the potential consequences of not engaging children and young people in service development: 'If children and young people are not involved, they often vote with their feet leaving the service unable to meet their needs or its targets' (CYPU, *ibid:* 59).

Much of the focus in the literature to date has been on implementing participation activities, and discussion of the best methods for engaging children and young people in making decisions about public services. Less attention is often paid to the *purposes* of participation (Kirby *et al.*, 2003; Tisdall and Davis, 2004). The CYPU's publication *Learning to Listen* (2001a), however, clearly outlines three broad reasons for involving children and young people, which are also evident in the Children's Fund Guidance:

> **Better services:** 'the involvement of children and young people is central to all service development that aims to meet their needs'.
> **Promoting citizenship and social inclusion:** 'the more children and young people are encouraged to participate the more that the process will itself make a contribution to their increased social inclusion'.
> **Personal and social education and development:** 'initiatives will not last if children and young people do not benefit through new friendships, learning opportunities and the on-going chance to express their views and ideas' (CYPU, 2001b: 59).

The Guidance indicates that whilst children and young people's participation is a requirement of the Fund, there is considerable latitude at individual partnership level to develop appropriate and innovative forms of participation (NECF, 2003). The Guidance states: '*We are not being prescriptive about which methods are used but the participation of children and young people is a requirement*' (CYPU, 2001b: 59). There is also recognition that investment of time and resources is necessary for the sustained involvement of children and young people, and that there needs to be a clear understanding of the *limits* of participation since there should be 'clear boundaries about how much power and decision-making will (or can) be shared with children and young people' (CYPU, 2001b: 61).

The NECF *Early Messages from Developing Practice* report indicated that the principles of children and young people's participation have been widely embraced across partnerships and that an array of approaches to enabling and catalysing participation has been adopted (NECF, 2003). *Developing Collaboration in Preventative Services for Children and Young People: The National Evaluation of the Children's Fund First Annual Report 2003* (NECF, 2004a) mapped the approaches taken by Children's Fund partnerships to the participation of children and young people and their families in strategic and operational activity across the initiative as a whole. The report indicates that considerable energy and activity is evident across all 149 partnerships in working on children and young people's participation. Box 1.3 details some of the key messages described in those reports.

Box 1.3 Early mapping of Children's Fund partnerships' work on children and young people's participation

A number of messages emerging from early work with all 149 Children's Fund partnerships concerning participation were outlined in the *Early Messages from Developing Practice* report (NECF, 2003). Key messages include:

There was a concern to find ways of working towards meaningful participation, and to avoid tokenism and misrepresentation.

Representative participation, involving diverse communities of children and young people proved challenging.

Limited time scales clashed with the need for careful preparation and confidence building.

Participation can require considerable local cultural change and this has not been an easy process for some partnerships.

A range of skills and knowledge was being built within the Children's Fund, which could usefully inform wider practice developments in participation.

The key learning points which emerged from the mapping of children and young people's participatory activities across the 149 partnerships are described in *Developing Collaboration in Preventative Services for Children and Young People: NECF First Annual Report 2003* (NECF, 2004a). These can be summarised as follows:

Partnerships are working hard at achieving participation, but it is a slow and careful process, recognising the need to move beyond consultation in a way that has some influence and is appropriate.

The presence of children, young people or their carers on partnership boards is relatively rare. Nonetheless, Partnerships have put in place a range of other structures to ensure engagement at a strategic level with the work of local programmes, often as a strategic response to concerns about 'tokenism'. This includes participation in decisions to commission services.

Dedicated participation workers are employed by at least a third of partnerships.

At an operational level there are examples of children and young people being involved in local evaluation and in the recruitment of programme staff.

Pressures of time and resources may impact upon the mainstreaming of participation and participatory approaches to the development of services for children and families.

1.5 Summary points

Key points arising from previous studies of participation in the UK include:

> Considerable participation activity is currently in evidence across a range of organisations across the UK. There is, however, concern that children and young people's views have had limited overall impact in decisions about public services.
> Challenges to effective participation include investing sufficient time and resources, ensuring children and young people are representative of different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and that they are genuinely empowered through their involvement.
> Organisations take a number of stances on participation that have implications for changing organisational cultures and practices.

Key issues relating to the promotion of children, young people, parents and carers' participation within the Children's Fund include:

> The Children's Fund Guidance states that the participation of children, young people and families is a guiding principle of the initiative. The Guidance broadly reflects the three purposes identified in the CYPU's publication *Learning to Listen* (2001a); that is, better services, promoting citizenship and social inclusion; personal and social education and development.
> There is considerable latitude for partnerships to adopt locally appropriate and innovative forms of children and young people's participation activities.
> Early NECF evidence suggests that the principles of children and young people's participation have been widely embraced across partnerships and points to the adoption of a diverse range of approaches to enabling and catalysing participation.

CHAPTER TWO

The purposes, strategies and activities for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation in the case study partnerships

Based on NECF evidence from the first six case study partnerships, this section highlights stakeholders' different rationales relating to the purposes, aims and benefits of children, young people, parents and carers' participation. The views of stakeholders from strategic and Children's Fund project levels are compared, as are the accounts of children and young people themselves.

Based on the approaches taken by these partnerships, it is possible to develop preliminary models of approaches to children, young people and parents' participation. Drawing on the three purposes of participation identified in *Learning to Listen* (CYPU, 2001a), namely better services; promoting citizenship and social inclusion; and personal and social education and development, the models categorise the rationales for participation and link these to the strategies and approaches adopted by partnerships at strategic and service levels. Robust models of children, young people, parents and carers' participation will be developed as part the ongoing analysis of evaluation evidence from all of NECF's eighteen case study partnerships.

Children's Fund partnerships have employed a diverse range of strategies and activities for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation at strategic and project levels. Appendix 2 summarises key activities employed by the six partnerships. The table illustrates the breadth of participation activity rather than comprehensively reviewing all activities across the partnerships.

2.1 The purposes, strategies and activities for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation: strategic level

There is a range of different rationales for children, young people and parents' participation among strategic stakeholders across and within the case study partnerships. Correspondingly there is a range of strategies and activities partnerships have adopted to work on participation.

In a number of case study partnerships, disparate notions of the concept and practice of participation were evident and some stakeholders did not have a clear understanding of how participation activities would translate into the development of local approaches to tackling social exclusion. A number of stakeholders indicated that they had a limited knowledge and understanding of the issues relating to children and young people's participation prior to the Children's Fund. These stakeholders also had a limited knowledge and understanding of the development of the participation agenda through the work of the initiative.

It was apparent in some partnerships that participatory activities tended to be confined to key members of boards and/or participation officers; hence stakeholders not directly involved tended to have limited knowledge of the work programme and consequently of the issues surrounding children and young people's participation.

Table 2.1 shows three distinct models of the approaches partnerships have taken to participation at strategic level; the rationales for participation are linked to the strategies and activities and the number of partnerships adopting each model are shown. It is important to note, however, that the relationship between the different rationales and strategies adopted is dynamic in that rationales do not always map directly onto particular strategies and participation activities and the case study partnerships' are developing new ways of working on participation on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, the work of individual partnerships tends to overlap more than one model, hence the numbers presented in Table 2.1 total more than six partnerships.

The most widely cited purpose of participation corresponds with **informing the development of partnerships' programmes of work and Children's Fund service planning and delivery through consultation**. Stakeholders from all six case study partnerships tended to emphasise this approach. The benefit of participation was seen predominantly in terms of Children's Fund programmes responding to children, young people, parents and carers' perspectives as well as developing more effective Children's Fund services that reflect service users' views.

From this perspective, agencies and organisations are seen as benefiting from participation in the short term. In the longer term children, young people, parents and carers are seen to benefit through improved, more appropriate services. Reflecting this view, a board member from a case study partnership said: '*If effective services are the desired goal then stakeholders must listen to children, young people and their families*'.

Four of the six case study partnerships had invested dedicated time and resources in the post of a **participation officer** as a member of their central team and saw this role as a key means for working on participation strategically across the partnership. The mapping of participation activities across all 149 Children's Fund partnerships found that dedicated participation workers were a key strategy adopted by at least a third of all Children's Fund partnerships (NECF, 2004a). In the two case study partnerships in which children and young people and parents/carers were not directly involved in the governance of the partnership board, the participation officer was regarded as representing children, young people, parents and carers' views on the board and as a champion for the participation agenda. In these partnerships, the participation officer was seen by members of the partnership board as primarily responsible for developing the participation strategy for the partnership.

The two case study partnerships which did not employ a participation officer as a member of their central team instead adopted a service model approach to participation, employing a participation worker within a host agency to lead a participation project.

Table 2.1
Models of participation at strategic level in the six case study partnerships

Model	Number of partnerships	Rationale for participation	Activities at strategic level
1. Programme development model	6	Informing planning & development of Children's Fund programmes at strategic level	Consultation; Communication, promotion & awareness; Networking & multi-agency working
2. Citizenship & rights model	4	Increased political engagement & citizenship. Moral responsibility to fulfil children's rights to participate in all decisions affecting them	Direct participation of children & young people & in some instances parents/carers in the partnership management; Participation in commissioning services; Participation in staff recruitment
3. Resilience, capacity & empowerment model	2	Building the resilience & capacity of children, young people, parents & carers. Aims to empower children, young people & families & participation is seen as an approach to the prevention of social exclusion	Direct participation of children & young people & in some instances parents/carers in the partnership management; Direct involvement of children, young people & parents/carers in wider decision-making processes beyond the Children's Fund

Strategic stakeholders from four of the case study partnerships saw the rationale for participation as **increased political engagement, citizenship, social inclusion of children, young people, parents and carers, and fulfilling children's rights to participate** (although they also saw participation as informing the Children's Fund programme and service planning and delivery). In these partnerships, children and young people tended to be directly involved in partnerships' decision-making and other activities such as commissioning services and staff recruitment at strategic level.

Of the four partnerships falling into the citizenship and rights model, two partnerships also appear to embrace the resilience, capacity and empowerment model at strategic level. In these partnerships children, young people, parents and carers have participated in partnership management and in processes beyond the Fund itself. Both the second and third models embrace a relatively broad definition of participation that encompasses the empowerment of children and young people, parents and carers, and building their resilience to prevent social exclusion. Hence, some stakeholders perceived participation both as a means to achieve change and as an outcome in itself. For example, a board member from a VCS organisation said:

> *So there's a whole sort of plus in terms of their developing self esteem now whether it's to express themselves, their confidence in adults and I guess also there's something about youngsters ability to, it actually enhances youngsters ability to make use of opportunities that adults provide, it might help give them tools, you know in the educational world and school, with their parents possibly. Even the local community where they live.*

Similarly, a participation officer commented:

> *It's positive experiences that they wouldn't have otherwise have had and for them to get the notion that they are important and their opinions do matter.*

2.2 The purposes, strategies and activities for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation: Children's Fund project level

Table 2.2 shows three distinct models of the approaches partnerships have taken to participation at project level. The rationales for participation are linked to the strategies and activities and the number of partnerships adopting each model are shown. As with the strategic level, the relationship between the different rationales and strategies adopted is dynamic and rationales do not always map onto particular participation activities. The work of individual partnerships tends to overlap with more than one model, hence the numbers presented in Table 2.2 total more than six partnerships.

As with strategic stakeholders, service providers' accounts of the purposes, aims and benefits of children, young people, parents and carers' participation were diverse. The most widely held understanding of participation among service providers from five of the six case study partnerships is **the participation of children, young people, parents and carers to inform service planning and delivery**. This rationale corresponds to strategies such as consultation and planning of activities with groups of children who are service users; involvement of individual children, young people, parents and carers in the design of individual support plans and needs assessments.

Table 2.2

Models of participation at project level in the six case study partnerships

Model	Number of partnerships	Rationale for participation	Strategies at project level
1. Service planning & delivery model	5	Informing the planning & delivery of Children's Fund services	Consultation; Planning & delivery of services and activities; Involvement of children, young people, parents & carers in evaluation of services
2.Citizenship & rights model	2	Increased political engagement & citizenship. Moral responsibility to fulfil children's rights to participate in all decisions affecting them	Direct participation of children, young people & parents/carers in management of projects
3. Resilience, capacity & empowerment model	3	Building the resilience and capacity of children, young people, parents & carers. Aims to empower children, young people & families & participation is seen as an approach to the prevention of social exclusion	Direct participation of children, young people, parents/carers in management of projects; Child-led & parent-led conferences; Mentoring younger children & involving young people & parents as volunteer workers; Support to projects from central teams; Training statutory agency staff in participatory practice

Service providers from two partnerships saw the rationale for participation in terms of **increased political engagement, citizenship and social inclusion of children, young people and families and a commitment to fulfilling children's rights to participate in all decisions affecting them**. This rationale (as with strategic stakeholders) was often linked to and moving towards the third rationale of **building the resilience and capacity of children, young people, parents and carers and aiming to empower them**. Service providers in three partnerships perceived the rationale for participation in these terms.

Service providers who perceived the rationale in terms of models two and three saw the participation of children, young people, parents and carers as a key focus of activity. They were **developing structures and processes to directly involve children and young people as equal partners in the planning, development and evaluation of services as an alternative to simply consulting them.** This represents moving towards the goal of what is often termed *co-configuration*, where children, young people and parents/carers are involved as equal partners in developing responsive services according to their needs and aspirations.

Many of these service providers facilitated children and young people and parents/carers' participation in the management, planning, delivery and occasionally, in the evaluation of services. Service users were also responsible for planning, organising, delivering and evaluating conferences for other service users.

A notable example is the children's management committee of a project working with children of multiple heritage that organised a conference for 150 other children of multiple heritage from schools across the local authority. When they were allocated a sum of money to spend as they chose, the children's management committee had the idea of a conference to give children of multiple heritage the space to discuss issues of concern to them as well as have fun meeting other children of multiple heritage backgrounds. Project workers supported them in planning and delivering the conference, with additional support from the Children's Fund core team.

Another example of a project that is attempting *co-configuration* in terms of designing services with children and families as equal partners in response to their identified needs is a play care project for disabled children that supported a parent-led conference. The project offered training and capacity building to parents to enable them to plan and facilitate the conference for other parents of disabled children. The parents also collated evaluation forms and wrote up a report of the conference.

Some Children's Fund services were involving children and young people in service delivery, for example as mentors and peer educators for younger children or as volunteers in play settings. These activities were seen by some stakeholders as a means to promoting children and young people's personal and social education and development. Hence, participation is a way of empowering and promoting the resilience of children, young people, parents and carers and to give children and young people experiences that they may find beneficial later in life. Illustrating this view, a Children's Fund service provider said:

> *I've got a goal in life for this project it is to get children's participation embedded in all areas, that has to be my ultimate goal. But on par with that is about building*

the children's knowledge and understanding of their rights, their local communities and how they can affect them, and that means building confidence and self-esteem, which tends to happen along the way to be honest, but I think they are the main things… it's very much about providing them with a variety of experiences and opportunities that they just would not have, and if in doing that we can also give them knowledge and understanding of, you know, how they can affect things and how things work in their local area…

2.3 Children, young people, parents and carers' perceptions of participation

Children and young people, parents and carers participating in projects in some of the case study partnerships perceived the benefits of participation predominantly in terms of personal empowerment and social development through increased confidence, gaining new skills, meeting new people and improved interpersonal skills. Box 2.1 provides a number of quotations from children, young people, parents and carers' participating in Children's Fund activities that illustrate these perceived benefits. Gaining confidence appears to be particularly important, as is helping others through participation. New skills recognised by children and young people and their parents include interviewing, writing and public speaking. Broadly these experiences appear to be building the resilience of the children and young people participating in Children's Fund activities.

Box 2.1 Children, young people, parents and carers' perceptions of the benefits of participation

Children participating in recruitment of staff for a large VCS organisation in one case study partnership, writing newsletters, and interviewing 'important people' felt that they had gained in confidence as a result of their participation. A young person commented:

…this has given me more confidence…because I used to be quite shy and now I don't mind talking in public and being the editor. I used to like I would rather sit in a corner alone and read a book but now I would rather shout out and talk to people and stuff because of doing the interviews and stuff has made me want to talk more…

A young person saw the benefits of participating in a project in terms of increased confidence, meeting people, and providing an opportunity to be involved in activities which she would not usually have done:

It really has made my confidence. It has brought more people into my life and made more friends and I feel more happy going places instead of being stuck in or say it is like a cold day or something….and instead of going out playing I can go and do something else, like to [the participation officer]'s office and write a newsletter.

Others saw the benefits of participating in strategic activities such as staff recruitment in terms of helping to bring about change for other children. As one young person commented:

I like doing the interviews and stuff because you know you are going to make a change for loads of different people, that you are making a good change for maybe some of the children that they are going to be working with and you are doing something good for someone, like you are giving them something new in their life and giving them change as well. It is like giving people a chance to change.

A parent saw the benefits of her children's participation in terms of developing social skills and confidence:

If anything I would say they have got more confident. I wouldn't have thought a couple of years ago that [my daughter] would have quite happily done interviews… interviewing adults for their jobs…and [my son and daughter] have done that and I wouldn't have thought they would have done that...a few years ago.

2.4 Summary points

There is a diverse range of interpretations of participation among strategic and service provider stakeholders and among children, young people, parents and carers. These can be categorised as follows:

> Informing the development of Children's Fund programmes at strategic level and informing Children's Fund service planning and delivery through consultation and through *co-configuration*, that is more direct involvement of children and young people;
> Increased political engagement, citizenship and social inclusion of children, young people, parents and carers;
> Building the resilience and capacity of children, young people, parents and carers. The aim of empowering children, young people and families through participation is seen as an approach to the prevention of social exclusion.

Stakeholders' definitions therefore appear to reflect the three purposes of participation identified in *Learning to Listen* (CYPU, 2001a), namely better services; promoting citizenship and social inclusion; and personal and social education and development.

Whilst stakeholders' perceptions of participation were diverse, the following broad differences between strategic stakeholders, service providers and children, young people, parents and carers' accounts were apparent:

> **Strategic stakeholders** tended to perceive the benefits of participation in terms of informing the development of the Children's Fund programmes and improved

service planning and delivery through consultation. Some stakeholders' accounts, however, revealed perceptions of the benefits as improved children and young people's citizenship, social inclusion and engagement in the community and personal and social education and development. These partnerships adopted direct participation of children and young people and/or parents/carers in partnership management and/or wider decision-making processes beyond the Children Fund as well as activities such as commissioning services and staff recruitment.

Service providers similarly tended to emphasise participation as informing improved service planning and delivery through consultation. Some service providers, however, indicated that potential benefits include promoting children and young people's empowerment and building resilience through giving children and young people experiences that they may find beneficial later in life. These partnerships contained projects that adopted children, young peoples and parents/carers' direct participation in the management of projects and activities such as child-led and parent-led conferences and mentoring.

Children, young people, parents and carers' perceptions of the benefits of participation were predominantly focused on personal and social education and development. Hence, the focus was on empowerment and building their resilience and that of others.

Partnerships have employed various strategies and activities that correspond to the predominant rationales in evidence at strategic and service level. The rationales, strategies and activities adopted by each partnership, however, tend to fall within more than one of the three models presented in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. Moreover, partnerships' work on participation is developing on an ongoing basis, hence this area of activity is subject to rapid change.

CHAPTER THREE

Children, young people, parents and carers' participation in practice in the case study partnerships

As the previous chapters suggest, considerable commitment exists among case study partnerships to the principles of effective participation within programmes and services. However, it was evident that the benefits of work towards children and young people's participation had not always been realised in the short term. Partnerships' work programmes around children and young people's participation is also developing on an ongoing basis. A number of factors inhibit the development of children and young people's participation. These stem from expectations of the Children's Fund at national level, factors relating to partner agencies and the challenges of developing participatory activities with diverse communities.

This chapter examines case study partnerships' work on participation in practice. The discussion focuses on stakeholders' accounts of the effectiveness of different forms of participation in practice and highlights key challenges at both strategic and project levels. The chapter starts with a brief review of the implications of Children's Fund requirements at national level for partnerships' work on children, young people, parents and carers' participation.

3.1 Children's Fund requirements at national level

The Children's Fund *Guidance* (CYPU, 2001b) sets out an ambitious agenda for the development of children and young people's participation. The Guidance suggests that children and young people should be engaged both from the outset of Children's Fund programmes as well as on an ongoing basis at a number of different levels.

An overarching tension appears to stem from these requirements. The need to invest time and resources in children and young people's participation is acknowledged in the Guidance: '*Involving children and young people and sustaining that involvement takes time and investment of resources in itself*' (CYPU, 2001b: 59). The importance of investing time and resources in developing mechanisms and capacities to facilitate effective and sustainable children and young people's participation and to avoid possible tokenism was also recognised among stakeholders from case study partnerships. There is an acknowledgement that investment may be needed in areas such as preparing children, young people and families for participation, building capacities within service provider agencies and achieving changes in organisational cultures and professional attitudes to children and young people's participation.

Stakeholders were also conscious of the pressure to meet government objectives within short timeframes with relatively limited resources. Partnerships have balanced ideal forms of participation with those that are achievable within time frames and with limited resources. Relatively idealistic views held by stakeholders at the outset were replaced with more realistic expectations. This issue affects the Children's Fund initiative as a whole, as highlighted in previous studies of Children's Fund Partnerships' activities (NECF, 2003; Craig, McNamee and Wilkinson, 2004).

In response to limited timeframes and resources, partnerships have made some compromises in developing their work on children and young people's participation. A member of a partnership board from a VCS organisation suggested:

I think you can get some quick wins in terms of participation, consultation, whatever… [but] I'm not convinced that they've kind of got down to it yet in terms of more in-depth processes, but I think they are working on it and they've certainly got a structure for that…

A statutory manager from that partnership suggested that compromises had to be made in the early stages of the development of the partnership, although it should be noted that participation activities had developed since the interview:

… [it] can be quite a difficult process and time consuming so it's kind of, well shall we do or just take them bowling and ask them these little questionnaires, what did you enjoy on your day out and all the rest of it, which is very [tokenistic] *and not really involving young people. So that's how I feel the Children's Fund have done it.*

Some stakeholders from another partnership reported that resources had restricted the numbers of children and young people participating in various activities they had facilitated. A number of stakeholders also indicated that they felt that the rapidly changing policy context and atmosphere of uncertainty in relation to Children's Fund budget allocations had compromised levels of involvement of children, young people and families over the last year. Stakeholders from another partnership suggested that insecure funding and uncertainties around the maintenance of funding levels have constituted barriers to effective planning and potentially the loss of experience and learning around children and young people's participation.

3.2 Participating in strategic processes in practice

There was widespread commitment among stakeholders in the six case study partnerships to avoid tokenism and involve children and young people in the work of the partnership at a level that could genuinely influence change. However, while there tended to be some ambition in the early stages of the initiative to involve children and young people fully in partnership board meetings, some partnerships recognised that participation had been more difficult to implement than was originally expected.

Indeed, some partnerships had come to a decision that involving children and young people and parents/carers effectively in strategic decision-making processes at board level would be inappropriate since it was too challenging and time-consuming. One participation officer said:

…for me it's not appropriate for children to attend partnership board meetings. And probably not for parents either, you know. And the only way you can do that then is to sort of represent the children yourselves… We do sort of report [children's views]… back to the partnership board. And hopefully that gets fed into the services that we provide.

A number of factors were identified by stakeholders that had influenced their attempts to work on children, young people, parents and carers' participation in practice.

3.2.1 Partner agencies' perspectives on participation

Directly involving children, young people, parents and carers as equal members in the management of partnership boards challenges traditional approaches to strategic decision-making and has the potential to involve considerable shifts in the balance of power and responsibility. Some stakeholders emphasised that their partnerships had experienced resistance to children and young people's participation from some partner agencies.

A number of stakeholders commented that the hesitation of some agencies in embracing the participation agenda relates to the perception that children and young people's involvement represents a potential challenge to professionals' power. These apprehensions tend to be linked to stakeholders' limited experience and knowledge of the issues relating to children and young people's participation. An interviewee working in a key position on participation in a case study partnership said:

> *People are frightened of working with children basically… there is still that kind of "give them an inch and they'll take a mile" stuff. People find all sorts of reasons for not including kids, [such as] they're too young; they'll be silly.*

Strategic stakeholders from one partnership indicated that whilst the principle of children and young people's participation is generally accepted, there had been resistance from some members of the board as well as from some mainstream professionals not directly involved in the Children's Fund. This resistance was explained as stemming from apprehensions about sharing power with children and young people combined with a lack of experience in involving them in decision-making processes. The participation officer from that partnership described professional cultures among some statutory agencies as being: '*… risk averse… [and a]… daddy knows best…*' culture. A number of interviewees from the same partnership expressed the view that some VCS organisations tend to embrace relatively flexible working practices compared to the statutory sector, were more responsive to the communities that use their services and were more prepared to adopt innovative working practices.

Some stakeholders from another partnership were concerned about what influence children and young people's views would actually have on decision making and whether adults would have the ultimate veto over them. These stakeholders were clearly concerned about professionals and agencies relinquishing too much control to non-professionals, communities, children and young people. A Connexions manager, who was a member of one partnership board said:

> *If you do it right, you're going to be challenged and the structures are going to be challenged… I would hazard a guess that there would be a lot of resistance, good god, yes. A lot of resistance to consulting… adults, never mind young people, so yes, it's just a guess, yes, there'd be a lot of resistance.*

Stakeholders from another partnership suggested that the limited collective experience of children and young people's participation among agencies across the local authority area had presented the partnership with both difficulties and opportunities for developing the work programme. This low baseline means that the Fund has the potential to make a relatively big impact on the agenda across the local authority area. However, a number of stakeholders reflected on the fact that it may take time to engage agencies and organisations in the ethos of children and young people's participation and to prepare and engage agencies in the process. One senior stakeholder from a large VCS organisation said:

... the preparation to get a meaningful involvement from children is time-consuming. It also takes time to move people to a place where they value that involvement. The cultural shift takes a while. I think that has happened. I do not mean everywhere, but there has certainly been a significant shift.

It was suggested by a senior strategic stakeholder from another partnership that commitment and knowledge need *not* be mutually exclusive. The stakeholder described a '... consistency of intent but deficit in knowledge'; hence stakeholders across sectors and agencies in the partnership appear to be willing to learn from each other.

3.2.2 Children, young people, parents and carers' motivations to participate in strategic processes

A number of strategic level stakeholders also had some reservations about children, young people, parents and carers' motivations to engage in the process. Some stakeholders did not think that children and young people would actually want to be engaged in the complex issues involved with decision-making at strategic level. Illustrating this view, a VCS stakeholder said:

At the end of the day [members of the board]... are there to make fairly serious strategic decisions about the way things are done and that would bore the life out of many kids; it certainly would have bored me.

The same interviewee also raised a key concern regarding whether children, young people, parents and carers could have an impact on strategic, local authority-wide issues and decisions when their motivation for participating tended to be based on a limited number of single, local issues that concern them. Hence, it was suggested, they might be better engaged in local-level issues:

They really only inform a local strategy, not the over-arching strategy on [an authority-wide] basis... how much these children and their parents have driven the overall strategy and agenda of the Children's Fund... I would question whether they have much impact at all.

3.2.3 Managing participants' expectations

In partnerships in which children, young people, parents and carers were actively involved in strategic decision-making at board level, stakeholders emphasised the importance of being clear about the limits of their participation. Stakeholders from

one partnership highlighted the tension between involving children and young people in decision-making and managing contradictions between their views and current policy agendas.

The importance of providing clear parameters and guidelines about what children and young people are able to influence was recognised in order to avoid potential disappointment if their views could not be acted upon. Board members from one partnership suggested that by enabling children, young people, parents and carers to define the extent of responsibility that they were comfortable with, agreement on the level of their responsibility could be reached. As an interviewee from a central staff team suggested, children do not necessarily want full responsibility when it comes to making decisions, just: '… *a fair crack of it*'.

Another related issue raised by stakeholders was the importance of feeding back to children and young people about the impact of their participation. One partnership sought to address this issue by developing a communications strategy. This included six-monthly child-friendly newsletters as well as newsletters aimed at adult stakeholders to report on the results of the consultation events and the ways that agencies were acting on children and young people's views.

3.2.4 Adapting strategic processes to facilitate children, young people, parents and carers' participation

One of the barriers to children and young people's participation identified in several case study partnerships was conventional, professional styles of meetings and the use of inaccessible language. A stakeholder from a Social Services department commented on conventional styles of meeting:

> *Children hated it. It was adult terms and it was adult times and it was adult business, and no matter how much you tried to make it child-friendly there was still the business that you had to do that the children found boring.*

Likewise, stakeholders from a partnership that had attempted to work with parents and carers in strategic processes suggested that professional ways of working and meeting had been a barrier to their engagement. The problem of availability of parents and carers during conventional working hours was also noted as an issue that had to be considered when working in this way.

Nevertheless a number of partnerships adopted measures to ensure the language, structure, and meeting environment were more accessible to children, young people, parents and carers. For example, the practical measures taken to engage children, young people, parents and carers in strategic processes by one partnership are described in Box 3.1.

> **Box 3.1 Measures taken by a case study partnership to engage children, young people, parents and carers in strategic processes**
>
> A case study partnership employed child-friendly and jargon-free language in order to overcome the potential for meetings to be uninteresting to children, young people and parents/carers. To enforce this, a system was applied whereby any board member, including children, young people and families, could hold up a *yellow card* if they felt inappropriate language was being used. The participation officer facilitated children and young people and families' participation by ensuring that they were actively drawn into discussions in ways that they could relate to. Considerable use was made of flip charts to simplify, clarify and summarise issues and concepts and ensure that children, young people and families understood the implications of certain decisions for potential service users.
>
> Other ways the partnership had sought to engage children include arranging seating in order to make the settings for meetings more informal and to allow children and young people's access to drawing materials and other activities during meetings. This was found to be particularly useful for younger siblings who were welcome to attend meetings. Meetings were arranged at times that fit appropriately around the school day and were generally longer than they might be if children, young people and families were not present, in order to ensure that issues were fully understood and discussed by all participants.
>
> Increasing the accessibility of meetings demonstrates an acknowledgement on the part of board members of the need to make considerable changes in the way that business is conducted in order to effectively involve children, young people and families at this level. One board member from a VCS organisation described how he now comes to meetings '… *with a different head on…*', accepting that longer, more cumbersome meetings are '… *the sacrifice you have to make for real participation*'.

Where attempts had been made to make board meetings more participatory in style, stakeholders suggested that children and families have been instrumental in making genuine strategic decisions, including those relating to decisions over budget allocations. Board members from one partnership felt that participants in a children and young people's forum had been involved in making '*... real and meaningful...*' decisions such as participating in the recruitment of the programme manager, the appraisal of funding applications and administration of a community grant scheme. In another partnership, children involved in a commissioning sub-group of the board played a key role in deciding which commissioning model would be both effective and user-friendly.

3.3 Participation in Children's Fund projects in practice

3.3.1 Building capacity within Children's Fund projects

The case study partnerships have promoted various children, young people, parents and carers' participation in the design, delivery and evaluation of projects. A number

of partnerships recognised the need for training and organisational capacity building to develop skills and help to build cultures of participation among service providers.

In some partnerships, participation officers offered on-going support to help some projects develop participative approaches with the children and young people they were working with. One partnership conducted a participation audit of all service providers to assess approaches and levels of participation and agreed action points to build on existing practice. Another partnership conducted an audit of training opportunities on children and young people's participation across the city to identify existing opportunities and training needs.

However, stakeholders suggested that varying degrees of support are provided by Children's Fund staff teams to help projects develop this aspect of their practice. In one partnership in which limited support was made available to Children's Fund projects by their central team to develop participation work, children and young people's participation in service development was limited. As the programme manager admitted:

> *I can't see, even in this round of re-commissioning, that [projects]… are involving young people on appointments for workers, or how they are designing or shaping up what's coming.*

3.3.2 Building relationships between project staff and children and young people

A number of project workers emphasised that the level of trust and familiarity that children and young people developed with project workers over time had a positive influence on levels of participation that could be achieved in Children's Fund services. Within one case study partnership stakeholders commented on the importance of project workers' skills in engaging children and young people and sustaining their involvement over a period of time. A representative from a large VCS organisation said:

> *… there is a worker who is dedicated to doing that, who has made ways of contacting children, whether it be within schools or the communities or wherever it might be, various mechanisms for getting in touch with children. And keeping those children engaged with the process by helping them to contribute in a way that is fun for them. And it's been down to the skills of that worker; she has made it work.*

Some children and young people's accounts also highlighted the importance of the relationship that they are able to develop with project staff in helping them feel that they are being listened to and understood. Indeed, some children and young people and parents/carers who participated in projects pointed to the role of particular project workers as being crucial in encouraging them to become involved and increasing the level of their participation. One young person commented about the project staff: '*They know what I mean when I say stuff, instead of most grown-ups*'.

Project workers from another case study partnership working with children and young people in interim accommodation involved the children and young people in an on-going, informal process of planning play activities. However, project workers felt that

it was inappropriate to involve children and young people and parents/carers in long term planning and participation strategies and in the recruitment of staff. Project workers commented that this was due to the families' high level of need, a lack of trust of 'authority figures' and the short-term nature of their involvement in the project, since they tended to move from interim accommodation after a period of a few months.

Furthermore, a stakeholder suggested that while champions of participation are important in encouraging service users' participation on a personal level, there is also a need to develop mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of participation work. This would ensure that momentum is not lost when key workers leave their posts.

3.3.3 Children and young people's influence on project activities

Despite the challenges in developing approaches to participation at project level, there are many examples of promising participatory practice. It is evident that children and young people involved in a number of projects were actively participating in decision-making processes and they had had some influence on shaping project activities. For example, a project worker from a residential care project commented:

> *The group is as much as is possible for kids, is a sort of self-directed so they have control of the budget and stuff, we try and get everybody to be involved in what the group's going to do throughout the period weeks - how the budget is going to be spent.*

Service providers felt that when children and young people were involved in decision-making processes as equal partners, they were able to have a real impact on service provision either on an individual or collective basis. Another worker from a residential care project commented on how children and young people's participation in making a video about their perspectives of the service was benefiting other children who were potential service users:

> *Three or four years ago, the children were saying that one of the issues is that when you go out to talk to people about the service, you are just telling it from an adult perspective and so we got some funding and they made a video here of what the service is like. [Because] the children did this, we are actually able to show that to children that are thinking of coming.*

Likewise, a young person participating in a mentoring project had seen changes arising from participants' suggestions:

> *I've seen a few changes because I was telling [the project worker] about... we could have a few [football] matches, instead of doing the training… and then, the next week, we were arranging matches and that.*

3.4 Ensuring good representation of children and young people in participation activities

Many stakeholders are conscious of the importance of ensuring that children and young people involved in participation activities are representative of differences in

gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic and home background and geographical area rather than just older, articulate, middle class young people.

A number of case study partnerships had made attempt to ensure participatory activities included a good representation of children and young people. For example, one senior local authority stakeholder commented:

> I've asked, you know, are we making sure that it's not just the children that have got the money and the parents that have got the drive and the ambition who encourage their children to do it? [But]... there have been children that have gone on these events where they have had to go to a neighbour to borrow shoes to go. So it has involved some children from quite poor backgrounds.

Particular concerns were expressed by Participation Officers and other strategic stakeholders about relying on older children at the top end of the Children's Fund age range to participate in decision-making processes. Engaging children aged five to eight years was perceived as more challenging than the older age group and most case study partnerships have focused on involving the latter. This issue has also been highlighted across Children's Fund programmes nationally (Craig, McNamee and Wilkinson, 2004).

However, in one partnership, younger children had participated alongside older children in strategic decision-making through a children and young people's forum. Strategic stakeholders felt that the forum had demonstrated good practice in engaging younger children in decision-making processes and set an example for wider public decision-making structures beyond the Children's Fund, such as the local area forums. One stakeholder anticipated that the work of the children and young people's forum and a child-led conference organised by the forum would:

> ... wake people up a bit and ...they will think more about that younger age group [and] what they need... you know because for years and years [the focus] has been ...eleven, thirteen kind of upwards.

Indeed, that partnership has worked on securing places for younger children on these forums to sustain and mainstream the children's involvement beyond Children's Fund decision-making structures.

Stakeholders from the case study partnerships identified groups that service providers have found traditionally difficult to engage such as children and young people with complex learning difficulties, challenging behaviour and autism. Partnership board members recognised that considerable time, energy and resources need to be invested in order to draw these children and young people into participation activities which go beyond the difficult task of effective consultation. In one partnership, project workers working with children with disabilities identified the need for more careful planning of large Children's Fund consultation events, so that children with diverse needs are able to fully participate in activities within a safe and inclusive environment.

Stakeholders from case study partnerships also pointed out that they had found children and young people from some black and minority ethnic groups, including those from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds, traditionally difficult to engage in

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participative activities. Partnership board members suggested that these difficulties may stem from differences in language or cultural issues.

The geographical size of local authority areas was also noted as a potential factor inhibiting the representative engagement of children and young people, parents and carers. Large counties create difficulties since this potentially involves considerable travelling time and costs to participate. This has particular implications for engagement at a strategic level since meetings tend to take place centrally because this is where most strategic professionals work. This arrangement, however, has excluded children and young people who live in more remote areas from participating.

It was clear that stakeholders were conscious of the need to find a balance between developing effective ways of engaging a representative cross-section of children and young people, which included those whom service providers have traditionally found it difficult to engage, whilst acknowledging the resource implications and their difficulties in seeking the views of some groups.

3.5 Summary points

An overarching contradiction stems from the short-term need to roll out the Children's Fund programme rapidly and the need to invest time and resources to develop effective participation strategies to involve children, young people, parents and carers in the development of the work.

Whilst recognising the challenges of developing effective approaches to participation, partnerships demonstrate considerable commitment to develop this aspect of their programmes. The partnerships have, however, needed to make a number of compromises such as limiting the forms of participatory activities supported at strategic and project levels and the numbers of children, young people, parents and carers participating.

The development of children, young people, parents and carers' participation has challenged the thinking of some agencies, which had previously demonstrated some resistance to the agenda. Whilst changing organisational cultures may take time, there appears to be considerable progress in promoting the participation agenda.

Some stakeholders believe that children and young people may be better placed participating in local level processes since they may have limited engagement with strategic, authority-wide issues.

The importance of providing clear guidelines about what children and young people are able to influence was recognised.

Conventional, professional styles of meetings and the use of inaccessible language were recognised as barriers to participation in strategic processes. A number of partnerships have adopted measures to ensure the language, structure and meeting environments were more accessible to children, young people, parents and carers, and these appeared to have facilitated their participation.

Providing training and organisational capacity building to develop project workers' skills and help to build cultures of participation among service providers has been an important activity in some partnerships.

Relationships developed between project workers and children, young people, parents and carers based on trust and familiarity over time have a positive influence on the levels of participation that could be achieved.

Ensuring children and young people involved in participation activities are representative of differences in gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic and home background and geographical area continues to be challenge to partnerships. Nevertheless some partnerships have attempted to engage children and young people who service providers have traditionally found difficult to engage in participatory activities.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mainstreaming the participation agenda

This chapter discusses the ways in which the six case study partnerships have attempted to broaden the impact of their participation activities and strategies with the aim of influencing children's services beyond the initiative. The partnerships are aiming to 'mainstream' elements of their work around children, young people, parents and carers' participation, although mainstreaming has been defined in a number of different ways and this has influenced the strategies and approaches that have been adopted.

4.1 Interpretations of mainstreaming children, young people, parents and carers' participation

A number of ways of understanding mainstreaming are identified in the document *Developing Preventative Services: Children's Fund Strategic Plan Framework 2005 – 2008*. These include:

    (a) **Sustainability of services:** ensuring that where appropriate there is continuity in the delivery of preventative services with special consideration of voluntary service providers;

    (b) **Embedding good practice in new local structures:** ensuring that good practice is embedded into those services and there are processes in place to learn the lessons from practice and disseminate them to all services and sectors;

    (c) **Cultural changes:** ensuring that early interventions and prevention for vulnerable 5-13 year old children and families in a multi-agency context continues to be a priority for service commissioning and development in the long term (DfES, 2004).

These approaches to understanding mainstreaming appear to be consistent with the ways case study partnerships' are thinking about mainstreaming their work on children and young people's participation. Some examples of the ways the six partnerships are focusing on this area of their work are identified below.

Sustainability: There are a number of examples of partnerships that are aiming to make specific activities around children and young people's participation sustainable. One partnership has adopted a system whereby children and young people are involved in the recruitment of staff in children's services. The activity has been funded within the statutory sector and is becoming more widespread.

Embedding good practice: A number of partnerships have attempted to embed good practice within organisations. In one partnership the participation officer trained teachers to involve children in decision-making in schools, including interviewing skills for the recruitment of staff. The participation officer emphasised the importance of embedding such capacities and practices within organisations so that his input is eventually not required.

In another partnership, a self-assessed *Children's Charter Standards in Participation* document has been developed and implemented by a multi-agency participation group, which has been given added impetus through the work of the participation officer. This partnership is also involved in developing a local authority-wide participation strategy with the *Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Board* and other multi-agency groups and has established a network of professionals working with children and young people in participation projects across the authority area. This network was set up with a view to sharing good practice and learning with other project staff across the area.

Cultural changes: Influencing organisations' cultures of children and young people's participation is an important part of the work of some partnerships. A number of strategic stakeholders from one partnership felt that their direct experience of working with children and young people on strategic elements of the programme had been beneficial in that this experience allowed them to influence the participation agendas in their own agencies.

This approach to mainstreaming participation was 'high on the agenda' in another partnership and was seen as preventive work in itself. The participation strand of work in this partnership involved projects working on building the capacity of services within and beyond the Children's Fund initiative to develop participatory practice. A central team member from that case study partnership indicated that the initiative had been an 'agent for change' in service culture:

> *I think what Children's Fund has done quite effectively has changed or bent the culture, particularly for our statutory partners, to be more inclusive, less bureaucratic, more responsive to local need.*

4.2 Strategies and mechanisms for mainstreaming children, young people, parents and carers' participation

The strategies and mechanisms for mainstreaming children and young people's participation employed in the six case study partnerships can be broadly characterised as follows:

4.2.1 'Champions' of participatory work

A number of case study partnerships identified a key/lead 'champion' who had been instrumental in promoting children and young people's participation within other agencies beyond the Children's Fund. In some partnerships a participation officer role was created.

The participation officer in one partnership was said to have given the board the 'push' they needed to make the participation of children, young people and community members in strategic decision-making in the core business of the partnership board a reality. This had given impetus to develop the agenda among partnership stakeholders and in the local authority area more widely. A similar experience was reported in another partnership where the participation officer was described by a statutory stakeholder as being '… *instrumental in integrating the entire Children's Fund programme… [encouraging]… cross working amongst… agencies*'.

In other partnerships, additional key individuals, usually operating at a strategic level, emerged as champions of mainstreaming children and young people's participation as the partnership developed. In one partnership two such champions were the chair of the partnership board and the programme manager, who was described by many interviewees at strategic level as bringing the learning from Children's Fund to the wider strategic and planning context.

4.2.2 Multi-agency approaches to mainstreaming participation and developing links beyond the Children's Fund

Multi-agency approaches to mainstreaming participation at local authority-wide level were adopted by case study partnerships to varying degrees. These include the development of structures such as multi-agency networks and forums focusing on children and young people's participation, either led by professionals with responsibilities for participation work with children and young people, or in which children and young people directly participated; and the development of capacity building, training or 'toolkits' promoting participatory practices in consultation work with children and young people.

Case study partnerships which had adopted multi-agency approaches to mainstreaming participation had tended to develop links with a combination of other partnerships related to children's services, such as Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Boards, Children's Trust boards and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. The promotion of the participation agenda by Children's Fund partnerships within these structures tended to be perceived by some strategic stakeholders as giving added impetus and value to mainstream agencies and helping to develop a participation strategy across local authority areas. Box 4.1 shows a number of complementary approaches a case study partnership is taking to mainstreaming children and young people's participation across the local authority area.

Box 4.1 Multiple approaches to mainstreaming children and young people's participation in a case study partnership

In one case study partnership a multi-agency group for children and young people's participation compiled a *Standards in Participation* document for organisations to self-assess their participation practice. The document is also intended to help identify potential training needs for staff in children's services, draw on the support of the Children's Fund to help develop their level of engagement with children and young people and potentially encourage individual agency commitment of resources to children and young people's participation work.

The participation officer in that partnership was also establishing a network of project workers working on participation with children and young people across the local authority to share good practice and learning in services for children and young people. A 'toolkit' on participative practice in involving children and young people was also developed and distributed to all Children's Fund projects, schools and youth clubs in the authority area. The toolkit was perceived by

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partnership board members as helping to facilitate a sustained change in practice and institutional cultures:

The toolkit helped me to realise that it is not difficult to do this. You can build it into your practice and make it part of your daily activity. It does not have to be something that you tick every six months. I think we have been very successful in that. In the schools, youth centres, and so on, it is about raising the voices of children to a practice level, and after that will come the more formal structures. We now have three children on a youth parliament, who are being invited to this multi-agency group to fill the seats we have at the table.

This suggests that mainstreaming children and young people's participation was perceived as a 'trickle up' process, where guidance on informal participatory practice will lead to formal recognition and establishment of structures to facilitate participation in more strategic decision-making. Indeed, the Participation Officer felt that formal structures have been developed to enable a sustained approach to participation across the authority area rather than having to rely purely on individual champions or informal networks to promote the participation agenda:

So I think… we have got the structures in place to take it forward and, you know, at the moment we've got the commitment and hopefully when… all the training and everything starts to kick in, in the next couple of years, but you know, that commitment will only increase.

The links between the Children's Fund and the Pathfinder Children's Trust were seen as a way of embedding good practice and enabling the Trust to take forward lessons learnt from the Fund in relation to children and young people's participation. The Participation Officer was seen as significant for promoting Children's Fund work on participation within the emerging structure of the Trust, and it was intended that Children's Fund participation work would increasingly be focused on supporting children and young people's involvement in the development of the Trust.

4.2.3 Sustaining children, young people, parents and carers' participation at project level

Stakeholders from the case study partnerships pointed to a number of examples of the ways in which children, young people, parents and carers' participation is being sustained at project level.

Children and young people who were service users were often encouraged to become mentors, peer educators and volunteers with younger children participating in projects. In one sports club, young people who had previously used the sports club went on to play a role in supporting and mentoring younger children. In another instance, young people who participated in the management board of an after-school study group had been encouraged to participate in school councils. There are also examples of projects in which parents' participation in the running of services has given them skills that have allowed them to continue their involvement by becoming

paid project workers. Box 4.2 describes a Children's Fund project in which this has happened.

Children, young people, parents and carers from several projects supported by case study partnerships expressed an interest in increasing their involvement in the development and delivery of Children's Fund services. A barrier identified by project workers to this, however, is a lack of resources which restricts their ongoing participation activities. For example, parents of users of an educational project for children of multiple heritage planned, organised and delivered a successful parents' conference. However, project staff from the statutory-managed project commented that despite their intentions, they do not have the capacity to facilitate parents' on-going participation in the project.

Box 4.2 An example of a Children's Fund project that worked on sustaining parents' participation

In one case study partnership, a VCS run project, which provided parenting support, involved parents in the day-to-day running of the service. The project had enabled some service users to develop the skills to become employed project workers and volunteers, working in the crèche and on reception, supporting other parents. One of the service users who had become a project worker talked about the place as 'one big family' and commented that there was no sense of stigma or feeling of being a victim as a service user, because there was no divide between workers and users. Other former service users commented on the support and encouragement given by the project manager; this had enabled them to develop the skills to become project workers. This process valued parents' participation, enabled them to develop a sense of empowerment and resilience, and sustained their involvement. This was also important in sustaining the community-based focus of the project, enabling parents and local community members to feel ownership of the project. The project manager commented:

Our service users speak for themselves… they talk about [the project], and we say like "[the project] is a place we always love to go, because when you go there you feel at home and there is somebody always willing to talk to you at your own level and we don't feel detached, we don't see ourselves as the worker/client, we see ourselves as part of the whole system".

4.2.4 Assessing, monitoring and evaluating participation outcomes

The case study partnerships were at different stages in the development of assessing, monitoring and evaluating participation outcomes. Whilst there tended to be a recognition that evidencing examples of successful practice was important in order to take the mainstreaming agenda forward, many stakeholders suggested that this area of work was in need of further development.

Evidencing positive outcomes of participatory practice was a particular challenge for the case study partnerships. Stakeholders suggested that whereas consultation on the

benefits of project work may be relatively straightforward to measure in terms of the extent to which services have improved, demonstrating the extent to which children and young people have been empowered or developed socially and personally as the result of their participation is more difficult to measure.

One partnership, for example, sought to assess approaches and levels of participation within Children's Fund projects by conducting a self-assessed participation audit of all service providers and agreeing action points to build on existing practice. Stakeholders from another partnership suggested that 'anecdotal' (qualitative) evidence tends to be more appropriate to capture these experiences than quantitative approaches.

Participation workers from another partnership emphasised the importance of demonstrating the effectiveness of participatory practices to mainstream services by highlighting the cost benefits of engaging service users in the recruitment of children's service staff. This practice has now been made obligatory for those employing staff within Children's Fund services in that locality. It was argued that if an appropriate decision is made in the first instance then costs are cut on potential future re-recruitment. As the participation officer explained, involving children and young people in this way can have benefits for both providers and potential service users:

> *You get services that are more relevant, that are better used and are used by people. And that the services you provide, if you're in touch with the people who are going to use them, you can adapt and change to meet changing need more quickly…. it can be about money. Well, maybe not always saving money but targeting money more effectively. So, if I'm ever working to try and influence senior officers or staff that I have, that's where I start.*

4.3 Factors inhibiting the mainstreaming of participatory activities

The following are examples of factors identified by stakeholders from the case study partnerships that represent challenges to the mainstreaming of children and young people's participation:

> The development of Children's Trusts has been statutory-led among case study partnerships. This may limit voluntary sector influence in some cases. There has also been a tendency to focus attention upon 'successful' or 'flagship' projects and services; these tend to be promoted because of impressive impacts. *Ad hoc* agreements between Children's Fund programmes and statutory agencies are encouraged to sustain them, but this has budget implications for those agencies.

> While 'champions' can take the lead in developing a strategy for mainstreaming participation in some partnerships, a reliance on champions to take the agenda forward without the establishment of effective structures and mechanisms to support the work could limit a more systemic and sustainable strategy overall.

> There was lack of clarity in some partnerships concerning how the overall mainstreaming agenda was to be taken forward. Concerns were raised by some

strategic stakeholders that the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* did not clearly identify the mechanisms by which statutory agencies would mainstream Children's Fund programmes and services. Furthermore, the responsibility for mainstreaming Children's Fund programmes and services appeared to lie with Children's Fund partnerships, rather than with statutory agencies on Children's Trust boards. In one case study partnership a document on mainstreaming suggested that 'it is not immediately obvious what reconfiguration of mainstream services are envisaged by the Green Paper'. Furthermore, the document suggests that some strategic stakeholders felt that the potentially significant role of the Children's Fund initiative in influencing mainstreaming agendas within children's services is not acknowledged.

Almost all of the case study partnerships identified difficulties relating to statutory agencies' capacities to resource participatory activities from their core budgets. In some partnerships Social Services departments were facing a crisis with significant shortfalls in budgets or receiving a 'zero' rating from Central Government for their performance. A similar situation was identified by stakeholders within Health Authorities and Local Education Authorities. Central Government targets demand that performance be focused upon 'core business'.

4.4 Summary points

This section highlights different interpretations of the mainstreaming of participation work. Key interpretations can be identified as:

Sustaining current participatory activities within the mainstream;
Embedding good participatory practice in organisations;
Influencing organisations' cultures of children and young people's participation.

Strategies and mechanisms for promoting the mainstreaming of participatory practices include:

Key individuals/'champions' who promote participatory practices both within and beyond partnerships to develop the mainstreaming agenda;
Broader, local authority-wide approaches such as establishing multi-agency structures and the development of 'toolkits' of good practice in participative techniques;
Projects that have enabled children, young people, parents and carers to sustain their participation or to become project workers;
Demonstrating effective participatory activities through monitoring and evaluation through the use of qualitative methods and demonstrating the long-term cost benefits of participation.

Potential inhibiting factors to mainstreaming participation identified by stakeholders include: the reliance on 'champions' within partnerships could slow-down mainstreaming if this approach is seen to absolve partnerships taking collective responsibility; there is a perceived lack of clarity regarding how mainstreaming fits with the Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*; and concerns about how Children's Fund priorities such as participation can realistically be pursued in a sector that has budget shortfalls.

CHAPTER FIVE

Key messages and learning

Key challenges to working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation emerging from the case study partnerships can be summarised as follows:

A range of participation strategies have been developed at strategic and service levels, but overall participation work has not been a key focus of case study partnerships

As a guiding principle of the Children's Fund initiative, the participation of children and young people has been widely embraced across the case study partnerships. A diverse range of participation strategies and approaches to mainstreaming have been developed at strategic and service levels. Despite this range, there was evidence that overall participatory work has not been prioritised as a key focus in these partnerships and work is on-going to develop this aspect of the programme. In particular, the participation of parents and carers has been considered a low priority in the case study partnerships, with the exception of a relatively small number of projects working specifically with parents and carers.

Differing rationales for children, young people, parents and carers' participation exist within case study partnerships which influence the approaches to participation adopted at strategic and project level

Different stakeholders (partnership board members, central team staff from partnerships, service providers, children, young people, parents and carers) have different and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the rationales for participation. This sometimes causes a lack of clarity about what participation is and how it should be implemented. These rationales influence the participation strategies and activities adopted at strategic and project level.

Time, capacity building and resources are needed for children and young people, parents and carers to effectively participate in Children's Fund strategic and project level processes

Stakeholders at strategic and service levels identified tensions between partnerships' commitments to the principle of children, young people, parents and carers' participation and the pressures of delivering within short time-scales and with limited resources. This has led to inevitable compromises and limitations in the development of work programmes around children and young people's participation.

Ensuring that a diverse group of children and young people are involved in participation activities, in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, disability, socio-economic and home background and geographical area has considerable resource implications

Case study partnerships felt that issues of representation had been addressed to some extent, although there were on-going concerns that only the voices of the 'usual

suspects' were being listened to. In particular, there was concern that children at the top end of the Children's Fund age range were more likely to participate in decision-making processes due to the challenges of engaging younger children. Stakeholders indicated that engaging children and young people with disabilities fully in participation activities had proved particularly challenging.

A range of approaches to mainstreaming children and young people's participation have been adopted

Case study partnerships demonstrated various approaches to mainstreaming, including those directed at organisational cultural change, approaches focusing on the sustainable funding of Children's Fund activities and those looking to embed good practice. Some partnerships relied on key individuals such as participation officers to promote participatory practices both within and beyond partnerships to develop the mainstreaming agenda on participation. Some took a broader local authority-wide approach, varying from the establishment of multi-agency structures to the development of 'toolkits' of good practice in participative techniques for consultation.

Systematic evidencing of good participatory practice is important for the mainstreaming agenda to move forward

Assessing, monitoring and evaluating participation outcomes was identified as a challenge among case study partnerships to date, but was recognised as important for mainstreaming participation in future. The development of effective, sustainable learning mechanisms may help to ensure that good practices are evidenced and learning in relation to participation is shared between the different Children's Fund stakeholders as well as beyond the partnerships.

There needs to be more clarity about the involvement of children, young people, parents and carers and the role of the Children's Fund in the development of Children's Trusts and other strategic partnerships in children's services

The mechanisms and strategies for involving children and families in the development of Children's Trusts are unclear at present, as is the commitment to the principle of participation by Children's Trust Boards and the responsibility for mainstreaming participation. Similarly, there tends to be a lack of clarity about the role of the Children's Fund in mainstreaming participation into other strategic partnerships in children's services.

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Appendix One

NECF methods of working with case study partnerships

1. Gathering evaluation evidence in the case study partnerships

The NECF's detailed work with eighteen case study partnerships takes place in the period January 2004 to the end of 2005. Eight studies are partnerships funded in Wave One, six are from Wave Two and four are from Wave Three funding. The first six Wave One case studies started in January and ended in July 2004. A further six studies drawn from both Wave One and Wave Two started in September 2004.

In selecting the first six case study sites we took account of regional spread and type of local authority such as rural, urban, unitary and two-tier authority and metropolitan. We also looked for cases where there was strong evidence, in the mapping that we carried out in 2003 (NECF, 2004a), that the partnership was taking forward the Children's Fund agenda of collaboration and participation in the development of prevention. These cases are therefore diverse, but in different ways present interesting examples of the catalytic influence that the Children's Fund was intended to have in the development of preventative services for children and young people and in children and young people's participation.

We are gathering evaluation evidence at several levels of activity in each of the case study sites. The main levels are the partnership board or its equivalent, programme managers and key members of Children's Fund staff, service providers, the experiences of children and young people and outcomes for them. We are also examining interactions between these layers of activity and are locating them within the wider context of health and social welfare services, structures and policies in local authority areas, including Children's Trusts where appropriate, together with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). We have also considered issues within case study partnership areas alongside changes in the national policy environment.

When we selected services within each case study site we focused our work on one or two specific geographical areas within the partnership so that we could work with several service providers who had the opportunity to collaborate in various ways with each other. In our work with children, young people and parents who used the services we aimed to capture their experiences, not only of the services, but also of the environments that these services are attempting to change. Having gathered information from children, young people and parents we were able to revisit services and partnership boards to ask questions which were informed by what we had learnt from the families. Our work is primarily based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of these layers together with observational work with the services that we worked with.

We worked with each site over a period of approximately seven months. During that period we made a minimum of five visits of around one week each to the partnership. These visits were at four-week intervals to allow us to analyse the evidence we had gathered before returning for the next visit. Once we had finished collecting all the evidence we continued the analysis and produced detailed case study reports which

we presented to key stakeholders within each case study partnership. The structure of the visits to case study partnerships is outlined below. An important dimension to the work in case study partnerships was to run 'Developmental Workshops' in Weeks Two to Five. These workshops are structured, two hour events which are intended to achieve three purposes:

To give rapid feedback to participants on the evidence we have gathered and the patterns we are revealing;
To enable us to check our interpretations of evaluation evidence with participants;
To provide an opportunity to gather more evaluation evidence on different and changing understandings of processes and practices across diverse groups of participants.

The first two points are central to our commitment to share emerging analyses as soon as possible with case study partnerships so that they can be incorporated immediately into current debate and developing practice.

In this report we are looking across the first six case study partnerships to consider the strategies and activities being used to enable children, young people, parents and carers' participation, and the way in which 'participation' is being defined and understood by different stakeholders.

The report draws on evidence from interviews with programme managers and key Children's Fund staff, members of partnership boards (or their equivalent), Children's Fund project staff and children, young people, parents and carers. The Children's Fund was set up to build on diverse local practices. It is therefore important that we acknowledge that diversity, including the different local contexts in which Children's Fund partnerships are implementing their programmes. Our analyses have therefore been driven by the *Activity Theory* framework, an approach that lends itself to providing coherent accounts whilst accommodating differences and changing processes together with diverse histories and contexts of children, young people, parents and carers' participation in Children's Fund Partnership areas.

Using key *Activity Theory* concepts we relate the precise *focuses* and *rationalisations* of partnerships' work on children and young people, parents/carers' participation to the particular *strategies* and *activities* that partnerships have adopted in this work. We also examine how local capacities and expectations have shaped the development of what is being worked on. A full description of the development of this theoretical approach and how it has been adopted within the work of the evaluation appears in the report *Collaborating for the Social Inclusion of Children and Young People* (NECF, 2004b).

2. Work schedule with the case study partnerships

A typical work schedule over the site visits is outlined below. These activities are in addition to set-up meetings and additional visits to special events such as children's forums and meetings of partnership boards.

Week One: Interviews with members of the partnership board or its equivalent, with the programme manager and with other centrally employed Children's Fund staff.

Visits to Children's Fund service providers to set up the research programme with them.

Week Two: Interviews and observations with service providers, identification and initial contact with children and young people participating in the work of the National Evaluation. Developmental Workshop with partnership board and Children's Fund staff. A brief overview of Developmental Workshops is provided below.

Week Three: Interviews with parents and carers of children and young people, interviews and other data gathering methods with children and young people. Developmental Workshop with service providers participating in the evaluation in Week Two.

Week Four: Ongoing work with children, young people and their parents and carers to prepare their contributions for the final Developmental Workshop in Week Five. Follow-up interviews with service providers and other key stakeholders in the health and social welfare sector identified during previous weeks.

Week Five: Follow-up interviews with some members of the partnership board and other stakeholders working at strategic level. Developmental Workshop with partnership board members, service providers, children, young people, and their parents and carers.

Final Visit (after two months): Presentation of case study report to key participating stakeholders.

3. The Developmental Workshops

The Developmental Workshops are based on a strategy for promoting organisational learning that comes from *Activity Theory*. They are structured so that we present evidence we have gathered which reveals differences in understandings between participants, or contradictions between what people have said they want to develop and the means they are using to get there. An example of difference might be two descriptions of the purpose of children and young people's participation that reveal different ambitions for participation in the programme of a partnership. A contradiction might be that board members argue that they are aiming at inter-agency service provision, but are not using a commissioning process that encourages it. We showed NECF evaluation evidence as quotations or video clips within Developmental Workshops in order to create opportunities for participants to discuss quite fundamental matters in a confidential environment. Differences and contradictions are not seen as weaknesses, but as points from which individuals and organisations learn and move on.

4. Checking NECF evidence

Evaluation evidence derived from our work in the case study partnerships is checked thoroughly at different stages of the evaluation and at different levels listed below. We see this process as more than verifying our analysis. It is also an important part of our knowledge management strategy which is based on managing knowledge

generated by the evaluation as often as possible and on drawing practitioner knowledge into our on-going research to help us shape a responsive evaluation:

Checking themes within the cases in the Developmental Workshops;
Checking themes across the six case studies in a workshop with case study programme managers as we undertook the cross-case analyses once we had finished collecting evidence in the six partnerships;
Checking the themes developed with the case study programme managers with our broader programme manager reference group in another workshop;
Checking broad themes with targeted groups of programme managers across England to, for example, clarify whether a particular phenomenon was common across most two-tier authorities.

5. Presenting NECF evidence

The material presented in this report does not aim to catalogue all activities relating to children, young people, parents and carers' participation undertaken by the case study partnerships nor is it a definitive guide to what works: it is too early in the evaluation to build robust models of effective working. However, we can identify patterns of practice, common themes, differences, tensions, contradictions and examples of how actively engaging children, young people and parents in the work of the Children's Fund is being viewed as a way of contributing to positive outcomes. In the spirit of the Developmental Workshops described above, we offer these as points for reflection and further learning. We are, of course, very interested to receive responses from Children's Fund partnerships that have not participated in the National Evaluation. We have therefore set up an e-mail system on www.ne-cf.org.uk which will allow you to comment on the extent to which the picture we offer in this report reflects experiences in other Children's Fund partnerships.

Appendix Two

Strategies and activities for working on children, young people, parents and carers' participation in case study partnerships

Strategies and mechanisms	Examples from case study partnerships
Management and governance of partnerships	Children, young people and parents/carers participating as members of partnership boards; Children and young people's forums that feed into partnership boards
Commissioning services	Children and young people participating in appraisal of funding applications; Children and young people involved in administration of community chest fund
Recruitment	Children and young people involved in recruitment of Children's Fund programme manager and other staff; Participation officer facilitating groups of children and young people and some parents/carers in selecting and appointing staff within the VCS and statutory sector
Consultation	Consultation and information sharing events to elicit the views of children and young people on a range of issues to inform future programme planning and service delivery; Consulting children and young people and parents/carers about service provision through use of child-friendly evaluation forms, focus groups and informal methods within project settings
Communication, promotion and awareness	Toolkits of good practice and handbooks to disseminate the learning from participation work aimed at service providers, project workers and schools; Developing child-friendly information about the Children's Fund using a range of media to ensure information is accessible to children and young people with disabilities; Child-friendly and adult-friendly newsletters to report on the results of consultation events and actions taken by agencies in response to children and young people's views; Working with children and young people in schools to design and develop an interactive website about children's services in the local authority
Management and governance of projects	Children's management committees made up of children and young people who were service users involved in on-going planning and implementation of service; Parents/carers' involvement in management group of projects; User sub-groups involved in making decisions about future service provision which are reported

	to management committees by a smaller number of user representatives who sit on the management committee.
Evaluation activities	Children and young people, parents and carers carrying out evaluation of projects and reporting back to the partnership board.
Networking and multi-agency working	Participation officer and Children's Fund team involved in multi-agency groups on participation with representatives from Health, Education, Social Services, Sure Start, Connexions, Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, the VCS, Youth Service and Children's Trusts; Developing a Participation Strategy with Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Boards and other multi-agency partnership groups; Development and implementation of self-assessed Children's Charter Standards in Participation across agencies on city-wide basis; Linking with children's rights organisations to inform work on complaints procedures for children and young people; Establishment of network of project staff working in participation projects to share good practice and learning across agencies.
Consultation and involvement in wider decision-making processes beyond the Children's Fund	Developing strategic forums of children and young people to work alongside multi-agency groups; Securing places for children and young people of diverse ages on area-based forums, local Youth Parliaments, multi-agency groups and consulting children and young people about their locality through area-based panels; Developing further opportunities for children and young people involved in the Partnership to continue their involvement outside of the Children's Fund
Support to projects from central teams	On-going support to project staff offered by participation officer; Participation audit of all service providers in partnership and agreement of action points to build on existing practice.
Training and capacity building	Organisational capacity building and training of agencies and service providers led by participation officers; Audit of training on children and young people's participation across the city to identify existing opportunities and training needs; Training packages to develop skills for participating effectively in strategic groups; Parents of children with disabilities involved in delivering workshops and training to service

	providers.
Planning and delivery of services and activities	On-going informal consultation and planning of activities with groups of children who are service users; Involvement of individual children and young people and their families in design of individual support plans and needs assessments and on-going informal consultation about the family's needs; Involving children and young people in supporting and mentoring younger children and working as volunteers in play settings.
Child-led and parent-led conferences	Children and young people planned and delivered a conference for other children and young people from local schools to discuss issues of concern to them; Parents planned, delivered and evaluated a conference for other parents of children with disabilities.