“Giving more opportunities to unheard voices”
Cheshire East Participation Strategy

Foreword

“Participation is a fundamental human right, not a gift dispensed by well-meaning adults that they may choose to withdraw”. (Fleming J: 2013)

“Giving more opportunities to unheard voices” (Amber, aged 16)

We want Cheshire East to be a great place to grow up and all children and young people to have a great childhood.

We know from our work to develop the Children and Young People’s Plan that children and young people in Cheshire East are keen to be involved in considering the important social issues affecting them and their community and offering solutions, and we are passionate about the improvements that can be made when they get involved in decision making and community life.

Through this strategy we aim to raise the profile and benefits of participation, to introduce a common and consistent approach and give all our young citizens the inspiration and confidence to get involved.

A wide group of young people and agencies have engaged in the development of participation in Cheshire East and we have used their collective knowledge, stories and insight to develop this strategy. We recognise that there is a plethora of good practice, policy and knowledge which we hope to build on to shape how we work more closely with young people now and in the future.

To equip young people with the skills to be agents of their own change, prepared to speak out on issues that concern them, requires adults to view meaningful participation as an on going process not a one off event. This strategy challenges all adults who work with children and young people to reach for excellence, and we hope that the stories and case studies will inspire and motivate agencies to be part of this journey.

A special thank you is due to Cheshire East Youth Council and those young people who have shaped the participation standards and to all the people and organisations that have actively contributed to the development of this strategy, listed in Appendix 1.
Statement of Intent

Over the next 3 years we want Cheshire East to be a place that respects and champions the right of all Children and young people to express their views, feel heard and be actively involved in decisions that affect their lives. The commitments the Children’s Trust Partners are making in this strategy are:

- **Rights** – we will provide high quality information to ensure that children and young people have an informed understanding of their right to have their say.

- **Have a Say** – we will support Cheshire East Youth Council to become the credible and democratic forum in the borough with a mandate to speak for all children and young people.

- **Networks** – we will strengthen existing networks and create and develop new ones to support children and young people to get involved.

- **Resources** - we will identify resources to support participative activity and development through partnership working.

- **Promotion** - we will raise the profile of and promote the benefits of participation.

- **Good practice** - we will share current skills and good practice across all key stakeholders.

- **Barriers** - we will address barriers preventing children and young people from participating, particularly those that are seldom heard.

- **Communication and Information** - we will work with and be advised by children and young people on appropriate and accessible methods of communication.

- **Quality** - we will co-produce a set of standards for meaningful participation with children young people in Cheshire East, and promote their use within and across agencies.

- **Progress** – we will ensure that young people are involved in monitoring our progress.
Policy recognition of the rights of children and young people

“Children and young people’s human rights are not a pick and mix assortment of luxury entitlements, but the very foundation of democratic societies.”
Alvaro Gil-Robles, Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner

Case study:
St Mary’s RC one of our local schools has formally registered commitment to UNICEF’s prestigious Rights Respecting Schools Award programme.

“Over the last couple of years, we have made much progress towards attaining this award. Regular workshops are held for children, based around the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and external visitors such as the Red Cross, Rotary International and Cafod give pupils and staff insight into practical means of supporting children’s rights around the world. There are displays of children’s Child Rights artwork around the school, and our pupils regularly sing the Child’s rights song that they produced. At the start of every year, classes devise their own rights-based Class Charter. All these themes are linked together in November when our school celebrates One World Week and Anti-Bullying Week.

“Through following the RRSA programme,” says Headteacher Mrs Fau-Goodwin, “our children have become unquestionably more aware of their role as global citizens.”

Matthew Plant, St Mary’s RC School

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the rights of children and young people to have their views heard and taken account of, while legislation has increasingly given service users rights to participate in decision-making and the planning of services.
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by the UK Government in 1991, was the first piece of international legislation to acknowledge that children are subjects of rights rather than merely recipients of protection. Article 12 of the Convention states that:

**Children and young have the right to express his or her views freely – about everything that affects him or her.**

**The child or young person’s views must be given ‘due weight’ depending on his or her age and maturity.**

**The child or young person has the right to be heard in all decision-making processes, including in court hearings. The child or young person can speak for him or herself, or someone else can speak for him or her.**

Subsequent legislation such as Children Act 1989, 2004, Health and Social Care Act 2012, Children and Families Act 2014 etc have all reiterated this commitment to children and young people’s participation.

In the past few years there was been growing awareness of the value of co-production which put simply means to co-produce together. This differs from participation but is closely linked in that decision making is an essential feature of co-production processes. Co-production is about the involvement of children, young people, families and carers as equal and reciprocal partners in the planning, design, monitoring and evaluation of services; recognising the strengths and assets children, young people and their families have from their own lived experience.
Locally, in order to inform our development, 67 agencies and services took part in an audit of current practice which demonstrated that the vast majority of organisations in Cheshire East are in the process of establishing and developing participation.

Some of the key findings of the audit were:

- The majority were at least at the developing stage of their commitment to participation and at the developing stage of planning participation.
- 46% of organisations had established or embedded structures to ensure children and young people’s views are built into decision making. This was slightly less for seldom heard groups and around a third had structures in place to ensure children and young people are specifically able to influence decision-making.
- Around a quarter have developed ways to involve children and young people in reviewing and updating relevant policies and procedures.
- Organisations’ recording, monitoring and evaluating systems to measure children and young people’s participation or the impact this was less established, with just over half being at the developing stage.
- 59% have children and young people involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of participation training to staff, managers and board members.
- Three quarters of organisations had limited or no training for staff around participation.
- The majority of organisations have developed or established some way for children and young people to develop skills and knowledge to influence change, although this is not fully established for all organisations.
- A third of respondents reported that staff and leadership celebration of children and young people participation is embedded.

This strategy aims to build from this position and support all agencies to improve and its delivery will be managed through an implementation plan and the development of materials and tools that support exemplar practice.
Benefits of Participation

In Cheshire East, we are fully committed to overcoming existing barriers to participation and establishing catalysts for change. Identifying and championing the substantial and wide-ranging benefits to actively involving children and young people is a key internal driver in this process.

Case Study:

“What really stuck me was the difference in the discussions as a result of involving young people. They kept bringing it back to what the experience is like for children and young people. As professionals this is what is most important to all of us, but we can get side-lined by resource restraints and other familiar barriers. Involving young people focused us on developing solutions.”

Attendee at the LSCB and Children and Young People’s Trust Leadership Summit in June 2014

Benefits for Children and Young People

- Build on existing skills and develop new ones
- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Increased understanding of organisations and how to influence them
- Opportunity to change services making them more tailored to children and young people’s needs
- Express their views freely and have their voice heard
- Increased awareness of their rights

Benefits for safeguarding children and young people

- Creates a protective culture
- Children and young people more confident about speaking up
- Adults more likely to listen to and act upon CYP concerns

Benefits to organisations

- Better understanding of children and young people changing attitudes and needs
- Children and young people may offer fresh perspectives and new ideas
- Services designed on actual rather than perceived needs
- Financial benefits less wasted resources on ineffective services
I started the Youth Council (YC) in April and already felt part of the group by the end of my first meeting. As I've put myself forward for almost all opportunities I've now had experiences presenting, debating, sitting on different boards, working with other passionate young people and starting to become more aware of the young people around me - their problems and the way through the YC I can personally have an impact on improving their lives which is highly rewarding.

I've learnt how to do most of the things I listed above: upon joining the YC it's unlikely I'd have presented in front of those there and just last night I was hosting a quarter of the agenda in front of 40 members of the LSCB - that's just one example, in many other ways I feel I've improved and the experience gained from the YC is probably the reason I have my current job and is the first thing I'll mention in my UCAS statement. As I said, for me, the most rewarding part of being in the YC is not just how much I've developed but how much of a difference I now know I can make, a year ago I'd have never dreamed of meeting the leader of the council, being heavily involved in a campaign engaging 9000 young people in my area or being told the way I spend my leisure time is fantastic because I eat a lot of pizza and sit laughing at Hazel's antics.

---

**Benefits to wider community**
- More vibrant and healthy democracy
- Community cohesion
- Raised aspirations
- Children and young people actively involved in shaping community

**Benefits across generations**
- Cross-generational collaboration
- Increased trust and respect across generations
- Exchange of ideas and concerns across generations
- Agreement on approaches to addressing issues

---

Case Study:

“I started the Youth Council (YC) in April and already felt part of the group by the end of my first meeting. As I've put myself forward for almost all opportunities I've now had experiences presenting, debating, sitting on different boards, working with other passionate young people and starting to become more aware of the young people around me - their problems and the way through the YC I can personally have an impact on improving their lives which is highly rewarding.

I've learnt how to do most of the things I listed above: upon joining the YC it's unlikely I'd have presented in front of those there and just last night I was hosting a quarter of the agenda in front of 40 members of the LSCB - that's just one example, in many other ways I feel I've improved and the experience gained from the YC is probably the reason I have my current job and is the first thing I'll mention in my UCAS statement. As I said, for me, the most rewarding part of being in the YC is not just how much I've developed but how much of a difference I now know I can make, a year ago I'd have never dreamed of meeting the leader of the council, being heavily involved in a campaign engaging 9000 young people in my area or being told the way I spend my leisure time is fantastic because I eat a lot of pizza and sit laughing at Hazel's antics”.

---

**Callum aged 16**
Defining Participation in Cheshire East

“Participation is a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change”
Treseder (1997)

In Cheshire East we are committed to creating a culture that promotes and facilitates the active involvement of children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services. In order to achieve this we believe that everyone is responsible for integrating participation into their daily practice. Aligned with Treseder’s Degrees of Participation model we share the belief that participation is not a linear or hierarchical process and that different levels of involvement may be deemed more appropriate for specific pieces of work.
Five Star Standards

“Rather than eating the crumbs that have fallen from the table of governance, young people should be partners, recognised as leaders and given the platform to express their views, have their input considered and their contribution clearly acknowledged and celebrated.”
LGIU report ‘Growing Up’ December 2009

The delivery of this strategy will be underpinned by the Five Star Standards, developed by the children and young people of Cheshire East, reviewed by the Participation Network and endorsed by the Children and Young People’s Trust Board. As we strive to become Five Star in our participative practice, these proactive standards will provide us with a robust method of monitoring, evaluating and quality assuring our development journey.

The children and young people involved in the development of the Five Star Standards felt strongly that the standards needed to be SMART, proactive and dynamic in order for organisations, services, individuals to engage effectively with them.

Rather then standards being perceived solely as a list of best practice guidelines, the children and young people wanted them to:

- Be seen as a call to action
- Facilitate more effective communication
- Promote mutual respect and bridge the gap between them and adults
- Create positive change
- Celebrate effective participation

In order to create a more vibrant, democratic and rights respecting culture in the borough, children and young people of Cheshire East felt that organisations, services, communities, families, individuals and children and young people themselves needed to be aware of the UNCRC. The standards are embodied by the overarching theme of “Having a say” which highlights and champions children and young people’s right to have their voice heard. This was viewed as being fundamental, pivotal and was directly linked by children and young people to their health and well being stating that having a say made them “feel happier” “mentally positive” “empowered” and “valued”. It was acknowledged that for effective participation to take place children and young people needed to be engaged in a variety of ways, based on their age, individual needs and level of development/maturity.
Case Study:

“Dear young people, I am writing this to you all, I’ve been where you all are, it’s horrible being stuck on a CSE plan. But honestly it gets better when you attend all your meetings and cooperate with everyone supporting you! My saying is “you have a voice and you voice needs to be heard”. You all might feel like it’s never ending, but it will end soon. I know because I’ve been on a CSE plan, I attended all my meetings, I made my voice be heard and now I’m free off the CSE plan, and finally getting my life on track! You can all do it too!”

Excerpt from a letter written by a young person to support other children and young people going through a CSE plan.
Children and young people acknowledged that there were some excellent participation opportunities within Cheshire East, but that they were often one off events that not all children and young people were aware of or able to access.

The children and young people that reported the most positive experiences of participation were when a structured approach was adopted whereby children and young people:

- Were made aware of the opportunity
- Knew what they were involved in
- Were informed of the benefits of their participation
- Had effective preparation prior to their involvement
- Were supported to participate
- Received feedback within a stated time using an appropriate method.
- Had the opportunity to see the changes they had contributed toward making

Case Study:

“As a school council representative we provide the voice for the other students who want to make a change. We have a system where if a student really enjoys a lesson, they can approach me, tell me what was good about it and I will discuss this at the next school council session. After our meeting the teacher that runs the school council will talk about this in staff briefing and that lesson will be discussed and seen by all the other teachers as a good practice standard. Other teachers can then use this to make their teaching more enjoyable and engaging for the students. I then go back and tell the student about the progress we have made and both teachers and students are happy as they feel that they understand each other better and they are being listened to and appreciated”.

Cheshire East Student aged 15
The children and young people felt that there was “No I in team” and that children and young people and adults could be far more effective in making positive change if they collaborated as a united group working towards a common goal. A number of children and young people reported positive involvement during their collaboration with various teams, youth councils and boards highlighting key factors in these positive ‘teamwork’ experiences as:

- A safe, supportive and inclusive environment
- No power imbalances
- Everyone having a say
- Everyone being honest
- Everyone’s opinions being respected
- Everyone’s points being acknowledged
- Constructively identifying areas of improvement
- Completed work, highlighted as successful
- Feedback and next steps communicated so that everyone can understand

**Case Study:**

“I joined the Youth Council in March 2014 around the time of the elections. I was nervous on my first meeting; however it was extremely enjoyable with different activities, lovely people and good food. Over the past 9 months or so, I have definitely improved in confidence with meeting and socialising with new people because of CEYC. I have made several good friends whom I see every meeting and it makes me happy knowing we all have the same goal: to make a difference within Cheshire East for young people. Working for the good of the community has been satisfactory to say the least as I know I am able to use my voice as a youth to change society for the better. Hazel and all the leaders have been such an inspiration as they’ve believed in all of us on this journey. I’m so glad I have another 18 months at least to contribute towards CE, and I know I will only grow in understanding of others and make closer friendships with all people involved with CEYC.”

Rachel aged 16
The level of children and young people influence in relation to decision-making and creating change can often be an issue that isn’t properly addressed prior to their participation. This can lead to children and young people feeling disempowered, confused, and frustrated about their involvement.

Our children and young people are passionate about making both short and long term positive changes for all children and young people and in order to encourage more participation they felt that prior to requesting involvement adults should:

- Be clear why they want children and young people involved
- Communicate what can and can’t be changed as a result of their involvement
- At the start provide clarity on their level of influence in the final decision
- Provide feedback on the decision and explain what impact their input had
- Say Thank You

Case Study:

“East Cheshire Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) have actively involved their service users, parent/ carers and the wider community in their recruitment and selection, service design, development and delivery over the last three years. During that time a group of young people aged between 14 and 19, as well as parent and carers, have become involved in a variety of participation projects that will bring about positive change for mental health services at both local and national level. These include presenting to East Cheshire Commissioners, NHS England and other local agencies to highlight areas of concern such as: Out of hours/crisis support, challenging stigma and a lack of mental health support at a primary level.

At a national level, young people from East Cheshire CAMHS are actively involved in the CYP IAPT program which is a service transformation project for CAMHS which aims to improve access to psychological therapies.”

Claire Evans Participation and Engagement Lead, East Cheshire CAMHS
“The LSCB have recently run a series of important challenge sessions with each of their statutory partners. Young people were present at all of these; they were involved in the planning of these events, the sessions themselves, and in the debriefs. They more than held their own in the discussions, made some critical points and issued some challenges that only they could have made. They made a real difference to all of the above, and this just illustrates how the involvement of young people in determining the policies which will protect them is absolutely critical if they are to work properly”.

Ian Rush, Independent Chair of Cheshire East’s Safeguarding Children Board
The children and young people were unanimous in their opinion that all adults would benefit from being trained in participation methods and how to work effectively with children and young people.

They also felt that children and young people should:

- Be involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of the training
- Link the training to workforce development in relation to the standards
- Have the option to lead the training where appropriate
- Visit other areas to speak to their children and young people to share ideas
- Be accredited and in certain cases be commissioned to work with adults in developing innovative participatory practice

Case Study:

“I have found this training to be very effective. The use of tools has enabled me to also learn from other people in my group. I like the use of humour, it puts people at ease. I also found all involved approachable and informative. It is excellent to have the young advisors here, developing communications between us. Very intelligent and mature young people”.

“Very informative, helped raise awareness of things from a young person’s perspective that we sometimes miss. Good atmosphere created by trainers and advisors. Great way of looking at how we include the voice of the child”.

“Confirmed some good work we do and gave scope for better practice”.

Feedback from participants at Children and Young People’s Participation Training in September 2014
Feedback

The children and young people felt it was vital that they received feedback on how their involvement had made a difference, including but not limited to:

- The impact on the children and young people
- How the organisation has changed.
- Clear feedback process established and agreed including timelines for outcomes and progress.
- A range of communication methods available to feedback that are accessible and understandable for children and young people.

Case Study:

“Over 2850 children and young people completed an online subjective well-being survey as part of The Children’s Society Good Childhood Enquiries followed by face to face consultations with around 800. The purpose of the enquiries was to speak to children and young people to ascertain what issues really matter to them in relation to their well-being. All children and young people were informed of why the research was taking place, the reasons for their involvement and what impact their participation would have. Children and young people's involvement have heavily influenced the Children and Young Peoples Plan”.

How will we get there?

The newly established Participation Network will lead on the implementation of this strategy on behalf of the Children and Young People’s Trust. The first step will be a clear strategic commitment communicated and acted upon by senior leaders across the Partnership.

Key activities will include the following:

1. **Equip the children’s workforce in Cheshire East with the skills and knowledge needed through:**
   - The development of a Child’s Rights and Participation training programme for managers and practitioners
   - Support agencies to review their workforce policies to embed the voice of children and young people
   - Produce a range of tools for effective participation
   - Support participation leads to be effective champions across agencies
   - Review all multi agency training to ensure that there is explicit focus on children’s voice
   - Include young people in training programmes

2. **Support children and young people to developing the skills and confidence to participate through:**
   - Recruitment and training of a team of Young Advisers to be able to engage and influence across a range of areas relevant to children and young people including commissioning, policy formation, training etc
   - Devise a development programme for young people involved in engagement structures
   - Produce a range of support information and tools for agencies
3. **Support Cheshire East Youth Council and members of Youth Parliament (MYPs) to participate:**
   - Build links between CEYC and relevant decision making structures of the Partnership and Local Authority
   - Support MYPs to attend regional Youthforia and UKYP Annual Sitting
   - Work with schools, youth services etc to ensure that young people are able to vote in Youth Parliament Elections

4. **Ensure that seldom heard children and young people are supported to participate through:**
   - Providing additional opportunities for C4C to voice their views and opinions to Corporate Parents
   - Raise awareness and profile of Children in Care Councils in Cheshire East
   - Support CICC and Care Leavers to challenge and influence policy and service design and delivery
   - Support and develop a group of young people with disabilities to review participation of children with special educational needs and disability
   - Work with CEYC and young people’s networks so that youth council is an inclusive and representative body of children and young people

5. **Ensure that children and young people have a consistent experience of participation**
   - Produce a set of Cheshire East standards for effective participation for agencies
   - Devise an evaluation framework for agencies to assess and evidence effective participation
   - Devise and run a development programme for young people in service evaluation
   - Produce a toolkit for agencies on innovative methods of engagement to enhance reach
   - Develop a range of young people led communication processes including the use of social networking as a participation tool

6. **Monitor progress through:**
   - An annual participation audit to identify distance travelled/skill gaps
   - Annual Report to CEYC
How will we know we’ve been successful?

The ambition in this strategy is for all children and young people to be active citizens who feel they have voice and influence, reinforced by our vision for Cheshire East to be great place to grow up. This vision underpins all our outcomes and priorities. In the Cheshire East Children and Young People’s Plan 2015-18 we set out our commitments to children and young people informed by what they have told us in the Good Childhood Conversations, which will form a key plank of our commitment to participation.

This strategy will be successful when:

Children and Young People tell us:
- they have a good understanding of children’s rights, according to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child
- they are treated fairly and feel respected
- they have their basic rights met
- they can express their views, feel heard and are actively involved in decisions that affect their lives
- they are positive about the impact it has on them as an individual
- there are increasing numbers are actively participating,
- children and young people from more diverse backgrounds are being involved
- more young people are voting in the youth council elections
- the Cheshire East Youth Council is active and represents the views and interests of children and young people in the borough
- they can see their views reflected in strategy, projects, reports etc
- they see positive media stories about how children and young people have taken the lead
- they know the outcomes from their involvement

Adults tell us:
- they have a good understanding of children’s rights, according to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child
- participation is the way we do things not seen as an extra or an add on or a tick box
- they have adopted the Cheshire East 5 Star Participation Standards
- they can evidence improved practice and this is informed by children and young people
- we are seen externally as a place with exemplary practice
- that external inspections and reviews reflect that the voice of the child is consistently gathered and acted on
The Cheshire East Children’s Trust Board tell us:
- they can evidence that the views of children and young people are reflected in Board strategy, projects, reports etc
- that children and young people have a voice in the Board
- that Board papers are young people friendly
- that children and young people consistently participate in and influence commissioning activity
- that all reports highlight what children and young people detail the impact of any recommendation on children and young people

Cheshire East’s Safeguarding Children Board tell us:
- that children’s rights agencies provide an assurance that, wishes, feelings and experiences are use to inform what help and services they are get, and that what is provided to children, young people, and their families is helping to keep children safe.
- that their Board papers are young people friendly
- all papers and reports comment on the impact of any recommendations on children and young people

The Cheshire East Youth Council will hold the Children’s Trust Board and the Local Safeguarding Children Board to account for the successful implementation of this Strategy.
Acknowledgements

Cheshire East Children and Young People’s Trust would like to thank the following organisations and partnerships whose support, advice, research, information, resources, drive and belief have helped; either directly or indirectly; in this Participation Strategy.

Young People from:
CAMHs
Schools Councils
Cared For Children/Children in Care Council
Cheshire East Youth Council
Cheshire East Youth Forums

Organisations:
Cheshire East Council
Cheshire East Safeguarding Children Board
The Children’s Society
Cheshire East Healthwatch
NHS South Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group
NHS Eastern Cheshire Clinical Commissioning Group
Cheshire and Wirral Partnership
Parent Carer Support Service
Cheshire East Virtual School
Catch 22
Cheshire East Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner
Police Safer Schools Partnership
Cheshire East Public Health
Middlewich High School
St. Mary’s Catholic Primary School, Crewe
Plus Dane Group
Cheshire Police
Cheshire, Warrington and Wirral Area Team, NHS England
Maternity, Children and Young People Strategic Clinical Network & Senate (Cheshire and Merseyside)
NHS England
Just Drop-In Youth Info & Advice Ltd