



Empowering Our Future

Participation and Engagement
2021 to 2025

Our vision

The vision of the Participation and Engagement team is that all children, young people and their families have the opportunity to actively participate in the decisions that affect their lives, in the delivery of the services they receive, and in the development of the policies that impact on them.

Introduction

Together for Children (TfC) is committed to supporting children and young people to make sure their voice is heard in a way that feels safe to them, and in a way that helps them feel stronger and more able to recover when they face challenges in their lives.

Our approach is driven by a series of articles within the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (ratified by the government in 1991). Article 12 states that every child has the right to express their views and to have these views given due weight in all matters affecting them.

Empowering Our Future was initially approved in 2017 when Together for Children was formed. We have spent time working with our children and young people in Sunderland to fully embed the voice of children and young people in the ethos and culture of Together for Children, which was recognised in our recent Ofsted ILACS inspection and Local Area SEND inspection.

'Hearing the voice of the child is an exceptional strength in Sunderland.'

Ofsted, ILACS (August 2021)



Participation and Engagement standards

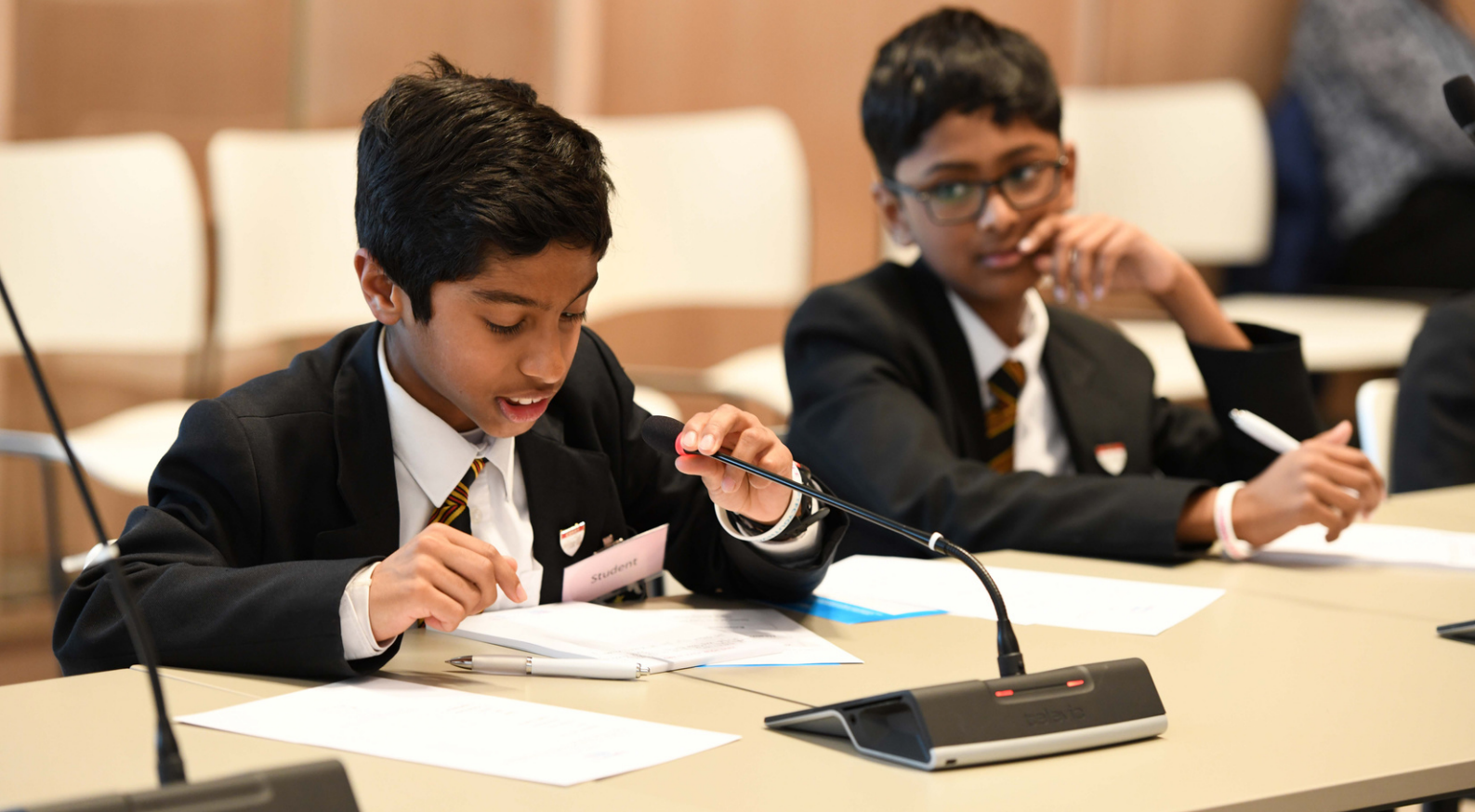
To embed participatory practice in Together for Children we have developed our participation and engagement standards which we will adopt, ensuring that participation is encouraged, supported, celebrated and is fully accessible and inclusive.

We will:

- Involve children and young people in the developing and running of our services
- Listen to what children and young people are telling us and find ways of improving the services we offer them
- Use children and young people's views to shape Together for Children and to tell others, such as our partners in the city, what's important to them
- Ensure children and young people have an equal opportunity to participate and engage, should they choose to
- Work to support those who face the greatest barriers including those children and young people with a disability and within Black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups

We will also:

- Ensure children and young people have the opportunity to participate in an age-appropriate way
- Ensure participation leads to positive outcomes that are agreed with and communicated to children and young people
- Seek to actively involve children and young people, rather than simply consult, ensuring follow-up and evaluation
- Ensure participation promotes the safety and protection of children and young people
- Value all children and young people and promote their successes



Where are we now?

The involvement of children, young people and their families in the development of policy and services is vital in ensuring that our future provision is more relevant, effective, and sustainable.



At Together for Children, meaningful involvement is achieved through a variety of methods from individual involvement in care plans and recruitment of staff, through to co-ordinated engagement groups and strategic commitment and oversight. Our Model of Participation and Engagement set out below supports embedding active involvement and participation in everyday practice from frontline services to strategic decision making.

Governance Structure

Fig.2.

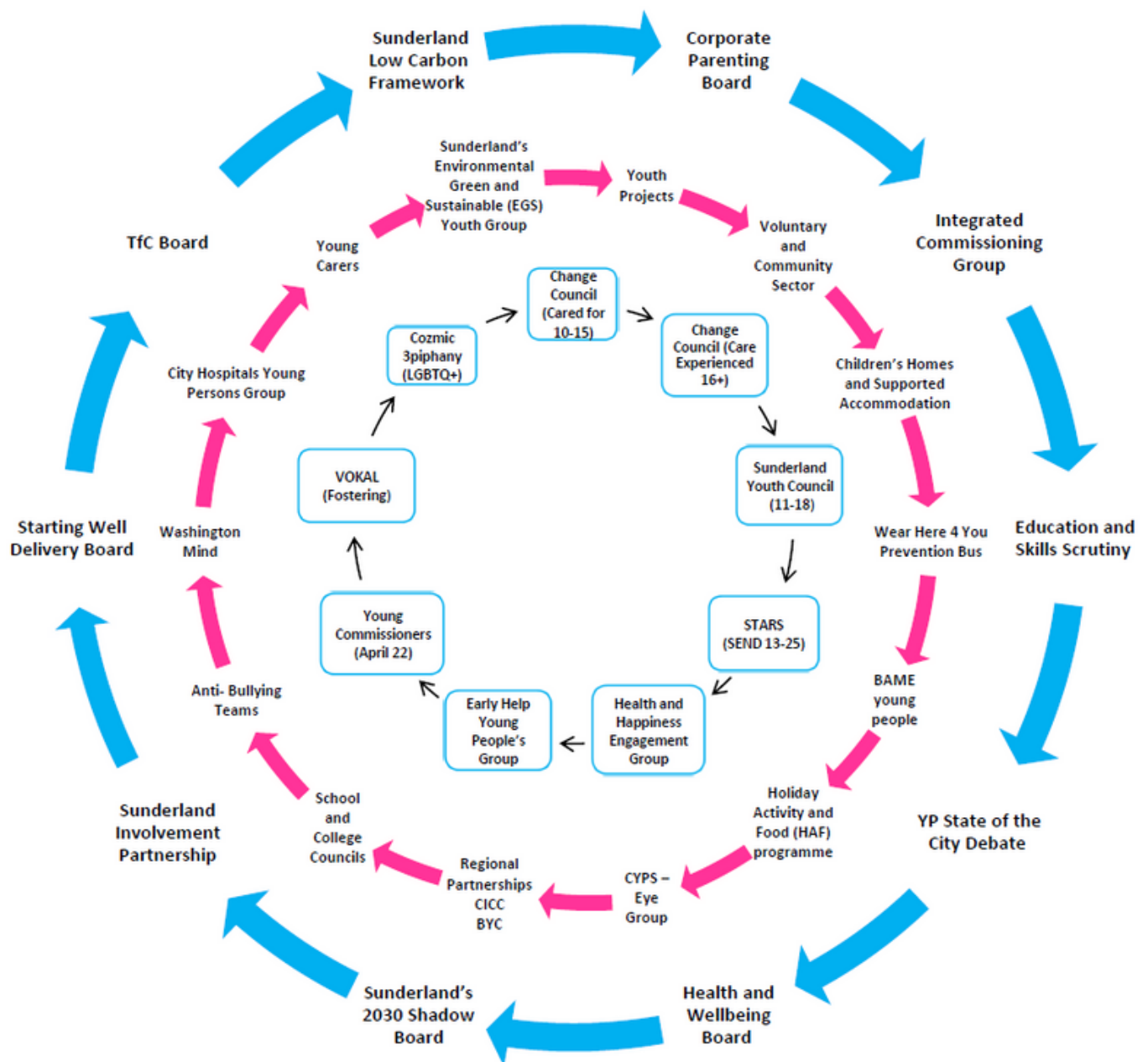


Figure 2. shows the various engagement and participation activities or forums that exist to ensure the child's voice is heard at strategic, service, and individual levels. Our vision, priorities and action plan aim to widen the circles to maximise participation opportunities for all children and young people.

Making a difference

The figure below (Fig.3.) is our principle to support how we know we are making a difference; all outcomes and activities can be measured using the below process.



Outputs

- Outputs are a quantitative summary of an activity
- An output tells you an activity has taken place

Outcomes

- The change that occurs because of an activity
- Certain projects might lead to chains of linked outcomes
- Sometimes it takes years for outcomes to take place

Impact

- Impact indicators describe progress made towards higher-level goals
- They are akin to statements of purpose, describing those objectives that are shared by the company, review our value, such as reducing poverty, increasing access to preventative services, or improving the accountability of our organisation
- While it is typically not possible for an individual project to achieve impacts without the contribution of others, impact indicators provide an important mechanism for coordinating services with those working on similar projects and can illustrate the connection between your project and the priorities of the wider company

‘Listening to children is central to all the service improvements. Inspectors met children and young people from a number of groups who were contributing to the improvement in services. They all reported on how services were much better, how they were personally benefiting from their views being heard and how their contributions were improving the lives of other children.’

Ofsted, ILACS (August 2021)



Tools and Resources

We have five participation and engagement groups in Sunderland.

STARS

STARS are a group of young people who are responsible for ensuring the voices of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are heard in the city. The group promotes young people's voices, helps shape services, and advocates for inclusion and accessibility.

Cozmic 3phiphany

Cozmic 3phiphany is a group that was developed on the request of young people in the city. The group aims to drive change and improve services targeted at LGBTQ+ young people, to ensure that the voices of the LGBTQ+ community are heard, and to improve representation in the city.

RISE

RISE is a group for young people who are supported by Early Help to build resilience and become inspired, self-assured and empowered. Group sessions are co-produced with young people, ensuring that sessions are tailored to support the ever changing needs of our young people.

'Children who met inspectors also reported very positively that early help participation groups had helped them develop new friendships, confidence and strategies for managing their feelings.'

Ofsted, ILACS (August 2021)



Sunderland Youth Council

This group is responsible for the state of city debate and is our widest consultation group in the city. The group co-ordinates consultation within schools and communities. Sunderland Youth Council support Sunderland young people to participate in the annual Make your Mark consultation.

'The Sunderland Youth Council is a highly impressive and committed group of young people who dedicate their time, energy, and ideas to make Sunderland a better place for children and young people to live. They have instigated meaningful campaigns around mental health, developing mental health charter mark status for schools, providing kit bags for the homeless and in improving the environment through targeted litter campaigns in the city.'

Ofsted, ILACS (August 2021)



Change Council

Change Council (10 to 15 years old) are a group of young people responsible for ensuring the voices of our cared for young people are heard within services.

Change Council (+16) are a group of young people responsible for ensuring the voices of our care experienced young people are heard within services.

Young people in Change Council support the corporate parenting agenda and have been instrumental in developing our Change the Language campaign.

'The Change Council is a dedicated and influential group of young people who are having an extraordinarily positive impact on the delivery of services for children in Sunderland. They described how their intervention had brought about changes for children, including the Change the Language campaign, training elected members, changing the referral criteria for care experienced children who become parents, and regular meetings with housing providers. They quite rightly have a great sense of pride in the recognition they receive for their achievements, which are facilitated by an organisation that is willing to learn from their views.'

Ofsted, ILACS (August 2021)



Wear Here 4 You

Our Wear Here 4 You mobile prevention bus offers a recognisable point of information, support and contact for children and young people in the city of Sunderland. The prevention bus delivers sessions both within schools and the community, enabling Together for Children and our partners to gain a greater understanding of young people's situations in order to increase accuracy of intervention. In delivering our model of participation and engagement, we use a number of tools and resources including:

- **Mind Of My Own One** enables young people to create a structured statement of their views in relation to events and situations they encounter while receiving support from social care and early help services. This could include cared for reviews, personal education meetings, Child in Need Reviews, Child Protection Conferences, Family Group Conferences, Pathway Planning, raising a problem or complaint, sharing good news, reviewing their wellbeing and as part of the overall assessment process. In Sunderland, we currently have over 569 Together for Children practitioners with a worker's account including Early Help Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Social Workers, Children's Homes Carers, and virtual school workers.
- **Mind of My Own Express** is designed specifically for younger children and those with learning difficulties or disabilities, the app can help children and young people have their voice heard regarding their education, health and care.
- **Signs of Safety** model of practice, which has been adopted by Together for Children and can utilise the three house template, which enables practitioners to discuss a child's likes/hobbies/strengths/worries and risks related to the child's dreams/hopes and wishes.
- **Independent Advocacy** is provided for all children and young people supported by Together for Children aged 0 to 17, and up to 25 years for care experienced young people and those with a special education need and/or disability.



Celebrating success

Together for Children is passionate about celebrating the success of our young people's achievements. Sunderland has an excellent history of success in holding numerous events for children and young people, such as Sunderland Young Achievers and our Healthy Schools Awards.

Recruitment and selection of staff

Children and young people are involved in the recruitment and selection of staff from social workers to senior members of staff, involving children and young people in training of foster carers and staff training. TfC recognises that the involvement of children and young people in recruitment and selection needs to be strengthened and supported more effectively within our HR processes to ensure children and young people have the opportunity to become involved at all stages of the recruitment process.

Working strategically and across partnerships

Empowering Our Future aims to build on the longstanding relationships between key stakeholders and partners that are founded in shared values and a shared commitment to our vision. We have strong commitment from our Board of Directors, Senior Leadership Team and corporate parents, to ensure the voices of children are heard and listened to. We continue to work in partnership to embed our participation and engagement standards and to deliver our priorities.

The following are examples of where the participation and engagement team provide a strategic link to support and promote engagement across Together for Children and within partnerships:

- Integrated Strategic Commissioning Group
- Starting Well Delivery Board
- Sunderland Safeguarding Children Board
- Primary and Secondary School Councils
- Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programmes
- Sunderland Low Carbon Partnership
- Corporate Parenting Board
- Sunderland Involvement Partnership
- Regional Participation and Engagement Meeting



Performance Management

Key performance indicators that support Empowering Our Future include:

- Number (Unique) of children and young people engaged in a participation activity
- Number of participations by children and young people in a participation activity

Data Snapshot 2021-2022

In the period of 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022, 743 unique children and young people engaged in a participation activity, however, 1,394 children and young people participated in a participation activity. This means that one young person may have participated in a number of different participation activities.



Where do we want to be?

Our current model provides us with a solid foundation for participation and engagement. It works successfully for children and young people in Sunderland and is something we wish to strengthen and improve further rather than radically change.

In 2017, young people branded our approach as 'Empowering Our Future', as they want to be a central influence in how services are delivered and shaped in the future. This approach builds on the model we have established to date, placing our young people at the heart of all engagement activity, and ensuring that they can be involved from an individual to a strategic level.

We have continued to embed a culture of participation in Together for Children as we have grown and continue to work with our partners to ensure that our children and young people have a voice and a real impact on decisions that affect them and the services they receive.

We would like to broaden our inclusivity even further by increasing our engagement with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and Electively Home Educated Children and Young People, so that we are capturing the views of all young people and ensuring that those who are seldom heard have opportunities and are supported in their participation.

At a strategic level we want to broaden representation. We have some excellent participation groups in existence and need to build on the best practice of these groups to widen and capture the views within our schools and communities. We are committed to listening to all young people in making key decisions about future services.



Finally, we want to ensure that those services we work with on a wider scale are committed to this approach and involving young people in service development, policy and decision making.

To achieve the above, we will:

- Develop a culture of actively involving children, young people and their families in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services across the city ensuring that all feel empowered and can take part.
- Provide opportunities to capture the views of all groups of young people and ensuring that those who are seldom heard have opportunities and are supported in their participation.
- Improve how we monitor, measure, and collate the views of young people so that we can influence on a broader scale.
- Ensure good quality feedback is provided to all children and young people, promoting the right of children, young people, and their families to be heard when professionals are making decisions that affect them.
- Require organisations we commission to involve children and young people in planning and reviewing their services providing more accessible, responsive, and better targeted services based on local needs.
- Work with existing groups to expand how we reach the views of wider community.



How will we get there?

This is a 'working document' and will be subject to ongoing consultation. All relevant stakeholders, including children, young people and their families will be involved. A key element is our action plan that will set out the actions for the relevant year.

How will we know we have been successful?

The Together for Children Board has overall strategic responsibility for ensuring the delivery of our vision and action plan, however, the implementation and impact will be monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis by the Prevention and Innovation Service in Early Help on their behalf, with a report produced annually.

The approach and action plan will also be reviewed by the Corporate Parenting Board, Sunderland Safeguarding Children's Board, and the Starting Well Delivery Board.

The Participation and Engagement Service's objectives will be reviewed regularly with children, young people and their families, to ensure that we are focussing on the right things at the right time in the right way.

We will know that we have been successful if we are able to demonstrate that our actions have been achieved and there are positive changes driven by young people and their families' views for shaping the services of the future.