

Summary: Knowledge exchange session: Children, young people experiences of Children's Social Care involvement in their lives – scoping how data is gathered 23rd March 2026

In total 25 participants from 20 organisations attended the knowledge exchange. The organisations represented were from 6 of the 9 regions of England.

Section 1: What data do you already collect about children and young people's experiences of social care? How is the collected?

We used a poll to hear from participants on methods and approaches used. As the results show, a range of mixed methods are utilised to collect feedback about the experiences of children and young people. Some local authorities had well-developed and embedded teams leading on co-production and feedback across a range of practice areas and system activities. These give children and young people opportunities to feedback on their experiences to someone independent of their social worker or family support practitioner. Well-developed feedback loops bring these data into organisational and local system development. In places where these practices and the application of learning from children and young people's experiences were well embedded, this was enabled by long term commitment to participatory and co-productive approaches at all levels within the local authority. Building relationships, both between professionals and with children and young people and families was a central focus, and there was a clear understanding of the benefits both for professionals at all levels and for the children and young people. Well-developed work with children and young people was often referenced alongside established coproduction work with parents and carers. Professionals emphasised their focus to ensure meaningful, strategically planned participation:

... meaningfully us[ing] this feedback and data to inform our work. While some elements of Families First are fixed due to national minimum requirements, we are committed to avoiding a scatter-gun approach or collecting feedback

simply to tick a box. Our priority is to ensure that the voices of young people and parents genuinely shape what we do [Chat]

For other participants capturing and understanding the experiences of children and young people and young people was limited or new initiatives were about to begin. Sources of data included:

- Direct work with children and young people with a participation, 'voice and influence' team or another professional not directly working with that child.
- Children and young people in care council and other in-person groups and coproduction activities.
- Exit interviews: children and young people working with early help, social care and care leavers.
- Use of the Bright Spots survey.
- Locally designed surveys -some coproduced with children and young people and young people.
- Direct observations by social worker / practitioner – indirect feedback.
- Consideration of compliments as well as complaints – actively seeking feedback.
- Focused pieces of local work to gain feedback from children and young people – example given was about child protection conferences, and child protection level work.
- Collecting feedback at 'fun interactions' or events – for example kinship care activity event.
- Audits and routine monitoring.
- Mind of My Own app – enabling children and young people to give feedback without the need for an adult present.

What data is missing? Whose voices might be missing?

- Younger children: comments ranged from the need for skilled observation to represent the views and feelings of infants and limited options for working with younger children.
- Children and young people not in school or with poor attendance – which might include a good many of those with social care involvement in their lives.
- Children and young people with communication needs and some aspects of disability. Examples included children and young people who are neurodivergent or non-verbal.
- Children and young people for whom English is not their first language.

There was discussion on the restrictions on responding freely that may arise when from children and young people need the support of an adult in giving feedback.

It is of note that there was no consideration of race or other types of discrimination in terms of barriers to feedback/participation work, or who might feel more or less able to take part in feedback activities.

Examples of good practice

Detailed examples were given from five local authorities with long term, mixed methods approaches to gathering feedback, including substantial co-production work. Where local authorities know their families well, they are able to identify differences between families with different levels of need and use this to inform service development. Commitment from and benefit for leaders was viewed as an essential enabler:

The reason we get such buy-in in is [that] you really have to commit to that process over many years, and you have to embed the practice... I think this is going to present a challenge for the national piece of work. My service leaders want this feedback because part of this survey feeds into their business plan and this feeds into their process.

I'm running a survey in the community around Families First priorities and we're talking to Tier 1 and Tier 2 parents [i.e. early and targeted early help]. And we can now see what's different because we know the Tier 3 and Tier 4 families so well [as a result of longstanding participation and feedback work at these levels]... Because we already have quite clear processes of tracking, I can tell you what our early help parents have been saying for the last 15 years... It does present some real challenges because there are some significant disagreements from what we [as professionals] would see as a Tier 1 or Tier 2 family and what their needs are and how they would want to engage with the service compared to families at Tier 3 and Tier 4. We're seeing some real different responses.

Section 2: What are the practical and legal issues in seeking children and young people and young people's feedback on their experiences of social care, and in particular survey methods?

Significant resources required to achieve modest response rates, often lower than required for statistical significance: One professional from a local authority where co-production work is well developed explained the practical challenges and time required to support response rates when administering the Bright Spots survey. They achieved less than 20% response rate, despite significant efforts.

... and I'd probably put forward the notion that we'd invest more time and energy in our own survey than promoting a DFE equivalent

The need for national bodies to coordinate and review data already available: A range of surveys and data about children and young people's experiences are already collected (by Ofsted and the Children and young people's Commissioner as well as locally). Participants strongly advocated DfE coordinating with other national bodies to develop least onerous, most meaningful approaches.

The suggestion was made that national data might better be collected if the DfE were to propose two or three questions to be inserted into local surveys or other collection methods.

Focus on in-person feedback: examples suggested that local authorities are using in-person approaches to achieve high quality data about children and young people's experiences. Methods include conversations at existing touchpoints and creating opportunities to engage at children centres / family hubs / schools. Participants recognise that these methods may not be statistically representative but they certainly reflect what we know from research about hearing from 'hard to reach' groups in meaningful ways.

Surveys are often long and onerous: The example was given of lengthy equality and diversity monitoring tick boxes. One participant said that they would instead complete these questions on behalf of respondents, if and when they knew the respondent.

Safeguarding concerns:

- **Anonymity:** The issue of responding to any safeguarding concerns raised in anonymised feedback was raised. It was also noted that even with anonymous methods some people *'don't trust it is going to be anonymous'*.
 - **Feeding back to an independent professional:** Specialist participation teams enable feedback to someone independent of the service being provided. This also ameliorates concerns about safeguarding issues being raised in anonymous feedback.
Examples of good practice were shared where participation teams are able to engage skilfully with children and young people across ages and abilities creating meaningful opportunities to share experiences, build relationships, and feedback.
 - **Parent, foster carer or other gatekeeping adults:** Concerns were expressed about the role of 'trusted adults' in mediating feedback and how this might limit and children and young people's ability to share openly with, for instance, a foster carer present. (see this ['safe adult'](#) blog)
 - **The support required varies according to levels of concern and stage of care journey:** *'it's very different if you're going through the court procedures process, for example, to being in a settled foster care placement'*
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that you've been in for years. All of that influences when you can ask, but also the responses that you get. So that needs to be taken into consideration as well, not just what that overall status is, it's the stage they're at in that journey.'

Ethics concerns and considerations:

- **What is the purpose and what are the benefits of taking part in a national survey for children and young people:** The DfE needs to articulate the purposes and benefits for children and young people and young people and for local leaders and teams of the data gathering they are considering. *'What's in it for them [children and young people and young people]?'... We can sell that locally as 'you can influence local services and we've got our hands on the lever of local change'. When it's national, it might be to communicate that notion to young people might be more of a challenge.'*
- **Using incentives:** offering incentives acknowledges time taken to respond and may improve response rates but requires resource and process, identifying details etc. Some suggested that in their experience offering vouchers does not seem to increase response rates. One local authority was considering what might be more effective incentives.
- **Closing feedback loops:** There were strong concerns about a national survey being tokenistic and the need to provide timely feedback to children and young people about what is done as a result of information that they share (closing feedback loops).

Accessibility and inclusion:

- **Ages, developmental stages and communication needs of individual children and young people:** Given participants' expertise about meaningful methods - some bringing decades of experience in this work – consideration is needed of what evidence would suggest that a survey would be an appropriate method as well as what additional support might be needed and how would that be resourced?
One participant gave an example that they used colourful paper forms and had good completion rates when completing in-person with children and young people and families (within a very well developed programme of participation work across the local authority). They felt it might be different if asking online.
- **In-person work,** sometimes via a familiar adult may be needed to gain feedback from younger children and young people, and children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities.

Examples were given of tailored participation groups made accessible for children and young people with SEND and with young children aged 5 and up, including with SEND.

What we found is every group that we have, our forums are very, they're all unique, depending on the young people that attend. Some of them are very active and that they need to play a lot of physical games. We've got others that are really into arts and crafts, and they'll talk about anything while they're doing their arts and crafts.

- **Digital access:** Digital poverty is a well-rehearsed issue. In addition, some children and young people's digital access is strictly limited due to safeguarding concerns.

The use of social media platforms to gather views was not viewed as a meaningful option. One participant noted that young people's preferences for social media platform change and facilitators noted debates on the use of social media by under 16s and ethical and safeguarding challenges these platforms raise.

What legal considerations are needed?

There was limited discussion of the potential challenges of gaining parental consent for children and young people to complete a survey or to give feedback.

Section 3: What is your perspective on the idea of a national survey approach? Benefits and challenges. What alternatives do you have for building a national picture beyond survey methods?

Benefits and challenges of national survey approach:

- Any such approach would need to be co-ordinated across government departments and other national bodies, to avoid duplication of effort.

*... It is worth DfE and national colleagues being aware of just **how many** requests for CYP engagement/consultation/research that colleagues in LA Voice & Influence roles get from academics, local partnerships, DFE etc. Pragmatically I think we have to "filter" these as we can't action them all and I suspect there will always be a bias towards local - or something that is focused on a specific issue or topic...*

The biggest question for me is "why do the DFE need to capture this information in their own survey?" when as demonstrated on this call - we collectively have lots of existing data and insight we can provide without rolling out another survey.

- The breadth of children's social care activity and the various levels of engagement professionals have with children and young people raise
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enormous challenges for achieving any level of representative sample sizes as required by survey methodologies.

- Increased understanding of child and young person perspectives at national level might help national bodies to identify 'systemic issues which need addressing at a national, legal, governmental level'. Adult social care already have a [national annual survey](#) and a biannual survey for carers, worth learning from this work.
- Essential that local authorities would have access to their own granular or raw data, so it is useable for their local needs.
- A small number (two or three) national questions inserted into local engagement methods would aid synergy of activity. Requires careful consideration of what would be the 'right measures' or questions.
- Potential to share learning and improve benchmarking. Sharing national comparative data with children and young people locally as means of improving standards:

I think it's quite powerful to have comparative data and also to share that with our young people's advocacy groups... because it is a good tool for change. It's quite a long journey to get that tool for change, but I do see the value in having a regional comparative data.

- With sector resources so limited and sustained investment in mixed method participatory methods demonstrably the most promising approach, the preference was for investment in local participation: 'I would rather pay £10k towards the salary of a YP to work with us to gather views rather than pay a company to administer a survey'. There is already a good deal of data held in case management systems. Investment in improving means to extract the data in a useable way for understanding views might be a better investment.
- There were concerns about the timing of considering a new national survey given Families First Reforms. There was also the suggestion of a national survey of all children and young people – with ability to identify those children and young people with experience of social care – to avoid stigmatising children and young people with experience of social care.

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