

Securing the active participation of Children and Young People in Central Bedfordshire

PURPOSE:

1. The report outlines progress towards the development of an active participation strategy and shadow Children's Trust Board for Children and Young People in Central Bedfordshire

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that members of the Children's Trust Board:

2. Note the proposed development of an Active Participation Strategy for Children and Young People in Central Bedfordshire. The strategy will be in place by the end of April 2016.
3. Support the development and implementation of the strategy through securing engagement with professionals and partner agencies from across Central Bedfordshire.
4. Agree to a new Shadow Children's Trust Board for Children and Young People being formed in Central Bedfordshire. The Board will provide a coordinated and strategic approach to engage with young people and ensure the council and its partners are held responsible for delivery of services that improve outcomes for Children and Young People. The Board would be in place from June 2016.

PUBLIC/EXEMPT: Public

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BACKGROUND:

Definition – 'Active' participation:

5. Active participation refers to children and young people having opportunities to have their voice heard, but also opportunities to have real influence in decision-making and being empowered to make decisions for themselves. Active Participation falls into two specific strands, identified as:
 - **Personal and group:**
Children and young people will have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that directly affect their lives, such as developing and monitoring care and education plans; planning and implementing the provision of play space; and the use of the local environment.

- **Democratic representation:**

Children and young people, including those not in education, training or employment, will have the opportunity to contribute towards decisions which affect their communities through inclusion in democratic processes

The definition applies to all children and young people, including those aged between 19 and 25 who are care leavers, or have learning disabilities and/or learning difficulties.

- **Legal Implications:**

The active participation of Children and Young People is underpinned by:

- **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)** – Including Protection of Rights, Respect for the views of the Child and Freedom of Expression
- **Children Act 2004 (and subsequent guidance)** – Legal and policy framework to promote the active involvement of children and young people in planning and commissioning – including the development of the Children's Commissioner

Current Position in Central Bedfordshire:

6. Discussions with colleagues across Children Services, and with external partners, have highlighted a number of areas of good practice regarding securing the active participation of children and young people in decision making. These are documented in the annual 'Children's Voice' report to the Children's Trust.

However, there are a number of areas for development, including:

- There is a strong commitment across both Commissioning and Operational service teams in the Council to secure the active participation of young people. It is also a priority for the LSCB and supported by a range of partners. However, opportunities to participate are often viewed as 'standalone consultation' events and in isolation from other aspects of strategic planning.
- Each team and partnership working across Children Services tends to plan, deliver and review services in isolation. Opportunities to integrate practice (e.g. ensuring young people from the Children in Care Council can be our young commissioners) are often missed.
- There are a number of opportunities for young people to participate in local decision making; for example, the Youth Parliament, Young Researchers and the Children in Care Council. However, these opportunities (where appropriate to do so) are not always accessible for young people who wish to participate.

- There have been opportunities for children and young people to meet with decision makers through the youth audit, Children in Care Council and on a '1-2-1' basis with the chair of the LSCB. However, this has tended to happen in an 'ad-hoc' way.
 - There is no systematic approach to measuring the impact of active participation and the benefits it has to local communities across Central Bedfordshire.
7. Overall, whilst there are a number of strengths in the current position there are also a number of areas for improvement. If these could be addressed, it would strengthen a Central Bedfordshire wide approach to active participation and secure much more effective use of resources across the council and with key partners.

Anticipated Outcomes:

8. The development of an active participation strategy will itself deliver a number of outcomes for Children and Young People, including:
- the development of a range of skills (e.g. decision making, communication, confidence, resilience and developing positive relationships);
 - opportunities to learn, have fun and achieve accreditation; and
 - secure active citizenship that will enable children and young people to be creators and not just consumers.
9. It is also anticipated that the following benefits could be secured once the active participation strategy is in place:
- More effective, valued services with better outcomes for children and young people.
 - Policy and planning based on actual rather than 'assumed need'.
 - Credibility with children, young people and their families.
 - Delivering government expectations – including regulatory requirements.
 - Opportunities to bring communities together, increasing understanding and respect.
 - Inclusion of vulnerable individuals and groups of children and young people.

Proposal:

10. In November 2015, CBC's Children's Services Management Team (CSMT) agreed a proposal to develop an Active Participation Strategy and a Shadow Children's Trust Board for Central Bedfordshire. This proposal outlined the approach to be adopted locally in order to support this development, including:
- Using the development of the strategy as an opportunity to secure the active participation of Children and Young People in decision making.

- Discussion with Children and Young People on the key themes to be considered in the strategy, including:
 - What does active participation mean for children and young people?
 - How do we ensure opportunities to participate are 'meaningful' and 'real'?
 - Who should have the opportunity to participate and how do we ensure this happens?
 - What experiences and opportunities do children and young people want to participate in both now and in the future?
 - What support and resources need to be in place to ensure high quality experiences and opportunities for both children and young people?
 - How professionals will use existing participation networks to work with Children and Young People (e.g. The Children in Care Council and Youth Parliament).
 - The importance of existing groups and networks of professionals in helping to oversee the development of the strategy. It is anticipated that professionals will:
 - support children and young people to launch the strategy;
 - promote active participation and the local strategy within their own agencies and partnerships;
 - support children and young people to develop a shadow Children's Trust Board; and
 - facilitate the development of an annual children and young people's conference.
11. Since the proposal was agreed in November 2015, a number of actions have taken place to promote the development of the strategy:
- Consultation on strategy development held with Central Bedfordshire Voluntary and Community Sector provider forum.
 - Planning session held with professionals at the Children and Young People's Voice meeting.
 - Allocation of staffing resources in the Youth Support Service (YSS) to support work with young people.
12. These actions have helped to put in place some initial foundations for the work planned into 2016.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS:

13. The development of an Active Participation Strategy for Central Bedfordshire will:

- deliver a range of positive outcomes for active participants, including confidence and communication skills;
- secure value for money by ensuring the delivery of services for children and young people (and their families) are much more responsive to their needs; and
- support mutual respect and understanding across different groups of children and young people.

14. In order to ensure the strategy can be delivered and benefits can be realised, the following next steps have been identified:

- By the end of February 16 – Discussion and feedback from Children and Young People on key themes that will form the basis of the strategy.
- In March 2016 – Draft Active Participation Strategy developed.
- By the end of Easter 2016:
 - Draft Strategy shared with children and young people.
 - First meeting of prospective members of the shadow Children's Trust Board.
- By the end of April 2016 – Final Strategy shared with CSMT.
- Between April – June 2016 – Development work with members of the shadow Children's Trust.
- By the end of July 2016 – Shadow Children's Trust Board meets formally.
- By November 2016 - Children and Young People's Conference hosted by members of the shadow Children's Trust.