



Northumberland
County Council

Northumberland Participation Strategy

2025 - 2028



Introduction

All children, young people and parents/carers have the right to be heard, be truly listened to and have their views valued and acted upon to affect improvement. This is achieved through our values of communicating openly, honestly and with mutual respect.

Northumberland thrives by involving children, young people, parents and carers at all levels, contributing and shaping the local area to enhance the range and quality of services. Children, young people, parents and carers are treated as equal partners; their contribution is supported, valued and respected. Trust and co-operation will be built through timely and honest communication, where we listen, do our best and act on our word, ensuring regular feedback is taken and given to and from children, young people and parents and carers on the quality of services and support delivered.

Our services are honest and clear about what can and can't be delivered and why. We will treat everyone fairly, by working together with children, young people and parents/carers to find solutions, not problems.



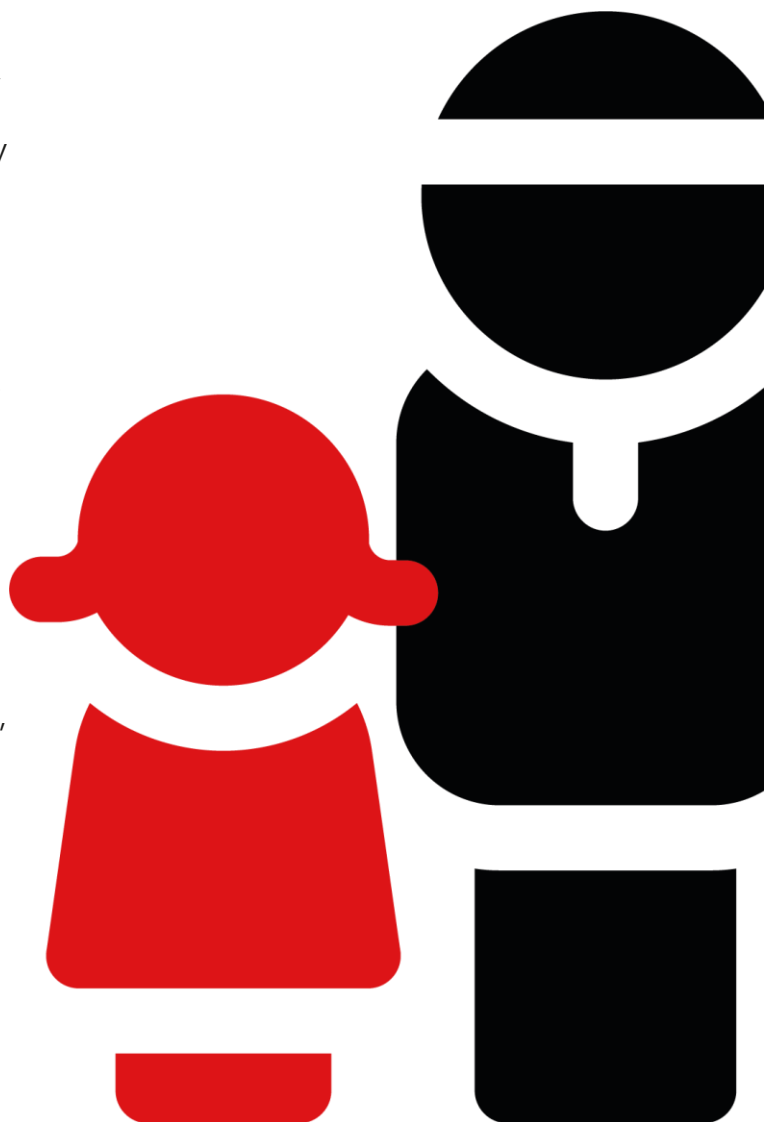
Participation Strategy Vision:

“Participation is a way of working, rather than an event, a project, an unachievable dream or a tick box ...(it is) a culture of participation from top to bottom and side to side.” Shenton, F (2004) *‘Everyday Participation: A Practical Guide to Youth Involvement.*

While Northumberland will hold be a number of specific participation activities, to further embed and enhance the ethos of participation throughout the day to day working. This statement from Shenton holds the key emphasis and vision of our strategy.

To demonstrate this way of working there is an expectation that:

- Children and young people will be proactively involved in strategic and political decision making to inform policy and delivery.
- Service delivery and policy will respond to the views of children and young people and will be based on their views, needs and aspirations.
- Children and young people will be proactively involved in the implementation and delivery of the participation strategy.



Defining Aims:

In keeping with the ethos of “Participation is a way of working rather than an event...” the following principles define how children and young people’s voices are heard, and their opinions influence the decision-making process in Northumberland:

1. Promoting positive images of children and young people and their achievements.
2. Identify and facilitate effective networks between participation groups.
3. Encourage high quality participation work.
4. Influence and support workforce development to include participation, knowledge and skills across all partner organisations.
5. Continue the development of the participation with all children and young people.
6. Develop appropriate communication channels with children and young people utilising social media.



Participation Groups:

In addition to embedding participation as part of the everyday working practice across Northumberland County Council we recognise that young people, parents and carers may choose to become involved to a greater degree. Often this will be in the form of “experts by experience” and as part of defined groups.

To support with this Northumberland County Council have established the following young people's participation groups:

- **Youth Parliament** - The youth parliament is a national body that aims to improve the lives of young people and give them a voice.
- **Youth Cabinet** - The Northumberland Youth Cabinet is an elected body of 11 to 19-year-olds, representing the views of young people across Northumberland.
- **Voices Making Choices (VMC)**- VMC is made up of young people who have various experiences of the care system.
- **Young Peoples Panel**- The young people's panel is a group of young people that represent the views of young people in family hub settings and their local community.
- **Care Leavers Group** - Young people who have left the care system but continue to be supported by the Leaving Care Team.

Participation Groups for development:

In addition to the groups currently supported by Northumberland County Council, we recognise further work is required to ensure the voice of young people with SEND and their families are heard. Initially, this will be through developing the links with Northumberland Parent Carer Forum and identifying, with their support, appropriate ways to ensure young people with SEND can share their views in a way that works for them.

- **Parent Carer Forum** - The Parent Carer Forum is a supportive group sharing views and shaping services to better meet the needs of SEND children and young people.
- **Young people with SEND** - regular contact with young people with SEND.

How we hear what young people say:

While we strive for participation to be part of the everyday work with children and young people, we recognise that the act of genuinely engaging and listening to young people and their views is the first and foremost approach to hearing what they have to say.

To support this, we use a number of specific tools, resources and methods:

- **Independent Advocates** – Available to young people open to a worker within Children's Social Care.
- **Mind Of My Own** – A digital communication tool available to any young person working with Children's Social Care.
- **Surveys and questionnaires** – on specific themes, shared with specific groups and creating focus groups when needed.
- **Make Your Mark** – National ballot enabling young people to highlight the issues most important to them.
- **Young people's feedback form** – available to young people open to Children's Services teams.

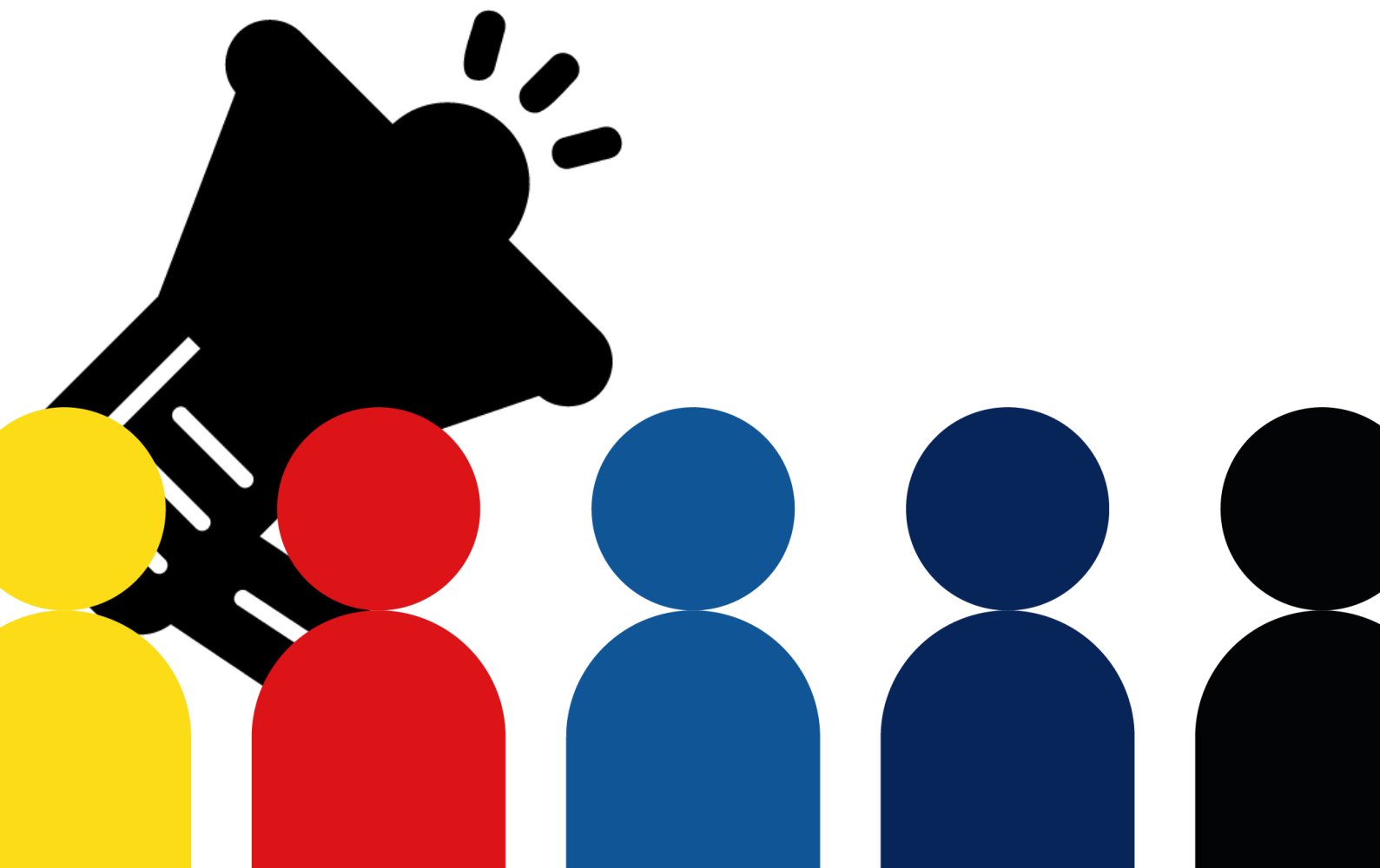
To ensure the voice and views of young people and their parents and carers are heard, and that appropriate action can be taken, the Participation Team have direct input to each of the following Strategic Boards:

- Corporate Parenting
- SEND
- Early Help
- CYPS (Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership)
- NCASP (Northumberland Children's Adults Safeguarding Partnership)
- Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board

How we hear what young people say:

In this way there is the opportunity for the Strategic Boards to hear from young people and provide their response, develop services and adapt appropriately to the needs of the young people involved with their services.

To further embed participation as part of the everyday way of working we are committed to developing this aspect of the Data and Performance clinics help with each team in Children's Services understand the journey and the impact our work has upon children, young people and their families. This will draw data from the information systems used by each team as well as the direct feedback forms completed by young people, parents and carers.



What our young people tell us about their workers:

Young people in Northumberland have told us that they feel like their workers respect them and they can have good relationships with them, for example,

"I am a young person, and I worked with someone called Steve. And he was proper mint I love him, he helped me gain confidence, reduce how much I smoked, got me used to going out the house again and honestly so much more. He's an amazing kind person that anyone would love to have as a worker. He is so fun, and he helped get back into education again he offered me a course which helped me very well with communication, teamwork skills and helped me make friends. Please let Steve know, he's mint, and I appreciate everything he has done for me. Thank you."

"My worker has listened to me, and I am able to talk about things comfortably."

"My worker did not treat me like I was a bad person, she was extremely nice therefore it made it easier for me to work with her. I will not reoffend after this work."

What young people have told us between 2023-2024

- Make Your Mark ballot in February 2024 highlighted the top three issues for young people in Northumberland are listed below. Overall, 5567 votes were cast by young people in Northumberland. The full Make Your Mark 2024 national report can be found [here](#).
 - Culture, Media and Sport – 1126 votes
 - Health and Wellbeing – 1045 votes
 - Crime and Safety – 629 votes
- Key themes that were voted for during the Youth Elections in February 2024 by young people across Northumberland included;
 - better access to mental health support,
 - tackling child poverty and free school meals for all,
 - improving education opportunities and curriculums to include learning for life,
 - care for the environment.
- Voices Making Choices (Northumberland's Children in Care Council) identified stigma and language in the care system as their priority issue. The group simply asked that workers, systems and practice, as far as possible, don't make them feel any different to others who are not open to services.



What we have done in response to young people's voice:

Young people highlighted the need for more to be done to help them feel safe when they are out and about, particularly in respect to the perception of knife crime and relationships.

We have:

- Held multi agency health relationships conferences, with focuses on education and awareness of signs of unhealthy relationships.
- Begun the organization of a young people's healthy relationships awareness conference.

Young people raised tackling child poverty and free school meals for all as a topic important to them.

We have:

- Supported Northumberland Youth Parliament members to present this issue at regional and national UK Youth Parliament events. With the UK Youth Parliament making this a priority area for the year.

Access to mental health support has been identified a number of times by young people in Northumberland as an issue important to them.

We have:

- Supported Northumberland Youth Cabinet and Northumberland Youth Parliament to work with The Be You team to review their website and challenged them to consider how to equip young people to support themselves and their friends.
- Supported Northumberland Youth Cabinet and Northumberland Youth Parliament to work with the Be You team to consider how young people not educated in schools can easily access mental health support.



What we have done in response to young people's voice:

Voices Making Choices told us we needed to change the language used within social care so that cared for young people no longer felt stigmatised by it.

We have:

- Worked with Voices Making Choices to develop training for practitioners and delivered this to 140 practitioners within Northumberland County Council.
- Delivered Voices Making Choices' Stigma and Language training to each new ASYA cohort.
- Delivered Voices Making Choices' Stigma and Language training to Foster Carers as part of their local support groups.
- Presented Voices Making Choices' Stigma and Language training video at Regional Children In Care Conference.



How we recognise the ladder of participation to identify our participative approach:

For participation to be effective and consistent throughout Northumberland it is necessary for everyone working with children and young people to have an agreed base of participation practices and standards, highlighting what is and is not considered effective or appropriate participation practice.

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation provides a framework for measuring children and young people's level of engagement and participation. In this way it is possible to identify what needs to happen to increase the involvement of the child or young person to maximise their voice and influence.

Professor Lundy's model of participation gives a clear and easy to follow practical approach and checklist to ensure that each activity and engagement holds a focus of the child or young person's voice at the centre.

In a practical sense Lundy's model is broken into four key elements, Voice, Space, Audience and Influence, that can be applied to each rung of Harts ladder of Youth Participation. These then ensure that in all situations children and young people's voice is kept at the core of all work.

- Have children's views been actively sought?
- Was there a safe space in which children can express themselves freely?
- Have steps been taken to ensure that all children can take part?

Space

How: Provide a safe and inclusive space for children to express their views.

Voice

How: Provide appropriate information and facilitate the expression of children's views.

- Have children been given the information they need to form a view?
- Do children know that they do not have to take part?
- Have children been given a range of options as to how they might choose to express themselves?

- Is there a process for communication children's views?
- Do children know who their views are being communicated to?
- Does that person/body have the power to make decisions?

Audience

How: Ensure that children's views are communicated to someone with the responsibility to listen.

Influence

How: Ensure that children's views are taken seriously and acted upon, where appropriate.

- Were the children's views considered by those with the power to effect change?
- Are there procedures in place that ensure that the children's views have been taken seriously?
- Have the children and young people been provided with feedback explaining the reasons for decisions taken?

Engagement, Participation and Co-Production:

Engagement relies on trust and collaboration and is founded in good conversations and positive relationships. Effective engagement supports genuine working together and co-production.

Participation is:

The process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. (Hart, 1992, p5)

For participation to be effective it needs to be well planned and have a genuine purpose, and a clear method of evaluation including feeding back to all involved how their contribution has helped.

Participation practice with children and young people should create the opportunity for them to grow and develop as well as supporting change to systems, processes and services. Participation should be part of the everyday business and not just specific events or activities.

The diagram shows the ladder of participation for children and young people. In Northumberland, we recognise that children and young people's participation starts where they are at that time, but we aim to support them to be able to participate on the higher rungs of the ladder. This will mean that decisions are made through listening to children and young people and sharing the decision-making processes.

These then ensure that in all situations children and young people's voice is kept at the core of all work.

**Young people initiated.
Decisions shared with adults.**

8

**Young people initiated and
directed.**

7

**Adult initiated. The decisions are
shared with the young people.**

6

**Young people are consulted and
informed.**

5

**Young people are assigned but
not informed.**

4

**Tokenism: symbolic integration
of minorities.**

3

**Decoration: young people are
used.**

2

**Manipulation: young people
are misused.**

1

Ladder of Participation example:

8 - Young people are initiated. Decisions shared with adults.

A young person wishes to change where they live. They discuss this with their social worker then plan a care team meeting together. The young person and social worker decide on a date, time and location as well as who to invite. The young person has an active role in the meeting and everyone involved makes decisions together.

7 - Young people are initiated and directed.

A group of young people decide to hold an environmental day in their school. They get permission from the head teacher. The young people make the decisions and the school provide support.

6 - Adult initiated. The decisions are shared with young people.

A worker asks young people for ideas on how to recruit more young people to a new group. The young people suggest a family fun day. The worker and young people plan the day together.

5 - Young people are consulted and informed.

A social worker consults a young person on what they would like from a new place to live. The young person tells the worker what they would like. The worker explains what will happen next then gives feedback on how their views impacted the decisions.

4 - Young people are assigned but not informed.

The council decides to hold a young people's awards evening. They write a post explaining the role and ask young people to volunteer to help run the evening.

3 - Tokenism: symbolic integration of minorities.

A young person is asked by adults to be on a panel to represent 'youth'. The young person is not given the opportunity to understand what they are getting involved with.

2 - Decoration: young people are used.

Adults write a script for young people to read at a conference about 'youth' issues.

1 - Manipulation: young people are misused.

Adults write a leaflet about what to expect if you become a cared for child. Quotes from young people are used in the leaflet, they do not know they are being used.



Northumberland's Young People

**Our commitment
to you.**



Healthy me

We will help you have a healthy lifestyle and support you to be physically and emotionally happy.



Pledge. Commitment.



Care for me

We will do all we can to make you feel cared about and not treated differently.



Support me

We will make sure you have the right people by your side, people that use words and phrases you are comfortable with and understand.



Talented me

We will help you do the best you can in your hobbies, interests and in school.

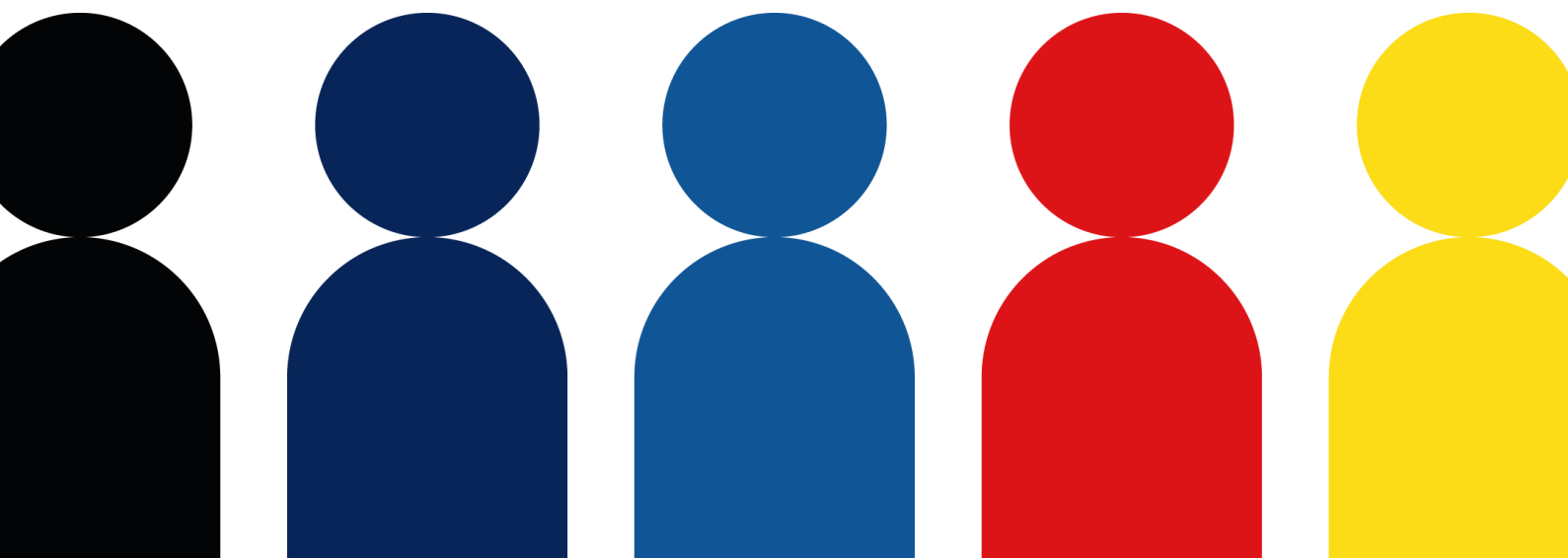


Involve me

We will involve you in decisions made about you, making sure we understand what you have to say and what you feel.

Participation Networks:

A wide range of youth participation takes place throughout Northumberland. Many services, agencies, organisations and schools engage in high level participation activities. To ensure the voice of children and young people is heard and taken seriously we link in with participation groups and networks across Northumberland as well as the North East region and nationally, including the Regional Children in Care Council, Regional and National Youth Parliament, School Councils and Northumberland Parent Carer Forum.



Commitment

Northumberland has made a commitment to all children and young people involved with services it provides to consider and act in a way that makes their life as positive as it can be. Children and young people have told us what our five key themes below mean to them and how they would like us to demonstrate these themes. We call this Our Commitment, a central part of this is the involvement of children and young people in decisions being made about them or that affect them.

Our Priorities going forward:

- **Increasing the quality of meaningful young person and family voice in SEND.**
- **Develop and embed the Northumberland Young People's Panel, to influence local provision for young people.**
- **Celebrate and promote Northumberland's young people and their achievements.**
- **Embed young people's voice on all strategic boards within Children's Services.**
- **Increase the involvement of Cared For young people and Care Leavers in shaping services supporting them.**



References:

Hart, R (1992) *Children's Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.