

Embedded Participatory Practice

Engaging young people in Contextual Safeguarding

June 2022

Laying the foundations

How does a Contextual Safeguarding approach support participation with young people? What are the different ways that young people can be engaged and included? In this guide we present learning from the Scale-up project to support leaders and practitioners to develop the participation of young people in safeguarding services

Beyond 'Youth Voice'

In this briefing we reflect on the challenges and opportunities that exist for child protection systems to engage in, and embed, participatory practice with young people. We particularly focus developing young people's participation as part of a Contextual Safeguarding approach to safeguarding. The briefing offers insights into the different levels of participation with young people, provides questions to consider and practical examples to support you in your journey.

When child protection systems first adopt a Contextual Safeguarding approach, they often begin by making changes to their policies and processes. This might include adapting forms, making changes to case management systems and developing new multi-agency panels. These are important steps to make, but to progress in embedding Contextual Safeguarding and to honour the values that underpin the framework, it is vital that young people are engaged with as partners. This includes young people:

1. Participating in system change development

AND

2. Participating in the safeguarding decisions and processes that affect them.

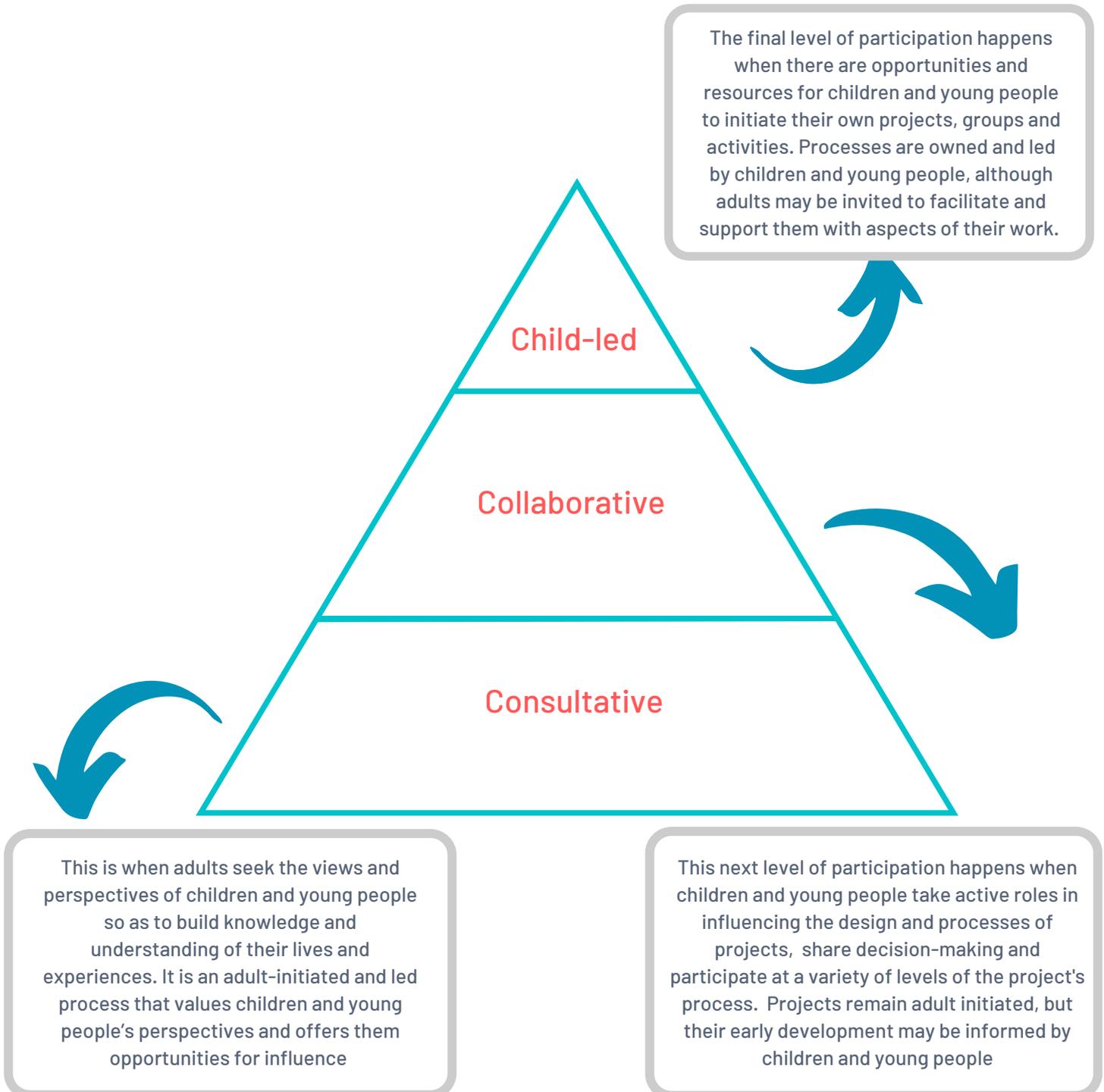
For each of these it is likely that you will need to develop new relationships, learn new skills and create new processes that support young people's involvement.

Developing meaningful ways of engaging young people in safeguarding processes can be challenging. Doing it properly involves going beyond the idea of representing 'the voice of young people', which can exist at the level of quotes and soundbites. The participation methods we have developed with sites during the Scale-up project have been informed by expertise from the voluntary and community sector, and beyond, where participation is actively promoted. Together, we are committed to developing and advancing ways to include young people in everything from frontline practice to the strategic level.

Levels of participation

The Safer Young Lives Research Centre (University of Bedfordshire) has developed an 'ethical working paper' which considers the role of children and young people in research. This has underpinned our work in the Scale Up Project. Although the paper is written with a research

focus, it covers essential points relevant for children's social care services seeking to develop Contextual Safeguarding. For example, it sets out different 'levels' that young people can participate and the scope of who could be included, starting with being consultative, then collaborative and aiming for being child-led.



Young people influencing change

During the Scale-up project the Contextual Safeguarding research team consulted with the Young Researcher's Advisory Panel [YRAP] who are based at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre. The group is founded on the principle that participation can be a protective and positive process. Young advisors were consulted about the design, structure and content of the research tools we developed for working with young people. We also consulted with locally based youth forums from within our partner services.

Spotlight from Scale-up

In the Scale-up project we saw the potential of youth services - from school councils, youth forums and young leaders to sports teams and drama groups - to facilitate the engagement of young people in changing safeguarding systems. But, the extent to which this was realised was often dependent on the flow of information across, and beyond, council departments. This means that a good place to start is to look at the communication channels and co-working practices that exist in your service between social care and youth services. Think with colleagues about how this could be strengthened at a practice and strategic level, so that there is a shared understanding of the aims of Contextual Safeguarding and a shared commitment to young people's views and experiences shaping the changes you are making. Build the relationships between professionals, so that youth workers can act as a bridge between social care and those young people who have ideas, opinions and are experts in their own lives.

Our experiences of working with the young advisors and other local groups convinced us of the potential for involving young people in changing safeguarding systems. If your service is adopting a Contextual Safeguarding approach, find out if there is an established Youth Participation Forums (or similar). This can be a great route to building relationships with young people who could then be invited to support the development of Contextual Safeguarding via consultation, co-creation and co-production.

One Local Authority was piloting an alternative safety planning process for young people affected by extra-familial harm. As part of the new design, they wanted to develop a conference model that young people would feel able to participate in. They contacted their established youth forum and asked if members would act as consultants. The pilot leaders wanted feedback on new material they were developing, including a letter to be sent to a young person ahead of the conference and a safety plan template. The young people discussed and annotated the material. Their views on wording, formatting and even how they felt about seeing the council logo, were presented to the pilot leaders for consideration. The group also fed back the potential for closer collaboration in future, for example by them being involved in co-producing new service initiatives from the outset.

Barriers to participation

As professionals we can find engaging young people in systems change work and their own safeguarding processes, challenging. We can feel frustrated if young people, for example, skip safeguarding meetings, fail to answer our calls or deviate from their safeguarding plans. But the onus, of course, is on us to reflect on this and to create systems that facilitate, rather than put up barriers, for young people to engage.

We asked young people to describe some of the challenges to participating in social care activities. They talked about five key things:

Relationships

These take time and need to feel and be meaningful

Trust

In working with adults due to past negative experiences

Lack of follow-up

A feeling that there was little point in sharing personal experiences if nothing changed and there was no feedback

Differing experiences

A sense that adults are unable or unwilling to understand what young people's lives are like

Professional role

Young people were much more likely to describe having a positive relationship with a youth worker than a social worker

Young people as partners

At the heart of a Contextual Safeguarding social care system is a commitment to professional practice that is relationship-based and respectful towards young people. A Contextual Safeguarding system should facilitate opportunities for young people to make decisions and gain a sense of control over their lives. This has many benefits, including:

- Redressing power dynamics which can be inherent in child/adult relationships by promoting anti-oppressive practice
- Valuing young people as experts in their own lives and knowledgeable about their experiences
- Foregrounding the lived experiences of young people, not just of harm, but of other things like poverty, racism and exclusion that contextualise their experiences of harm
- Facilitating working in the 'here and now' rather than making young people fit to a certain narrative, service or outcome
- Promoting a way of working that enables mutual and respectful learning between young people and professionals
- Facilitating co-produced plans for individual young people
- Informing system design and changes
- Creating greater opportunities for increasing safety for young people.

Conclusion

There are endless benefits to hearing from young people and improving practice in response to their ideas and collaboration. This is equally true if you are a practitioner introducing young people to safety in different contexts, or a team leader bringing in

Opportunities to work with young people

The learning from the Scale-up project is that young people are full of views and ideas about Contextual Safeguarding methods and systems. To hear from young people and involve them in the decision making process, certain conditions need to be in place. Here are some questions and considerations to support your development of these conditions:

- Find out which services are already working with young people in your area and build relationships with them
- Where are the lesser-heard voices? Find out which organisations and services you need to start new relationships with in order to engage with these young people
- At the strategic level consider where further investment is needed to improving participation in your service, for example to set up new forums
- At the practice level, think about ways of drawing on and learning from the expertise of those doing longer term one-to-one and group work directly with young people, such as youth workers. Can you invite them to your meetings more?
- Think about whether you can run events to bring young people together

alternative plans for young people affected by harm outside of home. We hope that this guide sparks enthusiasm and creativity around the possibilities that exist and that as a result you deepen your expertise to youth participation in Contextual Safeguarding.