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Putting listening practice at the heart of early years practice

An evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network

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NCB's vision is a society in which all children and young people are valued and their rights are respected.

Published by NCB Research Centre - National Children's Bureau
Registered Charity Number 258825
8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE.
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1.0 Executive summary

The Young Children's Voice Network (YCVN) at the National Children's Bureau's (NCB) Early Childhood Unit (ECU) promotes listening¹ to, and participation with, birth to five year olds at a local and national level. It is informed by a national advisory group of experts in the field of listening to young children, and received government² funding from April 2006 to March 2011.

YCVN aims to support local authorities (LAs) to meet their statutory duty to listen to young children to inform policy and the improvement of early years provision³, and has helped LAs to set up local practitioner networks, develop and share good practice locally and use young children's views to inform policy and practice.

In September 2010, the ECU asked the NCB Research Centre to carry out an evaluation of YCVN, with an emphasis on good practice to highlight what works.

The methodology involved five local authority case studies and in-depth face to face and telephone interviews with the leads for YCVN, early years, participation, training and workforce development, other key staff (e.g. early years advisors), and focus groups with practitioners⁴. Interviews and focus groups explored how listening practice was developed and embedded at strategic level and within settings.

Here we present a summary of the findings.

Policy Context

Since the introduction of the Childcare Act, 2006 and a specific duty on LAs to have regard for young children's views when developing and delivering services, there has been growing interest in listening to, and participation with, young children.

There is now recognition in the sector and from government that listening to young children to inform practice and policy is instrumental in providing services that meet their needs and support their learning and development. The Department for Education (DfE) has made a commitment to:

Introduce new support for the Early Years by retaining a universal offer, while also ensuring that services and opportunities reach those in greatest need.

¹ YCVN defines listening as a process which includes communication, participation, tuning in and appropriate consultation. See Listening as a way of life leaflet series. www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn/resources

² the former Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) now Department for Education (DfE)

³ (Childcare Act 2006, Section 3 (5) -duty to "have regard to such information about the views of young children as is available to the local authority"

⁴ A total of 42 people participated in this evaluation.

The recent review of **The Early Years Foundation Stage** (EYFS)⁵ proposes changes to the framework, covering regulation, learning and development, assessment and welfare. Listening to young children and supporting their participation continues to be implicit throughout the EYFS. Listening will also be important in the delivery of the **Health visitor implementation plan**⁶ that seeks to improve the health visiting service for children and their families, and will be integral to the government's commitment to **early intervention**⁷ to improve children's future experiences of learning, development and life chances.

Key findings

We briefly review the key findings below.

- The local YCVN strategies and priorities in the case study areas were primarily driven by an **early years pedagogy** perspective.
- Some YCVNs adopted a **children's rights perspective** that emphasised listening as an approach for developing effective participation of young children in decision-making.
- Participation in decision making was often viewed as a later stage in the process, after listening has become firmly embedded in everyday practice.
- Having piloted and disseminated listening and participation activities with birth to five year olds most local YCVNs were planning or implementing the mainstreaming phase.

Local YCVNs achieved many important successes. In particular, they:

- **Raised the profile of listening to young children in their local areas** and successfully challenged popular misconceptions that young children who cannot talk cannot express their views. A variety of creative methods and approaches were used to explore children's views and shape provision that better met their needs.
- **Adopted listening as an approach central to best practice** by identifying, engaging and developing high quality local settings as beacon settings to inspire and support others. Often settings started with specific projects to build confidence among staff and children and went on to develop listening as a whole setting approach. They linked in with a wide range of national initiatives and pedagogic approaches.
- **Improved communication among staff and with parents** by introducing a wider agenda of listening. This led to better communication between staff and parents about children's interests, needs and learning and ultimately improved the quality of provision. Managers listened to staff more and showed they valued their contributions, which helped to reinforce the above outcomes.

⁵ Tickell, C (2011) *The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning*, An Independent Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to Her Majesty's Government, http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_124202

⁷ Allen, G (January 2011) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government, London: HM Government.

Perceived outcomes of listening to and participation with young children

Children showed improved:

- communication skills and language;
- confidence, self-esteem and independence;
- ability to initiate engagement with adults, and other children; and
- behaviour: children were calmer, concentrated more, shared and took turns better.

Parents developed:

- increased confidence and trust in staff;
- better relationships with staff;
- increased confidence in supporting their children at home; and became
- more involved in their child's learning and development.

Practitioners gained in knowledge, skills and confidence and demonstrated:

- an increased commitment to listening to young children;
- a shift towards a more child-focused perspective;
- a deeper understanding of children;
- earlier identification of children's needs;
- greater confidence to respond to children's needs; and
- better relationships with children, parents and within staff teams.

At a **LA** level local YCVNs achieved:

- greater awareness that young children have opinions and can be consulted effectively; and
- more commitment to listening as core best practice in early years; which together
- '*opened doors*' for the future development of listening work across local authority areas, and the participation of young children in local authority strategic decision-making.

What works to support listening to and participation with birth to five year olds

Within local networks

Having a clear strategic plan for network development
 Ensuring access to high quality listening training
 Identifying, building on and sharing good practice
 Being solution-focussed when facing challenges
 Maintaining a celebratory culture, enthusiasm and inspiring others
 Using an empowerment model to encourage ownership of listening work
 Having beacon settings to showcase a listening culture

Within settings

Having the commitment and support of managers
 Delivering high quality listening training to whole staff teams
 Securing the support of key stakeholders, for example, parents and governors
 Building staff confidence by starting on small manageable projects/areas
 Providing access to quality advice, peer support, and practice development resources
 Securing funding to cover practitioner release and development time

In partnership with LAs

Having network leads who are confident at operating at a strategic level
 Being proactive about establishing links with LA strategic partnerships, and presenting evidence of young children's views
 Having strong commitment to young children from LA senior leadership

Most case study YCVNs did not think their work would have happened without the involvement of the national YCVN.

- The support was described as an external driver or catalyst and offered local YCVNs an approach; demonstrated how to put listening at the core of their work; promoted the empowerment model as a useful way of working; and created a structure through which local networks were able to channel their listening and participation work.
- Overall, a national, accessible presence that brought credibility and validation to the work, one to one support, practical resources and good practice, and networking events were most useful.

Recommendations for policy makers and strategic leads

To help LAs and settings to further embed their work in this area, participating local YCVNs would like more support:

- a national reminder to LA leads of the statutory duty to have regard for young children's views;
- to raise the profile of national policy consultations with young children;
- with auditing and evaluation;
- with getting schools and parents to listen; and
- the incorporation of listening in to practitioner qualifications.

2.0 Introduction and background

In September 2010, the ECU at NCB asked the NCB Research Centre to carry out an evaluation of YCVN, with an emphasis on good practice to highlight what works.

Listening to young children, their families and those who work with them is vitally important because; listening nurtures respectful and confident relationships, supports, enables and enhances learning and contributes to quality improvement of early years services.

Young children, practitioners (all those working directly with young children) and parents have experiences and views to share that can help shape the way in which services are planned and delivered. Early years settings and family environments that have a listening culture enable these experiences and views to inform day-to-day practice; develop the quality and sustainability of settings; enhance local authorities' abilities to respond to community needs; and, ultimately, improve outcomes for children.

Children need to be recognised as 'partners' in the planning and commissioning of services. By regularly listening to young children, local partners can respond to children's needs, identify barriers to learning and development, and ultimately work towards improving services for young children and supporting children to achieve their potential.

All staff directly working with young children (whether in early years, health or social care sectors) have an essential role to play in listening and responding to children's voices. Listening to young children is an integral part of understanding what they are feeling and what it is they need from their early years experience. It is key to providing environments in which all young children feel confident, safe and powerful thus ensuring they have the time and space to express themselves in whatever form suits them.

Early childhood services can develop a listening culture which nurtures day to day listening and provides opportunities for young children to make decisions about matters that directly affect them. Some local authorities are beginning to use the voice of the child to inform the design, planning and delivery of services, together with the voices of practitioners and parents.⁸

2.1 The Young Children's Voices Network

This section briefly sets out the background to the network and the evaluation.

The YCVN led by the ECU at the NCB promotes listening and participation with birth to five year olds at a local and national level. It is informed by a national advisory group of experts in the field of listening to young children, and received funding from the former Department for Children, Schools and

⁸ www.participationworks.org.uk/topics/early-years

Families (DCSF), now the Department for Education (DfE) from April 2006 to March 2011.

YCVN aims

To ensure that all early childhood services develop and embed a listening culture which values young children's involvement and views.

To support local authorities (LAs) in meeting their duty under the Childcare Act, 2006; 'to have regard to any information about the views of young children which is available and relevant to these duties'.

YCVN's vision is

That children feel that they are listened to and their unique needs and interests are recognised and responded to.

That families understand how important it is to listen to their child's voice so that they and practitioners can better support children's well being.

That practitioners in all early childhood services are confident in their ability to facilitate participation and recognise its importance in pedagogy and personal social development.

That LAs and their Children's Trust partners clearly value the voice of young children in developing and delivering services.

That listening to young children becomes an accepted part of our culture, fully integrated into the ethos of early childhood services.

YCVN defines listening as⁹:

- An active process of receiving (hearing and observing), interpreting and responding to communication - it includes all the senses and emotions and is not limited to the spoken word.
- A necessary stage in ensuring the participation of all young children, as well as parents and staff, in matters that affect them.
- An ongoing part of tuning in to all young children as individuals in their everyday lives.
- Sometimes part of a specific consultation about a particular entitlement, choice, event or opportunity.

In supporting LAs to meet their duty to listen to young children to inform policy and the improvement of early years provision, YCVN has helped LAs to set up local practitioner networks, develop and share good practice and use young children's views to inform local policy and practice.

⁹ NCB (2003) 'Listening as a way of life' *leaflet series*

During an initial pilot phase (April 2006 – March 2009), 20 LAs joined the national network. They received:

- consultancy support from the YCVN project manager to set up a local network;
- ongoing guidance and support to help develop a network;
- training for staff in listening to young children and enabling children's participation;
- access to expert advice through the national advisory group;
- email newsletters and contact sharing; and
- national networking days for sharing effective practice.

Each pilot received free of charge: one day's training for 24 practitioners; guidance on setting up a local network; offer of support in their first network meetings; and attendance at the first national networking day. Additional training sessions, attendance at seminars and events and publications were charged at a subsidised cost, however publications are free to download from the website).

In the national roll out (April 2009 – March 2011), YCVN aimed to continue to promote listening to young children in the early years, share learning from the pilot project, and reach all English LAs. The YCVN project manager offered free guidance with training and resources provided at a cost. Under the national roll out, LAs had greater flexibility to be part of the YCVN in different ways, for example by creating a virtual network instead of a physical local network. To broaden the reach of YCVN resources and messages, YCVN linked with Participation Works, a partnership of six national children and young people's agencies that enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services.

This report presents the findings to show how LAs have listened to young children, what difference it made, and in what ways and how well the YCVN has supported them.

2.2 Policy Context

Since the introduction of the Childcare Act, 2006 and a specific duty on LAs to have regard for young children's views when developing and delivering services, there has been a growing interest in listening to and participation with young children. There is now recognition in the sector, and from government that listening to young children to inform practice and policy is instrumental in providing services that meet their needs and supports their learning and development. The Department for Education (DfE) has made a commitment to;

Introduce new support for the Early Years by retaining a universal offer, while also ensuring that services and opportunities reach those in greatest need

Action 5.2 v. To;

Put in place a new Early Years framework that is less bureaucratic and more focused on improving young children's learning and development¹⁰.

This action illustrates the government's intention to ensure practitioners are enabled to place the child at the centre of practice, and supported rather than hindered by adult agendas such as record keeping. An initial step towards this has been a commissioned review of EYFS led by Dame Clare Tickell. The Report¹¹ proposes recommended changes to the framework and covers the scope of regulation, learning and development, assessment and welfare, intending to make sure those standards which support young children's learning are based on the best and latest research on children's development.

The review of EYFS framework

Listening, involving and tuning into young children are referred to throughout the EYFS and inherent in key principles such as 'Unique Child' and 'Positive Relationships'. Listening practice is evident in every area of learning and development, however during the review some of the sector called for greater emphasis on meeting the needs of all children by being more child-centred:

...Others consider that the requirements set out in the EYFS could encourage more focus on each child's own pace of learning and on their interests, and enable activities to be tailored around each child. My recommendations address this point by aiming to improve the accessibility and flexibility of the tools available to professionals, parents and carers, and by calling for early years practitioners to work more closely with health professionals to identify needs at an early stage.

The EYFS Review executive summary highlights that;

...Evidence shows that early identification of need followed by appropriate support is the most effective approach to tackling disadvantage and helping children overcome specific obstacles to learning. For this reason I am recommending the introduction of a requirement for practitioners to provide to parents and carers, a short summary of their child's communication and language, person, social and emotional, and physical development between the ages of 24-35 months.

Listening to young children (which includes observation) will be essential in the proposed 24-35 months assessment process and can, where

¹⁰ 2011-2015 DfE Business Plan

¹¹ Tickell, C (2011) The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning, An Independent Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to Her Majesty's Government

appropriate, also provide an opportunity for children to be involved in sharing their learning and development with parents and carers;

...In particular, I support the involvement of children in assessment activities, which I think is both empowering for children and a good learning experience in itself.

Children's experiences of the EYFS¹² were also included in the evidence underpinning the Review, and highlight the need for listening training for practitioners in some settings;

...The same research also gives a general idea of the variety of experiences from setting to setting, and the scope for some settings to develop further – for example, by enabling more activities which are led by children, and which reflect their interests and needs'.

The Health visitor implementation plan¹³

The Health visitor implementation plan published by the Department for Health sets out the full range of services that families will be able to expect from health visitors and their teams, depending on their needs. It will create a bigger, rejuvenated workforce with an extra 4,200 health visitors by 2015 and an improvement in the quality of the health visiting service for children and families. The rejuvenated service will reinforce the importance of the relationship between children's centres and health visitors - every centre should have access to a named health visitor, and provide ongoing support particularly with disadvantaged families, to deal with more complex issues over a period of time. It will be important for health visitors to receive tailored listening training which can support them in ways of working with other centre staff, and in their assessments of children and their reports to parents about their child's development.

Early Intervention

The government's commitment to early intervention recognises how important quality experiences are for young children in services, and most importantly in their home learning environment. These experiences impact significantly on children's future learning, development and life chances. The Allen Report¹⁴ recently set out the importance of Early Intervention in terms of improved social outcomes and economic benefits:

"...those programmes which ensure that babies, children, and young people build the social and emotional bedrock to fulfil their potential and reduce dysfunction. This is a prerequisite to break the intergenerational cycle of dysfunction and underachievement."

¹² Reference 99 – Garrick, R. Bath, C. Dunn, K. Maconochie H. Willis, B. and Wolstenholme, C. (2010) Children's Experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage. London: DfE.

¹³ http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_124202

¹⁴ Allen, G (January 2011) Early Intervention: The Next Steps, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government, London: HM Government.

Improved communication, confidence, independence, ability to initiate engagement with others, and behaviour are key outcomes from listening to young children, as we go on to highlight in section four of this report. Listening to young children communicate their thoughts, feelings, concerns and wishes, and modelling and enabling respectful relationships with them, needs to be at the heart of any early intervention with young children. Listening practice will be an essential means for professionals to identify and support young children in their learning and development. It is equally important to embed a listening culture within early years services, and to ensure parents and carers are recognised as children's first educators, and are involved and able to see benefits for the whole family, which may include older siblings.

Meaningful participation requires investment in and a valuing of practitioners, and their developing practice. With expected cuts to local authority funding, it will be important for practitioners to support each other, through networks like YCVN, to ensure that good practice continues and is built upon. Strategic leads and managers will need to think creatively to maximise opportunities for sharing effective practice.

2.3 The evaluation aim and objectives

The aim of the evaluation was to study the support YCVN provided to LAs and early years settings in depth, in particular how listening practice was developed and embedded at strategic level and within settings. This evaluation builds on a previous evaluation of the pilot project¹⁵. The objectives were to:

- Explore the nature and sustainability of local YCVN activity, and perceptions of impact on: practitioners (e.g. knowledge, skills and confidence), and quality improvement in settings (e.g. children's learning and development).
- Gather evidence about if or how involvement with YCVN has influenced local strategic decisions and policy in LAs.
- Gather evidence about if or how involvement with YCVN has influenced local listening practice, service delivery and setting policy.
- Provide learning for the YCVN and project funders about what has been most useful and least useful in supporting LAs.
- Produce a resource and case studies to help raise local awareness of effective practice.

2.4 Methodology

The qualitative methodology involved the development of five detailed LA case studies to show the nature, function and influence of YCVN activity at strategic and practice levels. The areas were selected because they

¹⁵ Gill, C. (2008) 'Evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network pilot project' (2006-2008), National Children's Bureau.

demonstrated good practice to show what works and how listening to young children might be taken forward. For individual case studies please visit: www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn

Scoping and sampling local YCVNs

The YCVN project manager analysed YCVN activity to provide an overview of the size and scope of local networks using data from the pilot evaluation and project data, and provided a sample of LAs that demonstrated good practice. The evaluation team used this information to select the final sample that included LAs which differed in terms of:

- size and tier (e.g. unitary and shire authorities)
- approach (e.g. grassroots or strategic-led)
- membership (e.g. schools, children's centres, childminders, private nurseries)
- lead (e.g. participation or early years).

Local authority case studies

Each case study involved in-depth, face to face and telephone interviews with the leads for YCVN, early years, workforce development and participation¹⁶, and a focus group with practitioners. Table 1 shows the number and type of respondents.

The interviews were tailored to reflect different roles, responsibilities and set-ups. Key topics for discussion included:

- Local aims and objectives in relation to listening to young children.
- How listening to young children has been developed locally.
- In what ways young children's voices have been listened to, and what has changed as a result of listening to young children.
- How much LAs have developed a sustainable culture of listening, and how LAs might continue this work in future.
- How effective YCVN has been in supporting LAs to develop a culture of listening, and what difference this support has made.

The topic guides can be found in Appendix A. The qualitative data was analysed using the 'Framework' method in Excel. Using a thematic framework, verbatim data was summarised and organised in the framework enabling the evaluation team to conduct theme and case based analysis, search for patterns, and interpret the data.

¹⁶ Note that in some areas the participation lead, for example was the same as the local YCVN lead.

Table 1: Number and type of respondents

YCVN leads	6
Early years leads	5
Training/workforce development leads	1
Participation leads	4
Practitioners	22
Other e.g. early years advisor	6
TOTAL	42

2.5 How this report is structured

- Section three discusses local YCVN approaches to listening to young children.
- In section four we explore what local listening activities have achieved and address the sustainability of activities and future plans.
- Section five examines how much and how well the national YCVN has supported local networks.
- In section six, we conclude our findings and highlight issues for consideration going forward during this time of political and financial change.

3.0 Local YCVN approaches to listening to young children

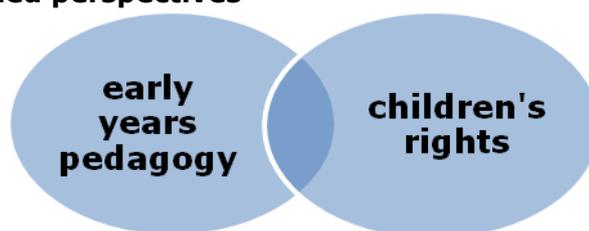
In this section we present the findings in relation to local strategies, structures and functions developed to support the participation of young children. The section then goes on to discuss how listening work was undertaken and what was achieved.

3.1 Local YCVN strategies, structures and functions

Local YCVN strategies

Local YCVN strategies and priorities were primarily driven by an early years pedagogy perspective. The extent to which local YCVN strategies emphasised a children's rights perspective varied according to whether local settings had established the participation of young children in decision-making processes, and how established the links were with LA strategic partnerships.

Figure 1: Combined perspectives



An **early years pedagogy** perspective emphasises listening as a tool for effective early years teaching and learning.

...For me it was more about the pedagogy, and about linking listening with other aspects of the work that they were doing anyway, it was about looking at effective early years pedagogy really. Listening is a tool in the same way there are lots of other things we use that are tools. And my role was to weave all those tools together to improve the teaching and learning, and the quality of provision for children and their families. So it was about up-skilling practitioners, and developing knowledge and understanding of what was effective in developing children's and parental engagement (Local YCVN Lead).

Local YCVNs saw listening as the core of early years best practice, around which the many national initiatives and pedagogic approaches already being used in early years settings could be brought together as a cohesive whole. Figure 2 shows the links between listening work, national initiatives and pedagogic approaches in the early years.

...It [YCVN] fits in extremely well. It supported so well what we were doing in the classroom and almost gave us permission to put listening and communication right at the heart which is what children need (Advanced Skills Teacher - Autism).

Figure 2: Links between listening, national initiatives and pedagogic approaches

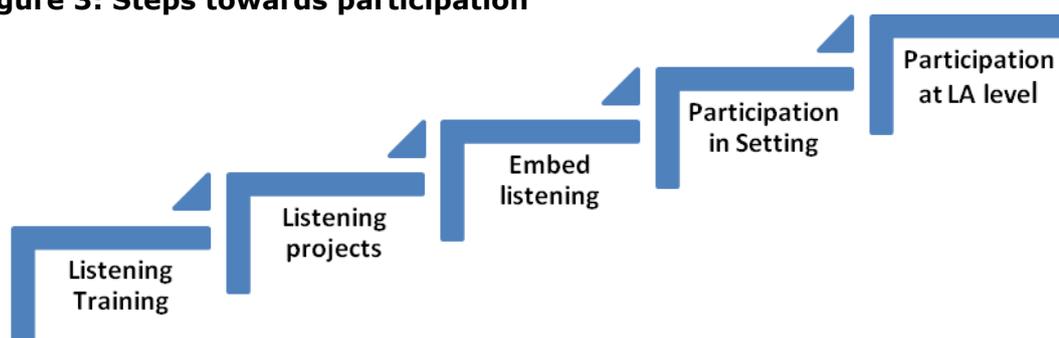


A **children's rights** perspective emphasises listening as a tool for developing effective participation of young children in decision-making.

...We're focused on children's rights and the right to be heard. The listening element actually has more ambition I suppose. It's about improving services for children. It's very much focused around the contribution of those voices to decision making processes. For me it's about informing from the bottom up. And what I'm saying to people is -oh that's really nice that children have chosen their snack or they've chosen their activity, and there is a place for that. But I feel that we've moved on from that now- they should be doing that as a norm. And our question to services, and to managers, is how are we getting those voices up to the Children's Trust Partnerships who holds the money and drives forward the services for the city? And it's really important that young children have a voice at that level. That's kind of where I'm at now (Local YCVN Lead).

Often local YCVNs viewed participation in decision-making as a later stage in the process, after listening has become firmly embedded as everyday practice.

Figure 3: Steps towards participation



...Usually what happens is there's that general kind of like Whoa- yes we understand and we know we have to listen to children. And then it's very focused on that immediate environment, so you'll have maybe a little consultation about well- What activities do you like to do?...once everybody's confident they're doing that and the children are confident about expressing themselves then it's involvement in those broader issues, in recruitment selection and the actual cogs and workings of the organisation of that setting (Local YCVN Steering Group).

Local YCVNs linked their aims and activities to the wider LA strategic objectives of improving the quality of provision and outcomes for children and families. They also linked listening work with young children, babies, disabled children, and children with English as an additional language to the wider inclusion agenda. Figure 4 provides an overview of the linkages between LA strategic objectives, local YCVN aims and activities.

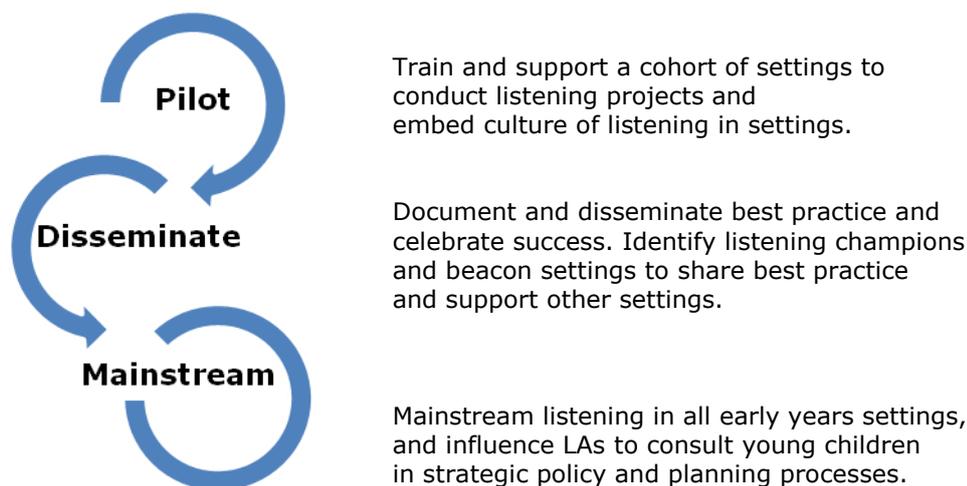
Figure 4: An overview of local YCVN aims and activities linked to LA strategic objectives

LA strategic objectives				
Improve quality of EYs provision	Improve outcomes for children and Narrowing the Gap	Develop citizenship democracy, inclusion and community cohesion	Fulfil LA duty to have regard for young children's views	Improve LA provision for children and families
Sources of impact evidence: Quality Standards Audits, EYFS profile scores especially communication, language and literacy (CLLD) and personal, social and emotional (PSED) development, Every Child Matters (ECM) outcome measures.		Sources of impact evidence: Childcare Sufficiency Reports, Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs), LA Play Strategy, LA Participation Strategy.		
Local YCVN aims				
To embed a culture of listening in all EYs settings (0-5yrs)	To develop effective partnerships with parents and families	To develop participation of young children in EYs settings	To influence LA to increase participation of young children in decision-making	
Sources of impact evidence: Listening Practice Audits, Investors in Children, Self Evaluation Forms (SEFs), Ofsted reports, policies, parent feedback, learning journals, staff session observations, planning and reviews. LA policies and practice.				
Local YCVN activities				
Training and resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify initial cohort of pilot settings to conduct listening projects. Provide listening training (through YCVN, LA bespoke or consultancy training) and resources (e.g. case studies). Support settings to document and evaluate listening work. Networking and peer support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up a local YCVN steering group. Support settings to network at meetings, events. Develop and signpost to listening champions/ beacon settings¹⁷ for inspiration and support. Support settings to develop young children's participation in decision-making within settings (through one-to-one consultancy) 		Dissemination and mainstreaming <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disseminate good listening practice, showcase settings' work, and celebrate success (e.g. events, strategy documents and CD ROMs). Mainstream listening in all EYs settings. Develop strategic links with LA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop links with LA strategic partnership and planning groups. Collate evidence of listening work in settings and identify key messages about young children's views. Present key messages to LA strategic partnership and planning groups. Evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document and evaluate local YCVN activities. 		

¹⁷ These included: preschools, playgroups, private nurseries, children's centres and family drop-ins, infant and special needs schools.

The strategies adopted by local YCVNs varied in details but commonly included three key phases as shown in Figure 5. At the point of interview, local YCVNs were at different stages of the process but most were planning or implementing the mainstream phase.

Figure 5: Key phases in local YCVN strategies



A common element of local YCVN strategies was the development of local listening champions and beacon settings, which influenced the type of settings local YCVNs included in their pilot cohorts. Most local YCVNs chose to work mainly with children's centres, and other early years settings that were perceived to be of good quality, with the intention of developing them into future listening champions and beacon settings that would disseminate best listening practice, and act as a source of advice and support for other local settings.

This was because:

- Embedding listening and participation requires a level of reflective practice which was most likely to be established in good quality settings.
- Children's centres were already leading the way locally in terms of early years best practice.
- Poorer quality settings would have needed more hands on support, which local YCVNs were not able to provide initially.
- Children's centres have an existing role to work with other early years settings in their reach areas.
- Working with children's centres was perceived to be a cost-efficient way forward because working with the PVI sector was already part of their role.

Structure and function of local YCVNs

Leads

In each LA area, a staff member/s took on the role of local YCVN lead with responsibility for coordinating local YCVN activities. Where, and with whom, the role of YCVN lead was located varied across the case study areas.

Figure 6: Where Local YCVN leads were based



Leads tended to be based within LA early years departments and often had a responsibility for quality improvement in provision or workforce development. One local YCVN lead was a designated listening to young children's officer based within the LA participation unit. In another area the YCVN lead was the head of a local children's centre.

During the course of this evaluation, one LA lead left due to re-structuring, and the subsequent lead was made redundant in the latest round of budget reductions. Having anticipated this situation, the LA integrated this work into the roles of all remaining early years consultants and trained them accordingly.

Steering groups

YCVN leads established local steering groups that typically included representation from LA early years teams and local early years settings. Somewhat less frequently they included, LA participation staff, independent early years consultants, and staff employed by other national children's charities.

Originally, each LA area set up a steering group to function as a local YCVN networking group. Steering groups tended to start work with a small number of early years settings. Generally, they started with children's centres. One local YCVN began working with pre-school playgroups and another engaged the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector. Steering groups held regular (e.g. termly) meetings to provide peer support, training and guidance to settings to carry out listening projects, embed listening practice and document and disseminate learning.

However, several local YCVNs reported challenges in sustaining this networking function over time. They overcame these challenges in two main ways, by:

- Reducing in size and functioning primarily as working groups - developing local listening strategies, training packages, practice development resources, and organising local events to showcase local listening work and disseminate learning.

- Functioning as an advisory group - developing the strategic participation of young children in the LA with members seeking to advise LA strategic management processes.

There was a general shift away from sustaining separate listening network meetings, and a move towards integrating listening into more established local networks such as the early years best practice meetings, children's centre cluster groups and local reach area meetings. This shift was due to several factors including:

- A recognition that local listening work had progressed from a pilot project stage towards mainstreaming.
- A shift in focus from embedding listening in early years settings towards the wider participation of young children in LA strategic decision-making.
- A lack of funds for practitioners' release and travel time.
- Inconsistent attendance at local YCVN networking meetings.
- Competing priorities for practitioners and YCVN leads.

Embedding listening is discussed in more detail in section 4.5 of this report. For more information about how to set up a local YCVN refer to the pilot evaluation report¹⁸.

3.2 How local YCVNs listened to young children and what they learned

Practitioners were keen to highlight that listening was an integral part of how they worked or should work, and not a separate activity. They said listening meant hearing what young children expressed verbally and tuning in, observing, learning about them as individuals, and responding to their needs and wants.

This involved spending more time with children, being led by them and what they did or wanted to do. Practitioners also spent more time with parents/carers learning about their children's interests and home-life.

There were many different ways of listening including:

- Asking individual children focused questions about what they enjoyed, who they played with, what they liked or disliked, how they felt, and what they wanted.
- Consulting children in small key person groups.
- Noting what children said to them or what they heard children saying to others.
- Observing how children interacted with children and adults.

¹⁸ Gill, C. (2008) Evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network pilot project (2006-2008), National Children's Bureau.

- Observing children's play, their levels of engagement, involvement and schemas.
- Observing children's body language, reactions and moods.
- Using a range of methods to communicate with young children including signs, pictures, symbols, photos, key words, and picture boards to communicate sequence of events.
- Asking children to talk about pictures they had made or cut out and photos they had had taken.
- Giving children access to voice recorders to record anything they wanted to say.

Many practitioners carried out consultations with young children on different aspects of their settings such as:

- the activities and resources available
- lunch and snack items
- outdoor play space
- staff uniform
- facilities for babies.

Some settings involved young children in other types of decision-making, for example:

- writing classroom rules and mission statements
- carrying out health and safety risk assessments
- interviewing new staff
- developing and presenting bids for a local participatory budgeting project
- designing outdoor and indoor spaces.

Key messages emerging from children and practice examples

Some key messages emerged from listening work in settings about young children's views.

Local YCVNs indicated that young children needed and wanted to:

- play outdoors in natural spaces
- feel safe and secure
- enjoy their role play
- explore their interests
- make choices.

Responses to these messages were typically mentioned by practitioners and settings.

Play outdoors in natural spaces

Children's wish to play outdoors was the message that came across most strongly and widely at different levels: practitioners, settings and LA level.

Many practitioners described how some children seemed happier and more communicative outdoors so they encouraged outdoor play to enable children to develop their voices.

...they come out of themselves so much. They're climbing up trees and they're shouting and they're screaming - you just see a completely different child. For some reason they're able to communicate outside. So you are able to listen to some children better outside and hear their noise (Practitioner).

Often settings improved their outdoor spaces to include more natural elements and activities such as digging and planting.

Play outdoors in natural spaces

At a private nursery practitioners observed babies' interest in pots filled with various outdoor materials such as turf, pebbles, rocks, bark and sand. Then they observed how babies interacted with the outdoor play environment. Practitioners found that babies were drawn to flowers, petals, leaves, stones and a small ledge which they climbed onto instead of the plastic play equipment. A new garden with more natural elements was designed on the basis of these observations.

Practitioners at a playgroup consulted young children about their outdoor play area and found they wanted to dig, grow plants, eat snacks outside, and have a stage for role play. Practitioners used the findings to re-design the outdoor space to better meet children's needs.

Many settings also adopted a free access policy to outdoor play to give young children the freedom to go outdoors when they wanted to. One setting also advocated outdoor play to parents, some of whom tended to stop their children from going outside and getting dirty.

In another area, a local YCVN collated emerging evidence from settings about outdoor play and natural play spaces, traffic and safety on the streets to present to LA strategic partnership groups.

...I would say that the big messages I'm aware of are the importance of play, and particularly free play outdoors, not organised play areas but places you can run around and have fun in naturalistic environments. Another subject is that the kids' play area has a swing and a roundabout and a bouncy chain. And that's what we think kids want but actually it's what adults think is a play area. Not what kids want, they want a bit of grass to run around on where there's no dog poo, litter or broken glass (Participation manager).

Feel safe and secure

Practitioners recalled how individual children needed to feel safe and secure and how listening and responding to them helped to build more trusting

relationships. Practitioners' responded by recognising the nature of young children's fears and preferences, allowing them choice or giving them responsibilities. For example, one child with special needs feared going into the school dining room and was given the option of eating lunch in the classroom to help the child feel safe and build trust in staff. Another child was unhappy about coming to nursery and was asked to feed the goldfish so he began to look forward to coming in.

Several settings involved young children in writing rules and mission statements, and one setting involved children in carrying out routine health and safety risk assessments.

...Last year a nursery actually had the children writing the health and safety risk assessments for the outdoor play area. On a weekly basis and a daily basis, there were children, three year olds, going out and taking responsibility with adult support to go out and identify areas of risk or reporting broken equipment, removing dangerous items from the play yard. Filling in a form as well, you know, and proper clipboard, a whistle and a hat... by the time it comes to June/ July, they can also carry out the full risk assessment within the setting ... with adult supervision but they do it all (Local YCVN lead).

The message that children needed to feel safe and secure was largely addressed at a practitioner or setting level. But one local YCVN found young children were fearful of walking past empty housing in the local area. The local YCVN presented this information to the LA, which then took action to make the streets more children friendly.

Feel safe and secure

A children's centre consulted young children about the local area. Children said they were frightened of 'monsters' and 'dungeons' when walking past empty housing on their way to the children's centre. These fears were fed back to the LA which led to improvements to the local streets. The fronts of empty houses were painted to make them look more child-friendly. Paintings included a cat sitting on a doorstep.

A private nursery carried out a staff uniform consultation with babies by presenting them with different materials and colours and observing their responses. They found that babies were not interested in the fabric or colour of staff uniforms and instead explored more tactile fabrics. Practitioners decided their staff uniform was not helping babies to feel secure when held and cuddled. As a result the setting switched to a non-uniform policy (For a full case study see p2 of *Leadership for listening* leaflet (2011), Listening as a way of life series: NCB).

Enjoy their role play

Some settings also reflected on boys' engagement with and enjoyment of role play. Interviewees implied that boys might not always have been actively encouraged to take part in role play the past. This message sometimes concerned the lack of dressing up items for boys in settings but mainly involved boy's interests in superhero and weapon play. Some settings had a culture that actively discouraged boys from superhero play because of the weapon play element and the verbal aggression boys expressed towards other children during play. This was probably the most

challenging message for practitioners to respond to in terms of changing culture and practice towards superhero play, and working out how to balance the voices of different groups of children.

Enjoy their role play

Listening led practitioners in one setting to question their practice of discouraging boys' interest in superhero play. They met as a staff team to discuss how they could embrace superhero play but at the same time allow children who did not want to be involved to have a voice too. A superhero and weapon play policy was developed to ensure staff agreed on how to deal with it. With the children they wrote a list of rules for superhero play, for example respecting the views of children who did not want to join in, and children were taught how to say and signal 'stop' if they did not want to play. Through the school newsletter the setting engaged parents in what they were doing. Practitioners celebrated boys' interests in superheroes by asking them to create and paint their own superhero. By making these changes the aggressive element in their superhero play diminished as the boys engaged more with other creative activities.

Explore their interests

A strong message from practitioners was that children needed to explore their individual interests. Listening enabled practitioners to identify children's interests and ensure that they planned accordingly. Practitioners frequently said that encouraging children to explore their interests resulted in better relationships with staff and other children, and facilitated their engagement in learning and other activities.

To explore their interests

Staff in a special needs school observed a new child moving from one activity to another and not engaging. By talking to the parent, practitioners learned that the child had a strong interest in the In the Night Garden TV programme. To encourage the child they brought in a CD player, headphones, In the Night Garden CD and books. Practitioners said the child made dramatic progress in concentration and engagement in the classroom.

One nursery had a child with behaviour problems. Through listening, practitioners found he liked to play with little links and join them together to make different things and use them in role play. Staff made this activity available to him and engaged in his play. Staff realised that he was covering six learning areas through this single activity. They also found his behaviour improved dramatically because he was exploring his interest.

Make their choices

Another common message was that young children preferred to make their own choices. Settings made several changes to offer greater choice and freedom to exercise choice, including:

- Introducing open access to outdoor space.
- Giving young children freedom to access snacks and drinks at any time.

- Involving young children in choosing the snacks on offer.
- Investing in trolleys to store away activity boxes and resources, and labelling them with pictures to help young children self-select activities and resources.

Make their choices

In one setting, practitioners observed that mark-making was confined to a specific area and many children were not using it. By way of encouraging young children to have a voice, practitioners wanted to make mark-making opportunities more accessible. At each indoor activity area they placed pens, markers, paper and clipboards. They also included boards and markers in the outdoor play area. As a result more children, engaged in mark-marking, talked about their drawings and writing, and more children left the setting able to write their names.

Collation of key messages by local YCVNs

Several Local YCVNs had started the process of collating evidence about young children's views from listening work in settings. One local YCVN said listening work had generated a vast amount of evidence particularly in relation to young children's views about their immediate environment and relationships.

Settings had different ways of collating and recording children's views, some of which are identified in this section (e.g. observation notes, picture boards). But interviewees highlighted an ever present challenge - how to feed in young children's views in the context of wider LA concerns such as traffic, safety and the condition of local streets. The extent to which local YCVNs have been able to influence local strategic decisions and policy in LAs to date is discussed in section 4.4.

4.0 Impact, outcomes and looking to the future

In this section of the report we explore the wider changes resulting from the work of local YCVNs, and outline the perceived outcomes for young children, parents, practitioners and settings, and LA areas. We then go on to discuss sustainability issues and plans for the future.

4.1 An overview

Overall, local YCVNs believed they had achieved many important successes which together laid a firm foundation for developing their work further. Mainly, they felt they had:

- Raised the profile of listening to young children in their local areas
- Adopted listening as an approach central to best practice
- Improved communication among staff and with parents.

All local YCVNs were confident that the settings they had worked closely with had embedded a culture of listening. However, they did indicate that some settings were further along the journey than others.

Raised profile of listening to young children

Local YCVNs commonly felt they had achieved successes in raising the local profile of listening to young children.

...I think its opened people's eyes a lot that the children can tell us a lot more than we realise. You kind of have that dawning on people that it is 0-5yrs and it isn't from being verbal. It's the ones who are pre-verbal like babies, the children who are autistic or children with English as an additional language that have been the most powerful case (Early years consultant).

Interviewees often highlighted a wider local perception that young children who cannot talk cannot express their views or that it was too difficult to find out their views. Local listening work was said to have successfully challenged such misconceptions by showing that:

- All young children can communicate their needs and wants regardless of age and ability to talk.
- A variety of creative methods and approaches can be used to find out the views of young children.
- Their views can be used to shape provision to better meet their needs in lots of different ways.

Practitioners believed listening training, and in particular whole team training had most impact in challenging people's perceptions and developing their understanding of listening. Training was often described by practitioners as a 'revelation', 'a turning point', 'a light bulb moment', and 'a complete shift in mind-set'.

...I've been working for 30 years with children and when I did the listening training course I thought I listened to children. And it was a bit of a shock, and I thought, oh I could do better, maybe I could have listened a bit more. And I think some of the activities are very clever and very simple, but they really give you a light bulb moment, and it really can, you can really put a lot of the activities into your everyday practice (Practitioner).

The listening projects that practitioners undertook in their own settings gained the interest and commitment, and developed the enthusiasm of other staff. Local celebratory events to showcase and disseminate listening work, and the co-hosting of national YCVN conferences were identified as successful achievements and said to be invaluable in reaching wider audiences such as: a variety of local early years settings, LA senior management, other LA areas, and national YCVN. For some local YCVNs, events increased their profile and were important ways of gaining the attention, support and commitment of LA strategic managers. Local YCVNs established or strengthened strategic links with LAs and thereby raised the profile of listening to young children within LA structures and processes.

Some local settings gained a national profile for their listening work as they were invited to present at national conferences or submit their work for national publications. Other locally produced resources such as local listening strategies and good practice guidelines were said to have been shared widely and placed on LA websites.

The adoption of listening as an approach central to best practice

Local YCVNs felt they were successful in identifying and developing high quality settings as local champions and beacon settings. This was believed to be particularly important for inspiring and supporting others. Many practitioners talked about starting with focused project work and then described how listening, as a whole setting approach, grew from it.

...It was good to have that initial focus because when you're taking it back to your colleagues, who can be a little bit jaded- with a simple project to start it off they see how effective it's been, and those children take the confidence from being part of that initial project. And then you start it in a different area. And then you suddenly think, oh yeah, OK, we'll do that, and then that makes a change. It is like a snowball, it just gets bigger and bigger. It's like an ethos that spreads round the setting (Practitioner).

Many practitioners highlighted how listening linked very well with national initiatives settings were implementing, and with other pedagogic approaches they were using, which also emphasise communication and

building relationships. Often interviewees said how listening 'dovetails', 'compliments', and 'fits beautifully' with other initiatives, particularly with EYFS, in particular Communication Language and Literacy Development (CLLD), Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED), the Every Child A Talker (ECAT) programme and the Parents Early Years and Learning project (PEAL). See Figure 2 (p16) for a diagram that shows national initiatives and pedagogic approaches that listening links with.

However, some interviewees saw a distinct difference between applying listening and other approaches. They felt that listening really puts the child at the very centre. Several settings said the way they worked had changed as a result.

...I think generally though the way we work as a setting has changed because of the children's voice work that we've done. That's the bottom line for us now, the children really are put first and the decisions that we make, we make those decisions based on what we know about the children. And if we don't know or if we're not sure then we'll do some kind of consultation or some finding out so, so that's the very starting point for anything that we develop now. I think before things were done because it was convenient for staff or because staff wanted things to happen in a certain way or other, but now we start off with what are the children's views? What will the children think? What impact will it have on the children? So it's been a turnaround. So they're very important in all aspects of the school decision making (Head of children's centre).

Where listening was perceived to be at the core of best practice and quality provision, some interviewees said that all initiatives and projects directed at early years in recent years could be brought together around it as a cohesive whole. It was suggested that this would help practitioners understand that listening was all about high quality practice.

Improved communication among staff and with parents

Several interviewees discussed how listening to young children introduced a wider agenda of listening. This highlighted a need to: communicate more with parents about their child's interests, needs and learning; and to listen to staff more, value their contributions, and better respond to their needs.

...You've got to find out from the family what they're doing, how they're feeling and the child. I think the permission through doing a project like this is huge to say that's what matters- take the time out to be with a parent, to have a proper dialogue with them. And I think from the point of view of the staff as well, you had to think about the wellbeing of them and did they feel they were listened to. It just gives you that whole agenda of listening (Head of children's centre).

...And it's about a leader or manager valuing when you see members of staff doing it, it is showing that you value the fact that they've done that. If that member of staff has spent time listening to a child or a group of children then you show that you value them (Practitioner).

Outcomes for practitioners, parents, and other groups are discussed in more detail in the next section.

4.2 Outcomes for young children and their families

Outcomes for children

Interviewees most commonly reported improvement in children's:

- communication skills and language
- confidence, self-esteem and independence
- ability to initiate engagement with adults, and other children
- behaviour: children were calmer, concentrated more, shared and took turns better.

Practitioners said that children were more confident to participate.

...Children know their opinion is worthwhile and they come out of the process being able to express their opinion without fear (Practitioner).

Many interviewees felt that listening had contributed to improved EYFS Profile results, and particularly in the areas of CLLD and PSED.

...In order to let them have their voice we have to do a lot of work around teaching them about emotions and teaching them to express their emotions. So in terms of their results and their scores at the end of the year their PSED moves on quite a lot because they can express their opinions and explain the way they are feeling (Practitioner).

Some practitioners said they had general feedback from schools and parents, which showed that young children from their settings did well in their first year at school. They felt listening work was a contributing factor because it made children more confident, better able to communicate and enjoy learning that was more tailored to their interests and needs.

A less commonly identified outcome for young children was a sense of ownership, achieved through children's participation in decision-making within their settings.

... And they're really involving them in writing house rules, we won't jump on the sofa. And they're telling us that the children are far happier to stick by that, because they've actually made the rules. They've not been imposed on them (Childminders coordinator).

Outcomes for parents

Several practitioners said that listening work involved spending more time with parents in order to:

- Understand individual children better and learn more about their home life.

- Learn more about their interests and needs.
- Inform parents of the approaches staff use with children.
- Share information about children's progress.
- Enable parents to better support their child's learning at home.

Interviewees felt the main outcomes for parents were:

- Increased confidence and trust in staff.
- Better relationships with staff.
- Increased confidence in supporting their children at home.
- More involvement in their child's learning and development.

Improved relationships between staff and parents have helped staff identify children's needs earlier.

...We've identified children's needs earlier because parents have become more confident in talking to staff. We always do a couple of questionnaires a year and a lot have said we feel we're listened to a lot more now and it's nice to be able to talk with the key workers- It's the relationships that have been formed that has been so useful (Practitioner).

One practitioner believed listening work was the catalyst for developing their work with parents.

...Lots of things have happened which means we are communicating more with parents and they are telling us more of what their children need. So lots of little things have come together really to make the listening project quite successful. Although we might not think it's come from this project, when you look back that's actually how it started. The listening project was the catalyst (Curriculum lead).

But other influences have also helped staff to build better relationships with parents, parental involvement initiatives like PEAL and the Pen Green Framework.

4.3 Outcomes for practitioners and settings

Outcomes for practitioners

The range of outcomes identified for practitioners show involvement in listening work had an impact on their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and working practices.

Interviewees highlighted the following outcomes:

- An increased commitment to listening to young children
- A shift towards a more child-focused perspective
- A deeper understanding of children
- Earlier identification of children's needs

- Greater confidence to respond to children's needs
- Better relationships with children, parents and within staff teams.

Practitioners' skills in observation and reflective practice improved and as a result they:

- Developed a more personalised curriculum
- Became more effective as key persons
- Were less prescriptive in planning
- Improved session records and evaluations
- Felt they were listened to more by staff and managers
- Felt they worked better together as a team.

Many practitioners said that listening made them look at their practices and provision from the children's point of view. This made them question their ways of working and the setting's routines and reflect on how they could change for children's benefit.

...But you think well, why do we have to do it that way? If you were the three year old that was involved in this routine what would it be like for you? And then once they shifted their perspective and got into that way of thinking, then there were lots of things we could identify that we were going to change, and it was just a mind-set change (Practitioner).

Through listening to young children, parents and other staff, practitioners commonly said they developed a deeper understanding of children's interests and needs. Some reported they honed their observation skills and recorded children's engagement, behaviour patterns, and what they heard children saying. Many practitioners said they developed more personalised records and learning journeys to reflect children's individual interests and needs. Some practitioners said they had re-structured staff team meetings to include more focused discussions about children's interests and needs. Curriculum planning in particular was believed to be more child-led and personalised.

...I feel we have planned more successfully for our children, we've planned for them as proper people rather than little things that have got to learn how to go to school, and looked at them as individuals with individual needs and that's been the best thing to come out of it (Practitioner).

Outcomes for settings

A wide range of outcomes for settings were reported by local YCVNs. These outcomes suggest that listening work influenced the setting environment, practices, policies, and decision-making processes. The range of outcomes for settings included:

- more child-centred environment
- more flexible practice
- more child-led decision-making
- more child-centred policies
- a wider listening culture
- a raised profile and validation of their work.

Most commonly settings made changes to the physical environment as a result of listening work. This involved organising resources to allow young children greater choice and freedom to self-select play activities. In addition, in response to learning about young children's interests and needs, many settings introduced more natural features or young children's art work in their outdoor space, and extended the range of activities on offer.

As discussed in section 3.2, many settings made changes to established practices as a result of listening to young children and responding to their feedback. Most commonly interviewees said child-led decision making had increased in relation to activities, snacks, outdoor spaces, and daily routines. Although, several settings were involving young children in more strategic decision making processes such as: writing mission statements, interviewing job applicants, carrying out health and safety risk assessments, and deciding how best to use resources.

...So the children are now involved in making decisions about resource and we carry out a consultation every term with the children. And we take in those views every term, we analyse those views and then that's fed into the governors meeting, and we'll look at the things that haven't worked for the children and we'll put a plan in place to try and correct that (Head of Nursery School).

A few settings had a specific listening policy or were in the process of developing one. Several settings indicated that listening had resulted in changes to their policies. These included: mission statements, prospectuses, school evaluation forms and induction packs for young children.

...We've changed their induction pack so that we can hear the children's voice right from their first visit, and we ask children what they're looking forward to? What are they a little bit frightened of? (Head of nursery school).

Many interviewees believed that listening to young children also meant listening to staff in the setting.

...When this first started off one of the things that kept coming back was a sense that the staff weren't getting listened to, so they were very cynical about asking the young children what they thought- because if you aren't listened to yourself why would you have confidence in a process of asking somebody else what their opinion is so they can make a difference? (Participation manager).

Several practitioners said that listening to young children helped staff to listen to each other more, which led to more cohesive staff teams. One setting introduced longer staff appraisal meetings to allow more time for listening to individual staff members.

In addition, as identified above, many interviewees felt listening to parents was also necessary. Settings generally allowed more time for staff to talk to parents. One was in the process of organising coffee mornings and workshops with parents, and another had introduced more frequent parent feedback forms.

As a result of listening work, a few settings reportedly achieved better Ofsted inspection visits and reports. Some reported achieving Investing in Children Accreditation; others were local listening champions/beacon settings and had received local and national interest and validation for their listening work. A few of the case study settings had received interest, support and funding from LAs for their listening work.

4.4 Outcomes for LAs and local areas

In general, interviewees felt they were a long way from achieving impact at a LA level or the impact was not yet known.

...Impact on LA would be that young voices are known as way of working- that's embodied by the Early Years Team and that's very appropriate, how much that then impacts on practitioners in the front-line is a different question (Head of early years).

...At the more strategic level whether it's (CYPP) delivered any change, it's a bit harder to traipse through it, isn't it (Participation manager).

Interviewees commonly felt that the main outcomes of local YCVN work at a LA level were:

- Greater awareness within LAs that young children have opinions and can be consulted effectively.
- More commitment to listening as core best practice in early years.

On the whole these outcomes were felt to have 'opened doors' for the future development of listening work across LA areas, and the participation of young children in LA strategic decision-making. This was said to be evident through local YCVN representation on LA strategic partnership groups (e.g. participation), LA Director's attendance at local YCVN events, and more references to consultation with young children in a range of strategies such as CYPPs and play strategies.

In addition, there was greater commitment to listening as core best practice in early years. Some YCVNs received more commitment in the form of Early Years funding for listening work. In some areas, Early Years had made strategic decisions to dovetail listening with other initiatives such as ECAT and PEAL.

Fewer outcomes were reported for local areas. A few localities have benefited from more child-friendly outdoor spaces and streets. In general, this was identified as an area for development, perhaps through listening champions and beacon settings already linked to different local networks.

4.5 Sustainability and future plans

Sustainability of local networks and activities

Local YCVNs were confident that their listening work with young children was sustainable in the longer-term because there was:

- A strong commitment to listening among practitioners and senior managers in settings.
- Greater LA early years commitment to embedding listening in core best practice across settings than at the start.
- Growing awareness and commitment to the participation of young children in LA strategic decision making.

...I think it can only grow because nobody who's doing it is going to think, I'm not doing that anymore, because we know the value of it (Practitioner).

Underlying this confidence was the knowledge that the principles of listening to young children were firmly embedded in:

- National policy through the LA duty to have regard for young children's views.
- National early years frameworks such as EYFS and many early years initiatives.
- Child-centred teaching and learning approaches informing early years best practice.

Impact of LA budget reductions

At the time of interview, there were concerns about continuation funding post March 2011 because of changes to existing funding arrangements, reductions in budgets, and CYPPs were no longer a requirement for LAs. One local YCVN had lost funding and two successive YCVN leads due to early years budget reductions.

On the whole, local YCVNs felt additional funding was particularly advantageous in kick-starting local listening networks, and to cover practitioner release and development time. Funding helped to sustain the momentum of local YCVNs. Networks that did not receive funding or lost funding tended to experience periods of inactivity and reduced activity.

In response to a loss of funding and YCVN Leads, one LA early years department decided to train, and integrate listening into the roles of all of their early years consultants who supported settings in best practice and

quality improvement. But they recognised that the loss of funding would impact on the general level of training and support they could offer settings because the staff team reduced by half.

It was suggested that the cuts might impact most on potential plans to engage poorer quality 'satisfactory' settings. The assumption being that these would require more training and support to build reflective practice before listening could be embedded as core best practice.

Overall, the case study YCVNs held a perception that a culture of listening was sustainable because settings required few extra resources to maintain that culture. On the back of successfully embedding listening in many pilot settings, local YCVNs had begun to mainstream listening across all early years settings, and other sectors, for example health and social care.

Local YCVN needs in a climate of budget reductions

There was a general view that although the principles were embedded in national policy and commitment was growing at a grassroots level, there needs to be a wider cultural shift towards valuing listening to young children at national and local levels. Interviewees said more needs to be done nationally to highlight the LA duty to have regard for young children's views. This would be timely given that LAs are currently re-focusing on statutory duties in light of budget reductions. Within this context, consulting with young children was believed to be particularly important to ensure LA spending effectively meets their needs.

To sustain and mainstream their work within the context of budget reductions, local YCVNs felt there was a growing need for more robust evidence of impact on children. Some local YCVNs based within LAs had carried out consultations with young children for Childcare Sufficiency and they intended to track the impact of these consultations on local provision and childcare, and on outcomes for young children and families but others lacked capacity to do so. There was some anecdotal evidence of marked improvements in EYFS profiles. This was put forward as evidence that through listening and other initiatives delivered by children's centres they were narrowing the gap, particularly for vulnerable children. Some local YCVNs said they lacked capacity to carry out impact studies tracking children's progress in schools from their pre-school settings and felt this kind of evidence was needed.

Instead, some local YCVNs were in the process of devising auditing tools to provide baseline data and track progress within settings. It was reported that settings tended to get feedback from local schools during the initial transition phase in to reception class. A few individual settings said they were in the process of developing links with local schools to track young children from settings in to year one, and ideally throughout Key Stage One.

Future plans

At the time of interview, the case study YCVNs had started or planned to roll-out listening and participation to all early years settings within LA areas, and to secure senior commitment in the development of policy and practice. They were at various stages of mainstreaming and their plans differed according to local contexts and priorities but most commonly included:

- **Integrating listening into existing locality-based or staff-based networks:** using groups like best practice networks and children's centres' cluster groups to broaden the reach, for example to the local PVI sector; extended schools cluster groups to reach infant schools; and staff-based local networks for social workers and health care workers.
- **Rolling-out listening training and support to all early years settings:** through children's centres and their local cluster groups; best practice networks; integration into the LA early years training programme (including mandatory listening training for children's centres, and bespoke training for setting managers); targeting other sectors including social work and healthcare teams in particular those working with disabled children and children in care; and one LA planned for ECAT settings to exit into the local YCVN.
- **Developing the role of listening champions and beacon settings:** one local YCVN planned to offer leadership training to Lead Teachers in children's centres to develop their roles as listening champions, and another planned to develop social and health workers as champions.
- **Auditing good practice in listening:** by using bespoke audits developed in-house, in one case with reference to *Let's Listen*; and in another using Investing in Children accreditation and assessment.
- **Building on links established with LA strategic partnership groups:** to link with Children's Trust partners; developing the role of the steering group as a source of advice for strategic planning groups; and some local YCVNs planned to present key messages from listening to young children at strategic meetings to try and influence decision making.
- **Collating and analysing young children's views:** some local YCVNs were in the process of collating local evidence of young children's views and planned to identify key messages; and in one example, map evidence of young children's views against LA key priorities, for example, reducing child poverty, and traffic safety.

What works to embed a local listening culture

Looking back, local YCVNs identified what worked well to embed a local listening culture, and what they believe will be needed in the future. The main points that helped overcome any challenges they experienced are summarised below:

Within settings:

- Having the commitment and support of managers.
- Delivering high quality listening training to whole staff teams.
- Securing the support of key stakeholders, for example, parents and governors.
- Building staff confidence by starting on small manageable projects/areas.
- Providing access to quality advice, peer support, and practice development resources.
- Securing funding to cover practitioner release and development time.

Within networks:

- Having a clear strategic plan for network development.
- Ensuring access to high quality listening training.
- Identifying, building on and sharing good practice.
- Being solution-focussed when facing challenges.
- Maintaining a celebratory culture, enthusiasm and inspiring others.
- Using an empowerment model to encourage ownership of listening work.
- Having beacon settings to showcase a listening culture.

In partnership with LAs:

- Having network leads who are confident at operating at a strategic level.
- Being proactive about establishing links with LA strategic partnerships, and presenting evidence of young children's views.
- Having strong commitment to young children from LA senior leadership.

Most commonly interviewees said that commitment from setting managers was an important facilitator in embedding a listening culture. Local YCVN strategies targeted lead practitioners and managers of settings to ensure that leadership support was secured at the start. Some interviewees believed whole staff team training was most powerful because it helped develop a shared agenda from which to work. It was considered necessary to communicate activities to all stakeholders to bring everyone on board.

...You've got to communicate the importance of it to all your stakeholders so your staff need to know, your governors need to know, your parents need to know, and the children need to know. So everybody who's involved with the school community needs to have that commitment not just one person (Head of nursery school).

Local YCVNs also said that a strong commitment to listening to young children from LA strategic leadership was an important facilitator. One local LA area had a history of leadership commitment to young children and listening pre-dating the emergence of the local YCVN. This commitment facilitated the local YCVN's successes in forming strategic links, developing the participation of young children in LA-wide consultations, and getting wider LA recognition for their work.

In LAs where such leadership commitment was lacking, local YCVNs found it took longer to form strategic links and secure LA recognition for their work. One local YCVN had been struggling to form links but when a new director of children's services announced a commitment to a child-friendly LA area, doors began opening and interest in the YCVN started to grow. One local YCVN took a proactive approach and invited the LA participation team to the initial meetings which secured their interest, and the YCVN lead was subsequently invited on to the participation partnership group to keep them updated. Such differences might reflect the capacity of YCVN leads to operate strategically at a LA level, and the varying LA structures and contexts.

Maintaining a celebratory culture was a key facilitator. Interviewees said this illustrated a shared journey towards embedding a listening culture, and recognised that settings came from different starting points. In a similar way, using the empowerment model was a key facilitator although it did not give a blueprint for embedding listening. Instead, it built confidence and ownership of listening practice.

...Making everybody feel that it's their practice, it's not that we've come in and told them something but I think that the way we've worked has been to make people feel empowered and confident in their own practice and that they're doing it because it's something they own (YCVN lead).

5.0 Views on national YCVN support

Here we explore views on the usefulness of support received from the national YCVN from the perspectives of network leads, managers and practitioners working in the case study areas.

5.1 How much has the national YCVN supported LAs and partners

During the course of the project national YCVN supported 105 LAs, most commonly through events and the newsletter. A smaller number of local authorities received consultancy and practice development support, and as pilot authorities received a broader range of support. In the past year, over a thousand early years advisors, practitioners and participation officers from across the country have engaged in the project¹⁹.

The five evaluation case studies engaged with the following types of support, some of which the national YCVN provided for free during the pilot stage:

- **Practice development training:** all five received introductory and/or embedding *Lets Listen* training and two local YCVNs bought in additional training days.
- **Consultancy:** most had consultancy meetings with the national project manager to get an overview of YCVN or resources; discuss strategic planning, ways of recording evidence, and how to evaluate local listening work; and some were invited to host national YCVN conferences, and take part in research and evaluation studies.
- **Networking:** all took part in national network meetings, seminars and conferences on different topics, for example, environments, creativity and inclusion; and some were invited to present at national conferences and seminars, and develop case studies for publication on the website or in national YCVN newsletters.
- **Resources:** all received national YCVN newsletters, *Listening as a way of Life* leaflets, and the *Lets Listen* self-assessment resource; and some contributed articles and case studies.

¹⁹ NCB (2011) Early Childhood Unit Annual Report 2009-10

5.2 How well has the national YCVN supported local YCVNs

All case study YCVNs accessed all or most of the support national YCVN offered. Local YCVNs were very complimentary about all aspects of support they had received. In addition, some local YCVNs said they often contacted national YCVN by telephone or email and always got a very helpful and professional response. They identified several aspects of support as being useful for different reasons as discussed below.

Practice development training

- Training courses were considered to be high quality, well-organised and resourced, and delivered professionally.
- They became a source ideas for some local YCVNs to further develop the content of bespoke training packages.
- The training was very useful for practitioners who often said it caused a shift in their perspective or that of fellow practitioners.

Consultancy

- One-to-one meetings were said to be very useful, provided an external driver, a focus, and direction for local work.
- One local YCVN said that the presence of national YCVN at a meeting with the LA helped to secure funding because national YCVN brought credibility and status to the local work.

Networking events

- These were very useful for reflecting on their own practice, approach and achievements and learning about how listening work was developing in other LA areas.
- They generated enthusiasm, motivation and inspiration.
- They gave attendees a feeling of being part of something bigger.
- The events helped to raise the profile of local and national listening work.
- They gave local YCVNs a sense of validation for their local listening work.

Resources

- These were useful for signposting network members to online resources on the YCVN website.
- Newsletters provided local YCVNs with the latest information and developments which they cascaded to local network members.
- Some local YCVNs found the *Lets Listen* resource particularly useful when designing their own auditing tools.

What was most and least useful?

Local YCVNs identified all aspects of support as being useful and none as being least useful. However, there were some differences regarding which support was most valuable to whom.

Local YCVN leads and steering group members tended to talk about the value of networking meetings and consultancy support, which they found very useful for shaping their local work. They were considered to be particularly useful for reflecting on and developing the strategic coordination of local listening activities, and for raising the profile of local activity.

Practitioners on the other hand generally said the training had a big impact because it challenged their perspectives and provided simple ideas for embedding listening practice in settings. A few practitioners also mentioned the value of networking meetings as a platform for sharing their achievements locally and nationally, and getting validation for their work.

What difference has the national YCVN support made?

Most local YCVNs felt their work would not have happened without the involvement of the national network. The support was described as an external driver or a catalyst. Local leads said that YCVN provided the mechanism and support structure through which to develop listening work locally. The fact that YCVN was a project within NCB was considered to be important because it brought credibility and validation.

...I think National YCVN has contributed a great deal. I think to have that link into a national initiative really gives additional credibility to us operating this project in our LA. I don't think we could have done it without that (Head of early years).

YCVN support helped to bring focus, direction, a sense of belonging, and the momentum to keep going in challenging circumstances.

...We held one of the network meetings here and it gave them focus to just make sure something happened. We had a really useful development day that YCVN came up and delivered that really helped to make sure we did keep going through a very difficult year. It's been really useful to have just something that we're part of to give you some external validation. And I think it's also been useful to people to go along to those national network meetings, they don't feel alone (Participation manager).

It also gave local YCVNs a valuable opportunity to reflect on the two key perspectives informing their listening work with young children.

...And it's been quite useful, because there is definitely a sense that doing this work through a participation focus rather than a foundation stage focus is a different model but I think it has been useful to compare and contrast (Participation manager).

Overall, in the five case study areas chosen as examples of good practice, national YCVN support was said to have enabled local settings to carry out excellent work, showcase their work and demonstrate that young children have a voice, and can participate. It has enabled them to embrace the inclusion agenda and carry out listening work with the youngest children, children with special needs, and children with English as an additional language. Support from the national network also enabled local YCVNs to gather evidence and make strategic links with LAs. As a result, they felt they were in a stronger position to move forward and effect wider local change.

Further support needs

Interviewees were asked to identify any further support needs. Most wanted the support they received from the national network to continue. Some interviewees highlighted what external support would help them locally to broaden the reach and strengthen the impact of their work:

- A national reminder to LA leadership of the duty to have regard for young children's views; as part of wider efforts to keep early years a high priority.
- Raise the profile of national policy consultations with young children (e.g. 'Are we having lunch today?') to help local YCVNs make the case for LA consultations with children in a fast changing policy environment.
- National networking meetings for local YCVNs that have embedded listening to focus on sustaining quality and evidencing impact.
- Support with auditing and evaluation; to help secure investment, particularly in the current climate of LA budget reductions.
- Support with getting schools and parents to listen; to ensure listening work and its benefits continue when young children start school, and at home.
- Access to a national bank of case studies; that offer variety and detail.
- Financial support for attendance at national YCVN events.
- The incorporation of listening in to practitioner qualifications, for example diplomas and NVQs; to further embed the work and help ensure sustainability.

6.0 Conclusions and implications going forward

In this section of the report, we highlight key findings in relation to each of the evaluation objectives and implications for developing listening to and participation with young children, going forward. In particular, focussing on what has worked well and aspects that were perceived to be good practice.

6.1 Summary of key findings

What difference has local listening work made to practitioners and quality improvement in settings?

The outcomes for practitioners were a key achievement for local YCVNs. Practitioners interviewed for this evaluation and wider interviewee perceptions indicated that practitioners' skills and knowledge grew in many ways. The main ways by which practitioners' skills and knowledge grew were:

- Increased awareness and understanding of listening and young children's participation.
- A greater appreciation of the value of the work they were already doing, and the potential for this work to develop as part of their everyday activities, including how listening linked to other aspects of their work.

Through more reflective learning, often the ways in which individual staff, and whole teams approached their work changed. They grew in confidence and in their abilities to listen to all children and encourage all children to participate as fully as possible during their time within the care of settings.

In turn, this led to quality improvement in service delivery. Staff believed that by taking the time to observe and listen they were better able to respond to the needs of children as individuals and as a group. This led to more child-led practice and a more personalised curriculum. In one case study YCVN, a setting believed all staff had learned to communicate better with children and their families, and with each other. Their work became more cohesive and inclusive. This changed the way they approached planning and assessment for the EYFS and they believed led to improved profile results at Foundation stage. In this and other examples, quality improvement was said to have been externally validated through improved reports such as Ofsted and Investing in Childcare Accreditation.

How, if at all, has involvement with YCVN influenced local strategic decisions and policy in local authorities?

The extent to which local YCVNs worked to influence strategic decisions and policy in LAs varied considerably. Some focussed on this on a children's rights basis whilst others focussed on developing listening practice within settings. Therefore, whilst some of the case study YCVNs had made good progress in establishing strategic links with LAs; for example by establishing representation on relevant strategic boards and ensuring that listening and the participation of young children featured in important policy and strategy documents, others had to a lesser extent.

Involvement with national YCVN helped local YCVNs take steps towards higher level input, for example by introducing a coherent avenue and process for consulting with young children, carrying out good work and collating an evidence base. There was a perception that this would not have happened without YCVN support.

Interviewees provided other examples of influence in relation to listening practice, service delivery and setting policy in LAs. As a result of involvement with the local YCVN, one LA has reportedly incorporated consultations with young children into Childcare Sufficiency Reports. In another area, the local play strategy includes consultations with young children. These examples show that in these areas listening to young children is also considered to be important outside of the early years sector.

However, the impact of consultations on decisions made by LAs was not yet fully known or evaluated and this was an area of limited impact, in general, for local YCVNs.

How, if at all, has involvement with YCVN influenced local listening practice, service delivery and setting policy?

Involvement with YCVN has influenced listening practice, service delivery and setting policy in lots of different ways. Section 3.2 of this report discussed how settings listened to young children, which for some involved changing how much and in what ways they listened. Underlying these changes was a shift towards a more child-led practice evident in a growing number of consultation activities with young children, and a wider variation of methods used.

In turn this led to changes in service delivery, as practitioners and managers responded to children's needs and wants and made changes to daily routines, and how they managed children's transition between classes, amongst other examples. The greatest impact has been on service delivery within early years. In one area for example, training has become mandatory for all children's centres indicating a major change in setting policy that will impact on service delivery across the local area in the future. There were somewhat fewer examples of influence on setting policy although a number of settings had involved young children in specific activities such as developing induction packs.

What has been most and least useful in supporting LAs and settings to develop and embed a culture of listening which informs local policy?

All the support provided by the national YCVN has been useful for the local YCVNs interviewed for this evaluation. The support can be categorised in three main ways. First, YCVN offered local networks an approach to put listening at the core of their work. Next, YCVN promoted a way of working; an empowerment model which practitioners working with young children could adopt. Lastly, YCVN created a structure for local partnerships to channel their work through the national network. Underpinning this support were the principles in place through legislation and the requirement for all LAs to have regard for children's views when developing and delivering services.

For some local YCVNs, there was a perception that they would not have developed without the support of the national network. Others were more established when they came into contact with national YCVN. Either way, the initial contacts were fruitful, in particular accessing the listening training and understanding listening in its broadest sense, and learning what needs to be in place to set up or sustain a local network.

Over time, involvement with the national network has helped to build momentum, maintain the impetus for the work, and generate new and inspirational ideas with a view to mainstreaming listening and the participation of young children. This approach, putting listening at the core, had most impact in settings that adopted it as part of best practice 'toolboxes' to improve the quality of provision.

Different things have been more and less useful to different local YCVNs at different times, depending on the local context, making it impossible to highlight an aspect of the work which was least useful. Although, some LAs needed help with collating children's views aligned to LA priorities to inform decision making and will need some help going forward. But the evaluation findings suggest that overall; a national, accessible presence that brought credibility and validation to this work, one to one support, practical resources e.g. *Let's Listen*, and good practice and networking events were most useful.

6.2 Opportunities and challenges for the future

At a local level, the case study YCVNs appeared to approach the future with mixed feelings – a sense of achievement and associated confidence, but also with a sense of uncertainty in the current climate of LA budget reductions and competing priorities. In planning for the future they sought to broaden their reach within and outside of early years settings to build on their achievements to date and to help sustain listening work in future.

By building the capacity of practitioners, managers and whole settings to take forward listening work, local YCVNs also sought to embed listening work within LAs and have more impact at a strategic level. One way to do

this was to link with established groups, such as extended schools cluster groups, and other, related initiatives. In one case study area, plans were in place for ECAT settings to exit into the listening network. This involved pooling resources and joining up to set listening within a wider early years context.

On the whole, several aspects of listening and participation appeared to be of greater importance:

- The quality of listening practice and audits as LAs deliver their own listening packages.
- The collation and presentation of evidence aligned to LA strategic priorities and specific objectives to strengthen links between local YCVNs and LAs.
- The evaluation of the impact of listening on decision making, early years practice, and outcomes for children and families because there is a gap in the evidence relating to the strategic level impacts of listening on the lives of children and families.

At a national level, YCVN plans to continue to support settings and local authorities already engaged in this work and will aim to inspire others to join and commit to listening to and participation with young children. YCVN will develop an online resource to share effective practice and strategies and aims to extend its reach to include social and health care professionals, and parents²⁰.

From April 2011, the Department for Education will fund the Early Childhood Unit and the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO) at NCB to continue to deliver specialist early years consultancy to local authorities. They will provide a sector-led quality improvement model to practitioners and managers which aims to improve outcomes and life chances for young children and their families.

Peer-to-peer support will be provided by sector specialists and via ECU's existing national networks – The National Quality Improvement Network (NQIN) The Black Voices Network (BVN) and YCVN. These networks will be the focus for activity to inspire and empower practitioners to get better at what they do and will continue to disseminate effective practice and support on five key areas of quality improvement: early learning, leadership and performance, workforce development, diversity and inclusive practice, and participation of children and families particularly the most disadvantaged.

YCVN will continue to provide support on the subject of listening to and involving young children with a particular emphasis on quality improvement in this area, using the *Let's listen* resource as a way of supporting local authorities to assess and plan for listening across settings. YCVN will also work in partnership with local YCVNs to ascertain young children's views and experiences within settings as part of their evaluative process.

²⁰ NCB (2011) Early Childhood Unit Annual Report 2009-10

Appendix A: Case study topic guides

YCVN Evaluation – Interview topic guide

Aim of the interview: The aim is to explore perceptions about how the national network has supported the development of a culture of listening, and if, how and where young children's voices are influential at a setting or strategic level.

Who will be interviewed: In addition to the YCVN lead, a range of stakeholders will be identified in each case study to be interviewed. These may include local authority staff with a responsibility for early year's management, participation, workforce development, and others suggested by the local YCVN lead.

The topic guide: The topic guide outlines the range of topics to be covered within each case study. It is not a script; prompts and probes will be developed by the interviewer within the interview setting depending on the topics raised by the interviewee, though some areas of probing are suggested in this guide. Note, not all interviewees will be able to comment on all topics due to the nature of their role - the interview will remain flexible to take account of this.

Introduction: To outline the aims and purpose of the study to the interviewee.

- Introduce yourself and NCB Research Centre.
- Introduce the study. Explain that:
 - it is being carried out independently of the Early Childhood Unit (ECU);
 - it will focus on perceptions of the support provided by the national work, as well as listening work locally and what impact this has had;
 - we recognise not all interviewees will be able to comment on every aspect of YCVN work.
- Final report deadline end of February 2011.
- Check it's OK to digitally record, and reassure re: confidentiality.
- Reminder of interview length – (45- 60 minutes).
- Any questions/concerns?

Context: To find out about the interviewee's role and responsibilities, strategy, and overall aims in relation to YCVN/ listening to young children.

- **Brief overview of interviewee role and responsibilities**
- **How did you first hear about/ became involved with YCVN national network?** *Were you already doing something similar? What prompted you to get involved? What did you think of it when you first heard about it? How easy was it to make contact?*
- **Local overall aims and objectives in relation to listening to young children?** *Overall what do you hope to achieve from this work? Does your*

listening work pre-date YCVN or has it developed independently to YCVN? How do you define 'young children' (i.e. what age-range)? What strategic objectives does young children's participation link to within the authority (e.g. implementation of EYFS, participation strategy, workforce development, 0-19/ 0-25 participation strategy)?

Developing local listening activity: To explore the nature of local activity in relation to listening to young children's voices and the approach taken to YCVN.

- **How has listening to young children been developed locally?**

- **Who has overall responsibility for the work?** *Where are they based in the LA? Who are their partners? Who else could be involved?*
- **Is there a network of any kind?** *Who leads this? How easy was it to get this off the ground? How did YCVN support this process? Who attends the meetings? How often do they meet? What do the meetings involve? Who else could be involved? How sustainable is the network now? If not, how have they developed the work locally? Why did they decide against using a network model?*
- **Who else is involved directly/ indirectly with listening activity?** *Who are they? What do they do? How do they link in with the network or activity lead? Who has been keen to get involved? Who has it been more difficult to involve? Who would you ideally get on board?*
- **How are staff supported to carry out listening work?** *Is there any training or ongoing support for practitioners? Are there any resources available to guide or support the work? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*

Nature and impact of local activity: To find out more about how children's voices are heard and if and how they have influence.

- **How have young children's voices been captured locally?**

- **In what ways are young children's voices listened to, formally or informally in individual settings?** *What kind of 'stand alone' activities take place? What kind of 'every-day' listening practice goes on? Are they involved in decision making in any way? Have any common messages been heard? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*
- **In what ways are young children's voices listened to, formally or informally in localities or local authorities?** *Are these different activities to those above? Is it a collation of messages from settings? What processes are in place to capture these? Are there any common messages that are emerging? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*
- **How are young children's voices recorded and shared?** *What formal or informal mechanisms are used to record views? Is this information pulled together or shared in any way? How do you decide to share key messages? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*

- **What has changed or been influenced by the voices of young children?**

- **What has happened at a setting level as a result of young children's voices being heard?** *How do these changes influence a 'typical day' at the setting? Have any policies or practices developed/ changed as a result? Is there any influence on other settings (e.g. within the same 'cluster' or across the authority/ sector)? What outcomes are these changes/ policies expected to bring, what limits impact of children's voices?*
- **What has happened at a locality or local authority level?** *In what ways have young children's voices been heard at a locality or local authority level? Have any policies or practices changed or been developed as a result? Who/what else is influenced? How will these changes support the local authority achieve its strategic objectives or improve outcomes for children? What limits impact of children's voices?*

Building a culture of listening: To explore what has helped or hindered the process of developing listening activity and influencing policies or practice.

- **To what extent has the authority developed a sustainable culture of listening?**
 - **Overall, how easy or difficult was it to set up the network or listening projects/ activity?** *How easy was it to get the network/ activities off the ground? What has helped or hindered this? What was easiest to implement? What were the barriers to getting going?*
 - **How easy has it been to build this approach in to the every day work of early years settings?** *How receptive have early years staff or managers been to this way of working? What worked well locally in developing listening practice? What have been the barriers to getting people on board? To what extent is this part of the 'normal business' of settings involved? How about other settings?*
 - **How embedded would you say a culture of listening to young children is right now?** *What is the profile of young children's participation (now and at the start of the work)? How sustainable do you think the network/ listening activity is right now? What could strengthen this? What are the threats (funding cuts, changes to EYFS etc)?*
 - **What would maximise the influence that young children's voices have in settings or in the wider local authority?** *Who else do you need to have on board? What needs to be put in place or what needs to happen?*
 - **Going forward, what are your short and long-term plans for listening activity and young children's participation?** *What would you like to achieve? Who would you like to work with? How do you plan to make the work sustainable?*

National network: views regarding effectiveness and impact of the national network (this material may have already emerged earlier in the interview).

- **How effective has YCVN been in supporting local authorities develop a culture of listening?**
 - **What has been/is the nature of the relationship between local listening activity and the national YCVN network?** *How did you first*

hear about them? How easy was it to access initial support? How did they help you in the very early stages?

- **What kind of ongoing support have you been able to access from YCVN?** *(E.g. newsletters, networking events and seminars, training and consultancy, literature and leaflets including 'Listening as a Way of Life' series and 'Am I Staying For Lunch Today', support from project manager and so on.) How useful have these been in supporting the work you do? Have you been able to apply anything from them directly? What have you done differently as a result of involvement with YCVN? What has been most useful and what was less useful?*
- **What difference has being involved with YCVN made overall?** *On listening practice, on practitioners (including workforce development), on children, on local authority policies? How has this work complemented or been in tension with other current initiatives?*
- **What additional support or resources would be useful along the way?** *At set up point? In terms of developing practitioners or strategic partners' awareness and skills? In terms of evaluating what you do? And at other points?*

Summary and close:

- **Overall, what is working well and less well in terms of developing a culture of listening locally?** *What stands out as key achievements? What would you like to improve?*
- **Overall, how effective has the support from the national YCVN been?** *What has been most useful and what would you like to see change?*
- Anything else that the interviewee thinks is important.
- Any questions.
- Reassure again regarding confidentiality and publication plans.
- Thank you.

YCVN Evaluation- Focus group topic guide

Aim of the focus group: The aim is to explore if, how and where young children's voices are influential in settings. The focus group will also explore the nature of practitioners' contacts with local and national networks, and the impact of these contacts on their work within settings.

Who will take part in the focus group: Practitioners working in a range of early years settings.

The topic guide: The topic guide outlines the range of topics to be covered within each focus group. It is not a script; prompts and probes will be developed by the facilitator within the focus group setting depending on the topics raised by the participants, though some areas of probing are suggested in this guide. Note, not all participants will be able to comment on all topics due to the nature of their role - the focus group will remain flexible to take account of this.

Introduction: To outline the aims and purpose of the study to the interviewee.

- Introduce yourself and NCB Research Centre.
- Introduce the study. Explain that:
 - it is being carried out independently of the Early Childhood Unit (ECU);
 - it will focus on perceptions of the support provided by the national work, as well as listening work locally and what impact this has had;
 - we recognise not all participants will be able to comment on every aspect of YCVN work, this focus group will concentrate on if and how young children's voices are influential in settings.
- Final report deadline end of February 2011.
- Check it's OK to digitally record, and reassure re: confidentiality
- Reminder of focus group length – (60 minutes)
- Any questions/concerns?

Context: To find out about the participants' roles and responsibilities and aims in relation to listening to young children.

- **Brief overview of interviewee role and responsibilities, including how listening to young children work fits in**
- **Local overall aims and objectives in relation to listening to young children within settings?** *Overall what do you hope to achieve from this work? Does your listening work pre-date YCVN or has it developed independently to YCVN? How do you define 'young children' (i.e. what age-range)?*

Developing local listening activity: To explore the nature of local activity in relation to listening to young children's voices, and where relevant, views on the approach taken to YCVN.

- **How has listening to young children been developed locally?**

- **Within your setting, how do you link in directly/ indirectly with listening activity?** *What do you do? How do you link in with the network or activity lead? Do you attend local network meetings? If so, how useful do you find the meetings and why?*
- **How are staff supported to carry out listening work?** *Is there any training or ongoing support for practitioners? Are there any resources available to guide or support the work? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*

Nature and impact of local activity: To find out more about how children's voices are heard and if and how they have influence.

- **How have young children's voices been captured locally?**

- **In what ways are young children's voices listened to, formally or informally in individual settings?** *What kind of 'stand alone' activities take place? What kind of 'every-day' listening practice goes on? Are they involved in decision making in any way? Have any common messages been heard? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*
- **[If relevant] In what ways are young children's voices listened to, formally or informally in localities or local authorities?** *Are these different activities to those above? Is it a collation of messages from settings? What processes are in place to capture these? Are there any common messages that are emerging? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*
- **How are young children's voices recorded and shared?** *What formal or informal mechanisms are used to record views? Is this information pulled together or shared in any way? How do you decide to share key messages? How has YCVN supported this work or how could they better support it?*

- **What has changed or been influenced by the voices of young children?**

- **What has happened within settings as a result of young children's voices being heard?** *How do these changes influence a 'typical day' at the setting? Have any policies or practices developed/ changed as a result? Is there any influence on other settings (e.g. within the same 'cluster' or across the authority/ sector)? What outcomes are these changes/ policies expected to bring, what limits impact of children's voices?*
- **[If relevant] What has happened at a locality or local authority level?** *In what ways have young children's voices been heard at a locality or local authority level? Have any policies or practices changed or been developed as a result? Who/what else is influenced? How will these changes support the local authority achieve its strategic objectives or improve outcomes for children? What limits impact of children's voices?*

Building a culture of listening: To explore what has helped or hindered the process of developing listening activity and influencing policies or practice

- **To what extent has the authority developed a sustainable culture of listening?**
 - **How easy has it been to build this approach in to the every day work of early years settings?** *How receptive have early years staff or managers been to this way of working? What worked well locally in developing listening practice? What have been the barriers to getting people on board? To what extent is this part of the 'normal business' of settings involved? How about other settings?*
 - **What would maximise the influence that young children's voices have in settings or in the wider local authority?** *Who else do you need to have on board? What needs to be put in place or what needs to happen?*
 - **Going forward, what are you short or long-term plans for listening activity and young children's participation within your settings?** *What would you like to achieve? Who would you like to work with? How do you plan to make the work sustainable?*

National network: views regarding effectiveness and impact of the national network (this material may have already emerged earlier in the interview)

- **How effective has YCVN been in supporting local authorities develop a culture of listening?**
 - **Have you had any contact with the national YCVN?** *If so, what was involved? How useful did you find it?*
 - **What, if any, kind of ongoing support have you been able to access from YCVN?** *(E.g. newsletters, networking events and seminars, training and consultancy, literature and leaflets including 'Listening as a Way of Life' series and 'Am I Staying For Lunch Today', support from project manager and so on.) How useful have these been in supporting the work you do? Have you been able to apply anything from them directly? What have you done differently as a result of involvement with YCVN? What has been most useful and what was less useful?*
 - **What difference has being involved with YCVN made overall?** *On listening practice, on practitioners (including workforce development), on children, on local authority policies? How has this work complemented or been in tension with other current initiatives?*
 - **What additional support or resources would be useful along the way?** *At set up point? In terms of developing practitioners or strategic partners' awareness and skills? In terms of evaluating what you do? And at other points?*

Summary and close:

- **Overall, what is working well and less well in terms of developing a culture of listening locally?** *What stands out as key achievements? What would you like to improve?*
- **[If relevant] Overall, how effective has the support from the national YCVN been?** *What has been most useful and what would you like to see change?*
- Anything else that the participants think is important.
- Any questions.
- Reassure again regarding confidentiality and publication plans.
- Thank you.