

Research
Centre



Putting listening practice at the heart of early years practice

An evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network

Case studies

Rachel Blades, Vijay Kumari

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

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Tel: 020 7843 6000

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Introduction

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 duty to listen to young children, to inform policy and the improvement of early years provision³. It 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 advisor), and focus groups with practitioners⁴. Interviews and focus groups explored how listening practice was developed and embedded at a strategic level and within settings.

In this report we present five local authority case studies to illustrate different approaches to listening to and participation with young children. We highlight pathways to mainstream listening, perceived outcomes, interviewees' perceptions of what worked well, and a range of practice examples from settings.

For the executive summary and the full evaluation report including local authority strategies, overall impact and outcomes visit: www.ncb.org.uk/ycvn.

For further information about YCVN contact YCVN Project Manager Lucy Williams on 0207 833 6816 or email to lwilliams@ncb.org.uk.

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.

Case Study Area 1:

An Early Years –led YCVN that promotes listening as a best practice approach and as a way to improve the quality of early years provision, across a large rural area in south England

Beginnings	<p>In 2008, an early years manager attended an NCB event at which national YCVN gave a presentation. The manager’s long –standing interest in quality improvement prompted her decision to set up a local YCVN. The manager had a clear strategy from the beginning which was to work with Children’s Centres in order for them to later cascade listening to their local PVI sectors. There was a clear intention to engage lead practitioners and managers because it was felt that listening needed to be strategically led in settings. The manager financed listening work from the early years budget and offered funding to settings to cover practitioner development time. In addition, the manager wanted to establish links with LA Participation Team from the beginning and invited them to attend initial meetings.</p>
YCVN Structure	<p>In the role of YCVN Lead, the manager put together a working group which included Early Years consultants and managers, an independent consultant working for Early Years, and a representative from the LA Participation Team who attended the first few meetings and later invited YCVN onto the strategic participation group to regularly feedback on YCVN progress.</p>
Pilot Activities	<p>The YCVN developed their own listening training and used national YCVN resources to train 12 children’s centres and special schools to carry out listening projects and embed listening within their settings. Individual support to settings was built into existing meetings and visits between early years consultants and settings. In addition, termly YCVN steering group meetings were held to feedback on progress. Settings were encouraged to document their listening work and write case studies.</p>
Dissemination Activities	<p>The YCVN produced a listening strategy including good practice guidelines and case studies from pilot settings. These were launched at a local listening conference organised by YCVN. A wide range of local early years settings, LA representatives, and national YCVN attended the conference. The Strategy and accompanying resources were posted onto the LA website.</p>
Mainstreaming Activities	<p>During the course of local YCVN activities, successive LA budget reductions have led to the original YCVN Lead and the subsequent Lead leaving the LA. The early years consultant team has been reduced by half. All remaining team members have had listening training and listening has now become an integral part of their roles in supporting best practice in settings. Listening has been linked to ECAT and both have been made priority topics for best practice network meetings run by early years consultants and to which all settings are invited. In addition the pilot settings have begun to cascade listening to other settings through their local cluster groups.</p>

Case Study Area 1: Pathway to mainstream listening

within local settings

LA Early Years-Led YCVN forms a working group to oversee local listening work



YCVN develops bespoke listening training and employs an independent consultant



YCVN trains and supports 12 children's centres and special needs schools to carry out listening projects and embed listening within their own settings



YCVN holds local conference and launches listening strategy and good practice guidelines.



All Early Years consultants given listening training. Listening becomes integral to their roles in supporting best practice in all settings. LA Early Years prioritises listening along with ECAT as topics for best practice meetings with settings.



Mainstream listening as part of best practice in all local early years settings

& within the local authority

YCVN invites LA Participation to working group meetings



YCVN Lead invited to sit on LA Participation Board



LA Participation Strategy identifies young children as a priority group



Develop participation of young children in LA strategic decision-making

Case Study Area 1: Outcomes & what worked

Perceived outcomes

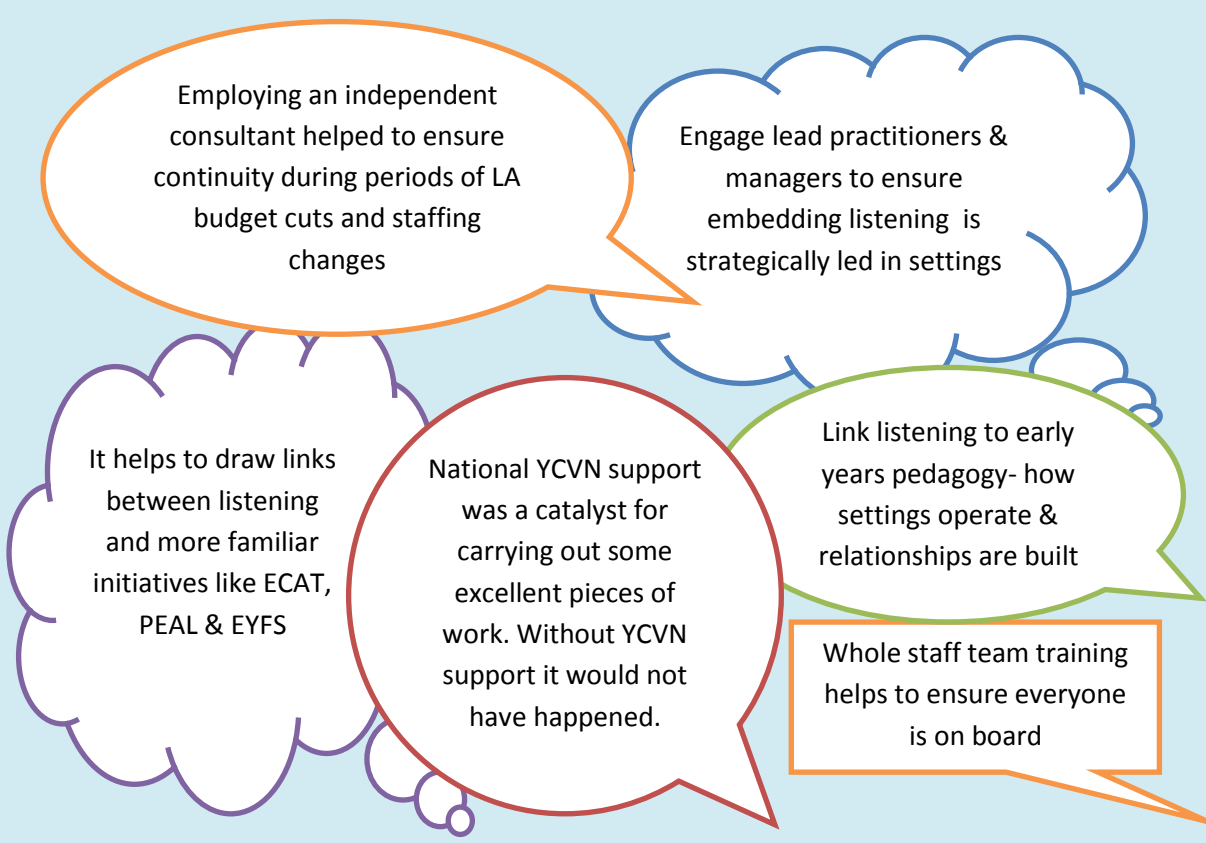
Children became more confident, communication improved and they initiated engagement with adults more. Their behaviour improved, they were more relaxed, became more cooperative and were better at turn-taking. EYFS profile results showed improvements.

Practitioners had better communication with children and realised that young children could tell them more than they thought. They became better at observing children's interests and play and have developed better relationships with parents. Practitioners reported being generally more focused on children's needs and wants, and were more flexible in responding to their needs. They felt more confident about making their own judgements and as a result could identify children's needs earlier.

Pilot settings embedded listening as best practice. These settings have begun to disseminate listening to their PVI sector through local cluster group meetings and other networks. Settings generally benefited from more effective key person systems, more cohesive staff teams, better relationships with parents, and improved quality of provision. Settings reported child-led routines and curriculum. A few settings reported better Ofsted visits and inspection reports.

Local Authority: The local YCVN conference helped to raise awareness of listening to young children and demonstrated to the LA how it could be done effectively. Another important outcome was that the LA Participation strategy prioritised listening to young children.

Perceptions of what worked



Case Study Area 1: Example Listening Project

A special school put listening at the heart of the classroom approach

YCVN delivered listening training to a whole team of 30 early years practitioners at a large Special School. A teacher who was a specialist in autism decided to carry out a project titled *'Making Listening Special'*, aimed at putting listening at the heart of best practice in the classroom. The teacher saw listening as a tool to support the various special needs approaches she used in the classroom that focused on fostering quality relationships, unconditional acceptance, and creating safe and secure environments.

'We put the curriculum aside and said listening was our curriculum so it became about what they are engaging in then the children's needs became the centre of the curriculum'.

To identify children's interests staff spent much of their time observing children's play, what they liked, what motivated them, and how they played. Staff took mental notes, wrote observations and took photographs for children's learning journals. Staff met daily to reflect on observations and plan the next day accordingly. At the time the teacher had a lot of children using non-verbal language and gestures, and the project involved really tuning in to find out what methods of communication they understood. This tended to involve symbols, pictures, maps, signing and key words.

Staff discovered children developed their own natural routine, and staff became more flexible- if children were engaged and happy they gave them more time instead of rushing them outside because it was time for outdoor play.

'We'd often have half the class who want to go out and half that want to stay in and that's ok now whereas before it was -right it's 10.30am everybody is going out to play'.

The project was an opportunity for staff to work together towards the same thing. They fine-tuned their resources and their observation skills. They saw great improvements in children's challenging behaviours, their communication, ability to cooperate, and their level of engagement with staff and in activities. Parents also noticed their children were happier and looking forward to school, and they were pleased with the changes in their children's behaviour and their new learning.

'I think reflective practice is so rewarding and worthwhile – you notice the subtle things and those really matter in special education'.

Staff found all 30 children benefitted from the project and they want to keep using the listening approach because it has been so worthwhile and rewarding. The children have moved onto the next class and now those classes have started using the listening approach. The Head of the school has asked the teacher to present her listening work at an INSET day for all school staff. The school Behaviour Manager thinks it could be a useful approach for dealing with some children's challenging behaviour and is working on introducing it in a few classes and letting it grow from there.

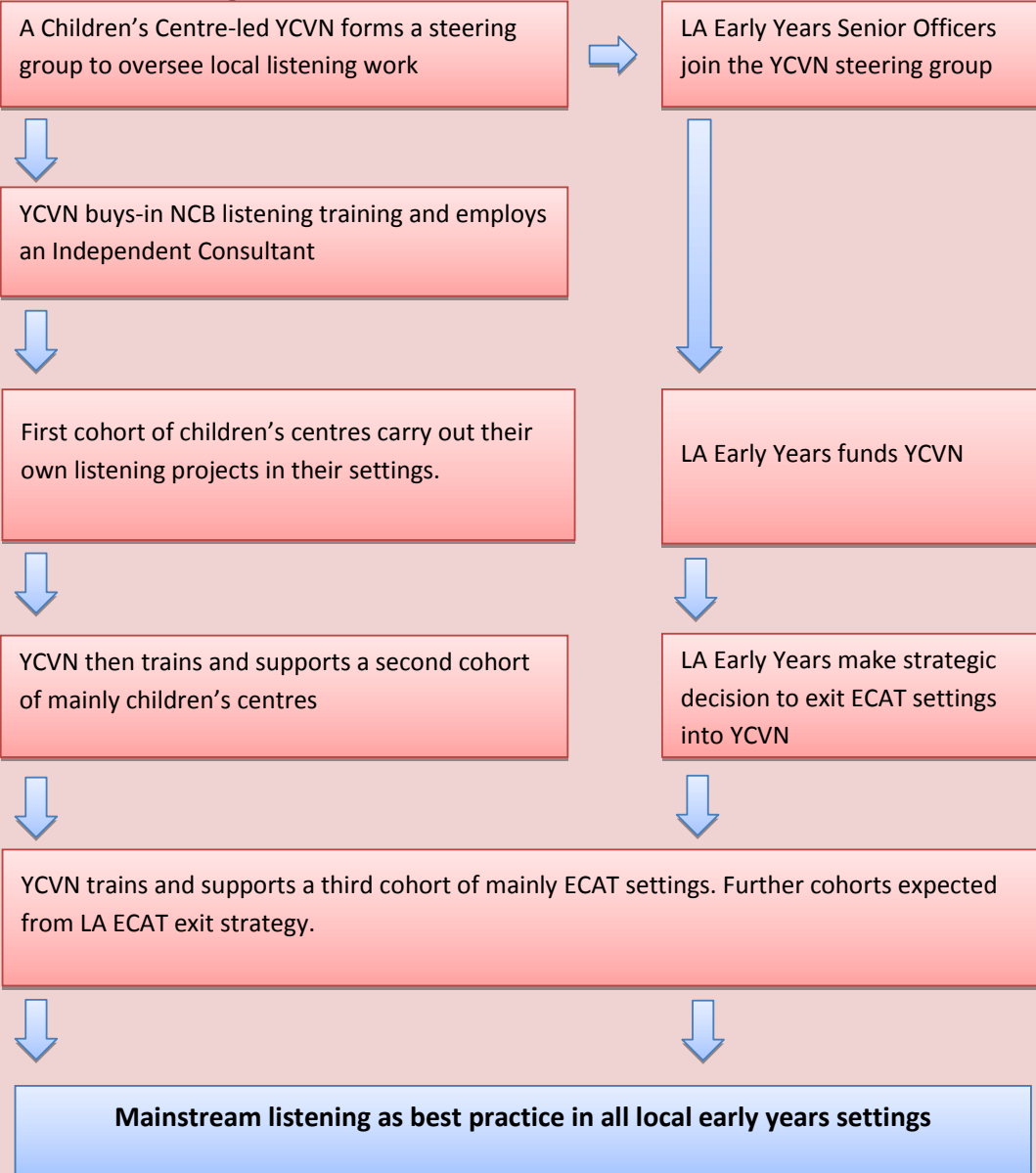
Case Study Area 2:

A Children's Centre –led YCVN that promotes listening as a best practice tool and as a way to develop inclusion and citizenship, within a city borough in south England

Beginnings	<p>In 2006, the Head of a high quality children's centre based in an area with an increasingly diverse ethnic population felt a need to communicate better with children, and more generally as a setting and with partners. The Head identified a need for a more child-led approach, attended training on the Mosaic Approach and read Coram's <i>Listening to Young Children</i>. Listening was perceived to be a way to develop inclusion and citizenship, and to help ensure children and families feel valued, that they have a voice and are listened to.</p>
YCVN Structure	<p>In 2007, the Head secured funding from the Ethnic Minority Achievement budget and formed the YCVN steering group in partnership with the LA Early Years. Members included an Independent Consultant, and the Head of Early Years and the EYFS Lead. The LA saw an opportunity for local capacity building around best practice and since 2008 YCVN work has been funded by the LA Early Years. The YCVN targets good quality Children's Centres and other settings to develop them into beacon settings that can further cascade listening to their local cluster groups.</p>
Pilot Activities	<p>An initial cohort of senior staff at local Children's Centres attended termly network meetings to share best practice. YCVN bought-in NCB listening training. Development support was provided by the Independent Consultant on the steering group. Tailored support to settings and for lead practitioners was provided on request. Each setting was supported to plan and carry out action research to identify ways to listen better within their own settings.</p>
Dissemination Activities	<p>Some settings involved produced their own resources on their action research projects. One setting showcased their work locally through an exhibition held at their setting on an INSET day. The work of the local YCVN was also disseminated through local and national networks and published articles.</p>
Mainstreaming Activities	<p>The YCVN worked with a second cohort of settings. Following a strategic decision by Early Years for all ECAT settings to exit into the listening network, the YCVN is now working with its third cohort which consists of mainly ECAT settings. Future plans focus on capacity building to establish beacon settings in each local cluster group and extended schools cluster. The YCVN has identified a future need to train practitioners in leadership skills and increase their confidence in promoting listening to a wide range of settings within their localities. The YCVN is developing its own audit tool based on Let's Listen with the intention that it will be used to support primary schools in the delivery of good EYFS practice.</p>

Case Study Area 2: Pathway to mainstream listening

within local settings



Case Study Area 2: Outcomes & what worked

Perceived outcomes

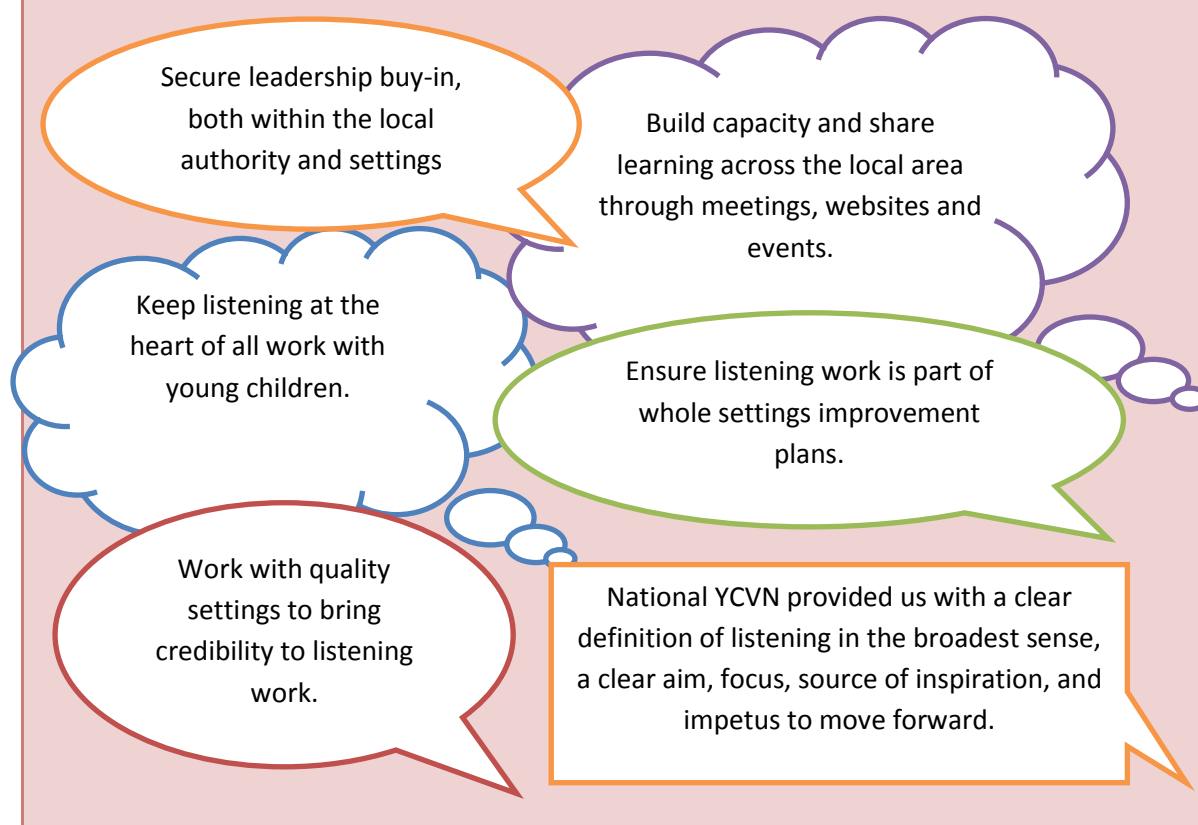
Children became more independent and grew in confidence. They learned that they could lead their own learning, make choices, and see change happen. Families became more involved in their children's learning. EYFS profile results improved, particularly communication, language and literacy and personal, social and emotional development.

Practitioners became more confident and reflective. They got to know children better, talked to parents more. Curriculum became more personalised. They used listening work to lead planning for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Pilot settings. Settings developed a common agenda, stronger ethos, better team-working and relationships with parents

Local Authority: Early Years involvement has helped to sustain the momentum of listening work and provide an exit route for ECAT settings into the local YCVN which will support the continuing professional development of practitioners.

Perceptions of what worked



Case Study Area 2: Example Listening Project

A children's centre's whole setting approach to developing Listening

Having attended regular listening network meetings, staff and the Head at a local children's centre wanted to further develop the existing ethos of listening within the setting. They decided to take a **whole setting** approach and examine the key question, *'How can we improve the quality of the way we listen to children'*.

In each area of the setting, staff carried out an action research project over a period of a year and addressed the key question but from different angles, for example, from the perspective of improving children's learning, self-esteem or language skills. Staff identified and tested out different listening approaches and techniques such as the Mosaic approach, learning stories, Makaton, and extended surveys where children are asked questions and staff write their responses. Staff used different ways of evidencing their work and tracking the learning of each child including visuals, photographs, observations, and recording what children said. During the project staff noted how their practice was changing and should change further.

'We are a more reflective team definitely. We're constantly evaluating whether or not the environment we've got is the most helpful and purposeful environment it could be for the children'.

Staff became more reflective, they noticed the quality of their observations improved, and they developed a deeper understanding of the children. Their curriculum and planning became more child-led. Staff adopted the approaches they had been testing.

'I think we've made less observations than we did last year but we know the children much more. It does bring a real depth to our knowledge of the children'.

Through the action research process of planning, experimenting and discussing the staff team have developed a common language, grown in confidence and work better as a team. Staff re-defined their roles and saw themselves as facilitators empowering children rather than leading them, and they gave children more space and time to express themselves.

The children's centre celebrated their work and success by holding an exhibition at their setting on INSET day. In the morning they invited other settings, organisations, and the local authority and in the afternoon they invited parents and carers. The exhibition was a useful way to communicate what they were doing to stakeholders. The children's centre is now planning its next action research project which will focus on how to further improve the way they listen to parents and carers.

Case Study Area 3:

An Early Years-led YCVN that promotes listening as an approach for best practice in participation, and as a way to improve the quality of early years provision across a city in north England

Beginnings	<p>In 2008 the LA Head of Early Years approached two members of the quality team to jointly take on the role of YCVN Leads. This was prompted by an interest in improving the quality of local provision and following contact with the national YCVN. The Head of Early Years wanted to involve children's centres but the LA was experiencing a long period of change and there was a flurry of initiatives aimed at Early Years. It was decided that the timing was not right for the YCVN to engage children's centres. Instead the local YCVN took the opportunity to focus on working with PVI settings to raise awareness of the value of listening to young children.</p>
YCVN Structure	<p>The joint YCVN Leads worked together and sometimes involved other members of Early Years quality team. The YCVN ran termly network meetings.</p>
Pilot Activities	<p>YCVN leads revised the LA's listening training course which had not been used for many years. They ran termly training as part of the LA Early Years training programme. After a period of one year, the YCVN suspended training as feedback reflected a growing need for more practice guidance and practical resources. From the training days YCVN recruited a small but very varied cohort of pilot settings. Settings attended termly network meetings and carried out listening projects in their own settings. YCVN offered whole team training to the settings on request and provided 1-1 consultancy support. Network meetings ran for one year and were difficult to sustain due to the small number of settings involved.</p> <p>Within the LA, the YCVN highlighted the lack of early years representation on the LA Participation Board and gaps in the LA participation audit. In late 2010, the YCVN was invited onto the Participation Board. Using the Let's Listen resource, the YCVN developed a basic level listening audit tool. YCVN carried out two successive annual consultations with young children as part of the LA Childcare Sufficiency reports. Through this work YCVN became more aware of the need to challenge practitioner perspectives on consulting babies and disabled children.</p>
Dissemination Activities	<p>The YCVN hosted a national YCVN conference which gave their listening work a higher local and national profile, and added credibility. The YCVN is gathering case studies of local listening work to disseminate as a practice resource.</p>
Mainstreaming Activities	<p>The YCVN plans to roll-out the new listening training to all early years settings. Training will be mandatory for all children's centres, and specific settings will be targeted with training on listening to babies and disabled children. Social and Health care workers will also be offered tailored training. The YCVN is collating evidence of young children's views to feed into LA strategic groups, and further developing its listening audit, and listening network meetings will be built into existing early years network meetings.</p>

Case Study Area 3: Pathway to mainstream listening

within local settings

LA Early Years –led YCVN develops and delivers its own listening training, open to all practitioners, to raise awareness of the value of listening



YCVN recruits a small cohort of PVI settings from the training courses. They carry out listening projects, attend network meetings, and begin to embed listening within their own settings



The YCVN hosts a National YCVN conference and pilot settings present their work.



YCVN develops mandatory listening training for Children’s Centres, tailored training for settings working with babies and disabled children, and tailored training for social and health care workers. YCVN aims to develop listening network meetings as part of existing local networks



Mainstream listening as part of best practice in all local early years settings

& within the local authority

YCVN raises the issue of the lack of early years representation on the LA Participation Unit



YCVN is asked to consult young children for the LA Childcare Sufficiency reports



The YCVN is invited onto the LA Participation Board, and collates young children’s views to feed into LA decision-making processes



Develop participation of young children in LA strategic decision-making

Case Study Area 3: Outcomes & what worked

Perceived outcomes

Children grew in self-esteem and confidence and they became happier and more settled.

Practitioners reported a change in perceptions and enthusiasm for listening. They valued listening more, and made more time to listen and observe children's interests, and model listening to other staff and parents. Practitioners felt they were more responsive and less prescriptive, and as a result they enjoyed their roles more. Practitioners delivered a more personalised curriculum.

Settings began embedding listening, and listening was embedded in a few high quality settings including private nurseries. Policies were modified in one setting to include a commitment to listening, for example, key person policy, job application forms, and person specifications. A small number of different settings carried out several consultations with young children which have led to changes in daily routines and the setting environment- including investing in storage trolleys to make it easier for children to choose activities, and improved outdoor spaces with child-led planning.

Local Authority: Within the LA there was greater awareness of the local YCVN which was recognised as an avenue through which to consult young children. For the first time the LA carried out consultations with young children for Childcare Sufficiency reports, and Early Years was represented on the LA Participation Board which were significant steps forward.

Perceptions of what worked

One-to-one support from local YCVN Leads helps staff to embed listening in their setting

Having managers who value listening gives staff permission to make time to listen to children

YCVN meetings are useful for exchanging experiences and getting ideas from other settings

Whole staff team Listening training brought about a complete shift in mind-set towards valuing listening to young children

National YCVN training inspired us and gave us ideas for our own training package

Working with the national YCVN gave us the opportunity to work with some high quality private sector settings

Case Study Area 3: Example Listening Project

A private nursery's staff uniform consultation with young children from birth to 5 years, staff members, and parents

After attending local YCVN meetings, two lead practitioners at a private nursery caring for children aged from birth to 5 years carried out a staff uniform consultation with all children in the setting, staff and parents. This followed an incident when the lead practitioner was cuddling an upset child and observed the child's interest in the scarf she wore over her staff uniform. The child felt the tassels and sparkling threads of her scarf which was perceived to make the child's experience of that cuddle more special and reassuring.

The practitioners prepared an attractive basket filled with fabrics of different colours, textures, and patterns. They included the staff uniform t-shirt which was made of aertex fabric. Practitioners took the basket to the babies' room and placed it on laid out rugs. Babies sat around it with their key workers who observed babies' interaction with the fabrics and their expressions. They ensured babies were able to reach the staff uniform t-shirt. Practitioners observed that when babies touched the fabrics they liked they rubbed the fabric, put it towards their face and smiled. Practitioners observed babies took little interest in the staff uniform t-shirt. They observed a similar disinterest from older babies when they took the basket to the toddler room.

When consulting the older children, practitioners asked them to dress a staff member for work. Children used all the different fabrics, the only item left in the basket was the staff uniform t-shirt. Practitioners asked the children whether she should wear the t-shirt to work and the children said no because they didn't like it. The children also drew pictures of what staff should wear for work.

"One child said I should wear my marrying dress to work. I did one day put my wedding dress on for them. But they decided it was a bit too big".

Having consulted all the children, the practitioners then consulted with staff. Most staff said they wanted to keep the uniform because it was easy and kept their clothes clean. Only four of the twenty-eight staff agreed to act on what the children were telling them. The lead practitioners decided staff needed to experience the listening training and asked the local YCVN to deliver whole team training. Staff asked questions, reflected on their own perspectives, and examined how listening fits in with the EYFS. After the training a majority of staff made the decision to act on what the children were telling them and have no staff uniform.

"I don't know if we've impacted on their practice but we got staff thinking...and I think that's the whole point isn't it?"

The lead practitioners also consulted with parents who were happy for staff to go along with what the children wanted. Practitioners put photographs up of all the staff with their key groups to help parents identify staff members more easily.

Case Study Area 4:

A Participation-led YCVN in a city in north-east England, that promotes listening as an approach for developing young children's participation in local authority

<p>Beginnings</p>	<p>The LA had a history of listening to children and some local settings had carried out pioneering work on young children's voices. The LA had a designated Children's Participation Officer when it joined the national YCVN in 2006. Shortly after joining, the post was made redundant and remained vacant for over a year until it was reinstated with Early Years funding. The YCVN has a strong focus on embedding participation in settings and building a body of evidence on young children's views to feed into LA strategic decision making.</p>
<p>YCVN Structure</p>	<p>The YCVN Lead is the Listening to Young Children's Officer based in the LA Participation Unit. The steering group includes the Participation Manager, a national children's charity, Heads of local beacon settings, practitioner listening champions, and a safeguarding officer from the school improvement team. The steering group functions as an advisory group supporting the work of the YCVN Lead, and as a working group; members assist in facilitating training courses, strategic planning, and promoting the participation of young children in strategic decision-making. The steering group has a large virtual membership which is kept up to date with email bulletins.</p>
<p>Pilot Activities</p>	<p>During the year the post was vacant the steering group developed a listening strategy, a tool-kit and a listening training course which was later accredited by the Open College Network. The YCVN discontinued their listening network due to fluctuating attendance and competing priorities. The YCVN Lead initially worked with children's centres to embed participation of young children. A range of listening training was developed and delivered through the LA training programme to early years practitioners, social and health care workers and managers of settings. During the training course participants were assisted to plan listening projects and feedback on progress. The YCVN Lead provides individual support to settings and referrals to local beacon settings and listening champions. The YCVN has carried out a series of LA-wide consultations with young children including Childcare Sufficiency, Children's Plan and participatory budgeting. The YCVN manages the Investing in Children accreditation scheme.</p>
<p>Dissemination Activities</p>	<p>The listening strategy and tool-kits are distributed widely and are posted on the LA website. The YCVN hosted a national YCVN conference which raised the profile of local work nationally and within the area. The YCVN lead gathers examples of local listening work and has built a bank of resources which settings can access on request.</p>
<p>Mainstreaming Activities</p>	<p>The YCVN plans to: deliver whole team training to social and health care teams working with disabled children and children in care, and PVI early years settings; develop locality based and work team based networks; develop the role of local champions and beacon settings; promote quality participation through Investing in Children; map evidence of young children's voices against LA priorities, and develop the role of the advisory group to feed evidence to LA strategic groups.</p>

Case Study Area 4: Pathway to mainstream listening

within local settings

LA Participation-Led YCVN develops a listening strategy, a tool-kit, accredited listening training course, and employs a Listening to Young Children's Officer.



Early years practitioners, social and health care workers, and managers of settings are trained and supported to carry out listening projects and embed a culture of listening



The YCVN starts assessing quality of participation in settings through Investing in Children accreditation



The YCVN starts to offer whole team training for PVI settings and specialist social & health care teams, and plans to develop locality based and team based networks. The YCVN plans to develop the role of listening champions & beacon settings beyond early years settings.



Mainstream listening as part of best practice in all local early years settings

& within the local authority

YCVN carries out a series of LA-wide consultations with young children in partnership with beacon settings



Evidence of young children's views is fed into some key LA strategic processes



The YCVN begins to map evidence of young children's views against LA priorities



The YCVN plans to develop the role of the steering/advisory group as a mechanism to feed evidence of young children's views to LA strategic groups.



Develop participation of young children in LA strategic decision-making

Case Study Area 4: Outcomes & what worked

Perceived outcomes

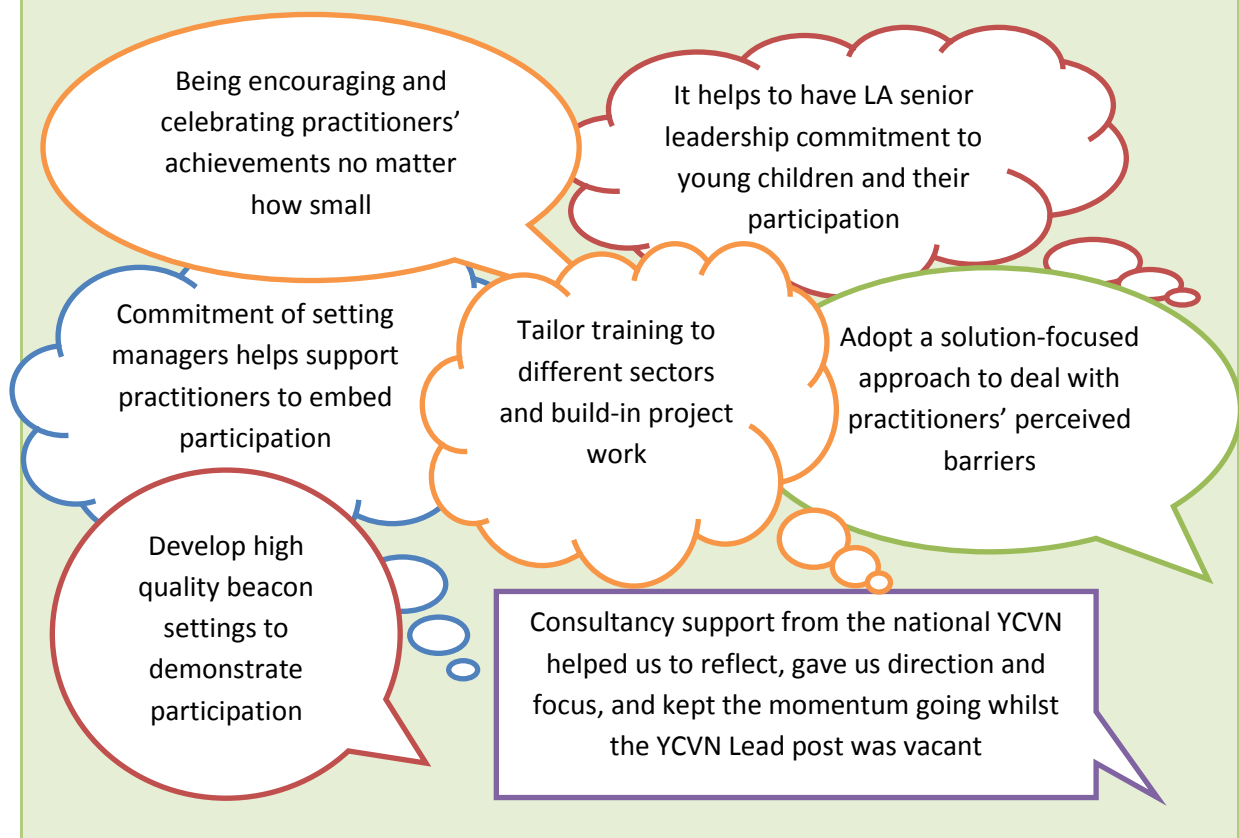
Children became more involved in strategic decision-making at a setting level and at LA level. Some settings achieving Investing in Children accreditation have evidence from children that their participation has resulted in benefits for children.

Practitioners, in the hundreds and from different sectors, were trained and produced good quality project work demonstrating listening and participation. A wider range of practitioners and managers became involved in the local YCVN steering group indicating a growing commitment to listening.

Settings embedded listening and the participation of young children in decision-making which has shaped provision within those settings. Since being involved in local YCVN work several settings have achieved Investing in Children accreditation and taken part in LA-consultations with young children.

Local Authority and localities: A few public outdoor areas and streets were improved as a result of listening to young children's views. The listening strategy has good buy-in from the LA and a series of LA-wide consultations were carried out and fed into LA strategic processes. The number of requests for evidence of young children's participation from different parts of the LA has increased.

Perceptions of what worked



Case Study Area 4: Example Listening Project

A children's centre involved young children in a LA participatory budgeting project to improve their outdoor play area

A children's centre with an established culture of listening and young children's participation in strategic decision-making within the setting, decided to become involved in a local authority-wide participatory budgeting project. Practitioners worked with the children to prepare and present an application for funding to improve an outdoor play area in the setting.

The play area concerned was an old patch of ground which the children used for riding their bikes on but it was not fit for purpose. Practitioners first carried out a small project on health and safety and road safety to prepare the children for assessing the safety of the play area. They then took the children onto the old patch of ground and the children talked about the ground, what was unsafe about it and how it should be improved. Practitioners recorded a video film of the children talking about the ground.

Practitioners then worked with the children to find out their views on what they wanted the ground to look like. The children looked through catalogues and talked about what resources they liked and wanted in their new play area. Children cut and pasted images from the catalogues and drew their own pictures and talked about their pictures and ideas. The practitioners wrote down what the children had said.

Applicants were invited to a local conference to present their bids and the practitioners decided to take the children with them. They took with them the videos of the children, their pictures and their notes of what children had said.

The conference venue was a very large room and hundreds of people attended. The children from the children's centre were the youngest children there. Most of the other applicants were mainly young people. When the practitioners arrived at the venue they thought perhaps the environment would be too overpowering for the young children but the children were very confident. They stood up on the large stage in front of all the people and used a microphone to explain very clearly what they wanted and why they wanted it. Towards the end of the event everyone had to vote on which bids the money should go to, and the young children were one of the applicants to secure funding.

Later, the young children worked with the architects to transfer their ideas into plans for the re-design of their play area. They also watched when the builders came in to carry out the work. Once the new play area was completed the children used it and then evaluated the new equipment.

Case Study Area 5:

An Early Years and voluntary sector- led YCVN, in a town in east England, promoting Listening as a best practice approach, a participation approach, and as a way to improve the quality of early years provision

Beginnings	The local authority has a strong commitment to hearing the voices of all children and young people. Due to the relatively small size of the area there is a strong sense of community. In 2008 an early years manager and development officer, employed by a national pre-school charity and based in the LA, were tasked with setting up a local YCVN following a visit from the national YCVN. They were interested in applying the empowerment model inherent in the YCVN approach. The aim was to increase understanding of young children's needs and wants and to empower them to make decisions about their environments.
YCVN Structure	The development officer took on the YCVN Lead role and invited all settings to the first steering group meeting. The steering group meets on a termly basis.
Pilot Activities	A wide variety of 12 settings joined the steering group. Listening training and resources were bought-in from NCB, and settings also received RAMPS training from Penny Lancaster. Pilot settings took on a listening project of their choice and the YCVN bought cameras for each setting to facilitate their listening projects. The YCVN focused on the empowerment model, encouraging settings to think about the work they were already undertaking and building practitioner confidence in developing this further. The YCVN Lead involved her employer, a national pre-school charity, which linked the YCVN to the charity's focus on the environment and supplied the settings with practical resources relating to the environment, recycling, and growing plants. Settings have also received training on writing listening policies and mission statements.
Dissemination Activities	The YCVN held an exhibition at a local museum to showcase the listening work carried out by pilot settings. Around 300 people attended including other local settings, the LA Director of Children's Services and other LA representatives. The YCVN Lead developed and circulated a book illustrating local listening work, and gave presentations to the LA strategic group on children's voices.
Mainstreaming Activities	The LA senior leads have been regularly informed of the progress of YCVN work and they have made a commitment to roll-out listening to all settings in the local area. The pilot settings had train the trainers' training and have started the process of developing local listening networks through their cluster groups. The YCVN plans to roll-out listening to all settings through existing cluster group meetings. The LA is considering developing a new local website in future to facilitate the exchange of ideas and practice between settings. The YCVN plans to ask schools for feedback on children entering schools from settings where listening is embedded, which would add to the evidence base and help ensure that good practice continues when children enter primary schools.

Case Study Area 5: Pathway to mainstream listening

within local settings

An Early Years and voluntary sector-led YCVN invited all early years settings to attend the first YCVN steering group meeting.



& within the local authority

The YCVN Lead regularly informs LA managers of YCVN activity and they give regular updates to LA strategic groups



Twelve settings attend termly steering group meetings. They participate in listening training and carry out listening projects within their own settings.



LA becomes more aware of local YCVN work. LA interest in & commitment to listening to young children grows



The YCVN holds a local exhibition and celebration of listening work carried out by the twelve settings. The LA attends the exhibition.



The LA makes a decision to roll-out listening to all early years settings



The 12 settings start developing local listening networks through their cluster groups. The YCVN plans to roll-out listening to all settings through existing cluster group meetings.



Mainstream listening as part of best practice in all early years settings

Develop participation of young children in LA strategic decision-making

Case Study Area 5: Outcomes & what worked

Perceived outcomes

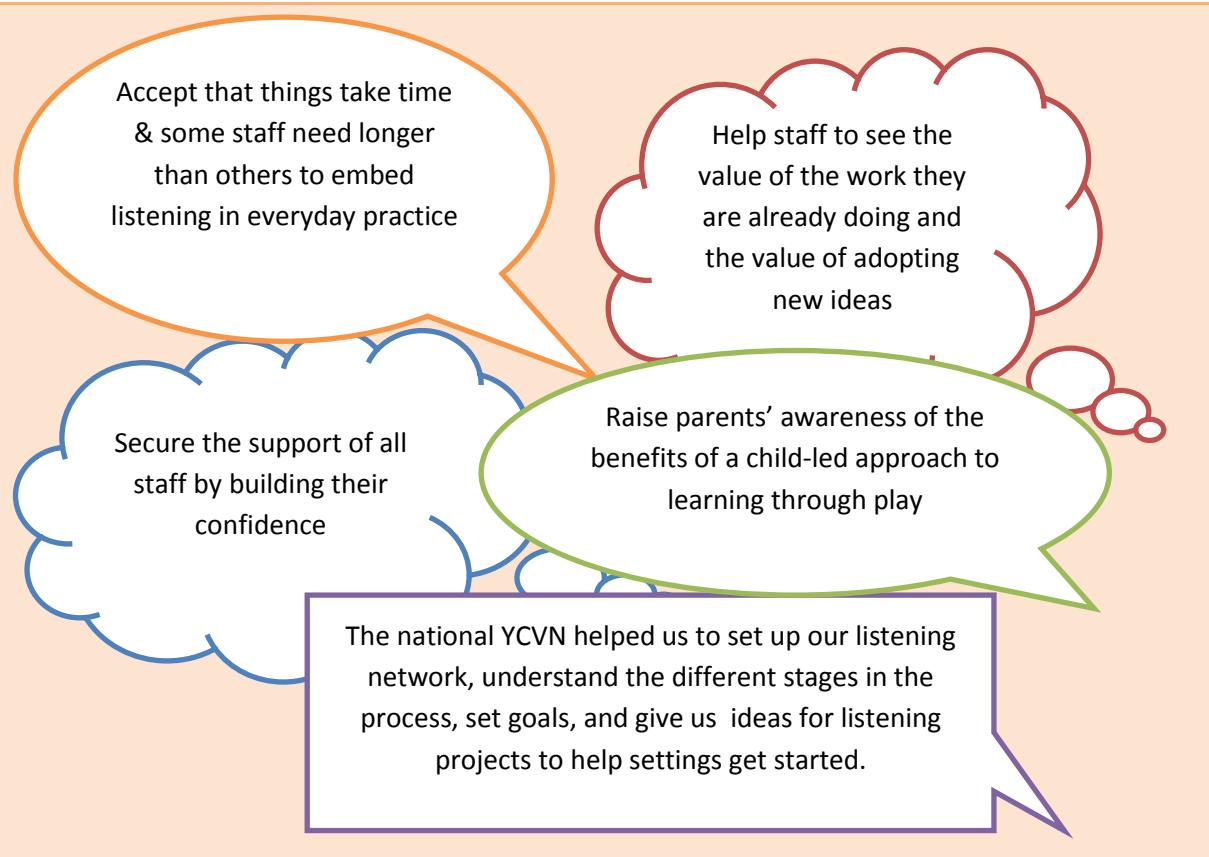
Children grew in self-esteem and confidence. Concentration levels improved and children became more cooperative because they enjoyed what they were doing. They liked making choices and talking to other children about them, which encouraged more participation. Children became more involved in day to day activities and took more responsibility, for example, in reminding other children of the setting's rules.

Practitioners spent less time planning sessions and were better able to identify and respond to children's needs and wants.

Settings improved the quality of their provision. Settings' policies and practice were informed by children's views, for example in the development of information leaflets for children new to settings. Some settings involved young children in the recruitment of new staff and interview panels.

The Local Authority took learning from the YCVN's effective adoption of the empowerment model and the Early Years Team intends to apply the model more generally to the way they work with settings. The LA has increased its commitment to young children's voices as indicated by its decision to roll-out listening to all local settings.

Perceptions of what worked



Case Study Area 5: Example Listening Project

A pre-school nursery adopts Listening and changes setting policy & practice towards boy's superhero & weapon play

"It was good to have that initial focus- a simple Listening project to start it off. Then colleagues see how effective it's been, and the children take confidence from being part of that initial project. And then you start Listening in a different area. And then you suddenly think, 'Oh yeah, okay, we'll do that', and it leads to making a change. And it's like a snowball really it just gets bigger and bigger. It's like an ethos that spreads around the setting.

In our setting we've always had mainly boys and when they get to a certain age or stage of development they start doing the superhero play and the weapon play. And we'd always had rather conservative feelings as a staff team about superhero play in as much as, 'Oh, we don't do that here'.

I suppose because we'd started thinking about the voice of the child and it just led us to the stage where we could actually look and say, 'Well are we listening to the voice of the child here?' Or, 'What are we doing to this small group of children who are having their creativity squashed really'. Because we're saying, 'Oh no, we don't play with guns here,' but we all know that they'll make a gun out of anything. In the end, we had a meeting to discuss what we can do to actually embrace this play but at the same time allowing children who didn't want to be included, be shot, to have a voice as well to say, 'No, stop, don't shoot me, I'm not in your game'.

We did actually develop a superhero and weapon play policy so that we as a staff team agreed on how we would deal with it. We set up a list of rules with the children about superhero play, so that they were allowed to do it but they had to respect the views and the wishes of other children who didn't want to get caught up in it. And the children who didn't want to get caught up in it were taught to say and signal, 'Stop'. And obviously we had to then engage the parents as well so we put an article in the newsletter about what we did.

We actually created our own superhero, and a lot of the boys who wouldn't normally have got involved in painting and sticking painted this superhero. He had a cape, he had a hat, he was painted completely black which is a colour they chose for him. By embracing superhero play the boys actually got involved in so much more.

And in the end the actual aggressive play diminished because we went with the flow and celebrated their game. But those children were much better behaved because they were allowed to do their own thing within a controlled environment.

And that all came about as a result of one of the parent surveys, when we asked children what they didn't like about our pre-school one of the parents actually wrote or the child told the parent- 'When so and so said he wanted to cut my head off'. So it's little things and it all adds together".

Nursery Manager