



Changing childhoods.  
Changing lives.

# From Voice to Action: Embedding Participation in Commissioning

**Dr Josh Harsant**

UK Head of Voice and Influence

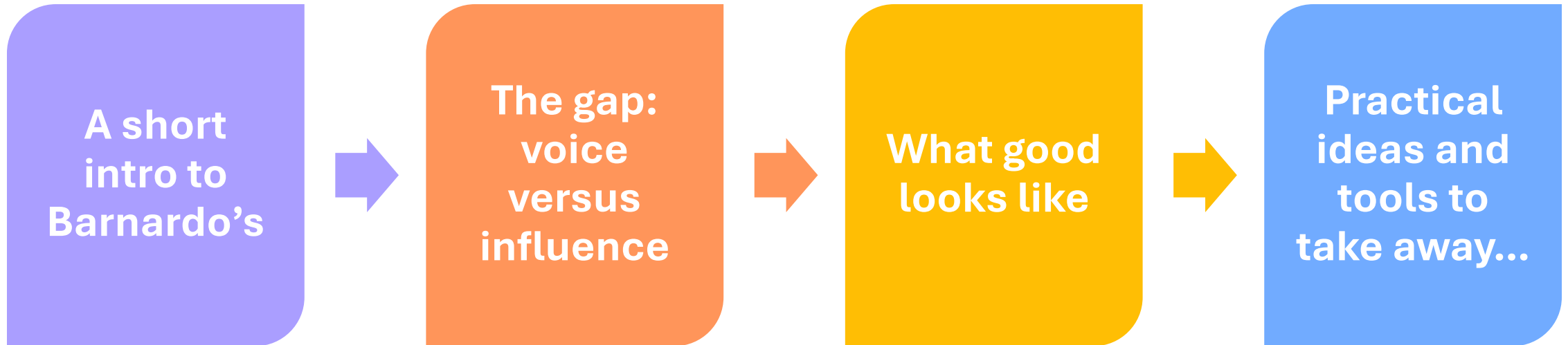
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*From Policy to Practice: Commissioning That Works for Children*

Wednesday 3 June 2026



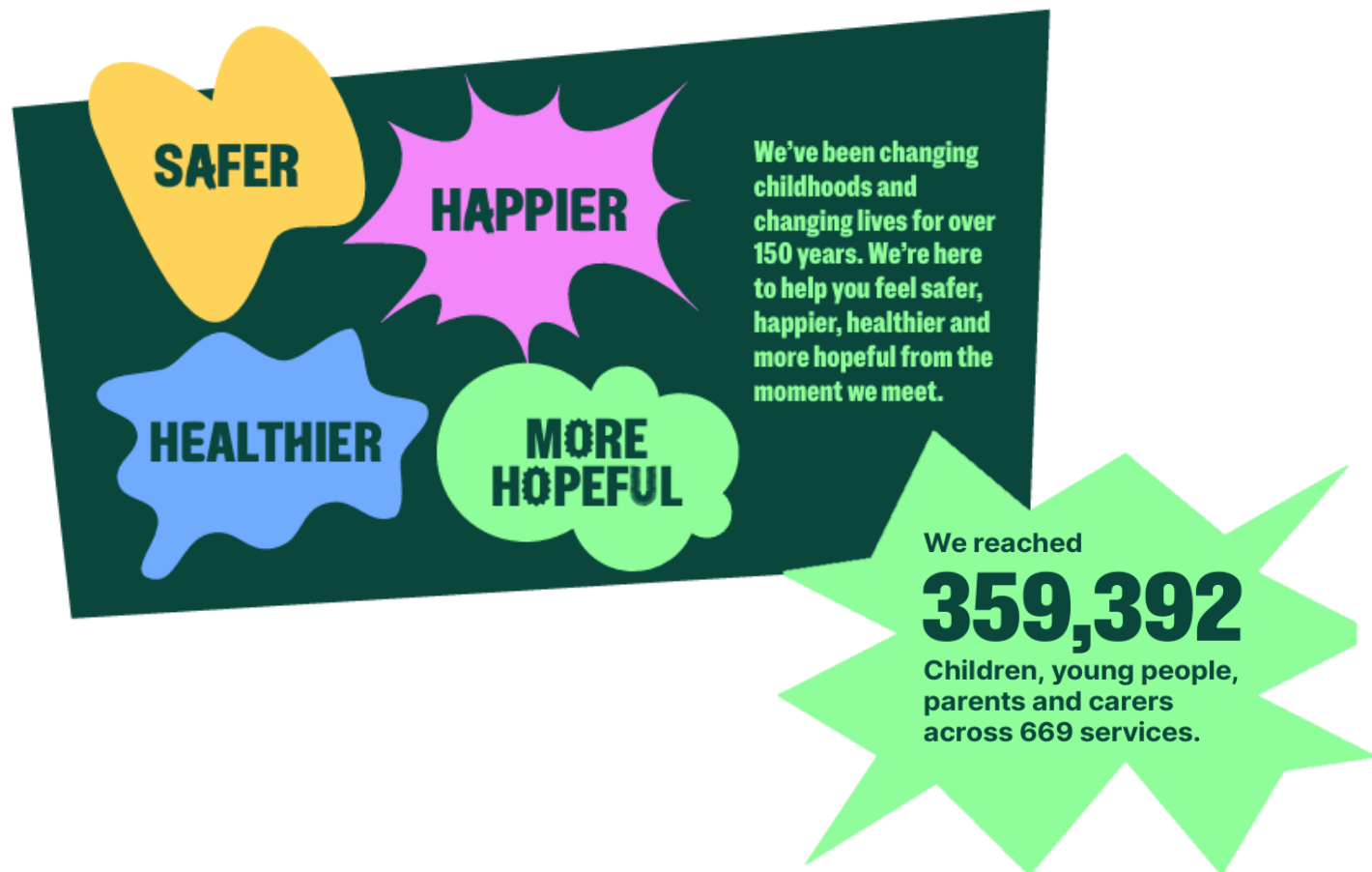
# Coming up...



**1:**

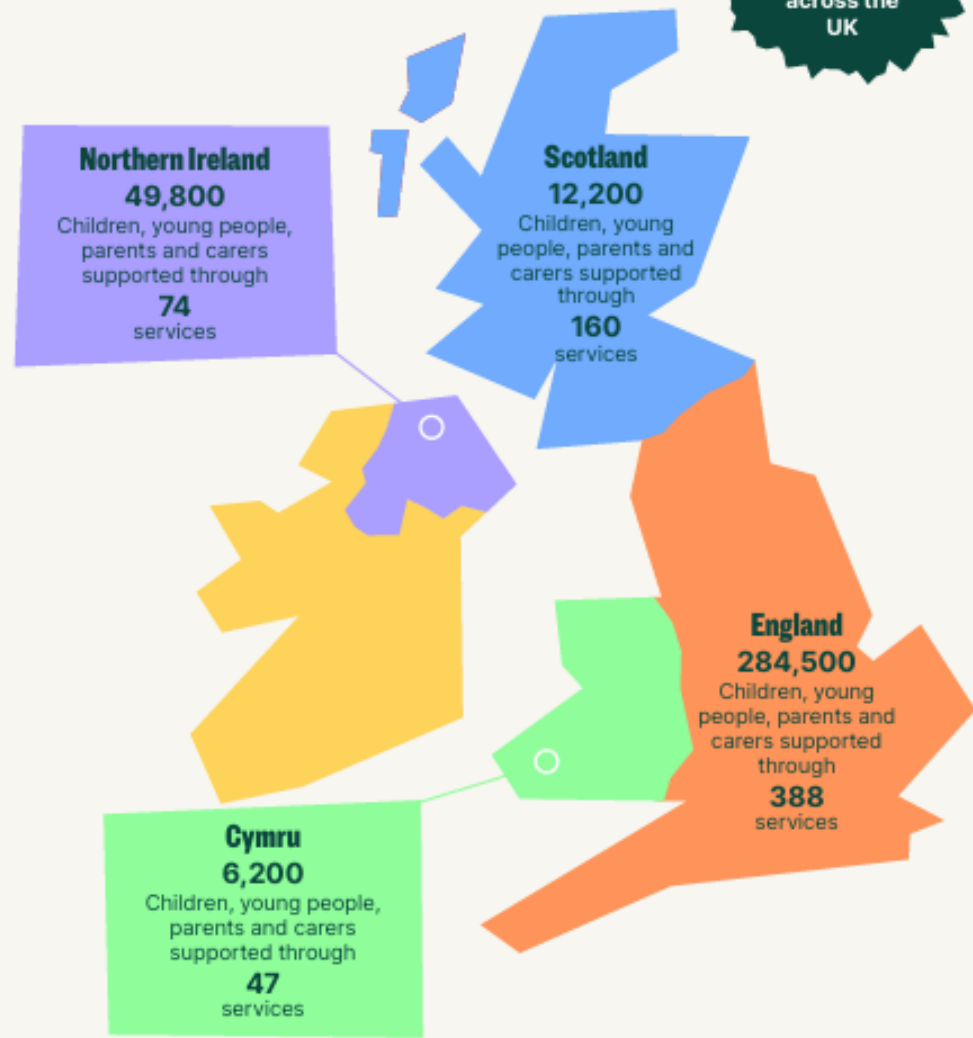
**A little about Barnardo's**

# Who we are...



## Barnardo's support across the UK

**669**  
services  
across the  
UK



**7,404**  
Colleagues

**18,520**  
Volunteers

# Driving change for seven populations

## Making it happen by



“ DNA is the language that the story is written in

THE WINDSOR MAGAZINE

**DR. BARNARDO'S HOMES**

Please be Santa Claus to a destitute little one this Christmas.


**10/-**

WILL FEED ONE CHILD FOR A FORTNIGHT AT THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

116,000 children admitted  
8,500 being supported  
5 come in daily

*"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto Me."*

Cheques and Orders payable "Dr. Barnardo's Homes Food Fund" and crossed, addressed Dr. Barnardo's Homes, 181, Barnardo House, Stepney Causeway, London, E.1.



Meet  
**George**  
1873



In George's own words:

"I was born in Britannia-street, Holborn. I am 17 years old I have a father. The last time I heard of him—about five months ago—he was living at 3, Canal-road, King's-cross. He is a stableman I left because I could not agree with my stepmother. My own mother has been dead seven years. It is twelve months since I left home. I got a job when I could, sold lights &c. Of a night I sometimes slept at the "News Boys' Home I was in the "Rods" three months. Have left about three months. I went out one day and didn't bring in 1/- the Manager, Mr. Nichol, made me lose my station—I left I have been to one or two schools. I can read and write a little.



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# 2:

## The gap:

## voice 'versus' influence

**If children and young people  
disappeared from our  
commissioning processes  
tomorrow, what would change?**

# Where commissioning often starts...

“Market  
engagement”

“Request for  
information”

“Consultation  
exercises”

Surveys

“Advisory  
groups”

# Where commissioning often falls short...

Participation happening too late

Tokenistic engagement

Feedback not influencing real decisions

Commissioning for short-term activity, not for long-term outcomes

# And the **impact** of that...

Part **Poor service design** late

To **Missed insights** it

**Lived experience is seen as 'nice to have'**

Comm **Disengagement, distrust and scepticism** tcomes

# Data-led to **evidence-led** commissioning

- **Data** is important – but it's **only part** of the evidence you need.

**Data helps us understand the system.**

**Lived experience helps us understand its impact.**

- **Lived experience** should shape your thinking – but it should also **challenge** it, and assumptions you have based on data.

**3:**

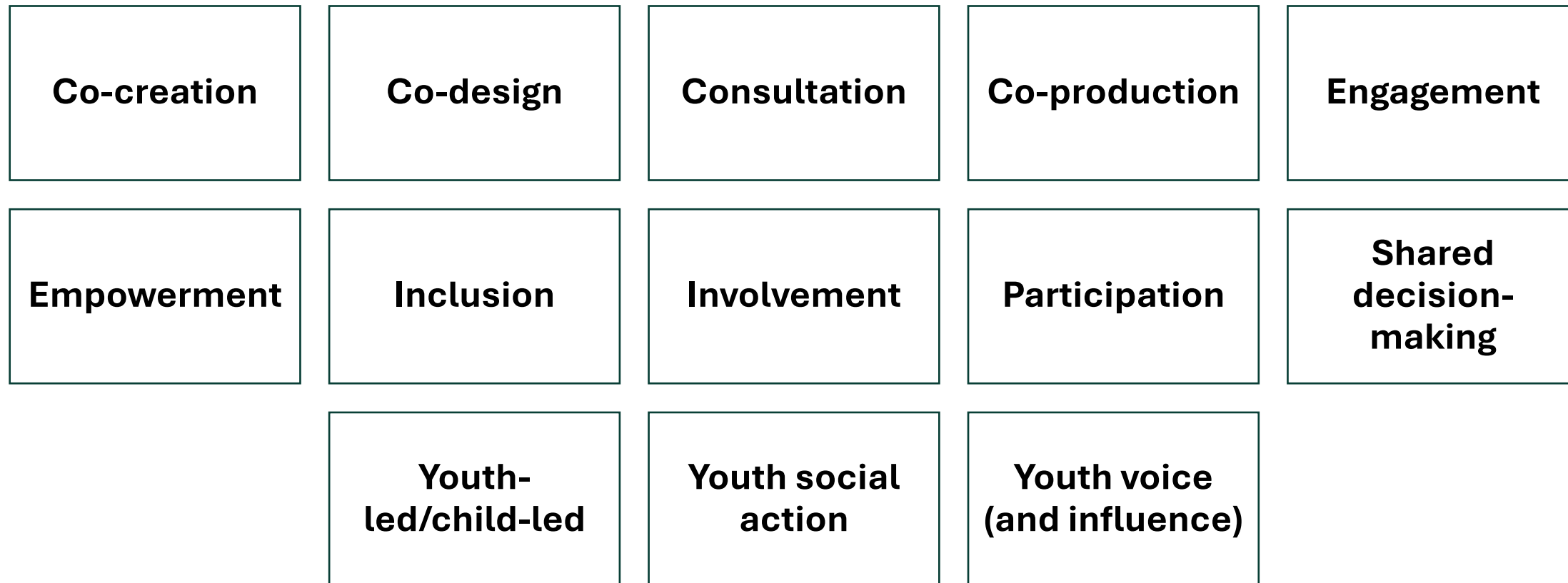
**What 'good' looks like**

**Don't get carried away...**

## Cobiquity: noun

“An apparent **appetite for participatory...practice** and increased **emphasis on partnership working**, in combination with the related **emergence of a plethora of ‘co’ words**, promoting a **conflation of meanings and practices** from different collaborative traditions.”

# Don't get overwhelmed...



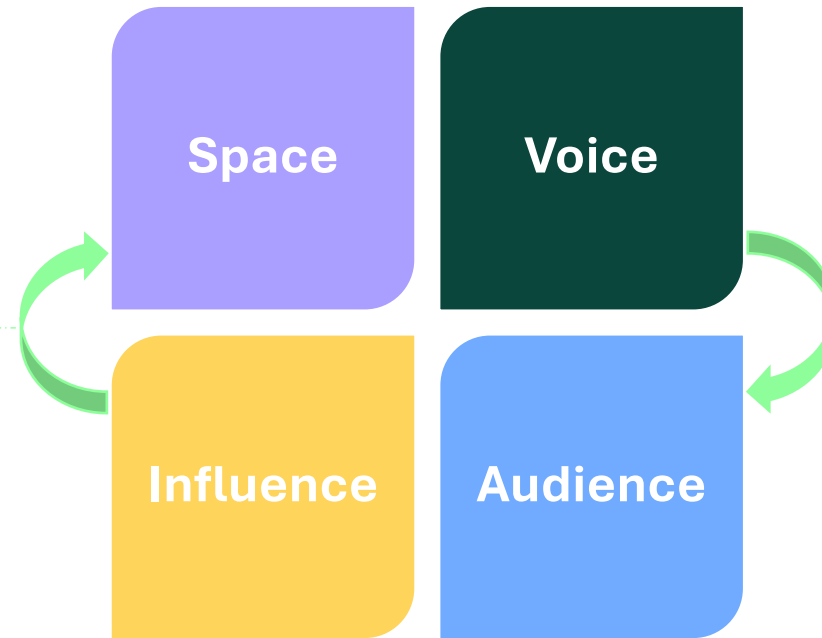
# But **start** as you mean to go on...

- Start **early** and **intentionally**.
- Consider the **data** alongside – and as equitable to – **lived experience**.
- Don't start with **change** in mind – be **curious** and **open-minded**.
- Be **humble** – you don't know it all.
- Recognise **lived experience as an equitable lens** to professional or learned experience.

# Putting **children's rights** at the centre

**1. Designing and providing safe, ethical, inclusive and meaningful opportunities** for children and young people to give their views and share their lived experience.

**4. The views and lived experiences of children and young people are responded to and/or acted upon, and feedback is provided** to those involved.



**2. Supporting and enabling** children and young people to **form and give their views** and share their lived experience, **in their way, on their terms**, to get the best out of them.

**3. The views and lived experiences of children and young people are heard by the people who can act or make a real difference.**

# Critical conditions for getting it right...

**Buy-in**

**Knowledge  
& skills**

(scope, scale, and depth)

**Understanding  
& negotiating  
priorities**

**The role/s of  
adults**

**Opportunities**

(mechanisms and activities)

**Recognition  
& reward**

# BUT what about...

<i>Barrier, panic, AAAH...</i>	<i>Deep breathe... consider...</i>
“It takes too long” versus long term value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Start small</b> – focused engagement at key decision points</li> <li>• <b>Use existing structures</b> – youth councils, school councils, community groups</li> <li>• <b>Create your blueprint</b> – becomes faster and more efficient each cycle</li> </ul>
Managing risk and safeguarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Agree ‘what’s in and what’s out’</b> – clarify roles, responsibilities and protocols</li> <li>• <b>Work with those who know</b> – professionals/organisations who are trusted</li> <li>• <b>Be proportionate</b> – not every decision needs participation</li> </ul>
Balancing professional expertise and lived experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Clarify roles</b> – what do people bring to the table?</li> <li>• <b>Accept challenge</b> – especially at problem definition and evaluation stages</li> <li>• <b>Be transparent</b> – keep a decision log, who’s input weighed more at what points?</li> </ul>
Scaling participation without losing authenticity and diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Build capability</b> – train staff and strengthen expertise</li> <li>• <b>Creating feedback loops</b> – there’s reciprocity at every level</li> <li>• <b>Be strategic about who</b> – consider the depth vs breadth engagement you do</li> </ul>

# 4:

# Practical ideas and tools to take away

# Build it in, don't bolt it on...

## Assessing need

- Involve children and young people in:
  - **Analysing and interpreting the data**
  - **Identifying the *actual* problem**
  - **Defining needs and priorities**
  - **Assessing current service provision**
  - **Finding gaps in what's currently available**



# Case study: Emotional Health & Wellbeing Service, Denbighshire Council, North Wales

- Barnardo's were commissioned to deliver a **whole family support service**.
- **Children and young people told us** they wanted their own their own separate worker for independence and to ensure their voice was heard (and not just their parent's voice).
- **Their feedback** was gathered and developed into a business case.
- The local authority approved **additional funding** for the 'My Voice' Project, creating a dedicated worker focused solely on children and young people.
- During re-commissioning, this insight led to a **full redesign of the service**, introducing a new model with dedicated/separate provision for children and young people.
- Barnardo's were successful in tendering, and all services within the new 'umbrella' have been **co-produced with children and young people**, including the service name and logo.



# Build it in, don't bolt it on...

## *Designing and delivering the solution*

- Involve children and young people in:
  - **Designing the service specification/model**
  - **Reviewing bid and tender submissions**
  - **Interviewing potential providers**
  - **Selecting the preferred provider/s**
  - **Onboarding the new provider/s**



# Case study: Essex Residential Reboot, Essex County Council

- **2021:** council sought a strategic partner to co-(re)design residential care.
- **Aim:** align values and jointly redesign services to improve outcomes for vulnerable young people.
- **Focus:** young people 13+ with complex needs, with solutions developed over 9 months.
- **Barnardo's appointed,** adding expertise, resource and clinical input.
- Created a **joint Residential Care Design Team** with council, partners and care experienced young people.
- Design phase now complete, informed residential service model.



# **Build it in, don't bolt it on...**

## *Making sure it's doing the job*

- Involve children and young people in:
  - **Inspecting / spot-checking the service**
  - **Gathering feedback from peers**
  - **Analysing performance data**
  - **Assessing 'you said, we did' in practice**
  - **Evaluating the commissioning process!**



# Case study: Young Inspectors, UK-wide

- An important part of our **quality assurance** of ‘in and leaving care’ services.
- **Young people, aged 8-25**, with experience of: foster care, adoption, residential care, 16+ supported accommodation or supported lodgings.
- Trained and supported to **conduct inspections** of Barnardo's services either face-to-face or virtually across the UK
- Inspections focus on **what's working well, what could be improved and how to make services better** for young people.
- Leaders take this feedback seriously and **develop an action plan** in response.
- This model has then informed our **Barnardo's-wide Young Inspectors guidance** for other services to adapt and use as they feel useful.



# What about...

# Young Commissioners?

- Involving young people in **all stages** of the commissioning cycle in a structured way.
- Treating young people's experience as **equitable** to that of professionals' experience.
- **Tangible 'you said, we did'** – young people are helping to spend money on delivering outcomes locally.
- Opportunity for young people themselves to **learn and develop skills**.

The screenshot shows the BARNET LONDON BOROUGH website. At the top, there is a teal header with the council name, a language dropdown set to 'English', and a 'My Account' link. Below the header is a search bar with the text 'Search our website'. The main content area has a breadcrumb trail: 'Home / Young people / My Say Matters'. The title of the page is 'Young Commissioners Programme'.

The screenshot shows the Middlesbrough website. The header includes the council logo and the tagline 'moving forward'. There are buttons for 'Pay' and 'Report'. The main content area has a breadcrumb trail: 'Home > Children, families and safeguarding > Get involved'. The title is 'Get involved and have your say'. Below this is a list of links: '1. Get involved and have your say', '3. Mini-CICC (age 7 to 13)', and '5. Young Commissioners'. The section title is 'Young Commissioners'. The text below asks 'Do you want to help make a difference to the lives of children and young commissioners?' and explains the role of a commissioner.

The screenshot shows the ROYAL GREENWICH website. The header includes the council logo and navigation links for 'Our services', 'News', 'Events', and a search bar. The breadcrumb trail is 'Home > Children, young people and families > Support for young people'. The main heading is 'Improve council services for young people'. Below this is the sub-heading 'Who can become a young commissioner'.

The screenshot shows the Newham London website. The header includes the council logo and navigation links for 'Listen / Translate', 'My Account', and 'Services menu'. There are buttons for 'PAY', 'APPLY', and 'REPORT'. The search bar contains the text 'Search e.g. council tax, bin collection'. The main heading is 'Young Commissioners Scheme'. Below this is a 'Contents' section with links: '1. Young Commissioners Scheme', '2. Miriam's personal story', and '3. Become a Young Commissioner'. There is a graphic with the text 'Newham Together' and 'The best place for Children and Young People' above an illustration of diverse children. At the bottom, there is a paragraph: 'Children's social care Commissioning Team is recruiting young people who have been in care or in care aged 13-18 years as young commissioners as active agents and change makers in the development of service for children looked after.'

improve our services, and  
become a young commissioner.  
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**To wrap up...**

# Few things to leave you with...

- **Start earlier:** involve young people at the problem definition stage
- **Make it visible:** show how input changes decisions
- **Build it in:** make participation a requirement, not a bolt-on

**What is one decision in your next commissioning cycle that young people could directly shape?**

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# Thanks so much!

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