

**Leicestershire County Council
Early Years Inclusion and Childcare Service**

Voice Strategy

2023 - 2026



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Our vision is that Leicestershire is the best place for all Children, Young People and their Families

The vision for young children

We want every child in Leicestershire to get the best possible start in life. To do this, we will work collaboratively with our partners so that all pre-school children are safe, healthy, sociable and curious about the world. We want young children to be emotionally resilient and able to reach their potential when they get to school.

This voice strategy supports 'Early Childhood strategy' 2020-2023 for the Children and Family Services department.

Focusing on the voice of the child will:

- embed their views in all aspects of practice with respect to the unique child; including their lived experiences, cultural values and home language
- empower children to be involved in all aspects of their learning and development including involvement in everyday decision-making processes
- raise awareness of the right for children and families to have a voice so they can fully participate and influence practice
- ensure that children's individual stage of development is prioritised over their chronological age to ensure they can meet their potential

This strategy and additional supporting documents will provide families, Early Years practitioners and partners in Leicestershire with information, guidance and practical strategies for listening and responding appropriately to children and young people, making it a golden thread throughout all aspects of our practice.



The child's voice is paramount in all our practice and is underpinned by the following principles and values

A collaborative approach with settings, schools and services which work with children and families to ensure equity of access to high-quality provision

Practitioners working together by cascading knowledge and information, sharing best practice and supporting colleagues and peers.

Collaborating through multi agency partnerships such as early help, health, and education

Working together, valuing and listening to parents to ensure a holistic approach to meeting the needs of the child and to foster an environment where children are recognised as unique individuals

We can achieve this through these values:

- ensuring children, young people and families are central to decisions about them
- the child's voice and experiences are heard and responded to sensitively, in a timely manner
- planning and delivering the best services based on the voice of children, young people and their families
- supporting children, young people and families and their communities to be safe, independent and responsible for their own wellbeing

Enabling high-quality early education and care to be fully inclusive and accessible to all children

Supporting children's individual, cultural and developmental needs and promoting equality and non-discrimination throughout the environment, resources and partnerships with parents

Providing a variety of means to communicate particularly for our most vulnerable so all that all children can be heard, valued and understood

We can achieve this through these values:

- being open, inclusive and accountable in our actions
- celebrating and respecting cultural and linguistic diversity and unique individuals by combatting stereotypes and stereotypical views
- reflecting on and challenging unconscious bias and feeling confident to initiate respectful questioning to increase knowledge and understanding of the uniqueness of each family
- ongoing professional development and support from a range of professionals with an openness to learn and develop new skills and knowledge

Ensuring there is **highly qualified workforce** who are committed, confident and competent to hear and respond to the child's voice

Settings policies and procedures reflect the crucial factor of the child's voice and so impact on all practice

Ongoing professional development opportunities are valued and continue to impact positively on best practice

We can achieve this through these values:

- By providing regular professional development which meets the needs of the individual practitioner as identified in supervisions
- Professional development is accessed from a variety of sources and a range of platforms
- Regularly update, review and share policies and procedures which acknowledge the voice of others; practitioners, parents and children

Outcomes for children start with professionals who support and empower parents and families and who value and listen to their contributions

This crucial information needs to be responded to and subsequently impact on outcomes for children

By empowering parents and carers and building on their knowledge, together, we can help children reach their full potential

We can achieve this through these values:

- Fostering an ethos which empowers parents and carers to share their views and knowledge with others
- Regularly reviewing practice to track progress and secure improved outcomes for all children
- Acknowledging the impact of the home learning environment and ensuring this influences policy, procedure and practice

Note: for this strategy, we will use the word 'voice'.

In this context 'voice' refers to all forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

Remember that all actions and behaviours are forms of communication.

Appropriate and effective support needs to be offered for children who may not have English as their first language and /or use alternative forms of communication

The legal rights for the child's voice

The law requires that children and young people are listened to, consulted with and involved in decision making.

Here are some of the most recent and relevant references:



United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1991

Governments across the world promised all children the same rights so that children grow as healthy as possible, can learn at school, are protected, have their views listened to and are treated fairly



The Children Act (2004)

The act gave legal power to the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes and placed a duty on Local Authorities to improve the well-being of children through co-operation with partners. The act also created the role of the 'Children's Commissioner' who is responsible for 'promoting awareness of the views and interests of children in England'

The Equalities Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 protects children, young people and adults against discrimination, harassment and victimisation in relation to housing, education, clubs, the provision of services and work

Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) 2014 (update due 2021)

The EYFS, through its standards for the learning, development, health and safeguarding of children from birth to 5 years old, recognises the unique child and the vital qualities of resilience, confidence and self-assurance for all children

Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years (2015)

Statutory guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities. The principles underpinning this code of practice aim to support 'the participation of children, their parents and young people in decision-making'.

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018

Guidance which promotes a system of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children across agencies. The guidance places an emphasis on agencies including the voice of the child within decision making processes

Ofsted: Early Years Inspection Handbook 2019

To assess whether the provider is meeting the safeguarding and welfare requirements, the inspector will find out how practitioners seek children's views and engage them in the planning of activities



Safeguarding: How does good practice in safeguarding value and respond to the child's voice?

Whilst listening and responding to the child's voice has holistic benefits, it is a vitally important aspect of safeguarding. The most effective approach to safeguarding is with the child's voice as the starting point

'Consider the daily 'lived' experiences of the child or young person and place them at the centre, listening to their voice, working out what they are trying to communicate and never lose sight of their needs'
*Competency Evidence Log **LSCP***



Documentation

Effective safeguarding procedures record a child's voice factually, acknowledging both verbal and non-verbal communication

Practice

Capturing the child's voice can inform practice by putting meaning to their actions and understanding their needs and desires. Vigilance and professional curiosity are required to ensure that non-verbal cues are acknowledged and responded to

Continued Professional Development

Consider the needs and individuality of the children in your care when identifying continued professional development

Supervision

Represent the child's voice during supervision and appraisals, strengths and areas of concern should be child centred

LSCP Safeguarding Competency Framework

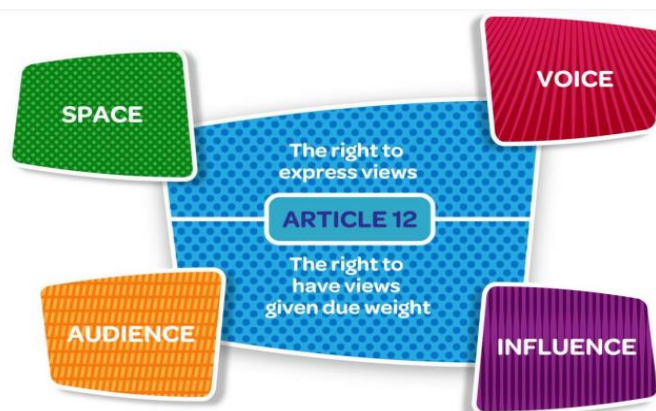
Practitioners should be competent in their ability to be child focused in safeguarding matters, including the 'voice of the child' and their lived experiences being recognised and represented

Listening is 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

Council for Disabled Children National Children's Bureau, 2017

The Lundy Model

Leicestershire County Council's Voice Strategy is underpinned by The Lundy Model.



This model provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC which is intended to focus educational decision-makers on the distinct, albeit interrelated, elements of the provision. The four elements have a rational chronological order:

- **SPACE:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their view
- **AUDIENCE:** The view must be listened to.
- **INFLUENCE:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Figure 1 Lundy's Model of Participation as included in Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020³

Article 12 of the UNCRC and ensure that children have the space to express their views; their voice is enabled; they have an audience for their views; and their views will have influence".⁵



Figure 2 Lundy's Voice Model Checklist for Participation as included in Ireland's National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020⁶

More information about the Lundy Model can be found in this [publication](#)

The importance of listening and responding to children



The strategy supports the understanding that **children** are:

Experts in their own lives – acknowledging the individual ways children can communicate about their unique and diverse lived experiences

Skilful communicators – all children, each with their own individual needs and developmental

stages, have capabilities and means of communicating; the process is not limited to the spoken word and celebrates cultural differences

Rights holders – all children can participate effectively and should have the right to express their views free from prejudice and bias

Active participants – in their own learning through meaningful interactions with adults, peers and their environment

The strategy also supports the understanding that **all adults**:

Will listen, understand and respond to children and **not assume** adults know the answers or that the answers are known; unconscious biases and stereotypical views need to be recognised and challenged



Respectfully value and respond to all knowledge and contributions - through children's behaviour, emotions, creative expression, gestures and sounds with respect to cultural diversity, ethics, morals and without judgement

Appropriately support interactions, environments (physical and emotional) - where all children's voices can be expressed, understood and heard

Work collaboratively in partnership - with parents/carers and other professionals

Acknowledgement and further reading: Clark Alison, Moss Peter, 'Listening to Young Children' Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2017

The most basic of human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them."

Dr. Ralph G. Nichols

Leicestershire Practitioners tell us



'Parents' views of their child and their needs may be different to that of the Practitioner / Professional'

'Children have a sense of being valued and respected when they are listened to'



'We gain an insight into the child's world through listening'



'Listening is tuning into children as individuals using all senses and not just the spoken word'

'Listening challenges assumptions and informs change'

'Active listening includes a response'



Listening to the Child's Voice

We listen to children because:

- it acknowledges their right to be listened to and for their views and experiences to be recognised and valued
- it offers opportunities to participate in decision making in an environment where children feel confident, safe and powerful; children need time, choice and space to express themselves
- of the difference listening can make to our understanding and visibility of children's lived experiences, priorities, interests and concerns; it is from here that appropriate responses can be provided
- of the difference it can make to how children feel about themselves and so impacting on levels of wellbeing and motivation to reach their potential
- this is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships with the children we support and interact with

Strategies to support an inclusive environment for listening and responding:

- Show interest in everything children communicate
- Give children time to communicate without interruption
- Silences are ok - we don't need to fill the gaps
- Make eye contact and get down to the child's level, stay alert that for some children eye contact may be very difficult
- Remember that 'why' questions could be challenging for young children
- Talk respectfully to children; they know when they are being patronised
- Be honest if you don't know something
- If you make a mistake, apologise
- Respect children's privacy, they may not want to share
- Acknowledge the feelings that are being expressed and give them validity

Listening as a way of life, Listening to Young Disabled Children, Mary Dickens and Lucy Williams, National Children's Bureau, 2017



‘Asking children what they think, but taking it no further will send a message that there is little interest in their view’

Mooney and Blackburn 2002



Best practice

Here are some ideas which can, when done effectively, support an inclusive environment for listening and responding to children and families.

- Information from the child and parent/carer recognising the child's lived experiences
- Home visits where further contextual information can be gathered
- Observations, assessments and planning processes with the child at the heart
- Graduated approach and targeted plans (assess, plan, do, review)
- Using visuals
- Transition Documents
- Summative assessment
- EYFS progress check at 2 years old / Integrated health reviews
- Joint observations
- Contributions towards a Request for Statutory Assessment (RSA)
- Supervisions
- Safeguarding Competency Framework
- Multi agency referral form (MARF)
- Children Missing Education policy
- 'Mind the Gap' and School Readiness materials
- Relevant continued professional development
- Noticing, recognising and responding to levels of wellbeing and involvement
- Every Child a Talker (ECaT) strategies
- Top Tips for listening and responding

For further guidance of where to access more information in relation to the above documents, please contact an Early Years Improvement Advisor on 0116 305 7136 or email childcare@leics.gov.uk

Ofsted's judgements of the setting's commitment to the child's voice

Ofsted recognises the child's voice, these statements are taken directly from the Early Years Inspection Handbook for Ofsted Registered provision (September 2023)

- Children's personal and emotional development, including whether they feel safe and are secure and happy
- Children with SEND achieve the best possible outcomes
- It (*the curriculum*) builds on what children know and can do
- Relationships among children, parents and staff reflect a positive and respectful culture. Children feel safe and secure
- All early years providers should have an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts children's interests first. This means they actively seek and listen to the views and experiences of children, staff and parents, taking prompt but proportionate action to address any concerns, where needed
- When observing interactions between staff and children, inspectors should consider how well staff watch, listen and respond to children

Recent outstanding Ofsted reports note that...

'The kind and considerate childminder supports children to establish strong relationships with her and to feel safe'

'They are respectful, nurturing and form secure, loving relationships with children.'

'Children have a voice in the setting. For example, they share ideas, choose the activities they want to participate in and make collective decisions about the routines of the day.'

'Children benefit from mindfulness sessions delivered by staff. This supports children to be calm, relax and learn to understand how to regulate their feelings and emotions'



Audit to reflect on an inclusive environment for listening and responding to the child's voice

Setting:		Date:	Practitioners involved:	
Areas to reflect on	What is in place and working well	Areas of concern	Next steps to develop your practice	
1.How do leaders and managers know and ensure all children including those who are vulnerable, are listened and responded to?	<i>Summative assessment</i>	<i>are all practitioners confident</i>	<i>support new practitioners through supervision and using observations to reflect the child's voice</i>	
2.How do leaders and managers support practitioners to be skilled at tuning into children and responding to their voice?	<i>supervisions joint observations</i>	<i>tuning into non-verbal children</i>	<i>staff meetings peer to peer support further develop visuals</i>	
3.How do practitioners regularly gather knowledge about what is important to the child. Consider relevant and meaningful approaches e.g. through active play, use of puppets, indoors and out	<i>observing play and adapting it to the children's interests</i>	<i>are a range of contexts used to gather the child's voice?</i>	<i>use outdoors and more child-initiated experiences to gather the child's voice</i>	
4. How do leaders and managers support practitioners to gather the voice of the non-verbal child?	<i>ongoing observations, use of visual aids and objects of reference.</i>	<i>are all practitioners confident in their ability to use visual aids and objects of reference?</i>	<i>training opportunities and regular discussions with parents</i>	
5.When gaining information about children's interests and needs from parents, carers and other professionals, how is this information then used in the emotional and physical environment to ensure it reflects and responds to the child's voice?	<i>information collected regularly in a variety of ways</i>	<i>does the setting adapt routines to meet needs of child?</i>	<i>review routines (small groups, snack times) to ensure all children needs are met discuss at supervision joint observations</i>	
6.To maintain the child's level of wellbeing, how are transitions managed to reflect their needs and interest in the new provision?	<i>parental involvement sharing relevant information with other professionals</i>	<i>are links to the new setting effective?</i>	<i>contact all new settings</i>	

Building on and developing best practice

The Leicestershire Model

Suggestions:

- <https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/early-years>
- Graduated approach booklet (assess, plan, do, review), Small Steps Guidelines and Ordinarily Available Provision document
- Mind the Gap, School Readiness materials
- Levels of wellbeing
- Top tips for listening and responding
- Safeguarding Children Partnership (Leicestershire and Rutland)
- Additional safeguarding agencies e.g. NSPCC
- National Organisation e.g. National Children's Bureau, OFSTED
- Research bodies e.g. Mosaic approach, Lundy Model
- Hear by Right <https://nya.org.uk/hear-by-right/>

Suggestions:

- Child's Voice Strategy: Early Years, Inclusion and Childcare Service
- Improvement and SEND advisor support (telephone, email, face to face)
- Bitesize video training modules
- Refresher training
- In house training
- Training (Eventbrite) e-learning, on-line, face to face



Suggestions:

- Parents and Carers
- Children and Family wellbeing services
- Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust
- Teaching School Alliances
- Additional agencies such Pacey, Preschool Learning Alliance
- SEND drop in support sessions

Suggestions:

- Supervision / Appraisal / Joint observations
- Colleagues
- Practitioner networks
- National organisations – online support

Next steps for the Early Years, Inclusion and Childcare Service

We have an ongoing commitment to supporting Leicestershire's families and providers to listen and respond effectively to the child's voice. Our next steps are outlined below:

Develop a bitesize training module to support the child's voice and recognise their emotions. Alongside this, develop a 'Top Tips' document to share with families around regognising and supporting emotions

Co-produce materials with providers to develop top tips for families and providers for giving choices to under fives. This guidance will be produced in partnership with families and the Early Years, Inclusion and Childcare Service - consulting with families about how to give choices and how best to communicate these messages

Promote the 'top tips for listening and responding to the child's voice'

