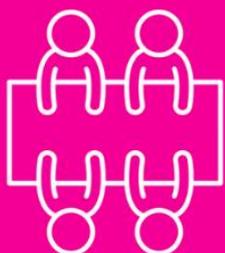


# Participation Network Online Event

THURSDAY 12 AUGUST  
13.00-15.00



INCLUSION, EXPERIENCE  
& VALUE IN  
PARTICIPATION

## Inclusive Participation Event – 12 August 2021

A big thank you to everyone who came along to the Participation Network Event, 'Inclusive Participation'! We were joined by multiple presenters, who delivered 5 presentations on various examples of participation projects, all of which take different approaches but have inclusivity and the value of participants at their hearts.

The idea of presenting multiple examples was not to 'rank' or 'score' them on which models and approaches we think are best; rather to see that participation can look very different from project to project, but the most important thing is for participation to be inclusive and meaningful.

After the presentations, attendees broke into smaller break out room to discuss and reflect on what they had heard. The presentations stimulated many dynamic and interesting conversations, and this resource is an accumulation of just some of the very rich discussions that the presentations evoked.

The discussions have been loosely themed, and all quotes are anonymous to respect the 'safe space' network members have created so that everyone can speak openly and honestly.

You can also watch the presentations on the [event page here](#).

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### *Engagement and Reach*

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One of the presentations was particularly focussed on reaching seldom heard voices, and encouraged us to think about the ways in which we can be more inclusive in our approach to engagement and reach. All of the other presentations also touched on this, leading to the topic of engagement and reach being discussed across all of the breakout rooms.

This focus was something that many attendees found very useful;

- *"Really enjoyed the focus on quieter voices and working with them too"*
- *"I just want to comment on how positive the focus on seldom heard voices is"*
- There were also several discussions around how to provide participation when you do not already have a 'captive audience', as well as how to gain the views of a number of people, rather than those who may be the most vocal. Several people mentioned that they think the issue of definitions in relation to care experience can be excluding and not helpful when trying to reach as many young people as possible. Several members thought that children and young people on the edges of care, or those looked after at home are often the most excluded as they can be missed by outreach services.
- *"Children and young people on the edges of care, or who have come out of care are not always included – they are not necessarily excluded, but not normally included, and this is perhaps not explicit enough in The Promise or some participation work (although The Promise emphasises not defining care experience too rigidly, but this is perhaps not as well known among the workforce)"*
- *"Children and young people on the edges of care may be unsure how to self-identify, some feel they can own their care experience label more if they have/had had a social worker"*

A gap in engagement that was recognised in the breakout discussions was around transitions. Collective recognition was given to transitions of all kinds being pinnacle in the lives of children and young people and that these times are crucial for them to feel supported, connected and included.

- *"Not enough work done in transition work; transition stages of young people's lives – leaving primary school, leaving high school, moving to work, college etc. Also, breakdowns in care arrangements; moving to kinship, in and out of formal arrangements"*
- *"Importance of participation in transition work, e.g. from primary to secondary or secondary to college, where education plans for these young people may not be discussed as much or they receive shorter-term support and have Supervision Orders closed down sooner"*

Members also spoke about how it should be up to each individual child and young person about how they want to identify in relation to their care experience, as our respective 'criteria' and 'definitions' are not in the spirit of inclusivity.

- *"Care experience should be self-defined by the young people"*
- *"Those who move in and out of care sometimes don't know how to feel included"*

Members also spoke about how participation works when you have an engaged and captive audience – but it can be difficult to initially get this in the first place. How can we be mindful of what young people have going on in their lives and work around this with them? Are they wanting to engage with their care experience at this stage in their lives, or do we need to be more flexible in order to accommodate including young people when they want to be, not when we want them to be.

There was much discussion on the complexity and diversity of participation and engagement. People can see it as an easy process – but it is complex and needs to be done well. Questions were raised on how to convey this to people who are less familiar with participation. It is useful for the network to have a think about running things a different way when with children and young people, and also thinking about barriers. We sometimes exclude in the way that we do things. It is very easy to fall back on the usual structure and that can't be acceptable.

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## **Language and Communication**

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Another theme that came up when discussing inclusive participation, was the importance of accessible language and communication. This largely followed on from conversations around extended engagement and reach, as well as including quieter voices, which was the focus of one of the presentations.

Attendees reflected on the importance of keeping language simple and jargon free:

- *"Keep things simple and accessible and think more carefully about how to communicate and engage with as wide an audience as possible"*
- *"The value of different modes of communication, keep it simple. Who are we excluding in the way that we do, how do we address that?"*
- *"Don't make people feel stupid with too much jargon and be prepared to spend time to make participation accessible"*

There were also numerous conversations on the importance of wording; The way we word things for participants, as well as the way in which we capture views, ensuring that we use the wording which young people did in order for voice to be authentic.

- *"Power of not filtering exactly the language as it was said – colloquialisms, swearing etc"*
- *"Getting rid of spin and the veneer of rewording to "suit the audience"*
- *"Importance of wording of questions – colloquialisms to make them genuinely accessible (one participant was asked to do this for some research based on their own experiences), not changing young people's wording to capture all the meaning, even swearing"*

Consideration and reflections were also given to the ongoing context of Covid-19 and working from home/ face to face restrictions. Ongoing reflections continue to be similar, with both pro's and con's of online working, dependent on the project, young person and situation. Discussions were also held around the additional difficulty of communication, especially when trying to model new ways of communicating to be more inclusive – these can be hindered by limited online platforms.

- *"Challenges around implementing different modes of communication, some people like to be very public whereas others prefer one to one conversations, so offering Zoom and telephone calls. Also In Napier University for example students are paid to be ambassadors. It is also about giving people credit and they are named if they like. The contexts might be different but this is about being inclusive"*
- *"COVID presented engagement challenges – loose of face-to-face connections, screen fatigue, and building and maintaining relationships without being physically present (given the topics) and be hard"*

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## **Genuine Listening > Tokenistic Hearing**

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- *"Meaningful participation is about not just giving views. It is about getting involved and being a part of the decision making. It is about moving from being heard and listened to, and giving these contributions due and equal weight"*

One of the other issues that was widely discussed across the breakout rooms was the topic of authentic listening and being open to flex and change ideas to reflect voice. Having pre-conceived idea about a topic or project, that can't be adapted or changed to reflect participants feedback is tokenistic and not meaningful and inclusive participation.

- *"Just having a conversation with a participant because you want something from them isn't good enough. Nor is knowing what you want them to say in the first place. You need to have the flexibility to hear what you don't expect to and change direction/ focus. Its not about the outcome necessarily, it's about the journey and how you value change coming from voice – that is true participation"*
- *"When participation is done by Government, they don't always seem to be open to hear what young people say. They pick and choose what they want to hear"*
- *"I really enjoyed the idea of participation needs to be mutually beneficial. Don't have a set idea of what you are going to do, you can have a desired rough idea of an outcome, but it needs to be able to flex and change"*

One of the challenges that many people spoke about what was tight deadlines and timescales given by funders. Balancing priorities between meeting funding objectives and requirements, and priorities around meaningful participation and having the time to spend with participants in a meaningful and inclusive manner, is an ongoing challenge.

- *"Limited funding projects are under pressure – and priorities significant things"*
- *"Don't want to agree to tokenistic access to the young people"*
- *"Funder timeline pressures, stakeholder expectations"*
- *"Taking the time. Building time for what is important for the young people to be involved in. Time is massive"*
- *"Focus on making participation less of a transaction – and how to be open about whatever the answer may be"*
- *"Have learned importance of closing the feedback loop, that it's okay to say no if something would be asking too much or wouldn't add real value – for projects with limited funding it's easy to be tempted to say yes to everything to have more outputs, but if asked for input at really short notice, if people have already made up their minds etc, this doesn't feel right. We need to feel better about being able to challenge this"*

Another ongoing challenge that was spoken about was the potential risk of power imbalances when it comes to participation. Participants 'having the ear' of influential people is brilliant and something we can all aspire to when appropriate, but we need to be careful that we are setting up meetings or joint work so that everyone involved is equally valued and included.

- *"Concerns about mixed experiences, for example young people being put in a room with very powerful leaders raised"*
- *"Co-creation, setting expectations, how do you keep people involved and co-create? Related that it is important that each stage is presented as a choice and people can engage as they want and how they want"*
- *"Participation is about so much more than giving views, and that people participating engage as they want, not as we want them to want to engage"*
- *"Participation should be mutually beneficial – need to be flexible to go where the people contributing want it to go – recognising that people's lives change and a 'zig*

*zag approach to participation is really valuable. There should be no power imbalance as to how much and when people can contribute"*

- *"Consideration of power – e.g. doing interviews when young people can and want to"*

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## ***Complexities of Inclusive Participation***

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The presentations and following break-out discussions highlighted the complexity and diversity of participation, which you might not fully understand as a new participation worker. How do we train/ teach new participation workers to understand this? Attendees commented that it was good we spoke about the nuances of power imbalance, but also meeting participants where they are at, literally and metaphorically. Inclusive participation needs to include an awareness and respect for participants needs outside of the project work too, with an understanding that it is not always the person we presume it is that holds the best relationships with young people. This was considered in line with the view of The Promise, which spoke about the importance of all adults with whom children and young people have a good connection.

- *"Biggest challenge – dealing with the holistic needs – basic level needs first before they can move to having their other needs met. Young people would then reach out to who was they could during COVID. Not always the right person for the job due to finding it hard find people remotely"*
- *"Volunteers feel they have a closer relationship than changeable relationships i.e. non-permanent social worker link"*
- *"One person's role changed from development officer to more holistic support to help meet young people's basic level needs before they can get to participation – someone else/other organisations should do this too"*
- *"The idea of therapeutic participation work is underrated"*

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## ***Other comments and Reflections on making participation inclusive***

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- *"No matter the size of the contribution they are always valuable"*
- *"Importance of people understanding experience by talking through them with others – benefit of peer research"*
- *"Tailoring the participation for individual"*
- *"Not one size fits all"*
- *"Don't make assumptions"*
- *"Consideration of payment and how this doesn't become coercive/manipulative"*
- *"Young people need to feel appreciated and valued for giving their time, they care about making a difference and want to know that they have"*
- *"On the surface they seem different, but this is really about understanding how we show people that we value them. The pyramid model recognises that there are a broad base of people who want to be recognised but then there are others who want*

*to be connected rather than recognised, so it is about valuing everyone how they want to be valued"*