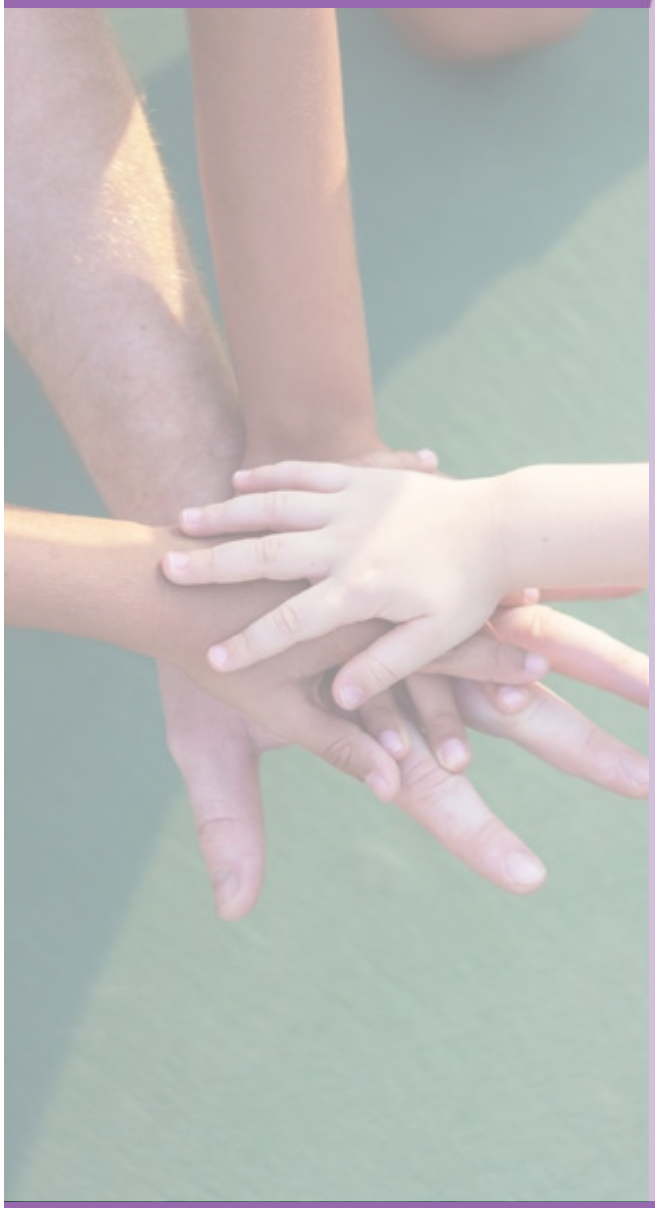
Making Participation Work

COUNCIL FOR DISABLED CHILDREN



Children and young people's voice in designing the Experts at Hand offer

COUNCIL FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

Department for Education

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Introduction

This resource has been created as part of the **Department for Education** (DfE) funded **Making Participation Work** programme.

It is for professionals who design and deliver strategic voice and participation work with disabled children and young people, and those with special educational needs (SEN), at a local-area level, and for anyone else who has an interest in supporting children and young people to be part of strategic decision making.

It intends to support thinking around participation and how to work with partners to ensure children and young people can shape the Experts at Hand offer in their local area.

It gives practical tips on how to create meaningful, strategic participation opportunities and explores children and young people's vital role in developing the Experts at Hand offer.

Overview of the Experts at Hand offer

The **Every Child Achieving and Thriving** White Paper includes a commitment to provide specialist support for mainstream schools.

The Experts at Hand offer is part of this; each local area partnership is required to make a plan for how they will use specialists to advise and support mainstream settings in making provision for children and young people more effective.

This plan will set out their vision for what the offer will look like, who will deliver it, and what success will look like in their area.

In year one, local authorities received additional funding to implement this plan as part of the **Experts at Hand & Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund**.

While local areas may identify a range of specialists who are key to promoting inclusion within their local area plan, the majority of this funding must be used to deploy a set list of identified professionals.

DfE has named these as Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Educational Psychologists and specialist teachers.

For further information on the role of the specialist workforce in enabling increased inclusion in mainstream settings, you can read the **Inclusive Classrooms Report** from The Council for Disabled Children **here**.

You can also learn more about the Experts at Hand offer **here**.

Strategic participation in a nutshell

> **"It's not just about one young person, but actually we're always thinking about other young people and the impact of what could change and how that might impact them as well."**
>
> **FLARE member**

Participation and co-production with children and young people can happen at an individual, operational, and strategic level.

Strategic participation is where children and young people have influence on decisions that not only affect their own care, education or support, but influence decisions that actively shape long-term aims, policies and services, and support for children and young people.

The importance of strategic participation

> **"Well, it's important because it affects them, and the children and young people, they know their needs better than anyone else, because it's happening to them.**
>
> **And it's important that they are the people giving the advice and stuff, and helping shape it, because if not, then it might be wrong for them, and that wouldn't be helpful for anyone.**
>
> **That would just be, like, a waste of money and stuff.**
>
> **And the young people might catch something that they might need or that might be a bit different, or they might even not need that."**
>
> **FLARE member**

Decisions made about the Experts at Hand offer will have a direct impact on the lives and education of disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs.

The importance and requirements of including children and young people in decision-making that affects them is stated in related legislation and guidance.

In line with this, government guidance **Experts at Hand: developing and delivering the offer in year 1** makes specific recommendations about when the voice of children and young people should be sought and considered in decision-making about the design, delivery and evaluation of this offer.

> **"Yeah, I think for me, like, the north star of all this work is, like, for young people to feel they belong, and to know that they matter, and that their voice is important.**
>
> **And I think nobody knows better what that feeling is like to belong, but also not to belong, than young people who are currently in that system, or have been in that system.**
>
> **There are things that are so important, like, even knowing what it means to have a peer group that really supports you, or things like that. That is what we hear from children and young people, that is the voice that needs to be part of those decisions in order for things to really work."**
>
> **FLARE member**

Moreover, we know that collaboration with children, young people, and families in the design of services and support creates better systems and outcomes.

Working collaboratively with education settings, experts, children, young people, and families in the development, delivery and evaluation of this offer will promote models that reflect and respond to local needs.

As we progress towards a new system, this collaboration will also promote consensus and commitment amongst key stakeholders and across local area partnerships around a shared vision for inclusion.

FLARE's role in creating this resource

FLARE is DfE's national young people's advisory group.

It advises DfE on its work relating to SEN and disabilities.

FLARE members informed the content of this resource. They advised what needs to be in place to ensure meaningful, strategic participation opportunities and how disabled children and young people, and those with SEN, should be supported to take part in them, with specific focus on the design, implementation, and evaluation of a local Experts at Hand offer.

Foundations for meaningful strategic participation

Involving children and young people in decision-making to shape the Experts at Hand offer could take lots of different forms. Whatever this looks like, opportunities to involve children and young people in decision-making must be ethical, inclusive, and meaningful. FLARE shared their perspectives on what makes strategic participation opportunities meaningful for them.



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Inclusive planning

> **"Yeah, I think for me, inclusive planning is so important in terms of actually thinking about everybody's access needs – I think that's for everyone, not just for young people, across the board. If we plan things in a more inclusive way, it would be better for everybody, not just young people."**
>
> **FLARE member**

FLARE recommends...

- Accessible engagement methods
  - Ensuring information is available in various formats (visual, written, verbal) to suit different access needs and learning styles.
  - Enabling different ways of contributing ideas and thoughts, that will suit different access requirements and communication needs.
  - Having schedules and breaks for meetings and activities.
  - Giving clear explanations of what is being asked and providing summaries of discussions afterwards.
- Feedback and evaluation
  - Giving children and young people the space to keep sharing what they need from you in order to participate – don't just have this conversation once.
  - At the end of the work, reflecting on what went well and what could change next time.

Young people's experience

"It feels a lot easier if you don't have to say it to the authority's face. Like going up to them and telling them that can be really like, you don't know how they're going to react.

But I mean, it's also much easier if it's someone who feels a bit more on your side. Especially since schools isn't always a safe place for everyone.

Like people, some people do, especially neurodivergent people can really struggle with school and with their teachers. And if you already have a bad relationship with your teacher, it can make it even more difficult."

FLARE member

FLARE recommends...

- Ensuring there are opportunities for facilitators and decision-makers to build relationships with children and young people, as this will build trust and a safe environment for them to contribute their ideas.
- Considering who facilitates conversations and activities, and whether the children and young people taking part will be able to share their views openly.
- Incentivising the opportunity in any way you can – "Good food makes or breaks".
- Promoting creativity and making activities as fun as possible – there are lots of creative ways to gather ideas and views, this does not always have to happen in formal meeting environments.

Power sharing

"The power dynamic, that's quite important. Especially being at school with people you might see around school, there can be that bit of a power dynamic where you can feel a bit nervous to sort of talk to about talk to people about it and especially say if something's wrong or something's not going well, it can be quite intimidating."

FLARE member

"It isn't youth participation and involvement if we don't allow young people to disagree with how things are and with how systems are set up, and for me young people's involvement is about being able to have those really difficult conversations, and to be able to hold that space in the messiness of disagreement, or challenge, or all of those things."

FLARE member

FLARE recommends...

- Letting children and young people set the agenda for the work as much as possible.
- Demonstrating that children and young people's opinions are equally valid as professionals by acting on them.
- Being open to children and young people's ideas and expertise – and not defensive.
- Setting expectations early and being clear with children and young people about what is possible and what is not.

Feedback and recognition

> **"I am a big advocate of young people being paid for their time, and thinking about, actually, how can we make sure that it is also about young people having the chance to gain the skills that they want to in these spaces, and how can we work towards things being really equitable in terms of the opportunities that young people are getting, the skills that they're developing, and tailoring it to what that young person wants at that time, I think is always really good.**
>
> **It's like thinking about almost being the careers service, of, like, this is what skills I want to develop, this is how we do that, I think is so important in terms of participation."**
>
> **FLARE member**

FLARE recommends...

- Remunerating children and young people for their time and expenses, and creating rewards for participation.
- Ensuring children and young people have the opportunity to build skills.
- Giving clear explanations for decisions and telling children and young people what has happened as a result of their input.

Additional recommendations from the Council for Disabled Children

In addition to the ideas put forward by the FLARE group, we think that practitioners and professionals who are designing opportunities for children and young people to influence decision making should also:

- Spend time identifying the way in which you are going to work with children and young people and bring their lived experience into the decision-making process – is it consultation, idea development, co-design, or a combination of different elements? Transparency about children and young people's role and their level of agency is fundamental to good practice.
- Think carefully about your ask to children and young people – are the aims, purpose, and tasks clear? Once you have a clear ask, you should also consider how you will communicate this to them.
- Consider how opportunities for children and young people to participate in decision-making will be embedded in your ways of working, contribute to your overall goals, and create meaningful and sustainable engagement.



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Hearing a range of voices

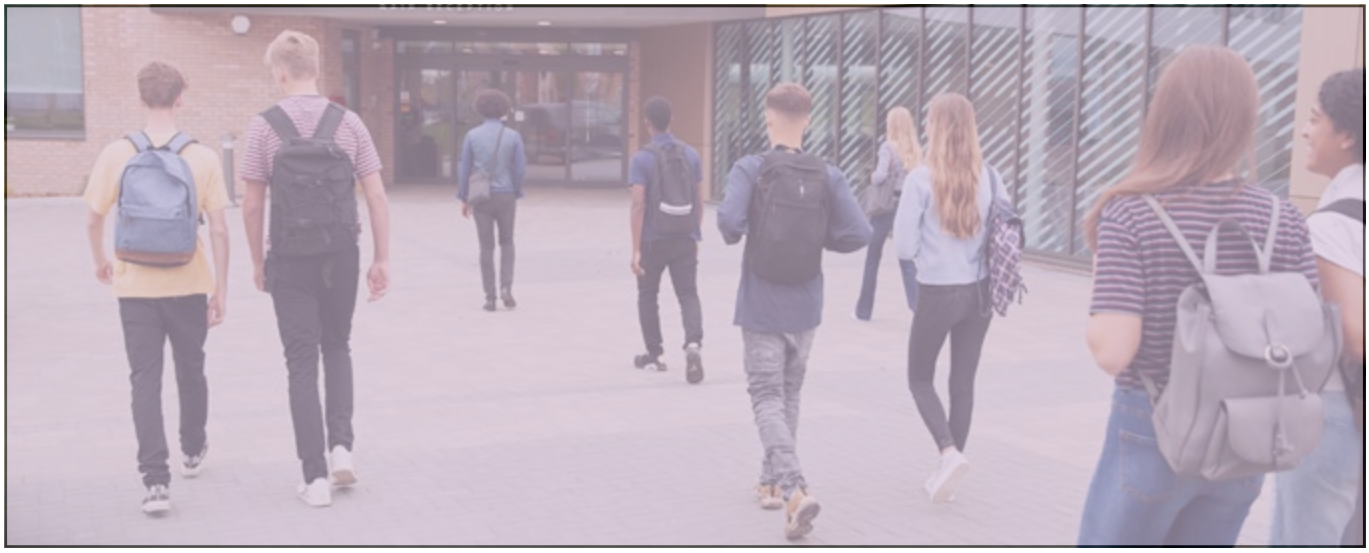
How children and young people will experience the Experts at Hand offer

The aim of the Experts at Hand offer is to strengthen inclusive practice in mainstream education settings.

Through the offer, specialists will be deployed to improve universal provision in settings, provide targeted support to specific groups of children and young people, provide advice and facilitate learning across settings, and coach and train teachers and teaching assistants to improve inclusive practice.

Children and young people will encounter support through the Experts at Hand offer in their education setting, although they may or not explicitly be aware of it.

In some cases, children and young people may be involved in targeted group interventions and occasionally in 1:1 interventions; in most cases, they will experience the offer through the implementation of strategies to improve inclusiveness, i.e. adaptations to the classroom and the teaching methods employed by their teacher.



Building participation skills

> "It's important that everyone's heard in this decision because if it's going to affect everyone, it should make sure that it affects everyone positively. Because people have different experiences, different backgrounds, and might need different things. And also to make sure it's accessible to everyone, because you don't include them in the conversation, then you might, by accident, not make it accessible to them."
>
> **FLARE member**

> It is about thinking who is in the room, who isn't in the room, who wouldn't want to be in the room – all of those things. It's like, what are the different ways that we can involve people, not everybody's going to want to come to a FLARE meeting, not everyone's going to want to do a survey, so it's just about giving different options, but also being really targeted in terms of whose voices aren't part of those conversations."
>
> **FLARE member**

Disabled children and young people and children and young people with SEN who are being educated within mainstream settings will, hopefully, be positively impacted by the offer, so it stands to reason that these children and young people's voices can and should be heard within decision-making to shape it.

However, there is always a need to find balance between recognising

children and young people's expertise in their own lives and finding the right tools and strategies that enable them to have influence on strategic matters and recognising that we can set a child or young person up to fail if we overwhelm them with opportunities that they have not been supported to understand and prepare for.

When thinking about whether a child or young person might be able to participate in strategic decision-making, we may want to ask some reflective questions:

- Have they had previous opportunities to develop their participation skills?
- Do we have the right tools and resources to enable them to make an informed opinion on the topics with the right support?
- Are they able to think beyond their own experiences and consider what it might be like for other children and young people?

It is important to remember that children and young people need time and support to build the skills needed to participate in strategic decision-making.

Some children and young people may find it challenging to think beyond their own direct experience, which means that it is important to also think about how individual participation can be collectively used to build a strategic understanding of what the offer should entail.

For example, using information about individual goals and aspirations gathered through support plans to inform strategic goals and indicators for evaluating the offer.



Strategies for ensuring a wide range of voices are heard

> **"I also think it's about diversity of experience, and recognising different life experiences, and how those different characteristics almost intersect with different life experiences, and how it all crosses over, and thinking about that and the very tangible things that you can do to make opportunities more accessible, like the fact that, like, everyone's travel is paid for and stuff like that, I think it's really important in terms of just opening up opportunities to people."**
>
> **FLARE member**

Efforts should always be made to engage children and young people who face additional barriers to sharing their views to influence decision-making.

This could include children and young people with communication differences, including those who do not communicate verbally.

It could also include those with sensory support needs, who need to receive and share information in specific ways.

As a practitioner, it is important to think about what resources you can provide to enable children and young people with a wide range of access needs to share their views.

Additional efforts should also be made to consider the experiences of children and young people who may face systemic disadvantage in relation to another aspect of their identity apart from their disability status or special educational need.

This could be race or ethnicity, sexuality or gender identity, care-experience, or economic background.

We should always apply an intersectional approach and seek to hear from a diverse range of children and young people in decision-making, as their experiences of and priorities for the systems that support them will be different.

As well as involving SEND forums and strategic participation groups in the local area, there are great opportunities to engage children and young people in their education, youth and community settings.

Given the aims of the engagement, it is also important to think about engaging children who are not currently in school.

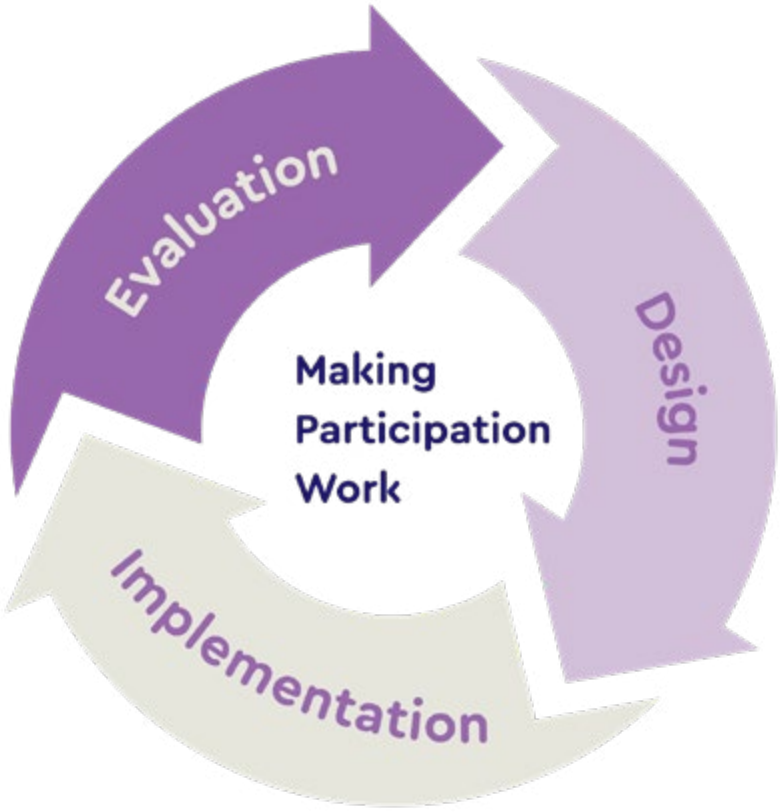
Building relationships with organisations and settings who work with children and young people in the local area will support greater and more diverse participation.



Identifying and creating opportunities for children and young people to have strategic influence

In conversation with FLARE members, we have identified different points in decision-making processes to design an Experts at Hands offer at which children and young people could be meaningfully engaged within their local areas.

These opportunities will facilitate strategic engagement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the offer.



Design

> **"I think designing the offer is so important, because from that very beginning, it's shaping how things are, and I think when you involve young people from the beginning, you do get those different outcomes and better outcomes, which are better meeting the needs of young people. And sometimes, young people are considering things that professionals in the room haven't thought about, because they're almost coming from it from a different angle."**
>
> **FLARE member**

Establishing a whole-system vision for inclusion

The **Experts at Hand Guidance** states that areas should start the design process by establishing a whole-system vision for inclusion, including what this means in the local context and how the offer will support this.

FLARE members thought that children and young people could meaningfully - whether it was through online or in-person activities – feed into the establishment of a whole system vision for inclusion in a variety of ways. They suggested different activities that would allow professionals to gather an understanding of their priorities for inclusion:

- Dot voting or throwing into buckets for different priorities
- Asking children and young people to draw what inclusion means to them
- A graffiti wall
- Hands up or voting activities, including physically moving around a room to indicate preferences.

The feedback gathered should be used alongside the input of other partners to create a whole-area vision for inclusion.

This would underpin different aspects of the offer, including the intended outcomes, the services to be commissioned, and the structured support offer for workforce development.

Children and young people's feedback from the initial exercise could then be used to shape the development of all of these.

Identifying outcomes and indicators

The **government guidance** also states that local areas should identify measures for assessing the impact of the offer.

As part of the visioning exercise, local areas should think about what outcomes they want the offer to achieve and how they will measure these.

FLARE suggested that children and young people could have an important role in identifying these outcomes.

They felt this would be particularly important when identifying desired outcomes for teachers and schools, as they could offer key insights into the behaviours and changes that would make the mainstream environment feel more inclusive.

FLARE suggested:

- Holding focus groups across the schools and education settings in the area to understand what outcomes they would want to see from the offer.
- Having conversations with school councils to understand what outcomes they would like to see in their schools.
- Hosting a conference for young people across the area to attend and feed in their views.

The feedback gathered could be used alongside the input of system partners to create an outcomes framework with meaningful metrics that reflect children and young people's priorities.

Implementation

"One of the things that I would love to see when we commission services and is – are we thinking about the joy and care of young people? Like, how are we embedding the way we work with young people in terms of those, like, joy and care?

I think when we're working with young people, joy and care, and fun, and relationships, and all of that should be embedded across all services. Like, I don't think anyone should come in and interact with a young person without considering, how are you making this a nice space, what does it feel like to be on the receiving end of me?

All of those questions, I think services should ask themselves a lot more, and, like, even if you're just delivering intervention or, like a whole school or classroom thing, for me, it's always thinking about how we're embedding some of those really important values."

FLARE member

Commissioning services

The **guidance** states that local areas should conduct strategic engagement and consultation, so the design and development of the offer is done in collaboration with key system partners, naming children and young people's voice as one of these.

In practice, this could include working strategically with children and young people to interpret data about gaps and need and to imagine innovative responses to this, laying the foundations for designing service models.

FLARE suggested different activities

that would allow children and young people to identify where gaps in support or resources were being felt, such as a "giant mapping" activity, where children and young people place icons on a mpa of their setting or local area to show what is working or children and young people acting as "young inspectors" within settings.

SEND youth forums or other local youth groups could also be involved in interpreting the information gathered about gaps and be asked their thoughts on what could address these to inform the design of desired service models.

FLARE members also suggested different ways that decision-making process about service procurement could be made more accessible and engaging for young people, so that a wider number of young people could meaningfully feed into these elements of creating the offer.

They stressed that complex information needs to be made understandable and accessible, and suggested creating animation videos of different service options.

They also suggested gamified methods of engaging children and young people in these decisions:

- **"I want it to be like 'The Voice' where you press the buzzer if you like the service"**
- **"[You could] have Monopoly money to put on your service"**

Incorporating children and young people's views – alongside those of system partners – will support the design of service models that meet needs and achieve identified outcomes.

Evaluation

Understanding the impact

The **guidance** says that local areas must measure impact, including outcomes for children and young people. As previously noted, children and young people can and should be involved in identifying outcomes and indicators of impact.

They can also co-design evaluation methods for understanding the

impact of the programme for children and young people, or carry out evaluations themselves (for example, inspecting settings). FLARE suggested a range of evaluation activities that could be designed and led by children and young people:

- Children and young people could be supported to become "Peer researchers" – developing evaluation frameworks based on the offer's intended outcomes and carrying out peer-to-peer evaluation activities in settings.
- Conducting social media polls to engage with children and young people online and analyse results.
- A whole-school photography activity where children and young people take photos of the school environment and annotate these to share their sense of the setting – for example, if one of the intended outcomes of the offer was for children and young people feel a greater sense of belonging in school, pupils could be tasked with taking photographs of areas where they feel they belong, and areas where they feel less so.

Activities such as these would support a holistic understanding of impact and will offer insight beyond assessment data and individual feedback. Children and young people's observations and interpretations of impact should be included in the overall evaluation of the offer, and in planning for the following year.

"I think learning is such an important process of all this work, because it's being able to sort of shape how things happen in the future, and being able to have the honest conversations of what works and what didn't, and a lot of learning that comes out of that. But I also think it is having young people interpret some of the evaluation, what is good for a young person might be different from the views of a professional."

FLARE member

> **"Evaluation is important because then the young people can be like, actually, this isn't working. You know, we can see how it hasn't worked, whereas, you know, it might be harder for the people who aren't, like, there [experiencing the offer]. To actually see how it hasn't worked. So, you don't continue on with something that isn't working, or even doing damage."**
>
> **FLARE member**

Identifying remaining gaps

Many local areas will not have had time to implement all of these measures in year one of the offer due to time and planning constraints.

However, there is still scope at the end of the year to understand what gaps remain in how inclusion is felt by children and young people as a result of the Experts at Hand offer, and what else is needed to improve this.

As well as the evaluation activities suggested in the **Understanding the Impact** section, FLARE members suggested gathering children and young people's views at the end of the academic year through polls, surveys, and focus groups with the aim of understanding where more needs to be done to promote inclusion in their settings.



Making Participation Work is a programme commissioned by the Department for Education that is spearheading change by championing young people's voices.

It is delivered by the Council for Disabled Children, which is part of the National Children's Bureau family.

Find out more at councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk

Department for Education

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