



Evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network pilot project (2006-2008)

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NCB promotes the voices, interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives.

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1.0 Executive Summary

To date, the Young Children's Voices Network (YCVN) has successfully instigated or developed a listening culture within Early Years in 15 of the 20 local authorities it has supported. Fourteen of these utilised a 'young children's voices network' model while the remaining authority chose to develop listening with social care and health care professionals who work with young children rather than early years practitioners (the remaining five authorities were unable, or felt it was too soon, to take part in the evaluation).

Network membership comprises a diverse array of practitioners and managers from within the early years field, with networks focussing on either a practice-led or a strategic-led approach to developing a culture of listening. Training and ongoing support from the YCVN project manager and steering group have enabled local authorities to spend time exploring what listening really means, kick start networks and initiate specific listening projects. Many authorities are now focussing on the wider dissemination of learning and training of staff.

The impact of the work was most immediately visible through reports of raised skills and confidence of practitioners. Listening work is most effective when it complements existing skills and knowledge and builds on these to embed a fundamental listening approach, rather than imposing a set of additional responsibilities.

Interviewees were witnessing a growing awareness within authorities regarding participation, although youth participation was generally understood to be further developed at present. Young children's participation was perceived to be something that was slowly 'gathering weight'. Some authorities were using young children's views to influence policy or strategy design and there were also examples given of changes being made in localised settings based on feedback gathered from children.

Senior-level support, enthusiasm and commitment of staff, and support from YCVN were all factors reported to help interviewees drive forward listening in their local authority. Staffing and financial capacity as well as a lack of understanding about the value of listening in some practitioners and strategic figures were said to be factors that limited the development of a culture of listening. To push the work forward, interviewees were looking to engage 'champions' or senior decision-makers, create links with other participation forums and widely develop skills and learning within their authority. Those leading the listening work also described how they would like to capture the impact that listening has on children themselves, as opposed to just focussing on the benefits it has on service design.

Overall, a high level of enthusiasm was expressed for the work. It was felt that the current policy and practice climate, including the duty now placed on local authorities to listen to young children through the Childcare Act 2006 and the Early Years Foundation Stage has created an opportunity for local authorities to really develop and embed the practice of listening to young children.

2.0 Background

The Young Children's Voices Network (YCVN) is a project that focuses on participation with birth to five year olds. The Early Childhood Unit (ECU) at the National Children's Bureau (NCB) has overall responsibility for delivering the project. The work is also steered by a National Advisory Group of key stakeholders comprised of people with a specific interest and expertise in the participation of young children in policy, and service design and delivery. The project was initially funded by the DCSF from April 2006 to March 2009, however, at the time of writing this report, continuation funding for a further two years had recently been agreed.

YCVN builds on the ECU's earlier 'Listening as a way of Life' project, from which, a series of leaflets were produced outlining research, practice and methods for listening to young children from birth up to the age of eight. Since then, listening to young children has gained legal backing under the Childcare Act 2006, which places a duty on local authorities to *'have regard to such information about the views of young children as is available to the local authority'*. (Childcare Act 2006, Section 3(5)).

YCVN aims to support local authorities in meeting their duty to listen to young children to inform policy and the improvement of early years provision (Childcare Act 2006) by supporting them to set up a local network, which will in turn help develop listening to young children. In addition it seeks to help authorities utilise existing knowledge that practitioners already have about young children's views. The objective is that local YCVNs develop and disseminate good practice, and facilitate the wider sharing of information, in order to influence local policy impacting on early years provision.

Authority leads were afforded flexibility in the way they developed their network so that it suited their local needs and resources. Throughout the initial funding period, a total of 20 local authorities were engaged in the pilot project. Support offered to local authorities from ECU included:

- Project manager offering consultancy support to initiate a local YCVN
- Continued guidance and support to inform network development
- Training for staff in young children's participation
- Access to experts from the National Advisory Group
- Email bulletins and internet contact sharing
- National networking days for representatives from local networks to share effective practice

A national rollout of the programme is planned from March 2009, based on learning from the first 3 years of piloting.

3.0 About the Evaluation

The overall aim of the evaluation was to explore the nature of local YCVNs and to find out what has helped and hindered local authorities in developing both their network and a culture of listening. This included gaining feedback about the support provided from the central YCVN project. In addition, the evaluation explored the support interviewees felt would be useful to help further develop existing networks as well as new authorities coming on board. The overall approach taken to the evaluation was qualitative to enable a deeper exploration into the experiences of participating local authorities.

Fieldwork was conducted at two separate points: January 2007 and September 2008. During the first phase, a questionnaire was administered to local authority representatives in order to establish a baseline picture of network development and to capture basic information about local mechanisms for listening to young children. In all, 15 authorities answered questions exploring how young children's voices are currently being collected and used within the local authority, if and how their local network is developing, and how local authorities are planning to develop their network in the future.

During the second period of fieldwork, in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with 15 individuals with lead responsibility for their local YCVN; 13 of these had taken part in the previous questionnaire. In interviews, YCVN leads answered questions about progress they had made in developing the network since 'phase 1' of the evaluation, the support received from the ECU in developing their network and a culture of listening, facilitators and barriers experienced in developing a culture of listening, and their ideas about the future direction of the network. Five authorities were unable, or declined, to take part in the interviews. This was largely understood to be due to staffing changes within the authority, or to representatives feeling it was too soon to be able to discuss their progress. Therefore this evaluation is based on responses from three quarters of YCVNs and does not represent the experiences of all those taking part, particularly those at the very early stages of setting up their network. Copies of the questionnaire and interview schedule used can be found in the appendix to this report.

Analysis of qualitative data collected in the phase-1 survey and phase-2 interviews was done using a content analysis method. This allowed the evaluation to draw out common themes and messages for learning, as well as allowing individual experiences to be understood. Basic quantitative data gathered from the phase-1 survey was analysed to generate simple descriptive statistics.

This report sets out the findings using data gathered at both stages of the evaluation but draws more heavily from the in-depth interviews conducted in phase-2. Firstly, the report will outline details about the nature and progress of the participating authorities. The report will then go on to explore further what has helped and hindered authorities develop both their local networks and a culture of listening, including the role the support offered by the Early Childhood Unit played in this. The report will also put forward messages about the type of support interviewees feel would be useful for the continuation of existing networks and for those who may be about to embark on the project.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Overview of local Young Children's Voices Networks

20 local authorities in England participated in the pilot of the YCVN project, joining at various points in time over the three-year period. The profile of participating local authorities is outlined in Fig 1 below. 15 authorities took part in phase-2 of the evaluation.

Fig 1. Pilot local authority details

Region		Type of Authority	
East Midlands	1	Shire	6
East of England	2	London Borough	7
London	7	Metropolitan District	4
North East	3	Unitary	3
North West	1		
South East	2		
South West	1		
West Midlands	1		
Yorkshire and the Humber	2		

At the time of writing the report, 14 out of the 15 interviewees reported having a network or strategic group in place to develop a culture of listening to young children in their local authority. In the remaining authority, the project was being taken forward using a different model as they felt listening was already embedded. Instead they were focussing on developing listening practice outside of early years settings with a range of social care, health and education staff. Of the existing 14 networks, one was 'on hold' at the time of the interview while the authority recruited a new member of staff to co-ordinate it, and two were due to hold their first meeting shortly after the interview.

Authorities participating in the evaluation showed diversity in terms of their overall approach to developing their network. They differed in terms of who they include in their network membership, how they co-ordinate it and how much the network engages strategically within their respective local authorities.

Co-ordination

Interviewees, all of whom held operational or strategic responsibility for their YCVN, represented a wide range of local authority roles and departments. Those represented include participation, training, quality assurance, early years development and inclusion. In addition, two interviewees were situated within Children's Centres and are therefore located externally to the authority.

Data from the baseline questionnaire indicated that the majority of authorities were planning to take the YCVN forward using a local 'authority-wide' model. For these interviewees, opening up the network to all settings or local authority departments was felt to be important. To a slightly lesser degree, networks have targeted specific services, for example Children's Centres. A smaller number of authorities have taken the project forward in certain localities or communities. This has occurred where

network objectives were felt to be more aligned with those of the specific services, for example targeting 'hard to reach' families, or where it is felt to be a more pragmatic way to develop the project, for example, in large counties.

Membership

Membership of networks is also diverse and a variety of early years settings is represented from the private, voluntary and maintained early years sector and the local authority. Interviewees cited personnel that included:

- Early years practitioners
- Early years senior managers
- Quality assurance managers
- Training and workforce development leads
- District council Children's Partnership lead
- Nursery assistants
- Childminders
- Voluntary Sector representatives
- Children's Centre Managers
- Teachers
- Social care professionals
- Health visitors
- SENCOs
- Outreach workers
- Parents

Several interviewees reported that they were struggling to facilitate childminders' participation in network meetings. This was felt to be because of the time and location that network meetings are being held. One interviewee described how they are hoping to overcome this problem by holding meetings at their local children's centre.

It was also suggested by a small number of interviewees that it was more difficult to engage people who work in schools, one interviewee specifically mentioned that they were struggling to engage a Foundation Stage Co-ordinator in their network. Again this was thought to be because the timing of meetings prevented them from attending. One interviewee mentioned that funding was only available from the authority to provide cover for nursery assistants to attend meetings. However, one person described how they had been able to make progress in involving primary schools by overcoming their concerns that the network would duplicate existing networks, and by linking in with existing complementary projects going on within the school e.g. school council training.

Strategic links

Networks differed in terms of their strategic focus and therefore, to the extent to which they outlined their strategic engagement within the authority. Some networks were described as operating very much at a 'practitioner level', characterised by their membership. One interviewee specifically identified their YCVN as a "bottom-up, grass- roots project" and as such was not necessarily seeking to engage with senior-

level local authority groups. The goal of these networks was to develop listening practice and culture at an individual level or within a group of individual settings.

A larger number of networks was made up of service managers, who come together in localities, clusters, or from across the wider authority, to feedback progress made in developing listening practice within the authority e.g. in Children's Centres or specific community based services. Others seek to operate more strategically from within the local authority itself, and are focusing on capturing the voice of the child within wider local authority planning processes.

Strategic groups that were referred to during these interviews included: local strategic partnerships (LSPs), district or locality partnerships, early years strategic groups and local authority participation/voice of the child strategic groups. Some however, were not yet linked in to strategic processes or were unaware of the wider participation work going on within their authority, and for some this was identified as part of their short-term or long-term goals.

Approaches to inclusion

The approaches to ensuring the inclusion of all children's voices in the networks described by interviewees varied, with differing levels of awareness and perception of importance being placed upon it. Responses fell into four general types:

- Approach and practice
- Monitoring of consultation activities
- Inclusion through settings and practitioners represented in network
- Targeted listening projects

The majority of interviewees expressed the view that the 'inclusion' of all children's voices was addressed through the general practice and approach of practitioners involved in the project. This was in itself described as being 'inclusive' and 'inclusion' was felt to be a value inherent in everything they do. This was considered to be particularly relevant when working with non-verbal children and children for whom English is not their first language.

To a lesser extent, interviewees reported monitoring the demographic details of children and young people that take part in consultation projects in their local authority, in order to be aware of who has taken part and whose views are being represented. Several authority representatives said they don't undertake specific separate consultation exercises with minority groups.

Most interviewees felt that the 'inclusion' of the voices of all children in their network was achieved through the membership of their network, most of which included SEN specialist staff or representatives from services located in areas with high black and other minority ethnic group (BME) communities.

A smaller number of participants were able to describe specific targeted listening projects; these included projects with newly arrived BME communities within one authority and in another, a project targeted children who had attended a specialist service at a children's centre. Another, whose network leadership sits within an inclusion department, is largely focused on SEN and was in the process of amending recording processes to routinely collect the views of children at the time of interview.

4.2 Networks: activities & outputs, impact & influence

Local authority representatives described various activities that have been undertaken, and resources that have been developed, in order to develop listening practice and widely disseminate learning. Interviewees were also asked directly about if and how they perceived impact to have occurred as a result of developing their network.

It is important to note that a small number of authorities had already done some work around listening, such as including aspects of listening in mandatory training. For these authorities, taking part in the YCVN project enabled them to build upon what they had already done or provided a channel through which to achieve existing objectives. However, for the majority of interviewees taking part in the evaluation, establishing a YCVN was the first step towards developing this line of work in their authority.

Activities and outputs

Network members and lead officers have developed activities and outputs that target differing audiences and are for use at different levels within the authority: at practice or setting level, for authority-wide dissemination and, to a lesser degree, for parents. .

Activities have been carried out within settings as a direct result of attending the listening training provided by ECU, in order to put learning into practice and further develop the network. One example given of a listening project involved a diary project undertaken with children that were accessing multiple local authority services. Another project involved children, who have access to a specific service at a Children's Centre, taking part in a 'building tour' exercise. The aim of this project was to gain feedback about the centre itself and service users' experience of using it. Another example involved young children helping plan the curriculum within the setting they attend.

At an authority-wide level, more than half of interviewees reported that they had already, or were in the process of, pulling together learning from activities going on within settings and were producing resources for wider dissemination. This has included publishing guidance, good practice, case studies, a 'listening book' and a 'listening DVD'.

Again, in relation to activities being undertaken at an authority level, the majority of interviewees described how they have been able to build upon initial training accessed through the YCVN project. Some of these have gone on to develop a stand-alone internal training package for rollout, and most have worked to embed elements of the listening training in their existing internal courses. One authority, that has developed a stand-alone package, has worked in partnership with a local college to deliver their training. This helped them overcome internal capacity barriers to widening the deliver of the training.

Two interviewees described how they have worked with parents in relation to developing a culture of listening to young children; one described delivering training for local parents to become 'parent mentors'.

Impact & influence

Interviewees were able to describe where they perceived the impact of their local network was occurring. One local authority representative made a useful distinction in terms of trying to locally evaluate impact in three different areas; practice, policy and culture. Responses fell into 5 broad categories:

- Practitioner confidence
- Practitioner skills
- Raised profile of early years participation
- Development of listening strategies
- Changes to settings and services

Several interviewees described the impact that being part of the YCVN was having on individual practitioners. Raised levels of confidence and motivation were seen to result from both the initial training and from ongoing sharing with others at local network meetings. More specifically, a small number of interviewees described how they perceived an 'attitude shift' in individuals who no longer felt that listening was an 'additional' task needed to be undertaken by 'specialists' and in people that had begun to realise that it is possible to, and there is value in, 'listening' to babies. Another facet that a small number of interviewees commented on was the change in some non-early years professionals, who would usually only focus on listening to the parent in relation to their children, but who were now learning to focus on listening to the child directly.

Activities and events relating to their local YCVN were thought by the majority of interviewees to have helped raise awareness within their authority about listening to young children. Training events, local conferences, presentations and the existence of the network itself, were all felt to be helping to elevate its profile. In addition, the fact that these activities were part of a national programme was felt to give more 'status' to the topic and reinforce a sense of priority around listening. There was a perception by many that participation generally is 'slowly gathering weight'.

The emergence of listening strategies, and the embedding of listening work into early years business plans, were examples given of how the YCVN was starting to have an impact at a strategic level. The development of strategic links with participation departments and their strategies was another mechanism seen to be 'giving weight' to listening to young children by bringing it to the attention of areas traditionally focussing on listening to older children or targeted groups of children such as children in care. It was felt by several interviewees that following this route could facilitate a greater opportunity to influence local authority policy. Examples given of how young children's voices have been used to influence policy included informing the parenting strategy of one authority and informing the budgeting processes of another.

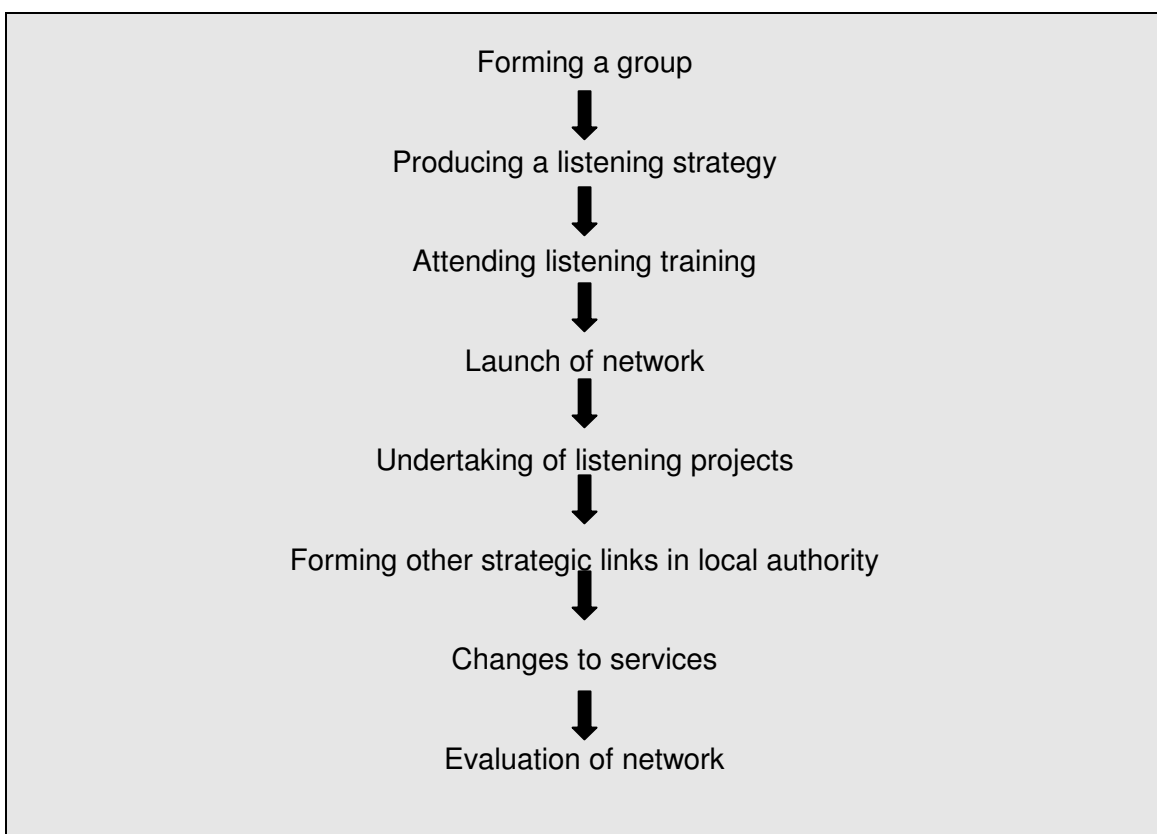
Finally, several interviewees were able to explain where impact was being felt in settings, by outlining changes that have been implemented locally as a result of listening projects undertaken by members of their network. One representative described changing the labelling of rooms in Children's Centres based on feedback obtained from touring the building with young children. Another described changes that have been made to paperwork used in review meetings undertaken with children identified as having SEN to make sure they routinely capture the views of children.

4.3 The process of developing a network

Interviewees were asked to identify key milestones reached in developing their network and what they felt had helped and hindered the development of a network. This section of the report puts forward responses by presenting internal and external factors as well as distinguishing the role of the central YCVN project in supporting them to do this.

Milestones

Fig 2. Milestones identified in developing a network



Most project participants interviewed made reference to the importance of setting up a strategic group or the production of a specific listening strategy. A key aspect of fulfilling this milestone was seen to be gaining senior level support, or adoption, of the strategy. Several mentioned how they had achieved 'sign-off' from their strategic partnership. Action planning, resulting from the formation of the strategy, was referred to by a small number of interviewees as something that had been undertaken or something that was identified as a short-term objective.

The majority of interviewees cited attending the initial listening training from ECU as a major milestone in developing their network. This event was felt to help form their group and kick-start the planning process. Following on from this, most representatives described developing or adapting their own internal training to reflect what they had learnt.

'Launching' their network was also given as a key milestone. There was a sense that this step could not be achieved without a level of 'behind the scenes' preparation, in

the way mentioned above, at which point the project was in a position to be opened up to the rest of the authority.

Following the launch of a network, the undertaking and completion of listening projects emerged as a milestone: putting learning into practice and continuing to motivate network members. The production of in-house resources, such as guidance and good practice resources also emerged as a key mark of progress at this stage.

Milestones of another kind involved making strategic links within the local authority, for example, linking in with the authority's Youth Service or participation team were significant steps in broadening the influence of their listening work.

Other significant steps that were put forward related to changes that were emerging as a result of the network, namely changes to services or processes based on feedback gained from young children.

A large proportion of interviewees reported that evaluating what they have achieved so far was an objective that was currently being addressed or something that would occur in the near future. Those that had evaluated their work had done so using a variety of approaches including self-evaluation and an attitude change survey.

Internal facilitators and barriers

The enthusiasm and commitment of practitioners was consistently given as a significant factor aiding the development of a network and its related activities. For example, enthusiasm for the topic made it easier to organise meetings and events. One interviewee explained that she hadn't struggled to convince people to come on board and likened it to "knocking on an open door". Another commented that "the hearts and minds in early years participation are won" and that it was easy for practitioners to see how the project was clearly linked to their work. One lead said that those who were unsure about the project at first were inspired by the feedback they were hearing from those taking part and this helped overcome initial doubts.

The commitment of managers within individual settings was also seen as crucial in supporting the development of the network and listening practice. One interviewee expressed the view that where there is a clear commitment to listening at a leadership level this then becomes visible throughout all levels of an organisation. Management level sign-up was felt to sanction the time practitioners need to dedicate to listening projects and network meetings.

Another internal factor put forward by participants, that was felt to both help and hinder network development, relates to staff capacity. Having staff members that had previous experience of developing participation work, or experience of working together as a team, was reported to be something that helped in the initial stages of developing a network. One interviewee described this as "starting from a higher level". In relation to this, some interviewees conveyed how building on pre-existing networks helped them make progress when it was proving difficult to get people to commit to an additional set of meetings. However, an alternative perspective was put forward by someone who felt that taking this approach could prove challenging when it became difficult to change the focus or ethos of a pre-existing group.

Securing internal funding and other resources was reported to be a key method that enabled local authorities to manage their network, facilitate attendance at meetings, and publish materials. However, limited internal capacity was consistently given as

the most significant barrier to developing a network. This was reported to impact on people's ability to co-ordinate a network: one authority had suspended their network while they recruit for a new post. It was also seen to impact on the ability of practitioners to attend network meetings, as staff cover is needed within settings. Others felt that generally they were not able to dedicate the time necessary to achieve the potential of the network, or to make the most of support and literature available from the Early Childhood Unit.

The size of the local authority was something put forward in interviews as a factor that acted as a facilitator or a barrier to developing a network. One person felt that being a smaller and 'homogenous' local authority had enabled them to set up an authority-wide network more easily, and ensure a broad inclusion of settings. Conversely, being a large authority was considered by one individual to have made developing and maintaining a network more problematic due to the large number and geographical spread of settings. To overcome this, some authorities were planning to develop a series of networks over time.

Other barriers to developing a network stemmed from a lack of awareness amongst practitioners about the value of listening and what children have to offer. This lack of understanding was felt to exist in some settings that have either been traditionally more commercially minded or that offer very short sessions. It was also felt that some practitioners still lack confidence or feel that listening is something to be done as a specific exercise by defined specialists.

This lack of awareness and understanding was also a barrier to the rollout of existing networks. For example, several interviewees described, amongst their long-term plans, the wish to develop multiple networks within localities. However, some felt that getting others to accept listening as a priority was problematic given the recent reorganisation within many children's services departments. Again in relation to sustaining and developing a network, maintaining the enthusiasm and momentum of the network was something to be mindful of.

External facilitators and barriers

Two interviewees made reference to external sources of funding (CWDC and National Strategies) that they had been able to access in order to develop their network. This was possible where there was an overlap in their objectives.

Role of ECU

Local authority interviewees explained how several aspects of support offered by the YCVN central project helped them develop their local network. The initial training offered by ECU was a resource highly valued by network participants. It was felt to be of high quality and was described as learning at a 'professional level'. Attending the training was also seen to help bring a group of people together, and so start the formation of the network, and generate new contacts. One interviewee said they "couldn't imagine what their network would have looked like without the training day". Two interviewees went on to say that they felt they would like further training, either to take their existing network forward or to support emerging secondary networks.

Ongoing guidance from the project manager, and in a couple of cases members of the steering group, was seen as crucial in developing local networks over a longer period of time. Consultancy support provided network leads with an initial opportunity to think

through and plan what they wanted to achieve with their network. Ongoing face-to-face or telephone support from the project manager was reported to provide practical information about developing a network at crucial points along the way.

Within the sample, a small number of authorities had already identified listening to young children as a gap in their authority, or made inroads into developing listening practice, before becoming involved with the NCB project. Linking in with the YCVN project therefore instigated the formation of the network, and in turn enabled them to take forward their existing objectives. One authority described how NCB and the authority had mutually supported each other in achieving their goals.

The networking day in Birmingham was another resource that was highly valued by interviewees. Aside from the learning that took place in the workshops for some, the day provided participants with an opportunity to learn from others whom they felt were 'one step ahead' with their network. Sharing with other network leads enabled them to find out about potential pitfalls and gain ideas about how to tackle barriers.

The newsletter and ongoing emails from the central project were seen as useful in terms of maintaining the momentum of networks and providing a tangible link with an ongoing, national programme.

The general approach taken by the project was described as being 'refreshing' by one interviewee as they did not feel they were being overly monitored or that they were 'ticking someone's boxes'. There was a perceived genuine commitment to culture change. Other interviewees positively referenced how the central project was not trying to 'manage the network for them' and that the flexibility afforded in local network design was helpful.

4.4 The process of developing a culture of listening

In addition to asking authority representatives about the process of developing their network, the evaluation also sought to explore the process of developing a culture of listening. Interviewees differed in terms of where they saw the culture in development being situated. Some responded in a way that indicated they saw the culture shift as being necessary specifically within early years settings whereas others described a culture shift in terms of a wider and strategic, top-down change.

Internal facilitators and barriers

Several internal processes were perceived by interviewees to be raising the status of listening to young children within their authority, and this was seen as an important stage in the development of a culture of listening. Developing an internal strategy relating to listening to young children was said to be important. However, in facilitating a shift in culture, interviewees felt that having a 'champion' and senior management support were more significant. In relation to status, it was also felt that responsibility for a local YCVN should be located in a part of children's services alongside statutory duties to ensure a high level of prominence within the authority.

Conversely, a lack of local authority support, or fragmented links with the authority where the network is located outside of the authority, was something that was felt to be a barrier to developing a culture of listening. One interviewee, who felt they were struggling to engage the local authority, felt that this was due to their infrastructure, and the fact that early participation didn't 'fit anywhere', rather than a lack of interest.

In relation to local authority structure, several people commented that the recent volume of internal changes within early years departments has meant that they have had to fight to keep listening and participation on the agenda.

In addition to raising the status of listening, interviewees described internal factors that had helped increase *awareness* of listening practice, and the role of the local network. Internal events, training sessions and networking opportunities were methods that helped facilitated this.

Although the majority of interviewees reported that there was a growing understanding about the need to listen to young children within their local authority, many felt that participation work with older children was more established. Reported links with participation or 'voice of the child' teams were at different stages in authorities. One interviewee described making the strategic link with the youth participation team as a significant milestone for them. However, there did not appear to be widespread awareness of participation structures within authorities by interviewees and some authorities are currently focussing much more on developing listening practice.

The passion and enthusiasm of practitioners was again reported to be an important facilitating feature in developing a culture of listening. This was something that was felt to have increased as practitioner confidence levels grew because of the successful completion of listening projects, and recognition through the project of the work they were already doing. The crossover of staff, from practitioner to strategic roles, was something that one interviewee felt had brought greater understanding within the authority regarding capturing the views of young children. However, it was also reported that barriers could be experienced at an early years practitioner level where people did not understand or value listening to children, or where confidence was low. In addition, interviewees described the challenges of seeking to influence non-early years professionals and the difficulty in getting them to focus on the views of the child rather than those of the adult; this was not felt to be an immovable barrier but part of a learning process. This view was echoed by another interviewee who was working with participation officers to help them to understand the value and feasibility of listening to children under eight years of age.

Having 'ownership' of listening was something that also emerged as a factor that could facilitate developing a culture of listening. One interviewee described how practitioners saw it as part of their role to promote listening and another explained how early years advisors were promoting the network and project within schools.

Limited internal capacity was cited as something that limited developing a culture of listening. One authority felt that listening training should be rolled out to all staff working with young children; however, they were not in a position to do this. A representative from a different authority explained how they have developed a partnership with their local FE College in order to overcome the capacity barrier to rolling out the training. Instead of the authority struggling to deliver training to a large number of settings and practitioners, the college does this on their behalf and charges back to the authority.

Finally, a few interviewees felt that they were currently trying to work out the best way to glean information from young children that could have an impact beyond their local early years setting. Several expressed the opinion that they found it easier to implement changes at a local level but had not yet devised a mechanism through which to extend the influence of young children's views.

External facilitators and barriers

From the interviews, government policy emerged a key external driver that is currently influencing work to develop a culture of listening. The Childcare Act 2006 was felt to have escalated momentum around listening to children and put increasing pressure on locally authorities to do so. In addition, the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage was also felt to be reinforcing listening practice.

One interviewee described how taking part in somebody else's badly designed consultation exercise had been a very useful learning experience of how not to do it! The experience had particularly highlighted the need to allow adequate time to collect the views of children and young people.

One interviewee described challenges they had faced when trying to implement listening activities within their local setting. The service users they were trying to engage in the activities, and whose feedback they particularly sought, were defined as 'hard to reach'. They outlined the difficulty in trying to balance the desire to move forward with activities whilst trying to hear the voices of the most vulnerable children within the community.

Role of ECU

In terms of support from the central YCVN project, the support of consultants was felt to provide the first steps to building a culture of listening. This resource enabled local authority representatives to think through what listening to children really means and helped them understand what 'children's spaces' are. The independence of trainers, YCVN project manager (and in a couple of cases members of the steering group) was seen as a helpful factor. Consultants' input was seen to be objective and neutral and in turn this was said to make discussions in the authority between practitioners and managers about the best way forward mutually agreeable.

Ongoing support from the project manager was described as being useful in working out how to take the project forward and provide guidance and reassurance along the way. In addition, the efforts of the central programme to make links with other key individuals in local authorities was felt to have provided 'back-up' to things the interviewee is trying to achieve internally and add the 'weight' of a national agenda behind their efforts. Links with a national project was felt to give events more status and thus increase levels of take up.

The fact that trainers and consultants are well recognised in their field was reported by many interviewees to be important. It was described as something that inspired practitioners in their work and made it easier to get people to attend training sessions. It was also cited as something that made it easier to get less convinced individuals on board.

The evidence base of literature and good practice (available from the ECU and NCB) was also felt to be a useful tool in influencing key internal figures. Several people described how they are now working to build a local evidence base. Having this evidence base was thought to give confidence to those trying to bring about change.

The networking day was felt to be useful in relation to facilitating a culture shift, due not only to the opportunity for sharing and learning, but also in working through how to turn strategy into practice. Interviewees reported that they picked up ideas about how to

embed listening within their authority and how it instigated the idea to draw up a participation strategy.

4.5 Sustainability of YCVNs and listening

At the time of the interviews, local authority representatives were at differing stages in considering the sustainability of their local YCVN and, to some degree, the point they were at when they came on board the project influenced this. Some had already embarked upon work to develop listening practice in their authority, either through the identification of listening to young children as a gap within participation practice or through the development of internal training. As such there is already some staffing capacity in their department with responsibility for engaging children. These authorities viewed their network as sustainable along these lines.

Interviewees, including those from other local authorities, where YCVN had played more of a role in instigating the development of listening work, also put forward a range of mechanisms through which they saw the sustainability of the network developing and the culture of listening being reinforced. Several people described how they planned to embed listening practice in internal mandatory training to ensure a future commitment to hearing the views of young children. In addition to this, a small number of authorities have utilised a 'train the trainer' model in order to generate a sustainable mechanism for rolling out training.

A number of leads felt that the network would be sustained through the integration of the aims and objectives of the YCVN into other strategic plans within the children's trust, for example, participation strategies and the Children and Young People's Plan.

The majority of those interviewed felt that the strength of enthusiasm and commitment of network members would be sufficient to ensure the continuation of the network.

Examples of how listening can be embedded and reinforced within local authorities

- Internal capacity
- Internal mandatory training
- Quality Assurance schemes
- Grant and budget allocation processes
- Children and Young Peoples Plan
- Sufficiency assessments
- 'Investors in Children' award
- Joining up of internal strategies
- Participation groups

4.6 Future plans

There were some commonalities in what interviewees identified as being their short and long-term objectives. Some YCVN representatives outlined clearly defined targets they had in place for the network's development whereas others illustrated more loosely defined aspirations. Future plans related to the network and to further developing a culture of listening.

At the time of interviews, two people were at the point of officially launching their local network and as such were focussing on developing and sustaining their membership. Others, who are further along the line, outlined objectives that related more to reviewing the work of the project so far and expanding their network. Planned models for expansion involved establishing a second network, developing strategic and operational tiers to the network, or changing the structure of the network to work through locality teams.

Several network leads outlined short-term goals in relation to publishing good practice and guidance for wider dissemination within their authority. Many also cited the rollout of listening training as a key objective for the short and long-term.

The development of a local evidence base was an objective that several interviewees referenced. This was put forward as part of a strategy to increase awareness about the work of the network and to increase the influence that young children's voices have within their authority. In relation to this, other goals involve developing strategic influence, for example, by targeting identified key individuals or key strategic and policy groups with which to make links.

Individual authority representatives summarised their intentions to: increase regional networking opportunities, undertake a baseline assessment of listening within settings, work out how to listen to parents and children when their views were opposed, and develop listening practice outside of early years settings.

4.7 Support needed from ECU

Interviewees were asked at various points throughout the interviews about what support they thought the ECU could provide that might help them achieve their goals, this included asking them to look back and outline anything that might have helped them more along the way. They were also asked what key pieces of advice they would give to somebody who was just about to embark upon the project. Support they thought would be useful fell into four key areas: support at the preparation stage, support in maintaining a network (including support with specific projects), support in developing a culture of listening and support with evaluation and measuring impact of listening.

Although local authorities valued the flexibility afforded by ECU in how they developed their network, a small number of interviewees felt that they would have welcomed greater clarity early on about what the goals of the central project were. One person also felt they would have liked more information about the long-term aims of DCSF in relation to listening and what the expectations were of local YCVNs. It was felt that this knowledge might help focus the work of networks and their leads more quickly as they embark on the project.

In terms of initial training for network members, again this was highly valued by the majority of those taking part in the interview. There were two instances where

suggestions for improvements were made. One interviewee felt that the training doesn't necessarily need to focus on 'selling' the idea of listening in some authorities, as participants are already 'sold' and may have undertaken work already in this area. Another suggestion was that the training could be tailored to meet the needs of those who were focussing on developing listening practice outside of early years settings. This would include professionals who might work indirectly with children or who do work with children but not in a childcare setting, for example in health or social care.

One person suggested that some amount of funding, no matter how small, might help speed up the initial process of setting up a network and raise the status of the project with other people in the authority. Another felt there was an opportunity to create a stronger link between the central project and wider network members.

Overwhelmingly, interviewees felt that further opportunities for face-to-face national networking would be beneficial, both for themselves and for new members. These events were felt to give people a chance to "think, explore and hear" from experts and people involved in other networks. They are also seen to provide an opportunity to keep abreast of what is happening nationally and centrally, and most importantly to provide ongoing inspiration for the work.

In order to continue learning, network leads felt that ongoing sharing of good practice examples would be useful. One specifically suggested good practice about inclusion and SEN, and one suggested that these be detailed rather than short paragraph case studies. One interviewee suggested that electronic communication processes could have 'added value' and put people directly in touch with each other, for example through some kind of interactive web-based resource.

Guidance and information sharing, was also welcomed around developing a culture of listening in authorities. For example one interviewee wanted to see examples of where listening has influenced strategy locally. Others wanted to find out more about where listening work is taking place outside of early years settings and wanted guidance about how to widen the influence of children's voices outside of settings. Again, along these lines, several people said they would welcome advice about mechanisms which have been successful in embedding listening, and information about how to transfer practical tools used in listening 'on the ground' into decision-making tools for use at management level.

Several people felt they would welcome support in trying to influence other key 'change-makers'. It was suggested that YCVN resources and communications also be directed at influential figures within local authorities, for example, Directors of Children's Services and Elected Members. The development of a set of standards for local authorities to follow was also put forward as a suggestion.

Finally, authority representatives said that they would like support in how to robustly evidence the impact and outcomes resulting from their local YCVN and from increased listening to young children. In relation to this, two authorities said that they were interested in finding out more about how developing a culture of listening actually affected the children themselves, as opposed to service development. One of these was interested in how children, who become used to a 'listening environment', then managed the transition into the school environment.

What follows are key pieces of advice, put forward by interviewees, for people about to embark on developing a YCVN and a culture of listening in their authority:

Frequent pieces of advice for setting up a new network

Approach and preparation

- Adopt a 'partnership' attitude, taking a children's trust-wide approach
- The Children and Young People's Partnership, and other statutory partnerships with decision-making abilities, need to be on board
- Establish a lead with a clear coordinating role and sufficient capacity
- Establish clear objectives and common goals that people can buy in to
- Locate responsibility for the network in a part of children's services alongside statutory duties in order to give it status
- Secure a budget or gain some financial commitment from partners
- Consider involving children's centres and working through locality arrangements

Key partners and support needed

- Make links with participation and inclusion departments
- Secure management commitment to enable practitioners' participation
- Involve key people in the steering group with contacts and seniority to influence
- Secure parents' commitment
- Develop a multi-agency partnership with multi-disciplinary input into the network
- Take advantage of ECU expert input and networking events

Activities and processes

- Relationships with practitioners are key and build on their strengths and enthusiasm
- Disseminate learning widely
- Develop a process to capture what children and young people are saying
- Good quality training and a common understanding that reflects the local context
- Time
- Develop a clear format for meetings allowing members to feedback about projects
- Listen to the experiences of those working in settings in order to overcome barriers
- Use a clear practical project in order to help people understand
- Help people understand 'there is no template to follow'

5.0 Conclusions and recommendations

The project has been successful in facilitating the development of Young Children's Voices Networks within at least 14 of the 20 pilot authorities (one authority chose to develop their listening work using a different model and five authorities did not take part in the evaluation). Those with lead responsibility for these networks were largely able to report how this was beginning to have an impact internally, not only on practice but also more widely on policy makers and internal systems such as quality assurance, sufficiency assessments and grant applications.

A small number of authorities that participated in the evaluation were able to describe work they had done to instigate listening to young children prior to becoming involved with the YCVN project. For them the project provided a vehicle through which to focus their objectives. For others, the YCVN project generated new work in developing participation of young children that was not traditionally included in participation activities already going on within their local authorities.

Diversity in network development and structure is apparent and many leads welcomed the flexibility that has been afforded by the central YCVN. However, there was a need expressed by a small number for greater clarity about the overall aims of ECU and DCSF in regards to listening, and greater clarity about the expectations of local networks. It was felt that this might help focus some local authorities, particularly at the early stages of setting up a network.

The membership base of networks is also varied, however childminders and those based within schools were identified as groups that were more difficult to engage. This was felt to be partly to do with the timing and location of network meetings presenting barriers to their attendance. However, it was also suggested that other barriers were preventing those working in schools attending, for example, in one authority it was reported that funding for relief workers was only available for those working in nurseries.

Within the sample, a large proportion of work to develop a network and a culture of listening was being taken forward through the Children's Centres agenda. However, it was not made clear as to why it had been developed through these services, as opposed to say, through nursery schools. It may be the case that the objectives of this new work were seen as being more closely aligned with the ethos of Children's Centres.

There appeared to be a gap in some authorities between 'strategic listening' and 'practical listening'. For example some practitioner-based networks did not seem clear about if or how participation work was led and managed within their authority, and vice versa. This may be an area for development given the early stages of some of the networks, and differing levels of progress that authorities have made in regards to participation more generally. However, it is something worth considering in local authorities in order to maximise the effectiveness of each.

Engaging with 'change makers', in order to bring about a culture shift and raise the status of listening to young children, is a common objective for pilot authorities. Some specifically mentioned that this is something they would welcome support with from the ECU. Key individuals, at whom it was suggested resources or efforts could be targeted towards, included Directors of Children's Services and elected members.

In addition, developing a bank of both national and local evidence, about the impact of listening to children, emerged as a key facilitator in relation to trying to influence key decision-makers within local authorities. This gives the 'influencer' confidence in the arguments they put forward and 'adds weight' to what they are trying to achieve. Internally evaluating the impact that listening to children has had, both on services and the children themselves, is something that interviewees felt they would welcome support with.

In terms of influencing *practitioners*, the most impact was reported where existing listening work was recognised and rewarded as a basis for building a culture of listening. Building confidence in practitioners, and helping them understand listening as an overall ethos to their work, rather than an additional responsibility, was felt to enhance enthusiasm for developing practice.

The most common barrier for pilot authorities in developing their network was capacity, both time and financial. A small number of authorities have been able to overcome this by securing amounts of internal and external funding. This is used to provide staffing cover for practitioners to attend network meetings and co-ordination for the network. Interviewees felt that some financial input would provide more time and resources to develop networks to their potential. Increasing the profile of listening within authorities might in time attract further internal funding but there may be a need for someone to 'broker' internal capacity within LAs.

The full impact of developing YCVN networks, on local authority culture, services and children, is not yet captured. More in-depth case studies, involving several representatives within a number of local authorities, would allow a fuller exploration. This could include speaking to a wider range of practitioners and policy makers as well as children and parents, and could help explore listening practice with very young babies. Closer work with newly involved local authorities might also provide a better understanding of the very early stages of setting up a network and embarking on building a culture of listening.

In all, the current time is perfect for the roll out of the YCVN project. The Childcare Act and the Early Years Foundation Stage have created an imperative for local authorities to listen to young children. Internal passion and enthusiasm within local authorities for the work, coupled with the support available from the YCVN project, provide a valuable opportunity to increase the level at which young children's voices are reflected in local authority policy and practice.

Glossary of terms

CYP	Children and Young People
CYPP	Children and Young People's Plan
CWDC	Children's Workforce Development Council
DCS	Director of Children's Services
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
ECU	Early Childhood Unit
FE	Further Education
LAC	Looked After Children
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
NCB	National Children's Bureau
SEN	Special Education Needs
SENCO	Special Education Needs Co-ordinator
YCVN	Young Children's Voices Network

Appendix 1- Evaluation Tools

Young Children’s Voices Network Baseline Questionnaire

1. To what extent are young children (0-5 years) views being taken into account in the design, development and delivery of services in your local authority?

Local level	Design	A lot	Sometimes	Not at all
	Development			
	Delivery			
Strategic level	Design			
	Development			
	Delivery			

2. In what ways, locally and strategically, are you currently taking young children’s views into account?

Locally:
Strategically:

3. What methods are you using to collect these views?

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4. Have you set up your YCVN network? If **NO** go to Question 9.

Yes	
No	
In process	

5. If you **have** set up your network, was it built on any existing structures?

Early years QA group	
Participation Group	
CYPP/ Children’s Trust	
Other	

6. What are the terms of reference of your network i.e. it’s aims and objectives?

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7. If your network is up and running, what form does it take?

LA wide	
Covers a cluster of settings	
Covers an individual setting only	
Is theme based i.e. mental health	
Other	

8. If your network **is** up and running, who is included in the network (*please provide numbers if possible in as many categories as apply*)?

Type of setting	Type of Strategic Staff	
LA Children Centres	Head of Early Years	
LA Nursery	Head Teacher	
PVI Children's Centre	Local member	
PVI Nursery	LA Participation co-ordinator	
School Children's Centre	LA Quality assurance co-ordinator	
School Nursery	LA Health co-ordinator	
Special School Children's Centre	LA Inclusion / Diversity co-ordinator	
Special School Nursery	LA SENCO	
	Other:	
Type of practitioner	Type of Co-ordinator / Manager	
Practitioners from the voluntary sector	Children's Centre Manager	
Practitioners from the private setting	Head Teacher	
Practitioners from the statutory sector	Setting Participation co-ordinator	
Practitioners from Special needs settings	Setting Quality assurance co-ordinator	
Practitioners from Health	Setting Health co-ordinator	
Practitioner from other: e.g psychologist	Setting Inclusion / Diversity co-ordinator	
	Setting SENCO	
Parents	Other:	
Any one else you wish to include in the future?		

9. If you **haven't** yet started setting up your network, are you encountering any particular problems?

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10. How many settings have received training in listening to young children's (0-5 years) views?

None	Under 25%	25%	50%	75%	100%

11. What organisations have been involved in training?

LA	
Coram Family	
NCB	
Study tours	
Other (<i>please state</i>)	

12. What form has the training taken? (i.e. part of a wider training or specific to listening to children?)

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13. Is there anything that has been particularly helpful about the training that has been delivered?

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14. In what ways do you plan to use your network in the future?

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YCVN Evaluation- Telephone Interview Schedule

The REE Department at the National Children's Bureau is conducting the evaluation of the Young Children's Voices Network pilot project. We are currently interviewing lead contacts within each of the pilot Local Authorities. The evaluation will focus on:

- Identifying how your YCVN, and the ECU, have supported the development of a culture of listening to young children
- Identifying what has supported the development of a culture of listening to young children in local authorities
- Identifying factors that have hindered listening to young children in early years settings, both in relation to the YCVN, ECU and pilot local authorities.
- Making recommendations for ways of overcoming barriers and developing good practice in relation to the further development of the network.

Interviewee responses will be confidential to the evaluation team.

Background information

I'd like to start by discussing your role, responsibilities and network

- 1) **What is the name of your organisation and department?**
- 2) **Can you briefly outline your role and key responsibilities within the department?**
- 3) **Can you tell me about what your role is in relation to the local YCVN in your area? How are you involved? Did you help establish the network?**
- 4) **Can you give me a brief overview of your network and mechanisms in place to listen to young children in your area? How does it work? How often do you meet? Who has overall responsibility? Who works together on this? Are there any resources available for this? How are young children's voices heard? How do young children's voices inform policy and service design?**
- 5) **In what ways does the network consider the inclusion of *all* children including BME, SEN and disabled children? Do have any kind of policy or terms of reference around inclusion? How does this work in practice? Can you give any examples?**

Support from the Early Childhood Unit and central YCVN project team

I'd now like to ask you a few questions about the role ECU in helping you with your work

- 6) **What support have you had this year from ECU/ YCVN to developing your network locally? What kind of support? Resources? Practical advice? Peer support and opportunities to meet others? Training? Newsletter? Leaflets?**
- 7) **Thinking firstly in terms of developing your local network, how useful do you feel this support was in helping you with that? What makes you say this? Which particular aspects were most useful?**
- 8) **Secondly, thinking about developing a culture of listening to children more widely, how useful do you feel this support was in helping you with that? What makes you say this? Which particular aspects were most useful?**
- 9) **What other support from YCVN/ ECU do you think could have helped with this?**
- 10) **Overall, do you feel that the support met your needs? In what way? What makes you say this?**

Network progress since baseline questionnaire

I'd like to talk specifically about your progress in developing the network in your area

- 11) **What progress have you been able to make with the objectives you described when we spoke to you last? (Recap from notes in baseline data) Are there any other activities or progress that you can tell us about?**

- 12) **Which of these has been easiest to take forward?** *Which activities? What factors made them easier to progress with? Who else helped you with this?*
- 13) **Which of these has been most difficult or have you not been able to make progress with?** *What factors made them more difficult to progress with?*
- 14) **What would you say have been the main barriers or challenges in developing your network?** *How have you been able to overcome these? What has been useful? Who helped you with this?*

Developing a culture of listening to young children in local authorities

I'd like to talk a bit about developments in relation to developing a wider culture of listening to the views of children and young people within your local authority

- 15) **In your view, what has facilitated the development of a culture of listening within your local authority?** *What has helped this? Who have been the key players? Where have you been able to see an influence on services and policy? What other factors have played a part? Have you seen any shift in attitudes? What makes you say this? What do you feel is the potential for change? How do you think this impact can be demonstrated?*
- 16) **Do you feel that you have seen any impact as a result of the development of your network?** *Can you give examples of this? Have you seen any shift in attitudes since your network has been operational? What makes you say this? What do you feel is the potential for change? How do you think this impact can be demonstrated? What is the benefit of being part of a network?*
- 17) **And what do you feel have been the barriers?** *What or who has been most difficult to change or to influence? Is there anything you been able to do to overcome these?*
- 18) **What would your key pieces of advice be to someone who was just about to set up a network in their local authority?** *What do they need to consider? What are the most important things to have in place? Whose support is most useful?*

Future plans

Finally, I'd like to know a bit more about how you hope to continue the work of your network.

- 19) **What are your key short and long-term objectives in relation to developing both your network and a culture of listening to young children further?** *How would you like to see the network develop? What are the main things you would like to achieve in the next 12 months? How about in the longer term? How would you like to see policy and service design be influenced further?*
- 20) **Are there any other activities going on within the local authority, outside of the network, relating to developing a culture of listening to young children in your local authority?** *What kind of things? Who is leading on these? How will they link in to the work of the network?*
- 21) **What support would like to see offered by YCVN/ ECU to help you make progress towards your objectives?** *Information? Resources? Events? Support? What else would help you achieve these objectives?*
- 22) **How will the network be maintained after the life of the central YCVN ECU project?** *Who will have continued responsibility for the network? Where will the resources come from for this work?*
- 23) **Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that you think we should know?**

THANK YOU