



contact a family
for families with disabled children

VOICES

Making co-production a reality

Co-production: how do you know when you're really doing it?

The good news is you're not alone. Everyone with a responsibility under section 19 of the Children and Families Act 2014, or who is planning for their Ofsted/CQC joint local area inspection, has asked themselves this question. The difficulty is meaningful co-production can be hard to replicate - there is no one-size fits all approach. But now, for the first time, there is an agreed common framework, developed by local parent carers working in equal partnership with their local authority, which has also been adopted as best practice by the Department for Education's national SEN contractors. It is on this framework that VOICES is built.

Developed by Genuine Partnerships (a Community Interest Company representing the real partnership that has grown between Rotherham Parent Forum and their Local Authority) and Contact a Family (the DfE's national delivery partner for parent carer participation) VOICES is a unique training and support package that will help your local area create its very own authentic co-production framework based around the 'Four Cornerstones' of Rotherham's nationally acclaimed Co-Production Charter.



Above: Genuine Partnerships' Four Cornerstones of Co-production

Testimony

'It's been a day I'll remember for a long time and for all the right reasons. The work in Rotherham is inspiring.' (Parent, VOICES pilot)

'I feel grateful for being given the opportunity to speak...coming here today has made me feel better about myself...' (Young person, VOICES pilot)

'The Rotherham approach helped me to move my thinking on from co-production to think differently about implementation of working with families' (Statutory colleague, VOICES pilot)

'We felt better prepared for our Ofsted inspection. Presenting the portfolios of evidence was extremely well received; we were awarded 'outstanding' in every area.'
(Charter training participant).

From local breakthrough to national adoption

The development of VOICES



Rotherham Parents Forum's journey started in 2009 with the publication of the Lamb Inquiry¹ and an invitation to speak at a conference for school leaders and SENCos, at which a group of local authority practitioners were also presenting their narrative-based research on the experiences of local children and their families. Witnessing these narratives had a huge impact on everybody at the event and an incredible partnership between the Forum and their Local Authority was forged. The partners realised that the weight and authenticity of these stories could be harnessed to generate prompt action and a real will for culture change amongst all the agencies involved.

The power of narratives

This powerful insight spurred a growing team of parent carers and practitioners to make an innovative project bid, leading to the development of the 'Four Cornerstones' of the Rotherham Charter and [package of accompanying training and resources](#) for staff in local schools. Feedback was so positive that the work even influenced the development of the SEND code of practice within the Children and Families Act 2014. From here, demand for training, support and wider tools grew steadily within education, health and care settings and services. Once that demand reached a tipping point it was felt a different structure was needed and the Genuine Partnerships Community Interest Company (CIC) was born - formalising this unique relationship between a Forum and their Local Authority, and providing a joint platform through which to share knowledge and learning.

Local expertise, national scale

In 2017 Genuine Partnerships teamed up with Contact a Family (and other national partners in the newly-formed VOICES Alliance) to explore how to scale up their offer nationally for local areas right across England. A series of pilot sites began trialling a new 'VOICES' package – a distillation of several elements of the core Genuine Partnerships training package with a contextual focus on the joint CQC/Ofsted Local Area Inspections. Early results are hugely encouraging, and together with the input and guidance of the Alliance partners, Contact a Family and Genuine Partnerships are now developing structures to facilitate this scale-up.

Members of the
Genuine Partnerships Team



¹ The Lamb Enquiry: Special Educational Needs and Parental Confidence

About the VOICES Alliance

A common language of coproduction

VOICES

From the Alliance's terms of reference:

'The VOICES Alliance is a collaboration of SEND reform partners, Local Authorities and statutory organisations whose purpose is:

'To ensure that we have a nationally agreed framework, process and principles for whole area co-production and participation that can be used in partnership by all stakeholders in each local area (Social Care, Education, Families and Health) in England.

These should capture the shared values that all Alliance members have in relation to participation and co-production and reflect the intent of the Children and Families Act 2014 in ensuring Families, Parent Carers and Children and Young People are fully involved in individual and strategic decisions that affect them. They should also support The Health and Social Care Act (2012) and the NHS Constitution (2015) in which co-production at an individual and collective level is a core theme.'

'The Alliance seeks to achieve this by promoting the use and understanding of the cornerstones of co-production, which have been developed and quality assured as part of the Rotherham Charter and wider Genuine Partnerships model. The Alliance sees these cornerstones as a common language of co-production that will support Local Areas to develop their own locally agreed and understood approach to partnership working.'



Rotherham Charter



Members of the VOICES Alliance

At the heart of our package is the VOICES day, a structured and facilitated session led by skilled parent carers and practitioners working in equal partnership. The day is grounded in 'appreciative inquiry' - an optimistic, strength-based model that supports organisational change involving dialogue and working together, towards common hopes and aspirations.

Combining a 'social constructionist' perspective (understanding that people bring their experiences with them, hold onto constructs and language built up over time, sometimes as a defence) with action research, activity theory and positive psychology, the VOICES day recognises all assets in the local area, values all contributions and employs a restorative way of working to create a fresh platform for lasting co-production.

Co-production: the impact is in the doing

We believe the real value of VOICES is to be found in undertaking the process itself in coproduction - impact is realised within the relationship-building that takes place as a by-product of the session, and in the investment in your partnerships that the day symbolises. Our pilot testimony speaks to the psychological breakthrough that participants typically experience, and the profound impact this has on how they perceive and nurture their relationships going forward.

Using appreciative inquiry and a narrative-based, systemic approach

Appreciative inquiry is an optimistic, strength-based model supporting organisational change through people talking and working together towards common hopes. Narrative practice shows us that as they try to understand their own lives and those of others; people tell stories (narratives) to express meaning. These change over time and are collaborative - they are co-constructed.

Systemic practice involves being 'relational' - focusing on whole systems like families and organisations and the contribution everyone makes to sustaining the system. It also employs a critical (small c) narrative, because power imbalances are acknowledged and adjusted so that all voices can be heard equally; different versions of the same event are validated, blame is removed and relationships strengthened.

By applying a systemic, critical narrative approach the VOICES team deliberately prioritises the voices of children and young people and their parents and carers, avoiding assumptions and redressing a historic imbalance, and creating a fresh platform for change and growth.

Business case and anticipated outcomes

VOICES has been designed for those seeking an antidote to the limitations of target-driven culture, hierarchical procedure and low buy-in to local partnership working. We are using the pilots to develop an outcomes framework to fully describe the impact we seek to make, although anecdotally we are already witnessing impact in terms of creating a more fertile ground for partnership working, efficiencies in service delivery, improved parent carer and young people wellbeing and reduced likelihood of tribunals.

Participants and practical arrangements.

A typical VOICES day includes around 5 participants from each of the following groups, individuals and communities: Local Authority Education and SENDIASS / IS (1), Local Authority Social Care (2), Parent Carers (3), Young People (4), Schools and colleges, settings and providers (5) and Health partners (6). The total number participants are therefore usually around 30.

The day usually runs from 9am – 3.30pm with a staggered start and finish to make it parent and young person friendly. It is helpful to book one large room with a capacity of 40 plus two small meeting rooms for focus groups (taking up to 8.) The room may need to be accessible depending on the needs of attendees. Facilitators require access to power point, a projector, access to sound and a flipchart. Lunch is suggested to encourage informal networking and coproduction.

Typical agenda

The VOICES Day is usually structured as follows:

Time	Item
8:45	LA Education and LA Social Care arrive for Focus Groups /refreshments
9:00-9:45	Focus Groups LA Education (1) and LA Social Care (2)
9:30	Parents/Carers and Young People arrive for Focus Groups/refreshments
9:45-10:30	Focus Groups Parents/Carers (3) and Young People (4)
9.45-10.30	LA Education and LA Social Care refreshments/networking
10:15	Schools / colleges / settings / providers and health arrive. Refreshments
10.30-12.00	(All groups) Working together in partnership in your area - Part 1
1.00-2.30	(All groups) Working together in partnership in your area - Part 2
2.30-2.45	Finish for those involved in AM Focus Groups
2:30-2:45	Break for Schools/colleges/settings/providers and Health
2.45-3.30	Focus Groups Schools/colleges/settings/providers (5) and Health (6)

VOICES delivery team

A minimum of four facilitators is needed to run the day – two practitioners and two parent carers. Additional colleagues may shadow delivery as part of our scaling-up programme. When members of the team are not engaged in focus groups they will be with the other participants meeting, greeting and interacting - modelling the principles and cornerstones of co-production.

Focus Group Interviews

- Interviews are narrative-based and adopt an appreciative inquiry approach.
- Questions are purposefully open and follow the direction of the speakers.
- Two Focus Groups run simultaneously. Each interview takes about 30 - 45 minutes.

- Ground rules are established at the beginning to ensure participants feel they are in a safe, supportive space in which they might voice the 'not yet said'.
- Interviews are recorded to help with transcribing, so permissions will need to be gained in advance. However, any quotes used to illustrate good practice or areas for development will be anonymised.

VOICES report

In addition, a key output of the exercise is the VOICES report - an invaluable reference point, which we compile and ensure is fully agreed and endorsed by all partners involved. The report includes:

- **A full introduction** – with reference to your aims;
 - **An outline of the day's activity and evidence base;**
 - **Key local narratives under each of the four cornerstones**, with agreed group and individual actions to take forward. These narratives draw on the background information gathered by our research team, Local Area self-evaluation so far, the Focus Group interviews, large group activities and wider feedback;
 - **Extensive transcription** of participant quotes (anonymised).
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Expressions of Interest | Staying in touch

We are now open to expressions of interest for local areas considering a VOICES package.

To register your interest, enquire about cost or for further information on any aspect of this document please email Training@cafamilly.org.uk to log your enquiry and schedule a follow up discussion.

To keep up to date with Genuine Partnerships' wider training work, including the learning outcomes of individual courses, please [bookmark their website](#). You can also [follow the Rotherham Charter](#) on twitter.

In addition you can view Contact a Family's [menu of professional services](#) or join our professional community by [connecting with us on LinkedIn](#).