



# Rethinking parental partnership for pupils with SEN and disabilities in the current school context

June 2022

## SUMMARY

This Policy seminar on *Rethinking parental partnership for pupils with SEN and disabilities in the current school context*, took place on 21 March in person at Birkbeck College, London and online via zoom. It focussed on the following policy questions: 1. How have models of parental partnership changed and what have been the consequences of these changes?, 2. What has worked in engaging parents of pupils with SEN/disabilities in their children's education? 3. How can issues in parent-professional relationships beyond the school/college be best resolved? 4. What models of parental engagement are worth pursuing at a strategic/systems level?

Presentations were given by: i. Sharon Smith (Parent advocate) on an *Overview of parental partnership: assumptions, changes over time and consequences*; ii. Brian Lamb (Policy consultant) on *Parental engagement in schools and beyond: what works and the implications for SEND?*; iii. Chris Firth, Coventry SENDIASS) on *Planning, reviewing and resolving issues in parent-professional relationships beyond the school*; iv. Candy Holder, MBE, Head of Pupil Services, Islington, on *What models of parental engagement are worth pursuing at a strategic/systems level?* and v. Zara Bowden, Co-chair and coordinator, West Midlands Parent Carer Forum network on *What models of parental engagement are worth pursuing at a strategic/systems level.*

**Sharon Smith** shows how the term *partnership* has changed as the importance of the role of parents has been increasingly acknowledged. But, while the way parents are officially positioned within policy might have shifted, parents continue to face power imbalances and feel sidelined, powerless, isolated, angry and exhausted. The lack of clarity about the nature of the parent-professional partnership and the unequal roles parents and professionals continues to be problematic. Amongst other key questions, she asks whether parents need to be seen as 'equal' to have their views and experiences taken seriously and to have a meaningful role in decision making for their child?

**Brian Lamb** gives an overview of more than 20 years of research about parental engagement in terms of what works and the implications for SEND. He outlines a number of models of individual parental engagement at the school level and how parental engagement has mapped onto relevant legislation. He identifies different types of engagement with parents: i. Assessment: Parent/Professional, ii. Service Development/ Strategic influencing and iii. Purchasing and commissioning. He argues for a significant shift in professional practice, training, understanding and guidance if the potential benefits of parent engagement are to be realised. He concludes by drawing out specific implications for current SEN Review.

**Chris Firth**, from his role in an Information, Advice and Support Service, argues for the principle that parents have the right to be provided with unbiased, accurate and up-to-date information in order to make informed choices. This is based on recognising that parent-professional relationships across the education health and care sectors are crucial for supporting children and young people with SEND to achieve good outcomes. He identifies two key models, the "expert model" and the "negotiation model", assuming the latter is the more effective in achieving positive outcomes for children and young people with SEND. He identifies some key principles which should be at the heart of all parent/professional relationships and concludes with some key factors to increase success in parent/professional relationships, enable successful planning and reviewing and in resolving issues.

**Candy Holder** explains the development of parental engagement over time at a strategic level in the Special Educational Needs Service in the London Borough of Islington. This includes an account of the context of the authority and its development approach, which is set in the changing cycle of national policy and legislation, which is interpreted using the Schlesingers' Cyclical Theory. In 1996, Islington's service was awarded a Charter Mark for excellence in public service, which has been the basis for its development of the Islington Pyramid of Participation. This is based on the idea that parents want to be listened to and know that their views are being acted on. but not everyone wants to be co-producing at the higher levels of the ladder of participation. At the most recent local area inspection, no serious weaknesses were found. The right model for parental engagement is presented as based on developing the 'right culture'.

**Zara Bowden** gives a quick history of parent-carer forums. She addresses what is co-production; that it has a core meaning, but that it is interpreted in different ways. Joint working, individual co-production and strategic co-production are discussed in local, regional and national versions, reflecting representative and Individual models of co-production. Honest and transparent communication is identified as a key starting point. Various approaches are discussed; the Rotherham Charter approach, Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) 'think

local act personal' approach, the involvement strategies of the Integrated Care System (ICSs) and the Shropshire Bench model of co-production. The paper concludes with recommendations for what is next for co-production with parent carers in the SEND field.

**Summary of discussion groups:** Seminar participants addressed the seminar questions in a way that reflected and endorsed much of the content of the presentations. Changes in school structures and teacher availability were seen as factors that have affected current parental engagement. This was also expressed in the many strategies identified as relevant to engaging parents of pupils with SEN / disabilities. The three level model of co-production was appreciated by several groups as a model worth pursuing. Recommendations included, for example: changes to initial teacher training to focus more on managing supportive positive relationships with parents; not treating co-production as a tick box matter; the importance of courageous conversations with an appreciation of how difficult it is to have them; and to avoid polarized stereotypes of parents.

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## Section 1: Introduction

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### SEN Policy Research Forum

The SEN Policy Research Forum, which organised this seminar, incorporates the aims and work of the previous SEN Policy Options group in a new format and with some expanded aims. The Forum's website is at:

<https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk>

The Forum is concerned with children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities from pre-school to post 16 (0-25 years). It will cover the whole of the UK and aims to:

1. provide timely policy review and critique through policy seminars, policy papers and a website blog,
2. promote debate,
3. set longer term agendas – acting like a think-tank,.
4. deliberate and examine policy options in the field.
5. inform research and development work in the field.
6. promote learning on knowledge transfer between academic, policy and professionals.
7. establish robust routes to media outlets.

The Forum recognises alternative UK terms, such as 'additional support needs' and 'additional learning needs' as well as the uncertainties over what counts as 'special educational needs' and 'disabilities' in relation to a wider issues about provision requirements. These will be among the many issues examined through the Forum

The Forum, which continues the work of the SEN Policy Options group has been continuing this work since 1993 for over 28 years. It started as an ESRC seminar series with some initial funding from the Cadbury Trust. The Forum appreciates the generous funding from NASEN and the Pears Foundation to enable it to function, though it operates independently of these organisations.

**Lead group and coordination of the Forum:**

Dr Peter Gray - Policy Consultant (co-coordinator)  
Professor Brahm Norwich - University of Exeter (co-coordinator)  
Yoland Burgess - Young People's Education and Skills, London Councils  
Professor Julie Dockrell – UCL Institute of Education  
Annamarie Hassall - CEO nasen  
Dr Beate Hellowell - Lewisham local authority  
Dr Brian Lamb - Policy consultant  
Professor Geoff Lindsay - University of Warwick  
Penny Richardson - Policy Consultant  
Chris Robertson - SENCO Forum; University of Birmingham  
Sharon Smith – Parent of young person with SEN  
Dr Rob Webster – Portsmouth University  
Professor Klaus Wedell - UCL, Institute of Education  
Julie Wharton - Winchester University  
Nick Whittaker – Learn Sheffield.

**Membership:**

If you would like to join the Forum, go to the website and follow link to register as a member. You will be invited to future seminars and be able to participate in discussion through the blog on the SENPRF website for joining instructions.

<https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk>

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**Past Policy Papers (see website for downloadable copies of the 46 policy papers since 1993; <https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk/past-policy-papers/> )**

Here is list of policy papers since 2018:

1. Policy for SEND and Inclusion: examining UK national and some European differences. Chris Robertson, Alfons Timmerhuis Niels Egelund and Camilla Brørup Dyssegaard, Cecilia Simón and Gerardo Echeita and Richard Rieser. 2018
2. Exclusions, barriers to admission and quality of mainstream provision for children and young people with SEND: what can be done? Jules Daulby, Louise Gazeley, Nicola Furey and James Roach. 2019
3. Accountability, performance management and inspection: how to enable positive responses to diversity? Jonathan Roberts, Nick Whittaker, Jane Starbuck and Robin Banerjee. 2020
4. A review of policy in the field of special needs and inclusive education since the 1990s Lorna Selfe, Robin C. Richmond with Peter Gray and Brahm Norwich. 2020

5. Trends in SEN identification: contexts, causes and consequences, Jo Hutchinson, Sami Timimi and Neil McKay, 2020.
6. Learning from the Covid crisis for educating children and young people with SEN / disabilities. Amy Skipp, Sharon Smith and Dominic Wall. March 2021.
7. How are schools coping with the impact of Covid-19 on the teaching of pupils with SEN: lessons for schools. Amelia Roberts, Beate Hellowell and Tricia Mahoney. June 2021

## Section 2:

### Overview of parental partnership: assumptions, changes over time and consequences

Sharon Smith

#### Introduction

The Children & Families Act 2014 and the Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND) Code of Practice both came into force on 1 September 2014 in an attempt 'to overhaul the management of special educational needs', introducing a reformed system that was 'proclaimed to be less confrontational for parents' (Burch, 2018:95). The reforms, which were regarded by some as 'the biggest shake up of SEND in 30 years' (Ward & Vaughan, cited in Webster & Blatchford, 2017:17), are understood to have their 'origins in findings from the 2009 Lamb Inquiry, which found 'low levels of parental confidence in the SEND system', which was seen by parents as 'dysfunctional' and which was 'a major source of stress and anxiety for families' (Webster & Blatchford, 2017:17). The Inquiry called for parents 'to be listened to more and brought into a partnership with statutory bodies in a more meaningful way' (Lamb, 2009:3). One of the key recommendations of the Lamb Inquiry was strengthening the voice of parents. This can now be seen in the current legislation which places a greater emphasis on partnership working within a system that is 'proclaimed to be less confrontational for parents' (Burch, 2018:95) as it places children, young people and their parents 'at the heart of the SEND identification, provision and reviewing processes' (Hellawell, 2018:165).

Holland & Pell (2017) describe how the 'direction of travel is along the lines of empowering parents and giving them a greater role in the SEND process' (Holland & Pell, 2017:308). The increased 'level of engagement of families and amplification of their voices was seen as central to overcoming parents' frustrations with the existing system' which could be achieved 'by improving the processes of co-production' (Webster & Blatchford, 2017:18). Co-production requires professionals to have regard to 'the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person, and the child's parents' (DfE, 2015:19) regarding individual provision, as well as parental involvement in decisions relating to the commissioning of local services (Hellawell, 2018:165; DfE, 2015:14). Partnership working between parents of children and young people with Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) therefore continues to be promoted as an 'unquestionable ideal' (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008:638). However, partnership working has not been consistently embedded in education, health and care, as illuminated during the recent Covid19 crisis (Hellawell et al, forthcoming) and parents continue to feel that their 'views are not listened to and their presence is tokenistic' (Green & Edwards, 2021:142). Power imbalances are inherent within the SEND system, and parents are frequently seen as 'part of the problem' as they make 'unreasonable demands' (Green & Edwards, 2021:143).

My intention within this discussion paper is therefore to question whether current conceptions of parent partnership are an unquestionable ideal, by highlighting some issues and asking questions about the way that partnership working between parents and professionals is being presented within current SEND policy and practice. I will initially provide a brief history of parent partnership in SEND policy, before discussing the shifting

role of parents and the possible implications of these changes. Through these discussions I will demonstrate that ideas relating to parent engagement and participation are not static and are always shifting, which of course means they can still be imagined differently. Rather than drawing any definitive conclusions, my intention is to raise questions about parent participation and co-production to invite further dialogue about what type of partnership working will result in meaningful changes for children and young people with SEND, as the existing approaches are clearly still not working. These questions feel timely following the recently published green paper - *SEND review: right support, right place, right time*, within which co-production continues to be 'a fundamental principle of the SEND system' (DfE & DHSC, 2022:28). The government plans to introduce consistent 'standards on co-production with children, young people, parents and carers' (DfE & DHSC, 2022:28), and is inviting input as to what these standards should be. Implicit within this statement is that co-production is here to stay, so it is vitally important that there is more engagement about what forms of partnership are actually beneficial or desired by children, young people and their parents, and what role co-production plays within a system that continues to be beset with problematic practices and difficult relationships. Although engagement with children and young people with SEND is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to recognise the potential tensions inherent within parental advocacy and allyship. Useful discussions of parents as allies can be found in Ryan & Runswick-Cole (2008) and Carey et al (2020).

### **A brief history of the role of parents within the SEND system**

Prior to the 1944 Education Act, children who were suspected to be disabled or feeble-minded were subject to an examination by medical and school inspectors, which led to some being classified as 'imbeciles' or 'defective' (Tomlinson, 1981:37). The medical profession, who were developing an interest in sub-normality, were deemed to be the only people who could examine and classify children, and there was 'wide acceptance' in society that it was the right thing to do to 'segregate these children from the rest of society' (Humphries & Gordon, 1992:66-7). Parents were not involved in the decision making. The 1944 Education Act started to bring special education under the general education framework (Tomlinson, 1981:43). The Act introduced the label 'educationally subnormal', bringing together those previously termed as mentally deficient or feeble-minded, and the larger group of 'backward children' (Tomlinson, 1981:43). These were the children who were deemed 'appropriate for special schools' (Tomlinson, 1981:47). Others were still seen as unsuitable for education in schools, as the 'severely subnormal' would still be catered for in hospitals or special care units (Tomlinson, 1981:44, 52). The Local Education Authority (LEA) had a duty of 'discovering children whose disability of mind 'is of such a nature or to such an extent' that they be passed to the local health authority' (Tomlinson, 1981:45). They were given powers that required parents to submit their child for medical examination and if they failed to comply, parents were liable to be fined (Tomlinson, 1981:250). If the medical examiner decided that a child needed special educational treatment, the LEA would give parents notice of their decision. There was minimal parental involvement in the process, as there was no statutory mechanism built into the Act for consulting or involving parents in decisions about their child and the medical examiner was not required to visit the home or meet the parents (Tomlinson, 1981:46-48).



During the 1950s, some parents started to recognise the learning capabilities of their children and began to challenge the ‘pervasive – and limiting – notion of ineducability’ as well as the dominance of medical professionals (Webster, 2019:2). Parents started to lobby government, and some parents of disabled children came together to set up and fund new special schools to improve outcomes for their children (Wedell, 2019:24). The 1970 Education (Handicapped Children) Act granted all children of compulsory school age a legal right to an education and recommended that parents should be involved in the decision-making process. Once all children with SEND were entitled to an education, the notion of parental partnership was introduced and has continued to evolve within SEND policy. The Warnock Report (1978) first introduced the ‘notion of parental partnership in decision-making’ for children labelled with Special Educational Needs (McKay & Garratt, 2013:738). The report opens with an assertion that the Committee ‘have insisted throughout this report that the successful education of children with special educational needs is dependent upon the full involvement of their parents: indeed, unless the parents are seen as equal partners in the educational process the purpose of our report will be frustrated’ (DES, 1978:150). The report included a whole chapter entitled ‘Parents as Partners’ (DES, 1978:150-161). The notion of parent partnership being introduced in the Warnock Report has a clearly defined focus. Parents were seen as valuable sources of information about their individual child, due to their ‘more intimate experience’ of their child (DES, 1978:155), which allows parents to ‘point to an aspect that the professional has overlooked or has insufficiently considered’ (DES, 1978:152). Parents were to be ‘advised, encouraged and supported’ to ‘effectively help their children’ by carrying out educational programmes devised by teachers at home, after being told what was wrong with them (DES, 1978:150,152). It is important to note that Warnock was clear that she did not see parents as ‘educational equals’ as this would challenge the position of teachers as ‘true professionals’; instead, the intention was to view the education of a child as ‘a joint enterprise’ where professionals, rather than parents, would have the last word (Green & Edwards, 2021:143).

### **The role of parents shaped by policy**

Since this time, there have been three statutory Codes of Practice in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disability – 1994, 2001 and the current version published in 2015 following the SEND reforms. Within both 1994 and 2001 Codes, the primary focus is on parents being ‘professional aides’ who are required ‘to provide information and carry out the advice of professionals’ in relation to their child’s education and individual interventions (Todd, 2003:282), which is in line with Warnock’s view about parent partnership. Mann et al (2020) describe how ‘implicit in the 1994 document was the idea that teachers’ views were driven by rationality, whereas parents’ views were driven by anxiety’ and they claim that such views ‘clearly undermine the commitment to equal partnership’. Parents are described as being potentially ‘anxious and defensive’, with LEAs being required to ‘give parents sufficient time and information in order to discuss their anxieties’ (DfE, 1994:52,106). Information should be presented to parents ‘in a manner that is not intimidating and which encourages participation and open discussion’ (DfE, 1994:52). The Code also describes how the identification of SEN might ‘be alarming’ to parents, who may ‘feel they are being blamed for their child’s difficulties’ (DfE, 1994:23). The LEA is required to make ‘every effort’ to ensure that ‘parents are happy’ with a proposed Statement of Special Educational needs after a statutory assessment and that they consider that their ‘wishes and feeling have been

given full and sensitive consideration' (DfE, 1994:106).

The 2001 Code also includes the idea of parent participation, stating that parents should be 'fully involved in the school-based response for their child' as it is 'vitaly important that schools welcome and encourage parents to participate from the outset' (DfES, 2001:17). Schools are required to remove 'barriers to participation' and encourage active partnership; parents have a responsibility to 'communicate effectively' to support their child's education and fulfil their obligations under home-school agreements (DfES, 2001:18). As seen in the 1994 Code, parents should be consulted and kept informed of the action being taken to support their child (DfES, 2001:34,36). Within the 2001 Code, parents were similarly 'positioned as holding "key information" rather than as being key decision-makers in their children's education' (Mann et al 2020). Again, discussion of parental emotions is seen in the 2001 Code (DfES, 2001) describing how parents may find the assessment process 'very stressful' and many need 'additional personal support' so can be accompanied to meetings by friends or family (DfES, 2001:115), or that parents 'may become confused' as the process will be 'new and unknown' (DfES, 2001:77). The Code describes how partnerships between parents and professionals can 'be challenging' (DfES, 2001:16) and parents might have had 'disappointing' experiences of working with professionals (DfES, 2001:27). It also describes how parents might be 'worried' about their child's future (DfES, 2001:30). Within this narrative there is potentially no space for a conception of a proactive and knowledgeable parent who is 'engaged in strategic, sometimes actively combative relations with professionals to obtain the care and services they perceived as necessary for children's well-being' (McKeever, & Miller, 2004:1189).

This language in the previous codes of practice is in stark contrast to the current Code of Practice that was published in 2015, which does not really discuss parents' feelings, but instead uses language more likely to be seen in the world of business, requiring instead for parents to both 'participate effectively' (DfE, 2015:21) and feel a 'sense of co-ownership' of services (DfE, 2015:31). Instead of practitioners needing to ensure that parents are 'happy' (DfE, 1994:106), local authorities now need to ensure 'customer satisfaction' (DfE, 2015:31). The procedural language of commissioning and parental strategic engagement leaves little room for anxiety, dissatisfaction, or alarm. Therefore, whilst a move away from deficit orientated language being used to describe interactions with parents might be seen as positive, the removal of all emotion and the requirement of parents to be effective and to take on responsibility for more than the education of their own child could potentially be problematic for parents.

### **Current SEND legislation**

Section 19 of the Children and Families Act 2014 sets out the principles underpinning the legislation and the guidance in the SEND Code of Practice. The principles are intended to support several aims, including 'the participation of children, their parents and young people in decision making' and 'greater choice and control for young people and parents over support' (DfE, 2015:19). Whilst parent participation is a key principle of the SEND reforms, parent participation is only explicitly mentioned two times in the Code. There is no clear and precise definition of 'participation' within the SEND Code of Practice, indeed it is even missing within the glossary of definitions provided. Equally within the SEND Code of practice, co-production is only mentioned once in relation to the Local offer, stating that LAs

should involve children, young people and parents in the production of the Local Offer 'in a way which ensures that children, young people and parents feel they have participated fully in the process and have a sense of co-ownership' (DfE, 2015:31).

Therefore, although co-production and parent participation are intended to be underlying principles that should direct how the rest of the policy is enacted in practice, they appear to defy any clear definition. Instead, the SEND Code of Practice briefly describes the benefits of participation, discusses the criteria that lead to 'effective participation' and provides a few practical recommendations, such as local authorities holding meetings in school hours and providing sufficient notice for parents to find suitable childcare (DfE, 2015:22, 63). It describes how parent participation is deemed 'effective' when 'it is recognised, valued, planned and resourced (for example, through appropriate remuneration and training); it is evident at all stages in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services; there are clearly described roles for children, young people and parents; there are strong feedback mechanisms to ensure that children, young people and parents understand the impact their participation is making' (DfE, 2015:22). Parents are therefore not only required to engage with professionals and participate in decision making that relates to their own child, but the SEND Code of Practice requires parents to agree shared outcomes at a service and strategic level (DfE, 2015:46) and to participate in the 'design or commissioning of services' and the 'provision of information, advice and support' in a way that ensures both that those services meet local needs and that there is a 'sense of co-ownership' (DfE, 2015:31). There is no guidance provided on how to achieve a sense of co-ownership, or why a sense of co-ownership is necessary or desired by parents.

Given the lack of clarity about parent participation and co-production within the current SEND Code of Practice, 'how to' information, such as that published by Contact, the DfE's delivery partner for parent participation, can offer an insight into the way that parent participation is currently being interpreted in practice. Contact describes how '[e]ffective parent carer participation happens when parents have conversations with, and work alongside, professionals, in order to design, develop and improve services. This conversation benefits everyone'; this approach 'requires real commitment from parents and professionals' (Contact a Family, 2012:3-4). The aim of parent participation is to welcome parent carers to the strategic decision-making process 'as full partners from the start', in order to deliver 'meaningful shared ownership of the outputs and outcomes' (Britton & Taylor, 2013:3, 8). When working in co-production, parents 'are not there just to illustrate the experiences of service users but rather to take responsibility to help shape future experiences and be an active part of delivering the solutions' (Britton & Taylor, 2013:4). Co-production requires all parties to work in partnership with each other and is a process that involves co-operation, compromise and equal relationships. Although Warnock envisaged parents helping to support the needs of educators, now parent carers not only have to do this for their own child but also there is an expanded role of needing to engage with shaping services too.

Furthermore, within the Code, local authorities are also 'actively encouraged' to work with Parent Carer Forums, who are 'representative local groups of parents and carers of children and young people with disabilities' (DfE, 2015:22). McKay & Garrett (2013) describe how there are several existing 'models of participation', representing different ways in which

service users can influence or be influenced by service providers (McKay & Garrett, 2013:736). It is frequently Arnstein (1969)'s ladder of participation that is used to illustrate ways of understanding parent participation (McKay & Garrett, 2013:736), including by parent carer forums who have adapted it for their own purposes and training of parents. Within this hierarchical model it suggests that co-production and participation are the ways of engagement that should be strived for, situated at the top of the ladder, as they enable a way to work together and to share responsibility and power. This fails to recognise that parent engagement is more like a 'messy web of interactions' than a clear progression up each step on a ladder, and there cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach to parent partnership (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014:400).

Additionally, parents involved in participation through parent carer forums are encouraged to adopt a professional, rational and calm approach, to understand and accept 'the constraints and limitations placed on services', and to agree a 'workable and realistic solution' (Contact a Family, 2016). Yet being a parent of a disabled child naturally involves a wide range of emotions, including frustration or anger (Gabel, 2008:560) or shame, guilt, and helplessness (Cohen & Mosek, 2019:5). These emotions were recognised in previous Codes of Practice, albeit in a way that potentially placed parents in a deficit position again of needing support, but they are no longer discussed in relation to parent partnership, despite parents feeling a range of emotions in relation to their engagement within the SEND system.

Although parents, such as those contributing to the Lamb Inquiry, stated that they wanted to be more involved in decision making and to feel less disempowered, it could be argued that for most parents this is more likely to have been in relation to their own child's support and education, rather than any strong desire to engage in strategic discussions and decision making. Parents of children labelled with SEND already face additional calls on their time, such as medical appointments and are more likely to be experiencing issues such as mental health issues, poverty, marriage breakdown, illness and isolation, so this adds significant responsibility for families who may already be feeling stressed and anxious (Aumann & Britton, 2014:14-16). Therefore, it is likely only to be a minority of parents who have the cognitive, physical, mental and financial capacity needed - or indeed the inclination - to want to engage strategically.

### **Final thoughts**

Green & Edwards have described how 'the term *partnership* has changed as the importance of the role of parents has been increasingly acknowledged' (Green & Edwards, 2021:142). Yet, whilst the way parents are officially positioned within policy might have shifted, parents continue to face power imbalances and feel 'sidelined, powerless, isolated, angry and exhausted' (Green & Edwards, 2021:141). Despite 'a plethora of writing and research' existing about parent-professional partnership, these relationships continue, in practice, to be 'highly problematic', and 'parents continue to feel disempowered' (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008:637-639). Hodge & Runswick-Cole (2008) describe how the 'initial aim of the "partnership with parents" policy and rhetoric was to reduce conflict and to make the system less adversarial... the lack of clarity about the nature of the parent-professional partnership and the unequal roles parents and professionals seem to have been assigned within the policy is problematic' (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008:639). Parents also face the risk of being labelled as 'difficult' unless they agree with professionals' decisions based on

their expert knowledge, in a system that still appears to devalue parents' intimate knowledge of their child (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008:639).

As Norwich & Eaton (2015) describe 'one of the hallmarks of the new system is adopting and extending current principles and practices and changing their terms of reference' (Norwich & Eaton, 2015:121). They further argue that the new legislation and associated Code of Practice 'represent much less change than its official presentation and dissemination imply. Changing names does not imply basic change...' (Norwich & Eaton, 2015:130). Therefore, it could be argued that the underlying SEND system has not changed significantly, rather the language of parent participation and co-production has been an add-on, without the necessary shifts in policy, practice or culture. As Green & Edwards (2021) describe, 'the sense that parents are in a constant state of war with the system and the professionals who represent it remains strong' (Green & Edwards, 2021:149).

When the current SEND system was being developed, then MP Edward Timpson stated that 'a change in the law isn't enough. It must go hand in hand with a change in culture to make a real difference' (Timpson, 2013). This change in culture is long overdue. However, the suggested shift in parent partnership that attempts to make parents 'equal partners' in decision making might not be possible within a system where professionals ultimately have the legal duties to meet, are responsible for resource allocation and are the ones who ultimately have the authority to make the final decisions. As Hodge & Runswick-Cole describe, the policy for parent-professional partnerships can actually be the 'source of potential conflict and tension' (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008:639). Parents might not want to develop the skills and knowledge needed to engage with strategic decision-making processes, instead they may simply wish for their experiences and views to be taken seriously by the professionals they are working with, for the benefit of their child. With the SEND Green Paper consultation in progress, this is an ideal time to be thinking about what meaningful parent engagement might look like, and to ask whether co-production as it is currently being presented within policy and local practice is necessarily the ideal for children, young people and their families. Whilst a lack of clear definition might be a positive step, allowing parents and professionals to negotiate what participation looks like locally, the risk is that this leads to inaction and problematic relationships as the status quo.

To draw this paper to a close, I would like to pose the following questions, which I feel warrant further discussion:

- Do parents need to be seen as 'equal' to have their views and experiences taken seriously and to have a meaningful role in decision making for their child?
- What is the relationship between individual and strategic co-production, and do all parents have the same ability and desire to engage in strategic co-production?
- How can the emotional nature of parenting a child labelled with SEND be recognised within co-production, without resorting to deficit language about either the child or the parent?
- Has the rhetoric of parent partnership and co-production and the shift in narrative towards rational engagement potentially led to even greater focus on formal routes to secure services (EHCPs, tribunal appeals) rather than relationship building and local determination of how to work together?

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### **Section 3:**

#### **Parental engagement<sup>i</sup> in the early years, schools and beyond: what works and the implications for SEND?**

Brian Lamb

##### **The Context**

Securing parental confidence and trust in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) system has been a part of successive Government aims in reforming legislation and provision. The importance of parental engagement in securing better outcomes for children with SEND was introduced in Warnock's seminal 1978 report (Warnock, 1978 sec 4.21, 9.19, 12.1). Since then the requirement to ensure parental engagement has been increasingly codified in guidance, culminating in the recent 2014 reforms (DfE, 2011; DfE, 2014) which strengthened legislative rights for parents building on the existing Warnock framework (Lamb, 2019).

The education system has historically suffered from low expectations for children with SEND (Lamb, 2009). One of the key aims of the 2014 reforms was to support greater aspiration and achievement for children with SEND (DfE, 2011). However, there has only been limited success in securing these aims as Ofsted (2021) noted "The ambitions that education settings have for children and young people with SEND, and the effectiveness with which these ambitions are realised, vary widely." In reviewing parental experiences in ten local areas they found that the majority of parents thought that since 2014 outcomes had not improved and they had not received the services necessary to deliver those outcomes (Ofsted, 2021). Yet parental engagement can make a decisive difference in the quality of provision, "In the best area SEND arrangements, children and families will tell us they are influential in decision-making" (Ofsted 2021). Progression and attainment figures also reflect a failure to achieve the reforms stated aims. At key stage 2, 22% of pupils with SEN meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths compared to 74% with no identified SEN and at key stage 4, only 27% achieve GCSE grades 4 or above in English and maths compared to 71% of children with no identified SEN. (DfE2020b).

##### **Parental engagement and the Reforms.**

The Code of Practice (CoP, 2015) recognises that "effective parent participation can lead to a better fit between families' needs and the services provided, higher satisfaction with services, reduced costs (as long-term benefits emerge), better value for money and better relationships between those providing services and those using them." (DfE 2015, par 4.13). What has been less focused on in the implementation of the legislation is the role that parental engagement in early years and schools can play in improving progression, attainment and wider outcomes. While the focus on 'every teacher is a teacher of SEND' is constantly reiterated in DfE policy we need to ensure that good parental engagement is a key part of our understanding of what this entails.

##### **Research on the impact of parental engagement**

As Goodall noted "It is not clear why the findings of more than 20 years of research about the value of parental engagement (for)... children's learning has for the most part been

ignored in school processes and policies.” (Goodall, 2018). While the evidence is very clear that parental engagement improves attainment, part of what we have lacked is “the ‘engineering’ science that helps us put our knowledge into practice.” (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003 p90). Gorard et al., (2012) concluded that previous approaches had failed to identify the “active ingredient” for successful programmes for disadvantaged groups of pupils. Conceptual confusion in defining parental engagement has also led to difficulty in aligning specific approaches or interventions with outcomes from parental engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

There is extensive research, including a number of meta-analysis, systematic reviews and literature reviews, on different aspects of the impact of parent engagement on progression, attainment, improved behaviour and wellbeing. While this paper is not an attempt to provide an overall synthesis or systematic review of this research it is helpful to pick out some of the key conclusions of those reviews and their relevance for early years and school practice. This is given more impetus given the renewed focus in the White Paper on Education (DfE 2022b) on parental engagement through the proposed ‘parental pledge’. A commitment to report to parents if their child is falling behind in English and maths and provide tailored support to the child. This is linked to the SEND Review’s aspiration to improve outcomes though it is not clear that any specific model of engagement is envisaged (DfE 2022a).

We still need further research and evaluation of what specific elements of parental engagement are most effective in supporting better outcomes (Ateş, 2021; O’Toole et al., 2019) but within the current research there are consistent indications as to which interventions and approaches are most effective in improving progression, attainment, behaviour and wellbeing (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Selection of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis on the Impact of Parental Engagement on progression, attainment and outcomes.**

Desforges & Abouchaar (2003 p4) reviewed the evidence on parental engagement on attainment for the DfE and found that; “The most important finding....is that parental involvement in the form of ‘at-home good parenting’ has a significant positive effect on children’s achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation.”
Reviews of parental engagement in children’s learning with a focus on attainment for children from different backgrounds (Gorard et al., 2012) found that; ‘parental involvement in their child’s learning’ was the only area with sufficient evidence to suggest a causal model for impact on pupil attainment and narrowing the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds.
A meta-analysis of 51 studies by (Jeynes, 2012) found that “Parental involvement programs, as a whole, were associated with higher academic achievement”.
A rapid review of evidence (Menzies, 2013 p3) on the best ways of supporting attainment for low income families found that parental engagement is most effective when; “it is collaborative, builds strong relationships and focuses on learning; Schools meet parents on their own terms by tapping into their needs and interests, creating environments that feel comfortable to them and involving other members of their community.”

Wilder (2014) found that the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was found to be consistent across different grade levels and ethnic groups in an analysis of nine meta-analyses; “the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was positive, regardless of a definition of parental involvement or measure of achievement. Furthermore, the findings revealed that this relationship was strongest if parental involvement was defined as parental expectations for academic achievement of their children.”

A meta-analysis of 37 studies found that “The results show that the parental models most linked to high achievement are those focusing on general supervision of the children’s learning activities. The strongest associations are found when the families have high academic expectations for their children, develop and maintain communication with them about school activities, and help them to develop reading habits.” (Castroa et al., 2015)

(Higgins & Katsipataki, 2015) reviewed 13 meta-analyses on how school-home partnerships improve parental involvement and impact on school-aged children’s cognitive and academic outcomes concluded that; “There is consistent evidence about the extent of impact from general approaches (three to six months average additional gain for children’s educational outcomes), and for targeted intervention (four to six months).....parental involvement, where school, family and community partnerships are developed to support and improve children’s learning in school, offers a realistic and practical approach that has consistent evidence of beneficial impact on children and young people’s attainment”.

A systematic review (Boonk et al., 2018) found that the types of engagement which showed a correlation with academic achievement included high expectations or aspirations, communication between parents and school, parental encouragement for learning and reading at home.

In a literature review of primary years education and parental engagement O’Toole et al., (2019 p71) found that; “There is extensive evidence that parental involvement and engagement with children’s learning linked to partnerships between the home and school, has immediate and long-term effects, regarding children’s behaviour, social and emotional development, academic achievement and enjoyment of school.”

An Education Endowment Fund review based on 97 studies found that; “The average impact of the parental engagement approaches is about an additional four months’ progress over the course of a year. There are also higher impacts for pupils with low prior attainment.” (EEF, 2021)

The focus of these reviews is wider than families with children identified with SEND. Generally they do not account for the specific barriers parents of children with SEND face in engaging with schools and settings or the specific learning barriers that some children identified with SEND will experience which impacts on their progression and attainment. Nevertheless, there is no reason to think that the general conclusions on the benefit of parental engagement will not apply to parents of children identified with SEND, especially as a number of these reviews found that the importance for disadvantaged children with lower prior attainment was greater. There are specific studies which also confirm the positive impact of parental engagement for children with SEND (Barlow & Humphrey, 2012; Blandford & Knowles, 2013; Lendrum et al., 2015). More broadly, the principles “for

educating pupils with SEND are the same as for educating any other pupil.” (Cullen et al., 2020 p15).

Some of the conclusions to come out of these research reviews chime with key themes of the SEND review, White Paper and the aspirations of the original SEND reforms. Improved progression, attainment and wider outcomes are improved by;

- high and sustained parental aspirations (which should also be mirrored by high teacher aspirations);
- collaboration and partnership between home and school in supporting the learning needs of the child;
- parental engagement focused on learning needs and a dialogue between schools and home;
- working with parents on their own terms in a systematic way;
- specific programmes supporting reading and literacy interventions at home, targeted programmes across a range of skills, improved communication between home and school, interventions aimed at emotional and behaviour that can impact on learning outcomes (O’Toole et al., 2019).

If high quality teaching is the most impactful influence for children in school (DfE, 2022b) then the parental engagement needs to be seen as a crucial component of high quality teaching. Parental engagement is a critical means of closing the progression and achievement gap for children with SEND as well as ensuring the wider benefits that engagement may bring around securing parental confidence and trust.

### Potential Models of Parental Engagement

There are a number of models of individual parental engagement at the school level which have been developed on the basis of evaluations of specific types of approaches. They share a number of key elements (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Models of parent engagement at school level**

Approach	Key Elements
<p>The structured conversation aimed to ensure that parents had the chance to share the knowledge of their child with teachers and professionals and be engaged in an on-going process of agreeing outcomes and reviewing these. It was part of a wider whole school approach to improving outcomes for children with SEND including teaching support, school leadership and supporting wider outcomes following on from the Lamb Inquiry (2009; DCSF 2009).</p>	<p>The conversation has four stages, <b>Explore</b> stage, seeking a better understanding of learning needs; <b>Focus</b> stage to clarify key issues, <b>Plan</b> stage parents and staff set challenging but achievable targets; Final <b>Review</b> stage summarise the key points of the meeting, clarify the next steps. Lendrum et al., (2015) in a follow on study concluded that parental engagement though the structured conversation had led to;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ more effective and constructive partnerships between Parents/Carers and the school community;</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ enhanced Parent/Carer, pupil, and teacher aspirations for pupil achievement;</li> <li>■ improved quality of information-flow between Parents/Carers and the school;</li> <li>■ increased confidence and the ability to address barriers to pupil achievement and outcomes;</li> <li>■ contributed to significant improvements in progression.</li> </ul>
Following a review of different approaches Goodall (2017) suggests the following typology for moving from the current ways in which parental engagement is conceptualised in schools to a more empowering model of engagement.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. School staff and parents participate in supporting the learning of the child</li> <li>2. School staff and parents value the knowledge that each brings to the partnership</li> <li>3. School staff and parents engage in dialogue around and with the learning of the child</li> <li>4. School staff and parents act in partnership to support the learning of the child and each other</li> <li>5. School staff and parents respect the legitimate authority of each other's roles</li> </ol>

What these models have in common is a focus on supporting the learning needs of the child through professionals and parents working together. The structured conversation, together with more recent insights from reviews and models developed, could be used to inform an approach for achieving better engagement in early years, schools and in EHCP assessments. This approach could form the basis for training in parental engagement from initial ITT onwards which could be reflected in a revised Code of Practice and the newly proposed national standards for SEND (DfE, 2022a).

Reviews on what needs to be in place to ensure good parental engagement can be mapped against the requirements in the legislation to provide a starting point for thinking about school or settings planning of effective parental engagement (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Areas of parental engagement mapped onto relevant legislation**

<b>Areas for Effective Parental Engagement</b> from Goodall, & Vorhaus. (2011).	<b>Relevant Legislative Requirements</b>
<b>Planning</b> -Parental engagement must be planned for and embedded in a whole school or service strategy.	Individual Schools and settings level; Schools SEN Policy / Schools Information Report / Equality Act Planning duties. Strategic level; through the Local Offer and general service planning and design.
<b>Leadership</b> -Effective leadership of parental engagement is essential to the success of programmes and strategies.	Schools Accountability Measures with Ofsted / Equality Act Planning duties / OFSTED Inspection / Schools Information

	Report, strategic engagement through the Local Offer.
<b>Collaboration and engagement</b> - Parental engagement requires active collaboration with parents and should be pro-active rather than reactive. It should be sensitive to the circumstances of all families, recognise the contributions parents can make, and aim to empower parents. Within schools looking at how parents are engaged and use language which is appropriate to their circumstances.	Graduated Response / EHCP assessment / Joint Panels for EHCP assessments / strategic planning through the Local Offer and proposed inclusion plan.
<b>Sustained improvement</b> -A parental engagement strategy should be the subject of on-going support, monitoring and development.	School SEN Policy / Schools SEN Information Report / reporting to Ofsted / strategic planning through the Local Offer and Inclusion plan

### Models and Terminology of Parental Engagement.

Most models of parental engagement used within the context of SEND, and more generally, envisage a move away from previous paternalistic approaches (Green and Edwards, 2021; Hellawell, 2017) towards more empowering ones. At the individual level this can be characterised as moving from professionally based models of control to parents being seen as equally expert but bringing different insights. At the strategic level participation is often seen as part of a continuum and the ‘ladder of engagement’ (Arnstein, 1969), from manipulation to full co-production and is often used in the context of parent carer forums as an overall template to structure thinking about parental engagement.

Disentangling some of the terminology and assumptions behind different types of engagement could be helpful in thinking through how to develop, manage and assess interventions aimed and securing greater engagement. It would be helpful to reserve the concept of **Parental Engagement** for specific individual engagement in settings and school through the graduated response and the EHCP assessment process and subsequent review. **Co-production** theory and the ladder of participation concept that currently underpins much practice at the strategic level in SEND is rooted in community level engagement and policy development (Arnstein, 1969; Britton & Taylor, 2013). Co-production or co-creation is often used for multiple levels of involvement in public services from individual service provision to groups (Brandsen et al., 2018; Bussu, & Galanti, 2018). However, it might be more helpful, in the specific context of SEND practice and provision, to use co-production as a concept exclusively to describe strategic work in the development of plans and strategies such as the Local Offer, joint commissioning and service development to ensure they are appropriate to parental needs. Parental engagement should be implemented and promoted for every parent while strategic coproduction is open, accessible and supported for those parents who want to contribute at the strategic level as well.

SEND legislation also treats **parents as consumers** of education services through personal choice backed with specific measures such as personal budgets and the choice of school

provision. The legislation also codifies co-production to structure what that market might offer in overall service provision and for individual personalisation through the EHCP assessment process that rests on notions of consumer choice (Lamb, 2019; Hodge and Runswick Cole, 2018; Hallowell, 2017; Lehane, 2017). This can produce tension with the other models of engagement when choices are not available or expectations cannot be met. The typology below is an attempt to set out some of the potential differences between different modes of engagement. In reality there will be considerable crossover between 3 different ways of working:

#### Different types of Engagement with Parents

1. Assessment: Parent/Professional
2. Service Development/ Strategic influencing.
3. Purchasing and commissioning

The tables below expand on each type:

**Table 4: Different types of engagement**

<b>1.ASSESSMENT: PARENT / PROFESSIONAL</b>	
<b>Overall Approach</b>	
Parental Engagement/ (Dual) Expert Model (Hallowell, 2017; Green & Edwards, 2022)	
<b>Type of Relationship</b>	
Individual working between professionals and parents through the graduated response and EHCP process. Also more generally with the school or setting at the level of supporting the child in good home school working.	
<b>Implications of Working</b>	
Acknowledges the equal but different role of both Professionals and Parents. Both have essential skills and knowledge they bring to the discussion and then work together to agree a plan of action or provision for the CYP. Hallowell (2017) proposed a hybrid definition of the expert model: Dual Expert Model to reflect the way this relationship is positioned in current SEND framework.	
Both professionals and parents are seen as experts but bringing different capacities and capabilities to the relationship. A danger of ignoring the potential unevenness in power relationships between the professionals who still are the gatekeepers to resources and parents on key areas of resource acquisition (Boddison & Soan, 2021).	
The engagement should meet parents where they are and build on the relationship with them (Smith, 2022; Menzies, 2013). This can be achieved “through finding points of commonality between educators’ and parents values around caring for children” (Fenton et al., 2017; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012).	

<b>2.Service Development / Strategic influencing.</b>	
<b>Overall Approach</b>	
<b>Strategic Co Production</b> (Arnstein, 1969; Britton & Taylor, 2013)	
<b>Type of Relationship</b>	
“When all team members together agree outcomes, coproduce recommendations, plans, actions and materials as a collective.” (Britton & Taylor, 2013 p10). Relates to the Local Offer, Inclusion Plan proposals, joint commissioning and seeks to establish consensus and stable relationships over time.	
<b>Implications of Working</b>	
Professionals still enable the process and provide the framework for coproduction. Depends on capacity and representativeness of parents and willingness and engagement of professionals. Especially relevant when thinking of influencing service design but has also been used in the context of producing EHCP plans. Also assumes significant commitment and input from parents as part of the process on a personal level or in engaging in meetings and consultations at the strategic and service design level.	

Danger of professionalising parental input or restricting to those who are familiar with the norms and culture of professional practice (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Smith 2022).

**3.Purchasing and commissioning**

**Overall Approach**

**Consumer Model** (Cunningham & Davis, 1985)

**Type of Relationship**

. Control of specific services through personal budgets or other selection or budget mechanisms. There is a linkage to strategic co-production through Involvement in commissioning frameworks and overall framework for consumer choice.

**Implications of Working**

Relates more to EHCP’s and personal budgets, choice of school, setting or provision. Some parents can be very empowered by having more control over the services they use or by even directly purchasing and managing them but personal budgets are limited in education provision and choice of education provision can be illusory (Satherley & Norwich, 2021) or services of inferior quality (Bussu, & Galanti, 2018)

Professionals’ role is to assess need, help parents make decisions based on best advice and joint working. This approach can be contested if professionals cannot deliver what is expected in the relationship, or expectations outstrip resources (Hellawell, 2018; 2017).

Requires a significant level of commitment from parents and the right context in terms of legislative rights and technical and resource support.

Depending on which aspect of the SEND system is being engaged with, local interpretations of the CoP (2015) will also influence the structure of parent’s experience of engagement, with different models and approaches, or the lack of them, coexisting within an overall framework. The SEND framework fails to fully integrate the rights model in the Equality Act (2010) and there continues to be an unhelpful tension between different and completing notions of rights to services and the needs based on the Warnock framework. This can add to the confusion about the entitlements which underpin the services parents are engaged and what underlying assumptions inform the models and ethos of service provision they are working with (Lamb, 2019).

**Support for Professionals in Education.**

As the current CoP notes (2015 6.68) discussions with parents “involves a considerable amount of skill”. For parental engagement and co-production to work as the legislation hopes there needs to be a significant focus and investment in supporting the workforce to implement this approach. Parents often have a ‘high level of commitment to their child’s education which is not matched by the capacity to provide effective support or by the ability of schools to work effectively with parents’ (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012 p4). As Hornby and Lafaele (2011 p46) noted “most teachers are genuine in their desire to actually find solutions and engage meaningfully with parents”, but are often left without the training needed to do so successfully. Also surveys of school professions show high support for the concept of parental engagement but that assumptions are made teachers are already aware of how to do this and engagement and communication with parents was to passive (Axford, 2019). This can be compounded by requirements for professionals to implement deficit model solutions rather than focusing on barriers children and parents face (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008).



While the parental advocacy role can create tension in relationships with teachers and staff it should also be seen as part of a valuable relationship (Schultz et al., 2016). Parents often value the capacity of professionals to listen and respond flexibly over more formal aspects of the engagement process and the act of engagement itself builds trust (Smith, 2022; Fenton et al., 2017; Hodge and Runswick Cole, 2008; Peacey et al., 2010). Understanding and support for the values which underpin the legislative requirements is therefore also an important factor. It is not simply the formal aspects of including parents in SEND process which matters but also the skill, empathy and professional agency of those working with the family which are also crucial. This will not simply be achieved by performativity in the way professionals may be required to deliver pre-defined targets and goals with legislative requirements (Hellawell, 2018; Smith, 2022).

Schools and settings that make most difference to improving outcomes are able to align learning goals and language used to engage parents in their children's learning (Blandford & Knowles, 2013). Research into engagement in supporting attainment for low income families found that parental engagement is most effective when "it is collaborative, builds strong relationships and focuses on learning; Schools meet parents on their own terms by tapping into their needs and interests, creating environments that feel comfortable to them and involving other members of their community." (Menzies, 2013).

There is a very strong case for much more specific training for early years and school staff in the skills and methodologies to better engage parents and the resources and time to be able to do so (Axford, 2019). The SENCO role also needs supporting in respect of parental engagement. A review of SENCO training found that working with parents did not feature as a major theme in the course (Esposito & Carroll, 2019). The SEND review is looking to change the structure of the National SENCO award (DfE, 2022a) and the knowledge and skills required for effective parental engagement needs to be more central in the revised qualification. Looking more widely at schools leadership training on working with parents more effectively should be built into the newly proposed national standards (DfE, 2022a) and reflected in school leadership training and organisation in line with the SEND legislation.

### **Which families benefit?**

Parents' capacity to engage is "heavily linked to socio-economic status as well as parental experience of education" (Harris and Goodall, 2007, p5). Therefore, one of the challenges is to "change the distribution of involved families from a few economically advantaged families to all families" (Epstein, 2017) as this would enable greater benefit to flow from parental engagement. This is especially relevant for SEND where there is a strong association between SEND and poverty (Shaw et al., 2015) with 38.0% of pupils with an EHC plan and 34.3% of pupils with SEN support eligible for free school meals (FSM), the gateway for receipt of the pupil premium, in 2021 compared to 20.8% of all pupils in all schools (DfE, 2021a).

There have been criticisms that parental involvement in education is also biased towards white, middle-class values with an emphasis on the types of involvement favoured by that social group (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). It has been claimed that middle class parents of children with SEND are able to fund assessments and legal redress to secure resources more routinely than other groups (Bryant, 2022; Elliot, 2020). This narrative then often goes hand

in hand with arguments that using SEND labels to secure resources from statutory authorities by economically advantaged parents reduces funding or support to other children without a SEND designation who also experience learning issues (Elliot, 2020). While it is clear that there are significant barriers for parents from poorer social economic groups, including parents with SEND, to fully participate in parental engagement there is a danger in the way the discussion is framed. It is important not to assume that parents from lower income groups are any less interested in supporting their children or have low ambitions for them (Kintrea et al., 2011), rather than they have to overcome greater barriers to engagement (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). The association between FSM and lack of engagement has been found to be relatively weak at the school level, if not the individual level, compared to other factors influencing parental engagement (Humphrey et al., 2012). Overall having a child with SEND is a predictor of greater parental engagement and involvement at school. A large survey of parents of children with SEND found that they were more engaged with the school than parents without children with SEND, they were more likely to want to increase that involvement and were more positive in relation to information provided by the school that can help them support their child's progress (Peters et al., 2007). The more significant the SEND need the greater the likelihood of involvement with the school (Barlow & Humphrey, 2012).

The history of the development of parent advocacy also points to individuals and groups of parents self-organising where there have been gaps in statutory provision (Kirby 2020; Lamb 2019). Thus it is the failure of statutory resource to meet the needs of children that has often triggered parental advocacy, not an attempt to gain positional advantage over other groups. School funding is not a zero sum game. The development of parent groups and voluntary organisations, often supported by professionals and academics, has then led to a growth in resources in ways which benefit wider groups of parents as needs are identified and resources have then been routinely embedded in mainstream provision in Dyslexia and Autism for example (Kirby, 2020; Evans, 2017).

We need a more nuanced understanding of the impact of parental engagement in respect of schools and settings. To the extent that parental engagement is unequal this should question what more needs to be done to secure equitable access by supporting parents to engage at whatever level of the system they chose to. This has implications for increased funding for SEND Information, Advice and Support Services, parent carer forums and other groups of parents.

### **The Future of Parental Engagement and the SEND Review**

“The future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed” William Gibson (2022)

The SEND review provides a crucial opportunity to take stock of what the system has learnt about parental engagement and co-production since the implementation of 2014 reforms (DfE, 2022a) and build on this. However, there needs to be a significant shift in professional practice, training, understanding and guidance if the potential benefits are to be realised. This would include;

- Developing national models of parental engagement for schools and settings building on evidence of what works best in supporting better progression, attainment and outcomes;

- Further developing co-production models to inform the proposed national standards on parental engagement and co-production such as the Rotherham Four Cornerstones approach (Rotherham, 2022);
- Ensuring that models of engagement do not rely on professionalising parents but meets them on their own terms and utilising approaches that are relevant to their needs;
- Support parents so that they have the capacity and information to engage successfully at all levels of the system should they chose to;
- Integration of training from ITT onwards in working with parents based on models co-produced with parents to ensure consistency and effectiveness and then integrating these into the new national standards proposed by DfE (2022 a);
- Commissioning research specifically on what works in parental engagement and which support better outcomes on SEND to further inform these the models and training
- Ensuring that teachers and support staff have the time and resources to effectively engage with parents and are proactive in reaching out and designing innovative programmes of engagement;
- Clarifying the terminology in legislation around parental engagement and co-production to ensure better understanding and consistency of approach between different levels of engagement and the skills required for each level.

These measures would help to clarify the welcome commitment in the SEND review (DfE, 2022a) to enhanced parental engagement and co-production. Professional competence in parental engagement and co-production, conjoined with high aspirations for children with SEND, has the power to make a significant difference to progression, attainment and outcomes for children with SEND.

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## **Section 4: Planning, reviewing and resolving issues in parent-professional relationships beyond the school**

Chris Firth, Coventry Information Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS)

### **Introduction**

The importance of parent-professional relationships across the education health and care sectors cannot be understated in supporting children and young people with SEND to achieve good outcomes. The expertise that can be offered by both in this collaboration is vital in identifying the needs, provision and support that the individual child needs. It can also help to form and maintain stronger relationships between parents and schools and empower parents on an individual level to feel confident in supporting their children. Establishing a positive relationship between parents and those professionals supporting a child or young person with SEND, is identified through one of the key principles outlined in the SEND Code of Practice:

“...the importance of the child or young person, and the child’s parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions, and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in those decisions” (*Principles – SEND Code of Practice, 2015*)

The relationship between a parent and a professional are established in a very different way to the relationships that a parent might experience with an education setting, particularly an early years or school setting. In these instances, communication between parents and settings are more likely to be on a regular or even daily basis, enabling that level of understanding to grow over time and hopefully, breed trust and confidence in each party. With the parent/professional relationship outside of the setting, whether they be a specialist teacher, an EP or health professional or a local authority EHC plan co-ordinator, that relationship is likely to be more sporadic and more immediate, in some cases professionals maybe become involved with children and young people (CYP) without parents fully knowing beforehand. So, from a professional’s point of view, building a picture of what might impact their relationship from the outset is very important ensuring that both parties can engage together and build trust.

### **Models of parent/professional engagement**

Dale (1996) outlines a number of different models that exist in the parent/professional relationship. The two most disparate of these are the “expert model” and the “negotiation model”.

The “expert model” describes a relationship in which the professional is considered as the expert, and the one who has the power and control not only to assess, but also to decide about what kind of help a child should get. The model makes an assumption that there are significant differences between the roles of a parent and a professional, which could lead to an element of conflict between the two, in terms of:

#### *Compulsory vs Voluntary*

Parents do not volunteer to be the parent of a child with special educational needs; their role is compulsory. The professionals working with children with SEN do so out of choice.



### *Continuous vs Sporadic*

A parent's responsibility for their special needs child is continuous, whereas professionals work with the child and family for a comparably short period of time.

### *Untrained vs Trained*

Parents of children with SEN are often left to find out for themselves how to deal with the difficulties that they might encounter, whereas all professionals working with children with SEN have undertaken a specialist qualification to start them in their chosen career, and have access to ongoing professional development.

### *Isolated vs Network*

Most professionals have the opportunity to share their concerns, ideas and experiences with an appropriate peer group. Although some parents are members of voluntary organisations and support groups, many parents do not have access to any form of support network.

### *Subjective vs Objective*

Parents are passionate, emotional and subjective about their child's future, whereas professionals are able to bring objectivity to each case, as they are not involved emotionally. It is important to recognise that these supposed differences are based on the assumption that the principles of *The SEN Code of Practice* and *Children and Families Act 2014*, are not being followed, as they are based more in the "negotiating model".

The main characteristic of this model is the continual discussion between professionals and parents in order to resolve all their differences and discover the best support for the child's disability. This blends together the individual circumstances of the child, the expertise of the parent and the knowledge and expertise of the professional. This is the model which best reflects the principles of the CoP, and enables all sides to contribute to successful planning and review of support.

### **Planning and Reviewing**

One of the key threads running through all of SEND is the graduated approach and at the heart of this, the "Assess, Plan, Do, Review" model. This cycle should enable not only the building of a strong identification of needs and provision, but also to do this following a person centred approach.

But this does not just stop at needs and provision; it is also fundamental in thinking how relationships are built between parents and professionals in the first place. *Together from the Start* (DFES, 2003) produced some key principles, which continue to ring true today and which should be at the heart of all parent/professional relationships.

- professionals have a duty to acknowledge and understand the unique role and relationship each parent has with their child;
- parents have unique knowledge about their child and have the right to be respected as the primary caregiver;

- parents have the right to be provided with unbiased, accurate and up-to-date information in order to make informed choices;
- professionals should acknowledge that each family is unique. Families can be diverse in terms of their experience, resources and expectations as well as their cultural, religious and linguistic influences;
- parents should be valued as equal partners.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given my role within an Information, Advice and Support Service, the idea that parents have the right to be provided with unbiased, accurate and up-to-date information in order to make informed choices is a key principle. A parent's experience and confidence of working with professionals, may be very different depending on their circumstances. Services such as IASS can provide a useful link between parents and professionals, helping parents to understand the roles of those professionals in advance and the type of advice they provide. By doing this in a more informal way of introduction, this can give confidence to a parent to:

- ask questions,
- ensure their experiences and opinions can be shared with professionals,

The ideal scenario is that parents and professionals are given as much opportunity as possible to interact. However, where there is limited opportunity for both parties to develop working relationships, it is important that time is focussed on the most important matters and used efficiently – we get feedback from parents saying that by discussing things with more informal support services beforehand, gives them much more confidence to work with professionals.

Another of these principles – that families can be diverse in terms of their experience, resources and expectations as well as their cultural, religious and linguistic influences” - is perhaps the biggest barrier to ensuring that positive engagement with parents can be achieved in as equitable a manner as possible. There are many potential barriers to achieving equity for parents, in building relationships with professionals and taking an active role in developing provision for their CYP.

**Literacy** – the language that professionals use can be a huge barrier for parents (and sometimes for everyone involved!) It is an important consideration in planning interactions and it is difficult because in line with the expert model, parents want to hear professionals sound like they know exactly what they are talking about

However, in the context of a parent/professional relationship in SEND, the most important thing is that parents get a clear understanding of their child's difficulties and what will help to support them in language they understand. It is hugely worrying that many areas of the SEND system have very little in place to support parents who have English as an additional language – from EHC plans to mediation arrangements.

**Learning Needs** – Some parents may have their own learning needs, which means that they may need a different type of engagement with professionals. An obvious barrier from the outset is only communicating with parents via letter (similarly with literacy). This can be a

barrier to even getting to see a professional in the first place – we have a number of children and young people who have been removed from waiting lists in health as they have not understood a letter that has been sent.

**Previous experiences** – Some parents are reluctant to engage with professionals because of previous bad experiences. This can often be unknown to any professional trying to engage parents, and again highlights the need for impartial (and slightly more informal) services like IASS to be available for parents to try and break down some of these barriers (and even support parents in making the first step in engaging).

**Emotion** – Often engagement happens at times of high emotion for a parent. Having to make decisions or put forward suggestions in these moments are very difficult and may move us back to a model where professionals make the decisions. Therefore, negotiation may be much more difficult to achieve where interaction between parent/professional is limited.

In thinking about establishing the ideal relationships between parents and professionals, it is critical to recognise the importance of training professionals in how they work alongside parents, to recognise some of the differences and barriers, not acting purely as the professional, i.e. following the “expert” model.

“At a strategic level, when commissioning training for professionals, partners should consider whether combined service delivery, training or a common set of key skills would help professionals and providers adapt to meeting the needs of children and young people with SEN or disabilities in a more personalised way”. (3.40 *SEND Code of Practice, 2015*)

In Coventry, the Local Authority provides a range of services to educational settings through their SEND Support Service. This is made up of services including Educational Psychology, a Complex Communications Team, the Social Emotional and Mental Health team, which are all traded services with schools.

In the past, parents have in some instances been unaware that their child had been seen, given that it was a “schools first” approach, i.e. schools are paying for the service and therefore, they are the ones that receive the advice. It was felt that this approach had its limitations, and instead needed to ensure that parents were at the heart of this process, and fully understand their child’s difficulties in order to maximise the effectiveness of intervention.

In the last few years, there has been a more targeted focus on not just providing support to the schools in relation to children and young people, but also in engaging parents outside of the school. This is in recognition of the additional benefits that can be gleaned from a holistic approach to support; consistency that that can only come with parents and professionals working together.

This way of working also helps to bridge the gap between those settings who continue to peddle the rhetoric that they can only support children and young people (CYP) with SEND when they are in school – something which can place a professional in a difficult position, posing the question “who are our customers? The setting paying for our time, or the children and families we are supporting?”

In assuming that a “negotiation model” is most effective in achieving positive outcomes for children and young people with SEND, the resounding answer should always be the latter. This shows that the way that services/professionals are commissioned can be a barrier to not only building constructive relationships with families, but also in the overall benefit to the CYP.

A few examples of things that have been put in place to widen parent engagement with professionals:

- Telephone/face to face discussions with parents about planning and reviewing children’s progress particularly after producing reports.
- Inviting parents to training programmes, including offering some through third parties such as SEND IASS – this helps to form links not only to professionals but also create peer networks for parents (reducing the perceived differences between parents and professionals).
- Offering joint training to setting staff and parents especially things like Emotion Coaching.

The advent of conversing via computer technologies, such as Zoom and Teams, has also opened an easy and potentially more time efficient way of communicating between parents and professionals. It can also enable access to parents who may not have the confidence, or means, to access a training session face to face, building their knowledge.

### **Resolving Issues**

Whilst focussing on the “negotiating model” seems to offer the best chance of holistic support for a child or young person – one where both the parent and professional take a dominant role in discussions at different times in the process - it naturally creates a higher possibility of creating disagreement.

Parents who are able to fully engage with a professional and understand the purpose and objectives of an intervention, may feel more naturally able to question, compared to those more dependent on the views and thoughts put forward by the “expert”. This can also be fuelled by a range of different sources, in the same way that our views on world events or a particular product may differ depending on who we know, what we read, and what we have clicked on as we surf through the internet.

Whilst the expanding amount of information available to us all in the modern world can be hugely beneficial, it can also distort our views to more radical extremes. Where a parent gets their information from can be very influential in determining the reputation of a service or professional, rightly or wrongly. Both these things have the potential to create conflict and disagreement.

This is where the development of the negotiating model comes to the fore. Planning and reviewing – again, repeating the idea of the assess, plan, do, review cycle – is key to success. Involvement on a regular basis is one of the key ways to develop relationships and a common understanding. Unfortunately, this seems to be one of the most difficult things to facilitate given the demands on resources faced by many services across education, health

and care. This has been particularly evident during the pandemic and may prove even more so in its aftermath.

Of specific concern currently is the rise of mental health difficulties in children and young people, specifically the rise of young people not attending educational settings. Whilst there are no easy answers to this, one key to minimising issues between professionals and parents is that whichever professional takes the lead in a case like this – and there is probably a whole different research topic right there – there must be a greater emphasis on flexibility of practice. Traditional approaches to assessment, either based at school or a clinic, will not work in these circumstances. Showing understanding of the situation and being flexible, such as meeting with families in a familiar environment, is again likely to strengthen relationships and provide longer-term benefits for children and young people and families.

It is clear there are some key factors to increasing success in parent/professional relationships, enabling successful planning and reviewing and in resolving issues. One is in establishing clear communication from the earliest stage, Another is identifying the most appropriate professionals to be involved – the less relationships that need to be built the better for all concerned. One key part of this (and something which unfortunately is very often not something that can be guaranteed) is consistency of workforce. Nothing is more frustrating than changing social worker, speech therapist, EHC Plan co-ordinator on multiple occasions. Professionals understanding the context of the individual – not sticking to a set way of working and ensuring that parent views and understanding are at the heart of decision making.

The big question that may never be fully answered is: Will parents ever feel like equal partners? Despite all the things discussed, and the step forward in collaboration that I think has occurred between parents and professionals in the past few years, there is still evidence of issues which are still a way from being resolved. It is seen most clearly in a phrase uttered by EHC co-ordinators on a regular basis: “I can’t write that in needs/provision unless it’s been written by a professional”.

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## **Section 5:**

### **What models of parental engagement are worth pursuing at a strategic/systems level?**

Candy Holder, Head of Pupil Services, Islington,

#### **Introduction**

In this paper, I discuss the development of parental engagement at a strategic level over time in the London Borough of Islington. However, I hope that many of the underlying principles and approaches will apply in many other Local Authorities across the country and believe they can also apply to direct work with individual parents and a families.

First, a little bit about me. This is my 44th year of working for Islington Council Children's Services – for much of that time managing services for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). I am not telling you this just to gain your sympathy, but to establish some sort of credibility, at least for staying the course... I have been in it for the long haul! And I am a historian by training, so believe that where you have been gives some insight into where you end up. So, the model I am about to describe is the result of a long journey, set in the context of local and National development.

For further context, some background on Islington:

- We are a small inner London borough (4 miles long and 2 miles wide) with the highest population density of all London boroughs
- Although it has a reputation as a wealthy borough, it is an area of contrasts, with rich and poor living literally side by side
- We have the largest proportion of children living in income deprived households in London
- 60% of families live in social housing (compared to 20% nationally). 30% live in one parent households
- We currently have 1,634 children and young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan (3.4% of our resident population) - a 10.6% increase on 2021
- The overall school population in Islington has reduced by 300 plus pupils over the last 12 months in line with other areas in London during / post the COVID-19 pandemic
- Growth in SEND numbers is particularly within the area of Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), but with a significant cross-over with Social Emotional and Mental Health needs.

The Local Area had its first SEND Inspection in November 2021, with a report published in January 2022 (Ofsted, 2021). The inspection found no serious weaknesses in Islington, and many strengths including:

- Strong strategic leadership and well-established teams
- Strong and well-established joint working relationships
- Partnerships with parents and children and young people are meaningful and effective
- Case officers know young people and their families very well.

My first job in Islington in 1978 was as an Education Welfare Officer. In my first week, I was asked to deliver a letter to a parent that said words to the effect – ‘Your son is maladjusted and must go to a special school from next Monday. The bus will pick him up at 8.30am’. Even though this was my first week in my first job, something seemed entirely not right about this. I walked towards the block of flats with some trepidation, I was fully expecting to be told exactly what I could do with this letter. However, the dad (in this case) took the content of the letter without exception. His only question to me was about the colour of the bus, which I was unable to answer. (I did get back to him to confirm it was blue however, as it seemed important).

It is hard to imagine now how it was then. But, within my working life-time parents were *told* that their child had to go to a special school - they were not consulted or asked for their views – and we referred to children as 'educationally sub-normal' and 'maladjusted'.

What I did not know at the time, however, was that the then Secretary of State for Education, Margaret Thatcher, had already commissioned an enquiry into the Education of ‘Handicapped’ Children and Young People (as they were then known) with Mary Warnock as chair. The Warnock Report (Special Educational Needs) (Warnock, 1978) was subsequently published in 1978.

There were 220 items in the Summary of recommendations: key were the new terms to identify groups of children with the intention of moving away from the previous offensive labelling, and that parents should have a designated Named Person to provide a point of contact.

In 1979, the Conservatives returned to power, this time with Margaret Thatcher as prime minister. Two years later, the Warnock committee's radical recommendations formed the basis of the 1981 Education Act, which gave parents new rights in relation to special needs, urged the inclusion of special needs children in mainstream classes, and introduced the system of 'statementing' children to give them entitlement to special educational support. So, Special Educational Needs (SEN) as we now know it was defined; Statements were born. Children were still labelled, but at least the terms became more 'user friendly'... a revolution had occurred; we were full of hope. What could possibly go wrong? The rest, as they say, is history. By 2003, then *Baroness* Warnock described the system she helped to create as 'needlessly bureaucratic' and called for the establishment of a new enquiry (TES, 2003).

In 2011, some 30 years on from Warnock, the Government released a Green Paper, 'Support and Aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability' (DfE, 2011). It lamented the ills of the ‘old’ system: bureaucratic, bewildering and adversarial, leading to a culture of low expectations; parents and children frustrated by a lack of the right help, with too much focus on inputs and too little on outcomes; Statements had taken us as far as they could. The Children and Families Act became law in April 2014 and came into force in September of that year. What could possibly go wrong?

In 2022, some 10 years on, the Government released a Green Paper (DFE, 2022). You get the drift.

Bringing us right up to date, ISOS have recently published a report 'Agreeing to Disagree' (Bryant, Parish and Kulawik, 2022) following their research into approaches to avoid disagreements and disputes between parents and local authorities in the SEND system, including, but not limited to Tribunal appeals. Their stark conclusion is : *'It is hard to decouple dispute resolution from the wider system. The Tribunal is a symptom of wider issues, not a cause of wider issues. The focus needs to be on preventing disputes.'*

The Schlesingers (Schlesinger A. Sr, 1949; Schlesinger, A. Jr, 1987) propose a Cyclical Theory to explain fluctuations in American politics, and as I said in my introduction, history can give some insights. The theory goes that cycles are 'self-generating', meaning that each kind of phase generates the other kind of phase. This process then repeats, causing cycles. The speculation is that since 'liberal' phases involve bursts of reform effort, such bursts can be exhausting, and the body politic thus needs the rest of a 'conservative' phase. The further speculation is that conservative phases accumulate unsolved social problems, problems that then require the efforts of a liberal phase. The Schlesingers also speculated on generational effects, since most of the cycles are roughly 30 years long, about the length of a human generation.

But let us not be too downhearted. The various Acts and legislation that have followed do at least show progress in attitude since the Warnock report, towards the aim of trying to include all children in a common education framework. The remainder of this paper therefore tells the story (which continues) of the journey in one area to foster parental engagement against the backdrop described above with what we believe is some success, although still a way to go.

### **From the 1990s**

I will pick up the story in the 1990's, when optimism following the Warnock revolution had plateaued and some of the cracks were already begin in to show, as in the 'Cyclical Theory' above. When I first became overall manager of SEND Services in Islington 1992, relationships with parents could be described as anything but harmonious, characterised by frustration, anger and most of all, a lack of trust – mainly flowing from individual parents' anxiety about whether children were getting their entitlement. And just exactly was that entitlement? And was it good enough... i.e., was it what they needed?

Looking back, I can identify some watershed moments in our journey towards establishing parental partnership and trust in Islington, that have built on and towards a local 'Pyramid of Participation' model (see more below) that is embedded and still holds.

In 1996, Islington's Special Educational Needs Service were awarded a Charter Mark for excellence in public service. Launched in 1992, the Charter Mark was an integral part of the Citizens Charter Program launched by John Major, UK Prime Minister. (House of Commons, 1991). It was an award for organisations that achieved excellent customer service in the public sector – so a national standard of public service provision. Organisations had to demonstrate that they met the citizens charter principles for delivering quality public services with demonstrable evidence of customer satisfaction - so back in the good old days when the customer was always right and customer satisfaction was high on the agenda.



To gain this award, organisations had to evidence to a very exacting standard and to external inspectors how they met the following criteria, which seemed to me very much what we needed to do to establish relationships:

- Set yourself clear, tough and meaningful performance standards
- Tell your customers what those standards are and how you perform against them
- Tell users in a clear, straightforward way about all the services and help available and how to get the best out of them
- Consult people on what services they need and how services can be improved, and make good use of their ideas
- Give people choices wherever possible
- Have polite and friendly staff, and a user-friendly approach to things like opening hours, answering the phone and any special needs of the people using the services
- Make it easy for people to say when they are not happy with the service and act swiftly to put mistakes right
- Give good value for money by budgeting carefully and using resources efficiently and effectively

We were one of only around 350 public service organisations nationally to gain the award in 1996, and as far as I am aware, the only Local Authority Special Education team to ever have held the award, which we retained consistently (by reapplying and being thoroughly assessed every three years) until 2008 when the scheme ended.

But I think my point is that through this scheme, the values of the service were established. Although people have come and gone (although many remain), those values have held. I think it has been an important component in our journey towards establishing the culture of parental engagement and our work with parents. We've still hold on to these values.

The next thing is about the right workforce – the right people doing the right thing at the right time. I have been blessed during my career to work with the most dedicated, skilled and kind colleagues with a strong work ethic, who have absolutely 'got it' when it comes to delivering a public service. Working towards the Charter Mark was not ever a hard sell to staff; they saw these as the right values and the right thing to do. They have continued to do so even though the award is long gone, caseloads have doubled, and parental expectations have grown. Many of my current team have worked with me for ten years or more, a few for twenty. Several of our SEND Keyworkers are local parents of children and young people with SEND, so experts by lived experience as well as in their professional role. The right workforce creates the right ethos.

We have also been very fortunate in Islington to have had a conciliatory Parent Carers Forum over the years, who have always wanted to work with the Council to resolve issues. This has been led by Centre 404, which is a registered Charity for people with learning disabilities. (Centre 404 ,2022) It is one of our local voluntary organisations who have always encouraged dialogue and openness. We have held a shared agenda.

### **Moving forward 15 years to 2011**

Consequently, when the next set of SEND reforms were introduced in 2011, with lots of talk about parental engagement, it did not feel like a big deal to us locally because we felt we were already in a fairly good place... But this 'new' word – co-production - puzzled us. We were not quite sure what that was all about. To be honest, it almost derailed us. This is because I think we probably took the Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of a little bit too literally

There are various interpretations of the model, but all range from levels of 'non-participatory' action (coercion, educating, informing) through consultation, engagement and co-design ('doing with') towards citizen control, with co-production towards the upper end of the ladder. Our initial interpretation of this model was therefore that we needed to get everyone co-producing everything as quickly as possible. As a consequence, we were virtually dragging parents off the streets to join committees, read policies, design services etc. It was really hard work. And what we actually came to realise, with the help of our braver parents who pointed this out, was that not all parents wanted or had the time to do that. It took us a while to work that this was OK. And that the ladder would soon fall over if everyone charged for the top rung. There is only so much room up there.

Where we have settled locally therefore, after lots of conversations, is that co-production itself, can happen at different levels. At a strategic level, parents might work with professionals to design, and deliver services. At an individual level, they may be supported to make their own decisions about the way the services they receive are delivered (e.g., through a personal budget). But they also participate in many different ways: some want to talk about specific issues, some want to know more, some want support from others in the same position and some want to complain.

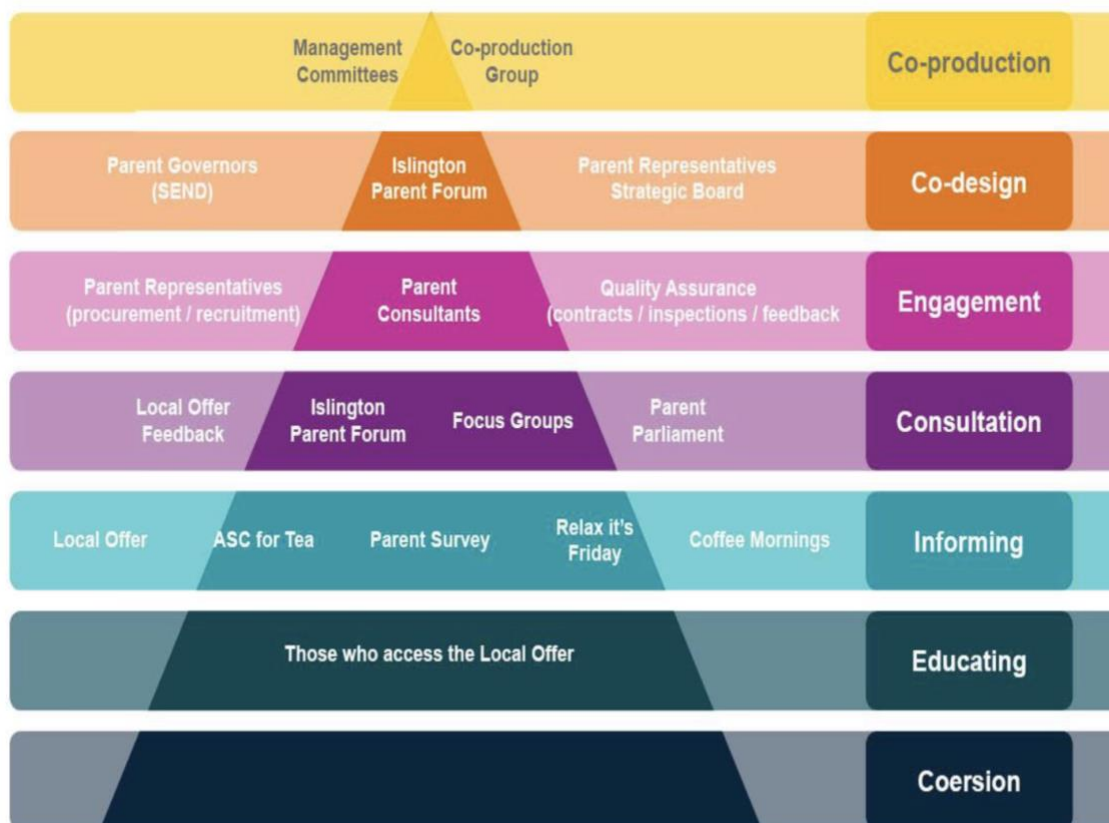
So, our model – which we call our Pyramid of participation – therefore tries to reflect the many different levels of involvement based on parents' capacity in terms of time commitment and their particular interest or motivation to be more actively involved. It reflects the ladder, but it recognises that there are these different levels of engagement and there are lots of things going on at each of those levels. And none of these things are wrong.

### **Islington Pyramid of Participation**

We now better understand that the ladder of participation can be used to help assess where we are and how we might develop. And, to understand better how the degree of participation can influence parents' perceptions of the local authority and good governance. We do not coerce. Parents want to be listened to and know that their views are being acted on. But not everyone wants to be up there, co-producing. The pyramid helps parents see what's possible, where they sit and whether they are comfortable with that.

I will quickly describe two elements of the Pyramid by way of example:

**SEND Parent Parliament:** Any Islington resident parent of a child with SEND can be a member (application is online). Membership takes up as much (or as little) time as parents can spare and they can contribute from wherever they have online access. Apart from their expertise as a parent, members also need to know how to access and use the Islington Local Offer website. Members of the SEND Parent Parliament do the following things:



- Respond on-line to consultations on live issues or proposed developments (e.g., improvements to or short breaks offer)
- Give views on age or phase specific developments (e.g., early years provision, services for children with hearing impairment, transition to adulthood)
- Vote on and approve content in the Local Offer - Parent Parliament also quality assure pages on our Local Offer and if they are happy, award a 'thumbs up - parent approved' badge.
- Volunteer to take part in 'task and finish' (i.e., short term) groups with professionals to give a parent perspective
- Give feedback or raise any issues or concerns that they think may apply to a number of parents
- Tell us about any ways they think services they use could be improved

We have around 350 active members. That means that if an issue that has comes up that we want to get some quick views on, through SEND Parent Parliament we can get 300 - 350 response quite quickly, so we have got that kind of rapid response. Those parents who like to know about issues as they arise particularly like this arrangement.

**Co-production Board:** The SEND Coproduction Group, co-chaired by elected Parent and Carer Forum representatives and I meet six times a year to support the strategic development of person-centred services for children with SEND in Islington. Half of the group members are 'experts by experience', elected by parents through Parent Carer Forum

to represent their views. Remaining members are senior professionals from Education, Health and Care services. The Group operate in accordance with the agreed Islington Council Co-Production Concordat. The Group receives information from the Parent Carer Forum, Parent Consultants, regular parent surveys, PALS, our local SENDIAS Service as well as comments through the Local Offer and any other feedback.

We have got a programme of work that we agree jointly. One of the products from that is our SEND Parents Charter, which sets out parents' expectations of any school – none of which costs anything but are about attitudes - hearts and minds. The parents came to the Head Teachers forum to present the Charter and I am really pleased to say it is always displayed in schools when I visit and adhered to by most. Also, the SEND Information Report Award – given to schools by the Co-Production Group when we jointly audit their published reports. And, of course, parents can move up and down this the pyramid, depending on their circumstances.

Is everything rosy in the Islington Garden, then? Regrettably, no! Like most other areas, we have seen a significant increase in volume, with a concomitant increase in disputes (i.e., we have got more disagreement because there are more families in the system). Despite the conclusion from ISOS ('Agreeing to Disagree') quoted above about de-coupling the dispute resolution from the wider system, and the promises of further reform within the consultative SEND Green Paper (DfE, 2022), our focus remains on preventing disputes. Good relationships are key to this. We are still trying to work it through.

One last component. In order to form those relationships on which parent participation are founded you need the right ethos, the right work force with the right attitude, plus Parent Carer Forums who recognise that when parents and professionals work together, understanding each-others expert knowledge, better decision are made. This enables you to develop the right local model. But you need your parent pioneers as well.

### **Conclusions**

I therefore conclude with the example of Sarah and Anthony (not their real names), one of the many families I have had the privilege of working with over the years. Anthony is now 36; he was born prematurely with cerebral palsy and visual impairment. He has learning difficulties and was later diagnosed with Autism. Sarah was an original 'Tiger Mum' who was not going to accept anything other than what she knew was right for her son. I remember exactly where I was sitting when this young man was four years old, and Sarah looked me straight in the eyes and said 'Stop trying to fit my son into one of your boxes'. It really was a 'ping' moment for me - when I began to understand that we must build provision around the needs of children, and not the other way around. Also, that parents were best placed to know what those needs were.

There have been many other families with whom we have had conversations that have made us think again. So, much of what we have achieved in Islington is therefore also down to these 'Pioneer Parents' who have made a difference.

My last word then to sum all of this up is 'culture'. If you have the right culture - ethos, workforce, parents who will work with you (including challenge) - then I think the right

model for parental engagement will present itself. And a final comment as a tribute to Baroness Warnock (who died in 2019, aged 94) and her committee. The Warnock Report is now more than 40 years old; but the foundations for parental engagement as we still recognise it are clearly set out in the chapter of the report called 'Parents as Partners'. Here, the importance of parents is stressed not just as part of their child's assessment and decision-making, but fundamentally to be a partner with professionals and others. This is the idea that we are all still developing in 2022.

**Note:**

For brevity I use parenteral engagement to cover a number of different aspects of working with parents given that is the term most commonly used in the literature and for this to also cover carers. Also see comments below on separating out this term from coproduction, co-creation and other terms going forward.

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## Section 6

### What models of parental engagement are worth pursuing at a strategic/systems level?

#### Zara Bowden

Co-chair and coordinator, West Midlands Parent Carer Forum network

#### Introduction

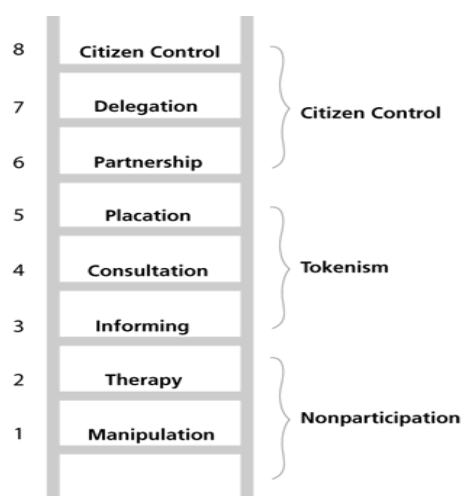
I am co-chair and coordinator of the West Midlands Parent Carer Forum Network, which basically means that I support forums in the West Midlands to have their voices heard and coordinate some of the work that they do at regional level. I also work with the regional leads of other networks to coordinate our work more sustainably across the region. As we are moving into this new world of everybody wanting to do everything for everyone everywhere, and not focusing anything locally anymore, I am a SEND champion. I always talk about SEND; it is what I live, sleep, eat and breathe because I have a child with disabilities and first and foremost I am a parent carer. So, I came into this world with a bump when my child was born premature.

We had a really challenging start and I found forums as a place where I could progress my thinking as a parent and challenged the system with the knowledge that I was learning, as I was moving away through the system and figuring things out for me and my child. I'm also the engagement and communication lead for my local forum, so I am the chair of my local parent carer forum,

So, a lot of what I am going to talk to you about today is quite forum focused, but actually we are moving into a landscape where that is not always the best solution. So, I am going to take a step back and look at the big picture.

#### Participation as part of policy development

This is a quick history and a whistle stop tour of where forums have evolved from. But just to give you the concept of where the participation element of what we do comes from, it is obviously the Arnstein (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation which showed participation ranging from high to low.



Arnstein's Ladder (1969)  
Degrees of Citizen Participation

The ladder of participation was evolved from designing cityscapes. It was about designing relationships with communities and the concept of Arnstein's ladder was about resourcing the mechanism of participation. I am not sure we still harness that and that we still understand that this is the root of where participation really first found its foundations in relationships between systems and the people who use them. I think it is really important that we remember that when moving forward in the SEND arena. 'Aiming High for disabled children' was the first real bedrock in 2007 where we started talking about parent-carer participation. This was about people using services being the fundamental segment of a system and understanding that you cannot make a system work if you do not know how people use it. So, we really tested that theory through the short breaks programmes, and that is where parent carer reforms evolved from.

This sprung up out of the system that was funded by the Department for Education and actually the concept of supporting participation in a framework strategically within our local systems really started to take shape. Moving forward a few more years and we have the Children and Families Act, and we have the new SEND Code of Practice (DFE, 2015) as we know it today currently. Possibly it will change in a few weeks, but this is how it currently stands.

We have already spoken about the fact that participation is mentioned twice and co-production is mentioned once in the Code, with the first legal reference made to Parent Carer Forums as Co-production Partners and Joint Working Stakeholders. This also expanded the role of participation from consultation to co-production. This is section 1.3 about participating in decision making:

'1.3 Local authorities must ensure that children, their parents and young people are involved in discussions and decisions about their individual support and about local provision.'

Parent carer forums were integral to the writing of this document. They were there minutes before it was published, making sure that those three words were not removed. I know this because one of my best friends was the person doing it and they were working really hard to make sure that parents remained integral to the foundations of any changes that were coming forward.

So, what is co-production? It is not easy and it is definitely not always fun, but it is essential. We talk about it in different ways, because it means different things to different people. Co-production to me today might mean something, but tomorrow it might mean something different to me in a week's time. I might not always view co-production as the same thing when I come to do co-production because in each context it has a different relationship, a different meaning and it has a different purpose. Currently it is spoken about in a lot of contexts, but the fundamentals are always the same code.

Production is about starting from a blank sheet of paper, which we know we never really have, but it is about starting from the beginning together and co-designing, developing and thinking about things together.

*'A way of working where children and young people, families and those that provide the services work together to create a decision or a service which works for them all.'*  
(Definition of Co-production, Local Area SEND Inspection letters)

*'Coproduction is about people, communities and services/organisations working together to create opportunities and solve problems. Done well, it has the potential to radically change how we make decisions and plan, deliver and review services and community supports.'*  
(NDTi ,2020)

### **The fundamentals of Co-production & Parental Engagement**

The fundamentals of co-production and parental engagement are quite simple. Everybody needs to have the right information. Everybody needs to have all of the information as without information people cannot co-produce successfully.

**Table 1: The fundamentals of co-production**

<p><b>The fundamentals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Information is key! – having a good quality, accurate, and aspirational SEND Local Offer and information provisions in place means people will know what is and what is not happening in your system.</li><li>▪ Acting as a system – Parent Carers do not need to know which department foots the bill or manages a service, they just need the parts of the system to work in synergy and be unified in supporting their family appropriately and well.</li><li>▪ Knowing that sometimes you will not like the answer – being prepared to hear honest feedback is hard, but systems must be prepared to hear that sometimes they have got it wrong or that their vision is not aligned with that of families and communities.</li><li>▪ Variety is essential – not every mechanism will work for everyone, so having multiple ways for people to contribute is really important.</li><li>▪ Honest &amp; Transparent Communication is the start – to coproduce and develop good engagement pathways, you need to be open and honest about what you want to achieve by engaging and what is and isn't within your gift throughout this conversation.</li></ul>
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Accurate information in an easy to find place like a Local Offer is always really helpful, because then everyone knows what is expected of the system. So, when we come to co-produce, we know what we are already working with which is always a good starting place.

Accountability frameworks that we have at the moment almost want to place the system and parents against each other because one is better than the other or one is doing it right and one is it doing it wrong. It creates controversy and disagreement. That is not what it is about. What it is really about is that the system does not always act as a whole.



My child is not disabled just at school or just when she goes to the hospital or just when she goes out with her mates and cannot get up the path to the venue because the steps are too steep for her. She is not disabled in parts. Likewise, when she interacts with different parts of the system, she is not only disabled with them. She is disabled with everyone all the time. That is just the nature of who she is. So, actually the system acting in a fragmented way does not help co-production because we are not working together. The system is already arguing within itself.

As a parent, that is not my problem. But when we are trying to work in partnership, it becomes my problem, which is where we get this fractious relationship and we see the accountability system being utilized in a more formal way to challenge that. Likewise, knowing that sometimes not everyone is going to like the answer you are given. If we go to co-production with the genuine principles of co-production in our hearts, you are not going to like everything that everyone says as a parent.

That a practitioner says to me, the first words out of a medical consultant's mouth to me were, do not have any expectations for your child - she may never walk, talk or feed; she may never have an independent life. I tell you now that is not my child, who is thriving. But, I did not like that answer, but I needed to hear it because it gave me the fire that I needed to be the parent that I am today. So, knowing and recognizing that we are not always going to like the conversation that we have is important.

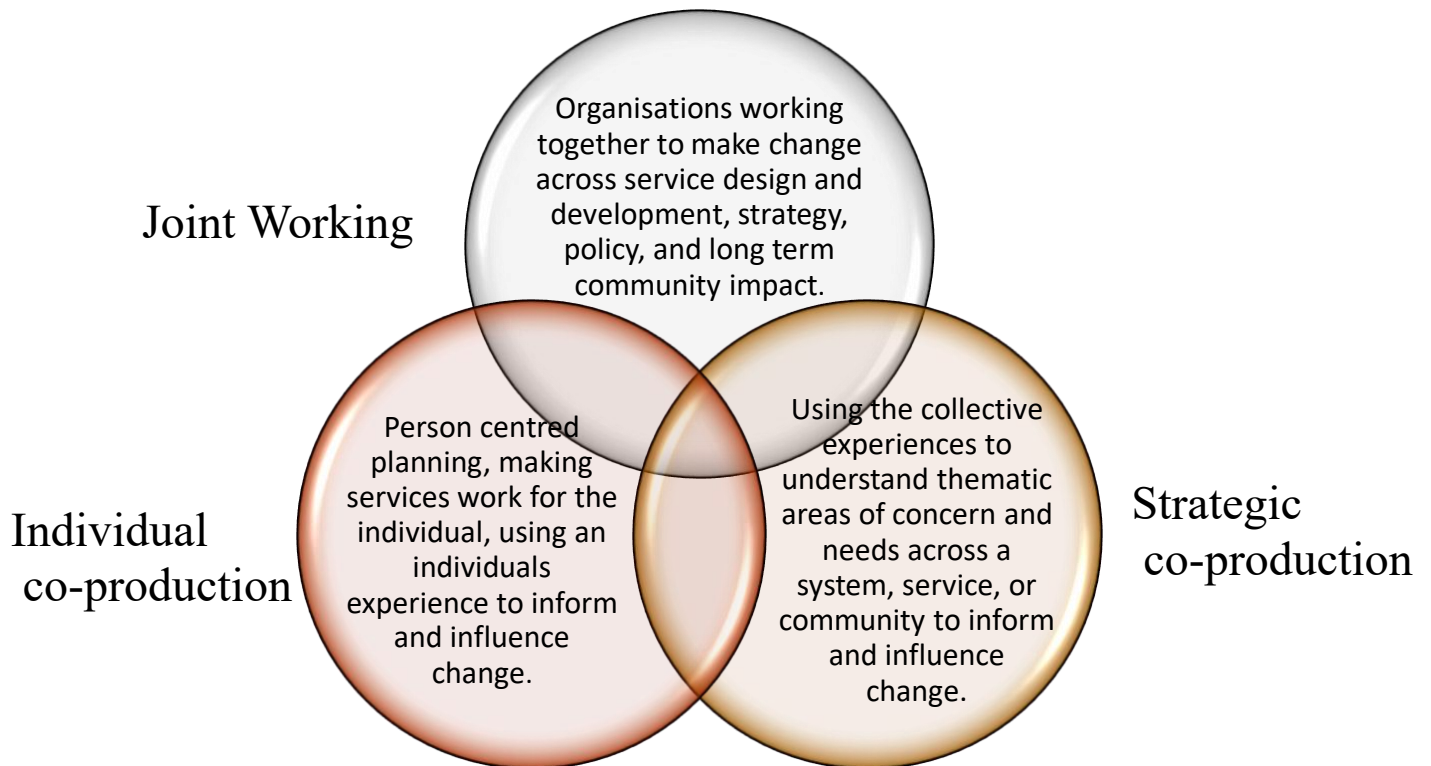
We have talked today about the different models of co-production and participation, how we work together in partnership and how we converse around designing systems and services that reflect the needs of our communities that put parents and children and leaders at the heart of that conversation. The reality is you cannot put this mechanism all into one box, even though it is phenomenal in what it does. It is just one mechanism, it is not the be all and end all, neither should it ever be. There must be multiple mechanisms in the system that enable participation at all levels.

An honest and transparent communication at the start is how you begin the journey. We may not be honest about what our limitations are when we are talking about participation. We can say that we can use zoom and then actually we cannot. We can assume that we can change the commissioning cycle for this service, but then actually we cannot. We believe that this person is definitely going to be in the room and then they cannot attend. We are not being honest about things and that automatically sets us up in that kind of confrontational arena because people feel like they have not been given all that is required to work with. So honest communication is essential.

Co-production comes in different ways (see Figure 1). But we do not just co-produce and participate. We also joint work and this is where the conversation about parent-carer forums, parental engagement and the layers at which we operate becomes really interesting. There is individual participation and co-production taking place with individual parents, with individual families with individual services. This involves people having that conversation about how to change this child's life and what is in my gift as an individual to that? We then talk about strategic participation and co-production which is about the

system level and talking about how can a service respond. This is about, how do I change my service to be better? That is that strategic level.

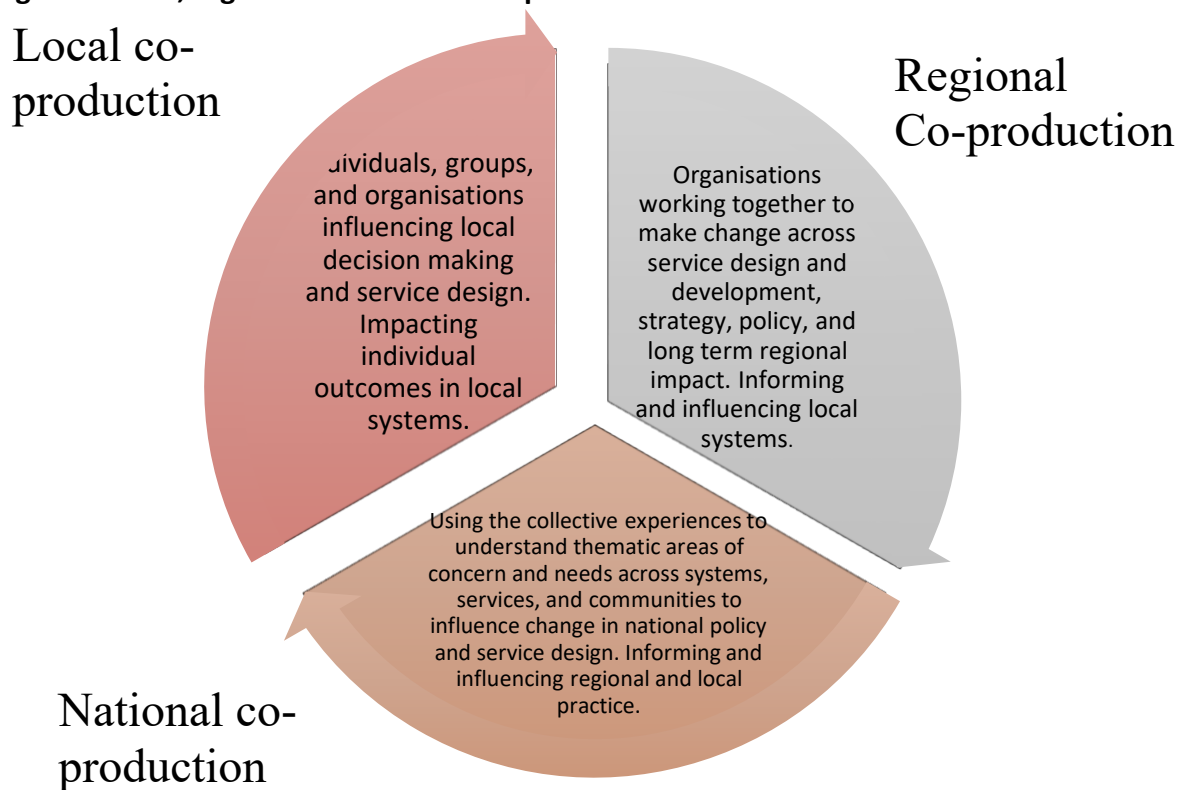
**Figure 1: Joint working, individual co-production and strategic co-production**



What we have also got now, as was alluded to in Sharon Smith's presentation, is joint working with organisations, and going back to Arnstein's original principle of participation, resourcing and working with system leaders. This is about working with community leaders and partners in the appropriate way to enable those who can and those who are interested to work at that higher level. That is where things like parent carer forums, experts by experience, fit in with the mechanisms of participation.

Why it is important to think about it in layers? This is because it all happens at different points (see Figure 2). We can talk about local matters, that is about service delivery in my home county. This is to make sure that aspirations and outcomes for my child are right for her and are met. I work in the region in the West Midlands, so my role is about making sure that all local areas' intelligence is utilized and harnessed to inform any decisions that are made. The regional level informs the local level strategies and development. This is because decisions are made in that middle layer that influence and sometimes change what happens locally like funding decisions. Sometimes even contracting takes place in commissioning that takes place at a regional level. So local systems can never influence that; it needs to be uplifted and again likewise with national participation in co-production.

**Figure 2: local, regional and national co-production**



We have talked about the **National Network of Parent Carer Forums (NNPCF)**. All have a role to play in sharing intelligence to inform and influence the national agendas, as we are going to see shortly. There are reviews of the Schools White Paper and the Health and Care Bills because they will all have had some form of participation happen at that national level.

**Table 2: Representative and Individual Model of Co-Production**

<b>WHO CAN WE CO-PRODUCE WITH?</b>
<p><b>Representative model:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Parent Carer Forums</li> <li>▪ Coordinated expert by experience groups</li> <li>▪ Youth Participation Groups</li> <li>▪ Local organisations and community groups led by those with lived experience</li> </ul>
<p><b>Individual model:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Parent Carers</li> <li>▪ Experts by Experience</li> <li>▪ Young People</li> <li>▪ Carers (inc. grandparents, foster carers etc)</li> <li>▪ Children</li> </ul>

It is really important that we be mindful about getting it right locally so that these other things can function as well. So, with what models of parental participation can we do it? Firstly, you need to think about what how can people participate (See Table 2). There is the individual model in which individual people come forward and share their personal experience. What is really important to remember here is that it is personal lived experience and it is a reflection of what they have been through. Then there is the representation model which is where things like parent carer forums with coordinated experience groups, youth participation groups and local community groups come into their own. This is because they are the ones who then take all of that individual knowledge and make sense of it for systems.

So what models are already being used? Genuine Partnerships: the Rotherham Charter approach is a model that is really heavily cited and a lot of systems are using it. It is being funded at a national level through contract and being developed and supported in local systems. But, the crucial thing about this is that it is not a one size fits all approach. It is a methodology that you localize. It is a set of principles and an idea that you change and adapt based on what your community needs, because no one community is going to need the same as another. This is an excellent methodology to pick the parts that are going to work for you in your system and giving you the tools to change. Everybody seems to like it and it is based on Arnstein’s ladder of participation.

**Table 3: Key elements of the Rotherham Charter**

<p><b>Genuine Partnerships – The Rotherham Charter</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Using the four cornerstone principals, the genuine partnerships approach looks to develop a foundation of equity and partnership</li> <li>▪ The model brings partners together to develop a framework and methods of participation that create opportunities for strategic coproduction to be sustainable and successful</li> <li>▪ There is a self-evaluation tool that allows systems to explore where they are now and where they want to get to</li> <li>▪ This model can be broader than SEND and speaks to multiple parts of the system</li> </ul>
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There is also the Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) with its ‘think local act personal’ approach. The SCIEs co-production charter is an example of how services and service users can work together building on the Arnstein model of citizen participation. They take a structured approach to working with Experts by Experience – coordinating individual participation and in some cases developing some representational approaches. This method uses individual participation in strategic and operational work areas to inform and influence on the ground delivery of services

Nationally SCIE as an organization informs national agendas and also has some regional connectivity. It does that in a regional way much as I do in the West Midlands Parent Carer Forum network. What is really interesting is that it is not the approach that they take in the local systems. The local systems that they apply ‘think local

act personal' bring lots of individuals' experience and intelligence together. This is about putting them in the right place to inform and influence local decision making and local service design to co-produce or participate in conversations. There is not much coordination that puts it into a representative model.

This is the model that is adopted more in adult services, than in organisations like parent carer forum. But, some groups and other community representative groups from religious communities to particular minority communities are all starting to tap into the 'talk model' as a way to be heard.

As we are moving towards integrated care systems, we have a new idea on the table. Someone has decided to introduce a new idea which is about involvement. Interestingly, involvement does not actually talk the same language as participation and co-production. It talks about allowing you to be heard and allowing you to feel involved, but actually it does not always result in services responding to that information.

These involvement strategies undertaken by Integrated Care System (ICSs) Landscapes are establishing their process and protocols for involvement of third sector and community representatives and their individual patients and service users. These are developing to include strands of how individuals and organisations can be Involved. Crucially this is about feeling heard, value and to be informing the system – this does not always translate to participation and co-production as the SEND system understands it. It builds on what is already in the system – this does need to ensure it captures the mechanisms elsewhere that stakeholders and system partners have developed (a risk of ignoring key mechanisms and methods of participation that work for specific sectors).

They will gather information and intelligence, but they do not always actually result in services changing. As a result, they do not always respond to that in a way that communities genuinely feel in charge of. But what is really interesting is that these are called Integrated Care Systems and ironically, they are run by health, but they are not delivered by health. They are delivered by the local area partnership, which includes the local authority, the volunteer community sector and anyone else who wants to dip their hand in. This is everybody's game and is the place where we can really make a difference..

There are some out there that are really looking at how they can do things differently, but not many. And, my concern is that actually one of the things we need to do is make sure that our SEND systems and our pathways for participation through the SEDN sector are genuinely integrated into involvement strategies. So that is food for thought for where we are going next.

### **West Midlands developments**

The concept that we are taking on in the West Midlands is about how can we do things differently. Not every parent-carer forum in the West Midlands is adopting this approach. Nor does everybody actually agree with this model. Some people might have cracked the nut already in their own way. But some areas have started to look at integrating genuine partnership models. So, in Shropshire we are really working hard on producing this as our SEND mechanism for co-production and participation. What you see in Figure 3 is that co-

production can be delivered through several tools in several different ways via several mechanisms. It does not always have to be a one box fits all.

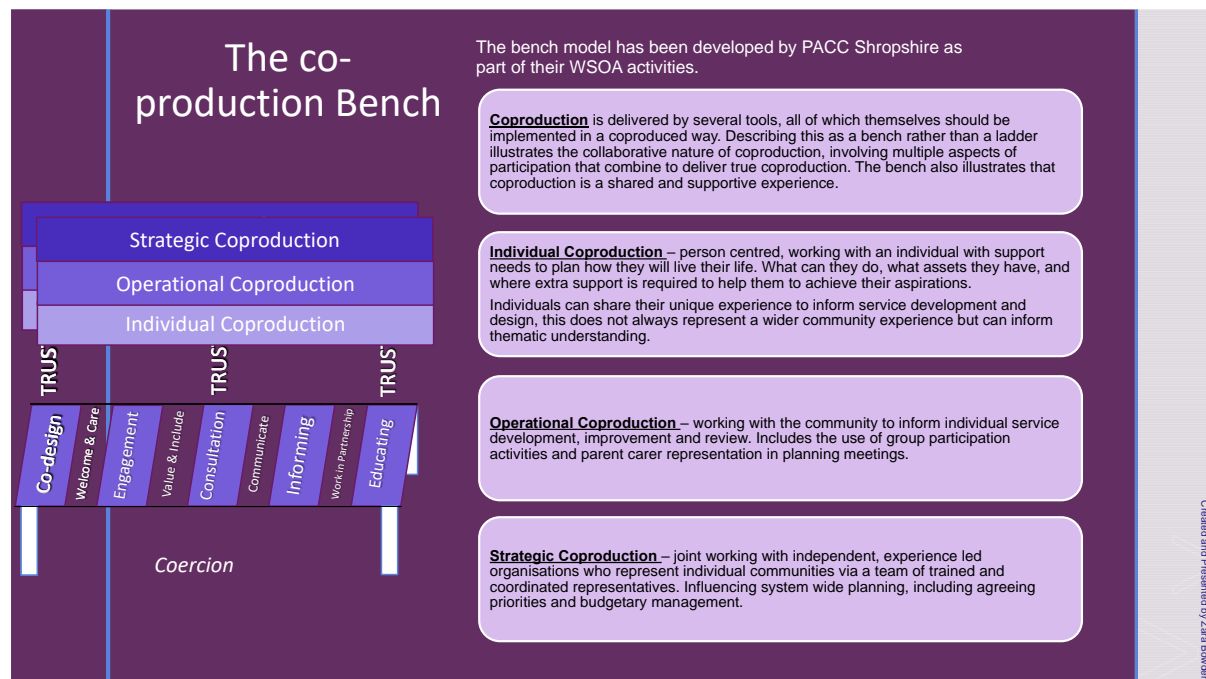


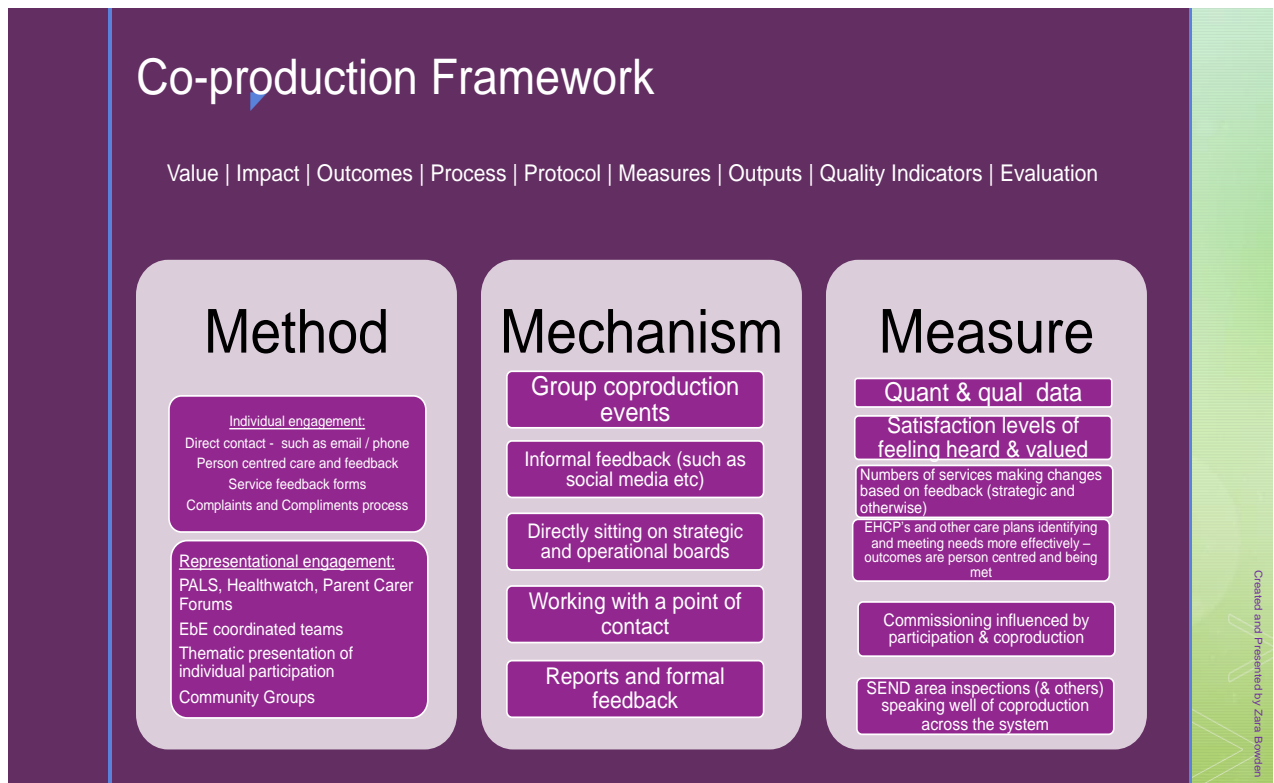
Figure 3: Bench model of co-production developed by Shropshire PCC.

This model looks at different levels. It incorporates individual co-production that involves person-centred care. This is about individual experience that changes how child care is received, had that service responded to that family. But, it also looks at operational co-production which is about using the community with its collective intelligence of what all of those families are saying about shaping the service and changing the strategy. And, then the strategic level which is more in line with joint working. Here we are looking at the risk of the system alienating certain families from participating because the system is becoming too formal in many ways. The way we have talked about participation in co-production has created this alternative reality where everybody needs to behave in a particular way. This is about creating a space for joint working and going back to the original principles of participation, resourcing and funding.

Champions in the Community speak on behalf of their communities in a representative way. This is what parent care forums could be aspiring towards and what coordinated expert by experience groups could be aspiring towards. Some are trying to get there as we are trying to take this approach where there are these different layers and there are different mechanisms to enable this to happen. But importantly, it sucks in the principles of the ladder of participation and the genuine partnerships approach.

There is a 'dirty' part to co-production framework (see Figure 4). This is the bit about participation that we do not like to talk about because the reality is that we do not moderate participation. We do not hold it to account. We have local area inspection that goes in and says yes to local authority; you are doing it really well or not. But, actually, do they have the same interpretation of co-production and partnership? They do not because if

you look at every written sane reaction, they are put through a different lens every single time reflecting different experiences and expectations. We do not have a single mechanism, a single agreed principle or a framework to quality assure co-production and participation, as the system and we the people who are receiving services deem them to be appropriate.



**Figure 4: Co-production framework**

That might not be a bad thing because actually it should be localised. Being localised, they will be testing that it is still working. So, this is where our framework comes in, with a focus on thinking about the methods, the mechanisms and the measures. The measures are vitally important. How does your system measure if participation and co-production are working for you? How does a school measure if it is working? That is where our principles and our single kind of expectation of what it should look like comes from. If you cannot measure it, you cannot quantify it, it is not tangible; not a real thing. So, there is quantitative and qualitative information with Figure 4 showing some examples.

**Table 4: What next for co-production**

- Developing frameworks of co-production that work locally and regionally
- Having agreed parameters of coproduction to enable all partners and community members to find a way to be heard and involved
- Developing outcomes and measures that demonstrate impact and quality assurance – and making these part of your Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA)
- Peer to peer scrutiny of co-production via the regional peer challenge systems
- Recognising and valuing co-production partners – resourcing and maintaining the structures to work sustainably.

### **What next for co-production (see Table 4)**

What is next for co-production with parent carers in the SEND landscape? Developing frameworks of co-production that work locally and regionally are essential. We need to be really mindful that there are other expectations in systems that we need to be taking into account. SEND is not a singularity; so our children are not disabled or have special educational needs, just in the SEND sector, which needs to feature in other parts of the system. Housing strategies should reflect on our SEND strategies in our systems. So why do we not talk to parent carers about housing strategies? So it is not just about one box fits all.

There should be mechanisms in local systems, in schools, in whatever you are doing in your work life for everybody to be involved. Not everyone is going to want to come to the table and formally have a conversation about how do we change the service. Some people will just want to send you an email, some people will just want to have a conversation with you about their child needs and that will be enough for them. That is OK, but you need to be thinking about making sure that they feel heard you are genuinely doing something with that information when you receive it.

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) system is vital, because anything that involves participation provides valuable data to inform commissioning. If we are not capturing that we are wasting an opportunity. The point of the SEND reforms was about making sure that you only need to change a system once, because you are listening to the service users. They know your services best because they are the ones receiving them. So we need to capture that data and feed it in strategically at that level, which could be through the parent carer forum, or it could be through a paid worker in the team who is responsible for collecting all of the feedback that comes in. It does not matter how it is collected, but it needs to be done smartly. That is the point of participation going back to Arnstein's principles. This is going to become important when moving forward. Our systems are getting wise to using their neighbours to quality assure and evaluate their performance. So why are we not doing it about the quality of co-production?

Each area can do it differently as each area will have different expectations, which is valuable because we can learn from each other about why this is important to them and not important to us. We can then realize that those differences are there for a reason. Sometimes we might have missed something because it is not been something that our families have talked about. But actually it is something someone else has picked up somewhere else and it is still important. Here one is recognizing and valuing our co-production partners. This again comes back to Arnstein's original guiding principles of the ladder of participation.

For this to happen parent carer forums need to be funded, as expert by experience models need to be funded. But, not every pathway is funded appropriately. Our local offers are under-funded, under-supported and under-utilized. Not every area has a co-production lead nor a participation pathway. Not every area has a core workstream that looks just at the communication of feedback making sense, which is really important. Because if we are not resourcing it, whether it be through cash flow or otherwise, we are never going to get it right. So my challenge to you all is to think about how can you do it differently? How can you make sure that whatever part of the cog you are in you are taking it seriously? And, it is



your responsibility because SEND is everybody's business. It is not just mine because I do not have a choice because I am the parent and I have to do it every single day. You are in your job roles for a reason; you have a passion and enthusiasm for what you do. Take responsibility for ensuring that participation where you have some control works well. If you can demonstrate it to others, this is where culture change happens.

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National development Team for Inclusion (NDTI) (2022) <https://www.ndti.org.uk/change-and-development/coproduction>

## Section 7 Discussion

The discussion took place in person and online, with participants in 7 groups. The group feedback was transcribed and analysed thematically in terms of the seminar questions., The summary of the discussion is organised in terms of these questions.

*How have models of parental partnership changed and what have been the consequences of these changes?*

Parent partnership services have changed over time, with the relationships with parents being different in the past. They managed to have a chat and coffee. When looking back, there have been changes in school structures and thinking; there were parental associations and parents were in schools. Teacher availability for parents, has reduced which does not allow them time to spend with parents; talking for trust to be built up and to share that understanding Models have changed since COVID, with meetings going online with a consequence that communication with some parents has become far more accessible, e.g. with parents' evenings.

*What has worked in engaging parents of pupils with SEN/disabilities in their children's education?*

- giving parents the platform to be able to speak openly and honestly about what their experiences are.
- being honest and willing to learn from experiences, both positive and negative would be beneficial for moving forward, although someone might not want to hear. Sometimes it has to be said.
- trying to respond in a timely manner, although not easy .
- everyone's experiences and interpretation are similar, so taking the individual into account.
- importance of taking a relational approach, being open-minded and open-hearted
- allowing space for empathy and for compassion.
- working together hard rather than fighting against each other.
- recognising enemy images and the power of blame and shame in the system.
- training and exploring together. All adults in a local SEND system, whether you're paid to be in the life of a child or family or unpaid.
- being really mindful about power with some shift in power.
- remote learning has enabled professionals to engage with parents, e.g. early evening training and advice; involving two or three parents rather than just one parent to engage in that training in an environment where they are comfortable.
- proactive school governors; can be really supportive, ensuring that the parents' voice as well as the parent governors' voices are heard.
- building relationships and using those relationships to build trust. Recognising that in parental engagement parents can provide their expertise and contextualized knowledge.
- accepting that parents have got equivalent expertise and enabling them to talk and share their knowledge and experience.

- being courageous and actually trusting.
- being in relationship and actually just experiencing it; via zoom or in person. It is about the implicit connection when you actually understand each other. This leads to moments where there is trust and out of the box solutions start happening.
- the importance of agency school, local authority or a service manager agency. This is to be able to help progress conversations both individually and strategically.
- transparency about your understanding and what is meant by different people, e.g. over inclusion and co-production.
- parent engagement has to start in the early years and continue through the years, as it tends to diminish in later years.
- how to engage parents of children with SEND is to start working very early and working with parents at that stage in a collaborative way about their children's needs, (e.g. teacher, psychologist and with the parent) to understand the needs, working to provision. Good examples in the hearing impaired and sensory impaired services, as confirmed by Ofsted reports.

*How can issues in parent-professional relationships beyond the school/college be best resolved?*

There was one reference to building more specialist provision. By building more schools the issue about places for children and people with conditions would be resolved.

*What models of parental engagement are worth pursuing at a strategic/systems level?*

The three level model of co-production was appreciated by several groups; the individual child in a family, the team or a service and then a whole system. This involves really understand what good looks like; what co-production is, have toolkits with techniques and approaches. In addition, there is being together, learning together and having time to really get to know individual families and families more broadly.

It is important to recognize that we are within a system of pseudo-choice and market forces. Much of the system works on that basis and some of the issues that have been raised about parents are linked to this. There is a need for care that terms like co-production have become a sort of currency, which can often be inappropriate.

Another point related to a positive part of the move since the Children Families Act (2014) about how much more visible and powerful the parent voices has become at this systemic level.

*Other recommended changes*

Teachers seem to be the only group that do not have supervision, whereas social care health colleagues do. This is a learning process that looks at case management and learning from individual experiences. In initial teacher training there could be more content around and managing supportive positive relationships with parents and carers.

In professional training and the initial training for different professions it was important to give students experiences to develop growth mindsets rather than just the needs of different types of SEN/disabilities. This could enable them to work collaboratively and with other professionals and with parents in a holistic manner.

Some of the key working has been lost, though less so in the early years in some places, where it has been stronger.

Co-production and achieving joint understanding is not just a tick box matter.

The importance of courageous conversations and appreciation of how difficult it is to have those. But, when it goes well everyone appreciates them and realises how it greases the wheels for more to happen.

Avoid the two polarized versions of parents. Either the middle class and pointy-elbowed, or the feckless, uncaring and harmful . There is something important about moving beyond characterizations of each other that demonising each other within conversations.

Much achieved if we could reduce the number of people wanting EHCP's because they were getting the provision that they actually were wanting. Research after the 2014 legislation showed that a third of parents who asked for a statutory assessment, thinking it was for a EHC Plan were turned down. So, a third of all parents came into the system at that stage in a negative way. So it is trying to reverse this process.

#### *SEN/ disability Review*

Some anxiety aired about the future of the graduated response and whether it will add to further polarity or seek to address some of failures. Much seems to be riding on the Review, such as parents and accountability and some of those other big issues that relate to the voice of parents and their engagement.

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