

Cwm Taf Morgannwg Early Years Services

Co-producing the Communications Approach: case study and insights

Report prepared by the Co-production Lab Wales

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1. Introduction

1.1. What is this report about?

The Welsh Government-funded national programme for Early Years Transformation provides a focus on patient experience, early intervention and prevention. In Cwm Taf Morgannwg, in order to meet these objectives, engagement is built into 6 interconnected workstreams, with a specific focus on 'Service User Engagement Across the Region' in Workstream 5.

The aim of the project was to develop engagement practices to add to the current consultation and feedback mechanisms. Increased participation and the development of solid working relationships with parents as well as with partner organisations, will open the opportunities for future co-design, co-production and citizen involvement. This will meet the aims of the EYT programme, as well as more widely move towards the co-production requirement in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, and the 5 ways of working of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 - especially involvement, prevention and long-termism.

This Insights Report details the methodology, principal activities and emergent findings of the co-producing the communications approach project.

This work has been led by the Participation and Involvement Officer with support from the Co-production Lab Wales, Wales' leading co-production and citizen involvement specialists. Work commenced in March 2023, and concluded in November 2023.

The Co-production Lab Wales has worked with the CTM EYT team to build on work and training to date, including the implementation plan developed from working with parents in Merthyr by the Premier Advisory Group, and research and survey data previously collected; to deepen and consolidate their engagement practice, paving the way towards a sustained co-production approach with families and children.

1.2. What are Co-production and Involvement?

Co-production is an asset-based approach to public services that enables people providing and receiving services to share power and responsibility, and to work together in equal, reciprocal and caring relationships. It creates opportunities for people to access support when they need it, and to contribute to social change. It is underpinned by five interconnected values:

1. Building on everyone's strengths.
2. Developing networks across silos.
3. Focusing on people's lives, not systems.
4. Working on the basis of great relationships.
5. Enabling people to be change makers.

Involvement is one of the '5 ways of working' enshrined within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which highlights 'the importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves.' In the Welsh policy context, we at the Co-production Lab Wales use the term involvement (as in, citizen or community involvement) alongside the term co-production, reflecting the similarity of their application in practice.

The spectrum of engagement (below) illustrates the key differences between co-production and involvement and other types of engagement:

doing to		doing for			doing with
coercion protection	education persuasion	information	consultation	participation	co-production involvement
e.g. criminal justice, safeguarding	e.g. smoking cessation programmes	e.g. Council website info on bin collections	e.g. surveys, urban planning, FixMyStreet	e.g. drop-in events, focus groups	e.g. person-centred care, shared decision making
<i>"We have a duty to act to ensure people's safety."</i>	<i>"We know what people need to do, we need to get them to do it."</i>	<i>"We provide information where /when /how people need it."</i>	<i>"We decide what questions to ask, and collect data to inform our decisions."</i>	<i>"We listen to people's lived experience, to inform our thinking and decisions."</i>	<i>"We listen to people's experience and share ours. There is equal power in our decision making. We value different experiences."</i>
The organisation has the knowledge. The organisation makes the decisions. The organisation enforces the decisions.		The organisation listens to people's knowledge. The organisation makes the decisions. The organisation enacts the decisions.			The organisation and the people listen to each other's knowledge. The organisation and the people make decisions together. The organisation and the people both take actions on the decisions.

1.3. Why is this approach being taken?

Improved engagement (and co-production) has been identified as a critical success factor for the Early Years service's transformation programme. The project aims to lay the foundation and set the services footsteps in the direction of co-productive transformation and continuous improvement for the future.

The legislative and policy context in Wales increasingly focuses on the way in which public service providers involve and work with stakeholders.

Legislation	Requirement
Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015	<p>Involvement: The importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves</p> <p>Collaboration: Acting in collaboration with any other person (or different parts of the body itself) that could help the body to meet its well-being objectives.</p> <p>https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/</p>
Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021	<p>Local governments must produce public participation strategies that include ways of promoting and facilitating processes by which local people may make representations to the principal council about a decision before, and after, it is made.</p> <p>https://research.senedd.wales/media/wsqqdoo3/21-18-local-government-and-elections-wales-act-2021.pdf</p>
Equality Act 2010	<p>A listed body in Wales must: involve people who it considers representative of one or more of the protected groups and who have an interest in how an authority carries out its functions. Protected groups are those who share one or more of the protected characteristics which are: Age; Disability; Gender Reassignment; Marriage and Civil Partnership; Pregnancy and Maternity; Race; Religion or Belief; Sex; and Sexual Orientation.</p> <p>A listed body in Wales may: consult and involve other people</p>

	<p>that it considers appropriate. In reaching the decision as to who is appropriate, an authority must consider the need to involve or consult people from one or more of the protected groups who have an interest in the way the authority carries out its functions, where it is reasonably practicable to do so.</p> <p>https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance#public-sector-equality-duty</p>
Environment (Wales) Act 2016	<p>The principles of sustainable management of natural resources under section 4 of the Act include the need to promote and engage in collaboration and co-operation and to make appropriate arrangements for public participation in decision-making.</p> <p>https://gov.wales/environment-wales-act-2016-factsheets</p>
Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014	<p>Part 9 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 requires local authorities and Local Health Boards (LHBs) to establish Regional Partnership Boards and adhere to a number of core principles including co-production.</p> <p>https://socialcare.wales/resources-guidance/information-and-learning-hub/sswbact/overview</p>
Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (Wales) 2018	<p>Children, young people and their parent carers are entitled to participate in the decisions that affect them and be involved within the development and reviews of IDPs.</p>

2. Methodology

2.1. Key activities and outputs

The project commenced with a series of exploratory meetings with the Workstream 5 programme team. Through these meetings, an engagement plan, and associated timeline, was established.

Along with introductory and foundation level co-production training, the following engagement activities were defined: attendance of family information sessions and focus groups with a range of service users, with additional engagement opportunities taken on a case-by-case basis by the Participation and Involvement Officer, supported throughout their delivery by continuous analysis and reporting, and regular communication between the Co-production Lab Wales and CTM EY project team.

In designing and delivering engagement activities, the imperative was to gain valuable insights to inform the on-going development of the region's communication approach with service users.

The key activities were as follows:

Date	Activity	Outputs
March 2023 - project close	Design and Planning Exploratory workshops with the CTM Early Years project leads reflected on the purpose and objectives of the proposed activities alongside key targets and deadlines for delivery.	Project Gantt Chart
March 2023	Introduction to Co-production training: Early Years Professionals	Appendix 1: Training slides Recording of online training
March	A Foundation in Co-production training: Early Years	Appendix 2:

2023	Professionals	Training slides
March - October 2023	Mentoring for the Participation and Involvement Officer Topics covered included: Ideas for engagement at drop-in events Designing learning surveys How to capture feedback How to close the feedback loop and maintain relationships built during engagement activities	Contribution to design of the Staff Survey (see below) and the Insights Report (see below).
April 2023	Survey of Early Years Professionals	1x survey platform. Contribution to Insights Report (see below).
April - May 2023	Mapping involvement in service design and delivery The Participation and Involvement Officer will look to understand current co-production practices across the region, by mapping how service users (and potential service users) interact with services across the region, and their involvement in design and delivery of services.	Appendix 3: Summary report from Participation and Involvement Officer Contribution to session planning for Focus Groups
July 2023	Parent Focus Groups Bridgend (0-2 years) Flying Start, Gurnos Community Centre, Merthyr (3-5 years)	Focus Group scripts: Appendix 4: 0-2 years Appendix 5: 3-5 years
August 2023	Workshop with CTM EY staff members: how to analyse/interpret qualitative data	Appendix 6: Outline workshop plan
September 2023	Parent Focus Group Parents of children who have english as a second language, Blessed Carlo Actutis, St Marys Campus, Merthyr	Focus Group script: Appendix 7: Seldom heard voices (ESL)

October 2023	Workshop with Workstream 5 programme steering group Sharing and testing the communications approach	Appendix 8: Workshop session plan Communications Approach document
November 2023	Workshop with Early Years professionals Sharing and testing the communications approach	Appendix 9: Workshop session plan Appendix 10: Communications Model document
December 2023	Presentation to the Cwm Taf Early Years Transformation Board	Appendix 11: project slides
December 2023	Production of Insights report and planning Phase 3	Insights reports. Insights archive.

2.2. Levels of engagement

In total as part of this project we have engaged with:

2.2.1. Staff

Activity	Participants
Introduction to Co-production training: Early Years Professionals	23
A Foundation in Co-production training: Early Years Professionals	16
Online staff survey	14
Thematic analysis workshop	5
Workshop with Workstream 5 Steering group	19
Workshop with Early Years Professionals	22

2.2.2. Service users

Activity	Participants
Parent Focus Groups	13
One-to-one / small group conversations	8
Drop in conversations	158
Teddy Bears Picnic event	182

3. Skills for co-production

3.1. How do we know when we should co-produce?

Co-production can take place in a variety of settings and circumstances. In Early Years services, co-production can occur at three levels:

Individual Level: Co-production relating to individual needs and support plans. For example, service users actively contribute to identifying needs at an assessment.

Service level: Co-production at the service level refers to how services are designed or delivered. For example, service users participating in the planning of activities within an early years setting, being involved in staff recruitment, co-delivering training to providers, developing service specifications, and playing an active role in the monitoring and evaluation of those services.

Strategic level: Co-production at the strategic level relates to future service delivery planning. For example, reviewing how well services are performing, deciding how budgets are allocated, defining good practice and quality improvement at a 'high-level'.

3.1.1. When and under what circumstances to co-produce

Here are some simple indicators of readiness for / feasibility of co-production:

When an Early Years service lacks a clear solution for at least some aspects of a problem or opportunity. The problem could be approached from multiple, sometimes conflicting perspectives, and there could be multiple solutions. The more unknown elements there are and the higher the level of complexity, the more valuable a co-production approach is.

If there is already an obvious solution that requires some feedback before implementing, consultation or participation would be more suitable approaches.

When expertise from both lived and learned experiences is required to provide answers. By lived experience we mean the knowledge gained from our background and day-to-day experiences in life. By learned experience we mean the knowledge we acquire through work and education. It is necessary to gather a group who are a mixture of Early Years professionals and service users who don't work for the service. For example, if co-producing a service, the group should include people who deliver the service and people who use (or might in the future use) the service.

If it is a problem or opportunity that only requires learned experience (e.g. a highly technical challenge that requires expert input), then information and consultation around its implementation would be more suitable approaches.

It is possible to gather people in the same location at the same time. Genuine co-production necessitates bringing together people with lived experience, professionals, and others involved (e.g. policymakers, childcare settings). Everyone involved in the process has something to learn and something to offer. While co-production may require people to work separately at times, it usually involves people coming together at least some of the time. The needs, preferences and safety of underserved communities should always be prioritised when making decisions around how and when the group collaborates.

When people cannot be brought together, dividing them into different groups and utilising participation methods may be more appropriate.

When the group of people gathered to co-produce can make at least some decisions. Co-producers should make decisions, not just suggestions. While it's unrealistic to expect that everything can be co-decided, co-production supports some decision-making by co-producers (including people with lived experience). Some decisions may need to be escalated and passed on to others as proposals or recommendations.

Consultation or participation may be more appropriate approaches if there is little room for any decision making.

3.1.2. When it might be difficult to do co-production well

These are the circumstances under which the Early Years service should consider whether a different approach is more appropriate, or if co-production needs to happen at a later stage in the process.

When there isn't enough time to develop relationships. The co-production process needs flexibility to 'move at the speed of trust'. This includes relationships between everyone in the co-production group. In an ideal scenario, any deadlines are flexible to make time for relationships and trust to grow. If this is not possible and existing deadlines must be met (for example deadlines set by statutory responsibilities or funders), these deadlines should be months rather than weeks away. Consultation or participation would be more appropriate approaches if there is insufficient time to build and nurture relationships.

If it is required by law to consult. Where there is a statutory obligation to consult, consultation should be used. However, it is still possible to consider co-productive approaches and values when conducting the consultation process. Any new ideas sparked and new relationships built through consultation could act as a starting point for co-production.

When decisions must be made very quickly (for example in an emergency or crisis situation). If the Early Years service does not have the necessary arrangements in place to co-produce in these types of scenarios, information sharing and rapid consultation is often the best engagement approach.

In the following sections we run through some of the activities we undertook with tips for those considering taking a co-production approach in the future.

3.2. Engaging with service users at events

As part of the mentoring provided to the Participation and Involvement Officer, we worked with them to consider how they could engage with service users through outreach activities - going to where families were likely to be rather than expecting them to come to an event put on by the project.

The Participation and Involvement Officer identified local opportunities for engagement at events where people with children would be attending. We considered quick ways people could interact and share their views if they didn't have the time (or inclination) to stop and chat.

Using a variety of tools including post-it note boards and simple voting systems, in addition to simply chatting with attendees, the Participation and Involvement Officer was able to gather 296 valuable comments on EY services.

The following questions were used for the “drop in” conversations:

- **Local authority events:** *“What would make Cwm Taf Morgannwg Early Years Services better for you?”*
- **Baby shower event:** *“What support would you like from your health visiting and midwifery service?”*
- **Teddy Bears Picnic:** During this event, a “voting” system was used to gather parent/carer’s views of how they would best like to hear about services, using the question: *“How do Parents of 0-7 year olds find out information/advice/assistance?”*

3.3. Designing the focus groups questions

When designing the focus group questions, we worked with the Participation and Involvement Officer to develop open questions, being careful to avoid closed questions.

Characteristics of closed questions

- Can be answered with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’
- The answer is predetermined (at least to some extent)

Characteristics of open questions

- The answer can’t be ‘yes’ or ‘no’
- No set answers
- Requires an explanation
- Starts with a ‘why’, ‘how’ or ‘what’

Why open questions?

- Open questions help to avoid single word answers
- They help to draw out well-thought out opinions and perspectives
- They stimulate conversation and provide responses with greater depth.

Examples from each of the focus groups can be found in Appendix: [4](#), [5](#) and [7](#)

3.4. Facilitating parent focus groups and workshops

Facilitation is defined as “making an action or process easy or easier.” When planning to facilitate both the focus groups and workshops with early years professionals with the Participation and Involvement Officer, we designed sessions bearing in mind the following key guidance:

- Focus on how people participate, not just what is achieved
- Facilitators should remain neutral; they are there to hold the voice/s of the group (rather than fill the space with their own voice)
- Support people to work together as a group and reach decision making

We considered the target audience when developing the workshop plans:

- What do they know? What do they not know?
- What will be the right format, tools and content for them?
- Do they have any inclusion or accessibility needs?

We shared tips for active listening with the Participation and Involvement Officer:

- Ask specific questions
- Demonstrate concern, or interest
- Use brief verbal affirmations - e.g. ‘I see!’
- Clarify and paraphrase information
- Refrain from judgement
- Think about body language, including: eye contact, facial expression, body posture

3.5. Analysing qualitative data

Vikki Butler of Co-production Lab Wales worked with a small group of EY professionals to support a thematic analysis of the data collected.

Thematic analysis groups themes into a two-level hierarchy of base themes and sub-themes.

Base themes are general concepts or topics, while sub-themes represent more specific topics.

Two analysis tools were used:

1. **thematic content analysis** to enable identification of common themes and sub themes that were common to all of the groups spoken to.
2. **comparative analysis** which involved comparing areas and different service user groups to see if there were issues specific to one that were different to other groups or places.

The outline plan and guidance from the session can be seen at [Appendix: 6](#)

3.6. Sharing feedback and maintaining relationships

In co-production it is important to close the feedback loop and maintain relationships built as it is very much an ongoing process.

Externally, to those who were involved in the focus groups, the Participation and Involvement Officer:

- Followed up with participants in a timely fashion.
- Said thank you.
- Sent any relevant resources, slides, links, etc.
- Told people what would be happening next.
- Invited people to stay in touch.

See [Appendix 12](#) for the communications created to share with parents after their involvement

Internally, as a project team along we:

- Held debrief / reflection sessions
- Captured learning: what to keep and what to change next time.
- Celebrated any achievements!

4. Insights - Overview

4.1. Results from staff engagement activity

In an attempt to get a snapshot of existing engagement with service users, the Participation and Involvement Officer undertook a [survey](#) of early years practitioners across the region.

14 responses were received from operational leads, responding on behalf of their teams who are actively involved with families.

Results demonstrated that EY services in the CTM region sit within the basic level of community ownership domain of the EIF Maternity and Early Years Maturity Matrix and operate predominantly at the “doing to” stage of the spectrum of engagement

4.2. Results from parent engagement activities

Across all service user engagement activities, and the 361 service users who have contributed to them, 328 unique comments, reflections and suggestions have been proffered, and 182 votes cast, forming the basis of the analysis done by the Participation and Involvement Officer.

Across all insights, and all engagement activities, 5 clear themes emerged as of interest and importance to service users with regard to EY services and communications.

In Sections 4.2.1 to 4.2.5. below, a brief summary is provided for each of these themes.

4.2.1. Lack of activities for families to join in

- services not fitting holistically around family life
- need activities which include mixed ages
- the affordability of activities/childcare
- need to plan services to enable single parents and Dads to attend
- age segregated provision causing gaps in services and accessibility issues

Comments from those engaged with included:

““There’s not many opportunities to take baby swimming, only sessions at like 8am and 5pm at night. Only some of them are baby-friendly””

"Need more exercise classes for mums, something like pramfit. Having a group set up before birth and continue to go after birth- share experiences build relationships would be good"

"There's nothing for my 2 year old. He is in nursery, but there's no classes I can take the baby and 2 year old to"

4.2.2. Service Provision for Children and Families with Additional/Health Needs

- lack of support and long waiting times for diagnosis
- experience of children and families with ESL

Comments from those engaged with included:

"Child went to school but didn't settle, no support to help child settle. Was asked to reduce my child's hours which was so distressing for him, we took him out of school I have nowhere for September I think I might homeschool"

"Child adopted from another town in South Wales – no support for child who has ALN/ trauma. Didn't know where to go, everywhere seemed to be a brick wall- not working or not living in right area When I looked at support, told couldn't have anything as no social worker"

"Took 5 years to get child into special school: son is wheelchair bound, catheterised and memory issues"

4.2.3. Education: transition and the admissions process

- Parents not supported to negotiate admissions process
- Lack of partnership working in the transition between services

Comments from those engaged with included:

"Only person who supports with transition is preschool- they act the role of Health Visitor, School, and preschool, cover all roles"

"Timeframe for school admissions and school places not clear"

"Lack of communication, consistency - school, ALN & family"

4.2.4. The value of community based services and being involved

- Parents experiences of having, or not having, voice and why it's important
- Parents ideas for service development and what has worked for them
- The benefits of a community approach
- Parents wanting information/advice on topics related to child development
- The impact of the pandemic upon accessing services and being involved

Comments from those engaged with included:

"Parents would make an effort to go to a group that the HV was running if they can't come to you. If you knew when the HV was doing drop-in I'd go to that"

"There are more free groups in Maesteg don't need to go to and book in my local area."

"First time mums – what to expect, need more guidance- maybe something like GroBrain prenatal"

4.2.5 Communication with Health Professionals

- Communication with services during perinatal period
- Relationships with health visitors

Comments from those engaged with included:

"I was in crisis when baby was at 11 weeks. I had no response from HV. I wasn't sure where to go or what to do. The GP was evasive and unhelpful. If it wasn't for my mum friends I don't know where I would be. It genuinely worries me"

"Unless you pick up phone you don't get help or advice"

"Would like face to face support or advice"

For the full report, produced by the Participation and Involvement Officer, see [Appendix: 3](#).

4.3. The Communication Model

Below is an overview of the process to develop the communication approach for Early Years service in the region:



The product of the process was a one-page document, referred to as the Communication Model, which aims to provide a framework for the growth of communication among Cwm Taf Morgannwg (CTM) early years services, services users and partner organisations.

The model focuses on 4 core areas:

1. Key values
2. Key areas of focus
3. What we are doing now
4. What we are aiming to do

Timescales didn't allow for testing with service users as planned and this will now be done in the next phase to ensure that the Communication Model developed works for all.

See [Appendix: 10](#) for the full Communication Model document

5. Lessons Learned

- Allow plenty of time for planning engagement, matching up people's availability isn't always easy and inevitably leads to delays.
- Avoid trying to plan activities too close to or during school holidays when working with families and schools.
- The time and intensity of the commitment needed for citizen involvement. This project has only been possible due to having a grant-funded dedicated Participation and Involvement Officer to enable activities.
- Some teams within Early Years services engaged more effectively than others in the process, this may be due to interest in the approach, capacity to engage or a lack of understanding as to the value of co-production in their work. More work needs to be done to enable Early Years professionals to actively engage in working co-productively.
- Accessible information is limited within CTM. More investment and marketing is required, especially around Social media and websites.
- 'Closing the loop' 'continued communication is vitally important for building relationships and trust with service users. Parent/carers want to know that their thoughts, time and feelings have been heard and 'taken on board'.
- Need to ensure service users understand the expectation of the provision/service. If a service can only offer limited support and contact, ensure this is communicated.
- Service users feel that more presence within communities and public events/ centres is important, for building trust, communication and relationships; for example, drop ins etc.

6. Next steps

6.1 Sharing the communication model with service users

The Early Years service will test and refine the communication model with:

- parents who took part in the focus groups
- wider service users

6.2 Developing a 'box set' for expectant parents/ parents/ carers in the first 1000 days

The Early Years service will work with service users to develop the materials they want in the first 1000 days through a series of engagement activities.

Providing further mentoring to the Participation and Involvement Officer and working with the Maternity My Way team to further embed co-production as an approach in the Early Years service.

END OF REPORT

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