

Say&Play

A report and toolkit for improving
Local Government consultation



More
to
say

Contents

Acknowledgements	4
About the Authors	4
About Involve	5
How to use this report	6
Foreword	6
Section one: Say&Play – The Event Planning Toolkit	8
1. Planning	
2. On the Day	
3. Afterwards	
Section two: Say&Play@Schools in Lambeth – Research Report	14
1. Introduction	
2. Organisation and Outcomes	
3. Learning from Say&Play in Lambeth: What Worked and What Didn't	
Appendix A: Further Resources	33
Appendix B: Details of Participant Schools	34

Acknowledgements

This work is licensed under a **Creative Commons Licence** (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk).

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display and perform the work under the following conditions:

- Attribution. You must give the original author credit.
- Non-Commercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.
- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the licence terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the authors' moral rights.

Involve, 212 High Holborn, London WC1V 7BF
020 7632 0120
info@involve.org.uk
www.involve.org.uk

ISBN: 978-0-9552421-6-8
2008

In designing and delivering this project Involve would like to thank the following people for their help and assistance; The London Borough of Lambeth and particularly John Kerridge, Frances Forrest, Leah Levane, Di Osbourne, Charlotte Evans. Ali Howes, Vajira Wignarajah, Julia Baxter, Amy Williams, Kirsty Schneeberger, Robbie Hoque, Karin Christiansen, Clovis Bergere and Paul Douglas for the photographs. The Head Teachers, staff, parents and governors at Immanuel and St Andrew Primary School, Vauxhall Primary School, Johanna Primary School, Stockwell Primary School and Wyvil Primary School.

Involve also gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance and support of the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the London Borough of Lambeth for enabling this project to happen.

About the Authors

Stella Creasy is Deputy Director of Involve. She was previously a local councillor in East London, acting as Mayor and Chief Whip, and an adviser to Douglas Alexander MP. Her doctorate was called “understanding the lifeworld of social exclusion” and she now specialises in the social psychology of public participation.

Alice Casey is a Project Manager at Involve. She has conducted research on mass engagement and has explored the potential of technologies in the NHS. Alice has also run engagement processes for the States of Jersey. She previously worked for the Electoral Commission’s outreach department and is particularly interested in youth engagement, design and social media.

Laurie Waller is a Researcher at Involve. He has conducted research on the voluntary sector, engagement in services and has carried out audit of empowerment resources for Communities and Local Government. He has also worked on practice projects for the European Union and Ministry of Justice. Laurie previously worked for the New Local Government Network and has a particular interest in local democracy.

About Involve

Involve is a not-for-profit organisation specialising in understanding public engagement in all its forms. The organisation was set up by a number of leading practitioners and researchers in the public participation field and is chaired by Geoff Mulgan.

Involve provides advice, training, research, events and networking services to organisations and individuals interested in public participation. The organisation focuses on the practical reality of public participation and has four core activities:

- **advocacy** – building the case for genuine citizen empowerment
- **new thinking** – improving understanding of what works in public Engagement
- **better practice** – supporting institutions and citizens to engage effectively
- **networking** – bringing people from the participation and empowerment field together.

Foreword

British society is no longer a single, easily-understood entity. It is a compound of different cultures and ways of looking at the world, and all the more interesting and worth living in for that.

But if each of those communities and the individuals within them are to share fully in the life of the country, it's vital that they have an equal chance for their voices and concerns to be heard.

Government makes policy, but it can only create policy tailored to people's needs if they get involved in the process.

Any kind of local democracy takes work and commitment. Modern life is complicated, and there are many calls on people's free time – so we shouldn't be surprised that some people choose not to attend local authority consultations, which often take place at times that conflict with family and work commitments.

So if people can't get to the consultation, why not bring the consultation to them?

Say&Play offers a way to connect the state and the citizen. It presents an alternative to traditional consultation processes that can inadvertently exclude people with families and young children from decision making processes.

As a Children's minister, I think young people should be involved in consultations on public services, both as a presence – accompanying their families – and as individuals with their own voices and opinions. They are members of the community too, and the quality of public services has a huge and continuing impact on their lives.

By working with communities, and being creative about how and when consultations happen, it is possible to make the business of government more accessible and engaging. Trials show that working in this way can bring large numbers of people – including busy parents – into discussion with service providers in a meaningful and enjoyable way.

This project involved a partnership between the London Borough of Lambeth and its primary schools, and I am particularly pleased that the Say&Play format takes advantage of the growing role of schools as community centres.

As the Extended Schools agenda transforms the way schools see their role within communities, they will increasingly become places where local residents of all ages come together.

Rather than creating new processes which require the citizen to come to the civic authority, the Say&Play approach looks for the spaces where citizens already act collectively, and asks how we can harness their civic energy. That energy will drive forward the excellent – and tailored – public services of tomorrow.



Baroness Delyth Morgan
Undersecretary of State for Children,
Young People and Families



How to use this report

This report has set out to be as useful to those in local authorities or public services who may wish to consider conducting a Say&Play event. The report is split into two discrete sections designed to be used independently of each other if required:

The first section is a toolkit that gives guidance for those who would wish to plan their own Say&Play style event. It gives an overview of the methods and principles that underpin this approach, and practical tips and ideas for how best to organise activities to help ensure a successful event.

The second section reports back on what happened when this methodology was trialled in the London Borough of Lambeth. It gives a detailed analysis of how the Say&Play approach was implemented, the outcomes it achieved and the lessons this case study can offer others in taking format this format for consultation.

Section one:

Say&Play Format – The Event Planning Toolkit

The aim of this toolkit is to provide practical guidance in the organisation, design and implementation of a Say&Play format for a consultation event. It builds on the trials of this format in partnership with the London Borough of Lambeth in 2008, the outcomes of which are detailed in Section Two of this report.

What is Say&Play?

Say&Play is a format for planning and delivering consultation events that combines a community fun day with appropriate consultation methods. It is designed to attract busy parents and carers who might not normally find the time to come to a more formal consultation event and is also suitable for consulting with children and young people. It aims to involve these groups of people by:

- holding the event at a community venue that is often well-attended for other reasons
- hosting a fun-day as part of the consultation so there are lots of other attractions to draw people along to the event
- ensuring it is easy and quick to participate in the methods used to consult
- hosting the event at a time of day which makes it easy for parents and carers to attend
- involving the local community in planning and running the day so that they feel ownership of outcomes

This toolkit is intended to provide practical guidance on how to develop and plan for each of these components of the Say&Play format. It is intended as a set of guidelines rather than a strict blueprint. Any successful public engagement activity is not simply about using one method in favour of another as it must also be designed to suit the local context in which it occurs. What works for one event or one community may be inappropriate for others. The detailed findings and analysis from the trials of this format in Lambeth are presented in the second half of this report and may also be useful to look at alongside the toolkit.

Teachers can be great facilitators for consultation activities so ask them for help!

The toolkit is divided into the following three sections:

- 1. Planning:** this section sets out how to plan for a Say&Play event. It gives tips for securing participation from key partners, the importance of clarity from the start about desired objectives and how to ensure activities take account of the specific character and capabilities of the target audience. (See below)
- 2. On the day:** this section sets out guidance on choosing methods of consultation which best fit with Say&Play events and tips for running a successful and safe community fun day. (See p.11)
- 3. Afterwards:** this final section identifies the activities which should be undertaken after a Say&Play event to ensure consultation activities are considered a relevant and meaningful experience to all participants and ensure that attendees feel willing to participate in future activities. (See p.13)

1. Planning

1.1 Planning: Where to hold the event?

A critical component of the Say&Play format for public engagement is the venue used for the event. The Say&Play method is not designed for use in formal local authority settings but in spaces and places that are well used by busy parents and carers. The Lambeth trial events were held in primary schools and Involve recommends educational facilities as appropriate venues for such activities. However, the format has also worked well at libraries with strong community links and may also work well at playgroups and nursery schools or at local community centres that have active voluntary associations, e.g. tenants groups or religious associations. Crucially the venue should have both an existing relationship with local parents and carers and the facilities should be able to support a mix of fun and interactive activities into which the consultation activities themselves can be incorporated. This means having a large hall or open area in which consultation activities can be

set up alongside social activities such as refreshments or face painting for children and participants can easily move between the two.

1.2 Planning: When to hold the event?

Say&Play events can be held on weekends or weekdays but are not suitable for evening events when parents, carers, children and young people are unlikely to be willing or able to attend. In particular, Say&Play is a format for consultation that fits well with fun activities – this means it can be easily incorporated into events that may already be planned, e.g. sports days, summer fairs or community open days. Combining these activities can be beneficial to all concerned as local authorities can help support volunteers who organise such events, e.g. the governors or parent teacher associations at schools and the costs and organising of an event can be shared between the venue and the local authority. Such events will also naturally attract participants and parents and carers, helping to increase the potential audience for the consultation.

1.3 Planning: Who to involve and how?

Working closely with the community is the key to success. Successful Say&Play activities involve representatives from all elements of the venue's constituency of users (hereafter the venue community). For example, if a school is used this means involving teachers, governors, parents' groups and pupils in not only participating in the event but planning it. The involvement of the target audience is key to creating an event which will appeal to the communities that use the venue and make the most of their buildings, facilities and community links. Reaching out and supporting the venue community to become involved can be done in many different ways depending on what works best for the individuals; whether setting up a small steering group with governors or parents, working informally with community association members or attending existing meetings open to all users and asking for assistance. It may also be useful to use the checklists given in the second section of the toolkit at these planning meetings to identify who will be responsible for each aspect of the day.

Five Principles for Effective Events

- 1. Make time to properly organise the day.** Good preparation and planning make all the difference to Say&Play events. As a general guide, events should be planned with at least ten weeks notice to allow enough time to meet and plan effectively with partners, help parents and community representatives take part and ensure quality entertainment activities are available to be booked.
- 2. Be clear about purpose of the consultation.** It is important from the outset that those conducting and participating in a consultation are clear about the purpose of the event, what it can and cannot achieve. Local Authorities need to be able to show explicitly how participation in the consultation will make a difference to the final policy or service delivery outcome. If people are not clear about how their participation and support can make a difference to outcomes then this can deter them from getting involved.
- 3. Identify explicit roles and responsibilities.** Each event needs at least one officer with strong local knowledge to lead on both liaison with the venue, partner agencies and the local authority. It is their role and responsibility to ensure commitment to the event and its outcomes from all participants. This also means there is a point of contact that can help identify what forms of information or activities are suitable for the event and help public agencies plan their involvement.
- 4. Prepare young people for the consultation in advance of the event.** Helping young people to participate encourages their parents to do so too. Ask the venue community to help decide how best to make young people feel part of the event. In some trials of Say&Play in schools teachers helped brief the children on what to expect by discussing the event in lessons.
- 5. Make sure there is lots of publicity!** It is vital to give time and funding for publicity for the event if it is to draw in a crowd of participants. This includes ensuring any publicity material is actually distributed at least two weeks in advance of the event, so design and printing times must be considered at least two weeks before this distribution – a month in total.

1.4 Planning: Publicity

Publicising the event is very important and must be planned in advance to ensure outreach and to boost attendance rates. The following are some effective and low cost ways of advertising events:

Print and distribute flyers and posters with the event details. Producing leaflets and posters telling residents about the event is a simple but effective form of advertising. They do not have to be glossy or in colour to get the message across about a fun event. Ask the venue community to help give these out – in schools this can be done by giving them to pupils through registers which can be taken home the week before the event. These can also be given to other local community venues for distribution and display, e.g. libraries, sports centres.

Tap into local networks. Whether these are electronic mailing-lists, local interest groups, political parties or informal word-of-mouth communities, ask local parents and partners to help spread the word about the event.

Issue a press release to local newspapers. This is often an effective way to reach people in the locality. Make sure it includes clearly what the event is, where and when it will be held and what activities will be on offer.

Ask other departments to advertise the event. Ensure other departments who interact with local residents are also aware of the event and are asked to circulate the flyer. This is a great way to ensure that publicity for the event reaches the widest audience possible.

Citizenship classes in schools are useful opportunities to prepare children to take part in a consultation. This can help ensure that results from their participation are meaningful.

1.5 Planning: Making a responsibility checklist

In planning for an event it is helpful to have the following key responsibilities assigned to someone assigned to ensure delivery on the day. Below are two checklists outlining some of those responsibilities. This list can be adapted and added to as needed:

Involve recommends that someone from the local authority takes responsibility for the following duties:

- Overseeing the logistical and publicity arrangements for the event. This can include managing budgets for activities, producing flyers and posters and inviting partner agencies and voluntary sector representatives
- Liaising with the venue community including organising meetings, e.g. with governors, staff and parents to support their involvement in the event
- Designing the consultation including deciding which methods to use and how best to explain them to the participants
- Staffing and facilitating each consultation activity
- Collating the data collected and feeding it back to local policy decision makers
- Evaluating the process and feeding back to participants on the outcome of the event and its impact on policy

Involve recommends that someone from the venue community takes responsibility for the following duties:

- Responsibility for choosing, organising and staffing entertainment activities and suitable refreshments for the event
- Responsibility for risk assessment of the event including child protection, fire safety, security during the event and first aid
- Responsibility for applying for a Temporary Event Notice from the local authority if needed
- If the event is being held outdoors, arranging a contingency plan in case of poor weather
- Preparing young people in advance for the event including organising discussion about what will happen and why to help them participate

2. On the day

2.1 On the Day: Fun and food!

Ensure within the budget for any Say&Play event there is sufficient funding for entertainment activities as well as affordable or free refreshments for all participants. This is because the fun activities provided are often the main draw for participants. What exactly is needed to make an event fun is something best left to the venue community to decide. For example, in one of the Lambeth trial events the design of the activities was devolved to school pupils who produced a series of sport challenges. In another, a parents' group created a fashion show, and in others more traditional forms of children's entertainment were used including face painting and bouncy castles.

Make sure everyone – whether local authority department, public service or community group- understands the nature of the event and is supported to offer an interactive and engaging activity to encourage participants to visit their stall. A more informal, interactive and 'fun' approach should be encouraged for all stalls and activities. For example, those running stalls can be encouraged to wear casual clothes, to stand in front of their stall rather than behind a table, and if they are able to provide useful information, freebies or sign-up sheets then all the better.

Making sure that all participants can have something to drink and something to eat is also an easy and key part to making them feel it was a worthwhile activity. The venue community may also have ideas for how best to do this and what should be provided, e.g. vegetarian, Halal, Kosher, etc. In one of the Lambeth trial events the school used the opportunity to hold a barbeque to raise funds for their Parent Teacher Association. Another school provided free smoothies and biscuits for participants.

2.2 On the Day: Setting out the venue

Successful Say&Play events require careful planning in the use of the space in which they take place. Positioning consultation activities in areas where crowds form, for example near food or close to popular activities such as face painting, increase their visibility and convenience – increasing potential for participation. Grouping all consultation activities together in one space can create a perception of separateness from the rest of the event and should be avoided. It is also important to think about how the venue will be used during the day, for example, noisy musical performances taking place in the area of consultation can prevent participants from engaging in activities which require verbal explanation. The following questions should be considered when laying out the activities for consultation at a fun day:

- Are consultation activities dispersed and mixed in with the other stalls and activities?
- Are activities positioned in spaces where people are likely to congregate? Be careful to not site activities in areas where nobody will naturally walk by and also to avoid creating areas which may become bottlenecks once the venue is full.
- Is accessibility of each consultation activity maximised, for example access for disabled participants or those with pushchairs and prams?
- Are facilitators positioned to actively engage participants?
- Is there a timetable for the day around which the consultation activities should be fitted, e.g. a band or music that might affect ability to hear explanation or discuss of consultation.

Different colours make it easy to distinguish the responses of children and young people from adults.



Method 4: Wouldn't it be great if we could...?

2.3 On the Day: Choosing the right way to consult

The Say&Play format works best with consultation activities that can be drop-in/drop-out for participants- there are some examples of the methods used in the Lambeth trial project on page 19. Additionally, further facilitation resources are signposted in Appendix A.

Say&Play format events work best with methods that are:

- Quick– taking no more than 2-3minutes to participate in
- Simple to understand, requiring only limited explanation
- Not reliant on reading or writing to participate
- Supported by a facilitator who can explain and assist as required
- Visually appealing
- Physically stimulating, e.g. does it involve a physical aspect such as voting with a sticker?
- Mentally stimulating, e.g. does it involve weighing up different options?

A balance must be achieved between making it clear that these are serious consultation activities, without intimidating potential participants by making them too formal. An additional option to submit written feedback should also be provided for those who wish to use a more traditional format.

2.4 On the Day: Making sure everyone can take part

- **Cater to all audiences and their needs.** Participants who speak English as a second language, groups with physical disabilities and those with low literacy all have different needs that must be incorporated into the design of the consultation activities. Tap into the knowledge of the venue community to find out about the audience they expect to attend and how best to address these issues.
- **Avoid jargon or vague ideas in the questions asked.** Make sure that the questions being asked are clear, precise and jargon free. Try to pilot the questions with the members of the venue community beforehand to make sure that the questions asked are accessible to all and can be rewritten if necessary.
- **Make sure consultation activities are accessible to both adults and children.** The ability and opportunity for children to take part in the consultation is as important as their parents. It is also important not to make the activities feel too playful and therefore to exclude adults – a balance must be achieved and made clear that the consultation is for all participants.
- **Make sure someone is always on hand to help.** Use trained facilitators who have the skills necessary to explain activities to participants and to clarify the purpose of the consultation. Managing the participation of children and young people can be particularly time consuming and Involve recommends that specialists in youth participation are present on the day to help facilitate this process.

Make sure all activities are friendly and approachable - Don't stand behind tables, behind suits, or behind clipboards!

2.5 On the Day: Tips for facilitation

For whichever consultation methods are used at the event itself, a well-prepared facilitator can make all the difference to participants' willingness to get involved and to their experience of involvement. The facilitator's role is therefore crucial. Involve recommends that a practice run takes place before the event and that facilitators use the following principles to guide their role on the day:

- Provide unbiased and impartial advice to participants on how to participate
- Actively inviting people to participate in the consultation – not remaining behind the desk
- Friendly and informal approach – in both dress and conversational style
- Patient and explanatory – they should be fully prepared to repeatedly explain how the consultation methods work and how the information will be used to inform decision making.

3. Afterwards

3.1 Afterwards: Feedback

Making sure participants know what will happen to their views is important in helping them to understand the value of participating and ensuring future involvement in consultation events. It is therefore important to build into any event proposals for feeding back the outcomes of an event, including responding to the views put forward and details of how and when decisions are being made following the consultation itself.

Involve recommend the publication of the findings from an event and any data which is included in a report or policy document should be made available to participants who contributed to it. This should be publicised through channels which will reach participants with the specific sections highlighted to them. For example, in the Lambeth trials the outcomes of all events were sent back to the Head Teachers and governors to circulate amongst parents.

Placing consultation activities near spaces where people congregate, such as food and drink, will lead to widespread participation.

It is also a good idea to provide a process whereby participants can raise other issues of concern to them and receive a response. This can help prevent such other issues from dominating the consultation and assist participants in understanding what is and is not up for consultation. To oversee both the feedback process and handling other issues it is best to identify a named individual to take responsibility for ensuring this happens. This person should cover both ensuring feedback to individuals and to the venue for the consultation itself. In the Say&Play trials the local authority committed to contacting each individual who completed a comment form asking for a response on an issue and included their contact details.

3.2 Afterwards: Evaluation and learning

Building time into the event process to evaluate its outcomes is a valuable feedback process for local authorities. An evaluation should ask participants in the planning and delivery of the event if they felt the event had achieved what it set out to do and if there were lessons to be learnt from the event for future service delivery and event planning. It can help the evaluation process to also collect data on the day from participants about their experience of the event. In the Lambeth pilot short forms were used to do this and facilitators actively supported the completion of the forms. These evaluation activities should enable participants and policy officers in recording whether the event was useful from their perspective to help in planning for future consultation and policy development activities.

Section two:

Say&Play@Schools in Lambeth – Research Report

During the course of 2008 Involve worked with the London Borough of Lambeth to trial the Say&Play format for consultation through five different events in local schools. This section of the report details the outcomes of this project. It sets out the methods used in the trials, the outcomes achieved and the feedback from participants on the events. This section therefore provides the evidence that underpins the toolkit for the Say&Play format set out in section one of the report.

Although the Say&Play format described in this report was trialled in Lambeth primary schools and employed a particular set of consultation methods, Involve believes that this approach should in future not be restricted to using schools as venues, nor should the methods used be restricted to those in the Lambeth pilot.

1. Introduction

“And I think what [Say&Play] does, particularly for Lambeth and other local authorities, is it provides a workable tool that’s not going to cost a lot of money, that’s not going to break the bank, but it’s very practical..it enables. Local authorities should be able to look at it and say “oh, it’s commonsense that people, particularly parents and young children, congregate around schools” – it’s not rocket science.”

Senior Local Authority Officer

Active participation by the public in decision-making is increasingly recognised as an integral part of good local and national governance. Whether by voting in elections, responding to a consultation or lobbying their elected representatives, British democracy is dependent on the involvement of its citizens for its legitimacy. Indeed, the growing concern over the low levels of turnout in local and national elections reflects in part a fear that without high levels of participation in democracy the ability of any form of governance to act is limited because it cannot be said to represent the will of the people.

Having forums in which the public can express their preferences about services is also key to ensuring the decisions made and services provided reflect the demands of the people who pay for them. In a society with many complex wants and concerns, good decision making thrives on effective channels for consultation and deliberation which can make sure that the different needs and demands of the public are communicated to service providers. To support this, over the course of the last ten years there has been a substantial growth of opportunities for the public to be directly involved in decision making in both

local and national government. In particular, within local government there has been an emergence of a large number of participation processes ranging from participatory budgeting and citizens juries to empowerment networks and New Deal for Communities.

However, in spite of these efforts the UK Government 2007-2008 Citizenship Survey reveals only 10% of the public have taken part in local public service decision making activities within the last year and only one-fifth (20%) of people feel they can influence decisions affecting Great Britain. The Hansard Society’s 2008 Audit of Political Engagement¹ shows that individual perceptions of influence in political decision making reveal a marked disparity between social classes; with classes AB and C1 much more likely to have contacted an elected representative than those classes DE. So too there is evidence that particular sections of society are underrepresented; the 2008 Audit shows that only 1% of BMEs are classified as political activists compared to 13% of white respondents. Others less likely to be politically active are people without formal qualifications; single people; and readers of tabloid newspapers².

Whilst a number of surveys highlight a growing cultural disengagement in political decision making, so others show that many of the processes used and opportunities for democratic engagement can inadvertently exclude those with busy lives or families. For example, the Hansard Society's 2007 Audit of Political Engagement³ showed 32% of respondents could not combine participation in the democratic process with "other commitments". This trend is further corroborated in the 2008 Audit of Political Engagement which shows far fewer people participate in more time-consuming political activities; for example, only 6% having attended a political meeting in the last 2-3 years, falling 3% from the previous year's Audit⁴. Research conducted by the Government⁵ also reflects the problems facing those who wish to mix civic participation with work and family obligations. Over a third of respondents to the Government's Active Citizenship Survey stated childcare commitments prevented them being involved in public life despite wishing to be more active in their community. Other respondents also highlighted their difficulty in participating due to their working hours. In response to this, some public service providers offer childcare facilities at formal consultative events or online engagement activities. However, the persistently low levels of involvement in consultations and democratic forums by those with children suggests that at best such provision only mitigates these practical barriers to engagement rather than offering a successful way of overcoming them.

In contrast to expecting residents to accommodate structures set up by local authorities, Involve developed the Say&Play format for consultation to address these issues from the perspective of the potential participants. It asked how best to fit public engagement activities into the lives of those busy with families and jobs. It was therefore developed to build upon the interest this group was considered to have in community and educational establishments as either parents or carers for school age children.

Involve sought to test whether consultation events at such institutions had the potential to attract the attention of a large number of local residents. To do this, with the assistance of the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the London Borough



Method 3: Shout Outs

of Lambeth, Involve designed and trialled the Say&Play format for consultation at five schools to consult on services for children and young people. The consultation element was combined with popular entertainment activities for the whole school such as sports days, summer fairs or community fun days. Activities were designed that could fit into the ethos of these events so that they could form part and parcel of the experience of attending. This report details the outcomes of these trials, the activities undertaken and the lessons this approach to public engagement offers for local authorities as they seek to engage with residents in public service decision making.

- 1 The Hansard Society (2008) The Audit of Political Engagement Research Report 5. London: The Hansard Society
- 2 *Ibid*
- 3 The Hansard Society (2007) The Audit of Political Engagement Research Report 4. London: The Hansard Society
- 4 The Hansard Society (2008) The Audit of Political Engagement Research Report 5. London: The Hansard Society
- 5 Kitchen S, Michaelson J, Wood N and John P (2006) 2005 Citizenship Survey: Active Communities topic report. London: Department for Communities and Local Government

Origins of Say and Play: Lea Bridge Library

The Say&Play project builds on Involve's previous work using educational establishments and community venues as forums for public service decision making. In March 2007 Involve worked with a "Friends of the Library" community group and their local authority in East London to design an event that would attract a large turnout of local residents to a consultation on the future of a library. Following discussion with the residents this event took place on a weekend afternoon and offered a range of entertaining and educational activities designed to attract residents and their children to visit the library in question. Participants on the day were also then approached for their views on proposals for the future of the library. This included children, young adults and their carers as well as library users of all ages. Participation in the event and all activities were free to local residents and funded through a small grant from the local authority.

Prior to the event, Involve worked closely with service providers and the community to design the event itself. In particular, the organisers worked with the "Friends" group to identify the kinds of activities children would enjoy having at the library, how best to enable both children and adults to comment on the proposals for the future of the library service and to publicise the event. This included producing a flyer that was distributed to local schools and community groups via local street wardens as well as notices about the event in the local paper and on community email networks. Members of the group were also encouraged to use "word of mouth" to recruit residents to the event.

On the day a range of consultation was conducted alongside other activities including story telling, poster making and refreshments. The methods used reflected the informal and fun nature of the day and ranged from the opportunity for children to produce a mural of what they would like to see in "the best library in the world" and a chance for adults to suggest and prioritise different potential service options for the building over refreshments. The outcomes of this consultation were then used to inform a bid to the national lottery for funding to refurbish the library, to enable the provision of additional services and to influence the development of library facilities in the local area.

The event attracted over 1,000 participants of whom 10% completed the consultation activities. This revealed that those who had taken part in the event were from a wide cross section of local residents, reflecting the demographic make up of the neighbourhood. The benefits of working in this way were also evident in the improved working relations the event fostered between service providers and users and increase awareness and take up of the services currently available through the library. This also manifested itself in rise in membership of the "Friends" community group after the event.

Context: Participation and community engagement in Lambeth

Following on from the pilot project in East London, the Say&Play format for public engagement was adapted for a trial in the London Borough of Lambeth as a way for the Council to consult on services for children and young people.

The Say&Play project came at a time when Lambeth Council was undertaking a range of geographically based participation initiatives called 'People First Expos'. The senior officer managing the local authority's involvement in this project stated:

"I want Lambeth to be at the forefront of shaping this agenda rather than being dragged through by statute. We wanted to achieve new ways of engaging and learn new ways of engaging. We wanted to try and build up a profile of what are the key priorities for people who are traditionally excluded from the more traditional way of engaging such as structured fora, surveys."

Securing more representative community engagement and participation in public decision making was therefore a clear priority for the local authority and led to their support for the trials. However, this commitment to engaging the local community in public service decision making was not necessarily recognised by the residents themselves. Lambeth Council's 2007 State of the Borough Report⁶ found that across the borough only four in ten (39%) residents agreed they could influence decisions in their local area and only three in ten (31%) were satisfied with the opportunities for participation in local decision-making. The survey showed whilst one in five residents said they had taken part in a consultation, responded to a survey or attended a meeting about local issues over the last twelve months, those who had tended to be those residents from more affluent backgrounds. This suggested that those currently



Method 1: People's priorities

participating in public engagement activities in Lambeth were not necessarily representative of the local community given the evidence that deprivation and poverty were high in the borough⁷.

These disparities in participation and willingness to participate were heightened in different parts of the borough itself. For example, in North Lambeth 48% of residents stated they were satisfied with the opportunities to participate in local decision making they experienced and were generally positive about the local area as a whole. This contrasted with Streatham where only 23% of residents were satisfied with their opportunities to participate.

2. Organisations and Outcomes

This chapter sets out the process by which the Say&Play format for public engagement was designed and implemented in Lambeth. It gives an overview of both the organisation issues arising during the project including the logistics, cost and consultation methods chosen and the outcomes secured. The following chapter then provides feedback from participants on the different aspects of the Say&Play format and offers an analysis of what local authorities can learn from the experience in Lambeth when considering undertaking a Say&Play style event.

Organisation: Event logistics and preparation

The five schools chosen for the trials of this method were each very different. They included schools in areas of high deprivation, a faith school, a pioneer in the extended schools agenda and a final trial linking a primary school with a local playground and its user group. The localities in which the schools were based varied from tight-knit communities with high levels of civic involvement to areas with highly transient populations with many varied and sometimes disparate communities. Full details of each of the schools who participated are given in Appendix B of this report.

The theme and design of each event was largely devolved to the school, with the event planning and organisation often split between staff (e.g. Head Teacher, Deputy Head Teacher) and parents closely involved in the school (e.g. parent governors, "friends of..." groups). In one instance responsibility for the designing the activities at the Say&Play event was devolved to pupils themselves, a strategy which ensured their interest in the event. The motivations for the schools' involvement in this project differed greatly. For some the motivation came from a need to connect to the local area. This followed on from the perceived success of other local schools in this ambition that were part of the Extended Schools agenda. For others it was a useful opportunity to tie a Say&Play event in with an event in the school calendar for which they could use the project money to finance.

Local authority knowledge and support was provided by Lambeth Council Town Centre Managers who worked closely with the schools in helping to identify potential partners for each event and local avenues for promoting it. The Town Centre Managers supported the contact and involvement of local organisations and ensured that representatives from the relevant departments in the local authority attended each event. The following table gives an overview of the range of events and agencies who took part at each of the five trials:

6. Lambeth First (2007) State of the Borough Report. London: The London Borough of Lambeth
7. Three quarters of its 21 wards have deprivation scores which place them in the bottom third of all areas in the Government's Indices of Multiple Deprivation – *Ibid*.

School	Type and Timing of Event	Partner Agencies	Local Authority Involvement	Social Activities provided
Immanuel and St Andrew Church of England Primary School	Indoor/outdoor, sports themed fun day linked to the national Sport Relief campaign Saturday 15 March 2008, 11am – 3pm	Primary Care Trust, Safer Neighbourhoods, Energy Watch, Asthma UK;	Democratic Services, Environmental Services, Planning	Sports activities designed by pupils, face painting, bouncy castle, pupil drumming circle, pupil steel band, BBQ
Vauxhall Primary School	Outdoor, School Spring Fair Saturday 29 March 2008, 12 – 4pm	Fire Brigade, St John's Ambulance;	North Lambeth Town Centre Office, Lambeth Housing	Bouncy castle, face painting, arts and crafts activities, tombola, South London Jazz orchestra, Fire Brigade display, pupil gymnastic display, aerobics for parents
Johanna Primary School	Indoor/outdoor open day for parents, Thursday 3 April 2008, 3.30 – 6pm	Waterloo Time Bank, Uni4U, Coin St Community Builders, Women Like Us, Bishops Safer Neighbourhoods Team, Blackfriars Settlement	North Lambeth Town Centre Office, Housing and Anti Social Behaviour, Democratic Services, Adult Learning	Bouncy castle, face painting, pupil choir performances, various sports activities, a fashion show, a speech given by The Archbishop of Canterbury, free food and drink
Wyvil Primary School	Indoor, open evening, Tuesday 29 April 2008, 3.30 – 6pm	Kings College Oral Health, Energywatch	North Lambeth Town Centre Office, Housing	Various arts and crafts, face painting, pupil choir performances, free food and drink
Stockwell Primary School	Outdoor, school sports day, Thursday 3 July 2008, 1.30-3.30pm	Health Mentors, Slade Community Playground	Housing Office, Environment Team, Health advisors	Sports activities, face painting, steel band, free healthy food and drink, raffle

Organisation: Budgeting and costings

For each of the five events, an initial budget of £1,500 was allocated to cover the costs of organising and delivering all aspects of the day. No school ran over the budget allocated for each trial and it was clear that, for primary schools, £1,500 was sufficient to run a Say&Play event. Discussions with a secondary school about running a Say&Play trial highlighted the difference in event style, budget and time commitment this would involve compared with a primary school. The secondary school made it clear that a budget of £1,500 would not be sufficient to hold an event that would draw in its community.

Organisation: Choosing consultation topic and methods

The first four of the five events were used to consult on Lambeth Council's Children and Young People's Plan, and for the fifth the Council's Fair Play Strategy was made the subject. The focus of the consultations was on gathering feedback on both these policy documents, e.g. whether the local authority had been successful in addressing crime or providing suitable play areas for young people. The criteria for the choice of methods were defined by the kinds of events which the schools were running and the data which Children and Young People's Services had requested. Every event ran three main consultation activities which were spread around the venues where the events were taking place with two further options for participants to give more in depth comments if they felt their opinions were not adequately represented in the consultation. All the methods used in the trials required low levels of time commitment suited the drop-in/drop-out nature of the events. They were chosen to suit an audience consisting primarily of young families.

Method One: *(Picture on p. 17)*

People's priorities

Purpose: find out if local people's concerns matched those outlined in Lambeth Council's Children and Young People's Plan and to find out which ones were most important to the community.

Method: Using sticky dots and flipcharts to vote on priorities. Each person received three sticky dots to vote on their top three priorities relating to children and young people's services in the area. They could use all of their dots on one priority if they felt strongly about it, or spread them out more evenly. Different colour sticky dots were given to children and adults.

This method attracted a mixed range of participants at all events. Facilitators were required to ensure that each participant received three dots of the correct colour. At the first trial one colour of dot for all participants. In subsequent trials this was adapted and different colours were introduced for children and adults. Eye catching material was displayed throughout trials with the aim of informing participants and encouraging them to take part. In the first trial, in depth instructions were visibly displayed on a wall, however reading this proved time consuming for some attendees and may have discouraged some from participating. Later trials modified instructions, making them simpler with the bare minimum information displayed. However, although some participants read these, a verbal explanation was frequently required to clarify the method. Later trials used simple slogans "Have your say" and "Tell Lambeth what you think" to attract attendees at the event to the activity and facilitators then actively approached and engaged interested participants. In the penultimate trial teachers assisted facilitators to engage participants. This resulted in one of the highest participation rate of all trials.

Checklist

- Flipcharts, sticky dots, accessible wall space, facilitator?
- Different coloured dots for the results of children/ young people and adults?
- Instructions and questions/statements written?
- Is translation needed?
- Is the activity visible?
- Is the activity accessible?

Method Two: *(Picture on p. 22)*

How did we do?

Purpose: find out how people thought Lambeth Council was performing on the priorities it set out by agreeing or disagreeing with a number of questions.

Method: Marbles in jars. Each question was written up on the wall – two jars are placed in front of the question. One was 'Lambeth doing well', one was 'Lambeth is not doing well'. Participants can add a marble to only one jar for each question. A single jar was allocated as 'Don't know' for participants unsure about any of the questions. Different colour marbles were given to children and adults.

The trials consistently showed this as the activity that yielded highest participation levels. Feedback interviews with attendees confirmed this activity as the most visually appealing and may explain the consistent interest from both adults and children attending the events. Facilitators were required to ensure that each participant received the correct number and colour of beads. Feedback from facilitators suggests that for most participants this activity was quick to complete and relatively simple to understand.

In the first trial one colour bead was used for all participants. In subsequent trials another colour bead was introduced to distinguish the results of adults from those of children. In the first trial, in depth instructions were visibly displayed on a wall, however these were rarely read by participants. Later trials modified these instructions, making them simpler with the bare minimum information displayed. However, these were again rarely read or used by participants who would often ask a facilitator to explain.

Checklist

- Jars, beads, table space, post-it notes, written materials, facilitator?
- Different coloured beads for the results of children/ young people and adults?
- Do I have instructions and questions/statements written?
- Is translation needed?
- Is the activity visible?
- Is the activity accessible?

Method Three: *(Picture on p. 15)*

Shout outs

Purpose: Help put faces to names and to hear real citizens' voices. This method aims to appeal particularly to young people.

Method: Video blogging – participants were invited to provide free-form comments to Lambeth on the relevant topic area – for example:

“What do you think Lambeth council could do to improve the lives of children and young people?”

This exercise was time limited to two minutes to ensure access to a large number of participants.

This activity required a pro-active and conversational facilitator to actively engage attendees at the event. The facilitator moved around the venue asking for participants and giving them time to reflect on the question posed before filming their responses. Feedback from facilitators who ran this activity highlighted the difference in attitudes of potential participants, with children more likely to express initial enthusiasm in participating. However, once fully explained most people were receptive to the idea that they could give a direct and personalised response to the council. In some instances language issues were cited as reasons for not taking part in this exercise.

Feedback from facilitators also highlighted the time intensity of this method. Preparing the participant and allowing them time to think about what they wanted to say were important elements in ensuring the quality of the video blog. Facilitators for this activity need to have both the technical expertise to use and test the equipment prior to its use at the event.

Checklist

- Camera, blank tape, microphone, facilitator?
- Has the technology been tested both before and during the event?
- Is there a quiet space available?
- Is the lighting appropriate?
- Arrangements for video to be edited afterwards?

Method Four: *(Picture on p. 12)*

Wouldn't it be great if we could..?

Purpose: To brainstorm ideas and help identify issues in the locality that may not be captured by the other exercises.

Method: Two spaces to be creative with writing and drawing up ideas. One area had a map of Lambeth and the other had a blank “graffiti table” with a relevant question written on it. Participants were encouraged to be creative and respond to this question by writing up ideas for services for children and young people and to identify issues geographical concerns on the map of Lambeth. Post it notes and colourful pens were laid out to help with this task.

In all trials a facilitator was used to encourage participation and to briefly explain each of the tables. The graffiti table was consistently more popular resulting in much higher participation levels than the map. In a number of trials the graffiti table was used almost exclusively by children and facilitators suggested that high levels of participation of children were likely to deter adults from taking part. Unlike the graffiti table, the map of the local area was used in all trials by both children and adults. Feedback interviews with participants and facilitators suggest that this was seen as the more “serious” activity of the two. However, it is worth noting that in the first trial of this event both adults and children took part in the graffiti table, often together, and this subsequently yielded a high number of comments and ideas that were specifically targeted towards local issues.

Checklist

- Graffiti table: plain wallpaper, pens, pencils, other creative materials, facilitator?
- Map: post-it notes, pens, facilitator?
- Do I have instructions and questions/statements written?
- Is translation needed?
- Is the activity visible?
- Is the activity accessible?
- Is the activity safe for young children (e.g. non-toxic pens, glue, choking hazards)?

Method Five:

Quick questions

Purpose: To monitor who participated in the consultation exercises

Method: A more traditional monitoring form with six questions. The questions were:

1. **Did you take part in the consultation activities today?**
2. **Have you ever taken part in a council consultation before?**
3. **What were the good and bad points about the consultation activities available today?**
4. **How old are you? (Age bandings)**
5. **Ethnicity? (List of options and open ended option)**
6. **Are you male or female?**

There was also an additional option to leave a contact address for Lambeth Council to get in touch.

In designing this method it was envisaged that this non-intrusive approach would encourage people to complete the forms. The form was attached to a clipboard and was available at each consultation activity table. The job of the facilitator was to give the form and clipboard to participants at the events to complete themselves. However, in none of the trials was participation in the method systematically achieved. There were many factors that may have played a role in limiting participation. The forms often took participants longer to complete than was anticipated when they were designed. Feedback from facilitators suggests that the forms were also viewed by participants as less important than the consultation activities in which they were asked for their opinions about policy issues.

Checklist

- Forms, pens, clipboards?
- Is translation needed?
- Is there a scribe available?
- Is there a safe place where I can store completed forms?

Method Six:

Comment forms

Purpose: To obtain more in depth feedback on questions from consultations exercises about which participants feel particularly strongly. Children and Young People's Services committed to contact each person to discuss the issue. Any comments which fell outside the remit of this department were to be forwarded to the relevant department or personnel.

Method: Clipboards with small comment sheets placed alongside all consultation activities. Space on form allocated for contact details of participant.

The comment forms were designed to allow participants to elaborate on any issues they felt were not adequately covered in the consultation. The nature of comments varied greatly from specific policy related comments to general reflections on the performance of the local authority. Despite a commitment from the local authority to contact all participants who gave comments and included their name and contact details, a significant minority withheld their contact information.

Checklist

- Forms, pens, clipboards, facilitator?
- Is translation needed?
- Is there a scribe available?
- Are the forms visible?
- Should the forms be printed on coloured paper?

Outcomes: Attendance and participation

Attendance figures for each event varied from approximately 200 up to 400 with participation rates ranging from approximately 50 up to 250 participants. Due to the large flow of people attending the events it was not possible to effectively monitor if participants in one activity also completed the other activities. Therefore it is not possible to give an accurate figure for overall participation rates in the consultation activities.

For the first four events, which were consulting on the Children and Young People's Plan, the conservative measure gives a figure of 422 participants; an average of over 100 per event. For the final event, which consulted on the Lambeth Play strategy, the participation rate reached 247. This brought the aggregate participation rate for the trials to 669. The breakdown of participation rates for each of the schools involved on each of the activities was as follows:

Immanuel & St Andrews Church of England Primary School	
Approximate attendance	300
Consultation activity	Participation
'How did we do?'	102 people
'Peoples' Priorities'	69 people
'Wouldn't it be great if we could..'	54 graffiti comments and 21 comments on Streatham map
Monitoring forms	60 forms
Comment forms	12 forms

Vauxhall Primary School	
Approximate attendance	200
Consultation activity	Participation
'How did we do?'	46 people (30 adults, 16 children)
'Peoples' Priorities'	47 people (30 adults, 17 children)
'Wouldn't it be great if we could..'	54 comments
Monitoring forms	24 forms
Comment forms	18 forms



Method 2: How did we do?

Johanna Primary School	
Approximate attendance	400
Consultation activity	Participation
'How did we do?'	98 (60 adults, 38 children)
'Peoples' Priorities'	40 people (30 adults, 10 children)
'Wouldn't it be great if we could..'	25 Comments
Monitoring forms	15 forms
Comment forms	9 forms

Wyvil Primary School	
Approximate attendance	400
Consultation activity	Participation
'How did we do?'	106 people (38 adults, 68 children)
'Peoples' Priorities'	168 people (81 adults, 87 children)
'Wouldn't it be great if we could..'	61 comments
Monitoring forms	36 forms
Comment forms	7 forms
Video Blog	10 Blogs

Stockwell Primary School	
Approximate attendance	400
Consultation activity	Participation
'How did we do?'	247 People (197 children 50 adults)
'Peoples' Priorities'	176 People (124 Children 52 Adults)
'My Ideal Playground'	112 Comments
Monitoring forms	12 forms
Comment forms	2 forms
Video Blog	4 Blogs

Monitoring forms, although only completed by a selection of participants, reflected a high participation rate by women, many of who were from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. The majority of those who completed monitoring forms were aged between 35 and 44 years although there was also a large cohort of adults aged 25-34. Very few of those who completed the forms, approximately 20%, had ever taken part in a local authority consultation before. Of these, the vast majority had completed at least one Say&Play consultation activity highlighting the effectiveness of the Say&Play format in engaging people whose voices are not normally reflected in the traditional models of local authority consultation.

Outcomes: Results of the consultation

The results from the first four consultations fed into the Local Authority's Children and Young People's Plan with the department committing to reference the data and provide personalised feedback to participants who completed comment forms. Results from this consultation showed widespread perception of high crime rates in the borough confirming one of the key themes from Lambeth's Sustainable Communities Strategy⁸.

Lambeth Council also committed to feeding back to participants who gave in-depth comments, and who included their contact details, on the comment forms provided. Analysis of comments left on 'creative space' activities at all consultations highlighted a perceived lack of leisure facilities in the borough, specifically the lack of a swimming pool. Sample comments given which were then fed back to the local authority for a response included the following:

"Leisure centre soon please"

"It would be nice if roadworks were done in the holidays that were outside school"

"More crossings near Vauxhall church and near Vauxhall park"

"Internet cafe that young people can go in for free"

Commenting on the results of the consultation one Local Authority Officer reported:

"The data has been very, very useful as far as looking at the priorities of the Children and Young People's Plan and how successful we have been in achieving those. We've been able to use that really well in the review of the Children and Young People's plan. Also what it threw up was that neighbourhood and localities can be very different and we've kind of created services that are more based around neighbourhoods, localities and communities."

The results from the final consultation were used to inform discussion about the department's future priorities for play provision throughout Lambeth. Results show that having a "safe atmosphere" for play areas was rated the most important by both adults and children at the event.

3. Learning from Say&Play in Lambeth:

What Worked and What Didn't

This final chapter of this report analyses the impact of this project on the participants and the local authority involved. As part of the evaluation conducted by Involve 45 feedback interviews were held with participants, partners and, local authority staff. The lessons this chapter offers for future public engagement activities are in four categories – the benefits and limitations of working with schools to conduct consultation, the importance of methodology and process issues in Say&Play events, the difficulties in ensuring adequate feedback and communication after events with participants and the wider difficulties of using the Say&Play format within a local government context.

Outside the Town Hall: Using schools to conduct consultation

Involve argue these trials have shown the value to using community venues and schools, in particular, as a place in which to conduct local decision making events. Aside from the financial assistance provided to the school for an event that was universally welcomed, the overall feedback showed they enjoyed the experience of participating in consultation and developed good working relationships with the local authority. In turn, the feedback from local authority officers and partner agencies showed they found the events a useful way of engaging with large groups of people who had not traditionally participated in local consultations.

This illustrates how taking consultation out to the public to spaces in which they feel comfortable can help engage those who had been resistant to participation previously. From the 45 participant feedback interviews, eighteen stated that they had not had attended council run events such as meetings or consultations. Of these eighteen, only five people stated that they either did not know about council run events or felt that they had not been given the chance to attend such events showing that their non-involvement was not the result of a lack of awareness of such opportunities.

"I'm ok with the school but I don't really deal with the council that much."

(Female parent)

Furthermore, ten people cited time pressures as the reasons for not engaging in formal council processes. It is significant that over a quarter of people interviewed gave time related reasons and reflects the findings of recent research⁹ which highlight the competing pressures placed on time use in modern lifestyles. Several interviewees stated that it was impractical for them to attend evening meetings due to the demands of their families while others said they were unwilling to give up their free time in the evenings or weekends to go to a meeting. The response by one female parent typifies the views of many parents in the trials:

"[council events] tend to be at unsocial time..they tend to have their consultation meetings at 7.30 in the evening and it's difficult because I have young children, otherwise I would [go]."

A number of interviewees also suggested that the needs or interests of their children would to a large extent determine the way they spent their time. The following response suggested that there is lack of participation opportunities designed around the needs of young families who, as the interviewee suggests, rarely act as isolated individuals but rather as a unit:

"I don't avoid local authority events but I need a reason. If it's something that appeals to my children then I tend to go and if not then we don't."

The responses also suggest that what constitutes an opportunity for engagement for a young family will be defined to a large extent by its perceived relevance to everyday family life – as this female parent observed:

"I don't usually read the leaflets [from the council] which come through the door..you always read the letters that come from the school..if my son has letters I will always read them."

This format for public engagement was developed to explore whether responding to these concerns by designing consultation around these pressures could impact on participation rates. The outcomes reflect how addressing these issues through going to where children are, rather than solely providing a crèche at a public consultation, can reap rewards in turnout and in the participation of people

who do not tend to be involved in public consultations. The limitations of trying to make traditional consultation activities “child friendly” were pointed out by a council officer:

“When you have a council meeting you don’t find children there..it has always been the same people.”

The involvement of parents in early stages of organisation appeared particularly to act as a way of increasing their sense of ownership over the event and encouraging them to promote participation amongst their peers. The involvement of parents in the organisation of a Say&Play event allowed schools to draw on a diverse range of skills. One parent noted:

“[parents have] so many skills but [schools] don’t realise those skills.”
(Male parent)

Alongside the ability of the schools to assist in securing participation, working with schools through this project also had many unintended but nevertheless positive outcomes. Feedback interviews with those involved in the organisation of suggest decisions on budget spending and the planning activities brought staff members, parents and parent-governors into regular close contact increasing the cohesiveness of the school with its community:

“Everyone felt that they had ownership over the event..it was one of the few times that the teaching assistants and the teachers and some of the governors all pulled together.”
(Male parent/organiser)

Similarly, evidence from interviews shows how such events serve to strengthen relationships within the schools. Interviewees noted that the informal environment of the Say&Play event had given them the opportunity to meet other parents and staff or new people and new organisations with whom they would not otherwise have spoken:

“It’s good to get to know other parents. Sometimes you’re in a rush and other parents are working and you don’t get the time to see other parents.”
(Female parent)

Institutions that are at the centre of a child’s everyday life are therefore well placed to engage parents. However, it is important to recognise that the popularity of these events was generated by relationships that are formed around the schools and as such success is dependent on the nature of the venue itself rather than the format. Almost all parents who took part in feedback interviews stated that they had attended a previous event at the school and were very positive about the experience. So too, facilitators noted that many of the teachers at the events had a strong rapport with parents and carers of pupils. The research showed parents often saw it as their duty to support the school in the activities it held and would come whether or not they had a personal interest in the event being run. In other cases parents cited the interest of their children as the motivating factor for their attendance. The following comment from a female parent is typical of the views given in many of the feedback interviews:

“My son was very keen to take part because it was something that the school were doing and he wanted to be part of it as well. I think it’s important to support the school and take part.”

The difference in attendance and indeed involvement of partners in each of the trials reflected the ethos of the schools involved in the trial towards playing a role as a civic space, rather than the use of a school per se. The schools that worked on this project were all clear that holding community events was an important part of their role and that this was part of the schools responsibility to their respective localities. Reflecting on the Say&Play methodology, representatives from all the schools gave positive feedback and agreed with the project’s central premise of using education establishments for public engagement as this teaching assistant emphasised:

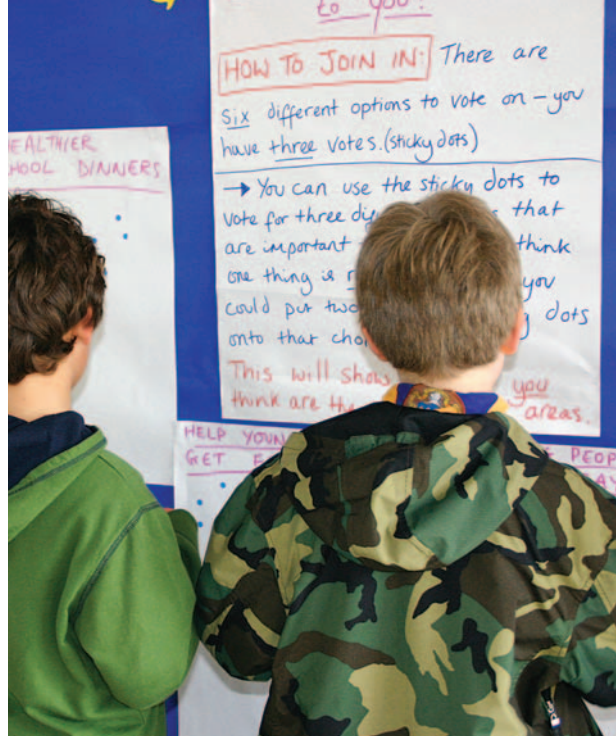
“As a school, in general, we try to get the parents involved and I think this [Say&Play] is a great way of dragging the parents in because sometimes it will drag in parents who wouldn’t normally turn up [to other events].”

However, it is interesting to note in contrast to this, a respondent to the online Say&Play discussion challenged the view of schools as safe civic spaces:

"It's interesting that..schools are described as places that people are familiar with – in [my local authority] the experience of many colleagues working with our most vulnerable and disadvantaged families who experience barriers to accessing services indicate that schools can be problematic spaces to invite people to. Previous negative experiences of school, both as children and as parents appear to create barriers which aren't present when more neutral venues, like community centres are used."

Attendance at all events was primarily from the families, and extended families, with direct links to the school. The involvement of the wider locality and parents or partner agencies that were not directly linked to the school to a large extent depended on the time at which the event was held and how it was publicised. Thus, some of the events had a much broader range of activities and partners than others due to the variation in relationships between the schools and other actors in the local area.

These limitations then determined how the school chose to organise the event. In particular, demographic data and anecdotal evidence show overwhelmingly a lack of adult male attendees and participants. There are many factors that might account for this including demographic trends local to Lambeth. However, one foreseeable limitation of devolving organisation to schools to set the timing for Say&Play events is that they were likely to choose times most suited to the parent or carer who has the most direct contact with the school, i.e. those who collect and drop-off pupils. Of the five trials, three were held at times which would conflict with the typical nine-to-five working week. Indeed, at the events held at weekends there were considerably more male attendees than the week day events. However, even at weekend events male attendance was still limited when compared to female attendees.



Further restricting who could participate, some schools deliberately decided to set conditions on those who could attend their event citing a range of reasons from child safety to issues of physical space. In these instances control over attendance was maintained by, for example, stipulating that adults must accompany a child, or by selectively publicising the event only to those who had direct links with the school. In contrast, other schools facilitated the involvement of the wider locality by holding their event at the weekend, publicising widely through local networks and linking to other local schools. The latter approach was adopted in the first trial and feedback from both teaching assistants and parents at this event shows that this approach was successful in attracting attendance from families who did not have direct links to the school itself:

"If its just the stuff about your local council "come and have your say" then people won't..if it's linked to a fun day..then you get a better reaction and looking around there are a lot of people who are not from this school."
(Teaching Assistant)

The trials showed all the schools involved had different relationships with the communities they served and with the parent-governors that influenced the nature of the event. Some schools passed organisation of the event almost entirely to parent-governors or "Friends of.." groups with little or no direct input themselves while others took more hands-on approaches with most decisions taken by the Head Teacher or another senior member of staff. Whilst the evidence of how relationships within schools and within local areas influenced outcomes should not preclude the use of schools in general as a place for Say&Play events, it is vital to recognise this factor – and mitigate for it where necessary- when planning for a successful event.

What Method Works Best: Once parents are in the room

Local community networks and contacts can bring people to an event, but they are not enough to guarantee the involvement or interest of participants. The methods chosen and activities provided on the day must also interest and engage parents and children if they are to be attractive to participants. The experience of the Lambeth Say&Play trials showed that stalls or activities that were not interactive or required a lengthy time commitment were not popular or well attended. Consequently all of the methods used in the trial were designed to facilitate “drop-in/drop-out” participation; that is, asked for only short term participation and did not require participants to complete all activities but only to do those which seemed of interest to them. This approach was supported by the feedback on the Say&Play format which was overwhelmingly positive. Most interviewees commented on the simple nature of the activities as an appealing factor that influenced their decision to participate. The following comment is typical of many of the responses given in feedback interviews:

“It’s a positive way of getting the views of the local community. It’s done in a very friendly and happy environment where people are comfortable talking about views and things..it’s such an informal way of getting your view across it makes people a lot more receptive to putting their ideas forward rather than forcing them onto a piece of paper.”
(Female parent)

Other interviewees focused on the interactive nature of the activities as factors they found particularly appealing:

“I also liked the way they’ve got different ways of trying to get people to give their ideas with the beads and the stickers and stuff..putting the arrows in places. it’s more entertaining as opposed to just a form.”
(Female parent)

However, an important counterpoint to this view was given suggesting that not all participants, particularly those who are familiar with formal consultation methods, will so readily welcome activities which deviate too far from more familiar methods:

“The activities for adults..perhaps I’ve seen some things that were more targeted towards adolescents, young people, teenagers, etc..some of the activities can be slightly infantilising.”
(Male parent)

Feedback from facilitators shows a small minority of participants held similar views, feeling the simplicity of the activities trivialised the value of the consultation. However, interestingly, facilitators noted that this did not ultimately deter them from taking part.

What Method Works Best: Making everything fun

Having interesting and engaging consultation activities is only half the battle. It was clear in working with five different schools with very different facilities that the layout of the event can also impact substantially on participation rates. Integrating the consultation into an event by dispersing activities around the venue is the most effective way of ensuring wide participation from attendees. Involve’s experience showed placing all consultation activities together or separating the consultation off from the rest of the event, discouraged people from taking part. Conversely, Involve found that at events where activities were positioned in spaces where participants were likely to congregate, for example, near food or next to queues for other activities, this was more likely to lead people to participate.

Getting the layout of an event right was also a matter of how people staffing activities conducted themselves as well as the content of the stalls. In setting out each activity Involve found that traditional layouts, where facilitators passively positioned themselves behind the table on which the activity set-up, were much less successful in achieving high levels of participation. Layouts which maximised accessibility, gave participants space to take part, and allowed facilitators to take an active role in engaging participants were much more effective in securing high participation levels.

What Method Works Best: Talking a different language

One of the key issues in both communicating the outcomes of the consultation and engaging participants in the consultation was the language used. In particular, the wording of the questions put forward by officers for consultation was often geared towards internal policy concerns. This highlighted the difficulty in translating local authority policy into language that is accessible and easily understood by those taking part. The trials showed using language that is not immediately accessible to the audience can create a barrier to the involvement of participants who have little or no experience with local government vernacular. One teacher noted that the meaningful involvement children and young people in consultation were to some extent limited by the obscure terminology and ambiguous questions. Sample questions given by the local authority for use included:

“My local play area is well designed – agree/ disagree?”

“How did Lambeth do last year on reducing drug abuse amongst children and young people?”

Feedback from council agencies attending the events highlighted the disparities between the language used internally by local authorities and that used by the audiences who attended the Say&Play events. Reflecting on the material that was distributed by one of the agencies at the Say&Play trials the representing officer noted:

“I think the stuff that we took, it was..it had lots of jargon..well, not lots of jargon but maybe in some cases was difficult to understand or there were some ambitious words in there which they tend to use in local councils..maybe having softer information for them would have been quite helpful.”

(Local Authority Officer)

What Method Works Best: Previous experience

All consultation activities take place against a backdrop of local and indeed national issues and long held prejudices or previous experiences of engagement with public services. Say&Play events are no different. It was clear in the project

that previous participation and involvement in consultation or engagement activities influenced the attitude of parents, teachers and even council officers towards the events and the data collected. To explore why this might be, participants in the Say&Play consultations were asked if they had previous experience of local government consultation and what they thought of it. Many interviewees felt that consultation was a good thing with some giving particular examples of specific consultations they felt had been particularly worthwhile. Several participants cited Lambeth Council's recent 'People First Expo' as an example of an event they had given them the chance to interact with the local authority and to find out information about service provision:

“I thought [the People's First Expo] was really good, well put together..there was a lot of different people and a lot of different stalls and you could go to the stalls which interested you.”

(Community worker)

However, frequently those who had previously participated in engagement processes complained that very little had changed as a result of their participation:

“I found that when issues were raised [at housing association meetings]..they acknowledged our concerns but nothing was done.”

(Female parent)

Concerns about the local authority's commitment to acting on the results from any consultation were voiced throughout the trials. In one case a Head Teacher contacted Involve during the week following the Say&Play trial at their school to express the concerns of those who had participated in the consultation about how the data was being used. Other interviewees highlighted what they saw as a lack of action on the part of the local authority and scepticism about how the consultation would make a difference:

“it seems like people say they will do something but they never do”

(Female parent/organiser)



Thus, it was no surprise that in the feedback on the events parents, teachers and even officers alike reflected these issues and this shaped their willingness to participate. In particular, many individuals questioned the motivations behind the consultation.

"The question I have is whether anything will come of it..whether there will be activity, results and action from today."
(Male Parent)

"The thing I'm sceptical about is that this could be used as a PR exercise by the council and lots of energy and effort and engagement happens, its taken away and chucked in the bin."
(Male parent)

This illustrates that no format for engagement, however well planned, can overcome the context in which it is used and it is harder to encourage participation in a culture where local people have felt they are not listened to prior to any event. Participants argued that more focus was put on being seen to listen to the views of people by the local authority than communicating the outcomes from the process. This lack of responding was an issue acknowledged by representatives from the local authority as a key problem in improving their relationship with the local community:

"If you wanted come back in say a year to do this again, people would need serious feedback about how what they said had made a difference..so that people feel that it's credible and they want to come back."
(Local Councillor)

The ability to demonstrate how results from consultation make a tangible impact in the work of the local authority is fundamental in getting people to participate and do so again. This means pro-actively communicating to participants from the first stages of the consultation to the final policy and service delivery outcomes how and when their views have been listened to or accounted for in the outcomes achieved:

"It's very difficult for local authorities to run [consultations]. I think a lot of people are quite unsure how to go about it. And, you do tend to get the usual suspects attending these meetings."
(Local Authority Officer)

"People think it's a good idea to involve people but they're not sure how to go about it."
(Local Authority Officer)

"So often it's the obvious that we don't do, we tend to rush towards high level, strategic plans."
(Local Authority Officer)

The need for a greater focus on transparency in how outcomes are matched to consultation activities requires local authorities to view consultation processes not only as one-off data gathering exercises, but as part of a wider approach to engagement and interaction with the local community. Other interviewees felt the Council was not visible in their day to day life resulting in a lack of trust in the local authority:

"I think Lambeth Council generally has to be more visible in the community because at the moment they are viewed with a great deal of suspicion within the community. Lambeth Council has a terrible reputation whether deserved or not."
(Female parent/organiser)

However, the widespread scepticism about whether anything would happen as a result of the consultation did not stop parents from taking part. Despite many interviewees linking their willingness to participate to the need for clear outcomes, feedback from facilitators noted the only reasons directly cited for not participating in the Say&Play consultations were either that they were not residents of the borough or language barriers prevented them. It is also of interest that participation of some language groups was secured when it was clear that the appropriate translation was provided reflecting a practical rather than philosophical barrier to involvement.

What Method Works Best: Are their fears justified?

The trials highlighted that residents wanted to feel their participation was valued and to receive feedback on how it had made a difference. This illustrates the need for clarity from the start of any Say&Play activity as to what issues are open to debate and what are not. The potential for the consultation events to impact the Children and Young People's Plan for Lambeth were limited in part because of the timeframes within which the consultation

was commissioned. The priorities for the Plan had already been set in advance of the consultation but are reviewed annually. With this in mind the consultation took the form of finding out how the priorities set in the plan were perceived by participants and which of these they felt were most or least important.

In turn, Children and Young People's Services committed to referencing the data obtained through consultation in the plan and, more broadly, the local authority committed to contacting individuals who contributed specific comments and included their contact details. However, from the feedback given in interviews it is clear that most participants at the Say&Play events were unlikely to read the Children and Young People's Plan. The final event consulted on a different subject, the Play Strategy for the borough, and the Data collected from the Fair Play consultation was to be used to inform planning for the Fair Play Strategy. There were, however, no formal commitments on the local authority's behalf to reference the data in any documents or to feedback the results to participants.

Ensuring feedback to participants about the impact of their involvement was also complicated by the range of issues brought up at the events that were not part of the consultation itself. Such additional issues are to be expected and Involve's experience is that any consultation activity will inevitably throw up responses that do not easily fit inside the parameters of the commissioning department. The challenge for any local authority is whether they have the systems in place to handle concerns falling outside of the commissioning department's remit to be passed onto and dealt with by the relevant department. It has not been possible to accurately determine if feedback has been given to participants on the issues raised which were not directly related to the consultation topics. Officers interviewed have not offered any clear evidence that issues raised which fell outside of their departments remit were passed to the appropriate department or personnel.

The Children and Young People's Plan 3 2008-2010⁸ was published shortly before the completion of this report. It is by no means clear how the data of the Say&Play consultations has been used in the Plan or indeed that any of the data has been used at all. Appendix C of the Plan includes the Say&Play consultations as a reference alongside six other unconnected consultations stating:

"The results from the following consultations with children and young people have also been incorporated into this Plan."

This lack of clear and transparent referencing in the Plan limits its use as a vehicle for public feedback. Indeed, the reliance of the local authority departments involved on the participants being able to access and understand the policy documents which were the subject of consultation limited the effectiveness of the trials in securing feedback to participants. To overcome this, Involve would recommend in future that provision is made to give feedback directly to any venue or community organisation that participates in an event, in addition to any activity around a formal consultation process or published policy document, to ensure the outcomes of the consultation were more directly available to participants.

Helping Local Authorities Get the Best Out of Say&Play

Involve designed the Say&Play format and took the lead role in the trials in Lambeth. Acting as the lead partner Involve oversaw the organisation of events, managing both the involvement of the local authority and the schools. Involve also took the lead in designing both the consultations in partnership with the Children and Young People's Services department and the evaluation of the project. Consequently, the impact of Say&Play in Lambeth and the capacity of the trials to be a useful form of consultation to the local authority were limited by the lack of direct responsibility for the project "in-house".

Lambeth's involvement in the Say&Play project initially stemmed from a desire to link the trials with other community engagement activities which were being trialled. Shifting timeframes meant that this was no longer possible so the project was passed to Children and Young People's Services who were in the process of consulting on their forthcoming Children and Young People's Plan. However, in the process of the initial shift in responsibility between departments for the Say&Play project some of the initial political and senior officer will to participate deteriorated.

This resulted in the Say&Play trials being viewed largely as something additional to the everyday work of the local authority and consequently led to delays in delivery of the events, as officers did not prioritise the project. Whilst this can be considered understandable for the trials and this project, this highlights the importance of ensuring, if this format is used in future, that there is a local authority lead and responsibility for delivery is clearly given to individuals or particular departments in good time. A senior officer observed that the lack of ownership of the project pointed to a way of working within local authorities rather than the lack of interest of any one officer:

"Local authorities work through a departmental approach sometimes and given the importance of this project that cuts across departments, one of the challenges we had was getting other departments to take an active role in being a partner within the Council and across Involve."

This departmental working pattern was evident in the fragmented representation of the local authority at the Say&Play events. Without an officer in the council directly co-ordinating the roles of the various departments involved in the project their presence at the trials was disjointed – as the following observations demonstrate:

"There wasn't anyone there on the day from CYPs and I think that was a gap on our part. I had made assumptions that of course they would be there because it was their consultation; you know, it wasn't my consultation."
(Local Authority Officer)

"I understand that Housing were there although I personally didn't see them."
(Local Authority Officer)

It should be noted that feedback from other agencies and organisations about the events in general was positive, with some seeing this as an opportunity to network with other professionals in the field:

"from a provider point of view it's really good because a lot of people here are organisations which are working together."
(Event partner)

Responsibility for inviting and contacting partners in the trial events was to a large extent devolved to schools with council officers playing only an advisory role on who they thought should be invited. This produced mixed results in attendance of public service representatives and activities offered. The representatives of schools who took part in the feedback interviews were happy to take the lead on organising the events and inviting partners, although it was unclear whether all the schools that took part had the capacity to effectively play this role:

"It was hard to know who would turn up and who wouldn't turn up."
(Head Teacher)

Officers working on the events highlighted the limited capacity of some schools capacity to manage the involvement of all partners. However, these officers felt that it would be difficult to step in once responsibility had been devolved to the school:

"I think I would have been very difficult to step in once we told the school that they were responsible and they were leading it."
(Local Authority Officer)

The manner in which the agencies or departments represented themselves at the trials was also often not suited to the event itself as were not fully aware of the social and informal aspects of the event:

"There wasn't a great opportunity to do much talking, partly because there was so much going on, on the stage, but if we hadn't been in the main hall I don't think people would have bothered coming at all."
(Local Authority Officer)

Representation from the local authority departments and agencies was almost exclusively restricted to stalls featuring literature and occasionally promotional giveaways with the officers positioned passively behind the stall. Some officers interviewed at the trials noted the problems with the way in which they presented themselves:

"We're not very interactive, a lot of other stalls are interactive..now that the free stuff has dwindled people are less interested."
(Local Authority Officer)

"We need to have a better stall..[people] do not even know where the Lambeth Council stall is."
(Local Authority Officer)

Other officers who gave feedback questioned the relevance of the event to the departments and agencies that attended:

"I don't know if Democratic Services got anything which was particularly relevant for them. I don't think that people were raising issues about the council. I think they were basically just swarming around the stall and taking or being given the free gifts on offer."
(Local Authority Officer)

For the Say&Play format to work for local authorities given the audiences they are likely to attract, it is important for officers and departments to be given support to re-imagine the way in which they represent themselves to an external public. To help this, building up direct experience of participation in such events by officers who can then help others understand the format is vital. This would help partners get the maximum benefit out of such events by having individuals who can help their colleagues tailor their services to fit the day. Whether knowing what forms of information could be given out to how best to consult in such an environment, in order to understand how to make the Say&Play format work, local authorities need to learn what works for them and the populations they serve. This clearly influenced what was achieved during the Lambeth trials.

Involve finally asked those who took part in the project how they envisioned local authorities directly using the Say&Play approach in the future. Their responses were clearly shaped by events happening on the ground in Lambeth itself. This reflects the wider issues facing the implementation of any form of public engagement activity within local government in the UK as changing policy and political priorities alter the space in which such events can occur. In the case of Lambeth it was also the case the restructuring of the local authority, which was taking place during the Say&Play trials, influenced the learning gained by the local authority from this project. Feedback from the local authority officers involved in the project highlighted the competing pressures under which officers operated both within their own departments and across the local authority as a whole. When asked how the Say&Play project fitted into their existing workload, one officer noted:

"It was extra and I think unfortunately it came at a time when there was a huge amount going on, not least a restructuring which hasn't quite finished."

In light of the changing structures of the local authority doubts were raised by some officers about the capacity of local government to effectively use the format without assistance from an outside partner:

"The way it is going, we have fewer resources centrally and we commission people like you to run these things."
(Local Authority Officer)

Other feedback by local authority officers suggested a move towards commissioning of public engagement activities rather than enabling local authorities to play this role directly:

"It doesn't have to be the Council as the lead..I think it's crucial that outside partners are given the chance to do something and I think the level at which they get involved will depend very much on the level they are operating at. So, for example, some organisations would struggle to get a stall together to attend an event, other organisations could actually run the whole thing."
(Local Authority Officer)

The trials showed that the events were most effective when someone capable of ensuring commitment to the outcomes and "buy-in" from the local authority had responsibility. Furthermore, they benefited from an individual who could play a leadership role in encouraging other departments and agencies to use the events for consultation and information. Without allocation of this role to someone within the agency commissioning the consultation it is difficult to see how the co-ordination required to bring together a range of partners and the different local authority departments can be done effectively. To overcome this, Involve suggest that decisions around responsibility for the event and its organisation are taken early in the planning process and clearly articulated to all parties.

Appendix A:

Resources

Manchester City Council:

Community engagement toolkit

<http://www.manchester.gov.uk/bestvalue/pdf/commengage/Manchester%20Community%20Engagement%20Toolkit.pdf>

Portsmouth City Council:

Consultation toolkit

http://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/media/PCC_Consulting_People_toolkit_pt.pdf

DCLG:

The Department for Local Government and Communities "Together We Can" website sharing information on participation and guidance for local government

<http://www.togetherwecan.info>

The Department for Local Government and Communities also manages a site regarding Neighbourhood Renewal and participation in community governance

<http://www.renewal.net>

The Cabinet Office:

The Government policy hub guide to public involvement

<http://www.policyhub.gov.uk/docs/Viewfinder.pdf>

Home Office (2004):

What works in community involvement in area-based initiatives?, Home Office RDS OLS (on line report) 53/04.

Available at

www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/onlinepubs1.html

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2002): Public Participation in Local Government: A Survey of Local Authorities, ODPM, London.

Available at:

www.interactweb.org.uk/papers/ODPMPublicParticipationinLG.pdf

Appendix B:

(from Indices of Multiple Deprivation

2007 and Lambeth Council

Education Statistics 2007-2008)

Immanuel and St Andrew Church of England Primary School

The Super Output Area in which Immanuel and St Andrew Church of England Primary School, located in Streatham, is situated ranks 6551 on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. The school has 257 pupils on its roll for 2008 of which 20.6% are eligible for free school meals. The performance of pupils is close to the borough average in measures of reading, writing and maths. The school is located in a suburban area which is largely residential. Interestingly, English fluency of pupils is lower than all other schools who took part in this project.

Johanna Primary School

The Super Output Area in which Johanna Primary School, located in North Lambeth, is situated ranks 5098 on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. The school has 184 pupils (including nursery) on its roll for 2008 – making it the smallest school involved in this project - of which 42.9% are eligible for free school meals. The performance of pupils is consistently below the average for the borough in measures of reading, writing and maths. The school is located in a busy area close to shops and other commercial activity. The school and parents involved in the organisation of the event noted a highly transient local population with a large number of non-native English speakers.

Vauxhall Primary School

The Super Output Area in which Vauxhall Primary School, located in North Lambeth, is situated ranks 4070 of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation; the second most deprived of the areas where trials were held. The school has 211 pupils on its roll for 2008 (including nursery) of which 73.5% are eligible for free school meals. The performance of pupils is consistently above the average for the borough in measures of reading, writing and maths. The school is located in a largely residential area which, according to staff and parents of the school, has a highly transient local population with a high number of non-native English speakers.

Wyvil Primary School

The Super Output Area in which Wyvil Primary School, located in North Lambeth, is situated ranks 3053 of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation; the most deprived of the areas where trials were held. The school has 513 pupils (including nursery) on its roll for 2008 - making it the largest school involved in this project - and of those 36.6% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The school is located in a largely residential area with a large Portuguese speaking community. Wyvil pupils have higher rates of English fluency than the other schools who took part in this project.

Stockwell Primary School

The Super Output Area in which Stockwell Primary School is situated ranks 9636 of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation; the least deprived of the areas in which trials were held. The school has 450 pupils (including nursery) on its roll for 2008 of which 38.2% are eligible for free school meals. The school is located close to the centre of Brixton and serves a variety of language groups including French, Spanish and Portuguese. The performance of pupils is well above the average for the borough in measures of reading, writing and maths making it the highest achieving on academic measures of the schools involved in the project.

**Contact Involve to find out how we can help you achieve
your engagement and involvement goals**

Involve

212 High Holborn, London WC1V 7BF info@involve.org.uk 020 7632 0120

Free online support: Use our interactive web portal peopleandparticipation.net
for practical information and support around public engagement