



Engaging Families in Lived Experience Participation Guidance

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A Whole Family Approach

Our approach

People with lived experience are at the heart of Justlife. Their insight shapes our decisions, our services, and our influencing work. We are committed to meaningful involvement, not as an add-on, but as a core way of understanding systems, challenging injustice, and creating change grounded in real lives.

Purpose of this guidance

This guide supports families to be meaningfully involved in lived experience participation work. It outlines a range of practical approaches to create inclusive and accessible engagement that aims to adapt to people's circumstances.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for practitioners who are planning to involve families with lived experience in participatory work.

Why is this guidance needed?

This guidance has been developed in response to lessons from Justlife projects, including [Peer Research](#), [Community Research](#) and [Temporary Accommodation Action Groups \(TAAGs\)](#), which illuminated the barriers that people with childcare responsibilities can face when participating and demonstrated the need for more inclusive and accessible ways of working.

The sections below explore these challenges in more detail and outline a variety of approaches to support participation for families.

How to use this guidance

This guide is designed to be used flexibly alongside existing organisational policies and sector guidance. It is supported by the following key policies and frameworks:

- [Introduction to Lived Experience](#)
- [Ethical Principles for Lived Experience Participation](#)
- [Lived Experience Payment Policy and Guidance](#)

For further reading on lived experience involvement, please see our [Lived Experience Padlet](#), which brings together resources from across the sector in one place. The resources are organised into different themes and explore a range of topics related to lived experience involvement.



Acknowledgements and Contributions

This work has been shaped by insights from a range of organisations who have worked with families living in temporary accommodation. We thank the following organisations for their valuable contributions:

- [Shared Health Foundation](#),
- [FSN](#),
- [1625 Independent People](#),
- [Groundswell](#),
- [Cardinal Hume Centre](#),
- [Mansfield District Council](#),
- [Creating Ground](#),
- [The Sensory Lives Project](#).

Contact Us

Feel free to reach out and schedule a chat with our Lived Experience and Participation Team if you want to discuss anything in more detail or have any suggestions for further guidance!

We're also here to help if you are about to undertake lived experience work, but don't feel the type of work you'll be doing is covered here.



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Understanding Families' Experiences and Barriers to Participation

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Intersectionality

For many families experiencing homelessness, participation is shaped by intersecting factors, including (but not limited to) disability, ethnicity, religion, neurodivergence, immigration status, single parenthood, and experiences of domestic abuse. As a result, needs, preferences, and access requirements can vary significantly between families.

Barriers to Participation

Practitioners should not assume that childcare is accessible or appropriate for all families living in temporary accommodation. In practice, families may face a range of barriers to childcare, including:

- Experiences of trauma, discrimination, and stigma, which can affect trust in services and professionals.
- Fear of involvement with statutory services, including concerns about children being removed from their care.
- Housing instability and frequent moves, making it difficult to establish routines or engage consistently.
- Practical challenges relating to childcare, including availability, cost, timing, and lack of suitable provision.
- Loss of support networks that would normally help parents engage in activities and services.

Even where childcare is available, some families may not feel comfortable accessing it or may prefer not to leave their children with unfamiliar caregivers. This may be due to:

- Concerns that unfamiliar caregivers may not fully understand a child's neurodivergence, disability, or individual needs.
- Safety concerns, particularly for families who have experienced domestic abuse and wish to keep children close.
- Cultural differences in attitudes towards childcare, with some families preferring support from trusted family or community members rather than formal services.

Understanding these experiences and barriers is key to designing participation that is accessible, inclusive, and responsive to families' circumstances.

Designing and Planning Family Participation

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Person-Centred Approach

Effective engagement requires a person-centred approach, working with families to understand what will enable participation to be accessible, safe, and appropriate within the context of each organisation, project, and available resources.

Practical options to support participation may include:

- Funding formal or informal childcare
- Providing on-site crèche facilities.
- Organisational staff supervising children on site.
- Involving children directly in participation activities

Meaningful lived experience participation requires approaches which are flexible and responsive to families' circumstances and preferences.

Safety and Support

One-to-one conversations can provide a private space for participants to discuss their accessibility needs, comfort around children's participation, and any adjustments required to support engagement.

At the beginning of a project, co-produced group agreements should be developed with participants to establish a shared understanding of how people will work together. These agreements help create a safe, supportive, and accessible environment for everyone, including where children are present. Group agreements may include:

- Expectations around supervision and parental responsibility for children
- How interruptions or children's needs will be managed during sessions
- Agreement on appropriate language and content when children are present

Peer support or buddy systems

It may be helpful to introduce a peer support or buddy system, where parents who have previously participated can welcome and support new families. This could help build trust, reduce anxiety and help parents feel more comfortable when joining a project for the first time.

Parent Champions

You may want to consider developing a Parent Champion role, creating opportunities for parents with lived experience to take on a more ongoing role in supporting participation. Parent Champions could mentor other parents and contribute to shaping future projects and activities.

Timing and scheduling

Where possible, participation should be scheduled during school hours in term time and avoid school and nursery drop-off and pick-up times (typically before 9.30 am and after 2.30 pm).

Sessions should take place on consistent days and times wherever possible, with scheduling agreed with parents to fit around family routines, childcare responsibilities and other commitments. Families should receive adequate notice of sessions, with any changes communicated as early as possible.

People should also be prepared for the day-to-day realities of family life, including illness, appointments and other unexpected circumstances that may result in late arrivals or occasional absences.

families may only remain in one location for a limited period and may be required to move at short notice due to factors such as the [statutory six-week limit on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation](#).

You should also be mindful that some families may be placed out of area or at a considerable distance from the services and support they need to access. Therefore, when planning engagement, consideration should be given to the logistical demands and travel time associated with long-distance journeys to and from schools, nurseries, places of employment, and other essential commitments.

Building flexibility into session design can reduce pressure on families and support ongoing engagement. Project timelines should therefore reflect this by allowing adaptable scheduling and, where appropriate, focusing on shorter periods of engagement rather than requiring extended continuous participation.

Ask people about any significant religious and cultural dates or times that may be important to them when scheduling sessions, and avoid scheduling sessions during these periods. This may include regular prayer or worship times, such as Friday lunchtime prayers, Sunday morning church services or Shabbat; periods of observance, such as Ramadan or Lent; and religious festivals, including Diwali, Hanukkah, Easter, Christmas and Eid.

Communication

Provide clear, accessible information in advance to help families understand what to expect before attending. This should include what the session will involve, what the environment will be like, how activities will run, and how families will be supported throughout the process.

Feedback and Reflections

Consider building in regular opportunities for reflection and feedback throughout your project, through one-to-one conversations, group discussions, feedback forms or emails, rather than waiting until the end or key milestones. This creates space for people involved to share their experiences and co-produce the project, so it can evolve in a person-centred way.

Good endings

Think about how you can bring the project to a positive and meaningful close, while supporting families to stay connected and informed after their participation ends. This could include:

- holding a final meeting or celebration to reflect on the project, share what it has achieved, and recognise participants' contributions;
- keeping participants updated on project developments, outcomes, and any changes resulting from their involvement;
- offering opportunities to stay connected, such as WhatsApp groups or follow-up family meet-ups;
- signposting families to relevant local services and support; and
- keeping families informed about future opportunities and activities through your own mailing list.

You may also ask whether participants would like to be added to Justlife's lived experience mailing list to hear about future participation opportunities. To arrange this, contact Gail at Gail@justlife.org.uk.



Lived Experience Payments, Expenses and Childcare Entitlement

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Lived Experience Payment

People with lived experience should be appropriately rewarded for their time and expertise. Payment should be discussed and agreed with people in advance, with clear information about how and when they will be paid.

Lived Experience Expenses

Expenses should be covered to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent people from participating. This should include paying for transport, such as bus passes or taxi fares. Childcare costs should also be covered where this is an option that works for the family.

Entitlement

Families may be eligible for [government-funded childcare](#) support depending on their circumstances.

In England:

- If a parent or carer is working, they may be eligible for up to 30 hours of free childcare per week for children aged 9 months to 4 years. This entitlement is usually available for 38 weeks of the year. Some providers may allow families to spread their funded hours across more than 38

weeks by taking fewer hours each week, so families should check directly with their chosen provider about the options available.

- All 3 and 4-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours of free early education or childcare per week. This is typically offered 5 days a week for 3 hours in the morning or afternoon, or as a combination of full and half days.
- Families may also be eligible for funded childcare for 2-year-olds, if the parent or child has additional support needs.

To understand what support may be available, families can use the [government childcare calculator](#) to determine financial support for [approved childcare](#).

Tax Free Childcare

Working families may be able to save on childcare costs through the [government's Tax-Free Childcare scheme](#), which adds £2 for every £8 paid into a childcare account.

Additional Costs

Even where families are eligible for funded childcare, there may still be [additional costs](#). These can include:

- meals and snacks
- nappies
- trips or activities

- additional hours beyond the funded entitlement
- deposits or registration fees
- advance payments

The [MoneyHelper](#) website can be used to help you or families to estimate and budget for childcare costs.

Childcare Payments

Paying for childcare may not always be straightforward in practice. For example, Early Years Free Entitlement funding is usually paid directly to childcare providers by the local authority, and providers may have different payment structures, including:

- direct debit or bank transfer
- monthly payments in advance
- termly billing arrangements
- pay-as-you-go or sessional payments, which are more commonly used by childminders or crèche settings



Nursery provision

Nursery provision may be a suitable option to enable participation where families already have an established arrangement. You may wish to speak with parents or carers to identify which dates and times are most suitable based on their existing schedules.

If you are considering offering to fund additional childcare costs, this may not be straightforward. Nurseries often operate at full capacity and may be unable to provide additional childcare on an ad hoc basis outside a child's allocated sessions. In addition, funding arrangements are typically managed directly between local authorities and providers, which can make it difficult to directly fund or arrange additional sessions.

As outlined in the earlier section on barriers to participation, it should not be assumed that nursery provision is accessible or in use by all families. Many parents do not use formal childcare arrangements for a range of reasons, meaning nursery provision may not be the most appropriate or accessible option to enable participation in all contexts.

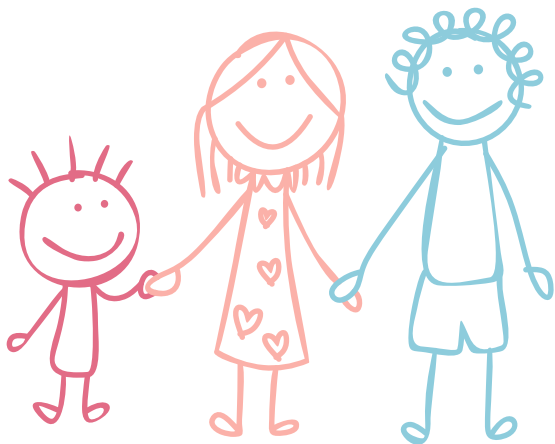
Childminder

Childminding is most suited where families already have an established arrangement with a childminder, as continuity of care is central to their practice. This means childminders are unlikely to provide one-off or ad hoc support.

Informal Childcare

If parents have an existing support network, they may prefer childcare to be provided by a trusted family member, friend, or community member rather than through formal services. In some cases, organisations have supported participation by funding informal childcare arrangements.





Where appropriate, designing sessions around families' realities and enabling families to bring their children, rather than requiring childcare arrangements, can improve participation and engagement.

Family Friendly Environment

When selecting a venue, the following features can support accessibility and create a welcoming environment for families:

- Family Hub or other family-friendly setting,
- Good public transport links and proximity to where families live
- Large, flexible spaces suitable for group work and play
- Baby-changing facilities
- Access to a quiet space for decompression
- A private, comfortable space for breastfeeding.

This could be supported by providing:

- Designated play areas with a range of age-appropriate toys and activities (e.g. books, LEGO, soft toys, arts and crafts, sensory materials)
- Snacks
- A sensory tent where children can take time out if needed.



A family-friendly environment should feel relaxed, welcoming and homely. To help parents feel at ease and reduce concerns about being disruptive, facilitators should reassure families from the outset that babies and children are welcome to cry, play, make noise and move around. Many families become accustomed to the background noise of children over time, although this will vary depending on the group, setting, and the age and needs of the children.

Safety

If you plan to have children at your venue, you will need to ensure the following [safety measures](#) are in place:

- Parents are required to remain on the premises at all times.
- Appropriate staff-to-child ratios are maintained, in line with [NSPCC guidance](#).
- A full register of all children attending is kept.
- Records of allergies and dietary requirements are collected and maintained.
- Appropriate safeguarding policies and risk assessments are in place and made available for families to view upon request.
- Insurance is in place to cover the presence of children on site.
- Parents are asked to sign an agreement confirming understanding of and adherence to the above arrangements.

Crèche

A mobile crèche can provide qualified childcare at your venue, with staffing ratios determined by the number of children and their ages to ensure appropriate levels of supervision.

Services may provide toys, activities, equipment, and snacks, and are typically suitable for short sessions (usually under two hours).

Uptake may vary, as families may prefer not to be separated, even where staff are DBS-checked and qualified, particularly when childcare is provided in a separate room.

Trust and engagement can be supported by having staff who reflect the cultural backgrounds of participating families.

A crèche can be delivered in a separate room or within a shared space, depending on the venue and the preferences of families. Shared-space models can work well where there is sufficient room to safely accommodate both activities and childcare, allowing children to remain nearby and supporting reassurance and engagement. This can be adapted using dividers or defined zones depending on the layout and needs of the session. While shared spaces may be noisier, some families may find this more comfortable as it reduces separation and supports a more inclusive, whole-family approach.



Staff supervision

Some families find it helpful to have a trusted, DBS-checked member of staff who is confident working with children to supervise them nearby, while another staff member works with adults.

Alternative Engagement Arrangements

In some cases, it may not be possible to arrange childcare, or for children to be present at sessions, depending on the nature of the project and the needs of the group. This may include situations where only one participant has caring responsibilities, or where there are differing views within the group about children being present. In these circumstances, alternative arrangements could be offered to ensure accessibility, such as:

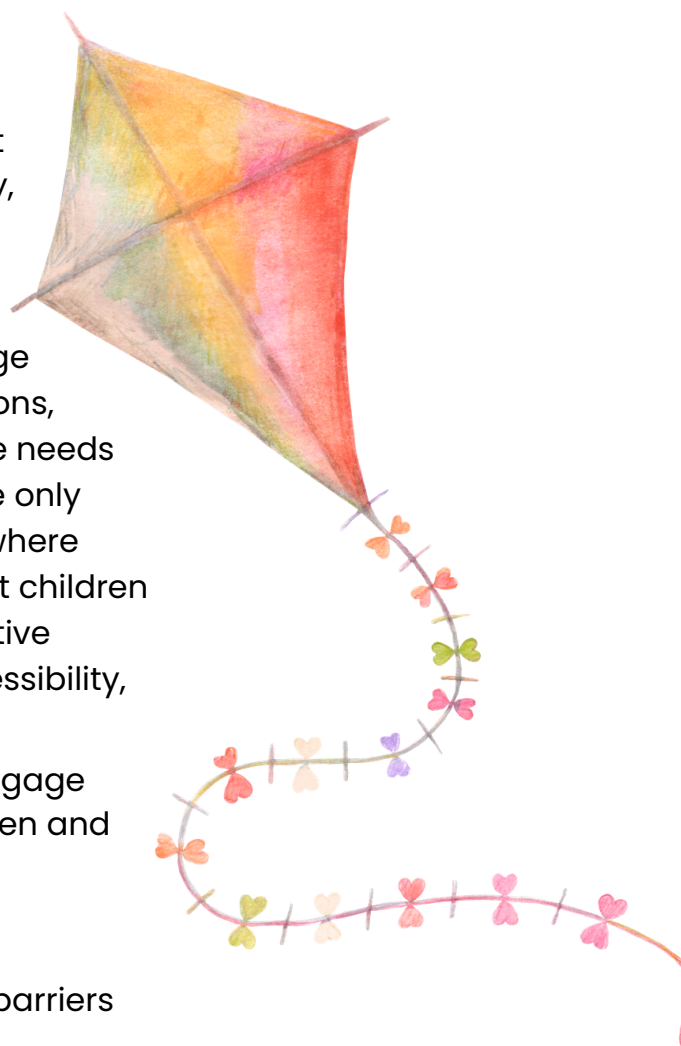
- Online participation, enabling parents to engage from their own space while caring for children and taking breaks when needed
- 1:1 sessions, providing focused, individual engagement with families
- Shorter or more flexible sessions to reduce barriers related to childcare.

These alternatives help ensure participation remains inclusive while respecting the varied needs and preferences of participants.

Children's Participation

Alternatively, you may choose to design your project to involve children through meaningful, age-appropriate activities. This could include child-centred activities, such as sensory play, creative arts and storytelling, rather than simply providing toys as a way of occupying children during sessions. These activities can be enjoyable while also supporting children's learning and development.

You may also wish to go a step further by facilitating project-focused activities that enable children to share their ideas and perspectives in ways that directly inform the project. This may involve developing activities specifically for children or adapting adult-focused activities where appropriate.

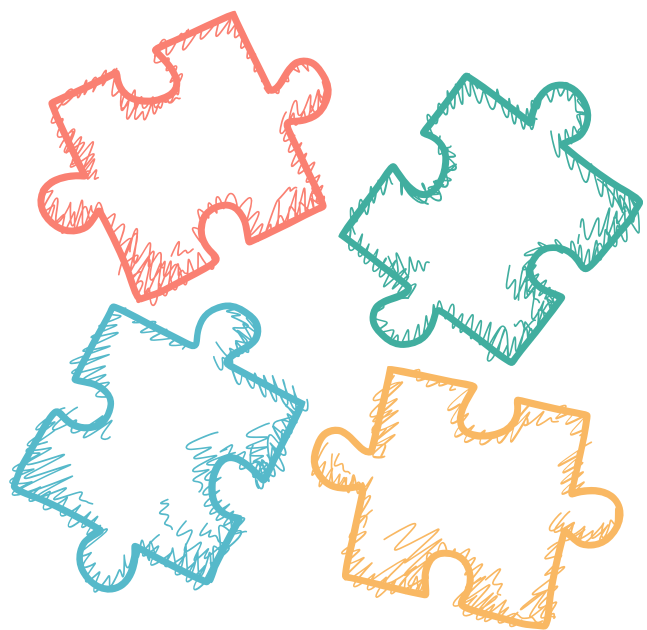


A range of child-centred engagement methods can support accessible participation, such as

- Talking Mats, which is a structured communication tool using symbols arranged in three categories: love, neutral, and hate. Children place symbols within these categories to express their preferences and experiences in a simple and accessible way.
- Informal engagement, which involves spending time with children during play-based activities, where practitioners sit alongside them, observe, and engage in natural conversation. This approach allows children to speak freely, express their views in their own way, and contribute without pressure or formal structure.
- Storytelling, where families can engage in imaginative play through fictional characters, creating a safe space to explore thoughts, feelings and experiences without direct personal disclosure. As a trauma-informed approach, storytelling can help children and adults make sense of their experiences together, while developing a shared language and practical tools to explore and talk about complex or difficult topics in ways that feel safe and supportive.

To support the diverse needs of families, you could limit the number of families attending each session to create a quieter, more manageable environment, particularly for neurodivergent families. Depending on participants' preferences, sessions could include facilitated parent-child activities with opportunities for parents and children to spend parts of the session separately, or dedicated activities for parents and children on different days. One-to-one sessions could also be offered to better support individual needs.

You might want to consider budgeting to provide appropriate rewards for children, as well as adults, in recognition of their time and contributions. This could include party bags and/or vouchers for children.



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