CHILDHOOD MATTERS SERIES

CO-DESIGNING WITH FAMILIES - OUR LESSONS SO FAR

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WHAT DID WE DO?

Families living in poverty should help shape the services that affect their lives, not just be asked for feedback. Through our Glasgow Community Power project,[1] Save the Children Scotland and community partner PEEK tested a co-design approach that brought parents and practitioners together as equal partners, valuing lived experience alongside professional expertise. Over four months, we worked with mothers of babies and young children to design a new service to support early childhood, within an agreed budget and remit. Here, we share the lessons emerging from that process — what helped, what proved challenging and what we learned about moving beyond consultation to share decision-making power with families.

KEY INSIGHTS

Our co-design approach was a process built on the pillars of:

Clarity, trust, accountability

- time and space to build relationships
- clarity of focus
- closing the feedback loop and a learning mindset

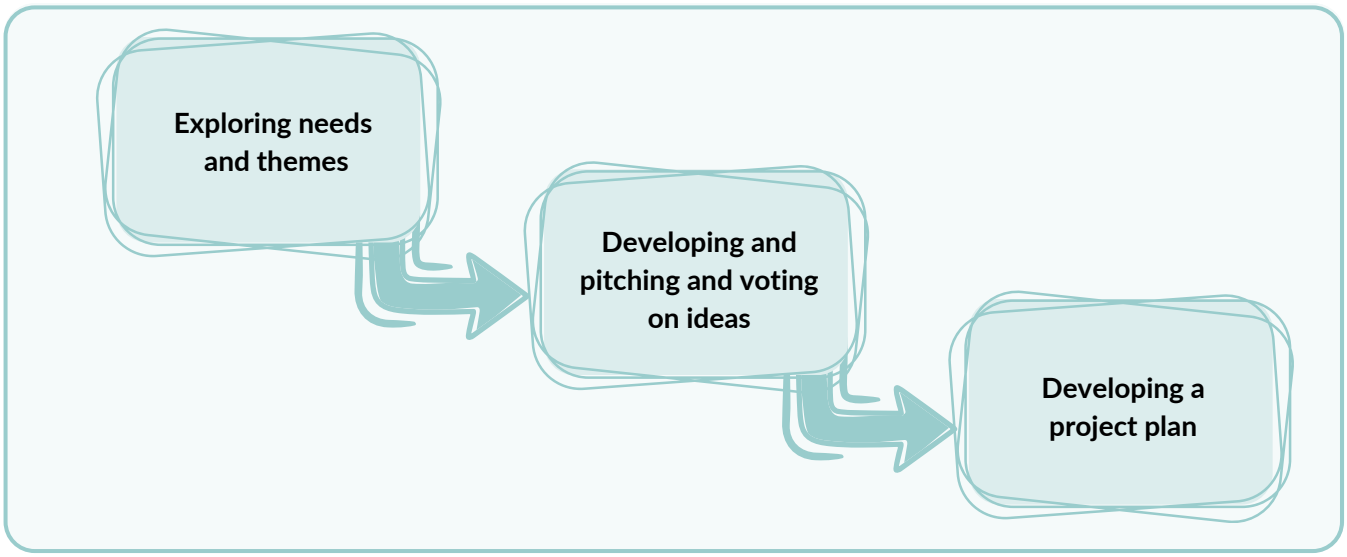
Valuing all types of expertise

- lived expertise
- learned expertise
- practice expertise

Resourcing and access

- recognition/thank you offer
- wellbeing support
- practical support with access

The co-design took place through three workshops, each a month apart:



[1] In our Community Power Project, we work with and fund local partners to deliver innovation projects that test, adapt and scale new ways of supporting early childhood for families living on low incomes. One of our innovation projects set out to co-design a new service with PEEK practitioners and parents who already accessed other services that PEEK offer.

WHAT HELPED?

We used our participation toolkit to guide parent participation, covering planning, delivery, evaluation, and our participation policies. Testing these tools in practice helped us identify the lessons below about what makes co-design robust, effective and able to deliver meaningful impact.

- **Sharing power and valuing expertise:** We set out to share power by fully involving parents in decision-making from the outset, shaping both the problem statement and the solution.

- **Clear boundaries and accountable decisions:** We had clear criteria, communication, focus and boundaries. Feedback on which decisions were made and why was given in a timely way and with reference to these criteria and boundaries.

- **Inclusive participation and strengths-based approach:** We valued all co-designers as equally valuable participants. This ensured that a range of skills and experiences fed into the co-design, including lived and learned experiences. Our strengths-based approach made sure that everybody was recognised as a holder of unique knowledge and skills e.g. insight as a mum with a young child on a low income, perinatal experience, knowledge of early childhood support across Glasgow, or expertise in early childhood. We used methods and activities that accommodated different ways to participate in the workshops.

- **Trust and connection:** We built on existing strong relationships between participating parents and staff members and protected time for social connections and sharing food together.

- **Removal of barriers to access:** We proactively identified support needs and potential access barriers and worked towards removing these through practical solutions. This ensured inclusive access to this participation opportunity.

- **Trauma-informed practice:** We used engaging methods and activities such as fictional characters and Dragon's Den-style team pitches which avoided re-traumatising or retelling parents' own experiences directly. We also included access to our employee wellbeing offer in case participants needed access to this support.

- **Accountability and feedback:** We provided regular and timely feedback on progress and how people's contribution has influenced decisions, services or projects.

- **Continued involvement:** We created opportunities for continued involvement in the service parents co-designed.

Practical considerations

There were a number of practical considerations that we put into place to ensure every co-designer was able to be a valued and capable participant. This helped to remove barriers to participation and enabled full engagement, but also ensured that the value of participation was appropriately recognised and parents had access to additional support and opportunities. We also made sure to create space for connection. This included:



Travel expenses and support



Creche in the same building



Relational time and space



Recognition and thank you offer



Lunch and snacks



Training and skills development



Access to employee wellbeing support



Endorsements and references

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

A successful co-design approach requires time, space and appropriate resourcing.

Combining lived and learned expertise can feel tricky at first and needs practice. Clear communication with regular feedback between the project team and parents and a tight focus on the task, purpose and its boundaries is helpful to navigate this. Honesty about what can and can't be implemented, and clear explanations help overcome points of tension.

Co-design takes significant staff capacity to plan, deliver, reflect, evaluate, and build trusting relationships. This needs to be built in, prioritised and resourced. It takes leadership and commitment to make it happen. However, the return on this investment is significant and makes for better and more sustainable services that meet real needs in a community.

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT?

There were different levels of impact that the co-design approach had:

Impact on participants

- **More trust and better engagement:** parent participants continued to be involved on a voluntary basis taking on active roles in the new service supporting outreach and delivery to other mums and babies, continuing to build new skills and experiences.

> "I liked being part of this project which made me feel useful and helping to shape something good for the kids."
>
> (Parent co-designer)

- **More confidence skills and agency:** mums who took part increased their levels of confidence and agency for change, as well as their skill set. A number of mums are now involved in Save the Children's Glasgow Parent Campaign Network.

> "I loved getting skills about designing the project and planning. Especially that we experienced having an idea in the first session and a project plan at the end."
>
> (Parent co-designer)

Impact on service design and organisation

The co-design approach made the service that was designed more relevant for and better suited to the needs of the families that it aims to engage. It led to:

- A more innovative and creative solution that was also cost effective because it worked better for the families it was designed with and for;
- Stronger accountability to those using the service;
- Greater engagement of parents with the service;
- Increased credibility and fundability: The project managed to source ongoing funding to continue running beyond its pilot phase.

> "This is so different to any previous session I've been in with parents, coming together, collaborating and bringing our ideas to shape the best possible project together feels so new and impactful."
>
> (PEEK practitioner)

> "I think co-designing the project made a big difference because everyone could contribute their ideas and perspectives. [...] This builds a sense of ownership for all involved, and it felt like everyone involved was committed to making it work. It helped make the project more inclusive and probably led to better decisions"
>
> (PEEK practitioner)

ABOUT SAVE THE CHILDREN

Save the Children works to make sure that families have the money, services and power to end child poverty, so that every child grows up loved, safe, happy, respected, full of hope and with an equal chance to fulfil their potential. We want to make sure that no child experiences poverty, that they grow up in communities that support them to thrive and that children's views are valued and acted on. We do this by helping to build communities of people who care about children, listen to what's important to them and work together to make things better for them.

To find out more about our work across Scotland, please contact Stefanie Keir, Senior Policy and Research Manager s.keir@savethechildren.org.uk. To find out more about our co-design approach, please contact Doaa Abuamer, Participation Manager, d.abuamer@savethechildren.org.uk.