



# A guide to co-producing children's services



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Action for Children is one of the UK's leading children's charities. We are committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

This guide is a supplement to a larger report, *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*. It is the culmination of a programme of research carried out by **nef** (the new economics foundation) with the support of Action for Children.

This guide has been produced by **nef** in collaboration with a number of different stakeholders including Action for Children. However, the overall contents of the guide reflect the views of its authors.

# Why this guide? Why now?

This guide is a supplement to a larger report, *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*, which is the culmination of a programme of research carried out by **nef** (the new economics foundation) and Action for Children. This guide looks at how practitioners can use a co-production approach to service delivery.

*Backing the Future* demonstrates the economic and social case for preventing social problems from emerging in the first place, rather than fixing them after they have already occurred. It also shows the need for early intervention if and when problems do arise to stop them from becoming entrenched. By making the transition to a more preventative system, the UK will improve child well-being, create a better and more just society, and support our economy by being less wasteful economically and making far better use of our shared but increasingly scarce public resources.

*Backing the Future* argues that a key element of shifting to a preventative system of children's services requires a new way of working, which nurtures the full range of issues affecting children's lives. As well as the structural factors affecting the circumstances of children's lives (e.g., poverty, inequality), the psychological and social aspects of children's well-being are also vital for improving outcomes. From our research, we identified six key pathways to well-

being, which should be promoted through children's services:

1. Link up and link in
2. Think family
3. Promote the positive
4. Encourage action
5. Factor in fun
6. Recognise children's wider world

We found that these pathways can be enabled by taking a co-production approach to targeted and universal service delivery.

There has been increasing interest in co-production as a mechanism for embedding more participatory approaches in service delivery in recent years.<sup>1,2</sup> Co-production takes a slightly different tack to normal engagement practices. It focuses less on identifying and responding to a child's 'need' or 'problem' in favour of a reciprocal approach, which builds on a child's interests, knowledge, experience, skills and support networks.<sup>3</sup>

This guide has been written to complement a recommendation in the overall project report suggesting that the benefits of a co-production approach to delivering children's services be evaluated as part of a national pilot funded by the lead departments for children and family services across the four nations. It draws on **nef**'s general work in this area and six service-level case studies,

undertaken as part of this programme of research.

## Who should use this guide?

We have written this guide to assist children's services professionals and practitioners to put the principles of co-production into practice. Central to this guide is a co-production framework that can be used by professionals to self-assess the way in which they work on a regular basis. A selection of ideas taken from practice-based settings should help professionals put mechanisms in place to encourage children's active participation and engagement in service delivery. This guide has been designed to be equally applicable to professionals working in both targeted and universal services. It is also relevant for project or service managers supporting professionals in the implementation of decisions on the way services are delivered.

## What is co-production?

### A definition

**Produce:** to make something or bring something into existence

**Co:** together; with

Co-production emphasises doing things 'with children' as opposed to doing things 'to children' or 'for children'. It is a strengths-based approach, which recognises that all children, young people and their families have their own sets of skills, knowledge and experiences which they can bring to the table.

## Beyond voice

Engaging with children in the co-production of services goes beyond consultation in decision-making processes. A co-production approach sees the purpose of engagement to provide children and young people with the opportunity to 'be the change'. To achieve this, it focuses on children as part of their own solution.

## From fixer to facilitator – the role of the professional

It is the role of the professional to shape the conditions for co-production to take place. At the heart of this role is the need to provide encouragement and support to enable children, young people and their families to put their positive resources and abilities to use. The role of the professional becomes less about being a 'fixer' of problems and more about being a 'facilitator' of solutions. A facilitator will actively recognise and engage the things children are able to do or are interested in. In doing so, they naturally focus on the things that are working well to create positive experiences and sustainable behaviour change driven by the child's intrinsic goals and aspirations. This involves recognising that being professional is not always defined as having all the answers and that in asking others for help, an opportunity is created for them to contribute.

There are four key principles of a co-production approach to service delivery, which form the basis of this guide:

1. Valuing children and young people as assets.
2. Celebrating children and young people's contribution.
3. Reciprocal working.
4. Growing social networks.

Below we summarise the main guidance emerging from the research findings about how to best implement each principle.

### **Valuing children and young people as assets**

- Work to identify and put to use children's assets – starting from who children are and what their interests are.
- Enable children to figure out what they are good at and how they are able to influence events and situations.
- Assets can include life experience, knowledge, skills, talents, energy, and enthusiasm – incorporate them into the design and delivery of services.

### **Celebrating children and young people's contribution**

- Provide positive feedback and praise for things children have done well and tried hard at.
- Build opportunities for positive experiences and rewards into budgets.
- Ensure there is a balance between extrinsic rewards – 'treats' – and intrinsic rewards, which may involve working with children to identify their goals to help them work towards them.

### **Reciprocal working**

- Provide opportunities to act as both a recipient and a provider of services.
- Enable self-organisation within individuals or teams in favour of direction from above.
- Foster a sense of shared responsibility for service delivery and a culture of give and take.
- Lead by example in the working relationships you form with children so they incorporate a sense of mutuality, empathy and respect.

### **Growing social networks**

- Find opportunities for children to use their assets to support one another in the service setting.
- Create opportunities for children to connect with other children who live in their wider community (defined by interest or geographical location). Consider this to be a core service activity.
- Actively bring children into contact with other groups in the community.
- Recognise families, carers and community members as potential members of wider networks.

## Focus Box 1: Co-producing in different service settings

### *Targeted service setting*

#### **Glyncoch Youth Time Banking Project, Pontypridd, South Wales**

Glyncoch is a housing estate on the outskirts of Pontypridd in the South Wales valleys. Many of the 3000 residents face a range of socioeconomic challenges, including high unemployment, high levels of child poverty and low educational attainment.

*Glyncoch Youth Time Banking Project* works on the simple principle that for every hour that participants give to the youth group and the wider community, they earn one time credit. These time credits can be used to go on youth trips and take part in activities.

The project starts from the existing skills and talents of the young people involved. They are encouraged to spend time thinking about the positive things and needs within their community and then they are encouraged to think about how they can use their own existing skills, talents and experiences to find solutions to problems. This has led to a number of projects including environmental projects, peer-learning projects (e.g., sexual health sessions), the development of an arson DVD, running youth sessions and support for other community groups.

### *Universal service setting*

#### **Learning to Lead at the Blue School, Somerset**

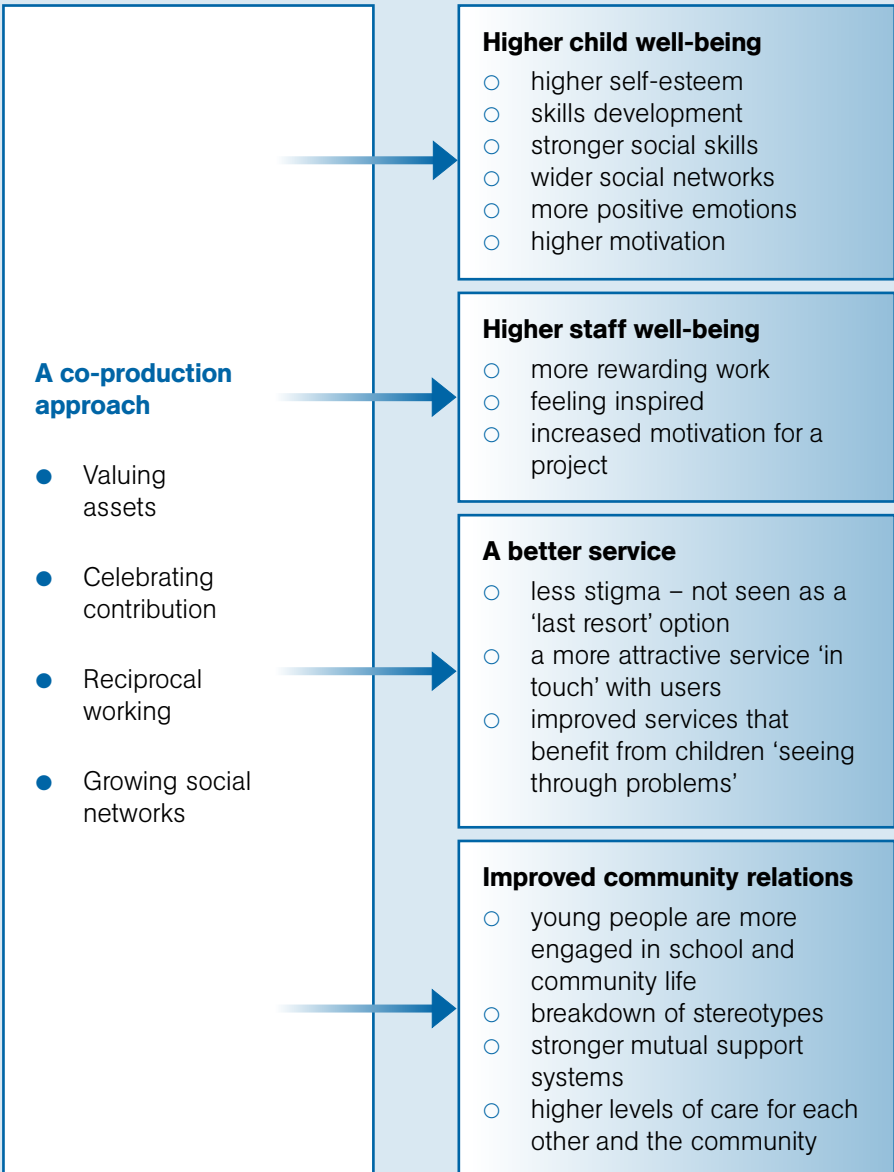
*Learning to Lead* was developed by a teacher and a parent in the Blue School in Wells, Somerset, to actively involve children and young people in all aspects of their lives and community as stakeholders. Students identify what they think is needed to improve their school and then self-elect themselves into student-led teams, in which they develop their ideas and are responsible for turning their ideas into positive action.

At the Blue School over 250 of the 1500 students are involved in all aspects of the school community in 22 teams, including Healthy Living, Africa School, Beautiful School and Finance Support. Students learn team working, agenda planning, goal setting, budgeting, the distinction between governance, management and action, and the meaning of accountability, transparency, and responsibility. The *Healthy Schools* programme has given financial and practical support in recognition of how *Learning to Lead* naturally develops the Every Child Matters agenda and helps bring *Healthy Schools* status to the school.

A national pilot is being run in an additional 10 secondary schools across the UK and feeder primary schools.

## Focus Box 2: Benefits of co-producing

nef's interviews with practitioners from six different service settings highlighted a number of benefits associated with taking a co-production approach to delivering children's services:



Co-production  
self-assessment  
framework



Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Valuing young people as assets</b>	1. Treating young people as assets.	Staff (and policies) value young people as assets. Some services support the development of young people's hobbies and interests.	All young people are asked what they like to do, what they are good at. Staff support young people to use their skills within services.	Young people (and their families/carers) direct experiences, skills and aspirations are integral to all services.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'If you think you are valued then you are going to start valuing yourself.'	'There is a cultural change in the schools; instead of students asking "why don't they do this?", they ask "why don't we do this?"'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your organisation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
<b>Justify your score</b>					

Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Valuing young people as assets</b>	2. Incorporating young people's skills and experiences into the design of services.	Young people are listened to and their views taken into account. Clear distinctions are maintained between roles and responsibilities of paid staff and service users.	Young people's ideas help to shape the way that services are run. Staff are responsible for securing funds and delivering services.	Young people have a constant active part in running, evaluating, directing and delivering projects. Their opinions have equal weighting to others.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'The young people are asked on a weekly basis what they would like to do over the next four weeks.'	'A lot of them are coming to us with their own ideas and developing their own ideas.'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your organisation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
<b>Justify your score</b>					

Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Celebrating children and young people's contribution</b>	3. Recognising and celebrating young people's contribution.	Contribution is restricted due to regulations and institutional risk management. Clear distinctions are maintained between roles and responsibilities of paid staff and service users.	Young people know when they get involved that it will be rewarded.	Young people's contributions are systematically recorded and celebrated/rewarded. Their contribution is vital to the service.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'The young people had clear ideas about what they were going to do. It was hard for them to get that idea across to the film-makers.'	'I just automatically say that it should be done. A massive part of it [the budget] needs to go towards young people's refreshments, their rewards and their going out places.'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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<b>Justify your score</b>					

Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Reciprocal working</b>	4. Sharing responsibility for the delivery of services.	Young people are encouraged to volunteer informally. Sometimes this is around or within services.	'Expert by experience' roles exist for young people within services.	Young people and staff know that it is their project. They each have an equal responsibility for it to run well.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'We are starting to try to make some of the young people volunteers.'	'They know that it is their project and that we are here to support them.'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
<b>Justify your score</b>					

Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Reciprocal working</b>	5. Valuing the work everyone contributes to achieve successful outcomes.	Staff invite young people to play a practical role by contributing time or ideas.	Young people's sense of practical contribution is fostered through individual development programmes.	The activity and work required within the project is shared to fit the skills and responsibilities of both young people and paid staff.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'The young people are asked on a weekly basis what they would like to do over the next four weeks.'	'They are the ones that are going out and doing lots of the work, really.'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your organisation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
<b>Justify your score</b>					

Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Reciprocal working</b>	6. Creating a culture of give and take between staff and young people.	Some give and take occurs as a result of staff values/way of working.	Reciprocity is encouraged equally between staff and young people blurring the distinction between givers and receivers of services.	Explicitly asking for and providing help from others is seen as positive and expected of staff and young people.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'They have energy and it inspires us to have the energy to match.'	'Young people help me to do a better job everyday.'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your organisation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
<b>Justify your score</b>					

Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Growing social networks</b>	7. Enabling young people to find ways to support one another.	Organisational codes of conduct don't prevent or undermine young peoples opportunities to support one another.	Informal mentoring or buddying takes place by young people connected to projects.	Investment in supporting peer networks that enable transfer of knowledge and skills is seen as core work.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'Some of them have been to the pictures together, or stopped together.'	'We are starting to reap the benefit of just how warm and welcoming they are to other young people.'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your organisation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
<b>Justify your score</b>					

Co-production principle	Co-production Indicator	Basic	Getting there	Excellent	Justify your score
<b>Growing social networks</b>	8. Developing young people's networks as a core activity.	Staff appreciate the practical and emotional value of young people supporting one another. Organisational codes of conduct don't prevent or undermine this.	Young people are encouraged to invite others to come along to activities. The development of new friendships is encouraged.	Staff and young people engage in activities that connect to local networks and activities beyond Action for Children.	Enter practical examples here
		Example from children/young people's service	'They know how to support one another and take an interest in one another's lives.'	'It makes them feel part of something. It gives them something to identify with, something they feel they can belong to.'	
		Your score	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your project	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
		Your organisation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
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		Co-production	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9		
<b>Justify your score</b>					

## Using the co-production self-assessment framework

In order to assess how your service or project is faring in terms of co-production, we have devised a self-assessment framework to reflect the four key principles. There are some key things to note about the framework:

- It was developed following a series of interviews with practitioners working in six different children's projects, which were taking place in both universal and targeted services:
  - Learning to Lead: a schools-based initiative (Focus Box 1)
  - Caring Together: a family support service
  - Community Living: an independent living project
  - Glyncoch Youth Time Banking Project: a youth time banking project (Focus Box 1)
  - Children's Say: a participation project
  - Young Reporters: a project providing opportunities to young people to influence policy and practice

These projects all use the principles of co-production to different degrees, with some projects showing strengths in particular areas.

- The framework has been set up to apply equally to how an individual professional works, how a service

or project works and the way an organisation works as a whole. Our research found this to be a useful distinction because barriers to and enablers of co-production can exist at all three levels, which can impact how you make sense of what is working well and what needs to improve.

- Self-assessment indicators of co-production are listed on the left-hand side of the framework. They correspond to the four key principles of a co-production approach.
- An individual, project or service needs to score 7–9 (excellent) against all criteria to be confident that it is co-producing with children and young people.
- The framework should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.
- We recommend performance is self-assessed every six months to prove and improve service developments. This will enable you to track progress and monitor any unintended consequences of changes to service infrastructure, design or personnel that might adversely impact the capacity for children and young people to co-produce the service. The framework can be used as a conversation guide with children and young people to understand how they experience your work.

# Steps to completing the framework

## 1. Identifying your score

For each indicator of co-production consider where you are on the scale from 1 to 9 and circle the number corresponding to your score, your project and your organisation.

You can use the descriptions as a guide to what a score of 3 or a score of 7 might look like in practice. For each gradient – ‘basic’, ‘getting there’ and ‘excellent’ – we have described how children and young people should be engaging with the service. Underneath, we have also provided examples from some of the children’s services that we were in contact with while developing the framework.

## 2. Justifying your score

For each score that you give, provide a practical example based on activities within your service. From our research, we learnt that examples help professionals to identify an accurate score. Try to avoid generic examples. If you cannot think of a practical example that reflects the score you have identified, then we recommend reassessing.

## 3. Reflecting on your score

Depending on how well you score, you may want to think about what you can do to improve for next time. Alternatively, you may wish to share your success so other services can learn from your good practice.

## 4. Proving and improving the framework

Each time you use the framework, there is scope for adapting it or applying it to suit your service setting. Some examples of how you might go about this include:

- Adapting the scale to include examples from your own service setting that are more suitable or applicable. This way, all professionals using the framework across your project or organisation will be able to self-assess based on practical examples that are recognisable to them.
- Asking children and young people who are engaged in the service to complete the framework. This can provide a check for your own assessment as well as opportunities for open, yet focused discussions on how things can be improved.
- Applying the framework to your recruitment process. Our research identified that the values and personal characteristics of staff were critical to making co-production work in practice. You could ask potential staff members to reflect on times when they have demonstrated the four principles of a co-production approach in their own work.

**Table 1: Applying the principles of co-production in practice: some examples**

Valuing children and young people as assets	Recognising hobbies and interests	
	Encouraging children's voice	
	Engaging children's assets	
Celebrating children and young people's contribution	External, 'treat-based' rewards	
	Internal, 'personal development' rewards	
Reciprocal working	Enable self-organisation	
	Provide a culture of mutuality and give and take	
	Foster a sense of shared responsibility	
Growing social networks	Support children to support one another	
	Bring children into contact with the wider community	

The *Children's Say* project facilitates 'this is me' planning days which invite children and young people to share 'this is what I like', 'this is what I like to do' and 'this is an important issue for me'.

*Caring Together* uses creative methodologies to enable young people to make decisions: 'we make a rocket and they decide what activities to put on the stars and you can prioritise the ones that they would most like to do by creating a continuum' with most popular activities at the top.

*Young Reporters* is in the process of recruiting new participants and the existing young people are 'involved in all aspects of the process, organising events, producing induction packs, everything from the word go'. This recognises the collective capacity of all the children and young people involved.

In *Glyncoch Youth Time Banking Project*, children are encouraged to spend time thinking about the positive things and the needs within the wider community and then they are encouraged to find their own existing talents and experience to find solutions to problems. This has led to a number of projects including peer learning (e.g., sexual health sessions) and environmental work.

Examples from across the projects included vouchers, time credits used to go on trips (like ice-skating or trips to the beach), or to access activities or community events, and recognition of children's work in the press.

Examples from across the projects included certificates, child-friendly reports describing their work, and copies of photographs of events, conferences and projects.

*Learning to Lead* allows children to self-elect onto teams of children and young people, who then work together to identify priorities and turn plans into action.

In projects like *Learning to Lead* and *Children's Say*, children are given designated office space to run their projects.

In projects like *Children's Say* and *Learning to Lead*, children have responsibility for running, evaluating and directing the project. In *Children's Say* they delegate responsibilities to staff. *Learning to Lead* invites children and young people to be directors on its Board.

Projects like *Children's Say*, *Young Reporters*, *Caring Together*, and *Glyncoch Youth Time Banking Project* operated informal and formal mentoring schemes between older and younger children.

Projects like *Learning to Lead* and *Glyncoch Youth Time Banking Project* encourage children to work together in teams to pool collective resources and assets and negotiate relationships with one another.

*Learning to Lead* and *Glyncoch Youth Time Banking Project* actively encouraged the integration of children's work into the local community. For example, with the time banking project, children are encouraged to give their time to events and activities being organised by other community groups. The same project uses 'learn something new' nights to bring younger and older generations together to share skills.

## How to apply the principles of co-production to your service

Our research found some really interesting examples of projects applying the principles of co-production in practice-based settings. We have highlighted some of these in Table 1 to provide you with ideas. We have more examples for 'Valuing children and young people as assets' and 'Celebrating children and young people's contribution' than we do for 'Reciprocal working' and 'Growing social networks', which reflected how active the projects we spoke to were across the various principles of co-production.

We encourage projects interested in applying a co-production approach to service delivery to link up and share best practice. In the overall project report we have called for government to establish a 'Children's Services in the twenty-first century' learning network to bring young people and professionals together to share ideas and celebrate achievements.

## Endnotes

- 1 For example, statements related to service-user engagement can be found within education policy in DfES (2005) Schools White Paper (London: DfES). Available at [http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=product\\_details&PageMode=publications&ProductId=Cm%25206677](http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=product_details&PageMode=publications&ProductId=Cm%25206677) [3 August 2009].
- 2 Action for Children's Participation Strategy aims for children and young people to become involved in initiatives across all levels and departments in the organisation. For example, it includes information to help staff involve children and young people in recruitment and selection. Action for Children (2008) *The right choice: Involving children and young people in recruitment and selection* (London: Action for Children).
- 3 Stephens L, Ryan-Collins J, Boyle D (2008) *Co-production: A manifesto for growing the core economy* (London: **nef**).

## Other reports related to this project include:

- **Full project report:**

- *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*

- **Practical 'how-to' documents:**

- *A guide to measuring children's well-being*
- *A guide to commissioning children's services for better outcomes*

- **SROI Assessment Reports for three Action for Children services:**

- *The economic and social return of Action for Children's East Dunbartonshire Family Service*
- *The economic and social return of Action for Children's Family Intervention Team / 5+ Project, Caerphilly*
- *The economic and social return of Action for Children's Wheatley Sure Start Children's Centre, Doncaster*

- **Report on the citizens' juries, including information on the process and conclusions:**

- *How can government act to increase the well-being and happiness of children and young people in the UK? A report on two citizens' juries*

All available at [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org) and [www.actionforchildren.org.uk](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)

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