

Effective Practice case study: Genuine Partnerships and the Four Cornerstones approach to co-production in Rotherham

Summary

Genuine Partnerships is a community interest company made up of young people, parent carers and practitioners working together to model and promote high-quality co-production and inclusive practice. The bedrock of their work is the now nationally recognised Four Cornerstones approach, which was pioneered through co-productive work between young people, families and practitioners in Rotherham. Genuine Partnerships aims to improve day-to-day lived experiences for young people and families by providing a clear framework for embedding co-production and inclusion within local Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) systems and settings. Now an independent organisation, Genuine Partnerships grew out of – and continues to be supported by – the work of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC)'s Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and Rotherham Parent Carers Forum (RPCF). Genuine Partnerships works nationally to deliver co-produced training packages, tools and accreditations that recognise and celebrate good practice in co-production and inclusion, drawing extensively on the perspectives of children and young people with SEND¹ and their parent carers.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the "strength of evidence" of this case study is **good** – the work of Genuine Partnerships has been reviewed internally, sustained for over a decade and replicated in many other local SEND systems. The "breadth of impact" of this case study is **promising** – there is evidence of impact in two of the four broad areas of impact considered by the framework².



¹ For ease of reading we use the term 'SEND' to refer to disabled children, young people and children and young people with special educational needs.

² The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework uses two "signal strength" indicators to present the strength of evidence and the breadth of impact of a case study. Each indicator has four bars – emerging, promising, good and robust. The "strength of evidence" indicator is based on how the project has been evaluated and the length of time it has been sustained. The "breadth of impact" indicator is based on whether the case study can demonstrate impact in four broad areas – the more areas of impact, the higher the signal strength indicator.

Why was this work undertaken? What did the work aim to do?

As part of an evaluation of the Inclusion Development Programme (a component of the 1997-2011 National Strategies) Educational Psychologists (EPs) in Rotherham, working with colleagues from the former Learning Support Service, used narrative inquiry – a form of in-depth conversation – to gather detailed accounts of lived experience from practitioners, parent carers and young people. The approach proved to be an effective way of uncovering previously overlooked aspects of parent carers' and young people's experiences of the SEND system – in particular, how practitioners communicated with and related to them, and whether or not their interactions built trust. The practitioners leading the research saw value in sharing these insights with schools, to help inform their relational practice with parent carers and young people, and support better co-production. The practitioners and parent carers involved at the start wanted to create something that made a practical difference to building trust and relationships – something that helped to make "co-production" (before it would have been recognised as such) real, rather than purely theoretical. The learning generated by the narrative inquiry approach, and the work undertaken by schools and the EPS to strengthen co-production and inclusive practice, led to the formation of the Rotherham Charter in 2011.

After the publication of the Lamb Inquiry report into parental confidence in SEND in 2009, RPCF and RMBC secured funding for an innovation project to build parental confidence, further developing the principles underpinning the Rotherham Charter. The Charter's initial focus on inclusion, empowerment and partnership developed into four principles of co-production – the Four Cornerstones.

With the 2014 Children and Families Act emphasising the importance of co-production between practitioners and families, the Four Cornerstones had clear potential to support local areas, as well as individual settings and services, who would benefit from a practical framework for fostering co-production. The Rotherham Charter Team was renamed Genuine Partnerships, reflecting the relevance of the Four Cornerstones Approach beyond Rotherham.

Genuine Partnerships sets out to achieve three main aims:

1. To create a clear framework to define and shape co-production, setting out how it can be made tangible and systemic;
2. To draw on families' lived experiences, empowering young people and parent carers to use their voice to shape strategic initiatives and inform day-to-day practice; and
3. To strengthen inclusive practice and improve day-to-day lived experiences for families, using partnership working and co-production.

1. Create a clear framework for co-production

The Four Cornerstones of co-production –

- ✦ Welcome and care;
- ✦ Value and include;
- ✦ Communicate; and
- ✦ Work in partnership;

aim to provide a framework for building trusting relationships between parent carers, young people, practitioners, services and education settings. The Four Cornerstones were co-produced with parent carers, and in turn aim to ensure that co-production becomes more systemic: the principles are designed to apply across settings and services rather than being applicable to the SEND system in isolation. To make the Four Cornerstones as practical as possible, Genuine Partnerships has developed self-evaluation tools and success measures that set out concrete examples of each "cornerstone", as well as tools for settings to monitor and evaluate their impact on co-production and inclusive practice.

2. Draw on families' lived experience

Genuine Partnerships model how to draw on the lived experience and expertise of young people and parent carers to shape strategic initiatives and day-to-day practice. The approach has been led by Rotherham's EPS, using the appreciative inquiry method, which recognises the importance of understanding and empathising with the perspectives and concerns of young people and their families, and developing solutions with, rather than for them. The aim is to empower children and young people with SEND and their families to work in partnership with practitioners so that their voices are heard and can influence practice and strategy.

3. Strengthen inclusive practice

By establishing a clear and practical framework for drawing on the lived experiences of young people and families to drive improvements in local SEND systems, Genuine Partnerships and the Four Cornerstones aim to achieve concrete improvements in inclusive practice within settings, including:

- ✦ An increase in the proportion of children and young people with SEND educated in local settings;
- ✦ A reduction in the number of permanent exclusions;
- ✦ An increase in appropriate identification of children and young people's needs; and
- ✦ A reduction in the number of requests for statutory assessments that are not jointly agreed by parents/ carers and children/young people's settings.

As one member of Genuine Partnerships put it, *"working in partnership is essential, almost a foundation, to inclusion."*

What was the impact?



- ✓ Lived experience of children and young people with SEND and their families
- Education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people
- ✓ Feedback from professionals
- Long term outcomes for children and young people

The project has been able to demonstrate impact in two of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework, through qualitative feedback from young people, parent carers and practitioners, alongside management data capturing the scale of outputs from the work. Findings have been shared internally and externally.

1. Create a framework to define and shape co-production

Through the work of Genuine Partnerships, the Four Cornerstones model is embedded in the key guiding strategies and decision-making fora in the Rotherham SEND system. Following Rotherham's 2021 Ofsted/CQC SEND Area Inspection, Genuine Partnerships provided the guiding principles for the Borough's Written Statement of Action (WSoA). The Four Cornerstones now formally underpin nine services and strategies in Rotherham, including the SEND Strategy, Learning Disability Strategy, Autism Strategy, and Preparing for Adulthood (PfA) strategic plan. Genuine Partnerships attends meetings of the SEND Partnership Board, PfA Strategic Partnership Board, SEND Education & Employment Forum, and Integrated Care Board (ICB) – holding services to account and ensuring co-production is authentic.

Beyond Rotherham, the Genuine Partnerships model has also been adopted by other local authorities including Warwickshire, Haringey, East Riding of Yorkshire, Telford and Wrekin and the Isles of Scilly, and is recognised as best practice in co-production by Contact – the delivery partner to the Department for Education (DfE) to support parent carer forums. The Four Cornerstones of Co-production and Inclusive Practice are now being used to define and shape co-production in local SEND systems across England. The Genuine Partnerships team has shared the findings of their work externally, such as through the SEN Policy Research Forum.

"I am delighted to offer a few words in support of the collaborative culture and ethos in Rotherham: it is remarkable! ... Genuine Partnerships' Four Cornerstones principles ... have evolved from the narratives of children and young people with SEND in Rotherham, and their parent carers. They capture the essence of good listening, effective partnership and confidence building. On a daily basis these contribute to and inform the way we all work across education, health and care to support our children, their parents and carers and our schools. The whole ethos is championed by some incredible 'Charter Gold' schools and settings, which model inclusive practice within the borough. It is no surprise that the work of the Genuine Partnerships team is recognised nationally for its project work and training strengthening genuine, authentic partnership working and co-production." **Senior RMBC**

Leader

2. Draw on families' lived experiences to shape strategic initiatives and day-to-day practice

Co-production with parent carers

Genuine Partnerships reflects the principle of equal partnership working between the local authority and RPCF. Alongside termly meetings for all staff and volunteers, parent carers can volunteer their time flexibly, receive free training and become a Parent Carer Lead, working alongside practitioners to deliver training and accreditation to schools, services and settings. Feedback from parent carers suggests Genuine Partnerships ensures their perspectives are valued and have a concrete impact on the local SEND system:

"Being involved in the Charter has shown me that I can make a difference, parents views do count, and what can be achieved when services work together alongside parents and children." **Parent carer**

"For me, a parent of two very special young people, the Charter represents a willingness to work in true partnership and really value everyone involved." **Parent carer**

RPCF is made up of 30 staff and 40 volunteers, all of whom have been trained in and are expected to uphold the Four Cornerstones. This makes a significant difference to the way in which RPCF members approach their work. As one practitioner within Genuine Partnerships, who is also a parent carer, put it, *"I definitely started out fighting for my kids, but Genuine Partnerships gave me a different way of looking at the situation."* Another parent carer member of Genuine Partnerships said, *"we think RPCF is a successful parent carer forum, and the reason why is Genuine Partnerships. We think of ourselves as 'velvet bulldozers' – we represent our members, but we don't damage anyone in the process."* For their part, the EPs involved in Genuine Partnerships reflected that they have learned as much from the parent carers they have worked with – as one put it, *"we have grown together."*

Co-production with young people

Guiding Voices is the forum through which Genuine Partnerships works with young people to shape decision-making in the local SEND system. Genuine Partnerships sees Guiding Voices as another key way of putting the Four Cornerstones into practice. The fundamental principle of Guiding Voices is a commitment not just to listen to the experiences of young people, but to act on them.

A group of 8 to 12 young people with SEND aged 10+, Guiding Voices meets weekly to discuss priorities and agree actions to be taken to the SEND Strategic Board, Children and Young People Partnership Board, Local Offer Sub-Group, and PfA Board. Guiding Voices attended 37 strategic meetings and events in 2023/24, contributing to the development of the SEND Strategy and PfA Strategy, and working with a range of organisations to develop a new initiative called 'The Future's Fair'. The group has been involved in recruitment to key posts, including interviews for a new assistant director, and co-production with Guiding Voices led to changes to Rotherham's Local Offer website. The group helps to assemble, articulate and promote the views of other groups of young people with SEND locally, and works with the Genuine Partnerships team to deliver Four Cornerstones training to settings.

In 2022 Guiding Voices helped to deliver an event in Rotherham to embed understanding and use of the Four Cornerstones across the borough, attended by over 170 strategic leaders, team managers and front-line practitioners. Feedback from attendees demonstrates that sessions run by Guiding Voices improved their understanding of young people's lived experiences, how they wanted to be listened to, and the forms of support they valued most. One attendee commented that *"the activities the children designed and showed us were really interesting and helpful."*

As part of internal evaluations of Genuine Partnerships' work, members of Guiding Voices describe the confidence they have gained from working as a group to articulate their priorities:

"We are just like one giant family, we work hard as a team, but we also celebrate together. Our last team meeting was on my birthday, so we had cake! We all care about each other, so bring out the best in each other. It's strange looking back because most of us were shy, nervous and not confident at all. Now we are chatty and confident. We still get nervous, but we have so much fun at these events and lots of friends on hand to help us relax. In our team everyone is equal, we know each other by names and not by a label."

Member of Guiding Voices

3. Strengthen inclusive practice and improve day-to-day lived experiences for families

In 2023/24 Genuine Partnerships oversaw 51 development projects with schools, settings or services, delivered 18 training events to around 500 attendees, and supported 45 strategic meetings. 24 schools and settings (22 of which are in Rotherham) have now achieved or are actively seeking Charter Gold accreditation – awarded when a setting or service can demonstrate that the Four Cornerstones are being genuinely embedded within their culture and ethos, and that this is being achieved in partnership with parent carers and young people. Feedback from school leaders working with Genuine Partnerships towards their Charter Gold accreditation suggests the process leads to concrete impact on culture and practice in relation to inclusion and co-production:

"There has been greater clarity of thought around our SEND provision and we have considered things from a parent's perspective more thoroughly." **School senior leader**

What were the key actions and practices involved?

There were 3 key features of the work:

1. A practice model grounded in appreciative inquiry
2. A tradeable package of training, tools and support
3. An organisational structure modelling the principles of equal partnership

1. A practice model grounded in appreciative inquiry

Genuine Partnerships' training, tools and support are grounded in appreciative inquiry – an approach to organisational change which focuses on existing strengths and assets, and which involves extensive dialogue to understand stakeholders' experiences, motivations and aims. Appreciative inquiry was at the core of the original Rotherham Charter: focus groups with children and young people with SEND and their parent carers identified the importance of quality interpersonal interactions, and the things practitioners can do which strengthen communication, partnership and trust.

These initial insights, and the appreciative inquiry approach underpinning them, are now central to the support, training and accreditations Genuine Partnerships deliver in and beyond Rotherham. VOICES is a package of support which spans several weeks, using appreciative inquiry to bring together young people, parent carers and schools with education, health and care partners within a local SEND system to identify and work on co-production next steps. As part of the Charter Gold accreditation process, pupils take Genuine Partnerships staff on guided tours of their settings, identifying aspects of the environment and provision they feel positive about as well as issues they want to be resolved.

Four Cornerstones training sessions are co-delivered by a practitioner and a parent carer or young person, using personal stories, music and practical activities to open up discussion, break down power imbalances between families and practitioners, and increase understanding of lived experience. Training is strengths-based: settings and services are encouraged to consider how they currently support the Four Cornerstones, what those principles look like in their own context, and how they can build on their existing work to strengthen co-production with parent carers and young people.

The principles of appreciative inquiry also govern the work of Guiding Voices. Practitioners can consult with the group, but this is a carefully managed process, focused on maximising tangible benefits for young people and avoiding tokenistic engagement. Practitioners must set out their intentions, how young people's voices will make a difference and how this impact will be communicated back to the group. This ensures the members of Guiding Voices have genuine influence and can see how their views feed into wider change.

2. A tradeable package of training, tools and support

Since 2011 the Genuine Partnerships team has co-produced a range of training packages and tools including:

- ✦ VOICES research and training, which brings together young people, parent carers and schools with education, health and care partners within a local SEND system to identify and work on co-production next steps together;
- ✦ Self-evaluation tools to help individual schools, settings and services across education, health and care to discover and embed the Four Cornerstones into their culture and practice;
- ✦ A success measures tool to help services and settings evaluate the impact of their work to embed the Four Cornerstones approach on inclusion and co-production outcomes for young people and parent carers;
- ✦ A voice and influence tool demonstrating how young people's voice can best be facilitated and inform decision-making; and
- ✦ A quality indicators self-evaluation tool to help education, health and care partners, parent carers, young people, schools and settings work together to strengthen co-production and inclusive practice.

Genuine Partnerships also runs the Charter Gold Accreditation process for settings and services, a two-year programme of training, research, action-planning and evaluation to embed the Four Cornerstones in partnership with parent carers and young people. The Four Cornerstones approach also features in training materials for the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi)'s SEND Leadership Programme. Outside Rotherham, Genuine Partnerships provides support to other local SEND systems on a traded basis.

All Genuine Partnerships training is co-delivered by a practitioner and a parent carer or young person. Members of Genuine Partnerships consider that this allows them to model the sort of partnership working and co-production that they are asking others to reflect upon. It also means when they are delivering training or working with an individual setting, there will always be someone to whom a practitioner, parent carer or young person can relate.

3. An organisational structure modelling the principles of equal partnership

The Genuine Partnerships team is made up of parent carers, practitioners and young people working together to set priorities, deliver training and support, and advocate for the Four Cornerstones approach. In this way, the team models the forms of co-production it is supporting other local SEND systems to develop. Governance and staffing arrangements also reflect close co-operation between the LA, EPS and PCF. Genuine Partnerships is incorporated as a Community Interest Company (CIC), with a board consisting of representatives from the LA and PCF and with staff seconded from the LA. Genuine Partnerships provides services within Rotherham partly under a service level agreement with RMBC, and partly through individually commissioned projects – based on a workplan agreed with the LA each year and shaped by young people and parent carers.

How has the work been sustained?

Since 2011 the Genuine Partnerships model has become embedded within the work of the LA and PCF.

The Four Cornerstones formally underpin a range of services and strategies in Rotherham and members of the Genuine Partnerships team attend strategic meetings within education, health and care to hold services to account and ensure co-production and inclusion remain at the centre of culture and practice. As a result, the Cornerstones are reflected in the local SEND system at a strategic and operational level, influencing day-to-day business such as how roles and meetings are defined and conducted, and shaping the recruitment of new staff within the LA.

While securing buy-in from the LA has been key to embedding Genuine Partnerships within Rotherham, incorporation as a CIC and secondment of EPS staff provides the team with a degree of protection from changes in LA leadership or strategy. Meanwhile Genuine Partnerships' part-traded model of income generation, and the national scope of its work, reduces reliance on LA resources within Rotherham.

Having been initially funded by the DfE, Genuine Partnerships is now sustained by a combination of commissioned work from RMBC and trading with other local SEND systems beyond Rotherham. This covers the secondment of 13 LA staff to Genuine Partnerships.



Resources required

- ✓ Financial investment
- ✓ Human resources
- Physical space

Value for money

- ✓ Sustained £ needed
- Cost neutral
- Savings (+outcomes)



Finding out more

Contact to find out more	Dr Claire-Marie Whiting, Genuine Partnerships Co-Lead genuine.partnerships@rotherham.gov.uk
Useful resources and links	Genuine Partnerships Guiding Voices Four Cornerstones resources

