

Effective Practice case study: embedding youth voice in decision-making through Surrey ATLAS

Summary

ATLAS (Accept, Teach, Listen, Access, Support) is one of seven Youth Voice participation groups in Surrey, and is a prominent voice on important topics from the perspective of young people with additional needs and disabilities living in the county. ATLAS has co-produced a range of concrete changes to services for young people with additional needs and disabilities, attends regular strategic meetings within the local authority (LA) and Local Area Partnership, and has shaped high-level strategies relating to additional needs and disabilities. ATLAS has led work to reframe the language used in Surrey in relation to young people with additional needs and disabilities, which is now reflected in county-wide terminology. The group has an effective governance structure centred around Action Cards, which ensures the priorities of young people with additional needs and disabilities are taken forward, regularly monitored and followed up within the LA and Local Area Partnership. ATLAS was identified as "a shining beacon" in the county's Additional Needs landscape as part of Surrey's 2023 Ofsted/CQC SEND Inspection.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the "strength of evidence" of this case study is **promising** – the work has been evaluated and shared internally, but has been sustained for over 5 years. The "breadth of impact" of this case study is **promising** – there is evidence of impact in terms of lived experiences of young people with SEND¹ and feedback from professionals.²



¹ For ease of reading, we use the term 'SEND' to refer to disabled children and 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?

ATLAS is a forum for young people with additional needs and disabilities, aged between 8 and 25, living in Surrey. One of seven Surrey Youth Voice participation groups, ATLAS has an additional needs focus and grew out of SEND Youth Advisors Surrey (SYAS) which had built a solid base of youth participation in the local SEND system. As Surrey's 2019 local area SEND inspection noted, *"the influence of young people's views has developed well since 2016. The membership of [SYAS] doubled in the last year... two representative groups now meet monthly with service leaders and have produced advice and guidance for other young people with SEND, informed by their own knowledge and experiences."*

Building on the strong foundations of youth voice and co-production put in place by SYAS, the group decided to rebrand as 'ATLAS' in 2022, signalling that young people wanted the local SEND system to be built around the terminology of 'additional needs and disabilities' rather than 'special educational needs and disabilities', as part of a broader shift in expectations and narratives relating to 'SEND'³. The change of name and brand, led by ATLAS members, was accompanied by new forms of governance, a more robust system to hold local decision-makers to account, and new forms of engagement with young people with additional needs and disabilities.

ATLAS is a busy team, meeting regularly and engaging in a range of work within Surrey and beyond. ATLAS' work is focused on three primary aims:

1. Challenge existing expectations and narratives relating to 'SEND'
2. Provide a forum for friendship, collaboration and empowerment
3. Co-produce positive change to services

1) Challenge existing expectations and narratives relating to 'SEND'

A key priority for ATLAS is to help people understand the diversity of disability and to tackle the ableism, discrimination and stigma encountered by young people with additional needs and disabilities. The group aims to promote the use of language that young people use to self-describe and identify in personal and professional settings, for example by publishing powerful personal testimonies and practical guides exploring the power of different forms of language relating to disability.

2) Provide a forum for friendship, collaboration and empowerment

ATLAS aims to provide a safe space for young people with additional needs and disabilities to share their experiences in confidence, identify shared priorities and take these forward for action. Although meetings are action-oriented, they also offer a chance for young people to share food and spend social time together, alongside regular social trips.

³ In accordance with ATLAS members' [preferred terminology](#), we refer to 'additional needs and disabilities' rather than 'special educational needs' or 'SEND' in this case study, unless we are referring to a historic usage of the term 'SEND', or an established use from elsewhere in the system – such as a 'Local Area SEND Inspection'.

3) Co-produce positive change to services

ATLAS aims to bring about positive change to individual services for young people with additional needs and disabilities in Surrey, and the structures and strategies underpinning them. This involves identifying changes that need to be made, drawing on lived experience to communicate those priorities to decision-makers, co-designing solutions with practitioners in the local SEND system and providing a point of accountability to ensure those solutions are enacted.

"The aim for ATLAS is a lot of us want to achieve full co-production with, like, everything. We want to be the ones up there sat on all of the board meetings; we want to be involved in all of the decisions being made in and about the services." **ATLAS member speaking on the Voices of ATLAS Podcast**

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



ATLAS is able to demonstrate impact in two of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework, through testimony from young people, inspection reports and changes to services and strategies attributed to the work of the group.

1. Challenge existing expectations and narratives relating to 'SEND'

The language of 'special educational needs and disabilities' has been dropped across Surrey as a result of ATLAS members' work to emphasise its negative impacts and to promote their preferred terminology. This is reflected in Surrey's local area SEND Partnership strategy:

"We recognise the importance of language and are committed as a partnership to embedding the language set out in the Surrey ATLAS Preferred Terminology report. This includes the use of 'Additional Needs and Disabilities' rather than 'Special Educational Needs and Disabilities or SEND', wherever possible." **Surrey Inclusion and Additional Needs Partnership Strategy (2023 to 2026)**

ATLAS have also led individual pieces of work to inform and reshape narratives around additional needs and disabilities with specific groups of practitioners and targeting particular forms of disability. In 2024 ATLAS created a presentation based on their Preferred Terminology Report and delivered it to the Early Years team within the LA, who wanted to better understand the importance of language when writing about young children. ATLAS have since delivered the presentation to other teams within the LA, with practitioners subsequently making pledges on what they would stop, start, or change as a result of the training.

Following an action card to raise awareness about invisible disabilities, ATLAS designed and filmed a promotional video series to educate others about Sunflower Lanyards and how to support those who wear them. The videos were posted on Surrey Youth Voice social media, and have been shared by the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower scheme.

2. Provide a forum for friendship, collaboration and empowerment

ATLAS holds monthly hybrid meetings, allowing members to join face-to-face or online. Meetings are facilitated by ATLAS apprentices who also provide wider support to the group, gaining experience in areas such as social media and business administration. Meetings follow a mutually agreed agenda, typically focused on existing and new Action Cards, upcoming events and training, and external requests to consult with the group. Beyond this core business, meetings are an opportunity for young people to catch up and share food – providing a space to socialise and connect. As one ATLAS member reflected on the Voices of ATLAS Podcast, "there's a lack of social groups between young adults... I think a part of the reason a lot of young people come to ATLAS is that they can socialise."

A friendly and collaborative environment, focused on clear aims and opportunities to influence change, forms a basis for genuine participation and the development of ATLAS members' confidence:

"The only experience I have of the concept of 'participation' has been throughout working with ATLAS. When I joined the group I was mostly non-verbal; I experienced situational mutism a lot. But once I started doing work with the UVP (User Voice and Participation) Team, it's been my only chance that I've had to participate. And now I talk, and you can't really shut me up. So it's really boosted my confidence." **ATLAS member speaking on the Voices of ATLAS Podcast**

The ATLAS participation model is now being rolled out across other youth participation groups in Surrey, beyond additional needs and disabilities, and was identified as a strength in Surrey's 2023 local area SEND inspection report:

"Members value the group for the friendships and opportunities it has given them. They feel that they have been actively listened to and their views respected."
2023 local area SEND inspection report

3. Co-produce positive change to services

ATLAS has played an instrumental role in bringing about change within the local SEND system at both a strategic and service level, as identified in Surrey's 2023 local area SEND inspection report:

"ATLAS... has co-produced many of the recent positive changes across the local area, for example the All-Age Autism Strategy. Members of ATLAS are helping partnership leaders to understand and respond well to the current situation of inconsistency."

2023 local area SEND inspection report

At a strategic level, as part of the Surrey Local Area Partnership, ATLAS fed into the development of the 2023-26 Surrey Inclusion and Additional Needs Partnership Strategy, co-produced Surrey's All-Age Autism Strategy, and is currently working with school staff, parents and carers to develop a new Co-production Charter. ATLAS members have fed into the development of the Local Area Partnership SEND Strategic Improvement Plan by sharing their experiences of Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessment and review processes, and their view on how young people can be more involved in making decisions about the support they receive.

ATLAS have also led work to improve and develop specific services and resources. The group recently developed a campaign to raise awareness of travel training for young people with additional needs and disabilities to increase uptake, and fed into the renewal of Surrey's Ordinarily Available Provision Guidance for Schools, ensuring the guidance is in line with young people's needs. Service Managers within the LA feel working with ATLAS has strengthened their understanding of young people's experiences and shaped their decision-making:

"Working with ATLAS has allowed me an opportunity to fully understand the experiences of young people who have all had very different experiences of education. I love the interactions I have with the ATLAS group as they speak with real passion about making a difference for children and young people. I have been able to really understand how the decisions I make and the work that I do impacts on young people." **Education and Inclusion Service Manager**

"I had the opportunity to have a workshop with young people from ATLAS to hear directly from them what matters around public transport - for example, what might make them use buses more and what makes them feel safer when travelling by bus. I would welcome the opportunity to hear from ATLAS again, as their views have fed into our overall Bus Service Improvement Plan for Surrey." **Programme Manager, Strategic Transport Group**

"ATLAS are key partners in the All-Age Autism Strategy (AAAS) and are integral to the work we do. The impact of coproducing projects with ATLAS is that the voice of young people is amplified, ensuring lived experience is at the heart of implementation. ATLAS provides the AAAS with a unique and essential perspective that supports the drive for change to make society more autism friendly." **All Age Autism Strategy Service Manager**

ATLAS members feel they have been able to bring their lived experience to bear on local decision-making and co-design genuine improvements to service delivery:

"It's important to have young groups like ATLAS available as it means everyone can have more opportunities, as ATLAS helps with opportunities so much and helps improve services that do affect you on a weekly basis."

"What is important is the fact that we get to have the opinions of people in the services, and this helps pave the way for improvements for future service users."

ATLAS members speaking on the Voices of ATLAS Podcast

ATLAS also works with national bodies to achieve change beyond Surrey. The group is collaborating with FLARE – the Department for Education's national young SEND advisory group – to feed into national reviews of issues such as how EHCP Annual Reviews can be improved.

What were the key actions and practices involved?

Key features of ATLAS' work are:

1. An Action Card process to establish accountability for young people's priorities
2. Effective governance structures linking ATLAS with wider decision-making across the council
3. Creation of a strong brand and channels for youth voice

1. An Action Card process to establish accountability for young people's priorities

When SYAS became ATLAS, the group adopted a new Action Card process to ensure their calls for action were passed to relevant local leaders in a standardised way, with clear lines of feedback and accountability. Action Cards capture questions and concerns in a template which is used by other User Voice and Participation (UVP) groups, as well as by Family Voice Surrey – the local Parent Carer Forum.

Action Cards are triggered when ATLAS members collectively agree they want to start, stop or change something in response to a commonly raised issue. Group members agree on the 'ask' to be captured in the Action Card, using the standardised template, and this is then shared and logged with senior managers. Cards are passed to the relevant leader in the local authority or the Inclusion and Additional Needs Partnership, and updates are sought regularly and shared back to the group. Action Cards remain open until the issue they address is resolved and ATLAS members are happy with the response. Outcomes are reflected in 'You Said, We Did, Your View on This' summaries published by the council.

By ensuring leaders are held to account and providing a transparent process for logging actions, Action Cards reflect the Lundy model of participation upon which ATLAS is built, which focuses on the need for young people to be engaged in genuine co-production rather than merely being consulted. Action Cards provide clear feedback loops to allow ATLAS members, and the wider public, to be clear about the change their participation has created.

2. Effective governance structures linking ATLAS with wider decision-making across the council

In Surrey, the Additional Needs and Disabilities (AND) Partnership Board is the governance mechanism for partnership accountability and is responsible for delivery of the local area partnership strategy. ATLAS meet before each half-termly AND Partnership Board meeting to agree their messages and asks, and meet every three months with members of the Partnership Board to discuss their view of services in Surrey and to work on ATLAS' current Action Cards.

ATLAS reports to the Partnership Board via the Action Card sub-group, which works with other UVP groups, as well as Family Voice Surrey. This allows Action Cards to be considered alongside each other to avoid duplication, or to further reinforce the case for action when demands for change are coming from multiple sources.

3. Creation of a strong brand and channels for youth voice

ATLAS members led the rebranding of the group in 2022, creating a strong and consistent visual identity. The group uses a wide range of channels to engage with young people including the ATLAS [blog](#), social media and the [Voices of ATLAS](#) Podcast. Through their [preferred terminology](#) report, ATLAS have led work in Surrey to reframe how people talk about additional needs and disabilities, leading to concrete changes in language and narratives that are reflected consistently across the local system.

How has the work been sustained?



ATLAS is funded by the LA as one of Surrey's UVP groups, which also include the Care Leavers' Forum and Surrey Youth Cabinet. Within the UVP team, ATLAS is supported by the additional needs and disabilities team which consists of a Participation Officer, a Participation Lead, a Senior Participation Officer, an Apprentice and a Team Manager. The group has been running as 'ATLAS' since 2022, and existed as SYAS for 3 years before this.

ATLAS is formally part of Surrey's Local Area Partnership, and the group's engagement with the Local Area Partnership AND Partnership Board through Action Cards is now business as usual. The learning of the work from this project would be relevant to any local SEND system seeking to create a means for young people to use their experiences to influence and shape strategic improvement projects across the local area.

Finding out more

Contact to find out more	Orsolya Foti – Senior Participation Officer, User Voice and Participation Team, Surrey County Council: orsolya.foti@surreycc.gov.uk
Useful resources and links	• What is ATLAS and how to get involved • ATLAS blog • ATLAS preferred terminology report