Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the findings from the interviews with early years practitioners are presented. Firstly, current practice among the practitioners regarding consultation with young children is examined, including the extent of consultation and the different methods used. Following this, the possible barriers and facilitating factors in consulting with young children within the early years setting are explored.

4.2 Current practice among the early years practitioners regarding consultation with young children

All of the early years practitioners interviewed reported that they had consulted with parents, or were at least aware of regular consultation with parents within their setting. Some reported that they regularly consulted parents but never consulted children, as the following quotation illustrates:

"I think in my [previous] role ... we did a lot of consultation with the parents. I don’t know whether we’ve ever consulted with children... And I have to say the children’s centre programmes now, you know, if the parents didn’t want it, it wouldn’t happen. But it’s right, there’s never been a consideration about what the children want, it’s about what the parents think the children want." (Early years practitioner 9).

However, the majority of interviewees reported that they had consulted with young children within their early years setting. Current practice among those practitioners who did report consulting with young children is explored in the following sections.
4.2.1 Definitions and understanding of consultation with young children

Some of the early years practitioners commented that the term consultation could have different meanings. Indeed, some asked for a definition to be provided before they discussed their experiences. In these cases it was explained that practitioners should interpret it as they considered appropriate because the various definitions and understanding of consultation was an issue of interest in the study.

The most common understanding of consultation with young children was the offering of choices to children. Providing children with the opportunity to make choices was considered by some practitioners to be an early stage of consultation as it enabled children to exercise an opinion.

Some practitioners viewed consultation as actively seeking opinions, in order to understand children's views, as the following quotation illustrates:

'...consulting to me means seeking their opinions. Not just the run of the mill chit chat but more finding out what they're thinking and what they're wanting is what I see it as.' (Early years practitioner 6).

Many practitioners understood consultation as being equal with a child-led approach to practice within the early years setting. A related view was that consultation means making children feel involved in activities and requires practitioners to share control with children, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'... I don't know if we've ever badged it as consultation with children but I think we would definitely say it's about encouraging practitioners to share control with
children. So children really being involved in their learning process and then concentrating on their environment so their accessibility to resources and experiences and then really the adult/child interactions. The relationship between the children and the adults that are looking after them.' (Early years practitioner 7).

4.2.2 Use of consultation

When practitioners discussed the focus of the consultation they had carried out with young children, for those who equated consultation with a child-led approach the consultation was often considered to be part of everyday practice, consistent with a particular way of working. In practice this meant that children were routinely consulted about activities and were also involved in shaping the early years environment, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘If they want to change the role play area, the staff consult the children and ask them what they’d like doing and the children are involved then ... so for example, at the moment, the children have shown an interest in babies, and somebody’s mum had had a baby, and they were talking about like the clinic and that, so the children have now set up a baby clinic area...' (Early years practitioner 1).

For the majority of interviewees, consultation with young children as part of everyday practice tended to consist of offering children limited choices, for example of snacks at snack time, or which activity from a selection they would like to do next. The following example is illustrative of this type of practice:

‘If you’re talking about day-to-day things, choices are given routinely day-to-day. Would you like water? Would you like milk? It’s not presumed that every child will have water or will have milk, certainly the older children will access that themselves which is their choice as to whether they have their snack, their choice as to whether they have water or milk, and down to things like choice of meals.’ (Early years practitioner 2).
The practice of offering children limited choices was considered appropriate by many of the practitioners because of the young age of the children. Therefore the choices were offered within the boundaries of children’s perceived abilities, as the following practitioner explained:

'... we try to give them as much choice as possible, it’s difficult because a lot of them are probably under three ... So within the, perhaps, their capability and maturity, things maybe say like at snack time, they would have a choice of what they want, so in a sense they’re not just given one thing, you know, and they are consulted in the sense that they have that choice of what they would like.' (Early years practitioner 5).

However, some practitioners demonstrated a broad interpretation of what consisted of offering choices, as in the following example, in which the practitioner explained that children exercise choice by eating or not eating the food which is given to them and by either staying at or leaving the table:

'We have a selection of healthy options, usually fruit based food, finger food so they can pick it up themselves, and in the bowl we usually give the child a selection within their own little bowl and then they can leave whatever they don’t want to eat. One of the little house rules that we have is a child can stay for as long as they want but soon as a child gets up and goes off and indicates that they’ve had enough, that they’re expressing their choice, they’re certainly not forced to stay ... but as soon as they’ve made that choice, the consequence of that is their bowl is taken away.' (Early years practitioner 4).

As well as offering children choices within daily routines, consultation had also been used for special one-off events, such as gaining children’s views and ideas about how to use the outdoor space in the early years environment, when the space was being redesigned. In this instance the
children’s suggestions were surprising to the practitioners as they requested a house for a monster who was a part of their play in the space:

‘So [the child] told me all about the monster and how they had been posting things through the fence. And if you post things through the fence then he’s fine, he’s very friendly ... But one thing they said they definitely, definitely needed above anything else was a house where they could be close to the fence where the monster was. And that was something that you could never have sort of imagined really.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

Some early years practitioners raised the concept of lower and higher levels of consultation with young children. Lower level consultation consisted of children being consulted about day-to-day practice and activities within services already in place. In contrast, higher level consultation would be consulting with children about the kind of services offered. The following practitioner made this distinction between the two levels:

‘When you’re talking about consultation do you mean consultation on that kind of low level – what kind of activities you want to do next or how we could shape the group? Or the kinds of services to offer?’ (Early years practitioner 8).

When most of the early years practitioners interviewed discussed consultation with young children, they referred only to the lower of these different levels of consultation. None of the early years practitioners reported having consulted children about the kind of services offered. The focus of the consultation tended instead to relate to the day-to-day routines and activities within existing services, as the following practitioner explained:

‘I’d say I was hugely aware of consultation on that kind of smaller scale of what song do you want to sing next ... Yes and perhaps to some extent shaping the groups once they’re up and running but that idea of what kind
of services should we offer that we consult with, well should consult with parents about, really well at Sure Start, I suppose I would say I'd neglect the children in that kind of service planning and provision.' (Early years practitioner 8).

One practitioner described how she had involved children in the evaluation of outings, by using children's drawings as well as discussion with children:

'We tend to evaluate after each trip and that might be in the form of a questionnaire or pictures really, for younger children, we get them to sort of draw pictures of the favourite trip they've been on, and which ones they liked and it might be specific things that they liked, so again it could be through pictures or writing, and talking as well. We would talk to them when we're on trips, if they're enjoying it, or what other places they might like to go to.' (Early years practitioner 5).

However, most practitioners reported that they had not consulted with children in order to evaluate services, although many thought it would be possible and potentially useful to do so. Some practitioners said that although they would consider the use of consultation with young children to evaluate services, they would not be sure how to approach it. This view is illustrated by the following quotation:

'I think it could be possible, I think so, I think it would be quite exciting. I think if we were, probably personally, if I just had a few more strategies than I have to do that, I think I perhaps would feel a bit more confident to do that. But I wouldn't have an issue with doing that, I just think I'd like a bit more information about doing it, perhaps in different ways.' (Early years practitioner 1).

The main difficulty perceived in involving young children in the evaluation of services was that it concerned more complex concepts, which could be difficult to present to young children, and could also be difficult for them to respond to, as the following practitioner explained:
'Basically we are going to be asking them, are we good at our jobs? Do we make you feel happy? Which is going to be very difficult to actually know how to make the child understand what we’re saying. I’m sure we'll get there but I know we’ve been sitting on the fence and kind of going, what kind of questions are we going to ask, because we can ask, do you like this toy, do you like that toy, that’s simple enough but when you’re starting to ask them some of the internal questions then it becomes more difficult even as adults to work out how to get those answers out.' (Early years practitioner 2).

In addition, the view was expressed by some that consulting with children to evaluate services could be tokenistic or meaningless if it was limited to asking children to indicate whether or not they like particular services. A further point was that it was thought possible to see whether or not children enjoy services from their behaviour. One practitioner explained that assessment of children’s progress was used to evaluate the effectiveness of services and that this was considered to be a more useful method than consulting with children.

'What happens is you generally assess them before the programme and after the programme and the assessment results then really speak for themselves ... I personally think it is a really enjoyable group and you kind of get the idea of whether they’re enjoying it or not anyway from their response during it ... If you were in a group with sort of five three-year olds, you’ll know pretty quickly whether they want to be there or not and whether they like it.' (Early years practitioner 8).

4.2.3 Methods of consultation

In this section, the different methods used by the early years practitioners to consult with young children are explored.
4.2.3.1 Talking with children

For some practitioners, for whom consultation meant offering limited choices, the choices could be presented verbally. Asking children verbally was also considered an appropriate method for consulting with older children for some practitioners. Talking with children was a part of the consultation process of planning the outdoor space in one setting, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘And then that led to a whole conversation about well, what could we do with the green fence, if you like it or you don’t like it. What could we do? Where they could stay out in the sunshine, where they could stay in shade because they were saying that they got hot and they didn’t want to get hot for you know that length of time. But they liked to be out in the sun, so it was kind of all this. Well, what can we do, the negotiation. They said very strongly that they had a problem with the sand tray because the sand tray leaked so they would like a bigger sand tray. So it was all these kind of things.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

4.2.3.2 Non-verbal means of communication

Practitioners described various different ways of offering choices to children, including methods allowing children to respond non-verbally, such as by pointing:

‘They’re put out onto the table so they can see what’s available, and then we would ask them, so we’d say, you know, what would you like, so we would ask them as well, and they can either point or say, if they’re at the age of speaking.’ (Early years practitioner 5).

Alternative methods of communication had also been used, such as Makaton, a simplified sign language:

‘I think going down to then our younger children, so our under twos, I think this is where we’ve started to use the Makaton, and giving them, with the language, the sign
and the language, and the choice. So at snack time it’s the milk or the water, or the apple or the orange, and the staff are making sure that there’s always a way for the children to communicate, so they’re always making a choice.’ (Early years practitioner 1).

Using objects or pictures to represent choices was another strategy used by some practitioners, as in the following example, in which the practitioner had supported others to consult with children about which song they would like to sing:

‘And they weren’t so aware of how they could ask the child what song came next. So we’ve got boards now with pictures that represent the songs. You could do it with objects too but we’ve got pictures that represent a song and they take a picture off the board and depending on what picture they’ve chosen that’s their choice of song.’ (Early years practitioner 8).

4.2.3.3 Use of observation

A child-led approach to practice was often considered to involve the use of observation as a means of consulting with children. Careful observation of children in order to allow practitioners to learn about children’s interests was an integral part of the High/Scope approach used in some settings. This approach encourages children to make their own choices of which activities they would like to do within the setting. This approach was considered to involve consultation with young children through the observation of children’s behaviour, which ensures activities are planned according to children’s interests, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘We have certain periods of the day when the children are free to choose and the adults make careful observations so that they can pick on the children’s interests and then plan a more focused activity.’ (Early years practitioner 1).
Some practitioners who did not follow the High/Scope approach also reported that they used observation as a means of consulting with young children and that this observation was used to inform the planning of future sessions:

‘Observation and I’d say through play, when I’m engaging with them when we’re doing activities ... I think I’d just be building up a general sense of what a child likes or doesn’t like, or feels, but most of it would be from observation really ... I have used observations as part of my planning though, for the next sessions activities, if we noted that a child responds in a certain way to an activity we might try and bear that in mind when we’re planning the next workshop, so I suppose they are expressing preferences.’ (Early years practitioner 4).

4.2.3.4 Use of an advocate

Some early years practitioners discussed the use of an advocate to elicit children’s views. In some early years settings children were allocated a key worker who would be responsible for that child’s care. Through building a close relationship it is anticipated that the key worker would be able to act as an advocate for the child if necessary, as the following practitioner explained:

‘They have a key carer which I think is important again to give them a voice, they have somebody special in their lives while they’re at the nursery and then they will gather in their small key carer groups so again it gives a smaller voice a louder voice for somebody who’s a little bit shy, who’s a little bit overawed with a well, a larger group of children.’ (Early years practitioner 2).

There was also an appreciation among some practitioners that at times children may prefer to communicate their feelings to others, such as their parents/carers, rather than the early years practitioner. The knowledge that these other adults have about the child can then be drawn upon by practitioners:
'And you know through parents, I mean sometimes children will often say things at home that they won't say in nursery. So again it's making that link with setting and home through parents and carers, or childminders to see if we can get that information together.' (Early years practitioner 7).

The idea was also expressed that parents/carers act as the child's advocate because they interpret and act upon their children's behaviour. An example of this is when children demonstrate that they are enjoying or not enjoying the session and parents respond accordingly:

'... more often than not the consultation would take place via the parent ... but indirectly, if the children aren't happy with the service provision that we are providing, they are going to make their views known, purely by non compliance, you know, they're not going to want to engage, they're going to obviously literally shout and scream, and once they are indicating that they're not happy then the parents would be the one to either move them out of the service provision or to negotiate what's making that child unhappy. So really the parents are their child's advocate.' (Early years practitioner 4).

4.2.3.5 Multi-sensory approaches

Multi-sensory approaches had been used by some practitioners in order to consult with young children. In one example the practitioner had consulted with children to elicit their views about the outside space in the setting as there were plans to redesign it. This particular consultation involved a range of approaches such as photography and painting, as well as the more traditional technique of talking with children:

'... there were a couple of children outside so I went and spoke to those two children first ... And they kind of walked me round the area first and I wrote a couple of things down. And then what I did was we went back and we took some pictures so we all had disposable cameras and we took pictures of places they liked and
places they didn’t like ... And then we had a look at the photographs and we started sort of grouping them together into sort of spaces that they liked, spaces that they liked but they wanted something else there ... So then we sort of had a bit of a large group time and they just told me loads of things and I wrote them down in lists and we had lots of lists. And then from that we did some painting outside and some art work outside in terms of spaces that they liked and spaces that they didn’t like.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

Another practitioner had used drawing with children to elicit their views. This practitioner discussed the importance of allowing children to talk about their art work, to explain what they meant by it, rather than the practitioner trying to interpret it:

“Yes we drew to get their opinions, certainly I’ve done that with gardens on more than one occasion where they’ve drawn for me what it is that they want ... as long as they could talk to you about it because you find then that they’ll talk about the drawing. If you just had the drawing on its own it isn’t, it’s only by using the drawing and talking with the children. And that’s when you’re talking on a one to one; you’d go and talk about what they were drawing and what was in the picture and so on.’ (Early years practitioner 6).

4.3 Factors influencing whether or not practitioners consult with young children

In this section, the possible barriers and facilitating factors in consulting with young children are explored. Several of the influencing factors relate to the views, attitudes and beliefs of early years practitioners with regard to consultation with young children whereas others are concerned with external factors related to the particular service, the setting and the current political climate.
4.3.1 Perceptions of children’s competence and understanding of child development

Practitioners’ understanding of child development and their perceptions of children’s capabilities at different ages was an influential factor with regard to whether or not they would consult with children. In order to consult with young children, practitioners need to believe that young children actually do have opinions, which is not always the case, as the following practitioner explained:

‘And unfortunately I think there are just some people out there that don’t really believe that young children are old enough to have an opinion.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

However, among the practitioners interviewed, none stated that they held that particular viewpoint. Indeed some specifically stated the belief that all children have an opinion, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘I suppose it’s just because my view of working with children is perhaps all of them at whatever level have an opinion, or should have an opinion and if they haven’t then part of my actual job is to make sure that they do.’ (Early years practitioner 8).

The majority standpoint among the practitioners interviewed was therefore that young children were capable of having opinions. One of the main factors influencing practitioners’ attitudes towards consultation was in fact their beliefs about whether young children were capable of expressing those opinions. Thoughts on this issue were divided. Some early years practitioners expressed the view that young children have limited competence in expressing their views and because of this, consultation with young children is not possible. Children’s age was an important factor as many practitioners
who considered that consultation with children is possible, thought this would be more difficult with younger children, due to their limited speech and cognitive skills, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'Yes I suppose the younger they are I would say the more difficult it is to consult with them. And I guess that's to do with the fact they're developing their speech and language skills and cognition generally as they're getting older. So I suppose it means you can use more sophisticated ways of consulting with them the older they are, and more reliable maybe.' (Early years practitioner 8).

Some practitioners considered that it is not possible to consult with this younger age range at all, as they believed the children are not yet capable of communicating their views. The following quotation exemplifies this position:

'You couldn't consult with a child under two, you couldn't do it, so when you're looking at, with regard to consultation with children under five, you're really consulting with children two and a half plus, because no child under two and a half is probably going to be able to communicate effectively with you about what they want.' (Early years practitioner 9).

Several practitioners said that children express their views through their behaviour. Some practitioners thought that with this being the case there was no need or value in consulting with young children, as practitioners were able to see from children's behaviour what they thought about activities, as the following practitioner explained:

'I think you do get feedback from the children so I think you know, children do respond, you know, and I think they let you know by sort of what they do really, you know in the sense that if they're unhappy with something, I think at that age they soon let you know really.' (Early years practitioner 5).
However, a contradictory perspective held by some other practitioners was that this observation of children’s behaviour was actually a means of consulting with children, as it enabled practitioners to find out children’s views which could then be used to influence planning and practice.

Conversely, some practitioners thought that even very young children were able to express their preferences and views, as the following quotation which refers to children aged nought to three illustrates:

‘I think you do get some that definitely prefer fruit and will just stick to that, and some will just prefer the fromage, there is definite preferences there and they will choose.’ (Early years practitioner 5).

The following practitioner also held this position, as she reported on her experience of conducting a consultation with young children about the outside space within the early years setting:

‘I mean these were children two, two and a half, up to about four, four and a half, and they really do tell you some fantastic things. They give you massive insight into themselves, how they relate to their friends and what they do in their space.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

For a minority of practitioners the view that even very young children are able to express their views and opinions also extended to babies. The example provided related to the use of ‘treasure baskets’. This is a basket containing various objects made from a range of different materials. This is placed in front of the baby and the baby is then able to explore the different objects and exercise choice in what they spend time playing with:

‘So in our baby workshop for example, we’re encouraged to use something called a treasure basket, which is … in play children are allowed to choose their
own items and even little babies, as soon as they can reach out and select items, they’re making their first choice of what they want to choose and explore.’ (Early years practitioner 4).

Some early years practitioners considered that consultation with children was basic good practice and an integral part of their way of working. These practitioners expressed the view that consultation was closely linked to the principles of early education, stemming from their understanding of child development, as it allows practitioners to follow children’s interests, therefore children will learn more, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘It would be the principles of early education. I think our team are incredibly passionate about what we feel is good for young children ... And that is all about children being at the heart of the process, looking at holistic needs of a child, involving the child and the family right from the word go planning and preparing experience and opportunities for children that interest them that are from their interests ... It comes from research projects, it would come from sort of the underpinning of child development in early childhood really.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

An understanding of child development could allow early years practitioners to consult with young children in such a way that enables them to express their views. For instance, some practitioners explained that they provide younger children with limited choices appropriate to their stage of development, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘... give them options, it’s about like giving options isn’t it, to kids, and or, you could do something around drawing or whatever, but it is, if you say to a child what do you want to do next week and didn’t give them any options, they wouldn’t have a clue, or they’d say something random, but it is about asking, you know, if you gave them options, you could probably do it.’ (Early years practitioner 9).
A related view was that young children may need help to express their views, perhaps by using non-verbal methods, such as picture symbols. It may also be necessary for the practitioner to understand the individual child’s level of development and particular methods of communication, as the following practitioner explained:

‘And I would say you know it makes me really happy in my job if children do have an opinion and can express an opinion like that in whatever way whether it’s picture symbols or I don’t know. It even comes down to just facial expression sometimes.’ (Early years practitioner 8).

4.3.2 Views of childhood

The practitioner’s view of childhood was also found to be relevant to whether or not they consulted with children. Some practitioners described a common view of children held by the public that children should be told what to do by adults, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘I’m sure that probably a lot of people just think children should be told what to do anyway, isn’t it?’ (Early years practitioner 1).

A related issue was the view that it is the adult’s role to teach children things, which can conflict with the concept of consulting children. Therefore practitioners’ own views of childhood can influence their philosophy of practice.

Children’s lack of autonomy was a further issue. The following practitioner commented that some decisions are made for children, such as whether or not they actually attend a service, so they have limited autonomy:
‘I don’t know it just makes me uncomfortable to say that children can’t be consulted because I think they could probably be consulted in everything. It’s just kind of the degree of it and the flexibility you’ve got. Like whether they come to the [my] group or not isn’t their decision because it’s something I’ve suggested and something the parents are going to bring them along to.’ (Early years practitioner 8).

Furthermore, this lack of autonomy could result in some practitioners feeling that there would be little if any consequences of poor practice, as the following quotation illustrates in discussing a possible scenario:

‘These children need to sit down and read a book because I need to fill in a form and they need to be quiet at this time, or something … It maybe more so for children though because children don’t have a voice, and yeah, I suppose they’d have no fear of a child going away and saying well they sat and did nothing all day, would they? (Early years practitioner 2).

Children’s status and stakeholder position within the service were further issues. Some practitioners raised the question of who the services are actually for. There were differing views expressed among practitioners as to the status of children as service users. One view was that children are the main stakeholders in early years services, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘… realistically you could end up with some very small children within day care settings for 50 hours a week … When our nursery nurses are on a 40 hour week you sort of start to say to them, well, who is the major stakeholder in this environment and these experiences because actually you could have some children who are here for more hours a week than you are. So, you know, they should have a big part to plan in deciding where they sleep, how they sleep, what comforts them, what doesn’t comfort them. Those kind of things.’ (Early years practitioner 7).
However, an opposing view was that it is the parents rather than the children who are the main stakeholders and so in this case it is the parents rather than the children who should be consulted about services.

‘... the question is with children’s centres, is children’s centres around the needs of the children or the needs of the parents? And surely if the parents are happy and supported and empowered, then surely that then does have an impact on their children ... So from [my] perspective I’d be probably providing the service for the parents, rather than the child ... I would say consultation with parents is very important but I’m not sure about with the children.’ (Early years practitioner 9).

In order to see consulting children as valuable, as well as seeing the children as key stakeholders, practitioners need to believe that children actually have views and that these views may be different from those of their parents, as in the case of the following practitioner:

‘So we would consult children, say if it was like an individual family that we were working with, and we would ask them how they feel things are within their family, because sometimes the children view it very different to an adult, you know, an adult might think everything’s okay but the child might think it’s very different, or it might be the other way around really.’ (Early years practitioner 5).

Some practitioners pointed out that consulting with children could lead to conflict with parents/carers as their views may differ from that of the child, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘... if you then came back and said to the parents ... well we’ve actually consulted with the kids, the kids are quite happy at snack time ... that then could almost cause tension between the parents. The parents might be like well what do the kids know? ... So you could almost end up, I know best, they’re my children ... So that could end up being a potential problem and especially when you look at the way that children’s centres do
consult with the parents, is there could almost be conflict between what the children want and what the parents want and that could, that's got a nasty potential.’ (Early years practitioner 9).

This highlights the importance of parents/carers' perceptions of children's status and their ability to hold and express views. It also relates to the question of who the key stakeholder is, as consulting with children may result in practitioners facing opposing views from parents/carers and their children and would then need to decide how to respond.

4.3.3 Perceived benefits of consultation with young children

Those practitioners who considered that consultation with young children was possible and useful described several benefits of this consultation. For some practitioners, consulting with children was thought to lead to a better relationship between the practitioner and child. One practitioner thought that this was a benefit in itself:

‘And if you give them, you know, if you respect them, and they're confident that you understand their needs, then you're going to get a much better relationship out of them, I think it's just providing children with the experiences, you know the process of doing something, it's not the product at the end of the day, is it?’ (Early years practitioner 1).

Some practitioners reported that consulting with young children had allowed them to learn more about the children they worked with, as the following quotation illustrates:

'We're just getting to know the children a lot more, what their likes are, what their dislikes are ... Especially for when we're writing profiles and things, and talk to parents about their children, you know, we get a deeper insight, definitely.' (Early years practitioner 3).
Developing a better understanding of children was considered important for allowing practitioners to target their activities appropriately. Indeed, consulting with children in order to follow children’s interests was considered by many practitioners to be a main benefit. The common view was that if practitioners plan activities according to children’s interests, then the children will be more engaged and therefore the desired outcomes of the work are more likely to be achieved. Therefore, the main benefits of consultation were thought to be educational or learning outcomes for the children, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘I guess if you’ve consulted them and you’re doing something that’s interesting for them then the chances are your outcomes are going to be a lot better than if you’re merrily just going along on your own track.’ (Early years practitioner 8).

Another commonly held view was that consultation was beneficial for children’s own development. Some practitioners expressed the view that consulting with children makes children feel respected and valued which leads to the development of self-esteem and self-confidence. The following quotation is illustrative of this view:

‘And it gives them tremendous self-esteem and self-worth to think that what they are saying and doing is actually put into practice. And they can see it around walls and you now see it in their own room. You know— I’ve made a decision about that or I took part in a discussion about that.’ (Early years practitioner 6).

It was also thought to encourage the development of other skills, such as language skills and problem solving skills:

‘Their language development, thought process, often problem solving as well, if you’re consulting with them during an activity, a puzzle or something, obviously
they're going to be more independent because they’re going to choose what they want to do.’ (Early years practitioner 3).

Empowerment of children was also considered to be a benefit of consultation. This was linked by some practitioners to a feeling of citizenship and belonging, as in the following quotation:

‘It’s about empowering them. I think they become more confident, they are more articulate, they’re passionate about what they want and why they want it so it gives them a sort of deeper sense of belonging, it gives them a deeper sense of community. It instils in them huge amounts of values really that will stand them in greater stead for later life.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

The majority of perceived benefits of consultation therefore were benefits for the child, in terms of their own development. However, a small number of practitioners expressed the view that consulting with young children can benefit practitioners too, as their practice is improved as they reflect on what they are doing. One practitioner explained this in the following way:

‘And it’s teaching us, it’s teaching us to look inside. That’s what we’re supposed to be doing isn’t it? We’re supposed to be improving our practice every time we’re here. If we look and listen then we will improve.’ (Early years practitioner 2).

4.3.4 The need to act upon the results of consultation

Those practitioners who supported consultation with young children discussed the importance of actually acting upon children’s expressed wishes, to make the process meaningful and so that children see the results of the consultation. It was considered important to avoid children becoming disillusioned by the process of consultation, which is possible if their views are always ignored. This is illustrated by the following quotation:
‘If you do the consultation but then it doesn’t impact on the nursery or the project or whatever, children very quickly get used to this well why am I bothering, they don’t listen to me anyway.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

If practitioners consult with young children then inevitably there may be times that children express a wish that it is not possible to meet, perhaps for practical reasons or because children have suggested something imaginative but unrealistic. Some practitioners may not want to consult with children because they wish to avoid this type of situation, as the following practitioner explained:

‘I mean, maybe if they thought they couldn’t provide what the children were sort of asking for, because I guess sometimes, I know one of the things they wanted was a football pitch, you know, or something like that to play on, the size of the building. But then that’s just children’s imagination isn’t it? Just their ways really, but I mean whether some people might be put off from thinking they can’t provide what children ask for.’ (Early years practitioner 5).

However, some practitioners who reported that they had consulted with children discussed the need to anticipate this and deal with it, for example by being specific from the outset about what would be possible, or by talking through any suggestions and the implications with the children. The following practitioner expressed this view:

‘I suppose it comes back to what I was saying before about raising expectations, you sort of consult with them without trying to say ‘what do you want?’ and they give you a wish list and then expect it to appear sort of within the next few weeks. I suppose that’s a part of the negotiation ... And I think through the consultation process I think you’ve always got to say to them some of these things can happen but some of them might not happen yet. And some of these things probably won’t ever happen because...’ (Early years practitioner 7).
In fact some practitioners viewed this as a positive experience for children as they could learn problem-solving and negotiation skills, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘And wonderful reasoning skills. Problem solving really as well. You know we can't do that that way there isn't enough space. Or you know, like doing the garden and they said we want a slide and we'd go mmm, and a swing. And then we'd talk about it. I mean some of them wanted a fairground as you can imagine. But you know it's amazing how when you talk to them about it they go yes, you can't do that can you?’ (Early years practitioner 6).

A commonly expressed view was that consultation was necessarily limited by health and safety issues, as protecting children's safety came first and so any activities which were dangerous would have to be avoided. However, the following comments from practitioners suggest that this does not mean consultation should not happen, but rather that children can be helped to understand why some things are not possible, as part of the process:

‘... I suppose on a day-to-day level you would get a child doing something that was inappropriate or dangerous and that is the point where you don't negotiate any more you just go, we just can't do that. And you explain to them why.’ (Early years practitioner 7).

‘Health and safety issues to a certain extent can be non-negotiable but there again, if we've been sensible we will have already cut those off beforehand so that a child will not be asking for something that we wouldn't be able to offer them.’ (Early years practitioner 2).

4.3.5 Potential changes to working practice

For some practitioners, including those who are used to working in a child-led way, consulting with children may not involve much change in practice.
However, for others consulting with children may be a new way of working which can be unsettling or threatening for some practitioners. As a result of consultation it may be necessary for example to change plans and so practitioners may need to be flexible which some practitioners may struggle with, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'Sometimes you might not get the right answer or the answer you expect so you might have to change your plans and some people find that a bit difficult to do. So you know if you're in a setting that's quite formal and a bit prescriptive it's sort of, it's a bit uncomfortable isn't it. It kind of you know you have to be a bit out of your comfort zone to do it.' (Early years practitioner 7).

A further issue highlighted was that by consulting with children, practitioners are sharing control. Some practitioners stated that this may be difficult for some who are not used to working in this way as they may fear losing control and the possible consequences of this, such as changes to children's behaviour, as the following practitioner explained:

'I think also it's probably a little bit scary that they might feel, you know, how can you ask the children, we're in charge. You know they might lose some control somewhere along the line if they start to ask the children ... I think that fear that if they let the children express opinions that suddenly they'll lose control and the children will be out of control and all over the place.' (Early years practitioner 6).

The skills and confidence of the early years practitioner was also a factor which could influence whether or not they consulted with young children. While some practitioners reported that they regularly consulted with young children and used various methods to do so, others felt less confident. Some practitioners stated that although they thought it could be possible to consult with young children, they would not feel able to do it, as they did not consider
themselves to have the necessary knowledge and skills. There was a perception that in order to consult with young children a specialist would be required, as the following quotation illustrates:

'I mean whether or not you could have some play therapist or something that could bring them out you know in the way that they draw or maybe you could say shall we draw about what you'd like in a children's centre, or whatever, then maybe their suggestions, but I wouldn't personally have the skills to do that with a child.' (Early years practitioner 9).

4.3.6 Time implications

Consultation with young children was considered by the majority of practitioners to be time-consuming, unless it was integrated into daily practice and routines. Practitioners referred to the time needed to reflect on their own practice and plan the consultation and then the time that would be needed to carry out the consultation. Time was an important factor as one practitioner indicated that some early years practitioners may see a value and feel confident about doing it but may not feel they have the time.

'I mean maybe people can do it if you know what you're doing. To almost sit down and say this is what I'm going to do. But it's actually having that time to almost reflect upon because I'm sure a lot of people have got the skills to do it but it's about actually sitting down and recognising what you'd like to do.' (Early years practitioner 9).

It was considered by some that consultation with young children is more effective if it is part of the daily routine, so that children become familiar with it and understand the process and the meaning of the choices or consultation. The following practitioner explained one strategy for consulting young children which involved an imaginary train travelling around the room with
children choosing which activity they would like to go to by getting off the train at a particular 'stop'. The practitioner explained that children needed time to become familiar with this routine and understand what it involved:

'New children as well, obviously they’ve got to get into the swing of things, to get confidence, getting used to where all the stops are. Obviously if they don’t know where the stops are they’re not going to know where they want to play. So we give them a few weeks really, even a couple of months, just to get into it, and then a lot of them, some of the children will come into it straight away. Obviously some of them will take a lot longer.' (Early years practitioner 3).

It was also considered important for children to trust the adult in order to feel comfortable in expressing their views. This could take time, as the following practitioner explained:

'I would say there is something very important about building up a child’s trust. I would tend to use very much a play approach really to start off with. We'd always sort of do some games or some play, just to help the child to relax and just to get to know the child a bit really. And then I think once you’ve built that up then it's much more easy then for the child to feel ok to sort of talk.' (Early years practitioner 5).

Some practitioners thought that it would be necessary to bring in consultation as an ongoing process, rather than a one off event and that this would have implications for time as well:

'But I think again it comes down to kind of standardising it and there’s no point asking unless you’re actually going to put it into practice and do it on a regular basis ... We could start asking the three year olds what they like, what they don’t like. We could start observing the babies, but unless you kind of put that in writing and do it on a regular basis, we’re not actually doing anything, you can’t just do it as a one off, so then that then needs time to set that up doesn’t it?’ (Early years practitioner 9).
Addressing each of these issues was considered by the early years practitioners to have time implications when there are already many competing demands on their time. In order to consult with young children, practitioners have to consider that it is worthwhile. Even if practitioners do see it as useful, it needs to be prioritised in order for it to occur, as illustrated by the following quotation:

'It's one of those things that you think - oh it would be lovely to do that. But at the same time it's one of the easiest things to neglect. I mean it takes me all my time sometimes to consult with parents even though that's a really bit part of Sure Start. So I guess no, I'd be guilty of neglecting the children ... It's just sort of how worthwhile is that to do when my time's already so pushed.' (Early years practitioner 8).

4.3.7 Children's varied developmental stages

One of the most often cited reasons that consulting with young children was considered to be time consuming was that within the early years setting there is often a wide range of developmental levels among the children, for which different approaches and methods of consultation would be necessary. Differences in individual children's ability to express their views in particular ways was considered to be a factor which could encourage or prevent practitioners from consulting with young children. These differences between individual children were related to age, gender, language skills, cognitive skills, communication skills and confidence, some of which are mentioned by the following practitioner who described the children she thought would be more difficult to consult with:

'I would say, well, children who have difficulty with language and particularly I suppose, our children who are on the autistic spectrum, who have additional needs, and difficulties communicating their needs to
others, that’s one group. Children who through certain life circumstances are socially less adept at communicating, who are not confident, who are very shy, I’d say they were the other group.’ (Early years practitioner 4).

In order for consultation to be effective, this would need to be taken into consideration and different children may need different approaches and strategies of consultation to enable them to express their views. Having such a range of developmental levels present within the same group was thought to be an additional difficulty. Therefore some practitioners considered that consultation with children is more effective if done individually or in small groups, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘...looking at how a three year old would respond to that would be very different to how a four year old would respond, as would a two year old, and within that scope, a two year old from a, you know, more needy family, their development could be very different. So you know, you’ve got such a huge spectrum of development that, I don’t mean to write it off, but I think it would be very very difficult to produce something … So it’s almost producing something to meet the needs of differently developed children isn’t it?’ (Early years practitioner 9).

A related point was that the practitioner would need to know the individual children well in order to appreciate the best way to elicit their individual views and therefore consult with them effectively, as the following quotation illustrates:

‘And even then you couldn’t say let’s do it for all the three year olds because you’d have some three year olds where you just couldn’t, you know, who wouldn’t have the comprehension to talk about it and yet a really advanced two and a half year old probably could have a conversation with you. So that’s the problem, that’s why I kind of think you need somebody who has got the skills to be able to communicate with children and know
the child well enough ... so they think yeah, they are going to be competent in doing that, no, we'll do that technique with them.' (Early years practitioner 9).

4.3.8 Issues specific to the particular service and setting

Some children's services were considered to lend themselves to consulting with children more than others. This was related to the aims and focus of the particular service. For example, speech and language services which aim to encourage and enable children to express an opinion were thought to fit well with the idea of consulting with children. By contrast, some health services, which may be constrained by particular activities which they have to do, such as measuring height and weight and testing eye sight, were not thought to provide many opportunities for consulting children. This was due to having little flexibility because of these set activities and so it was not considered that consultation could have any resulting influence, as the following practitioner explained:

'... I suppose if you're looking at it from a children's centre point of view, the services the children's centres deliver, I can understand why [consultation might be relevant]. However, when it comes to health visitors, children have to be weighed and measured, children have to have their eyes done, there are certain things that children have to have done, and there's no nice way about doing some of those things. You know, I suppose if you consulted with the child and said, would you like to wear that, the child would probably say no I don't want to have my eyes tested, there's going to be no comprehension there that they have to have it is there? (Early years practitioner 9).

It was also considered more difficult for consultation to take place within some educationally focused services because of existing restrictions around
service delivery, due to the pressure of delivering a set curriculum and meeting specific targets, as the following quotation illustrates:

'...all the other workshops, we're trying to deliver something, the message to the parents really ... And we're trying to keep to that aim, there's probably a little less flexibility in those sessions because we're trying to achieve a certain goal.' (Early years practitioner 4).

This was also the case for therapeutic sessions in which the practitioner is following a set programme, as in the following example:

'I mean in some ways the children can't have too much choice about what happens in the group because it's therapy ... that's quite a prescriptive kind of group as well, it sort of follows a set programme. So if you've decided that that programme's you know it's proven that it works already, if it's a sort of published programme then it's a bit more set in stone that this is what the programme is and this is what has to be delivered quite consistently. And then it doesn't really give children much option ... I've generally planned out what we're going to do in the session.' (Early years practitioner 8).

Therefore the specific aims and focus of individual services could influence whether or not practitioners perceive that there is an opportunity to consult with children about what happens within the service.

The ethos of the service setting was also considered to be an important influencing factor in facilitating or preventing consultation with young children. Practitioners reported that management was particularly influential in creating a setting in which consultation with young children is valued or not valued, as illustrated by the following quotations which describe two settings with a very different ethos, stemming from the respective managers' attitudes:

'I mean, in the last nursery, with it being private, privately owned, there's not that influence, they haven't
been childcare workers before, it’s a business more to them, so the routine wasn’t set up where there was small group time. The large group times we had sometimes twenty four children in them and they were toddlers at two ... the whole ethos of them choosing exactly what they wanted to do, they could choose but with what was out because things were locked away in cupboards or stacked up in boxes. It wasn’t the ethos where they could just go and choose and independently play.’ (Early years practitioner 3).

‘... but it’s having the, when working in an organisation, a climate where it’s encouraged. I’d say from management. It’s saturated here, and that helps you to be confident in trying things in a different way. I’ve worked in other settings where they might give it lip service, but actually engendering it into your practice, there’s an ambiguity there ... And I would say at the heart of what we’re trying to do here, we are trying to be child/family centred. And the management would bend over backwards to put that first.’ (Early years practitioner 4).

4.3.9 Influence of Government policy and initiatives

Government policy and initiatives were found to have the potential for both encouraging and preventing consultation with young children, depending on their implications. The majority of practitioners thought that Sure Start had been very influential in introducing and encouraging consultation, although some considered that this had focused very much on consultation with parents but not with children. Instead, parents were consulted about what they thought their children needed, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘But thinking about it local Sure Start programmes were probably a massive influence because they really did do huge amounts of consultation with local communities ... as soon as the local programme was set up, the consultation, they had a huge amount of parents involved in. They were listened to very carefully about what services they felt their children and their families needed here. And that shaped the entire programme.’ (Early years practitioner 7).
However, it was generally considered that there was a limit to the extent that children could be consulted about planning service provision within Sure Start Children's Centres because of Government restrictions as to the core services required, as the following practitioner explained:

'In terms of service planning in a wider children's centre way ... I suppose from one side you've got the Government strategy telling you that you need to set, you need to have a certain core set of services.' (Early years practitioner 7).

The Government Green Paper Every Child Matters and the Children Act 2004, which provided the legal underpinning for this, were considered by practitioners to have encouraged them to reflect on their practice and refocus services towards the needs of children and families. Some practitioners reported that practice has changed as a result, leading towards a more consultative approach rather than the previous more authoritarian philosophy of practice, as illustrated by the following quotations:

'I mean originally we didn't always give them a choice, I have to say, so that is something that we have moved towards really, you know, at one time it always tended to be toast ... but then I think we, with things like the Children's Act, and looking at sort of giving children more choices, I think that was something that we did work together as a team, that we should give children more choice about things and so now we do always provide a variety ... with the Green Paper and Every Child Matters and I think it's something we looked at as a team and thought about, what choices are we giving children really.' (Early years practitioner 5).

'I think predominantly through Every Child Matters, that's probably the time when people have to kind of sit up and take notice. And before that, particularly in a school situation, there was a time when it was all getting a bit too formal and a bit rigid really and children were done to very much rather than done with.' (Early years practitioner 7).
By contrast, the Government department of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), responsible for inspecting standards within education and day care settings, was thought to have had a negative influence with regard to consultation. This was due to a perception that the perceived focus of Ofsted was on assessing children, and working towards particular targets, and so consultation was not considered a priority, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘But I think its not encouraged particularly, Ofsted don’t seem to comment on it. So I mean and a lot of these settings Ofsted is the one that they listen to. So I don’t think it’s mentioned, they don’t seem to see it as important particularly so I don’t think they’ve encouraged it.’ (Early years practitioner 6).

The advent of curriculum guidance for the early years and the inspection process had actually led to a decline in the use of consultation with children for the following practitioner:

‘Funnily enough I think I [consulted with children] more in years gone by than I did more recently ... I think that’s because other pressures came in ... Curriculum, other things so you felt pressure from above that you were feeding them information while that isn’t really my, it wasn’t my gut way of doing it ... [Nowadays practitioners are] I think a little bit too busy feeling they’ve got to feed the children information while really they need to be talking to the children ... they feel getting information in to the children is more important than actually asking their opinions.’ (Early years practitioner 6).

However, the view was also expressed that more recent changes to the early years curriculum had begun to rectify this, by encouraging a deeper understanding of child development and improving children’s status, as illustrated by the following quotation:
'I think the biggest change is in the teaching, in the education world isn't it? And I think that started from probably when the Foundation Stage Curriculum, in my opinion I think that had a very big effect on the attitude of people towards very young children, and I think that also the Birth to Three Matters document has given children under three a voice ... and hopefully it will go through now with the new document that's coming out, the Early Years Foundation Guidance, that's going to give a real status to children under five and the practitioners, and I think in the education world, that's had a big impact ... I think that we've stopped, or we're definitely stopping, telling children what to do, and asking them more and giving them more of a voice, and valuing them really, more I think.' (Early years practitioner 1).

4.3.10 Training for early years practitioners

While practitioners suggested that it may be difficult to change the perceptions, attitudes and practice of some early years practitioners, generally it was considered that training may be useful for this. Overall practitioners suggested four potential areas of training for early years practitioners, as described below.

Firstly, it was suggested that the initial training of early years practitioners could be improved, as some practitioners were of the opinion that early years practitioners' initial training does not currently provide the right basis for encouraging consultation with young children, as explained by the following practitioner:

'I think a lot of the training that these practitioners have gone through haven't rated communicating with children and discussing things with children ... I think a big thing would be the training ... I don't know much about NVQ4 but 1, 2 and 3 need to put much more emphasis on child interaction and discussion so that they appreciate how important it is.' (Early years practitioner 6).
Secondly, it was considered that training for early years practitioners already in post would need to focus on encouraging practitioners to see the value and benefits of consultation. Several practitioners mentioned the importance of having research and evidence about the value and benefits of consulting with young children. It was considered this could encourage practitioners to bring it into practice, as illustrated by the following quotation:

‘...possibly some sort of research that shows that it is beneficial to your practice ... that there was, you know, some, consulting children aids your behaviour strategies, or your progression then I think, yes, to raise the profile of it a little.’ (Early years practitioner 1).

For some practitioners it could simply be a question of raising their awareness around consultation with young children, as they may already be working in this way but may not be conscious of doing so, as the following practitioner explained:

‘I would think that quite a few don’t even know they do it, does that make sense? That they’re actually doing it, but they don’t even know they’re doing it. So they wouldn’t value it ... if you said to them, are you giving children choices, they’d probably say, no, don’t think so. But if they actually looked at what they were doing, then I’d think they’d be amazed as to how many choices they give.’ (Early years practitioner 2).

Thirdly, the training would need to provide practitioners with ideas and practical strategies for consulting with young children. This was mentioned by the majority of professionals and was considered much more important than being provided with resources to do the consultation:

‘I think it’s probably the how to do it because I guess the resources would be what you’d got. I don’t think you need any fantastic all singing all dancing resource, I think it’s just that how, I think it would be like the questioning, what kinds of questions to ask. Or you
know, how many choices to give, or whether that be in the photograph form or the objects, so I don't it would be, yeah, just the how I think.' (Early years practitioner 1).

Finally, practitioners considered that it would be helpful to then be supported and encouraged to try consultation with children in their own setting. One method suggested was to have another practitioner model consultation, as in the following example:

'I think one of the things is, which we do to a certain extent is go in and try and practice it with the children ourselves. Like an example as it were, might be one way. Actually trying to encourage them to do it, even if it's just in a little step so that they can see that it actually works. So very small steps towards encouraging them.' (Early years practitioner 6).

Another suggestion was that early years practitioners could be offered support to plan, carry out and collect and interpret the results of the consultation, as the following quotation illustrates:

'If there was a setting that would like to do some consultation ... potentially we could provide extra bodies and we could do some planning and preparation with them before. And then I suppose really through the consultation process you need somebody to bounce ideas off at the end and maybe pull the findings together and then really look at sort of what the implications of what you've found.' (Early years practitioner 7).

A further method was that early years practitioners could be involved in research into consultation with young children within their own setting, as suggested by the following practitioner:

'I think we could actually be encouraged to take part, not just as observers, but actually to be encouraged to do research ourselves in some way, even if it's just a simple thing like you know, how many children use this
4.4 Conclusion

Findings related to the current practice of the early years practitioners involved in the study, with regard to consultation with young children, have been presented. The barriers and facilitating factors in consulting with young children were then explored. The influencing factors were found to include the views, attitudes and beliefs of practitioners with regard to consultation with young children. In particular, their perceptions of children’s competence and their understanding of child development, as well as their views of childhood, were found to be important. External factors which could be influential included the aims and focus of the service, the ethos of the setting and current Government policies and initiatives. It was also found that early years practitioners considered that training would help to encourage and support them to consult with young children. The different areas of training that were considered to be potentially of benefit were also highlighted.