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Hearing Young People's Voices – Reflective Questions for Strategic Leaders



Department
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Funded by the Department for Education

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Introduction

Young People's voice is one of the [TCE Support Programme's](#) priorities and our aim is to identify and share ways in which senior leaders can bring children and young people's voice into strategic discussions about child exploitation and extra familial harm. This piece of work is being led by Ellie Fairgrieve ([The Children's Society](#)) and Isabelle Brodie ([University of Bedfordshire](#)). We are also working to provide support to local areas so that they can better capture, amplify and use the expertise of children / young people, parents/carers and the community, within their strategic response. You can read more about this work [here](#).

This resource has been developed as part of the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme in response to the increasing recognition by partners across local areas of the need for consideration by strategic leaders, how children, young people and families are engaged to inform and influence the services, support, and the responses they receive. This builds on the established rationale for hearing young people's voices, which has value

linked to young people's rights, efficiency and efficacy of service delivery¹ and developmental benefits for young people² building on youth voice as a basic human right. Article 12 of The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children have the right to have their opinions taken into account and their views respected in decision-making that affects them.³

Whilst this resource considers issues for partners engaging young people around issues linked to exploitation, it is intended to inform thinking more broadly and have applications for engagement in a range of settings and scenarios.

The format of this resource is split into 6 key themes and is envisioned to support strategic leaders to reflect on a number of key questions, which will inform and underpin the development of local approaches to youth engagement, consultation, participatory practice and co-production^{4 5}, rather than offering a how to guide. It is encouraged that this resource is used alongside other tools and approaches,

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1. Head, Brian. (2011). Why not ask them? Mapping and promoting youth participation. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 33. pp. 541-547. 10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.05.015
 2. Sprague Martinez, L; Richards-Schuster, K; Teixeira, S; Augsberger. (2018) A The Power of Prevention and Youth Voice: A Strategy for Social Work to Ensure Youths' Healthy Development, *Social Work*, Volume 63, Issue 2, , pp. 135-143
 3. United Nations. (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). New York: United Nations.
 4. Hart, R A (1992) Children's participation, from tokenism to citizenship. UNICEF: Florence.
 5. Shier, Harry. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*. 15. pp. 107-117. 10.1002/chi.617.

including those which bring youth voice into the planning on how best to undertake this work. This approach is well aligned to the work of the Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme, which recognises the value of local knowledge and the need for development that responds to local need whilst utilising the guidance of the TCE programme's delivery partners.

There is already much written on the definitions and interpretations of the terms; youth engagement, consultation, participatory practice and co-production, and so this resource will not explore what is meant by each.

1. Motivation and Intention
2. Values and Culture
3. Ethical Considerations
4. Equality, Diversity, Inclusion⁶ and Difficult Conversations
5. Communication and Feedback
6. Young People's Physical and Emotional Safety

6. [Equality, diversity and inclusion thinking - Tackling Child Exploitation \(researchinpractice.org.uk\)](https://researchinpractice.org.uk)

Motivation and Intention

There is a wealth of research and writing on the values of involving young people and hearing their voices, with youth participation being a fundamental right⁷. It is acknowledged that local areas may be driven by a variety of reasons to embark on youth voice work and exploring what these may be, particularly across diverse partnerships is an important starting point. Before mapping out approaches and processes to engagement there are several considerations related to motivation and intention to reflect on, starting with the ‘why’ and understanding the purpose⁸.

1. What is the strategic driver for engaging young people in informing and influencing development and delivery?
2. How clear are you on the scope of influence that young people have? Is this currently being achieved or an ambition?
3. What are the limitations on their influence and have these been communicated effectively?
4. How well is this understood and shared across directorates and partners? Is everyone on the same page?
5. How can leaders ensure shared understanding and commitment at a strategic level?

7. United Nations. (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). New York: United Nations.

8. Cahill, H & Dadvand, B. (2018). Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action. Children and Youth Services Review. 95. 10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.11.001.

Values and Culture

Holding space for this type of work and ensuring it is valued and embedded across partnerships starts with a focus on the shared values underpinning this work. Organisational values and how they relate to youth voice may not be clearly articulated by different partners but can be understood as the unseen drivers of culture and behaviour, based on organizationally deeply held beliefs that drive decision-making. Values are a key element of creating a culture of empowerment, engagement and participation throughout organisations and partnerships, creating opportunities for young people's voice to be heard at all levels and embedded in practice and process⁹.

1. Currently, what are the held beliefs and values across the partnership that will influence this work? How might they be articulated by different partners? Where is there good alignment?
2. Are there areas where there is additional work needed to better understand and align values? What might need to be let go of for this work to be effective?
3. Does the stated ethos and vision of partnerships reflect these values?
4. How does the culture and leadership of your organisation and partnerships support ways of working that take account of the complexity of hearing and responding to young people's voices?
5. How do you support practitioners to work in ways that empower young people and that facilitate truly hearing their voices?
6. How are young people's voices heard at the moment? What happens to this insight and information? What influence do young people currently have? What else might you need to do to better understand how and when young people feel heard?

9. Kirby, Perpetua and Lanyon, Claire and Cronin, Kathleen and Sinclair, Ruth. (2003) Department for Education and Skills (DFES), corp creator. Building a culture of participation: involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation: handbook.

7. How might young people's voices in practice be better heard by strategic leaders and inform strategic development? Where might there be opportunities to listen to young people's voice without them having to share again or form part of a new project?

8. What current practice is promising and could be built on?

Ethical Considerations

It is important that listening to young people's voices is not tokenistic and is a thoughtfully considered, sequenced endeavour that consistently reflects on ethical issues. These include how and when young people are engaged, with consideration given to how what they share will be received and responded to, and how to ensure that this is an empowering experience for young people wherever possible with consideration given to power dynamics and power sharing^{11 12 13}.

1. How might information sharing protocols, procedures and practice impact on how young people's voices are heard and their contributions shared?
2. How might disclosure of safeguarding or risk information be responded to when shared as part of this work? What impact might this have when young people or families are engaged in statutory support or intervention?
3. How ready are the workforce to hear young people's voice? How can they be supported to really hear what is said and share it safely and appropriately?
4. What is your current understanding of the power dynamics and differences that may exist in different relationships with young people?
5. How can understanding of exploitative relationships be considered when approaching this work? How can you ensure that participation work doesn't mirror or replicate exploitation?
6. How is trust in professional relationships understood by both professionals and young people? How might these factors facilitate or inhibit young people feeling like they have a voice and will be heard? How might you address these?

10. Gunter, H and Thomson, P. (2007) *Support for Learning*, 22 (4), pp. 181-188

11. Dadvand, B, Peterson, G, Stahl, H, Soong (Eds.), (2018) *The Palgrave Handbook of Citizenship and Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

12. Hadfield, M & Haw, K (2001) 'Voice', young people and action research, *Educational Action Research*, 9:3, pp. 485-502

Equality, Diversity, Inclusion¹³ and Difficult Conversations

Ensuring that there is focus on really hearing young people is central to effective work around young people's voice, including how difficult conversations and disclosures may be heard and responded to, as is ensuring that inclusion is foregrounded and considered from the outset¹⁴. This is often a particular challenge when young people share their experiences of structural oppression, professional bias and discrimination including racism¹⁵ and where the messages from young people are unfamiliar to or at odds with the views of strategic leaders.

1. How ready are leaders, organisations, partnerships and practitioners to engage in these difficult conversations? What additional work may need to be undertaken to support meaningful dialogue where there are uncomfortable messages shared?
2. How might existing issues around equality, diversity and representation impact on effective participation and youth voice? How will you identify these?
3. How will you ensure that participation practice is inclusive and that marginalised or less heard young voices are amplified?
4. How might young people's experiences of oppressive systems or practice influence organisational culture beyond the remit of participation focused work?

13. [Equality, diversity and inclusion thinking - Tackling Child Exploitation \(researchinpractice.org.uk\)](https://researchinpractice.org.uk)

14. [The hyper-visible and invisible children - Tackling Child Exploitation \(researchinpractice.org.uk\)](https://researchinpractice.org.uk)

15. DiAngelo, R. (2018) *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Beacon Press.

Communication and Feedback

Effective communication must be a thread running through all engagement with young people, including consideration of how feedback loops in systems and/or practice can be developed or enhanced to ensure that young people understand the way in which their voices are heard, understood and responded to and the difference this makes. Supporting young people to understand the agency and influence they have are key elements of empowerment and ongoing engagement and rely on timely and clear communication that responds to their voice.

1. How will you ensure you, as leaders, organisations and partnerships, understand how young people's voice impacts or influences? How will you formulate and articulate this?
2. What mechanisms are in place for feeding back to young people how their insights, information and feedback is used?
3. How might you strengthen this to ensure that young people feel heard and improve their sense of agency and influence?

Young People's Physical and Emotional Safety

Asking young people to share their experiences is often a challenging experience for them, particularly when they may still be living in complex, challenging and risky circumstances or have yet to fully process or emotionally heal from these experiences. Consideration must be given to how young people will be emotionally supported before, during and after they are engaged in sharing their voice as well as how they are kept physically safe.

1. How will risk, including both familial and extra -familial safeguarding risks, that may emerge or be escalated as a result of youth voice work be considered, assessed and managed?
2. How will you ensure that youth voice engagement doesn't create risk e.g. by bringing young people in conflict together or by making it known that information has been shared with professionals that could be attributed to an individual?
3. How might you infuse this work with trauma informed approaches¹⁶ that recognize the emotional impact on young people?
4. What additional consideration may need to be given to how young people are emotionally supported to feel that they are safe, emotionally and physically, to engage and share their experiences?
5. What resources, skills and capacities currently exist in systems and networks? What additional resource may be needed to fully consider the emotional impact on young people and ensure the right support is in place at the right time?
6. How might existing positive relationships be used to support the safe sharing of information, ideas and experiences acknowledging the tensions that may be present when these exist within the systems and structures that are being explored

16. *Trauma-Informed Practice is a strengths-based framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.* Hopper, Elizabeth & Bassuk, Ellen & Olivet, Jeffrey. (2010). Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-Informed Care in Homelessness Services Settings. *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal*. 3. 80-100. 10.2174/1874924001003020080.

Partners can access the expanding library of blogs and articles hosted on the [TCE microsite](#) linked to participation and young people's voice for more information and recommended additional reading.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using TCE resources and tools.
Connect via Twitter using #TCEProgramme to share your ideas.**

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