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The
Children's
Society



Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Child exploitation and youth participation: key considerations



Department
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Introduction

One of the priority areas for the TCE Programme is the inclusion of children and young people's voices in strategic decision-making. Part of the work carried out under this priority had been a series of interviews with professionals with expertise in the field of participation and co-production with young people. This is the third of three resources developed based on the key themes to emerge from these discussions. The first two resources focused on how organisations can fully prepare themselves to carry out effective participation work and empower young people to engage meaningfully. This third resource focuses on youth participation in relation to child exploitation. The TCE programme was particularly interested in any insights interviewees had about particular considerations when carrying out youth participation work to feed into child exploitation strategy.

Key messages:

- > Young people do not want to be described and labelled as vulnerable, disadvantaged, a victim, or exploited. It is important to listen to what young people are saying about the language relating to exploitation, and consider new ways of talking about the issue.
- > Young people have different ways of thinking about exploitation and adults should not impose their perceptions of the issue. It may be helpful to frame discussions in relation to community and wider questions of personal and public safety.
- > We need to think carefully about who is being invited to take part in work that aims to influence child exploitation strategy, and when this happens. Individuals will be ready to take part in participation work at different times. If young people are not ready to take part in a group, we may need to think of other ways in which they can express their views.
- > A trauma-informed approach is essential to any participation work relating to child exploitation. This means both recognising the short and longer term impact of exploitation, and thinking carefully about how individual young people can be kept safe and supported while undertaking participation work.

- > Young people who are being invited to participate should be given time, information and the opportunity to ask questions about the activity and what is being asked of them.
- > It is important to work closely with professionals who are already working with young people who are being invited to participate, to ensure a shared understanding of the young person's needs.
- > Young people should be asked to express their views as experts, and should not be put under pressure to describe their personal experiences.
- > Young people will need help and support about how to express their views in ways that are objective, rather than subjective. There are different ways this can be done, which will take time and practice.
- > Young people's time and expertise should be recognised through remuneration and official recognition in reports and other outputs. We should think about how this can be done when the project is being planned, and talk to young people and professionals about the best ways to do this.
- > Young people must be given feedback about how their work has made a difference. When this does not happen, young people feel used by the system. Young people deserve recognition for the work they have done.

Interviewees:

Caroline Adams: Staff Officer, Children & Young People's Portfolio – Sussex Police HQ

Darwin Bernardo: Community Engagement Lead at Mayor's of London's Violence Reduction Unit

Chloe Darlington: Policy and Communications Manager at Children England

Chloe Dennis-Green: Innovation Practitioner at The Children's Society

Nicky Hill: Freelance Consultant at Reform Consulting around Youth Violence, Criminal Exploitation and Safeguarding www.reformconsulting.co.uk

Jo Petty: Youth Engagement Lead at The Children's Society, currently on secondment to another organisation

Labelling and stigma

A key theme to emerge from the interviews was that most young people dislike being labelled. Many young people do not want to be labelled as vulnerable, disadvantaged, a victim, or exploited. This type of language is very deficit based, reductive and can carry a lot of stigma. It can make young people feel limited, boxed in, weak and stripped of agency. Labelling a young person based on any harm or abuse they have experienced fails to see them as a whole person with multiple identities and experiences to draw on. Chloe Dennis-Green and Jo Petty therefore noted that it can be counterproductive to create a participation group and call it something directly related to child exploitation. It can discourage young people from taking part, out of fear that their involvement would leave them feeling exposed or lead to stigmatisation. Hill takes this further and suggests we should listen to what young people are saying about the language professionals use in the safeguarding sphere in general.

Chloe Darlington and Jo Petty also noted that not all young people will understand or view their experiences through the lens of child exploitation. By creating a participation group specifically about child exploitation, we may unintentionally shut down relevant conversations and exclude the voices of many young people with pertinent experiences and insights about exploitation and extra familial harm. There are many other lenses through which young people may view and talk about their experiences. Petty says ‘we must find their lens, rather than placing our own lens on it automatically’. Darlington and Petty both suggest using a more general point of reference to talk to young people about their possible experiences of exploitation, such as the lens of ‘feeling safe in one’s neighbourhood’.

‘If they turn up to the group and the group is titled for example, “Child sexual exploitation youth voice group”, they’d look at that and they’d be like, “No way, get lost. I’m not being put into your box”, or you know, “Is that really what I am?”’

– Chloe Dennis-Green

Youth participation work: avoiding further harm

All the interviewees highlighted the necessity of working in a trauma-informed way when carrying out participation work with young people around child exploitation. Asking young people who may have experience of exploitation to then talk about exploitation can be triggering or lead to re-traumatisation. Practitioners carrying out the participation work must be able to recognise and understand trauma. And whilst practitioners do not need to be trauma specialists to carry out participation work, the young people involved should be made aware by the professionals supporting them that if they wish to access professional therapeutic support that they will make young people aware of what is available locally to them. To ensure participation work avoids replicating or causing further harm to young people, interviewees also noted a range of factors to consider. These have been structured under the following headings:

- > Before participation work takes place.
- > Whilst participation work takes place.
- > After participation work takes place.

1. Before participation work takes place

Who should we speak to and when?

Chloe Darlington, Jo Petty and Nicky Hill all spoke about the importance of carefully considering which young people to invite to take part in participation work around child exploitation strategy, and when. Whilst turning to a local youth council or action group might be the simplest approach, these young people may not have the depth of experience of systems and processes needed in order to effectively inform strategy development. However, turning to young people with direct experience of exploitation requires extreme sensitivity. A multitude of factors will impact upon the ability of young people who have experienced exploitation to participate safely. Petty, Darlington and Hill were all incredibly cautious about asking young people to engage in participatory work whilst still involved in statutory services and having very recently experienced exploitation. Interviewees warn that it can be potentially very traumatic to ask young people to regurgitate or reflect on their horrific experiences that are still incredibly alive for them. Is it safe, fair or responsible to ask young people to do this?

Hill, Darlington and Petty assert the need for careful sequencing, whereby, ideally, participation work invites young people with direct experience of exploitation after they have had a chance to process and heal. Hill caveats this by reminding us that processing and healing from experiences of exploitation can involve a lifetime of work and requires having access to good therapeutic support, which arguably many young people do not. Darlington argues that it feels safer to work with young people who are able to talk about their experiences with a level of objectivity. She refers to the participation group of young people she recruited for the [ChildFair State Inquiry run by Children England](#):

'All the young people involved were now in a good place. The nature of our approach was an objective intellectual exercise – where young people could reflect backwards on their experience.'

– Chloe Darlington

Petty, Darlington and Hill do not advocate for silencing the voices of young people currently experiencing or recovering from child exploitation. Darlington and Petty suggest ways of engaging with these young people that are less likely to cause harm. For example, allowing these young people to participate in a more anonymised and less intense way, perhaps in one-to-one sessions. These young people would also require a lot more intensive support in order to enable them to engage safely. Hill suggests that engagement with these young people should occur through participatory practice. This means ensuring young people

are informing the decisions that are made about them within any statutory service they are involved in. Frontline staff should consistently be asking young people they work with ‘How does this feel for you and what could we do differently?’ This learning should be systematically fed back into the system and lead to ongoing improvements. This would then negate the need to ask young people to take part in potentially upsetting workshops, focus groups or questionnaires.

Jo Petty argues that much consideration must be given to what groups of young people are brought together when carrying out participation work in relation to child exploitation. If some young people are at risk of exploitation, is it wise to expose them to young people who are currently or have recently experienced exploitation? And if you are engaging with young people in one particular geographic area, are there risks around bringing young people together that might be involved in local rivalries? Petty suggests that, in situations like these, it might be safer to engage with young people one-to-one rather than as a group.

The importance of one-to-one briefings

Chloe Dennis-Green and Darwin Bernardo both contend that it is important to meet with young people on a one-to-one basis first before inviting them to engage in group participation work around child exploitation. This is an opportunity to let young people know what to expect and find out what they might need in order to feel comfortable taking part. It also gives young people the opportunity to ask questions about the participation work in a less intimidating environment and to state what they would be interested in talking about. It can be an opportunity for young people to shape the focus and structure of discussions.

Bernardo also notes that this gives young people the time to reflect and consider whether it is something they want to take part in. He understands that some professionals might assume it will be too traumatic or difficult for some young people to get involved in such work, but he thinks it is only fair to give all young people a choice. However, young people require information and time to make such an informed choice.

‘Give young people time to digest and really think about it. Give them a real option to participate or not, but let it be their fully informed choice. Don’t take the choice away from them and do not eliminate their options. I gave them the option about whether they wanted to feed into this conversation. What’s more dangerous than not giving them the option, is you automatically removing that because you’ve now put your own perception on it about whether or not they feel comfortable being asked such questions.’

– Darwin Bernardo

2. Whilst participation work takes place

Utilise existing trusted professionals

When asking young people to take part in participation work to feed into child exploitation strategy, Dennis-Green emphasised the importance of working closely with professionals who have existing and trusted relationships with them. Dennis-Green saw this as particularly important when engaging with young people who may have direct experiences of child exploitation. By working through or alongside professionals who have an existing relationship with young people, it becomes easier to assess and respond to potential new disclosures. The trusted professional is also in a better position to discuss next steps with a young person if a safeguarding referral has to be made.

Darwin Bernardo thinks that any participation work with young people around child exploitation cannot be a one-off occurrence and should take place over an extended period of time. It is not fair to ask young people to discuss such a sensitive topic without there being proper support in place both before and after any engagement. If the organisation carrying out the participation work is not able or best placed to engage with young people over this longer period of time, then Bernardo agrees that it is imperative to work closely with other professionals that have existing and trusting relationships with the young people involved. Hereferred to an instance where members from the TCE Programme team came and spoke to [London's VRU Young People's Action Group](#) about how to develop and improve strategic working in the inclusion of children and young people's views. They worked closely alongside Bernardo, who helped to run the action group. Bernardo held an introductory session with the action group in order to help prepare them for the focus group. This was also an opportunity to check whether each young person felt comfortable talking about the topic and gave them time to reflect and decide whether or not to take part. Bernardo and his team were also there to offer young people on-going support following their participation in the focus group.

Caroline Adams notes how difficult it can be for particular organisations or agencies (in particular the police) to engage young people with lived experience of exploitation. She argues that young people understandably do not trust the police and are unlikely to want to share their insights and experiences with them. Adams therefore encourages police forces across the country to work with organisations and professionals that already have trusting relationships with those young people. Adams says, 'it works best when we work with organisations that have the trust and confidence of young people already, and they broker that conversation in the middle.'

Keep it professional – don't make it personal

Dennis-Green, Darlington, Hill and Petty said that when carrying out participation work with vulnerable young people, it is important not to ask them to speak about their own personal experiences. Instead they should be treated as expert consultants on an issue. So whilst they may draw on their own personal experiences, they are being asked about their overall opinions and ideas about a particular issue or service. Interviewees made it clear that participation work around these sensitive issues should not involve digging into young people's personal experiences and asking them to share their own stories. If one young person in the group chooses to share a lot about their personal experiences, Dennis-Green emphasises the importance of ensuring other young people in the group do not feel pressured to do the same. Nicky Hill also argues that **in treating young people as expert consultants, it will contribute towards dismantling the power imbalances that exist between professionals and young people.**

When professionals are invited to attend youth participation events, Hill and Petty stress the importance of reminding them not to ask young people inappropriate questions about their personal experiences. It is normal for humans to be intrigued by horrific and traumatic experiences, and professionals within the safeguarding sector are not immune from this tendency. It is therefore important for professionals to check themselves and ensure they do not ask inappropriate or unnecessary questions. Hill and Petty also discussed having to prepare young people on how to deflect and shut down personal questions at these kinds of events. They both lamented the need to place this burden on young people's shoulders.

'Within the Children's Society, there's often that conversation about young people being spokespeople, being able to speak to that piece of work, or that subject area, but not having to use themselves, and their own personal stories to do that, but to have that sort of collective perspective behind them to draw on.'

– Jo Petty

'Maybe with child exploitation, if you are asking young people to feed into strategy work, perhaps you can ask them questions in a way that is treating them as an expert on the system, a service, or support, and not ask them about their own particular story?'

– Chloe Darlington

The art of storytelling

Nicky Hill says that in certain contexts, it is possible to support young people to tell their own stories in a way that is trauma-reducing, not trauma-inducing. However, this takes time, skill and careful planning. She refers to a project she is working on with Coram called the [Young Dads Collective](#) (part of the [Following Young Fathers Further Project](#)¹). As experts by experience, young dads deliver training to professionals around how to transform the way organisations engage with young dads and overcome the hidden barriers that shut young dads out.

The young dads use their own personal stories to help professionals reflect on their own practice. They work with a professional storyteller, who spends a lot of time helping them understand their own story and figuring out how best to tell it. This includes thinking through which parts of their story to disclose and which parts to keep private. This necessitates trying to understand and foresee the possible repercussions over the rest of their lives of sharing their personal story. Supporting young people to tell their story in a safe, boundaried and empowering way takes a lot of skill and experience. Hill believes this work necessitates the involvement of experienced professional storytellers. And in line with the previous point, Nicky Hill advises professionals to ‘listen more and talk less’ when young people are telling their own personal stories to help influence and improve strategy and service development. Young people should be able to choose with parts of their story they share, and not then be asked further probing questions.

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1. [See this short video](#) featuring young dads explaining in their own words how they achieve service change through sharing their stories.

3. After participation work takes place

Recognition and remuneration

Whilst most practitioners agree that young people's contributions to strategy development needs to be recognised and valued, there is not always consensus on what that should look like in practice for anyone involved, i.e. young people, practitioners and senior leaders. This debate is all the more sensitive when it comes to how to compensate young people for their input into child exploitation strategy. Some interviewees questioned whether paying young people money for their participation was problematic and in some way mirroring the exchange dynamics of exploitation. Nicky Hill argues that paying young people a fair living wage for their time and expertise is a way to acknowledge the important work they are doing. In contrast, rewarding young people with gestures such as a trip or meal out, feels more tokenistic and more akin to 'grooming'. Hill explains that a key element of child exploitation is the power imbalance at play. If professionals want to ensure they do not replicate exploitative transactional dynamics, then '*address that power imbalance by acknowledging that everyone in the room is making a valuable contribution as a professional*'. Part of this means paying them fairly for their time and expertise.

Darwin Bernardo argues that for participation work to include the voices of vulnerable young people (including those at risk of child exploitation), practitioners must understand and address the financial constraints and pressures many of these young people face. It is not fair to ask these young people to volunteer their time for free. This was a key consideration for Bernardo when recruiting young people to join London's VRU Young People's Action Group. Bernardo suggests that paying young people a proper wage is essential in enabling them to take part in positive activities like participation. Youth participation work can then also play a more active role in diverting young people away from activities or scenarios that put them at risk of exploitation:

'[Vulnerable] young people are not even taking up those opportunities because they can't afford to volunteer. You can't even give up an hour of your time for free. Because there's real issues at home that you need to deal with. So we said, "to prevent you from looking at making money illegally, we need to pay you for your time here with us."

– Darwin Bernardo

The feedback loop

Organisations carrying out youth participation work must provide young people with feedback on how their views have informed any work. This was deemed even more important when young people are being asked to input into child exploitation strategies. Many of the young people being asked to engage on these issues will have felt used and let down by the 'system'. Bernardo argues that to 'drain them of information' and not return to explain what has happened as a result is mirroring the abuse they have already experienced.

'Don't ask them to spill their guts out and then have them not hear from you again... You can't just come with such a heavy subject around child sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation, get them to expose themselves and then leave and never to be seen or heard from again.'

– Darwin Bernardo



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using TCE resources and tools.
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