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## Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

# How do we empower young people to meaningfully engage in participation work?

## Introduction

One of the priority areas for the TCE Support Programme is the inclusion of children and young people's voices in strategic decision-making. Part of the work carried out under this priority is a series of interviews with professionals with expertise in the field of participation and co-production with young people. This is the second of three resources developed based on the key themes to emerge from these discussions. It focuses on how organisations can equip and empower young people to meaningfully take part in participation work. Interviewees spoke about a wide spectrum of participation work. This included distinct participation work, such as the establishment of specific action or advisory groups, or running a number of focus groups with existing youth or participation groups. Interviewees also referred to participatory practice or online consultations, or dialogue using social media. It is therefore important to remember that the discussions that follow do not refer to a single model of participation work.

Following on from the resource that focused on organisations laying the necessary groundwork to carry out meaningful participatory practice, interviewees spoke about how to reach specific target groups and provide young people with the right support to enable them to engage fully and confidently. This resource summarises some of the key messages that emerged from discussions about how to develop an effective engagement strategy and equip young people so they can contribute to their full potential.

### Key messages:

- > Recruitment for youth participation work can be a challenge. It is important to reach out to a range of organisations working with young people, rather than automatically going to those who have been involved in the past. This will include thinking about groups of young people who may traditionally have been excluded from participation opportunities.
- > Tailor any advertisement for youth participation opportunities according to the preferences and needs of the young people one wants to reach. Do not send out posters or leaflets or advertise on your organisation's website, as this is not where young people will look! Talk to young people about what is most likely to attract them.

- > It is important that young people are enabled to shape the agenda. Participation is not meaningful if the agenda is also in place, and decisions are made.
- > Organisations seeking to undertake participation work may need to consider who is best placed to do this. It may be more helpful to commission another organisation with the appropriate expertise to facilitate this work. This can make a more open and honest conversation possible.
- > The goals of participation work are often short-term and focused on a particular project. It is important that we are thinking about how young people benefit as individuals, in terms of what commissioning organisations can offer, and what skills and credentials can be supported through the participation work.
- > Young people need to be prepared in such a way that they can effectively contribute to strategic planning and decision-making. This will include equipping young people with the necessary skills, tools, resources and information so they can confidently engage with other adults in professional spaces. It is also important that the group of young people have had time to develop trusting relationships with each other, so that they are able to work collaboratively.
- > Participation work should be fun and engaging! It will change and develop over time, and it is important to be flexible as projects develop.

## 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](http://www.reformconsulting.co.uk)

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

## How to reach and appeal to young people

Interviewees agreed that a primary challenge when carrying out youth participation work is in reaching and engaging seldom heard, vulnerable or disadvantaged groups of young people. It should be noted that the use of these deficit based terms was considered problematic, but that there is a lack of more strength-based and appropriate terms. Darwin Bernardo acknowledges how much easier it can be to recruit ‘serial volunteers’ or the ‘usual suspects’, but stresses the importance of recruiting a more inclusive and representative group of young people. Interviewees gave several suggestions for how to include the voices of young people with actual lived experience of the forms of harm that statutory and third sector organisations need to tackle and effectively address.

### Utilise well-placed gatekeepers. Reach out to organisations that work directly with young people

Chloe Darlington and Darwin Bernardo emphasise the need to not only work with schools and colleges to recruit young people. It is essential to collaborate with services and community groups that work directly with young people that tend to be less involved in youth participation work. This includes care leaver organisations, Pupil Referral Units, Youth Offending Teams, community faith organisations, and local youth groups. Jo Petty and Caroline Adams also highlight the value of engaging with young people in the spaces young people already occupy and utilising the trusted relationships with adults they have already developed.

Nicky Hill agrees that the trusted relationships young people already have with certain professionals is a key ingredient to supporting their engagement in participation work. However, she questions whether it is appropriate for professionals who are directly involved in the delivery of a service a young person receives to be involved in carrying out youth participation work. For example, when asking a young person to reflect on their experiences whilst in care, it can be unhelpful to have their social worker sit in the room (even if they are a trusted adult for the young people in question). This can impede a young person’s willingness to speak honestly.

*‘What is the likelihood of a young person being honest [about their experience in care] with their social worker sat in front of them? Even if you’ve got a great relationship with them, you’re probably not going to unpick all the things that social worker did that wasn’t helpful. Don’t ask young people to reflect on how they have experienced the system they are in, with those with power within that system sat in front of them.’*

– Nicky Hill

## Use targeted and appropriate advertisement strategies

Jo Petty highlighted a key finding from her [literature review on how to design services with young people facing multiple disadvantages, which suggests tailoring](#) any advertisement for youth participation opportunities to the preferences and needs of the young people one wants to reach. Do not send out posters or leaflets or advertise on the organisation's website, because these methods of communication do not work with young people. Bernardo suggests asking the type of gatekeepers referenced above for advice on how best to capture the attention of the young people they work with. Take advantage of their knowledge and expertise about what young people are interested in and care about. Then tailor any communications about the youth participation work accordingly. Additionally, where possible, ask young people themselves about what the best ways to capture their attention might be.

Caroline Adams noted her surprise that not more third sector or statutory organisations were **using social media to reach young people**. This is a space that most young people inhabit and where they are comfortable. Adams observes that when police forces advertise for youth advisory group members in more traditional ways, they often end up attracting law students or cadets. She sees social media as being a far more effective way of recruiting a more representative group of young people. She suggests that organisations are fearful of using social media or do not seem to comprehend the potential for reaching young people online.

*'We need to change and we need to be different, and we need to learn how to engage with young people effectively. And to do that, we have to be in their space.'*

– Caroline Adams

## Implement a fair and accessible recruitment process

In order to establish a representative group, Darwin Bernardo and Chloe Darlington stress the importance of a recruitment process that (where appropriate) considers information related to lived experience, the use of statutory services, ethnicity, family income levels, geography, health conditions, disability status, sexual orientation and gender identity. Taking a purposive sampling approach, where the selection of participants is criterion-based, can ensure that a participation group is more representative of the population in question.

To make an application process accessible to young people of all literacy levels, Bernardo suggests keeping it short and simple. Furthermore, give young people enough time to complete the application process. For example, for [London's VRU Young People's Action Group](#), Bernardo developed an application form with three questions and gave young people six weeks to complete it. Additionally, Bernardo recommends making interviews feel informal and less intimidating by framing them as a casual conversation, so as not to discourage young people from applying. Lastly, in order not to discourage young people from applying who have been involved in the criminal justice system, make it clear that a criminal record does not prevent a young person from taking part.

## Let young people shape the agenda

Chloe Dennis-Green, Bernardo, Darlington and Petty draw attention to the **importance of not having a fixed agenda** when asking young people to feed into programme, service or policy development. Interviewees reflected on examples where youth participation simply entails asking young people a range of predetermined questions about a very limited set of themes or options. Petty suggests this is symptomatic of when organisations already have a fixed idea in their minds about what needs to happen and carry out ‘participation work’ with young people to reinforce and validate their existing point of view. This was not perceived to be meaningful participation work or particularly worthwhile. This approach does not allow for an open dialogue with young people or empower young people to develop and articulate their own ideas. **Young people should be able to shape the agenda and be given the opportunity to voice what really matters to them.** Moreover, Bernardo argues that only by allowing young people to shape the conversation will you ensure genuine engagement and buy in.

*‘When you go in with a set agenda, then automatically you’ve taken young people out of that equation. Because they haven’t shaped the way they could’ve engaged – they haven’t shaped the agenda.’*

– Darwin Bernardo

*‘You ask them a series of set questions and they didn’t really have much room to move on it and often they are quite closed questions. So you didn’t really give them the option to give their voice, did you?’*

– Chloe Dennis-Green

Darwin Bernardo referred to when the TCE programme 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. Bernardo says that whilst TCE Programme team members came in with a range of possible questions to ask, they were principally focused on finding out what the young people wanted to speak about. Inevitably they only got through one of the questions they had brought along, because the young people ended up changing the conversation entirely and key ideas and issues emerged that TCE staff had not anticipated.

Chloe Darlington spoke about the [ChildFair State Inquiry](#) run by Children England. The aim was to get young people to redesign the welfare state with children and young people's needs at its heart. She spoke about how discussing the welfare state through the more 'open-ended' lens of community tended to prompt lively, engaged conversations. Darlington suggests that the analysis of this strand of the research might enable particularly innovative proposals by the young people. Both these examples highlight how a more open approach that allows for the unexpected to surface was therefore seen as being far more effective in terms of really finding out what young people think and care about.

The interviewees also raised interesting questions about what kind of organisation might be best placed to carry out participation work with young people. Is it easier for certain organisations to carry out this work without coming in with a set agenda? Chloe Darlington argues that Children England was best placed to set up and run the ChildFair State Inquiry because they do not run any direct services themselves and therefore have no set ideas about how the welfare state should be improved. This made it easier to support young people to come up with their own ideas and be completely responsive to the direction that young people wanted to take.

The inquiry was therefore completely led by young people.

### **Should organisations look for partners who have no direct interest or stake in their agenda to carry out participation work?**

*'Having no fixed agenda makes it easier to hand over power to young people. We have no priorities and no specific approach or way of working that we would push for or defend. We can't really second guess what young people are going to say because we don't have a particular practice of our own.'*

– Chloe Darlington

Jo Petty advises that any organisation being commissioned to carry out participation work on behalf of another organisation firmly specifies that they cannot guarantee what issues or topics young people will discuss. She cites MAC UK, an organisation that supports statutory and third sector organisations to generate youth lead solutions, as a good example. They refuse to sign any contract to carry out youth participation work that requires specific outcomes 'because their model of work is to co-produce with young people'. If an organisation is going to ask young people to discuss a list of predetermined themes and suggestions, then it is important not to frame it as participation work (and perhaps more akin to consultation). Some interviewees acknowledged that there might be instances where there is a value in asking young people a range of closed questions about set topics. However, when doing this, it is imperative to be transparent about what kind of engagement this really is.

## Setting realistic expectations

Dennis-Green, Hill and Adams emphasised **the importance of being honest and clear with young people about what they can realistically influence**. They argued that it is unfair to ask young people to spend time and emotionally invest in considering how to improve elements of a service or a programme that cannot feasibly be changed. Nicky Hill contends that implying to young people that they have reach and influence in areas that they do not can cause significant harm to their wellbeing. Whilst being realistic about what young people can influence might significantly narrow the scope of what is up for discussion, it was deemed far better to only ask young people to contribute towards what they can actually meaningfully shape or change.

*‘[It is important] to have a real clear boundary, so state, “This is what this group is here for. This is what is definitely ruled out. This is what I can do, what I can’t do, or what is out of my control and I can’t change”’.*

– Chloe Dennis-Green

Is there a tension between being realistic about what young people can influence and going in with an open agenda? Perhaps an important discussion to be had is around how to ensure young people can freely shape the discussion whilst still putting in place clear boundaries about what can or cannot be changed.

## Equipping young people: skills, expertise and equipment

Darwin Bernardo and Jo Petty both highlight the need to sufficiently prepare young people so that they can effectively contribute to strategic planning and decision-making. **It is imperative to equip young people with the necessary skills, tools, resources and information so they can confidently engage with other adults in professional spaces** (like in meetings, presentations and workshops). This includes ensuring young people can understand and use all the relevant terminology so they can engage fully in conversations with professionals at the strategic level. Whilst some practitioners would argue that jargon and complex terminology should be avoided when carrying out participation work with young people, Bernardo disagrees and believes we should equip young people to be *'able to articulate themselves in the language we are all using'*.

Petty and Bernardo drew a parallel with how any professional would want to feel ahead of joining an important strategic meeting with other professionals, i.e.:

- > completely informed on the topic in question
- > fully briefed about any relevant context or background
- > clear about meeting objectives
- > prepared to contribute based on one's own knowledge and expertise.

It should be no different for young people being asked to take part in participation work.

*'We need to give [young people] the tools, resources and information so that they feel that they can come and contribute at a strategic level. Brief young people in the same you would want to be briefed yourself coming into a meeting where you have to give your opinion. Young people must feel that they have all the information they need to contribute to the best of their ability.'*

– Darwin Bernardo

Interviewees specified other factors that need to be considered in order to effectively equip young people to contribute in participation work at the strategic level. Petty emphasised building in sufficient time at the start of any participation work in order to prepare young people and allow the group to establish a strong and cohesive dynamic. Darlington suggested giving young people access to a range of different professionals that can act as sounding boards and answer questions. Whilst it is important to ensure young people are taking the lead on any participation work, having access to the expertise and knowledge that various professionals offer can help empower and equip young people to engage more effectively.

Equipment, training, and hands-on experience are also crucial when equipping young people to take part in youth participation work. Bernardo commented on the need to provide young people with the necessary equipment to be able to participate in a safe and effective way, including laptops, phones, desks and chairs. Young people need to know how to use certain programmes, such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, video conferencing and email. They need to be trained on project management, giving presentations, and public speaking. They must be given hands-on experience in carrying out key administrative tasks, like organising meetings and developing agendas.

## How will young people benefit

Bernardo, Dennis-Green, Darlington and Petty all agreed that **participation work with young people should always focus on the exit plan and on how to support young people on their onward journey**. Organisations tend to highlight the soft skills that young people can develop through their involvement in participation work (such as communication, teamwork and problem solving skills), but interviewees stressed the need to think about the concrete opportunities or pathways that young people can gain access to through their involvement in participation work. Too often participation work with young people focuses solely on how young people can contribute towards the development of a service or programme of work, and not enough on what young people can get out of the experience themselves in the longer term. A number of practical examples were given of what this could look like in practice:

- > Explore what young people's personal ambitions and goals are.
- > Help young people envision possible career paths and develop plans for next steps.
- > Tailor the participation experience to meet individual preferences and interests.
- > Provide young people with training.
- > Help young people network and facilitate useful introductions where possible.
- > Help young people develop their CVs and LinkedIn profiles.
- > Support young people to find further opportunities (e.g. further education, jobs, internships and other participation opportunities).

Bernardo recommends that this all be done through a formal and structured process. For example, each young person involved in London's VRU Young People's Action Group is assigned a mentor within the engagement team. Together they develop a personal development plan (PDP). The plan involves exploring with the young person where they would like to be in 1 to 2 years after taking part in the participation group and thinking through how this particular experience can help them get there. They discuss with the young

person what skills they want to learn, what areas they would like to improve in, who they would like to be put in contact with, and what further opportunities they might be interested in. The PDP aids the development of measurable goals and concrete actions. It also holds the engagement team to account by ensuring and evidencing that a young person really benefits from their experience in the Action Group. Bernardo also argues that providing training, mentoring and development opportunities in such a structured way gives young people a sense of responsibility, purpose and accountability.

Bernardo asserts that with many organisations the objectives of participation work with young people tend to be very short term. They focus solely on the insights that young people can provide during their direct involvement in a participation group. Bernardo thinks that organisations should be more strategic and think longer term. **A key objective should be to support and empower young people to fully participate in society going forward.** We should equip young people so that they can continue these conversations with other young people in other parts of their life. We should be helping young people become experts in their own right and go on to inspire and inform others.

*‘We should not just focus on how they’re involved with our work, but how they are then more equipped to be involved in shaping society and their communities. How they can make their world a better place. When I look at effective youth participation or involvement, I’m always thinking of the wider picture.’*

– Darwin Bernardo

Bernardo also suggests this reinforces the need to recruit young people who have lived experiences of the very issues we are trying to tackle or better understand. This way youth participation work helps to develop role models out of young people that other young people from similar backgrounds will listen to and be inspired by. Bernardo says *‘we need more positive role models from the communities who are suffering the most. We need those people to help change the narrative. We need them to talk to their fellow peers.’*

## Other important factors to consider

Interviewees specified a range of other factors that can support the meaningful involvement of young people in youth participation:

- > **Make youth participation work fun and engaging.** Use games and interactive activities. Create a space that young people will feel comfortable in. Try not to be too prescriptive and keep group meetings feeling informal and light hearted.
- > **Take a flexible approach to how young people can engage** which takes into consideration a range of different needs and preferences and the complexity of young people's lives. Petty argues that this is particularly the case if an organisation is engaging with vulnerable or disadvantaged young people, who, for a range of reasons, may not be able to engage in the same way throughout or may have to stop engaging altogether. Petty suggests that a 'hub and spoke' participation model can enable a more flexible approach. This is where a core group of young people (who are able to commit fully) engage throughout but are responsible for connecting with a larger sample of young people on a one off basis throughout the full period of engagement. This allows youth participation work to include the voices of a larger and more representative group of young people that would otherwise not be heard due to not being able to commit to a longer term arrangement. The ChildFair State Inquiry adopted this approach.
- > **Choose quality over quantity.** Organisations should only recruit the number of young people that they can adequately support. Recruiting a smaller group of young people that are therefore able to contribute in a safe and more meaningful way is better than a larger group whose support and learning needs cannot be properly met. Making youth participation work accessible to larger numbers of young people can come at the expense of being able to design a process that can reach or adequately meet the needs of more vulnerable or less heard young people.

- > **Engagement over a longer period of time is more effective than one off conversations.** It is hard to prepare young people to effectively contribute in one meeting or focus group. Ideally participation work with young people should occur over a long period of time (12 to 18 months). If an organisation is speaking with an existing participation group then, at the very least, build in several meetings. This allows for a preliminary session to:
  - > provide young people with the relevant context
  - > break down any related terminology
  - > introduce the key themes or questions.

Young people can then reflect and come back to the next session more prepared and able to contribute. If possible, a third session enables practitioners to return to sense check initial findings and further explore particular areas of interest.

- > **Establish a feedback loop.** Always return to young people to let them know what has been done with the information they have provided. Explain what changes have been made and what recommendations have been implemented. Furthermore, be transparent about what can't be taken on board and why.



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