



Tackling Child Exploitation
Support Programme

Organisations: laying the groundwork for effective engagement with children and young people

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 first of three resources developed based on the key themes to emerge from these discussions. It focuses on how organisations can carry out the necessary groundwork in order to effectively listen to young people and act on the information and insights they provide.

Key messages:

> In order for organisations and senior leads to effectively listen to the voices of young people it is important to reflect on how they will approach this, and how young people are supported to feel safe to do so. Young people don't often have a problem with speaking up. The breakdown happens once young people have shared their experiences and the actions professionals or organisations carry out next.

> It is advantageous for senior leaders across a partnership to develop a shared understanding of youth participation and a consistent approach to conducting this. Issues to consider could be:

> Where are these opportunities currently available within the partnership?

> Who can they learn from?

> What works and, more importantly, what does not work?

> How do strategic leaders plan to respond to young people's feedback?

It would be useful to think through these questions before any participation work is undertaken and how this can become part of routine practice.

> There can be a tendency to engage the voices of young people once a decision has been made by professionals. Try flipping this process and engage young people's voices from the outset in order to inform and influence professionals' ideas so young people are brought in from the start. This will help build trust and enable power to be shared between professionals and young people.

- > Senior leaders should set out from the first instance a clear scope and parameters of influence and change. It is important young people understand the extent to which their voices and experiences can influence. This also helps senior leaders to respond more realistically.
- > It can feel uncomfortable, but by senior leaders reflecting on their own perceptions and biases of young people, they could help to alleviate the power dynamics that exist between them. How will the voices of young people a partnership is engaging with be perceived? Reflecting on this could present an opportunity to identify barriers and unhelpful perceptions.
- > A barrier to doing this work is organisations acting in ways that are risk averse. Organisations and senior leaders do not have to manage the risks alone. They can always ask other organisations for advice, utilise local expertise, and collaborate with other organisations to recruit and run participation work.
- > This work is not easy. It should not be underestimated how challenging it can be and the *'emotional, physical and cognitive capacity'* it takes to do it well.

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

Young people are speaking up, but are we listening?

A clear consensus emerged from the interviews about a misplaced focus on finding ways to get young people to speak up. Nicky Hill, Darwin Bernardo and Caroline Adams all argued that **the first step was in fact to ensure organisations were prepared and equipped to effectively listen to young people.**

Nicky Hill argues that the concept of youth voice often unfairly places the focus on young people, when in fact *‘they have never had a problem speaking up – they speak powerfully and articulately every day.’* Caroline Adams agrees, and reflects on how young people have been telling the police what they think for a long time but they seemingly continue to be unheard. Following a consultation with young people to help inform and review policing strategy, Adams says young people told us, *‘We’ve been telling you this for years and you haven’t listened. And you haven’t changed anything. Don’t keep coming and talking to us without changing anything.’* All the interviewees agreed that organisations and professionals have a lot of hard work to do to improve the way they listen, support and respond to young people. Without first laying these crucial foundations, it is not fair to continue to ask young people to speak up. This work cannot take place overnight and will require commitment, resources and expertise. Interviewees noted that most professionals and organisations understand the value in carrying out this work and have the appetite to do so.

Building a culture of participation

Chloe Dennis-Green, Darwin Bernardo and Nicky Hill spoke about **the need for a shared understanding of youth participation work across an organisation, as well as a consistent approach to how that work would be carried out.** Whilst there needs to be room to adapt an approach to meet the specific needs of young people, youth participation work must be taken seriously and adhere to a set of standards and values to ensure it is done safely and meaningfully. Otherwise youth participation work can start to feel *‘messy and like an optional ‘like to have’*, rather than an integral and necessary part of any project or programme of work, says Bernardo.

Many examples emerged from the interviews of organisations publishing statements about how they designed services ‘with’ young people, despite that not really being the case in practice. These cases were described not as deliberate lies but in fact down to crucial differences in how meaningful youth participation was understood by different professionals, including senior leaders. Similarly, those we spoke to talked about various teams within one organisation doing participation work differently and being incredibly resistant to change. All the interviewees commented on the challenges of being a lone voice within an organisation trying to persuade or convince colleagues to engage with young people differently.

*‘The most dangerous words I’ve ever heard were,
“we’ve always done it this way”’.*

– Darwin Bernardo

The process of developing a shared understanding of what youth participation work means and what it looks like in practice must come from the top down. Strategic leaders need to play an integral role in bringing everyone within an organisation along on this journey. Chloe Darlington and Jo Petty emphasise the need for strategic leadership to understand what meaningful youth participation entails and to have the desire and willingness to drive forward the required hard work. **Consensus must be reached about why an organisation wants to hear young people’s voices, what youth participation should look like, and how the organisation’s culture and values can support participatory work or act as barriers.**

Nicky Hill suggests that this process might involve uncomfortable and difficult conversations. As such, this reflective work has to be modelled from the top down. **Strategic leaders should therefore create the time to do some internal self-reflection and model a learning culture that starts at the very top, before getting the organisation as a whole to do so.**

'I would really encourage strategic leaders to create some space for them to have reflective time. Spend a bit of time on unpicking and exploring and understanding how you as a leader, are modelling this work. How are you setting the tone? How are you defining organizational culture and values? Where you are anticipating there might be work to do, how are you articulating that? How are you owning that? How are you leaning in to an uncomfortable space?'

– Nicky Hill

Jo Petty and Chloe Dennis-Green spoke about the need to **build in youth participation work from the very start of any project or programme of work. They long for organisations to engage with young people whilst still designing a programme, or before deciding on which specific issues or themes to focus on.** They reflect on how, all too often, organisations decide to reach out to young people too late in the day, once they are no longer able to meaningfully influence anything. If we ask young people for their opinion once decisions have already been made and things are set in stone, then what is the point? Participation work in this context becomes tokenistic and a tick box exercise. Jo Petty emphasises that if youth participation is carried out after agenda's have been set, their views and opinions might contradict what professionals have already decided upon. This positions youth voice as a direct challenge to professional expertise, which is unhelpful and potentially detrimental. Youth participation work needs to be a necessary part of the design process, and this means systematically building youth participation work into a project plan at the very start.

Power, agency and participation

Nicky Hill, Jo Petty and Caroline Adams all spoke about the importance of **being committed to doing something with what young people tell you**. It is not enough to just listen, you have to be prepared to respond and act accordingly.

‘Don’t ask if you are not prepared to change anything because that is a waste of everybody’s time. It is totally disrespectful to ask young people to give their views and then not be prepared to change anything as a result.’

– Caroline Adams

When carrying out participation work with young people, **organisations need to be transparent about what young people can actually influence**. They must then also commit to acting on what young people say. This requires **having honest conversations about where power sits within an organisation**. Who will be making the decisions about which recommendations or ideas to implement, and how? Jo Petty says this works best when strategic leaders commit to implementing ideas and recommendations even if they do not agree with them. She contends that organisations carrying out participation work with young people need to be **prepared to hear things that might challenge their expertise and professional status**.

‘It is really important that organisations have the will to take the risk that what you’re going to hear, you’re maybe not going to like, but you’re still going to implement.’

– Jo Petty

This of course involves giving up power to young people. Nicky Hill reflects on how *‘giving up power is as hard as acquiring power.’* Furthermore, **to give up power, professionals and organisations have to admit they hold power over young people. This involves having to reflect on some uncomfortable truths about existing power dynamics**. Hill argues that all professionals working with young people, whether they are social workers, police, health practitioners, schools, or the third sector, wield extreme power over young people. Hill describes that power as not just being an abstract concept, but a very real and tangible

experience for young people, particularly for those in statutory organisations. In most of the work carried out with young people, particularly within the safeguarding sphere, there is little equity in decision-making or in defining outcomes. However, whilst that power is firmly rooted within a professional's identity, often the idea of holding power over young people is something that is not always sought or embraced. These power dynamics do not always sit comfortably with professionals, and consequently are not acknowledged and often ignored. **If professionals do not accept and reflect on these power dynamics, then they also will not be addressed or challenged.**

Hill contemplates that this process of reflecting on power dynamics is made more difficult for an individual professional because it can shine an uncomfortable light on past interactions with young people. She suggests that **good supervision and reflective spaces can help professionals and organisations work through this process.**

'You realise the things that you might have done, unwittingly, unknowingly, unconsciously, unintentionally and you can't turn back time. You might be horrified with yourself for how you did things in the past and you just have to sit with it.'

– Nicky Hill

Chloe Darlington, Jo Petty and Nicky Hill also talk about how certain perceptions of young people, particularly those seen as vulnerable, can also impact negatively upon our ability to hand over genuine power and influence. Darlington argues that children are not treated or consulted as equal citizens who have as much right as adults to take an active part in society. Jo Petty thinks it is important to interrogate how strategic leaders really view young people. Do they see them as vulnerable children who need to be rescued and fixed? Or as people with rights, agency, lived experience and expertise with valuable contributions to make? Similarly, Hill questions whether professionals view young people as capable and competent of understanding their own lived experiences and having valid perspectives over what should happen in their own lives. **Organisations and professionals must examine how their own perceptions of young people can inadvertently strip young people of any meaningful agency.**

‘Young people say things and as professionals we will think we know better – and sometimes we do – but that does not negate the validity of what they are saying – their truth, their perspective – and maybe we need to acknowledge that a bit more.’

– Nicky Hill

Chloe Darlington reflected on her own experience when [Children England established a youth-led inquiry into the welfare state](#). When the young people were carrying out analysis and developing their recommendations, Darlington spoke about having to step back and let go of her own professional baggage and anxiety. She had to trust that whatever young people came up with was OK and fight the urge to override any analysis with her own. This was not easy, and she spoke about how the organisation they collaborated with to manage the participation work ([Leaders Unlocked](#)) were invaluable in helping her to manage her ‘*professional anxiety*’ and to ‘*take a step back and trust the young people.*’

Managing risk or risk averse?

A key theme to emerge across all the interviews was around **organisations shying away from carrying out some participation work with young people due to fears about the potential risks such work may bring**. Chloe Dennis-Green, Darwin Bernardo and Nicky Hill also referred to organisations and individual professionals not feeling able to respond appropriately to potential disclosures of harm or abuse, due to a fear of being held liable as a consequence.

‘[After suggesting some participation work] I get a response saying, um, “Well, that sounds a bit risky because how do you know they’re not going to disclose?”’

– Chloe Dennis-Green

Bernardo suggests that a lack of exposure to direct work with young people, and therefore a lack of experience following safeguarding protocols when disclosures do occur, can leave organisations feeling ill-equipped and apprehensive about dealing with disclosures. Dennis-Green speculates that organisations that deliver services to young people may also not want to hold an ‘extra risk’ by carrying out too much ‘participation’ work with young people. Organisations that have suffered reputational damage for past or even historic misconduct may feel even more reluctant to take on the perceived risk associated with certain forms of participation work with young people. Nicky Hill argues that individual practitioners can also avoid risk due to a fear of ‘persecution’ if things go wrong. Hill believes this is directly linked to the flawed ways in which professional bodies and society hold individual professionals to account. Professionals do not feel like they will be supported if anything goes wrong.

Interviewees agreed that what this amounted to was organisations attempting to safeguard themselves by avoiding risk altogether, rather than considering the safety of young people. Hill, Bernardo and Dennis-Green suggest that organisations and professionals need to feel more comfortable with managing risks rather than avoiding it point blank.

So how can organisations and individuals feel more comfortable to hold and sit with risk?

Darwin Bernardo suggests **reminding organisations they do not have to manage the risks alone. They can always ask other organisations for advice, utilise local expertise, and partner with other organisations to recruit and run participation work.** Chloe Dennis Green suggests that, in particular, there is a lot that can be learnt from the youth work sector. Youth work tends to be far more comfortable with ambiguity and holding risk, and so that sector may be a good source of advice and guidance for the charity sector and statutory services.

‘The risk comes from when they [organisations] feel they have to do everything themselves. So share the risk with others.’

– Darwin Bernardo

Similarly, if an organisation feels ill-equipped to manage risks, they should carry out a risk assessment. **Assess what expertise, training, knowledge or processes are needed to ensure the organisation can adequately hold and manage that risk.** It may require supporting and training existing employees, or developing new internal roles, or partnering with another organisation. For example, Chloe Darlington noted that Children England were not equipped to carry out the participation work with young people for the ChildFair State Inquiry, they therefore commissioned Leaders Unlocked who brought the necessary capacity and skills to carry out the work. Caroline Adams also notes that her key advice to police forces who want to carry out participation work with young people is to commission external organisations that have the skills and expertise.

Chloe Dennis-Green highlights the value **in creating learning spaces within an organisation to demystify the processes that need to be followed when disclosures occur.** For example, the safeguarding team or teams that have more exposure to working directly with young people can present and discuss their work in monthly catch-ups or lunch time workshops to fellow colleagues. Or create more spaces where colleagues can come together to discuss real-life cases where disclosures occurred and what professionals did when that happened. Bernardo also advocates using case studies of participation success stories to demonstrate real-life examples of why working directly with young people to help design and develop programmes and services is worth carrying and managing the associated risks.

Dennis-Green also suggests that professionals who want to advocate for more participation work with young people within their organisation should choose their timing wisely, i.e. wait to discuss these issues with senior leaders when their organisations are not in crisis mode (e.g. responding to a crisis, restructuring, or fighting for funding). Organisations will feel less equipped to hold extra risk in these moments.

Sufficient training, support and resources

An overarching theme was that meaningful and safe participation work with young people necessitates workforce development. Participation work requires specific skills and expertise. Professionals with no background in working directly with young people (or even those that have) cannot be expected to just start managing participation work without the appropriate training. Interviewees argued that often organisations can undervalue the skills required to carry out effective participation work with young people. Jo Petty reflected on the induction training for staff at her organisation. She remembers that when she first started there was a two-day induction process, with an entire session set aside to focus on participation work with young people. Now it involves a much shorter slot within a half-day induction. Delivering more comprehensive training to all staff can help ensure that participation work does not become a siloed and distinct project that is solely managed by specific members of staff, but instead a programme of work that the whole organisation takes responsibility for.

Nicky Hill and Jo Petty also argue that professionals carrying out this work need to be properly supported. Hill says **organisations need to acknowledge how challenging this work can be and the ‘emotional, physical and cognitive capacity’ it takes to do it well.** This also relates to the discussion above around power dynamics and tricky conversations. Young people might share things that make professionals feel uncomfortable, attacked, or out of their comfort zone. Organisations have to equip their staff to manage challenging conversations constructively and to have the emotional space to reflect and respond appropriately. Additionally, practitioners carrying out participation work need to find ways to communicate potentially difficult messages back to their own organisations.

Darlington, Adams, Petty and Bernardo draw attention to the fact that **participation work with young people cannot be done ‘on the cheap’.** It has to be properly resourced. Bernardo says organisations have to be ready to provide young people with training and equipment (e.g. phones, laptops, desks and chairs), in the same way an organisation would do with a new staff member. Adams argues that carrying out participation work with young people is a whole job in and of itself. She talks about how, often in statutory services, staff are expected to do the job on the side of another full time job they already do.

‘We expect someone who’s busy in a [police] force to just set this [consultation work with young people] up as part of their existing job. But engaging with young people and running this work is a job in itself. It’s time-consuming, it costs money, and I don’t think we value it enough to put that resource in place to do that. So proper funding is important.’

– Caroline Adams

Jo Petty argues that **participation work with young people for a particular project or programme is rarely costed properly or sufficiently incorporated into funding bids**. To address this problem, Petty says that the third sector has to get better at building participation work into their funding requests. Equally, funders need to acknowledge the importance of specifically and properly funding participation work with young people. The sector cannot continue to see participation as an ‘add-on’ that does not need to be specifically and properly resourced.

‘If we want to do [participation work with young people], then we need to put our money where our mouth is, as well as for our time and capacity building... to do the participation you need to value both bits of it [the intervention and the participation work], and not just expect one just to follow the other. [We must] recognise they’re equally important. And they need to build it in right from the start, and it’s got to start with the funding. [The funding] has to come in and equally support both things.’

– Jo Petty

Darlington and Hill also talk about having to consider the resources it will take to implement any recommendations or ideas that young people suggest through the participation work. Both noted that **it is unfair to ask young people to develop ideas and suggestions if there are no resources available to put them into practice**.

‘If we hear loads of great ideas from young people, how’ve we got the resources to put them into practice? We don’t want to start something that we can’t do justice to.’

– Chloe Darlington

Is it time to rethink traditional participation approaches?

Chloe Darlington and Nicky Hill both alluded to a need to significantly shift the way we carry out participation work with young people. As it stands, the most common form of participation work tends to entail individual organisations or agencies developing separate and discreet participation groups. This might involve an online forum, or a panel, council or advisory group. Darlington and Hill **challenge the effectiveness of these more traditional forms of participation work and suggest that organisations should be thinking about participation work with young people differently.**

Nicky Hill wants there to be **more of a focus on participatory practice rather than participation work.** Hill says *'participation should be at the heart of what we do all day, every day.'* She wants to see professionals listening and responding to young people's voices in all elements of their direct engagement with young people through services and interventions. **Participation needn't only be a separate piece of work that sits outside of the actual work being directly carried out with young people** (although Hill acknowledges there is value in that also). Hill argues that participation work, 'when done well, should be embedded in practice frameworks'. What this would look like in practice would be young people attending meetings that are about their lives, or young people being consulted about every decision being made that affects them, or having good and consistent advocacy in place. It means amending practice so that young people are able to constantly feedback on what the processes look and feel like throughout. And it means having structures in place that ask practitioners to feed that learning back into the system. Then practice can begin to shift and develop and have young people's voice at the heart of it.

Furthermore, a key challenge for separate and discrete forms of participation work can be reaching young people with lived experience of harm and abuse. **Weaving youth participation into direct work carried out with young people ensures that it is the voices of young people with lived experiences of child exploitation and of statutory services that get to influence any changes to practice that are made.** Hill refers to some consultation work that the Metropolitan Police carried out with young people in order to learn and implement lessons from the Stephen Lawrence murder. It turns out that the young people being consulted were police cadets. Hill questions whether police cadets are reflective of the young people the police need to hear from in order to improve and amend their practice. Would it not make more sense to listen to what young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system have to say on an ongoing basis?

Chloe Darlington draws attention to the fact that many young people are creating their own platforms to speak out about their views, opinions and suggestions. There are ample examples of social action being taken by children and young people. They have their own ideas and their own agendas, and they perhaps do not need organisations to *'generously open their doors and ask them what they think about this particular issue'*. Darlington suggests that **youth participation does not need to be something organisations instigate and develop themselves. Instead, organisations can go out and support what children and young people have started up themselves.** She highlights the Belgrave Trust, a funder, as a good example of an organisation that has begun to fund individual young activists, rather than funding organisations to do youth voice work.

'We do not need to shape [youth participation], or professionalise it too much and mess it up. Maybe we just listen and learn from what young people are already doing and saying.'

– Chloe Darlington



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