

Just One Question Insights – May 2025

This month we asked: Which one action, project or strategy to involve young people's voice in service design and decision making has had the greatest impact or been the most successful?

We had: 132 responses.

Key Message:

Young people are not just participants in youth services. They are co-creators, leaders, and change-makers. The most impactful youth voice practices are those that embed young people meaningfully at every level: from research and campaigning to governance and service design. When young people are trusted, supported, and given real power, they influence policy, shape services, and address complex social issues with authenticity and insight.

This message is reinforced through 5 key emerging themes:

1. Youth-led research and advocacy
2. Youth Leadership: meaningful and inclusive participation in decision-making
3. Safe, trusting environments for honest expression
4. Sustained engagement and relationship-building
5. Recognition of intersectionality in youth experiences

Key Findings

Youth practitioners responding to this question stated that they embedded youth voice in a number of ways in their service design and decision making. The ones that had the greatest impact or were considered most successful are outlined below.

1. Youth-Led Research and Advocacy

Young people are actively involved in researching, analysing, and sharing findings on issues that affect them, using evidence generated to inform and influence decision-makers and their service provision.

'Our peer researchers help find information via consultation that informs bids, they analyse the information that they have found and create recommendations and actions based on it. We use peer research to evaluate our existing youth programmes but we have also helped local services choose what to commission based on research.'

- For example: One practitioner outlined care-experienced youth researching care leaving grants disparities, producing reports indicating disparities between different areas. The findings were then used to challenge local authorities.
- For example: As part of the 'Potential Not Poverty' project, young people presented their research findings on how poverty affects education to the Minister of Education. They also submitted their reports to Downing Street.

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2. Youth Leadership: Meaningful and Inclusive Participation in Decision-making

Recognising young people as experts with lived experience and ensuring they hold real power in decision-making and project leadership. Creating formal and informal spaces where young people's voices are heard and have real decision-making power, leadership, and influence across all project or service development stages.

The types of spaces included:

- Young People's **Steering Groups** guiding ongoing project design.
- **Youth boards** with significant youth membership, often chairing and running groups with adult support.
- **Community Panels** with flexible membership, allowing young people to engage as they wish without pressure.
- **Panel events** quizzing local authorities, MPs, health, and voluntary sectors.
- Encouraging **youth to lead events, campaigns, and co-facilitate youth leadership panels.**

'One of the most impactful strategies we've implemented to involve young people's voices in service design and decision-making has been the creation of our volunteer Youth Leadership Panel [...]. This panel brings together a diverse group of participants aged 14–19 who meet monthly to reflect on their experiences, provide feedback on current programmes, and co-design future sessions [...] What has made this approach particularly successful is that young people aren't just consulted—they are empowered to lead.'

3. Creating Safe, Supportive Environments for Authentic Voice

Building trust, comfort, and safe spaces where young people feel empowered to share their lived experiences honestly, often using creative or informal methods, such as:

- **Creating positive, supportive atmospheres** enabling open conversations about sensitive topics like mental health, bullying, discrimination.
- **Focus groups** embedded in projects and delivered flexibly (e.g., park benches).
- **Storytelling** at events where young people with lived mental health experience share with professionals of different disciplines both positive and negative impacts of services.
- **Creative engagement methods** (podcasts, arts, worry walk project) that encourage engagement, honesty and openness.
- **Detached youth work** reaching young people in their own spaces.

Practitioners also emphasised that co-creating materials, campaigns, and communication strategies with young people was particularly impactful to ensure relevance and authenticity. Some of the things mentioned were youth-designed communications such as leaflets and social media content and using creative outputs (digital, arts, podcasts) to share knowledge, experiences, and advocacy messages.

"Turn those narratives into compelling outputs they can be proud of and willing to share with others, e.g. peers, parents, decision makers that can affect their lives positively."

4. Developing Sustained Engagement and Relationship Building

Avoiding one-off activities, instead providing ongoing, sustained support and involvement that fosters trust, ownership, and long-term empowerment. With the emphasis on 'hand ups' not 'hand outs', young people want ongoing opportunities and support, not just single events.

"Sustainability! People especially young people do not want one-off interventions - they want sustained and prolonged support. And they do not want handouts. They want hand ups"

5. Collectively Understanding and Addressing Intersectional Issues

Through various collective listening activities between young people and youth practitioners focusing on specific challenges affecting young people, including poverty, mental health, discrimination, and social justice, using their voices to highlight complexity and nuance and interconnections between issues. Some of the intersectional issues mentioned are:

- Projects addressing poverty's impact on education and mental health.
- Campaigns tackling school uniform costs and related social exclusion.
- Groups exploring misinformation, heritage, religion, and identity.

"School uniform campaign - legislation changed as a result of a campaign from Young People who identified families getting into debt to pay for their school uniform, and their experiences of exclusions and punishment for having the wrong items"

What is UK Youth doing in this area:

- Engaging young people in **designing and facilitating** learning events, such as the **Joined Up Summit and Joined Up Institute**, a youth-led re-imagining of youth sector collaboration.
- Young people leading the research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination activities. For example, recently 10 young people were recruited as **Youth Collaborators** to work on collecting insights from young people across England, through different methods, to inform the **National Youth Strategy** and **Youth advisory panels** to direct and inform research for **DCMS and Youth Education Foundation**.
- **Youth lead social action**, encouraging and supporting young people to take part in youth social action in their communities, through our different programmes. For example, the **iwill Movement, Inspire and EmpowHer**.
- **Policy influencing** by enabling young people to shape government policy through a number of **roundtables, events, and meetings with politicians**. Young people have been present in our **fundraising campaigns, in our visits to No 10 and political party conferences**.