



How to support young people most intensively involved in youth voice activities

Proudly supporting youth social action



Department for Culture, Media & Sport



THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH VOICE

Part of YMCA George Williams College

Introduction

This guidance helps practitioners support young people involved in several youth voice activities.

The guide offers practical guidance should you be:

- Improving your understanding of these young people's specific needs;
- Helping them manage multiple demands; or
- Seeking to provide them with holistic support.

This guide mainly focuses on young people who give significant time to youth voice activities. They are likely to have multiple roles and overlapping responsibilities. For brevity in this guide, we call these 'Young Leaders'.

Young Leaders could include young people who are:

- Involved within your organisation and also have roles in other organisations;
- Have roles in local groups in their school, local youth fora and national organisations;
- Involved in groups with a specific focus linked to their own identity or experiences;
- Engaged with some roles that endure over multiple years as well as taking part in shorter-term activities such as time-limited projects or one-off opportunities such as consultation events, workshops or residential; or
- Take on multiple roles with significant time commitment (for example, being a Member of Youth Parliament or Chair of a Youth Board).

While the guidance is primarily for those involved across multiple groups, it may provide useful insight into supporting those actively engaged in one project with a significant time commitment (e.g. as a peer researcher or young inspector within one project).

Following this guidance, and adapting it to your context, should help you to:

- Provide practical support which meets their needs;
- Offer high-quality and relevant emotional support; and
- Reduces risks of them experiencing unethical or detrimental activities.

It is critical to recognise that while this guidance seeks to improve support for Young Leaders, it is not a replacement for continually diversifying and extending the reach of youth voice activities. Better support for those currently involved sits alongside efforts to bring in new voices and those underrepresented in youth voice activities. Consider the cumulative negative impacts of having fewer young people involved within your organisation and not hearing from a wider range of views and experiences. Those often under-represented can play key roles when barriers are removed, opportunities presented, and appropriate support and consideration given.



Why this is important for effective youth voice activities

There is broad evidence that a small proportion of the population volunteers the most. This smaller group – sometimes called the Civic Core – report being more consistently and heavily involved as volunteers over time than the wider population. Similar trends may be seen amongst young people – once people are involved in youth voice activities, these can open them up to wider opportunities. Their networks and contact with other organisations grow over time, and they can take on other roles. Similarly, as they gain new knowledge and skills, they may seek progression routes and opportunities for further training and support.

Evidence from the #iwill Fund ‘Evaluating Youth Voice’ research project showed that young people most intensively involved in youth voice activities can experience competing demands from one or multiple organisations, which can be difficult for them to navigate. They can sometimes struggle to fit youth voice activities around other personal commitments, and there needs to be more acceptance of this from organisations working with them. While passionate about the organisations they are involved with and the issues they are engaged in, the activity needs to be realistic and flexible to their unique needs. Young people valued good communication from the organisations they were working with to help keep them in the loop and feel in control.

Benefits of supporting those intensely involved

Enhancing their impact: Young Leaders play a crucial role in shaping the direction and impact of the youth voice activities they are involved in. By supporting them well, we can have a wider impact on the causes they care about.

Building capacity: supporting Young Leaders builds their abilities and skill development, allowing them to lead teams of peers effectively. Their increased capacity leads to more effective youth activism and them – and their peers – being heard.

Amplifying voices: Young Leaders often serve as community representatives and advocate for their community’s needs and concerns. By supporting these leaders, we help amplify community voices and ensure policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders hear them.

Recognising their unique needs

All practitioners will want to ensure they offer high-quality support to the young people they engage with in their youth voice activities. Young Leaders most intensively involved will have specific needs that are only sometimes recognised or accounted for.

Juggling different demands: they may have competing demands or expectations on their time from multiple organisations. They need to manage their time and practical logistics of involvement – scheduling attendance, getting transport booked or claiming expenses – across different groups or opportunities at once.



No 'one' support worker: engaging with several youth organisations at once will bring them into contact with multiple workers. They may need to share personal and sensitive information about their lives, backgrounds, and support needs numerous times, which could be re-traumatising.

Differing levels of support: different opportunities in different organisations may have very different levels of support for young people. Some organisations may be effusive in offering holistic support; others may be more hands-off. There may be different approaches to paying expenses or what is a claimable expense.

Parent and carer engagement: some parents or carers may not be aware of the different organisations or conflate different groups. Depending on the level of parental engagement, the parents may have limited or no understanding of what the young person is engaged with.

Hearing about or observing risky or inappropriate behaviour: where Young Leaders are in positions of responsibility, they may receive disclosures of harm or abuse from their peers. They may spot signs or symptoms of harm or, with their experience, be able to identify inappropriate behaviour from practitioners.

Responding to peers: as a Young Leader, their involvement may be highlighted within their school or the local community. Be conscious that young people's peers may not respond positively to their involvement. The young people you are working with may need support in experiencing negative comments or bullying.

Contact with older peers: Young Leaders may sometimes have opportunities to engage in activities with people older than them. As these relationships develop, they may hear about their older peers' lifestyles and circumstances. Some may be exposed to alcohol or drug use or other risky behaviour.

Emotional investment: many Young Leaders will have played a key role in youth voice activities and groups. They will have dedicated significant time, effort and emotional labour into the groups. Many will, therefore, naturally have a powerful emotional connection to the group. That can be difficult to manage when the group or project is time limited or, by design, they are "replaced" with a new cohort of younger people.

Top tip: *be aware of the risks of 'adultification'. Practitioners may treat Young Leaders as more mature than they are, minimise risks they face and not afford to them notions of innocence and vulnerability. A Young Leader's personal characteristics, confident manner and experiences may lead practitioners to miss signs of harm. Where harm is suspected or known about, practitioners may view them as responsible in some way for the harm or as more resilient and able to withstand harm.*



Building the right relationship

When you identify a more intensively involved young person, consider how to approach them best to understand their specific support needs.

Build trust and rapport: trust is crucial when working with Young Leaders. Take the time to build relationships and show genuine interest in their concerns and aspirations within your organisation or beyond.

Listen and learn: ask young people about their involvement in other groups. Consider with them the potential consequences of participation across multiple groups – exploring both the benefits and also acknowledging the practical and emotional challenges. Consider whether there are any other workers that they feel might be helpful for you to connect with.

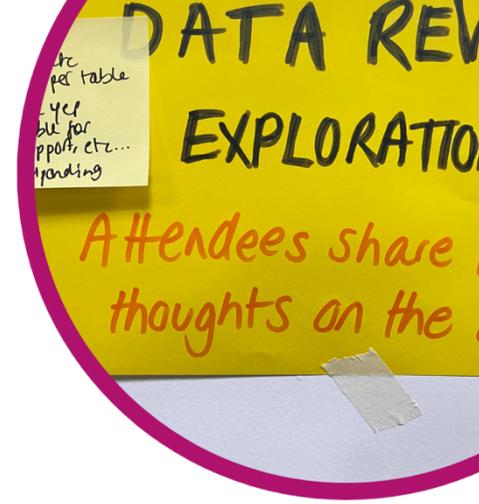
Identify conflicts of interest: identify whether there are any potential conflicts of interest or potentially difficult relationships to manage. For example, if they are distributing funding with one group, that may prohibit them from drafting funding bids for another.

Provide resources and support: identify and provide access to resources that can aid Young Leaders in their work. This could include funding opportunities, technical assistance, or training programmes to enhance their skills. Consider what unique training or support needs might assist them, not just in your organisation but across their activism. Some Young Leaders may have previously had access to training or support from other organisations. Their learning needs may be different from other young people in the group.

Consider sustainability and succession: assist Young Leaders in considering their longer-term involvement and any succession planning. By developing leadership pipelines and preparing the next generation of leaders, you can contribute to the sustainability and continuity of the group.

Help define and then respect boundaries: work together to know the boundaries of support. Provide boundaries for young people regarding how much energy and time they give to this work. Regularly remind young people that youth voice activities should always be their choice and that there is no pressure or obligation for their continued engagement.

Keep it fun too: Young Leaders should still be actively engaged in fun activities and celebratory events.



Femi is actively involved in several youth groups. He is a Member of Youth Parliament, on a regional authority advisory board, and involved with two national youth voice groups. In joining a new national Youth Panel, his new workers set up an induction call. They listen to his experience of being involved elsewhere and map current commitments. They recognise that he had previously participated in training they planned to deliver. They relook at their training and Femi helps to co-deliver the planned training to other group members.



Offering practical support

This guide mainly focuses on young people who have multiple roles and responsibilities. These may be solely within your organisation or within your organisation and other organisations.

Plan ahead: wherever possible, seek feedback from young people about their availability as early as possible. Offer to use online scheduling tools like Doodle or Outlook Polls for young people to indicate their availability and preferences for attending.

Show flexibility: recognise that young people may need flexibility if attending events. For example, booking travel that allows them to go from one event with your organisation to another event with a different organisation instead of returning directly home. You could consider sharing those costs with the other organisation.

Proactively cover costs: you should reimburse any reasonable expenses incurred while someone is volunteering. It is good practice to avoid the young person or their family needing to incur expenses to be reclaimed. Where possible, book travel for them directly.

Be mindful of the full costs of involvement: cumulative indirect costs from involvement can add up for Young Leaders and their families. Keep in mind any costs associated with involvement and consider good inclusion practices:

- Always be clear on the appropriate dress code for events. Always avoid expecting young people to wear smart clothes, suits, or dress shoes. If this feels necessary, sensitively approach the issues with young people and what role your organisation can play in contributing to these costs if reasonable.
- Do not expect them to bring a packed lunch to an event.
- Adopt organisational policies to enable young people to get drinks or snacks on longer journeys. Give them cash in advance if possible, without necessarily needing a receipt (eg. a £5 note to take with them to get a drink on the way home if on a much longer train journey).
- Proactively offer to cover costs for mobile phone data or printing materials at home.

Confirm logistics: Depending on the young person's preferences, always confirm logistics with young people and their parents. If preferable, send clear calendar invites for events.

Joe is asked to attend a meeting at the House of Lords. Upon receiving the invite, he is unsure what to wear. He speaks to his family about buying a tie, assuming he needs one. His family are struggling financially and makes sacrifices to buy this for him. Joe is grateful but finds this an awkward process. When he arrives, he sees no one else wearing a tie. He feels embarrassed to show his family photos from the event.



Offering emotional support

Leadership roles can be challenging and demanding, often requiring individuals to address sensitive issues. You should consider offering emotional support, creating safe spaces for reflection, and promoting self-care practices to help Young Leaders manage stress, avoid burnout, and maintain their well-being.

By implementing these practical tips, you can contribute to creating a supportive environment where Young Leaders feel valued, cared for, and motivated to continue their work in the community:

Foster a supportive culture: create a culture within the group that values open communication, empathy, and support. Encourage leaders to share their challenges and feelings and provide a safe space for them to do this. Use group agreements or a Code of Conduct to build a sense of safety and support.

Regular check-ins and debriefing sessions: schedule regular check-ins and debriefing sessions with Young Leaders to discuss their emotional well-being and provide a platform for reflection. Create a space to share their successes, challenges, and concerns. Actively listen, provide validation, and offer guidance when necessary. Be clear on the boundaries of confidentiality for information shared.

Provide self-care resources: share resources and information on self-care practices. Encourage Young Leaders to prioritise their well-being and model self-care behaviours within the group.

Encourage peer support networks: facilitate opportunities for Young Leaders with similar levels of engagement to connect and build peer support networks. Encourage the formation of support networks or access to mentoring programmes where Young Leaders can share experiences, offer advice, and provide emotional support to one another.

Claire is actively involved with several youth voice groups. She has observed that one organisation – Bright Start - has a very loose approach to organising events. The staff there share their personal mobile numbers and Instagram. They make comments and jokes. Over time she starts to feel that the difference in behaviour feels stark compared to other youth groups. She approaches the worker at another youth organisation to talk through her concerns. They agree that Claire should share her concerns with the Trustees of Bright Start. The other worker helps her write an email to the Chair of Bright Start.



Reducing risks of vicarious trauma and stress

Young Leaders may be in positions where they regularly hear about others' distress. They may be in formal and informal peer support roles for others. This regular and significant exposure to others' distress can impact their own mental health. If not well supported, it can have a significant mental health impact and, if not managed well, be a pathway to more serious consequences. Good practices to reduce the risks of distress include:

Promote self-awareness and self-care: encourage Young Leaders to develop self-awareness regarding their emotional responses and vulnerabilities. Promote self-care practices like practising mindfulness or relaxation techniques and encourage regular breaks, time off, and opportunities for rest beyond youth voice activities, work, and studying.

Support healthy boundaries: demonstrate to Young Leaders the importance of setting and maintaining healthy boundaries in their volunteering roles. Encourage them to identify and set their limits, respect their decisions to say no when necessary, and balance their commitment to helping others with their needs.

Validate emotional reactions: show empathy with young people who are impacted by others' distress. Validate that this is a compassionate and caring response rather than a sign of weakness or challenge. Highlight the need to manage and limit their engagement; recognise the voluntary and peer support nature of their roles in youth voice activities.

Peer support and debriefing: create an environment that encourages individuals to engage in regular peer support and debriefing sessions. These sessions provide opportunities to share experiences, express emotions, and process challenging situations.

Consider the impact of sharing: encouraging people to tell their personal stories at organisational meetings, conferences or case studies can have ongoing impacts. While anyone should receive support directly after telling their story, be mindful of the risks of re-traumatising if being asked to share repeatedly by different groups and that distress can emerge after the event itself.

Actively remind people of their positive impact:

engaging with challenging or distressing content can be tough, but engaging with these issues can be valuable and bring about positive social change. Remind people of the value and purpose of their activities and their work.

Get additional support: consider whether young people would be better supported by more specialist care if appropriate. You personally may not always be skilled or experienced to deal with a particular situation or trauma and you should look to connect young people with other services.



Jane is a young carer who was previously homeless. After several years of being involved with various youth groups, she has gained confidence and is an evocative and charismatic speaker. Several organisations have invited her to speak and "share her story" at conferences and events. She feels obliged to share personal details of abuse she experienced but is uncomfortable about it. Over time, she finds the process increasingly upsetting and extractive.



Learn more

- The 'Civic Core' is a term used for those most engaged in volunteering. Read this [2012 paper](#) by the Third Sector Research Centre, which explains the evidence behind it and gives ideas on its use.
- Learn more about 'Adultification' on [the Listen Up Research website](#).
- Follow the broad guidance from NCVO on [Paying Volunteer Expenses](#). For details on expenses and interaction with benefits, see this [Volunteer Payment guide from the Low Income Tax Reform Group](#).
- Young people could get additional support as a [#iwill Ambassador](#) or through specialist leadership programmes like [Clare Discover Youth](#).
- The Anna Freud Centre has advice for young people on [self care techniques](#). Young Minds has a [library of resources](#) on practical information, resources and tips to support a young person with their mental health.



About this guide

This guidance has been produced as part of a project that captured youth voice's impact within the #iwill Fund. During 2021-2023, a Young Evaluators Panel of young people from across England steered the collection and analysis of data on how young people are heard within the #iwill Fund and other youth voice activities. A participatory process allowed other young people, practitioners, funders, policy makers and academics to review their findings. A final report of their findings is available on the Centre for Youth Voice website.

The Centre for Youth Voice team has drafted these guides based on the learning generated through the project, the views of young people engaged in the project and wider good practices. All scenarios are hypothetical composites informed by examples provided by young people, practitioners and the teams experiences. Links are provided to learn more but they do not constitute an endorsement or approval by YMCA George Williams College and we bear no responsibility for its accuracy, legality or content.

About the Centre for Youth Voice

At YMCA George Williams College, our vision is for a just and equitable society that invests in support for all young people to learn, grow, and explore their relationships with the world around them. Established in 1970, the College works to provide transformational support to practitioners, funders, and policy makers across the sector, to improve the quality and impact of provision and outcomes for children and young people across the UK. This support is characterised by safe spaces, high quality socio-emotional skill development opportunities, and relationships with trusted adults.

As part of its work, the College hosts three Centres of Expertise. The Centre for Youth Voice at YMCA George Williams College advocates for and supports a stronger role for the voices of young people in evaluation and continuous quality improvement. Underpinned by the belief in participation of young people in the decisions that affect them, the Centre for Youth Voice develops and shares relational, structural, and practical approaches to embedding the voices of young people, and directly supporting them to develop their research and evaluation skills.

About the #iwill Fund

The #iwill Fund is made possible thanks to £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities.

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Author: Tom Burke

Young Evaluators Panel: Alex van der Zyl, Amy Scott, Claire Muhlawako Madzura, Django Perks, Finlay Wyer, Harman Guraya, Kevin Hysenaj, Paige Keen and Rorey Scriven.

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