

Drawing the learning from the Samworth Foundation's Young Voices programme

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November 2023



Setting the scene

How can we place young people at the centre when we think about prevention of sexual exploitation? How do we weave their experiences into our service planning and delivery? What challenges might this throw up?

Back in 2019, the Samworth Foundation funded a set of six organisations in their Young Voices programme. The aim of the three-year programme was to work with and learn from these organisations who already worked closely with young people in preventing sexual exploitation.

The programme resulted in considerable shared learning around the challenges and demands of this kind of work, and the need to allocate time and resources for successful engagement with young people who have experience of sexual exploitation.

In this briefing we draw together the lessons from the programme and consider how to take these forward in the sector as a whole.

“That’s what makes you feel really heard – like there’s actually something being actively done about it, or even just discussion – that makes you feel validated”

Young person

The Samworth Young Voices projects

The six projects in the portfolio all represented organisations with a clear commitment to a participatory approach, who could all demonstrate that young people played a legitimate role in developing good practice.

The projects were spread around the UK and represented a range of different activities, including stand alone projects or work that was part of ongoing wider activities. Some of the organisations already had sexual exploitation at the heart of their work; for others the project was more of a departure.

Despite the differences there were many links and similarities across the portfolio. All had clear and established expertise in working with young people facing sexual exploitation and dedicated engagement staff. In some cases the work contributed to organisational development and embedding of participation approaches; in others it related to outreach and new ways of engaging groups of young people.

Evaluating the programme

The overall questions for the evaluation related to how the fund was set up and operated, to what extent young voices were placed at the centre of the projects, the contribution of this to improving services and policies, and what the challenges and next steps might be in this kind of work.

We drew on a number of sources of information including a survey of grantholders, project outputs, interviews with all the project team, observation of a meeting and direct engagement with three young people who worked with the projects. The material was analysed systematically to distil the main themes.

Overall, all six projects were successfully completed despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Lessons from the engagement work

- **The range of different participation models that can be used:** The projects employed a range of ways of working and it was clear there was no 'one size fits all'. Methods need to be suited to the aims of different projects, rather than prescribed by set models
- **The importance of human relationships and empathy in this work:** The projects demonstrated the critical importance of building trust and good communications for successful engagement, perhaps more so than in participation work with other groups of young people with different experiences
- **The power of lived experience:** This was emphasised both by young people who shared their experiences with others, sometimes for the first time, and also by the projects in terms of the power this gave to policy and practice messages
- **The importance of skilled staff:** The level of skill needed to make these projects work effectively, and the importance of investing in and supporting participation staff, were widely emphasised. This requires time and resources in order to get it right

"If I had to divide up a piece of pie in terms of what our time has been spent on...80% of the time is just about sustaining those relationships"

Project staff

"...you can say with the best will in the world, oh we'll have service user representation, but you have to carefully analyse what that means and how as an organisation you are going to accept it and work with it".

Project staff

- **The need to understand what empowering young people actually means:** There can be a gap between people's commitment to participation and the reality – and challenges – of really implementing proper co-production. Sometimes this can be an uncomfortable process for organisations; this could benefit from more acknowledgement and discussion, so that youth voices can be seriously empowered effectively
- **The importance of group and peer-based work:** There can be a reluctance to bring together groups of young people with these kinds of experiences, but group work was extremely powerful and important
- **The range of support needs that young people may have:** Young people's personal needs could vary considerably depending on their individual stories and this may be exacerbated in more deprived areas. Preparing to respond to different kinds and levels of need was important in successful engagement
- **The amount of time needed for this kind of participation work:** The investment and time required to put this kind of participation work into practice could exhaust staff and needed recognition
- **The role of cascading influence:** The work of these projects beneficially affected both the host projects and others who were involved more peripherally

“...the pastoral work that goes alongside the work [is] absolutely crucial to inclusive practice”

Project staff

Stakeholder discussion

In November 2023 the Association for Young People's Health hosted an event to share the learning from the Young Voices programme. Participants welcomed the opportunity to learn more about the work that had been undertaken including directly from participants in the funded projects.

Discussions included support for the main themes from the evaluation, notably the importance of skilled staff to deliver the kind of inclusive practice that is needed to work with young people affected by sexual exploitation and indeed any kind of sexual violence.

In addition stakeholders highlighted the following:

- The importance of representation of different groups of young people, staff and organisations in lived experience work
- The value of embedding youth participation in organisations and how this can lead to improved services and systems
- The ongoing need for organisations to build confidence and skills in participation work with young people affected by sexual exploitation
- The need for increased recognition of the resource intensive nature of this kind of participation work particularly from funders, commissioners and policy makers

Participants emphasised the value of the learning from the Young Voices programme across a range of sectors and settings. Building networks and structures that enable shared learning and shared support for this kind of work is critical.

Discussions also suggested the need for a 'culture shift' to allow this kind of work to be properly supported, and the need for a range of training options that could help towards that ultimate goal. Topics included learning on language, participation skills, myth busting and supporting strategic buy in to participation work.

Conclusions

The project resulted in considerable amplification of young people's voices, and important learning about how to facilitate this process. However this is a disparate sector, posing a question about how best to share the learning and embed the findings.

One significant theme running throughout the work was the need for a wider acknowledgement and recognition of the demanding and resource intense nature of this kind of participation work. One of the many challenges was the need to recognise and work with the inherent risks, some of which are specific to this population of young people who may have experienced sexual exploitation. A clear understanding of safeguarding is clearly critical, but the projects also raise discussions around the possibility that concern about risk and protection could outweigh or contradict young people's need to be heard. Finding ways of allowing participation for even very marginalised or vulnerable young people is essential for recognising their rights. But this kind of balance needs discussion and support for the staff involved.

In addition, participants raised questions about how the sector could better support, understand and handle the role boundaries between being young people, volunteers, paid team members, support workers, friends and staff in this kind of work, where the support needs were very high and the young people had few other places to turn for help.

The projects highlighted the power of lived experience via group and peer based work and the potential rewards of this type of engagement work both for participants and in the way it can support improved policy and practice. As interest in youth engagement and youth voice increases across services and sectors, a more nuanced understanding of the demands, challenges and rewards of this kind of engagement work needs to be developed in order to make the most of the opportunities and allow the widest possible participation by young people with different kinds of lived experience. This will not happen without continued investment and resource.

Acknowledgements

AYPH is very grateful to everyone who took part in the evaluation, and to the Samworth Foundation for both project and evaluation funding. We would also particularly like to thank all the project participants that attended the stakeholder event

For more information

For more information about the project and the analyses summarised here, contact info@ayph.org.uk

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