

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

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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.

In this briefing paper we summarise the results of an evaluation of the programme, undertaken in 2023 by AYPH. We also raise questions for discussion at a forthcoming stakeholder event in November 2023, where we will 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 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.

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'
- **The importance of human relationships and empathy in this work:** The importance of building trust and good communication was critical, perhaps more so than in participation work with other groups of young people
- **The power of lived experience:** This was both for the young people who shared their experiences with others, sometimes for the first time, and also for the power this gave to policy and practice messages
- **The importance of skilled staff:** The level of skill needed to make these projects work, and the importance of investing in and supporting participation staff, were widely emphasised
- **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
- **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
- **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

"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"

Worker

"...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".

Worker

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

Worker

Discussion points

The project resulted in considerable amplification of young people's voices. How can we share that more widely? As the range of projects included in the programme demonstrated, a number of different professional groups and sectors will be tackling these kinds of issues. There is no 'sector' as such, so sharing these messages needs creative thought to go beyond the core projects. Who needs to see this work? How do we embed the findings into practice? Building networks and structures that enable shared learning and shared support is critical. The National Working Group is one example of this, but other initiatives are needed.

How can organisations better acknowledge, recognise and support the demanding and resource intense nature of this kind of participation work? There is a growing emphasis on youth participation in all nature of policy and practice projects, but the recognition of the importance and cost of 'behind the scenes' work is less advanced. Without highly skilled staff who have the time to do this properly, the work brings risks.

How can we help people to recognise and work with the risks inherent in this kind of participation work (rather than avoid them)? Balancing risk and benefit was a theme that arose in different ways across the piece in this programme. But the potentially unethical implications of being too risk averse were raised; some young people are excluded for potentially being a risk. This is an old problem, but it perhaps needs surfacing again in the current climate.

How do we support better understanding and handling of the role boundaries between being young people, volunteers, paid team members, support workers, friends and staff in everyday work? This is potentially an issue of training and shared notions of 'roles' in the sector(s). In the programme, simply being able to acknowledge the conflicts was an advance. Again, more 'surfacing' of this issue could be a contribution.

What needs to happen next, more demonstration projects or some other kinds of projects? If other, what kinds of things? Given what we know from the work of the Samworth Foundation's Youth Voices Programme, what might be the agenda for the next two to five years in this area? What needs to happen next and how might that be resourced?

For more information

For more information about the project and the analyses summarised here, contact:

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