Co-creation and Participation in the Youth Justice System

Youth Justice Board

peerpower

Authors and Acknowledgement

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Grateful thanks to: all the practitioners and managers from the Youth Justice Services (YJS) across England and Wales who responded to the survey, and the children, managers and practitioners who gave their time in Deep Dive sessions and telephone interviews. Without your views, experiences and opinions we would not have the extremely helpful insights to develop and produce resources for the project.

We'd like to thank the Youth Justice Board (YJB) for commissioning Peer Power Youth to deliver this project in partnership, and in particular special thanks to Mamps Gill, Nicola Kefford and Sue Thomas at the YJB for their continued support, passion and encouragement, and to Stephanie Roberts-Bibby, thank you for listening.

Words and terms we use in this report

- **Youth Justice Services (YJS):**
  Youth Justice Services and the acronym YJS was used in the survey and is used throughout this report to be an inclusive term to include reference to Youth Offending Teams (YOT), Youth Offending Services (YOS) and other services that include youth justice.

- **Children:**
  Throughout this report we use child or children to mean anyone under the age of 18 years (United Nations, 1989).

- **Peer Power Experts:**
  Peer Power Experts are young adults and teenagers who work with Peer Power and have lived experience of social care, justice and mental health services who are committed to voicing issues for and with other young people.

- **Deep Dive:**
  A Deep Dive is a research method where an individual or team conducts an intense, in-depth analysis of a certain problem or subject. It is conducted after a short analysis has proved that there is need for further investigation.

About Us

Peer Power Youth

We are an empathy-led charity that heals trauma and adversity through caring relationships and transforms youth services and systems by supporting our young partners to influence and have their voices heard. Our vision is a world where empathy-led services and systems support all children, teenagers and young adults to achieve their dreams and lead their best lives. We provide young people with a family and relationship-based support network in order to change their lives so they can change and inspire the lives of others and increase empathy in the services designed to help them.

The children, teenagers and young adults we partner with have described themselves as being 'abandoned by society'. Our young partners have experienced injustice and inequality through a range of social and economic factors, including race, class, poverty and disabilities in addition to childhood adversity and trauma (individual, societal and system trauma). They are passionate about using their experiences in positive and powerful ways to improve social care, justice and health services by voicing issues for and with other young people.

We engage young partners with two goals in mind; individual change and system change. We help them overcome trauma, provide platforms for them to have their voices heard, and support them to get the skills, experience and training they need to become future leaders. With their help, we support those delivering, designing or commissioning services in responding to the experiences of young people; driving empathetic and participatory approaches across the youth sector.

The organisations, agencies and stakeholders that we partner with include youth justice services, health services, prisons, police, social services, schools and more. We know that those delivering, designing and commissioning services care about children and young people, however sometimes the systems they are working in make it hard to embed the empathetic and participatory approaches that are so needed.

The Project Team

Peer Power Experts: Eight young people aged 16–25 took part in the project between January and June 2021. They have lived and learned experience of health, justice and social care agencies across community and secure settings.

ClearView Research: Lead on Phase 1 of the project, supporting co-creation of the survey to YJS and the data collection, analysis and associated reporting. ClearView's founder, Kenny Imafidon, is also a founding member of Peer Power's advisory board. Its social mission is to use research to empower those in society who are striving for social, racial and economic justice. More about ClearView Research can be found in the appendix.

Peer Power working group: The working group consisted of the project lead, Anne-Marie Douglas, founder/CEO Peer Power alongside three academics who are advisors to Peer Power, with specialisms in youth justice, participation and strengths/asset-based approaches.

- Colin Falconer (academic, consultant at InspireChilli, founder of Advantaged Thinking with Foyer Federation)
- Dr Sean Creaney (lecturer, academic and advisory board member at Peer Power)
- Dr Samantha Burns (lecturer, academic and advisory board member at Peer Power)

Biographies can be found in the appendix.

Contents Page

Introduction

Pages 8 - 12

Introduction

There have been a number of studies around participatory practice, including in a youth justice context over the last few years. But there is still a need to understand the complex cultural and environmental factors at play where participation and co-creation thrives in a youth justice context. And in particular to involve the voices of those who directly experience YJS, and those that work in them, in applying a participatory approach in practice.

The YJB's commitment to Child First principles has allowed for a deeper reach in to the extent of, and understanding of, participation in youth justice settings across England and Wales through this project.

We have been able to find, plot and share a broad range of participatory practice in YJS across England and Wales, and this report goes into some of the tensions and opportunities that are present. From this we have produced some resources to support services with their practice that adds to, rather than replicates, the current literature and resources. We have included a list of current literature and resources in the appendix.

Crucially, the delivery of the project was co-created from the start of phase 1, and we are grateful for the involvement from Peer Power Experts, peer leaders, an academic working group from Peer Power, the YJB and all the practitioners, managers and children from YJS that gave their commitment and time to shape the project throughout, despite the limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

From small steps to BIG CHANGE

Many practitioners in YJS believe in listening to children and involving them in decisions. But, for many reasons, it's not always happening as well as it could, or in the same ways in different areas of the same service, or across different services. Some services were more evolved than others with their capability to co-create and co-design service provision. At the same time, there was an understanding that co-creation required a wider organisational and strategic commitment and a whole system approach.

From the views and experiences of the various practitioners across YJS, the academic working group and the Peer Power Experts, we've proposed some recommendations along with a resource pack. We acknowledge that, in practice, there may be barriers to implementing co-creation, and reiterate that co-creation with children needs to be responsive to the context, but carefully balanced with children's rights. More support, including funding, will help children get involved. Giving practitioners training and coaching will help services bring in more individual, creative and interesting ways so that practitioners and children enjoy getting involved in participation and get something out of it.

One of the most important points to takeaway from this co-created project is that change won't just happen by itself. A culture of participation and co-creation needs to be embedded in the way YJS deliver services.

A full list of thematic recommendations can be found at the end of the report, and links to a range of useful resources for developing participation and co-creation with children are in the appendix.

The resources created from the project are listed below:

- Explainer: How to use the resource pack
- Findings from the YJS Surveys
- Survey Results: Participation and co-creation in the Youth Justice System
- Younger reader report: Participation and co-creation in the Youth Justice System
- Tips for Digital Inclusion
- Voice and Influence Charter
- Voice and Influence Film
- Pick n mix of participation
- Are you really co-creating?
- Directory of Participation
- Peer Power Co-Production Film
- Peer Power Code of Ethics for Storytelling

What is participation and co-creation?

There are lots of different ways that children can have their voices heard and responded to in a youth justice context. This can be on an individual, operational or strategic level and can mean involvement in:

- their individual plans (e.g. what kind of activities they take part in)
- the design and delivery of the service (e.g. taking part in recruitment panels and decisions, co-designing and delivering workshops, etc).
- broader youth justice policy/systems change (e.g. using their experiences to influence changes to policy such as YJB strategies).

There are many different models, frameworks and definitions that exist to help understanding of co-creation and participation, and they are terms that are often used interchangeably. While they are linked, there are some key differences, and they represent different levels of children's involvement/leadership.

The Social Care Institute of Excellence (2015) offers a useful distinction: 'participation means being consulted while co-production means being equal partners and co-creators'.

The National Youth Agency (NYA) goes further to define participation as: 'the process by which children and young people influence decision making which brings about change in them, others, their service and their communities.'

The term participation is not straightforward. It means different things to different people. There are many different levels of participation and frameworks for understanding participation in different contexts.

The ladder of participation

One of the most well-known models of participation for children is developed from Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation later adapted by Hart (1992), and uses a ladder to show increasingly inclusive approaches, ranging from coercion on the lowest rung of the ladder, to a scenario where the child initiates decisions and shares decisions with adults on the highest rungs of the ladder through co-design and co-production. A slightly adapted version of the ladder can be seen in Figure 1. The ladder can be a useful tool for assessing participatory practice but some have criticised the levels of hierarchy inherent between the levels of participation.

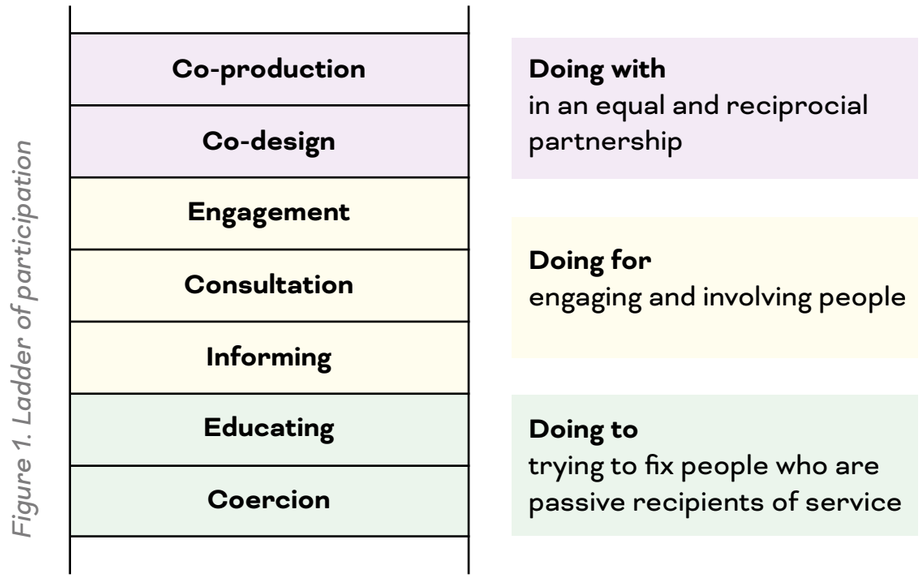


Figure 1. Ladder of participation

Peer Power's Participation Continuum

There are many different models of participation, and details of some of these can be found in the appendix. The Degrees of Participation model from Treseder (1997) argued there should be no hierarchy of participation, advocating instead that children need to be supported and empowered to achieve full participation. Shiers (2001) Pathways to Participation model allows for a journey of participation to be plotted and includes a marker for adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

For this project we have used Peer Power's Participation Continuum model to describe and plot levels of participation and co-creation in YJS. Taking the ladder of participation and laying it flat allows us to plot a range of participatory activities along a continuum without any perceived hierarchy where one participatory activity may be more or less worthy than another, with the exception being coercion which is not participation, nor co-creation.

Rather, it is seen as movements back and forth across a participation continuum according to the needs of different groups . It allows for a full range of involvement activity and power sharing within a youth justice context, acknowledging that children may be at the service for different lengths of time, engaging in different interventions and with different abilities, needs and interests. What is most important is the intention of involving children at all levels of the youth justice service across the participation continuum.

We suggest it's useful to think of participation as a non-linear journey, that is more part of service culture, a way of being rather than a way of doing.

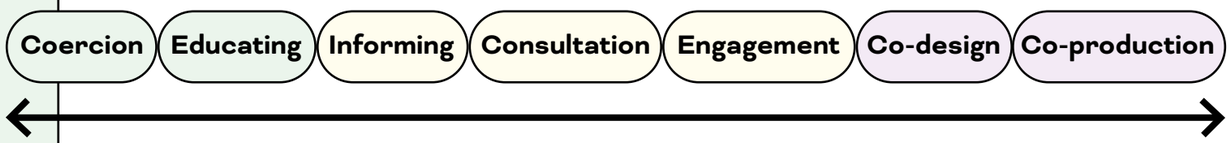


Figure 2. Peer Power's Participation Continuum

Introduction

Pages 8 - 12

Project context

Pages 14 - 15

Project methodology

Pages 16 - 20

Project context

The YJB for England and Wales has a vision to build a youth justice system that sees children as children, treats them fairly and helps them to build on their strengths so they can make a constructive contribution to society. This means a commitment to looking beyond the need to stop a child offending in the short term, to help them desist in the longer term, so they can make a positive contribution to the community they live in. This will, in turn, prevent offending and create safer communities with fewer victims.

Child First

This project sits within the Child First strategic objective workstream as part of the 2020-21 YJB overarching strategic objectives. It aligns to the third principle: 'encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work promotes desistance through co-creation with children.'

Child First is an evidence-based positive youth justice philosophy representing a rights and strengths-based way of working with children in the youth justice system appropriate to their age, maturity and needs. It represents a guiding principle for the YJB and for youth justice work across England and Wales. Meaningful participation and co-creation with children who have lived experience can improve outcomes for children and is therefore a core tenet of Child First.

Importantly for the success of this project, these principles and ways of working are intrinsically aligned with Peer Power's approach to engagement and our organisational values.

Project objectives:

In January 2021, work began on the YJB commissioned project in partnership with Peer Power Youth for the delivery of this project. The objectives of the project were:

- Explore participation in the youth justice context.
- Identify examples of good participatory practice, methods, techniques and meaningful engagement with children.
- Develop resources for YJS to help them develop participatory approaches that are bespoke to different elements of the youth justice system.
- Identify what lessons can be learned and disseminated.

Hopes for the project from Peer Power Experts:

At the start of the project Peer Power Experts were asked about their hopes for the project:

"Implement some systems change or help them [YJS] to develop and engage their ways of working."

"Making it the norm for co-production and making sure they [children] are equal partners to it not an accessory that looks good for PR."

"Co-creation needs to be normal and YJS need to work harder to be more empathetic and less victim-blaming."

"Co-creation should be normalised and at the forefront of everything they do."

"I hope from this work that [youth justice] organisations can see the value of co-creation and how it can empower both professionals and children to create a more empathic service and be more inclusive."

"Co-creation can create long lasting change and organisations should be proud to take that first step in making an equal ground."

Project methodology

Eight Peer Power Experts and peer leaders were involved in the design and delivery of the project, alongside the working group. Throughout the stages of the project, from deciding the survey questions together, to determining the focus and design of the Deep Dive sessions, the Peer Power Experts and those in the working group agreed to explore complexity around participation and co-creation in a youth justice context, specifically in the following areas:

- enquiry into the role of power and consent between children and YJS practitioners
- to what extent was relational, trauma-responsive, caring practice for children and practitioners embedded as an approach at the YJS, and the links to participation and involvement identified?
- inclusivity and visibility in services: was it evident that the YJS included children in its services through employment, voice and influence activities and explicit anti-oppressive practice?
- geographical settings of YJS, and digital participation
- establishing whether YJS could differentiate between the different levels and types of participation and co-creation
- identifying whether YJS evaluated the impact of their participation and co-creation work, for children, practitioners and the whole service

Activity

The above were to be achieved through the following activities:

- Phase 1 – A survey to determine the nature and extent of participatory practice in YJS across England and Wales. The survey was co-created with children who have lived experience and are currently engaged with Peer Power. The survey questions can be found in the appendix, and the full results of the survey from YJB Resource Hub.
- Phase 2 – Identify a small number of justice services to take part in Deep Dive sessions to take a deeper look at their participatory practice, and any lessons learned about digital and remote engagement with children and families.
- Phase 3 – Development of a co-created report and resource pack that adds to current materials, developed in response to the views of those involved with the project across Peer Power and YJS

Phase 1: Survey

ClearView Research used Peer Power's extensive knowledge of participatory approaches in youth justice and, alongside the Peer Power Experts and the working group, co-created an online survey for YJS across England and Wales. The survey questions were developed collaboratively with children and the working group over three sessions through a process of identifying hopes for the project, then priorities for theme areas, before finally honing the final questions.

The aim of the survey was to gather and share examples of participatory practice and co-creation with the sector, and determine the extent of participatory practice across the YJS, including identifying innovative practice examples.

The survey was designed to be answered by both or either, the YJS manager or the YJS lead for participation. This allowed us to collate information with mostly quantitative and some qualitative data to gather baseline information and to capture a snapshot about the understanding of participation by YJS.

The results identified some services to take part in the Deep Dive sessions in Phase 2 of the project. The survey was live to all YJS between 1 February 2021 and 24 February 2021 after being disseminated by the YJB and included the half term holiday period. The YJB supported the completion of surveys by alerting YJS through a story in their bulletin, via regional leads and through email reminders.

There are a total of 154 YJS in England and Wales. We received 75 responses from across all YJS England and Wales and individual responses accounted for 48.7% of all YJS. Having nearly half of all YJS providing a response, the data collected is sufficient to gain insights into the experiences of YJS in England and Wales but not enough to make broad statements or conclusions. The results of the survey can be seen in the 'Survey Results: Participation and co-creation in the Youth Justice System' report, in the resource pack. Figure 3 provides a clearer picture of where the responses came from regionally: ***Where is your YJS based?***

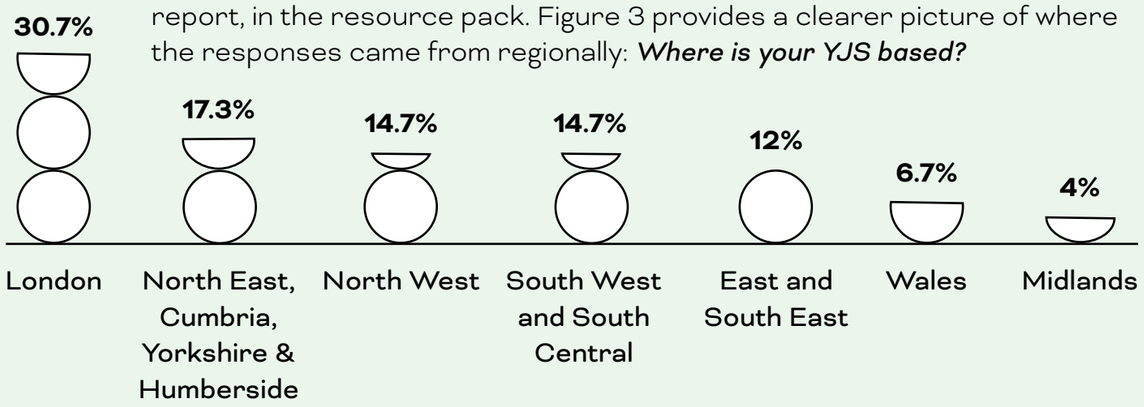


Figure 3. The geographic location of the responding YJS

Phase 2: Deep Dive sessions

In the Deep Dive we set out to further explore what the concepts of participatory and co-creative practices look like in youth justice and how they are being implemented. To achieve this, the following objectives were developed in response to the themes emerging from the survey data in Phase 1:

1. Explore and understand the knowledge, understanding and practice of participation within the YJS, learning about their experiences of achievements, methods and barriers.
2. Identify specific learning and resources available to share with the wider youth justice sector.
3. Co-create principles for a working participation culture (which involves inclusion, sharing power, trauma responsive and relational approaches, positive/asset based approaches, and evaluation).
4. Examine the implications of the children's rights agenda and its relationship to participatory youth justice practices.

The Peer Power team made efforts to reach services across diverse geographical areas in England and Wales, and including North East, North West, Midlands, London, Wales and South West. Over 70% of YJS indicated they would like to take part in the Deep Dive sessions with Peer Power. The final YJS chosen were selected on the basis of geography, size of YJS, and the types of participation examples and barriers they had given in the survey so that we could ensure we had a diverse and representative section of services to explore participatory practice further with. Consideration was also given as to which YJS were able to attend in the time slots available.

There were four Deep Dive sessions consisting of a 90-minute Zoom session. Each of four digital Deep Dive sessions had a maximum of eight attendees. In total there were:

- 15 practitioners and managers
- 2 children
- 3 young adults

involved in the Deep Dive sessions from four YJS. Peer Power Experts, a member of the working group and the Peer Power youth engagement team were also present at the Deep Dive sessions. A further three YJS were involved via telephone sessions as they were unable to attend the full Deep Dive sessions.

The Deep Dive sessions were co-created with the working group and the Peer Power Experts. Children informed the activity design of the digital sessions and the learning outcomes, and were involved in the sessions in roles such as leading in different sections, facilitating debates, coaching sessions and managing the IT and music throughout.
As part of the Deep Dive sessions, a series of activity-oriented techniques were used, which were multi-method and creative to encourage all participants, children and adults, each with varied interpersonal and communication skills, to express their viewpoints and perspectives.

The sessions included a series of icebreaker activities, interactive digital tools such as Mentimeter, and coaching. We wanted to ensure that participating YJS gained tools, coaching and techniques around digital participation experientially by taking part in the project as an added benefit/incentive to involvement.

Using these techniques enabled the researchers to gather unique perspectives, and co-construct data that was authentic and credible (Case and Haines, 2014; Bryman, 1988). Data was analysed and subject to critical reflection, which involved formulating initial codes, and constructing and revising themes (Braun and Clark, 2006; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), which form the three sections of this report.

As part of each Deep Dive session, there was a significant focus on identifying best practice in the field of youth justice, which involved actively highlighting people's strengths and accomplishments (Liebling and Arnold, 2004; Robinson, et al., 2014). There was also a commitment to provide constructive feedback to the YJS who took part through coaching and mentoring exercises.

Ethics

It was explained to all participants that it was completely their choice if they wanted to take part in this project. An information sheet and consent form were sent to each participant before the Deep Dive session began. If participants decided to leave the study, it was possible to withdraw research data up to seven calendar days following the session. It was explained that after this time it wasn't possible to remove research information relating to participants because the interview would have been transcribed and anonymised. YJS practitioners and managers are not identified in the report to maintain anonymity. Other examples of participatory practice we found are included through the report and in the Directory of Participation produced as a resource from the project.

All the activities of this project were conducted according to the nine principles of quality child participation as set forth in The Right of the Child to be Heard, General Comment Number 12 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009)

GDPR: All data collected was used fairly, stored safely, and not disclosed to any other person unlawfully. All participants agreed for the Deep Dive sessions to be recorded. Once the sessions had ended the recording was transcribed and all the participants were provided with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Phase 3:
Development of a report and resource pack

The Peer Power Experts and working group spent time analysing and reflecting on the data and the themes emerging as a whole from phase 1 and phase 2. All agreed that the resources needed to identify key principles underpinning good participatory practice, add to the resources and literature that exists and avoid duplication, identify good practice examples across the sector and tangibly support YJS in their journeys to co-creation.

An explainer document has been created to support the use of the resource pack accompanying this project.

Findings and insight
Quantitative findings

1. Nearly 90% of YJS surveyed stated that participatory approaches were mostly utilised on an individual level.

2. The majority of YJS ranked their understanding and implementation of participatory approaches with children in the decision-making process as good or satisfactory.

3. just over 1 in 5 YJS ranked their implementation of these approaches as poor or very poor.

The survey and the Deep Dive were designed to explore what participation and co-creation activity was happening across YJS, and how well YJS understood levels of participation and co-creation, types of participatory activities, the resources allocated to participation, and to learn about any barriers they faced.

Some of the key findings were:

1. The individual level being where children are included in decisions when it relates to them or how a service affects them. The least used participatory approaches that YJS use with children is at the strategic level.

2. This was common across the individual; operational; and strategic levels.

Interestingly, although the majority of YJS (87.8%) stated that participatory approaches were mostly utilised on an individual level, 3.

Further analysis from the survey highlighted that the YJS reported that they utilise participatory approaches at a strategic level tended to include children in the production of the annual Youth Justice Plan which YJS produce ***(see Figure 4)***.

Do you involve young people in your Youth Justice Strategic Plan?

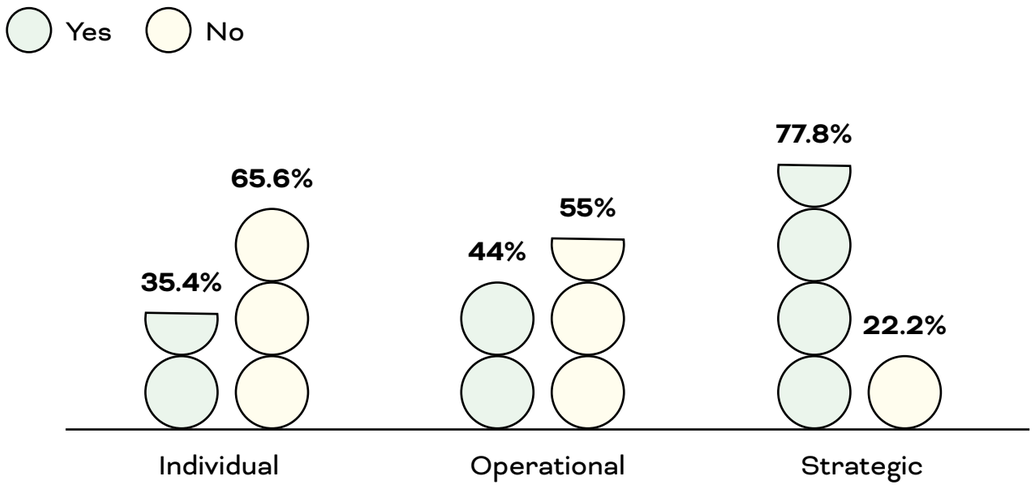


Figure 4. A cross analysis of levels at which participatory approaches are used and involvement of children in the Youth Justice Strategic Plan

Defining co-creation and participation

One of the key findings that came out of the survey and Deep Dive was the ambiguity around how different YJS define participation and co-creation. We asked the Peer Power Experts to define the different degrees of participation on the co-production ladder ***(see table 1)***.

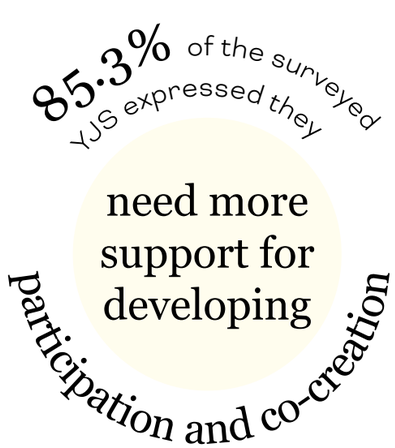
When focusing on the respondents who stated they were confident that they knew the differences between the different degrees of participation on Peer Power's Participation Continuum, **well over two-thirds described co-creation differently.**

This conflict indicates that it is likely therefore that many YJS are involving children in participation at an engagement level, believing it to be a co-creation level.

On this premise, it can be concluded that children are currently limited in their involvement at certain stages of the planning and delivery of the services that affect them.

However, importantly, over 4 in 5 YJS did gather feedback from children about their experiences at the service.

Table 1:	*The different degrees of participation on the co-production ladder*
Term:	Definition:
Co-production	Children and practitioners work together from the beginning to plan and deliver the services that affect them.
Co-creation	Children are only involved at certain stages of the planning and delivery of the services that affect them.
Engagement	Children are given opportunities to express their views and might be able to influence some decisions about the services that affect them.
Consultation	Children are asked to give their opinion e.g. through surveys but do not have the opportunity to influence decisions about the services that affect them.
Informing	Children are simply told about the decision and its effect on the services that affect them.



Of those that had, **only 19% said the role was resourced and budgeted for.**

It was expressed by YJS practitioners that participatory methods with children are often used in silos, with just individuals or a single team leading on it, rather than as a whole service approach. Therefore, what could help them on their journey to implementing co-creation would be sharing and learning knowledge on:

- how to involve children creatively who engage less, and in groups, especially for YJS that cover large geographical areas where group engagement can be difficult, and changing engagement styles as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing restrictions,
- conducting meaningful evaluations and gathering insightful feedback; and
- budgeting and making use of available resources.

A sketchnote with highlights from the survey has been produced as a resource from this project.

Figure 7. Findings from the YJS Surveys: What our research revealed

Findings and insight
Qualitative findings

For this report we've separated our findings into three main sections, interweaving some data from the survey, the Deep Dive sessions and sessions with Peer Power Experts and working groups at Peer Power. Each section had a lead researcher, however all parts of the project had involvement from the group to ensure continuous co-creation.

These sections are:

1: Strengths, not offence: Taking a strengths-based approach in YJS

- Finding a positive balance through a strengths-based approach
- Working with, not doing to people
- Promoting trust while managing risk
- Overcoming barriers through practitioners and service culture
- Thinking about the way we talk

2: Children's participation rights
(Lead Author: Dr Sean Creaney)

- A difficult balance? Dual role of enforcer and enabler
- Power-sharing
- Experiential peer support
- Time management
- Understanding what 'good' participation looks like
- Do children's voices have influence?

3: Participation and co-creation in practice
(Lead Author: Dr Samantha Burns)

- The journey to co-creation
- Resources for evolving practice: participation leads, partnerships and children's expertise
- Incentives for children
- Participation in high risk meetings
- Digital participation

1: Strengths, not offence: Taking a strengths-based approach in YJS

In our research with YJS, reflections on language, person-centred work, and the management of risk and trust, all suggested that a focus on strengths-based practice as a topic would help us understand the experiences of practitioners and children.

To explore strengths-based practice, it is first helpful to recognise the wider asset-based philosophy it forms part of, understanding its significance as an approach that seeks to: 'redress the balance between meeting needs and nurturing the strengths and resources of people and communities' (Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 2012).

We found that in the YJS who took part in this project, this question of balance and power was evidenced through two central oppositions that determined how far practitioners could be identified as working in a strengths-based way:

- managing risks while responding to children's needs and interests
- fulfilling specific roles in the legal system while meeting children's rights

A strengths-based approach was very much about engaging all children in terms of their strengths, not offence, in terms of language, focus and relationships.

Finding a positive balance through a strengths-based approach

For a service wanting to be strengths-based, it proved important to begin to get the balance right, starting with a greater focus on, and expectations for, the child. **Fundamental to this is 'a belief that children who offend are first and foremost children' (Surrey Youth Justice Partnership, 2015)** . This was movingly captured in an interview with a YJS practitioner who compared her expectations for individuals in the justice system with her own children:

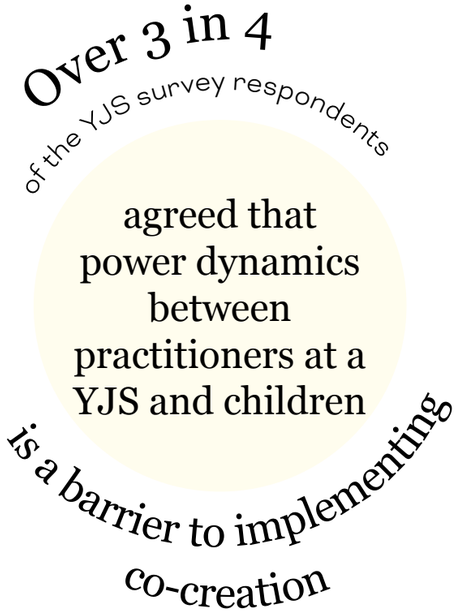
> "I would not want them to be treated like criminals, I would not want them to be sitting down all day and talk about their problems and the problems with the world. I would want them to be able to broaden their horizons and walk away from their experience feeling like their life is better [...] I feel like there is an element of what we do that is aside from crime, they [children] are human beings."

Other services equally **stressed the importance of simply acknowledging the power imbalance**, as a practitioner noted:

> "**you can be very human and transparent** about the interaction between you, and **you can show understanding of that imbalance** and be clear, to the young person you're working with, about where they can make a difference."

Responses from other practitioners acknowledged a limit to how far a YJS could work in the same strengths-based way as a traditional youth service:

> "there is a power imbalance and I'm not sure how you get out of that [...] I think it is difficult because we are statutory service and a lot of the work that we do is mandatory appointments, to be reaching out from around being that and being more of a volunteering youth service kind of approach – that's really hard [...]"



Further analysis highlighted that over half of the YJS that agreed power affects the degree of participation that takes place, also think that **existing relationships can be a barrier to co-creation, indicating that relationship building methods in YJS could be further developed to enhance participation.**

Practitioners equally recognised:

> "we try to give as much agency as we can to children, within the parameter that we operate in a system....we just think of the risks that might happen or that could happen and what are the consequences to us, and that puts us off from doing anything."

However, **within the limiting parameter of this system, some strengths-based approaches were still applied as a way to reclaim positive balance**, as practitioners noted in practice that recognised future goals along with current needs:

> "**we have been doing a lot of work with action plans with young people so rather than focusing on their offence it's more about what is going to move them forwards with their future** [...] We are really trying to look at behaviours as a symptom of need and trying to understand behaviour in that way, rather than, you know, high risk."

Practitioners appear to:

> "recognise it [risk] can be a bit of a barrier so we need to recognise needs and show that you [children] are good for something."

In this context, needs as opposed to risk implied more positive progression on the asset-based continuum, away from deficits or an offence-focus to a more holistic appreciation of the person. Practitioners at one service drew attention to the potential to:

> "make it [the guidelines] more personable so people don't feel like they have to be robots around these young people."

This was equated to producing a strengths-based report but what was more strengths-based in the example offered was the actual process followed in terms of being:

> "fair with that young person that you've asked for their views."

Working with, not doing to people

Strengths-based practice is often described as an approach that is more about 'working with' rather than 'doing to' people (McCashen, 2005). Many of these 'working with' characteristics were identified in examples of good practice from the services we researched, with the top five including:

1. being solution-focused to find what works instead of just breaching a child who was deemed to be not engaging
2. addressing the interests of the individual instead of their offending behaviour
3. developing plans in which a child had genuine voice and control
4. creating safe places for children to talk and engage in relational and trauma responsive ways
5. always listening and asking children for their views at every opportunity.

Trauma-responsive practice can also encompass strengths-based and relationship focussed practice. For example, the Trauma and ACE informed toolkit used in Wales (TrACE), covers areas of; safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment and trust (relationships and trustworthiness). ***Further information about the toolkit can be found in the resources section of the appendix.***

At its most misunderstood, a strengths-based perspective was sometimes limited to referring to just a child with a creative talent rather than embracing a wider understanding of all people's diverse abilities. **Being able to identify people more broadly as 'assets with skills' (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2015) is a key principle for co-creation to exist**. Importantly though, as services were able to reflect, it was helpful for practitioners to think more about and recognise children's potential talents:

> "we have been in danger of actually doing a lot 'to' and 'with' young people, where actually young people have got the creatively and ability to show us [...] we have forgotten the talents that young people have."

Some references to strengths-based practice did suggest it had become diminished as a buzzword in the sector, but there were good examples of how strengths-based awareness was translated by practitioners into more authentic relational practice, so that practitioners could offer:

> "that warmth, trust, consistency and attentiveness to their [children's] needs and making sure that they [were] rewarded for what they do."

In a follow up session, Peer Power Experts recommended that YJS should be encouraged to reflect more on how a strengths-based approach is actually expressed in their practice, for which the example characteristics identified above might prove helpful as sources of inspiration.

Promoting trust while managing risk

Services shared a lot of examples about the time and commitment required to listen, build trust and create meaningful relationships with mutual respect and reciprocity, which are all essential elements for strengths-based practice. As one practitioner from YJS told us:

> **"Positive working relationships and trust are significant elements involved in maintaining and sustaining engagement and participation of young people."**

Trust in particular requires further unpacking, as trust-based relationships are typically hampered by transactional, formalised and risk-limiting approaches, which often leads to a conflict when services try to promote trust within systems like the justice sector that are designed on the basis that trust is not present. As one of Peer Power's Expert coaches responded to practitioners in a research session:

> "trust itself has to go both ways, and if you are worried about the risk then it becomes a barrier to trust doesn't it?"

This is an important consideration for a youth justice setting, given there were frequent references to risk from practitioners in our research. **Services must begin to recognise that risk-management concerns need to be balanced with trust-management opportunities if genuine strengths-based practice is to flourish.** Trusted relationships between practitioners and children are a foundation of embedded trauma responsive practice.

Overcoming barriers through practitioners and service culture

The top three barriers to being strengths-based that most services in our research sought to overcome were:

1. prejudices that defined children as problems to be fixed in the justice system rather than individuals with assets that could improve how the system worked
2. children feeling disempowered by having things done to them through case management rather than working with practitioners using a more person-centred focus
3. pressures to breach or exclude rather than engage those children deemed more challenging or higher risk

A significant counter to these barriers was the passion and creativity of practitioners willing to do things differently, reflected in those most committed to participatory work. **Positive practitioners and service culture are essential foundations for strengths-based practice to grow**, and these were clearly evident in most of the services we researched.

At one service:

> "a supportive senior management team and a creative team" enabled a culture where practitioners were "willing to try alternative things" and felt safe they could "be a bit more vulnerable and take the professional armour off."

Practitioners wanted to prioritise having:

> "a genuine commitment and for people to genuinely care, and for people who are actually passionate about their job and working with children."

They recognised that **children**:

> "**want staff to be passionate and show them they care [...] that's what builds the compassion and the trust.**"

Thinking about the way we talk

Strengths-based practice consciously pushes against limiting labels and language used to describe people negatively, encouraging us to reframe such deficit narratives through a positive lens. The reduction of individuals into the language of problems perpetuates an injustice that strengths-based practice should always challenge. In the context of the YJS we researched, this meant three things:

1. taking care with language to stress what children can do rather than what they can't do
2. taking time to see and understand who children are as individuals underneath the youth justice labels imposed upon them
3. ensuring that any plans written with children are in words which they themselves own and recognise.

The topic of labelling in language came up as a particularly important consideration for services to advance a strengths-based culture. For example, one service described:

> "**we were a Youth Offending Team until very recently** and now changed to Youth Justice Service so that we're not labelling; because **it's quite labelling and I think it's got a very negative connotation to it. So we've been trying to think about our language.**"

A practitioner at another service spoke powerfully from their own lived experience on the theme of how labelling operates in YJS:

> "I have noticed from very young that if the system sees something in you that they like or is going to benefit that one service or that one sector then they overlook a lot of things. But then I find that once you come into a sector such as the YOS then you are labelled as that person or into the criminal justice system you are labelled as that knife carrier or that drug dealer or that young person who exploits other young people, etc. And that really clouds the positives that people can take from working with you."

These examples emphasised the significance for services to be fully conscious of language choices. **Sometimes this was as simple as practitioners actively choosing to use more relational phrases:**

> "we use language like 'it's good to see you', 'thank you for coming', 'how are you doing?'"

Personable greetings help to push against the power of the system by stressing to children that:

> "they are the most important people in this room."

This was particularly important to one practitioner interviewed, who stressed:

> "You know they [the tabloids] say 'scum' when someone commits a crime and that extends very strangely and very horrifically to children [...] but what I am trying to do with the space that I have been given is to make sure that the young people I work with don't have to feel like that."

When questioning language choices, **care must also be taken to ensure that blanket use of the term child or children to positively reinforce Child First principles does not itself become a limiting label to shield against seeing an individual's identity and rights.** Child First principles are not about calling everyone a child; they are about recognising people's rights and status.

What matters most from a strengths-based perspective in YJS is the effort taken by practitioners to choose language and approaches that:

> "rather than focusing on their offence [...] is going to move them forwards with their future."

In this particular service, practitioners also acknowledged the creation of networks and contacts with pathways to positive outcomes, widening access to education and training opportunities to more purposefully build children's capital in ways that could enable them to thrive:

> "I use my music contacts to get opportunities for them, so I will contact the music industry and say can I get discounted tickets for things or for like nights out to go and see orchestras [...]"

Such examples emphasise a participatory rights discourse, in that it is considered pivotal that a warm, trauma responsive and caring learning environment – where individuals felt happy and safe – should be created, where children could participate without feeling judgement. As a Peer Power Expert reflected:

> "we have got to do something different to try and engage those young people in a space that they feel comfortable in and therefore can participate in [...]"

A follow up session with Peer Power Experts also highlighted the need to ensure that children are fully engaged to reflect on their own strengths. In one excellent service example, this attention to engagement meant establishing a Voices in Partnership (VIP) group to encourage participation:

> "What I love about the VIP group is that we are not there to change them or look at their offending behaviour. That's not us. They come into the group and they are important, they are VIP's!"

Treating children as VIPs reflected the extent to which some services were able to challenge labels and power dynamics in a strengths-based way.

Below are some reflections on language that have come up through the project. Shared language and terms can be co-created and agreed together.

- **Empower:** Those with power 'allow' those without power to have some power.

- **Giving a voice to...:** See above.

- **Vulnerable:** Used in assessments and as an identifier for support by practitioners about children. Can also be used as an assumption, which can be power and inequality based. It's the circumstances, structural inequality and systems that children experience that can cause problems, rather than the child being labelled as individually 'vulnerable'.

- **At risk or high risk:** As above. Children have told us how negative it felt to learn they had been identified by practitioner as either 'at risk' or 'high risk' to self or others.

- **Young Offender, Client, Caseload, Patient, Service User:** Most YJS have moved away from language labelling children as 'young offenders', and many have moved to 'youth justice services', rather than 'youth offending services'.

- **Service user:** is often used in adult services. This can serve to 'other' people making them not feel part of the community and can feel transactional. Other terms that could be used may be 'people or communities we work alongside'/'the community we work with to provide services too'/community participants' or 'community partners'. Our preferred language at Peer Power is: 'those we work in partnership with', 'peers' or 'young partners'. Terms that goes further in collaborative power-sharing could be 'co-creators', 'co-producers' or 'co-liberators'.

2: Children's participation rights

- A difficult balance?
  Dual role of enforcer and enabler
- Power-sharing
- Experiential peer support
- Time management
- Understanding what 'good' participation looks like
- Do children's voices have influence?

At the outset of each Deep Dive session, Peer Power presented the children's rights agenda and discussed its relationship to participation and co-creation. There was a sincere interest expressed by YJS practitioners in involving children in decision-making processes and to promote the voice of the child (cf. Article 12 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)) alongside the best interests of the child being the primary consideration (cf. Article 3 of the UNCRC). **Respecting and promoting children's participatory rights, notably freedom to impart ideas and be listened to** (UNICEF UK, 2020; Youth Justice Board, 2020), **was considered to be a pivotal step towards facilitating children's meaningful involvement in the design, delivery and evaluation of services.**

During the Deep Dive participants also answered questions on the benefits and challenges of recognising and realising children's participatory rights in youth justice policy and practice (UNICEF, 1989), ***see Figure 5***.

How do you demonstrate a rights based approach in your YJS? (Or) How do you think young people know that their rights are being met in the YJS?

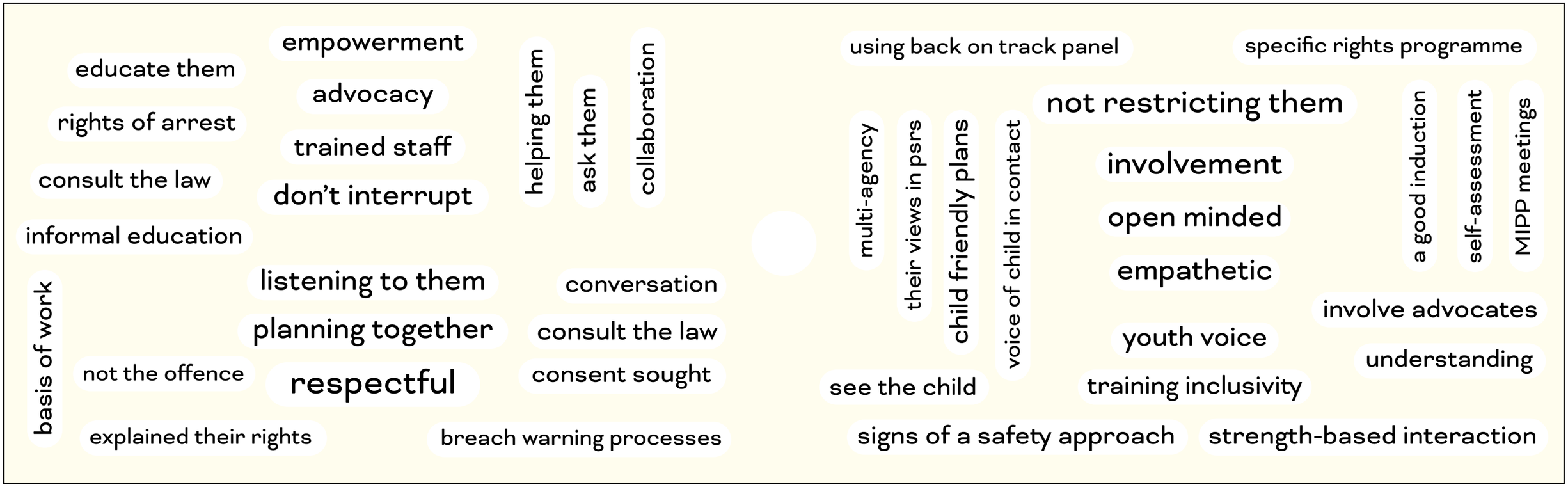


Figure 5. Recreation of the 'word clouds' created on Mentimeter during Deep Dive sessions

Respecting the child's right to decline answering questions that made them feel uneasy was also viewed to be important as one practitioner said:

> "...it is your right to go in and talk about what you want to talk about, at some point you are going to speak about these things but if somebody asks you a question you have a right to say no to it if you feel uncomfortable."

While, at times, there was no explicit reference made to Children's Rights, each service alluded to, or gave examples of, practices that could be described as being compatible with a participatory rights discourse.

A difficult balance?
Dual role of enforcer and enabler

Participants discussed the perceived paradox of enforcing compliance and co-facilitating children's participation. In other words, **many described how practitioners have the ability or power to either instigate breach proceedings or impose further sanctions for non-compliance. Some felt this acted as a barrier to recognising children's rights to participation, potentially preventing them from expressing a candid view about situations or circumstances that affect them.** A YJS case manager described it as a really difficult balance for a YOT practitioner:

> "I think participation coming from the YOT worker side of things, it's a really interesting one because there is levels of like coercion, there is certain things from the YJB and the courts, we are told young people have to do and if they don't there's consequences to that. It's a really difficult balance to try and get that participation from a YOT worker perspective."

Another practitioner gave some insight into how to deal with this challenge and navigate this complexity:

> "I was transparent at the start about what I am here to do, and what needs to be done, but then I was very clear about negotiating the process now and how you want to make it achievable – so this is what needs to be done, how can we make it happen?"

Elsewhere, one participant gave a searingly honest account of how patently difficult it can be for children to express a viewpoint to a person in a position of authority perceived, at least in part, as an enforcer by those in receipt of care and supervision:

> "It's difficult [...] to tell someone who is in a sense very in control of your life about maybe what you really feel [...]"

From a child's perspective, there may be the fear that practitioners are given carte blanche to decide a course of action considered necessary to secure compliance with an adult-led agenda. To potentially overcome this real or perceived concern, one practitioner alluded to the importance of a process of negotiation and compromise taking place, where children have opportunities to exercise agency/choice (cf. Article 12 of the UNCRC), with a view to an agreement reached whereby both stakeholders meet in the middle.

Yet practitioners also acknowledged that certain aspects of the decision-making process were non-negotiable in that children were mandated to adhere to certain requirements. This is a noticeable barrier to progressing collaborative decision-making or embedding a Child First and participatory rights-based approach.

There was an emphasis on valuing the perspectives of children by not only being interested in consulting them on matters but acting on the concerns and priorities expressed by those in receipt of interventions. According to one practitioner, this means on the one hand working collaboratively with children, and on the other hand being committed to building a culture of participation at all levels within the organisation. Crucially, a case manager aimed to promote children's agency/autonomy and practice in a manner that was compatible with children's evolving capacities (cf. Article 12 of the UNCRC):

> "In terms of the way I work with young people, it depends on [their] level of maturity and ability [...]"

Power-sharing

Eliciting authentic and meaningful input from children, though, involves forming an alliance between children and practitioners, and a commitment to equal power sharing. Importantly, a rights-based approach comprises a bona fide commitment to the practice of 'information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 2009), and simultaneously, as a practitioner mentioned, a firm commitment to valuing children's engagement, by expressing gratitude to children for sharing their insights.

While it was acknowledged that there can be some resistance from practitioners, to relinquishing forms of power and control, **one practitioner emphasised the importance of having a conversation with children about the extent to which children want to occupy control over the agenda-setting and decision-making.** While versatility and adaptability were considered key components of effective relationship building, correcting a noticeable imbalance of power was thought to be an issue difficult to reconcile.

Other aspects that were considered – as part of the essential criteria for a trusted relationship to develop – related to responses to children being 'fair' and 'just' (Haines and Case, 2015). **It was considered pivotal that children were treated in a way that was perceived to be legitimate, which includes a clear explanation for why certain decisions were being made:**

> "I think it's about making sure you feel like you have been fair with that young person [...] it's asking the young person, being honest with the young person; we can't always do everything that they'd like us to do but I think it's being able to rationalise that and give a reason why you can't do that and try to be as honest with them as you can."

Another practitioner reflected on the challenges involving children in the decision making process:

> "It's how do you reach those 'unreachable' young people and I'm sure they are not unreachable but for some reason [...] I know I have a history where I've struggled with some young people just because and I feel like I have tried different options but whatever is going on for them at that point just means that I can't reach them; and maybe I'm not going to be able to, maybe it's not a reachable moment, but [...] I really want to. And I think it's really important that we get to those young people."

And another reflected:

> "There is no hiding the fact that young people are involved with YJS due to their involvement in the criminal justice process so the very basis of the initial engagement cannot be deemed voluntary [...] if there is active demonstration that young people are being heard and placed in a position to actively bring about meaningful change in partnership with the board and others who make key decisions about the running of the YJS, this can go a long way to countering the power imbalance that is at play from the outset."

Experiential peer support

During many of the Deep Dive sessions **it was considered crucial that practitioners help children to understand their participatory rights and capture all voices, respecting, promoting and safeguarding children's right to freedom of expression** (cf. Article 13 of the UNCRC) as according to one child:

> "Everyone is different. They have different learning needs, different way of communicating, different way of expressing ourselves…"

One way to promote children's participatory rights and to foster a culture of co-creation is through progressing forms of experiential peer support, a practice with principles grounded in equality and inclusivity. Other core components include trust and reciprocity.

> "[…] a training session that I have been creating is around the participation of young people and why we disengage. So it's to explain from our lived experience as young people why we didn't engage in services. And it's not about pushing blame onto people. It's about making people understand our own feelings and our reactions and the way in which we took in information. Like I said because we co-produced these things with young people… we get even the younger generation giving us information that we no longer are involved with because we have been away from the system for so long […]"

During a telephone interview with a practitioner from a YJS, there was discussion around how to involve children with lived experience of their service in leading conversations about children's human rights. At another YJS this type of practice is more established. They have appointed children to peer roles. Also known as peer mentors, children involved in these roles were considered to be positive influences, and described as occupying an important role, actively involved in shaping the design, delivery and evaluation of YJS:

Experiential peers were considered capable of being able to connect with others. Their lived experiences can help them to employ appropriate methods to facilitate positive outcomes, especially with those children not routinely invited to co-create practice:

> "It [is] good to get someone who is a positive peer, someone who's been involved and has come out the other side, maybe. I don't know if that gives them something back. If you can get somebody to lead it!"

Time management

However, a practitioner from **one YJS alluded to her other job requirements being potential stumbling blocks in terms of facilitating projects of this type**, and reflected on other pressures and constraints, including time management:

> "I suppose a lot of it is time management, understanding the time management of: how do we shift between dedicating time for putting together a youth group within the YOT as well as managing everything else that you need to do alongside your job?"

Elsewhere, managerialism and bureaucracy were key challenges:

> "And how to fit that in with, as a YOT case manager, getting pressured by the courts or the panel members or by senior management to get the case closed or to get this done in a certain way."

Other constraints:

> "There are a lot of young people who come through the service who you will never hear from and because people are always busy, workers are always busy, case managers are always busy, it's hard."

> "Being such a large service geographically so a bit dislocated and disconnected […] we have really struggled to do some of the things that you and other services would think are the basics, like recruitment selection, and having kind of service-user groups, and that's not because we haven't tried but because we haven't been able to land it consistently."

This was all alongside the difficulty balancing focus on children's rights with implementing risk-reduction strategies, as acknowledged above.

Understanding what 'good' participation looks like

When asked what they think good participation looks like from the perspective of children within their service, practitioners mostly spoke from their own perspective, but included terms such as: **transparency; honesty; rapport; clarity; understanding; consistency and trust** (Youth Justice Board, 2016). It was mentioned by several practitioners that the **relationship** plays a crucial role, especially in terms of **breaking down power inequalities** and in **achieving the co-creation of knowledge production** (Burns, 2019; Smithson, et al., 2020).

One participant expressed the need to be **alert to, and tolerant of, forms of bottom up resistance**. This type of practice does not mean condoning offending behaviour:

> "We are trying to get the young person not to re-offend, so the more we push against them, the less likely they are to engage with us, so one of the terms we use is called 'rolling with resistance'."

To bolster compliance with court order requirements, this practitioner expressed the need to adopt a standpoint that is, to a degree, responsive to children's concerns:

> "[We] try to embed some time for that member of staff to spend time with that young person and work with them over a period where they can have a bit of an agreement between them, and that's why we talk about collaboration and setting goals and learning to improve and empower, but also there for supporting what the court needs to do to keep the community safe and keep that young person's risk down."

While there was consideration of methods or strategies to prevent further offending and reduce risk, there was a conscious effort to spotlight children's priorities. This latter focus is an important formative step towards ensuring children experience a rich and fulfilling childhood (Creaney and Case, 2021).

At the same time, it was emphasised that within the youth justice context there is a responsibility element of participation, as this YJS practitioner explains:

> "There is a responsibility for children to participate, and I've never hidden that, they have to participate and there is a consequence attached to it if they don't."

When children are more resistant, there is a potential consequence: non-participation or sporadic engagement. This can result in children having to attend non-compliance meetings or can lead to breach proceedings being triggered. Regarding the latter, it is unclear to what extent children's rights are upheld in these processes.

Elsewhere, practitioners explained and discussed the importance of **creating opportunities for children to be given a degree of ownership and responsibility over approaches in practice**. Other key components for effective participatory practice include **authentic listening to children, promoting the voice of the child, acting on their concerns, and communicating how children's input has made a difference** at the point of service delivery:

> "Most importantly that we listen, and not just that we listen but we hear what they are saying and follow through with what they are saying [...] they just want to see that I care, that I'm interested, that I'm bothered and that I am hearing them."

While there is acknowledgement of the importance of relationships for good participation, within the youth justice setting the tension of children having limited choice but a heavy responsibility to participate was mentioned, especially in relation to satisfying the requirements of court orders.

> "Sitting there and talking about anything was good participation, I didn't need to talk about my offence or the reason I was actually there, just actually having someone to talk to [...] talking about what they [children] actually want to talk about."

Children who have been engaged with YJS in the past, and were involved in peer mentoring roles took part in the Deep Dive sessions, and shared their perspective on good participation and agreed mostly it was about **providing a space to be heard, to also be seen as a human being first**, not viewed through their offending behaviour:

> "**I feel the most important thing in the service is** probably the fact that you need **to help people empower themselves.**"

Do children's voices have influence?

Those who participated in the Deep Dive sessions indicated that a participatory rights discourse – an integral element of the most recent General Comment No.24 on Children's Rights in the Child Justice System (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019) – underpinned aspects of the decision making process or at least guided responses to children in practice. However, there was at least some uncertainty concerning the extent to which children's voices, when they expressed them, had influence at the coalface:

> "We've had a lot of organisations come in to ask young people things which is very heart-warming, having those conversations, but I have had experience of that sort of thing where there is a feedback loop which never closes – where is the report? What did the young people say which actually changed things or influenced this new policy or report or something tangible so they know they are not just chatting; they are making a difference."

One practitioner was of the view that the process becomes tokenistic if children's participation results in little or no change to their situation or how the service operates (Tisdall et al., 2008). This can be counterproductive in the sense that this experience can be demotivating for the child. Such a situation may exacerbate feelings of disempowerment and trigger a sense of hopelessness.

It's important to carefully reflect on whether children's voices do make a difference, and if so, to what extent. As the quote above illustrates, practitioners must value children's input, and show this by articulating, in a meaningful way, not only how the contributions of all those involved in the consultative process are appreciated but crucially whether their suggestions for improvement will be actioned.

3: Participation and co-creation in practice

- The journey to co-creation
- Resources for evolving practice: participation leads, partnerships and children's expertise
- Incentives for children
- Participation in high risk meetings
- Digital participation

The journey to co-creation

During the Deep Dive sessions and phone interviews, one of the objectives was to understand the extent of co-creation and participation practices by practitioners, to learn more about how they unfolded, what methods merit appreciation, and what challenges are still faced that need to be addressed. During the Deep Dive sessions, Peer Power shared two models of participation, Roger Hart's ladder of participation (Hart, 1992) and Peer Power's Participation Continuum – one a hierarchy and one a continuum – acknowledging that it's not always feasible to reach the top rungs of co-creation and co-production with children. Rather, it's beneficial to see a non-hierarchical continuum that is fluid and dynamic in response to specific youth justice contexts and needs of the children involved.

The models became a useful catalyst for reflecting on what types of participation and co-production are prevalent within the different YJS in practice. All services appeared to be at different stages on a journey towards involving practices of co-production including co-creation and co-design.

A participation practitioner from one YJS spoke about the importance of needing to differentiate between types of participation so that the value of co-creation can really stand out, to understand:

> "how deeply young people are included in the process".

This was explained by approaching children at the earlier stages of decision-making processes and drawing on the principles of participation by asking children from the outset:

> "What should the piece of work look like? And how can we pull it together?"

This was essential to move beyond 'a chat around the table' and make sure children are active co-producers sharing decisions with adults.

Echoing the strengths-based narrative from the previous chapter, and reports on culture in the youth justice system (Hart and Thompson, 2009, Nacro 2008), Peer Power expressed during the Deep Dive sessions that '**the most important thing is that there's a culture of participation and an intention around participation and moving through the continuum**'.

One YJS shared that there is still a culture among practitioners where they think about children as:

> "well they're here because they've offended."

So, this needs to be changed.

Whereas, in other services, there appeared to be more of a sense that participation processes were embedded, and an emphasis on not being 'tokenistic', such as participation not just being for inspections or audits.

In another YJS there was an understanding that more could be done to strengthen co-creation and co-design with children. Nonetheless, within their service, the culture emphasised more freedom and creativity for participation initiatives to develop;

> "I do think one of the biggest strengths is the autonomy afforded to us and the creativity we can use [...] there's not really any limits."

Some practitioners described their journey to co-production as difficult and hard work especially in a risk-based environment, but said they were open to new ideas and learning. Similarly, another YJS shared how their YJS are still venturing towards co-production:

> "I don't think we are there yet in terms of co-production."

Those that were further along their journey to incorporating more co-production practices went beyond individual participation and included children in co-designing aspects of service provision. In practice, most participation was focused on individual plans for children's orders. While this is an important aspect of service delivery, with individual levels of participation, it appeared that there was less shared decision-making, and instead the concept of giving agency prevailed;

> "It is about giving them the agency to help them decide they want to do certain things."

The caution with this terminology is, it can lead to participation simply being seen as a form of being involved in an activity, rather than sharing power in planning and design processes. It appeared to become increasingly important to differentiate the types of participation and co-production and use the terminology of co-production.

At the same time, one doesn't have to be more important than the other because it does have to be carefully contextualised. **The varied responses show that each local YJS is at a different stage of co-production, which isn't to suggest some are better, but** in practice, **those who were more successful were those who had particular resources for evolving practice, understood the role and value of incentives for children, and were able to use dynamic ways of engaging with children.**

Resources for evolving practice: participation leads, partnerships and children's expertise

It was often explained by YJS practitioners that the youth justice environment isn't designed for participation and there are many missed opportunities due to administrative commitments. In practice, participation and co-creation were more absent where practitioners talked about how they were too busy, as discussed in the time management section above, as well as where managerialism and bureaucracy were identified as challenges for case managers having to satisfy senior management or the courts, rather than spend their time focusing on co-producing with children.

While one YJS manager noted challenges from a more senior level, it was detected that there were also tensions between management and frontline practitioners:

> "Getting young people involved in the design of the service and processes that we follow is a challenge that I'd like to embark on but I'm pragmatic and think it's hard enough managing staff to achieve these things before broadening it out and involving children."

This comment drew attention to wider organisational challenges and the morale of practitioners. It's concerning that if practitioners are not involved in design and delivery, then does it raise a barrier of practitioners feeling equally powerless and not afforded a space to be listened to? As reported previously, the hierarchal nature of YJS can be a challenge for co-production, which emphasises equality.

Lack of resources to dedicated participation practitioners seemed to be another challenge to achieving co-production.

Over 1/2 (57.3%) of those who responded to the survey, reported that they were not the lead person for participation in their YJS

Over 1/3 of YJS (39.5%) said that their YJS do not have a designated participation lead

58.1% of YJS have a participation lead.

Of the YJS who have a designated participation lead,

only 18.6% said that this is a resourced role that is funded and budgeted for.

Whilst **69.8% of YJS said that the lead participation role is an additional responsibility and attached to another role.**

In line with the survey responses, the Deep Dive sessions uncovered differences between YJS with regards to a dedicated participation practitioner role. Some practitioners or managers took this on as an additional duty alongside their full-time role, whereas other services had a fully resourced participation role.

One practitioner's explanation identifies difficulties of not having the resourced role:

> "I think it's really crucial getting a [participation] lead. I know that if I could dedicate my time to this I feel like I'd be able to pull more from it, but when you have got all your other work going on as well...how do we shift between [priorities]?"

Those **services with dedicated participation leads can be a model for learning**. Some said they thought a dedicated participation practitioner requires a specific skillset, e.g. the ability to network and search for funding opportunities, with time and energy to be creative and flexible:

> "If I was going to write a job description [for a youth participation worker] I would definitely put into the spec that the person has the ability to network and create partnerships and broker opportunities, that's what makes the difference and that is what brings the consistency."

This creativity and flexibility could even alleviate the barriers to participation by those practitioners in a more formal authority position with children. **By directing resources to participation and co-creation it can help to create that important culture and intention of participation with children.**

Furthermore, **dedicated participation practitioners** worked in partnership with specialist organisations with a mission of embedding children's participation and the necessary knowledge and independence to consistently co-create with children, in creative ways, through advisory groups. A YJS participation practitioner explains the Voices in Partnership (VIP) group she facilitates:

> "I have a wonderful group who I work with, they are very cohesive and most of them finish their order and then come back because they enjoy it. I feel the onus is on me to provide a warm and caring environment [...] **one of the reasons why I think the group is so successful is because we engage them creatively**, like we are doing a project now where they are allowed to be creative and I think that it is important, to reflect upon what their needs are and what their interests are, as well as having the consistency."

From the Deep Dive sessions, it became apparent that **there may be scope to encourage YJS to build stronger partnerships with local community groups or charities that specialise in participation and co-creation, or who already have an established model of a young advisory group. These organisations can do so much more in terms of creativity and consistency, as well as share resources and skills to create a more profound impact.**

Thinking beyond immediate co-production work, **this may also promote pathways to support desistance, as part of this process could involve offering incentives to children to participate. Collaboration with a partner organisation can provide an abundance of employment and education opportunities beyond the scope of the child's supervision order within their local YJS.** Most importantly, it is using children's expertise as a resource, and the appreciation of children's expertise was something absent from most of the conversations in the sessions, which is perhaps related to the varied views on the role of incentives.

Incentives for children

The role of incentives for children who participate in co-production activities is rooted in the concepts of equality and reciprocity (SCIE 2015). **The basis of an equal, reciprocal partnership enables children to feel their skills and expertise are needed and valued.** During Deep Dive conversations and phone interviews, there was a variety of attitudes to, and experiences of, using incentives for children who have been in conflict with the law. There were rarely any explicit examples of the type of incentives used, rather there were generic responses such as:

> "Sometimes children will be involved in set bits of work like in interview panels and there might be an incentive there, to reflect the time and assistance they have given."

The lack of a clear example provided, and suggestion that there might not always be incentives used, can be interpreted to suggest incentives are being under used and may not be perceived as an important foundation of co-production.

Others expressed ambivalence about using incentives:

> "Yeah the child has some kind of incentives to encourage them to come, but I think that can be something quite tokenistic, so I think [it could be reconsidered] what would be beneficial for that young person."

> "We do have small incentives...we do have to balance that because sometimes the benefits for young people are there anyway so it's trying to find that mutual benefit."

While another practitioner noted that resources were a constraint to providing incentives for children:

> "We don't have a huge budget, we might be able to pay micro bursaries for some of the work the young people do."

In one Deep Dive session, a YJS manager was momentarily resistant to the idea of incentives:

> "I don't want case managers to be dangling carrots to get involvement though."

This comment provided a sense that incentives were not always appropriate, which is concerning, as incentives can be viewed as showing equal value being placed on children's time and expertise. Rather than viewing incentives as a 'dangling carrot', children are more likely to become equal reciprocal partners with the use of incentives, which can overcome the power imbalance discussed previously.

Incentives for children can include doing something specific to help the service – and not just based on children's individual participation, for example in their supervision plans. Thinking about incentives helps to move thinking from individual participation to the more strategic levels.

In one YJS they had used education and vouchers as incentives but shared some of the experiences, alongside concerns they had about it, which are from a more empathic perspective where they understand that children may not want to be part of the system and so they were reflecting on how services could offer incentives more connected to the community:

> "We offered a certificate, and nobody wanted them [...] we have done the Oscars [...] we've done the vouchers, they varied, there was £5, £10. We've asked them if they wanted specific vouchers [...] We've done reparation hours [...] that tends to be a good one[...] ideally we'd like the reparation section of things to be done more directly with the community."

In one YJS, it was explained that a Youth Independent Advisory Group pays children:

> "around £11 per hour which is similar to the living wage", to put value on their time and expertise.

This service described a transition from the Voices in Partnership group for younger children, to the Youth Independent Advisory Group; this progression builds on children's professional skills and increases opportunities, such as attending the YJB conference, and being involved in steering groups at the Ministry of Justice. This progression route echoes the Peer to Professional model that Peer Power harnesses with their young partners and may be something for YJS to consider as a way to maximise participation and co-production with all children.

Some examples of incentives can be found in the resources produced for the project.

Participation in high risk meetings

Peer Power Experts were interested in the inclusivity aspect of participation within YJS, and designed a question for the Deep Dive sessions about the opportunities for children labelled high risk to participate. Practitioners responded by alluding to the risk-dominated language when describing children, and disregarding children's rights to participate at the expense of 'public safety', which correlates with the challenges raised in the previous section about 'taking a strengths-based approach'. A practitioner reflected on the importance of involving high risk children and questions why they are labelled high risk in the first place:

> "I have learnt we need to create safe spaces for people to talk, and it's the **high risk [children] who are really the most important to get feedback from – why are they high risk in the first place** or what would have helped them within the situation, or what intervention, or when would it have been useful? – you can't plan your services effectively around it otherwise."

A question was asked in the Deep Dive sessions around how children classified as high risk could be involved in decision-making, or whether practitioners thought participation was only reserved for those who are classified as low or medium risk. From the four Deep Dive sessions, responses were quite similar in that they wanted to involve those children whom they labelled high risk. This aligns with principles of co-production but there were some barriers discussed due to the normality around the use of high risk classifications;

> "We are trying as a service to do it right. We are really trying to look at behaviours as a symptom of need and trying to understand their behaviour in that way rather than you know high risk. And we try to talk to young people about high risk [terminology] and sometimes we do recognise it can be a bit of a barrier."

This service is trying to explain why they label children as high risk but are missing the reciprocity element, as there's no opportunity for children to question or share their perspective and understanding of the risk classification they're given.

Other barriers discussed included various concerns around public safety, and confidential information sharing at high risk meetings:

> "When you get into some of the practical realities of some of the young people, we have responsibility for, and are charged by the court to manage the risk the young people present and sometimes the risk present is high, like high risk of [...] violence, and we also have to be tied to the victims' code of practice to keep the victim's voice central, and usually the victims are other children themselves. Then you layer on sensitive and confidential information that might be brought into high risk meetings, by police officers for example."

On sharing these concerns, this practitioner claimed they've decided to include children's voice in the high risk meetings but without having them in the room. There was no explanation of how this was done, but this example suggests that an adult practitioners' voice is of greater value than children's in the decision-making process. Interestingly, a practitioner in the same meeting continued this discussion around children's involvement in high risk meetings by explaining an example of where a child had co-lead their own high risk meeting and been involved in shared decision-making around a risk classification;

> "I managed a nasty case with a child where there was a sexual offense against his adopted sister, over a lengthy period of time, and he actually received a custodial sentence and because of the risk being so great he actually came into a therapeutic section of custody, and he had been in this community placement for about 12 months and I went into the most amazing meeting that was chaired by him [child] which was amazing! I couldn't get over it! And he said I realise that whilst I am in this environment my risk is medium because I am safe, but I will not be safe at Christmas, and they [practitioners] said why is that? And I said, that is because my [relative] is at home and I can't be there, therefore I am at greater risk, and it was a bit of an eye opener really that they had got to that stage where he could chair his own meeting, which took an awful lot of energy and therapeutic work and a lot of support, but his risk was more manageable because he was part of the whole process and he understood it, and well, it's his risk isn't it, it's about him and that is the bit about it's not being done to him, it is acknowledging it for himself. I don't think we have got the energy or the ability or the time to be able to do it in that manner with all of our young people, BUT I would LOVE it! Wouldn't it be lovely!"

This demonstrates that **children have the capability and expertise to be co-producers with practitioners during high risk meetings. This would be empowering for the child and help them to understand their difficult life situation.**

In a different Deep Dive session, one peer trainer from a partner organisation, who has had their own experience of services, shared their experience of being labelled high risk without participating in any meetings;

> "My whole experience throughout the criminal justice system I have been deemed as high risk, whenever someone has said that to me, I have always been kind of mad jaded and confused by it. I look at myself and I go I'm a high risk? I know who I am and what I am like. How am I high risk? Just because we were high risk to not be involved in something that has led to us now being full-time workers [...] separating those [high-risk] people and segregating them and classing them in a group already takes away opportunities because of judgement and bias."

This peer trainer expressed frustration and confusion about being labelled as high risk. Increasing participation of those high risk children into meetings may help to broaden the understanding of risk classifications used in YJS. Perhaps with a Child First ethos, the high risk meetings could even undergo a language change with support and an opportunity to co-design meetings to ensure the child is listened to and involved in the decision-making process within multi-agency meetings about their safety. Even for those children who couldn't attend in person, video conferencing could enable their involvement, especially with a recent increase in digital participation techniques mused in YJS.

Digital participation

In the recent context of Covid-19, the Deep Dive sessions were an opportunity to reflect over the last 12 months of how things have changed, with children invited to participate in different ways with YJS. Some of the examples shared were:

1. phone calls and WhatsApp messaging
2. sending photos of activities done at home
3. going for walking meetings

Two services noted how their geographical space was so vast it had a negative impact on participation in practice:

> "I think the challenge has been for the county that we are, and for how big wide and long, getting young people together to discuss issues, that's always been a logistical nightmare. I think going forward, I think there are a few other things we can start using, such as teams, and doing group sessions over the internet [...] I think that's something we might need to look at."

With geographical barriers, there is certainly scope for services to develop digital participation initiatives. Further feedback after the Deep Dive sessions emphasised how much that the YJS practitioners involved in the sessions had learned from using the digital engagement tools, such as Mentimeter, and it was something they'd be interested to learn more about and use with children in their service. ***There is further information in the digital engagement resource produced as part of this project.***

Recommendations for Youth Justice Services

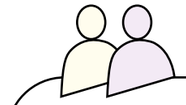
The following suite of recommendations were developed with Peer Power Experts and the working group in response to analysis and reflection of the findings from both the survey and the Deep Dive sessions and are covered in depth in each section. Many versions of the final recommendations list were created and amended, before group agreement around five themes:

- **Relate and Connect**
- **Visible and experiential power and inclusion**
- **Strengths and positivity**
- **Resources (money, time and more)**
- **Rights and Readiness**

We have grouped them into:

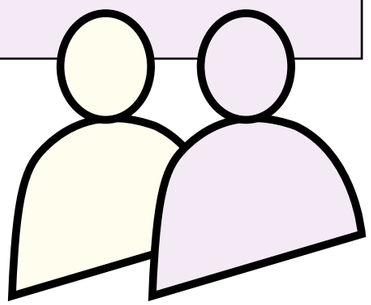
- **Quick wins**
- **Building momentum**
- **Big change**

to reflect our finding that YJS wanted to be able to self-assess and understand what they might be able to put into place quickly and what might require longer term cultural change. Peer Power Experts wanted to see that YJS were able to tangibly make changes as a result of the recommendations and resources created from the project.



Relate and Connect

Quick Wins	Prioritise time to invest in trusted, caring relationships and connection first. Start with the practitioners who support in the most relational ways and build from them.
Building Momentum	Use TrACE Toolkit (Wales) for trauma-responsive relationship based practice. Commission and embed empathy-based training and practice for children and practitioners at the service. Do not cause harm – use the Peer Power Storytelling Code of Ethics or co-create your own – ensure safe and trauma-responsive experiences of services within the work, recognising that with participation in YJS can come emotional toil, and that trauma can arise from involvement in the system and societal oppression.
Big Change	Embed trauma responsive and relational practice at the YJS for both practitioners and children and see this as a 'way of being' to create the conditions for participation. One cannot exist without the other. Embed empathy-based practice for children and practitioners at the service

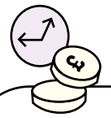


Visible and experiential power and inclusion

Quick Wins	Normalise routine conversations that acknowledge and negotiate power within the individual relationship and the service relationship. Acknowledge societal injustice and oppression of marginalised groups and take action to explore this in the YJS.
Building Momentum	Acknowledge societal injustice and oppression of marginalised groups and encourage the co-creation of projects together to take action. Invest in anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory specialist training and provision within participation design and practice to enhance inclusion
Big Change	Embed anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice to enhance inclusion and the representation of under-represented groups, including racialised people and communities, girls, those with difference in communications, disability, neurodiversity and LGBTQ+ groups Ensure recruitment strategies include the creation of paid employment roles for individuals with lived and learned experience, including apprenticeships and Peer Mentor roles.

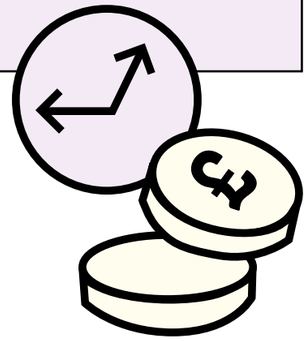
Strengths and Positivity

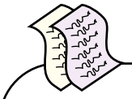
Quick Wins	Define children who use the YJS as having positive skills and expertise to contribute.
Building Momentum	Create strengths-based measurement tools to understand the readiness of children for participation in different ways in the service. Ensure that both children and practitioners develop skills, personally and professionally.
Big Change	Build strengths-based two way reciprocal relationships between YJS practitioners, children and management so that they work together to achieve their shared goals. Apply strengths-based approaches in practice, including co-creating positive language used about children in all communications.



Resources (money, time and more)

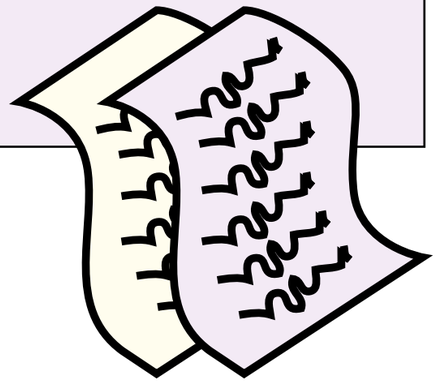
Quick Wins	Ensure a culture of reciprocity at the YJS for children and practitioners for equal involvement, with an ethos of 'you put something in, you get something out'. Co-create a range of incentives for involvement with children and YJS practitioners. Ensure a clear communication that their expertise and knowledge is valued not just for their time.
Building Momentum	Secure resource for a dedicated participation lead role. Involve more experiential peer support. For example: use social media platforms and create child participation influencer roles to inform other children of participation rights and the opportunities to be involved in advisory groups, etc. Build partnerships across the local authority, local community and voluntary sector to provide extra resource and on-going opportunities for children beyond their time at the YJS.
Big Change	Budget to commission partnerships with independent groups – with lived experience of support services and that specialise in participation and co-creation – to ensure consistency, accountability and evaluation.





Rights and Readiness

Quick Wins	Ensure YJS practitioners are cared for, have support and have mechanisms for their views to be heard and be responded to as equal partners in the service. Encourage more reflective practice, coaching and listening opportunities for YJS practitioners as modelled through the Deep Dive session methodology used in this research.
Building Momentum	Assess the readiness of the YJS, as a whole system and the practitioners within it, to see themselves as agents for change with children rather than service providers for children. Ensure that accredited rights-based participation and empathy training is available for children involved in participation and co-creation.
Big Change	Offer refresher training on applying strengths-based approaches in practice. Ensure that rights-based participation (including the differences between participation and co-creation) and empathy training is mandatory for new practitioner inductions (including annual refreshers).



Further recommendations from Peer Power Experts on how the Youth Justice Board can influence change:

- Create a national charter of participation to sit alongside Standards for Children in the Youth Justice System across all YJS.
- Include participation, co-creation and shared decision-making as part of Standards for Children in the Youth Justice System.
- Increase investment in the participation and co-creation if you want to see Child First principles come to life.
- Produce guidance for YJS on the operationalisation of high risk multi-agency practitioner meetings to ensure approaches live up to Child First and participatory rights discourses.
- Commission a report on the efficacy of peer mentoring schemes in YJS across in England and Wales.
- Support the set-up of peer support groups for practitioners in YJS regions – the role of participation influencers and communities of practice to share skills, knowledge and training.
- Encourage organisational wide co-creation and empathy training.
- Ensure a holistic approach to co-creation of guidance e.g. co-creating case management guidance with children, practitioners and the YJB.
- Encourage services to implement lived experience mentorship for children and invest in communities with a high level of [experience of] mental health [services] and injustice.
- Encourage services to involve charities that actively promote participation as part of the youth justice model.
- Explore with key stakeholders how peer support could be introduced for children in cells at police stations.

Appendix

List of Peer Power Resources:

- How to use the resource pack *(Figure 6)*
- Findings from the YJS Surveys: What our research revealed *(Figure 7)*
- Survey Results: Participation and co-creation in the Youth Justice System
- Younger reader report: Participation and co-creation in the Youth Justice System
- Longer report: Participation and co-creation in the Youth Justice System
- Tips for Digital Inclusion *(Figure 8)*
- Incentives and Rewards *(Figure 9)*
- Voice and Influence Charter *(Figure 10)*
- Voice and Influence Charter Films
- Pick n mix of participation *(Figure 11)*
- Are you really co-creating?
- Directory of Participation *(Figure 12)*
- Peer Power Co-Production Film
- Peer Power Code of Ethics for Storytelling

Sketchnotes
by Mandy Johnson

(sketchnotes.co.uk)

Figure 6. How to use the resource pack

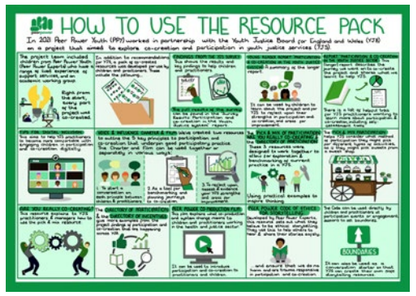


Figure 7. Findings from the YJS Surveys: What our research revealed

Figure 8. Tips for Digital Inclusion

Figure 9. Incentives and Rewards

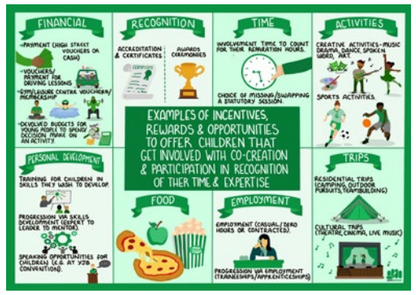


Figure 10. Voice and Influence Charter

Figure 11. Pick n mix of participation

Figure 12. Directory of Participation

Further reading on embedding participation and co-creation:

- Children & Young People's Commissioner Scotland: Young People Participation Golden Rules Cards (https://cypcs.org.uk/get-help/i-work-with-younger-people/golden-rules)
- Creative Commons: a useful summary of over 30 participation models (https://participationpool.eu/resource/participation-models-citizens-youth-online/)
- CYCJ Developing Participative Practice (http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Info-Sheet-95.pdf)
- IRISS: Co-Production Project Planner Guide (https://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-05/iriss-coproduction-project-planner-guide.pdf)
- IRISS: Co-Production Planner Tool: Inclusion Checklist (https://www.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-05/iriss-coproduction-project-planner-tools.pdf)
- Ladder of Participation: Think Local Act Personal (https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Latest/Co-production-The-ladder-of-co-production/)
- Participatory Youth Practice: Co-creating youth justice practice with young people: Tackling power dynamics and enabling transformative action (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/chso.12441)
- Pathways to Participation (https://www.academia.edu/2304903/Pathways_to_participation_openings_opportunities_and_obligations)
- SCIE: What is co-production? (https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide51/what-is-coproduction/)
- TrACE Toolkit: Trauma-informed practice used in Wales (https://aceawarewales.com/traceorgtoolkit/)
- UNCRC Summary (https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/01/Summary-of-the-UNCRC.pdf)
- Wales Participation Standards (https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/Bilingual-Participation-Standards-poster2016.pdf)
- What makes co-production different?: Think Local Act Personal (https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/co-production-in-commissioning-tool/co-production/In-more-detail/what-makes-co-production-different/)
- Young People in the Lead: Tips for Youth Voice (https://youngvoicesheard.org.uk/2020/11/24/in-the-house-from-the-heart-youth-people-in-the-lead-at-the-national-lottery/)
- The Youth Voice and Participation Handbook for creative and cultural organisations (2020) (https://issuu.com/soundconnections/docs/youth_voice_and_participation_handbook)

Working group biographies

Colin Falconer

Colin Falconer is director of InspireChilli, an innovation consultancy that specialises in asset-based training, quality assurance and development work for organisations from across the UK to Australia. Colin has led various education, health and quality assurance programmes, including 14 years as director of innovation at youth charity The Foyer Federation where he first introduced the concept of Advantaged Thinking in the youth sector.

Colin has served as an advisor for Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Youth Fund and a mentor for young leaders through InspireChilli's Team Young People network. Colin is also a trustee at Sounddelivery Media Charity and chair of trustees for the award-winning We Belong, the UK's first youth charity set up and led by young people from migrant backgrounds.

Credits range from a 2011 TEDx performance in Thessaloniki to a London theatre show in 2014, with various published pieces including the 'Advantaged Thinking Program Framework' (2019) with BSL, the 'Strength in Solidarity' (2020) report for the Listening Fund, and the 'Connecting Minds' (2021) evaluation for States of Mind.

Find out more at: www.inspirechilli.com

Samantha Burns

Dr Samantha Burns is currently a research associate at Newcastle University understanding children and young people's adverse life experiences and co-designing new interventions to improve outcomes for children, young people, and families, to inform policy across health, social care, education, and criminal justice sectors. Samantha recently completed her PhD at City University of Hong Kong, studying the role and impact of social workers' co-production practices with at risk young people.

She has previously worked on a range of projects focused on children and young people's participation which sparked her research interests in youth justice and rights based, participatory approaches. Samantha is also a Trustee for the National Association of Youth Justice (NAYJ) which campaigns for the rights and justice of children in conflict with the law.

Sean Creaney

Dr Sean Creaney is a senior lecturer in psychosocial analysis of offending behaviour at Edge Hill University. Sean is a founder advisory board member of social justice charity Peer Power. Sean's primary research interests are youth justice and children's participation, particularly the promotion of Child First approaches and participatory rights discourses. He is a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the Safer Communities journal (Emerald).

Anne-Marie Douglas

Anne-Marie Douglas is founder and CEO at Peer Power and is a champion for lived and learned experience, love and empathy in the transformation of support services for children and young people. She has worked in participation and youth engagement for over 20 years across children's health, social care and youth justice services in both voluntary and statutory sector roles. She is a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellow having travelled to the USA and Canada to research the role of empathy in support services for children and young people.

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ClearView Research (Phase 1 of project)

ClearView Research Ltd (CVR) is an audience insight and strategy agency. It is a specialist in working on research, evaluation and engagement projects with young people, minority ethnic groups, culturally diverse communities, people with protected characteristics and those who often go unheard. It is committed to ensuring that its work is always inclusive and equitable. It strives to ensure that all of its participants enjoy the research process and find it accessible, engaging and empowering. It ensures that participants voices are central in the materials (e.g. reports and frameworks) that it produce.

It works best with organisations who give a damn and want to make a genuine impact. It is a MRS company partner and upholds and acts in a manner compliant with the strict ethical and rigorous rules contained in the MRS Code of Conduct.

Find out more at: www.clearviewresearch.co.uk

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