

Creating meaningful participation with young people

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Whilst there has been a shift in recent years to more opportunities for children and young people to have their voices heard, the views of those with justice experience often remain unheard. From the inception of [Youth Just Us](#), we have found that there is an apparent lack of understanding around what meaningful participation is and how it might work in the justice system. [Morrison and Gibson \(2017\)](#) recognise that practitioners may find participation complex and challenging as they work to manage risk and protect the community. However, we know that under the UNCRC children have fundamental participation rights which extend beyond simply “having a say” in decision-making processes.

“Participation provides a pathway of opportunities without pressure to develop skills. It helps you communicate properly, being clearer and fuller in expressing emotions, all the while being taken into account and appreciated (Kevin Lafferty, YJU Peer Mentor with lived experience of the care and justice systems)”

Youth Just Us (YJU) is a youth-led steering group which shapes the work of the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum (Staf) and the Centre for Youth & Criminal Justice (CYCJ) national participation project [Youth Justice Voices](#). Group members aged 16-25 meet weekly and mix pro-social activities with opportunities to creatively share their experiences of the care and justice systems.

“I believe what I bring to the role is a real honesty and motivation. I am so excited about my future and smile when I think about it being as a result of finding my own voice” (Kevin Lafferty)

Youth Just Us has benefited greatly from the support of a volunteer peer mentor, who has helped shape the direction and ethos of the project. Not every project will have access to this opportunity; however, we would urge services to consider how they systematically include more people with lived experience in the development of their work.

Prior to involving young people, it is important to consider what you are trying to achieve. Is it participation, co-production or service user involvement? Regardless of what word you use it is important to consider whether it is truly empowering or are you or your organisation setting the agenda? [Shier \(2001\)](#) and [Hart \(1992\)](#) both provide influential models which can help projects to assess readiness and avoid tokenism by moving towards more meaningful forms of participation which value youth-led processes. [Weaver, Lightowler and Moodie \(2019\)](#) also provide an excellent practical guide to adult service user involvement in community justice which could be adapted to include young people.

Like [Smith \(2011\)](#) and [Creaney \(2014\)](#) we value the youth work approach to participation. In the case of Youth Just Us we worked alongside young people to develop a group which reflected their needs, interests and aspirations. Ultimately the early stages were about creating a space where we could have fun, build trust and bond together as a group.

It is therefore important to consider the skills and values of the adults who are involved in participation. Do they have an in-depth understanding of participation? Are they ready to share power or is there a conflict of interest in your organisation? Having a dedicated worker for the project, who was contactable and available to support individuals out with the group was really important to participants - as was having a consistent meeting time, space and structure. It is worth considering if you can enlist the support of a trained worker or external organisation to facilitate the process.

“It makes you feel worthy, it’s something to do. You feel a sense of purpose, seeing goals turn into achievements” (Kevin Lafferty)

Young people should be involved from the start to ensure that the experience is both empowering and rewarding. Policies should also be in place which safeguard and protect participants. Where possible documents and policies relating to confidentiality and consent should be co-produced with group participants. Additional support should also be available if young people are discussing potentially sensitive issues or experiences.

Investing time in relationships is critical. It requires outreach work, meeting professionals and young people individually and collectively to advertise the project and keep young people interested. We delivered information sessions and attended various events. This was critical as it is how young people became aware of the project and a key factor which supported engagement. It also meant that young people who may not have been considered were able to attend sessions. For example, we worked closely with a Secure Care Centre to support a young person to access mobility from secure to attend the group. Going that ‘extra mile’ was also important to the group members. The project worker attended meetings and wrote court reports (when young people requested this), signed off attendance as community payback hours (when appropriate) and offered practical and emotional support when they needed it. This included weekly meetings with a young person in prison.

Whilst Youth Just Us had a clear purpose “to amplify the voices of care-experienced young people in the justice system ensuring that their voices are heard by corporate parents; senior managers, policy makers and the Scottish Government” this process was not set in stone. It was led, shaped and evaluated by young people. Crucially their involvement in the project is completely voluntary, as they look to give up their time to make improvements for others experiencing similar issues. The young people had ownership over Youth Just Us, agreeing on the name, issues they wanted to discuss and what role they wanted to have in the process.

Young people want to be part of something which makes a difference. Merely listening and providing young people with a one off chance to have their say is tokenistic. They need to be viewed as active partners who influence how they share their views and how we act upon them. This can be achieved creatively. At Youth Just Us we used film, art and games to discuss important issues. The group were also skilled up on children’s rights and relevant policy issues which enabled them to participate in challenging and complex public policy issues such as the UNCRC incorporation, the Independent Care Review and Disclosure Scotland Bill.

“I think everyone should have the opportunity to participate in something positive and progressive such as Youth Just Us. Being listened to and appreciated is crucial to self-worth, the safe space created by us all at Youth Just Us has helped our group members call out the injustices they feel in their own lives and lets them recognise the importance of contribution and the rewards it can bring. Care experienced young people deserve the chance to be equipped with the life skills that can be gained through participation” (Kevin Lafferty).

If you are interested in finding out more about Youth Just Us and the wider work of the Youth Justice Voices project contact ruth@staf.scot. Thanks to Kevin Lafferty for his words of wisdom and ongoing support with Youth Justice Voices.