

Creating safe spaces

Consulting Young People around Child Exploitation.



**The
Children's
Society**

The Prevention Programme

The Children's Society's national Prevention programme was established in 2019 and is commissioned by the Home Office. The programme works to drive improvements in the prevention and disruption of child sexual abuse (CSA) and exploitation (CSE), child criminal exploitation (CCE), and modern slavery on a regional and national basis across England and Wales. With expertise on the lived experiences of children, current and emerging forms of child exploitation, and effective approaches to improving victim identification and support, we support thousands of professionals across law enforcement, child protection, healthcare, and the private sector each year.

In 2023 we decided to introduce youth voice work as a key part of our activity in order to ensure our work was being directly informed by the views and experiences of young people. We developed our youth voice model in the autumn of 2023 and began directly consulting with young people from the beginning of 2024. We have published the findings of these consultations in a series of reports. The most recent of these was published in May 2026 and focuses on young people's views around education they receive on exploitation. You can access this [**here**](#).

The Children's Society's Youth Voice Work

The Children's Society was established in 1881 and since then, we have constantly adapted to address the needs of young people and to influence societal attitudes towards them.

In recent years that has included a sustained focus on the participation of young people and ensuring their voices have influence and power. Our approach to youth voice is grounded in decades of engagement with young people and a desire to learn from them and ensure their views and needs are paramount. But our approach also involves a readiness to change how we work, including by applying the learning that comes from really listening to young people. This can be provocative and challenging, not least to us in The Children's Society. We seek to work with and for young people, and this creates a dynamic process in which we are aiming to give young people the space to speak out on the one hand, and a space where they feel protected on the other. Tensions can arise from this dual approach, and this creates opportunities for creativity and innovation – and that is something we embrace.



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"You made me
feel as if I was
fully listened to"

Young person

Introduction to this resource

This resource is primarily aimed at professionals working with young people who want to understand how to create protective, empowering spaces for gaining the views and opinions of children and young people on topics relating to abuse and exploitation.

It is also relevant for commissioners, leaders and those working in service design who are interested in considering how youth voice can be embedded safely and meaningfully into new or existing services and work related to exploitation, abuse and serious youth violence. **including how to do so without relying on personal disclosure from young victims and survivors.**

This resource responds to two key challenges that professionals are faced with when undertaking such work. First, how to avoid encouraging personal disclosure from young victims and survivors given the inherent risk that this may retraumatise them. Second, how to ensure that these opportunities provide young people with meaningful influence and provide feedback on how their input has been used and what it has achieved. By sharing our learning and proposing some potential solutions to these issues, **we hope to support professionals with ideas around how they can consult young people in both an ethical and meaningful way.**



The development of our youth voice model

The Prevention Youth Voice Model draws on multiple sources, primarily **the Lundy Model**, alongside The Children's Society's approach to consulting young people when developing the Tackling Child Exploitation Multi-Agency Practice Principles for responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm¹. It is designed for adult-initiated but young person-informed work, where the goal is not to ask young people to recount their traumatic experiences but to gain their views and expertise, including expertise by experience, to ensure that their perspectives shape how Prevention communicates with partners and influences national responses to exploitation.



Our approach involves building relationships with existing youth groups and services across England and Wales and then partnering with these 'host' organisations in order to consult the young people they work alongside and support.

Consulting diverse young people, including those who aren't normally given the opportunity to influence national practice and policy, are key to our approach and help guide which services we seek to partner with.

Not all of the young people we consult have disclosed lived experience of exploitation or abuse, and that is a deliberate part of our model. We know that many young victims and survivors won't yet have made such disclosures, with it taking on average 24 years for survivors of sexual abuse to disclose their experiences.² While the views and opinions of those with disclosed experiences of abuse and exploitation are crucial to tackling child exploitation, we believe that limiting consultation to only this group risks excluding young people who are not yet ready or able to disclose their experiences. By widening the scope of our consultations we are also open to the views of those indirectly affected by exploitation.

Another consideration is that while not all young people can speak directly to experiences of exploitation, all young people can speak to the experience of being a young person. Their understandings and views on relationships with peers and adults, school, the specific pressures and challenges young people face and the realities of growing up in the current moment are of real value and are crucial to preventing child exploitation. As a prevention programme, our focus is on stopping harm before it occurs, and that means understanding the broader picture of young people's lives and their understandings of child exploitation and society's response to it even when they have not directly experienced it; not only the experiences of those who have already been harmed.

At the same time, we intentionally consult with groups of young people who we know are at higher risk of experiencing exploitation. This includes young people with care experience, those who are neurodivergent or have learning disabilities, those who have been excluded from mainstream schools, are refugees and migrants or who have experience of the criminal justice system. By consulting these young people we are able to hear and learn from those who are most at risk of experiencing exploitation and those who may already have such experience, whether they have disclosed it to someone or not.

This approach allows us to gather insight that is relevant and representative without placing young people in a position where they feel they must disclose or revisit trauma to be heard.



A note on sharing young people's lived experiences

We recognise how essential it is that youth voice is represented in all spaces where they are being discussed. This can include resources and reports, conferences and events and film and media. Within the Prevention Programme we choose to platform young people's insights through reports and best practice guides, alongside embedding their views and perspectives in our training materials. This allows their perspectives to shape national conversations and professional practice without exposing

them to environments that may be overwhelming, intimidating or potentially re-traumatising. We know that large professional spaces such as conferences or events often involve scrutiny, intense discussion and adult centric dynamics that are not always accessible or appropriate for young people. It is for these reasons that the programme does not engage in the practice of asking young people to attend such events and, in particular, does not to ask them to attend and speak about their disclosed lived experiences.

We know that young people are sometimes contributors to events and conferences in this way and recognise the remarkable bravery for a young person to share their experiences in such a space. We also have no doubt that professionals find their contributions highly impactful and are well-meaning in encouraging young people to share their experiences. At the same time, we need to be mindful of the risk that young people's consent to participate in this way may be influenced by a range of factors.

Our experience of working with victims and survivors of exploitation, some who contributed to events in this way when they were children and young adults have shared that they now regret having done so and that the experience was ultimately re-traumatising. They have also shared that they felt unable to express this to the professionals involved at the time, including professionals they had close, trusting relationships with.



These power dynamics can elicit further complexity, where young people may also feel an obligation to the service supporting them or to figures of authority more widely, including social workers and the police. Victims and survivors of exploitation and abuse may also have needed to demonstrate compliance in order to survive and this compliance can therefore be present in their behaviour with professionals, including when asked to share their lived experiences.

We therefore encourage other professionals to carefully consider these dynamics and factors and approach requests of this nature with great caution. We would advocate for alternative methods of platforming young people's voices such as:

- Ensuring the purpose of young people attending these kinds of events is for them to share their views and opinions rather than their personal experiences
- Setting clear ground rules with attendees which make explicit that young people should not be asked such questions and taking immediate steps to intervene if this does transpire
- Considering alternative anonymised ways of representing young people's views and opinions such as written quotes, or the creation of audio clips or video utilising actors so that young people can engage in more controlled environments

In line with the above, young people that engage with the Programme are always anonymised in our reports and we do not create audio recordings or videos featuring them. Recognising that we do not hold close relationships with the young people we consult, and instead do so through host organisations, we feel that such recording methods would inhibit young people's ability to speak with us freely.

By anonymising all contributions and focusing our approach on transcribing young people's contributions rather than recording them, we feel **we are able to protect young people's privacy, dignity and long-term wellbeing while ensuring their voices remain central to our work and remains highly impactful for professionals engaging with us.**

Our youth voice principles

We include, but do not rely on, disclosed lived experience

- We avoid asking young people to share personal trauma because one-off sessions cannot provide wraparound support.
- Instead, we use case studies, composite characters, and scenario based exploration.
- This protects young people from re-traumatisation while still allowing their lived experiences to inform our work.

We do not exclusively consult with traditional youth councils and forums³

- Traditional youth councils and forums sometimes represent a narrow demographic of young people.
- They might not be inclusive of young people with complex needs, negative experiences of statutory services or those who feel less confident or articulate.
- We instead consult with a wider range of established groups attached to a variety of services, enabling young people to access support from a service they are familiar with and the practitioners or teachers they have an existing relationship with.

Our work is consultation rather than participation based

- By choosing not to work with a single fixed panel or participation group we can reach a wider range of young people across England and Wales and avoid asking any one group to represent young people more widely. This also helps us include young people without asking them to make a long-term commitment to work with us.
- This also helps us to consult a more diverse range of young people by intentionally working with Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), refugee groups, detached youth services, LGBTQ+ youth groups, violence reduction units and others.



We prioritise ethical, protective practice

- The space itself is designed to be protective, empowering, relational and inclusive.
- We use a range of facilitation techniques to ensure our sessions are as accessible and inclusive as possible. Sessions are developed following meetings with the host organisation, where the individual needs of young people are discussed and woven into the session plan.

We focus on influence, not tokenism

- Young people know who the audience is, what their views will inform, and what the limitations are.
- We commit to feedback loops and transparency, ensuring that young people know how their contributions have been used and the impact they have made, while being honest about the limitations.
- We ensure that young people are reimbursed for their time (through vouchers rather than money). This makes it clear that their time is valued and appreciated rather than expecting them



Recommendations around how to run consultation sessions

Go to young people's spaces

- Go to the groups and spaces where young people spend time, rather than expecting them to come to you. For example: schools, youth centres, community spaces, charity groups.
- Avoid formal, intimidating spaces like council chambers.
- Consider how you will reach a diverse range of young people and build relationships with groups who specialise in providing spaces for young people who may not feel safe or that they belong in other settings. Examples of this include LGBTQ+ and refugee and migrant youth groups.

Ensure wraparound support

- Only consult with groups attached to services. This ensures young people have built in support before, during, and after the session. It also allows you to understand existing group dynamics before consultation.
- Agree safeguarding roles and responsibilities with the host organisation in advance.
- Develop a written agreement with each host organisation which includes who is responsible for what, including your agreed approach to safeguarding and which organisations safeguarding policies take precedent.
- Never meet a young person 1:1 without their worker.
- It can be helpful to share a short biography and photograph of yourself with the organisation beforehand, this can support young people who may feel nervous about meeting a new practitioner.



Build safety quickly

- Make clear from the outset that you are not asking young people to share any lived experience they may have of exploitation and abuse or wider traumatic experiences. At the same time make it clear what you will do if anyone shares anything which makes you concerned about their safety or others and who they can speak to afterwards if they need support or advice relating to anything you discuss in the session.
- If personal disclosures are made, you can acknowledge these without dwelling on them by using statements like 'thank you for sharing your experience. If 'George' was in a similar position, what might be supportive to him?'. Always follow up on the disclosure in line with the safeguarding plan you have made with the host organisation (see above), and outside of the group space.
- Allow enough time at the beginning of the session for an ice breaker activity. Use one that encourages young people to use their critical brains, to challenge and interact with each other and share ideas while remaining fun.
- Acknowledge that young people haven't met you before and that they only need to share what they are comfortable with. Allow time for them to ask you questions.
- Be transparent about the process, limitations, timeline and follow-up including a clear commitment to feedback on how you have used young people's contributions and any evidence of its impact.

Use varied facilitation styles

- Use interactive and or movement-based activities (agree/disagree lines, object based tasks and games).
- Make space for open dialogue and conversational consultation. Enable young people to guide the conversation whilst offering gentle prompts to keep the space boundaried and the conversation relevant.
- Create opportunities for all young people to engage. Some may prefer to offer verbal input while others may want to write on sticky notes.
- Consult with small groups or 1:1 (with a worker who knows the young person) to enable deeper conversation and ensure everyone is heard.

Use fictionalised scenarios to explore exploitation

Other considerations and follow-up

- Use fictional scenarios and composite characters and consider diversity and inclusion when doing so, alongside adapting the scenario to the location young people live where possible.
- Involve the group in building the characters so they feel a sense of ownership and the ability to project experiences onto these characters in a safe way. Then use these characters to explore risks, decision-making (while recognising children cannot consent to their own abuse), and systemic responses.
- Ensure you have both a facilitator and a note taker in the session. This allows the facilitator to be fully engaged with participants.
- Where possible, ensure the host organisation knows which young people will be coming in advance of the session. This supports in following up on disclosures and wider safeguarding promptly and aids being as prepared as possible for any additional need or adaptations required for those attending.
- Make sure to follow up with the group to feedback on how you have used their contributions (see above) and provide them with copies of any publications which feature their words and views.



For more information about the Prevention Programme and our youth voice work, including to explore opportunities to work together, please contact us at **prevention@childrenssociety.org.uk**

References:

¹ **Multi-agency Practice Principles for responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm**

² **F.1: Barriers to disclosure | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse**

³ Traditional youth councils are often larger, structured groups that meet at set times and follow formal procedures. Participation is sometimes organised through elections or appointed roles, with young people representing their peers in a way that might mirror adult decision making systems.