

Developing participative practice

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This Info Sheet shares practical tips on how to further develop participative practice in your work. These tips have come directly from members of STARR, Youth Just Us and individuals who have shared their wisdom and insight in the development of CYCJ's participation strategy. STARR are Scotland's only volunteer group with lived experience of secure care who help advise, influence, inform and challenge secure care and Youth Just Us are the youth-led steering group behind Staf and CYCJ's [Youth Justice Voices](#) project, funded by The Life Changes Trust, which seeks to creatively amplify the voices of care and justice experienced young people (aged 16-25) to influence national change. Thank you to everyone who took the time to be involved in shaping this work and for agreeing to your views being published to help others.

Background

Recent research by [Smithson and Jones' \(2021\)](#) explores how power dynamics can be tackled when co-creating youth justice practice with young people. Along with Cahill and Dadvand (2018) and others, they acknowledge the importance of understanding "relational power dynamics when undertaking participatory work with young people in a criminal justice context" as the relationships that justice experienced children have with professionals within the system will differ from those out with (Smithson and Jones, 2021, p. 3). Whilst Smithson and Jones' research has a specific focus, it is an example of how services can meaningfully engage and co-create participation opportunities with young people. It is also an example of how classic youth work activities and approaches can support the process. Read more about their Participatory Youth Practice framework [here](#).

Like Checkoway (2010), we believe that youth participation should enhance and respect the expertise, rights and personal development of young people. Whilst the quality of participation can be measured by the effect it has on outcomes, decisions or processes (Checkoway, 2010); it is also important to remember that an "individual may not be able to participate in empowering organisational processes unless they perceive themselves as being able to". It requires confidence and is a "process by which groups and individuals feel empowered to achieve, to participate and to overcome their lack of power and control" (Fitzsimons et al, 2011, p.5).

This is not a complete guide to participation; there are a range of matters to carefully consider. Co-producing a strategy with children and young people is a starting point. It requires skilled staff, time and resources in addition to structural and cultural change. However, the suggestions made are components which we can all consider and adopt in our practice. These are some key components which young people told us they regard as good, basic practice.

Recruitment

- You need to "widen the net out" to approach and include people who haven't been involved before so you're not relying on the same faces all the time. A scoping exercise could help you to think about hidden voices and the barriers preventing young people from taking part.
- A meet-up beforehand would be beneficial, allowing new participants to connect and get to know you prior to attending a session/carrying out any work in your organisation

Facilitators

- People who are leading sessions should welcome challenge and a different lens from which they view the world - "don't be scared to hear the truth"

- Facilitators should be kind and genuine - “don’t put on an act” - trust, respect and empathy should be core values
- Building relationships is key and this should be at the heart of any participatory experience, strategy or project

Meetings and experiences

- It is important to provide refreshments and food in face to face participation meet ups, whether it is an individual or group meet up - sharing a meal can be a bonding experience
- Honesty needs to be the golden thread running through any participation strategy. Be clear on what can be achieved in the short term and what longer term work needs to happen to fully achieve or implement change.
- Sessions should take place in safe and creative spaces where young people feel comfortable
- Sessions should help participants gain skills, knowledge and confidence. This could include further training and employment opportunities for people with lived experience in different areas within or out with your organisation.
- Sessions should also have a flexible structure with the autonomy to make changes to fit the group’s needs. The facilitator and session plan should demonstrate compassion and empathy and have an understanding of the audience and different experiences - “don’t put pressure on us”
- Sessions should be fun, engaging and non-judgemental. A level of emotional intelligence is required to understand and support your audience - “just be human”
- You should create a sense of freedom so young people can drop in and out
- You need to create different opportunities to engage and communicate in different ways as an individual or a group e.g. phone calls, emails, texts etc.
- Balance structuring and not structuring sessions - “keep it informal, people are giving up their time so keep it friendly and happy”

Benefits

- Reimbursing people for their time should be key to your participation strategy - everyone’s time is of value and that should be respected - “pay us or give us rewards when you can”
- There should be mutual benefits – e.g. skills and development opportunities
- Applicants for jobs should be welcomed from those with experience of the justice system in your organisation

Continuing projects during the pandemic

- Despite the challenges the pandemic has placed on face to face contact, it’s important that we use technology to keep connected for as long as is necessary - “my opinion matters”
- Try and keep the same focus and activities but do it online
- Ask us how we want to take part, what platforms we use and be flexible
- Care packages, creative activities which can be used off line and data all help

Get in touch

Contact ruth@staf.scot to discuss Youth Justice Voices. Contact ross.a.gibson@strath.ac.uk and deborah.nolan@strath.ac.uk to discuss STARR or CYCJ’s participation strategy.

References

Cahill, H., & Dadvand, B. (2018). Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 95, 243-253.

Checkoway, B. (2010). ‘What is youth participation?’ *Children and Youth Services Review* 33 (2011) 340-345.