

Guiding principles for youth-led social action

We are young people based all over England and from diverse walks of life, who are involved in leading change within organisations, across our local communities and in national policy. We know, from first-hand experience, that young people - all young people - have the power and the passion to make real change in the world, and we want to see organisations doing more to support us in our efforts.

These guiding principles are designed for organisations who want to channel young people's energy into impactful action, as well as young people who want to take on more of a leadership role in change-making spaces. We hope they can be applied in settings such as:

- Youth organisations and youth-led groups/projects
- Campaign groups
- NHS bodies
- Schools, colleges, universities
- Research institutions
- Local and national government and policymaking



Summary



Our principles focus on building spaces that are:

- Rooted in a culture of genuine youth leadership
- Inclusive to young people from all walks of life, especially those who are often excluded from social action spaces
- Impactful, contributing to real change in the world

The culture of youth-leadership should be...

Youth-led: Really, genuinely let young people lead, supporting us with the tools we need to do that.

Ambitious: Be ambitious, open and ready to change things up - you'll probably end up with something better than you could ever have thought of without us.

Authentic: Create a culture of honesty, transparency and genuineness to help build trust, avoid tokenism, and show through your actions that we can all be our full selves!

Inclusive: Be intentional and pro-active in creating spaces that feel welcoming, non-judgemental, safe, collaborative and genuinely youth-led.

The principles shaping this culture are to...

1. Embrace diversity
2. Address inequities
3. Nurture an inclusive & representative staff team
4. Support lived experience
5. Help us build & use our power
6. Recognise our power
7. Help us stay strong



The following document outlines the reflections, advice and suggestions from young people and the staff in organisations supporting them to lead real-world change on how to begin or boost your approach to youth-led social action.

Culture

Principles

The ideas and values that should shape a culture of genuine youth leadership are:



Youth-led: *Really, genuinely let young people lead, supporting us with the tools we need to do that.*

Ambitious: *Be ambitious, open and ready to change things up - you'll probably end up with something better than you could ever have thought of without us.*

Authentic: *Create a culture of honesty, transparency and genuineness to help build trust, avoid tokenism, and show through your actions that we can all be our full selves!*

Inclusive: *Be intentional and pro-active in creating spaces that feel welcoming, non-judgemental, safe, collaborative and genuinely youth-led.*

“Young people can tell if you're trying to be something that you're not. It's important that we bring that sense of authenticity and being ourselves, because it encourages them to believe that whoever they are, whatever their personality or whatever, that they can feel comfortable to do so too.”

– Dean, 21, Peer Researcher at YPAS

Actions and reflections:

In order to **embody the principles** above, we encourage you to...



1. Recognise our value

Everyone in the organisation should genuinely understand what makes young people so valuable to your work.

Our participation isn't just 'nice to have' or the 'right thing to do' - we are skilled experts! We understand the issues faced by our peers better than anyone, we are well connected into our community, we have skills, insights and ideas that older adults won't have, and most of all - we have the passion to drive change!

Recognising our value goes beyond words - we want to be shown that we are valued; that means treating us as individuals, taking our ideas and contributions seriously, and compensating our time and expertise through payment where possible.

2. Let us lead

Young people are so often condescended or patronised. Please take an active approach to avoiding this and entrusting us with genuine leadership!

We want to take ownership of projects and lead areas of work - not just 'having a voice' but taking action, running programmes and getting hands-on. We will need support to do this meaningfully, for example:

- Budget & resources
- Our time paid for
- Contacts and connections
- Training and support to build our skills and confidence to take on genuine leadership.

It's also important to challenge traditional ideas of what 'leadership' is or looks like. We all have different strengths and interests, and we'll need support to work out where we can make our best contributions and what help we need to do that.

3. Involve us from the start

We don't want to take on 'tick-box' jobs, only being consulted once the big decisions are made, and we don't want to be involved as the 'token' young person. We want to be involved in shaping work from the very outset, to build and connect with a community, and to take a proactive role in growing our movements.

4. Act on feedback

Embed systems to hear our feedback over time, listen carefully and take action. We want you to *tell us* how you're taking action as well as *show us* - it's so motivating when we can see our influence in how programmes or services are run, how money is spent, and how other young people experience the organisation.

5. Ensure staff have the right skills and qualities

This should start from the beginning - involving young people in staffing strategy, recruitment, training and up-skilling (including the organisational strategy around that). Young staff, and those with shared identities or experiences are especially valuable.

6. Be honest & transparent

Trust is key. Stick to your word, don't overpromise, and manage expectations so young people don't feel disappointed if change is slow, or tokenised if our involvement is limited. Be honest about the challenges you're facing, and ask us for help with this, so we know it's OK to need help!

There should also be systems for accountability – spaces and processes where we can monitor progress and safely challenge. You might want to consider:

- Youth boards and young trustees
- Consultation, advisory or steering groups
- Youth-friendly progress reports and budget breakdowns



7. Treat us like individuals

Young people are not one homogenous group. We will have shared experiences, interests and perspectives with our peers, but we also offer so many unique insights, skills and contributions. Please don't assume anything about us because we're a certain age, race, religion, gender identity or anything else. No one young person can speak for all of us, so please think about who is and who is not in the room, how that might be influencing how our voice is heard, and how you can involve more of us.



Inclusion



Principles

The principles that should underpin an inclusive approach to youth-led social action are:



1. Embrace diversity

Recognise and cater to the whole range of differences among our generation. Please don't assume that having your doors open will mean everybody can, or will want to, come inside. Take active steps to guide us in and celebrate the unique contributions we each can make.

Do this by...

Reducing barriers - Try to avoid having additional criteria for involvement, other than age. Recognise the barriers that might be in the way for us (eg transport, language, access...), and take pro-active steps to help us overcome those.

Recognising diversity within the community - Of course there'll be common ground between people of the same generation, nationality, religion, gender etc, but we are all still individuals, with different needs, skills and passions. Take a person-centred and intersectional approach - considering how our different identities and experiences might interact and contribute to marginalisation.

Active community outreach - Don't wait or expect young people to come to you. We are not 'hard to reach' - organisations need to go to where young people are and make sure it's easy for us to get involved. Who better to lead this outreach than young people who are already part of the community? For example, Young Ambassadors at KRAN are the perfect workers to ensure other young refugees can access the service - they are already embedded in that community!



Partnerships can also be important - Youth Access Member No.5 is partnered with a local youth football club, ensuring their workers are right in the heart of where young people already are.

“I’m at college, so I can point people towards KRAN. Other organisations don’t know how to open up to young refugees. As Youth Ambassadors, we’re like them – they might not go to some professional who’s dressed formally. We are employed but they just see us as a friend”

– Obaida, 21, Young Ambassador at KRAN

Ensuring different communities, cultures etc have their needs & preferences met –

Whether it’s language, food, facilities, or scheduling - think ahead, ask folks from the community, ask young people (and keep asking!): “how can we make this space work for you?”. Base this on genuine listening and research, rather than assumptions or stereotypes. Ensure all staff are responsible for this – not just those who are from that community. Importantly, let us know exactly what you’re doing to make your spaces inclusive, so we feel less anxious about the unknown.

2. Address inequities

We can’t truly challenge injustices and inequalities if we replicate them in our social action spaces. We need to be pro-active about ensuring that certain communities are at the centre of our change-making, otherwise they risk being left at the margins.

Do this by...

Recognising who's not in the room (and why) - There’s a whole range of reasons why some young people might not be able to, or feel comfortable to get involved in your spaces. Take notice of who you tend to engage easily, and who is absent. Seek to understand why this may be and what the solutions might look like



“We mustn’t get complacent. Young trans people are a broad demographic – being good at engaging this group isn’t enough and doesn’t mean we’re good at engaging other intersecting identities, or ensuring positive experiences or outcomes for them.”

– Stone, Youth Board member at Gendered Intelligence

Considering programmes both by and for specific communities - Some communities face very specific injustices, barriers to engagement or can have their voices drowned out among the ‘mainstream’. Young people who share an identity or experience (eg racism, migration, parenthood...) may want to lead change specifically on injustices related to that, and should be supported to lead a specific programme rooted in that common ground.

“My background is Arab, and I felt very ostracised and alienated in trans spaces until I started going to QTPOCalyse (which used to be the ‘BAME’ group) and I pivoted a lot of what I did to QTPOC spaces. Meeting staff like Saba and Hassan - people from Muslim backgrounds - was life changing.”

– Young ambassador at Gendered Intelligence

3. Nurture an inclusive and representative staff team

Workers should embody the values of youth-leadership - from who is recruited and how, through to their training, development and management.

Do this by...

Having a mix of 'lived' and 'learned' experience' - Ideally young people can see ourselves represented and valued in paid staff roles, alongside other workers who share identities and experiences with us. Where staff are not from the same communities as us, we appreciate 'learned experience' - those who have come to know the challenges we face through study, training and work.

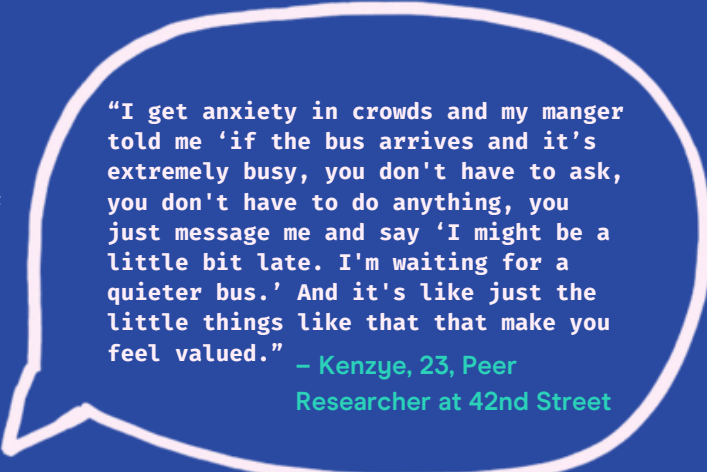
**LIVED EXPERIENCE
IS STILL
VERY VALUABLE
EXPERIENCE!**

The Changemakers programme for Black young people campaigning on mental health, has invested in building a majority Black team, with Black young people employed as co-producers, and efforts to ensure a racially diverse and representative mix of trainers and guest contributors. This helps young people to see themselves reflected in a whole range of valued roles, and ensures common ground and understanding. For example, staff recognised the importance of having African and Caribbean cultural food in making the young Changemakers feel welcome and valued at an in-person event. Small changes like this “show that you’re thinking about them...And they love that.”

Embedding inclusive values & management styles – This needs to be led from the top, with leaders demonstrating the values of youth leadership, and embedding systems to support the whole team to uphold these, including training and personal development.

Skilled and intentional approaches to facilitation – Holding inclusive spaces is a key skill which workers should be supported to develop. Training is great, but so is being able to observe and learn from experienced facilitators, as well as having enough time to prepare sessions and back-up plans.

Flexibility & adaptability – An inclusive approach means being prepared to take on feedback and change things up. This might mean changing up a project plan or making on-the-spot changes to a session. Making young people feel safe and included means taking action when things aren't working! For example, at Youth Access member 42nd Street, young Peer Researchers totally adapted their interview format to accommodate an autistic participant who needed to move around the room. It showed that participant that they were valued and ensured the researchers could get the best from them.



“I get anxiety in crowds and my manager told me ‘if the bus arrives and it’s extremely busy, you don’t have to ask, you don’t have to do anything, you just message me and say ‘I might be a little bit late. I’m waiting for a quieter bus.’ And it’s like just the little things like that that make you feel valued.” – Kenzye, 23, Peer Researcher at 42nd Street

4. Support lived experience

When we have personal experience of the injustices we’re trying to fight, it makes us even more passionate, knowledgeable and powerful, but it can also take its toll on us.

We’re often told to ‘toughen up’ when we express our needs, but if you want to build change with us, we need to be able to channel all our experiences and passion into change without burning out.

Do this by...

Offering training and personal development – Help us arm ourselves with the tools we need to do this work effectively, and to use social action as an opportunity to build skills for the future. At Youth Access member No.5, young people can even gain AQA accredited certificates on topics such as ‘social action’ and ‘participation and engagement’.

Recognising the emotional impact on us – It’s not easy to be constantly reminded of the inequalities, injustices and barriers we face – and we’re often still facing these even as we take action. We want to fight to overcome these, and support our peers to do the same, but we need to be able to stay well and to see some light at the end of the tunnel. Supportive management is

Supporting with the things that might be affecting us outside of the space – We might also have things going on outside of our social action - issues with housing, family, education, work etc – and there might not always be the knowledge or support within our communities to help us deal with these. Help us to navigate these challenges so we can stay well and stay involved in social action.

Having fun! It's so important that social action - even and especially on the toughest of issues - still centres our humanity and brings us joy. Think about how to include social activities, celebration and community-building, and build our sense of self over time.



"We've completely gone against tokenism. [We gave out self-care boxes to research participants] because I didn't personally feel comfortable, being like, 'come and tell us all your trauma but there's a £25 gift card,' It just didn't sit right with me at all. Being able to do it in that way and showing like, not only do we appreciate what you've told us, but we also appreciate the impact that may have on you now. And you're not alone in that."

– Kenzye, 23, Peer Researcher at 42nd Street.

Impact

Principles

The principles that should underpin an impactful approach to youth-led social action are:



1. *Recognise our power*

Young people are important and powerful changemakers. We have knowledge, skills, perspectives and reach that our older counterparts won't have. Who could understand the issues we face, the solutions that would work best and the steps to get us there, better than us?

Do this by...

Embracing power at the margins – People who are used to being ignored often have the best ideas for getting heard! Young people are passionate about change and we will do whatever it takes to be taken seriously – all you have to do is channel that!

Think about the different levels of impact – Social action can be an important way to create change in:

- Us as individuals (building skills, confidence, feeling like we're making a difference)
- Your organisation (by changing ways of working, informing decision-making, making a more representative team)
- Our local and regional communities (through our campaigning or volunteering, working with commissioners and decision-makers)
- National policy and society (by engaging with policymakers, raising awareness of issues and changing attitudes)

Recognise the positive impact social action can have on us – Not only can we build skills, experience and confidence, but working towards change for people like us and knowing that we're helping make sure others don't face the same injustices that we did can also be an important part of our healing and recovery.

“As a teenager you can feel a bit purposeless. I remember finding this group and it gave me a sense of ‘I’m doing something, I’m contributing and it’s helping me, but I’m helping other people as well,’ and it just felt right. I hope it still feels like that for young people who come now.”

- Grace, Peer Researcher at YPAS

Think beyond 'voice' - Surveys and consultations are useful as starting points, but it's also important to think about how young people can have deeper involvement - we want to co-create programmes, run sessions, campaign for change, design resources, work with policymakers and more!

BEYOND VOICE → DEEPER INVOLVEMENT

2. Help us build and use our power

We can have so much more influence when we can tap into the expertise, resources, networks and know-how of the organisations supporting us.

Do this by...

Using networks, partnerships and brand to help us feel part of something bigger and be taken seriously. It's good to know we have others backing us.

Helping us to explore different strategies, tactics, audiences and approaches - We'll need to develop a well thought-out approach to how we'll have impact. We don't want to always be knocking on closed doors - think about how you can help us to identify and reach the audiences who *will* engage and the spaces where we *can* have an influence. It could be through partnerships or coalitions that you're part of, influencing local, regional or national policymakers, working with funders or commissioners, feeding into research, publishing resources, delivering training, or getting coverage in media outlets or academic journals.

Research approaches to building power - Lots of organisations find approaches based on 'community organising', Lundy's model of co-production and models of participation useful. Engage with training and resources on different approaches to making change - keep testing, learning and sharing!

3. Help us stay strong

To have an impact we need to stay determined, resilient, and most important of all, we need to stay well.

Do this by...

Helping us build resilience and determination - As well as positive attitudes, this also requires practical support, managing our expectations and supporting us to build strategies that are realistic in terms of the audiences we're targeting and the timelines and resources we're working with.

Show and celebrate wins (big and small!) - It feels good to see our impact! Help us to see where we've contributed to change, both in the immediate and in the longer term.

Making support available - We'll need appropriate, tailored support to build confidence, tackle issues that come our way, and avoid burnout. Many projects based in Youth Access member services, for example, can offer counselling alongside social action (in fact, it's often from the counselling service that young people get involved in social action).

"We want to actually see pay off! We like it when we see changes happen - like the trans people of colour and trans feminine residential that happen now because we asked for them."

- Young Person, 22, Gendered Intelligence

Thinking long-term - It's OK to start small and build over time. This work does take resource and can't be a tag on to somebody else's job.

Think carefully about how to resource this work appropriately and embed systems for sustainability, including:

- Finding ways to monitor the 'big system' changes over time, so we can see the impact we're having even when this isn't immediate
- Using feedback to improve systems over time - and letting us know how you've acted on what we've said
- Planning for how we'll keep our action alive beyond time-limited funding - so we don't just see our big ideas fall apart once funding comes to an end

"After our report is done, it isn't up to us, which makes me kind of sad and angry because I feel like things might not change... I'm hoping there's ways we can stay in touch or monitor things ... I'd be really upset, angry, annoyed if nothing came out of this."

- Sofija, Peer Researcher at 42nd Street



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?



Now it's over to you.

We've provided this resource as a guide – it's not a step-by-step instruction manual, because every organisation is different and every group of young people will want different things. We encourage you to use it as a framework and a way to kick-start the discussion with young people about how you can make your social action spaces more youth-led, inclusive and impactful.



If you're committed to working with young people to embed these principles, please *sign the pledge at*

bit.ly/guidingprinciplespledge

By signing the pledge, you'll showcase your commitment to embed the principles for young people and gain access to the guiding principles campaign pack, resources and future opportunities via our dedicated mailing list.

These guiding principles were made in collaboration with young people in various social action roles at:

- Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)
- The Traveller Movement
- Gendered Intelligence
- YPAS Liverpool
- 42nd Street

They were additionally informed by older adult staff in the above organisations, and:

- The Young Changemakers Programme (The Diana Award)
- Children in Need's We Move Fund
- No5 Young People
- Free to Be You



About Youth Access

Our vision is that all young people can access support on their journey into adulthood that respects their rights and meets their individual needs.

Alongside our member network of 133 local youth advice and counselling services, we champion young people's right to access high-quality services in their community that provide a range of support, from mental health and wellbeing to housing and employment, all under one roof.

Get in touch: admin@youthaccess.org.uk