"Breaking the Cycle"

PAC North East:
Young People's Voices on Tackling Violence Affecting Young People and Building Safer Futures

Contents

A Note from the PAC Team

In this report, the North East Peer Action Collective (PAC) share our journey, the findings from our research projects, and the impact we have made so far.

**All of the ideas and recommendations we present come directly from the voices of young people and have been shaped by Peer Researchers.
Our aim is not to place judgement or criticism on any professionals or their practice. We recognise the real challenges that exist, particularly within schools, and we want this report to open up conversations, not close them down.**

Call to Action: Every Voice Matters

**Young people in the North East have been clear about what they need. Here's how you can act:**

- Scan the QR code to join our mailing list
- Use the resources we've created in your practice
- Share them with your networks so more young people benefit

- Make PSHE interactive, engaging, and fun
- Ask young people what they want included
- Create safe, accessible spaces for support
- Think about class sizes and group dynamics in sensitive topics
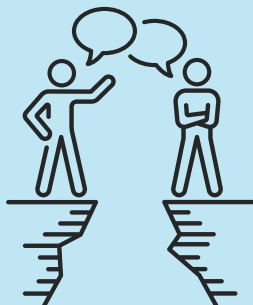
- Link schools with youth groups and support services
- Fund youth workers and external orgs to deliver in schools
- Strengthen connections between teachers, communities, and young people
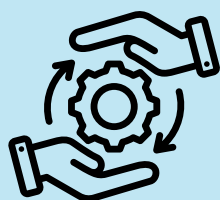
- Fund youth voice and youth-led projects
- Pay young people fairly for their time and expertise
- Challenge stereotypes and back young people with lived experience
- Champion the North East as the region that invests in youth voice

Scan the QR code to act now and be part of creating meaningful change.
Or Click Me

SCAN ME!

PAC case study: Penny's Journey

> **"I want to be the change I wish I had."**

From feeling unheard to becoming NE Youth's first Youth Voice Worker Trainee - Penny's journey shows the power of youth voice.

At just 17, Penny joined NE Youth as a Peer Researcher after experiencing violence affecting young people and years of school exclusion, where she often felt unheard and unseen. With no previous involvement in youth services, she decided to take a chance - attending an NE Youth open day where, for the first time, she felt truly listened to and accepted. Through the Peer Action Collective (PAC) programme, Penny began her journey towards creating safer, more inclusive communities for young people.

Since then, she has become a fearless advocate, using her lived experience to challenge professionals and stand up for her peers. Penny's empathetic, open-minded approach, and her drive to keep learning and growing, has made her a respected youth voice in Gateshead and beyond.

Caroline Evans, Youth Lead at Gateshead Council, described her as: **"a real champion for young people... an inspirational role model for her peers."** Most recently, Penny became NE Youth's first-ever Youth Voice Worker Trainee, a landmark achievement for her and for the organisation.

Penny's story shows what's possible when young people are invested in for the long term. She is living proof of resilience, transformation, and the impact one young person can make.

Her journey should be a trailblazer for others. **Young people matter, and when given the chance, they thrive.**

Background and Summary

The PAC is a national £11.4 million programme, which aims to give young people the chance to make their communities safer, fairer places to live. It is funded by the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iwill Fund (a joint investment between The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and the Co-op Group.

PAC is a network driven by and for young people across England and Wales to conduct peer research and act on the drivers of violence affecting young people. More than 70 young people, employed by local delivery partners and supported by The Young Foundation, drive the network forward and demonstrate the power of youth voice.

The project is youth-led, where young people are employed as peer researchers, social action leads and changemakers to research the root causes of violence against young people and transform their findings into social action projects - creating safer and fairer communities where young people can thrive and flourish. Between 2023 and 2025, across England and Wales, PAC has worked with over 5,000 individual young people. In the North East alone, we have supported and worked with over 900 young people, aged between 11 and 25.

- Peer researchers use their lived experience of violence against young people to guide research.
- Social action leads transform our research findings into social action projects.
- Changemakers support our social action leads to create meaningful social change in their communities.

PAC has influenced school practices, improved local mental health services, co-produced violence reduction strategies, and supported more young people in employment. Together, PAC ensure that young voices respond to issues that directly affect them.

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Middlesbrough
Peer Researcher

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Lead Youth Worker
Gateshead

Caitlin
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Arthur
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Ellie B
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Ellie
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Penny
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Lucy
Peer Researcher
Gateshead

Jess
Peer Researcher
Middlesbrough

MEET THE TEAM

North East PAC

The North East PAC team explored the impact of PSHE, trusted adults, trusted peers, safe spaces and school exclusions on violence affecting young people.

Young people told us:

PSHE should be consistent and high quality, focusing on topics that really matter to young people. It works best when it's fun, engaging, and interactive.	**Teachers build trust** when they empower young people to speak up, listen to our voices, stay calm and consistent, and respect confidentiality.
PSHE should be shaped by young people and delivered by people with lived experience, so the lessons feel real, relevant, and relatable	**Exclusions on their own don't work.** Instead, schools should offer safe, accessible spaces where young people can go when they feel overwhelmed or distressed.

We have spoken to over 900 young people in the North East to understand their experiences and perceptions of violence affecting young people. We have conducted two phases of research with young people. We explored the impact the following had on violence affecting young people:

- PSHE,
- trusted adults,
- trusted peers,
- safe spaces and
- school exclusions.

Although we discussed school exclusions generally, we know it can mean different things, from being in exclusion (in school), suspended, to permanently excluded (out of school).

Following this, PAC transformed the findings into local, regional and national social action, facilitating meaningful change with young people across the North East and beyond.

To support organisations and professionals in bringing these changes to life, and embed youth voice and leadership into their practice, North East PAC have:

SCAN ME!

- Launched the Gateshead youth directory.

- Created their own PSHE framework, which includes session plans for 13 topics designed by young people, a PSHE Guidance Workbook and a PSHE delivery guide.

- Co-produced Q-Cards with support services for young people.

- Designed a youth voice toolkit.

We Are PAC North East!

In the North East PAC there are 8 peer researchers and 2 social action leads in our team, based across Middlesbrough (Youth Focus North East) and Gateshead (NE Youth).

We all joined PAC for similar reasons - we have witnessed or experienced violence affecting young people, and we want to see change!

We joined PAC so we could be the ones to make that change. We want to make an impact on preventing violence affecting young people.

> **"PAC is such an interesting project 'cause we get to make sure young people's voices ARE heard."**
> Peer Researcher (18)

Our research explored the relationship between PSHE, support services and violence against young people. This project aimed to understand whether PSHE and support services have an impact on violence affecting young people.

This research was motivated by our own experiences as young people within the education system.

We know:	What did we want to achieve?
- The education system does not suit every young person. - Teachers' time and resources are limited, they need more support. - Young people need tailored support. - Education can be the first step in violence prevention. - Young people feel there's a lack of accessible and open access safe spaces	- An understanding of young people and their needs to reduce violence against young people within schools. - To explore what young people believe would help make meaningful change. - An understanding of support services and PSHE's role in meeting the needs of young people and how impactful these services are currently.

Our Journey

We started in Sept 2023 by getting to know each other and our experiences. This influenced our research focus.

Our first research project was carried out between March and June 2024, with our phase one findings presented in Nov 2024.

Based on our findings in our first research, we developed our second research project, carried out between Jan and March 2025.

Our Social Action Leads and Changemakers developed initiatives based on the findings of our research

Our Stakeholder Event in Sept 2025 presented our findings, social action to date and our Call to Action.

Methodology - Peer Research

Peer research is when young people lead research using their own experiences to guide it – from planning the questions to sharing the findings.

Peer researchers are "**experts by experience**." We understand the issues young people face because we've lived them. Our project was designed by young people, for young people. This means young voices are at the heart of the work, making sure views are shared honestly and openly. By doing research in this way, we can create change that actually matters – turning what young people say into real social action and social impact.

PAC teams work with a simple message:

**To work with us, but not for us;
to talk alongside us, and not over us;
and to recognise us as key part of the solutions**.

We use our platform to broadcast the voices of young people who are often unheard.

"It works because they get us. We don't need to explain what we are saying because they are our age. They just understand it".
Young person (Male, 14)

Methodology - Peer Research

Our experiences as peer researchers

For many of the young people we spoke to, interviews and focus groups felt relaxed and even enjoyable. Some told us they'd like to stay involved in the work and joined us as changemakers.

Running focus groups helped us build trust and create real conversations, not just tick-box answers.

> "We've spoken to loads of young people all saying the same thing. It feels amazing to shout about it and push for the positive changes that young people really want and need."
> Peer Researcher (18)

> "Being a peer researcher has been an incredibly eye-opening experience. Collectively, we bridge the gap between young people's wants and needs and the key stakeholders who can make meaningful changes."
> Peer researcher (17)

Together, **we learned that young people want change** — and they can see the difference it would make for themselves and their friends. They told us students could benefit from more PSHE and shared what topics they'd like to explore.

We heard so many inspiring ideas. But we also heard frustration: **young people often feel there's no point speaking up**.

Through this project, **we want to show them why their voices matter**.

PSHE IS THE REAL-LIFE STUFF SCHOOL DOESN'T ALWAYS TEACH - MONEY, RELATIONSHIPS, HEALTH, AND LIFE ONLINE.

Peer Researcher Defintion

> "Being a changemaker with PAC has shown me I can make a difference and my voice does matter. Because of PAC, I now want to do more social action projects.."
> Young Person (Male, 14)

Methodology

Research Questions

To understand more about violence affecting young people in the North East, we created interview questions that helped us explore what drives it, what helps to prevent it, and how young people experience and view it. We also wanted to hear young people's own ideas for solutions. In total, across two phases of research, we spoke to 157 young people, aged 13 to 24.

Research Phase	Research Question
Phase One	How does access to support services and PSHE impact violence against young people in educational settings?
Phase Two	What do young people view as the root causes of violence against young people in schools, and what can the education system change to improve this?

Our Model

To be inclusive, we chose different ways to carry out research.

Some took part in one-to-one interviews. These gave young people the chance to have private, in-depth conversations about important topics such as trusted adults, trusted peers, safe spaces, and school exclusions. The individual setting meant young people could share their thoughts openly, without outside pressure.

Others joined focus groups — set up like workshops with activities to help everyone feel safe and respected. These sessions built trust and gave young people the space to share ideas openly together.

Within the focus groups we encouraged young people to share and discuss each others opinions, shifting the power dynamic from us controlling the conversation to the young people speaking between themselves.

One to one Interviews

Focus Groups

Question

Opinion

Thoughts on Opinion

Barriers and Challenges

Like any youth-led project, the PAC journey hasn't been without its challenges. Along the way, we've learnt how to overcome barriers while staying true to our values and putting young people at the centre.

Theme	Barrier / Challenge	What We Did
Access & Delivery	Getting into schools	Stayed persistent, showing how PAC builds skills and confidence through youth voice.
	Adult perceptions and stereotypes	Advocated for young people by showing their skills, highlighting positive contributions, and challenging stereotypes through action.
	Distance between PAC teams	Met halfway monthly and kept momentum with regular online check-ins.
Participation & Inclusion	Building Trust	Took extra time to connect with young people before expecting their views.
	Ensuring Inclusivity	Worked in schools, alternative provision and youth clubs across different areas.
Capacity & Travel	Too many opportunities	Set clear team priorities and focused on the highest-impact opportunities.
	Travel was tricky	With schools and youth settings spread across the region, travel was a challenge - so we mapped interviews by location and worked with our leads to organise transport.
Doing Research	Starting with little research experience	Delivered bite-size training, shadowing and used simple guides.
	Consent, ethics & safeguarding	Used clear scripts, age-appropriate consent and had a named safeguarding lead.
	Analysis skills	Used simple theming and sense-checks to build confidence.
	Emotional load and wellbeing	Built in debriefs and regular check-ins.
	Research fatigue (participants)	Kept sessions short, varied formats and always fed-back: "You said > We did".

Trusted Adults

Through our research we wanted to find out what young people think makes a **trusted adult**. Together, we listed the key traits and qualities, then pulled out the main themes: **Delivery, Understanding, Relationships, and Support (DURS)**. But across all of these, one big issue kept coming up - **inconsistency**.

Delivery:
Young people reported very different experiences of PSHE. Some described sessions that were interactive, engaging, and involved experts or people with lived experience. Others explained that their PSHE was limited, uninspiring, or in some cases, not delivered at all.

Understanding:
Accounts of how teachers responded to and supported young people also varied considerably. Some young people recalled negative experiences where teachers were unpredictable, overly harsh, or dismissive. Others shared positive experiences of being supported by trusted adults who listened, cared, and understood the challenges they were facing.

Relationships:
Trust was identified as central to young people's relationships with professionals. When trust was broken or young people felt their voices weren't taken seriously, relationships suffered. But when professionals built trust and treated young people with respect, young people felt empowered and valued.

Support:
Young people also noted inconsistencies in access to support, the availability of safe spaces, and the type of help offered in schools and the wider community.

From these findings, we created the DURS framework. This came directly from what young people told us makes a **trusted adult**.

That's how DURS was born – a simple tool to help professionals design sessions that feel engaging, relatable, and meaningful for young people.

The artwork of the hands (on the next page) shows the qualities young people shared with us. The bigger the word, the more often it was mentioned in our interviews.

D.U.R.S.

DELIVERY | UNDERSTANDING | RELATIONSHIP | SUPPORT

D

Young people told us what is taught is just as important as how it is taught. **Delivery** should be changeable and loose in order to create an environment for a youth-led focus to flourish. Every professional should use an open mind set and be able to cooperate with a diverse delivery framework meeting the needs of the individuals they are supporting.

U

Understanding is created through listening and acting on what the young people need and want. The ability to acknowledge youth led leadership and to assist them throughout is crucial to allow room for young people to grow "we want people who are relatable".

R

Relationships are fundamental in order to build trust with young people. Healthy relationships are highly important in order to breakdown power imbalance and allow for an open environment, in order to give young people the space to confide in trusted professionals.

S

Support is needed to uplift young people. Professionals need to create the correct balance of support and independence to allow young people to feel empowered but also learn through action. Young people need you to be there through the highs and lows, acting consistently and being one of the people they can turn to when needed.

Our Findings

We explored how trusted adults, trusted peers, safe spaces, and school exclusions connect to violence against young people.

From this research, four key themes stood out:
1. **Young people want and need effective PSHE.**
2. **Building positive student–teacher relationships**
3. **Confidentiality and breaching trust**
4. **Exclusions and punishments**

Theme One: **Young people <u>NEED</u> and <u>WANT</u> effective PSHE in schools.**

Without PSHE, young people miss out on essential life skills — as one young person put it, **"ignorance comes from a lack of understanding".**

Our research showed that most young people we spoke to aren't getting enough PSHE in school. We know teachers already carry huge responsibilities and can't be expected to do everything **"they (teachers) already have enough to do"**. That's why we recommend schools work in partnership with external services — like youth organisations, uniformed services, and community partners — to deliver informal education alongside the curriculum. We also see value in strengthening pastoral support, using a youth work approach that complements teaching and helps students feel more supported.

At our first stakeholder event, teachers and professionals shared that sometimes they are asked to deliver PSHE without training or resources to do it effectively. This isn't about criticising teachers — it highlights the need for schools to have the right support around them. By building stronger community networks, schools can bring in outside expertise and create more opportunities for young people.

Community networking matters because it:
- **Connects young people to more resources** - e.g. local businesses offering internships, non-profits running mentoring, or youth groups providing safe spaces.
- **Strengthens youth voice and advocacy** - communities working together can secure more funding, better facilities, and improved resources for schools and young people.
- **Creates belonging and support** - when young people feel connected to their community, they are more likely to stay engaged, build positive relationships, and develop confidence.

We also believe young people should be asked directly what type of PHSE they want. Covering the curriculum is important, but so is making lessons engaging and relevant to real life.

Takeaway: PHSE isn't an optional extra - it's a vital part of preparing young people for life. Schools, teachers, communities, and young people all have a role to play in making it work.

They said, we did

We created PSHE lesson plans designed and delivered by young people, for young people, in partnership with schools and the VRU.

Our Findings

Theme Two: Building positive student–teacher relationships

In this theme, young people shared how they see their relationships with teachers, pointing out both good and bad practice.

"I like (teacher). She just listens and doesn't judge"

"In Year 7, can you remember? He told [Name] to go jump off a bridge, and then he called me a crybaby."

They explained that unpredictable approaches and teachers who escalated conflict instead of calming it down made positive relationships harder.

"They're bipolar. I go in and they're like: 'You're amazing, you're going to be absolutely brilliant when you grow up, you're going to do this,' and then the next day I go in and they're like: 'You're going to be a failure...'"

A key theme was the unhealthy power imbalance between teachers and students:

"Like, just because we're kids and they're adults doesn't mean that they have the right to shout at us, but we can't answer back."

"Whenever something's happening, we have to listen to their opinion, but then whenever we want to express ours, they never listen."

Young people also felt that students were often held to higher standards than teachers:

"Whenever they have a bad day, they take it out on us. We have a bad day, and we take it out on them, we're seen as like problematic."

To improve relationships, young people suggested teachers should embed youth voice into their practice. This would help create equality and reduce harmful power dynamics that damage trust between students and teachers.

Takeaway: Young people told us that trust and equality are the foundations of positive relationships - when teachers listen and value their voices, real change can happen.

They said, we did

We created a Youth Voice Toolkit to assist teachers in increasing youth voice in their delivery.

Our Findings

Theme Three: Confidentiality and Breaching Trust

Young people spoke openly about their lack of trust in teachers, often linked to safeguarding referrals. Many felt these referrals weren't always explained clearly, and this sometimes led to fear, or negative perceptions, about what would happen next.

"No. If you definitely tell them something that's happening at home...They have to tell safeguarding."

"Teachers will get Social Services involved or something."

At the same time, some young people said their trust grew when adults respected confidentiality and explained their actions clearly.

"So if they keep things confidential, it makes them more trustworthy."

Takeaway: Young people understand that safeguarding is important - but how it's handled matters. Trust is built when professionals are open, explain what will happen and listen to young people throughout the process.

Theme Four: Exclusions and Punishments

When discussing punishments, young people described some as excessive, while others were seen as ineffective or inconsistent.

"They kick them out, and then they forget about them. They're just standing out there for the whole lesson...Yes. That happened to [Name] and [Name]. [Name] just forgot he existed."

"They put us in [Isolation], it's freezing. They don't let us have a hot meal in [Isolation]. We have to eat sandwiches. Don't you think that's quite bad?"

"You get food for free. You just want to be in there [Isolation] all the time."

There were also mixed feelings about exclusions. Some young people admitted they tried to get excluded, while others felt exclusions could seriously affect mental health, particularly for those already facing difficulties.

"I just think they're [exclusions] pointless. People try to get excluded on purpose."

"Maybe he might feel suicidal sort of."

Theme cont'd...

Message for professionals

"Explain safeguarding clearly. Don't just act - talk us through it"

Our Findings

Theme Four: Exclusions and Punishments CONTINUED

Young people also emphasised the need for safe spaces in school, which they felt could reduce aggression and violence, while improving mental health and wellbeing. One focus group said the following:

P1: "You know what they should bring back? Timeout passes."
P2: "But not all teachers let you use them, though, do they, to be honest?"
P3: "Even if you have one, some teachers just say no."

Many suggested alternatives like time-out passes, but felt these approaches were used inconsistently by staff.

Most young people agreed that having a dedicated safe space in school would help them manage emotions, support mental health, and reduce risks linked to violence against young people:

"It [safe space] would be good for your mental health."

"A safe space, you know what I think? Boxing, because when you're boxing, everything just goes out your head. You just can take your anger out then, can't you?"

"Because when you go to the safe space, you're safe. No, like you can calm down a bit."

One alternative education provision already used creative and flexible approaches, such as 'Twilight':

"Change the day around, where they have some time out of the groups. Sometimes there's something like mobile learning, others coming in after school when everyone's... just to change around a little bit until they get settled in."

Takeaway: Young people told us they don't just want fewer punishments - they want better alternatives. Safe spaces, time-out passes, and creative approaches can help reduce conflict, protect mental health, and keep schools safer for everyone.

They said, we did
Worked with young people to co-design their 'ideal' safe spaces.

Social Action, Impact & Influence

PAC's impact has been felt locally, regionally, and nationally — with young people leading change at every level

Local – Young people shaping their communities	• Co-designed a youth directory with Gateshead Council. • Featured on BBC Newcastle to promote PAC and launch the directory. • Created self-help cards for young people with local info. • Organised launch events with young people and stakeholders. • Presented findings at a Gateshead Council youth violence conference.
Regional – Influencing systems and services	• Influenced £16,000 of funding with the Northumbria Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) for youth-led projects. • Designed a toolkit for professionals on working with young people. • Co-created session plans with Northumbria Police to improve school delivery. • Chaired a panel on Masculinity and Politics. • Partnered with Teesside University to embed youth-led PSHE in teacher training. • Advised the Cleveland Police & Crime Commissioner and VRU on youth-centred solutions. • Developed a digital PAC PHSE delivery guide and workbook for teachers, plus youth-led PSHE session plans. • Ran a community safety workshop at the NCS Hope Hack. • Co-delivered a democracy and young people event. • Held two regional stakeholder events to share findings. • Produced a digital PAC PSHE Delivery Guide for teachers. • Reviewed the Violence Prevention Ambassador Programme in collaboration with Northumbria Violence Reduction Unit (VRU).
National – Making youth voice heard in policy	• Shared PAC findings with directly MPs in Parliament. • Shared our findings with the Department for Education and directly fed into the PSHE guidance as part of the national curriculum review. • Submitted evidence to the Women's and Equalities Committee on misogyny. • Presented PAC at Civil Service Live.

Our Final Message

On behalf of the North East Peer Action Collective (PAC) team, we want to say a huge thank you to the funders of PAC: **the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iwill Fund (a joint investment between The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and the Co-op Group**. Your support has not only helped us tackle violence against young people in our communities, but it has also made a lasting difference to us as young people.

Because of this opportunity, we've been able to **amplify the voices of young people**, carry out peer-led research, and co-produce solutions to issues that directly affect our lives. Together, we've worked to create safer spaces for young people across the North East.

Being part of PAC has also shaped our own futures. We've gained experience in youth engagement, research, leadership, and project delivery, skills that are now guiding our journeys into youth work and other careers. We've built confidence, developed professionally, and discovered a **real passion for making change with young people**.

We would also like to thank all the partners (individuals and organisations) that have supported our journey and made our experience what it was.

None of this would have been possible without investment in youth-led action. We are deeply grateful for your belief in the power of young people and your commitment to building a safer, fairer future.

It is our hope that the ethos, values and legacy of North East PAC will continue, with local, regional, and national stakeholders using our research and resources. We hope this proven model of Peer Research can be adopted in more scenarios to improve the lives of young people and support them to thrive.

Above all, we would like to thank every young person who took part in our research and social action. Your voices have been the driving force for change in our communities.

The North East PAC Team

|	Middlesbrough (Youth Focus North East)	Gateshead (NE Youth)
Peer Reasearchers	Ellie Butters, Liana Crump, Yousef Khan, Jess Elliott, Kendal Douglass	Arthur Golden-Shillaw, Lucy Brannan, Penny Rosemond, Brandon Smith
Social Action Leads	Katy Mann Ellie Symon	Ellie Johnson
Project Management Staff	Caitlin Stephenson, Laura Kane, Megan Stratton, Rebecca Harrop, Dave McCreedy, Veena Bumma-Dykes	Dan Straughan, Nikki Niblo, Quinn Stanger, Caroline Evans

Appendix A - Who we spoke to

Sampling and Diversity

We spoke to young people in youth clubs, local secondary schools, and alternative education settings. This meant we reached a wide mix of young people, including those who aren't always involved in mainstream education. By working with schools and groups that support young people outside of traditional schooling, we made sure voices that are often missed were included. This gave us a bigger and more inclusive picture of what young people think.

Demographics

We heard from young people from all sorts of backgrounds and communities, including those from minoritised and marginalised groups. This was really important to us, because we wanted our findings to reflect the experiences of all young people in the North East. The demographics of our participants are, in general, reflective of the demographics in the North East. The main age we worked with was 13 - 16 year olds.

As young researchers, we wanted to make sure no voices were left out: **everyone's experiences matter**.
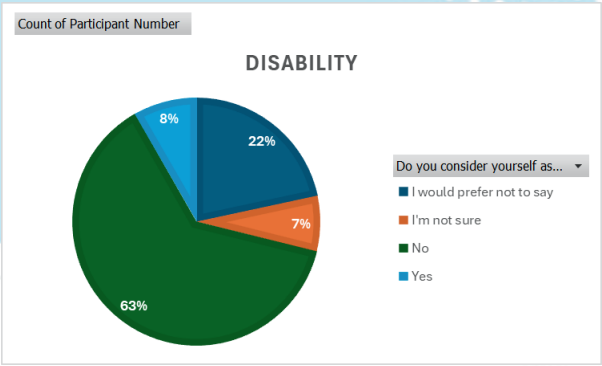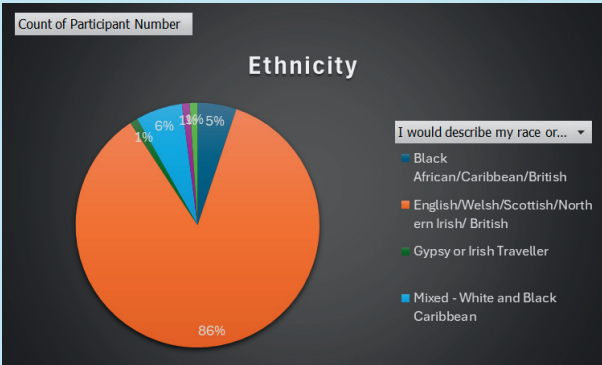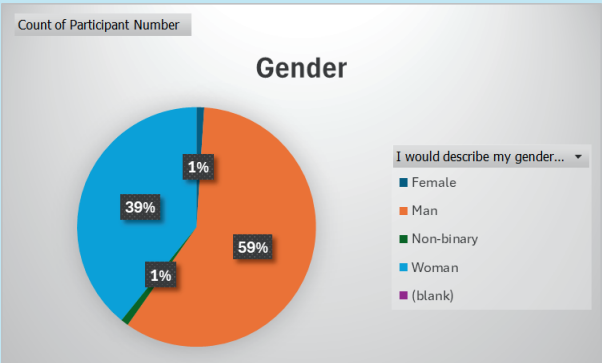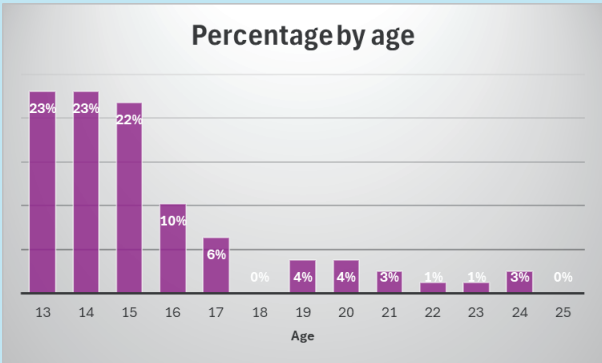
Appendix B - Links

Stakeholder Report

Click me

Youth Voice Toolkit

Click me

PSHE Delivery Guide

Click me

PSHE workbook

Click me

Q-cards

Click me

SCAN ME!

EXPLORE MORE. DO MORE. GATESHEAD. (Youth Directory)

Click me

National

7 National Partners

3 School Exclusion focus

5000+ Total Engagements

2000+ School exclusion engagements

NE Focussed Impact

900 + North East
Majority 13-16 years old

- 157 interviews
- 600+ Social Action Participants
- 80 Changemakers
- 80 + Surveys
- 10 Leads

For more information please contact:

Youth Focus North East (Middlesbrough)
youthfocusne.org.uk

NE Youth (Gateshead)
neyouth.org.uk

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