

INCLUSIVE  NORTH



PAC Lancashire

Research report: Supporting young people in schools



Contents

	Pages
About PAC	3
PAC in Lancashire	4
Why did we focus on support in schools?	5
Our key themes and recommendations	6
Theme 1: Mental health was the underlying factor	7
Theme 2: Youth Voice	9
Theme 3: Punishments, detentions and isolation spaces	10
Theme 4: Trust between students and teachers	11
Conclusion	12
Our recommendations	13
Social action - they said, we did	16
PAC leads and Changemakers - the real power behind the research	18
Appendix - Methodology	20



About PAC

The Peer Action Collective (PAC) is a £11.4m 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. Nationally, 121 young people were employed by 10 delivery partners (community-based youth organisations) to drive the network forward. PAC teams worked across Lancashire, the North-east (Gateshead and Middlesbrough), London, Wales, the South-west (Bristol and Exeter), Yorkshire (Bradford and Hull) and Birmingham.

Between 2023 and 2025, across England and Wales PAC engaged **5,158 young people across peer research and social action**. PAC teams looked at one of three key themes:

- **Trusted adults** and how they can play a more significant and more effective role in the lives of young people, to protect or prevent their involvement in violence.
- **Schools** and how they can be more supportive environments to improve attendance and prevent exclusions.
- **Positive activities** and how these can protect children from violence.

In Lancashire we focused our research and social action on support for young people affected by violence in schools.

Joining other PAC teams across England and Wales we share insights from our work with a simple plea: **to work with us, but not for us, to talk alongside us, and not over us and to recognise us as a key part of the solutions.**

PAC in Lancashire



PAC in Lancashire was delivered in partnership between Inclusive North, BwD Healthy Living and Child Action North West (CANW). The team worked across Lancashire, including in Preston, Leyland, Blackburn, Darwen, Hyndburn, Pendle, Burnley, Nelson and Colne. You can find a breakdown of some of the key achievements of PAC in both Lancashire and nationwide below.

Lancashire



20 young people were employed as PAC Leads to drive research and social action forward.



They spoke to **447** young people affected by violence in their research.



PAC Lancashire covered Preston, Leyland, Blackburn with Darwen, Hyndburn, Pendle, Burnley, Nelson & Colne.



The team heard:

- A lack of trust between pupils & teachers impacted relationships.
- Youth voice was often seen as a tick box exercise.
- Students wanted more support with their mental health in schools.
- Detention and isolation spaces were seen as unproductive, and students wanted to help re-design these.

England & Wales



121

Young people leading research & social action



2,621

Young people shared their story through peer research and a survey



2,049

Young people worked for change through social action



Why did we focus on support in schools?

In recent years, conversations around young people's mental health has grown more urgent, and rightly so. As young people face increasingly complex social, academic, and emotional pressures, institutions, especially schools, are being called to reconsider how they support well-being.

As a team **we understand and recognise the increased pressures felt by schools and teachers** around meeting this need, in a context where they are constantly being asked to do more in their roles. As a result, we strongly think that **teachers and schools need more support** to meet these needs.

Too often, however, responses to student distress or behavioural challenges are shaped by punitive models: detention, isolation, surveillance, or exclusion. These approaches may create compliance in the short term, but they often worsen the very conditions that affect students' mental health.

This report focuses on the **importance of creating safe, trusting, and equitable spaces** for young people, especially within schools. We heard that when students feel psychologically safe, supported, and genuinely heard, their capacity to learn, engage, and grow increases significantly. Conversely, when school environments rely heavily on isolation, exclusion, or discipline without dialogue, they undermine trust and erode young people's sense of belonging.

Rather than assigning blame to schools, parents, or young people themselves, this report takes a constructive, forward-looking approach. It examines how educational systems can build rapport with students, and make better use of physical and social spaces to promote connection rather than disconnection, and create inclusive structures like student councils that are truly equitable. Special attention is paid to evaluating how student voice is currently functioning, and what mechanisms are needed to ensure young people are not only heard but also empowered.



Our key themes and recommendations

From our research with 150 young people affected by violence across Lancashire, four key themes emerged:

1. **Mental health was the underlying factor** - students shared how their mental health played a big role in shaping their behaviour. Despite this, they often felt they weren't asked enough or felt safe enough about **why** they behaved how they did, often shaped by challenges around their mental health, and were instead punished without the chance to explain **why** and get support to address these root causes.
2. **Students didn't feel youth voice programmes in schools were effective enough** - students shared how they typically didn't have confidence in youth voice programmes at schools, feeling that young people like themselves, typically those who often get into trouble, weren't well-represented and that not much action seemed to be taken from student's recommendations.
3. **Students felt punishment systems needed to be re-worked** - students felt that that schools needed to move away from what they saw as a culture of punishment, towards one of curiosity, support and intervention, with detention spaces re-worked to develop plans for addressing root causes and support needs behind behaviour.
4. **Many students didn't feel they were taken seriously, which broke trust between them and teachers** - students shared how they felt concerns were dismissed, their ideas were brushed aside, and that their realities were misunderstood.

Our recommendations are explored in further detail later in the report, but focus on three core asks for teachers and schools:

1. **Work with students to develop more inclusive and effective youth voice programmes.**
2. **Focus efforts on creating safe spaces and relationships to better understand and address root causes driving challenging behaviour.**
3. **Centre solutions on building trusting relationships between students and teachers.**



Theme 1: Mental health was the underlying factor

Mental health is not just a buzzword, it's a vital aspect of a young person's overall well-being and development. For many young people, school is not just a place for learning; it's also a place where they carry 'baggage' from home, social pressures, and internal struggles that impact how they show up each day. Despite this, young people shared how they felt schools **too often rely on punitive measures** such as detentions or sanctions when students act out or fall behind, without first asking *why*.

Unfortunately, this approach fails to recognise that behaviour is often as a result of miscommunication. For students, this can stem from a fear of being punished, while teachers may worry about losing their authority. A student who is angry, disruptive, withdrawn, or unmotivated may not be choosing to "misbehave" but may be struggling with anxiety, depression, trauma, or intense pressure outside of school. **If we don't ask the deeper questions, we miss the opportunity to intervene with compassion, and instead risk worsening the problem.**

Through our research most young people shared how punishments of students does not support their growth. It reinforces shame, disconnection, and a belief that their struggles are not valid. Students may struggle silently or express distress in ways that are misunderstood, through low mood, avoidance, outbursts, or declining performance.

Pressures can affect everything, from sleep and concentration to emotional regulation and behaviour. A student who seems "disrespectful" or "lazy" might actually be exhausted from staying up late helping a parent, or anxious because there's no food at home. These are real barriers to learning, and schools must respond accordingly.

“
One teacher tried to lecture me around mental health and they have no experience of this
”

“
I know when I am about to 'blow' or when I get 'frustrated' but don't know how to express myself, so the teachers or other students get it
”

“
It still hurts today...I used to feel suicidal in class... It used to get really bad for me.. People thought I was overreacting. I felt like no one understood mental health.
”

“
I was going through some bad times at home. My grandad died. The next day, I was supposed to hand in my homework for foodtech and I didn't... I got into trouble. They never understood. My grandad died and you want me to make a f*** pizza.**
”

Solutions from students

- **Supporting teachers with more training:** students felt that teachers might benefit from additional mental health and trauma-informed practice, to support them in recognising early warning signs and responding appropriately.
- **Stronger referral systems:** students suggested that stronger referral systems between in-school counsellors, mentors and external mental health services could make a difference. They shared how they understood teachers were under pressure, and wanted them to have more back-up.
- **Greater access to spaces that felt safe:** students shared that they would benefit from more safe, calm spaces within school where they could decompress and speak privately with someone they trusted if needed.
- **More proactive support:** students felt that pastoral systems could be more proactive, checking in on vulnerable students regularly instead of it feeling like they were waiting for issues to escalate.
- **Being flexible:** students felt that flexible approaches to behaviour and attendance should be given when students are known to be struggling with mental health or home difficulties.
- **Working collaboratively:** students felt they should be invited to co-design support systems so they feel a sense of agency in shaping their own wellbeing.



Theme 2: Youth voice

For most young people we spoke to, they felt youth voice had lost its meaning. They felt they were told their opinions mattered, but when they tried to speak up, they felt their voices were too often dismissed, ignored or not acted on.

Instead of feeling genuinely included in conversations that shape their lives at school, students told us they left feeling like participants in a performance, one where the outcome is already decided. Students told us that real youth voice was more than a slogan, it needed to be a culture, a commitment and belief that young people are not just the future, they're the present, and they deserve to be heard now.

“
Even being a part of the school council, our teachers used to ask for our opinions but never acted upon them. It made us feel useless..
”

“
Nothing makes a perfect school, There's never ever gonna be a school that will always listen to us....but I just want to be heard
”

School councils, prefect and head boy/girl systems were felt by young people taking part in the research as a tick-box exercise. To young people we spoke to, these initiatives felt like symbolic gestures, rather than a functioning platform for youth voice. As student leadership felt like a formality, research participants told us they stopped engaging, not because they didn't care, but because they knew it wouldn't change anything. For many, youth voice at school was seen as window dressing.

Solutions from students

- **True representation:** students felt student councils are sometimes made up of the most confident, well-behaved or popular students, not necessarily those with the most important perspectives. They felt those often badged as 'naughty' had a lot to offer, but often weren't included.
- **Real decision-making power:** Students felt they may be asked to give ideas but rarely see those ideas implemented. Their suggestions often disappear into silence and acting on suggestions would make a real difference in re-building trust.
- **Follow-through and feedback:** Students felt they aren't often told what happens with their input. There's no transparency, which creates the feeling that their involvement was pointless. Regular feedback is key.



Theme 3: Punishments, detentions and isolation spaces

Young people told us they feel schools should move away from a culture of punishment toward one of curiosity, support, and intervention. When a student breaks a rule or exhibits difficult behaviour, they felt the first response should be to ask *why*?

- *What's going on in this student's life that might be causing this?*
- *Have we built a relationship where this student feels safe talking to someone?*
- *What support structures do we have in place to identify and address underlying needs?*

Research participants felt that automatic detentions or exclusions were often quickly given, which **limited space for what they really needed: thoughtful conversations, emotional check-ins, and access to mental health support.**

With detentions in particular, most young people expressed their **disappointment around the absence of staff** in these spaces, making them feel unproductive and futile. As they felt there wasn't the opportunity to explore what was going on for them, they expressed how they often had no regard for them, would regularly not attend and had no fear of repercussion.

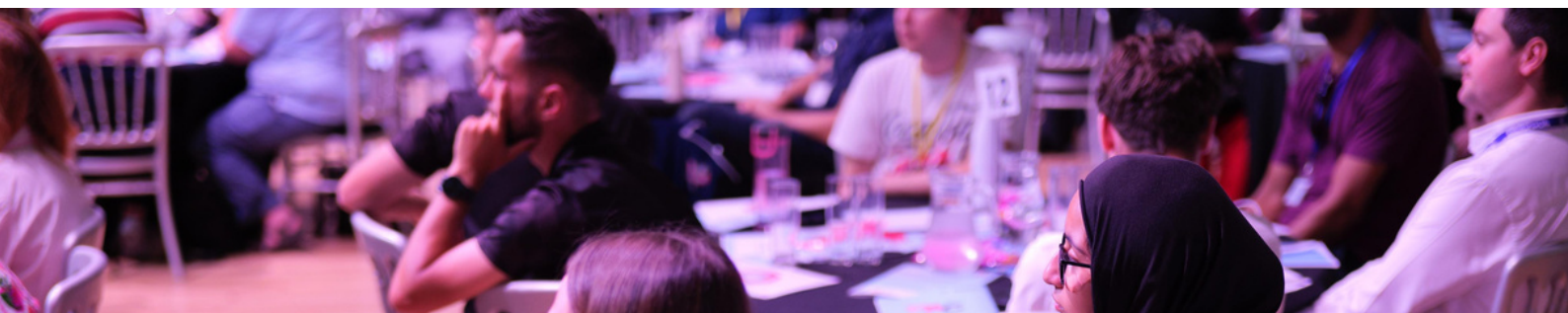
“

For the majority there is no clear justification or explanation for punishments or warnings which is frustrating

”

Solutions from students

- **Facilitate restorative conversations** - students suggested that school staff should be trained and supported to lead restorative circles or one-on-one conversations. This would create vital time to understand the student's perspective and begin addressing root causes driving behaviour.
- **Offer greater access to support services** - students suggested that being provided with resources about coping skills, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation would make a difference.
- **Encourage positive reinforcement** - students shared that they would engage well with opportunities to “earn back” privileges through constructive participation in school life, for providing honest reflections and demonstrating positive behaviour changes.
- **Gather more feedback** - students wanted regular and greater opportunities to input on how isolation and detention spaces and processes could be improved to address root causes behind their behaviour.



Theme 4: Trust between students & teachers

A significant number of young people we spoke to felt they weren't taken seriously, they **felt their concerns were dismissed, their ideas were brushed aside, and their realities misunderstood.**

Too often, when students raised issues about mental health, bullying, unfair treatment, or problems with how the school operates, they told us reactions were that they were too dramatic, disrespectful, or "just need to focus more." This created **frustration and resentment**, and it fuelled their **belief that teachers were only interested in their grades** and don't want to focus on why students behave the way they do.

Without honest, respectful communication, this perceived gap with teachers will continue to grow. Rebuilding that bridge must start with adults being willing to listen first and defend later and with **students being seen as co-creators of the school culture, not passive observers.**

“

Most teachers can not have a honest conversation where they see us as more than young people and that what we have to say has some importance to it

”

Solutions from students

- **Model discretion and confidentiality:** If a student shares something private, it should only be shared on a need-to-know basis, and the student should be informed at every step.
- **Follow through on concerns raised:** If a student reports bullying or mental health issues, they must see real, timely action taken. Empty responses destroy trust.
- **Train staff to listen, not just respond:** Active listening, emotional literacy, and non-judgmental support should be baseline skills for every adult in the school.
- **Empower peer support with guidance:** If students trust each other more than adults, schools should invest in safe peer mentorship programs that are monitored and supported, so students aren't left to carry each other's trauma alone.



Conclusion - we need compassion before consequences

We heard that students often don't know how to raise issues or who to go to when they want to be heard. They feel there is a lack of established, trusted communication channels between students, teachers and school leaders.

Even when young people did try to voice their concerns, whether it's through surveys, feedback forms, or informal conversations, **they felt they were rarely shown the outcome.** This creates a culture where young people feel ignored, even when schools believe they are listening.

Youth voice cannot be treated as an afterthought, a formality, or a decorative piece of policy. It must be treated as what it truly is: essential. Students are not simply recipients of education, they are active members of the school community. They see what's working and what isn't. They know what they need. If schools want to become more inclusive, more responsive, and better support mental wellbeing, the first step is simple but powerful: **Start listening. And when students speak, believe them.**

Communication should be clear, ongoing, and most importantly, two-way. **Young people must be given consistent, accessible ways to voice their opinions and ask questions.** And when they do, they need to see change, or at the very least, an explanation.

A school should be a place where compassion outweighs control, and support replaces shame. Instead of viewing young people through the lens of "good" or "bad" behaviour, **schools need to make a more trauma informed approach to teaching and education.** Only then can we build an environment where all students have the opportunity to feel safe, seen, and be successful. **Working with young people to identify methods and spaces where they can be truly heard** should be a priority for schools as well as a platform where there is transparency and honesty regarding inconsistent messages.

Trust should be built from the very beginning between young people and teachers, if not real harm can take place, even if no one intends it. The absence of trust builds a culture of silence especially if a young person is getting bullied, discriminated, or abused, which leads to an impact on their mental health and well being. Behaviour influenced by anxiety, depression, or trauma is often neglected by teachers, demanding a more attentive approach to behaviour management.



Our Recommendations

1 We need more inclusive & effective youth voice programmes

Student leadership opportunities must be **accessible to all students**-not just the most confident or popular. That means rethinking how members are chosen, how meetings are run, and how decisions are made. Every student, regardless of background, ability, or confidence level, should feel they have a seat at the table. **Diversity in the student council ensures that different perspectives are considered and that the council can truly speak for the entire student body.**

It's not enough to say students are being heard, schools need to ask: Is student voice making a real difference? This requires regular review and feedback. Anonymous surveys, discussion forums, and reflection sessions can help identify whether students feel safe and empowered to speak up, and whether their voices are actually shaping decisions. **The aim should be for students to feel that their insights are not only welcomed, but also acted upon.**

Effective communication is the foundation of trust. **Schools should work toward clearer, more consistent, and student-centred communication strategies.** This includes how teachers speak to students, how decisions are explained, and how concerns are addressed. Messages should be timely, respectful, and accessible, with efforts made to connect with families in ways that reflect their needs and languages. Strong communication helps everyone feel more connected, included, and informed.

Social action should be a part of everyday school life, not just something reserved for assemblies or awareness weeks. Students are deeply aware of the world around them-from climate change and mental health, to racism and inequality. The school should actively support students in engaging with these issues through the curriculum, student-led campaigns, and local community partnerships. This empowers students to become thoughtful, informed changemakers, both inside and outside of school.



Our Recommendations

2 We need to understand and address root causes behind behaviour

Before any meaningful change can occur, schools must take an honest look at the specific challenges affecting students and teachers. These might include issues like student disengagement, exclusion rates, racism, or mental health concerns. The goal is not to assign blame but to understand what isn't working, and why. **Engaging students, staff, and families in identifying these issues helps create a clearer path forward based on shared priorities and collective responsibility.**

Schools need to **move away from reactive and punitive approaches to more preventative and restorative ones.** Instead of focusing solely on consequences when things go wrong, schools should ask: *Why did this happen? What support is needed to prevent it from happening again?* This means looking at repeated problems as signals - not just disruptions - and creating systems that address the root causes with compassion and fairness.

Many students are carrying emotional and psychological stress that can impact their learning and behaviour. A trauma-informed approach acknowledges this and equips teachers with strategies to respond with empathy, patience, and flexibility. This includes using calming strategies, understanding triggers, offering choices, and creating safe learning environments. **Training and support for staff are essential in making this a consistent, school-wide practice - not just a theory.**



Our Recommendations

3 Focus on building trust & relationships

Strong and trusting relationships are at the heart of a positive school culture. Teachers and staff should be encouraged and given time to build rapport with students outside of formal teaching moments. Whether it's chatting informally in classrooms, joining students in extracurricular activities, or simply checking in during break times, these moments help students feel seen and valued as individuals. **When students know that staff genuinely care, they are more likely to engage, behave positively, and ask for help when needed.**

We recognise that pressures with the curriculum can limit time for this relationship-building, but to support young people to reach their potential it's crucial to intentionally create moments to talk to students not as "learners," but as young people with thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences. These conversations should be relaxed, respectful, and on their level, free from judgement or pressure. This kind of engagement builds empathy and helps adults understand what students are really going through.

Self-evaluation shouldn't be a behind-the-scenes process. Schools should regularly share how they are doing with students, families, and staff-and be open about what's working and what isn't. **A culture of transparency builds trust and invites the whole community to be part of improvement efforts.** By modelling openness and accountability, schools set the tone for how everyone should grow and learn-from mistakes, feedback, and each other. Schools must move away from a "blame culture" and toward a learning culture. Mistakes by students or staff should be seen as opportunities for reflection and growth, not judgment. This helps create a safer, more open environment where people are more willing to take risks, admit when something's gone wrong, and work collaboratively on solutions.



Social Action - they said, we did

Students said

- Whilst some teachers were praised, others were criticized for either being disengaged or not showing enough how they cared about their wellbeing.
- For many, there was a breakdown of communication and trust between students and teachers, with students feeling there were barriers between themselves and teachers.
- Many students emphasised that they did not feel supported or understood emotionally with their mental health.
- There were frustrations with detentions and rules feeling overly strict.
- It was broadly felt that student voice programmes, like student councils, were ineffective, felt tokenistic and that suggestions from these were not taken seriously.

We did - addressing concerns through social action

The PAC leads and changemakers (other young people supporting the team), used these findings to develop social action ideas to address particular needs across three geographical areas, Blackburn with Darwen, Central Lancashire and East Lancashire. Teams of young people across these locations worked over several months to finalise three tools, and develop an associated toolkit to share learning with others, to support schools and teachers to address challenges raised through the research. These ideas were developed with over 220 young people across schools and youth clubs to improve these through input and feedback.

“

Most teachers can not have a honest conversation where they see us as more than young people and that what we have to say has some importance to it

”



Social Action - they said, we did

The three tools the teams developed are summarised below, with links available (just scan the QR codes) to video instructions and the associated toolkit for all three tools. If you have any questions or would like to learn more about these, please contact office@inclusivenorth.org.uk.

Spill The Tea Board Game

The board game has been designed to be used in schools to encourage discussions on key themes and issues that affect students and through discussion build greater understanding between teachers and students. It's interactive features aim to prompt positive discussion and build trust through fun and collaboration.



Reframe & Connect - Detentions & Isolation Spaces

This tool uses 3D magnetic blocks to support students and teachers to re-imagine what detention and isolation spaces could look like to support effective behaviour change, emotional wellbeing and to build trusting relationships



Turning The Tables

Turning The Tables is a tool used to bring about conversation on relevant topics related to wellbeing and behaviour. Students and teachers are invited to spin the 'wheel of fortune' - made up segments containing either questions or activities that aim to prompt communication and discussion between students and teachers. Views are recorded before agreeing on which discussion point(s) to address via the development of a framework.



[Reframe & Connect Toolkit](#)
[Video Instructions](#)



[Turning The Table Toolkit](#)
[Video Instructions](#)



[Spilling The Tea Toolkit](#)
[Video Instructions](#)



[Social Action Toolkit](#)
[Booklet](#)



PAC Leads & Changemakers - the **real** power behind the research

Young people drove PAC in Lancashire and were the key to its success. We found that because research was led by young people who shared similar backgrounds, experiences, and challenges, **participants opened up more**. Their shared lived experience supported PAC leads to ask the right questions in sensitive ways, interpret responses with empathy, and identify solutions and nuances that adult researchers might overlook. Placing young people at the centre of peer-led research is not a methodological choice, it's a **statement of trust and belief in their potential to drive meaningful change**. PAC Leads not only gathered data; they shaped the future of their communities by ensuring that young people's voices are heard, respected, and acted upon.

PAC leads also played a key leadership role in supporting Changemakers to use research findings to lead social action activities, developing and testing tools and toolkits to support wider change. Changemakers too demonstrated leadership skills, resilience and greater ownership over the ability to make positive changes within schools.

Centring young people creates a ripple effect, empowering them to support each other, challenge harmful norms, and build safer, more inclusive school environments. Below you will find videos of the young people describing their journey on PAC and their vision as well as how PAC has had an impact on their lives. **We encourage others to consider similar youth-led approaches**, as it not only leads to better, more relevant and more inclusive work, but also greatly benefits young people leading.

PAC & Changemakers
Journey Video



Please Scan

Impact of PAC on
young people



Please Scan



Appendix - Methodology

BwD Healthy Living used Participatory Learning And Action (PLA) to train the PAC Leads to deliver peer research. PLA can be described as a group of approaches or methods and behaviours that enable community members to analyse issues affecting them. This approach supported the team to plan actions to take and monitor and evaluate the results.

The successful use of PLA depends upon facilitators acting as catalysts and convenors and not dominating the process. Central to the approach was our shared belief that young people are the experts of their own reality and that when young people identify their own problems and solutions, these are much more likely to be feasible and implemented than those imposed by adults.

To support young people to lead, we used several PLA methods. These methods supported young people to express and share information and stimulate discussion and analysis. Most of the methods required minimal input from adults, and few resources. Central was sharing information and experiences, including:

- Young people sharing information between themselves.
- Young people and facilitators sharing information.
- PLA facilitators sharing information and experiences amongst each other.

The Young Foundation played a crucial role in supporting the PAC team by providing additional training and guidance to young people in research approaches. Researchers from The Young Foundation supported the research design, helping to make the research more inclusive and safe. Their involvement has helped to empower young people to become involved in positive change in their communities, contributing to the understanding of issues related to youth violence and social deprivation.

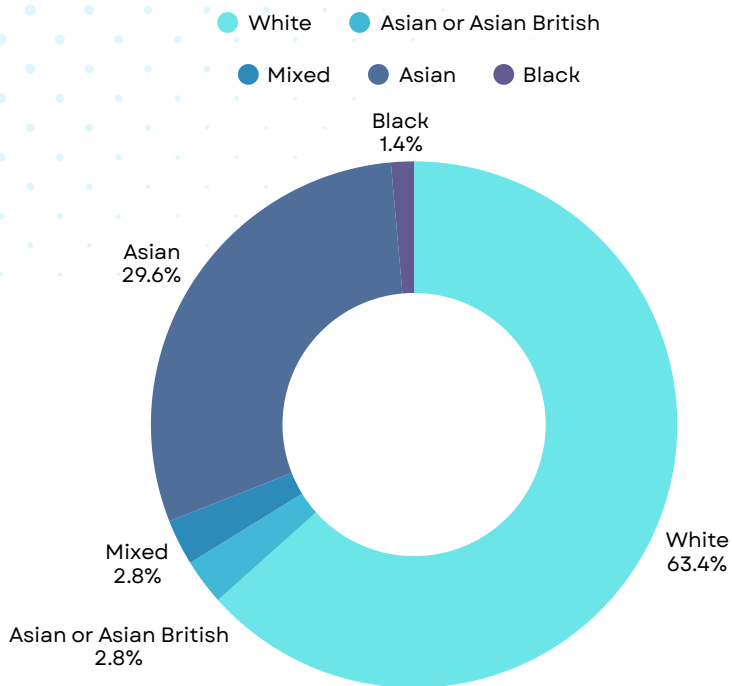
PAC leads led the research, they designed the research questions, developed their approach to engaging young people (a mix of interviews and workshops), and built partnerships with local organisations to recruit young people to take part. The research took part in two phases, with slightly different questions asked in each, to support the team to dig deeper from the first phase. The research approach and tools went through an ethical approval process. This process supported the team to reflect on potential risks and identified measures to support young people who may be at risk of being triggered by traumatic memories or experiences.



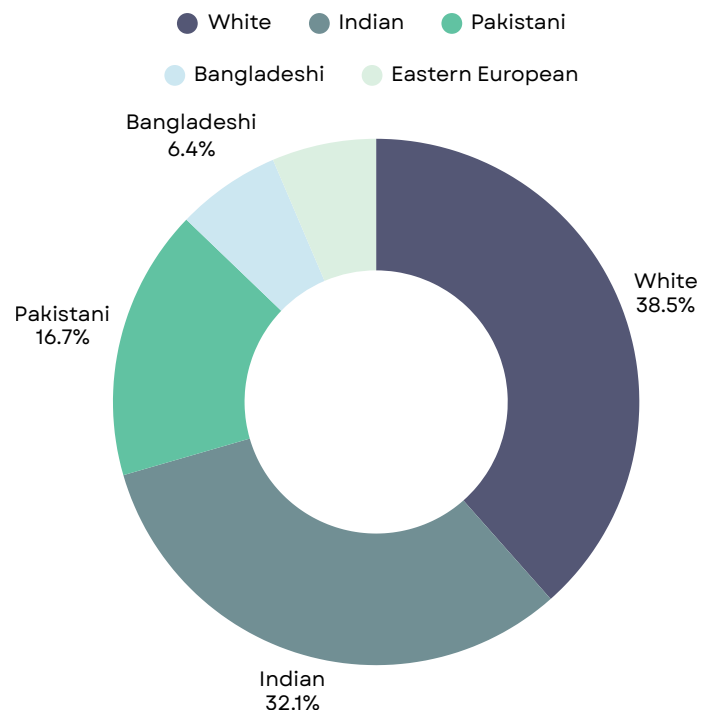
Appendix - Methodology

All young people participating across the team's work provided consent and all GDPR procedures were followed and digitally recorded. Any young person aged under 16 who took part provided parental consent and interviews and workshops were recorded and transcribed to support accurate data analysis. You can find a summary of the sample of young people engaged below.

Foundation Research
Ethnicity Distribution



Second Stage Research
Ethnicity Distribution



Research Age Distributions
(Across the project)

