

SHARING POWER, SHOWING UNDERSTANDING

A call to tackle violence affecting young people, with young people

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	6
About the programme	6
Who was involved	7
OUR APPROACH	9
Peer research	9
Survey research	11
Social action	12
ABOUT THIS REPORT	13
Presenting the evidence	14
THEME 1: VIOLENCE IN CONTEXT	15
THEME 2: POWER AND UNDERSTANDING	32
THEME 3: MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING	50
LEARNINGS AND TAKE-AWAYS	61
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	64

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Peer Action Collective (PAC) is a network driven by and for young people at risk of or with lived experience of violence across England and Wales. PAC gives young people a chance to make their communities safer, fairer places to live through a programme of peer research and social action. Since PAC started in 2021, the programme has involved more than 12,000 young people through research or social action.

This report covers the second iteration of the Peer Action Collective, running from 2023–2025.

This iteration involved 10 community-based youth organisations in regions across England and Wales who employed

young people as PAC Leads. These young people designed and delivered peer research, and drew on their own lived experiences and peer insight to develop social action activities, supported by a wider team of young people in Changemaker roles.

Since 2023, and as of July 2025, a total of 5,158 young people aged 10–23 were engaged in different roles. Within this, the peer research comprised 273 interviews, 139 focus groups and a non-probability survey with 1,510 participants, all taking place between January 2024 and July 2025.

Key themes

The research and social action carried out by PAC highlighted three overarching themes, each providing insight to help tackle violence affecting young people.

Theme 1: Violence in context

Young people shared a feeling that violence was potentially all around them – within their communities, on their phones through social media, and in the physical spaces they travel through in their neighbourhoods. In this context, young people wanted positive activities away from home and school where they could feel safe and included. They hoped for mediated safe spaces to have fun, relax, alleviate boredom, and divert them away from negative influences and behaviours.

Social action across regions focused on tackling violence affecting young people on social media; addressing barriers to safe travel; and developing interactive maps for young people to access positive activities.

Theme 2: Power and understanding

Young people perceived relationships with adults – such as teachers, the police, parents and youth workers – as imbalanced when adults did not treat them with empathy, fairness and understanding.

In contrast, positive relationships were said to give young people agency, making them feel heard and centring their voices and experiences in authentic ways.

Social action activities focused on deeper listening in Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education; giving young people a greater voice in decision-making through youth forums; using play to rebalance power between students and teachers; and creating an immersive experience that placed adults into the shoes of young people.

Theme 3: Mental health and wellbeing

Concerns around mental health and wellbeing were raised spontaneously throughout the research, from the impact of specific challenges, such as exam stress, through to the varied experiences of mental health support.

Young people described wanting adults to create psychologically safe places for them to sit, feel emotions, and give advice when needed.

Social action activities included creating an engagement tool to support young people to regulate their emotions; and a new recruitment approach to ensure youth workers have necessary characteristics such as being caring, confident, approachable and warm.



Learnings and take-aways

The PAC network's dedication and hard work to support young people away from violence highlighted five key learnings for tackling violence affecting young people:

1. **Safe places and positive activities matter to young people.**
2. **There is a need to understand the *why* behind behaviour and provide support in schools.**
3. **There is a gap in consistent mental health support for young people; and a greater focus on emotional wellbeing is needed.**
4. **Trusted adults make a big difference.**
5. **Involving young people creates trust and engagement.**

INTRODUCTION

About the programme

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 (YEF), 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. The Young Foundation is the programme's national partner.

PAC is a network driven by and for young people across England and Wales to conduct peer research and act on drivers of violence. Some 121 young people were employed by 10 Delivery Partners (community-based youth organisations) and supported by The Young Foundation. Overall, the PAC programme has engaged over 12,000 young people to date, running in two phases. The [first phase of PAC](#) ran from 2021 to 2023 and reached 6,861 young people. The second phase ran from March 2023 to September 2025 and, as of July 2025, had engaged 5,158 young people.

This second phase of PAC involved two rounds of research activities. Interim findings from this second phase were [published](#) in July 2025. Now this report brings together learnings from across all second phase activities, demonstrating the power and importance of listening and responding to young people.



Who was involved



The young people

PAC aims to engage and support young people at risk, or with lived experience, of violence, involving them in a programme of peer research and social action. All the young people involved in the programme were aged between 10 and 25 with a range of lived experiences. This included young people who were victims and witnesses of violence, those at risk of being drawn into violence, and those who had committed violent acts themselves. While it was clear that young people may have experienced violence in more than one way, PAC recognised lived experience of violence in four broad categories:

- Direct experience – as a victim and/or in committing violence;
- Indirect experience – through violence impacting close family or friends, again as a victim and/or in committing violence;
- Community experience – indirect experience of violence in the places they live in or groups they engage in, for example at school;
- Being at risk of being drawn into violence – through experiencing poverty, exclusion or limited opportunities linked to broader structural inequalities.

Throughout the programme, young people were engaged in a range of different roles, as PAC Leads, PAC Changemakers, and as research and social action participants.



The PAC Leads

From 2023 to 2025, 121 PAC Leads were engaged, employed and supported by 10 community-based organisations (our Delivery Partners), across seven regions in England and Wales. Full details of the regions and Delivery Partners for each region are included in Appendix A.

The PAC Leads worked part-time hours and were paid at or above the relevant Living Wage. They learned research skills and spoke to 1,111 of their peers across 16 research projects about the challenges and solutions to violence affecting young people. Taking a peer research approach (see section below for details), the PAC Leads were involved in designing, conducting, analysing and presenting their research. Evidence from the first round of their peer research (2023–2024) is published [here](#). In this second round of research, PAC Leads also supported design and reach of a survey (see below for details), engaging 1,510 young people.

Alongside their research activities, the PAC Leads learned how to translate their findings into social action to drive change in their communities. Together, they delivered more than 30 social action activities to change young people's experiences of education, youth provision, local and national transport, youth voice initiatives, and awareness of and access to trusted adults.



The PAC Changemakers

PAC Changemakers supported PAC Leads to design and deliver social action activities. They worked with PAC Leads and Delivery Partners for an average of 12 hours each on social action projects that ranged from a few months to almost a year in duration. The Changemakers were volunteers who were supported by Delivery Partners, which in some regions included being incentivised or compensated for their time. Changemakers delivered a range of activities, from co-producing the script of the PAC London team's Xcluded interactive film to facilitating further engagement of young people in feedback on tools, for example PAC Lancashire's board game in schools. As of July 2025, 577 young people had been engaged by the PAC network as Changemakers.



The PAC research participants

PAC Leads worked closely with full-time staff from Delivery Partners to recruit young people to take part in their research projects and for the survey. Recruitment took place using a combination of:

- PAC Leads drawing from their personal networks within their community.
- Delivery Partners drawing from their own provision with young people.
- Delivery Partners promoting opportunities within their networks of partners.
- PAC Leads and Delivery Partners working together to share opportunities through new partners – often using in-person visits to build trust in their activities before young people agreed to sign-up.

The PAC research participants were all young people at risk, or with a lived experience, of violence. Full details of the numbers of young people participating in both the peer research and the survey elements, including their demographic characteristics, are included in Appendix A.



The PAC social action participants

PAC Leads, supported by Changemakers, delivered social action to reach other young people, the social action participants. Some social action participants were involved in further testing and developing social action outputs to support these to be more engaging and inclusive, for example board games in Lancashire and Bristol. Others were the intended audience for the social action outputs PAC teams had developed, for example attendees at the screening of an interactive film on exclusions in London. As of July 2025, 1,472 young people had been engaged by the PAC network as social action participants.

OUR APPROACH

The PAC programme is unique in both working with young people to develop research activities and supporting them to translate their learnings from their research into social action. In this chapter, we outline how these activities were conducted and also explain how to interpret the learnings shared in this report.



Peer research

Peer research is an approach to research where people affected by an issue are involved in developing and driving research to explore this issue. As an umbrella term, the extent and depth of their involvement can vary by stage of the project and/or intensity across different projects.

More than a method, it is about a team of people affected by an issue making decisions together throughout the research process. Put simply, it is about research being carried out *with* and *by* people affected by an issue, rather than *on* or *for* them.

Alongside this commitment to communities taking a leading role in driving research, a key focus of peer research is on purpose: designing the research to support positive change for people affected by an issue. In this programme, YEF provided overall research topics. Young people were then supported by their local Delivery Partners and The Young Foundation to narrow down their research focus. The overall topics were:

- **Trusted adults** and how they can play a more significant and more effective role in the lives of young people in protecting against or preventing their involvement in violence;
- **Schools** and how they can be more supportive environments to improve youth voice initiatives, attendance, and prevent exclusions;
- **Positive activities** and how young people can be supported to access these, benefit from them, and how they can be used to protect children from violence.





Within their chosen theme, each team developed their own research questions and identified suitable approaches to engage other young people. Young people's research designs were then taken through an ethical approval process with The Young Foundation. They conducted the research themselves, and contributed to the analysis and dissemination of their findings. The approaches taken included interviews, focus groups and workshops, using techniques such as discussing hypothetical 'personas' to support the exploration of sensitive issues. This first round of research took place between January 2024 and July 2024 and included 175 interviews and 52 focus groups involving 532 young people in total.

Reflecting responses from research participants, some teams chose to focus on a different topic for their second research project, while others chose to ask deeper questions around their original topic. The second and final round of research was completed between November 2024 and July 2025 and included 98 in-depth interviews and 87 focus groups/workshops involving 579 young people in total.

Full details of the methodology and specific topic areas for the qualitative peer research are included in Appendix B.



Survey research

In order to engage a wider group of young people in the research, a small group of PAC Leads supported design of an online survey. The Young Foundation co-ordinated and led on the design process, with input from YEF and a small number of young people. The survey was to be conducted within their communities using a non-probability 'snowballing' sampling approach. In other words, young people asked other young people from across their region to complete the survey if they met the relevant criteria, but they were not asked to meet targets to ensure the overall sample generated was representative of the region.

Each Delivery Partner used different strategies to promote the survey locally: typically, the survey link was shared with partner organisations and networks, who in turn shared it with young people they engaged, and PAC Leads promoted the survey through in-person events and visits to partner organisations. Parental / guardian consent was sought for those aged under 16, in line with relevant ethical guidelines and common practice in social research.¹

The survey was conducted between February and July 2025 and had 1,510 participants. This report includes findings from the survey throughout, noting where these findings relate specifically to young people with lived experience of violence (who reported having been a victim of, witness of, or having perpetrated a violent crime) or from a wider population.

Overall, 557 young people taking part in the survey indicated that they had experienced one or more of having been a victim of, witness of, or having perpetrated a violent crime. This included 306 (20%) who had been victims, 430 (28%) who had been witnesses, and 210 (14%) who had been perpetrators of violent crimes.

It is important to note that due to the use of a non-probability sampling approach the survey findings are not representative of the national population – rather they provide indicative insight to a wider pool of experiences across the communities surveyed. Full details of the methodology and questionnaire areas for the survey research are included in Appendix C.

¹ [SRA Research Ethics guidance 2021.pdf](#) see p11



Social action

PAC Leads drew on their own lived experiences and the conversations they had with their peers to develop social action activities to make change in their local areas and nationally. PAC Leads also had the support of Changemakers (young volunteers aged 10 to 20) to design and implement social action activities to engage a wider group of young people, the PAC social action participants, as well as key stakeholders.

PAC social action activities were undertaken between January 2024 and September 2025 with 2,049 young people

as of July 2025. Full details of the range of social action projects undertaken by the PAC Leads are included in Appendix D.

PAC social action activities have also generated a wide range of resources. Several teams have developed toolkits, [accessible here](#), to support individuals and organisations to develop more effective youth voice programmes. Delivery Partners also fed into the development of a framework for more effectively supporting young people, accessible [here](#).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report highlights key learnings from the most recent round of the PAC programme. As a result of taking a peer-led approach, research questions and topics varied across the PAC network. Nonetheless, some common and underpinning themes emerged, reflected in the following report chapters:

Violence in context. This chapter focuses on the environments young people live in that can draw them into violence, including the role social media can play in escalating violence. It also explores the importance of having somewhere safe and comfortable to go, and the barriers of not knowing about these spaces, not feeling these are safe enough, and not feeling safe enough to get to them.

Power and understanding. This chapter explores the role of power in relationships between young people and trusted adults. It discusses young people's perspectives on how power can be shared to help them feel heard and included — particularly in relation to the roles that teachers, other trusted adults in schools, and the police play.

Mental wellbeing. This chapter explores the importance of mental health support in protecting young people from violence, as well as the challenges posed by inconsistent support and the lack of psychological safety.

PAC places youth voice and perspectives at the forefront. The report therefore includes in-depth portraits of specific local and community-based experiences, drawn from across the seven PAC regions. These aim to exemplify the broader themes highlighted in the report and are drawn from the interviews and focus group conversations with young people described above.

The report also includes profiles of PAC social action activities, demonstrating how young people identified issues through their research and worked to identify and implement routes to change in their communities.



Presenting the evidence

Throughout this report, quotations from interviews and focus groups present young people's perceptions and experiences in their own words. The evidence draws on interviews in which young people shared their personal experiences, and focus groups, in which they shared personal views and reactions to stimulus, such as hypothetical 'personas'. This report therefore presents a range of these perspectives, offering explanatory context throughout.

Quotations have been anonymised, removing any identifying information, and attributions include whether the quotation is drawn from an interview or a focus group, and the location. Demographic information is only included for quotations drawn from interviews, as per the example below and typically include only age, although in some cases ethnicity is also included, to support participant anonymity.

"They should ask more questions, ask why, how the students are doing instead of getting people in trouble most of the time"

Young person, age 15, interview, London

Where young people's experiences were common across several regions, this has been highlighted, but it is important to remember that each PAC team developed their own research questions, asking similar types of questions but in different ways. This means topic areas for discussions with young people varied, with few commonalities across the programme. The full range of topic areas for the qualitative peer research is included in Appendix B.

Theme 1: Violence in context

The young people engaged by PAC shared a feeling that violence was potentially all around them – within their communities, on their phones through social media, and in the physical spaces they travel through in their neighbourhoods. In this chapter, we present evidence of young people's accounts of these issues, and their need for physical spaces which are free from violence.

Growing up around violence

In the course of their specific peer research projects, young people in Bradford, London and Birmingham shared views and experiences of crime and violence in their neighbourhoods. Examples of this included:

- Reflecting on a scenario in which a young person was involved in a gang, and youth violence, exploring what that young person might be thinking and feeling.
- Exploring drug culture.
- Reflecting on the role of neglect and abuse in some young people's lives.

As part of these discussions, young people talked about the realities of the neighbourhoods they lived in; they identified aspects of life that they thought provided a backdrop to mental health challenges and experiences of crime. Stories included experiences of poor housing and deprivation, visible homelessness where they lived, and a lack of local resources.

"You just felt oppressed constantly... because you felt you were in a dirty, dangerous environment 24/7. It was almost like it was dragging you down with it. You just felt like this is going to be your life forever. It felt like there was no escaping this."

Young person, age 20, interview, Yorkshire

In London and Bradford, where issues such as poverty, feeling unsafe in neighbourhoods, low aspirations, and pervasive cultures around gangs or drugs within communities came together, research participants spoke about crime and violence as inescapable realities. In Birmingham, young people said that where young people are neglected or abused by adults, this could lead to feelings of isolation, and gangs might offer a feeling of belonging to those young people.

The two 'spotlights' below highlight in detail how different aspects of growing up around violence were experienced and reflected on by young people.



Local spotlight: Growing up around drug use in Bradford

Young people taking part in interviews in Bradford said that poverty, limited opportunities for employment or education, and lack of positive examples of success were widespread within their communities. These were, in their eyes, powerful drivers pushing young people towards both using and selling drugs.

"I think especially if you're in Bradford, if you're a young person, if you're surrounded by poverty ... you feel like you've got no escape from it because there's not enough jobs here, there's not enough opportunities. It's no surprise that a lot of them get involved in drugs because for a lot of them it might seem like their only choice, it's their only chance to have a decent life. It's their only chance to get money and maybe get a nice house or a nice car."

Young person, age 20, White British, interview, Bradford

Drug dealers with expensive cars and clothes seem to have escaped the cycle of poverty, making that pathway appealing in the face of deprivation and a lack of alternative routes. This leaves young people exposed to crime and violence.

“I do think a lot of young people do look up to these people, these drug dealers, and they see them as quite aspirational figures, people they want to emulate”

Young person, age 20, White British, interview, Bradford

Some young people spoke about their own issues with drug use, leading them to experience emotional and mental health problems, as well as putting them at risk of violence through the dangers inherent in taking drugs.

“Cocaine, I got really bad on it ... I was sat there sniffing on my own waiting for my mates to finish school after I’d been kicked out. It made me very aggressive... [and] from a physical side, I’ve owed people money, and they’ve sent people out to jump me. I’ve been smashed in with metal bats and had people pull knives on me”

Young person, age 20, White British, interview, Bradford

Young people in Bradford talked about the importance of youth clubs and spaces for young people to do activities to divert away from drug use and crime. One spoke about their local mosque having a youth club and the benefits that brings to the community.

“I feel like sometimes them projects might be better because ... of the fact that tight-knit community leaders are telling... other people’s parents that they’re close with, ‘Get your kids to come here because this is my youth club, I’ve set it up, and I want people to come here to do this’. And when you’re in a mosque you’re less likely to want to smoke and stuff like that.”

Young person, age 23, South Asian, interview, Bradford



Local spotlight: Growing up around gang culture in London

Young people taking part in focus groups in London were asked to consider what might draw people towards becoming involved with gangs. Together, they reflected and agreed that people could be exposed to gangs from a young age and find it hard to see alternative routes, particularly in the context of poor living standards and deprivation. They also described how out of control gang rivalries seem to be in their communities and the huge impact this has on individuals.

"It's gone way too far with postcode beef to even stop it anymore... like even someone from my area died yesterday... From a fight, and then someone came and stabbed him."

Young person, focus group, London

"[They affect people] mentally. And ... they might like start doing stupid things. If you see everyone carrying a knife, they're going to want to start carrying a knife. Like, it's just goes like that."

Young person, focus group, London

“His upbringing [is important]. Because obviously his parents don’t care about him and all his siblings and family members are gang members, so it’s just going to like, go into him.”

The young people noted that when others are surrounded by others who are involved in gangs, an individual's involvement becomes inevitable. This makes the existence of alternatives to the gang culture and lifestyle very important.



Social media as an amplifier

The role of social media in the lives of young people, their mental health, and in relation to their experiences of violence emerged as a theme across several areas. It was specifically covered as a topic in Birmingham, where young people explored the role of social media in escalating in-person conflict and strategies that could use social media to instead de-escalate this conflict, as illustrated in the following 'spotlight'.



Local spotlight: Reducing social media violence in Birmingham

As part of conversations in Birmingham, young people discussed how social media could often escalate in-person conflict. Various potential reasons were given, including the tone in a social media post being misinterpreted, the larger number of young people who can witness the conflict when it moves online, and the ease with which the original post can be shared and the context misinterpreted – and, in young people's words, "hyped up".

"...them little group chats [on Snapchat] where people are just running their mouth online, that can escalate to loads of stuff. Like I had a little argument in the group chat but that was just a little joke, and then that led me to being set up... Things spread fast on social media, and so like rumours and lies get spread and it just escalates the situation more than it needs to be"

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

“Because when you look into it [conflict] and you find the reason I feel like it’s for stupid things and it’s about people are taking things out of context that are being said on the internet and making it like what it kind of seems. And then it’s like people are getting accused of things and then it will just blow up into big kind of conflict or arguments”

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

“Someone screenshotted someone’s story or someone’s put a full stop at the end of a sentence that someone else don’t like on social media. And it starts fights and stuff”

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

“I’ve seen a lot of situations where there’s a conflict between two people and when they bring that to social media and you got all these other people viewing and liking, they get hyped off of that hype and then the beef [conflict] becomes even worse”

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

Responding to this escalation, young people were asked what changes they would ideally want to see from social messaging apps to de-escalate conflict. Participants felt that it was vital to create a supportive community at the core. This was because they had seen posts from other young people about how positive activities had helped them to step away from crime or gang culture and wanted these posts to have a greater reach.

“I’ve seen videos of people making clubs, like sports clubs, art clubs, stuff like that, so they don’t get or don’t take part of the violence in life and have a different mindset once they join the club”

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

“Social media can be used to create supportive online communities by creating like a group chat of like scared young people, everyone sharing their experiences and it’s all going to be anonymous”

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

Young people taking part in focus groups accepted that social messaging apps should seek to remove harmful content, but expressed frustrations that the tools used to flag or block these messages were not sophisticated enough to accurately assess the context. Rather than simply flagging words such as ‘knife’, they suggested that tools should more carefully and accurately assess the context the word was used in.

“If it contains any bad words or anything that has to do with violence or anything, it deletes it. But you know how you could have a knife, you could say I’m going to use a knife and kill someone, but then the knife could also not be used in a violent way like my mum said I should buy knives to cook. So that’s what the AI’s going to do.”

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

By creating an engaging, uplifting and safer online environment, focus group participants felt that young people may be less likely to become involved with criminal activities.

Across conversations with young people, social media was said to provide an escape for young people, offering chances to connect with others and find useful information, such as how to access mental health services. In this way, it amplified positive experiences for young people.

However, outside of this, participants said that social media could draw young people away from real-life interactions, mirroring, compounding and amplifying some of the negative things they were experiencing in life.

References were made across several areas of seeing and experiencing cyberbullying and online hate crime based on characteristics such as ethnicity or religion. This meant these young people were not only feeling vulnerable or unsafe in the real world, but that this extended further into online spaces. They also noted that adults often did not understand the impact of growing up in a digital age and the pressure this creates.

“Everything being online now, increases stuff like bullying... I feel like that wasn’t as much of an issue [for an older generation] growing up, because obviously they didn’t have social media”

Young person, focus group, Wales

“More people are seeing comments, more people seeing different people saying you should be this, or you should be that”

Young person, focus group, Lancashire

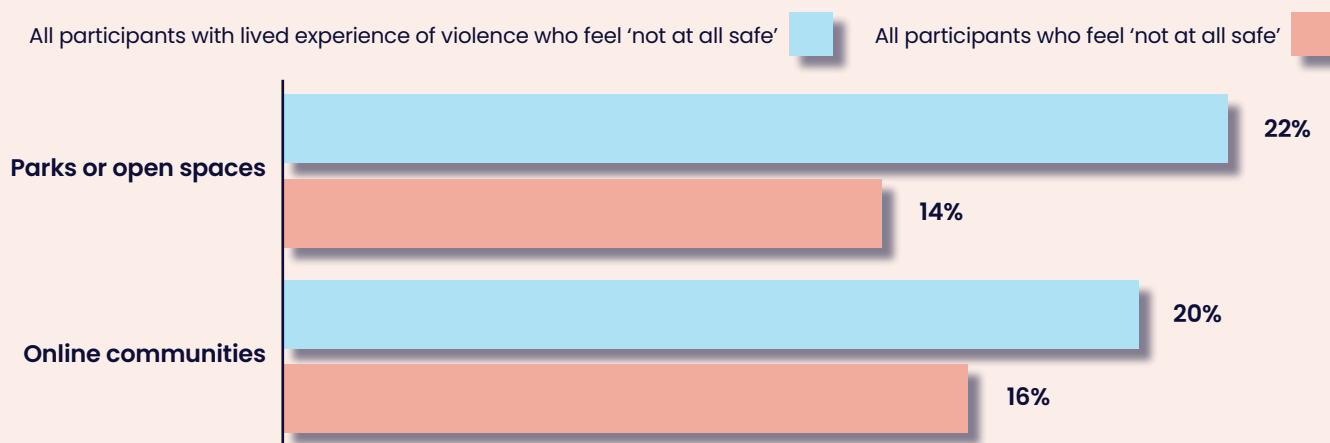
Among young people in education who took part in the survey, six in ten (59%) said they had learned about staying safe online in school or college, with around three quarters of this group (77%) going on to say what they had learned enabled them to stay safe in some way.²

Despite learning about staying safe online in school or college, when survey participants were asked about a range of public spaces and whether or not they felt safe in them, the most common places young people taking part said they did not feel “at all” safe were in online communities (16%). This was a similar proportion to parks and open spaces (14%). This demonstrated that, even with learning about online safety in schools and colleges, the young people surveyed could still feel unsafe online. The chart below presents this for the overall sample of young people in the survey, as well as findings for just those with lived experience of violence. Among those with lived experience of violence, a fifth (20%) said that they did not feel safe online, which was similar to the proportion to those with lived experience reporting that they did not feel safe in parks and open spaces (22%).



² Young people in education excludes respondents who indicated they were home schooled, not currently in education or training, or ‘not sure’, what type of education or training they were in at the time of their response. It includes those who indicated ‘yes’ or ‘not sure’ to the question ‘Do you currently have any lessons in your [educational institution] that speak about topics like health, safety, managing money, and relationships’.

Figure 1: Public places where survey participants feel least safe



Bases: all participants (1,510); all participants with lived experience of violence (557)

Young people also talked about how social media exposed them to footage of physical violence, making it feel hard to escape. Sharing videos of fights was said to be commonplace online, and young people in London in particular spoke about seeing gangs post on social media platforms and seeing knife crime online.

"If you mean like actually witness someone getting stabbed or stuff like that, then I've seen it online. I've never witnessed someone in-person getting stabbed, but I've seen fights, like boys fighting over silly things, like boys on the roads fighting, I've seen videos"

Young person, focus group, London

Participants felt that the anonymity of sharing online content or comments could give people a level of confidence they would not have in real life, which could escalate or promote violence. Examples included seeing someone showing their new knives online, and rivalries escalating in a way they did not think would happen offline. Equally, participants thought young people may feel pressurised to engage in arguments

online that they did not want to, in order to not to 'lose face' with their peers and avoid embarrassment.

Young people across the research talked about how social media can create aspirations and expectations around lifestyles in different ways. This ranged from seeing influencers with certain clothing, to making drug use appealing. Young people recognised that, for some, this could contribute to participation in crime and violence, in the same way seeing drug dealers in real life could make the lifestyle aspirational.

'Well, you'll see people posting, like you can see people posting with their nice clothes, everything. So, it makes other people want to have it. And then that's where robbing comes in, like people take people's clothes because they want to look like them.'

Young person, focus group, London

Engaging with the challenges presented by social media to young people, the Birmingham PAC team developed a social action campaign detailed below.



From research to social action: Tackling violence affecting young people on social media

PAC's Delivery Partner in Birmingham, Bringing Hope, focused their social action on addressing social media's role in amplifying violence and maximising its potential to support and connect young people.



Learning from the research:

Through the first phase of their research, the Birmingham PAC team found that social media both connected young people to positive influences and networks, while also exposing them to violent content and negative influences and influencers. They built on this through their second research project, exploring the interactions between social media and real-world violence, finding that some young people might have been willing to "let beef go" and ignore aggressive behaviour from peers, but struggled to do so where this was posted on social media rather than shared in person.



Making change:

PAC Leads worked with a team of young Changemakers. Together, they designed and delivered in-person workshops, using roleplay techniques to help young people affected by violence to reflect on how they could de-escalate online harms. Their work drew attention to the steps needed to maximise social media's potential good, while minimising its potential harm. Through engaging national media (BBC News and the Guardian), and in working with Ofcom to inform the ongoing development of the Online Safety Act, the Birmingham PAC team was also successful in sharing the views and experiences of young people, and their asks of social media platforms.





Safe spaces and positive activities

While personal safety in the local area was not a primary topic of conversation in any of the areas, it emerged spontaneously through other discussions. Across areas, lack of street lighting and concerns about using public transport were identified as making young people feel potentially vulnerable, as well as experiences of harassment, discrimination, and local gang rivalries creating a pervasive threat.

Overall, 62% of young people in the survey said that they feel safe in their local area. However, over one in eight (13%) said that they did not and a fifth (21%) of those with lived experience of violence did not feel safe.³

In addition, a lack of local resources – particularly activities and clubs – was a common theme across the peer research conversations. Young people spoke about youth clubs closing and a general decline over time in these resources, and variability across local areas. Where participants lived in rural locations, resources that did exist felt inaccessible due to a lack of safe transport options.

Across many of the areas, young people talked about wanting positive activities away from home and school where they could feel safe and included. They hoped for spaces to have fun, relax, alleviate boredom, and divert them away from negative behaviours.

“Because when you’re bored, or when you have nothing to do, then it’s when you decide to go down this, let’s batter somebody, let’s do drugs, let’s break into some house, something like that. So, if the kids have something to do, they’re not going to go down that route.”

Young person, focus group, Bradford

³ In the survey, young people were asked the extent to which they agreed that ‘I feel safe and protected in my local area’



Activities such as football, boxing, cycling, cooking and video games were highlighted as good for not only keeping young people busy, but developing skills and having mental and physical health benefits. Young people said that such spaces provided a way to establish friendships and connections that they could depend on outside of the club; this could reduce feelings of isolation and give young people a greater sense of confidence in their everyday lives.

Conversations about the role of adults revolved around the need for boundaries and mediation while not stifling the sense of independence and freedom such spaces could bring for young people. Indeed, adults were seen to have an important role in ensuring a safe and non-judgmental environment to ask questions. Examples included providing information and signposting on mental health, as well as information around drug use. The relationship young people wanted to have with trusted adults is covered more in the following chapters.

While there was broadly consensus across the areas that covered this topic on the need for positive activities delivered in spaces where young people feel comfortable, several young people spoke about different needs or benefits of these activities. For example, some young people wanted age-appropriate spaces for older children, with youth clubs, at times, characterised as being more suitable for younger children. Others spoke about the need for spaces free from discrimination, such as homophobia or hate-crime based on gender identity. Queer and trans young people taking part in the research, while a small sample, spoke about the value of separate LGBTQAI+ spaces to minimise the fear of being targeted, but also an ideal world where all youth spaces feel accessible.



Local spotlight: Offering positive activities in the South-west

Young people sharing their views in Bristol and Exeter talked about how important leisure activities were as an escape from stress and from being drawn into harmful activities. Access to positive activities and spaces for young people were seen to offer “different realities” to difficult or harmful social contexts that might make violence seem otherwise inescapable.

“[Having activities like video games is] like you’re thinking of something else, and it makes you feel like you drift away from like all the harm, danger and things you can think of.”

Young person, focus group, Bristol

“I’d probably say consistent support, and probably ... to be distracted in some sort of way... being distracted from that lifestyle, if you get what I mean.”

Young person, age 18, interview, Bristol

Young people talked about their preferences for the physical features of these spaces. For example, bright colours and bean bags were mentioned, with young people keen for spaces to be comfortable and calming. Participants also had a keen sense of their personal safety and saw these spaces as environments where they would be protected from threatening behaviours or criminal activity.

“It’s safe in here because obviously they manage the people who come in and if you were to do this football thing ... in a park, then anyone can come up and approach you and anything could happen. Obviously here it’s like in control...”

Young person, focus group, Bristol

They also valued having spaces where they could make new friendships and support networks, overcome isolation, find positive role models and build their confidence.

“So, you’ve got coaches, and you’ve got all your mates and everything ... It’s the type of thing where if you go to and you’re not feeling too good, they’ll give you the confidence to get through it and then go out and carry on with your day or with your week or whatever.”

Young person, focus group, Exeter

“I had all these friends there and then the adults that worked there became like, they are still in my life now, like very important figures”

Young person, age 18, interview, Exeter

“That’s where you meet new people as a kid. That’s how you get to know the community. Without them, you’re kind of by yourself.”

Young person, age 19, interview, Exeter



The following case studies demonstrate how young people translated their concerns about safe spaces for young people into social action, making change in their local areas.



From research to social action: Addressing barriers to safe travel

As part of the wider PAC Yorkshire team, a group of young people from Bradford led on a [successful national campaign](#) that supported their peers to feel safer on the nation's railways through making it easier to report safety concerns, particularly Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG).



Learning from the research:

Many young people taking part in the research in both Hull and Bradford reported that they sometimes or often felt unsafe where they lived and when travelling on public transport. They also reported that this limited their access to positive activities that were not located close by. Local rail companies agreed this was an important problem and asked for the PAC team's support in tackling harassment on trains, especially of young women and girls.



Making change:

Working with three national mobile phone operators, all charges for using a dedicated text service for reporting Unwanted Sexual Behaviour (USB) to the British Transport Police were dropped. This eliminated the barrier of not having available phone credit to access the service. The PAC team also created a [campaign video](#) and built relationships with national train companies, who in turn had links to national mobile operators to support the campaign.





From research to social action: Positive activity interactive maps

As part of the wider PAC Yorkshire team, a team of young people from Bradford developed an [interactive map](#) to support their peers to connect to positive activities and support services. Changemakers helped the team gather feedback on the activities and services to include, and its design. Alongside the map, the team created a [how-to video](#), to support young people to navigate and use the tool.

Separately, as part of the wider PAC North-east team, young people from Gateshead collaborated with Gateshead Council, producing an [interactive map and directory](#) to support young people to access positive activities and support services. Changemakers again helped the team to gather feedback on the directory and its design, but also in ways to engage young people and partner organisations featured on the map.



Learning from the research:

When young people were asked about their access to positive activities, two key barriers were raised:

- Many young people reported that they were not aware of positive activities they could access in their community.
- Even if they knew about them, young people shared concerns around travel (safety and cost), not knowing anyone that was also accessing that provision, and concerns around what it would be like or how they could be treated.

In Gateshead, the directories that were developed aimed to address the first key barrier, supporting young people to build stronger awareness of the positive activities and support services they could access, and developing tools including prompt cards to address specific concerns around accessing services.



Making change:

The PAC Bradford team have secured endorsements from high-profile partners, including the Lord Mayor of Bradford, EFL in the Community, and several local schools, which have supported their interactive map to have further reach. The Bradford team have also been able to utilise these connections with schools to collaborate with [Sound of Change](#) to deliver workshops on mental health, problematic substance use, and resilience in secondary schools. These workshops help young people engage with the support offered by organisations featured on the map.

In Gateshead, the team is currently finalising prompt cards on particular topics (eg, mental health), including a QR code that links to relevant entries in the database and provides key information about support services. Gateshead Council host the directory and have committed to keeping this updated through working with partners.

Theme 2: Power and understanding

This chapter explores the role of power in relationships between young people and trusted adults. It discusses young people's perspectives on how power can be navigated to support young people to feel heard and included, particularly in relation to the roles that teachers and other trusted adults play in schools and the police later in this chapter.

A feeling of imbalance

Many of the regions taking part in the research focused on trusted adults – from teachers and the police to parents and youth workers – as part of their research, with power and authority being common themes. Across these conversations, young people perceived relationships as imbalanced when adults did not treat them with empathy, fairness and understanding.

Stories and examples that tipped the balance for young people included adults not seeming genuinely interested in them, approaching their jobs superficially as a “tick box”, not taking action when young people raised concerns, or where they broke confidentiality. The issue of breaking confidentiality is covered in more detail in the chapter on mental health.

“Whenever you are talking to them and they either look really bored or really frustrated.”

Young person, focus group, Exeter

“The fact that they have power over you. They can use the fact that they can tell everyone everything, there’s nothing technically stopping them. And just the entire fact that they are what they are, if that makes sense. And then the whole sort of like illusion of them being like safe even though they’re not.”

Young person, focus group, Exeter



Participants across several of the regions said that they could, at times, feel judged or stereotyped, feeling that some adults approach young people with preconceived ideas: for example, assuming that teenagers take drugs or minimising their experiences of mental health issues because of their age. Neurodivergent participants in Wales reflected on how these narrow perceptions and stereotyping impacted how adults approached them, with one autistic participant talking about feeling infantilised by employers and others.

“A big issue for a lot of people who are autistic is once people find out you’re autistic, a lot of people, especially employers, will usually treat you like you were a child when you’re not a child.”

Young person, focus group, Wales

Young people recognised that adults with different professional roles had varying levels of authority due to the nature of that role. For example, they understood that teachers and the police needed to tell young people what to do to a greater extent than others, such as youth workers. However, participants still wanted, and had experienced, positive relationships with trusted adults across all types of roles. These were characterised by adults giving young people agency and making them feel heard without judgement; centring the voices and experiences of young people in authentic ways.



From research to social action: Centring young people in PSHE provision

For the PAC North-east team, a key message from their research was that the quality of PSHE support was inconsistent across local schools. While some young people felt that their PSHE provision covered important topics in engaging ways, others felt the opposite. The young people wanted to help shape and improve these lessons but did not feel able to influence them. To address this, the team identified key organisations they could collaborate with to improve provision, engaging them in their research findings.



Learning from the research:

Research in the North-east focused on PSHE provision in schools and how, more widely, schools can support students with their wellbeing. They developed the 'DURS' framework to summarise their findings:

- Delivery – how teaching is delivered is as important as the content itself.
- Understanding – adults in school need to actively demonstrate their understanding of students and the diverse challenges they face.
- Relationships – these are key but require work to build the trust necessary to engage with support offered.
- Support – alongside being taught about issues, students value being connected to support through school.

The team's social action therefore centred on supporting schools, and teachers and adults working in schools, to build structures for deeper listening to young people. This was because they recognised that to be implemented effectively, the DURS framework needs to be tailored to the needs of students.

Making change:

On a regional level, PAC North-east fed into the development of existing training programmes to support this delivery to better meet the needs of young people. For example, the team worked with the Violence Reduction Unit to support the development of their Youth Ambassadors programme and associated training. While the programme is in its early stages, their feedback on the length and content of the training was fully considered and has played a key role in shaping the development of the programme. They have also worked with the Violence Reduction Unit to decide how more than £10,000 of grants were distributed.



Building on this, the team co-produced a series of PSHE session plans with the North-east Police Education Team to ensure these reflected the style of delivery that young people shared they wanted through the research. These improved sessions will be delivered to students over the coming years.

The team are currently working on toolkits to support adults in centring youth voice and teachers to design responsive PSHE sessions. To support this, the Delivery Partners, NE Youth, and Youth Focus North East, have each employed a young person full-time as a Youth Engagement Lead to champion the voices of young people across the charity and with partners, with these toolkits supporting them to assist partners in centring youth voice further.

From a national perspective, the team took part in a workshop with policymakers from the Department of Education to feed into the ongoing PSHE review. The team also helped to raise the profile of youth voice through a presentation at Civil Service Live and delivered an event in Parliament to North-east MPs to share their research findings.

The value of these relationships was further highlighted in the survey among young people who had lived experiences of violence. The survey asked about the support young people received after experiences of violence. Young perpetrators of violence felt that 'listening without judgement' was the key factor in making them feel supported, with 54% saying this. This was followed by the adult 'taking action' (32%) and providing advice (28%). This pattern was similar for victims and witnesses of violence.

The survey explored the formal routes for young people to have a voice by asking whether they had a system for youth voice in their school or college. Four in ten (39%) indicated that they did not have a formal system for youth voice or were unsure if they did, and this was the same among those who had lived experience of violence (40%).

Addressing power imbalances, and a lack of opportunities for young people to have a voice in situations that affected them, were key concerns of many of the PAC teams. The following 'research into social action' case study demonstrates how PAC Leads translated their learnings into change in their local areas.



From research to social action: Giving young people a greater voice in local decision-making

Across Yorkshire PAC teams, young people have developed resources to help organisations bring the voices of young people into their decision-making processes.

Working with Bradford PAC, First Buses committed to creating a youth forum to influence how First Buses connects with young people. During this process, Bradford PAC also created a [youth forum toolkit](#), documenting how they developed the forum, and a [practical guide](#) to support organisations to engage young people more meaningfully in shaping safer, fairer and more supportive communities.

Hull PAC created their own Youth Voice Group, which has become part of Tigers Trust, an organisation that delivers community sports training and facilities for young people. They captured their approach in a [toolkit](#), documenting their advice and giving examples of good practice.

Learning from the research:

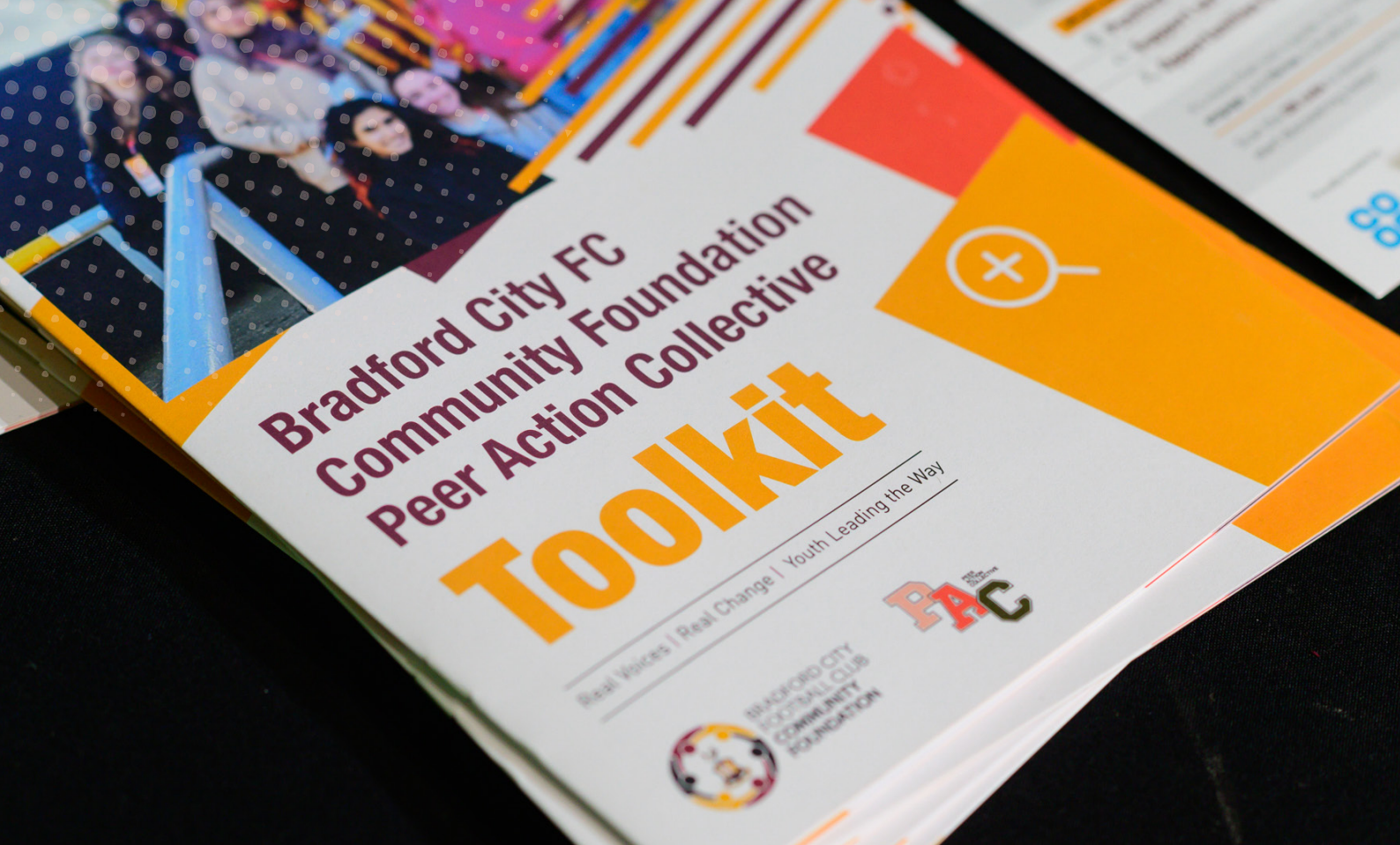
A key theme across PAC Yorkshire's research was that young people wanted activities and services in the community where they would feel welcome and safe, and that better met their needs. They also identified the importance of designing services collaboratively with young people. This inspired the PAC Hull and Bradford teams to develop tools and practical advice on deep listening and collaboration with young people.

Making change:

First Buses continue to meet quarterly with Bradford PAC to co-create their Youth Forum, providing opportunities for young people to lead and influence change. So far, the team have met with the marketing and operations team to review how travel offers and discounts are promoted, so they reach young people in ways that work for them. They have also explored how the First Buses app and other digital tools can be more user-friendly, accessible and youth-driven. Bringing youth voice into the design of communications is helping to shape First Buses service responses and, in doing so, young people are building their confidence and trust in using public transport to access opportunities around them.

Hull's Youth Voice Group has already started to influence change. Working with senior staff, the group have introduced an 'Ask for Amber' scheme at the Tigers Trust Arena, enabling women to discretely request sanitary products from the front desk without stigma, shame or embarrassment.





The rest of this chapter focuses on two key areas where power dynamics and needing to feel understood particularly emerged in conversations with young people: school and relationships with the police.

Being heard and treated fairly at school

Across the research, young people shared their challenges in building relationships with teachers and staff. Experiences of favouritism and being shouted at were seen to break trust or impact relationship with teachers. Young people said such experiences make them less likely to seek support or help from teachers and staff when they need it.

Views of behaviour management approaches were directly focused on in the North-east and Lancashire but also became part of discussions across several areas and stages of the research. Young people reported that schools' behaviour management policies can feel punitive without addressing root causes

or supporting young people to regulate their emotions and help them make better choices.

“Just berate them over and over and just make the child more angry and usually much more violent the next time they have a violent outburst...”

Young person, focus group Wales

Points-based systems, the use of isolation, and exclusion were all felt to potentially cause disengagement and even escalate behaviours if not accompanied by attempts to understand why young people behaved a certain way or were violent. From their first research project, the PAC London team also identified that experiences of exclusions could increase a young person's likelihood of becoming involved in violence by generating anger and resentment towards the school, which disengaged them from education and positive influences. The following local 'spotlight' illustrates these concerns.



Local spotlight: Exclusion and isolation policies in Gateshead schools

Young people in Gateshead discussed how young people might feel when they are excluded, whether exclusion is fair in different situations, and behaviour management in general. Participants expressed frustrations with teachers not treating them as equals, instead using their authority to exert power over students without listening to their views.

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

Young person, focus group, Gateshead

“You’re being told off and that’s good but sometimes they take it too far by telling you off too far, they shout at you or something. It builds a persona in their mind that they’re evil.”

Young person, focus group, Gateshead

Putting young people in isolation was seen to be ineffective for helping young people, both with their education and behaviour. Young people described having nothing to do and being unable to speak to staff, which exacerbated negative emotions. One young person said it was “a bit like prison” with practices, such as having to remain in isolation to eat lunch, being seen as overly punitive.

“Like it makes you angry because you’re just sitting in a box doing nothing.”

Young person, focus group, Gateshead

“If you try to even communicate the slightest, you get told to turn around and be quiet”

Young person, focus group, Gateshead

Exclusion was also perceived as leading to several negative outcomes. For example, when responding to hypothetical scenarios, participants noted that, as schools provide some young peoples’ only source of nutritional meals, being excluded jeopardises that, which could lead to crime. In addition, participants expressed concerns that it would be unfair to exclude young people because of strict uniform policies, where families were struggling to pay for clothes.

“If you haven’t been fed for days and days and you don’t have no money to buy food, you’re going to nick food, aren’t you?”

Young person, focus group, Gateshead

Some young people also saw behaviour management, such as isolation and exclusion, as counterproductive, because they can be attractive for young people and therefore encourage further bad behaviour.

“Pointless. Literally it’s a way to get home, play on the Xbox or something.”

Young person, focus group, Gateshead

“You get food for free. You just want to be in there all the time.”

Young person, focus group, Gateshead



Among those taking part in the survey who were currently in education, a third (38%) had been excluded or suspended during the 12 months before taking part. Among those with lived experience of violence, 62% had experienced this in the 12 months before taking part. This included one or more experiences of internal or external exclusion, or suspension, with the most common experience being lunchtime exclusion (21%) and the least common being permanent exclusion (4%). [Government data](#) for England highlights that, nationally, less than 1% of pupils were permanently excluded in the 2023/24 academic year. This suggests that those taking part in the survey were a particularly vulnerable cohort.

Among those who had experienced one or more types of exclusion or suspension, anger or being upset at the decision was the most common feeling young people reported (30%). Other emotions included feeling unfairly treated (21%), embarrassed or ashamed (13%), and disconnected from family and friends (10%). However, 11% said that they were indifferent to being excluded or suspended and, worryingly, a quarter (25%) were relieved to have a break from school. This pattern was similar when looking at the findings for those with lived experience of violence, with 'anger and upset' being the most common response (34%). These findings support the learnings from the interviews and focus groups with young people, which suggest that exclusion and isolation policies should better understand and support young people throughout the process.

These findings also support the learnings from the interviews and focus groups with young people, which suggest that it is critical to create safe spaces to explore the *why* behind behaviour and not just take the *what* of behaviour at face value. Overall, in conversations, young people shared an understanding that behaviour management approaches need to exist in school as part of a holistic approach to ensuring young people's safety. However, they want to be engaged in conversations about behaviour in ways that show empathy and understanding, rather than simply the exertion of power and authority. For example, they spoke about teachers and young people taking "a step back" when an incident – including violent incidents – happen in school, giving time for the young person to calm down, and time to talk to and listen to the young person before considering exclusion. PAC teams in the North-east, Lancashire and London have reached similar conclusions in their research activities. The PAC London team created [emotions cards](#), which aim to help increase and improve understanding of feelings young people experience around school exclusions.

"I feel like they should have at least asked me what happened before excluding me [...] They'll exclude you and then after you're done with your punishment, then you come back and then you can say what happened. And I feel like they should ask you first before excluding you. I used to be in set one for everything and now I'm in set two."

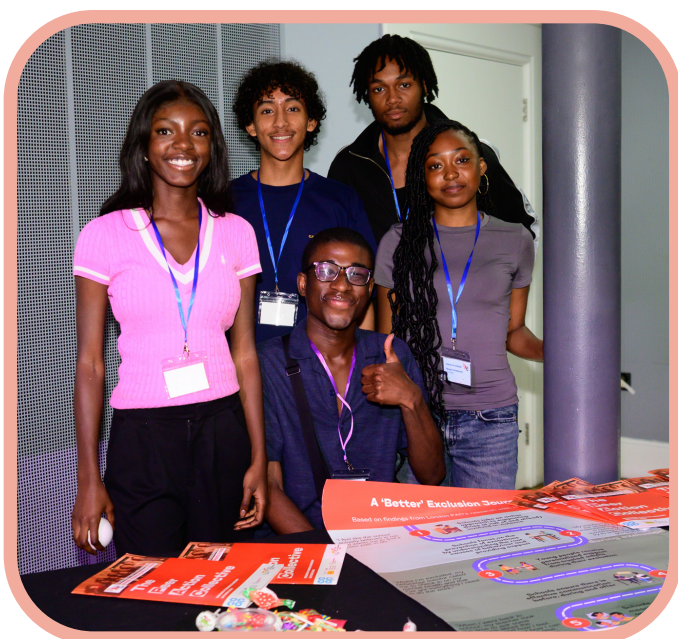
Young person, focus group, London

"I think if you were to actually give someone exclusion, I think you should ask if anything was happening. You should always get two sides of a story or multiple sides of a story so you can actually judge fairly. Instead of isolating a young person after an incident, talk to them and understand more."

Young person, focus group, Gateshead

The findings reflect the importance of ensuring behaviour management policies and approaches in schools facilitate empathy and understanding instead of power and authority where incidents take place.

The following 'research into social action' case study demonstrates how one PAC team built on learnings about power dynamics in local schools through conversations with young people to work towards better collaboration between teachers and students.





From research to social action: Supporting more effective behaviour management in schools

The Lancashire PAC team have developed a connected set of social action games that build relationships between students and teachers, and prompt conversation and collaborative action to improve behaviour and wellbeing support in schools. Designed and developed by Changemakers, each social action game centres around play to prompt discussion. For example, a board game that features topic-based discussion squares (eg, 'Spill The Tea'); spinning a wheel segmented into behaviour- and wellbeing-related questions or get-to-know-you activities ('Turning The Tables'); or using 3D magnetic blocks to reimagine and redesign detention and isolation spaces ('Reframe and Connect'). The core team have since developed a toolkit to support schools to facilitate and play these games with their students and teachers.



Learning from the research:

Distrust towards teachers was common among young people taking part in the research across Lancashire, many of whom reported that they were unlikely to turn to teachers when they needed support on key concerns such as wellbeing and behaviour. Their research also uncovered that many young people perceive youth voice engagement activities as a "tokenistic" and "tick-box" exercise within schools, rather than legitimate ways for young people to have agency and influence change.

By incorporating play, activities and prompt questions into the design of the games, Lancashire PAC have created an opportunity for students and teachers to bond and build trust, shifting the power dynamic. The games encourage open dialogue, allowing students and teachers to engage in two-way discussions around wellbeing and behaviour, working alongside each other to develop solutions.

Within Lancashire PAC's research, young people also reported that detentions and isolations were not being used in the right way, with many seeing them as a "missed opportunity" to communicate with students to understand the root causes behind poor behaviour, rather than as punishment. Young people spoke of the need to redesign isolation and detentions to make them more productive, an issue which the 'Reframe and Connect' game directly responds to. In this game, young people work together to build their ideal detention / isolation space while responding to prompt questions around detentions, fairness, youth voice and mental health.



Making change:

Lancashire PAC trialled their social action games in two local schools and students presented their findings and action plans alongside teachers, to members of their Senior Leadership Teams (SLT).

The discussions generated through play were open and honest. Teachers were able to share personal perspectives and explain the changes they were able to make to the system. Students also shared that they were misusing detention reflection sheets, filling them in with what they thought teachers wanted to hear, rather than with the real problems driving the behaviour that led to them getting a detention in the first place. Such conversations fostered trust, mutual understanding, and respect for the challenges both students and teachers were experiencing.

Students and teachers presented innovative ideas around the introduction of wellbeing walks, allowing students to take time in nature, possibly with a wellbeing dog, while having a conversation with a teacher side-by-side, in a neutral setting – rather than face-to-face, in an environment that reinforced power dynamics and authority. The school's SLT welcomed what students had to say and were impressed with the way teachers and students were working together to develop solutions and improvements. Lancashire PAC are planning to roll out these tools in a further local school later in the year.

Relationships with the police

In the interviews and focus groups, perceptions of the police arose through conversations about trusted adults across areas, and young people in Wales were asked specifically for their views on police powers to stop and search young people.

For young people in Bradford, relationships with the police felt fragmented and unstable. Participants spoke about the impact of the 2001 riots on trust in police and the criminal justice system, especially among ethnic minority residents. Participants also spoke about not wanting to speak to the police, even if they were a victim of crime.

too long ago. There's still people who remember that, who were there, who lived through it. So I think for a lot of young people in Bradford, especially from minority backgrounds, don't feel comfortable talking to the police."

Young person, focus group, Bradford

"Even telling the police, I don't feel that comfortable in telling, especially because I am Black so they might just have an idea of me and think that I'm probably involved."

Young person, focus group, Bradford

"We had the riots in 2001, that wasn't



This was reflected in views shared in other areas, where young people talked about the police as having an elevated sense of power, with police uniforms and badges seen as facilitators or symbols of this. For example, a young person in London shared:

"...We don't call the police because we don't trust them. They do bad stuff...."

Young person, focus group, London

Young people recognised that their views of the police were also, to some extent, shaped by news from other countries and social media. For example, they spoke about the United States, where George Floyd was murdered by an officer in 2020, and videos they have seen on social media of the police that build a negative picture.

There were also alternative, positive perspectives from those who took part in the research. One participant said that, when they reported that they had been abused by a family member, the police made them feel heard and understood, reinforcing that it was not their fault. Overall, young people wanted to have more positive relationships with the police and other adults.

"I don't want to have to speak to a police officer and look at [them] like a big, bad police officer... I just want to talk to them as a human"

Young person, focus group, Wales

The following case studies demonstrate the concerns of young people in interactions with the police and the actions they undertook to support positive change in this regard.



Local spotlight: Views on 'stop and search' in Wales

Young people in Wales were asked about police powers to stop and search. They felt that, to some extent, these powers were potentially important for protecting the community, referring to the frequency with which young people carry knives. They did however share concerns about police powers, noting the vulnerability of young people and the perceived potential for discrimination.

Participants felt strongly that, if young people are stopped, they should be treated very differently to adults, as the experience could be very scary and traumatic, and more so for neurodivergent young people.

"If I was on the street and suddenly an officer just came up and was like, 'OK, stop what you're doing. I need to look through your stuff', that would be very distressing for me... So, I think if they do it less discriminatory, but in a more calming, caring way and you just put the person at ease, that would work a ton."

Young person, focus group, Wales

"If somebody has got like a knife on them or something, then obviously it's understandable... But at the same time, a lot of people who have additional learning things, they're not visible. You can't always see them, and it might cause like more trauma to them."

Young person, focus group, Wales

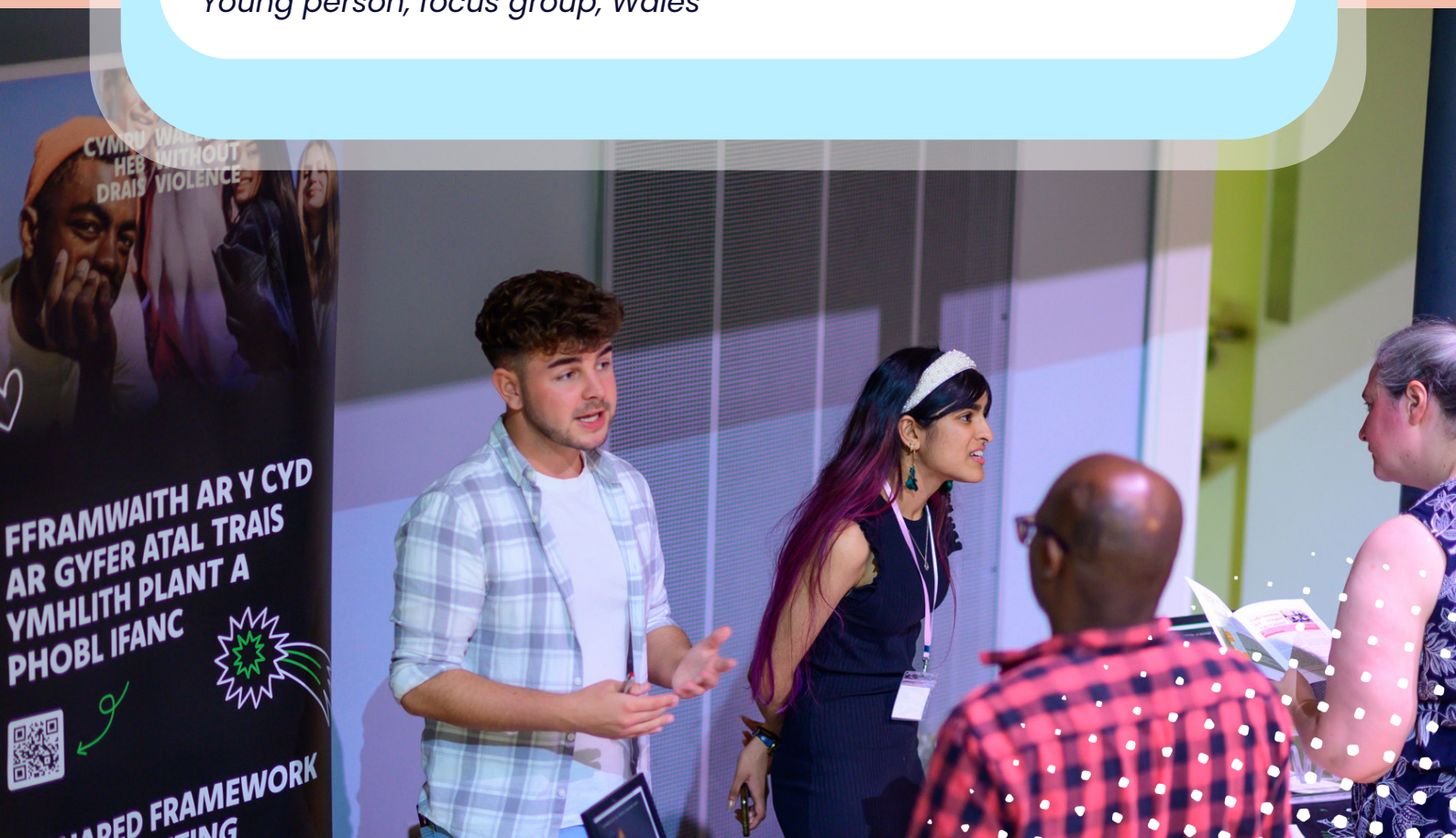
Across the interviews and focus groups, participants in Wales discussed the potential and discrimination in use of the powers. These concerns revolved around the idea it was unlikely to be random, and the rationale of a young person 'fitting a description' was deemed vague and open to bias. Young people worried people would be targeted based on discriminatory stereotypes, such as being from deprived areas, what they wear, and characteristics such as ethnicity, gender identity, and sexuality.

"As much as they can say it's completely random who we choose, it never feels random to whoever's been stopped and searched."

Young person, focus group, Wales

"On one hand, they are just trying to keep the peace... But obviously, it can cause stress for some people, especially when there's a discriminatory factor in it. There's been examples of people of colour being stopped and searched more often than say, a White person, so obviously that can be distressing for them."

Young person, focus group, Wales



Overall, the powers were seen as potentially punitive and damaging, rather than focused on the root causes. Young people want 'stop and search' to be carried out in a way that rebalances the power dynamic, shows understanding of young people whatever their circumstances, and does not risk traumatising young people.

Young people thought the police should have training on this, including how to identify and work with neurodivergent young people. This could be combined with the police and schools talking to young people about stop and search and what to expect, making it clear how they would be treated with respect.

"If you don't have that skill of being able to actually identify how to work with a young person then you shouldn't be working with young people."

Young person, focus group, Wales

"Speak about it in schools, especially because it's becoming more prominent...I think it is good to educate young people on how it should be done so if unfortunately it does happen to them, then they're aware of how it should be handled... so they do know about how it's meant to be performed and to assure that they are safe themselves."

Young person, focus group, Wales



From research to social action: Supporting trusted adults to build better relationships with young people

The PAC Wales partner, Media Academy Cymru, focused on developing outputs that support adults to build better relationships with the young people they interact with.

From speaking with trusted adults (mostly youth workers) and the young people they engage with, the team developed a 'Trusted Adult Documentary' in partnership with the Wales Violence Prevention Unit (VPU), highlighting the qualities, approaches and perspectives of trusted adults to raise awareness about the significance of these relationships in young people's development, and to inspire others to become supportive mentors and role models.

Media Academy Cymru also developed a 'Trusted Adult Walk': an immersive experience that places adults into the shoes of young people, taking them on a journey that reflects what they're experiencing on a daily basis and how the presence, or absence, of a trusted adult, can shape a young person's life. The walk invites participants to hear real-life stories informed by the team's research, and interactive elements including experiencing a stop and search themselves, prompting feelings and reflections that are later discussed and acted on.



Learning from the research:

The Wales and South-west (Bristol and Exeter) PAC teams focused their research on the roles of trusted adults in supporting young people away from violence. Young people reported the importance of building a relationship of trust, nurtured over time. They described the best relationships as those built around care, fairness, reliability, compassion, honesty and protecting privacy. The PAC Wales team developed the Trusted Adult Documentary and Walk to help trusted adults reflect on their everyday practice, to improve the strength of relationships and support offered to young people.

Making change:

PAC Wales Trusted Adult Walk has been trialled and tested in different locations across Wales. Using feedback from participants as well as their own learnings and reflections, the team has developed a toolkit to support organisations can use and apply to their contexts, prompting more adults to think about their role as trusted adult and how they can build better relationships with the young people they interact with.

The Trusted Adult Documentary has helped raise broader awareness,



supporting those who may or may not recognise themselves as a trusted adult, to understand the role they can play and the impact they can have on the lives of young people.

Building on this work, PAC Wales have been working with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for North and South Wales to share learnings around how to meaningfully engage and collaborate with young people.



Theme 3: Mental health and wellbeing

Concerns around mental health and wellbeing were raised spontaneously throughout the research and formed a powerful theme as young people explored and discussed of a range of topics. In this chapter we present evidence on why young people felt this was important, their views on support services, and the importance of psychological safety.

Young people and mental health

Aspects of mental health were specifically discussed in London, Lancashire, Exeter and the North-east, although they also formed part of different conversations across the research. Participants recognised some positive shifts in society, such as greater awareness of and focus on mental wellbeing, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

“I think it wasn’t until after Covid and when everyone realised how important mental health is after being locked up for ages”

Young person, focus group, Lancashire

Through the conversations, participants across areas identified various challenges associated with being young, which were said to impact young people’s mental health. For example, in the North-east and Wales, the exam pressure was raised as a major source of stress for young people, and, in London in particular, participants

talked about the pressure young people could feel from comparing themselves to others. As in Theme 1: violence in context, social media was said to play a role in Theme 3: mental health and wellbeing, creating expectations for young people around lifestyles or clothing. Participants in Exeter commented that young people can experience a vicious circle of poor mental health and feelings of isolation, where one reinforces the other. Lack of access to activities can compound this.

“Especially with the youth clubs closing as well it’s kind of made everyone shut off from each other and more anxious... I feel like a lot more people are just more anxious and depressed and they’re kids as well.”

Young person, age 20, interview, Exeter



In Bradford, where conversations particularly focused on drugs, a link was made between drug use and mental health issues. This included drug use itself leading to mental health challenges (as discussed in Theme 1: violence in context), and recognised that experiences such as grief or poor living standards affect mental health and potentially lead young people to take drugs.

A link was also made between proximity to violence and mental health issues. For example, in Birmingham, in their discussions about the potential impact of familial harm, participants talked about the fear that abuse could create, affecting relationships and impacting mental health. For example discussing what might lead young people to certain negative and violent behaviours. They discussed a scenario of someone who had been neglected by their family, which led them to bullying and eventually someone taking revenge. Through discussions of this scenario, participants talked about the fear that they thought abuse could create, affecting relationships and impacting mental health.

“It would be very hard for you to make like friends because you have anxiety, and you’re scared of going like... let’s just say you’re scared of even doing a handshake because you just feel like you get PTSD from physical abuse.”

Young person, focus group, Birmingham

In London, one young person highlighted that young men in particular may not feel they have a place to go to share the anxieties that come with their proximity to violence. Such a place, they said, is needed to explore emotions arising from proximity to youth violence. This was reflected in conversations in Exeter, where young people talked about the challenges men face around mental health and the expectation to ‘toughen up’.

“They feel like they’re not getting the support when it comes to ... what to do when it comes to youth violence or if they’re worried even about walking on the street by their self as a male. I feel like there should be that type of help open for them the same way we have, especially if they’re fearing for their lives. I really think that boys should have that type of help. Someone they can talk to, maybe like a website they can write their thoughts and stuff or someone they can vent to”

Young person, focus group, London

Experiences of mental health support in education

Young people taking part in the survey were asked about experiences of mental health support in school. Four in five (80%) of those in education said they had learned about mental health in school or college, and three quarters (75%) overall said their school or college provided enough information on mental health. However, 40% said while they had been provided with information in school, it could still be better, and 19% said their school or college did not provide enough information. This figure stood at 30% among those who had lived experience of violence.

Among those who had spoken to a teacher about their mental health, more than half (54%) said their concerns were listened to and addressed. Among those who had spoken to a teacher about bullying, two fifths (39%) said their concerns were listened to and addressed.

Against this backdrop, the interviews and focus groups highlighted where young people thought schools or colleges could give more support. For example, young people in both Exeter and Lancashire said that while support was available in their school, college or university, it felt “tokenistic” at times, rather than stemming from a real focus on and concern about mental health. In Lancashire young people talked positively about time being set aside during school hours to truly focus on mindfulness and wellbeing, and provide space to talk about issues.

In the survey, young people in education were asked about which, if any, of a list of school-based approaches would improve mental health support in their school. ‘Having more trained school/college counsellors available to talk to’ was the most common response (27%). This was followed by mental health awareness

workshops or assemblies, and regular stress management and mindfulness sessions (21% and 20% respectively). One in eight (13%) said training for teachers, and one in ten (10%) said peer mentoring or buddy systems.

In the interviews and focus groups, among those who had received support, such as from counsellors in school, experiences varied, with young people in Gateshead and Exeter talking about inconsistencies across these services, and their short-term nature. As an example of poor experiences, in Lancashire, one autistic young person highlighted the challenges young people could face in accessing suitable support. They said they saw a school counsellor and tried to explain how they were struggling in lessons due to the loud environment and lights being too bright. They hoped the counsellor would show empathy and understanding, offering a route to change the environment so the young person could go back into lessons. Instead, the young person felt the counsellor inappropriately minimised the issue, which led them stop the sessions and continue to miss lessons. They then had to wait a year to get external support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which further impacted their learning.

“So, I still kept struggling to go to lessons in that time and now I’ve fallen back significantly with my grades. I went from getting sixes and sevens to getting ones. Like a four was my highest grade. And they’ve shown no support with that whatsoever other than that therapy which they counted as being low intensity despite how much I was struggling”

Young person, focus group, Lancashire



Local spotlight: Accessing services in the South-west

Young people in Bristol and Exeter spoke about the increasing awareness of mental health issues and need for mental health support services for young people. Participants were familiar with available mental health support services, such as CAMHS and counselling, but spoke about the difficulties in accessing this support, which could sometimes be confusing and overwhelming.

“There’s more and more people who need it but there’s less and less help available”.

Young person, focus group, Exeter

They described the system as ineffective, with a lack of sufficient support available within the NHS to meet the high demand, leading to long waiting lists and young people not being given the right support when they need it. Accessing early support was said to be particularly difficult, with young people feeling their mental health needed to be at crisis point before they would be taken seriously by support services.

It was months till we heard anything back and they were like you’re on the wait list again and I was like okay, great. I was doing horrendously at the time, but you had to fight to even try and get a little appointment.

Young person, focus group, Exeter

“[There’s no support] until things get awful. They won’t listen to you until you’re in crisis.”

Young person, focus group, Exeter

Young people who did access mental health support described frustrations with this being short-term and inconsistent, and having to battle for the help they needed. They also described some services as poor, exacerbating their mental health issues. These experiences created a lack of trust in mental health support services among participants, deterring them from trying to access support at all.

“Then once you’ve got the help, they think you’re all good enough and you’re coping with it very well and then they just bin you off basically and then you go back to that not being yourself or something and then it all just repeats.”

Young person, age 17, interview, Exeter

Young people saw few alternatives, with private mental health support being considered too expensive for most. What they did want was more visible, accessible services that would allow them to access support earlier and through less formal systems. Schools, colleges and universities were also seen as vital gateways through which much-needed support – even in the form of initial conversations – should be accessible. Young people felt strongly that they should have access to psychologically safe spaces where they could easily access professionals such as counsellors and CAMHS workers, either in school or through outside services. They also wanted teachers and staff in schools to have the necessary training to increase their knowledge of, and ability to support with, a wide range of mental health issues.

“A place where you can just walk in and be like I need help. You literally go in, someone’s there and it’s like you can just talk to them and be like I need help, I don’t know what to do.”

Young person, focus group, Exeter

“Even stuff like autism and ADHD ... that gets missed a lot and brushed off as ‘they’re just really anxious’ when they’ve got ADHD but it’s because the person they’re taking to doesn’t know anything about these things because they’ve only been trained about anxiety and depression. That’s a thing I encounter a lot.”

Young person, focus group, Exeter

The following case study demonstrates how PAC Leads drew learnings from their research to develop interventions to support vulnerable young people's mental health and wellbeing, specifically in school settings.



From research to social action: Supporting young people to regulate their emotions

The centrepiece of PAC London's social action is their interactive film, *Xcluded*, which aims to support adults working in schools to be more aware and responsive to the challenges young people face that can lead to a school exclusion; and encourage students to think about how they might better regulate their emotions to avoid a chain of events that may lead to an exclusion.

This is achieved via 'decision points' in the film, where students discuss and choose characters' next steps, impacting the next scene and the ending of the film. PAC Leads and a team of more than 50 Changemakers co-developed the script and film with the support of a film director, Antony Forde. They also developed an accompanying workshop guide to support classroom discussions around sensitive topics, including mental health, challenges at home, and violence.



Learning from the research:

The PAC London team completed two research projects related to schools. Their research highlighted 11 feelings around exclusions that students feel need to be better understood by schools: low mood, self-image/confidence, energy/motivation, feeling labelled, liberation, processing actions, and impact on social relationships. The team developed the interactive film to support students and adults working in schools to work together to better understand and respond to these.

Their second project focused on the links between mental health and violence and the roles schools can play in better supporting young people with their wellbeing. These findings informed the design of the accompanying workshops.



Making change:

Informed with the engagement of more than 50 Changemakers and tested with local schools, the team built an impressive engagement tool. This can be used across schools and youth settings to support important but sensitive conversations around emotional regulation, and to develop collaborative action to address the why behind a young person's behaviour. The team is in the process of planning a longer-term strategy to safely and sensitively share the film further with professionals and young people alike, which will increase its reach and impact.

The team has screened the film in local schools and to the Department of Education and have also shared their findings and work with the Minister for Children and Families, the Metropolitan Police, the Home Office, ITV news, and various podcasts (including the Social Worker & The Mentor Podcast) to raise broader awareness of the film and the steps adults can play to better support children and young people.





Feeling psychologically safe

The qualities and characteristics of trusted adults and safe relationships were discussed directly across the North-east, South-west, Hull, and Wales, but also emerged across conversations about violence and trauma in other areas. Through conversations, young people described wanting adults to create places for them to sit, feel emotions, and give advice when needed.

“A place available for me to go to when I’m feeling overstimulated about things in my life so I can distract myself if I feel upset so I can act rationally. Somewhere there I can always rely on to make me feel more at ease.”

Young person, focus group, Bristol

Many of the ways young people described how they wanted adults to approach these spaces reflected the principles of [trauma-informed practice](#): safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural awareness.

For example, young people across several areas mentioned the use of non-verbal markers such as body language, tone of voice and eye contact as ways for adults to convey compassion, empathy and active listening. Active listening skills overall were seen as necessary for trusted adults, as well as being authentic and genuine in conversations with young people.

“I tried to share my feelings with a teacher and she was like, ‘Yeah, I know you’re going through a lot.’ But I felt like it was so fake and she was saying that because she need to support me, but it was more about like she had to but she didn’t want to”

Young person, focus group, Wales

“I think showing me that what I say is completely open. I can say whatever is on my mind. That they’re not going to judge me for anything. They’re just going to be there to listen. They’re not going to interrupt me and all of that stuff. Just showing that it’s an open conversation. That it’s not pressured.”

Young person, focus group, Wales



From research to social action: Creating engaging and psychologically safe spaces for young people

As part of the wider PAC South-west team, a group of young people in Bristol developed three booklets, each aimed at different age groups, to find out what young people want from a youth space. Through the inclusion of mixed-methods questions, the group gathered data on where young people wanted a youth space to be located, when they wanted to access it, the types of activities they wanted to do there and, crucially, the qualities they were looking for among staff working there.



Learning from the research:

A consistent theme across our PAC South-west team's first research project was the importance of feeling comfortable sharing experiences and needs with adults. Young people also noted the importance of context: what they needed and wanted from different adults varied. Recognising this, the South-west PAC team decided to develop tailored materials that could be shared more widely to support deeper listening with young people.



Making change:

Bristol PAC discovered that caring, confident, approachable and warm youth workers supported long-term engagement with services. Drawing on this knowledge, they approached the SLT at Robin's Foundation, a local youth-focused community charity, proposing two questions to be added to all future Foundation recruitment interview question templates. These were approved by SLT, with the 'ideal answers' to these questions drafted by the young people to support with the interview process. This intervention has helped Robin's Foundation recruit trusted adults with the characteristics young people are looking for. Robin's Foundation have also employed PAC young people into internal roles, helping to embed long-term learning about youth voice across the organisation and the respective projects they're working on.



The question of whether adults needed to have lived experience of the issues young people face in order to successfully create spaces to talk arose in several areas. In Bradford participants said adults who have led similar lives or had similar past experiences would be easier to talk to: for example, someone who understood the factors that might push someone towards drugs, crime and violence. Cultural representation was also seen as important for understanding how communities view behaviours such as drug use.

“They’ve been there, they’ve done that. They know that it’s going to be fine. And they have a lot of street experience. They’ve seen things ... having someone that has either been through it or seen it and done it before is massively important for communication.”

Young person, age 18, interview, Bradford

This was reinforced in Wales, where LGBTQAI+ participants discussed the value of talking to adults who share the same experiences. This commonality, combined with consistency in relationships, was said to build trust and help to validate the young person’s experiences, emotions and thoughts. Choice was also an important feature of these therapeutic relationships.

“If I want to seek support from someone or guidance for specifically for my life then it will just be someone who’s trans or just any part of the LGBT community, because they might actually be able to understand any experience you’ve gone through”

Young person, focus group, Wales

“You are given options in how you want to engage and they support you in... something that felt a bit cheesy, but she would always say to me, my current therapist was that ‘this was my mental health journey and we’ll do it however I want to’. It sounds very silly, but it is reassuring, because just knowing that I have the control in the situation and she will walk at my pace and do things how I want to that helped a lot.”

Young person, focus group, Wales

However, while specific lived experiences were seen as important when talking about specific issues, in general, young people wanted trusted adults to be relatable, and have characteristics such as empathy and understanding, to help them open up. One young person in Wales described this as someone who is:

“culturally aware, culturally sensitive, understands people’s religious and spiritual boundaries, socially aware as well and the ability to be open-minded, humble and listen.”

Young person, focus group, Wales



Being able to see life through the eyes of young people was important. Participants mentioned feeling a generational divide at times with adults; they wanted to talk to someone who is either “young but mature” or takes the time to be aware of issues for young people.

Trust and confidentiality were raised as valued characteristics of trusted adults across multiple areas. At times, safeguarding protocols and practices could feel like a barrier to building this trust, because young people had experienced adults talking to others about issues that they had raised.

“I guess if they didn’t keep what you told them private. If you ever heard them talking about other people’s business, you really wouldn’t want to tell them anything.”

Young person, focus group, Exeter

“I must’ve told the counsellor or therapist. I was just opening up to her and telling her and then it just turned on me. It just turned on me so different. So then after that, I just... It was supposed to be confidential. It wasn’t confidential. After that, I just didn’t trust anyone.”

Young person, focus group, London

However, overall, participants across areas understand confidentiality protocols existed for a reason but wanted greater transparency and clarity about what is shared and when.

“I think the best thing about him [a trusted adult] was when he explained that anything that I say to him that he worries would be damaging he has to explain to the school. So, he always made sure that I understood that it’s going to be going somewhere whether he likes it or not, that’s his job, that’s his responsibility.”

Young person, focus group, Wales

Learnings and take-aways

Through PAC, young people affected by violence generated vital insight and understanding of experiences and challenges that they face. They also implemented ideas for change to support communities through social action.

The following learnings and take-aways can be drawn from the PAC network's dedicated and hard work over the past two years to support young people away from violence.



Safe places and positive activities matter

Young people shared that having spaces to go where they feel safe, comfortable, included and not judged, with positive activities to do, can help avoid boredom and risky situations. The value of this insight was notable against the neighbourhood realities shared by young people, where factors such as deprivation provided a backdrop to mental health challenges and experiences of crime.

PAC teams have already responded to this learning in various ways, including, but not limited to: the PAC Bristol team developing a toolkit to help co-design a brand-new youth facility from scratch, the PAC Bradford team developing a [successful national railway campaign](#) to support young people to feel safer when travelling to and from activities; and the Hull team working with the Tigers Trust to co-develop a [Youth Room](#) where young people could feel safe and comfortable enough to access support.

YEF's evidence base also shows that providing structured, high-quality out-of-school activities – such as [sports programmes](#) – could have a high impact on children's involvement in crime and violence. This, combined with the insight from PAC, highlights why access to safe places and positive activities matter.



It's important to understand the *why* behind behaviour and provide support in schools

Young people shared in conversations that they felt punishments like exclusion or isolation often make things worse, especially when no one asks *why* they are struggling. They also described how being excluded without the right support can push them towards riskier behaviours and damage their relationships with school.

PAC teams responded to these concerns in various ways as outlined in the report. For example, PAC Lancashire developed creative activities to support teachers and students to build better and more trusting relationships, such as re-designing a detention space, and creating opportunities to discuss school rules and punishments. PAC London's interactive film and accompanying workshop, '[Xcluded](#)' helped support teachers and students to explore the choices and emotions that can lead to exclusion or violence.

YEF have produced [guidance](#) around supporting children in education, including a practice guidance report for school, college and alternative provision leaders on how to reduce children's involvement in violence. As such, future work in schools and focus on behaviour management policies and approaches could build on the learning from PAC utilising the guidance from YEF.



Consistent mental health support and a focus on emotional wellbeing is needed

Young people across the research said that poor mental health – which young people discussed in contexts including violence, neurodiversity and exam pressure – can push them away from positive environments and influences and towards riskier behaviours. Young people shared that they often felt existing services were inconsistent, crisis-led, or dismissive of their individual needs. Neurodiverse young people shared that they didn't always feel understood, which left them falling behind.

Responding to these concerns, the PAC North-east team created Q-cards (business-card style with information about local mental health services) and developed guidance for teachers and schools around PSHE sessions on mental health. The PAC Exeter team co-designed enrichment sessions at a college and are working with young people and the college to co-design and develop a mental health hub.

YEF has highlighted the importance of supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing, with Toolkit strands on targeted mental health interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy showing potential to reduce violent crime.



Trusted adults make a difference

The insight from young people through the research highlights how much difference a trusted adult can make. Young people talked about feeling judged or dismissed by some adults whose role it is to support them.

Instead, young people valued authentic relationships with adults who provide psychologically safe spaces. This includes reflecting empathy and understanding in all interactions.

The work of the PAC network has provided ways to build on this learning. For example, the PAC Wales Trusted Adult Walk supports trusted adults to reflect on their role and how they can best build relationships and support young people with diverse needs.

YEF's evidence base also reinforces the value in this PAC insight, with the YEF Toolkit including approaches, such as [mentoring](#), that focus on trusted relationships, and show promise in reducing young people's involvement in violence.



Involving young people creates trust and engagement

Finally, the insight from PAC peer research and social action highlights both that young people want to be heard and the value of hearing them.

Where services and support were co-designed with young people there was creativity, innovation and engagement – from designing and leading workshops in Birmingham to exploring de-escalating online harms, to creating a transport forum with local companies in Bradford so that young people can help shape services.

The voices of and learning from young people in this report are testament to the power of investing in youth leadership, voice and engagement.

Acknowledgements

The dedication and creativity of 121 PAC Leads has driven PAC and enabled the programme to hear honest insights on the drivers of violence affecting young people and create local and national change to address these through social action. There are too many individuals to list here, but we thank each and every one of you, you have made a massive difference to the success of the programme.

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