Learning To Lead
A study into youth involvement
For London Youth, high quality youth work has young people embedded into every part and the purpose of this research is to explain why youth involvement is important and to explore some examples of how it can be done well. We hope it will inform and inspire youth organisations to consider their own youth involvement strategy and how this can be developed further and become embedded within their organisation. All of the youth organisations involved in this research are run in different ways and in a range of contexts, which means that a variety of approaches can be showcased and learnt from.

Methodology
We conducted telephone interviews with ten youth workers from London Youth member organisations and later ran focus groups with groups of young people from four of those organisations. We asked a variety of questions about the ways in which organisations involved young people in delivery and governance and how to make this meaningful and beneficial to both the organisation and the young people. When running the focus groups, we asked the young people to consider their own motivations and how they knew that what they do is valued and worthwhile.

What is Youth Involvement?
Youth involvement for us, is looking at the ways in which our organisations function and flourish and using the skills, qualities, creativity and potential of young people to achieve more. It involves the young people themselves being more connected and active members of their community, making decisions and becoming empowered to create change; and youth organisations embracing the people they benefit to make meaningful contributions to the delivery and sustainability of their activities.

It is about having young people involved right from the start, from the consultation and planning stages to running the project and evaluating it: it’s about making sure that young people are being heard and that their opinions are being taken on board, not just in a tokenistic way but so that things change.”
— Leaders in Community

Every young person feels they have a part to play and have a stake. It’s important that each individual feels that they count.”
— Haringey Shed

For London Youth this is the start of a process to ensure our own practice is reviewed and improved regularly. Through mechanisms such as our forthcoming Youth Involvement Network, we are able to share and promote our learning across our membership and beyond. We hope you enjoy reading this, and that it stimulates discussion about how it can be applied.

Terry Boyce
Head of Youth Action
Why is Youth Involvement important?

We asked young people and youth workers this question and found some key themes around why youth involvement is so important.

- To ensure the service is relevant and is meeting the needs of its users. Many youth workers stated that some of the best ideas for programmes or decisions had come directly from young people.
- Youth participation leads to engagement. When young people are involved, they become more committed and invested in what is happening.
- To give young people opportunities to develop new skills and understand how to add value to an organisation.

How do you prepare young people to become actively involved?

Our research showed there were some key things that were important in order to get started and then embed youth involvement within an organisation.

Positive relationships
Young people will only engage beyond participation if they hold positive relationships with staff at their organisation. At Haringey Shed when young people could see that they had been invested in they were keen to “give something back and help out”. Respect and trust is key to building confidence and to enable staff to provide appropriate support.

Role models
Where young people saw their peers in a leadership role, they also wanted to be involved. For some this was for the social element but when they saw others taking on different roles, they wanted the same opportunities.

Opportunities
Training and accreditations were seen as incentives particularly when they would be beneficial moving forward into work.

“Volunteering teaches us work skills like time management, team work and leadership.”

Action on Disability
Rewards can encourage those less likely to want to be involved however this works best as an initial attraction method rather than an ongoing arrangement.

“Ask young people open questions to find out what they want to do...find out what they want to get from being involved too and then review this to ensure they are pleased with their own outcomes.”

Meaningful decision making
Seeing things actually happen as a result of suggestions and discussions increases the likelihood of young people wanting to engage. It’s important to involve young people in decisions into which they can have a meaningful input.

Responsibility
Ownership of tasks and leadership of others is desirable and encourages sustained involvement.

Youth Board
Young Trustees
Young people who are more engaged could have additional opportunities through a young leaders or volunteering opportunity. They may lead sessions or support other young people in a mentoring role.

Young leaders
Volunteers
Delivery with active participants

This level requires a higher level of commitment from both young people and the organisation as a whole. Young people should have influence over the way things work within the organisation and should be given opportunities to make decisions. This could be as youth representatives, running consultations with other young people in the group and then sharing findings.

All organisations should be aiming to have all of their members as active participants. This may involve them taking part in programmes and doing more than participating in the regular activities of the organisation. It may involve them being actively engaged in designing, delivering and evaluating programmes.

Young people from Prospex explained why youth involvement is crucial:

“If we didn’t get to have our say, we wouldn’t come because it would be boring... everyone gets to decide together and that makes our sessions better.”

• To ensure the service is relevant and is meeting the needs of its users.
• Youth participation leads to engagement. When young people are involved, they become more committed and invested in what is happening.
• To give young people opportunities to develop new skills and understand how to add value to an organisation.
Delivery with active participants

Additional programme involvement
Young people can become more active within an youth organisation by taking part in an additional programme which involves them doing more than just attending regular activities. This could be a leadership programme, for example, where young people take the lead in designing a project or planning an event.

Cedars Youth and Community Centre was involved in Athan 31, London Youth’s original social action programme, in 2015 - 2016. The programme involved supporting a group of young people from the centre to create their own social action project to deliver in the community. Following this, Cedars have now been working with more females through football and dance on a regular basis, allowing them to further consider and develop their approach to youth involvement.

Programme development and evaluation
It is possible to involve all young people in the development and evaluation of projects and activities. This is the quickest and easiest way to immediately embed youth involvement into an organisation. Creativity is crucial in thinking about how to gather honest feedback which is valuable and usable however this can be formal or informal.

“We use iPads now to make it more fun but this also keeps it accessible for different groups of young people.”
Cedars Youth and Community Centre

Where young people feel comfortable and have positive relationships with staff, young people feel able to give suggestions and provide their opinions at any point. There should still be a formal way for youth workers to record this in order to ensure the information is not lost.

Formal methods can also be effective, such as feedback cards and forms, at the end of individual sessions or whole programmes. At FYA, young people are sent questionnaires by email. One young person said, “The questionnaires are good because it means everyone gets a say.”

Young people were asked how they knew their opinions mattered. Almost all said it was when they saw their suggestions in action and could see the direct results of their feedback.

Case Studies

Action on Disability

Action on Disability (AOD) works with young people from all walks of life. Their aim is for young disabled people to have the same opportunities to live independent, fulfilling lives as non-disabled people. AOD have a structured volunteering scheme for members aged 16+. The volunteers run small focus groups for young people to discuss which activities they would like to be run and what they can get from these activities.

Volunteering starts with young people having an introduction to the role and what to expect. Inductions are followed by a trial where they shadow another young volunteer to see what the role entails. They are then given specific role descriptions and have volunteer group meetings at the beginning, half way and end of the scheme. Volunteers run their tuck shop which involves learning about money management and understanding the dietary requirements of their peers.

Young volunteers have said they “like the responsibility and can learn work skills like time management, team work and leadership”. Staff noted that many of the young people who become part of AOD are usually marginalised and isolated. Having responsibilities as lead volunteers gives them a sense of belonging and gets them to be committed.

Leading on from the success of the volunteering programme AOD users have decided to start their own youth board. This is to make sure young people have a say in how the organisation can benefit them. The youth board also plans to help publicise AOD by visiting schools and other youth clubs. Youth board members directly collect feedback from their peers and structure their meetings on these opinions. By doing this AOD plans to be truly inclusive of all their members’ voices.

Leaders In Community

Leaders In Community (LiC) is based in Tower Hamlets and was set up to help young people have their voices heard. It was started ten years ago when poor lighting at the local football pitch, inspired young people to start Leaders In Community to improve local services. Now LiC focuses on a range of creative learning programmes to empower young people in leadership and governance.

The CEO backs the importance of having young peoples’ voices heard, all the way through to the strategic level. The organisation is led by a Trustee Board made up entirely of young people under the age of 25 (up to 30 for existing Trustees). As with any Trustee Board, they are central in all decision making, including on the running of the organisation, programmes and funding. Most Trustees have been members of the club and others have come in externally after expressing interest in volunteering or having been sought out for the needs of the organisation.

LiC are currently working on a new model which flips the usual hierarchical system to ensure members are at the top. Instead of the Trustee Board feeding into delivery staff, members should be leading on decision making and using the Trustee Board to support this.
Young Leaders and Volunteers

Many organisations have opportunities for young people to volunteer or take a leadership role either formally or informally. Based on our research, this works best with a formalised process so that young people understand their role and are more likely to commit over a sustained period. This means:

- having a recruitment process including a role description and interview opportunity;
- giving the young people a chance to explore their reasons for wanting to do the role and what they are hoping to get out of it.

With these procedures in place, one to one support can be provided in a meaningful, tailored way to make the opportunity as beneficial as possible to the young people. This can be used to work on a personal development plan. Relevant training should be offered as frequently as possible and opportunities for young people to put their training into practise should also be considered.

Have an asset-based approach

It’s important to see that having young leaders and volunteers is an investment in the organisation. It is best to understand where the strengths of your young people lie and how these can be utilised within the organisation and then build on their skills using additional training and support.

During our research both young people and youth workers were able to explain why having young leaders and volunteers has a positive impact on both the organisation and the young people themselves.

Case Study

Fitzrovia Youth In Action (FYA) have an ambassador programme which is similar to a youth board. In order to be a part of the programme, young people must have completed a project and then go through a recruitment and induction process.

Those that were selected went on a residential where they did team activities to bond them as a group and were provided training. The content was based on information about FYA in order to ensure they could represent the organisation externally. They also had sessions discussing and exploring what they would be doing throughout the rest of the programme and assigned roles to each member to give all young people a stronger sense of their responsibilities. These included a partnerships officer, who liaises with other organisations and “welfare officer”.

The trustees of the organisation have also provided training for the ambassadors which one young person described as a “good introduction into the working world”. All of the young people were very enthusiastic about the residential and cited it as a key reason that they stayed involved and committed to the programme.

The group meet once a month and set their own agenda. They also have their own budget and decide what to spend it on. They conduct regular consultations with other young people at the club which works well as there are multiple sites, so the opinions of all can be brought to a central point during their meetings.

FYA also create steering groups for each project that happens at the club. Many include the ambassadors but also other members. These groups ensure that the youth voice is heard during delivery of all of the activities that they run.

The club runs more smoothly with volunteers as some activities couldn’t be run without them, it also makes it more fun.”

Action on Disability

At AOD, young people support others who have highly complex needs and cover support workers. They also run inclusive sports sessions, and some went on a course to learn how to do this professionally.
Youth Board and Young Trustees

A youth board can be an extension of the role of young leaders or can be a separate entity. The most important thing about the youth board is that it has a youth-led purpose so that the young people have a clear understanding of what they are aiming to achieve through the group. This is something that should be re-established regularly, particularly if the members change.

At Activities 4 U, the young people are partnered with a more established member of the board. This means that the ‘less likely suspects’ are engaged by their own peers and those who have been on the board for longer, have additional mentoring responsibilities.

Youth boards can be used to:

- Represent the views of their peers
  Young people who are involved may not always be representative of all of the young people who attend activities, so regular opportunities for them to hold their own consultations and conduct research is necessary. One young person at Action on Disability said “other young people are more likely to answer to their peers”.

- Make decisions and have an influence
  One young person at FYA said “…It’s not top heavy”. It’s important that this is not tokenistic and that opinions of the young people are taken forward to show that their decision making is valid and real.

- Represent the organisation externally
  Young people can play an important part in explaining what the organisation does and how it operates, as well as speaking with funders to show the value and importance of the organisation. They can also provide useful feedback to other organisations representing the views of other young people.

At Paiwand, the young people are involved in the recruitment process of new staff, they ask their own questions as part of the interviews. They also support with training for new volunteers at the organisation where they share a youth perspective.

We would like to thank all of the members that took part in the research which supported this report:

Top tips for great youth involvement

- Start small - you don’t have to do all of these things immediately. Begin by formalising ways of collecting feedback to ensure it’s happening consistently and then try something new.

- See young people as assets - although youth involvement can take some time and effort to embed, it will have a positive impact on the way your organisation works.

- Give young people responsibility - whether as young leaders or a youth board, ensure the opportunities that young people are given are meaningful as this is when it will be most positive and beneficial.

- Network with other organisations - reach out to other organisations to find out more about how they make this happen at their organisation. Share tips and resources with them.
With thanks to the Jimmy Dixon Charitable Trust for funding this research and report.