

“A Space of Our Own”

The role and value of youth organisations
in strengthening communities

Principles for Good Practice

Good Practice

In our report “A Space of Our Own”, which demonstrates the role and value of youth organisations in strengthening communities, we identified four principles for good practice. We developed these principles through interviews with youth professionals across the London Youth network. The principles underpin how youth organisations are working with young people to help them feel a part of their community and to bring different parts of the community together. We have outlined the principles below, along with some areas where existing practice could be extended or reflected upon.

Principle 1: Bring people together on equal terms

Many of the organisations we spoke to provide opportunities for young people to interact with other people they may not ordinarily get the chance to meet. This is most effective in situations where power dynamics are as equal as possible, and young people feel they are in a team with or ‘on the same level’ as the people they are engaging with.

Practice example: CARAS, an organisation which supports refugees, individuals seeking asylum and unaccompanied minors in South West London, uses local volunteers from a range of different backgrounds to work with the young people they support, and together they carry out activities such as gardening and DIY projects. The teamwork required in these activities allows the young people and volunteers to build relationships based on trust and a common goal.

Principle 2: Celebrate young people’s cultural identity

Recent research from the Local Trust has highlighted the importance of identity in creating strong communities.¹ We saw examples of youth organisations supporting young people to develop, maintain and celebrate their sense of cultural identity, as well as creating opportunities for them to share this with others. Having a strong sense of identity, and connections with individuals you identify with, are important for giving people the confidence to get involved in the wider community.²

Practice example: Shpresa Programme, which promotes the participation and contribution of the Albanian-speaking community in the UK, provides young people with the opportunity to participate in traditional Albanian dancing, alongside modern street dancing. By offering both forms of dance, young people are able to engage with their Albanian heritage, as well as explore how this links with British culture through mixing the two art forms.

¹ Local Trust and IVAR (2018) *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*.

² Ibid.



Principle 3: Give young people ownership

Our research has shown that youth organisations can provide young people with a sense of belonging within their communities. A contributing factor is young people having a sense of ownership over both the physical space and the activities they take part in. A number of different approaches can be used to facilitate this, ranging from formal governance roles for young people within an organisation to providing open, unstructured sessions where young people choose how to spend their time.

Practice example: At Fitzrovia Youth in Action, the staff team has an explicit open-door policy for the football pitch and playground they manage. This allows young people in Camden to feel that they have their own space in an area where spaces that are accessible to them are extremely limited. They also provide opportunities for young people to take a lead on community events, and in supporting each other, for example, through peer mentoring.

Principle 4: Build the foundations for community involvement

For young people to get involved in their communities, they need to feel confident and able to do so. The organisations we spoke to were providing a lot of support, often over a sustained period of time, to enable young people to grow in confidence, develop new skills and identify the issues they felt passionate about, before moving on to some form of community involvement. Progressive routes that allow the time and provide the necessary support for young people to develop these foundational skills are likely to be most effective.

Practice example: Anti-Tribalism Movement works within Somali diaspora to tackle inequality within the community. They have a structured programme aimed at supporting young people to become more active in their community. This begins with sessions focusing critical thinking to ensure young people are able to engage with different ideas, as well as understand the sources of power in their community and city, before moving on to applying their skills within a social action project.

Extending existing practice

In addition to the good practice highlighted above, there were also some areas where we are interested to see how practice could be strengthened or developed further.

- **Being purposeful in how we bring people together** – We were struck by the importance of power dynamics and pre-existing prejudices when bringing different parts of the community together. Is there more that youth organisations could do to actively consider and take steps to address potential barriers to different groups within a community coming together in a meaningful way?
- **Ownership of spaces within a community** – Youth organisations can provide young people with a physical space within a community. However, there are other places that young people choose to go in their free time, such as parks and shopping centres. How can we ensure that young people feel that they belong in these spaces? How could youth organisations work with local residents, community groups and business owners to ensure that this sense of belonging extends to more areas?
- **Support for transitions** – Whilst youth organisations are providing young people with a space where they feel they belong within their communities, we were left with a question around what happens beyond the life of their involvement with the youth organisation to help maintain that sense of community. Do we need to think about transitions from youth organisations in the same way that we might consider key transition points in education or within other types of services? What might a successful transition look like and what role could youth organisations and others play?

Practice reflections

For youth professionals:

- To what extent are these practices built into your work?
- Is there anything that you could develop further?

For practitioners working in other sectors:

- What opportunities are there to learn from and collaborate with youth organisations?
- What good practice could you share?

For funders and commissioners:

- How do your funding/commissioning practices support youth professionals to build these practices into their work?
- What could be learned from the youth sector that could be applied elsewhere in designing services for communities?