

Youth-Led Structures:

A guide on setting up youth involvement structures in organisations

2021

Contents

Introduction	3
Preparing to introduce a new youth involvement structure	5
Types of youth involvement structures	6
Youth Steering Group	6
Board/Committee/Forum	7
Youth Ambassadors	7
Youth Leaders	8
Researchers	9
Active Participants	10
Peer Mentors	10
Young Trustees	12
Youth Advisor	13
Opportunities and other resources	14

Introduction

What is London Youth?

We are London Youth, a charity on a mission to improve the lives of young people in London, challenging them to become the best they can. We do this with, and through, our network of 500+ community youth organisations around London and at our two residential centres. We provide opportunities and programmes in sports development, arts and culture, employability, youth social action, and outdoor education. We look to work with all young people, focusing particularly on those who wouldn't otherwise have access to the kind of opportunities we offer.

What is youth involvement?

Youth involvement is the process in which 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. It also requires youth organisations to create a context that embraces the young people they benefit and allows them to make meaningful contribution to the delivery and sustainability of their activities.

Put simply, youth involvement involves understanding and celebrating young people and their potential by involving them in the way an organisation is run.



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Why is youth involvement important?

The benefits of youth involvement can be felt by both young people and the organisation. Youth involvement can help to:

- Promote accountability and trust between young people and an organisation.
- Ensure services are relevant and meeting the needs of its users, thus providing a more effective service for the organisation and a more enjoyable experience for the young people.
- Promote higher levels of engagement and retention as young people feel more invested into a project they have helped to create
- Give young people opportunities to develop new and transferable skills. This can help them to understand how to add value to an organisation and may aid in future employment.

Why this booklet?

In 2017, we created our first publication on youth involvement, [the *Learning to Lead* report](#). In *Learning to Lead*, we outlined good practice of youth involvement and spotlighted case studies from within our membership. This *Youth-Led Structures* booklet has been created to build on the discoveries from *Learning to Lead* and provide extra support around implementing youth involvement.

Preparing to introduce a new youth involvement structure

When starting up a new youth involvement structure, organisations may want to consider the following areas before starting:

1. Set the purpose of youth involvement in your organisation.

How much scope and power can young people have on your decision making? What are the key aims you hope to achieve through having meaningful youth involvement?

2. Have preliminary steps to prep young people so they are interested and engaged

Young people are often more open to increased levels of youth involvement if they have had a chance to experience youth involvement in more simpler ways before. For example, before starting a youth board that discusses year-long programme strategy, you may want to prime a group of young people by supporting them on a short-term youth-led project

3. Consider appropriate structure

Choose a structure that meets the aims of your youth involvement goals. It also must be achievable for your organisation and of interest to your young people.

4. Ensure team members, leadership and trustees are on board

Youth involvement works best when all stakeholders in the organisation are able to understand and agree on its value. Provide training and support where necessary to help this.

5. If funding is needed, seek funding

Running a youth involvement structure will incur some costs in both staffing and resources. Budget this out and apply for funding where needed.

6. Recruit young people

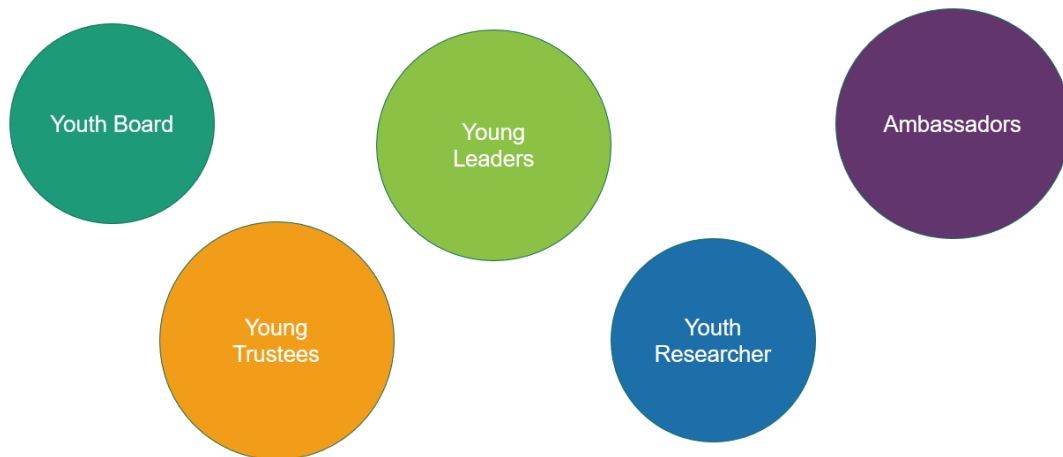
Recruitment can be as creative as desired. Consider how you will ensure that the young people you recruit have a good understanding of what to expect and will be reliable and committed. Also ensure the young people you recruit are reflective of your wider beneficiaries. Plan ahead to consider the prospect of potential drop out over time (that's normal and can be expected in small margins).

7. Begin!

Types of youth involvement structures

Youth involvement can come in many shapes and sizes and people often call these structures many different things. All of the structure names used in this booklet are not the official names, but they are the names we have chosen as the most appropriate to represent each type of structure. Youth involvement structures can be renamed as desired by the organisation.

Youth-Led Decision Making



Youth Steering Group

Purpose: A group of young people meet regularly over a set period of time to discuss and make decisions around one particular topic. This is usually related to a key event in the year. Once the event is complete, the group disbands.

Key elements this structure may have:

- They meet in the lead up to a key event or large-scale decision
- Young people meet regularly and get to make important decisions on the key topic

- There are often ongoing agenda items and discussions are often focused onto one thing
- The members of this group remain the same throughout
- The group disbands after achieving its purpose

Board/Committee/Forum

Purpose: A group of young people who commit their time regularly to discuss and make decisions around a variety of matters in an organisation. The members of this group don't often change throughout the year. They have a good understanding of the organisation and may feed ideas to the board of trustees.

Key elements this structure may have:

- Young people meet regularly and get to make important decisions in the organisation
- The members of this group remain the same for at least one year
- The structure remains an integral part of the organisation and remains active even when the members of the board change
- Tenures of each member could range from one to four years depending on what is needed in the organisation
- The board may have several different focuses throughout the year

Youth Ambassadors

Purpose: a representative or promoter of your organisation. They share their stories to help recruit new young people, raise awareness and engage wider audiences.

Key elements this structure may have:

- Young people receiving training in communication and presenting
- Young people have a good understanding of the organisation and have a narrative they are comfortable sharing – this is usually of their personal experience of the organisation or the context in which the organisation works in
- The members of this group may change depending on availability and tenures for each member can vary
- They may feed in to how the organisation uses social media, presents information and communicates with stakeholders
- The structure remains an integral part of the organisation and remains active even when the members of the board change
- Meetings for this group consists mainly of training, creating comms content and team bonding

Youth Leaders

Purpose: Young leaders are involved in the running and/or coordinating of activities or programmes (could be in part or end to end). These young people may or may not be paid for their time.

Key elements this structure may have:

- Young people are given responsibility over a project or a particular aspect of a project
- These young people receiving training in subjects such as health and safety, first aid, and facilitation
- They may be involved in session briefs and debriefs or planning meetings
- The people in this group may lead on different projects within the organisation

How do I encourage young people into leadership roles?

- Start small
- Validation and positive reinforcement
- Utilise small funding pots Mentoring and buddying
- Peer research
- Comms and engagement
- Training
- The more you put in, the more your young people will flourish

Researchers

Purpose: Finds out about the attitudes and behaviours of others, usually their peers, and then reports it back to the organisation. This may be through a report, verbal feedback or notes. Depending on how complex their task is, this may be a paid freelance position.

Key elements this structure may have:

- Young people in this group receive a specific brief to begin their task
- This role operates for a limited amount of time
- The same young people are used from beginning to end, or some young people carry out the research and other young people (those who are more confident in communicating or writing) summarises the findings
- Young people may already have experience in research or receive training in research techniques as part of the role
- Safeguarding procedures are in place to ensure young people are safeguarded when meeting or discussing with other young people

Active Participants

Purpose: Young people who attend a programme or service within an organisation but also regularly provide constructive feedback on how that programme or service is run. The organisation must ensure they utilise the feedback given for this structure to be effective.

Key elements this structure may have:

- All young people who engage with the organisation can become active participants
- Reflections and feedback can be given as a group or as individuals
- There are methods of collecting evaluation information regularly e.g. end of programme surveys, suggestions board, quarterly reflection sessions etc
- Young people are encouraged to think of problems in a solutions-based way
- Time is taken to regularly reflect on feedback given and there are methods to ensure this is fed into wider decision making
- Active participants may not be present at the final stages when their suggestions are implemented

Peer Mentors

Purpose: young people pair with other young people to model good behaviour and/or help to guide them through challenges. This arrangement can be formal or informal.

Key things this structure may have:

- Mentoring relationships often have one person as the 'mentor' who holds slightly more power and experience, and one person as the

‘mentee’ who is believed to be able to learn from the mentor.

Though, a key aspect of peer mentoring is that each person involved understands that both parties have something to learn from each other and the mentoring relationship is mutually beneficial.

- Informal peer mentoring relationships often present themselves as friendships or buddying. Organisations may want to guide or give some advice to the mentor but shouldn’t interfere with the young people’s personal friendships
- Formal mentors are trained and are encouraged to work with their mentees for a set period of time with agreed guiding principles
- Mentors have a way of feeding back their learning when meeting with their mentees and have a chance to influence how the organisation works with their mentees
- Often times youth leaders are also peer mentors

Mentoring Formats

Model	Description
1:1 General Support Mentors	Mentor and mentee undergo 1:1 meetings in order to provide a safe space to talk, seek advice or build friendships (e.g. meeting once a week for 20 minutes within youth club time)
1:1 Specific Support Mentors	1:1 support for young people going through a particular event (e.g. stress during their parents divorce or moving into secondary school)
Group Mentors	Mentor supports or guides a group of mentees in a particular task or environment (e.g. on a residential or programme that they have experience of)
Learning Mentors	Supporting a mentee to harness a particular skill, usually on a one-to-one basis but within the wider context of the group (e.g. helping with public speaking within a social action project)

Mentoring Social Dynamics

Coaching	Mutual Learning Dynamic	Student/Teacher Dynamic	Buddying Dynamic
Mentor coaches mentee, does not give their own opinions or feedback but only asks questions to help mentee find their own way	Mentor and mentee are/have been in similar positions, they work through a topic together using a framework. They both give their opinions and feedback	Mentor supports mentee with a particular topic. Mentor gives feedback on their progress and makes suggestions on how to improve	Informal mentoring in which mentor loosely keeps track of mentees progress, and sometimes offers advice and support where appropriate

Young Trustees

Purpose: Young people, usually between the ages of 18-25, that have legal responsibilities over the organisation. They must be registered with charity commission and have shared responsibility in making sure the organisation is working within its aims.

Key elements this structure may have:

- Young people are paired with/mentored by other full trustees to ensure they feel comfortable contributing
- The trustee chair is aware of the young trustees and encouraged their engagement
- Young people are met with before trustee meetings to talk through board papers and clarify understanding
- Other trustees are briefed or trained on how to work with young people and involve them into conversations and decisions
- Young people are trained or briefed on the requirements needed to be a trustee

- The young trustees have a good understanding of the organisation
- The young trustees have an area of expertise that benefits the organisation when making high level decisions e.g. a degree of qualification in a particular area of interest to the board, or an in-depth knowledge the community/environment the charity works in or with
- May have to go through an application process to be selected

Youth Advisor

Purpose: A young person who sits in on trustee or committee meetings but is not an official trustee. Acts as an expert in a particular field and does not have to attend all meetings.

Key elements this structure may have:

- Can be a young person/young people of any age
- The young people are briefed on the content of their role, and understand what area of expertise they have and why this expertise is needed
- A young person in this role may or may not be paid for their time depending on the complexity of the decisions they are helping to make
- Young advisors may be trained to become young trustees over time

Opportunities and other resources

London Youth offers support to our members around youth involvement including 1:1 support, training and funding. Please visit www.londonyouth.org/ for the most recent information about the support on offer.

This booklet was written by Kadisha James-Fergus in January 2021. Please contact Kadisha.james-fergus@londonyouth.org if any questions arise.