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MANCHESTER
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#YoungPeopleCan

Listen Better

Strengthening Care-Experienced Youth
Voice across Greater Manchester



A Greater Manchester mapping report on
care-experienced participation:
What is working, what needs strengthening, and
how young people's voices can shape change.

Prepared by Greater Manchester Youth Network
With support from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

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Foreword

Greater Manchester already has strong foundations for care-experienced youth voice.

Across the city region, children in care and care leavers are already giving their time, insight and experience to help improve the systems around them. Participation workers, Personal Advisers, advocates, voluntary sector staff and senior leaders are creating spaces where young people can speak, be heard and influence change.

This report recognises that work. It does not dismiss it, and it does not pretend that nothing good is happening. There are strong examples of care-experienced young people shaping services, challenging practice, influencing Corporate Parenting Boards, designing events, using creativity, and building trusted relationships with adults who care deeply about their voice.

But the message from this mapping work is clear: Greater Manchester can listen better.

This first stage of this Esmée Fairbairn Foundation-funded work gives us a clearer picture of care-experienced participation across the ten localities. We are grateful to Esmée for making this work possible, and especially grateful to the young people and practitioners who shared their views openly and honestly. We also want to thank Anna Walters for leading this mapping work with care, curiosity and respect for the young people and practitioners who contributed.

Their contributions show both the strength of what already exists and the work still needed. Children in care participation is often well established, stable and strongly rooted in relationships. Care leaver participation is more varied, more affected by transition and life pressures, and more dependent on flexible approaches and dedicated capacity.

The recommendations in this report are not about creating another layer of consultation. They are about strengthening the foundations: better connection, clearer accountability, wider reach, fair recognition, shared standards and stronger routes from voice to influence.

Young people have spoken. Practitioners have been clear.

The task now is not simply to listen.

The task is to listen better.

Alex Fairweather
Chief Executive Officer
Greater Manchester Youth Network

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Introduction

1. About this report

This report maps care-experienced participation across Greater Manchester. It looks at how children in care and care leavers are currently supported to share their views, influence services and connect with decision-makers.

The report sits within a wider shift in how Greater Manchester listens to care-experienced young people. Children and young people have a clear right to be heard in decisions that affect them and public bodies also have a duty to understand young people's wishes, feelings and experiences when making decisions about their care and support.

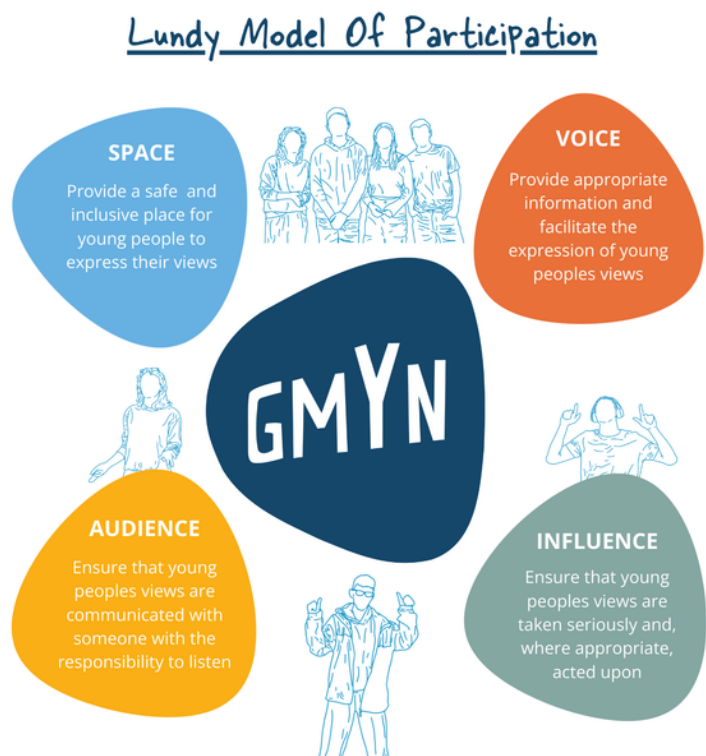
Locally, that ambition is visible through the Greater Manchester Care Leaver Guarantee, the Greater Manchester Housing Providers Care Leaver Pledges, Trauma Responsive Greater Manchester and the Regional Care Cooperative. All of these point towards better support, stronger accountability and young people having a meaningful say in the systems around them.

This mapping report is the first stage of Greater Manchester Youth Network's Esmée-funded work to strengthen care-experienced youth voice across the city region. However, it is not a final blueprint but a starting point, providing a clearer picture of what already exists, what is working well, where the gaps are, and what needs to change.

The report is grounded in the Lundy Model of participation which includes the four elements: **Space**, **Voice**, **Audience** and **Influence**.

That means asking:

- Are young people given safe opportunities to express their views?
- Are young people supported to share those views in ways that work for them?
- Are the right people listening?
- Are young people given feedback and able to see how their views have influenced decisions?



Where findings differ, the report considers children in care and care leaver participation separately. While these areas are closely connected, they are not the same in practice, with differences in the structures, pressures, engagement patterns and support needs that shape participation at each stage.

2. How the work was carried out

To build a picture of care-experienced participation across Greater Manchester, participation leads or equivalent staff from all ten local authorities were contacted.

In most boroughs, this involved speaking to two practitioners: one responsible for participation with children in care, and one responsible for participation with care leavers. In some areas, one practitioner covered both age groups.

Research was carried out between February - May 2026 and included:

- An initial survey with local authority participation staff
- 15 semi-structured interviews with practitioners
- Visits to voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations working with care-experienced young people
- A short online survey for care-experienced young people involved in local authority participation groups
- Two in-depth conversations with individual care-experienced young people.

Nevertheless, the report acknowledges that the young people's survey had some limitations, as it was targeted at those already connected to participation groups and received a relatively small number of responses. While these views provide valuable insight, they do not represent the full range of experiences and perspectives of care-experienced young people across Greater Manchester.

However, this limitation reflects one of the wider findings from the mapping: participation structures often engage a smaller group of young people already connected and involved. The challenge moving forward is to continue valuing these voices while developing more effective ways to engage those who are not currently accessing participation opportunities.

The mapping explored what participation structures currently exist, how young people's views are gathered, how those views reach decision-makers, what feedback young people receive, and what would help participation become more meaningful and better connected across Greater Manchester.

A note on the language used throughout the report

- For consistency, participation groups for children and young people under 18 are referred to as Children in Care Councils (CiCCs).
- Care-experienced young people will be referred to as **CEYP**.

3. The Current Picture: Participation across Greater Manchester

Care-experienced participation is already happening across Greater Manchester as every borough has some form of participation group for children in care, and most have routes for care leavers to share their views. There are also voluntary sector groups, youth voice projects, advocacy routes, regional networks and links into strategic decision-making spaces.

Statutory Duties and Participation

For children in care, under Section 22(4) of the Children Act 1989, local authorities are required to ascertain and give due consideration to the wishes and feelings of children in care and to ensure they are meaningfully involved in decisions about their care and the services they receive.¹ Statutory guidance further emphasises that authorities should follow these expectations unless there is a clear reason not to, giving them significant weight in practice.

For care leavers, while the Children Act framework still applies, participation is underpinned by the corporate parenting principles set out in Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. These require local authorities to '*have regard*' to the need to encourage young people to express their views and to take those views into account, embedding participation as a core expectation of corporate parenting practice.²

While there is no explicit legal requirement to establish Children in Care Councils or Care Leaver Forums, these structures have become widely recognised as key mechanisms for fulfilling participation duties and demonstrating effective corporate parenting. As such, they are commonly treated as best practice across the system. This report therefore explores how different local authorities in Greater Manchester have interpreted and implemented these expectations through their respective participation groups, highlighting variation in approach, structure, and impact.

Children in Care Participation

Children in care participation is well established across Greater Manchester with all ten local authorities having a participation group for children in care. 90% of groups have been established for over five years and tend to have stable membership and consistent engagement levels with young people attending regularly over several years. Over half of the groups have approximately 6 to 10 active members however some local authorities reported larger cohorts of 11 to 20+. The majority of groups meet weekly or fortnightly and some combine participation activity with a broader youth club model, including social activities, trips, games or creative work.

This is an important factor as for younger children, participation is often strongest when built around belonging, relationships and consistency. Young people may not join a group because they want to sit in a formal meeting, however, they may join because the space feels safe, familiar and enjoyable. From there, they build confidence, develop relationships and begin to share their views.

CiCCs often act as the anchor of formal care-experienced youth voice across Greater Manchester.

Care Leaver Participation

Participation opportunities for care leavers are also well established across Greater Manchester, however, findings indicate more variation.

Six local authorities have dedicated groups for care leavers; however, two councils use mixed-age groups that include both children in care and care leavers. Furthermore, an additional two local authorities do not currently have a dedicated care leaver participation group however other routes for care leavers to share their views are provided.

Care leaver groups generally appear to be more fluid. The data shows that most groups operate on a monthly, quarterly or ad hoc basis and there is a higher presence of groups that have been running for less than three years.

Attendance and membership stability is more varied, with 43% of groups reporting 'some' or 'high' turnover, as young people may engage strongly for a period, then step back because of housing pressures, work, college, university, parenting, mental health, finances, relationships or periods of crisis.

This indicates that participation opportunities for care leavers must be adapted to fit around the complexity of their adult lives. Care leaver engagement often needs to be more flexible, topic based and relationship led. It may work best through short-term projects, one-to-one conversations, creative activity, outreach, online options or opportunities linked to practical issues such as housing, money, mental health, employment and support from Personal Advisers.

Findings suggested that young people can also struggle to transition from their CiCC to an older age range group.

This raises an important gap where some young people can feel too old for children in care participation, but too young or not ready for care leaver groups. This transition between participation opportunities needs more attention.

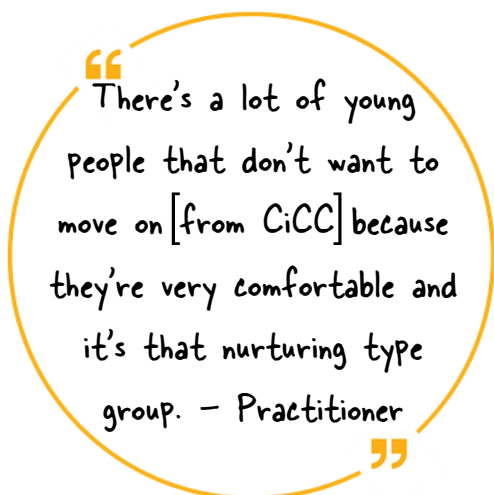
What this comparison tells us

Children in care participation across Greater Manchester is generally more established, regular and stable. Care leaver participation is more varied, more transitional and more capacity sensitive.

A single participation model will not work for every age, borough or circumstance.

Greater Manchester needs a shared approach, but not a one-size-fits-all model. The recommendations that follow should be read as a shared Greater Manchester improvement agenda, not as a judgement on individual borough performance. Where actions involve local authorities, they will need to be agreed and supported with regional partners.

See [Appendix 1](#) for a summary of key differences between Children in Care and Care Leaver Participation in Greater Manchester.



“There’s a lot of young people that don’t want to move on [from CiCC] because they’re very comfortable and it’s that nurturing type group. – Practitioner”

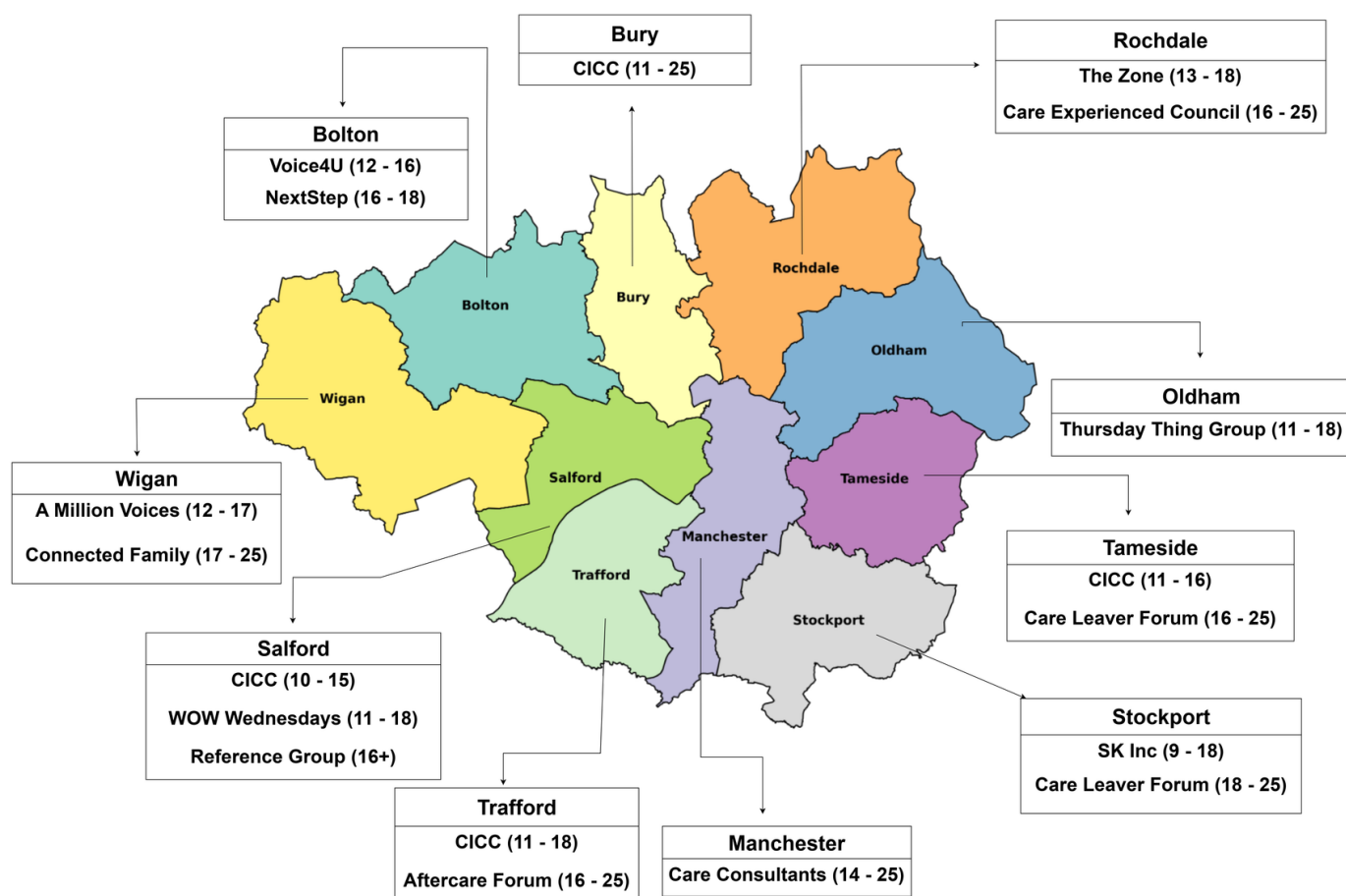


Figure 1. Care-experienced participation groups, with age ranges, for each Greater Manchester Local Authority (accurate at the time of data collection, February - April 2026)

Key Findings

4. Listen Better by connecting what already exists

The mapping found that 93% of practitioners believe that care-experienced participation is not currently very well connected across the Greater Manchester.

Conversations with practitioners and young people highlighted a desire for more opportunities to share learning, build relationships and develop a stronger regional voice. This was reflected in the young people's survey, where 81% said they would like opportunities to connect with care-experienced peers from other boroughs to share experiences, ideas and perspectives.

The issue is not that nothing exists but that too much depends on local provision, individual relationships and informal links.

“
There's 10 local authorities, like
someone's going to be doing
something amazing that you can
take inspiration from. –
Practitioner
”

Practitioners described strong work happening in different localities, but also a sense that people are often “reinventing the wheel”. Good ideas, tools, events and approaches are not always shared and workers under pressure do not always have time to find out what others are doing. Smaller or newer groups may not have easy routes to learn from more established ones.

Young people themselves also expressed interest in connecting with care-experienced peers from other localities. They wanted opportunities to visit other groups, host others, share experiences and build wider relationships. Currently, opportunities for CEYP to engage with peers from other boroughs are limited; even within VCSFE organisations, many are constrained by borough-specific funding despite operating across wider geographical areas. This limits opportunities for shared learning, relationship-building and the development of a stronger collective voice across Greater Manchester.

One young person also raised the importance of access across the whole city region:

“Most opportunities goes to those who can easily access Manchester city centre. There needs to be more emphasis on other boroughs too, and for those who live in different boroughs to their local authorities. I wish all hubs and events were just made to be clearly open for all GM care leavers.”

Children in Care Findings

Some practitioners leading CiCCs already access wider networks, including networks beyond Greater Manchester such as Youth Focus North West, which has enabled practitioners to build relationships with one another. These are valued, but they do not replace the need for a clearer Greater Manchester-specific approach.

There is an opportunity to bring CiCCs together around shared themes, peer visits, regional events and joint projects. This would allow young people to learn from each other and help local authorities share what works.

Care Leaver Findings

Care leaver participation appears less consistently connected across Greater Manchester. Some care leaver groups are newer, smaller or more irregular and some local authorities do not have a dedicated care leaver group.

Stronger regional connection could help reduce isolation, build peer support and strengthen the collective voice of care leavers across Greater Manchester. But it must be accessible and opportunities should not default to Manchester city centre. They should rotate across boroughs and consider travel, timing, food, childcare, digital access and confidence.

What is already working

There are existing foundations to build on, including the GMCA's Care Leaver Participation Network, which provides one route for regional care leaver voice. In addition, Youth Focus North West's Cared For Network is valued by some practitioners, predominantly those running CiCCs. Local authorities have developed their own groups with strong practice including arranging events, board takeovers, celebration activities and consultation methods. These should not be replaced, they should be connected.



Recommendation 1: Strengthen existing Greater Manchester-wide participation networks for CEYP

Establish regular, structured opportunities for children in care and care leavers from different boroughs to connect, share experiences and collaborate on shared issues.

This could include regional forums, joint projects, peer visits to other groups and themed events that bring CEYP together across the ten localities.

To make this sustainable, Greater Manchester should identify funded coordination capacity to manage cross-borough networks, align participation calendars and organise regional opportunities. This should avoid adding more pressure to already stretched local authority staff.

“ More regional meetings, more sharing of practice between authorities, standardising that approach, because if you’ve got more on board, then it’s easier to challenge your own local authority to replicate that work.”

“ I think that meeting other young people from other areas is something that will be beneficial for the young people and their collective voice.”

“ I’d love to see my group go to other boroughs and talk about what we’re doing.”

Quotes from practitioners



Recommendation 2: Establish a structured practitioner network and central resource hub to reduce duplication and share best practice

Launch a dedicated Greater Manchester practitioner network for staff involved in care-experienced participation.

The network should:

- Share best practice and learning from existing projects
- Reduce duplication of work
- Build stronger professional relationships across boroughs
- Meet every 3 to 6 months
- Include a central digital resource hub where practitioners can share toolkits, templates, information and established resources
- Include a peer buddying system so smaller or newer groups can learn from more established ones.

This recommendation recognises that practitioners are already doing good work, but often under pressure. It is about helping them connect, not adding another demand.

A full summary of responses to the question ‘What do you think would help make Care-Experienced youth voice more meaningful & better connected across GM?’ can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

5. Listen Better by closing the feedback loop

Across Greater Manchester, the majority of groups have regular opportunities for young people to attend and present at Corporate Parenting Boards, take part in business meetings, join consultations and contribute to events. 79% of practitioners when asked, believed there are well established routes for young people's voice to reach decision-makers. However, the gap is not always whether young people are asked, but often what happens with their feedback afterwards.

Although many practitioners described feedback processes such as action logs or trackers, these systems varied between boroughs. More than half of practitioners reported that feedback to young people was not always clear or consistent. In some cases, practitioners also described a disconnect between strategic decision-making and frontline delivery, meaning that agreed actions are not always visible to the young people who contributed them.

This gap has the potential to undermine trust and long-term engagement. Both practitioners and young people described the importance of demonstrating impact, with some young people expressing frustration that participation could feel 'pointless' because 'nothing happens' after they share their views. Strengthening feedback mechanisms and consistently closing the feedback loop would help ensure young people can see how their contributions have influenced change.

Children in Care & Care Leaver Findings

There were no significant differences between responses relating to children in care and care leavers. Practitioners across both groups highlighted the need for stronger feedback loops. Feedback should be timely, accessible, clear, honest and respectful. Effective feedback should explain what has changed as a result of young people's involvement, what is still being considered, and where changes have not been possible, including the reasons why.



Showcasing Effective Practice: Closing the Feedback Loop Through Structured "Request for Consultation" forms in Wigan

In Wigan, the A Million Voices group has developed a formal "request for consultation" process to ensure young people's time is valued and their involvement is meaningful.

Requests from senior leaders or external partners must be submitted through a consultation form, setting out the purpose of the engagement, how young people's views will be used, and how feedback will be provided afterwards. The process also requires appropriate recognition of young people's time, such as vouchers or refreshments.

Requests are then reviewed with young people, who decide whether they wish to take part, ensuring involvement is voluntary and based on their interests. A key strength of this approach is the expectation that professionals close the feedback loop by informing young people when they will feedback and how their views have (or haven't) influenced decisions. This reflects the principles of the Lundy Model by supporting accountability, transparency and meaningful participation.



There's areas where I think we need to improve from a tracking perspective to make sure we don't keep going back and asking the same questions.

– Practitioner



If a young person is going to spend some time giving feedback on a particular topic, it should not just go into the abyss.



– Practitioner



Recommendation 3: Formalise the request to consult and feedback loop process

Every local authority across Greater Manchester should implement a standardised request for consultation form, based on the model developed by Wigan's A Million Voices group.

Any professional, service or decision-maker asking for young people's views should clearly set out:

- What they want to ask
- Why they are asking
- How young people's views will be used
- When and how feedback will be given
- What reward or recognition will be offered.

Greater Manchester should also adopt a simple and consistent 'You Said, We Did' (Or We Couldn't) feedback template across participation activities.

This should include:

- What young people said
- What changed as a result
- What could not be changed (and why)
- What will happen next.

This should be used in plain language and in formats that work for young people.

6. Listen better by reaching beyond the usual voices

Conversations with participation leads suggested that many groups rely on a relatively small number of engaged young people, with ongoing difficulties reaching and sustaining involvement from a wider range of CEYP. Over 85% of practitioners identified recruitment as a challenge, making it the most commonly reported issue across both CiCCs and care leaver participation.

Survey responses found that 80% of groups had less than 10 active members, with only two groups reporting more than 10. Given that there are approximately 3,800 children looked after aged 10-18³ and over 4000 care leavers across Greater Manchester⁴, this represents a very small proportion of the overall care-experienced population.

While of course these young people make valuable contributions, reliance on a small core group can create challenges. Practitioners highlighted the risk of hearing from the same voices and placing increased pressure on these young people to represent the views of their peers.

Greater Manchester needs to hear from a wider range of CEYP, including those who are less connected to services or less likely to attend formal groups.

However, this is not a criticism of the young people who do take part, but a challenge to the system to widen the routes in.

“

Even though the work they do is really effective and they turn up each week and we get their youth voice, we're not necessarily capturing everyone's, it's just a small cohort.

– Practitioner ”

Children in Care Findings

CiCCs often retain young people once they are engaged, with only one CiCC worker identifying retention as a challenge. Practitioners frequently described young people who do engage as remaining involved for long periods of time and developing strong connections with both staff and their peers. However recruitment still remains a challenge. Children in residential care, out-of-borough placements, or with more complex needs may be less likely to attend formal groups.



Showcasing Effective Practice: Using Advocacy to Strengthen Recruitment and Participation in Bury

In Bury, the Children's Rights Team and advocacy service provide a key route into the Children in Care Council (CiCC).

Advocacy workers, who already have trusted one-to-one relationships with care-experienced young people, also lead the CiCC, creating a natural pathway from individual support into group participation. This approach supports recruitment, reduces barriers to engagement, and helps sustain involvement by maintaining relationships with trusted adults and providing ongoing opportunities for young people to share their views.



Showcasing Effective Practice: Reaching Underrepresented Young People Through Residential Home Outreach in Oldham

In Oldham, another proactive outreach approach has been developed to engage young people living in residential settings who may be less likely to attend traditional participation groups.

Rather than expecting young people to attend a weekly CiCC session, the Participation Lead visits residential settings on a monthly basis to gather views and build relationships over time. Regular visits have helped create trusted relationships and provide a more informal way for young people to share their views.

The approach has also supported some young people to become involved in wider participation activities, while ensuring that the views of those who do not wish to attend the CiCC are still captured. It has also strengthened relationships with residential providers, supporting wider participation activity and access to additional resources.

This example demonstrates the value of flexible, relationship-based approaches that take participation opportunities to young people, creating additional routes for those who may be underrepresented in traditional groups to have their voices heard.

Care Leaver Findings

Unlike the CiCC workers, 63% of care leaver participation workers referenced retention of young people as a challenge. These findings have shown that care leaver groups often experience more turnover as young people may move accommodation, start or leave work or college, become parents, experience crisis, or disengage from services. Evidently, participation needs to adapt to this reality.

Furthermore, the 16 to 18 age group was identified as a particular gap. Some young people feel too old for children in care groups but too young for care leaver groups. Others have strong relationships with their children in care participation workers and find the transition difficult.

“

The thing I feel like is a bit of an issue is the 16 to 18 year olds. It'd be really good to get them engaged [in the care leaver forum] and see them being peer mentored. – Practitioner

”

“

I would say that they're [16-18s] underrepresented because they feel when they fit in that age group that often they're too young to come to forum because we've got older members. – Practitioner

”

However the most significant representation gap identified was separated young people (formerly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or UASC) with 88% of participation workers interviewed reporting that they did not currently have any members of this cohort attending their group. This is notable when compared with local demographics. In Manchester, for example, figures from 2023 showed that UASC made up 13% of the looked after population. What's more, UASC and former UASC young people accounted for approximately 28% of the care leaver population aged 16–25, the second highest nationally.⁵

Some local authorities have developed dedicated groups to work with separated young people, but the wider picture suggests these voices are not yet consistently included.

Furthermore, other groups identified as less likely to be heard include young parents, young people in custody, young people placed out of borough, young people with complex and/or additional needs and young people who are disconnected or disengaged from services.

The role of VCFSE spaces

This is where VCFSE organisations can play an important role in engaging CEYP who may not access local authority-led participation opportunities. These organisations often provide different routes into participation, with some young people experiencing them as less formal, more independent and built around existing relationships of trust.

However, this is not to suggest that local authority spaces are unsafe or that VCFSE spaces are always more effective. Many local authority practitioners are creating supportive, consistent and meaningful opportunities for young people to participate. Rather, the findings suggest that different young people may need different settings and approaches in order to feel comfortable sharing their views.

Several VCFSE practitioners reported working with care leavers who choose not to engage with local authority-led forums due to previous negative experiences or a lack of trust in statutory services. In these cases, community-based organisations can provide an important route for hearing from young people whose views may otherwise be missing from formal participation structures.

Young people may feel more comfortable engaging through spaces such as youth groups, arts projects, advocacy services, peer support groups or other community settings where relationships have already been established. Some young people particularly valued spaces where they could participate without feeling defined by their care experience or expected to discuss it unless they chose to.

The findings suggest that VCFSE partnerships should complement and strengthen local authority participation approaches, providing additional routes for engagement rather than replacing statutory responsibilities for hearing and acting on young people's views.

Please see [**Appendix 3**](#) for a full summary of voluntary sector insight.

Creative and Flexible Routes

Additionally, creative methods were also identified as a useful way to improve recruitment and engage young people who may not attend formal action groups.

Practitioners described examples including creating videos, jewellery-making, therapeutic art, redecorating family hubs, poetry, song writing, photography and graffiti art.

Creative work can help young people share what matters to them without having to sit in a formal meeting or repeatedly retell difficult experiences. It can also create more memorable outputs for decision-makers.

“It's been a way that I've used to actually recruit to group because it's only open to care-experienced. So people that wouldn't necessarily come to an action group, they will come to creative sessions.
– Practitioner”



Showcasing Effective Practice from Outside Greater Manchester: Derby City Council working collaboratively with the voluntary sector to maximise engagement

CEYP who attend Derby City Council's 'Our Voice, Our Success' CiCC group shared their own views and experiences of the care system to shape the film 'One Day' which breaks down the stigma around growing up in care.

Derby City Council approached Plus One, a creative partnership project delivered by Derby Theatre for CEYP, to develop a resource exploring the lived experiences of young people within the care system.

Through two months of creative workshops, young people explored key themes identified by the Virtual School and generated authentic material for the final piece.

The project engaged **75 young people and care leavers**, with 15 young people aged 8–16 working more intensively on the final piece over 4 weeks. Young people were central to every stage of the process, collaborating to help create illustrations, models and audio for the final film.

This project demonstrates how local authorities can work collaboratively with the VCSFE sector, combining expertise to engage a large number of CEYP in creative co-production.

You can view the film here: [One Day - Derby City Council](#)



Recommendation 4: Launch a targeted inclusion strategy to reach underrepresented groups and bridge the 16 to 18 participation gap

Local authorities should move away from relying only on formal group structures and should include a wider range of engagement opportunities, such as:

- One-to-one engagement
- Creative projects involving artists or alternative facilitators
- Outreach-based participation
- Short-term or theme-based projects
- Partnership working with VCSFE organisations in trusted community spaces (see recommendation 5 below)

Greater Manchester should also create a dedicated transition pathway for young people aged 16 to 18. This could include:

- Taster sessions for young people moving from children in care groups into care leaver participation
- Older care leavers acting as peer mentors
- Short-term projects that fit around college, work and other commitments
- Clear handover between workers
- Support for young people attending their first few care leaver sessions.



Recommendation 5: Partner with the VCFSE sector to engage care-experienced young people within trusted community spaces

Greater Manchester local authorities should strengthen investment and partnership working with VCFSE organisations to expand participation opportunities for CEYP.

This could include funding or co-commissioning targeted youth voice sessions for young people who are disengaged from statutory groups.

Senior Leaders, Directors, Corporate Parenting Board members and other decision-makers should also engage directly with young people in trusted environments, rather than only expecting young people to attend formal meetings in corporate spaces.

7. Listen better by making participation safe, fair and accessible

Participation should be built around young people's safety, time, needs and choices. These foundations are essential in order to make youth voice meaningful.

A consistent theme across the mapping was the importance of trusted relationships and safe, welcoming environments. Practitioners described successful groups as informal, relationship-focused spaces where young people feel comfortable being themselves and where staff are approachable, consistent and genuinely invested in their wellbeing. Long-term relationships with trusted adults, alongside opportunities to connect with peers who share similar experiences, were seen as fundamental to maintaining engagement.

"I value the safety and comfort that the group brings." – Young Person

Children in Care Findings

Regular CiCCs can provide safety, belonging and consistency. In particular, youth club-style models can help younger children feel comfortable and can build confidence over time.

However some practitioners raised questions about whether formal spaces, such as Corporate Parenting Boards, are the most appropriate setting for children in care to participate. While young people's representation in decision-making spaces was recognised as important, there were reflections about whether attending formal meetings with large groups of adults always creates meaningful opportunities for children to share their views. If children and young people do enter adult professional spaces, they must have proper preparation, emotional support and a clear understanding of why they are there.



Showcasing Effective Practice: Adapting Corporate Parenting Board to Centre Young People's Participation in Trafford

Trafford's Aftercare Forum has adapted its Corporate Parenting Board structure to make participation more inclusive and meaningful for care-experienced young people.

Meetings have moved away from a traditional committee-style format, with young people and decision-makers now sitting together in smaller table huddles to create a more equal and less hierarchical environment.

Trafford has also created dedicated opportunities for young people to lead discussions with decision-makers through Q&A focused Corporate Parenting Board meetings. Questions are developed by young people through the Aftercare Forum and shared with board members in advance, allowing time to prepare responses. Responses are then shared with young people beforehand, helping create transparency and supporting young people to feel confident engaging directly with decision-makers.

Some practitioners also suggested the importance of decision-makers creating opportunities to engage with young people in their own spaces that feel safe, accessible and designed around their needs, rather than expecting young people to adapt to existing adult led structures.

“ If they [decision makers] actually want the views, why don't you come to see them [young people] and why don't you spend a bit of time talking to them rather than putting them in an adult meeting? If you want to come and get involved, come and play football with them.

– Practitioner ”

“ They [another LA] actually get the corporate parenting board to come to the youth club. I think that that might be a better way, really, because I've been to some corporate parenting boards and they're really dry aren't they? And a lot of the time they focus on the problem.

– Practitioner ”

Care Leaver Findings

Care leavers may be experiencing transition, balancing adult responsibilities and pressures. Participation must take account of work, study, caring responsibilities, childcare, travel, money, mental health and housing.

For care leavers, safe participation also means clarity. Care leavers in particular expressed the importance of fair and transparent financial recognition for participation, particularly when young people are contributing significant time, expertise, or lived experience.

Furthermore care leavers should not be repeatedly asked to share painful experiences without a clear purpose, support and feedback.

Accessible Participation

Accessible participation means removing practical barriers. That may include travel, food, childcare, interpreters, digital access, support for neurodivergent young people, flexible timing, accessible venues and different ways to contribute. It also means being honest about what is open to change. Young people should not be asked to influence decisions that have already been made.

Safe Creative Work

Creative participation can be powerful, but it also needs care. Creative work should be properly planned, supported and resourced. Practitioners and young people need preparation, clear boundaries, safeguarding, debriefing and a shared understanding of what the work is for.

Creative methods should not be used simply to make consultation more attractive. They should help young people express what matters to them in ways that feel safe, meaningful and useful.



Recommendation 6: Create fair and consistent approaches to rewarding participation

Greater Manchester should develop shared principles for recognising and rewarding participation, ensuring respect, fairness and transparency.

These principles should include clear guidance on:

- When participation is voluntary
- When young people should receive money, a voucher or other incentive
- When young people should be paid
- How travel, food, childcare, access costs and lost income should be covered
- How young people's time, expertise and lived experience should be recognised fairly.

For participation involving substantial responsibilities or time commitments, such as co-production, training delivery, recruitment panels, consultancy, facilitation or strategic decision-making, young people should be paid at least in line with minimum wage.

“ So making it clear from the start, is this a paid opportunity? Is this not? Because, you know, as probably shallow as it is, there are some things where I have to prioritise it being paid over unpaid.

– Young Person ”

This section additionally underpins the other recommendations in this report regarding feedback, inclusion, voluntary sector partnership, shared practice and the Lundy Model.

8. Listen better by turning insight into action

The findings suggest that while examples of good participation exist across Greater Manchester, there is variation in how practitioners understand and apply meaningful participation in practice. Practitioners highlighted differences in awareness and application of the Lundy Model framework, alongside ongoing challenges in turning insight into action and translating young people's views into meaningful change.

Only 20% of practitioners interviewed could confidently say that young people were consistently involved in co-producing work. While most practitioners were able to provide examples of co-produced projects, many were honest in acknowledging that co-production was not yet embedded and that there was further progress to be made.

Many practitioners recognised that participation is still often shaped by adult agendas, service requests and senior leaders' priorities. While there was a clear commitment to ensuring young people's views shaped discussions, the findings showed that this was often balanced alongside organisational priorities and requests from services. Only 13% of practitioners reported that young people were always actively involved in setting agendas or priorities, highlighting an ongoing challenge in moving towards more consistently youth-led approaches.

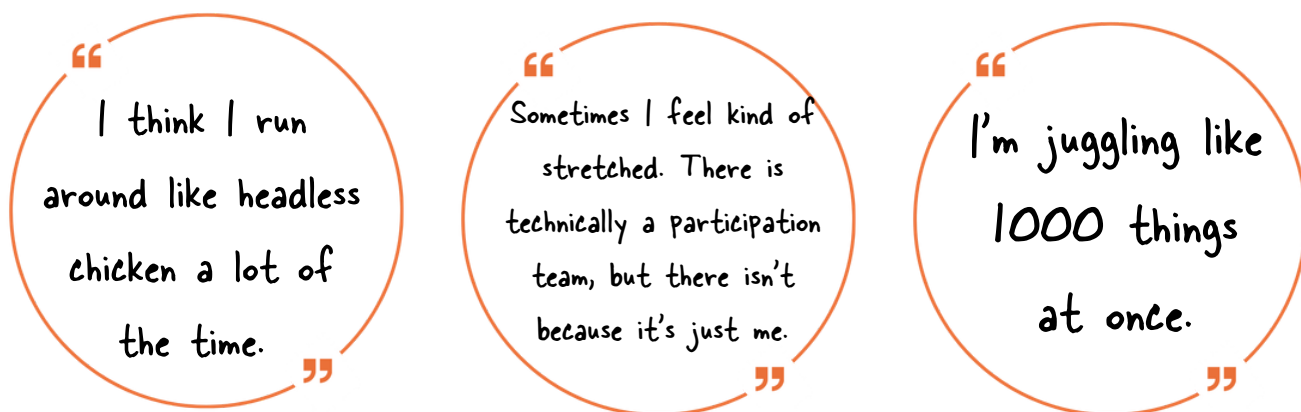
However, meaningful co-production does not mean that all priorities or ideas have to originate from young people themselves. The key distinction is whether young people are involved early enough in shaping decisions, rather than being asked to comment on proposals that have already been largely developed. Greater emphasis on co-production from the beginning of a process - for example, jointly developing service specifications or commissioning priorities alongside professionals - would help move participation beyond consultation and towards genuine shared decision-making.

“ I think it's impossible for it to always be them [young people], if you've got other people that are wanting consultation, you've always got a senior management team that want a view on something. - Practitioner ”

Children in Care Findings

All practitioners leading CICC's reported being familiar with the Lundy Model of Participation, with nearly half actively using it in their work. This provides a useful foundation for supporting a shared understanding of meaningful participation. Responses also showed that practitioners using the Lundy Model were more likely to describe approaches that strengthened feedback loops and demonstrated how young people's views had influenced decisions.

Two-thirds of practitioners leading CiCCs had dedicated participation roles, however, this did not necessarily remove capacity pressures. Among CiCC leads, 62% described feeling overstretched, often balancing responsibility for multiple participation groups within the council or wider youth voice activity alongside the CICC. Several practitioners also highlighted the challenges of supporting a wide age range of young people within a single group.



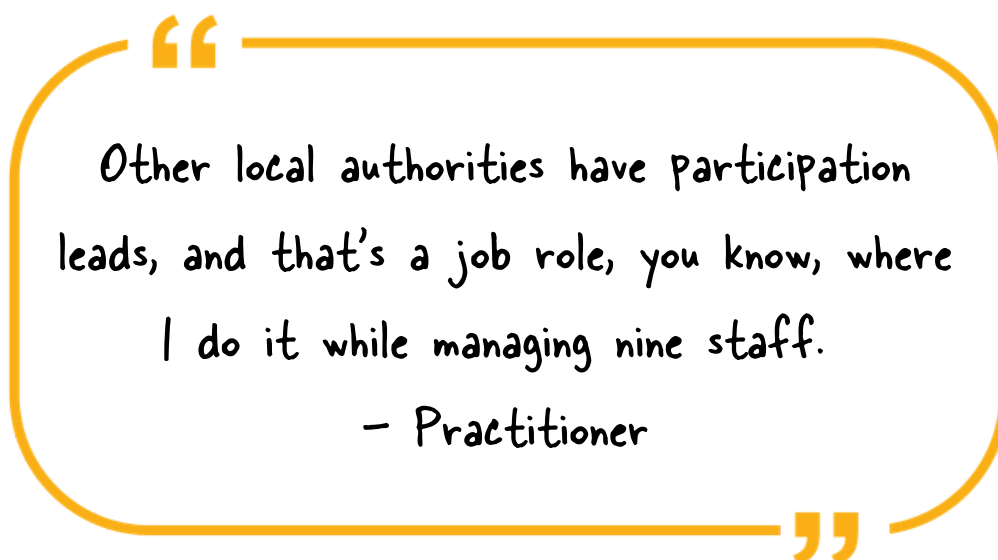
Quotes from CICC workers when discussing running multiple voice groups and initiatives for the council.

Care Leaver Findings

The mapping has shown that care leaver participation would benefit from stronger infrastructure and support. Awareness and use of the Lundy Model was less consistent among staff leading care leaver groups, with over a third reporting that they had either not heard of the model or were only vaguely familiar with it.

Furthermore, less than half of practitioners leading care leaver participation groups held roles dedicated to participation, with responsibilities often sitting alongside demanding roles such as Personal Advisers, Community Parenting Officers or Advanced Practitioners.

Several practitioners highlighted that participation work had been added to already busy workloads, limiting the time and capacity available to develop this area of work.



Practitioners consistently reported that limited capacity affects both the reach and quality of participation activity. It can restrict the frequency and depth of engagement, reduce opportunities to recruit and support new members, and limit the ability to develop innovative projects or collaborate across borough boundaries.

If care leaver participation is under-resourced, the voices of young adults leaving care are less likely to shape the services and systems they rely on.

“

I feel like I do everything. And I feel like participation works best when you've got someone whose main role is participation. I'm literally just doing the best I can in the limited time I've got. But I know if you had someone who had more time, oh, they could do amazing stuff.

– Practitioner

”



Recommendation 7: Invest in dedicated participation roles, in particular for Care Leaver engagement

Participation should be recognised and resourced as a specialist function, not treated as an add-on to already stretched roles.

Local authorities should create dedicated participation roles, or protect existing ones, especially for care leaver engagement.

Dedicated participation capacity would support:

- Better recruitment of young people
- Stronger retention of young people
- Wider inclusion of young people
- Safer participation
- Clearer feedback
- Regional collaboration
- Stronger links to decision-makers
- More consistent use of the Lundy Model.

This recommendation is particularly important for care leavers, where participation is more varied, more transitional and more affected by staff capacity.

The Lundy Model as a shared standard

The Lundy Model gives Greater Manchester a clear way to test whether participation is meaningful. It asks whether young people have:

- **Space:** Safe opportunities to express views
- **Voice:** Support to express those views
- **Audience:** The right people listening
- **Influence:** Evidence that views are taken seriously and acted on

The mapping found that the region is often strongest on space and voice, with the weaker areas being audience and influence. Young people's views do reach decision-makers in many places, but not consistently enough and feedback is not always clear. Furthermore, young people are not always involved early enough in the process and system response is not always visible.

“I just think in terms of across Greater Manchester, it's important that everyone follows the same framework. So everyone follows the Lundy Model. So that it's that continuity that follows through, even though the projects are different, everyone should follow the same sort of guidelines. – Practitioner”



Recommendation 8: Embed the Lundy Model across Greater Manchester through training for practitioners and leaders

Greater Manchester should launch a training initiative centred on the Lundy Model of participation to establish a consistent regional standard for meaningful participation and co-production.

Training should reach every level of the workforce, including Participation Leads, Personal Advisers, Managers and senior decision-makers.

The aim should be to move away from high-volume, tokenistic consultation and towards fewer, deeper pieces of co-produced work.

Greater Manchester should also establish clear, direct pathways to decision-makers and formal procedures that make senior leaders accountable audiences for young people's views.

A full summary of responses to the question 'What gets in the way of responding effectively to youth voice, and what would help your organisation respond more consistently and meaningfully?' can be found in [Appendix 5](#).

Conclusion

9. What this means for Greater Manchester

This mapping shows that Greater Manchester has strong foundations for care-experienced youth voice. There are committed practitioners, established children in care groups, care leaver forums, creative projects, local innovation, voluntary sector spaces and young people already shaping decisions. In many places, participation is built on real relationships and genuine care.

“The important thing is to get our voice in front of people with actual influence. – Young Person”

However there are inconsistencies. Care leaver participation varies, with findings highlighting the impact of transition, competing life pressures and staff capacity. Feedback loops can be inconsistent, meaning some young people do not always see how their views have influenced decisions. The mapping also identified that good practice is not always shared across the region and that participation can sometimes rely heavily on the commitment and capacity of individual workers rather than being supported by wider systems and infrastructure.

The focus for the next stage should not be the creation of additional disconnected participation structures, but rather strengthening the connections between existing approaches, widening access to ensure more young people's voices are heard, improving feedback and recognition, and embedding young people's insight more consistently into decision-making.

The Eight Recommendations

- 1) Strengthen existing Greater Manchester-wide participation networks for care-experienced young people.
- 2) Establish a structured practitioner network and central resource hub to reduce duplication and share best practice.
- 3) Formalise the request to consult and feedback loop process.
- 4) Launch a targeted inclusion strategy to reach underrepresented groups and bridge the 16 to 18 participation gap.
- 5) Partner with the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector to engage care-experienced young people within trusted community spaces.
- 6) Create fair and consistent approaches to rewarding participation.
- 7) Invest in dedicated participation roles, particularly for care leaver engagement.
- 8) Embed the Lundy Model across Greater Manchester through training for practitioners and leaders.

Together, these recommendations offer a practical route to stronger, safer and more accountable care-experienced participation across Greater Manchester.

10. What happens next

This report is not the end of the listening process. It must now be taken back to the people who contributed, especially young people.

The next phase should focus on three practical steps: testing the findings with young people and practitioners; agreeing system ownership for the recommendations; and identifying which actions can be progressed through the Esmée-funded work and which require additional resource.

Next Phase Priorities

The next stage should include:

- Sharing the findings with young people who contributed
- Producing a young people's version of the report
- Sharing the findings with participation leads and voluntary sector partners
- Sharing the report with local authorities, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the Regional Care Cooperative, Greater Manchester Housing Providers, the Greater Manchester Care Leaver Trust Board and local Corporate Parenting structures
- Testing the recommendations with young people and practitioners
- Agreeing which actions can be taken forward through the Esmée-funded work
- Identifying which actions need additional resource or system ownership
- Developing a practical implementation plan.

Young people should not have to keep repeating the same messages in disconnected spaces and practitioners should not have to keep starting from scratch. Decision-makers should not receive young people's views without a clear responsibility to respond.

Greater Manchester has the foundations. It now needs the infrastructure, consistency and commitment to build on them.

Our task is to **listen better** and to show young people what can change when **they are heard**.

Acknowledgements

Greater Manchester Youth Network would like to thank the care-experienced young people who shared their views, experiences and ideas through this mapping work. Their honesty, time and insight are the reason this report matters.

We are grateful to participation workers, Personal Advisers, advocates, managers and local authority colleagues across Greater Manchester who contributed openly and generously. The report recognises the commitment, care and creativity already present across the city region, as well as the shared work still needed.

Thank you to the voluntary and community organisations that took part in the mapping, including 42nd Street's Cloud 42 group, Make Good & Pure Insight's Arts and Carbs group and Manchester Care Leavers Collective.

We also recognise the wider ecosystem that supports care-experienced young people's voice: advocates, foster carers, supported accommodation providers, housing partners, youth workers, creative practitioners, peer-led spaces, voluntary and community organisations, and local authority teams. Strong participation depends on this wider network of relationships and support.

Thank you to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for supporting this work and investing in care-experienced youth voice as a route to stronger, fairer systems.

Finally, thank you to Anna for leading this mapping work with care, curiosity and respect for the young people and practitioners who contributed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Children in Care and Care Leaver Participation: Key Differences

Children in care participation and care leaver participation are connected, but they do not work in the same way. This table summarises the main differences identified through the mapping.

Area	Children in care	Care leaver participation
Coverage	All ten local authorities have a CiCC.	Care leaver participation is more varied. Some areas have dedicated groups, some use mixed-age groups, and some don't have a formal group.
Stability	Groups are generally more established, regular and stable.	Engagement can be more fluid and affected by transition and adult life pressures.
Frequency	Groups are more likely to meet weekly or fortnightly.	Groups are more likely to meet monthly, quarterly or ad-hoc, based around specific issues or projects.
Engagement	Young people often stay involved over time once trust is built.	Some young people stay engaged for a long period however recruitment and retention need to be continuous and flexible.
Staff capacity	More likely to be supported by staff with dedicated participation roles.	More likely to be added to already stretched roles, including leaving care roles.
What works best	Consistent groups, trusted adults, peer belonging, youth-club style activity and preparation for decision-making spaces.	Flexible routes, one-to-one work, outreach, peer support, issue-based projects and practical access support.
Main risk	Hearing mainly from a small group of confident or long-standing members.	Missing care leavers whose lives are affected by housing, work, study, parenting, mental health, money or crisis.
Main opportunity	Build on established groups to strengthen regional connection and shared learning.	Develop better-resourced, more flexible care leaver participation across Greater Manchester.

Appendix 2: Practitioner Responses - Making participation better connected across GM

Below is a full summary of practitioner responses when asked: What do you think would help make Care-Experienced youth voice more meaningful & better connected across GM?

1. Limited capacity makes it difficult to engage more young people across Greater Manchester and strengthen connections between councils. Additional funding and dedicated coordination would be needed to bring voices together effectively. Partnerships with organisations like GMYN and Pure Insight help, but councils cannot deliver this work alone alongside existing demands.

2. To make Care-Experienced youth voice more meaningful across GM, there should be a forum where youth voices from all boroughs come together, either virtually or through regular meetings. This would encourage more joined-up work and allow groups to share and collaborate on the great initiatives happening in different areas. I would also love for this group to visit other groups in different boroughs and for young people to share what they've been doing.

3. GM focussed network - what is everyone doing across GM. YP sharing what they're doing.

4. Bringing care-experienced young people together across Greater Manchester could be positive, but there are concerns about managing large groups and ensuring a clear shared purpose. Differences in local authority policies and support offers may also make it harder to align priorities.

5. A buddying system to link lone workers across GM with professionals in other boroughs who have successfully delivered similar initiatives. This would require some sort of shared contact list or central coordination (e.g. via an existing regional group or WhatsApp network) to make collaboration and knowledge-sharing easier.

6. More opportunities for different care-experienced groups across GM to meet, share good practice, and collaborate would strengthen connections. Greater consistency through a shared framework (e.g. the Lundy Model) would also ensure continuity and alignment across all projects.

7. Clearer agendas shared in advance and stronger connections between borough participation leads.

Appendix 2: Practitioner Responses - Making participation better connected across GM

8. More regional collaboration, shared best practice, and a standardised, joined-up approach across authorities to strengthen collective voice and accountability.
9. GM-wide network for participation leads would help workers connect and share what each borough is doing. This cross-borough communication could indirectly increase young people's engagement and make youth voice more meaningful across GM
10. More GM-wide opportunities for young people to meet and share experiences would strengthen their collective voice. Professionals would also benefit from more connected networks, though this must be balanced with recognising capacity differences between areas.
11. Larger GM-wide events and team-building activities would help young people connect more meaningfully across boroughs. Rotating locations and creating informal, fun opportunities to meet would also strengthen regional participation.
12. Semi-regular meetings (not too dissimilar from the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum) to share best practice, facilitated by staff, but presented by Young People.

Appendix 3: Voluntary Sector Insight

This appendix summarises learning from VCFSE organisations working with CEYP.

Organisations Included

The mapping included conversations with staff and, where possible, young people involved at: 42nd Street's Cloud 42 group; Make Good and Pure Insight's Arts and Carbs group and Manchester Care Leavers Collective. These groups are not all formal youth voice groups, but they offer important insight into how CEYP engage in trusted, informal and community-based spaces.

Trusted Relationships and Community Matter

A strong theme was the importance of trust, consistency and belonging. Young people valued spaces where they were not required to talk about care experience unless they wanted to. Staff emphasised that meaningful engagement is built over time and should not feel transactional or only focused on consultation.

Young people do not always want to attend local authority forums

Some young people in voluntary sector groups were aware of LA participation opportunities but did not attend them. Reasons included anxiety, uncertainty about the purpose of forums, concern that some voices dominate, previous negative experiences, or a belief that participation does not always lead to visible change. This does not mean LA spaces are unsuitable but the finding is that different young people need different routes into participation.

Taking participation to young people

Young people and practitioners highlighted the value of decision-makers going to young people's existing spaces, rather than expecting young people to attend formal meetings or council-led events. This supports a broader model of participation, where LA forums, voluntary sector spaces, peer groups, creative projects and outreach all play a role.

Issues raised by young people

Young people in voluntary sector spaces raised similar issues to those in LA groups, including:

- Mental health and support
- Housing and safety
- Relationships with Personal Advisers and professionals
- Isolation and loneliness
- Employment, training and money
- Foster care and support networks
- Wanting genuine influence, not tokenistic consultation.

The role of the voluntary sector

VCFSE organisations can help engage CEYP who do not access formal participation groups. Their role is not to replace statutory participation. Their role is to complement it by offering trusted spaces, reaching young people who may not attend forums, supporting creative approaches, building confidence and helping decision-makers hear from a wider range of young people.

Appendix 4: Young People's Survey Findings

The young people's survey had a 16 responses and was targeted at young people already involved in participation. This means the survey findings should not be treated as representative of all CEYP across Greater Manchester.

Headline findings from the survey

- Young people generally described participation groups positively.
- They valued safe spaces, trusted staff, peer connection, consistency and opportunities to influence change.
- Priorities raised included housing, mental health, transition to adulthood, money, care leaver rights, support from Personal Advisers and improving support for future CEYP.
- Ten of the sixteen young people said they had seen at least some positive impact from their group. (Fig 1.)
- Only one young person said they had seen "a lot" of change. (Fig 1.)
- Almost 70% wanted better feedback about how their views and ideas had been used. (Fig 2.)

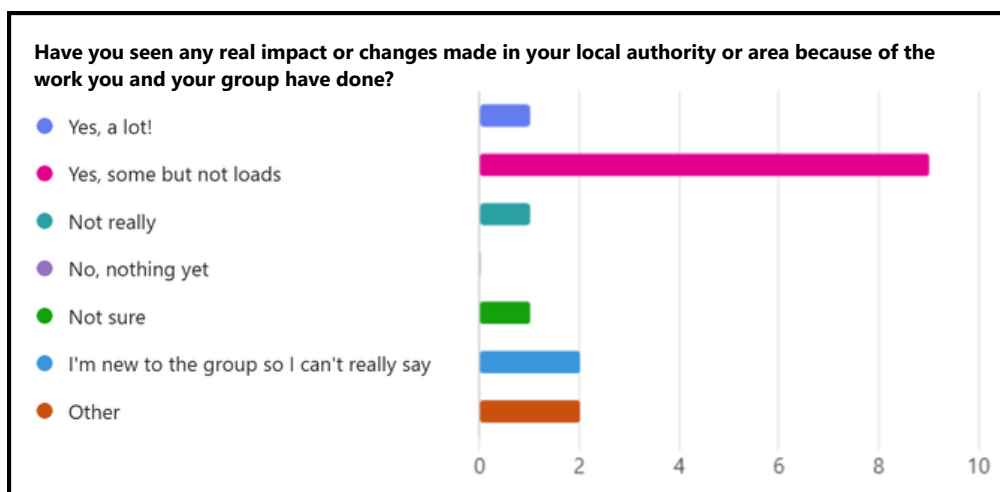


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

- Young people wanted varied routes to decision-makers: some preferred formal meetings, some preferred decision-makers visiting their group, and some preferred a trusted adult to share their views. (Fig 3.)
- Thirteen of the fifteen young people who answered the question wanted to connect with care-experienced peers from other localities. (Fig 4.)



Figure 3.

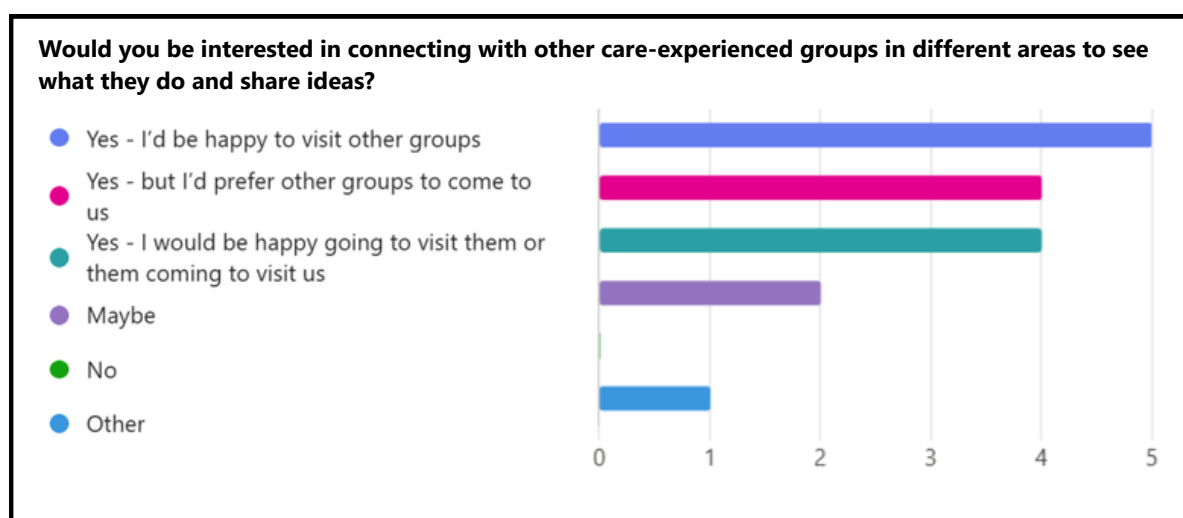


Figure 4.

Additional learning

Two in-depth conversations added further insight into the importance of trusted spaces, peer support, fair rewards and recognition, better communication across local authorities and practical barriers such as childcare and travel.

Key message

Young people value participation, but they want clearer feedback, stronger influence and more opportunities to connect across Greater Manchester.

Appendix 5: Practitioner Responses

What gets in the way of effective youth voice?

Below is a full summary of practitioner responses when asked: What gets in the way of responding effectively to youth voice, and what would help your organisation respond more consistently and meaningfully?

1. Limited capacity and no dedicated participation lead or strong senior oversight make it difficult to respond consistently and strategically to youth voice. Engagement is often limited to the same small group of young people, making broader and more representative participation challenging. However, youth voice is embedded through reviews and surveys, leading to tangible changes (e.g. driving lesson support).

2. The main barrier to responding effectively to youth voice is the complexity and instability in young people's lives, which makes consistent group engagement difficult. What helps is building strong one-to-one relationships, offering flexible ways to contribute (e.g. email, virtual roles, questionnaires), and not forcing attendance at formal meetings. A meaningful approach involves tailoring involvement to each young person's circumstances, spreading tasks out, and supporting them to participate in ways that suit their confidence and availability.

3. Barriers include tokenistic co-production, weak communication across agencies, and a lack of timely feedback on how young people's views influence decisions. Clearer processes for follow-up, set feedback timescales, and tools like a regular newsletter would strengthen meaningful engagement.

4. Staff capacity, limited time, funding pressures, and emotional/trauma-related group tensions.

5. The main barrier is young people's life circumstances after turning 18, meaning sharing their views is often not a priority, especially during difficult or crisis moments. It's also harder to engage those who don't want or don't understand participation, making consistent youth voice challenging.

6. Communication barriers, meeting planning - sometimes there isn't enough time to plan so experiences are lost or not shared.

7. Limited capacity (with only one participation worker), fragmented structures, and no junior CICC group make it hard to respond consistently to youth voice. More staffing, resources, and a more joined-up participation approach would significantly improve this.

Appendix 5: Practitioner Responses

What gets in the way of effective youth voice?

8. Responding effectively is limited by having a small group and difficulties reaching under-represented young people, as well as system issues that can't always be changed. Clearer follow-up processes and stronger cross-agency communication would help make responses more consistent and meaningful.

9. Timeframes

10. A key barrier is that not all staff are fully engaged, with social workers and IROs rarely bringing young people to participation sessions, possibly due to workload pressures and competing priorities. Greater organisational buy-in and more flexible delivery options could help improve consistent and meaningful responses to youth voice.

11. Delays in responding to young people's ideas, often due to capacity issues, can hinder effective youth voice, particularly when feedback is not provided promptly. Limited staffing and reliance on other teams also affect promotion and follow-through. Though planning to get an apprentice who could strengthen this.

12. A key barrier to responding effectively to youth voice is the low number of young people participating, with only a small group involved compared to the wider looked-after population. Increasing engagement and representation would help ensure a broader, more inclusive range of views informs decisions.

13. Barriers include limited resources, inconsistent understanding of youth voice, and a tendency to focus narrowly on single issues without wider communication. More consistent feedback, clearer demonstration of impact, and ongoing staff training would help responses feel more meaningful and effective.