

Towards inclusive co-production in youth policy: Insights from the Understanding Youth Social Action project

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Youth policy describes strategies “implemented by public authorities to provide young people with opportunities and experiences that support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of society and agents of change” (Council of Europe CM/Rec(2015)3). And whilst it is generally difficult to witness policy development in action, we can see an increased interest from public authorities in co-producing knowledge supporting policy development; we see more public authorities involving young people in different stages of the policy process and we see more participatory approaches being used to bring the lived experience of young people in to the decision making process, especially on issues affecting their lives.

In February 2024 the [Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society](#) (CARES) at London Metropolitan University, was commissioned by the Greater London Authority Civil Society & Sport Unit’s Youth team to conduct a piece of research aimed at understanding youth social action as a system within London, as well as the factors that underpin youth social action participation. The outputs of this project can be found here:

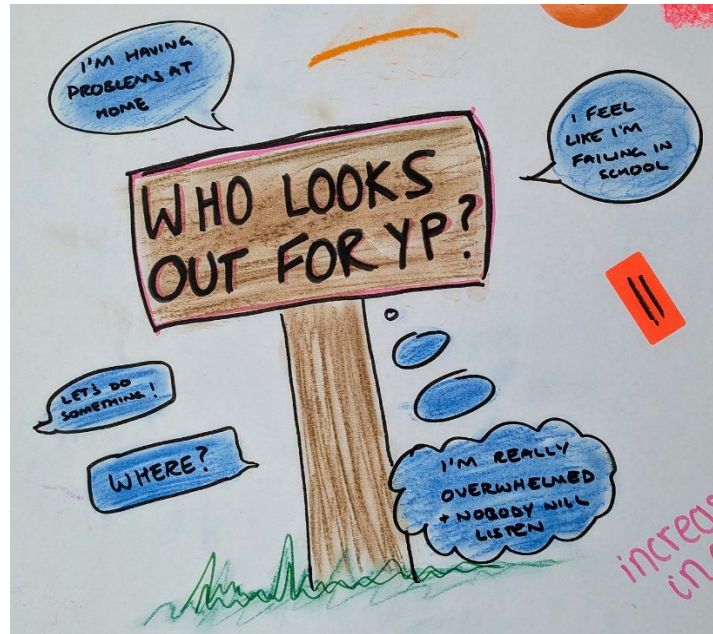
- [Understanding Youth Social Action Report](#)
- [The London Youth System Map](#)

This piece brings together reflections from policy practitioners, young people and academics involved in the project exploring the value of co-production and youth involvement.

Project description

The project explored how young Londoners take part in social action, and what enables and prevents their involvement. Social action refers to a wide range of activities that benefit others such as volunteering, campaigning and advocacy, as well as more informal and often overlooked contributions through family, community or faith settings.

Drawing on participatory research with young people as well as on a review of evidence, this project used systems mapping to understand youth social action as an interconnected eco-system, where capability, opportunity and motivation factors interact on different levels (personal, inter-personal, institutional, community and policy) to shape young people’s participation in social action. Our findings highlight both the personal and collective benefits of social action participation, such as improved confidence, skills, wellbeing and sense of belonging, as well as the challenges to participation. Barriers include financial and time pressures, unequal opportunities across ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, fragmented delivery, and limited trust between institutions and young people.



Young people's artwork from the Young Change makers Forum (July 2024)

The participatory research with young people revealed that certain conditions must be in place for youth social action to take place and be effective. These conditions — epistemic privilege, voice, trust, agency, social justice, relationships and sense of belonging — need to be considered when planning policy and interventions to influence youth social action.

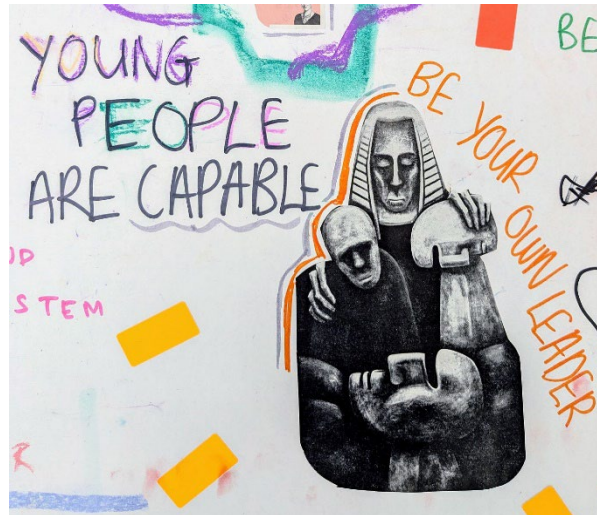
Why was the research needed in the first place?

Policy-makers: *“The research was needed to support us on our strategic journey in meeting our vision, synthesizing the different types of evidence gathered from our programmes and support our lateral thinking to identify where there are potential areas for change. The research helps us to address how different elements of the complex landscape interconnect from an individual level right through to a policy and design level. Using the systems map as a tool will allow us to gain a holistic perspective of the complex barriers young Londoners face.”*

Co-production: what it is and why it matters

At the heart of this project was a commitment to participatory research and co-production. This commitment came both from the academic research team and from the commissioning body, and it was seen as essential by young people involved in the project too.

Policy-makers: *“The Greater London Authority Youth team are committed to empower under-represented young Londoners, through youth voice to become change-makers in their communities, tackling key issues facing the city such as the environment, social injustice, mental health, and safe spaces not just researching young people, but working with them to shape the questions, methods and outcomes.”*



Young people artwork from the Future Change makers' Forum (July 2024)

Young People (Steering Group Member): *"I believe it's essential for young people to be meaningfully involved in decisions that affect their lives because it empowers them to take control of their futures and advocate for their needs and aspirations. When young people have a voice, it not only promotes responsibility and accountability, but also leads to more relevant and sustainable outcomes."*

Co-production means recognizing young people as knowledge-holders and co-researchers in their own right and treating their lived experiences as essential evidence for policy and practice. For us at [CARES](#), this meant creating a space where young people and decision-makers could meet on more equal terms, and where the skills of researchers could help translate between policy requirements, and the everyday reality of young people through the medium of academic research.

We were guided in our work by participatory approaches such as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and Participatory Learning Action (PLA), and we focused our design on enabling youth agency, and co-production at different stages in the research process. Instead of sitting on the sidelines, young people were invited to join a Steering Group that met regularly, took the lead on designing data collection activities for our participatory research, directed our inquiry, and helped us make sense of the findings of our evidence review. Similarly, with the commissioning body, the GLA team, we established a rhythm of engagement, communication and feedback that allowed us to clarify questions as we went along, tap into useful networks and, most importantly, that what we produced was relevant and usable.

Together with young people in the Steering Group and the policy team that commissioned this work, we co-created a space where enabling youth voice was central and paramount. The Steering Group model allowed us to champion youth leadership and share power in the research design process. The continuous engagement over a few months and the iterative reflection on the emerging findings from our evidence review and the participatory research fostered collaboration and a sense of ownership over the final report recommendations.

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Young people in co-production — a young person perspective

Young people (Steering group Member): *“As part of the Steering Group, I attended meetings, contributed to discussions, shared ideas, and helped refine key concepts. Being involved allowed me to engage with a wide range of perspectives, creating a strong foundation for meaningful research and analysis. I was personally motivated to be part of the project because of its core purpose, amplifying the voices of young people.*

Looking back on my time with the Steering Group, I appreciated how everyone contributed and collaborated thoughtfully. As mentioned earlier, we all shared our ideas and were open to compromise. Even something as simple as setting meeting times was a group decision, everyone had a say, and we worked around what suited the group best. The dynamics felt balanced, and we respected one another’s voices.

The meetings were structured but never rigid; we naturally spent more time discussing the topics we felt most connected to. There were also activities that helped us get to know each other, which was a great bonus, especially since some of us hadn’t met before. Sharing experiences and ideas can be daunting but building that sense of connection made it easier and more meaningful.

Knowing that our input directly supported and strengthened a wider research project gave me a real sense of purpose. It also gave me insight into how impactful youth-led contributions can be. I’ve gained a deeper understanding of how research works on a larger scale, and I now carry valuable knowledge and practices that I’ll take forward in my future career.

The approach to this project was truly inspiring, not just research about young people, but research with young people. Being part of the Steering Group and helping shape how information was gathered felt like a real example of a bottom-up approach. Knowing our ideas were valued and helped drive meaningful results made me feel like we were genuinely part of something important.”

The relevance of findings and process: a policy maker’s perspective

Policy-makers: *“The research will aid the GLA Youth team and others in decision making in line with the Manifesto commitments, prioritising, and taking a more holistic evidence-based approach to our future work. We want to understand the barriers to, and the facilitators for, amplifying youth civic action. The research will allow us to develop the appropriate interventions for young Londoners as well as provide the opportunity to share the approach across other policy teams and key youth stakeholders. This research and its evidence base put us in a strong position to shape current and future policy making and influence stakeholders in the way they approach designing youth social action activity, to make it inclusive, accessible and meaningful.”*

“The report recommendations and 7 conditions will now form part of our framework and approach going forward. We will embed the conditions within funding agreements as well as refer back to when designing new programmes. They will also help in shaping policy development.”

“We have various live scenarios where we are putting the research findings into practice in shaping our Youth Civic Action Holiday Hope programme and engagement work with young Londoners in developing the new London Heat Plan. When meeting with different teams across the GLA we can zoom in on specific areas of the map and the artwork to share insight and

recommendations in line with their focus areas. We have presented the map to the Sport team, Democratic Participation team, Mental Health team and will soon be presenting to the Children and Young Londoners team. We also look forward to presenting the research to the Young Londoners Coalition and have shared key findings with the National Lottery #iwill fund team to help shape their place-based fund. The research has also gained international interest following sharing it with Saudi Arabia Community Engagement delegates and the C40 Cities youth network.”

The importance of young people’s voice and co-production

Our review of evidence as well as our participatory research with young people revealed what we intuitively know: youth voice matters and so does the lived experience of young people: what they care about, what influences their day to day experience in the city and what determines their wellbeing and future prospects.

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Young people’s artwork from Future Change Makers’ Forum (July 2024)

Policy-makers: “Seeing young people’s voice reflected in the design of the research and findings was extremely important to us and aligns to manifesto commitments and our team core principles and values. One of our core pillars is focused on providing platforms and opportunities to center the voices and experiences of young people and working with them to co-design future opportunities for young Londoners. We visited the steering group in action on several occasions and were blown away by their meaningful involvement and creative ideas in bringing the participatory research event to life.”

“This research has enabled us to gain a clearer picture of what is needed for inclusive co-production to take place and we will ensure the recommendations are embedded in our future work. From enabling youth voice through creative innovative design of participatory interaction right through to acknowledging their input and closing the feedback loop. Inclusive co production with young Londoners will help us create policy and programmes that meet the needs of underrepresented young Londoners.”

Academics as mediators, facilitators and translators of evidence

As researchers, we saw our role as mediators and facilitators in a process that was youth led. We relied on the expert facilitation of youth and education studies colleagues to create a space that felt transformational, and empowering for young people. On the one hand, we translated the policy context into accessible terms for young people; on the other, we carried their voices and everyday experiences back into the evidence base. The Steering Group and the research process became a “third space” where knowledge could flow in both directions, between the lived experience of young Londoners and the strategic planning process shaping city-wide policy. In this space, the seven conditions for youth social action participation came to life. Through recognizing the epistemic privilege of our young co-researchers, through capturing youth voices through creative and art-based methods (suggested by the young people themselves), through trusting and valuing the input of the Steering Group and the young people that took part in the participatory learning action day, we showed that inclusive participation was possible when trust, mutual respect, and recognition are built over time.

Looking ahead: what do we need for inclusive co-production with young people?

Bringing together young people, academics, and policy makers in this project has highlighted what is possible when co-production is taken seriously. Inclusive co-production requires not only time, resources, expert facilitation and openness to challenge but also multi-disciplinarity, creative approaches and systems thinking. Young people’s issues need to be tackled taking into account the complex eco-system underpinning their lives: personal characteristics, inter-personal factors, institutional settings, community dynamics as well as the wider policy environment. For policy, inclusive co-production creates stronger and more legitimate strategies that reflect the realities of the communities they aim to serve. Systemic thinking also allows for holistic rather than siloed approaches. For young people, it offers empowerment, agency, learning, and the chance to see their contributions shape decisions that affect their futures. As for us, the academics mediating, facilitating and translating that third space, it provides us with invaluable opportunity to link theory and practice, to innovate in terms of our methods and challenge and question exclusionary academic research practices, whilst striving to achieve real world impact.

Full credits for the project:

Research team at London Met CARES: *Elster, J., Agyeman, A., Stirbu, D., Webb, J., Holloway, M., Hills, S., Hunte, R., Warren, R., Mulrooney, H. Woods, A., Seymour, E., Naser, M.*

Youth research steering group: *Hussain, N., Green, K., Ahmed, H., Rahman, M., Halilaj, H., Hamid, MD., Lima, PA., Abid, M., Shakir, A., Farah, J., Tajud, E.*

Greater London Authority: *Horlock, R., Smith, B.*

Acknowledgements: *Haverstock School*