

PRACTITIONER BRIEFING

*Thinking about 'readiness'
and risk assessment
processes when supporting
the participation rights of
children and young people
with lived experience of
child sexual abuse and
exploitation*

Introduction

Background to the study

Every child and young person who has experienced child sexual abuse and exploitation has a right to be involved in decisions that directly affect them. The level of their involvement, and the weight given to their views are determined by their evolving capacities. Young survivors¹ may also have opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes or activities that seek to address the sexual abuse and exploitation of other young people, for example, working with different organisations to inform the development and implementation of research and advocacy, co-produce resources, engage in peer-to-peer education or mentoring, or take part in advisory groups, training or conferences.

Engaging young survivors in participatory initiatives is both important and complex. Professionals can worry that a young survivor's involvement in such activities may cause them (or others) further harm or distress, or have a negative impact on their recovery. However, young survivors not only have a right to be heard, but research and practice show that there can be benefits to supporting children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse and exploitation to inform and influence change for themselves and for others.

Researchers at the University of Bedfordshire wanted to understand more about the complexities and potential outcomes associated with participation for young survivors. We consulted with a panel of 58 'experts' from 18 countries (including researchers, practitioners and young survivors) to understand their perspectives on this².

¹ We recognise that not everyone with lived experience of sexual abuse and exploitation will identify with the term 'survivor'. The term 'young survivor' is used in this paper to ensure consistency across the study's outputs. The term describes all children and young people who have had these experiences – however they identify themselves.

² For the purposes of the briefing papers, when quoting participants, we identify them as either 'professionals' or 'young experts'.

About our practitioner briefings

We have developed four practitioner briefings to share some of the learning from our research. They present findings from a questionnaire and subsequent focus group discussions. The questionnaire involved our panel of 58 experts rating and responding to a series of statements to determine how far they agreed or disagreed with them. This was to identify if there was consensus³ around certain complexities and outcomes associated with participation for young survivors. Some of these statements are shown in our briefing papers with their associated percentages.

These figures are contextualised with learning from the supplementary qualitative data gathered from the questionnaire and focus group discussions. This data highlights that nothing is 'guaranteed' when it comes to participation and that there are a number of factors that may determine the final outcomes⁴. Each of our briefing papers explores a specific element of these findings.

We have also produced a separate briefing paper which sets out our methodology in more detail.

³ We define consensus as 70%+ of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

⁴ See 'Factors that influence outcomes when supporting the participation rights of children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation: Practitioner briefing.'

This briefing paper

Our research found that overall there was strong agreement on the potential positive outcomes associated with young survivors having opportunities to inform and influence decision-making about their own care, and through their engagement in policy, practice and research initiatives.

We also asked participants to comment on some of the logistical and practical considerations surrounding the participation of young survivors, particularly in group-based activities.

One area we were interested in was the concept of 'readiness' – when and who decides when a young survivor may be 'ready' to be engaged in particular types of initiatives and activities, such as joining an advisory group or contributing to resource or project development⁵. We also wanted to understand more about risk assessment processes, who was involved in these processes and how they were undertaken.

We have produced this briefing to convey what participants shared in response to this topic.

⁵ We recognise that in many cases, a young person's experiences of abuse and exploitation may be unknown. Therefore, this briefing relates to circumstances where an organisation is working with, or seeking to work with, young survivors specifically and therefore their experiences are known to those involved in the activities.

'Readiness' is a difficult concept to define and measure

'Readiness' is a term often used when thinking about whether a young person may be emotionally, psychologically and physically in the 'right space' to get involved in a particular project or initiative.

Risk and needs assessment processes must be in place to check whether children and young people are 'ready' to take part

86% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that risk and needs assessment processes should be in place before young survivors are invited to get involved in specific participatory activities. However, a number of participants raised issues with the term 'ready', emphasising that such processes should focus on weighing up the benefits and risks of participation.

'I'm having a hard time with the word "ready" – rather it is about weighing risks and benefits of participation in a format that includes them. I do agree with the importance of a risk and need assessment process although the extent or format of this would depend on the activity/process they are to participate in.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

'I'm having a hard time with this one. What does it really mean to be "ready"? I think there should probably be some mechanisms in place to ensure the emotional and physical safety of the young people participating, but I could also see some young people not being "ready" per se but still getting therapeutic benefits from participating – maybe that is necessary in order to get them "ready".'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

As the quote above highlights, there may be value in supporting young survivors to engage in a particular project even if there is some uncertainty surrounding how they might find the experience. In further discussions in the focus groups, it was evident that waiting for a young survivor to be 'totally ready' or 'stable' may preclude ever inviting some individuals to engage in such initiatives. It was emphasised that recovery is different for everyone and that choice and 'being heard' are an important part of this process.

Professionals also need to think about how ready they are and what resources they have, to support young people's engagement in participatory initiatives.

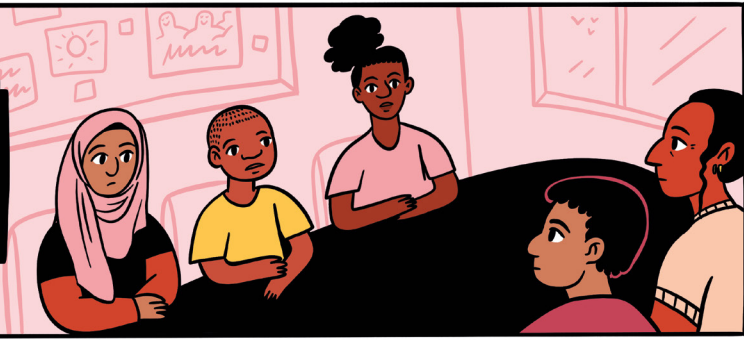


ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA STOIAN

'I feel like I hear people say, you know, "when everything's sort of OK and they're stable. Then they're going to be in the headspace to engage with decision making", rather than thinking, actually choice is a part of helping them be safe.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

'I think [risk and needs assessment processes] are important for involving youth in some sort of formal participatory activity, but I think youth should always be given opportunities to make choices and have their voice heard regardless of where they are in their healing process. Voice and choice is part of healing.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

These responses indicate that opportunities for 'everyday' participation, informing and influencing decisions in all areas of a young survivor's life, are critical.

One participant noted that while it can feel paternalistic to prevent opportunities for engagement in participation projects, there is a reality that sometimes it may not be a good time for a young person to engage in such activities.

'I know that this could be characterised as professionals being over cautious and not treating young people as agentic, but I think the same care should be taken with adults, too. A child in the middle of a court case or a placement breakdown doesn't need to be pressurised by a worker into an activity when they need to give their time and energy to their own situation.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

This reflection reinforces the importance of taking the time to consider potential impacts, risks and benefits of engagement.

Organisations must also consider how 'ready' they are to support young survivors to engage in participatory activities

When discussing risk and readiness further in the focus groups, participants also raised the issue of 'organisational readiness'. They shared that the idea of 'readiness' not only applies to young survivors, but that organisations that are supporting young survivors' engagement are also required to consider whether they are 'ready'. This included considering whether they have:

- the necessary budget and resources
- staff who have the right training, knowledge, skills and experience
- partnerships in place to provide any necessary support
- organisational commitment to meaningfully engaging young survivors

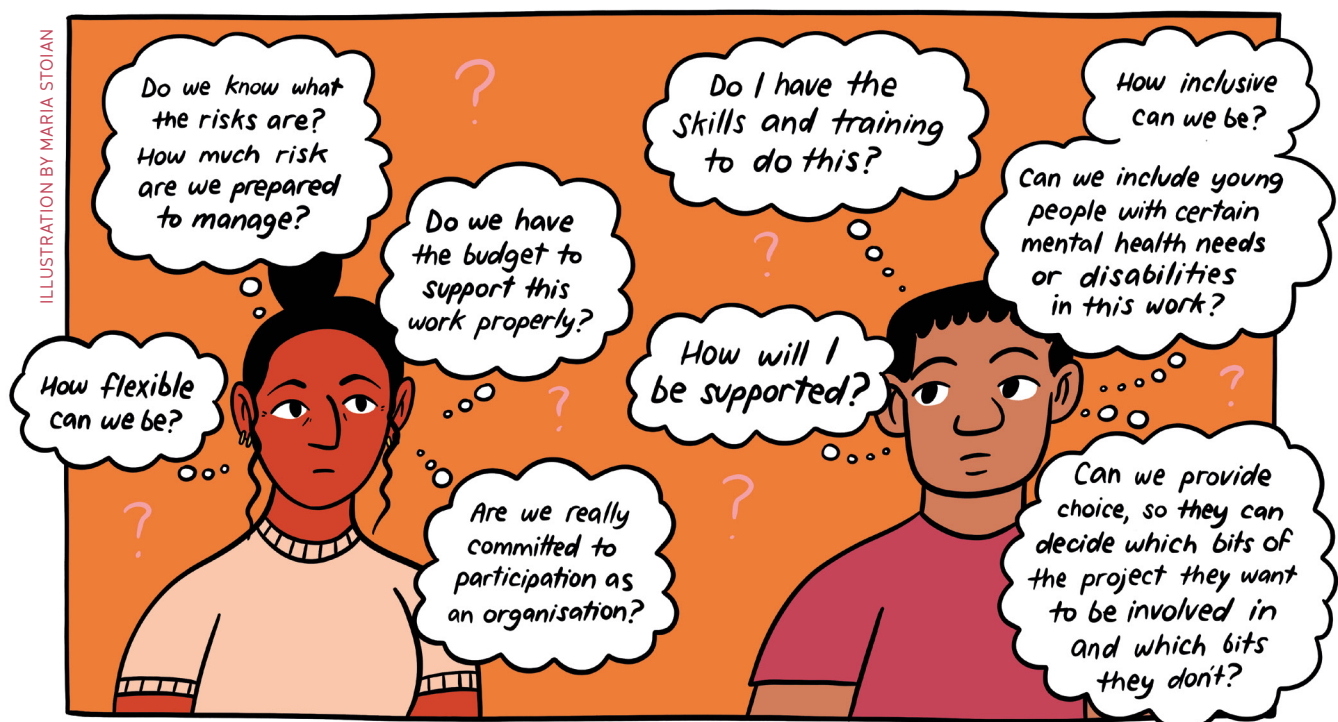
'I view readiness in quite a number of aspects. I'm looking at: do we have the right materials to enable us to undertake the participation? Do we have the right competences in terms of do our staff have the knowledge, the skills, the required capacity to actually participate or engage in participation with the young people? But I also look at readiness in terms of do we have the resources... but also partnerships.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UGANDA

Another participant shared how critical organisational commitment was and that if you are going to commit to child and youth participation, particularly with young survivors of child sexual abuse or exploitation, this commitment should be embedded into every structure and function of the organisation:

'One of the things that I think is often not understood is that if you're going to commit to child and youth participation in any sustained and meaningful way, it needs to be institutionally embedded as a core area which is budgeted for, which is built into plans, organisational plans, strategic planning, it's built into the reporting mechanism.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK



Risk and needs assessment processes need to be approached in a collaborative way and aim to maximise participation

It was evident from the questionnaire data that while risk and needs processes are useful, they need to be approached in ways that are:

- strengths-based and seek to maximise young survivors' participation
- collaborative
- not overly bureaucratic

Participants emphasised that children and young people have a fundamental right to be involved in decision-making processes. Therefore, risk assessment processes are not about determining whether or not young survivors should take part in a process, but about considering how, and the best ways to approach their individual engagement.

'I agree that they should be able to participate – but I think risk and needs assessments can help ensure that the participation is trauma-informed and can reduce risk of retraumatisation.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

Other participants also spoke of the importance of enabling and supporting a young survivor to try something even if it doesn't go exactly to plan, or they're unable to complete the activity.

Participants drew attention to the importance of professionals not being too prescriptive or bureaucratic in their approach to risk and needs assessment processes – but rather being flexible and adaptable to the individual activity and young survivor.

'Risk and needs assessments are good practice for all participation work but they shouldn't be used harshly with young people who have experienced sexual violence because adults perceive them as more at-risk, less trustworthy, etc.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

'I think that these processes are inherently paternalistic. I think if it is clear what capacities are required - e.g. to sit through a two-hour meeting, then the worker and young person can work together to honestly assess if they can handle that. There also has to be room to experiment and fail but with support.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

In response to a number of statements about risk and needs assessment processes, participants emphasised that the young survivors themselves should be involved in these processes and discussions as much as possible.

'It is crucial that young people are given the space to work their own "readiness" out for themselves, alongside adult or worker "assessment".'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Children and young people should always be part of risk assessment processes

84% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that young survivors should always be a part of the process. They shared that it was not only right for them to be involved, but that it was also an important part of identifying additional risks that professionals may not necessarily have considered.

The importance of collaborative conversations was emphasised throughout:

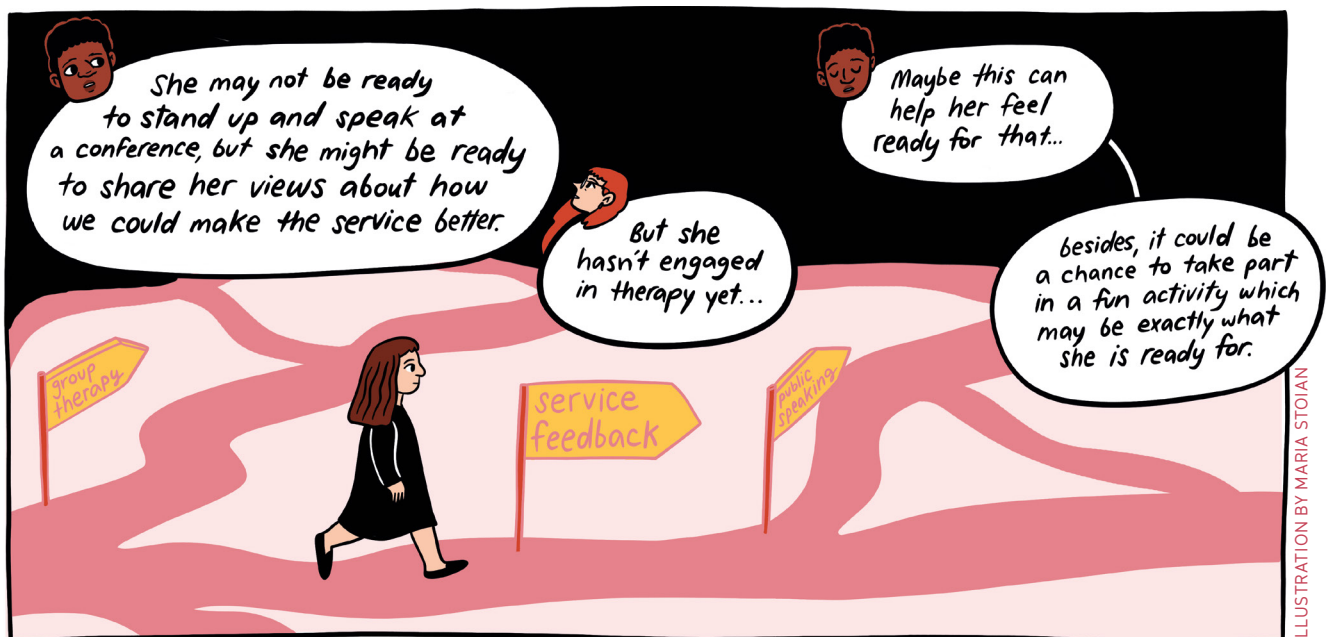
'A good worker can help guide them by answering questions and talking through any risks (without making it sound too scary to be involved). It should be a shared process.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

We need to do that together [decide if a young person is 'ready']. Sometimes they think they're ready, out of desire, but they're not.

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL,
SERBIA

Some participants though did note occasions where young survivors may not want or need to be involved in such conversations.



It is important to be aware of potential risks and consider ways to mitigate these, but the presence of risk should not be used as a reason not to engage young survivors

Often the potential for risks and benefits co-exist. This means that there will always be risks involved in engaging any child or young person in participatory projects⁶.

This study highlighted that if we try to avoid risks altogether, then there would be no opportunities for engagement, particularly with young survivors. Instead, it was clear from our data that we need to acknowledge, identify and anticipate risks and work with others to mitigate these as much as possible.

Thinking and responding to risks throughout is essential

97% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that considering and responding to risks related to participatory engagement was essential. A number of participants noted that risks were inherent in this type of work and it was important to address and consider these on an ongoing basis:

'What you can do is be aware of what those risks are and be sensitive to them. And if you see them happening, being there to engage and to enter into provision of any support that's needed. But if you try to avoid all risk, children will never speak out because that's been one of the excuses that's been given traditionally for not allowing children to speak – that it's too risky. It's why you don't let children speak in court and why you don't let children speak at case conferences and so on, because they may be exposed to risk.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

There are risks involved in everything we do – we need to learn to manage them rather than ignore them.

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

⁶ See 'Group work as a mechanism for the collective participation of children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation: Practitioner briefing.'

Young survivors may be experiencing specific circumstances that affect their ability to participate safely

Participants were asked to consider whether it would be appropriate to invite children and young people to engage in participatory activities when they:

- were currently experiencing sexual abuse and exploitation
- were in situations of humanitarian crisis
- had complex mental health issues
- had not engaged with support services

It is not appropriate for children and young people who are currently experiencing child sexual abuse and exploitation to be involved in participatory activities

This statement did not reach consensus. There were a mix of responses, with participants noting that:

- Participation was always a right and there are always ways for young survivors to engage safely.
- Engaging in such opportunities may in fact be helpful and a first step in seeking support.
- The focus should be on securing safety first before being asked to engage in such activities.

'We have to understand that sometimes the idea of "helping others" might give someone the space to disclose, exit, or have hope.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

'This is too definite. There are lots of reasons to exclude CYP [children and young people] but also ways of engaging them safely.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, AUSTRALIA

Participation is a right at all stages.

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UGANDA

Others felt that the priority in these situations should always be establishing safety and while a formal activity may not be appropriate, a young person should be able to convey their preferences and needs during this time:

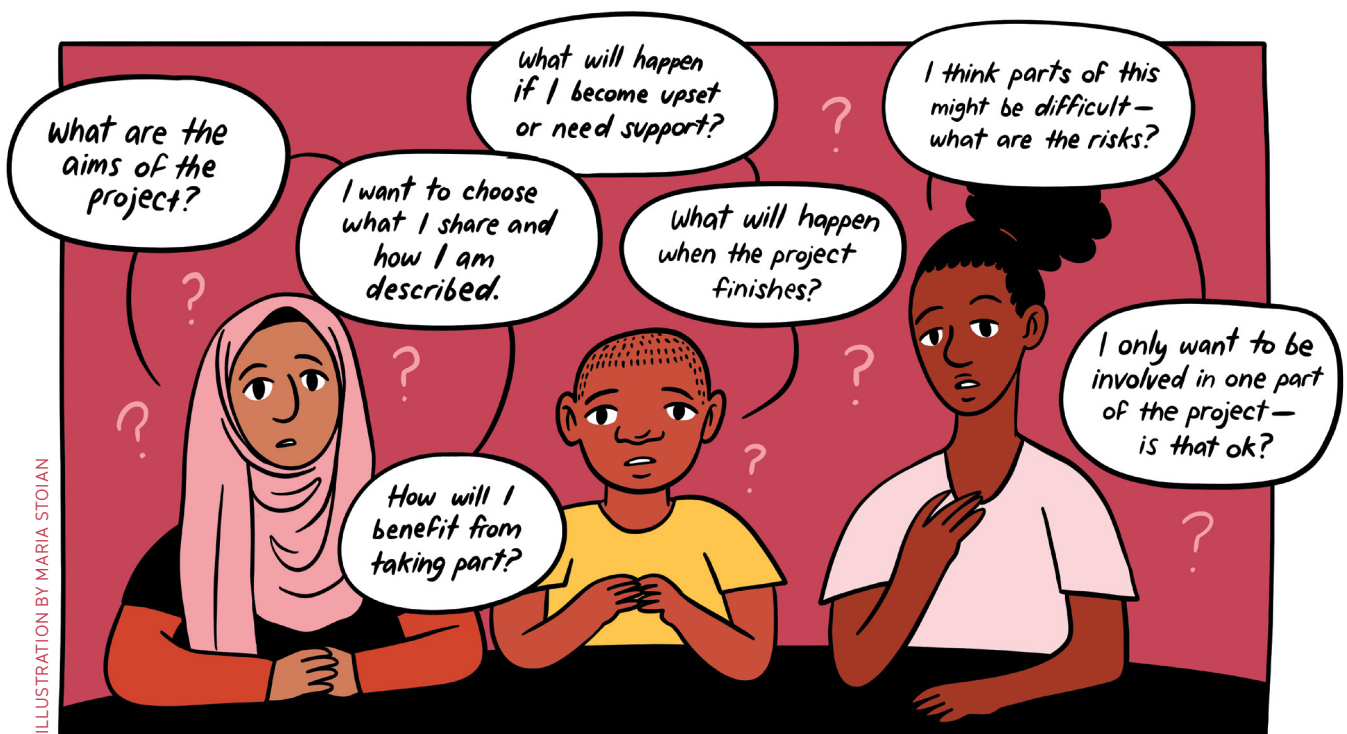
'I agree if this is referring to some formal participatory activity – the focus should be on safety and getting them out of a harmful situation. But giving youth choice and voice can help empower them, build self-efficacy and relationships with safe adults that can help them get out of harmful situations.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

Other participants expressed an understanding of the ethical and moral challenges surrounding the engagement of children and young people who were being abused and exploited, but also felt that it was important that their views and perspectives were captured:

'It's a difficult one, isn't it? Because I think the voices of young people who are being exploited are likely to differ in some way from those of people for whom that experience has come to an end... It could also bring a lot of really valuable insights into where people are emotionally and it isn't always easy to get those insights when people are talking about experiences in the past. But at the same time, it's ethically problematic... of course the focus should be on safeguarding.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK



It is not appropriate for children and young people who are in situations of humanitarian crisis to take part in participatory activities

A statement about involving young survivors in participatory projects when in contexts of humanitarian crisis **did not achieve consensus**. Similar responses were made as to the statement explored above, in that young survivors had a right to participate.

Other comments acknowledged how opportunities for engagement in 'fun' activities could be beneficial and an important 'lifeline' in such settings.

It depends on the nature of the participatory activity. It could be a chance to take part in a fun activity.

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

I'm thinking about youth in refugee camps from previous work I did, and these youth were not in an active warzone,

and certainly would have benefitted from being part of participatory activities.

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, USA

Some participants felt that due to potential insecurity and safety issues, it may not be appropriate. Again, context was emphasised:

'I have worked for example in refugee camps with children, but also a situation where an earthquake had happened. After we addressed some immediate needs and there was some safe space I saw that it's important for them to participate. Because it opens their eyes and minds to see different [activities] and to support [them]. It depends on the setting and the situation. But if there are the right conditions, it's important [to give young people a chance to participate].'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, ALBANIA

Mental health issues

We did not have a statement in the questionnaire about the inclusion of young survivors with complex mental health issues. However, this point came up in a focus group discussion and again, there were differences of opinion regarding how it may be possible to include young people with additional needs. One participant shared how her team had found it difficult to include a young survivor with complex mental health needs when engaging in group work:

'It was very difficult to manage the situation in the group and we tried hard and it looked as if all the energy of the group was going towards [this young person]... So then together with her we decided that she needed first to get some treatment and support. And of course the door is open later for other projects etcetera... It was difficult for us as a team to manage.'

FEMALE PROFESSIONAL, ALBANIA

While it may be extremely challenging to meet the individual needs of young survivors with complex mental health needs, or the needs of the wider group, it was also emphasised that engagement in participatory projects could potentially benefit those struggling with their mental health. One participant reflected on his own experiences and shared how significant it had been for him to be able to engage flexibly with projects while he managed his mental health.

'I've been very ill for a lot of my adult life, related to the trauma I'd experienced, and being involved in ways like this [was valuable], having employment opportunities that are part time that aren't necessarily fixed hours that you can take time out when you need to...I think that definitely having it flexible [is important], because otherwise for the past few years, I just would have had nothing on my CV.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Without overlooking the potentially significant challenges that may be involved in supporting the participation of survivors with a range of mental health issues, it is worth considering how flexible engagement could be. For example, seeing whether it is possible for young people to 'step out' of initiatives if they need to, but with the commitment and support in place for them to re-join where possible.

When young people are not engaged with support services

Often participatory initiatives are set up internally by a service, or if they are initiated by external organisations such as universities, these organisations will work in partnership with those providing frontline support services. These support services are therefore the 'gatekeepers' and often commit to provide support to young survivors during the project. In the focus group discussion, a question was posed about engaging young survivors in projects who were not engaged in services. One participant reflected on the challenges of this while also recognising the need to learn from those who are unable to, or choose not to, access support services due to their experiences.

'It makes it a lot harder to recruit, in terms of the risks and needs and I think it is important to be inclusive of people who haven't used services, because actually we don't know a lot about how people move on from these experiences and what their journeys look like when without services. We need to know more about that and we need to know more about why they haven't accessed services.'

MALE PROFESSIONAL, UK

Key Messages

- **'Readiness' is a difficult concept to define and measure.** Recovery is an individual process that looks different for everyone, which means knowing when someone might be ready to engage in a certain activity can be challenging.
- **Voice and choice** are key principles in a trauma-informed response and therefore whether or not a young survivor wishes, or is able to, engage in a formal participatory process or project, there should always be opportunities for that young person to be heard and to inform and influence decisions surrounding his or her own life.
- It can be helpful for adults and young survivors to think together about the timing of the opportunity along with the potential impacts, risks and benefits involved. Thinking about **emotional, psychological and physical safety** is key in this process.
- Organisations supporting the participation of young survivors must also consider how 'ready' and committed they are and whether they have the **necessary budget and resources** to support engagement safely and meaningfully.
- **Risk assessment processes** can be helpful if they are approached in ways that: are strength-based and recognise young survivor's strengths and capacities therefore seeking to maximise participation; involve collaborative conversations between adults and the young people themselves; and are not overly bureaucratic.
- When working with young survivors it is not possible to eliminate all risk and therefore the presence of risk should not be used as a reason not to engage young survivors. As potential risks and benefits co-exist we need to **acknowledge, identify and anticipate risks** and work with others to mitigate these as much as possible.
- There may be **additional challenges and risks** involved in attempting to engage children and young people in specific circumstances in participatory projects and initiatives (e.g. children who are actively being abused or exploited, in situations of humanitarian crisis, dealing with complex mental health issues, etc.). However, as in any situation, it is important to consider the potential risks and benefits before coming to a decision. Organisations should consider how comfortable they are, and how able they are, to engage with and mitigate, different dimensions of risk.

Suggested citation: Cody, C. and Soares, C. (2023) *Thinking about 'readiness' and risk assessment processes when supporting the participation rights of children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation: Practitioner briefing*. Luton: Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank all the participants who took part in this study and extend our thanks to a number of services/organisations who facilitated the engagement of young people in the study and supported them throughout the process. Thanks to our Project Advisory Group for their ongoing support and input. This project was possible thanks to the support of Oak Foundation.