

BRIEFING PAPER

What can we do now to strengthen safe and meaningful opportunities for young survivors to inform and influence the international childhood sexual violence sector?

Background

In April 2024, researchers from the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire organised and facilitated two online workshops as part of the *'Changing practice: prioritising participation in actions to address child sexual abuse project'*.

The first of these brought together representatives from international organisations and international networks of NGOs working to address childhood sexual violence and related issues. The second workshop assembled representatives from funders and donor intermediaries supporting work on childhood sexual violence.

The workshops shared learning from recent research exploring the value of, and complexities involved in, supporting the participation of young survivors in developing and designing actions that effectively address child sexual abuse and exploitation¹.

The aims of the workshops were to:

- **Share** curated key messages from research undertaken at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre.
- **Hear** from workshop participants about their experiences of supporting survivor engagement.
- **Brainstorm** together and develop a list of practical, relevant and realistic recommendations for different stakeholders that could easily be implemented to improve engagement with, and support for, young survivors' participation.

This briefing paper summaries some of the key discussion points that were shared across the two workshops and suggests areas for further conversation. In sharing these reflections, we hope to help organisations and groups to reflect upon their own work and potential ways to strengthen and improve the ethical, meaningful and contextual involvement of young survivors in this field in the future.

¹ We recognise that not everyone with lived experience of sexual abuse and exploitation will identify with the term 'survivor' and that some may describe themselves as a victim or may prefer not to identify with any such labels. The term 'young survivor' is used in this paper to ensure consistency across outputs from our projects. The term describes all children and young people who have had these experiences – however they identify themselves.

The research

Researchers at the University of Bedfordshire wanted to understand more about the potential outcomes associated with the participation of young survivors in decision-making processes or activities that seek to improve their own circumstances or positively influence responses for other children and young people². We consulted with a panel of 58 experts from 18 countries (including researchers, practitioners and young survivors) to understand their perspectives on this topic³.

Key messages from the research

- There are a range of potential positive outcomes that can arise when young survivors participate to inform and influence decision-making. This includes benefits for the young people themselves, organisations seeking to support young people and wider society.
- The likelihood of benefits occurring will be influenced by 'how well' the participation of young survivors is planned and supported, along with other contextual factors.
- This includes recognising: the importance of ethical standards and principles; the need for scaffolding to support participation; that everyone is an individual with different needs and preferences; the critical role of facilitators and those accompanying young survivors in setting up and managing 'safe spaces' to participate and; the impact of the wider context – including norms and structures – that may impede change.
- This work involves a level of 'uncertainty' whereby there is potential for positive and negative outcomes to co-exist. However, if we don't involve young survivors we are taking a different risk through not understanding their needs, experiences and ideas.
- As there is the potential for tensions and challenges to occur, acknowledgement of these should inform how engagement is planned, facilitated and supported rather than prevent opportunities for participation⁴.

² 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.

³ Read more about the methodology in [The Our Voices III Study: Methodology paper](#)

⁴ Read the practitioner briefings that share more details about the findings <https://www.our-voices.org.uk/publications/research-and-consultation-reports>

Key discussions held across the two workshops

On developing proposals and funding projects

We must acknowledge and address our own internal blocks and biases

Participants in both workshops recognised that, as individuals, we have our own 'internal mental blocks' that may prevent us from changing the ways we work. It was noted that internal patterns and prejudices may prevent us 'opening up' different opportunities to support young survivors to inform and influence work at various stages.

We need to recognise our 'distance' from the work

There was acknowledgement in both workshops that, as individuals predominantly working at the 'international' level (whether providing technical support and advice or making decisions with regards to funding), in reality we are often 'one step removed' from work happening on the ground with young survivors. This distance means it is not always easy to understand the frontline realities involved in supporting young survivors to inform and influence change.

Those working with international networks of NGOs felt that it was critical to have these experiences captured in any recommendations developed⁵. Participants within the donor workshop reflected on how, because of this distance, we need to find creative ways to learn how young survivors experience their engagement in different participatory projects and activities.

We should reflect on who informs the design of projects and initiatives within the sector and how this design phase could be strengthened through collaborative working

When reflecting on how we could create better opportunities for young survivors (and frontline practitioners supporting this work) to influence the design stage of projects and policies, participants felt that there should be wider consultation and conversations before projects are conceptualised and applications submitted. Participants shared how it was important to discuss opportunities with local organisations first and explore whether different types of projects needed to happen in the first place.

In thinking about this same point within the donor-focussed workshop, representatives shared how they recognised that there was value in organisations and groups having the opportunity to discuss ideas and concepts with young survivors. However, they also drew attention to some of the practical logistics involved in doing so.

In discussing potential options for how grantees could be influenced to build in initial consultations with young survivors and local practitioners – such as having a question in funding applications asking grantees to explain how the project had been informed by young survivors – a number of challenges were highlighted. It was noted that such an addition may either lead to a superficial, tokenistic attempt to quickly gather young survivors together, to essentially 'tick the box', or that if this process was undertaken meaningfully it would be lengthy, resource intensive and therefore require funding in of itself.

⁵ It is worth noting that a number of the expert panel involved in the research study discussed were frontline practitioners who had experience of supporting young survivors to participate in different initiatives and projects.

In response to this, the use of 'planning grants' was discussed. It was noted that these could provide the opportunity for organisations and groups to collaborate with frontline staff and young survivors in order to generate ideas and processes in unison. It was also suggested that this space could enable wider discussion surrounding some of the key tensions highlighted in the research study. For example, thinking through together: the context for participation; whether there were the right staff in place; what additional training may be required for staff to help them support the process; how young people could be compensated and acknowledged for their inputs etc. It was recognised that such 'planning grants' could be helpful, but that there were also risks involved. This included circumstances where, following these preparations, the decision was taken not to fund the proposed project, or the concept was considered not viable in the context. There was recognition that it could be hard to manage expectations when individuals had committed so much time and resources in an initial phase.

We must recognise the importance of building trust with young survivors and understand the practical implications of this in terms of funding and timeframes

In reflecting on the research findings, participants in the donor workshop shared how the importance of establishing 'trust' greatly resonated with them and how this was a theme that was coming out from other work. Reflecting on this, it was noted that in order to support young survivors to participate, practitioners needed to develop this foundation of trust first. It was recognised that building and establishing trust takes time and this phase should be acknowledged and resourced.

We need to consider the different types of experience and expertise that may be helpful when it comes to reviewing and assessing proposals

Participants from the second workshop reflected on the fact that it may not always be evident to reviewers what they should be looking for when assessing applications that involve the engagement of young survivors, or what might be some of the 'red flags' to look out for.

One participant in this group shared how, through recent experience of working with Lived Experience Advisors to review applications, it was evident how these reviewers were able to appraise applications with a different, yet highly tuned, critical lens. This participant shared that reviewers with lived experience, who were also located across different regions, were well placed to assess applications. It was felt that in addition to their expertise of the subject matter, they were also able to assess for levels of authenticity (e.g. whether proposals appeared to be truly survivor informed or centred) and were able to comment on the feasibility of proposals based on their understanding of different cultural contexts. It was also noted how, in creating the call for applications, the Lived Experience Advisors were able to identify potentially insensitive, patronising or triggering language within the call documentation.

Areas where we need to learn more

In addition to the initial discussions above, participants identified a number of areas where they felt it would be useful to know more, in order to help them develop a clearer understanding of the area.

Understanding what difference age makes in supporting participatory approaches with survivors

It was significant that in both workshops participants questioned how different the emerging learning was, when thinking specifically about the participation of 'young' survivors as opposed to adult survivors⁶. There was recognition among participants that although 'childhood' and 'adulthood' are often presented as a binary (and systems, policies and services are setup in response to this) in reality the experiences and obstacles for 'young survivors' (often defined as aged between 15–24), in engaging in participatory processes may be similar to those experienced by adult survivors.

Participants also shared that in their experience of engaging with young survivors, particularly male survivors, often the young people who wish to take part, and feel able to, are over the age of 18. This then suggests that we may be missing out on transferable learning between these two sectors, those working with 'children' and those working with 'adults'⁷. Alongside this reflection, participants were also curious about how different this work might look when engaging younger children, under the age of 11 or 12.

Learning more about what safe and meaningful participation looks like for different young survivors

As shared in the research findings, it is recognised that young survivors are not a homogenous group and therefore we need to understand more about what is important for different young survivors in different contexts. What may help them feel safe when it comes to engaging to inform and influence work? In what ways would they wish to work and how would they like to be supported? What are the different challenges and fears that they face?

Considering what this means for working with 'specialist' and 'generalist' organisations when seeking to improve actions and responses to childhood sexual violence

Within the donor workshop, through considering the significant shift in language and attention to 'survivor-led' and 'survivor-informed' work within the sector, there was some discussion about the potential for overlooking the majority of organisations who are doing significant, yet 'non-specialised' youth work. In these cases organisations may be engaging with a wide range of young people, which may include survivors who have not disclosed, yet addressing childhood sexual violence may not be the central focus of this work. It was recognised that it was important to keep supporting these organisations and thinking about how they can learn from this work to help them develop, for example, relevant safeguarding policies.

⁶ It is worth noting that in the research study under discussion, panel members were asked to think specifically about young survivors aged 12 and over (up to 25) when responding to the research questions.

⁷ These discussions reflect wider debates and the move towards, what has become known as 'transitional safeguarding' described as 'an approach to safeguarding adolescents and young adults fluidly across developmental stages which builds on the best available evidence, learns from both children's and adult safeguarding practice, and which prepares young people for their adult lives' (Holmes and Smale, 2018).

Exploring the differences between online and offline participation

Participants had questions about how participatory approaches that involve online engagement may lead to additional complexities that may differ from those learnt through experience of face-to-face engagement. It was noted that if young people identify as survivors online, there is a permanent record of this and young people need to make informed decisions about this. Therefore, participants were curious to know what the differences are, and the additional considerations that may need to be further explored in online participatory work.

Mapping the knowledge and skills required in facilitators supporting and accompanying participatory work with young survivors

In responding to the research findings – which underscored the central role of facilitators in making this work ‘work’ – participants expressed that, from a donor perspective, it was not always easy to know, or to assess, which organisations or groups had the staff in place who had the necessary experience, ‘soft skills’ or knowledge and attributes to support young survivors to participate safely in different processes⁸. There was therefore some utility in trying to understand, or map out, what may be the relevant training, skills and experiences that could help facilitators safely navigate participatory work, particularly participatory group work, in the sector⁹.



ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA STOJAN

Moving forward: small steps rather than large leaps

The discussions reflected the complexity of this work and underscored the importance of taking the time to think, listen and learn from others.

There was recognition that collaborating with practitioners working on the ground, and young survivors with lived experience, was critical in designing activities and policies that aim to address childhood sexual violence. It was also acknowledged that creating a foundation of trust with young survivors is the first task, which in itself can be a long-term process. While these processes may appear to be ‘preparatory’ steps, they are in fact a central part of the work and therefore must be recognised and financially supported as such.

The goal of the workshops was to come up with a list of ‘recommendations’ for different stakeholders working within the international childhood sexual violence sector, however, through these discussions, what was identified was a series of ‘stepping stones’, ideas for opening up conversations and the identification of areas for future discussion.

⁸ More discussion about the critical role of the facilitator can be found in Cody, C. and Soares, C. (2023) [Practitioner briefing: Group work as a mechanism for the collective participation of children and young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation](#). Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

⁹ For example, one participant noted the importance of facilitators being able to access trauma-informed training.

Stepping stones: Towards stronger and more meaningful participation with young survivors

Support opportunities for guided reflection and discussion within teams and across networks

General areas for discussion

- What might be some of the 'internal blocks' we hold around collaborating with young survivors at different points in, and in different areas of, our work?
- What might be some of the 'external blocks' we anticipate or assume may prevent us from collaborating with young survivors?
- How can we move beyond the 'protectionist point of view' and consider the uncertainties – including the potential benefits – associated with participatory approaches?
- How do we help others (colleagues, board members, trustees) understand the importance and value of working with young survivors, and the costs and flexibility involved in doing this work well?
- What does safe and meaningful participation look like for different young survivors in the different contexts we work in (including online and offline opportunities to participate)?
- How could we support facilitators to develop their knowledge, skills, experience and training to feel better able to support participatory work with young survivors?
- How could the labelling of work as being 'survivor-led' or 'survivor-informed' have negative unintended consequences?
- How can young survivors be meaningfully engaged beyond the 'consultation' phase?
- What are the challenges of involving young survivors throughout different cycles (e.g. research, advocacy and policy cycles) and how could such challenges be overcome?

Consider who is involved in developing and reviewing proposals

Discussion points related to developing proposals

- In recognising our distance from the field, how might we encourage and support more collaborative approaches to writing proposals?
- Who is (and who is not) involved in conceptualising and designing this project or programme?
- What other voices and perspectives would be useful for us to learn from?
- How could we learn from adult survivors and their allies to strengthen how we support and engage young survivors in this work?
- If young survivors are involved, how are we building in time to support trust building, flexibility and wrap around support for young survivors? and who will be supporting young survivors and what skills and experience do they have?

Discussion points related to application and review processes

- If we took a 'participatory lens' to this work how might that change the questions we ask and the processes we use to review proposals?
- How could we support initial phases of work that encourage more collaboration and engagement with young survivors and frontline workers?
- How can we build in more flexibility to allow participatory projects to evolve?
- What kind of support do ethics boards need to be more supportive of research involving young people and survivors?

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