Co-Creating Tomorrow
Our City, Our Say

Report and Recommendations of the Southampton Youth Voice Project

University of Southampton

Energise Me

Southampton Voluntary Services

NIHR | Health Determinants Research Collaboration Southampton

SOUTHAMPTON CITY COUNCIL

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The Southampton Youth Voice project was funded by Southampton City Council and the Southampton Place Partnership (Sport England) in collaboration with Southampton HDRC, Southampton Voluntary Services and Young Southampton.

Cite this report as:

Black, C., Risley, K., Leonard, N., Awasthi, A., Chowdhury, A., Morris, D., Ganzuic, E., Breeze, E., Nowicki, G., Coomer, H., Hamed, H., Mazurek, L., Abbas, M., Hamid, m., Amissah, N., Courtnell, O., Ogunbande, O., Nagra, R., Nyimbili, W., Anderssen-Templeton, Z., Collins, H., Lineker, C., Parsons, H., Ramos Bonilla, G., Taheem, R., Barker, M., Ryan, M., Woods-Townsend, K., Sofaer, J*. 2025. *Co-Creating Tomorrow - Our City, Our Say: Report and Recommendations of the Southampton Youth Voice Project*. University of Southampton.

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Authors and Acknowledgements

NxtGen Researcher Biographies

Ayesha

Ayesha is eager to pursue a career in therapy, as she is deeply motivated to help others. Being part of the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme and Youth Jury has exposed her to a wide range of roles within healthcare - seeing the impact of these professions firsthand has truly inspired her. “This experience has encouraged me to follow my passion for healthcare and speak out on behalf of young people, knowing that both as a future therapist and young person, I can make a meaningful difference in people’s lives.” She looks forward to seeing the recommendations implemented and reflecting upon the differences the cohort of young researchers has made to young people in Southampton.

Daisey

Daisey aspires to work in hospitality and catering. She loves to bake and make desserts. She was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease last year and found it really difficult to do basic things needed for everyday life. This research project has helped Daisey see other people’s experiences with Crohn’s, what the local community could do to make these experiences more manageable and to encourage people to take part in physical activity. She is hoping that policy makers will think well about her findings and that some of the group’s ideas will be implemented!

Eva

Eva’s experience in the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme has expanded her knowledge on little everyday things significantly, from both her own research and the people around her – especially as she wasn’t aware herself of some of the recurring issues in school that put so many kids at a disadvantage. Taking part in the programme has been a unique and fascinating experience for her as she couldn’t think of any other place to meet and befriend so many people who are really passionate about helping the community develop. In the future, as she is leaning towards the profession of an engineer, she believes that having the skills for effective analysis and knowledge of trustworthy sources will expand her understanding of having valuable information.

Evie

When Evie leaves school she would like to become a police officer and help her community. Doing the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme has given Evie many skills – the main one being an increased confidence to talk to new people. She says, “some of the research skills have helped me in my schoolwork. It was a nice opportunity to research something I’m passionate about and I’m happy to know my research will help people in the future.”

Gabriel

Gabriel wishes to become a professional musician but wants to try and help solve issues in other areas that may not be up to standard. By doing the research, he figured out that some areas of life might need some more balancing, and therefore, great changes can occur. “I always wondered how it would be to research something and end up getting results that could change how something works, knowing that you made a change that could ease the lives of others. Now that I know that experience, it makes me want to do it more.”

Hugh

Hugh aims to advocate for young neurodiverse people like himself, through pursuing a career in paediatric physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Through completing the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme, he enabled the start of lively discussion arising from his research which he hopes will be developed into real outcomes that make a difference, and has thrived on the invaluable training and skills which the programme delivered. He says, “Through the data I collected, I was inspired by the passion for change - shared by pupil participants, staff respondents and specialist consultants alike. This became a call that demands a high-level answer, for which the Youth Jury was an excellent opportunity to develop, together with guests who attended our weekly sessions.”

Huniya

Huniya is a Year 9 student in secondary school. Huniya aspires to go to university and is interested in medicine. Her future aspirations are now to investigate medical research options for her future career. Before the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme, she had only basic knowledge of what research was and didn’t know how to perform it. She now knows how to successfully partake in research by herself or by working with others. “The NxtGen Programme gave me a massive insight into what research is, how you can present research and the tools, skills and requirements you need to carry it out. Through this programme, I have also learned that young people can certainly make a change and work together to accomplish goals! I really hope the policy makers develop our recommendations through the Youth Jury and make good change!”

Luiza

Luiza would like to be a criminal psychologist. She wants the job because she is interested in criminals and the law behind it. She says, “This is my ambition, and I think NxtGen will help me reach and achieve that goal. The NxtGen Researcher Training Programme was a great learning experience for me, and it will benefit me in the future.”

Maryam

Maryam aspires to pursue a future in the world of science and medicine, her passion focused on learning and understanding more about the subject in a way that makes a difference to society and the world around her. She might follow the conventional path of a doctor or becoming a researcher in a specified field. Interacting and engaging with others is something Maryam finds herself gravitating towards. She says, “Being part of the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme allowed me to meet new people and boost my confidence. It gave me the independence I needed to believe I could make a change, even if it was small. I hope that no matter how small of a change we as young researchers made, it makes a difference to even just one person, and that we can continue to improve the society around us in the future.”

Maryam

Maryam is unsure of what exact career she wants to go into, but she knows she is interested in attaining a career linked to maths and science where she can learn new things and skills, actively making an impact around her. The NxtGen Researcher Training Programme and Youth Jury have taught her many skills and built on her encouragement and sense of speaking publicly to people who have authority, making her feel more involved in the community and city she lives in. She hopes that the goals she aimed to achieve from her work will be implemented and that there will be more female physical activity for those communities who may be underserved, and that they will have better opportunities.

Naana

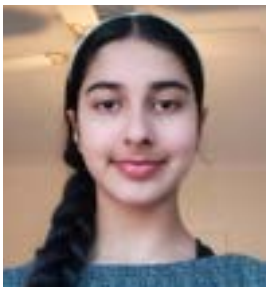
The NxtGen Researcher Training Programme was a turning point in Naana’s academic journey. It gave her the first real experience with research, teaching her how to think critically, design a project and present her findings confidently. With guidance from mentors and collaboration with peers, Naana gained valuable skills in writing, analysis and time management. Most importantly, the programme helped her realise that she has a voice in the academic world and has the tools to use it.

Oliver

Oliver would like to join the emergency services. When he leaves school, he wants to apply for bricklaying at college. The skills that the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme has given him are how to find data and see that there are a lot of different responses to everything out there. He said, “It has helped me build up my confidence to go and do an interview if I were to again. With my research I’m really proud of myself because I learnt how to do a lot of things, and I found a lot more information that I did not know about what people were thinking and saying.”

Oluwatoni

Oluwatoni is a passionate and driven young person with a strong commitment to building a career in nursing, while also nurturing a deep interest in becoming a creative director in the future. She’s energised by people-facing roles that allow her to combine empathy, creativity, and meaningful connection that align with both the healthcare and creative sectors. Her experience with the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme and Youth Jury gave her valuable insight into how local services operate and the real impact young people can have in shaping decisions that affect their communities. She says, “The Youth Jury not only gave me a deeper understanding of how systems work in Hampshire but also showed me the power of youth voices in decision-making. Change often begins with being informed, intentional, and willing to engage.” Whether through compassionate care or visual storytelling, she is committed to making a difference. Her journey reflects the intersection of service and creativity. With the learnings she has gained, she aims to use to positively influence the world around her.



Reet

Reet seeks to become a paediatrician or a cardiothoracic surgeon. She knows that she wants to work in a team to benefit others, and participating in the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme has taught her many things, the most important being teamwork. “I enjoyed working with others to create policies that will benefit a variety of communities, and I hope the policy makers take our recommendations further so that people can benefit from what the team has been working towards.”

Wanzi

Wanzi aspires to become a biomedical engineer, driven by the goal of making a tangible difference in healthcare for people from all walks of life. The NxtGen Researcher Training Programme equipped her with invaluable confidence and skills, along with the desire to continue making meaningful change. “Through Lifelab, I’ve had the opportunity to collaborate with all sorts of incredible young people united with a shared passion for both innovation and real change.”

Zac

Zac hopes to become active in local government and decision-making in the future. Taking part in the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme has inspired him to want to learn more about the systems and people that exist within the real world that can affect change. Being part of the Youth Jury has been an integral part in Zac realising that it's possible for members of underrepresented communities, like home educated young people, to have their voices heard in decision-making. He says, "I talked to people about the inequity experienced by home educated young people in their access to educational resources. I felt engaged, empowered and inspired by the process."

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Acknowledgements

With special thanks to all the following who have supported the young people's research and attended training sessions, the Co-production Jury Day and/or consortium meetings:

Aananya Mahajan
NxtGen graduate

Alexa de Kerckhove
NxtGen graduate

Alice Mooney
No Limits

Anne Hendon-John
Rethink Refresh

Becky Wilkinson
Southampton HDRC

Cara Headon
Abri Housing Association

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Executive Summary: Co-Creating Tomorrow Our City, Our Say

Purpose

This report presents a co-designed enabling environment model to support the commissioning of a youth voice service in Southampton. Grounded in the lived experiences of local young people, and developed through the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme, the report offers practical recommendations for implementation of the enabling environment model, alongside wider insights into the systemic conditions needed to embed inclusive, sustained, and meaningful youth engagement. It moves beyond consultation and existing models for co-creation by focusing on the underpinning conditions required for youth voice to thrive, positioning young people as critical researchers and equitable stakeholders in shaping policies and services that affect their lives.

Background

One third of the residents in Southampton are under the age of 24. This population group are disproportionately affected by structural inequalities: 34% receive free school meals, 20.3% have special educational needs, and 538 are in care. To address the needs of young people in Southampton, Southampton City Council (SCC) and the Southampton Place Partnership (SPP) commissioned the Southampton Youth Voice Project. Delivered by the University of Southampton in collaboration with local partners and drawing on UKRI and NIHR-funded research projects (Pathways to Health through Cultures of Neighbourhoods, LifeLab, MOTH, Re-Booting Democracy), the project co-designed a framework for a Youth Voice Service that embeds co-production into research-informed, policy-driven service development, aimed at improving outcomes for young people and the wider community. To illustrate the enabling environment model in action, the report features a case study of the co-created NxtGen Young Researcher Training Programme, delivered by LifeLab at University of Southampton.

Recommendations for an Enabling Environment

The enabling environment model is envisioned in a circular manner in 8 steps, from a planning phase to a final reflection stage. Recommendations for the implementation of a Youth Voice Service are embedded within each phase. These recommendations emerged from the work of young researchers in the NxtGen Programme and their deliberative engagement with decision-makers in Southampton.

1 Planning

Involve young people from the start to define the role of youth voice, scope of influence and intended outcomes. Build co-ordinated partnerships between schools, community organisations, and decision-makers to support knowledge exchange. Identify target groups, barriers, and adjustments required to ensure inclusivity. Allocate budgets early and embed equity through funding models that compensate young researchers and support skills development, as well as recognising time needed for decision-maker involvement.

2 Recruitment

Co-design active community-based recruitment strategies and selection processes with young people, including clear, inclusive, youth-led advertising across a range of platforms and locations, leveraging trusted leaders, role-models and peers from networks including schools, community groups, and youth organisations. Translate documents for parents with English as a second language and increase parental awareness of benefits of participation. Use weighted recruitment to ensure representation of marginalised groups and facilitate place-based working.

3 Onboarding

Onboarding should clarify aims, the scope of value exchange, and participation structures, while ensuring psychological safety for both young people and facilitators. Early relationship-building, clear expectations around communication, accessible and varied formats to share information, skills development and payment, as well as equitable access to technology, are essential. Creating welcoming spaces, supported by youth mentors, and actively addressing power dynamics throughout are key to effective co-production.

4 Activation

Involve young people in agenda-setting and power-sharing from the outset. Provide different kinds of opportunity and varied entry points with differing levels of responsibility and flexibility to navigate different levels of participation that supports diverse needs, abilities, and availability, while building essential skills of advocacy, facilitation, and research, empowering sustained involvement. Centre young people's expertise, understand the importance of trust and invest in a skilled, supported youth sector workforce.

5 Deliberation

Bring young people and decision-makers together in structured, inclusive dialogue to co-develop priorities, shape services, and make informed decisions. Support deliberation by building young people's skills and confidence in effective formal deliberation through dynamic and inclusive facilitation. Create transparent, formal accountability mechanisms linking youth recommendations to decision-makers and strengthening links to existing system governance structures, with progress and outcomes regularly communicated back to young people.

6 Dissemination

Creative, visual, and digital dissemination underscoring youth voice and outputs provide meaningful opportunities for young people's personal and career development, and should be integrated to service delivery. Celebrating outputs through events involving stakeholders and partners reinforces the value of youth-led work and fosters wider system learning. To sustain momentum and build capacity, clear structures must be in place to support ongoing youth involvement beyond the life of individual projects, ensuring long-term impact and continued engagement.

7 Evaluation

Mixed-methods evaluation frameworks should be agreed and embedded from the outset, with a multi-level focus capturing individual outcomes (e.g. skills, confidence, wellbeing) and the system-level change that young people effect (e.g. policy influence, service design, organisational culture). Young people should participate as co-evaluators with appropriate support and hold decision-makers accountable, while enabling continuous improvement. Evaluation findings should be shared and accessible.

8 Reflection

An ongoing, embedded reflexive process across all stages of the enabling environment ensures continuous learning and accountability. Offering multiple modes of reflection at individual, team, and system levels, supports inclusive, accessible participation and helps maintain alignment with shared values, governance and strategic objectives throughout the youth voice experience, as well as future planning.

Conclusion

Commissioning a youth voice service calls for more than isolated initiatives. It requires a city-wide commitment to an enabling environment where young people are valued as equal partners in shaping services and decisions from inception to delivery and evaluation. This requires long-term investment in capacity and infrastructure, co-ordination and partnership across the system between actors involved in creating an enabling environment, widening participation, deliberative engagement and attention to evidence-based, education-informed approaches.

The enabling environment model is not theoretical; the recommendations in this report are themselves the product of an enabling environment. They are grounded in a robust, evidence-based, co-designed process involving young people through the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme, alongside key local partners, and informed by both lived experience and academic insight. NxtGen is one valuable entry point to youth voice, but should be complimented by other diverse, flexible pathways for youth involvement. Southampton now has a unique opportunity to lead nationally with this innovative, meaningful, and sustainable model of youth voice, positioning itself at the forefront of inclusive governance.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Case for Youth Voice

Innovation in public services depends on moving away from top-down systems towards collaborative, values-based models (Johnston and Fenwick 2025). National and local strategies increasingly recognise the pressing need to embed meaningful youth voice into public service design and city-wide decision-making. Designing with young people - not just for them - makes services more flexible, effective and acceptable, with significant cost savings for councils and improvement in service delivery (National Youth Agency 2010). The Government's National Youth Strategy and accompanying initiatives to promote children and young people's rights have reaffirmed that young people must be meaningfully engaged as active contributors in policy decisions that impact their lives.

Involving young people as equitable stakeholders allows for the development of strategies that are not only more contextually relevant but better attuned to address the inequalities they experience. Meaningful participation of young people in decision-making has far-reaching benefits including promoting social cohesion, creating more equal communities, helping adolescents make better informed and more empowered transitions to adulthood (Patton *et.al*, 2016), supporting their health and wellbeing (Modi *et al*., 2024), strengthening self-efficacy and contributing to the formation of future aspirations and social networks (Bandura *et al*., 2001; Ellison *et al*., 2014; Wise & Sainsbury, 2007). These factors are known to improve young people's educational and professional attainment (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012) and can further strengthen longer-term political and community engagement (Breeze *et al*., 2023). Meaningful participation is therefore more than a democratic right. It is a practical lever for improving life outcomes and addressing structural inequality over time.

1.2 The Southampton Context

Southampton is home to a growing and increasingly diverse population of children and young people. Approximately one-third of residents are aged 24 or under. This group also faces structural inequalities: 34% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, 20% have special educational needs and 538 young people are currently looked after (Southampton Data Observatory).

Southampton has made several steps forward over recent years in line with Southampton City Council's (SCC) Children and Young People's Participation Strategic Plan, as well as wider engagement activities with young people through the youth sector and other partners. This includes Southampton Youth Forum, Southampton Voices Unite, Southampton Young Inspectors and the Children in Care Council, as well as targeted campaigns such as This Girl Can, Clean Air Southampton and a number of large scale surveys including Make Your Mark (2021,2022 and 2024), #Beewell (2024) and Child Friendly Southampton (2022). These are valuable platforms for young people to share their views and contribute to community-wide conversations. However, while there is increasing data on what young people think about specific issues, there is currently no coordinated mechanism to enable these insights to inform co-created policy decisions. As elsewhere in the UK (Youth Voice Observatory, 2023), existing engagement tends to operate within a consultative model, where feedback is gathered but decision-making remains separate.

In order to strengthen the City's ability to respond to children and young people's priorities in meaningful and lasting ways, SCC and the Southampton Place Partnership (SPP) have recognised the need to connect young people's insights to decision-making processes in a consistent, embedded and sustained manner. They have commissioned the University of Southampton, in partnership with Southampton Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC), Southampton Voluntary Services and Young Southampton, to co-produce a set of recommendations for establishing a Southampton Youth Voice Service that places co-production at the centre of Southampton's approach to working with children and young people.

1.3 The Southampton Youth Voice Project

The commission, known as the **Southampton Youth Voice Project (SYV)**, has built on University of Southampton's work in the city through the UKRI-funded project *Pathways to Health Through Cultures of Neighbourhoods* (2023-2024), which created a city-wide consortium committed to working with young people in order to improve their lives. It has also built upon the NIHR and ARC Wessex-funded *MOTH* and UKRI-funded *Rebooting Democracy* projects (2024-2025) which embedded co-production with young people into the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board Strategy for Children and Young People. Following these existing models, **SYV brought together young people, academic researchers, commissioners, service providers, youth sector practitioners and decision-makers to co-design an inclusive and evidence-informed model that enables 'youth voice' to be fundamental to decision-making in Southampton.**

The diverse group of 16 young people age 14 to 18 who co-produced this project were part of the NxtGen Researcher Training Programme (NxtGen)[1], which ran from December 2024 to April 2025. NxtGen is a 12-session programme of training in research skills, developed at the University of Southampton and co-created with young people, which supports seldom heard young people to carry out their own research in order to generate robust evidence to inform their advocacy for change. NxtGen is rooted in young people's lived experience, informed by local context and capable of influencing policy and service delivery across the city.

Together we have developed a model for a Southampton Youth Voice Service for children and young people age 14 to 24 that focuses on an *enabling environment* as an overarching framework to guide commissioning of the service. The NxtGen researchers' findings provide a suite of evidence-informed recommendations for the structure, implementation and evaluation of a youth voice service. The findings were developed in conjunction with consortium insight, a Southampton HDRC scoping review of local council youth voice activity across the UK conducted for this report (Linaker & Collins, 2025), and insights from academic literature. The process of developing the model and recommendations itself provides a case study of an enabling environment in which young people are not merely participants, but active co-creators of change in their communities.

Throughout this report the recommendations for specification of a Southampton Youth Voice Service are substantiated with quotes from young researchers themselves. These quotes were extracted from exit interviews and reflection log data and help to contextualise the report's key elements with authentic youth voice.

[1] *The NxtGen Researcher Training Programme was formerly known as the Young Researcher Training Programme (YRTP)*

Training
Programme
Southampton Youth
Voice Co-Production Jury
Thursday 10th April 2025
NIHR
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2.0 An Enabling Environment: A Model for a Southampton Youth Voice Service

2.1 Why an Enabling Environment

UNICEF emphasises that if young people truly are to be the architects of their own futures with meaningful decision-making power, they need to be supported and fully empowered to do so (Bakrania *et al*., 2018). Our work with young people in Southampton shows that they want to be involved in decisions that affect them but often feel powerless or that they will not be taken seriously. Although adults in Southampton 'hear' young people through surveys, they struggle with how to involve them in decision-making processes, resulting in a general perception that young people are 'hard to reach' or disengaged (Grant, 2024; Marshall *et al*., 2015). We also heard that although adults want to embed youth voice in decision-making, including it in 'business as usual' is currently challenging and they want clear pathways to help them. There is a need for consistent infrastructure and a shift away from short-term, project-based engagement.

Youth participation spans a wide spectrum from everyday civic actions like voting or petitioning, to direct involvement in governance through youth councils, advisory groups and peer-led initiatives. The National Youth Agency categorises different forms of participation as individual, social and public participation, each reflecting different levels of influence and visibility. However, while participation typically allows young people to have a voice, it does not always involve them in shaping decisions. The concept of co-production seeks to move further, placing young people alongside policy makers as equal partners in the design, delivery and evaluation of services (Beresford, 2013).

Previous attempts to bridge the needs of young people and adults often refer to existing models such as Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), Shier's Pathways to Participation (2001) and frameworks like Hear by Right. Although these provide useful conceptual tools for thinking about levels of youth involvement and influence, they focus on categorising participation rather than designing the conditions that allow it to thrive. Our scoping review for this report revealed

that the tendency to categorise creates difficulties in evaluating the impact of youth involvement which tends to be measured by 'how much' activity takes place rather than changes to policy and outcomes. Participation should not be judged solely by how 'high' up the ladder it operates but recognised in terms of its own value and contribution to getting young people involved in creating change (Hart, 2013). Furthermore, several of these models were developed without direct involvement of young people and do not fully reflect the realities of contemporary co-production or the structural inequalities faced by seldom heard groups (Cornwall, 2008; Ellis & Sen, 2024). Nor do they respond to the challenges and pressures faced by adult decision-makers and their need for a clear route to youth voice.

In contrast, **the enabling environment model described in this report focusses on the underpinning conditions that facilitate the embedding of youth voice**. It was co-designed with young people, reflects their lived experiences in the city of Southampton and is grounded in practice rather than abstract typologies. It is designed to respond to local infrastructure, resource constraints, emerging insights from NxtGen and good practice in Southampton and elsewhere in the UK. Rather than ranking levels of participation, **our model focuses on what needs to be in place systemically to enable inclusive, sustained and impactful youth engagement and involvement.**

The enabling environment model can be applied to a wide range of activities. It should be used as the basis for commissioning a youth voice service in Southampton. The service should draw on the principles and recommendations in this report as a framework for service delivery.

2.2 Enabling Conditions Matter

Both research evidence and feedback from young people in Southampton suggest that the environment plays a critical role in the success of an initiative. The characteristics of the environment are critical for creating the conditions in which young people can move beyond surface-level involvement to meaningful collaboration and advocacy. As such, they directly impact the quality and relevance of outputs produced. This is particularly true where engagement depends heavily on interpersonal communication, relationship building and the creation of trust between young people and adults.

Definitions of enabling environments highlight three complementary characteristics:

i) Politics and policy

Gillespie *et al*. (2013, p.553) define the enabling environment as encompassing "*political and policy processes that build and sustain momentum for the effective implementation of actions*." This definition prioritises systems-level readiness, emphasising alignment between infrastructure, leadership and resourcing to enable progress.

ii) Psychological safety

Haigh *et al*. (2012), drawing on work in therapeutic communities and mental health, outline a set of interdependent features that support participation, inclusion and accountability across complex services. This approach stresses the relational fabric of an enabling environment: a psychologically safe culture shaped by equitable relationships, shared expectations and transparent decision-making. When young people feel psychologically safe and supported, they are more likely to contribute authentically, develop their confidence and invest in collective outcomes.

> "...everyone was really trustworthy... it was just really good to find a place where I can feel safe apart from home and school."
>
> -NxtGen Young Researcher

iii) Distribution of influence

Resnik *et al*. (2024) identify voice, access and ownership as essential conditions in advocacy contexts, drawing attention not only to who is involved but to how influence is distributed.

All three of these characteristics are important to a successful model for a youth voice service. Without them, youth engagement risks reproducing the same structural inequalities it seeks to challenge, offering young people a voice but not the conditions necessary to use it to create meaningful change. Tokenistic models are ultimately unsustainable because they not only limit impact but also risk disillusioning young people and undermining trust in future engagement opportunities.

2.3 Who is involved in an enabling environment?

An enabling environment for a youth voice service in Southampton needs to involve three groups of actors: young people, service providers, and decision-makers (including commissioners). All of these actors need to be involved in each step indicated in Figure 1 for a well-supported and effective enabling environment to be built. Thus, **successful delivery of a youth voice service in Southampton will require co-ordination and partnership across the system and city geography.** The degree to which actors are involved at each step will depend on capacity, resources and timing for specific initiatives, and may be tailored accordingly.

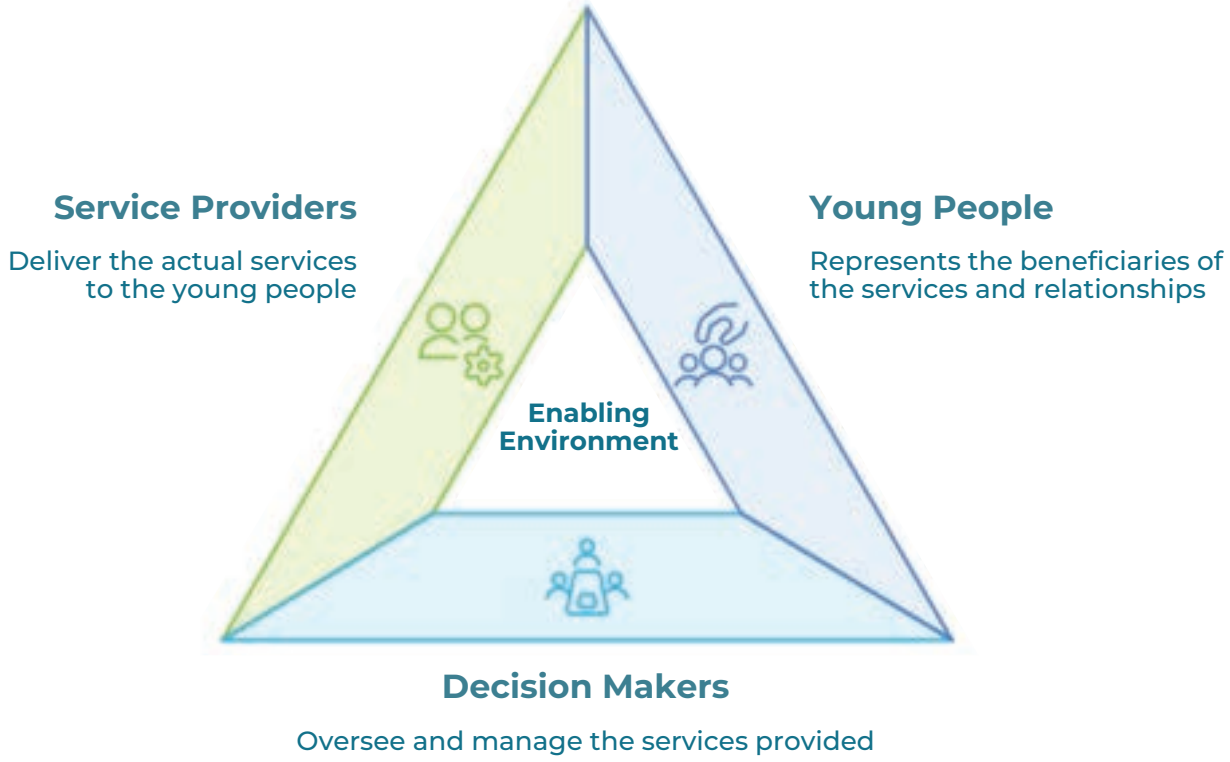


Figure 1. *Actors involved in an enabling environment for youth voice in Southampton*

Consciously curating an enabling environment offers better opportunities for young people to influence change, strengthens the relevance and legitimacy of outputs for decision-makers, and promotes sustained, system-wide engagement beyond the lifespan of individual programmes and initiatives.

2.4 From Concept to Practice: Introducing the Enabling Environment Model for a Youth Voice Service

Our model for an enabling environment for a Southampton Youth Voice Service sets out the conditions that should exist across a cycle of any youth voice activity. It has been developed through co-production with NxtGen researchers and consortium partners. The model incorporates:

- **Recommendations arising from NxtGen research**
- **Consortium work on principles for co-production with young people that build on, and modify, those developed by Southampton Voluntary Services for adults in Southampton**
- **An HDRC scoping review of local council youth voice activity across the UK conducted for this report to learn from local and national projects and evaluations**
- **Insights from academic literature**

The model recognises that youth engagement and involvement is not a fixed point, but an ongoing process shaped by the three characteristics of enabling environments described in 2.2. It provides a practical framework for a co-ordinated Youth Voice Service that embeds youth voice into local governance, service design, strategic planning and delivery in a way that enables equity, long-term engagement and system-wide integration.

The model has 8 steps, each of which constitutes a component of an enabling environment (Figure 2). These are discussed in detail below (Section 3.0), including specific recommendations for each to support commissioning and delivery of a Youth Voice Service in Southampton. Importantly, creating an enabling environment involves more than facilitation of an activity. We identify delivery of an activity as the mid-point of a process which has several steps on either side.

Components of an Enabling Environment

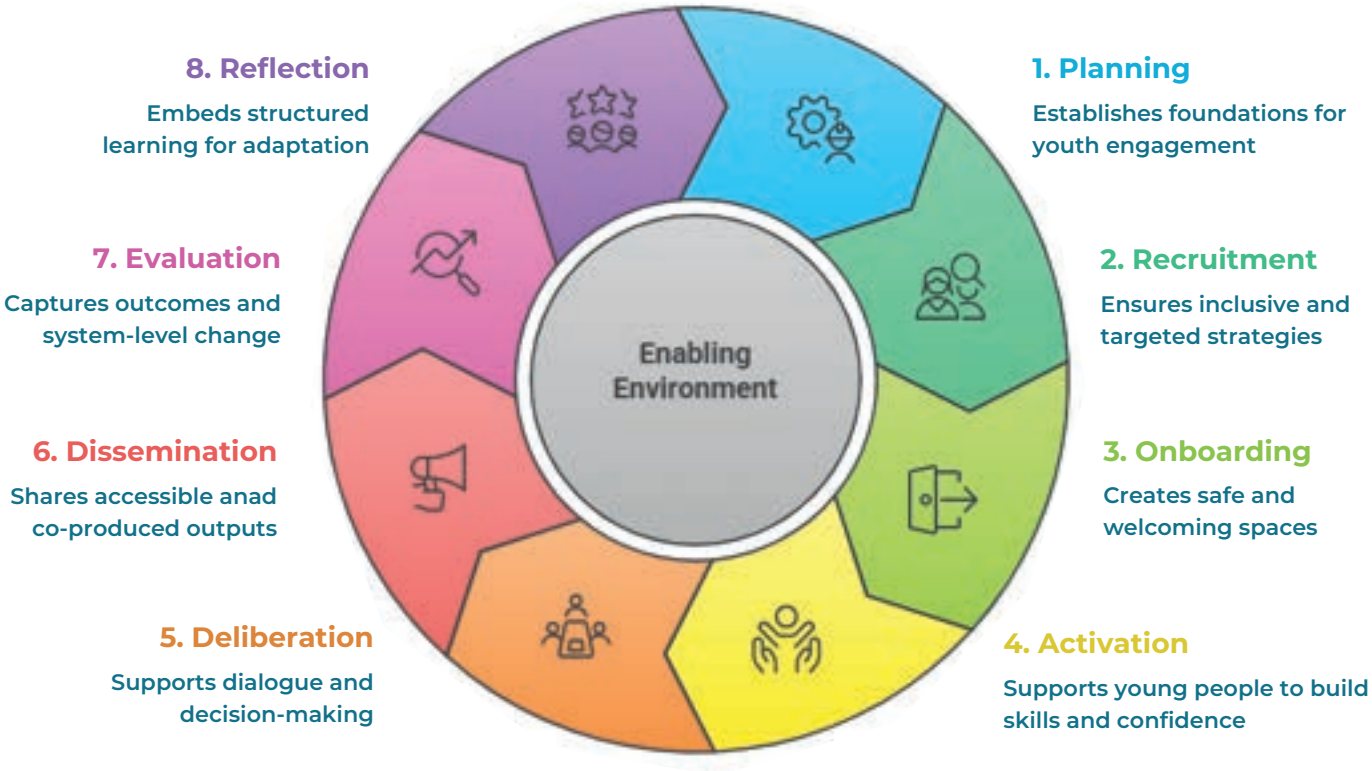


Figure 2: *Key components of a process to establish an enabling environment for youth voice*

3.0 Recommendations and Measures of Success for Components of an Enabling Environment

3.1 Planning

Young people need to be involved at the start (with budget allocated to their involvement), as part of shared goal setting to align expectations, alongside engaging partners and stakeholders. Setting shared goals at the outset supports consistency across delivery teams and enables all parties to work towards a common purpose. Reviews of participatory models show that success is often judged not by impact on services, but by whether young people felt heard and respected (Larsson *et al*., 2018; Macauley *et al*., 2022). Defining the form of participation at the outset whether consultative, co-design or shared decision-making and setting expectations accordingly is critical to managing outcomes and avoiding disappointment.

Funding is a persistent barrier to establishing a functional enabling environment. Not only does it determine the scale of participation, but how collaborative and inclusive a programme can be. Evidence from community sport programmes suggests that reduced or insecure funding constrains not only delivery scope but also staff capacity and role clarity, with programme leads often diverted into unrelated work under austerity pressures (Crisp, 2020). Guidance from Artswork (Top Tips for Co-Creation) highlights the need to establish a clear budget early, allowing the scope of work to be defined in realistic terms and ensuring that essential resources, including those relating to access and facilitation, are in place before plans are finalised. Co-production is not a 'free' activity for providers or participants. Socio-economic pressures such as precarious housing, limited access to transport, and unpaid caring responsibilities can prevent young people from participating, regardless of interest or ability. There needs to be planning for a clear value exchange. This could include direct payment, training, skills or qualifications.

Where the intention is to influence policy or decision-making, it is important to understand the institutional context. Consideration should be given to the level of autonomy, capacity and resources decision-makers have available and their willingness to support change. Early engagement with decision-makers can help build alignment and increase the likelihood that participation leads to action. Young people are more likely to view engagement as meaningful when they can trace a clear connection between their contributions and subsequent decisions (Macauley *et al*. 2022).

Young people want to see more co-ordination between organisations. Fragmented delivery structures often result in repetitive or disjointed engagement, limiting both impact and trust (Beresford, 2013; Macauley *et al.*, 2022). Early knowledge-sharing can help avoid duplication and reduce the risk of consultation fatigue experienced by young people in Southampton. Organisations across the city also recognise the need for co-ordination and have formed Young Southampton.

Drawing on the experience and relationships of local organisations helps ensure that participation is not just accessible but grounded in existing community work. Where delivery is led by third sector organisations, their capacity should be considered during the planning phase as many operate under significant constraints and may require additional support or clearer role definition to participate meaningfully (Ellis & Sen, 2024).

Planning processes should allow for realistic lead-in times. Reviews highlight that short or rushed planning cycles limit opportunities for co-design, capacity-building and inclusive onboarding (Beresford, 2013; Brady, 2021). Where delivery begins before planning decisions are finalised, or where facilitators and partners are expected to mobilise rapidly, the risk of fragmentation increases. Beresford (2013) notes that rushed implementation often results in re-engaging only the most available or familiar participants, further entrenching exclusion. To support equity and continuity, timelines should be agreed early and allow sufficient space for preparation, iteration and meaningful stakeholder engagement.

Ethics, risk assessments and safeguarding protocols need to be finalised before any work can commence (Centre for the South, 2024). Planning should include evaluation and include review points that allow for adjustment in response to emerging learning. Structured reflection during delivery helps teams respond to challenges early and strengthens alignment between values and practice. Sustained youth engagement relies on processes that are adaptive, not fixed, and young people are more likely to remain involved when they see their experiences shape delivery as it unfolds (Brady, 2021).

Recommendations: Planning[2]

1 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Involve young people at the planning stage. Develop a shared statement of purpose at the outset that is co-produced with young people. This should clearly define the role of youth voice, the scope of influence, and the intended outcomes. Share learning and provide seed funding to support this.

[2] *Recommendations arising directly from NxtGen researchers in Southampton are highlighted in **orange** text.*

2 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Facilitate constructive partnerships between schools and local organisations/ community organisations to make a difference together. Share knowledge and co-ordinate between organisations drawing on their knowledge, networks and delivery experience to avoid duplication or consultation fatigue.

3 Assess organisational capacity and alignment with existing infrastructure, supporting integration with broader city-wide efforts. Clarify roles, expectations and required capacity.

4 Define target cohorts clearly. Use existing data such as Southampton Data Observatory to understand Southampton's population and which groups to target. Identify likely barriers to recruitment of these groups and specify how engagement methods will be adapted to meet their needs. This may include for example adapting materials, formats or facilitation styles to meet the needs of groups such as young people with special needs or disabled young people.

5 Encourage cross city co-ordination, collaboration and learning, including via the sharing of project planning materials to support overall understanding of project development and preventing 'reinventing the wheel'.

6 Ensure evaluation plans are in place and evaluations and reflections have begun.

7 Establish equity at the planning stage by building in costs for access and delivery infrastructure, including transport, food, digital access, payment for participation and time, onboarding, relationship building and iteration including all people involved in creating the enabling environment.

8 Engage institutional decision-makers at the planning stage, particularly where youth input is expected to shape policy or service design. Secure early commitment to act on youth input, map decision-making pathways and define how feedback will be used. Facilitate involvement by recognising the need for time commitment.

9 Embed safeguarding and ethical frameworks into planning documentation, including risk assessment, consent processes, data management, psychological safety and protocols for how young people's contributions will be recorded, stored and shared, and influence will be handled. Clarify escalation routes and how risk will be mitigated across delivery partners and settings.

10 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Train and support adults in co-production with young people to develop their confidence and skills. For example, allocate time for supervision and reflection and planning for continuity of relationships, training in active listening and methods for co-production that reflect the diversity of lived experience and young people's sensory and cultural needs, as well as safeguarding, peer support and facilitator training.

11 Agree realistic planning and delivery timelines, allowing sufficient lead-in for co-design, mobilisation and onboarding. Avoid compressed timelines and build in formal review points.

Measures of Success

- Evidence included in finalised plan and design brief that purpose was co-produced with young people and partners, defining scope, role and influence. This might include testimonies of young people in terms of their influence.
- Transparent documented needs assessment with adaptations for specifically identified target groups.
- Access costs fully budgeted, including payment, transport, and facilitation: 100% of essential costs present in approved budget.
- Decision-makers involved, and feedback pathways mapped: named contacts identified with clear routes for responding to input. Time allocated in workload models and 'commitment contract' signed or agreed to by decision-makers to act on young people's recommendations.
- Timeline in place, allowing co-design and mobilisation: ≥ 4-week lead-in; ≥ 1 review point scheduled.
- Plans outlined to complete facilitator training needs analysis, training and ongoing support are embedded into plans.
- Communication and data plans ensure transparency and feedback and clarify who will know what and when about the process and its outcomes.
- Delivery partners submit readiness statements on capacity and commitments. A simple understandable short form could allow partners to identify key actors, commitments and expected constraints.

3.2 Recruitment

Recruitment plays a critical role in shaping the inclusivity, reach and credibility of any youth voice initiative. Including seldom heard voices brings critical lived experience into policy and service design, enriching the relevance and reach of outcomes by improving responsiveness, supporting innovation and strengthening trust in organisations (Erdtman *et al*., 2024; Eseonu, 2022). Minority viewpoints stimulate critical thinking and challenge assumptions within decision-making groups (Gafari *et al*., 2024). However, youth engagement models often make implicit assumptions about who will participate and why. Cornwall (2008) warns against assuming that participation is always beneficial. For example, interviews with care-experienced young people revealed a problematic expectation that they would automatically want to share personal, sometimes traumatic, experiences without sufficient support (Ellis & Sen, 2024).

While young people often cite financial incentives and CV-building opportunities as initial motivators, they tell us that their route into participation is often mediated by trusted adults, such as teachers, parents or youth workers. Open recruitment strategies often attract those who are already engaged, confident or well-supported, while seldom heard voices can remain underrepresented (Langer *et al*., 2021). To address this, recruitment should be understood as a designed process rather than an open invitation. It requires active outreach strategies that are sensitive to context, timing and representation. Community-based recruitment, although more resource-intensive, is vital for engaging participants from underrepresented backgrounds (Vander Wyst *et al*. 2020), and to produce better outcomes. Partnerships with community organisations are therefore important in reaching underrepresented groups, especially where these organisations already have trusted relationships. Working with schools, cultural organisations, youth justice settings or health services can provide routes into communities who may not respond as readily to traditional outreach (Langer *et al*. 2021). A young researcher demonstrates the importance of trusted adults and schools in recruitment by saying:

> **"...maybe have schools pass down the information... I just saw it from my science teacher, and I was interested but it wasn't really spoken about in school, so I don't think many people knew about it, nor were they really interested."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

The format and timing of outreach are equally important; recruitment campaigns should account for academic calendars, assessment periods and other time pressures. Advertising should take place across a range of platforms and locations that young people already use - including schools, youth spaces, social media and public venues such as shopping centres or sports facilities. Messaging should clearly state the value exchange involved in the opportunity, including any incentives and ideally should be co-developed with young people to ensure clarity and relevance – so that value of engaging is not misaligned with expectations. Research on recruitment in underrepresented communities suggests that representation and trust shape who applies and relatable staff are key; the credibility of the messenger matters as much as the message itself (Vander Wyst *et al*., 2020). Involving young people as mentors or role models from similar backgrounds in school visits, videos or open days may help build confidence and increase reach. Recruitment processes should be co-designed with young people themselves. Involving young people in shaping eligibility criteria and co-designing outreach activities ensures that language, tone and framing are appropriate. A NxtGen young researcher shares their positive experience of recruitment through their school:

> **"I feel like what my school did was good where they made like an entire assembly about all the different like opportunities offered outside of school. So, I feel like most schools should be doing that because that's definitely caught my attention.."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

Recruitment processes must be inclusive with eligibility screening conducted in as non-intrusive a way as possible. For instance, eligibility screening with collection of special category data should be conducted online to avoid personal identification of profile in front of others. Application and consent processes should be flexible and accessible, using multiple formats (written, visual, audio) and allowing for varying literacy, language and neurodiverse needs.

Recommendations: Recruitment

1 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Communicate opportunities to young people via reliable and trustworthy sources. In particular, advertising through social media should be targeted to young people through trusted youth organisations. Target recruitment to the places young people go, or the resources they use. For example, advertise in shopping centres, hospitals (for specific young people), coffee shops, sports centres or use home education or young offenders' networks to promote opportunities to these groups.

2 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Youth-led and youth-created advertising of opportunities to ensure that they are youth appropriate using a variety of recruitment methods to attract a diverse range of young people. This could include campaigns and pop-up sessions providing taster days/fun day events.

3 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Improve transparency by giving full and reliable information that is specific to the opportunity. Ensure payment for participation and other forms of value exchange (e.g skills development) are clearly displayed on recruitment materials.

4 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Form tutors can be instrumental in young people finding out about youth voice initiatives. Strong relationships are therefore needed with teachers in targeted schools and/or leaders of targeted organisations. They should be notified prior to recruitment that advertising materials and application forms will be circulated, then communication maintained throughout the recruitment period. This may also include arrangements for suitable ambassadors such as NxtGen graduates to attend school assemblies and promote youth voice initiatives.

5 Implement a weighted recruitment system to ensure those with diverse abilities have an equal opportunity to take part and be selected. For example, giving a higher weighting for a particular school, gender, ethnicity or quality (SEND) allows those individuals a higher chance of selection within standard recruiting frameworks that tend to focus on academic ability. Make use of tools such as the Place Needs Classification to ensure reach into underserved communities.

6 Involve young people in setting up the inclusion and exclusion criteria, interview questions and participant selection to ensure legitimacy of choices.

7 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Ensure that home educated young people and those with specific needs have access to opportunities so that there is equal access to opportunities inside and outside of school.

8 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Translate documents sent to parents by schools to reduce barriers for parents for whom English is a second language. Increase parental awareness that participation can improve academic performance and support health and wellbeing.

9 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Increase the availability and visibility of role models, especially those from underrepresented and marginalised groups.

Measures of Success:

- Participant cohort includes representation from priority groups identified during planning (e.g., care-experienced young people, disabled young people, ethnically diverse backgrounds, LGBTQ+ young people, young people from low-income households). Representation targets set during planning are met or exceeded.
- Use of a variety of different platforms or channels (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, school assemblies, youth spaces, shopping centres) is recorded and evaluated based on conversion metrics to maximise accessibility and reach.
- Evidence that young people have contributed to the design of recruitment materials, eligibility criteria, outreach activities application and/or selection processes (e.g., meeting notes, co-created materials, youth feedback).
- Recruitment materials and selection guidance explicitly state that applications will be assessed on a wide variety of values and potential contributions, not writing or presentation quality alone. Panel members trained to recognise and value non-traditional communication styles.
- 100% of recruitment materials clearly state the benefits and incentives (e.g., payment, experience, skills development) in accessible language.
- Selection process incorporates weighting or adjusted criteria to promote inclusion of young people with diverse abilities and backgrounds from target places, with audit trail documented.

- Evidence that recruitment reached beyond traditional education settings, engaging participants from additional sectors (e.g., youth justice, healthcare, cultural organisations).

- Early feedback from recruited young people indicates satisfaction with the recruitment process, measured through a short post-recruitment survey or discussion.

3.3 Onboarding to the environment

Co-production takes time and trust, particularly amongst communities historically excluded from or harmed by institutional processes. An enabling environment must be consciously designed to promote belonging and allow young people to learn, grow and collaborate without judgment (Griffiths, 2021; Warwick, 2008). Particular attention should be paid to managing power dynamics between staff and young people, ensuring that engagement remains youth-led while still providing appropriate guidance. As a gold standard in levelling power dynamics, young people should be compensated with fair and flexible payment for their contributions. (Bradshaw-Walsh & Ali, 2024). A young researcher talks about the draw of being paid for the work they do, emphasising the importance of fair value exchange:

> **"I learn something new as I'm earning money, so it's like a win-win. I get money and get to learn at the same time."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

Relationship building is an essential first step in any true co-production process. It is essential for developing trust, mutual respect, as well as supporting young peoples' individual needs and goals. Relationships are built by showing empathy, patience, politeness, being personable and allowing young people time to authentically interact and get to know members of the group, including facilitators (Crisp 2020). This includes both formal structured contact such as scheduled meetings or check-ins, and less formal, but still professionally managed and according to organisational safeguarding policy, communication through approved messaging systems, work email addresses, or appropriate face-to-face conversation. Facilitators play a central role in creating a climate of openness, role-modelling behaviour and group norms. Multiple communication formats respect individual preferences, thereby removing barriers to engagement.

Aligning the aims and expectations of young people, facilitators and other stakeholders ensures everyone is working towards a common goal through agreed upon objectives. This can create a shared identity between members, fostering a collaborative environment where everyone feels they belong and can contribute. Similarly, establishing a working agreement for in-person sessions allows all parties to come together under the same guiding principles to effectively collaborate with each other, promoting equality and levelling power dynamics. Young people are also empowered to self-regulate and challenge each other's behaviours, helping facilitators keep the environment comfortable and equitable for all, while young people maintain a role in shaping their own collaborative space.

Proactively seeking young people's opinions and encouraging their input further builds trust and communication. This can be emphasised by providing opportunities for young people to feedback, and for that feedback to be taken seriously. As an example, in the NxtGen programme young people are given a chance to anonymously detail any improvements they feel should be made and what they enjoyed about the session after every session. The facilitators take the feedback and implement as many requests as reasonable to demonstrate the value of this input. Some of our young people reflect on the sense of belonging they felt as a result of setting up an effective enabling environment:

> "I feel like it did make us so feel like a little tiny community."
>
> - NxtGen Young Researcher

> "Everyone felt like family."
>
> - NxtGen Young Researcher

> "I have also met some unbelievably nice and smart people; I am so proud of what they have accomplished. It makes me happy being surrounded by these incredible friends.."
>
> - NxtGen Young Researcher

Recommendations: Onboarding

1. Establish an onboarding process that agrees the aims, scope of value exchange and structure of participation. This should be tailored to the needs of the cohort and include opportunities for questions, clarification and informal discussion.

2. Ensure that onboarding supports psychological safety. This includes introducing facilitators, co-developing group norms through working agreements and enabling young people to build relationships with one another before moving into task-based work.

3. **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Use accessible and varied formats to share information. This may include visual tools, co-designed materials, or informal conversation rather than written guidance alone.

4. Communicate clearly about access and payment. Young people should know what forms of support are available to help them take part, including how and when they will be paid or how to claim expenses.

5. Offer orientation or induction where participation is sustained over time. This may include introducing organisational processes, decision-making structures, or relevant contextual information.

6. Ensure communication expectations and technology access are addressed during onboarding. At the outset of any programme, young people should be supported to set up email accounts and other communication tools and be thoroughly briefed on expected communication practices. Time should be allocated to walk through how and when updates will be sent, what response is expected and who to contact for help. This can reduce the need for repeated follow-up and support smoother coordination throughout the programme.

7. Consider capacity building activities to support young people to understand how their contributions will shape decisions and influence systems.

8. **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Include other young people as mentors in the onboarding process. For example, NxtGen graduates have all had first-hand experience with the programme and are confident in sharing their learnings with new recruits.

9

Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers: Create safe spaces for young people where they feel comfortable happy and welcomed, sometimes with trusted adults in the space. Giving young people a voice and input into what their spaces look like, and the activities provided in those spaces.

Measures of Success:

- 100% of participants have access to required systems (email, communication platforms, travel support information). Young people report that they were well-supported in accessing systems and report confidence in how to navigate them
- 100% of participants have received information about communication channels, travel, logistics, location and report feeling comfortable with the order of events for the programme. All young people are comfortable asking for help, are using the systems and are replying to emails or other communication efforts within pre-agreed timescales.
- 100% of participants have received clear information about their role, the programme structure, how they will be compensated and how payment will be tracked, managed and distributed. Participants confirm understanding and are able to access further support through onboarding feedback or check-ins.
- All young people participate in structured onboarding activities, including introduction to facilitators, group norms and organisational structures.
- Young people co-develop ground rules and input into the set-up of the environment (e.g., choosing session music, food, or comfort items). Evidence of these preferences being acted upon (e.g., adapted space, documented ground rules).
- Structured opportunities for connection (e.g., ice-breakers, informal breaks, rotating seating) are embedded and evaluated positively by participants through informal feedback or check-ins.
- Observations and feedback show that young people feel comfortable in the environment - demonstrated through behaviours such as asking questions, accessing facilities independently and engaging freely with peers and facilitators.

- Materials and onboarding sessions use varied formats (visual, conversational, written) and feedback indicates these methods were accessible and appropriate for the cohort's needs.

- Feedback mechanisms embedded from the start: Anonymous or informal feedback opportunities (e.g., post-session surveys, check-ins) are introduced during onboarding and young people report feeling heard when raising suggestions.

3.4 Activation

3.4.1 Forms of Activity

Whatever the activity, young people, supported by their growing sense of autonomy and agency, must be involved in agenda setting and decision-making processes for the development of healthier and more sustainable futures (Patton *et al*., 2016; Macauley *et al*., 2022).

It is important to provide a range of different kinds of opportunity to engage in youth voice. Co-production should not be contingent on availability, confidence, or the ability to commit intensively. Not all young people will participate in the same way, or at the same level and different groups of young people need different forms of co-production (Children and Young People's Centre for Justice, 2024). Diversity of opportunity enables young people to engage at the level that suits their current capacity. This is particularly important for exam-aged students, those with caring responsibilities or young people navigating health or employment challenges. Offering varied entry points with differing levels of responsibility also enables young people to remain involved over time and ensures that youth voice can be embedded across different aspects of a programme, as opposed to a single representative space.

Authentic youth engagement must centre young people's expertise, not simply include them in processes defined by adults (Jenner *et al*. 2023). Youth councils for example, are often positioned as vehicles for inclusion but evidence suggests they can just as readily entrench existing inequalities if structural barriers are not addressed. Augsberger *et al.* (2018) demonstrate how participation in a US youth council was typically skewed towards academically high-achieving, college-bound young people, with access often mediated through existing networks. Wyness (2009) made similar observations in the UK, showing how elected councils often privilege older, more confident pupils and systematically marginalise those from less advantaged or underrepresented backgrounds.

Deliberative engagement offers an alternative approach, expanding access through peer referral and flexible membership. Deliberative engagement can also be highly effective in decision-making as long as accountability and representation are addressed at planning stage. Approaches like NxtGen not only allow for ongoing cohorts of young people to receive developmental support but recognise that young people involved in co-production grow up, move on, and have a range of commitments. Therefore, there needs to be continual refreshment of the young people engaged, such that activities do not become overly professionalised.

Embedding skills development for young people in an activity is critical for both organisational effectiveness and establishing youth engagement (Breeze *et al*., 2023). Training of young people demonstrates that they are valued and worth the investment of resources (Meyer & Allen, 1991), while ensuring they have the skills they need to produce quality outputs. Relevance is equally important in maintaining youth engagement. Projects/topics of interest should be directly related to the lives of young people involved to sustain their long-term interest (McGimpsey *et al*., 2023; Peterson *et al*., 2022; Chana, 2007; Chon & Park, 2020). One of our NxtGen researchers expresses the importance of exploring relevant topics:

> **"We were sort of arguing for something that we wanted to see a change for rather than something like in schoolwork in geography."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

3.4.2 Facilitation of activity

Skilled facilitation is key in whether participation feels meaningful to young people. The facilitation style employed by youth workers is crucial in the successful training and engagement of young people in any programme of work (Kirshner, 2008). Across multiple studies, young people emphasise the importance of facilitators who can build trust, communicate clearly and show empathy (Macauley *et al*., 2022). This echoes findings from Warwick (2008), who identifies active listening, authenticity and shared goal setting as essential to sustaining youth-led collaboration.

However, meaningful youth participation extends beyond facilitation alone to encompass the fundamental design of activities and programmes. Effective youth engagement requires careful consideration of both pedagogical principles and developmental appropriateness. For NxtGen, this dual focus is embedded in its design, having been developed by educators who understand how to structure sessions that meet young people's needs from both their lived experience and an educational/skills-development perspective, alongside research experts who bring their expertise in conducting research to ensure the programme effectively trains participants in research methods and practices.

The HDRC scoping review further emphasises the need for a clear commitment to developing a skilled and supported youth sector workforce and that recognition of the professional identity of youth workers is an important step forward (Linaker & Collins, 2025; Swords *et al.*, 2020). There is a need for greater effort to increase awareness and visibility of youth work as a career option, especially for those with lived experience of youth services who are often well placed to become youth workers themselves or play a role in youth worker recruitment. Competent youth workers balance providing support to young people with encouraging their autonomy to ensure they have every opportunity to develop as well-rounded individuals while still maintaining the structure they need to participate successfully (Warwick, 2008). Fully resourced, skilled and dedicated youth workers are essential in ensuring and maintaining engagement of young people (Smith et al., 2023; Swords *et al.*, 2020; Burke *et al.*, 2023).

Keeping young people engaged and progressing at an even pace requires a commitment from youth workers, including monitoring and adaptation of procedures and systems to accommodate for the individual needs of young people. This is particularly true when working with groups with differing capabilities, such as SEND. From an educational design perspective, careful consideration must be given to how young people are introduced to new information, tasks and skills, ensuring these build systematically on previous learning or revisit earlier concepts to support the development of new knowledge and skills. Without this thoughtful sequencing, too much information delivered too quickly can become overwhelming for participants, or lead to the introduction of misconceptions that can hinder their progress. A NxtGen researcher explores the role of facilitators in mitigating issues, maintaining communication and supporting young people:

> **"There weren't really any struggles. Everything was explained really like sincerely and very in detail. If we had any questions, we would just ask you or [the facilitator]. That was great and we got responses really quickly."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

Effective facilitation involves more than managing group discussions. It also requires creating spaces where young people can explore complex issues, build reflective skills and develop a sense of agency in relation to their futures. Creative methods that centre lived experience and support collective sense-making can be particularly powerful. For example, recent work with young people from coastal communities used a co-designed board game to surface questions around inequality, aspiration and opportunity (Wanick *et al.*, 2024). Through structured play, participants explored trade-offs between wellbeing, income, autonomy and security, ultimately echoing the kinds of value-based deliberation that underpin youth-led research and co-production. Such approaches illustrate how facilitation can scaffold not only participation, but the development of young people's capacity to act within and shape the systems around them.

Recommendations: Activation

1 Foster young people's agency. Young people should be involved in setting the agenda and making decisions. This includes enabling young people to select their own topics of interest, supporting them to develop skills in inquiry and advocacy and connecting their findings to broader community priorities. Be clear about power sharing (what power is shared and how).

2 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Provide diverse, inclusive opportunities including those appropriate for young people with specific needs. A system of tiered participation can facilitate diversity of opportunities for young people to get involved. Provide a range of different ways for young people of different ages to become involved, allowing for flexibility, opt-out pathways and varied levels of participation according to young people's needs and circumstances. This could range from light touch 'no commitment' drop-ins to regular paid employment. For example, LifeLab offers various forms of participation and commitment from youth panels to the NxtGen programme which sits as a top-tier participation model; young people involved at the top-tier, may be trusted conduits to engage those who wish to engage less intensely in the first instance. Embed flexibility in project design, responsive infrastructure and, where necessary, trauma-informed approaches.

3 Schedule activities around school or employment to ensure that young people can attend without missing these. Consider hybrid models and/or detached youth work to further facilitate participation.

4 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Offer advocacy training. Support young people to develop advocacy and facilitation skills, particularly where they are involved in co-delivery, peer-led work or representational roles. This may include training in public speaking, negotiation, analysis, or collaborative leadership.

5 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Be aware of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and accommodate cultural / religious needs as well as neurodiversity and specific needs. Be sensitive to the identities of young people. Embed peer support and culturally sensitive practices to ensure relevance and reach, such as offering materials in accessible formats.

6 Engage young people through creative activities wherever possible. Make use of games, role playing, technology, art and contextual discussions. This makes content more accessible for a variety of individual needs and is more entertaining for young people, moving away from a teacher – student format.

7 Be an active listener: 'Seek first to understand before you can be understood'. Co-production takes time and trust, particularly amongst communities historically excluded from or harmed by institutional processes. Provide space and time to develop mutual trust, understand expectations, plan collaboratively, and be open and transparent in communication about what is happening. Take a reflexive, reflective and responsive approach.

8 Require all delivery partners to demonstrate inclusive facilitation approaches. This includes the ability to incorporate a variety of activities ensuring all access needs and communication preferences are catered for, using a varied facilitation toolkit.

9 Commit to developing a skilled and supported youth workforce. This may include a structured coaching and development programme for facilitators, support to develop active listening skills, work with diverse groups, recognition of different participation needs, fostering psychologically safe group dynamics, communication strategies, boundary setting and approaches for supporting young people to express themselves confidently. Crucially, development should also encompass educational expertise in designing and delivering effective learning sessions, including pedagogical principles, session planning and sequencing, age-appropriate activities, and scaffolding techniques to ensure meaningful skill and knowledge development.

10 Prioritise continuity in facilitation teams, recognising that trust is built through sustained relationships. Where staffing changes are necessary, plans for continuity and relational handover should be in place.

11 Embed reflective supervision into delivery models to support facilitators' wellbeing and adaptive practice. This should be included as a scheduled and budgeted element of all long-term youth engagement activity.

Measures of Success:

- Young people report feeling empowered and demonstrate measurable growth in research, communication, advocacy or leadership skills (assessed through self-assessment tools, facilitator observations or practical outputs).
- Documented range of opportunities with differing entry points and levels of commitment and responsibility, including the NxtGen Training Programme.
- Young people are provided with structured opportunities to apply skills (e.g., presenting to decision-makers, leading activities, contributing to dissemination outputs).
- Attendance rates are ≥85%, with evidence of active participation (e.g., contributions to discussions, completion of tasks).
- Facilitators adapt support approaches to meet individual needs, evidenced through differentiated activities, and participant feedback.
- 100% of facilitators complete relevant training prior to delivery, including inclusive practice, active listening, boundary setting, and adaptive communication strategies. Gaps in facilitator skills are identified early, and targeted training sessions are scheduled.
- Facilitators are observed using varied delivery approaches (e.g., group discussions, creative methods, visual tools) to engage young people with differing communication styles and provide them with multiple ways to connect with the material.
- Facilitators have access to a structured reflection they can complete for each session, identifying what worked, what could be improved and any adaptations needed for future sessions. Facilitators participate in scheduled reflective supervision sessions to support wellbeing, skill development and adaptive practice.
- Where staffing changes occur, documented handover processes ensure relational continuity and support trust-building with young people.

3.5 Deliberation

Deliberation is the process of bringing young people and decision-makers together in structured, inclusive dialogue to co-develop priorities, shape services, and make informed decisions. Deliberation is a fundamental part of the democratic process and is vital to co-creation and change. Its legitimacy and impact depend on more than assembling groups of people or consultation. Deliberation must be carefully configured to enable equity, representation and impact. Meaningful deliberation requires structures that enable considered judgement, transparency and inclusivity. In the context of youth co-production, this demands deliberate attention to power, voice and access as building blocks for an enabling environment. When a young researcher was asked what they expect from decision-makers, transparency came across as an important element:

> "...even just if they're [decision-makers] saying, oh, we're having difficulties doing this, at least like just being transparent about it."
>
> - NxtGen Young Researcher

Fishkin (2011) identifies five core conditions for effective deliberation: access to information, balance of perspectives, participant diversity, conscientious reasoning and equal consideration. These conditions underpin what he terms 'deliberative polling' designed to reveal informed public judgement rather than surface opinion. Building on this, Bächtiger and Parkinson (2014) propose a broader framework for evaluating deliberative quality which includes: authenticity, constructive engagement and context sensitivity. All these features are important to co-creation initiatives with young people.

However, deliberation is not neutral. Sanders (1997) highlights that deliberation frequently privileges those who are already comfortable or experienced communicators – i.e. those who are articulate, composed and received as credible. Without meaningful intervention, marginalised voices therefore risk being excluded, even when formally present. Lijphart (1997) similarly warns that unequal political influence results from unequal participation, which is shaped by class, education and access, amongst other factors. These critiques evidence the need for inclusive design, preparatory support and facilitation that deliberately offsets structural disadvantage. Central to this approach must be the practice of enskilment – which involves participants becoming skilled through immersive, hands-on engagement in real-world environments (Ings,

2023). Through this process, learning emerges through doing, observing and responding within an authentic and social context (Ings, 2023; Woods, Rudd & Gray, 2021). Thus, young people need to have training before they enter deliberative processes in order to be able to speak as equals.

The legitimacy of the deliberative process should also be considered in order to reassure both young people and decision-makers that the outcomes of deliberation are fit for purpose. Small group processes can enable high-quality discussion, but they risk bypassing broader public participation and therefore failing to nurture democratic legitimacy (Lafont 2015). In order to avoid this, it is important to understand that legitimacy arises not only from who is present, but from which discourses are represented (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008). Young people who are involved in deliberative processes need to be able to speak as experts based on an evidence base that they have accumulated. A young researcher comments on what impact they felt they had during deliberative discussions with decision-makers:

> **"Hopefully I could give them [council members] an opportunity to think about what young people really want because there is a lot of things that adults or the decision-makers decide, but they don't actually get the opinion or views of the young people... they're creating that space."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

Crucially, the participatory nature of democratic innovation is not enough on its own; effectiveness depends on whether these efforts produce change. Deliberative processes must translate into legislative or institutional outcomes in order to justify their democratic legitimacy (Pogrebinschi and Ryan 2018). Accountability structures for decision-makers are therefore critical. Recommendations arising from youth engagement should be matched to named individuals or bodies responsible for their implementation. Standing actions linked to youth voice should be incorporated into the agendas of relevant committees and boards to maintain accountability and continuity when there are staffing changes. Mechanisms such as deputations by young people,

mobilisation of supporting NGOs and stronger integration with cross-sector boards including the Health and Wellbeing Board and education partnerships should be used to embed youth influence within city-wide decision-making. High-level leadership buy-in is essential to maintain momentum and secure a sustainable model of participation.

The NxtGen Youth Jury process (described in Section 4.6) provides an example of how to prepare and configure a deliberation process.

Recommendations: Deliberative process

1 Select deliberative methods that match the aims of the work and the capacity of the group. Approaches should be chosen in collaboration with delivery partners and where possible, with young people themselves. Methods should be chosen based on whether they support dialogue, shared decision-making and accountability. We suggest adopting the youth jury format as a structured deliberation and accountability mechanism, to create space for structured dialogue and challenge. This enables young people to present informed recommendations directly to decision-makers, placing the responsibility for response on professionals. The format supports public accountability, mutual learning and co-authorship of actions.

2 Provide preparatory materials and warm-up opportunities to help all involved feel confident in deliberative settings. This might include short briefings, creative exploration or rehearsal activities, which help participants to understand their roles and develop the confidence to participate meaningfully. Decision-makers should be included in preparation and should develop skills in active listening, rapport building and communication with young people. Aligning communication styles helps to address power dynamics and allows all members to participate authentically.

3 Embed enskilment into deliberative methods. Support young people to gain confidence, awareness and skill through preparation, guided practice and active roles within the deliberative process.

4 Plan for inclusion through structure. Group size, pacing, room layout and scheduling all shape who is able to participate and how. Use facilitation techniques that enable a range of communication styles such as small group discussions, visual methods and tools that allow for anonymous or asynchronous input. Ensure sufficient time for informal connection building activities is scheduled to promote communication and collaboration between young people and decision-makers prior to deliberations.

5 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Create accountability. Design structures that enable young people to be heard but also hold adults accountable for the decisions they make in order to ensure that commitments to change are seen to be acted on. Connect outputs to formal decision-making structures. Recommendations should not only be recorded and shared but embedded in systems of governance. Formalise accountability structures for decision-makers, matching specific recommendations to named individuals or boards. Mechanisms such as standing actions on committee and board agendas, deputations by young people and the mobilisation of supporting NGOs should be used to sustain momentum and influence.

6 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Be clear about how influence will be communicated back to young people so that they know what difference their involvement has made. Task adults with demonstrating how they will ensure transparency in decision-making and communicate outcomes to young people. Assign responsibility for follow-up, agree reporting mechanisms and clarify how young people will remain involved in monitoring progress over time.

7 Strengthen links to existing governance structures, including Health and Wellbeing Boards, education partnerships and other strategic forums, to embed youth voice within system-wide decision-making. Where possible, responsibility should sit with institutional roles rather than individuals to maintain continuity through staff changes.

Measures of Success:

- All participants (young people and decision-makers) complete preparatory activities (e.g., briefings, warm-up exercises) and report feeling prepared to participate fully in deliberation sessions.
- Young people report feeling confident expressing their views, challenging ideas respectfully and advocating for themselves and their peers. Decision-makers respond in ways that are respectful, clear and encourage continued participation.
- Observations show that decision-makers adapt their language, listen actively and engage meaningfully with young people's contributions (e.g., taking notes, asking clarifying questions, and engage with explaining rather than telling).
- Facilitation techniques such as small group discussions, anonymous input tools and visual methods are used in deliberation sessions to support diverse communication styles.

- Session observations and participant feedback confirm that all voices are heard and considered in deliberations, regardless of confidence, communication style or background.
- Deliberative sessions result in a jointly developed action plan between young people and decision-makers, with clear assignment of responsibilities, timelines for implementation and follow-up mechanisms agreed.
- 100% of deliberative outputs are formally responded to by decision-makers, with clear documentation of how recommendations will be adopted or considered.
- Regular updates on progress against agreed recommendations are shared with young people through accessible formats (e.g., emails, summary videos, infographics).
- Recommendations arising from youth input are linked to named individuals or committees. Standing agenda items at governance meetings are established to review youth voice impact.
- Mechanisms are in place for young people to stay involved in tracking progress on recommendations, such as participating in review meetings or co-producing monitoring reports.

3.6 Dissemination

Dissemination ensures that young people's insights and recommendations are not only shared but meaningfully contribute to wider system learning and sustained engagement. Wilson *et al.* (2010) define dissemination as a planned process that carefully considers target audiences, settings and communication timings to optimise the uptake and impact of research outputs. Effective dissemination requires a strategic, intentional approach that reflects the diverse needs of audiences and ensures young people's contributions are visible, accessible and actioned.

NxtGen researchers emphasise the importance of being involved not only in the creation of research outputs but also in the dissemination process itself. Young people involved in participatory initiatives often report that presenting findings through creative channels such as theatre, visual art or performance deepens both their own engagement and the reach of their messages (Macauley *et al*., 2022). In the context of community engagement initiatives, this broader approach is essential to reach stakeholders across sectors and backgrounds. Youth input on dissemination plans helps inform what needs to be shared, in what format and through which channels to reach their target group.

This is critical in ensuring dissemination is inclusive of gender, age, literacy, ethnicity, culture and economic status (Ross-Hellauer *et al.*, 2020). A young researcher shares their expectations for the dissemination and roll out of their recommendations, emphasising the desire to be involved in the process and the challenges of being systematically excluded from conversations:

> **"What would be really nice is of course to be involved, but like I don't know those meetings where they are having their next discussions or whatever, it'd be nice to be present."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

Restricted funding and project-based commissioning often lead to young people completing a programme without clear routes for continued engagement or opportunities to apply their new skills. This risks disengagement once projects formally conclude and can leave young people feeling disconnected and uncertain about how to build on their experiences. Addressing this challenge requires building continuity into dissemination and engagement strategies from the outset. The NxtGen researchers highlight the importance of giving them opportunities for dissemination not only in the project but beyond its immediate lifetime. They identify this as recognising their expertise and as part of their personal and career development. Sustained dissemination, combined with structured pathways for ongoing participation and peer-to-per learning can ultimately ensure that the energy, insight and networks generated through youth engagement initiatives are maintained into the future. A young researcher comments on their expectations for decision-makers to stay in contact with any updates on the implementation of their recommendations:

> **"I would expect them to kind of keep in touch and communicate about what they're thinking of doing or are doing. "**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

Recommendations: Dissemination

1. Plan dissemination as part of the delivery process, with dedicated time, budget and capacity for facilitation. This should include identifying the motivation for the dissemination, the intended audiences and how young people will be involved in shaping the approach.

2. **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Use accessible and varied dissemination formats, including visual, digital and creative outputs. Formats should be adapted to audience needs and co-designed with young people wherever possible.

3. **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Recognise the importance of dissemination for young people's personal and career development. Acknowledge and celebrate young people's contributions, for example through credits, events, testimonials or portfolio artefacts. Recognition should be meaningful and pre-agreed in advance with participants.

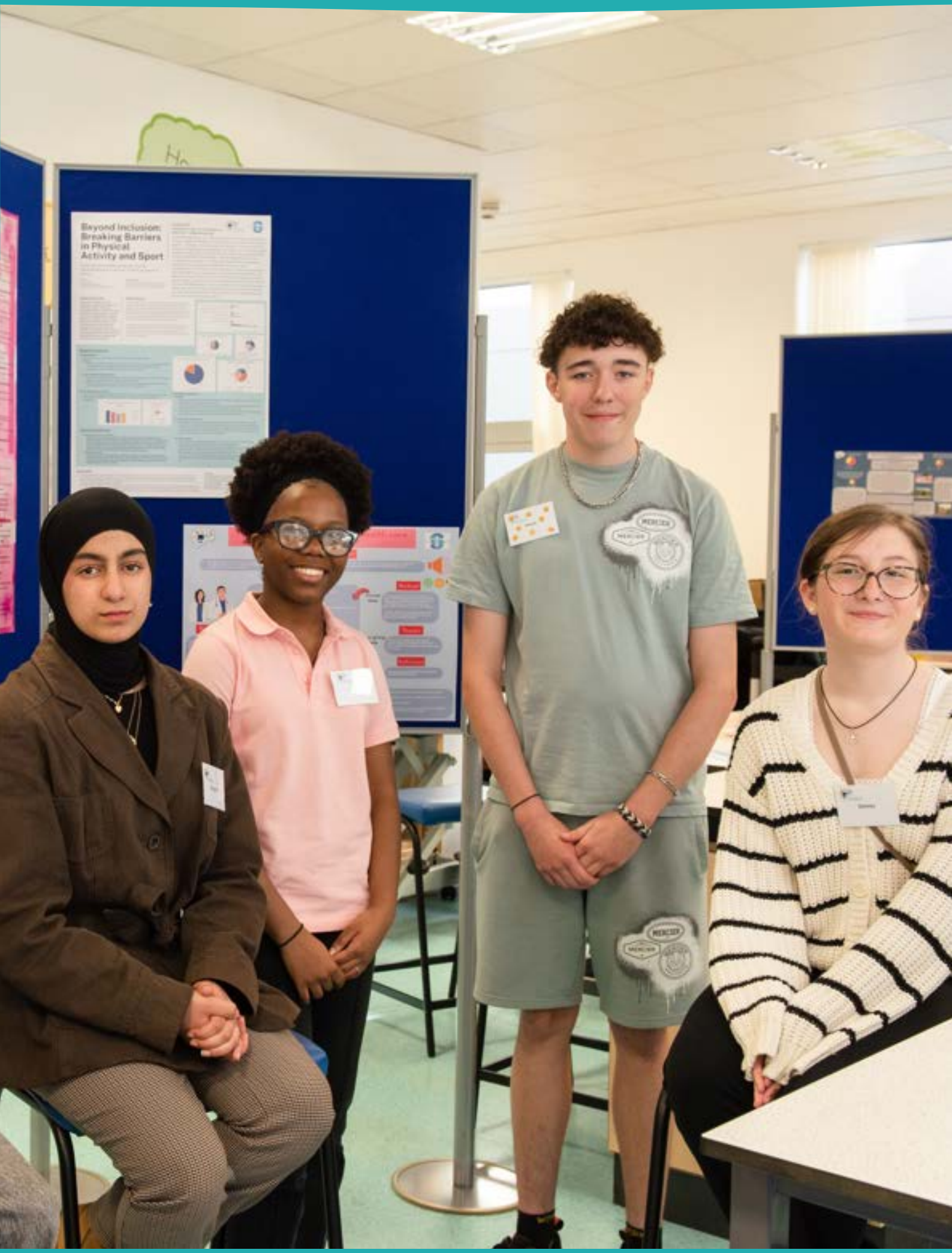
4. Share learning across services and sectors, using dissemination as a tool for system-wide reflection and improvement. Where appropriate, findings should be made public and fully accessible.

5. **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Engage all stakeholders/ partners, including young people themselves in dissemination plans. Leverage their existing networks and communication channels and sector partnerships to widen reach and sustain momentum around young people's recommendations and contributions.

6. **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Create structures that enable young people to stay involved beyond project completion, such as alumni networks, mentoring opportunities or advisory roles. Ensure dissemination activities connect to these pathways.

Measures of Success

- Dissemination activities demonstrate engagement with intended audiences, measured through indicators such as social media analytics, attendance figures, website traffic or stakeholder feedback.
- Outputs are assessed for accessibility (e.g., readability, use of visual media, cultural sensitivity), and feedback confirms they are engaging for diverse audiences.
- All young people involved are formally acknowledged through agreed recognition mechanisms (e.g., credits, certificates, events).
- Mechanisms such as alumni networks are established and active, providing ongoing opportunities for young people post-project.
- Dissemination activities lead to the creation of new networks or partnerships, documented through contact lists, partnership agreements, collaborative activities or invitations to further opportunities.
- Dissemination outputs are shared with system partners (e.g., local authorities, schools, community organisations) and contribute to broader learning and practice improvement.


Beyond Inclusion:
Breaking Barriers
in Physical
Activity and Sport

3.7 Evaluation

Regular evaluation and a willingness to adapt are central to organisational effectiveness and to sustaining responsiveness to young people's changing interests and needs (Peterson *et al.*, 2022). Building evaluation into programme design from the outset supports learning, improves practice and strengthens trust among stakeholders.

A Southampton HDRC scoping review identified lack of consistency in the evaluation and reporting of youth voice models across the UK. Of 35 projects reviewed, 27 lacked any significant mention of evaluation, or provided only anecdotal descriptions of outcomes (Linaker & Collins, 2025). Where evaluations were reported, they typically focused on individual-level outcomes, such as improved confidence, leadership or teamwork (e.g. Salford's Joint Working between Youth and Children's Services (Local Government Association, 2020)). Some projects reported organisational metrics, such as programme engagement rates (Learning and Skills Council and Connexions Service, 2002) or uptake of services (Local Government Association, 2022; Local Government Association, 2024). A smaller number linked youth voice activity to broader organisational culture change, such as Doncaster's Mental Health Champions project (Local Government Association, 2018). This pattern reflects findings elsewhere, including the Establishing Youth Voice Report (Burke *et a*l.,2023). Where monitoring and evaluation processes remain inconsistent, this limits ability to build cumulative learning. Guidelines such as the National Youth Agency's Hear by Right Framework provide practical models for evidencing youth participation and embedding youth voice across organisations. However, these frameworks are often underutilised or inconsistently applied and do not cover all the steps in the model that we propose in this report.

To address these gaps, a comprehensive evaluation framework should be implemented from the outset, clearly and systematically linked to the programme's intended outcomes as well as the mechanisms through which change is expected to occur. Evaluation measures should be identified early, spanning multiple domains: individual development, system influence and organisational practice. Thus, evaluation of youth voice initiatives must go beyond simple participation metrics. Dissemination activities should be evaluated alongside other project components to ensure their effectiveness. Even within structured environments, learning outcomes depend on how participants navigate between real-world identities and structured roles (Gomer *et al*. 2024). Evaluating youth participation should include reflective analysis of how participants interpret their role, make decisions and navigate multiple perspectives. A mixed-methods approach is recommended, combining quantitative indicators with qualitative insights drawn from observation, interviews, participatory analysis and where feasible, longer-term tracking. Evaluation must be multifaceted, capturing outcomes not only for young people, but also for facilitators, partner organisations and decision-makers.

Young people's representatives should be embedded within the evaluation process itself. Co-evaluation approaches, such as those used in the Southampton Young Inspectors model (Hendon-John & Newman, 2025), enable young people to define success criteria, contribute to data collection and analysis and hold decision-makers accountable for agreed actions. Evaluation outputs must also be made accessible and visible, with findings shared across participants, delivery partners and system leaders in formats that promote dialogue, transparency and iterative improvement. Meaningful feedback loops from evaluation must be established to ensure that young people can see how their input informs real change, thereby strengthening trust and sustaining engagement over time. A young researcher explores these concepts by talking about their desire to be continuously included in processes following on from deliberation and dissemination. They recognise that impacts will take a while to be evaluated but want to be included in the process nonetheless:

> **"I understand it might take a while for things to get started, but it'd be nice not to be completely left out of that process."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

Recommendations: Evaluation

1 Agree a shared evaluation framework across services, drawing on successful models adapted for the local context. Build evaluation into the delivery process from the outset, with clear timelines, roles and budget lines agreed.

2 Embed evaluation throughout the delivery cycle, ensuring that time, resources and methods are in place to support ongoing, iterative learning from the start of the project through to its conclusion.

3 Adopt a multi-level focus in evaluation frameworks, capturing both individual outcomes (e.g. skills, confidence, wellbeing) and system-level change (e.g. influence on policy, service design or organisational culture).

4 Use mixed methods that go beyond participation or survey data, combining qualitative feedback from young people and stakeholders with quantitative measures. Qualitative data includes interviews, focus groups, narrative accounts, observation, creative methods and longitudinal tracking where feasible. Social media analytics can be used to support continuous improvement in dissemination.

5 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Involve young people as co-evaluators building on frameworks such as the Young Inspectors. This includes supporting young people to define success criteria, contribute to data collection and analysis and contribute to findings. This may include participatory analysis sessions, reflective interviews or peer-led evaluation tools, providing a structure for young people to hold decision-makers accountable for their agreed upon actions.

6 Develop templates and standardised tools (e.g. action-tracking templates) to monitor progress on recommendations and provide clear routes for young people to follow up on decisions.

7 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Make evaluation findings visible and accessible, ensuring that outputs are shared in formats that support dialogue with young people, service delivery partners and system leaders and are used to inform future planning.

Measures of Success:

- A shared evaluation framework is agreed by all partners before project delivery begins, which identifies key outcomes, change mechanisms and evaluation methods.
- Evaluation tools explicitly measure both individual development (e.g., skills, wellbeing, advocacy confidence) and system-level impact (e.g., policy change, service design influence, organisational culture change).
- Quantitative and qualitative (including creative) evaluation methods are deployed, with different types of data collection methods used across the project (e.g., interviews, surveys, reflective workshops, observation).
- Young people contribute to defining success measures and selecting or co-creating evaluation tools (e.g., survey questions, reflection prompts).

- Young people actively participate in data collection, analysis or reflection activities, contributing to evaluation outputs.
- Templates or standardised action-tracking documents are used to consistently monitor how recommendations are progressing and enable young people to follow up on actions.
- Evaluation outputs (e.g., reports, infographics, summary videos) are shared in youth-friendly formats and circulated to young people, service partners and decision-makers.
- Evaluation findings are used to inform ongoing adaptation during delivery, with documented examples of project or service adjustments based on evaluation feedback, including as a standing item on relevant boards and committees.

3.8 Reflection

Structured reflection allows young people, delivery teams and system leaders to build on success, address challenges, adapt approaches in real time and share learning. Reflection is integral to a process of continuous improvement and is therefore distinct from (and complementary to) formal evaluation which focusses on programme impact. Without space for honest reflection, opportunities for innovation and deeper learning are easily lost. Therefore, reflection must incorporate both what worked well and what could be improved. Failure to acknowledge and examine weaknesses is a barrier to innovation; Spada and Ryan (2017) found failures in democratic innovation are often under-reported in academic and practice literature, despite many initiatives falling short due to poor institutional embedding, limited follow-up or lack of political commitment. Embedding structured, cross-sector reflection mechanisms helps to counter this tendency, increasing learning and system resilience. Evaluating why stretch goals are not met should be seen as an opportunity for positive learning.

Young people should be supported to reflect on their experiences, skills development and areas for growth, through tools such as reflection logs, participatory feedback sessions or group review activities. Delivery teams should build reflection into regular supervision, peer learning spaces and facilitated review sessions. Some examples of reflections taken from some of our NxtGen researchers' reflection logs:

"I am also proud of contributing to something perceived as important as it is. I am also proud of my question as I have managed to find something I have an interest in that I believe could help people understand more about."

- NxtGen Young Researcher

"Seeing that everyone like listen actually listen and then take your ideas into consideration. It was quite rewarding knowing that we've done that."

- NxtGen Young Researcher

Reflection must also operate at a system level, creating opportunities for departments, delivery partners and governance bodies to review progress, share learning and adapt practices based on lived experience. Capturing co-production actions and lessons and ensuring these insights feed back into strategic planning and commissioning cycles can strengthen institutional memory and support continuous improvement.

Recommendations: Reflection

1. Reflection should include all of the components required to create an enabling environment. Identification of adaptations needed for future cycles should be carried out.

2. Build regular reflective activities into the youth voice experience, enabling young people to consider what they have learned, how they have contributed and what skills or confidence they have developed. Reflection logs, exercises to identify successes and areas for improvements, and participatory review sessions should be embedded throughout the programme, not only at the end.

3 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Offer multiple modes of reflection, recognising that young people have different preferences and needs. Options should include written, visual, audio or conversational formats, allowing for choice and accessibility.

4 **Recommendation from NxtGen Young Researchers:** Involve young people in shaping reflection processes, consulting them on what reflection activities are meaningful and how they would like their feedback to be used.

5 Create structured opportunities for reflection amongst delivery teams, including supervision, peer learning and facilitated review sessions. These should support both wellbeing and adaptive practice, enabling teams to make adjustments during delivery rather than only at project close.

6 Capture co-production actions and lessons formally, using templates or tracking tools to ensure that lessons from youth engagement are systematically recorded and feed into commissioning cycles, strategy documents and governance reporting. Ensure transparency around how reflection findings are used, sharing summaries with young people and stakeholders and documenting what changes have been made in response.

7 Normalise reflection on failure as well as success, through leadership and role modelling to create a culture where challenges are openly discussed and treated as opportunities for learning, as opposed to risks to be hidden.

8 Use reflection as a system-wide learning and accountability tool, creating opportunities for departments and delivery partners to consider progress, share insight and reflect on how youth voice aligns with wider strategic objectives as part of strategic planning and delivery cycles.

Measures of Success

- Reflection logs, review exercises and/or participatory feedback sessions are used regularly throughout the programme as well as formally at the end.
- Young people are offered a variety of options for reflection (e.g., written, visual, audio, conversational) to suit different preferences and access needs.
- Young people are consulted on what reflection activities are meaningful to them and feedback confirms they feel ownership over the process.
- Reflection outputs (e.g., logs, discussions) demonstrate that young people can articulate what they have learned, skills they have developed and contributions they have made.
- Scheduled supervision sessions, peer learning groups, or team debriefs are held at least once per project phase to support adaptive practice and facilitator development.
- Documented case study examples show how insights from youth or facilitator reflection have led to adjustments in programme delivery or facilitation approaches.
- Lessons and insights from youth engagement activities are formally recorded through templates or tracking tools, with clear documentation of how they inform strategy, commissioning or governance reporting. Summaries of reflection activities and resulting changes are shared with young people and stakeholders, promoting accountability and trust.
- Reflection records or reporting explicitly capture challenges, failures or areas for improvement, not only positive outcomes. These are role-modelled by leaders, who express what they have learned and what they would do differently.
- Reflections from youth engagement activities are recognised explicitly in organisational or system-wide planning, decision-making and review cycles (e.g., commissioning strategy updates, governance board reports).

4.0 Case Study in an Enabling Environment: NxtGen Research and Specific Service Recommendations

4.1 NxtGen research and development of the recommendations in this report

This report and the recommendations within it have been co-created with young people, commissioners and service providers in Southampton. The process by which they were co-created acts as a case study in how to create an enabling environment for youth voice. It illustrates a method of meaningful engagement and involvement that we suggest should be adopted by the planned Southampton Youth Voice Service.

The process builds upon University of Southampton's experience of developing and delivering the NxtGen Researcher Programme through the well-established LifeLab Programme. Co-created by young people and University of Southampton staff, the NxtGen Researcher Programme represents an innovative approach to research education. It is designed as a comprehensive training initiative that empowers young people to develop the skills necessary for conducting independent applied research. Grounded in solid pedagogical theory, the programme strategically combines evidence-based teaching methods with practical skill development to create an engaging learning experience that spans the complete research cycle. NxtGen young researchers ask and answer their own research questions, conduct rigorous research, and develop skills to advocate on issues they feel are a priority for them and for other young people.

The programme was originally developed as part of the UKRI-funded *Pathways to Health through Cultures of Neighbourhoods* project (*Pathways*) through the specialised expertise at LifeLab. Pathways brought together a Southampton-wide consortium of over 30 organisations with the city's young people to work on reducing health inequalities through community-led research. In this context, equipping young people with research skills had several purposes; The first was to enable them to carry out research with communities of young people that adults and trained academic researchers might otherwise not be able to

access. The second was to train young people in skills that would support their learning, academic achievement and ability to advocate. The third was to expand their social networks, including providing them with a network of contacts in decision-making roles in the consortium. Twenty young people were recruited as the first pilot cohort of the training programme in 2023 as part of the *Pathways* project.

The foundational training materials and framework were fundamentally transformed during the summer of 2023 through the direct involvement of young people employed specifically for this purpose. These young collaborators didn't simply refine existing content but actively co-created substantial new elements of the programme. They developed fresh activities, resources, and materials that brought authentic youth perspectives to the curriculum and ensured the programme truly resonated with its target audience, whilst maintaining its comprehensive scope and educational rigour. Through each delivery of the programme, modifications have been made to enhance the experience and impact of participation. The programme was formally launched at an event hosted by the University of Southampton at the Winchester Science Centre in March 2024.

Two further cohorts of young people were trained in 2024, one of which worked closely with the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care Board to co-produce their Youth Strategy as part of the NIHR *MOTH* and UKRI-funded *Rebooting Democracy* projects (2024-2025). The latter enhanced NxtGen programming by incorporating activities and opportunities to engage young people with policymakers more directly. With the collaboration of political scientists with expertise in policy deliberation, the programme was adapted and expanded to further develop the translation of young people's research into achievable policies for implementation via a co-design process with relevant policymakers.

The cohort of 16 young people recruited to the Southampton Youth Voice project is the fourth to experience NxtGen training. The focus of the young researchers was to develop recommendations for practice that would inform the specification of a Southampton Youth Voice Service, in particular ensuring that young people are actively involved in the service's operation and commissioning of activities. As part of this process, the young researchers also developed a series of service-specific recommendations which are reported below (Section 4.6, Table 2).

4.2 Planning the Southampton Youth Voice Project

Planning for the Southampton Youth Voice project and NxtGen training included partner meetings with SCC, SPP, Southampton HDRC, Southampton Voluntary Services and Testlands Wellbeing Hub. These centred around reaching consensus on project scope, aims and objectives, aligning expectations, developing an appropriate programme of work to meet agreed goals, funding and determining target groups for recruitment of young people. Regular steering group meetings were established to input on framing of the project, ensure policy buy-in and reflect on progress. The insights of young people developed in previous iterations of NxtGen also informed these conversations.

The Pathways Consortium provided third sector buy-in. Consortium meetings provided a space to discuss theories and practice of co-production, determine capacity of service providers and integrate cross-sector learnings in youth engagement. They were integral in outlining the project's scope and intentions to the young researchers throughout the programme.

The University of Southampton research team led on the creation and sharing of risk assessments and safeguarding protocols. Ethical approval was obtained at University of Southampton. Programme co-leads reflected on their current skills, experience and reviewed what they would need to successfully engage young people from specific backgrounds in this project. As a result, the team identified the need to further develop expertise in working with neurodiverse and SEND young people and put relevant support and training in place.

Top Tip:

Identify who is involved in facilitating an enabling environment for your project and involve them at the planning stage

4.3 Recruitment to NxtGen

SYV NxtGen researchers were recruited towards the end of 2024. In order to align with SCC service priorities and those of SPP, recruitment focused on care experienced young people, young carers, neurodiverse young people and those with SEND, ethnically diverse young people and those from SPP high IMD priority areas of the city.

Young people living or working in Southampton between the ages of 14 and 18 were invited to apply for a paid position as a NxtGen researcher. The advertisement was co-created with young people to appeal to the target groups and to ensure that the information they required was clear.

Top Tip:

Create youth-led advertising and disseminate through trusted channels

Figure 3: *The recruitment poster used to promote the NxtGen Researcher Programme (formally The Young Researcher Training Programme).*

Advertising took place through a range of channels and social media platforms. Advertising to target groups was mediated through third-sector members of the Pathways Consortium. Schools were engaged through LifeLab's established connections with headteachers and members of staff. NxtGen graduates from previous cohorts were vital in spreading the word in their communities and advocating for participation. Recruitment therefore drew on networks to meet young people where they are, instead of having them come to us.

As this was a paid opportunity with a limited number of places which required commitment over a number of weeks, a simple application process was put in place. This also provided young people with valuable life experience by modelling applications for education or employment. The application process was designed to be inclusive of a wide range of characteristics and needs. For example, audio applications were encouraged alongside written online formats.

A total of 74 applications were received. This demonstrates the desire of young people to get involved, the importance of value exchange, the role of peers and trusted adults (including teachers and youth workers). Reputable avenues of dissemination...ensured that young poeple had confidence that the offer was legitimate, encouraging action.

To ensure participation from our target groups, application review was based on a ranking system. This prioritised commitment over academic skills or previous experience, allowing those that face academic barriers an opportunity to be included. Four University of Southampton staff, one funder representative and two young people who are NxtGen graduates co-shortlisted the 74 applications based on the ranking system. For example, applicants declaring SEND were given a higher score than those that did not, creating a more equitable shortlisting process. In addition, effort was made to address the disparity between lower engagement of those that identify as men and the higher engagement of those that identify as women. Figure 4 demonstrates this disparity despite efforts to include more men. NxtGen graduates were key in identifying targeted recruitment strategies to entice male audiences to apply. Twenty-five young people were invited to interview. Four young people did not attend. They were contacted (along with their parents), giving them another opportunity to interview. From that group, one young person confirmed they would prefer to be interviewed online and this was accommodated.

The interview process was designed to build rapport amongst applicants and interviewers. To reduce stress an icebreaker such as 'research bingo' is an essential first activity. This was followed by a group discussion linked to the theme of youth voice, and lastly a short one-to-one interview. Previous NxtGen graduates facilitated group discussions and helped set interview questions.

A total of 16 young people were offered places on the NxtGen programme; this represents an increase of 4 more places than the 12 places originally planned. The enthusiasm and quality of applicants was so high that we wanted to offer the opportunity to as many people as possible. The young researchers were employed through the University of Southampton casual worker scheme for four hours a week; paying the young researchers properly encourages broad social and economic diversity by facilitating young people who would not otherwise be able to afford to take participate. It also gives the young people experience of the expectations and responsibilities of being an employee. Feedback from previous iterations of the programme has revealed the importance of financial value exchange to young people.

The 16 young researchers had the following characteristics:

- Six attended Woodlands Community College, four attended St Anne's Catholic Secondary School, two attended Richard Taunton Sixth Form College, two attended South Wiltshire Grammer School, one attended The Polygon School, and one was home educated.
- Three described themselves as care experienced / care leavers, one as a young carer, four had special educational needs (two of whom were neurodivergent) and one had a disability.
- Figure 4 reports self-described gender of the NxtGen researchers, evidencing the need to develop recruitment strategies to attract more men to the role.
- Figure 5 reports the age distribution of the NxtGen researchers on entry to the programme.
- Figure 6 reports the self-described ethnicity of the NxtGen researchers.
- Figure 7 reports the IMD (index of multiple deprivation) distributions of the NxtGen researchers.

NxtGen researchers self-described gender

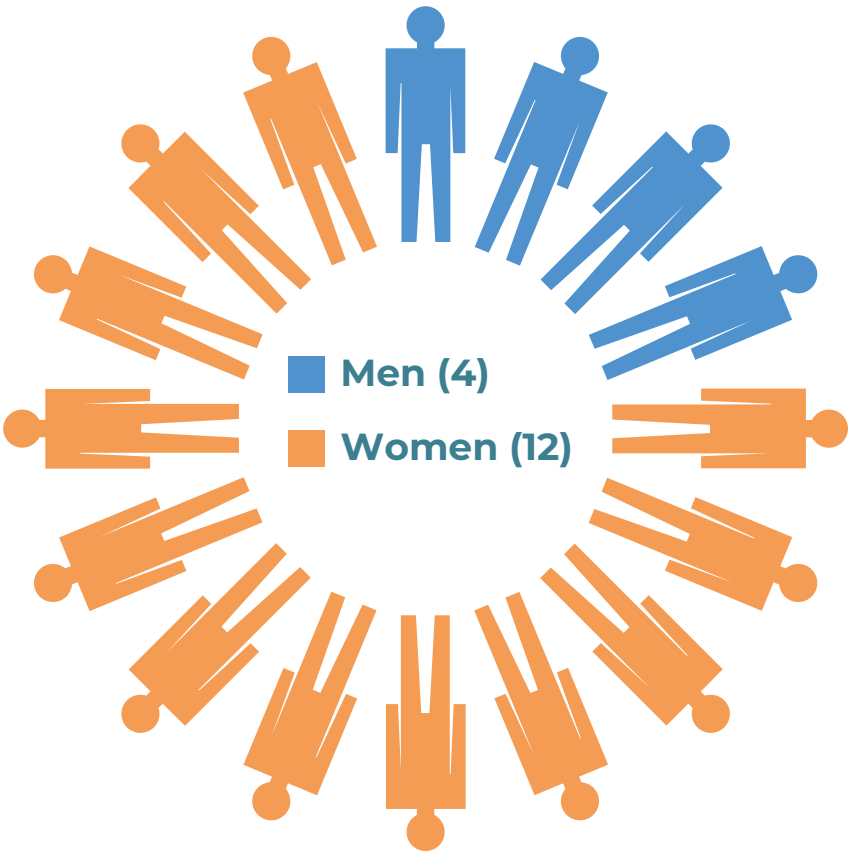


Figure 4: *NxtGen researchers self-described gender*

Age distribution of NxtGen researchers on entry to the programme

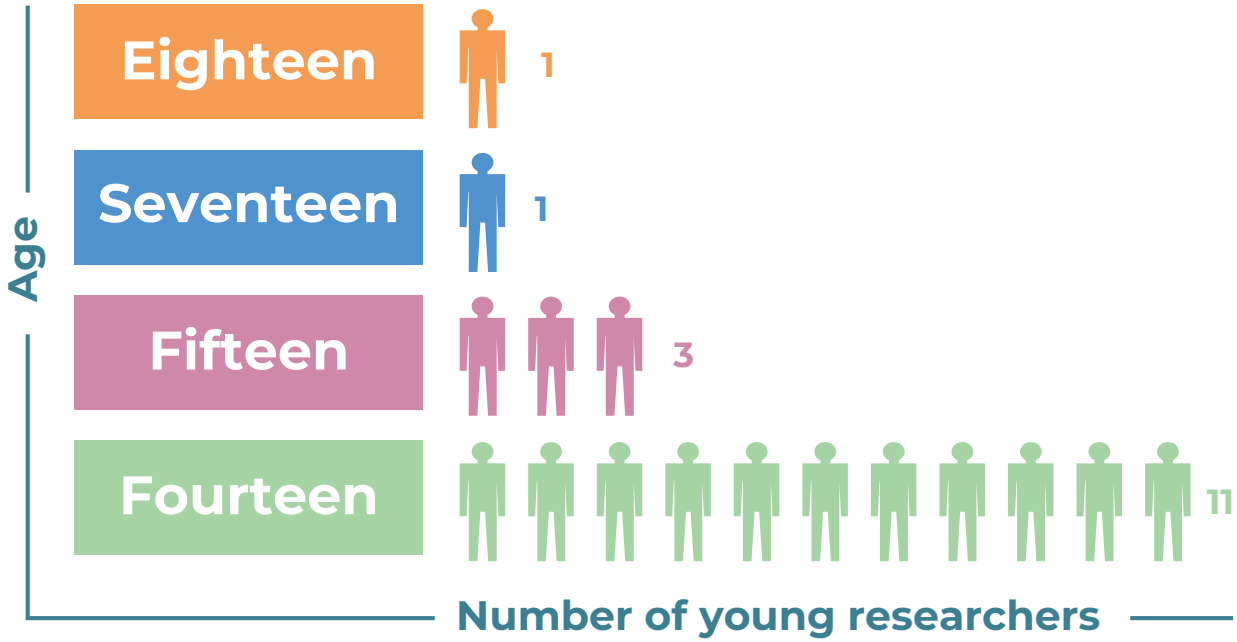


Figure 5: *Age distribution of NxtGen researchers on entry to the programme*

NxtGen researchers self-described ethnicity

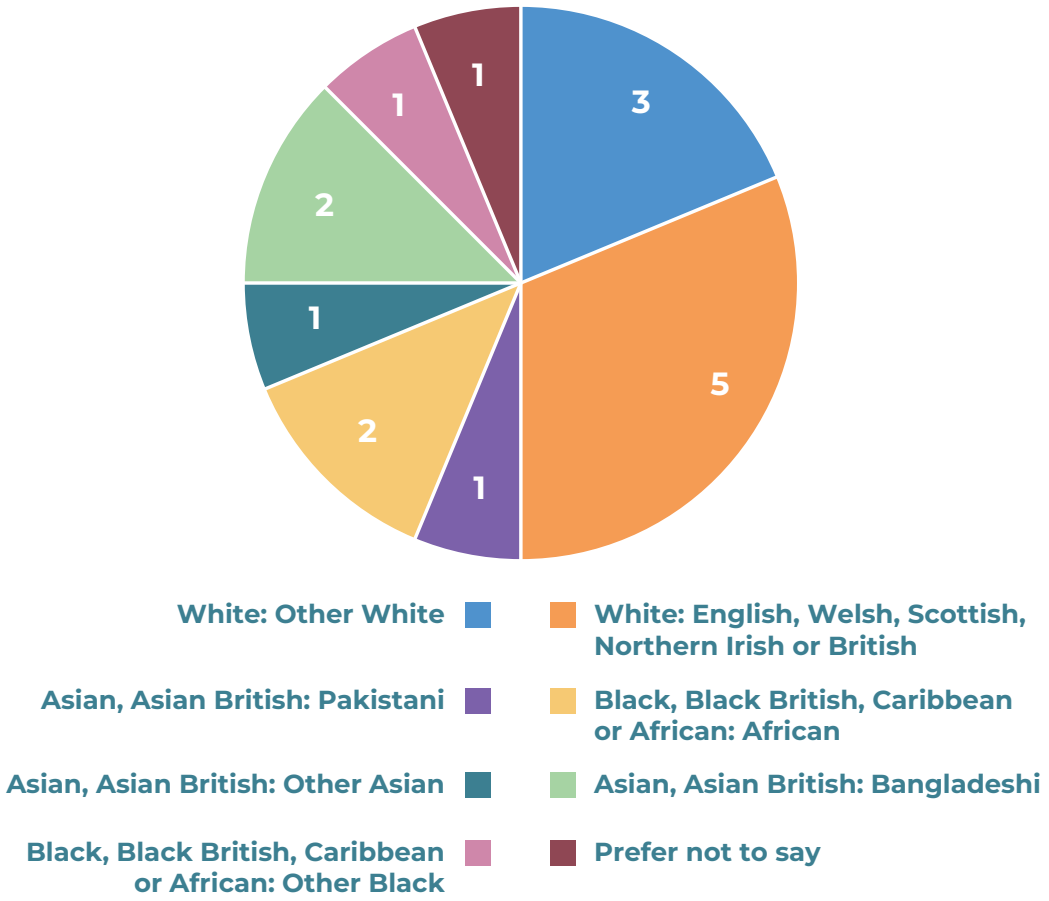


Figure 6: *NxtGen researchers self-described ethnicity*

Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) distribution of NxtGen researchers

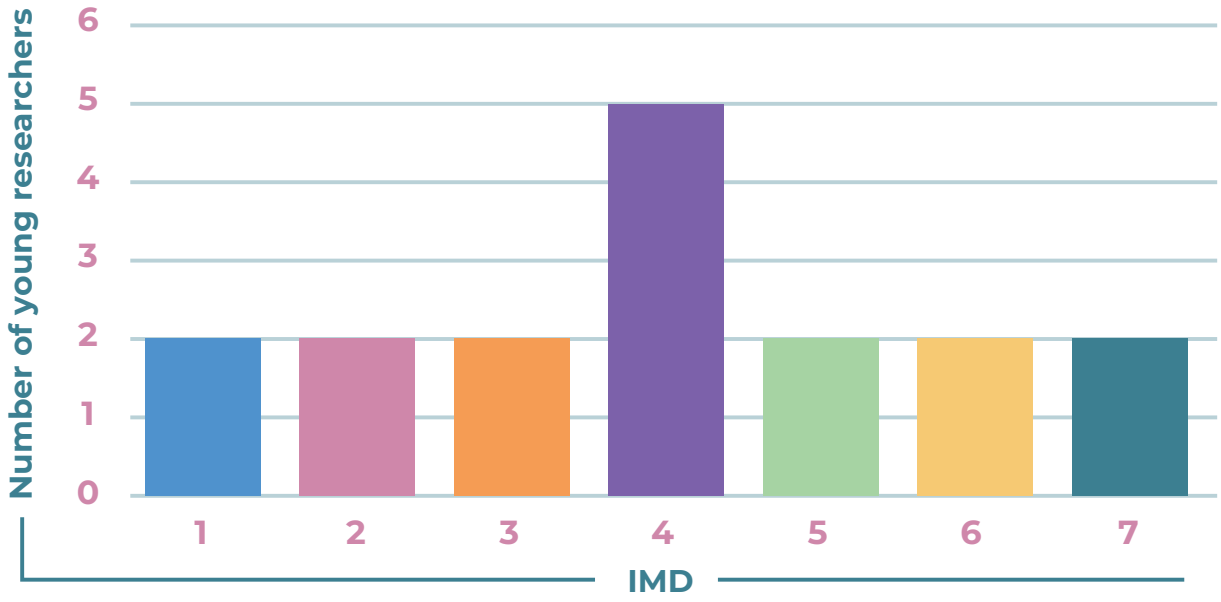


Figure 7: *IMD distribution of NxtGen Researchers*

4.4 Onboarding to NxtGen

Onboarding the NxtGen young researchers to the SYV project took place in December 2024. The team prioritised creating an environment centred on belonging and inclusion which responded to the individual needs of the young people. LifeLab's facilities, which were designed for young people, played an important role in creating a comfortable and safe space for the cohort to work in. They were able to take ownership of the space and see it as theirs. This, coupled with the consistency of using the same location every meeting, allowed young people to feel comfortable and confident. Following consultation with a specialist in engaging neurodiverse young people and building on learning from previous delivery of the NxtGen programme, we implemented the following onboarding actions:

- **Pre-session communication:** Sent welcome emails explaining what to expect, expressing enthusiasm, and setting up technical systems in advance to address any issues during the session.
- **Familiarisation:** Created walkthrough videos of the venue to reduce anxiety about unfamiliar spaces.
- **Inclusive arrival:** Met the entire group at the venue entrance to prevent anyone from getting lost or feeling forgotten.
- **Dietary inclusion:** Gathered dietary requirements beforehand and provided diverse food options (Halal, vegetarian, gluten-free, dairy-free) at all sessions.
- **Safe space:** Established a quiet zone with supplies like pens and paper where participants could retreat if feeling overwhelmed or needing a break.

Top Tip:

Focus on belonging and inclusion. Clarify expectations from both young people and adults and involve them at the planning stage.

The NxtGen programme involves weekly 2-hour in-person meetings and 2 hours of independent work caried out by the researchers. The first in-person meeting was crucial for setting the foundation for the rest of the sessions. The first activity was an icebreaker in which all young people and staff took part to build rapport. Following this, co-leads explained the programme, positioning young people as the centre of the project and ensuring they understood that they were our colleagues, and NxtGen Researcher was their job role. We emphasised the importance of communication and checking emails regularly. We explained how payment works - something that is new to many young people. Facilitators encouraged feedback (verbal, written or anonymous) and provided opportunities to access help through structured online check-in sessions every week. Young people were given the opportunity to ask questions, come to a consensus on 'session rules', decide on what they expected from co-leads and facilitators, and to talk to each other before any work began. Previous NxtGen graduates inspired the new group by sharing their work.

Socio-economic and cultural differences were considered from early in the programme. Where appropriate, young people were provided with iPads in the session if they did not have their own device or if they did not feel comfortable writing on paper. In this way we mitigated potential barriers to participation that have surfaced based on previous iterations of the programme. Facilitators honoured cultural diversity by encouraging use of the prayer room at times that were appropriate for the young people.

Representatives from SCC, SPP and organisations likely to be involved in delivering the Youth Voice Service were involved from the first NxtGen session, setting the scene for the NxtGen researchers and laying out what was required of them. Young people chose their research topics in the knowledge that their findings would be used to inform the development of a Southampton Youth Voice Service.

4.5 Activation: Delivering NxtGen

NxtGen training took place from December 2024 until April 2025 (inclusive) with breaks for half-term and school holidays. In-person meetings took place on a weekday evening to ensure that young people did not miss out on education or work. Safe travel to LifeLab was paid by the project, thereby facilitating young people's independence and ensuring that participation was not dependent on adult availability.

Top Tip:

Give young people autonomy and treat them as equals

The NxtGen programme trains young people in research skills by taking them through the research pipeline as they conduct their own research (Figure 8). In this way they can immediately apply learning to their own research projects. The 12 training sessions include: 'What is research?', 'How to be a reflective and reflexive researcher', 'Introduction to research methods', 'Research ethics' and advocacy training. It includes session plans, PowerPoint presentations, worksheets and videos. Case studies and content were adapted to reflect diverse cultures and contexts.

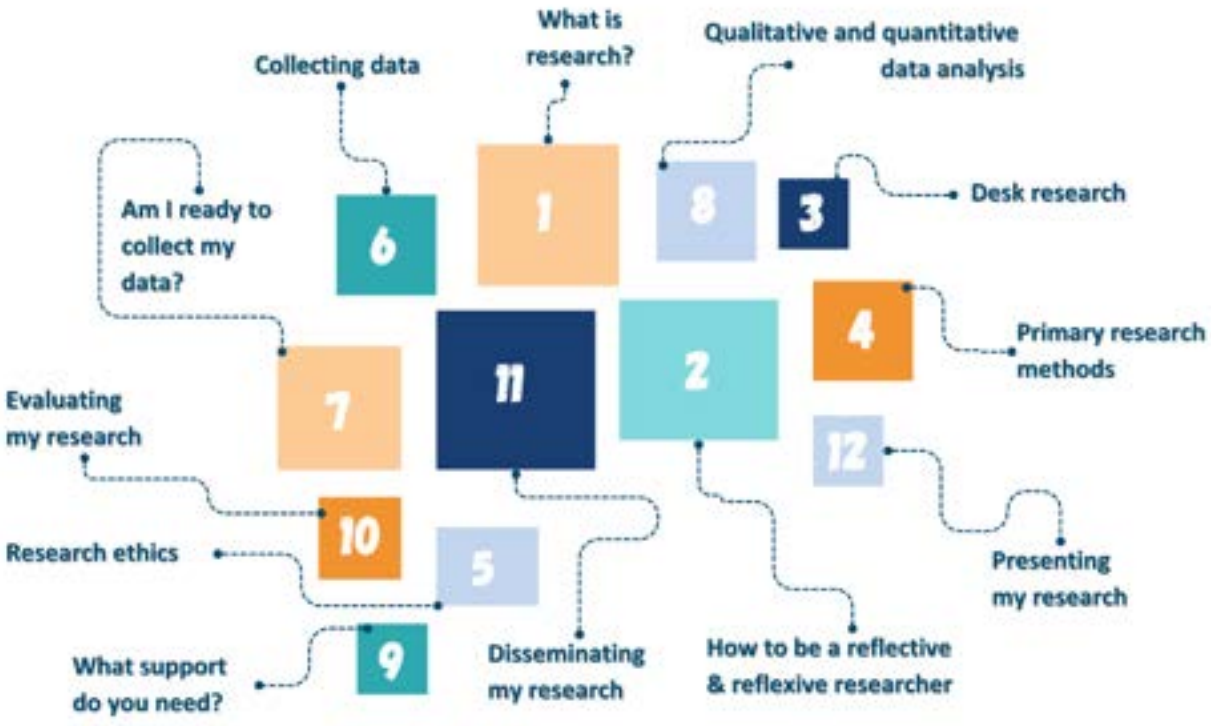


Figure 8: *NxtGen research training topics*

Young people were given autonomy to choose and shape their own research projects on a topic that was interesting and relevant to them, supported by NxtGen staff. Where necessary, consortium members brokered relationships to organisations and individuals who could assist NxtGen researchers in collecting data for their projects.

During the training, guest speakers and facilitators were invited to share expertise with the NxtGen researchers; involving relevant and passionate guests builds interest and expands young people's social and professional networks. Opportunities for experiential learning and practice were built into the sessions. Young people find it more engaging to actively learn. For example, facilitators set up mock surveys, focus groups and interviews where the researchers could practice interview skills. Similarly role-play scenarios were used to simulate real research challenges such as dealing with biased data and paperwork logistics (i.e., consent forms). Keeping all young people progressing at an equal pace involved constant monitoring and providing tailored support for students when needed. Dedicated members of staff observed each session to identify what needed to be improved each week. The team had a debrief immediately after each session to put action plans in place where young people needed extra support. This also supported staff development.

Facilitators shared weekly self-directed tasks via PowerPoint which included descriptive voice-overs on each slide, explaining the tasks in more detail. This allowed viewers to listen to the instructions, as well as read them. In addition, co-leads hosted a weekly online (MS Teams) check-in session for NxtGen researchers to ask any questions about the self-directed tasks or the upcoming session. This was particularly useful for those young people with additional needs. When students could not attend sessions in person due to sickness, but still wanted to be involved, they were offered the option of joining online and the laptop carried around the room by facilitators to ensure inclusion.

Young people were given autonomy over elements of their working environment and provided input via post it notes at the end of every session. In this way they could decide what foods they would like, what music they would like played during breaks, when their breaks should be and indicate which elements of the training that they are enjoying the most. Sessions were adapted in light of this feedback. For example, many young people expressed enjoyment of group discussions and activities were therefore adapted to include more of this.

Staff modelled kindness, active listening, understanding and enthusiasm throughout the programme, prompting similar responses in young people. Facilitators greeted all young people at the door, and they were offered drinks and food on entry. Staff interacted with all the young people throughout the sessions, thereby continuously building trust over the programme. Group collaboration was prompted by assigning the young people seating when they arrive. Seating plans changed each week. This gave the NxtGen researchers an opportunity to build connections with different people, thereby maintaining an inclusive group dynamic and building a cohesive cohort. Adults and young people were consciously integrated to avoid any division between the two groups. Adult guests were encouraged to mix-in with the young people's groups and youth voice was maintained by ensuring adult guests never outweighed the number of young people in the room.

Power sharing was explicit throughout the programme. Young people were treated as equals and were encouraged to communicate with staff as colleagues. Their opinions were valued and their insights sought throughout the programme. As a result of this environment, there was strong programme engagement, evidenced by an average 95% attendance rate.

4.6 Deliberative process: From Research to Action

The NxtGen programme culminated in a deliberative event – a Co-Production Jury Day with decision-makers held on 10th April 2025. This was designed to create a bridge between young people and decision-makers by creating the conditions to co-produce a series of recommendations that move young people's individual research into actionable recommendations for a Youth Voice Service. The format was based on well-established principles in the academic literature on deliberative democracy (OECD, 2020). It was structured to enable equity, representation and impact through structured dialogue and shared decision-making.

The deliberative model used in the SYV project had 10 steps (Figure 9). The first 5 steps involved preparation for meeting with decision-makers to ensure that young people entered the process as equals and as recognised knowledge experts rooted in NxtGen research. It included opportunities for young people to build confidence, practise articulating their positions and to critique each other's ideas in a supportive space. The second 5 steps took place within the co-production jury day itself.

Top Tip:

Invest time in planning and preparation. Deliberation is highly effective but needs careful planning and preparation so that young people enter the process as equals and concrete actions emerge.

Figure 9: *Summary of the principles of our Youth Jury model utilised to create actionable policy recommendations from young people's research findings.*

4.6.1 From Research to Recommendations: Preparing to Meet with Decision-Makers

The day before the event (9th April 2025), the 16 NxtGen researchers came together to develop recommendations for change based on the findings from their research. They were guided through a day of deliberations and discussions which began with idea generation. This produced a long-list of more than 100 possible recommendations arising from their research and experiences during the NxtGen programme. Facilitators combined and condensed these to a reduced list of recommendations. From this list, the young researchers discussed which of the recommendations they wanted to prioritise. They reached consensus on 14 draft recommendations to be presented and discussed with decision-makers involved in commissioning or delivering services to young people in Southampton at the Co-Production Jury Day. Each recommendation was allocated to a young person to advocate to decision-makers based on their research interest.

4.6.2 The Co-Production Jury Day: Meeting with Decision-Makers

Fifteen adult professionals, external to the University of Southampton attended the Co-Production Jury Day. Building and expanding upon relationships developed through the Pathways Consortium, they represented decision-makers responsible for commissioning and service delivery of a Southampton Youth Voice Service, as well as those responsible for services related to the NxtGen researchers' individual research topics. To ensure a balanced representation, the number of adult invitees was, where possible, matched to the number of early-career researchers in the programme. An additional 13 University of Southampton staff also attended in facilitation and / or research roles.

Name	Affiliation
Anne Hendon-John	Co-Director, Rethink Refresh
Counsellor Alex Winning	Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Learning, SCC
Debbie Chase	Director of Public Health, SCC
Hayden Collins	Health Determinants Research Collaboration, SCC
James McCombe	Service Manager, No Limits
Kerry Franklin	PIER Youth Service, Southampton Hospital, UHS NHS
Lee Timothy	Place Development Lead, Energise Me
Lizanne Smith Head	Senior Produce, ZoieLogic Dance Theatre
Luke Newman	Testlands Wellbeing Hub
Mike Harris	University of Southampton Civic Partnerships and former CEO Southampton City Council
Sam Cairns	Southampton Cultural Education Partnership
Sarah Jane Slark	Inclusion, Diversity and Participation Lead/Practice Educator, SCC
Simon Martin	Senior Community Safety Officer, SCC
Stuart Webb	Head of Quality Assurance at Southampton Children and Leaning Service, SCC
Tim Davis	Strategic Lead for Children's Care, H&IoW ICB

Table 1: *Names and affiliations of adult professional attendees at the Co-Production Jury Day*

Prior to the scheduled activities, NxtGen researchers held an informal poster conference. Upon arriving, decision-makers were encouraged to review the posters to get an idea of the research that had been conducted and to introduce themselves to the young people. The day formally commenced with an ice breaker activity to allow young people and decision-makers to form relationships before any collaboration began. A NxtGen researcher described the importance of building rapport prior to collaboration:

> **"At first my heart was racing. I was nervous to speak to them [decision-makers], but when I stood up and I did say hi and it made them laugh, it definitely made like a weight lift off my shoulders.."**
>
> **- NxtGen Young Researcher**

The ice breaker was followed by a facilitated research carousel. This gave decision-makers an overview of all the young people's research projects and findings, and provided context for later discussions on their specific recommendations. Adults and young people then split into separate rooms where they were both tasked to prepare for the youth jury portion of the event. Adults were presented with the list of 14 draft recommendations developed by the young people. The adults discussed the research findings and draft recommendations arising from them, identifying where and how they could move from recommendation to action. During this session adults were reminded to respond to young people in accessible and appropriate language. The NxtGen researchers prepared questions to ask the decision-makers to help inform implementation planning. Facilitators helped them to practise their arguments to ensure they were confident in speaking during the youth jury.

Figure 10: *NxtGen researchers discussing their findings with decision-makers during the research carousel*

A youth jury is a structured deliberative process that allows formal conversations between adults and young people on each recommendation. Each young person shared their recommendation and asked their prepared questions. Decision-makers responded to these, discussing how each recommendation could be taken forward or adapted in order to move it to action.

Figure 11: *Youth jury in action*

Following deliberation in the jury, the young researchers engaged in one-to-one action planning with an adult decision-maker working in a department or industry related to their recommendation. Together they finalised the recommendation, working together to collaboratively co-create an action plan for how, when and who should be involved in its implementation.

Figure 12: *One-to-one collaborative action planning*

The final 14 co-created recommendations for change are provided in Table 2. They include a number of service-specific recommendations, including how to provide more and better access to physical activity and culture, as well as recommendations for education and SEND provision. Cross-service recommendations include training in advocacy, mentors and role models, communication, spaces for young people, partnership working and accountability to young people as a vital element of an effective youth voice service. They form the core recommendations for the model for a Southampton Youth Voice Service described in Section 3 of this report, supplemented by additional recommendations that emerged during the co-production jury process.

1	Provide single gendered activities such as women-only gyms and sports, and a wider range of sports activities to girls in school. Advertise these through campaigns and pop-up sessions providing taster days/fun day events. Create safe, well-maintained spaces that are comfortable (not intimidating) to girls and women.
2	Translate into a variety of languages all documents sent to parents by schools to reduce barriers for parents for whom English is a second language. Increase parental awareness that sports participation can improve academic performance and support health and wellbeing.
3	Create partnerships between school and community organisations to promote activities that are inclusive of all. Facilitate constructive partnerships between schools and local organisations/community organisations to make a difference together, Young Southampton being one example.
4	Increase awareness of EDI and accommodate cultural / religious needs in schools, particularly in the area of dietary requirements.
5	Provide equal access to opportunities inside and outside of school, meeting the needs of the home educated and those with specific needs. Make educational support and taking exams free for home educated young people. Raise awareness of disparities in opportunities provided to those who are private, state and home educated, highlighting lack of equity in opportunities and aiming to reduce these inequities.
6	Offer low impact physical activities for those with specific needs, e.g. Crohn's or Autism.
7	Communicate opportunities to young people via reliable and trustworthy sources. Youth-led and youth-created advertising of opportunities through schools. In particular, advertising through social media should be targeted to young people through trusted youth organisations. Improve transparency by giving full and reliable information that is specific to the opportunity. One of these opportunities should be for mentoring.
8	Create safe spaces for young people where they feel comfortable happy and welcomed, sometimes with trusted adults in the space. Give young people a voice and input into what their spaces look like and the activities provided in those spaces. Free up spaces for young people, e.g. in closed-down shops. One site for a pilot of this kind of space might be the Portswood corridor.
9	Train teachers and staff inside and outside of schools on inclusivity, including training in providing sensory activities and programmes (sensory diets). Advocate for marginalised people such as those who are neurodiverse and people who require special considerations and have disabilities.
10	Provide diverse opportunities outside of sport, including cultural activities such as music. Partner with local bands for inspiration with community jam sessions and other activities to promote the benefits of making music. Encourage more young people to make music, balancing cultural activities against encouragement to take part in sport.
11	Offer advocacy training in schools delivered by professionals and supported by trained young advocates.
12	Increase the visibility and availability of role models, especially those from under-represented and marginalised groups.
13	Make sure that everyone has access to more mental health support. Signpost resources and help.
14	Design structures that enable young people to be heard but also hold adults accountable for the decisions they make in order to ensure that commitments to change are seen through. Do not ask young people to fulfil roles "just because". This is tokenistic engagement.

Table 2: *The final list of 14 recommendations debated and agreed by young people, commissioners and providers of services for children and young people in Southampton.*

4.7 Dissemination of NxtGen Research

NxtGen researchers were prompted to think about their dissemination pieces around halfway through the programme. This ensured that they had time to consider what information they would like to share and in what format. They were given several dissemination options to explore including academic-style posters, policy briefs, videos, presentations and theatre pieces. Presentation skills were also developed via a workshop delivered by Theatre for Life. In SYV project, the young people primarily chose to produce academic-style posters; these are particularly effective in conveying evidence to decision-makers. The young researchers were supported to create their outputs with facilitators offering feedback on how to improve content and structure. This cohort's final dissemination pieces will be published in a separate booklet, with its own DOI, ensuring that young people's contributions are recognised academically and making them available to wider audiences.

Top Tip:

Leverage networks to develop dissemination opportunities

The young researchers' posters were on display at the Co-production Jury Day, enabling decision-makers to further understand the NxtGen research outputs and to speak directly to poster authors. However, this is only one of several opportunities to present research findings. Throughout the programme, young people are supported to identify partners that they feel are well placed to carry their research and recommendations forward. For example, a NxtGen project focusing on the lived experiences of care leavers was connected to representatives within SCC Children and Learning Service. The young researcher has been invited to present her findings to the SCC Children and Learning Service Improvement Board. Similar opportunities are being afforded to young researchers via the Southampton Education Partnership and SPP, amongst others. Close communication with partners in the Pathways Consortium ensures that young people's outputs will be disseminated to the right people at the right time across a range of services, including sport and culture, education, SEND provision, corporate parenting and public health.

To support sustained engagement beyond delivery of the NxtGen programme, we have established a NxtGen Academy as a mechanism for maintaining connections with trained young researchers. Academy members, drawn from all NxtGen cohorts, opt-in to receive communications about further research and advocacy opportunities which are screened and shared by the project team. Young people are therefore able to continue to engage with trusted adults and to access further opportunities, including mentoring new NxtGen cohorts. This builds capacity in youth voice across the city. In this way, dissemination is understood not only as the sharing of outputs, but as part of a broader strategy for embedding young people's voices within ongoing systems of decision-making, community engagement and organisational learning.

4.8 Evaluation of the NxtGen Programme

The NxtGen training programme was evaluated based on a logic model, developed at project inception. A logic model assists in identifying the inputs and processes required to successfully deliver the programme of work, and links these to key outcomes to which appropriate qualitative and quantitative measures can be applied. This approach has enabled the team to identify potential impacts at multiple levels (Individual, community, institution), including potential impacts of practice and policy, and at a series of time scales (short, medium and long-term). Table 3 provides examples of outcome measures used to evaluate the NxtGen programme, including validated scales where appropriate.

Top Tip:

Use a logic model to help identify key outcomes at the start and match appropriate evaluation measures to these.

	Outcome of Interest	Measure / Method
Short-term outcome	Young people gain skills in applying and carrying out a job	Interview
	Young people have a source of income	Interview
	Young people acquire research skills	Research skills and confidence (Doolittle & Faul, 2013)
	Young people gain a recognised qualification	Longitudinal tracking
	Young people acquire new social networks	Social network analysis (Tuominen & Tikkanen, 2023)
	Young people begin to work with new people, places and organisations	Social network analysis (Tuominen & Tikkanen, 2023)
	Young people and decision-makers understand each other's perspectives	Interviews and observations
Medium-term outcome	Young people are more confident (self-efficacy)	Self-efficacy - a 10 item scale measure at start and end of the programme (Schwarzer *et al.* 1995)
	Young people's aspirations are raised and motivation to succeed	Plausible futures (Hutton et al. 2021) and aspirations - a 6-item scale to assess extrinsic future aspirations and intrinsic aspirations (Yamasaki *et al.* 2021)
	Improvement in wellbeing	Mental wellbeing - a 7-item scale to measure mental wellbeing (Clarke *et al.* 2011).
	Increased bonding and bridging capital and more connected to communities	Social capital network analysis (Tuominen & Tikkanen, 2023)
	Co-production of an actionable implementation plan	Thematic Document analysis (Abelson *et al.* 2003; Cairney *et al.* 2022)
	Issues raised by young people on local government and third sector meeting agendas and strategic documents	Participation in decision-making - a 10-item scale measure at start and end of the programme (O'Hare *et al.* 2016) Thematic document analysis (Abelson *et al.* 2003; Cairney *et al.* 2022); Interviews with decision-makers involved in the project or who have attended associated events.
Long-term outcome	Improvement in educational attainment and motivation to succeed	Intrinsic motivation - a 7-item scale to measure interest/enjoyment and a 6-item scale to assess perceived competence. (Ryan, Mims & Koestner, 1983)
	Young people in employment with a positive future	Longitudinal tracking
	Research and decision-making informed by young people	Interviews and thematic document analysis. Civic engagement using 14 item scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013)
	Change in budget allocation and commissioning of young people's services	Thematic Document analysis (Abelson *et al.* 2003; Cairney *et al.* 2022)
	Better services for young people	SCC and SPP evaluation measures

Table 3: *Example outcomes of interest and associated evaluative measures selected for the NxtGen ResearcherProgramme*

To evaluate individual outcomes for young people, a semi-structured pre- and post-programme interview guide was developed to assess changes in thinking, skills development, self-efficacy and aspirations. Each interview lasted 10 to 15 minutes. In addition, a pre- and post- programme social network mapping activity and survey hosted on Qualtrics XM was completed by young researchers at the same time as the interviews. For safeguarding purposes, evaluative activities, whether online or in person, took place in the presence of a facilitator.

Evaluation of policy and practice impacts necessitates on-going collaboration and communication with consortium partners and SCC. We keep an action-tracking log of impacts on policy and service delivery. This also ensures that young people can remain updated of any progress.

Findings of the evaluation are relayed back to young people and partners via email once results have been analysed and consolidated. Information is shared in a visual format and in accessible language.

4.9 Reflection on SYV NxtGen

The NxtGen programme integrates reflection throughout to support continuous improvement. We include a session focussed on the importance of reflection in research and each week the young researchers contribute to a reflection log (written or oral), documenting their research experiences. In addition, young people are encouraged to provide feedback via anonymous post it notes at the end of each session following the 'what went well' (WWW) and 'even better if' (EBI) format (Figure 13). They provide feedback on evaluation methods in interviews. We suggest that this approach can be easily adapted to other forms of youth engagement activity.

Top Tip:

Involve young people in reflection by encouraging use of reflection logs and regular feedback.

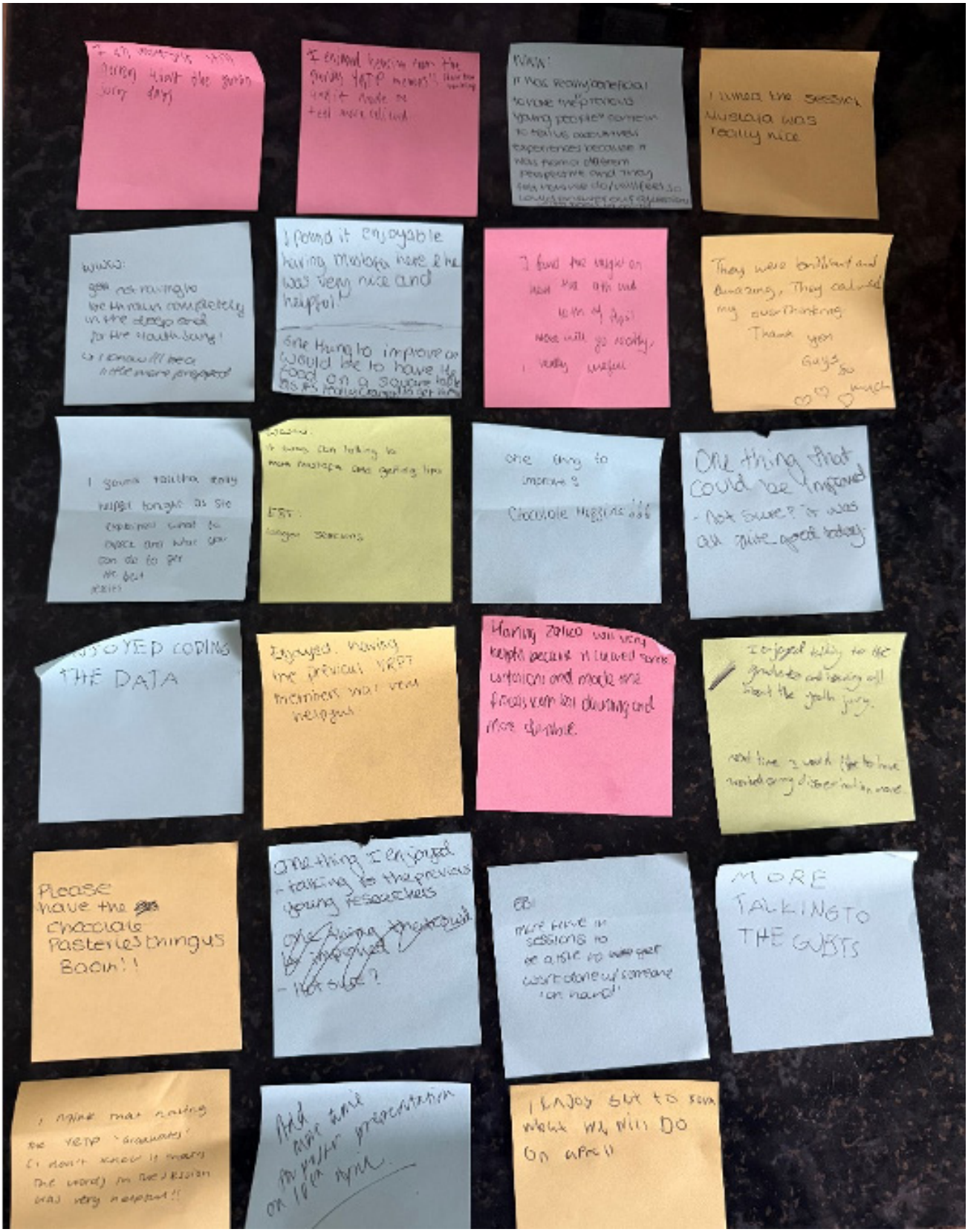


Figure 13: *Example feedback from young people obtained at the end of NxtGen session 11 using the format of what went well (WWW) and even better if (EBI).*

The delivery team has developed a structured mechanism to identify issues before they become problems and to reinforce good practice. Immediately after each session the research team reflect together on successes and failures, and what needs to be addressed for the next session. Observers are crucial to this reflection by providing an account of what they witnessed during training.

All feedback and observations are stored on a central MS TEAMs site to ensure iterative learning and that no information is lost between cycles or staffing changes.

Example reflections from this cohort and learning that we will take forward include:

- Youth-led communication: Involving young people in the design of recruitment materials makes them more relevant and effective.
- Develop recruitment through schools: the young researchers highlighted this as the best way to get information about the opportunity to young people in Southampton.
- Bring in decision-makers from the start to help frame the work and allow the young researchers to get to know them: This supports collaboration, data collection and gives everyone a stake in project outcomes.
- The effectiveness of peer mentoring: Young people appreciate the advice and experiences of their peers (they are 'closer to the ground' than facilitators). We will further embed mentoring of NxtGen graduates from the Young Researchers Academy in future iterations. This builds on previous learning in the importance of including NxtGen graduates in the application phase (shortlisting and interview), in inspiring new young researchers during onboarding, in sharing experiences of data collection, and in readying them for the youth jury.
- Assign seats to manage group dynamics and promote collaboration across the cohort
- Invite young researchers' friends to a data collection event: This creates a 'snowball effect' and promotes NxtGen opportunities beyond the current cohort.
- Engage schools earlier to ensure smooth data collection where young people are collecting data within schools.
- Match decision-makers to specific research projects in the deliberation phase.
- Allow more time to prepare dissemination outputs.

These learnings, and those from delivery of previous NxtGen programmes, inform the recommendations in Section 3 of this report.

5.0 Conclusion

This report sets out a framework for embedding an inclusive, impactful and sustainable Youth Voice Service. **We recommend that the principles and provision of an enabling environment should guide the commissioning of a Youth Voice Service in Southampton.** This is necessary to move beyond traditional consultative models and to embed genuine co-production and shared decision-making in the city.

The enabling environment model presented in this report identifies eight key components for success, from thoughtful planning and inclusive recruitment to skilled facilitation, two-way deliberative processes, integrated evaluation, effective dissemination and structured reflection. Throughout, emphasis is placed not only on participation itself, but on accountability, system integration and visible impact. **Building on local experience, national and international research and the insights of young people themselves, we provide a series of specific recommendations for each of these components to support creation of an enabling environment for youth voice in Southampton.**

The report's findings demonstrate that **meaningful youth engagement requires coordinated infrastructure, investment, partnership and deliberate attention to using education-informed approaches and widening participation, along with deliberative engagement, system-level embedding and a sustained commitment to valuing young people as equal partners.** Without these foundations, youth voice risks being disconnected from change processes, underpowered and ultimately eroding trust among young people.

For Southampton to build on its past successes and realise the full potential of a Youth Voice Service, cross-sector collaboration, long-term investment and high-level leadership commitment will be essential. The recommendations outlines provide a roadmap for action. If implemented collectively, they will position Southampton as a leading example of how to embed young people's expertise, priorities and aspirations at the heart of city-wide decision-making now and in the future.

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Useful links and resources

https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki

Co-Creating Tomorrow - Our City, Our Say: Report and Recommendations of the Southampton Youth Voice Project

ISBN:

Electronic: 978-1-912431-45-8

Print: 978-1-912431-46-5

Published by the University of Southampton, 2025

Supported By

SOUTHAMPTON INSTITUTE FOR ARTS AND HUMANITIES

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