

# **Young People and Participation: Making it Real**

**Monday 15<sup>th</sup> – Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> December  
2025**

**A St George's House Consultation**



## Contents

Summary .....	3
Background .....	3
Approach and Purpose.....	4
Structure and Topics .....	4
Day 1: .....	4
Session One: The why .....	4
Session Two: The pervasive issues.....	4
Session Three: What matters most.....	5
After dinner speaker .....	5
Day 2: .....	5
Session Four: Considering impact .....	5
Session Five: Where next? .....	5
Why do we care about young people’s participation? An honest reflection. ....	5
The Issues: What is participation up against?.....	8
Getting Comfortable with Uncomfortable: Participation with Consequences.....	14
Impact .....	17
Actionable Steps .....	18
Reflections on the Consultation.....	19
What Young People Told Us.....	20
Fear, Honesty and Adult Control .....	21
Who Took Part: Our Young Consultants .....	22
Annex: Participants .....	23



## Summary

In December 2025, the consultation at St George's House met to discuss 'Young People and Participation: Making It Real'. Rather than tackling specific issues and solutions, the group focused on honest, uncomfortable conversations about the current effectiveness of their organisations and how to better include young people. CEOs, funders, policymakers, governance leads, participation specialists, practitioners, researchers and advocates shared their struggles and wisdom.

Key issues mentioned regarding youth participation:

1. 'Youthwashing' on trustee boards where young people are given separate boards and used as spokespeople rather than included as equal partners and selected for their specialist skills.
2. Secrecy within the sector leads to wasted resources through competition and a lack of shared wisdom.
3. Youth participation is not yet integrated into most organisations. This is reflected in attitudes towards it as 'repetitive' and 'messy' rather than a consistent requirement (like marketing or fundraising). Young people feel unwanted as a result.
4. Professionalising of young people when the same groups are selected. This could lead to mirroring and neglects the needs of young people (such as enjoyment and prioritisation of other aspects of their schedules).

The main conclusion of the consultation was that collaboration across the sector offers exceptional opportunities for improvement and prevents organisations from wasting resources both for supporting young people and for productive youth participation. This collaboration should be defined by mutual honesty, vulnerability, accountability, and an appreciation that those across the sector want to make the world a better place. It could look like creating more spaces for protected, open sharing, shared databases, sharing successful processes, and informing each other about bids to prevent wasted resources through competition.

Other actionable steps to improve youth participation included, integrating trustee boards that prioritise age diversity and recognise the skills of young people; reframing youth participation as a legal rights requirement that is also vital for efficiency rather than simply a "nice thing to do"; and decision-making that puts young people and decision-makers in the same space.

The consultation plans to meet again with young people. They invite those who read this report to use it to improve their youth participation and contribute to the discussion.

## Background

It was estimated by the group at they shared over 200 years of experience working with young people and shaping systems which impact them. This first consultation did not include young people to allow those attending to have frank discussions about where their organisations are struggling or succeeding. The decision was made on the understanding that this would clear the way for focused conversations at the next consultation which will include young people.



## Approach and Purpose

The group dedicated two days at St George's House for focused idea-sharing on 'what it actually takes to make youth participation real'. Members of the consultation noted that this time was exceptionally valuable for them, leading to stronger connections between organisations and new approaches to youth participation.

Members, including the keynote speaker and co-chairs, stressed what made this consultation different from previous gatherings on the topic was not only *who* attended, but *how* it was held. The group gave each other the following permissions:

- Permission to be honest
- Permission to feel uncomfortable ('Have you ever not acted on information from a young person?' 'Have you ever said no to a young person?')
- Permission to admit where participation is not working
- Permission to celebrate recent successes and specialisms of their organisations ('What are you proud of?' 'What is going well?')
- Permission to prioritise discussion over problem-solving ('slow cook' rather than finding 'fast food' solutions)

Members found that the prioritisation of honest, uncomfortable discussion in a safe space (which followed Chatham House rules) contributed to unexpected progress. A key solution which members reached to many of the challenges they discussed was collaboration between organisations. A part of this desired collaboration was open conversations between leadership about struggles and solutions.

Although the group encouraged each other to be fair about the positive steps made by their organisations and good intent they have, the consultation 'was not positioned as a celebration of youth voice but a reckoning of what it takes to make participation real – particularly when it disrupts adult comfort, systems and power.'

One of the co-chairs began by asking the group to reflect, share and possibly self-criticise during the consultation and to take a collaborative, relaxed, comfortable approach. This person also noted that youth participation was increasingly topical considering the recent Government announcement of its National Youth Strategy.

## Structure and Topics

The group stayed in one shared space, regularly breaking into flexible groups or one-to-one conversations based on prompts to discuss preprepared questions or develop further on new ideas. The consultation sessions were split up into the following sections:

### Day 1:

#### Session One: The why

- Why do we care about young people's participation?
- Why do we prioritise participation and how does it make us feel?
- What are the problems that young people's involvement is trying to solve?

#### Session Two: The pervasive issues

- What are the barriers to meaningful participation of younger people in our organisations?



- What are the default positions and inhibitors?

#### Session Three: What matters most

- What is "good" youth involvement and how do we know it?
- Is our sense of "good" the same as young people's?

#### After dinner speaker

- "Comfortable with the Uncomfortable: The Future of Youth Voices"
- Led by a member with experience in youth engagement and consultation.

## Day 2:

#### Session Four: Considering impact

- What measures should we use to assess the impact and change that comes from young people's involvement?
- Can young people see the change in us as much as we do in them?

#### Session Five: Where next?

- What are the actions we will take to ensure that young people's involvement is meaningful?
- Who can we ask to help us on this continuing journey?

Conversations also continued over meals and breaks, which are an important part of the St George's approach to 'nurturing wisdom through dialogue' in a supportive, relaxed environment.

#### Why do we care about young people's participation? An honest reflection.

The consultation began with a group discussion regarding the reasons they care about youth participation. The popular phrase 'young people are the future' was unanimously banned as one individual pointed out that children live in the present. Members wished to avoid overenthusiasm for lifting the voices of young people when they already have a voice. It was also noted that the definition of age varies for people with significant learning disabilities.

A member of the consultation highlighted that it is not simply a 'nice' or useful thing for organisations to do but a right enshrined in the UNCRC, 2004 Children's Act and ECHR. There was concern from the group about a current climate that pushes back against Human Rights and avoids conversations about them. Another member emphasised that the Rights of the Child are *rights* not *privileges*. This approach to *why* was one of the most impactful parts of discussions. Many members mentioned it in the closing comments of the consultation. They reflected upon its importance for explaining the necessity of youth participation to funders, commissioners, and members of their organisations.

A recent quote taken as part of the Scottish Youth Parliament Manifesto was given by a member of the group:

"Parents don't want us inside and nobody wants us outside."

This view was also provided by the keynote speaker who quoted a different young person as saying:

"Adults say they want our voice... until we use it."



The keynote speaker explained that this was not presented to the group as a critique of intention but a challenge to adult systems, behaviours and power. They stated that "The problem is organisations and cultures that are not prepared to be changed by the people they serve.

When asked about their hopes for the consultation, members explained that they hoped to address issues and create new opportunities for youth participation so that "what happens here" is relevant to young people going forwards. They also wished to challenge the idea that it is hard to maintain levels of participation when repetition is a part of all types of work (like marketing or fundraising).

Within this discussion, a member pointed out that those involved with youth participation and serving young people can often aim for an objective truth which they seek through scientific methods and subsequently apply social policy. These policies have varying results when applied to "the real world of young people" rather than the "world of policy." It was agreed by the group that there is a multiplicity of 'right approaches' to youth participation which became another core perspective of the consultation. Members of the group regularly noted that the organisations present take very different approaches and so there should not be a focus on specific answers to issues but potential ones. This difference was considered valuable for sharing ideas during the consultation and after it.

Other key reasons given by members of the consultation were:

- Youth participation helps families and those around children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to 'lean in' and recognise the ways that those children can express themselves and communicate.
- Promotion to leadership roles creates distance from the young people organisations serve. One member explained this gave him "staler" stories and references that weren't up to date with needs of children in the present.
- Young people are part of society, which needs to serve everyone.
- Young people, and especially young women, are heavily impacted by the development of technology when it comes to their safety. An individual noted that "Californian values", particularly regarding freedom of speech are driving "everything".
- The development of social media and other technologies provide young people with "fewer spaces to be themselves and meet new people" due to echo chambers created online and a surveillance culture.
- The attitude towards "a lot of things" would benefit from young people due to their diverse views and better understanding of technology than many people older than them.
- The "No Child Left Behind" principle.
- Barnardo's has accounts from children that date back to the charity's founding 160 years ago. Those accounts detail the experiences of children that made them eligible for a place in a children's home. One member explained that these origins continue to drive the organisation.
- Young people bring agency and inspiration to a room when they have agency.
- Youth participation leads those around young people to realise how systems fail them.
- Empathy for the feelings of young people in a world where adults make decisions for them.



- Young people should be beneficiaries first in practice as well as in theory.
- The Victorian principle of "seen but not heard" has been passed on generationally.
- Young people often express that systems are not getting it right for them. Important passages of childhood are lost in the process, particularly for young people with health issues. They feel like the world is failing them.
- Young people have a right to thrive.
- Young people know what needs to be fixed. They should be amplified and they need to be in the driving seat.
- Systems of support can alienate young people.
- Young people are often not consulted in policy.
- Young people need partnership, support, guidance and a voice for entry into adulthood. One individual pointed out that mistakes are critical for development in youth.
- Young people feel that their presence can be unwanted by adults inside and outside their homes.
- Organisations rely on the feelings and experiences of young people to influence and encourage people to care more about them.
- Getting young people involved in research is powerful, such as in the creation of social policy that can function in the "real world".
- It is impossible to bridge the knowledge gap without young people, especially when it comes to getting them to participate in the services offered by organisations.
- An equal footing and equal numbers in participation between young people and adults has the most impact for efficiency and change within organisations.
- Young people have different forms of knowledge, including how to adapt to AI and safeguard against its potential risks.
- Young people should be part of the decision-making process.
- Smaller organisations find it easier to include young people in participation, but it becomes more of a challenge as they grow.
- There are limited groups of young people that leadership get to meet so there is a need for increased work and investment to fix the issue.
- It can be hard to keep skills within organisations modern and up to date compared to young people.
- Children are ambitious which helps in governance where people can become jaded. For example, those in governance understand the nation in a very vertical way (through statistics) whereas children's experience is in a flat way (through what they experience and what impacts them).
- Data is helpful but young people can be left out of statistics. For example, The Children's Commission found that a 15-year-old boy in an institution for youth offenders was being denied food as a punishment.
- Young people can offer a strong challenge to data-led approaches which is especially helpful in governance. For example, the Children's Commission tried to explain to Google that pornographic material was available on YouTube, although it did not appear in Google's data. A young person was able to speak with total candour and easily prove that the material was accessible.
- Young people need more support and leadership. It's impossible to provide without listening to them.
- Simply to get young people outside, having fun, in a world where their phones are increasingly addictive, which requires their input.



Some key quotes from members about why they care about young people's participation included:

- "Nothing about us, without us."
- "Children know their lives and what would make a difference to them. They express it differently because they're not stuck in the systems that we are."
- "I can't assume years of experience make me relevant. [Caring] prevents me from saying 'I've been here before. I've done it before.'"
- "I need the voice of a young person ringing in my ear."
- "Society needs to work for everyone."
- "We care because it's their right and our legal duty."
- "Why wouldn't you care?"
- "If I were a young person, I would be frustrated at adults deciding for me."

The group summarised the reasons they care about youth participation as:

1. Rights
2. Agency
3. Opportunity

In the closing comments for the session, the group concluded the following:

For those present, youth participation is moral and efficient, based in respect and enthusiasm. While the group is passionate about youth participation, their approach to it should focus on a belief in the legal rights and duties owed to young people. Young people are not there to answer our questions but to define them. Society needs to work for everyone. Children are not the future but the now. Young people have value as thinkers at all levels, such as health, politics, technology and social care. Youth participation has to be real and embedded within organisations. Currently, participation exists within a formal, adult-created structure with adult-created expectations at different stages of their lives.

These closing comments, particularly about adult-created structures help to facilitate the next session on issues. The co-chair noted positively that members were already offering provocations to each other. This person noted that they want to encourage it as part of the consultation's aims of honesty and vulnerability.

### The Issues: What is participation up against?

The co-chair overseeing the second session began by calling for openness and asking, "What is your organisation struggling with?" Members discussed some of the issues they face, such as:

- Who determines transitional periods? Young people can suddenly find that they are adults without the support they previously relied on. For example, 27-year-old elite athletes are unable to advocate for themselves after a sheltered youth.
- The world has changed so quickly.
- There is a common belief that participation is messy, but it isn't.
- Bureaucracy and involving young people in it. Telling them that change is fast can set them up for huge disappointments later in life.
- The same young people are brought to participation events which makes those young people more detached.





- Not everyone puts themselves forward for participation.
- Young people are vulnerable. Organisations need to be clear about what power and influence they have.
- Sometimes young people don't show up to participate.

One individual shared four points, based on their experience, which they believed would be valuable to the group:

1. Their organisation has its origins in Victorian Christian philanthropy and the views of a middle-aged, white, Victorian man. "This seeps into what we've been." For the past 20-30 years, this organisation has "done a lot of apologising" but the individual still maintains that even 160 years ago, the organisation had the intent of putting the child at the centre of its work. The organisation needs to reflect the modern concept of having a voice, while staying informed by its history.
2. There is an inevitable tension brought by the needs of charities for funds. The appeal a charity makes for funding requires the voices of young people but asking them to contribute to a persuasive narrative might not always align with what they believe or wish to say.
3. The individual sees the same young people, who are offered all kinds of opportunities (like roles as ambassadors, advocates and spokespeople). This professionalises those young people. They may develop these opportunities into a career. "But why were those young people chosen? Are they mirroring us?"
4. "The repetition [of youth participation] is endless." This is a difficulty for governance as people often say, "We've heard this before, haven't we?" They fail to recognise that new young people are saying what they might have heard before. Those young people might also contradict what has previously been said. There is a tension between cumulative experience and fresh, broad experience. "Authenticity isn't polished, but it might become polished from young people who have been in our systems long enough."

The consultation then broke into smaller groups for discussion. Some of the issues mentioned included:

- Children feel unheard.
- Leadership promotions cause distance from young people.
- 'Youthwashing' where young people are brought out to speak at conferences but an organisation may not have properly embedded youth participation into their work, or young people are included in trustee roles but they are badly planned (for example, the target audience of an organisation might be older but young people are used as spokespeople on the misguided belief that it will draw the target audience), or young people are not included in trustee roles at all.
- Communicating with and engaging funders, commissioners and politicians.
- Maintaining levels of participation (young people have busy schedules and cannot attend or cannot commit to long-term participation) and young people wanting different outcomes to leadership (for example, they may wish to have a fun experience or make a step that benefits their careers).
- Issues with terminology.
- Adult-created environments, questions and expectations.



- A need to set realistic expectations with young people about the time it takes to make progress and the restrictions of funding. Young people require training and parameters. Building genuine, honest feedback mechanisms is difficult.
- Putting young people on boards can put them in an unfair position of responsibility.
- Charities are regulated.
- An organisation which helps young people find work collaborated with companies which have complex moral implications, such as impacting the environment or manufacturing arms. Young people in the organisation felt let down and frustrated. A member of this organisation said it was difficult to explain the trade-offs they had made to young people. This was echoed by members working in areas like youth sport.
- Sometimes the most vocal voices can end up with the most sway, in terms of youth participation and beyond.
- Youth participation is seen as a burden because it requires repetition. Most work requires repetition which shows that people have a different attitude to the value of youth participation and it is not properly integrated into systems.
- It can be hard to properly fulfil rights.
- Youth participation is easier for smaller organisations.
- A one answer approach based in a scientific method doesn't apply to all organisations equally.

Many members discussed issues they faced with trustee boards. An initial issue is a lack of age diversity on boards. This could even be a lack of people in their 30s. One member expressed that any diversity would be positive and an incremental approach could be beneficial where boards are encouraged to think in terms of decades (reducing the average age in stages) rather than immediately introducing young people. The individual noted that it is trustees who can be shamed or inspired into action, but it is much easier when they come up with the idea of youth participation on their own. A member of the group expressed that trustees can forget children exist if they don't see them, despite representing children's charities. There is a need to challenge and engage boards, which is a wider governance issue as "big charities have big boards". It was noted that young trustees are effective at challenging boards. In turn, children who interact with boards become less intimidated by the systems which impact them.

Another issue that was noted was the lack of integration regarding young trustees. Some organisations have a trustee board and a young trustee board which creates inequality and reduces the sharing of ideas. Even when organisations have young trustees, these roles can contribute to 'youthwashing' as they are treated as ceremonial and young people are used as spokespeople at conferences but not heard beyond these kinds of events. Similarly, some boards can want young trustees because they consider youth participation to be a 'shiny' new idea without considering what specialised skills young people have. In such cases, the organisation's target audience might be over a certain age, but young people are used as spokespeople under the assumption that this will increase draw.

One member expressed that they decided against young trustees because it conflicted with the rights of young people to safety despite their rights to expression and information. They explained that children cannot be held liable for their mistakes, and yet they can be given responsibility for financial or security issues. While children should not be forgotten, they shouldn't be burdened with damage to a charity. This person recommended a scheme of delegation which focused on the question, 'What



can be meaningfully delegated?" This was controversial to some of the group, with one person stating that it's okay for children to step into risky spaces. This conversation was also connected to discussions about over-professionalising young people. One member asked, "what is paternalism and what is advocacy?" Another stated that it must be a matter of the right young person at the right point.

A different member stated that youth participation will always hold the risk of damage to an organisation, but in any organisation, boards, leadership and team members bring the risk of damage. It was noted that children cannot be held accountable, but leadership and governance are frequently held accountable for mistakes made by those in their team. This concept was mentioned in the keynote session when a member noted that it is necessary for leadership to say no to young people in the same way that it is necessary to say no to their team. During the 'What Matters Most' session, a member of the group commented, "You can't just participate for the good stuff. You have to involve young people when things go wrong as well." They gave examples of fire damage or cyber-attacks which young people would also have to navigate in participation roles. It was suggested that "Too much safeguarding risks tokenism." In the same session, another member expressed the importance of creating opportunities to be in safe environments with young people with basic activities that explore risk in a safe way.

It was also recognised that young people cannot always be informed of immediate or day to day decisions until after they have been made by an adult in an organisation. A member pointed out that this relates to 'culture', stating that "my young people shouldn't be surprised by a decision I make" because the individual should be acting in a way which reflects shared values and goals. Members who were not concerned with the liability of young people suggested that this could be a difference between statutory and youth work. Another member noted that many of the organisations present have a macroeconomic impact and they accept responsibility for it.

It was also noted that closing feedback loops should be an ethical minimum. Young people provide their time, intellectual property and experience which requires clear information on what actions have been taken in response and why some actions were not taken despite feedback.

Regarding saying no to young people, discussion from across both days can be summarised in the following way:

1. Participants acknowledged that not all asks made by youth people can be acted upon.
2. There was strong agreement that saying no should never cause harm, disagreement should not feel like rejection and system constraints are an adult responsibility.
3. To achieve this there must be clear expectation-setting, shared principles, trauma aware practice standards, and vulnerability.

The consultation then shared what they had discussed in their groups:

- The consultation agreed that it was reassuring that they have many shared issues.
- Youth governance was a repeated issue.
- There is not one correct approach to youth participation, and it cannot be done in an instrumentalist way.



- For lots of people, youth participation is a small part of an organisation rather than integrated into it.
- Listening and responding should be at the core of organisations.
- Youthwashing is a barrier to participation, but it is hard to call out. This keeps adults comfortable.
- Youth participation requires constant learning and adaptation which isn't aligned with current processes of sticking to budget cycles and strategies.
- Exercises around purpose and history would benefit teams. One member noted that the original Victorian accounts of children helped by their charity were used in an internal exercise. Team members believed they were modern accounts since the issues of clothing, housing and food remained the same. This motivated the team in their shared purpose. They highlighted this as an instance where repetition can be a powerful driver.

During the keynote session the consultation shared further issues. A major part of this discussion was secrecy among different organisations within the sector. This perceived issue formed a key part of the consultation and the progress it made. Members agreed that a cause was a lack of resources and infrastructure for consortiums as well as a fear of vulnerability. It was also agreed that organisations should open the door more to avoid researching on their own or relying solely on the research of another organisation which might not be tailored to their needs. One member pointed out that it is important to recognise when another organisation would be better suited to help, for example local organisations might be able to meet more of a young person's needs. Another member drew attention to the homelessness charities who set up a separate organisation as a coalition to focus on a specific issue. This solved issues of time management and people power.

The keynote speaker summarised the session on issues in the following way.

A set of adult-made barriers were named openly and without defensiveness:

- Participation shaped around adult planning and funding cycles, not young people's lives
- Reliance on the "same" young people because it feels safer and easier
- Governance structures that replicate adult models because they are convenient
- Youth involvement that requires permission rather than being structurally embedded
- Fear of risk, loss of control or reputational discomfort
- Restricted funding landscapes that force competition over collaboration
- Performative participation driven by optics rather than influence
- Difficulty owning when organisations have "got it wrong"
- Compassion fatigue and participation burnout — in adults *and* young people

A critical insight emerged:

**"Many of the barriers we describe as inevitable are, in fact, choices."  
What Matters Most?**

The consultation divided into those involved in service and those involved in campaigning, such as supporting children to change the world beyond themselves. The co-chair overseeing this session asked:

- What is "good" youth involvement and how do we know it?



- Is our sense of "good" the same as young people's?

Within this session several valuable points were made including:

- The feelings of young people should be considered more as a metric for success and an end goal (such as young people saying they had a good time or feel proud of their participation).
- Young people have different ideas of success (such as, making a new friend or enjoying a good meal).
- Surveys are "dead". One member highlighted youthwork centred conversations more useful than filling out a questionnaire as it had a relational approach to gathering information. Another member pointed out the value of outward-bound activities where young people open-up more about the organisation and provide feedback in a natural way while also having fun, developing skills and making connections. In these spaces they are not expected to professionalise.
- It can be seen as a bad thing to lose young people from an organisation and a good thing to have a long waiting list.
- An organisation was praised for its approach to participation. It had closed meetings but shared the meeting notes with young people. The young people chose which topic would be publicly minuted. It shows what impacted them most and closes the feedback loop.
- Spaces where young people are celebrated also brings good feedback.
- The question was asked, "How comfortable are boards and commissioners with co-creation?" It can be hard to define 'good' with them.
- It is more common to be focused on young people, but families and other organisations/agencies involved with a young person should be considered. Although in these cases, sometimes other voices can be louder than the young person.
- It's valuable for young trustees to gain skills which are relevant to their lives and they can apply elsewhere. Sometimes the focus is on their participation as a metric for success rather than what the young person gains from the role.
- One member asked, "How much do we engage in the existing methods of engagement and structures. What are the alternatives?"
- One member said that their organisation banned the word "powerful" internally for people to describe their experiences with young people.
- It can be assumed that care experienced kids will go into the sector so it's important to show them people with similar experiences who have succeeded in different areas.
- Adult ideas of success can be very binary, such as housing and employment. "Sometimes we just want them to be happy."
- It is important to make sure the work is "true and real." It can be hard to measure what matters most to young people, like having fun, but value should be placed on what matters to them.
- While governance and being a young professional has its place, lots of young people who are non-verbal or disabled are not included.
- Different levels of connection are important. One member gave the example of an app that an organisation used to gamify feedback. Young people using it asked to included pets in the game.
- It's important to create opportunities to be in safe environments with young people with basic activities that explore risk in a safe way.



- One member stated that "get outdoors and do things" is an underrated aim. Another member added that barriers of access (including injustice and class barriers) mean that many young people can't reach many outdoor spaces, but organisations can utilise local spaces like parks.
- In a society where nepotism and networks are increasingly important for how people succeed, organisations can provide opportunities for young people who otherwise wouldn't be in those spaces so that they can network, build skills, add to their CVs and increase their confidence.
- Friendship, wellbeing and feeling safe are all excellent measurables which are already valued.
- Recruitment was highlighted as an important part of youth participation. An example was given of an organisation's WhatsApp group, which informs young people of opportunities and support available to them that includes other organisations.
- One member pointed out that removing services due to low performance or funding could have rights implications that should be considered. One member suggested that it would be better to involve young people in these decisions and use their agency to find fixes.
- Rather than considering participation as an abstract idea, those involved should remember it is a fundamental part of organisations and funding applications.
- Adults involved in youth participation should still check that children have the basics first before asking for their contribution. "Do they have an okay jacket and how are things at home? Are they in the right place of mind to talk about these things? It's not always the big outcomes."
- Age diverse boards should be standard, and separate boards should be removed.
- Organisations should consider how to share information in a way that accounts for their different evaluation networks, theories of change and values.
- Youth participation should be seen as a method of stress testing the resilience of an organisation.
- Some members commented that basic frameworks that could be applied to the whole sector would be helpful for boards to measure an organisation's success.
- A member of the group pointed out that most of the consultation was focused on older young people, not toddlers and babies. Since they have a voice but use it in a different way, organisations should improve methods of communication with them. They gave the example of an organisation which accommodated for height differences so that environments were less intimidating. Similarly, a member mentioned a toyshop which used a step ladder at the counter to put children on an equal level. Another example was taking a vote on the strength and type of juice provided which was important to the young people present but is often overlooked.

## Getting Comfortable with Uncomfortable: Participation with Consequences

This keynote session involved methods used by the speaker when working with young people such as fidget toys, stickers, colourful post it notes and postcards for personal notes of reflection.



The keynote opened with the quote which they often hear from young people:  
"Adults says they want our voice until we use it."

The consultation highlighted several uncomfortable aspects of participation:

- Exceptionalism makes the bar harder for other young people to reach.

The keynote speaker asked the consultation to imagine they were in 2028 and had collectively failed young people, then they addressed possible causes of this failure. The consultation divided into smaller groups to explore this scenario. There were four main reasons the groups gave when they fed back to the entire consultation:

1. Organisations not listening to young people, not including young people nor holding themselves accountable. This would include actions like tokenism.
2. Resources continue to be spread too thin. Without collaboration, the current lack of funding to the sector leads to a duplication of work which wastes resources and could have serious long-term implications.
3. A lack of leadership commitment to youth participation and a lack of an agenda for youth participation.
4. Organisations have failed to include or deal with urgent needs, primarily, poverty.

Other protentional reasons for future failure were:

- Political cycles.
- Feedback and compassion fatigue felt by young people and organisations.
- Working in silos.
- Not including young people in social media decisions. There are clear statistics for creation and reception but not whether that converts into action.
- Proxy measures being taken as measures.
- Engagement stats being taken as a full picture.
- Pressure groups moving into the space of campaigning. What does this mean pressure groups are campaigners?
- Not meeting a need to change the culture to embed youth participation rather than othering young people in organisations and failing to adapt to modern challenges.

Based on their experiences, the keynote speaker added the following potential causes of failure:

- Performative participation.
- Protecting power.
- Fear of risk.

The consultation was then asked to consider possible solutions to avoid failure by 2028. The primary solution provided was collaboration. One member described an individual they know in a different charity sector who informs other organisations that their organisation is making a bid. It was noted that this had positive business implications as it avoids fighting for scraps. It also avoids an uncomfortable feeling of guilt. Honest conversations between organisations were considered to be a positive solution.

As previously mentioned, members agreed that causes of secrecy between organisations included, a lack of resources and infrastructure for consortiums as well as a fear of vulnerability. It was also agreed that organisations should open the door more to avoid researching on their own or relying solely on the research of another



organisation which might not be tailored to their needs. One member pointed out that it is important to recognise when another organisation would be better suited to help, for example local organisations might be able to meet more of a young person's needs. Another member drew attention to the homelessness charities who set up a separate organisation as a coalition to focus on a specific issue. This solved issues of time management and people power.

The session ended with the keynote speaker's request that those attending make a pledge to become part of the coalition that drives the next decade of youth policy with young people. They stated that youth participation is not a moment but a culture and it is now essential thanks to the progress made in the last decade. They expressed a hope for a future where adults don't panic and young people don't have to be exceptional. The keynote speaker described the session in the following way:

The keynote deliberately broke the frame of a traditional speech.

Rather than focusing on belief in youth voice, it focused on **what happens when youth voice has consequences** — when it challenges policy, governance, leadership behaviour or power.

Through facilitated discomfort, peer dialogue and honest reflection, participants explored:

- Where their organisations unintentionally silence youth voice.
- Truths young people have shared that were ignored, softened or delayed.
- What leaders would have to give up to genuinely co-create power.

A clear message surfaced:

**Discomfort is not a sign participation is failing — it is often evidence that it is real.**

**The premortem: learning before we fail**

Participants were asked to imagine it is **2028** and this work has failed — publicly and decisively.

What emerged was striking.

When given permission to be honest, leaders overwhelmingly located failure **within adult systems**, not young people.

Commonly named causes included:

- Siloed working
- Short-term political and funding cycles
- Protecting organisational power
- Underinvestment disguised as innovation
- Consultation without visible change
- Duplication and lack of shared learning

One insight cut through clearly:

**Every preventable failure named was something adults' control.**





This left a live question hanging in the room — deliberately unresolved:

*"If failure in youth participation is adult-controlled... is success adult-controlled too?"*

## Impact

At the beginning of the session on impact, the co-chair overseeing proceedings asked the consultation to consider a series of questions:

- What tools does your organisation have to show young people what you're doing?
- What's going well?
- Are our expectations realistic?
- Where's the mundane and day to day?
- How do we track transformation?

The consultation then broke into informal groups to discuss. Some of the positive changes that members mentioned were related to shifts in culture and technology that have brought progress in the past ten years, such as:

- The way that technology has forced creativity and innovation.
- A culture of accountability has required historic charities to apologise for and reflect upon wrongful actions. A member of one these charities commented that this has been incredibly motivational for those in their organisation and for the sector.
- Previously, people worked in one organisation for a long time. Now, the norm is to work in different areas (including other sectors) which brings new ideas and skills. When a key person moves on, systems are tested. If they remain functioning afterwards then it is a positive sign of progress. However, it can also lead to "parking" those systems when the person who implemented them is gone.

It was a recurring comment that a lot of change regarding youth participation comes down to culture. This takes time, which can be frustrating for young people. One member explained how they established a "passing on the mantle" approach to give young people a realistic idea of the world and to celebrate their achievements. By including young people who were aging out of the service in the onboarding of new young people, all involved could recognise the value and effort of their work.

Other positive steps made by members of the consultation included:

- 360° team feedback
- Coproducing policies with graphics designed by young people which helped with future proofing.
- Gamifying feedback and exploring the potential of AI. "Gen Z are gamers."
- Personalised emails after participation that asked young people to reflect upon what they were proud of as well as the event so they could track their own development.
- Improved schemes of delegation.



## Actionable Steps

1. Owning when organisations get it wrong and sharing the learning mistakes have brought with others in the sector.
2. Reflecting on the value of the consultation, one member commented that conversations in the margins offer "alchemy". It was agreed that this style of sharing should be continued in the future, especially to share knowledge of processes for the benefit of the sector.
3. Reframing youth participation as not just as "the right thing, but the only effective thing." This would improve approaches to youth participation since it is not yet fully integrated into most organisations.
4. Deliberate decision-making using processes that puts young people and decision-makers in the same space. While it is impossible to know the exact influence of such conversations, it would still improve processes and outcomes.
5. Celebrating young people's little wins like speaking up more or having fun. A small win for them might be huge and should be noted.
6. Reflecting on the origins of organisations as well as the past decade of change, including the positive intentions of the past and recent progress made.
7. Challenging teams within organisations to take new approaches rather than relying on what is tried and tested in order to keep up with the modern world and improve processes.
8. Noticing the little wins made by an organisation, members of organisations and the sector, and sharing these wins with other organisations for mutual growth.
9. Finding a balance between what young people want and what an organisation has the capacity and resources to achieve in a way that adheres to the rights of young people and respects their agency as equal participants.
10. Sharing knowledge rather than creating new frameworks and toolkits.
11. Removing separate boards for young trustees and instead focusing on age diverse boards that account for the skills of young people rather than their potential merely as spokespeople for an organisation.

Primarily, the consultation decided that vulnerable, open conversations and collaboration would have the greatest impact on the sector and improving youth participation. From the beginning of the consultation, it became clear that a safe space to share was meaningful to the participants. While one member commented that it is incredibly hard to get CEOs to open up honestly about their struggles, another stated that they find CEOs incredibly honest to the point of being "too harsh" on themselves. It was certainly agreed that the consultation at St George's House had been exceptionally honest in an effort to hold real accountability and make real progress.

The desire of the participants to hold themselves responsible for mistakes was welcomed but challenged. Many of the participants asked for their peers to celebrate themselves more frequently since improvements have been made and the intentions of all those present remain "making the world a better place for young people." One member shared that, as someone at the start of their career, they found it very reassuring to learn that so many people are working in so many different areas across the sector with this mutual goal. Another added that there is "no silver bullet" for the issues discussed but a shared desire to do better held a lot of opportunity for problem solving. Considering these repeated comments, those present committed to open conversations that share struggles and successes in the belief that both are necessary for shared wisdom. One member commented that fidget toys had become acceptable and meaningful in recent years, "When did that happen? Something has changed for



the better. Surely this kind of progress has happened in other areas too. We should celebrate the cumulation of these things."

Considering how immediate and consistent this level of kindness and empathy was throughout the consultation; it was apparent that meaningful collaboration had already begun and could continue to flourish on a large scale. The consultation was described as a "slow cook" rather than "fast food" approach which revealed the multiplicity of engaging, involving, promoting and collaborating. "It means we [at individual organisations] don't have to get it right across the board on our own." This would avoid silos and prevent wasted resources. It was suggested that AI could offer an opportunity for shared knowledge on a wide scale with easy access. One member commented that existing AI databases are missing lots of information which could be improved through collaboration. Many members commented on the value of "slow cook" focus over quick meetings since they allowed total focus on the topic at hand, with one person adding it was potentially the longest they've been able to focus solely on youth participation since they began in their leadership role.

The consultation reiterated their intention to meet again, with young people, and to continue regular communication that prioritised honesty and mutual support. A member commented that the current climate, including economic hardship and the rapid development of digital technologies, means that success looks different. They suggested that getting support to as many people as possible during this time should be taken as a big win even with imperfect processes. This was summarised by one member who said, "We should recognise that people's hearts are in the right place and support each other in co-creation. The world is on fire. We need to work together and make it a better place."

## Reflections on the Consultation

After the consultation, members provided further reflections about the impact the event has on them and what they planned to do going forwards.

One member produced the following reflections:

"If every failure named in the premortem is adult-controlled — is the same true of success?"

As CEO and Founder, this raises honest reflections:

- When did youth voice make us uncomfortable this year — and why?
- What did we learn from that discomfort?
- What behaviours did it change in us, our team and our practice?
- Where did we get it wrong — and how do we share that authentically?
- Where did we get it right — and how do we evidence that clearly?

There is a clear commitment to:

- Get better at wrapping up projects with learning made visible
- Share insight transparently with young people, partners and the sector
- Capture behaviour change, not just outputs
- Support young people and early career talent to leave well — treating exits as growth, not loss
- Model the honesty and vulnerability young people ask of adults



A live idea emerging from this work is the development of a simple **"We Heard → Together, We Did → We Learned"** learning log to support organisations to capture youth voice and its impact at every level.

This is not an endpoint.

It leaves live questions:

- How do we flip adult-controlled failure into shared success with young people?
- What would a genuinely shared learning framework look like?
- How do we embed participation without institutionalising it?

This Consultation Wrapped is therefore not a conclusion.

**It is a mirror, a prompt, and an invitation."**

This individual then shared their experience at the consultation with a group of young people during a short-paid Youth Thinking Task. They shared the results of this participation:

### **The Youth Thinking Task: Turning the Mirror Back**

Following the event, we invited young people from Participation People's networks — including those who help shape our work as Young Consultants — to respond honestly to the provocations that emerged.

This wasn't a consultation for optics.

It was a paid, time-bound Youth Thinking Task, explicitly asking for raw, unfinished reflections — not polished answers, not what adults want to hear, and definitely not AI-generated responses.

Young people were invited to respond to one or two provocations, including:

- If participation only works when young people are "exceptional", it isn't participation — it's selection.
- If adults feel comfortable all the time, youth voice isn't working.
- If adults control all the failure in youth participation, they probably control all the success too.

We made a clear contract: young people would be shown what changed, what didn't, and why — because voice without response is extractive, even when intentions are good.

What came back was honest, sharp, and alarmingly consistent.

## **What Young People Told Us**

On the provocation that participation often rewards "exceptional" young people, the message was unequivocal.

Young people described youth voice spaces that are quietly curated — not open.



The same confident, articulate, policy-literate young people are invited back again and again, creating the appearance of inclusion while filtering out difference, challenge and lived experience.

Those most likely to be left out include:

- Shy or quiet young people.
- Neurodivergent young people.
- Those not in school or in alternative provision.
- Young people in care or with criminal justice experience.
- Those from low-income or rural communities.
- Young people whose first language isn't English.
- Younger children and teenagers.
- Racially minoritised young people.

Their absence, young people told us, is too often labelled as “disengagement” — rather than recognised as a failure of design.

### **Participation was described as exhausting and unrealistic when:**

- Entry points involve long, inaccessible forms.
- Opportunities aren't communicated in ways that make sense to young people.
- Contribution is only valued if it's verbal, confident and public.
- Adults already know what they want from the process.

As one young person put it: “Youth voice is meant to shake things up — if it isn't, you don't have the right young people there.”

Perhaps most powerfully, young people challenged the idea that exclusion is inevitable.

They spoke about the need to:

- Go to where young people already are.
- Offer multiple ways to contribute (research, writing, small groups, asynchronous input).
- Actively seek out those least heard.
- Design participation with young people in mind from the start.

Across responses, a simple truth emerged:

If participation relies on confidence, availability and polish, it isn't inclusive — it's convenient.

## **Fear, Honesty and Adult Control**

Young people also reflected on a deeper tension raised in the keynote: that adults often control both failure and success in participation.

Several spoke candidly about working with senior decision-makers who are afraid — afraid of being asked for things they can't deliver, afraid to say no, afraid to lose control. But this fear, they argued, often leads adults to disengage altogether — which becomes its own form of failure.



Young people were clear: they don't expect perfection. They expect honesty.

They would rather have messy, authentic conversations with adults who admit constraints than polished processes where power remains untouched.

What they want is partnership — agreed expectations, shared accountability, and clarity about what will happen with their voices.

As one young person reflected: "Adults are so worried about failing young people that they choose not to engage at all — and that's how they end up letting us down."

## Who Took Part: Our Young Consultants

The young people who completed the Youth Thinking Task are part of Participation People's wider Young Consultant UK network — a paid, supported group of young people aged 12-25, who bring lived experience, insight and challenge into our work with organisations and systems.

They come from across England — London, the South East, South West and North East — and bring a wide range of lived experiences, including:

- Racism and faith-based discrimination
- Poverty and digital exclusion
- Mental health challenges
- Neurodivergence and health conditions
- School exclusion and alternative education
- Single-parent households and homelessness

Some are highly experienced in youth voice spaces; others are newer to participation.

What unites them is not "exceptionality", but a willingness to be honest about what works, what harms, and what needs to change.

This diversity is intentional.

It reflects our belief that youth participation should not rely on the same voices, the same pathways, or the same definitions of success."



## Annex: Participants

Mrs Samia Abdelrahman	Youth Voice Support Worker The Children's Society
Ms Cathy Ashley	Chief Executive Family Rights Group
Ms Grace Bailey	Rapporteur St George's House
Ms Jessica Bool	Strategic Lead – Youth Engagement The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK)
Ms Sarah Boswell	Chief Executive Officer Wales Netball and Dragons (Super League)
Ms Clare Bracey	Director of Policy, Campaigns & Communications Become
Ms Sally Brighton	Director of Development Young Epilepsy
Ms Jo Carr	Assistant Director, Participation National Children's Bureau
Mr Richard Collier-Keywood OBE	Chair Fair4All Finance
Mrs Claire Coussins	Director of Fundraising, Engagement and Voice Kids
Mr Jim Davis MBE	Director of Youth Voice The Children's Society
Ms Antonia Dixey	Chief Executive Officer Participation People
Mr Jamie Dunlop	Chief Executive Scottish Youth Parliament
Ms Rosie Ferguson OBE	Chief Executive UK Youth
Mr Barry Fletcher	Chief Executive Youth Futures Foundation
Ms Katie Ghose	Chief Executive Kids
Dr Josh Harsant	Head of Voice and Influence Barnardo's
Mr Aidan Jones OBE	Chief Executive The Scout Association
Mr Joe Lane	Deputy Director Children's Commissioner's Office
Mr Jamie Masraff	Chief Executive OnSide



Mr Ibrahim Serhat Onel

Research Fellow  
Cumberland Lodge

Ms Felicity Oswald OBE

Chief Executive  
Girlguiding UK

Ms Angela Salt

Director  
Angela Salt Consulting

Mr Jason Stacey

Director of Policy, Communications &  
International  
YMCA England & Wales





# ST GEORGE'S HOUSE



For more information about  
Consultations at St George's House  
visit [www.stgeorghouse.org](http://www.stgeorghouse.org)



St George's House, Windsor Castle, Windsor SL4 1NJ

T +44 (0)1753 848848 E [house@stgeorghouse.org](mailto:house@stgeorghouse.org) F +44 (0)1753 848849

 @StGeorgesHouse  @StGeorgesHouseWindsor