

A guide to embedding

youth

voice

into
libraries



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Is this document for you?

Are you happy when no teenagers or young adults walk through your library doors? Do you believe your library will continue to thrive without those pesky youths? If so, **this document is not for you.**

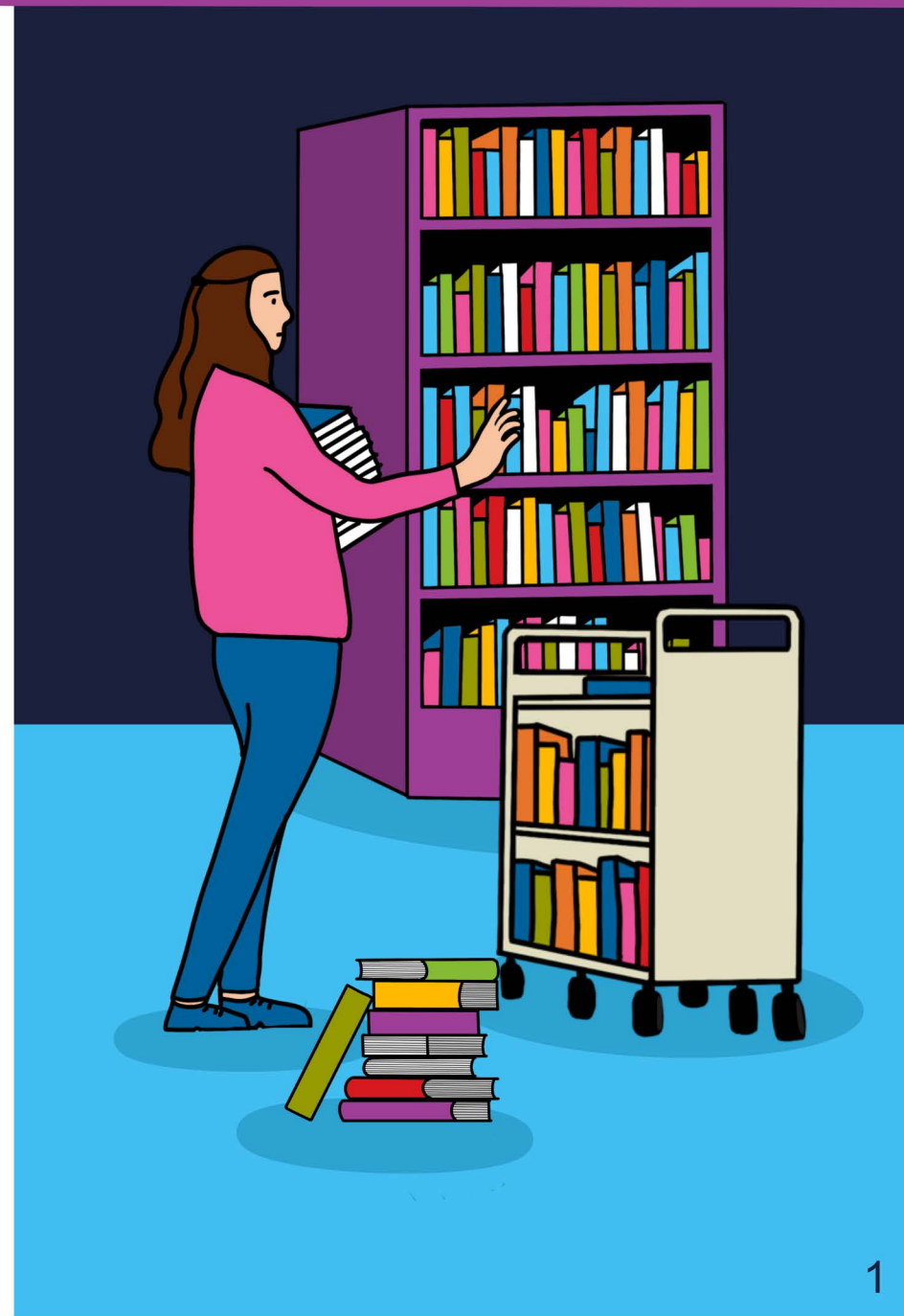
Alternatively, is your library brimming with young people who are using and shaping your services every day? Your footfall is growing, and your business model is sustainable. If so, then well done, but this document is not for you either. **Please stop reading** and instead get in touch as we'd love to hear about your experiences.

This document is for the rest of us – those who wonder why we can't keep young people engaged with the library after they graduate from the children's books section.

We are the library staff who want to foster youth engagement, leadership and participation but know we could be doing it better. If you are one of us, please keep reading.

In 2021 Hertfordshire Libraries recognised that, despite our efforts, young people were not engaging with our services. We were offering volunteering opportunities but our programmes were standardised and transactional.

Instead of engaging young people – with all their insights, interests and networks – we added them to our standard rota. They stacked shelves for us and listened to children read. We would thank them for their time, and then wouldn't see them again until they had their own children. We were just a line on their CV; they became another statistic.



We recognised that we needed the influence and active participation of young people to shape the services that directly impact them.

We needed to include their opinions, ideas, and perspectives. We needed to give them meaningful roles in decision-making and driving positive change.

We needed to prioritise youth voice.

In 2022, we launched My Voice, a Volunteering Futures project, supported using public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

By involving young people in meaningful roles, we witnessed firsthand the positive impact of their contributions on both the library environment and on the young volunteers themselves.

This guide is designed to support library staff in continuing this momentum. We will provide you with:

- suggestions to **effectively engage young people**,
- strategies for creating **inclusive and supportive environments**,
- tips for facilitating **youth-led initiatives**, and
- examples of successful **youth engagement projects**.

We hope this guide will inspire and equip you to harness the power of youth voice in your library, creating a space where young people feel valued, heard and empowered to make a difference.

We hope you find it helpful.



Youth Voice

Youth voice: what and why?

Youth voice refers to the active participation and influence of young people in shaping services that directly impact them. It encompasses their:



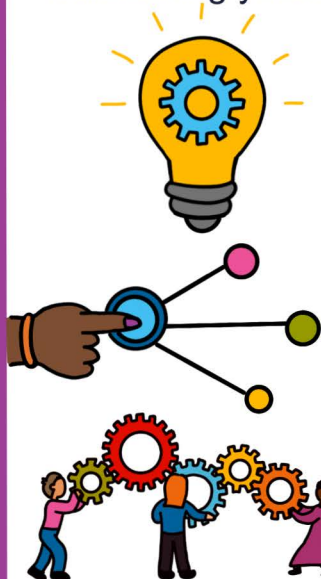
This ensures they have a meaningful role in decision-making and driving positive change.

Introducing youth voice in public libraries constitutes:

- **Positive change:** libraries as vibrant hubs where youthful energy fuels innovation, inclusion and community transformation.

- **Influence in action:** young people can impact every programme, every resource, and every digital corner.

- **Collaboration:** youth voice isn't just about giving young people a seat at the table. It's about listening, not passively, but as collaborators.



Youth voice: what does it look like?

- **Young people commissioning or creating their own events for their community**

e.g. a group of young people worked with our Artist in Residence in one library to develop their skills and have now set up their own social craft club in the library.

- **Young people advising on design**

e.g. young people told us they wanted study spaces, plug sockets and noticeboards.

They also wanted the “Teenage” sections rebranded to “Young Adult” areas. We changed all our signage accordingly.

- **Insight and ideas about how and what we do**

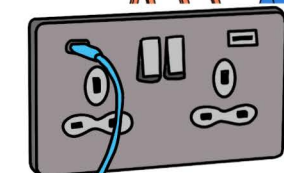
e.g. young volunteers have been helping us to make the summer reading challenge more inclusive for neurodiverse people

- **Active inclusion of disadvantaged groups**

e.g. some of our young people commissioned a British Sign Language interpreter to run a session on deaf awareness in one of our libraries.

- **Young people sharing decisions with adults**

e.g. one group of volunteers worked with staff to devise and develop a Winter Reads Challenge to appeal to young adults.



Volunteering as a platform for youth voice

Library volunteering is a powerful platform for young people to grow and thrive. Consider these benefits:

- **Skills Development:** Volunteering provides practical experience and valuable skills that can kickstart young adults' careers.

Case study: Introducing bureaucracy

We brought young people into the reality of how decisions are made within libraries. They were taught about corporate branding, asked to consider our accessibility guidelines and were supported in completing business cases and risk assessments.



- **CVs and Personal Statements:** Volunteering enhances CVs and personal statements, making them more appealing to employers and educational institutions.

- **Workplace Experience:** Volunteers gain real-world workplace skills, preparing them for future employment.

Case study: Making us more social

One young volunteer created social media content for one of our libraries over several months.

This increased the library's online engagement and led to the young person securing a job in this field.



- **Social Connections:** Volunteering fosters networks within communities, helping young people build valuable relationships.

Case study: Book slot

One of the highlights of every Youth Panel meeting that we have hosted has been our regular "book slot" – where we allocate time for the young people to discuss what they are currently reading.

Half the time we don't understand what they're talking about, but they all love it – they are all Book Tok fans. They've all become good friends.



- **Interest Pursuit:** Through volunteering, individuals can explore their interests and passions.

- **Increased Confidence:** Volunteering contributes to a greater sense of self-worth and autonomy.

Case study: Shaky start

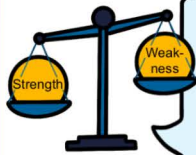
We had one young volunteer who was incredibly nervous when they started. They came in shakily and wouldn't talk to anyone if they didn't need to.

A few months later and they now say hello to everyone when they come in.



Youth Panels

Inclusion & accessibility



I was nervous my conditions would limit what they'd let me do but they focused on my strengths.

We are a team rather than a hierarchy.



In other environments I'm diluted. I'm more confident here.

Despite not being physically there, I am still included.



Due to my health conditions, the youth panel is one of the few times I get out. It is very stabilising for me.



We are a TEAM

Developing skills

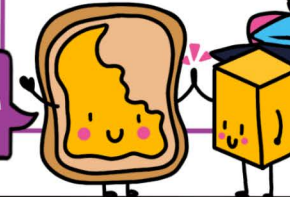


We are gaining lots of skills but it doesn't feel like work.

I haven't been scared to speak to adults in the library. When I'm here I feel like a peer.



I love the social element of the Panel. We all get on like bread and butter.



Gaining experience



We get to see how much work goes on behind the scenes and how decisions are made.

I love books so it's great to get relevant work experience in this field.



Making a difference



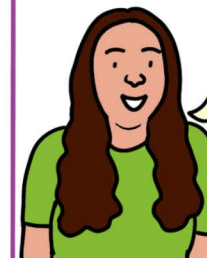
We have seen positive quantitative & qualitative results from our contributions.

It is a good opportunity to be involved in something positive.



We have helped to redesign our section of the library. It was very exciting to see the physical change.

Before the Youth Panel existed, there was a disconnect between what the library thought we needed and what we actually needed. We changed that.



Sharing my knowledge and experience has helped make the summer reading challenge more accessible for people like me.

Hertfordshire
Libraries'
Youth Panel

We are helping the next generation

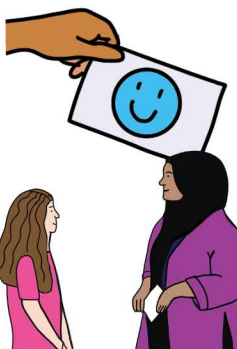
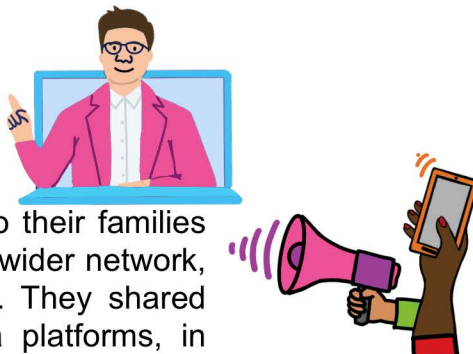
Partnerships

Partnerships to break down barriers

As part of the youth voice project, we partnered with a local charity working with young people with Down Syndrome.

The charity was able to support us with:

- Online training sessions on Down Syndrome Awareness for library staff.
- Promotion of our volunteering offer to their families and young people, and to the charity's wider network, including health and education teams. They shared our information on their social media platforms, in team meetings and at charity sector events.
- Liaison between young people interested in volunteering, their families, and the library service to ensure that the library environment was suitable for each young person's needs.
- Site visits to train key frontline staff for each successful volunteering placement of a young person with Down Syndrome into a library.



Our youth volunteers got involved with a wide range of volunteering activities at different libraries and, with encouragement from staff, developed their own volunteering experiences. One volunteer went from helping with displays and story time to creating her own displays and reading stories at story time. Another helped organise a local history walk. One became 'Chief Picture Book Sorter'.

The young people, their families, and local staff responded enthusiastically to the volunteering opportunity, and we have made provision for the partnership to continue after the grant funding comes to an end.

Feedback:

*Volunteering is also a good way to be more social and do things that aren't online. The library is a **safe space** as well, and I feel **secure** here. I like **being social** with other people, the public and the staff.*

- Youth volunteer, 18

*Everyone has been **very welcoming** with staff treating her with respect and as a grown up - no talking down. They listened to what she was interested in when we had the intro meeting, and she is starting off helping with the toddler storytime. They **listened to our recommendation** that she engage with one task consistently for a block of weeks, rather than trying different tasks each week.*

- Parent of youth volunteer

*She has really impressed me with her enthusiasm and creativity, and her positive attitude. I really look forward to our sessions each week and hope that she will continue to enjoy volunteering with us. **She is a real asset to our team!***

- Youth volunteer coordinator

*From our perspective this volunteering placement is just **fantastic** - he makes his own way to the library after college and makes his own way home again. Brilliant for building **independence and responsibility**.*

- Parent of youth volunteer

*A few adjustments have had to be made as we go along, but it means that **she can achieve so much more** and she feels that she is really contributing towards the work done at the library. We have built a **good rapport** and I hope that she enjoys working alongside me as much as I enjoy working with her.*

- Library assistant

But what if...

Meet Robert. He works in one of our libraries and is part of a committed team of staff and volunteers.

All the library's volunteers are retired except for twice a year when they welcome young volunteers in to support their Duke of Edinburgh Award and/or to help with the Summer Reading Challenge.

The library is well used by families with young children as well as many older people who attend the weekly coffee mornings, Storytime, talks and workshops. Despite the brilliant team and all the library's activities, **the library's footfall overall is falling.**

Robert suggested that the library runs a Saturday afternoon "pizza party" to entice more young adults through the doors.

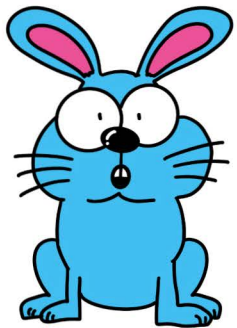
Some of the staff are worried about this idea. Last winter, the library had a problem with a few teenagers' antisocial behaviour. A couple of the team are reluctant to do anything that may encourage their return.



Achieving cultural change

Robert is a fictional character, but his story is real. It is an amalgamation of what we heard as we started to talk to our library staff at the beginning of the project.

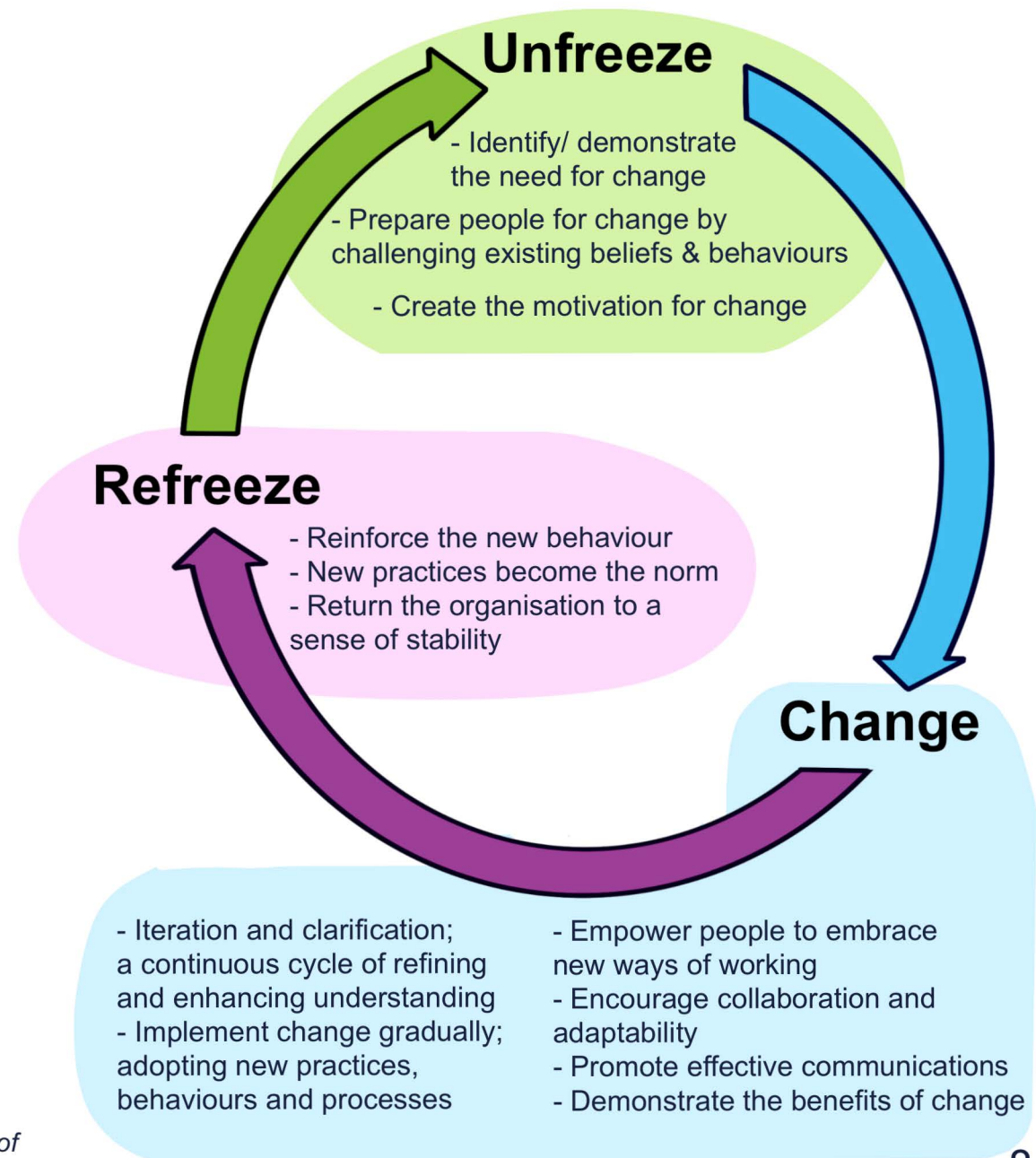
Library staff told us that they wanted their libraries to become more relevant for young people, but they feared what this might mean. There were many preconceptions about what could go wrong; lots of “what ifs...”, lots of fear.



Fear can paralyse us; it can turn us into metaphorical rabbits in headlights but you can't go forward if you refuse to move. To move forward, we needed to change the culture within our libraries.

We looked at several models of cultural change (*and would recommend you do this too*). We decided to adopt Kurt Lewin's three-step model[1].

This model breaks down the process of change into three distinct phases that are shown opposite.

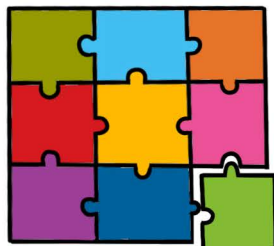


[1] Citation: Burnes, B. (2020). "The origins of Lewin's three-step model of change." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 56(1), 32–59

Where are you now?

To identify necessary changes, understanding the current situation is crucial. This will enable you to recognise potential challenges, make informed decisions, and establish a solid foundation for successful implementation.

By breaking down the assessment into different levels, you can more effectively present the case for change to stakeholders across the organisation.



Things to consider:

At organisational level

- How is youth voice represented in service planning?
- What are the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) pertaining to young people?
- Are Young Adults recognised as a distinct group in organisational processes? (data gathering/budget setting/event planning/stock selection/strategic discussions, etc.)
- If you asked frontline library staff who was responsible for overseeing youth voice how would they answer? Does that answer align with the views of senior leaders?
- How is the organisation perceived by young adults and the people who work most closely with them?

Individually

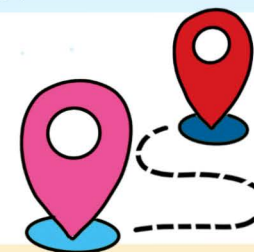
- How do individual staff perceive young adults/ youth volunteers?
- Do individual staff members take responsibility for engaging with young adults?

At team level

- How is youth voice represented in local library plans?
- What are the local Key Performance Indicators?
- What is the role of youth volunteers in your library?
- What is the level of retention of youth volunteers?
- Is youth volunteering a year-round offer?
- What is the local perception of young adults/volunteers?
- Whose responsibility are youth volunteers?

Where do you want to get to?

Consider what outcomes you hope to achieve. To do this, it can be helpful to envision what success will look and feel like by a specific date.



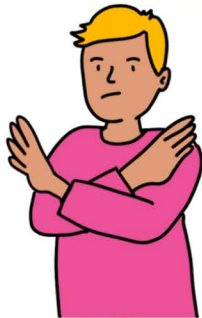
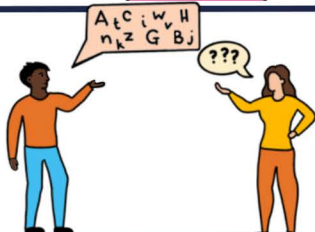
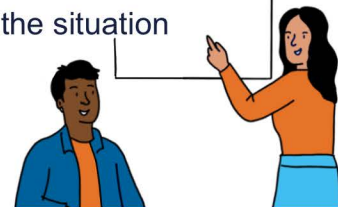
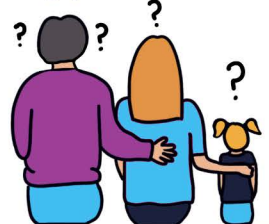
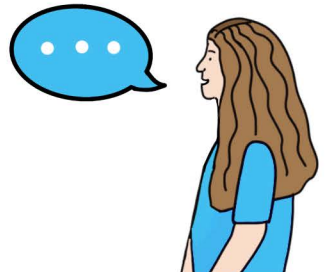
Example:

- How things will look in [date]
- We have successfully recruited [XXX] young people
- Our Youth Board is active and implementing change
- Our staff are better able to support young people in their communities. They are comfortable talking and working with young adults and embrace the flexible nature of youth volunteering.
- Our network of youth volunteers is transforming their libraries, mentoring new volunteers, and organising cultural events in their local library
- Our volunteering offer is diverse and inclusive
- Youth volunteering is an established offer in libraries, supported by [partner names]

What do you need to get there?

Determine what needs to change to achieve the desired outcomes. Anticipate potential obstacles that might hinder these outcomes and plan how to address them. Remember to periodically reassess for new obstacles. Potential obstacles/mitigations might include:

	Potential obstacle	Mitigation
Staff buy-in	Persuading senior managers of the value of youth voice in libraries	Prepare your case thoroughly before presenting it to key stakeholders
	Library staff who are resistant to the new way of working with young people, for example - Lack of confidence - fear of change - stereotyping - focus on potential problems, not possibilities - tainted by previous negative experiences 	Provide training and information, e.g. - Introduction to youth voice - Unconscious bias Listen to the staff voice, e.g. - Provide opportunities for honest and open discussions with staff - Offer online drop-in sessions for staff to share good practice and address barriers 
	Library staff who find the concept of youth voice difficult to understand	- Ensure clear, consistent messaging to staff 
	Library staff who find it difficult to adapt to the new way of engaging with young people	- Have key staff available to support libraries - Provide training sessions for managers to advance the offer in their teams 
	Library staff who don't believe this is part of their job role	Highlight the importance to the organisation e.g. - include your youth voice programme in individual objectives and service or library plans - set local targets for number of volunteers to be recruited 
Engagement	Perception that young adults are a difficult audience to reach 	- Acknowledge this is a challenge and explain this is one of the reasons we need to change - Create communication channels and regular discussions between staff from different libraries to swap ideas and experiences - Remind library staff that some of their colleagues are young people, and can be a starting point for engagement - Ask partners to promote to the young people they work with

	Potential obstacle	Mitigation
Commitment	Young people don't want long term commitments 	- Offer micro volunteering opportunities to help understand how young people want to engage with the library service - Recognise that the availability of young people changes during the year and provide opportunities that allow for this - Keep the conversation open e.g. might a lapsed volunteer want to help with the Summer Reading Challenge?
Partnerships	Finding the right partners 	Be clear about what you want to achieve and how e.g. - Do you have a target group in mind? - Will it be the same for every library? - Do your objectives align? 
	A key partner experiences issues that impact their work with the project 	- Have an open and honest conversation about the situation - Discuss what is realistic/feasible - Adapt original plans to fit new circumstances - Don't lose heart – there will be other opportunities to explore 
Capacity	Difficult to find time for outreach due to staffing levels 	- Implement realistic timeframes - Build on existing volunteer base - Share promotional resources with networks and partners - Maximise use of online platforms 
Message	Promotions aren't successfully reaching your audience e.g. - Young adults - Parents/carers - Organisations or individuals who work with young adults 	- Involve members of your target audience in the creation of promotional material - Seek advice from young adults on best channels for reaching their peers - Focus efforts on specific groups 

Making your case

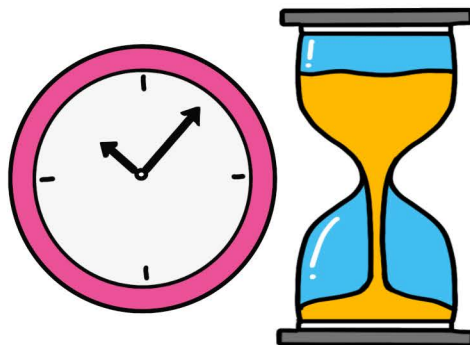
To move the plan forward you need to identify and win the support of key people within the organisation.

Consider the different messages you would use to engage each group of stakeholders. Think about their motivations and how these might impact your approach.

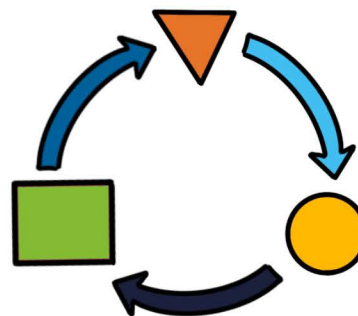
Be Realistic: Cultural shifts and letting go of long-held practices can be challenging.



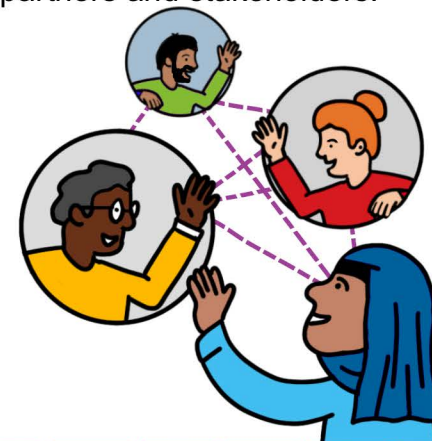
Allow time: Changing stereotypes about young people (and vice versa) takes time. Patience is key.



Flexibility matters: Adapt your approach, especially in larger authorities - uniformity may not benefit all libraries.



Strong links: Establish and maintain communication with partners and stakeholders.



Coaching element: Allocate sufficient time for coaching in delivering youth voice locally.



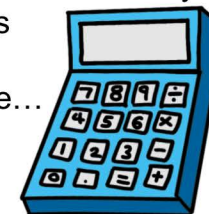
Online training: Consider online/hybrid training to minimise staff time away from the frontline.



Expect dead ends: Not every path leads somewhere; anticipate unexpected turns.



Budget considerations: Consider if a fair share of any existing budgets is being spent on this audience...

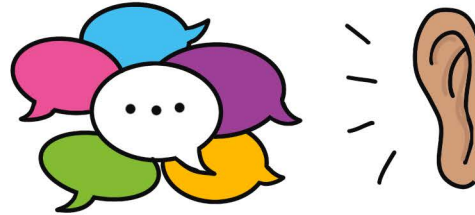


...or if there are partners you can work with to build your offer.



The answers may not be what you expect

The main thing that we knew we wanted to do with this project was to listen to young people.



We wanted everything we did to be driven by their voices. This was scary to start with, and sometimes we still find it scary.

The more we trusted ourselves to put young people in the driving seat, the more we achieved together.



We've learned to expect the unexpected. There are so many examples of young people asking for things we had never thought of.

"I thought we'd have a lot of requests for beanbags, but we didn't get a single one."

- Project Manager

Many of their ideas have helped increase the footfall of our libraries, bring in new audiences and reach new people. All this whilst also supporting and encouraging the young person's interests.

Case study: Harry Potter potions

We worked with a young person with a real passion for science. She organised a STEM-themed Harry Potter day in one of our libraries.



Case study: Manga and pizza

A group of young people commissioned a Manga artist to run a session in one library. This inspired young people in a different town to commission another manga artist to do the same.

The first session was successful, but the young people requested that the next session move from a Saturday morning event to an evening workshop with pizza – hosted after the library had closed. This was agreed and has helped to increase its popularity.



The practicalities

As you embark on the journey, consider the practical aspects of empowering young people within your library.

1. What is your offer?

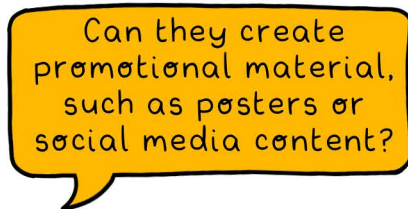
Consider what youth voice will look like in your library and share that vision with everyone.

For example:



Frontline staff can then use this information to highlight upcoming opportunities in the library and work with volunteers to incorporate these opportunities into their volunteering roles. This might include supporting events or helping with behind-the-scenes preparations.

Clearly define the areas where young people can make an impact. For example, here are a couple of questions you could ask yourselves:



These opportunities not only empower the young people but also provide valuable learning experiences in corporate branding and accessibility.

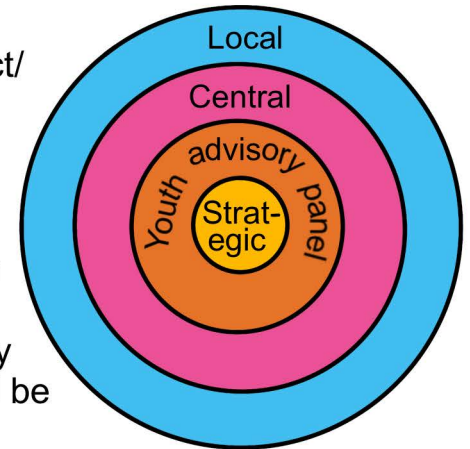
2. Who will be responsible?

Where will youth voice and youth volunteering sit in the organisation?

If budgets allow, having a dedicated role can make a significant difference in ensuring that youth voice remains a priority throughout the organisation.

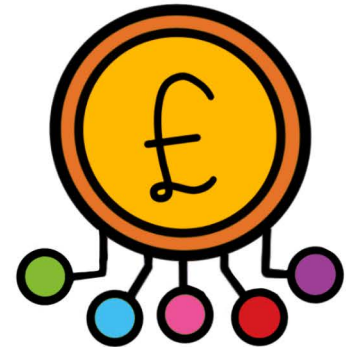
We were lucky enough to have funding for a project officer. The project structure was:

- **Local:** Youth Volunteer contact/coordinator in each library
- **Central:** Youth Voice project officer
- **Strategic:** Senior leader with strategic responsibility for youth voice
- **Youth Advisory Panel:** ideally the role of a youth panel should be central, strategic and influential



3. Budget

Clearly outline the budget available for different aspects of the project. However, remember that the success of introducing youth voice is more dependent on attitude than on cost.

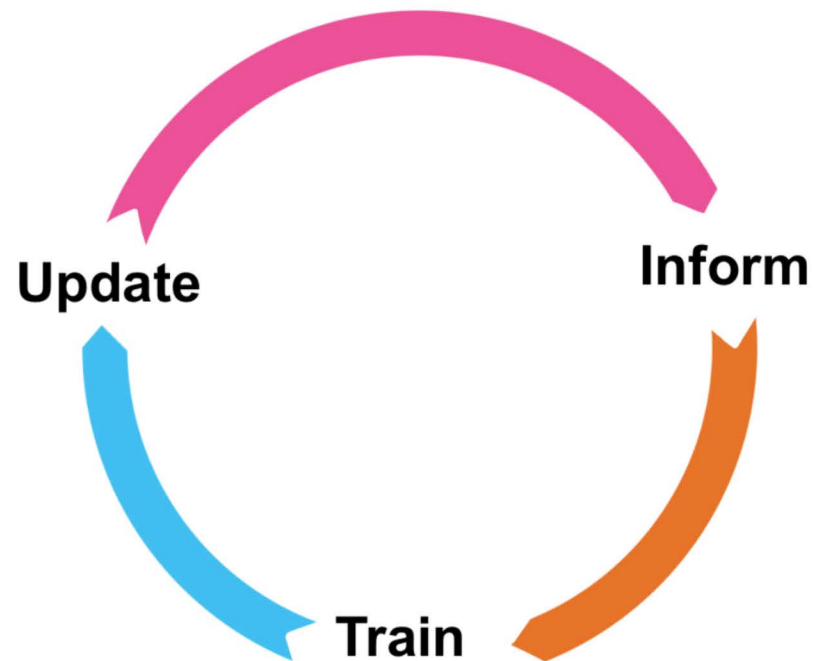


4. Staff knowledge

Ensure that staff understand what's expected of them before rolling out any new youth volunteering opportunity.

Empowering young people involves collaboration and shared understanding. Recognise that this approach may be challenging for some staff members, even experienced ones.

Develop and implement a comprehensive plan to inform, train, and update staff across the service about youth voice.



Consider the key messages you want to convey to staff and how best to achieve that.

Communication channels might include:



courses



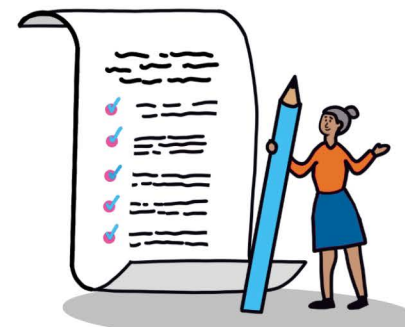
meetings



presentations



newsletters



informal documents



toolkit documents

5. How will you support staff?

Establish a support structure at the project's outset and adapt it as needed. In larger library services staff will need support across multiple sites. Technology can be especially helpful here.

Consider some of the following:



- **Dedicated email inbox:** use this for staff queries and as a point of contact for youth volunteers.

- **Shared resource bank:** Create a toolkit with:



- **promotional materials,**
- **document templates** (e.g. volunteer agreements),
- **case studies** from different libraries,
- **top tips** for various activities/events, and
- **practical ways to engage young people** who wouldn't typically consider volunteering.

- **Face-to-face sessions for youth volunteer coordinators:**

Informal sessions allow coordinators from different libraries to share ideas and best practices and provide insight into how things are *really* going!

- **Drop-in sessions with project leaders:** it won't only be volunteer coordinators who want to know more about youth voice.



6. Business cases

When progressing youth volunteer ideas, some actions can be implemented immediately (book displays, creating social media content, wall displays, etc). However, some decisions will warrant further consideration and for these a business case should be completed.

When youth volunteers have ideas that need refining, library staff can support them to create detailed plans and write risk assessments and budget proposals.

This process can bring the following benefits:

- **Practical Considerations:** Use it to work through ideas with volunteers.
- **Expectation Management:** Helps manage volunteers' expectations.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** Provides detailed feedback if an idea cannot progress.



Areas to consider on a business case:

- Proposal
- Date(s)
- Resource implications
- Background of proposal
- Objective(s)
- Benefit(s) to library users
- Target audience
- Diversity & Inclusion considerations
- Breakdown of financial costs (if any)
- Level of staff required
- Other relevant information



Top tips for reaching young people

- **Focus Groups:** provide an easy way to gather young people's thoughts and opinions without requiring a long-term commitment from participants.

- **Feedback Preferences:** Determine young people's preferred platforms and methods for gathering feedback. Check your organisation's safeguarding policies to ensure your plans are compliant.

e.g. following a consultation with our Youth Advisory Panel, we started using Padlet to share ideas and gather feedback from young people. Padlet is more likely to appeal to young people than emails or online surveys and is commonly used in schools and universities.

- **Recruitment poster:** Send a recruitment poster containing a QR link to the web page to libraries and partners.

- **Involve young people in the design of publicity materials:** we commissioned an early-career artist, who had recently created displays for us as a youth volunteer, to create promotional posters for schools.

- **Website:** Promote youth volunteering opportunities on the authority's website alongside additional information about youth voice in libraries and links for feedback.



- **Increase targeted outreach:** Without targeting, most engagement is likely to be with existing library users.

- **Ask youth volunteers to attend Young Adult events and bring their friends:**

A busier session may make it easier for other young people to join in. If they can't attend, ask them to spread the word – peer to peer recruitment is more effective.



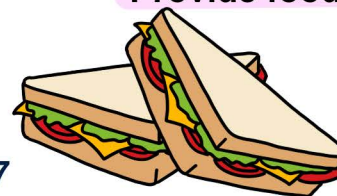
- **Shorten promotion times for young people's events:** If the length of time between signing-up and attending is too long there is a higher chance of no-shows.

- **Last minute sign-up:** Approach young people in and around the library on the day of a Young Adult activity, especially during revision season when they need a break.

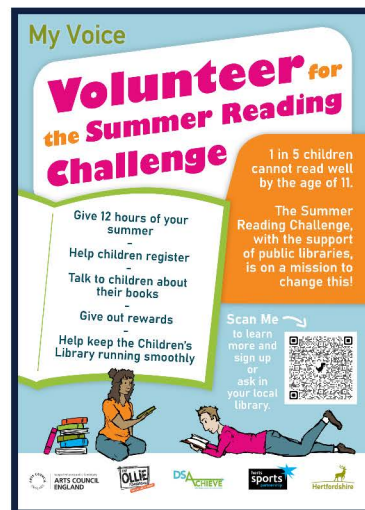
- **Consider over-subscribing Young Adult events:** If you experience no-shows regularly, consider over-subscribing but be prepared to manage them if everyone turns up. We gradually increased ticket numbers until we found the optimum amount.

- **Pick your time:** Be aware that participation levels are likely to be impacted during the lead-up to exams and Duke of Edinburgh Award expedition season.

- **Provide food:** One library manager told us,



Offering sandwiches before the workshop worked really well and broke the ice a bit for those who were a bit shy, so they were relaxed in each others company before it began.



**Thank you for reading this guide.
We hope you found it helpful.**

**For more information email
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