Participatory Toolkit
Participatory Research with Young People

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The **Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society (CARES)** is located within London Metropolitan University. CARES members are academics from the university; collectively, they represent a diverse range of disciplines. CARES is dedicated to applied research and knowledge exchange with public institutions, community groups, third sector organisations and socially responsible businesses. CARES supports London Metropolitan University's commitment to the United Nations' sustainable development agenda by taking a multidisciplinary approach to tackling social problems. CARES-WPS was founded in 2026 by Dr Shaun S. Yates, who also serves as Editor-in-Chief.

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1. Context and outline of the 'Youth Social Action' project

This toolkit provides a practical guide to conducting participatory research with young people. It attempts to demonstrate what can be achieved when facilitating a research space where young people are in the driver's seat. The toolkit draws on the experience gained and lessons learnt throughout the Youth Social Action (YSA) Ecosystem research project. The YSA project was commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA) Civil Society and Sports 'Youth team,' and was conducted by researchers from the Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society (CARES)[1] with young Londoners as peer researchers.

1.1 Aims of the 'Youth Social Action' (YSA) projects

The aims of the YSA project were threefold:

- To understand youth social action as a system within London.
- To understand the factors that underpin youth social action, including facilitators and barriers to participation.
- To make recommendations to policy and programme makers to improve youth social action to harness its benefits.
- To use participatory approaches to involve young people in co-designing the study.

1.2 Research output and impact

The research team produced a visual systems map based on the evidence gathered by the GLA team and the findings emanating from the participatory research. At the end of the 'YSA project,' a report1F[2] was created and shared with the young people who were part of the steering group, who were listed as co-authors. Young people want to see the impact of their voice, thus, closing the feedback loop of engagement is crucial.

1.3 Findings: Key Conditions for Effective Youth Social Action

The participatory research revealed that certain conditions must be in place for youth social action to take place and be effective. These themes underpin the relationships identified within all of the socio-ecological levels presented in the systems map.

The following seven conditions need to be considered when planning policy and interventions to influence youth social action.

I.   Epistemic Privilege

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[1] The Centre focuses on empowerment and community engagement, identifying opportunities to collaborate and co-design research into the challenges faced by Londoners, working closely with civic partners.
[2] The *Understanding Youth Social Action* project report (Elster, 2025).

      a. Recognising young people's unique lived experiences and perspectives.

      b. Adults need to value these insights to foster empathy and inclusivity.

II. Voice

      a. Young people want genuine influence, not tokenistic consultation.

      b. Closing the feedback loop is essential so they see the impact of their input.

III. Trust

      a. Distrust in institutions and decision-making processes is a major barrier.

      b. Transparency and accountability are key to rebuilding trust.

IV. Agency

      a. Young people need confidence, control, and structural support to act.

      b. Formal recognition (e.g., awards, accreditation) enhances motivation.

V. Social Justice

      a. Inequalities discourage participation.

      b. Opportunities for youth-led initiatives on issues like climate and education are vital.

VI. Relationships

      a. Family, peers, and networks strongly influence engagement.

      b. Digital spaces offer opportunities but also challenges for authentic action.

VII. Sense of Belonging

      a. Community connectedness motivates participation.

      b. Urban isolation and mobility can weaken this over time.

1.4 Who is this toolkit for?

The toolkit offers guidance and examples for anybody interested in enhancing 'youth voice' and conducting participatory research with young people.

The stimulus behind this toolkit is the youth participatory and iterative research process, applied as part of the 'YSA project,' that allowed for various inputs from a steering group of young people to researchers and policymakers. The toolkit, therefore, is useful for young people, youth researchers, practitioners and youth policymakers whose aim is to *bridge the gaps* between youth-led insights, academic research, and policy implementation.

2. Methodological literature review: state of participatory research with young people

Youth participatory approaches are of interest to both 'youth' researchers and practitioners (Rowland, Wills and Ott, 2024, p. 4), as they expand the perspectives of researchers, practitioners and, of course, young participants. Whilst participatory research creates opportunities for 'personal growth,' it also aims to make a meaningful *impact* (Obateru *et al*., 2024, p. 3). Youth participatory research, thus, goes beyond viewing participants as sources of information and contributors to knowledge creation, and regards participants as active agents who ultimately should shape the research questions, methods, analysis, and outputs. As Butti (2025) states, 'participatory methods imply a redistribution of power from the researcher to the participants.'

Many toolkits and frameworks have been developed to include, document and advance youth engagement in policymaking. For instance, the *2020 European Commission report on Good Practices of Youth Participation* collated country-specific examples of good practice, which include 'entrusting young people to develop ownership over initiatives, to make youth participation a priority, and embedding it in institutional and policy-making structures' (Macauley et al., 2022, p. 204). The absence of youth voice can lead to ineffective and even detrimental policies (Njelesani and Hunleth, 2020, p. 1).

2.1 Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR)

YPAR is a leading approach to research with young people. It draws on the mantra that 'the best way to learn is to do, and the best way to do is to learn.' YPAR engages young people as researchers with epistemic privilege – that is, unique insights from lived experiences – and is committed to 'equity by including youth from historically marginalised populations' (Cohen *et al*., 2020, p. 318). Like participatory action research (PAR), an approach first put forward by Colombian sociologist Fals Borda, those most affected by the problem under study co-research and take action in partnership with different stakeholders (Kennelly, Larkins and Roy, 2024, p. 494).

Although YPAR is regularly applied in a range of fields such as youth studies, social work, health studies, anthropology, nursing, education and sociology, Kennelly, Larkins and Roy (*ibid*.) outline that crucial questions have emerged about whether projects referred to as 'participatory' remain aligned with their original, radical roots:

'PAR and YPAR are rooted in forms of resistance to the neoliberalisation of knowledge production in higher education institutions, attempting to ensure that research is directed and owned by the collaborating communities.'

In addition to its emphasis on youth participation and not separating research from practice, a key component of YPAR is *transformational change*. YPAR thus does not only regard young participants as sources of information, but also as active agents in shaping society. This 'action component,' means that the research aims not only to produce knowledge, but also to directly 'improve the conditions and practices of those participating' (Butti, 2025). Well-implemented YPAR projects,

therefore, tend to conclude with *action*-oriented presentations to relevant policy and decision makers (Kennelly, Larkins and Roy, 2024, p. 494).

2.2 What are some benefits of using participatory approaches with young people?

Participatory research with young people offers several benefits for young research participants and for researchers:

- **Young people have the opportunity to develop research skills**, such as designing methods and research activities, analysing data and building teamwork skills, which increase employability (see, e.g., Obateru *et al*., 2024, p. 4).
- **Knowledge produced by young people is indispensable** for creating suitable and effective policies and practices (see, e.g., Njelesani and Hunleth, 2020, p. 1).
- **Enhanced reflexivity due to the process of reflecting** on one's own experiences and perspectives whilst taking an active role in analysing the data. This can give rise to self-awareness and a better grasp of the complex causes and negative effects of structural inequality, institutional discrimination and socioeconomic issues present in society (see, e.g., Elster, 2019, p. 1389; Kennelly, Larkins and Roy, 2024).
- **Co-designing research helps inform changes towards more accessible and 'margin-responsive participation'** which can better support active engagement of traditionally excluded groups (see, e.g., Bussu *et al*., 2025).
- **Fostering trust, a sense of belonging and conviviality** (see, e.g., Gilroy, 2004; Obateru *et al*., 2024, p. 4) can be achieved through collaboration with young people from a wide range of communities and backgrounds. This facilitates a diverse space with differences, where shared cultural or faith practices are acknowledged and, ultimately, respected.
- **Collaboration and participation can foster a sense of ownership** over solutions, ensuring that practice, programmes, and policy are relevant and appropriate (see, e.g., Elster *et al*., 2025).
- Redressing power imbalances between researchers and communities allows for a deeper understanding of the research topic (see, e.g., Partnership for Young London, 2021; Obateru *et al*., 2024, p. 4).

2.3 Are there any challenges of using participatory approaches with young people?

Some challenges with youth participatory approaches include:

- **Young people may have limited time** due to education, personal or employment commitments. In addition, new opportunities for the young participants may arise during the research process. Participation may also be frustrated by challenging communication between the researcher, gatekeepers and young people (see, e.g., Obateru *et al*., 2024, p. 4).

- **Young people experiencing marginalisation and exclusion can be apprehensive** about engaging in more formalised processes and institutional spaces. On the other hand, young people with strong ties to civil society are typically familiar with the organised, structured and collaborative nature associated with participatory methodologies. 'Cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers can play a notable role in excluding marginalised young people from research and evaluation activities' (Rowland, Wills and Ott, 2024). The typical research environment, despite well-intentioned application of participatory methods, presents barriers through research and evaluation activities that become a space of exclusion, favouring the voices of some young people over the voices of others.
- **Reducing power imbalances in knowledge production between young people and any adults** involved remains an important priority in the participatory research process. This, however, is not always achieved as young participants can feel pressured into conforming with adult expectations and the latter may risk 'homogenising' the youth population, 'assuming that the views expressed by socially engaged youth are representative of all youth' (Butti, 2025).
- **Research projects may be carried out on a short timescale**, which makes it hard to build rapport and trust with young people (see, e.g., Obateru *et al*., 2024, p. 4).
- **Many youth participatory projects may not fully integrate young people into all stages of the research.** Young people may, for instance, be excluded from data analysis and research dissemination. The result is that researchers ultimately draw conclusions and prepare the outputs, which has clear implications for the ethics of 'youth voice' and representation (see, e.g., Butti, 2025, p. 4).
- **Youth participation is also at risk of being tokenised** in the research-to-policy process, and genuinely bottom-up approaches can face limited uptake by policymakers.

Some of these challenges are addressed by the participatory approaches taken, as explored below.

2.4 Youth-led participatory research and the Youth Social Action project

The Youth Social Action study utilised a mixed-method approach. First, a youth participatory methodology was employed, involving a steering committee of young people to collaboratively design and implement mixed-methods data collection activities across a participatory research day for 16- to 25-year-olds and school-based workshops for 12- to 14-year-olds. Innovative qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, including focus groups, vox-pop interviews, artwork and poster creation activities, were created by the youth-led steering group members and applied during both events. This approach ensured that the perspectives and experiences of young people were central to the research process.

2.4.1 Methods – what was done?

Given the complex interweaving nature of the process, the method is best demonstrated through its core participatory components. These were interactive and interconnected, forming an integral part of the co-designing practice throughout the project. The ongoing, dynamic engagement between these components at different stages contributed to an evolving adaptive methodology. As such, rather than presenting the method as a sequence of linear steps, the key participatory aspects are outlined below:

I. **Steering group members** – were instrumental in the design and direction of the research project. Met regularly on the University site to discuss directions, develop tools and co-design workshop activities for the Young Changemakers Forum. Members also addressed any points or questions arising from the policymakers and researchers. In addition to their critical insights, they were able to generate novel suggestions and questions for the researchers and policymakers. Some steering group members also led the workshops held for the 13–14-year-old participants at the school, as well as contributing to some of the data analysis process.
    a. 15 steering group members (16- to 25-year-olds), living in London
    b. Steering group members were recruited through a range of partners including GLA and London Met's Widening Participation team.

II. **Policymakers** – were the Civil Society & Sport GLA 'Youth' team who funded the project. However, they continued to embody the participatory approach throughout by attending regular meetings with researchers, those held with steering group members and key gatekeepers such as those at the school. The GLA team were engaged with the steering group, supported and facilitated recruitment, engaged in co-design over the length of the project. They ensured they did not take space in the young people's steering group meetings, wanted the contributions of the young people to be acknowledged and brought to the forefront of all outputs

III. **Researchers** – acted as one of the main connective parts of the process. Researchers engaged regularly with policymakers to share updates, discuss direction and collaboratively shape the evolving map. They equally met with young people – both steering group and participants of the data collection workshops. Researchers engaged with ethics committee members and

teachers as part of the safeguarding and ethical processes. Additionally, researchers collaborated with other administrative related staff to coordinate logistics.

IV. **Gatekeepers** – held a crucial but varied role in ensuring a reflexive, inclusive and safe approach remained a priority. Although some gatekeepers were formally aware of this role – e.g. ethics committee reviewers and teachers – others acted as such but less visibly so. One example would be parents/carers for the participants aged 13-14.

V. **Young Changemakers Forum participants (aged 16-25, 13-14)** – a Young Changemakers data collection forum took place in July 2024 (for Londoners aged 16 to 25). Young people participated through focus groups, vox-pop interviews, podcasting, dot voting, surveys, and group art activities to discuss youth social action. In addition, an adapted interactive session with Key Stage 3 pupils at a London secondary school was held to understand youth social action from young people aged 13-14 years. An unstructured review of the published and grey literature formed the basis of a systems map of youth social action in London.

    a. The Forum brought together around 50 young Londoners to participate in group discussions and interactive research activities focused on the question: 'How can we improve youth voice and youth social action?'

    b. Steering group members and Young Changemakers Forum participants were recruited through a range of partners including GLA and London Met's Widening Participation team.

    c. Participants, regarded as key changemakers in London, engaged in a range of activities throughout the day. Working in four diverse groups that rotated between four main research activities, participants took part in podcasting, focus groups, an art activity and a Post-it Notes and discussion activity. The day was supplemented by mini-surveys and Vox-pop activities during breaks.

VI. **Disseminating and closing the feedback loop** – this YSA project demonstrated that these young people wanted their voices heard. They also wanted to see the impact of their voice. Therefore, as part of the naturally participatory process closing the feedback loop was crucial, so that the impact and contributions young people have made is being fed back to them. In addition, the steering group members have been asked to contribute further thoughts on their experiences and thoughts overall.

2.4.2 Safeguarding and ethics

The participatory methodologies sought to embed an organically ethical approach throughout the research process. This is due to the emphasis on co-design of the project and iterative input and reflection between the young people, researchers and policymakers. However, discrete ethical and safeguarding considerations remained paramount. Whilst ethical complexities were apparent for those aged 16-25, these were heightened with the younger 13–14-year-old participants. Below are some of the key considerations made in relation to balancing research ethics protocol, school and institutional safeguarding requirements.

I. DBS requirements

A basic requirement for the project was to ensure all members of the core research team acquired an Enhanced DBS. This was organised by the Greater London Authority and was done well in advance of the anticipated data collection start date (approx. 2–3 months). Researchers attended in-person to provide key documents including proof of address and identity which were verified in-person by GLA staff. Whilst this was in progress, institutional ethical approval was sought in line with BERA (2024) and UKRI (2020).

II. Choosing the research site and consideration of power dynamics

Choice of research site involved consultation with participants, researchers, policymakers and with 13–14-year-olds, school staff. For the 16–25-year-old participants the decision to conduct sessions on the University site was selected due to accessibility and space requirements for steering group meetings and Young Changemakers Forum data collection event. However, for the 13–14-year-old participants there were enhanced deliberations around conducting research sessions on the school site versus the University campus due to the potentiality that schools may reinforce power differences (Kirby, 2020).

In this case discussions revolved around potential power dynamics with researchers being seen as extensions of school authority. The decision to conduct research on the school site, however, meant that participants were in a familiar and comfortable space with familiar adults. It also meant that the school did not have to organise additional safeguarding administrative procedures for leaving the school site with pupils. Researchers continued to reflect on the dynamics throughout.

III. School safeguarding protocols

For the 13–14-year-olds given that data collection workshops took place on the school site, additional school requirements were necessary. Researchers attended the school prior to the workshops to present DBS documentation which was uploaded to the school system. Researchers also familiarised themselves with the school behaviour policies including key contacts such as the designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and related procedures. Researchers also explored DfE policy guidance such as KCSIE (DfE, 2024).

IV. Participant assent and parental informed consent

Given the participatory approach taken, assent was sought from the participants under the age of 18 prior to then acquiring informed consent from parents or legal guardians. The process included a detailed participant pack using appropriate language and opportunities for discussions with researchers. This balanced respect for the young people's agency, whilst ensuring their legal rights were also protected (Waters, 2018). Participants were reminded of their

right to withdraw at any time, and researchers were aware of the various ways young people may dissent. This approach aligns with a wide range of literature on best practice guidelines for research with children and young people (see Coyne, Carter *et al.*, 2018, Morrow, 2008; UKRI, 2020; NSPCC, 2023).

V.   Duty of care

The team recognised the impact of the content and experiences of research on the wellbeing of young people. The research team was committed to proactively avoiding harm to participants. As such there were debriefs after workshops and formal / informal spaces created for them to freely express their concerns (Obateru *et al.*, 2024, p. 6). Participants' time and expenses were also valued. The steering group members were given £50 in vouchers and the 16–25-year-old 'Young Changemaker' participants £30. The younger 13-14-year old participants were offered stationery and were able to keep their art pieces once the research team had collected the necessary anonymised data.

VI.   Data protection and storage

All research data was collected and stored using University-owned password-protected devices and storage folders. Data was handled sensitively in line with UK GDPR (ICO, 2021). For the 13–14-year-olds in particular, any photographs taken during data collection workshops were anonymised. Some participants aged 16–25 had consented to photographs being taken during the workshops and these were included in dissemination materials. All project data (e.g. consent forms) will be held for at least six years and all research data for at least 10 years in accordance with University policy.

3. Advice for audiences

By involving young participants in every aspect of the research-to-policy process (shaping, e.g., research questions, methods, analysis, and outputs), participatory research with young people is better positioned to achieve impactful youth policies. Participation from the preliminary phase to policy design can also foster a sense of ownership over solutions.

Participatory research with young people should involve continuous reflection on one's own experiences, positionality and perspectives throughout the research process. This facilitates a space where trust, a sense of belonging and conviviality are more likely to be fostered. It can also help in redressing power imbalances between researchers and communities.

To avoid research and evaluation activities becoming a space of exclusion, steer clear of overly formalised processes, and address linguistic, cultural, and structural barriers prior to inviting young people to participate in the project.

To encourage active engagement, young participants should be involved in seeking suitable research sites and time. Participation is often hampered due to young people's limited availability. Incentives, such as vouchers, refreshments, job references and refunding travel costs, can also increase participation.

To facilitate an environment where young people can freely express views, standpoints, perspectives and ideas, avoid using research locations that can potentially reinforce power differences, such as schools.

Research should not treat young people as a homogenous entity and young participants should not feel pressured into conforming with adult expectations. The research team should therefore not assume that the views expressed by participants are representative of all young people.

Building rapport and trust with young people at an early stage is advantageous, especially since many participatory research projects are carried out on a short timescale. What's more, fostering a sense of belonging may be easier when groups of young people are invited to take part – rather than merely reaching out to young individuals – as shared bonds may pre-exist the research project.

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