**“What is the current picture of Youth Voice across the East Midlands?”**

**February 2020**

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Commissioned by The Mighty Creatives

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**Introduction from The Mighty Creatives**

**The Brief**

**About TMC:**

Established in 2009, The Mighty Creatives is a charity which has transformed the lives of CYP through arts, culture and creativity. Based at the heart of the cultural quarter in Leicester, we have served CYP’s communities across the East Midlands, reaching across the UK and Internationally through our partnership work.

Our Values are:

* We know our stuff - We are passionate and knowledgeable about the cause and the programmes we deliver
* We Listen - We are a learning organisation, informed by data and directed by evidence
* We Collaborate - We value the right of CYP and their communities to determine their own futures
* We Act - We are focused on action, are driven by need
* We Make a difference - We reflect on our work to enable, innovate and deliver change with style and ambition

We have:

* considerable expertise and experience in the fields of education, culture and youth engagement and empowerment
* a well-managed, robust and financially sound organisation
* excellent regional and national partnerships
* tried, tested and scalable programmes that contribute to positive, lasting transformation

We work in partnership with CYP, key funders and sector partners to champion, develop, deliver and grow:

* services that can be scaled up, demonstrate reach and result in significant and measurable cultural and social impacts
* inspiring opportunities for CYP to engage with arts and culture
* investment in CYP’s own creative skills, knowledge and practice
* capacity in the cultural end education sectors to support the infrastructure of the region
* programmes of cultural and creative education regionally, national and internationally
* models of practice which ensure that the creative voices of CYP are at the heart of all our programmes

Our charitable purpose is to advance the education of CYP and those who work with them in a creative context. Our governing documents are included within our Memorandum and Articles of Association and available in addition to that of our 5 Year Business Plan 2019-2024 in support of brief attached to this work.

**Background:**

In order to achieve our strategic objectives outlined in our Business Plan, we deliver the following programmes: Cultural Education; Creative Communities; Creative Careers and Creative Leadership. Amongst these programmes, our Creative Leadership work demonstrates our commitment to involving children and young people in every aspect of our work, from choosing our name to shaping the services we offer to children and young people. In the future, our Creative Leadership programme will prioritise opportunities for children and young people to step up and lead action from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds to work with us to make a difference to how future generations access the arts and connect to the creative and cultural sector.

**Objective:**

As part of our Creative Leadership programme, TMC will continue to offer youth leadership and governance opportunities to the young people we work with across our wider programmes. In order to continue to offer a meaningful programme of opportunity relevant and of value to young people, TMC sought to commission an individual or organisation to undertake a piece of research to identify the current provision of Youth Voice opportunities across the region in answering the following research question: *‘What is the current picture of Youth Voice across the East Midlands?’.*

In answering this question, the research itself captures examples of Youth voice initiatives in and outside the arts sector across the East Midlands, includes a brief overview of these initiatives, explores challenges within Youth Voice and identifies recommendations for what is next for us at The Mighty Creatives and the wider sector.

**Purpose:**

The paper itself has provided an insight into Youth Voice across the region and has identified gaps and recommendations that we at The Mighty Creatives can work to solve. The paper will contribute to an online resource available to organisations, schools and individuals who work in and outside the sector where there will be spotlights on various levels of participation and youth leadership through case studies, informative how-to documents and guides as well as further referencing and learning material.

The piece itself will inform our whole organisation, across our wider programmes and develop the support and opportunities we provide moving forward, including a Youth Voice symposium in July 2021.

**About the Author**

The author of this report, Daisy Giuliano, has worked alongside young people for the past five years, both regionally and nationally, on many youth voice projects. As a result, her experience and network has guided this report's path of enquiry. Daisy hopes the report proves to be a useful tool and conversation starter for many organisations to consider how they approach working with young people.

**Executive Summary**

Youth Voice is a popular term for how young people can lead, express, inform, collaborate and influence their world around them, mostly working alongside established organisations to achieve this. The age bracket of 'young people' differs from organisation to organisation, but broadly is 18-25, with some organisations working with younger, primary school age children and others working up to 30 years old. The Mighty Creatives define young people as 0-30 years old. There are different levels of engagement, all of which hold value in their own way, as well as presenting their own challenges.

This report will cover examples of youth voice work spanning Phil Treseder’s Degrees of Participation (1997):

* Assigned but Informed: An adult-chosen and led project where children and young people (CYP) can volunteer and be involved but direction and governance is owned by adults within the dynamic.
* Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children: Adults generate initial ideas with subsequent phases of planning and implementation actively involving children and young people.
* Consulted and Informed: Adults run a project or programme that has been crafted from consulting with CYP.
* Child Initiated and Directed: CYP have the original idea, determine what will happen, when and how. Adults are available but do not control.
* Child Initiated and Shared Decisions with Adults: CYP have the ideas, establish the project and determine when to seek support, advice, and consultation, but not direction, from adults.

There are trends and styles of work that are applicable to youth voice projects, regardless of geography. There are also national pieces of work that are happening across the East Midlands. This report will begin by exploring examples of youth voice work more broadly and then move to explore the key themes which have been concluded as a result of research for this report, specific to the East Midlands.

These key themes have emerged through direct conversations with professionals and young people working on youth voice projects and within organisations that work directly with young people.

Those who have contributed directly to the report are:

* Ruth Lewis-Jones, Learning Producer & Parmjit Sagoo, Community Projects Producer at New Arts Exchange, Nottingham
* Marianne Barraclough, Education Manager & Deputy Chief Executive: Programme, Sinfonia Viva
* Alix Manning-Jones, Cultural Education Producer (Plus One & Reimagine Project Manager), Derby Cultural Education Partnership
* Bez Martin, Rights and Participation Manager, Leicester City Council
* Youth Commission, Office of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner
* Andrew Garbutt, Participation Team, Lincolnshire County Council
* Emrys Green, Upstart Projects, East Midlands
* Jemma Redden, Director, Access Generation CIC, Leicester

The following questions were asked to all contributors:

* What youth voice work do you do?
* What benefits does this bring to your organisation and young people?
* What challenges do you face when working on youth voice projects?
* What support would help with youth voice work?

As a result of these conversations and further research, it was evident that there are a handful of key themes which are felt almost universally:

* There is a strong consensus that involving young people, at varying levels of engagement, is the right thing to do.
* Clarity would be welcomed over a definition of youth voice work.
* A wider focus on building the agency and citizenship of young people is needed.
* Working sincerely with young people requires a skillset which needs to be recognised, appreciated and supported.
* There is a challenge around capacity and resource to be able to sincerely deliver youth voice work.
* Due to the nature of the interactions with young people, demonstrating the longer-term impact of involving young people in projects can be a challenge.
* The arts sector lends itself well to working in this way, as many art forms naturally encourage collaboration, revision and risk.

After considering the above conclusions in more detail, the report will share a more in-depth summary of the individual conversations had with the contributors. These summaries will provide an insight into personal experiences, tangible examples of youth voice work and reflections on the topic.

**What’s next for the sector?**

Having a better understanding of the current picture of youth voice in the East Midlands inevitably raises the question of what's next and how the challenges can be considered and addressed. The following questions are prompts to consider as potential solutions, or part of solutions, for organisations, projects and individuals.

1. **To develop and share a consistent way of evidencing the short and long-term impact of youth voice projects**

* Who needs to be involved in 'agreeing' it?
* What is the right methodology to measure the impact?
* How do you practically do it when youth voice work is often transformative and developmental on a long term timescale?
* What else needs considering in evidencing impact? The project set up, staff involvement, level of resource etc?

1. **To build time and flexibility into bids to ensure genuine engagement is possible**

* How do you influence/lobby funders?
* What if they aren't convinced of seeing the need?
* How else can funders learn about the potential risks around genuine engagement?
* How can you demonstrate existing relationship with young people and the trust built to make the project as successful as possible?

1. **To collaborate with schools/colleges/youth organisations to build a sense of citizenship**

* How do you build citizenship? (The million dollar question!)
* Is citizenship built in schools and colleges?
* Is there a wider issue of societal engagement to be addressed?
* Is this an opportunity for us to be the trendsetters and lead by example, building agency with young people?

1. **To build meaningful networks to encourage collaboration and sharing good practice**

* Who is best placed to lead this?
* Who would/could be part of the network?
* Is it arts specific or cross sectors?
* Is it face to face or digital?
* Could this group lobby to funders/external influencers as to the support needed for youth voice work to continue to thrive?

1. **To build capacity amongst professionals and ensure quality**

* What is the most effective way of sharing learnt skills and experience?
* What existing qualification/training already exist in this field?
* What's the quality assurance behind existing programmes?
* How can young people be involved in shaping future training?

**National Youth Projects**

Encouragingly, there feels a movement to genuine desire and interest in involving young people in decision-making processes within organisations at all levels, national, regional and local. The level of engagement varies, as well as the experience, confidence and resources needed.

Below are a couple of examples of youth voice work happening more broadly. The examples cover mechanisms that allow young people to lead the direction of topic, such as the National Citizen Service (NCS) Youth Boards and the Students’ Union roles, and also projects that have been established to consider a very specific topic of interest, such as the National Health Service (NHS) Youth Forum.

**NCS Graduate Youth Boards**

The NCS is a youth programme for 16-17 year olds, happening across England. Aiming to build a more connected, compassionate and capable generation, young people spend four weeks exploring their own personal development as well as their role in their communities through a range of activities. The programme culminates in a social action project led by young people with the support of seasonal staff. After the intensive programme typically taking place in the summer holidays, many NCS providers offer ‘extension’ opportunities to continue developing the roles of young people in communities. There is a focus around social action for these groups, but there is also a structure of youth boards that feed into each other from a local to regional to national level.

Due to the variety of providers in the NCS network, there is a variance as to how this takes place, but for example Derby County Community Trust who are a provider in Derby City, run elections within their cohorts of young people during the summer programme to ensure there is an element of representation from the young people who took part.

**Student Union Officer Roles**

Students’ Unions are independent organisations with a ‘purpose of promoting the general interest of its members as students’ and legally enshrined as a result of the Education Act 1994. It is worth noting that student demographics are really varied and it is misleading to equate all students as young people, however there are a significant number of student populations who are considered young people.

As membership organisations, Students’ Unions have a strong foundation of democratic engagement and a sense of being truly led by its members. Almost all Students’ Unions have the roles of lead representatives, often split into focused areas for example, education, welfare, sports and development. Stemming from these leadership roles are often comprehensive and exciting structures of representation for hundreds of students to personally engage with, with the potential to reach all students across the institution which is tens of thousands. There are a significant variety of representative roles available, for example at the University of Lincoln Students' Union. Most Student Unions have a staffing infrastructure to support the representatives to be successful in their roles, particularly the lead representatives who are often full-time and paid for their work.

**NHS Youth Forum**

The NHS Youth Forum is a group of 25 young people from across the country who are interested in improving health services for young people. Facilitated by the British Youth Council and founded in 2013, this group of young people have been able to influence services to become more youth-friendly, educated other young people in their healthcare rights and championed youth representation at Clinical Commissioning and Patient Participation groups. Forum members over the years have also had the opportunity to present, share and attend events alongside NHS Directors, Commissioners, MPs and NHS

staff. The NHS Youth Forum is an example of a national and public sector organisation (NHS England) recognising the value of young people as part of their community and providing the funding, opportunity and sincerity to ensure their voices can influence decisions, where otherwise the existing structures may not have allowed.

**Youth Voice in the East Midlands**

As outlined in the introduction of this report, a handful of themes have emerged from both the conversations directly with professionals working with young people, and as a result of research. This section of the report will provide more insight into these headlines to understand the current picture of youth voice in the region.

**There is a strong consensus that involving young people, at varying levels of engagement, is the right thing to do.**

It is universally felt that creating spaces and opportunities for young people to lead, collaborate and influence across the arts and civic space is the right thing to do both for young people but also organisationally and for the benefit of wider society.

Almost all contributors used the words ‘tokenistic’ and ‘buzzword’ in sharing their concern at the risk of youth voice work being undertaken insincerely, and could give many examples of times where this had happened due to a lack of time, preparation, understanding and resources.

It was also evident that related organisations who are working a couple of steps away from young people directly could benefit from deepening their understanding of youth voice work and having the confidence to engage and lead their own projects. There was a sense that confidence came from experience and a lack of experience might mean an apprehension to begin to sincerely collaborate with young people.

**Clarity would be welcomed over a definition of youth voice work.**

As the trend suggests, more organisations outside the small participation teams within local authorities are really positively developing and delivering work in collaboration with young people.

Inevitably, the answers to the question ‘what youth voice work do you do?’ were varied. Those working directly in participation roles were very confident in answering, however those working in broader engagement or education roles, and within the arts sector, often caveated their responses as their projects often aren’t titled as youth voice work. Whilst this is not an issue for those professionals working directly on the projects, it does mean it becomes more of a challenge to translate the youth voice elements of the project, and its benefits, to others who are working on it, for example, management, or funders.

Coupled with this, the specific term ‘youth voice’ in itself feels very much like a phrase used within ‘the sector’ and doesn’t hold its weight outside of that. This can present itself as an issue when the decision-makers, influencers and funders are not directly involved.

**A wider focus on building the agency and citizenship of young people is needed.**

There was a very strong sense of the importance of laying the groundwork for young people to feel they are able to, want to, and would enjoy being involved in projects in collaboration with organisations. One of the biggest challenges is the disconnect between organisations and young people. Whilst organisations are recognising the importance and value of working in this way, there is a constant challenge of a lack of uptake by young people which impacts on being able to deliver the projects sincerely, and justify the potential of future similar projects taking place.

It would be lazy and misguided to place the blame on young people for not engaging, though it is not uncommon to hear ‘it was an open call out, I don’t know why more young people haven’t applied’. Evidenced by examples like voter turnout, it is probably fair to say there is a wider issue with a lack of agency and citizenship across society, regardless of age.

For youth voice work, this challenge impacts on the recruitment to projects, the diversity of young people involved and continued engagement over a project’s lifespan. Not being able to overcome these challenges often results in the tokenistic style of youth voice work that so many genuinely want to avoid.

The Youth Commission of the Office of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner shared their thoughts on why more young people might not get involved in youth voice opportunities and cited the following:

* Having to manage their time & other things just take priority, like school.
* They just don’t care - the group felt it is a parent's responsibility to educate when it comes to issues like politics.
* No one knows about the opportunities.
* It depends where people come from.
* People are influenced by their peer group, both positively and negatively.
* The perception of taking part, that it could be seen to be uncool.

It is interesting to understand the Youth Commission’s perspective of their peers against the backdrop of almost all contributors mentioning the diversity of voice in their projects and sustaining the attendance and engagement of young people as challenges.

**Working sincerely with young people requires a skillset which needs to be recognised, appreciated and supported.**

When contributors shared examples of work that had been really successful, many mentioned the brilliant professionals who enabled and supported the young people they are working alongside. Conversely, where projects had perhaps fallen flat, it was in part due to the ‘adults’ not fully understanding what was required of their role. It was strongly felt that working in this way requires a skillset that is not as valued as it should be. Sinfonia Viva succinctly articulated that their approach is allowing and encouraging significant risk to take place within a framework of support and expertise to produce exciting outcomes, that are always undefined, or at least up for negotiation, at the outset.

The risk here is a diminishing pool of professionals able to deliver this work to an outstanding and authentic standard versus the rising demand of projects to be delivered in collaboration with young people. Upstart Projects have recognised this and have begun delivering training in youth voice, with young trainers. The Reimagine Project taking place across Derby’s Cultural Education Partnership over the next three years has built in workforce development as part of its funding bid, recognising the impact it makes. Leicester City Council offer internal training which is also led by young people to ensure other services across the local authority are working from a rights-based start point and that participation becomes everyone’s business. Other organisations are recognising their key artists and freelancers are able to work well in this area and nurturing them to offer consistency and quality experiences for young people.

**There is a challenge around capacity and resource to be able to sincerely deliver youth voice work.**

Related to the need for workforce development, there is a sense that the youth voice sector is in a period of transition, from it being the responsibility of a specific participation team to deliver this work, to it being embedded across most roles within organisations. Whilst an enormously positive transition, it has resulted in an increase in demand from participation teams and impacted on the capacity and resource to be able to sincerely run projects. Many job roles have participation and voice work as part of the role, not as the sole focus. Equally, many are part-time and contracted as a result of funding bids, which in itself presents challenges around continuity and capacity.

Delivering a project in collaboration with young people is more time intensive by its very nature and is more often than not, not happening between 9-5pm, Monday to Friday. Establishing relationships with young people in a way to unlock their creativity, ideas and passions requires an emotional investment, which in itself can be time-consuming, powerful and require further action and intervention. Delivering this under time pressure and without adequate resources impacts on all involved.

**Due to the nature of the interactions with young people, demonstrating the longer term impact of involving young people in projects can be a challenge.**

As is the nature of youth voice projects, what they look like is extremely varied, and therefore as are the interactions with young people. Organisations and professionals could meet a young person as part of a one-off session as part of a consultation, a 6 week collaborative project ending in a showcase, a one year term in office as an elected representative, or years as part of a local authority Youth Council.

There were some really powerful and affirming stories shared by the contributors of this report, detailing the transformative impact their youth voice project had had for a young person. From becoming the country’s youngest MP, to feeling loved and heard by your corporate parent as a child in care, to actively influencing policy within the public sector, to making friends for life and speaking in public for the first time, to the personal and societal benefits and impact of youth voice projects are immense. Bez Martin at Leicester City Council simply described that ‘they just move from A to B so quickly’ through being involved.

The challenge for the sector then is to consider how we evaluate and demonstrate the long-term impact of this work and how we can better ‘justify’ why it’s so valuable for all involved to work in this way.

This would in turn help to make the case for some of the other challenges faced, such as buy in from gatekeepers of the power of youth voice, continuity in project funding, building capacity and importantly supporting more and more young people to have access to the transformative opportunities similar to their peers.

**The arts sector lends itself well to working in this way, as many art forms naturally encourage collaboration, revision and risk.**

There was a really interesting observation between the contributors working within the arts sector, and those in the civic realm. Many in the arts sector felt their art form lends itself well to being able to really see the benefit of youth input, present an outcome up for negotiation, encourage collaboration and take risks and build skills and experiences for all.

Translated to a local authority setting, it is felt the very established hierarchical structure and processes require a certain amount of ‘know-how’ to be able to navigate and influence. This in turn could limit the projects which take place, as well as the ability to really influence. Many authorities are working successfully within this environment, establishing full places on Safeguarding Boards, creating a youth-led enquiry about services provided across the city, sitting on recruitment panels for roles related to young people within the authority, to name only a few examples from the region.

In the spirit of collaboration, there is the potential to really learn from the different environments young people are working in, sharing the transformative power of creativity and the arts and understanding how change happens and the spaces that it happens in.

**In Conversation With…**

**Ruth Lewis-Jones Learning Producer & Parmjit Sagoo, Community Projects Producer**

**New Art Exchange, Nottingham**

New Art Exchange (NAE) is a contemporary arts space in Nottingham that celebrates the region's cultural richness and diversity. Their learning and community programmes are full of rich examples of participation work and their commitment to youth voice and community engagement, despite the challenges faced.

In collaboration with a local school, NAE have established Arts Champions as a mechanism to introduce young people to the visual art, their organisation and their work. Two Key Stage 2 pupils from each class are nominated as Arts Champions on behalf of their classmates. As an example of an opportunity, the Arts Champions visited NAE to meet a number of the NAE staff and spent time getting to know their roles, what that actually means on a day-to-day basis and how they work with young people. They also plan to visit 3 seasons of art gallery exhibitions and take part in an after school art club weekly in school It was reflected that through their more formal roles as champions, the pupils felt a real sense of responsibility which resulted in more equal conversations between staff and pupil. This initiative was created through a direct relationship with a specific teacher in the school who is an advocate for the arts and the involvement of children. Ruth reflected that she felt the Arts Champion set up is replicable and would work in other schools.

Ruth also reflected as to how established programmes such as the Arts Awards provide a natural framework to encourage participation, collaboration and leadership, all elements of youth voice work. The academic validation that Arts Awards provides also serves as a dual source of motivation, the creativity and exploration for the young person, and the accreditation for the parents/carers perspective. It is helpful to understand the full scope of the motivations to take part, and frame the opportunities in a multitude of ways to different audiences (e.g. young people vs parents/guardians) to offer the best chance of young people be able to engage in projects, programmes and ideas, especially when they are the people who are practically and physically bringing them to the Arts Club to be able to take part.

In a similar vein, within an academic environment, naturally schools and specifically teachers are also levers to making opportunities possible for young people. Ruth felt the Artsmark award supports with this, as well as there always being dedicated staff within schools who are really passionate about the arts, and continue to make things happen despite the challenging financial climate they are working in.

Outside of the established relationship with schools, NAE work within the community. Younique Festival took place in 2019 for the first time, and will happen again in 2020. It is a festival organised by, and for, young people. As the Community Projects Producer as NAE, Parmjit spoke of the questions she asks of projects like Younique:

* Is it an authentic event?
* Is there a diversity of experience, background and skills of the young people involved or are we working with the same young people?
* How do we connect with other groups of young people, not yet currently involved with the arts at all?
* What could motivate a young person to come to the building?
* What’s stopping them currently?
* Is it appropriate to incentivise engagement with a project through things like vouchers or food?

Parmjit reflected that the above questions are applicable to community engagement more broadly and are often a challenge, which requires real commitment and understanding to the importance of working in this way. Parmjit described participation work as a ‘series of interventions’ to support the group to travel from A to B. It was felt that there is a definite skill and knowledge needed to work collaboratively with the community, and young people, and more could be done to initially recognise this and then go further to champion and support those working in this area. Both Ruth and Parmjit shared they feel there is a small pool of artists they work with who they feel confident to work in this way and providing training and support for more people would bring a real benefit to young people directly, as well as the organisation’s projects.

**Marianne Barraclough, Education Manager & Deputy Chief Executive: Programme, Sinfonia Viva**

Sinfonia Viva are a national orchestra, based in Derby, focused on connecting people, communities and professional musicians to create exceptional, creative and unique performances. Their education programme has participation and engagement as part of its fundamental way of working and produces both high quality performances and also transformative and developmental experiences for the young people they work with.

Interestingly, Marianne didn’t initially regard this way of working as ‘youth voice’ work, and commented that as Sinfonia Viva didn’t have mechanisms like formal youth boards like other organisations may, that she often reflected as to whether they should be doing more ‘youth voice work’ in its traditional form. After a brief discussion, it is obvious how embedded and fundamental their way of working is to what they do and how involved young people are with the creative decision-making processes, and therefore a really good example of youth voice work. We spoke about having the confidence, or sometimes lacking in confidence, to choose not to do traditional youth voice work when it doesn’t fit, especially in an environment where it feels like 'everyone' is 'doing' youth voice projects. There is also a lack of clarity around the definition of youth voice which would help in feeling confident in the way an organisation is choosing to work.

Marianne neatly described their way of working as allowing and encouraging significant creative risk to take place within a framework of support and expertise to produce exciting and unique performances. It provides an opportunity for young people to have ownership and agency over the work they’ve made and to be able to see the value of their contributions. Their interaction with young people is often over short periods of intensity, for example weekly sessions over a 6 week period. There is the recognition that knowing the long-term impact of their work is a challenge as it is difficult to sustain relationships with young people given the wide geographic reach of the work. Marianne described their work instead as a ‘spark’ for young people, schools, parents and youth groups to be able to take forward.

Within a school setting, this style of working has also emboldened teachers both to consider their own practice and also challenge the assumptions they may have made about a pupil with feedback regularly being ‘I just never knew they could do that’ about an individual.

Having the ‘right’ music leaders to deliver this way of working is crucial to its success. Marianne commented that time and experience has made it very clear the type of music leaders they look for to run workshops. Most importantly, it’s that they share the same excitement about this way of working. This is also the case for the musicians from the orchestra who work on projects.  Having a small but hugely committed and skilled team of musicians within the orchestra is central to its success. Marianne also reflected that there can often be a challenge in translating this way of working to partner organisations and mostly seeing it in action is the tipping point in getting people on board. Not having the ‘gatekeepers’ (schools, teachers, partner organisations) on board can contribute to the project feeling flatter than it should be so Sinfonia Viva proactively work with these groups early on to ensure their buy in. Whilst Sinfonia Viva have some stand alone choir groups which they recruit for and run independently, the rest of their projects involve working in partnership with existing groups, removing the risk of a lack of engagement.

Marianne reflected on the strength of music as an artform to support this collaborative and shared way of working, and that it lends itself particularly well to this style. It was felt that working towards a performance unites a group and encourages a shared sense of ownership.

Sinfonia Viva were partners in a consortium project across Derby City, called ‘This is Derby’ in which different art and sports organisations took the lead in different areas of the city to support the development of young people. Sinfonia Viva led a ‘SEND Hub’, working with the city’s special schools to support young people with additional needs to take part in arts and sports. It was felt that their collaborative approach worked successfully with SEND groups and produced really exciting performances. Marianne reflected on some of the practical adaptations made to support the process such as understanding the speed with which to run a workshop, the power of taking time to listen to the group to get to know them better and to use the expertise of the music leaders to offer alternatives when needed, though acknowledging that all music leaders work in this way for all sessions.  It was also felt that Sinfonia Viva’s time with these groups positively increased the expectations of individuals, both for the individuals but also those around them such as teachers and parents/carers.

**Alix Manning-Jones, Cultural Education Producer (Plus One & Reimagine Project Manager), Derby Cultural Education Partnership**

In her role as Cultural Education Producer for Derby’s Cultural Education Partnership, Alix has an insightful overview of the way in which young people are being involved in the arts across the City. This is Derby: Reimagine is a project building on the success of This is Derby in 2018/19 and offers opportunities for targeted young people to access arts and sports where they otherwise might not have had the chance to. As Project Lead for this, Alix spoke of her ambition to create the ‘Young Creatives’, a group of young people acting as a steering group for the three year project. The Young Creatives will ensure young people are involved at the strategic level of the project and have the opportunity to meet the many creatives involved in bringing the project to life.

Reflecting on her experiences of involving young people in decision-making and running youth voice projects, Alix reflected that there is a challenge around building genuine relationships and trust with young people before presenting the ‘opportunity’ to them. Alix felt missing this crucial step results in the challenge many talk about, in getting the same ‘type’ of young person showing their interest in decision-making roles and keeping those involved engaged on a longer term basis. Often project bids or timelines don’t factor in this ‘preparation’ time and significantly contributes to the success, or not, of a project.

Alix reflected on the roles she’s held, that have worked both with young people and stakeholders, that there is both a misunderstanding and a sense of fear from the gatekeepers and decision-makers about what young people have got to say. She felt the further away organisations are from working directly with young people equates to being left behind in this style of working, resulting in a sense of trepidation about how to adapt their working style. It was felt that the professionals who work with both groups (like the role of Cultural Education Producer) should offer a real influence and support to the ‘adults’ too.

**Bez Martin, Rights and Participation Manager, Leicester City Council**

Sitting within the Children’s social care directorate of the local authority, Rights and Participation team at Leicester City Council deliver a significant amount of voice work and opportunity for young people to shape their lives and influence the world around them.

The Young People’s Council is an opportunity open to all young people living in the city aged 11-18. The group are democratically elected and represent the voices of young people across the city, especially within the local authority, where they sit on the council scrutiny mechanisms, holding elected members to account. Most recently, the Young People’s Council have produced a report focused on the mental health services across the city. The report and project, called Generation Select, mirrored a Parliament Select Committee Enquiry. The group of young people selected the issue democratically, based on youth consultation and debate, and then proceeded to ask for evidence to be submitted, and held interviews with key stakeholders and people working in this area. The group then authored and presented the report to those in decision-making roles working in the areas of mental health and young people. Generation Select has seen very tangible outcomes as a result of their enquiry, for example, the creation of job roles addressing the concerns of the reports (young people were involved in the recruitment process for these new roles). Not only has there been specific and related outcomes to this project, but there has also been a wider appreciation and acknowledgement of providing space for young people, treating them as peers and experts, and asking for their support.

The Rights and Participation team also facilitate mechanisms for looked after children to ensure their voice is considered and heard, as laid out in the Children Act (1989). Local authorities have a statutory obligation to ascertain the feelings and wishes of the child in their care in relation to their care planning and wellbeing, and for them to be taken seriously. This is consistent with Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. Traditionally and commonly, local authorities run a specific Children in Care Council to fulfil this obligation, as well as to bring young people with shared life experiences together.

Leicester City Council have begun to move away from this set up, as it was increasingly difficult to ensure meaningful engagement and attendance. Following a review, there is now the opportunity for looked after children and care leavers (16+) to become ‘Care Experienced Consultants’. This set up recognises the expertise the young people have gained through their experience of the local authority as their corporate parent and how it can help inform future decisions for other children and young people. The Consultants are linked into the Corporate Parent Forums. Starting from February 2020, a ‘Generation Select’ style enquiry will happen, specifically focused on an issue facing looked after children in Leicester City, led by looked after children and care experienced young adults. It is felt this is a more engaging, beneficial and meaningful way in which to both fulfil the legal obligation of the authority, and sincerely hear and support the voices of looked after children. Bez reflected that to feel heard is to feel loved in this setting and that the potential to build real agency and positive relationships with these young people cannot be overstated.

Leicester City Council also facilitates the ‘Big Mouth Forum’ which is a space for young people with additional needs to share their voices, feelings and experiences. Leicester City Council run the national Parent Champion Programme in the city which is an opportunity for parents of younger children to influence, promote and support the early help provisions across the city, and therefore acting as another method for as many young children to get access to the support they may need.

Related to supporting youth voice, the Rights and Participation Team also work in advocacy and youth rights, supporting young people to shape their own care plans, with the support of independent advocates. This also extends to supporting young people making complaints against services. The team also support young people to deliver ‘how you hear me’ training, which is rights based participation training for teams and services across the whole local authority. Bez strongly reflected that ‘participation is everyone’s business’ and reframes the capacity issue participation teams are up against. It also strengthens their own services, making them more fit for purpose and informed for having listened to young people as part of their standard processes.

When asked about the challenges faced, Bez commented that (lack of) capacity continues to be the biggest issue she faces, but that this is borne from the positive recognition participation work has received across the authority. This in turn has created another challenge around encouraging capability and accountability for youth voice work wider than the Rights and Participation team rather than it all coming through the team.

As an employee of the local authority, Bez also reflected on the potential tension youth voice work brings for the employee personally (this tension could happen within any organisation working in this way). How do you manage the potential conflict of supporting the voice of young people, who are often scrutinising local authority services, when they are also your employer?

When asked about the challenges around recruitment, engagement and commitment, Bez felt there always needs to be an investment on branding and marketing, to really help convey the opportunity in a way that speaks to young people. This is often an oversight of projects. Bez also felt it was important to ensure projects had as much ‘currency’ as possible which means that not only are they getting the opportunity but there could also be an accreditation, voucher or other reward coupled with taking part to strengthen the likelihood of engagement even further.

Coupled with this challenge, is ensuring the ‘offer’ to young people has substance behind how ‘glossy’ it may look. It is easy to invite young people to conferences or ask for their opinions at a late stage of the ‘service’ development but we, as a sector, then run the risk of exploiting the voices of young people for our purposes.

Bez finally reflected that she consistently scrutinises the work she is doing, and the work others offer. She shared that she often thinks about the big soul-searching questions of, ‘what decisions are you giving away’? and ‘if you’re not distributing power, why are you doing it?’.

**Youth Commission, Office of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner**

The conversation with the Youth Commission of the Office of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner took place prior to the group presenting to local stakeholders and decision-makers on the issue of road safety. The Youth Commission had identified this issue from the Fire Plan for the County and felt it was relevant to young people. They went onto speak to over 1100 other young people on this issue to gain an insight into young people’s views. This information was presented to local stakeholders and decision-makers to take forward, in collaboration with the Youth Commission.

 The following questions were asked to a group of 12 Youth Commissioners and the commentary is the collection of their responses and thoughts:

* Why do you take part?
* Do you feel listened to as a young person, generally and as part of the Youth Commission?
* Do you feel able to influence how the Commission works and what you do as a group?
* How should organisations work alongside young people to make sure they are heard and involved?
* Why don’t more young people get involved?

The group shared a variety of reasons as to why they take part in the Youth Commission. They were broadly split into three themes of representation, personal development and because it’s fun and interesting. One young person shared that they felt they represent a ‘different kind of voice’ and that it’s important to bring different voices to things like the Youth Commission. Others recognised that it is important to represent others with their voice and to not let an opportunity like this pass as they believe young people shouldn’t just be complaining and not wanting to be part of the solution. One young person said that it has been really powerful to learn about the experiences of other people different to them, through the consultation they have led on youth violence and road safety.

The group also felt it was a great opportunity to develop personally, ‘to get yourself out there and talk about the things that matter’. Others also recognised the career opportunities being involved can offer, with some young people really interested in pursuing a career in public services in the future. Finally, the group spoke about how they felt it would be a great opportunity to meet other people that they otherwise may not meet in their day-to-day life and how they were generally interested in what the Youth Commission could do.

It was interesting to hear the difference in how the group felt listened to. There was a general consensus that schools aren’t great at listening sincerely to its students, unless they spoke up individually which can be difficult for many. They also reflected that they understand any conversations in school can’t be kept confidential which makes it hard to feel comfortable in openly sharing and being honest on an issue. The group did go onto share that within the other groups they are part of, dance, Cadets, the Youth Commission for example, they do feel empowered and able to speak up. One Youth Commissioner reflected that they felt because they haven’t got established careers, or responsibility or ‘as much’ experience as adults they felt young people aren’t taken seriously.

When asked about being able to influence the direction of the Youth Commission, as well as how organisations should collaborate with young people more generally, it was felt there was a balance to be found between the adults and the young people, and that they did not necessarily want to be ‘in charge’. One young person commented that they wanted their expertise of being young to be recognised and acknowledged.

The group reflected about their peers and why others didn’t take up the opportunities in the same way they had done. They shared that they have a lot going on in their lives and that some people may struggle to manage their time, or not see this as enough of a priority to fit into their schedules. Coupled with this, a number of the Youth Commissioners had spent their day completing mock GCSE exams and shared the stress of them, so it’s also important to recognise the changing priorities of young people, throughout the school year and related to their age.

The group also felt that people just didn’t know enough about ‘politics’ to engage, one young person said that the majority of their class didn’t know what an MP is or does, and that concerned them. They felt the main responsibility to educate them on these things is down to their parents. One young person also shared they felt where young people physically live plays a role in whether or not they are likely to get engaged. They also shared that they felt it was really hard to find out about these opportunities and their peer group had a role to play. When someone knew about it, their peer group would be positively influenced by someone who was taking up an opportunity, but equally there could be a peer pressure not to get involved. They did share they felt there was a certain perception people had of people who got involved with opportunities like the Youth Commission and that could be difficult for people to overcome.

**Andrew Garbutt, Participation Team, Lincolnshire County Council**

Lincolnshire County Council’s Participation Team works with and oversees a number of local authority young people's groups. However, Voice of the Child (VOC) work is embedded in day to day practice and showcased by the Children's Services Stakeholder Engagement Group through an annual team audit and quarterly submissions of 'You Said, We Did' examples. Posters are produced bi-annually to highlight how they are listening to children, young people and families and demonstrates that sharing comments, suggestions, compliments and complaints makes a difference to their services.

There are strong examples of VOC happening in wider services in:

* Children's residential homes' monthly meetings that demonstrate how resident’s views shape structures, routines and staff practice within the homes e.g. meal choices, activities, room decoration etc.
* Early Help/Social Care interventions engaging children and young people in sharing views on their/family life and relationships and supporting them to build relationships, self-esteem and resilience.
* Positive activities for young people (universal and targeted) where VOC contributes to session and activity development to help keep them interested and engaged.

More specifically, the Participation Team oversees the following projects:

**Lincolnshire Youth Council (LYC)**

LYC is a group of both universal and targeted young people aged between 12-18 years old, which aims to give young people the opportunity to share views to officers and councillors about issues affecting them. There has been a move away from school engagement to targeting young people involved in local authority services – the latest recruitment drive is with the young carer groups and locality teams. LYC is currently under-utilised for their opinions. However, a senior management report was supportive and they are currently exploring ways to include the LYC in Council business through engagement and commissioning.

**Lincolnshire Children in Care council (Voices4Choices)**

There are 4 locality groups that have 6-10 young people involved. This is a participation group for looked after children and care leavers aged between 8-18 years old. Sessions now take place in external venues based around activities with scope for discussion and sharing views on services. The Participation Team maintains an overview and passes on work for the groups to consider. Big Conversation takes place 3 times a year bringing the locality groups together with Leaving Care Service and senior officers and councillors to discuss topics and new pieces of work to improve services. Recent work includes carer and young people's profiles; carer profiles are all in place and they are looking at how best to quality assure their use for children and young people changing placements. Current work includes Language That Cares, training using the Placement Game (developed by Sheffield Children in Care Council), revision of the care pledge, and exploring their views on respite. FAF (Fun and Feedback) is run by social workers and engages a wider group of children in care. FAF runs two or three times a year to explore a particular

topic.

**Lincolnshire Young Inspectors**

There are currently two groups running (22 young people aged 11-19 years old.) supported by a project lead and a young apprentice. The Young Inspectors project is high profile in Children's Services. Young Inspectors are invited to plan inspections from a young person's perspective which are carried out in the

school holidays. These inspections can be children's services, commissioned services or partner organisations. A report with recommendations is produced based on their experiences and conversations. This report goes to managers for comment and action and there is an expectation that managers report back to the Young Inspectors about decisions taken on the report. Reports also go to senior managers. Recent inspections have been children's centres, Liaise (SEND) service and professional supervision.

**Lincolnshire Young Voices (LYV)**

LYV is a SEND group (up to 25 year olds) that want to make a difference for children and young people with SEND. Recently two young people have been appointed apprentice Chairs of the group (which are paid 0.5 FTE roles). The group meet bi-monthly and have developed a work plan with the following priorities: audit public toilet accessibility, gather views on public transport accessibility, raise awareness of SEND issues in the Council, with partners and raise awareness of LYV and SEND issues more widely.

It is felt there are a variety of challenges depending on the kind of work, relationship with young people and their experiences. In terms of volunteering in youth voice work with the participation groups it is two-fold: recruitment into volunteering roles and maintaining interest given that it is in their free time. However, this can also be in part about a reliance on other team's 'selling' the message on the participation team’s behalf, if they aren't well informed or as interested. The team are visiting groups directly and producing better publicity to try and overcome some of these issues. There is also a barrier of entry into a new group due to young people's fears of the unknown. To overcome this it may be necessary for workers to accompany a young person (with peers ideally) to try a session. At a recent young carers meeting a worker said he thought it would be good for some of them to attend a group and offered to go with them.

In order to maintain interest they offer food, activities and trip rewards and incentives. Young Inspectors meet mid-week so are rewarded with away days whereas children in care council and youth council have activities built into their day. Young Voices see the meeting as a social gathering in their calendar and a chance to catch up face to face. Placement Support Workers (Fostering Teams) are particularly good at supporting children in care to attend groups.

Andrew felt that cooperation from other teams to push the opportunities available and encourage attendance would really support the further success of the groups. He also felt that a clear purpose for the groups is required. LYC has struggled with this although, as already stated, the Directorate Leadership are supportive and agree engagement needs to have a purpose and be meaningful. Young Inspectors have produced reports that have not been followed up with feedback as expected. Big Conversations have held lively debates and seen clear follow up though there is a need to quality assure some of the work better. For example, once the Care Pledge refresh is complete how will its implementation be monitored?

Andrew reflected that the work with young people can be both highly rewarding and unfathomable. It is strange that more young people don't wish to take up the opportunities on offer because when they do they open up a world of new learning; chances to develop practical and social skills to populate CVs with interesting and worthwhile volunteering demonstrating commitment and a sense of community responsibility.

**Emrys Green, Upstart Projects, East Midlands**

Upstart Projects is an organisation working nationally to support the development of young people as professionals predominantly within the art sector. Youth voice and young people shaping their own opportunities underpins their mode of operating, which can be seen from having young Trustees on their Board, to developing youth voice training for organisations in collaboration with young people and supporting a platform for young people through Voice Magazine. As a development from Arts Awards Voice, Voice Magazine has grown exponentially, with 352,000 site visits last year. As an example of personal development, the current Editor started as a Voice Contributor at 17, and has continued to contribute and stay involved and is now the Editor at 25 years old.

When asked what are the benefits to young people when Upstart provide opportunities, Emrys replied without doubt that ‘it’s in our DNA’, that Upstart exists for this very reason and that in a climate of decreasing opportunities, they see their role as an opportunity to ‘activate’ young people, igniting the activist in them and providing the tools for them to be successful. Emrys proudly shared numerous stories of individual young people who had significantly developed as a result of being engaged with the opportunities Upstart offers, and through the arts.

Emrys shared the consideration needed in pitching opportunities to their youth network, explaining how important it is to manage the expectations of what it means to be involved, what the purpose of the opportunity is and how the opportunity is being shared amongst everyone. He also shared the purpose built activity management tool Upstart use to support young people to get timely and easy access to the opportunities, and to ‘talk’ back. This tool clearly allows Upstart to successfully work with young people nationally and remotely and is something others may benefit from replicating.

As an organisation which has working with young people as part of its foundations, Emrys reflected on the sector and how expertise can be shared more effectively, including the balance to be found in networking and sharing best practice. He commented that there is real strength in being able to network, share knowledge and best practice but to recognise the tipping point of offering expertise that could and should be paid for, as a small organisation which is working to build this type of consultancy like income.

It was also felt that the sector, including themselves, is very good at building case studies and providing qualitative information to demonstrate the impact of the project/work/intervention. Whilst Emrys didn’t necessarily feel this was an issue, he did reflect that this information could be used more widely to highlight those projects that are ‘doing it right’, how they got there and how it could be replicated for the benefit of others.

**Jemma Redden, Director, Access Generation CIC, Leicester**

Access Generation CIC is a social enterprise that empowers young people and business to make the world of work accessible. Their purpose is to encourage businesses to employ inexperienced young people. Their mission is to share young people's views and expectations to help businesses become more visible and attractive to the next generation. Access Generation have a vision to be run by and for young people so in 2019 they created a peer panel of young volunteers aged 18-30. The role of the peer panel is to ensure young people's views are represented and heard by business. All of their work is influenced by young people. The peer panel are also involved in paid work experience opportunities. This includes participating in Access Generation’s employer training workshops and assessing employer websites using their youth employment accessibility matrix tool.

Access Generation has recently worked with three interns through DeMontfort University and one of the team created a marketing campaign #AccessYourTruePotential. This campaign has been created through focus groups with young people to highlight the key issues young people face when trying to apply for jobs online. There is a drive for young people to sign the petition to encourage employers to change. The campaign will be launched this year with employers who will be asked to sign the pledge to make those changes.

The aim is for employers to:

* Embrace diversity and inclusion
* Promote opportunities to progress
* Acknowledge receipt of applications
* State when feedback is available
* Create entry level roles and get rid of the catch 22 situation - no experience, need the experience to work

Jemma reflected that ‘seeing is believing’ when it comes to encouraging businesses to make a change. She shared that when young people have been actively involved in delivery training workshops, or presenting the findings of an employer's assessment, they get the greatest response. Their training workshops have been delivered to over 100 employers and the feedback is rated 80%, very good to excellent. For young people, Access Generation offers them experience to enhance their CV, connection to their business contacts and an opportunity to represent young people’s views.

Jemma shared that when working with young people you have to take into consideration their other commitments such as studying, part time or full time employment. Their peer panel is a flexible voluntary position open to anyone aged 18-30. They work with the team remotely via Whatsapp chat and video calls.

As with most not-for-profit organisations, sponsorship to help Access Generation pay for expenses to cover the peer panels work is always a welcome support. There is also strength in collaborating with other young organisations working with 18-30 year olds who could share the opportunity to their young people to become part of the peer panel, and likewise support the peer panel to take up other opportunities.

**Conclusion**

It is evident, from the consultancy, mapping and conversations above, that Youth Voice is indeed, the right thing to do and organisations, individuals and schools are providing more space for their young people to take leadership and share initiative to shape and develop future provision and opportunities. From local authorities to galleries, hese opportunities themselves provide invaluable experience and benefits to, not only the young people, but also the organisations involved. These benefits include increased citizenship, risk taking, short and long-term impact and promoting creative careers, amongst many others. However, it also evidently comes hand in hand with challenges. Amongst these, lies limited capacity, lack of funding, no universal definition of youth voice, insincere delivery and upskilling of staff to name a few. The recommendations made in the “What’s Next?” section will contribute to a series of developments that will aim to alleviate these challenges to enable for a more widespread and meaningful delivery of youth voice initiatives, both in and outside the sector with space to share best practice and create a more consistent approach.

**Directory of Projects**

The list below is a directory of the projects mentioned in this report. The information was available accessed in January 2020.

* NCS Youth Board - <https://wearencs.com/youth-boards>
* Lincoln Students' Union - [https://lincolnsu.com/](https://lincolnsu.com)
* NHS Youth Forum - <https://www.england.nhs.uk/participation/get-involved/how/forums/nhs-youth-forum/>
* New Art Exchange - [http://www.nae.org.uk/](http://www.nae.org.uk)
* Sinfonia Viva - [https://www.sinfoniaviva.co.uk/](https://www.sinfoniaviva.co.uk)
* Derby Theatre, Plus One: <https://www.derbytheatre.co.uk/get-involved/plus-one>
* Leicester City Council - <https://www.leicester.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/support-for-children-and-young-people/rights-and-participation/>
* Youth Commission, Office of the Northamptonshire Police, Fire & Crime - Commissioner - <https://www.northantspfcc.org.uk/opfcc-youth-commission/>
* Lincolnshire County Council - <https://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/young-people/join-lincolnshire-youth-council>
* Upstart Projects - [https://upstartprojects.uk/](https://upstartprojects.uk)
* Access Generation CIC - [https://accessgeneration.co.uk/](https://accessgeneration.co.uk)