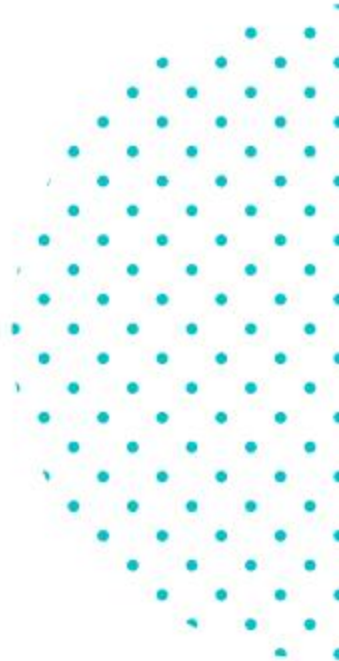
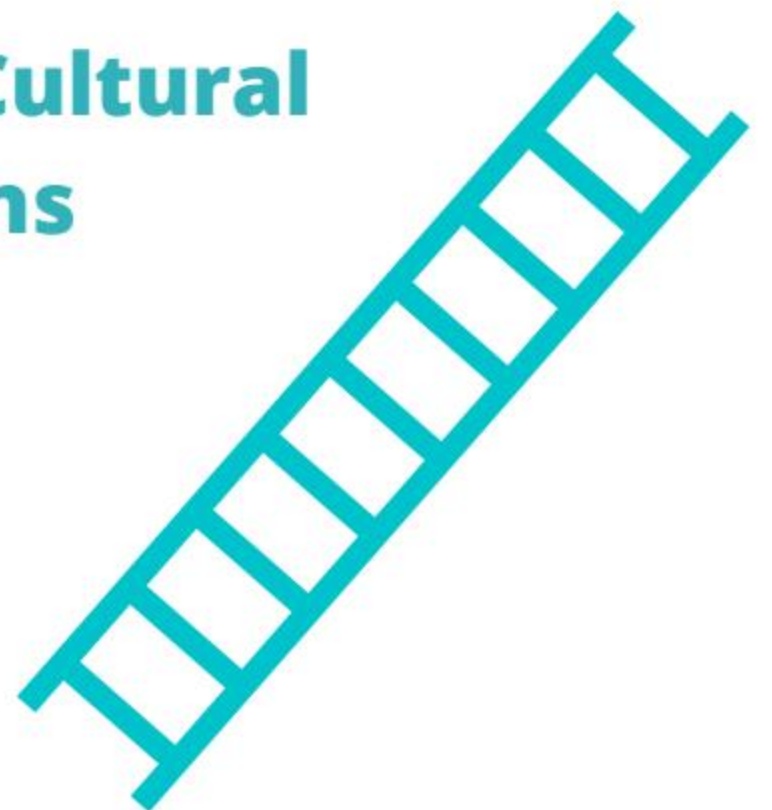


The Youth Voice & Participation Handbook

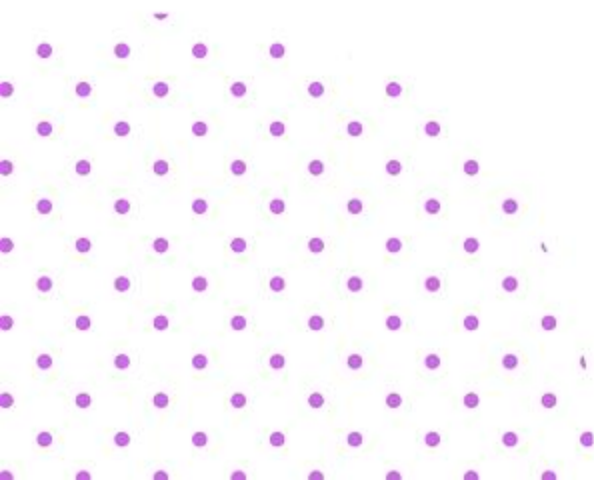
for Creative and Cultural
Organisations

Lawrence Becko &
Jennifer Raven



Contents

About this handbook	2
Introducing youth voice	4
Applying youth voice	17
Embedding youth voice	26



About this handbook

Sound Connections has been experimenting with Youth Voice & Participation since 2008. We were inspired by research produced by the Participation Works consortium, a partnership founded to further understanding and practice of youth voice, particularly across the voluntary youth sector. We were especially influenced by the milestone report, *Building a Culture of Participation* (Kirby et al., 2003) the findings of which we began to test and implement in our youth voice and leadership programme, Wired for Music.

Over the years, we've learnt about the profound impact a youth voice approach can have on practice, people, planning and policies. Quite simply, we are not the same organisation we were ten years ago. Today, young people are integral to how Sound Connections operates: they shape our programmes, produce their own events, advise us on funding decisions and sit on our board. They also play a key role in our work advocating for youth voice practice across the creative and cultural sector, especially the consultancy we provide to other organisations looking to learn more about youth voice and embed it in their programmes and strategies. It has been an eye-opening and transformational journey, and one that we want to share as widely as possible.

And that's why we've created this handbook. As far as we know, to date, no-one has attempted to produce a guide to youth voice for the creative and cultural sector. This handbook is for you if you or your organisation work creatively with young people. You might work in arts, culture or heritage, in a youth work or educational setting, or in another sector where creative engagement is enhancing the lives of young people. We are delighted to launch the **Youth Voice & Participation Handbook** and we hope that you will find it informative, intriguing and inspiring.

The authors

The handbook is written by Lawrence Becko and Jennifer Raven, the leading experts in youth participation in the creative and cultural sector. It is published by Sound Connections and Lawrence Becko Associates. The content is the property of Lawrence Becko (Lawrence Becko Associates) and Jennifer Raven (on behalf of Sound Connections), unless otherwise credited.

We have worked closely with our diverse team at Sound Connections and drawn on over a decade's experience of exploring, applying and advocating for youth voice. As with all our work, the contributors reflect a diversity of backgrounds and experience working across arts and culture, and particularly music where most of the team started out.



How to use the handbook

This handbook is designed for anyone working in creative ways with young people. Whether you're a practitioner, educator, producer or project manager looking to transform your work with young people directly, or a senior leader, director or trustee who wants to embed youth voice strategically in your organisation, you will find the inspiration and advice you need here. We use youth voice as an overarching term that includes children and young people of all ages, from early years to young adults.

The handbook is in three parts:

- 1 Introducing youth voice:** all the basics and essentials you need to know, from definitions to the underlying theory and evidence.
- 2 Applying youth voice:** the practical applications, packed with top tips, lessons learned and advice on developing your mindset and approach.
- 3 Embedding youth voice:** the strategist's guide to youth voice, giving you the tools and frameworks to embrace the approach, embed it in your programmes or organisation, and sustain the work long-term.

In each section, you'll find a mix of concepts, theory, advice and suggested activities to work through. Everyone learns, thinks and develops differently, so here are three ways to use the handbook:



Cover to cover:

If you want to explore all there is to know about youth voice from theory to practice and strategy, we recommend a straight read-through.



Dip in and out:

Go straight to the bits that you are most drawn to. What feels most important? What will you discover? Where will it take you?

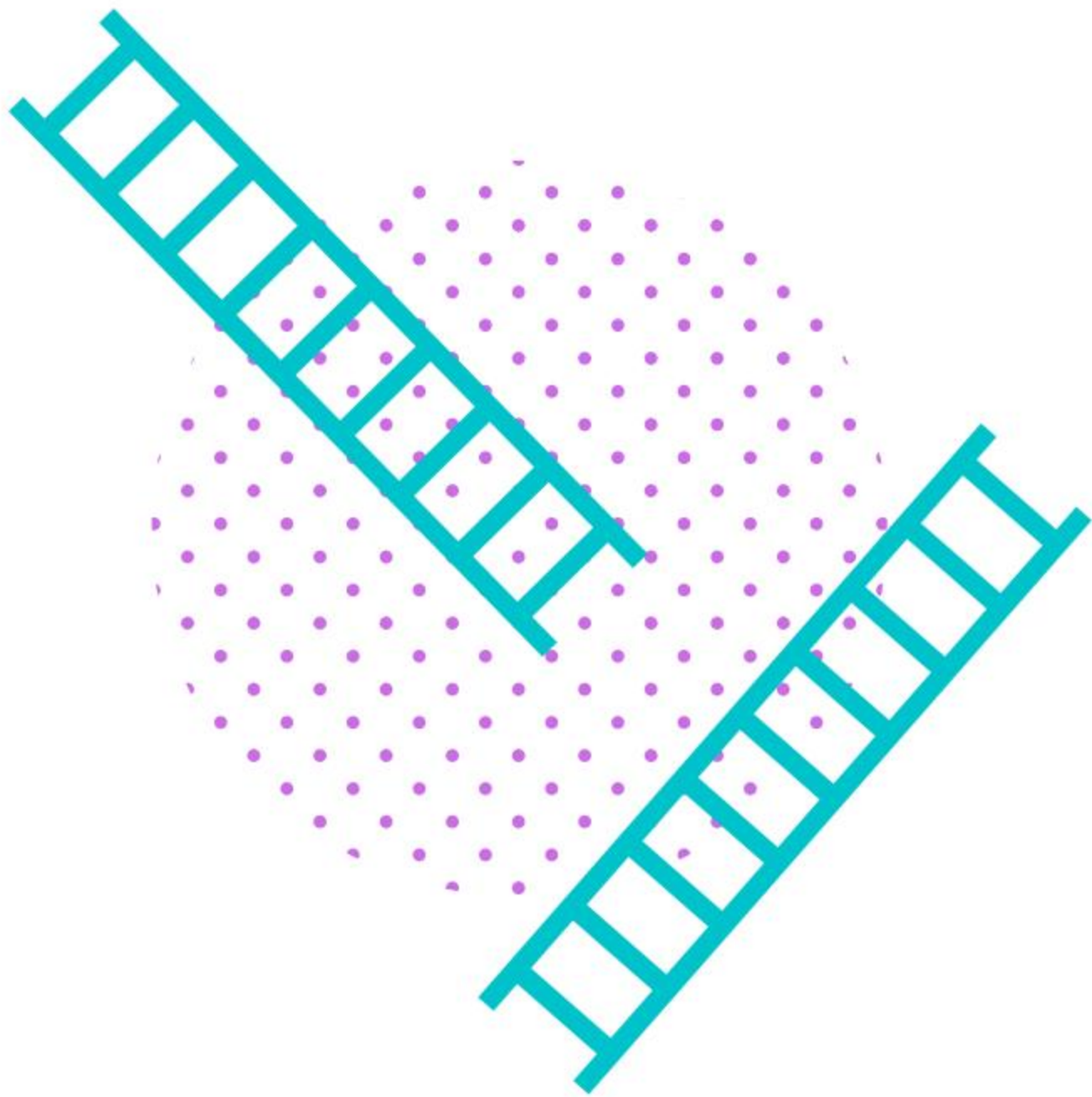


Team time:

Explore the handbook with your team, working through the activities together or dividing up areas of interest and feeding back.



Introducing youth voice and participation



Theory and essentials



What is youth voice and participation?

Do you remember being young and feeling like you weren't being listened to... or that older people weren't taking you seriously? Did you ever have to speak out to change something that mattered to you? Youth voice and participation is about young people having a say in decisions that affect their own lives from their education and wellbeing, to the creative opportunities and services they access.

When we talk about organisations doing youth voice, we mean **consulting** young people, **listening** to what they have to say and **acting** on it together. We were all young once. Youth voice is about remembering what it feels like to be listened to, included and empowered. Sometimes adults don't even need to be involved: from youth parliaments to climate action, young people are self-organising and speaking out to change the world. From changing politics to running their own creative projects, young people are constantly shaping the future and bringing new ideas to life.

Youth voice and participation is a human right and is enshrined in the UN Articles on the Rights of the Child. Youth Voice makes our work more relevant, representative and relatable. Youth voice isn't about young people being involved in a tokenistic way (eg being asked to put out the chairs at a rehearsal, flyering for an event or completing a feedback form at the end of a project). It's about genuine, two-way dialogue and collaboration between adults and young people. It's hugely enjoyable, full of surprises, twists and turns, and utterly life-affirming. By listening to young people and inviting them to shape their own experiences and opportunities, they feel more included and empowered. It opens our eyes to fresh perspectives and new ways of doing things - and it's a lot of fun. We have created this handbook, because we believe that by listening to each other and working together, young people and adults can change the world for the better.



The UN Articles on the Rights of the Child



The guiding light for youth voice is the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN was established with The Charter of the United Nations, signed in 1945 by 51 countries representing all continents. One of the Charter's aims was to reaffirm human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person - central to this is people's right to have a say on matters affecting their lives.

In 1989 the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child followed on from the Charter, and made specific commitments to children and young people. One of the four core principles of the Convention is respect for the views of the child. This principle is enshrined in two articles in particular:

ARTICLE 12

"Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life."

ARTICLE 5

"Governments must respect the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up, so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child's increasing capacity to make their own choices."

These articles sit alongside and interlink with Article 31 "Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities."

The world is in a period of profound change - climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic - so connecting our goals and purpose as creative people to global rights is powerful and compelling. By promoting youth voice, we are playing a part in a global movement to ensure young people's human rights are upheld.

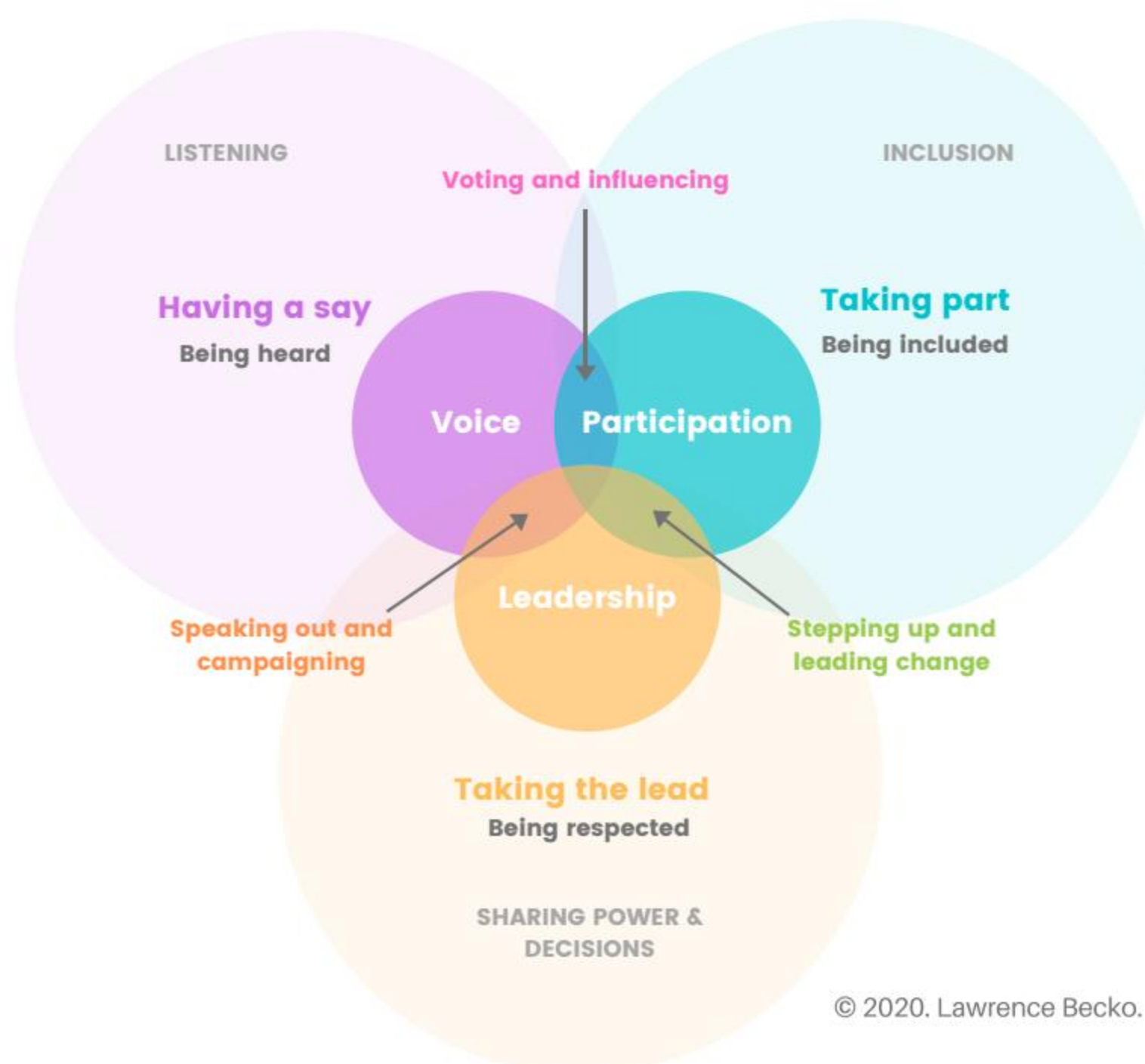
Three facets of youth voice and participation

We use Youth Voice as an umbrella term to encapsulate three inter-related facets:

- **Youth voice** itself is about young people having a say – and being heard;
- **Youth participation** is about young people taking part – and being included;
- **Youth leadership** is about young people taking a lead – and being respected.

Voice, participation and leadership are each important facets of a broader process of including, listening to and sharing power with young people. The three facets intersect in a number of ways:

- Where youth voice meets youth participation, we find activities like youth councils, youth boards and young producer programmes;
- Where youth participation meets youth leadership, we find activities like young enterprise, personal leadership programmes, youth governance and change-making;
- Where youth leadership meets youth voice, we find activities like advocacy, campaigning and activism.



Why youth voice and participation?

There are many good reasons to promote youth voice practice, ranging from a universal entitlement to be heard, through to very practical drivers. Here are the five main reasons to embrace youth voice:

Youth voice is a human right.

The most important reason is simply that having a say is a human right. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Articles on the Rights of the Child enshrine every child and young person's rights to take part in culture, and, crucially, to have a say about their participation. By embracing youth voice, you are implicitly endorsing and promoting our shared universal rights and freedoms. This means that even a small creative project can align with a global movement for change. If you're looking for a compelling reason to consult and listen to young people, this is a great place to start!

Youth voice increases representation.

Youth voice is a powerful means by which to increase representation because it gives individuals their say and thereby brings their views and experience into the conversation. Being consulted and listened to gives validity to your perspective. The more people who are consulted and the more diverse the range of consultees, the more representative the resulting work will be. Youth voice enables more stories to be told, more barriers to be broken down and more viewpoints to be considered. This is why consultation forms such a fundamental part of participatory democracy around the world.

Youth voice delivers high quality outcomes and impact.

For anyone looking to make a positive impact on the lives of young people, youth voice generates clear and compelling benefits. Having a say, stepping up and taking a lead are empowering experiences that build self-confidence and resilience. Funders increasingly acknowledge this fact and many now ask applicants to explain how they have involved young people in designing a programme or scheme. Through ongoing discussion, evaluation and reflection, you will see cumulative benefit of taking a youth voice approach as your programmes improve and your participants grow and shine.



Youth voice is an eye-opening experience.

If you work with young people in a creative context, you will already know how inspiring and energising it can be. Younger minds are less encumbered by the blockages and fixed patterns that inevitably befall adults as we move through life. Young people's ideas can be surprising, unexpected, fresh and provocative – in other words, totally creative. They can also be challenging, inviting us to step out of our comfort zone and embrace new ways of working. As adults who care about the arts and creativity, we also have much to give and share. Two-way communication and collaboration is at the heart of great youth voice practice.

Youth voice is key to safe and inclusive practice.

Safeguarding and inclusion are critical for every youth organisation, and the creative sector prides itself on maintaining the highest standards with regards to young people's wellbeing. Youth voice is a vital aspect of creating a safe and inclusive space – when young people are heard, respected and valued, they feel more included and this gives them the security they need to thrive creatively. Knowing they can speak out, means they will feel more able to come forward if they need to voice concerns or disclose. Youth voice should form part of your safeguarding policy and all staff should receive training that develops listening and communication skills.



Activity: What's your why?

This exercise will help you to reflect on why you are choosing to incorporate youth voice into your project, planning or organisational culture.

Read through the five drivers above and think about how they relate to your own work. Use these prompt questions as a guide:

- How do they relate to your **charitable objectives** or your company's **core purpose**?
- Who do you **represent** and how might youth voice interact with this?
- What do your main **funders** or **employers** expect when it comes to youth voice?
- Which activities might be reinvigorated by **new perspectives** and **fresh challenge**?
- What does your **safeguarding policy** say about **listening** to participants?

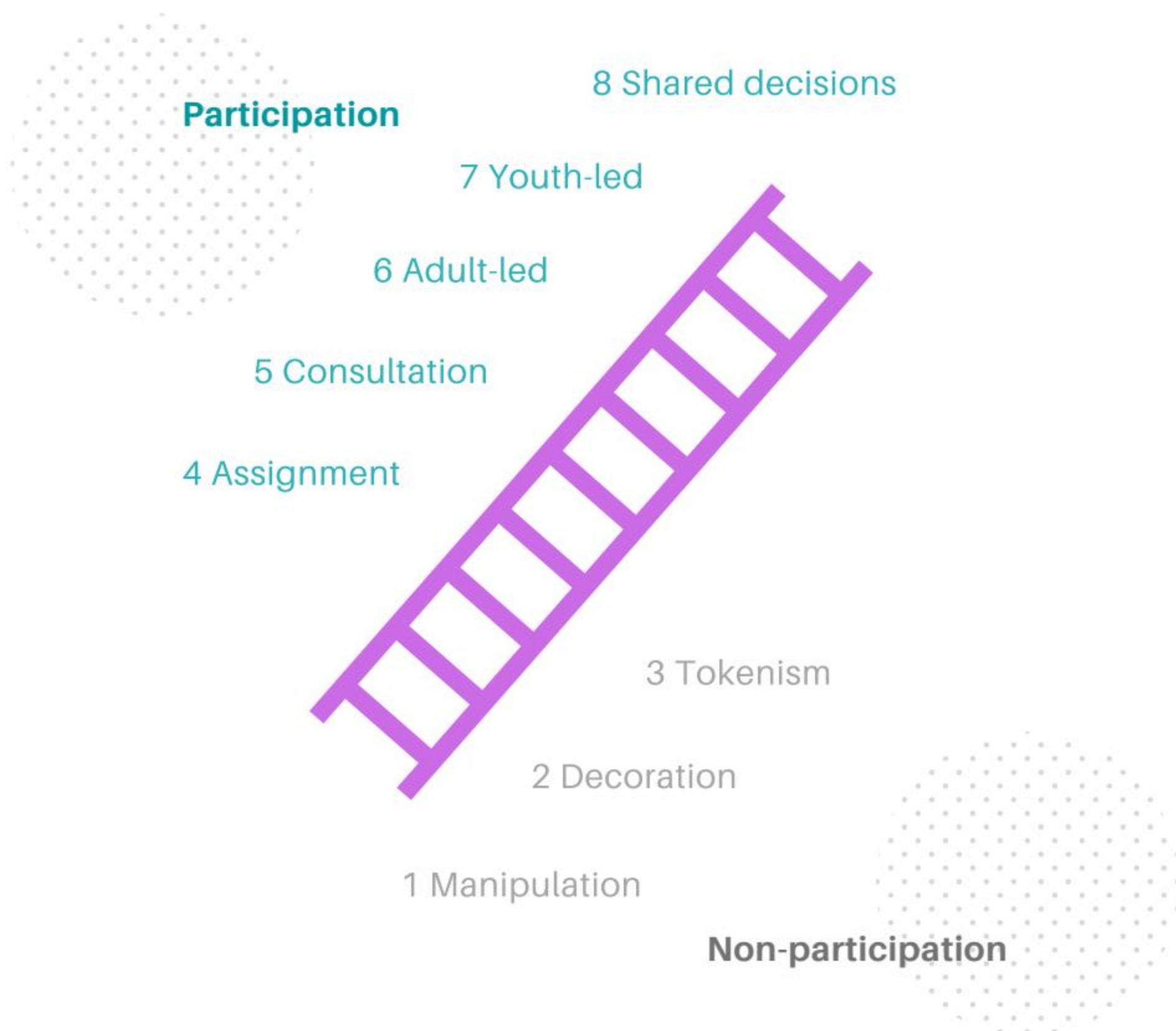
You might want to present your answers as a mind-map or write them up as a 'statement of intent'. Share the results with a colleague and ask for feedback. This is a great first step towards creating a youth voice strategy or action plan.

Ladders of Participation

The Ladder of Participation is possibly the best known youth voice and participation model. We owe the ladder to Sherry Arnstein, who created the first version, in 1969. Since then it has evolved and developed, and the version we refer to today was developed by Roger Hart (on behalf of the United Nations) in 1992.

The Ladder is rooted in citizenship and democracy; it encourages us to consider how we meaningfully involve children and young people as active citizens. The Ladder is divided into two zones: non-participation and participation.

Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation (1992)



Explaining participation

The ladder is a fantastic tool for better understanding our youth voice work journey. It provides ready-made scaffolding and a clear direction of travel. Remember that youth voice isn't a 'race to the top', but a gradual progression towards a range of ideal scenarios and mindsets. Here is an introduction to the higher rungs of the ladder, starting at the top:

Rung 8: Young people and adults share decisions

They collaborate in a mutually-beneficial way that values everyone's expertise equally. Adults prioritise supporting and enabling young people's ideas and suggestions, rather than foregrounding their own. *Example: A Board of Trustees/Directors with 50/50 young people and adults.*

Rung 7: Youth-led

Young people instigate and lead ideas and initiatives. Sometimes this includes support from adults. *Example: campaigns, businesses or initiatives led by young people.*

Rung 6: Adult-led collaboration

Adults are the main leaders and instigators but young people are heavily involved in decision-making and implementation. *Example: Young producers programmes hosted by creative organisations.*

Rung 5: Consultation

Adults consult young people and use what they learn to inform and shape ideas and initiatives. Young people know why they are being consulted and what happens with the information they share. *Example: An organisation researches what young people in their area want and need through a survey and focus groups. The consultation has a direct impact on what activities are run and how.*

Rung 4: Assigned and informed

Adults assign projects or activities to young people but explain fully why they are being assigned the task and why it's beneficial. They also have a chance to reflect on the project throughout and changes are made during the project/activity as a result of young people's feedback. *Example: A creative programme at a youth centre where the goals and benefits of a project are clearly shared before it begins, and where there is an ongoing cycle of reflection and feedback.*

... and non-participation

The bottom three rungs usually manifest as a result of well-meaning adults wanting to incorporate youth voice without having thought about how to do it effectively.

Rung 3: Tokenism

Young people appear to have a say but in actual fact have little or no involvement in what say they have or how they communicate. No thought is given to the briefing and support they may need in order to participate, and the different ways in which young people like to communicate is given little consideration. *Example: the most articulate and confident young people are chosen to be involved in an interview panel for recruiting a new member of staff. They are given little briefing or training in advance, and they are wholly reliant on their own confidence and communication skills to get them through.*

Rung 2: Decoration

Adults use young people to 'decorate' an event or initiative.

Example: young people are invited to perform at a conference but have no briefing or understanding about the topic of the conference, they aren't involved in planning the conference, and they have no opportunity to speak or present.

Rung 1: Manipulation

Adults pretend that young people have genuinely participated. Adults ask young people for their feedback, ideas and input which isn't then used or acted upon. Young people receive no feedback about how their contributions were used.

Example: young people are asked for ideas about a new project - their ideas aren't recognisable within the final project plan but adults claim it has been influenced by young people.

Remember: Sometimes it is OK to run activities that have no intention of participation, for example a competition where the competition task/brief is assigned with clear rules and expectations - as long as this is completely transparent.



Activity: Where are you on the Ladder?

Think about your current activities, projects and organisational processes.

Where would they sit on the ladder? What would take you up to a higher rung? This activity works really well in a team!

Ladder pros and cons

When thinking about any theory or framework, it is important to critically reflect on it and evaluate its purpose and relevance to your work.

Here are some reflections on the Ladder of Youth Participation. What advantages and disadvantages do you see of using the ladder in your work with young people?

Ladder pros

It helps you to reflect on progress towards participation by presenting the different degrees of participation in a logical way.

It encourages you to avoid slipping into non-participation.

Ladder cons

It doesn't tell you what you need to do to make progress.

The use of a ladder with upper and lower rungs suggests you have only succeeded once you reach the top - in reality, being on any of the top 5 rungs is positive.



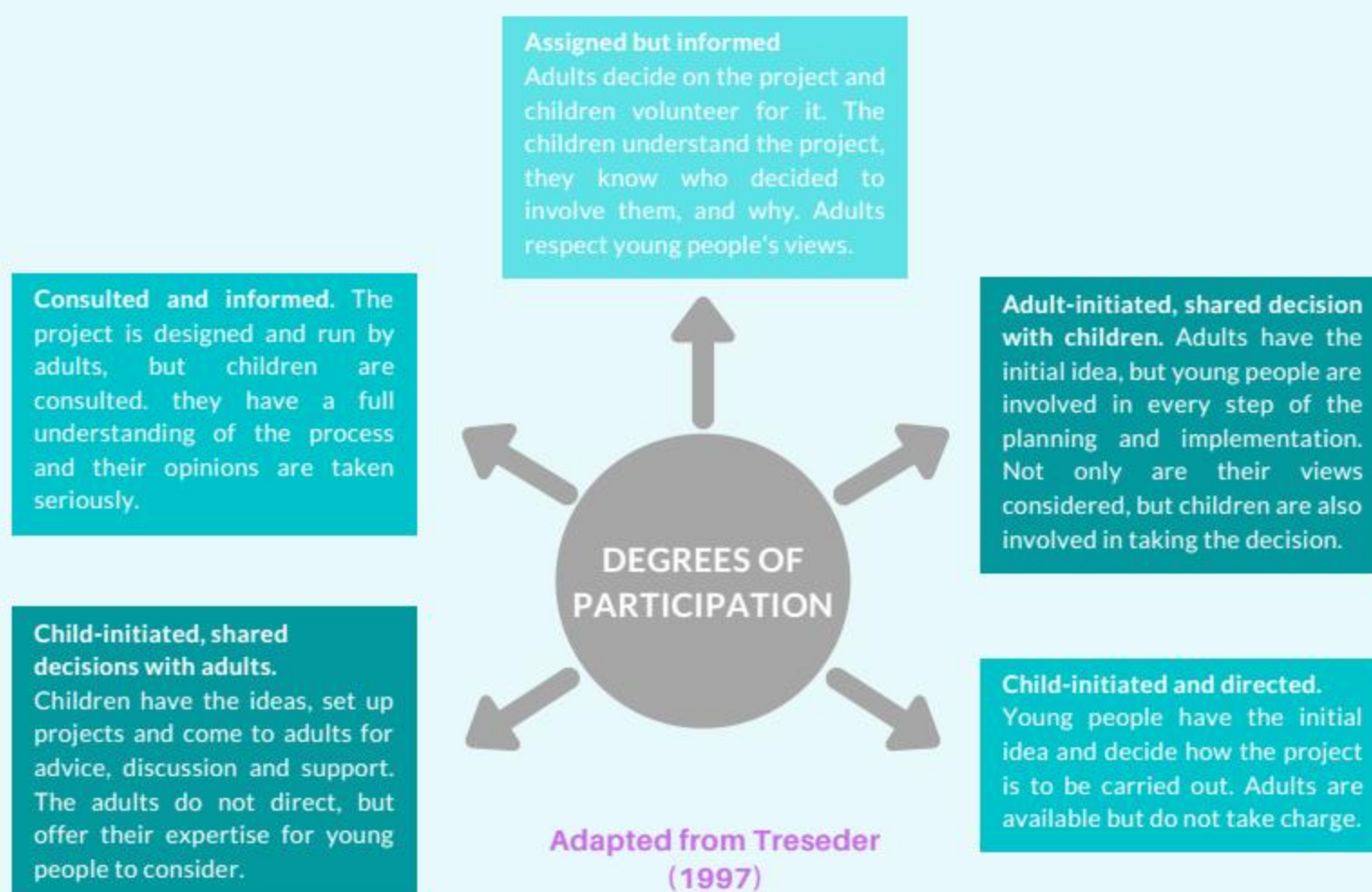
Further reading

If you are interested in learning more about the Ladder, this is an [excellent paper](#) written by Roger Hart himself, published by UNICEF.

Beyond the ladder

Treseder's Degrees of Participation (1997)

Phil Treseder's Degrees of Participation focuses on the top five rungs of the Ladder. Treseder addresses the most common criticism of the Ladder – that it is hierarchical – by showing that there is no particular order in which participation should be developed. He argues that there is no limit to the involvement of children and young people, but that they will not be able to initiate and direct their own projects right away, and need to be empowered and supported appropriately and adequately for full participation to be developed.



Hodgson's Five Conditions (1995)

Treseder, in turn, sets his model within David Hodgson's five conditions that must be met if youth participation is to be achieved. Hodgson stipulates in *Participation of children and young people in social work (1995)* that young people need to have:

1. Access to those in power
2. Access to relevant information
3. Real choices between different options
4. Support from a trusted, independent person
5. A means of appeal or complaint if something goes wrong

Pathways to Participation

Pathways to Participation (Harry Shier, 2001) is one of our favourite participation models as it engages you actively in reflecting on your position and progress through asking a series of questions. It correlates with the top five rungs of the Ladder. It also suggests the point at which your organisation fulfils the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. You can view the framework [here](#). The model is divided into three columns:

- **Openings:** this column is about an organisation having an appropriate mindset and openness to embrace youth voice.
- **Opportunities:** this column is about the activities and mechanisms you have in place to enable youth voice.
- **Obligations:** this column is about youth voice becoming enshrined in organisational policy.



Activity: try it yourself

Use Shier's Pathways to Participation to trace your own youth voice pathway.

Start at the bottom left of the diagram and answer the questions following the arrow. Notice when it's easy to say 'yes', and where you get stuck. Perhaps you find that your organisation is ready ('Openings') but that you haven't yet found the right mechanisms to act. Or that you have some very successful youth voice activities ('Opportunities'), but that the work sits mostly with programme staff and isn't yet part of board-level strategy ('Obligations'). Whether you're on the first row or the last, it's ok! Be honest with where you get to and then commit to an action to move you forward another step. This is a great exercise to do as a team and with your governing body. You can use it over time to track progress - it's a good way to hold yourselves accountable.

The Youth Engagement Equaliser

(Dewar, Dicker-Thorne, Loveless, Raven, 2015)

In 2015, we created a new youth voice model called the Equaliser: an interactive tool to help creative organisations and practitioners assess their activities. The Equaliser refers to six categories of youth participation, each relating to a different area of youth voice activity (see the next section). By analysing your responses to a series of multiple-choice questions, the Equaliser suggests where on the Ladder of Participation you might be for each category. The categories were first identified by Lawrence Becko (2014) and we later refreshed them, adding a seventh: youth voice in formal settings - to encompass creative work done in settings like school classrooms. Try the Equaliser [here](#).



Further reading

If you enjoy youth voice frameworks and models as much as we do, this is a brilliant [encyclopedia](#) to check out!

What does great youth voice look and feel like?

Youth voice results in significant benefits for everyone involved. You know that it's working well when there is a palpable feeling that people are living and breathing a youth voice approach.

In a project or organisation where youth voice is thriving, you are likely to see some or all of the following within the culture, ethos and behaviours:

- Open, accessible and inclusive
- Not too heavy on rules and processes
- Fun, exciting and creative
- Collaborative, ego-free and democratic
- Safe, supported and risk-assessed
- Based on feedback and continuous improvement

Feeling the benefits

When great youth voice is happening young people feel heard and valued; recognised and understood as an individual; part of a community working towards something together. Meanwhile, staff in organisations feel proud to uphold the Human Rights Act so that every life is valued; more confident that programmes are representative and inclusive of a diverse voices; more certain that impactful and more meaningful work is being produced; more creative and energised with new ideas and fresh thinking; safer and more inclusive.



Activity: Four levels

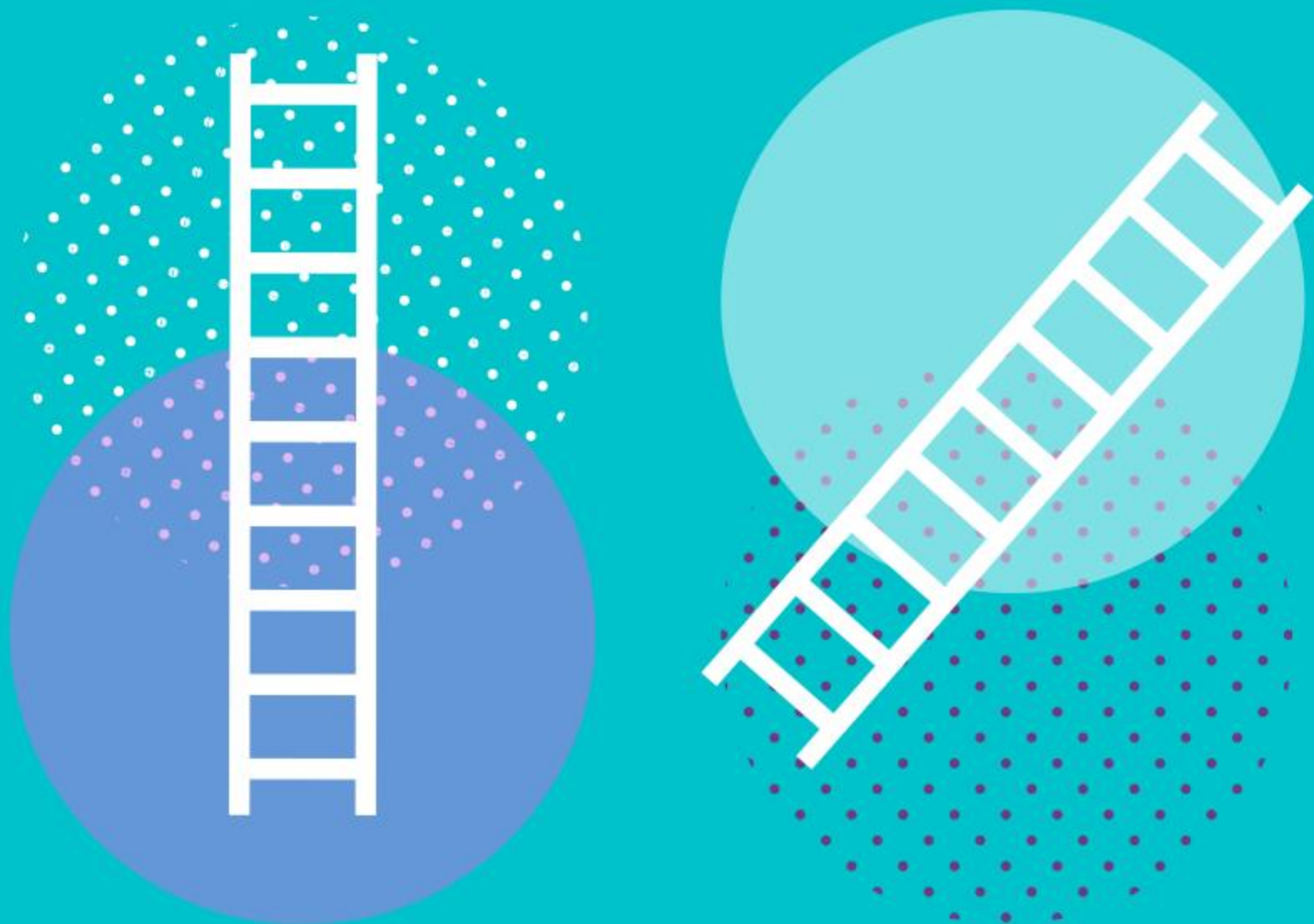
This exercise is about exploring and understanding the benefits of youth voice and participation for different audiences. You can do this on your own or in your team, including with young people themselves.

On four separate sheets of paper or digital noticeboards, write down what the benefits are:

- ...for you
- ...for your organisation
- ...for wider society
- ...for young people themselves

Share your thoughts and discuss how these benefits overlap or influence each other. What are your priorities? Did anything surprise you? What do you need to consider going forward?

Applying youth voice and participation



**Practice and
implementation**

Youth Voice and Participation in practice

Seven categories

When we think about youth voice in practice, we talk about seven key forms it most often takes. These are not exhaustive - youth voice can take many different forms - but these are the forms we have most commonly observed in the creative and cultural sector. As you read through, think about which might best apply in your setting.

Youth consultation

How do we find out what young people really want and need? The best way is usually to ask them. Youth consultation is a great starting point for any youth voice journey. Consultation is about asking open questions, listening to the responses, clarifying or seeking further insight, and then acting on what has been said. Youth consultation is the bedrock of youth voice - it's a great way to engage young people, build trust and involve them in a meaningful way in the construction of a project or the running of an organisation. You must *always* feed back the results to anyone you consult.

Key skill areas: questioning, listening, taking action, feeding back, building trust

Co-production with young people

Perhaps the first thing people think about when imagining a youth voice activity is a project or event produced by and for young people. Co-production gives us an opportunity to share decision-making with young people in a creative setting, providing safe parameters within which to take creative risks and assume responsibility. What examples have you seen of work co-produced with, by and for young people? How might this apply to your own practice or programmes?

Key skill areas: sharing decisions, setting boundaries, creative risk-taking, budgeting, event and project management, facilitation

Youth enterprise and start-ups

Youth enterprise is a popular theme in education and innovation settings, and is all about supporting and developing young, aspiring entrepreneurs to have ideas and pilot new business concepts. Creative start-up culture has been making a buzz for over 20 years and youth enterprise can give young people their first taste of the excitement of starting and growing a business. We also use this theme to talk about young people getting involved in grant-making, for example the Wired4Music *Generate* fund.

Key skill areas: creativity, business development support, innovation, grant-making

Youth leadership

Youth leadership can take many different forms, from young people advancing their own personal and professional development, to aspiring leaders stepping up to lead creative activities for their peers. Leadership is about taking responsibility and inspiring others - and youth leadership is about creating space for young people to tap into their own natural ability and desires to create change and positively impact the experience of others, whether in a creative context or in their own lives.

Key skill areas: personal development, life skills, taking responsibility, creating change

Youth governance

Youth governance is increasingly recognised as a key component of good organisational health. It involves engaging young people in the strategic operations and higher level decision-making of an organisation, for example on the board of trustees, in a Senior Management Team meeting or in an expert advisory group. Recruiting young people to a board takes time and should be done thoughtfully and with the right support in place. Once young people are on board, the transformative power of involving them at a strategic level becomes clear to all. After all, if your organisation supports young people, why wouldn't you want them involved at the top?

Key skill areas: strategy, power-sharing, recruitment, listening, self-awareness

Youth advocacy and campaigning

Youth advocacy is about young people speaking out about causes that matter to them. Our understanding of what young change-makers can achieve has been transformed by the actions of one brilliant young person: Greta Thunberg. Her actions launched the youth climate strike and she has become a global climate ambassador. She's not alone: from young MPs in parliament to the youth-led A Level Results campaign, young people are stepping up and speaking out. Youth advocacy and campaigning is where it all began for us too: over the years, our Wired4Music young leaders have been advocating for youth voice across the creative sector, including launching their own manifesto for the future of young people's music.

Key skill areas: platforming, amplifying, campaigning, messaging, change-making

Youth voice in formal settings

Whilst our focus has been on non-formal participation, formal education also provides a range of opportunities to incorporate youth voice, from sharing decisions about the creative syllabus - such as repertoire choice, topics or themes - to democratising the classroom through participatory practices like voting and suggestion boxes. Many schools, colleges and universities host student councils or provide opportunities for young people to organise, advocate or make change on their own terms. Peer-to-peer learning and mentoring also opens up new possibilities for voice, participation and leadership to flourish.

Key skills: student-centred learning, democracy, peer learning, mentoring

Moments of Choice

Whatever approach you take, you have to start somewhere. Embracing youth voice is a choice, and when we look deeper at our daily working lives, we start to see a diverse range of opportunities to involve and listen to young people opening up.



Activity: Moments of Choice

Youth voice can feel like a huge, overwhelming and sometimes abstract goal for an organisation to achieve. With this in mind, we find it very helpful to focus on the small steps each of us can take, whatever role we are in, to build youth voice into our work.

1. Pick a project or task you are working on
2. Write a list of all the moments within the project or task when you have a choice or make a decision (this can be big things like choosing a venue for a performance or small things like the font size you use for a newsletter)
3. Highlight any moments when you already share this decision with young people
4. For the moments for which there is no shared decision-making with young people, consider where and how this could change. Could you invite input from young people? Do you have an existing forum for this - if not, what could you put in place? Remember, there are formal structures you can put in place for consulting young people but also informal ways of doing it within workshops and lessons.
5. Reflect on what you have discovered: if there are blockages preventing you from sharing decisions with young people, is it within your power to change this or are there other factors beyond your control?

Note: we have had great success sharing youth voice frameworks and models with young people. It's a great way for them to understand the bigger picture of youth voice, and how it operates within the context of an organisation. Wherever possible involve young people in using the tools.



Nuts and bolts of youth voice

Once you've identified the areas that seem most appropriate for applying a youth voice approach, it's important to scope out the practical demands and requirements of making it a reality. Here are the key questions you need to ask yourself and our top tips for putting it into practice:

Outcomes and priorities

Start with why you want to take a youth voice approach. What outcomes are you looking for - for young people and for your organisation? How does youth voice help meet your priorities and the needs of the people you work with? In what ways does it chime with your organisation's mission and your personal values? **Write down your answers to these questions and begin to create your own youth voice mission statement. What are your aims and what outcomes do they lead to?**

Outputs and activities

Next, think about what you want activities you want to deliver. What is more appropriate and what aligns most with your current ways of working? Is it about building on something you're already doing or starting something new? Imagine yourself delivering the activity: how does it feel and what might you need to think about when making it a reality? **Start to map out all your ideas for potential activities on a blank page.**

Location

Where will this work take place? Is it a project that takes place in a physical space, or is it a process that will unfold across a number settings and contexts within your organisation? The COVID-19 lockdown has seen many creative activities and projects moved online: how might you create a safe and inspiring digital space for youth voice? **Draw two columns: one for physical spaces and one for virtual settings. Map out your options. What are the opportunities and risks for each one?**

Timeline

What sort of timeframe might be required to achieve your aims and deliver the activities you have mapped out. What is realistic in the context you're working in? It's natural to want to dive in and make it all happen, but youth voice is deep work and it can help to play a longer game. **Allow yourself to think longer term: draw a ten year timeline. What change would you want to make over that timeframe? What are your long-term youth voice goals? Now work backwards: what about the medium term and, finally, the short term? Use your timeline to guide your decision-making.**

Audience and numbers

Who are you really doing this for? It's a simple but profound question. Sometimes we can get caught up in our own agendas, or the demands of our organisations, and lose sight of who youth voice is really for. Think about the young people you want to work with and work your way out from there: they should be at the centre of any youth voice activity you plan. **Who will benefit directly and who will experience indirect benefits? Think about who else you will need to make your youth voice activity a success.**

Capacity

Great youth voice means making the appropriate resources available. A youth voice project or process can grow and develop in unexpected ways because it tends to be about other people's ideas. The more successful it is, the more potential it has to expand and evolve. **Think carefully about capacity: how much staff time is available for this project now? How much capacity could you build in to your plan and how will this be resourced? How will you set expectations around capacity and support for the young people involved?**

Budget

Youth voice takes time and energy, and it also requires a budget. Whilst some youth voice activities - like youth governance or consultation - might seem intangible, their true cost should be carefully considered. Have you built in budget for training staff or hiring a facilitator? Will you need to hire a space or invest in new technology to make your meetings accessible and engaging? Will you make budget available to the young people themselves, for example to deliver their own events or produce resources or materials? **Start a spreadsheet and list out all the potential costs. Don't worry if you don't yet have the budget available. Knowing the possible outgoings will help you to fundraise and allocate enough funds to make your project a success.**

Safeguarding, inclusion and diversity

Youth voice often means engaging with young people in a new or different way. It's important to ensure that your safeguarding, inclusion and diversity policies and procedures are relevant and sufficient. For example, if you are going to explore ideas and opinions together with a group of young people, what can you put in place so everyone feels safe to share? How will you respond to a situation in which there is tension amongst the group? How will you work together to establish an environment in which diversity is recognised and valued?

Review your safeguarding and equality policies with your new youth voice activities in mind - in particular look for gaps in existing documentation. Check that young people have access to information about safeguarding, inclusion and diversity too.

Youth voice online

Engaging young people online has been an important aspect of youth work for more than two decades, whether through websites, social media or other apps and platforms. But 2020 is the year that saw online activity go mainstream, as we all adapted rapidly to the challenges of the global pandemic. In our newly expanded digital worlds, youth voice is more important than ever.

In the physical world, the pandemic has led to venues, museums, libraries and galleries being shut down, festivals being cancelled, school spaces rationed and youth centre access restricted. Meanwhile, meeting informally to get creative with friends is no longer easy, as families contend with changing guidance and a litany of new restrictions. All of this has made online the obvious destination for young people looking to get creative.

Young people are digital natives and the online world is a natural habitat to them. So much creative production and consumption is already digital: from music software to digital downloads, photography to design, and Netflix to gaming. However, we still face serious barriers: not everyone has access to the devices and connections they need to participate fully in creative and cultural activities online. Those who do may still face limitations within their homes, such as a lack of space to focus, or competition for bandwidth with other family members. What's more, there's a healthy limit to how long anyone can spend interacting on a screen. Great digital provision and engagement need to be both accessible and measured. Don't forget to take plenty of screen breaks to refresh and recalibrate!

Top tips for youth voice online

- 1 **Make it as safe and accessible** as you would if you were meeting in the physical world. Risk assess all activity and consider the safeguarding implications. Be welcoming and as inclusive as possible: if young people do not feel comfortable interacting on screen, what other options are there?
- 2 **Harness innovative software** to make it as engaging as possible. There's no need to fall back on the usual applications, and it's important to stay abreast of the latest tools and possibilities. From meeting platforms to social media channels, and online jamming apps to virtual gallery tours, new technologies can help make our youth voice activities more accessible and entertaining.
- 3 **Consult young people themselves** about how they want to interact online. As digital natives, they may have discovered methods and tools that you haven't even heard about yet! What else do they enjoy? Would anyone prefer to dial in or perhaps work offline and feedback by a different method? Be sure to ask and you might be surprised by the answers.
- 4 **Prepare for a 'blended' future.** The digital transition has been rapid and there's no going back now. When we emerge from the pandemic, the future of creative youth work will most likely incorporate both face-to-face and digital activity. Think ahead about what a blended offer would look like in your organisation or practice.
- 5 **Capture your processes and successes.** The online world can feel fleeting and intangible. Moments shared on a video call soon disappear into the ether - and our brain doesn't register digital interaction and eye-contact in the same way. For both psychological and practical reasons, it's important to capture your group's progress and encourage everyone to spend some time offline, reflecting on shifting thoughts and emotions.

What skills and capacities do we need?

To truly maximise the impact and benefits of youth voice in our work, we need to develop a range of inter-related capacities.

When we talk about capacities, we mean the combination of skills, qualities and behaviours that are needed to make great youth voice happen. These capacities can make youth voice work feel different to our usual working approaches. They include:

Listening, curiosity and clear communication



Listening, questioning and communicating key to successful youth voice. Youth voice starts with asking a question and listening mindfully and empathetically to the answer. It is a two way process and requires clarity, honesty and integrity. Consulting and listening are a continuous feature of creating genuine dialogue with young people. They should always be complimented by action: it is important to act on what is being said or to explain what can or can't be done about it. The ability to give and receive feedback is also a critical capacity when consulting young people: be prepared to learn as you go along.

Self-awareness, motivation and generosity



Anyone working with young people should ensure they are committed to developing their Emotional Intelligence: their ability to understand their own emotional state and the emotions of other people. You will need to leave your own ego at the door: youth voice is not about your agenda, it is about that of young people. This requires self-awareness, the ability to reflect on events and a motivation to be selfless. Whether you are facilitating activities yourself or overseeing the process, a sense of perspective and a willingness to collaborate and share is essential.

Creativity, experimentation and risk



Youth voice is all about new ideas, fresh perspectives and taking creative risks. It's important to create a space where everyone involved can try new things without fear of judgement or reproach. This doesn't mean overlooking your safeguarding policy or ignoring common sense - clearly set parameters actually create even better conditions for innovation. It's ok not to get youth voice 'right' straight away: it's an ongoing process that evolves and develops over time. Be prepared to try new things and work in new ways. That's the definition of creativity and the essence of youth voice!



Activity: Self-reflection

Take a moment to reflect on your own skills and qualities.

What comes naturally to you? What might you need to develop? How might you go about it? You might find it helpful to keep a reflective journal about your youth voice work.

Monitoring, evaluating and reflecting on youth voice

Evaluation and reflection is an essential part of working with young people and creating change. Youth voice is inherently a reflective process but it's important to consciously build evaluation into your plans. Ultimately youth voice is about having a greater positive impact for children and young people, so knowing what impact you are aiming towards gives clarity and direction.

Starting points for evaluating youth voice

- 1** Make youth voice targets and outcomes part of your strategy and evaluation plans, so that you have a structure through which to review youth voice developments regularly
- 2** Involve young people in deciding what to evaluate - what change or progress do they want to see as a result of being involved in youth voice activities?
- 3** Invest in time to reflect with young people, staff and trustees on how things are going and what you are achieving. Evaluation should involve everyone, not just participants!
- 4** When evaluating youth voice look at it from different angles: benefits and outcomes for young people, the impact on your team, and the changes for your organisation.
- 5** Use creative evaluation methods such as digital pinboards (for example, Padlet or Pinterest), scrapbook or a feedback wall, if meeting in a physical space. Enable young people to respond to evaluation questions creatively and in a way that suits them, for example using video, audio, images, words or movement. Get staff involved too.
- 6** Always strive to be reflective so that you are continuously learning and growing. Youth voice work can be unpredictable and doesn't always work out - treat setbacks and unexpected twists and turns as opportunities to learn.
- 7** Theory of Change is a planning and evaluation tool that provides a great structure for mapping out the long-term youth voice impact you are aiming for. Have a go at creating a youth voice Theory of Change with your team.

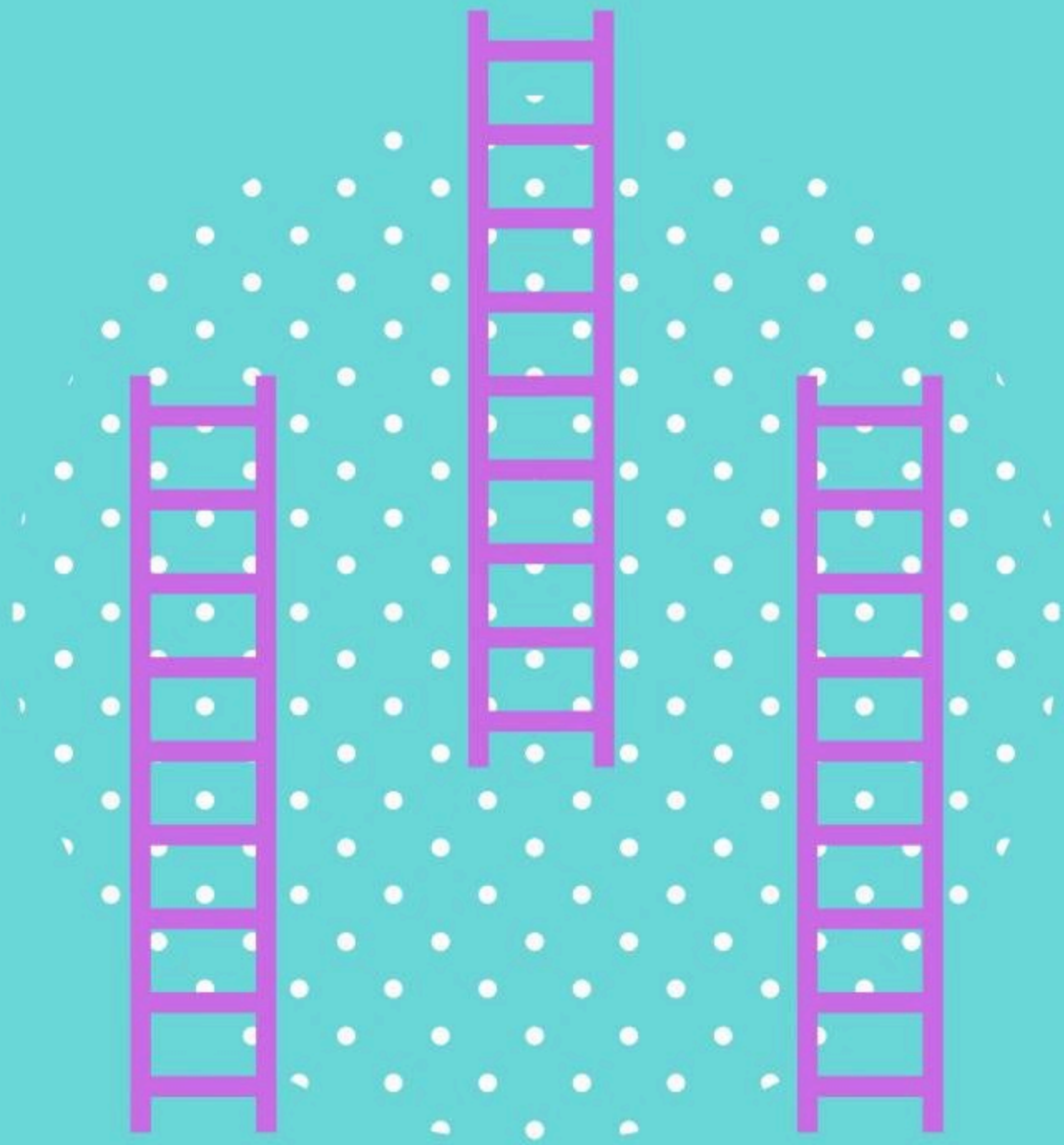


Activity: Preparing to evaluate

Revisit your existing evaluation framework

Where and how could youth voice fit within or alongside the aims and outcomes you are already measuring? What creative evaluation methods could you introduce to measure youth voice goals?

Embedding youth voice



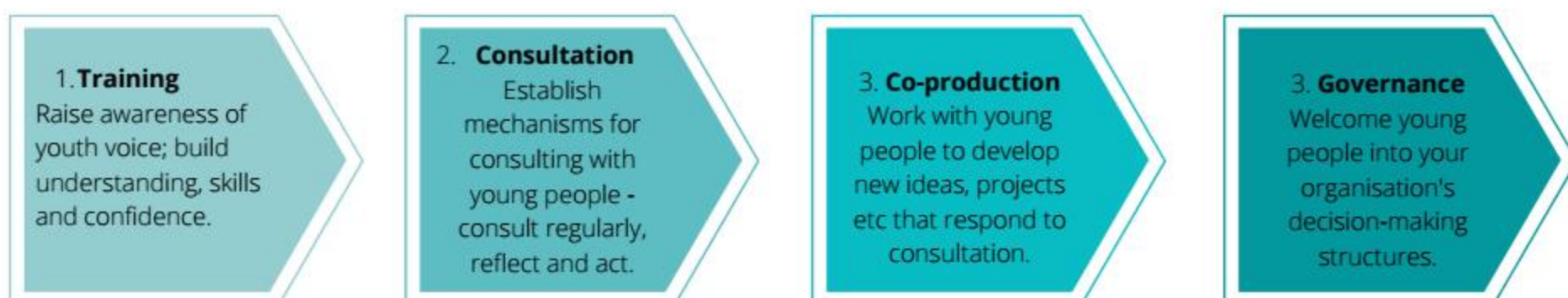
Strategies and tools

Embedding youth voice: four stages

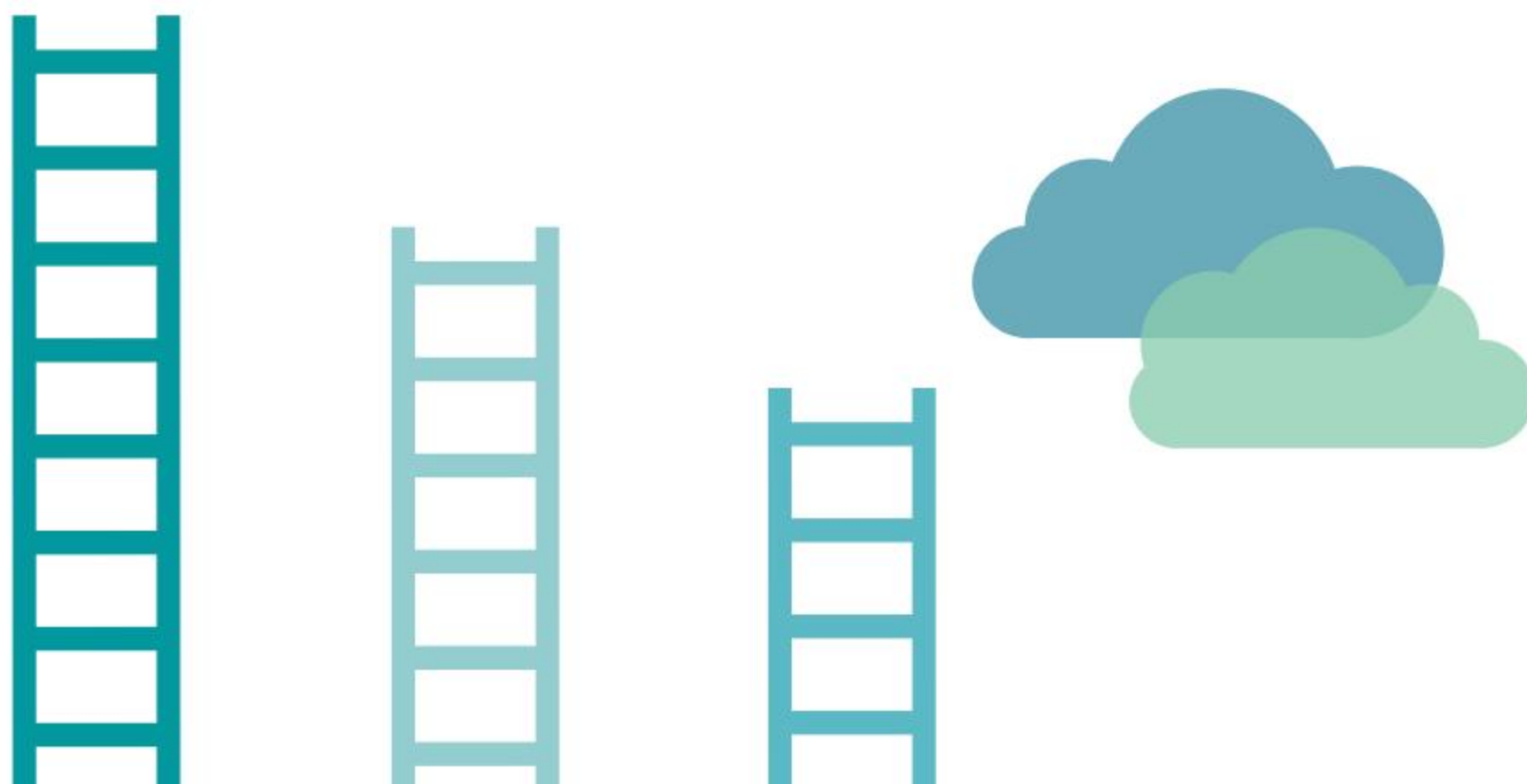
To come into its own and have maximum impact, youth voice needs to be wholly embraced by an organisation and woven throughout the fabric of all that you do. Where a deeply embedded culture of youth voice exists, everyone in an organisation lives and breathes it every day. Getting to this stage can take a long time: you have to sow seeds, tend to the garden with care and patience, then you'll see the flowers blossom!

During our time developing youth voice and supporting other organisations to do the same, we have observed the phases of development and mapped them out in the flow diagram below. Of course in real life it doesn't happen in an entirely linear way: there is often lots of overlap and moving back and forth between stages. Nonetheless, the flow diagram can be a helpful way to clarify the process you are embarking on, check your progress, and remind yourself that it takes time.

Whilst it's important to keep the long-term goal in sight, it's also important to celebrate the successes along the way so make sure to keep a log of your youth voice achievements, however big or small.



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Power, influence and change

Sharing decision-making means sharing power. Most societies involve some kind of hierarchy or power structure. These are often historic, preserving ways of doing things or safeguarding things that are held to be important. Unfortunately, over time, power can become entrenched, and without effective democratic mechanisms to ensure it is handed over, it becomes concentrated in the hands of the privileged few, at the expense of the many.

At its most potent, youth voice and participation is about **breaking down hierarchies** and **sharing power**. For some this will feel uncomfortable, for others exciting and necessary. From a youth voice perspective, the hierarchies in question are predominantly based on age - but, for a multiplicity of reasons, they will also resonate with questions of race, gender, ethnicity, class and other protected characteristics. It is worth keeping this in mind when setting out to embed a youth voice approach in your organisation. Well-meaning efforts to embed youth voice in an organisation may meet with resistance: are people ready to let go of authority and responsibilities that it may have taken their whole career to attain? Do those same power-holders trust younger people with that power? Do you?

Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Participation was about **empowering disenfranchised citizens** of all ages so that they could demand to be heard and participate in the formation of democratic societies. Roger Hart's work with UNICEF helped to turn the focus onto young people's rights to do the same. From Greta Thunberg to young MPs in parliament, young people are challenging the status quo and asking adults to question their behaviour and actions. **Sometimes adults listen, and other times they don't.** The friction this creates is often described as a clash between different generations. The important thing is to focus on what is being called for: can we really afford to ignore young people and exclude from decisions that affect their lives and their futures? Yes, the creative sector is on the whole less activist than the sphere of civic engagement and human rights - but we are still subscribed to the principles of the UN Declaration (which itself also protects our right to engage in art and culture) - and we ought to be upholding them.

And yes, of course adults have more lived experience - and hopefully more accumulated life wisdom - than young people have yet had the chance to gain. But this debate isn't just about quantity, it's also about the quality of our ideas, actions and behaviours, and whether we can selflessly step back and let others in. The top rung of the ladder isn't about adults letting go of all their responsibilities: it's about genuine collaboration between adults and young people. Remember this as you embark on your youth voice journey.

Youth voice as a change process

When it comes to organisations embedding youth voice, we increasingly describe it as a **change process**. By this, we mean that it requires a willingness to embrace new methods, approaches and strategies. As with any type of organisational transformation, it will need planning, managing and reviewing. This is always most effective when shared across teams, departments or specialisms. Change is a shared responsibility and everyone deserves the opportunity to be consulted as part of the process.

Influencing others

For this reason, it is important to think about who you will need to influence within your team or organisation, and to develop your own capacities to advocate for youth voice. Here are some ideas and resources to give you the confidence and knowledge to win others over and get them excited about the potential of youth voice:

Outside influence

Invite someone from an organisation that has successfully embraced youth voice to speak to your staff and trustees and demystify how it works - ideally invite a young person and a member of staff to share their experiences and practical strategies.

Start small and build

Sometimes you need to test something out and prove the concept to convince others youth voice is viable. Pick one small project or activity that allows you to test youth voice out in a way that feels safe and contained. Starting small also means you can focus on doing one thing really well. Make sure you evaluate and reflect on the process so that you can share and celebrate the impact and learning.

Explain the benefits

If someone is resistant to youth voice think about what makes them tick and help them to understand the benefits on their terms. Is it that they want to see better outcomes for young people? Are they thinking about the financial viability of programmes for young people? Are they motivated by human rights?

Spread the word!

Once youth voice is working well internally it's important to shout about it externally. Share your youth voice journey so others can see that it's possible and that it leads to great things!



Ready for change?

Before you get going, we highly recommend taking the **Youth Voice Readiness Self-Audit**. We've designed these questions to help you think the key aspects of the process from a variety of perspectives. You can also use the audit to track your progress.

ARE YOU READY?	NOT YET	GETTING THERE	YES!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To listen and be curious To empathise and communicate To learn and change To share power 			
IS YOUR TEAM OR ORG READY?	NOT YET	GETTING THERE	YES!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is willingness and motivation there? Does everyone understand what is at stake? Do people have the awareness, skills and training, including safeguarding? Is there allocated budget and capacity? 			
ARE YOUNG PEOPLE READY?	NOT YET	GETTING THERE	YES!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do young people want this? Is it appropriate and timely for them? Is it safe and suitable to proceed? How will they be kept in the loop? 			
IS THE WORLD READY?	NOT YET	GETTING THERE	YES!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will this be received? Can you manage the response? What will change and how will you capture it? 			

Your journey from here

We've reached the end of the handbook - but this is just the beginning. Embracing youth voice will have a profound impact on your work, your team and the impact your organisation has in the world. Some parts will happen effortlessly, whilst others will be more challenging. You will learn a lot, change and grow together.

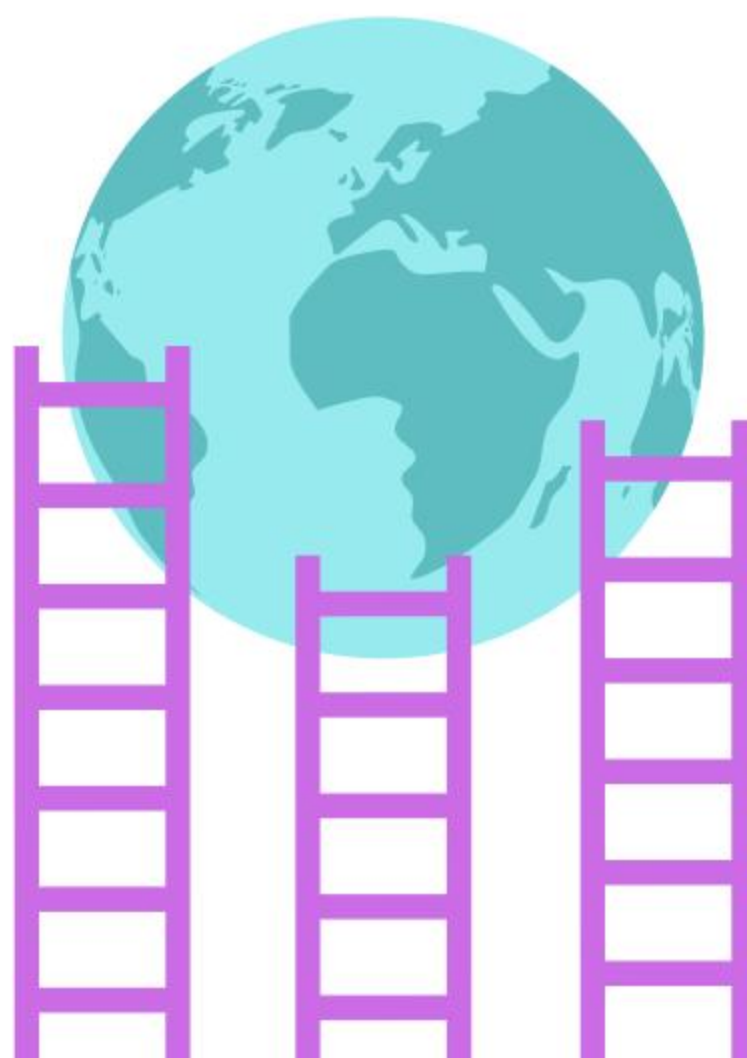
In the immediate term, it's about starting to experiment with the ideas you've had whilst reading this guide. Start with the suggested activities and build up a file of useful thinking. If you are looking for more inspiration and support to bring the ideas to life, you might want to book on to our Essential Youth Voice Training Series, or simply get in touch to discuss how we could support you.

In the longer term, youth voice will start to become part of your programming, as well as your strategic and operational thinking. From fundraising to HR, youth voice provides us with a new lens and changed perspective on running a creative or cultural organisation. Most importantly of all, take time to consider the journeys of the young people you work with: what will make this a memorable and meaningful life experience for them, now and in the long term? What do they need to live happy, creatively-fulfilled lives? What can you do today, to ensure that young people can shape their own future, on their own terms.

We wish you all the best on your youth voice journey and we look forward to hearing from you and the young people you work with along the way.

Lawrence Becko and Jennifer Raven

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