

# Increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women

## A briefing paper

This briefing has been produced as part of the The National Lottery Community Fund's Women and Girls Initiative (WGI). The WGI was created by The Fund in 2016, using National Lottery funding, in order to invest in services for women and girls across England. It includes:

- Insights from nine WGI funded girls and young women's projects
- The principles and values driving their work
- Examples of successes and challenges encountered
- A series of provocations (searching questions) for consideration and learning

### Introduction

This short insights briefing has been developed as a resource to support girls and young women's services.<sup>1</sup> It also contains useful insights and evidence for commissioners, service providers, funders and other professionals about how increasing the voices of girls and young women can influence and improve services. It has been co-written with nine projects who have met since 2018 as an Action Learning Set (ALS), through the WGI Learning and Impact Services. Their shared experience, learning and voices have been brought together for this briefing, which follows ['Why Working with Girls and Young Women Matters'](#), published in 2019.

Whilst many WGI projects work with young women and girls aged 13-25, most of the ALS members were supported to set up new projects for young women and girls through WGI funding. A key objective of the work of services has been to ensure the voices of girls and young women are listened to and valued. This also means that girls and young women get to influence decisions and actions that affect their lives. A number of different terms are used in work with young people like engagement, participation, empowerment and co-production that can be confusing.


In this briefing, increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women, including through co-production, is the key terminology used. WGI funding has helped projects focus on learning through co-production and whilst all of the projects say they are still learning and evolving, this document shares insights from their work so far.

Although there is already a body of literature on this subject, very little focuses on girls and young women. There is no consensus about an agreed definition. Equally, there is little evidence about the challenges of co-production with young people who are female and often unused to being heard or listened to, coupled with intersecting experiences of being marginalised and traumatised. This short briefing attempts to highlight some of the complexities in applying mainstream ideas about co-production to the girls and young women accessing WGI projects.

The definition of co-production that best defines the approach of the participating projects is as follows:

*"It just means 'working together to produce a product, service or activity.' It is based on the idea that many heads are better than one. It also celebrates the value of direct life experience (rather than only professional expertise) in planning, designing, delivering and reviewing services..... We can think of co-production as a journey that staff and young people go on together to get to a better place, learning from each other on the way." (Rathbone, A. et al., 2018)*

1. This briefing was drafted at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.



As this briefing goes on to describe, giving voice and influence, often through co-production, demonstrates commitment to girls and young women, and acknowledges their right to shape their own future. In the context of Covid-19 and lockdown, young people may be a generation facing fear and economic uncertainty and rising levels of mental health problems. Girls and young women are particularly at risk of domestic and sexual abuse (Why Working With Girls and Young Women Matters, 2019), and there is national concern regarding how to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in this challenging climate. Therefore, harnessing the energy and voices of girls and young women is even more important to meet the challenges and inequalities facing this generation.

## Principles and values

A number of models of participation and co-production exist including ladders of progression (Arnstein, S.A., 1969; Hart, R., 1992), whereby the top rung defines what can be perceived as 'true participation/co-production.' Such models have led practitioners to conclude that their hierarchical nature, where the onus is to reach the somewhat unattainable top of the ladder, can be counterproductive. An important principle instead is inclusive co-production. This recognises that some girls and young women accessing projects may feel unable or unwilling to participate in co-production that requires a substantial personal contribution, due to the level of trauma they have experienced. Equally, girls and young women may require absolute confidentiality and anonymity and are highly diverse, including their ethnic, socio-economic, age, religious and cultural backgrounds.

Some girls and young women may be able to contribute and participate relatively easily, but the risk is that the most able, least traumatised, and most confident take centre stage.

Participating girls and young women need space to work on their own issues and build confidence and trust in each other and the organisation.

As outlined in the Rathbone et al. (2018) definition, it is the journey that is important for each individual against their starting point.

Therefore, projects contributing to this briefing work to a number of underlying principles and values, in order to enable voice and influence for all girls and young women. This is not a one-off event or activity and is embedded in the ethos of the organisations.

The following values and principles provide a framework to help ensure that projects are as inclusive and empowering for girls and young women as possible:

1. A deep understanding of what it means to be young and female.
2. Being young and female intersects with race, poverty and other inequalities.
3. Girls and young women are experts by experience.
4. Girls and young women's lives are contextual, and they are working through their identities, aspirations and becoming adults.
5. Girls and young women are often marginalised, may be traumatised and begin their journeys in projects at very different places.
6. This is a marathon, not a sprint.
7. There are many ways for girls and young women to contribute and voices need to be heard in ways that work for individuals.
8. The concerns, creativity and passions of girls and young women are centre stage.
9. Changes in service delivery, policy and practice demonstrate change.

## What's working

Participating projects tend to co-produce in three key ways:

### 1. The individual support/ recovery journey

Services for girls and young women are led by what girls and young women need and are adapted accordingly. Put simply, projects use a variety of ways to find out where girls and young women are genuinely at, and their needs, and ask. They try to avoid making assumptions about how ready they are and where they want to be. What this means is that girls and young women experience being listened to and heard as part of the organisational culture. Over time, they are able to articulate what their support and recovery needs are.

General examples include regular one-to-one and group consultations, feedback forms, and anonymous suggestion boxes.

*"We have used an array of methods to involve young women, they are central in the decision-making process around what goes on in the refuge. Over the last six months, we have involved women through house meetings, interviews, individual needs assessment support meetings, activity driven consultation meetings, suggestion boxes to get a full picture of their needs, concerns, priorities and ideas."*

**Seerose Project** (Birmingham)

All of the participating projects are inclusive in their approach, which means they provide a wide range of opportunities for all young women to be heard and involved, at the level that works for them.

**The Blossom Project** (Stockton) has embedded co-production throughout including:

*"...co-producing their support plans and how they want their sessions to be structured.....and choosing what topics the group sessions will focus on by leading with what matters most to the young women."*

**The Chamomile Project** (Gateshead) builds in routine listening and feedback from girls/ young women after every session and at different points in the year. **Project 1325** (Calderdale and Kirklees) has developed according to what girls and young women say they want and need: "Ask the girls!". The young women say what they need in one-to-one sessions and choose the topics for group work.

The **Noa** project has developed 'think tank' sessions that are more formal, where older and younger girls meet quarterly to reflect upon the project and their needs. They also hold one-to-one 'think tanks' for girls who prefer anonymity. One of the latter revealed that the project's desire to protect confidentiality meant that:

*"'Shayna' did not like the feeling of secrecy in the house, lots of closed doors and people checking if anyone was around before walking down the corridor..."*

(\*Shayna is a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.)

Whilst it is important for many young women that their support is absolutely private and confidential, Shayna found this to be re-traumatising. As a result:

*"...as we expand our facilities we are dividing up to have different spaces for girls who would like to remain confidential and those girls who are comfortable with being seen."*

This is in addition to individual check-ins about preferences around confidentiality. As a result of her involvement and the resulting changes, Shayna is joining in drop-ins, which she previously wouldn't consider.

Peer support and mentoring is an important dimension in the support and recovery journeys of young women. When young women are ready, the support of their peers, who have similar life experiences, is invaluable. They realise they are not alone and gain strength from each other. With support, young women have also been able to take up peer leadership roles in organisations and work with other girls and young women, for example as peer researchers or in co-facilitating work with younger girls.

**Pause for Thought** (Barrow in Furness) is:

*"...based solely on what is identified by the young women and their ownership of the programme is integral to its continued successes."*

This project has developed peer mentoring, which involved supporting a number of young women to build their skills and lead some group sessions. As a result, one of the peer mentors was able to speak at a women's health event:

*"She shared with an audience of nearly one hundred what it feels like to go through the CAMHS services and Women's Community Matters groups and how working in a non-judgemental environment helped to develop her self-beliefs... how she felt it is shaping her future... based on HER choices."*

**The Chamomile Project** has developed a number of young women as peer mentors, building their skills and confidence:

*"...three of those young women now work for us."*

Young women in the Blossom project have developed a peer support group whereby they plan and lead sessions supporting one another:

*"The young women have led on topics such as; baking, beat boxing, rapping, friendship, team building games, periods, mental health and self-esteem. The impact of this on the young women is increased resilience, feeling empowered and social support."*

**Venus** (Merseyside) co-created a weekly group where women and young women:

*"...meet to socialise, share experiences and simply feel safe in an environment which is free of judgement and shame."*



Peer groups and staff together can help to clarify and shape thinking by offering different perspectives.

**Project 1325** ran confidence workshops in schools and were asked to support a group of sixth form students:

*"[The] students created their own group to provide peer support to younger students using their voice and influence to inspire, inform, support and educate."*

## 2. Design, direction, delivery, governance and evaluation of participating projects

All of the projects ensure that the voices of girls and young women are heard and acted upon, particularly in relation to improving services and service delivery.

A number of projects were designed by young women themselves, meaning that their identities, shape and focus is girls and young women centred. This creates ownership, increases engagement and ensures that they are relevant.

*"Project 1325 launched its name, logo, publicity and allocated space at the WomenCentre, built on the voice of our young women. The chosen name 1325 is a United Nation's Resolution, recognising the specific needs of and increasing the representation and participation of women and girls in decision making, so Project 1325 just felt right."*

The **Vibe (Voice, Influence, Be Empowered)** project, operating in Yorkshire and Sheffield, was established to give young women a say in the issues affecting them regionally and nationally, and to increase their voice and influence.

*"VIBE was established via consultation, and then co-produced, led by our design team and several young women. Each offshoot, or development, is needs-led and led by young women."*

The project uses a test and learn approach, building their offer on what girls and young women want. They are able to flex to current issues affecting young women, for example responding to and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement.

Projects identified a myriad of ways they have shaped and improved services by responding to the concerns of young women, including expanding their offer. Venus expanded its offer to include a wider range of young women.

*"The service has changed over the years through encouraging the 'voice' of young women and women within our community. Its main aim is inclusivity. By listening to the young women/ women we were able to make some changes to initial restrictions on entry criteria, which focused on how marginalised they were. There were no groups for young women/ women where people didn't ask the awkward question, 'Do you have any children?' without them feeling judged if they answered honestly. Venus broadened the criteria so that any young woman/ woman could access the service if they experienced losing a child in the care system."*

They have also developed a stakeholder forum for women who are participating, or have participated, in the project.

*"These women and young women who previously felt they didn't deserve a voice, given their past experiences, are now shaping the services across the whole charity. Promoting confidence, sense of self-worth and empowerment for young women and women that no matter what their experiences, their voices are always valued at Venus."*


The **Seerose Project** provides one-to-one support for young women who have moved on from the refuge. They are now expanding this to develop an External Residents Community Programme. This is a response to the loneliness experienced by some of their young women who are no longer in the refuge space.

*"It's a bit lonely so it would be nice to meet up with other people." This is in the planning stages with the young women, with the focus being "mainly...just about getting together."*

An important feature of co-production with girls and young women is to flex and refresh to stay relevant.

**The Girl's Network** used the recent break in school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to keep their mentoring programme girl centred. They used research methods to gather evidence and adapted their programme content as a result.

*"Recently we ran focus groups across London & Merseyside online during school closures and sent out a questionnaire to all of our mentees to find out what girls their age and in their areas worry about, what they aspire to do, and what they feel they need in order to thrive. We've adapted our programme content according to this to ensure girls are getting more of what they need - for example now we have included a session in our programme on 'becoming an independent woman', with the aim to help girls learn how to gain financial independence in the future and ask all the questions they want about their futures."*



**The Chamomile Project** builds in routine listening and feedback from girls/young women after every session and at different points in the year, which is used to improve the service. Young women shape and influence programme evaluation, whole service review, staffing, crèche facilities, lunches, timing and delivery of sessions. Every girl and young woman takes part in overall reflection at the end of the work. This involves asking questions like: Where was I then and where am I now? What changed and how did it change? If the project wasn't here what would have happened to you? What support will you continue to need when you leave us? The project is able to make changes quickly and young women feel empowered, listened to and valued. The project has seen the impact of the voices of young women being heard:

*"Young women speaking out and challenging has given them confidence to be involved in consultations, share their stories to help others, and enabled them to challenge issues within their own lives and make more better informed choices."*

Feeding back to girls and young women about how their voices have influenced changes validates their contributions, helps to co-create trust and increase confidence. A general critique from the literature is that young people can give valuable time and energy in co-production, yet this does not always lead to change. Care is required to avoid what can be seen as tokenism.

*"Having follow up conversations around the changes achieved also reinforces confidence."*

**Project 1325** asked their young women how they had benefited from co-production:

*"Young women stated it gives them a sense of purpose, they feel valued and they feel heard. Co-production is, and will continue to be, the catalyst to our success in enabling young women to feel empowered and provide opportunities to maximise their potential."*

### 3. Influencing practice and policy more widely

Girls and young women are influencing WGI projects and services to good effect. It is much harder to influence practice and policy more widely, and this is the case more generally in any form of co-production, perhaps more so with young people who experience greater power differentials because of their age.

The **Vibe** project co-produced their period poverty campaign, which was something the young women they worked with felt strongly about. The campaign aimed to raise awareness about period poverty and its impact upon girls and young women. They called for free sanitary products in schools, and their work contributed to a wider evidence base used by the [Government](#), who have agreed to make the changes called for.

In Barrow, their young women's project:

*"...undertook a body of work as a group, led by a peer mentor, evidencing what they expected from agencies working with them, based on their personal experiences. The project was called #thefutureisme and was launched with publicity in our local mayoral office in Barrow in Furness."*

The local authority is backing their young people's charter.

Most of the projects have contributed to local consultations. For example, **The Chamomile Project** contributed to local policy around maternity services, where young women from the project were able to offer advice and suggestions. Young women from the **Blossom** project also periodically contribute to local partnership consultations whereby their opinions and experiences are shared to enhance local service delivery.

*"This not only empowers them but also strengthens their entitlements, particularly to the political process and to voice."*

The Vibe project supports student placements and believes that this contributes to important wider understanding of gender specific services and co-production.

*"It's great for these students to see how a gender specific project differs from other mainstream services. They can understand co-production, co-design and participation work and embed this in their career paths and service delivery in the future. They have found women and girls work personally challenging at times but equally empowering and want to give something back to other young people/ girls."*

As a result of the voices of their young women/women, **Venus** is now part of the local authority Legal Gateway Panel, which means they are in a position to influence what happens locally, and provide advice to Children's Social Care about the legal options available to safeguard and promote the child's welfare.

*"Due to being involved in these meetings we are now able to intervene with the young women/ women at a much earlier stage. The women had previously felt this is the stage when support was required most."*

## Challenges

There are several key challenges to increasing the voice and influence of girls and young women, including through co-production.

- A critique of achieving voice and influence (including co-production) is that there can be a tendency for the most confident, affluent and able young people/ women to be at the forefront. This is exemplified by the make-up of youth councils and other bodies. As indicated earlier, girls and projects try to combat this tendency offering a range of opportunities to be heard and contribute, according to where young people are at and what they can cope with.
- Linked to the point above is that projects say they need to build trust and confidence in participating girls and young women, between them as peers and in the organization and staff, in order to co-produce. This is the foundation and can take time, and sometimes a very long time.
- Some girls and young women are just coping and healing, therefore wish to contribute quietly and individually, or may not wish to contribute at all.
- Simply asking open questions to girls and young women like "what would you like to do/achieve?" may not work as many are unused to being asked, or may not have been given the opportunity to influence before. Starting off with suggestions and examples may work better.
- There can be group and friendship dynamics when girls and young women begin to lead activities that may need to be addressed, for example whether groups have a lead, or share leadership. Continuing support is almost always necessary to enable girls and young women to take up peer leadership roles.
- Genuine co-production, hearing young women and enabling their influence takes considerable time, effort and commitment.

## Provocations (searching questions)

This briefing ends with the following provocations devised by the voices of the participating projects. They are offered as a series of searching questions to work through, and reflect upon, for organisations seeking to develop greater voice and influence of young women and girls, including through co-production.

- Are all girls and young women genuinely listened to, and heard?
- What do girls and young women say about where they are at, how ready they are and where do they want to be? Have you asked?
- Have you committed time to dedicate to all of this? What are the strategies for the inevitable times when things may not work? How do you celebrate successes?
- Are all girls and young women able to take part in some way?
- Are you able to support the development of skills and confidence in girls and young women who wish to contribute more?
- Have you checked out if girls and young women are doing this to please you or because they really want to?
- Are you genuinely open to learning from, and with, girls and young women and doing what you can to put their ideas into practice?



## WGI projects involved

The projects involved in writing this briefing, working with Sue Botcherby (DMSS) and Camilla Child (TIHR) are:

### **Blossom Project (A Way Out - Stockton)**

Targeted support for young women aged 16 – 24 years living in the Stockton area who are at significant risk of poor outcomes due to a range of vulnerabilities and complex needs.

### **Chamomile Project (Young Women's Outreach Project - Gateshead)**

Provides specialist support, advice and guidance to young women and girls aged 11-19 years.

### **The Girl's Network**

Inspiring and empowering girls from the least advantaged communities by connecting them with a professional female mentor and a network of role models. The projects have come together with a shared set of values and principles that underpin their work, from the starting point that the voices of girls and young women are underheard in society and that nobody knows better than girls and young women what their lives are like and the support they need.

### **Noa Girls**

Practical, emotional and therapeutic support for girls in the Orthodox Jewish Community.

### **Pause, for thought (Women's Community Matters)**

Groups for girls and young women to explore life.

### **Project 1325 (Calderdale and Kirklees Women's Centre)**

Offers both emotional and practical support around a wide range of issues, provided in a safe space. Including 1:1 support in a variety of settings and group work to enable girls and young women to talk about the things that matter to them, make sense of things that may have happened to them and to be supported to be the girl and young woman they aspire to be.

The project works to raise self-esteem and confidence along the way, while welcoming and encouraging those supported to be involved in the development and delivery of services.

### **Seerose Specialist Young Women's Refuge (Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid)**

A specialist refuge and support for young women aged 16 to 25 who have experienced gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, rape and sexual abuse, grooming, forced marriage, gang violence etc.

### **Step Together (Venus – Merseyside)**

Working with young women/women with children who are in care, preventing recurrent removals.

### **The Vibe Project (Together Women – Sheffield)**

A project led for and by young women and girls aged 12-19 to have a say on issues affecting them and make changes locally, regionally and nationally.

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Find out more [here](#).