

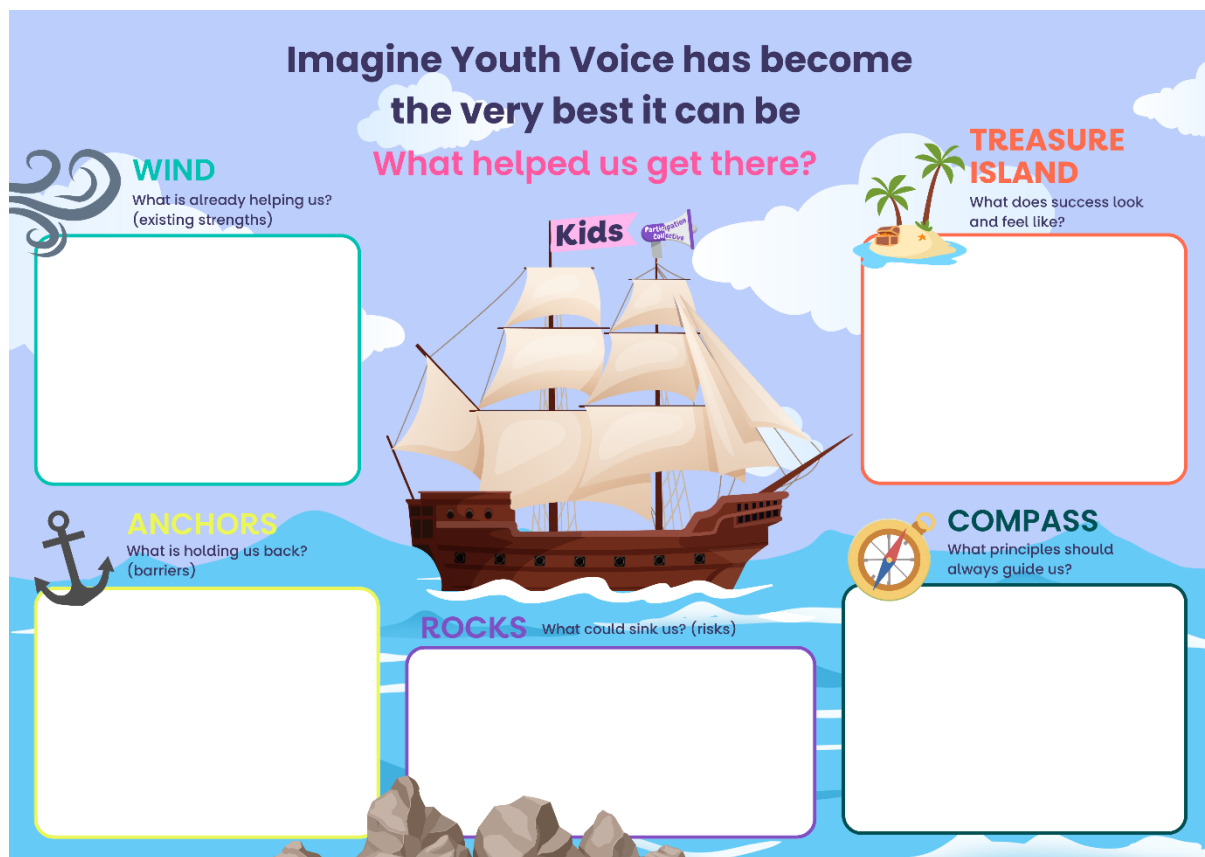


Collective Get T★gether

The Future of Youth Voice

Session overview

This activity explored young people's views on the future of youth voice and The Collective. Through a creative, nautical-themed workshop, participants reflected on the current strengths that help youth voice thrive, the barriers that can hold it back, and their vision of what success looks and feels like. Using the analogy of a ship's journey, strengths were identified as the wind in the sails, challenges as rocks and anchors, success as reaching a treasure island, and shared values and ways of working together as a guiding compass. The session provided valuable insight into young people's aspirations, priorities, and recommendations for shaping the future direction of The Collective.



What Young People Identified as the Strengths of Youth Voice and The Collective

When asked about the strengths of Youth Voice and The Collective, young people consistently highlighted several key themes that demonstrate the impact of meaningful participation and co-production.

1. Amplifying Young People's Voices and Increasing Representation

Young people valued The Collective's ability to ensure that the views and experiences of children and young people are heard at local, regional and national levels. They recognised the importance of ambassadors and representatives feeding into wider forums and decision-making structures, helping to bring the voices of a diverse range of young people to the table.

Participants highlighted:

- Young people representing and speaking on behalf of others.
- Existing ambassador programmes linking local and national discussions.
- Representation on local authority boards and engagement with the Department for Education.
- Opportunities to share views through forums, groups and participation activities.
- Good representation from across England.

This demonstrates that young people see The Collective as an effective mechanism for influencing decision-makers and ensuring lived experience informs policy and practice.

2. Inclusivity, Diversity and Accessibility

A recurring theme was the importance of inclusion. Young people described The Collective as a space that welcomes individuals from different backgrounds, experiences and disabilities, recognising that no two young people have the same needs.

Young people particularly valued:

- The diversity of participants and experiences represented.
- Efforts to reach different communities and groups.
- The ability to participate both online and in person.
- Opportunities for everyone to contribute and have their voice heard.

These responses suggest that accessibility and inclusivity are viewed as fundamental strengths of the programme.

3. Strong Relationships and Trusted Adults

Young people repeatedly emphasised the importance of supportive, approachable adults who listen, engage and work alongside them. Specific staff members, youth workers, teachers and senior leaders were recognised for their commitment to listening to young people and championing their views.

Young people highlighted:

- Approachable and supportive staff.
- Positive relationships with youth workers and professionals.
- Engagement from senior leaders within local authorities.
- Adults who actively create opportunities for young people to contribute.

This reflects the value young people place on trusted relationships and meaningful partnership working between young people and professionals.

4. Collaboration and Co-production

Young people viewed The Collective as a genuinely collaborative network where solutions are developed together. They valued opportunities to co-design services, programmes and activities rather than simply being consulted.

Key strengths identified included:

- Co-design of youth-led programmes.
- Working in partnership with other groups and organisations.
- Professionals engaging constructively with young people.
- Young people being involved in identifying solutions to challenges.

Young people's feedback suggests they value being active partners in decision-making and service development.



5. Communication and Peer Engagement

Communication emerged as one of the strongest themes throughout the discussion. Young people recognised the importance of creating spaces where conversations can happen openly and where peers can challenge, share experiences and learn from each other.

Examples included:

- Regular communication between members.
- "Time to Talk". Local forums and discussion opportunities.

- Young people reaching out to other groups to gather views.
- Creating opportunities for open and honest conversations.

This highlights the role of Youth Voice activity in building confidence, dialogue and peer-to-peer engagement.

6. Community, Belonging and Enjoyment

Alongside influencing change, young people emphasised that The Collective provides a sense of belonging. Participants described it as fun, engaging and community-focused.

Young people valued:

- Collective Get Togethers and social opportunities.
- Youth clubs and community activities.
- Feeling connected to others with shared experiences.
- Enjoyable and engaging participation opportunities.

This suggests that creating positive social experiences is an important element of sustaining meaningful youth participation.

7. Connections to Services and Wider Support Networks

Young people recognised the benefit of links with wider support systems and services, including mental health services, youth provision and community organisations.

Examples included:

- Connections with CAMHS, Mind and mental health support services.
- Free clubs and activities for different age groups.
- Partnerships with a range of organisations and networks.

These connections were seen as strengthening support for young people while increasing opportunities for participation and influence.

Overall Message from Young People

Overall, young people described The Collective as an inclusive, youth-led and solution-focused network that empowers children and young people with SEND to influence decisions, connect with peers, work alongside professionals, and shape services at local and national levels. They particularly valued the opportunities for genuine co-production, strong relationships with trusted

adults, diverse representation, and the sense of community created through participation activities.

This feedback demonstrates that young people see The Collective not simply as a consultation mechanism, but as a platform for meaningful influence, belonging and positive change.

What Young People Told Us is Holding Youth Voice Back

When asked what is preventing young people with SEND from fully participating in Youth Voice activities and influencing decision-making, several consistent themes emerged. Young people described a range of practical, systemic and personal barriers that can prevent participation and meaningful engagement.

1. Unequal Access and a "Postcode Lottery" of Opportunity

The strongest theme was that opportunities for participation are not available equally across the country.

Young people reported:

- Not all areas offer participation opportunities or youth forums.
- A lack of local groups and activities.
- Significant differences in available resources and support depending on where young people live.
- Concerns about funding limitations, particularly outside London.
- Local authorities not always working together to create opportunities.

Young people felt that access to Youth Voice should not depend on geography and that all young people should have equal opportunities to participate and influence decisions.

Key message: Opportunities for Youth Voice remain inconsistent, creating unequal access for young people with SEND across England

2. Funding and Resources

Funding was consistently identified as a major challenge affecting both participation opportunities and the ability of organisations to listen and respond effectively.

Young people highlighted:

- Reductions in funding for youth services and participation activities.
- Limited resources available to support engagement.

- Concerns about long-term sustainability.
- The costs associated with attending activities, including expenses and transport.

Key message: Young people recognise that meaningful participation requires investment and that funding pressures can limit opportunities for engagement.

3. Accessibility and Practical Barriers

Many young people identified accessibility issues as a significant obstacle to participation.

Challenges included:

- Transport difficulties and travel costs.
- Communication barriers.
- Locations that are difficult to access.
- Digital exclusion, with recognition that online participation is not always the answer.
- A lack of appropriate support to enable participation.



Young people stressed that accessibility extends beyond physical access and includes communication, financial and practical considerations.

key message: Participation opportunities need to be designed with accessibility in mind from the outset to ensure all young people can take part.

4. Lack of Awareness and Poor Communication

Young people reported that many children and young people simply do not know opportunities exist.

Participants identified:

- Low awareness of Youth Voice groups and forums.
- Difficulties spreading information in schools.
- Poor communication about available opportunities.
- Limited promotion and outreach.

They also highlighted the importance of receiving feedback after sharing their views.

One recurring message was:

“ Tell us why you made that decision ”

Young people want to understand how their views have influenced outcomes and what happened as a result of their involvement.

Key message: Better communication is needed both to promote opportunities and to demonstrate the impact of young people's contributions.

5. Feeling Unheard and Tokenistic Engagement

Many young people expressed frustration when they feel their views are not genuinely considered.

They spoke about:

- Adults assuming young people do not have a voice.
- Experiences of being ignored.
- Participation feeling tokenistic.
- Decision-makers not always listening to young people.
- A perception of "them and us" between young people and professionals.

Young people warned that when participation feels tokenistic, they become less likely to engage in the future.

Key message: Young people want authentic partnership and evidence that their participation leads to meaningful influence and change.

6. Confidence, Anxiety and Emotional Barriers

Young people recognised that personal factors could make participation difficult.

These included:

- Lack of confidence.
- Fear of conflict or confrontation.
- Stress and pressure.
- Anxiety and worry.
- Mental health challenges.
- Difficult circumstances at home or within families.

First meetings were described as particularly intimidating, and many young people felt that everyone needs support to feel comfortable participating.

Key message: Emotional wellbeing and confidence-building support are essential for enabling participation.

7. Inclusion, Diversity and Representation

Young people felt there is still more work to do to ensure all voices are represented.

Participants highlighted:

- A lack of diversity in some participation spaces.
- Inequalities experienced by young people with different disabilities.
- The need to hear quieter voices.
- Under-representation of younger children and young people.
- Concerns about subconscious bias and misunderstanding.

Key message: participation should reflect the full diversity of the SEND community

8. Culture, Language and Safe Spaces

Young people also raised concerns about the culture surrounding participation and engagement.

Issues included:

- Formal or "robotic" language that can feel inaccessible.
- Rigid ways of thinking that limit innovation and participation.
- A lack of safe spaces where young people feel comfortable speaking openly.
- Limited opportunities for social connection and relationship-building.

Young people wanted participation environments that feel welcoming, relatable and youth-friendly.

Key message: Participation is most effective when young people feel safe, respected and able to communicate in ways that work for them.

Overall Message from Young People

The overall message from young people was that the biggest barriers to Youth Voice are not a lack of willingness to participate, but a combination of **unequal opportunities, insufficient funding, accessibility challenges, poor communication, lack of awareness, and experiences of not being genuinely heard.**

Young people want:

- More opportunities to take part.
- Better accessibility and transport support.
- Greater awareness of Youth Voice opportunities.
- Diverse and inclusive representation.
- Safe, welcoming participation spaces.
- Clear feedback about how their views have influenced decisions.
- Genuine co-production rather than tokenistic consultation.

Most importantly, young people want decision-makers to **listen, act and demonstrate the impact of participation**, ensuring that every young person with SEND feels valued, included and able to shape the decisions that affect their lives.

What Young People Told Us Success Looks and Feels Like in Youth Voice

When asked what success looks and feels like in Youth Voice, young people described a vision that goes far beyond simply being consulted. Success was defined as feeling valued, making a difference, building confidence, and seeing real change happen as a result of their involvement.

Success Means Personal Growth and Empowerment

The strongest message from young people was that successful participation creates positive personal change.

Young people described success as feeling:

- Proud of themselves and their achievements.
- More confident in sharing their views and experiences.
- Happy, positive and optimistic.
- A sense of achievement and accomplishment.
- Excitement and pride when they have done something meaningful.
- "Over the moon" when their efforts have made a difference.

Youth Voice was seen as a vehicle for helping young people recognise their strengths, develop new skills and realise their potential.

“ **Being proud when you have made an achievement or done something special** ”

Success Means Seeing Real Change

Young people were clear that participation must lead to action.

Success was described as:

- The changes young people ask for actually happening.
- Effective improvements that meet the needs of children and young people.
- Young people's views influencing decisions and services.
- Maintaining momentum and achieving outcomes within meaningful timeframes.

While many recognised that change can take time, they emphasised the importance of seeing progress and understanding how their contribution has influenced decision-making.

“ The change happens ”

Success Means Every Voice Being Heard

Young people consistently described success as creating opportunities for all voices to be included.

They highlighted the importance of:

- Hearing as many voices as possible.
- Expanding reach and engaging young people from diverse backgrounds and experiences.
- Building strong networks of young people across different communities.
- Ensuring everyone has an opportunity to contribute and be listened to.

Success was not viewed as representing a small number of individuals, but as creating a system where participation is open, accessible and inclusive.

“ Everyone has a voice and everyone is listened to ”

Success Means Genuine Co-production

Young people emphasised that successful participation is built on partnership, not consultation alone.

They wanted:

- Young people to be involved from the beginning of decision-making processes.
- Genuine co-production between young people and professionals.
- Decisions to be shaped with young people, not presented to them after they have already been made.
- Positive and respectful partnership working.

This reflects a desire for young people to be recognised as equal partners in designing solutions and shaping services.

“Involving young people from the start of a process and not just using us for justifying the decision you have made already”

Success Means Belonging and Connection

Many young people described success as the relationships and sense of community created through Youth Voice activity.

Success was associated with:

- Meeting new people.
- Developing supportive peer networks.
- Feeling a sense of belonging.
- Building connections with others who share similar experiences.
- Being part of something bigger than themselves.

Young people highlighted that participation is most powerful when it creates both influence and connection.

Success Means Communication and Accountability

Young people stressed the importance of communication throughout the participation process.

They described success as:

- Receiving regular updates.
- Being kept informed, even when there is little progress to report.
- Closing the feedback loop.
- Understanding how decisions have been made and what has happened as a result of their involvement.
- Maintaining engagement over time.

Young people want transparency and ongoing communication as evidence that their contributions are valued.

Success Requires Sustainable Investment

Young people recognised that meaningful participation needs appropriate support and resources.

They identified success as:

- Having sufficient funding for participation and co-production.
- Opportunities to meet regularly.
- Local authority investment in Youth Voice groups.
- Effective promotion and visibility of opportunities through local offers and other channels.

This demonstrates an understanding that meaningful engagement requires long-term commitment and infrastructure.

Overall Message from Young People

The message from young people was clear:

Success in Youth Voice is when young people feel confident, valued and connected; when every voice has the opportunity to be heard; when young people and professionals work together as equal partners; and when participation leads to visible, meaningful change.

For young people, successful Youth Voice is not simply about being consulted. It is about belonging, empowerment, genuine co-production and seeing their experiences translated into action. Above all, success is knowing that their voice has been listened to, respected and acted upon.

What Young People Told Us About the Principles and Ways of Working That Matter Most

When discussing the values and approaches that should guide Youth Voice and co-production, young people consistently highlighted the importance of respect, inclusion, communication, accountability and meaningful partnership. Their feedback demonstrates that effective participation is not only about creating opportunities to contribute, but also about how young people are engaged throughout the process.

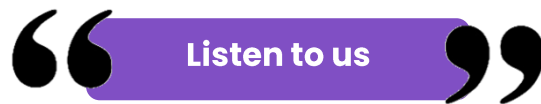
1. Listening Must Be at the Heart of Participation

The most common message from young people was simple and powerful: **listen to us.**

Young people emphasised the importance of:

- Listening to all views and experiences.
- Creating opportunities for everyone to be heard.
- Taking young people's contributions seriously.
- Demonstrating that feedback has been considered and acted upon.

Young people want participation to be built on genuine listening, where their voices influence decisions rather than simply being collected.



2. Respect, Kindness and Inclusion Are Non-Negotiable

Young people consistently identified respect and kindness as essential foundations for effective Youth Voice.

They highlighted:

- Being respectful to everyone.
- Treating all participants with kindness.
- Valuing different opinions and experiences.
- Creating welcoming environments where people feel comfortable contributing.

Young people believe participation works best when everyone feels valued, respected and included.

3. Safe Spaces Enable Honest Conversations

Creating safe and supportive environments was another key theme.

Young people said participation should:

- Provide safe spaces for discussion.
- Help young people feel comfortable sharing their views.

- Encourage contribution without fear of judgement.
- Support young people to speak openly about issues that matter to them.

This demonstrates the importance of emotional safety as a foundation for meaningful engagement.

4. Young People Should Be Involved From the Start

Young people were clear that they want to help shape decisions from the beginning, not simply be consulted at the end of a process.

They highlighted:

- Including young people from the earliest stages of planning.
- Involving young people in designing solutions.
- Working in partnership throughout the process.

Young people described this as a key principle of genuine co-production.

“Include young people from the start”

5. Transparency and Accountability Build Trust

A strong theme throughout the discussion was the need for organisations to be open about decisions and demonstrate accountability.

Young people valued:

- Integrity, honesty and openness.
- Clear explanations about decisions.
- Transparency about progress and outcomes.
- Mechanisms that track progress and demonstrate accountability.

They wanted organisations to provide clear answers to questions such as:

“Tell us why”

Young people feel that transparency helps build trust and confidence in participation processes.

6. Closing the Feedback Loop Is Essential

Young people repeatedly stressed the importance of hearing what happens after they have shared their views.

They highlighted:

- Providing feedback on actions taken.
- Demonstrating impact.
- Sharing updates throughout projects.
- Communicating outcomes in a timely way.

The principle most frequently referenced was:

“ You said, we did ”

Young people want evidence that their voices have made a difference and that participation has influenced decision-making.

7. Regular Communication and Ongoing Engagement Matter

Young people emphasised that engagement should not be a one-off event.

They wanted:

- Regular opportunities to contribute.
- Consistent communication.
- Frequent updates on progress.
- Ongoing relationships rather than occasional consultation exercises.

This reflects a desire for participation to be embedded within organisational culture rather than treated as a standalone activity.

8. Recognition, Encouragement and Celebration of Impact

Young people highlighted the importance of recognising contributions and celebrating achievements.

They suggested:

- Encouragement for participants.
- Acknowledging when young people have helped create change.

- Appropriate rewards and incentives.
- Celebrating progress and achievements within realistic timeframes.

Young people felt that recognising contribution helps maintain engagement and demonstrates the value placed on Youth Voice.

9. Flexible and Accessible Participation Is Essential

Young people recognised that different people engage in different ways.

They advocated for:

- Hybrid participation opportunities.
- A choice of face-to-face and online engagement.
- Flexible approaches that meet individual needs.
- Reducing barriers to participation wherever possible.

This reflects the importance of designing participation around young people's needs rather than expecting young people to fit existing systems.

Overall Message from Young People

The message from young people was clear:

Effective Youth Voice is built on listening, respect, kindness, safety, honesty and genuine partnership. Young people want to be involved from the start, kept informed throughout the process and shown how their contributions have influenced outcomes.

Young people's guiding principles for participation can be summarised as:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| • Listen to us | • Show us what has changed |
| • Respect everyone | • Communicate regularly |
| • Be kind | • Recognise our contributions |
| • Create safe spaces | • Make participation accessible for all |
| • Include us from the start | |
| • Be honest and transparent | |

These principles provide a clear framework for meaningful Youth Voice and co-production and represent what young people believe good participation should look like in practice.

Conclusion

As part of the future of youth voice plenary activity, young people reflected on both the barriers that can prevent meaningful participation and the factors that enable youth voice to thrive. These were captured visually through **storm clouds** representing challenges and **sun rays** representing success



factors and aspirations for the future. This encouraged reflection on what can make it difficult for young people to have their voices heard, as well as what helps participation to thrive.

Barriers to Participation

Young people identified several challenges that can make it difficult for them to share their views and influence decisions. A key concern was the feeling that too much attention is often placed on professionals, policymakers and organisations, while not enough attention is given to the experiences and perspectives of young people themselves.

Participants also highlighted a lack of awareness about existing participation opportunities, with many young people not knowing what groups are available or not having a local group where they can share their views. Accessibility was another significant theme, particularly around transport, the need for support from family members to attend activities, and practical barriers such as time, confidence and availability.

Concerns were also raised about funding pressures, with young people recognising that limited resources can affect the availability of participation groups, workshops, activities and opportunities. Some participants shared experiences of feeling ignored or not being heard, highlighting the need for cultural change to ensure young people's voices are consistently valued.

What Success Looks Like

When discussing the future of youth voice, young people were clear about the factors that help participation succeed. Central to this was the importance of **safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces** where young people can speak openly without fear of judgement or stigma. Trusting relationships, strong communication and opportunities to connect with peers who have similar experiences were all considered essential.

Young people wanted participation opportunities to be accessible, flexible and community-based, with enough time for meaningful discussion and relationship-building. Free activities, local groups, youth clubs and events were highlighted as important ways of ensuring that more young people can get involved.

The strongest message was the importance of seeing that participation leads to **real change**. Young people want clear evidence that their views are being heard, taken seriously and acted upon. They called for genuine co-production, visible outcomes and an end to tokenistic engagement. Participants emphasised that young people should be involved as equal partners in decision-making and that their contributions should help shape services, systems and policies from the outset.

Overall, young people's vision for the future is one where participation is inclusive, accessible and impactful. They want opportunities to share their views in trusted environments, alongside clear evidence that their voices are making a meaningful difference to the decisions that affect their lives and communities.

Appendix – Youth Voice Future

Wind – Strengths and things that help us

- The Collective Get Together.
- Kids are open and challenge.
- Kids travel the country and include all.
- How kids bring other young people's voices to the table.
- Kids team going out there to groups.
- Already having ambassadors from local Co-production groups feeding into national groups.
- Communication.
- Approachable staff.
- Fun.
- Engaging
- Community
- Professionals. Engaging with youth.
- Time to talk forum.
- The Collective and DfE engagement
- Staff like Becca. Wendy, head of SEN. Steven Director of children's services. And other youth workers, Jane / Chris, teachers and members of staff.
- Youth clubs.
- Mental health support. Cams. Mind.
- Free clubs for all ages.
- Kids working with us.
- The support and backing of the local authority senior leader teams.
- Representation at local authority boards.
- Proactivity – We knock on doors and give solutions. We are solution focused.
- Communication – We talk a lot.
- Everyone has an opportunity.
- Partnerships. Part of other groups.
- Having the availability To share our voices through groups and forums.
- Different types of people. Not all disabilities are the same. We are very diverse.
- Co design of youth LED programmes.
- Good representation from across England.
- Having both in person and online.

Anchors – things that holds us back

- Not everyone offers participation in their area.
- Not asking for help.
- It is harder to spread a message at school.
- Not enough support.
- Assuming you don't have a voice.
- Confidence. Conflict. Confrontation.
- Post code lottery.
- Funding the commitment to listen.
- Bad politics. Not listening to young people. And ministers changing too much.
- Funding, especially outside of London, for youth voice.
- Transport not being able to reach activities. Local authorities not working together.
- Resources. Like money.
- Lack of diversity and need of more diverse representation.
- Breaking rigid thinking.
- First meetings are intimidating.
- Hearing quieter voices.
- Location, location location. Online isn't always the answer.
- Tell us why you made that decision.
- Being tokenistic - Then don't want to take part.
- Them and us.
- Young people want to know their barriers.
- Not being known.
- Lack of awareness that these groups exist.
- Lack of groups.
- Lack of understanding.
- Money.
- Accessibility
- Time
- Poor communication.

Rocks - things that stop youth voice

- Accessibility. Including transport and communication barriers.
- Expenses.
- Lack of confidence.
- Lack of awareness.
- Time and pressure.
- Everyone needs support to feel comfortable.
- Age - not enough 'young' young people.

- Robotic formal use of language. Think about who government are speaking with.
- £££ being cut.
- Lack of modern opportunities.
- Lack of equality when it comes to different disabilities.
- There is no middle ground at the moment when it comes to socialisation.
- Not protecting safe spaces for young people to speak.
- Subconscious bias and ignorance.
- Pressure.
- Mental health.
- Something bad happening in the family.
- Stress.
- People ignoring us.
- Conflict.
- No help.
- Worry.
- Because I am special and have autism

Tresure island – what success looks and feels like

- Proud of yourself.
- More confident.
- Amazing.
- Happy person.
- Feel good about yourself.
- Being proud when you have made an achievement or done something special.
- The change happens.
- Meeting new people.
- Dream of your goals, big and small. Close your eyes and make it feel real.
- Success looks upward to the next big thing.
- Strong network of diverse voices.
- Hear as many voices as possible.
- It feels very bittersweet. It takes a long time. With as much support that is given.
- Success of Unified and streamlined networks streamlined by visualisation.
- Effective change that meets young people's needs.
- Flexibility – expand reach need to hear all the voices.

- Amazing.
- Feels like achievement.
- Over the moon.
- Relief.
- Meeting young people where they want to be heard.
- Great partnership working between young people and professionals.
- Updates even if there are no updates. Ongoing communication.
- A belonging.
- A drive of passion.
- Involving young people from the start of a process and not just using us for justifying the decision you have made already.
- Genuine Co production.
- Everyone has a voice and everyone is listened to.
- Closing the feedback loop.
- Everything is done within a time frame and maintaining engagement.
- Having enough funding to meet more regularly.
- Having participation and Co production groups funded by local authorities.
- Local offer advertising.

Compass – guiding principles and ways of working

- Listening.
- Engaging.
- Be kind.
- Be respectful to everyone.
- Listening.
- Kindness.
- Comfort
- Respect
- Safe.
- Listen to everyone's views
- Respecting everyone.
- Making sure everyone has a safe space.
- Include young people from the start.
- Listen to us.
- You said we did.
- Tell us why.
- Integrity, honesty and openness.
- Open communication.

- Rewards and incentives. Realising young people making a difference within appropriate timeframes.
- Progress tracker for accountability.
- Regular engagement.
- Encouragement.
- You said we did. - Timely manner - Updating us as soon as complete.
- Hybrid options face-to-face or online