

# THE YOUNG LONDONERS RESEARCH PROGRAMME

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was designed, carried out, and analysed by Merton Council's Young Inspectors; a team of young people who live, learn and socialise in Merton.

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SUPPORTED BY  
**MAYOR OF LONDON**

Supported by the Mayor of London's Young Londoners Fund which has supported over 300 youth organisations and over 100,00 young Londoners.

Released August 2023

# INTRODUCTION

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The research question was inspired by our research on 'The impact of Covid-19 on young people in Merton' which was conducted in 2021. Hence, it was continuation of the research and to further analyse the barriers set in place for care experienced young people.

'What reforms need to be made to youth services to make them more engaging and accessible for care-experienced young people aged 11-16 in the London Boroughs of Merton, Wandsworth and Kingston?'

To gain the insights from young people we used focus groups whereas with Service Managers we facilitated semi-structured interviews.

We spoke to young people from Merton, Wandsworth and Kingston by visiting Children in Care Councils and facilitating interviews via MS Teams. We also spoke to decision makers from Merton and Kingston; decision makers ranged from Heads of Service, Service Managers for Children in Care and Youth Work Service Managers.

Based on our research question, this report will discuss some concerns raised by our young people with care experience followed by direct quotes that they shared on our interviews and focus groups.

Moreover, after exploring our young people's thoughts and needs, we concluded in exploring four themes that affect them the most. These themes include Safety, Community, Freedom and Independence and Experience.

# METHODOLOGY

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## Peer Research Approach:

This research took a peer research approach and has been produced by young people who grew up and live in Merton, with some of our researchers also having care experience. This is done to ensure that our data is valid and that we can illuminate the experiences of young people. Also, working for a local authority, we are in a good position to understand and acknowledge the experiences of the youth service managers as well as the decision makers.

This project has been guided by three core principles:



### 01 — Neutrality

We conducted this research in an impartial manner not to judge or challenge the experiences of any of our participants to ensure we were able to present the most authentic findings.



### 02 — Informed Decision Making

To help give your audience an overview, this section can include a brief description of the goal, its relevance to your sector or industry, and the specific sub-targets your organization is addressing.



### 03 — Support

As a team of peer researchers, we were not afraid to ask for help from our peers, working with each other's strengths to create our best piece of work. We also gained support from Partnership for Young London (PYL) and our manager Sukpal and worked in collaboration to finalise our research.

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## Process Overview:

Our research can be divided into three key stages:

- **Stage 1: Research Planning & Training**
- **Stage 2: Fieldwork**
- **Stage 3: Analysis**

## Stage 1: Research Planning and Training:

We were tasked to conduct a peer research project to explore young people's views on the following:

- Access to youth services
- Barriers to attending youth services
- Young people's specific needs and the type of activities young people want

Our interview guide was based on our original research and the key issues that young people with care experience faced. With this in mind, we also wanted to investigate what was already being done by managers and decision makers so we could reform the services accordingly. We decided to focus on different areas depending on who we were talking to:

With our young people, we decided to explore the themes:

- **Safety:** Feeling safe in their borough and how their perception of safety impacts their engagement with youth services
- **Community:** What does community look like to them? How can this be implemented in youth services?
- **Freedom and Independence:** Do they have a say on where they can go or what happens in their borough? What is their relationship with their carer / social worker?
- **Experience:** Their overall experience in engaging with youth services

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**With our Youth Service Managers, we focused on:**

- **Experience:** Their experience in youth centres and leading youth services
- **Engagement:** How do they engage young people with care experience?
- **Challenges:** What have they found difficult in leading youth services in their borough?

**With our key decision makers, in both youth services and the children's social care, we focused on:**

- **Relationships:** What's their relationship with the young people? What is the relationship with other departments and managers?
- **Resources:** Where are they allocating resources and funding?
- **Accountability:** How can we make them accountable? Is there transparency in the work they are doing?
- **Experiences:** What has been their experience in being a key decision maker?

### **Training and Skills:**

As peer researchers, being Merton Young Inspectors, we came with existing research and interview skills from previous projects. Partnership for Young London provided us with training and provided us with the tools to make decisions about the research. For instance, we took part in:

- **Introduction to research:** We looked at research, why it's important and the differences between qualitative and quantitative research.
- **Conducting Interviews:** We learnt about in-depth interviews and focus groups and gained experience speaking to various different participants.
- **Analysing data:** We looked at the best approach in analysing transcripts and thematic analysis.

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## Stage 2: Fieldwork stage – interviews and focus groups:

On average, interviews lasted around 30 minutes with focus groups varying from 25 minutes to 55 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and informed consent was provided by all participants. The quotes throughout this report is taken from those interviews and focus groups.

**The Participants:** The majority of our research focused on the young people in care who were all under 16 as this was our target demographic. Our four Youth Service Managers were representing Merton and Kingston as well as the PAN London Children in Care Council Managers. Our three senior decision makers were based in the Children, Lifelong Learning and Families directorate at Merton Council. There was an underrepresentation of decision makers from Kingston and Wandsworth due to lack of engagement. Our focus groups and interview minutes amounted to over 500 minutes of data.

**Places:** Most of our interviews were done virtually however we spoke to young people in a variety of youth centres such as Twickenham Youth Centre, Wandsworth Youth Centre and the Merton Civic Centre.

**Incentives:** To incentivise our young residents in care, as a reward for engaging in our research they would be put in a raffle to win AirPods or gift vouchers.

## **Stage 3: Analysis Stage**

We came together to look at our interview and focus group data; this allowed us to curate our key findings. We also worked in collaboration with the PAN London Children in Care Council that analysed our key findings and helped with recommendations.

### **Qualitative Analysis:**

- Learning: We learnt about qualitative data analysis, like content and thematic analysis, and how to code transcripts
- Interpretation: We coded the transcripts and looked for key themes and ideas
- Structure: We brought all our interpretations together to generate key findings as well as become the content of our report.



# KEY FINDINGS

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## Safety:

- Young people have concerns travelling on private and public transport due to stories they have heard from their peers and negative media coverage. In particular, this fear was articulated most by young girls.
- Young people are less likely to access youth services in the winter months or the evenings due to worries about travelling in the dark

## Relationships:

- The relationship between young people with care experience and their social worker is crucial to opportunities; the shallower the relationship the less they are exposed to opportunities.
- Local authorities have not taken sufficient action in understanding the needs of young people in care regarding youth services.

## Advertisement:

- Youth services are finding it difficult to engage with youth people in general, disproportionately those in care; there is a gap in understanding between the generation immersed in digital communication and services that are yet to adapt, leading to a lack of engagement in opportunities.
- Services are missing the opportunity to work collaboratively and have a primary outlet to share all activities within their local boroughs.

## Funding:

- Local authorities are facing a financial crisis in terms of what they can offer young people e.g., budget cuts lead to limited staff and therefore they cannot offer longer hours or open on different days to suit the needs of the young people.
- Funding is needed to provide training for staff, so they feel empowered to create a safe and engaging space for our young people with care experience.

## Opportunities:

- Young people believe they are not being listened to and would like to be involved partnering with the services to create a space that benefits them. They also desire a space that focuses on mental health and self-care to promote a healthy wellbeing.
- Young people have found it difficult to access youth services due to the price of transportation and available services not being nearby.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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- 1 Building better communication between decision makers and youth services:** There is a gap of communication between these two parties which leads to a lack of understanding and information on both parts. We recommend regular meetings between the two e.g. youth club heads and the department of children in care to update on plans and work collaboratively to create engaging and accessible services for our young people with care experience.
- 2 Training for all staff:** We need to ensure that all staff understand the foundations of participation as well as becoming care aware and trauma informed. This is to give them the confidence to engage and support young people.  
We propose:
  - Mandatory sessions for all staff specific to the needs of children in care alongside other training provided
  - A booklet written in collaboration with the young people with care experience as a guide to supporting and engaging them.
- 3 Digital Communication:** Youth services need to either create or reform their social media pages to use as a tool to engage and advertise to young people e.g. an Instagram account. Furthermore, these platforms can be used as forums for young people to address their concerns and give them an efficient way to ensure their voice can be heard.
- 4 Transportation:** Local authorities need to find a way for our young people with care experience to physically access youth-friendly spaces. Ideas include:
  - Minibuses that can pick up our young people
  - A form of bursary that allows our young people to pay for travel, apply for a zip card etc.
- 5 Building relationships:** This is crucial to foster a feeling of community for all residents in borough, we suggest holding events to provide a space for our young people, carers and councils to learn about each other's roles and responsibilities, a space to talk about concerns and an opportunity to meet new people and create bonds especially for our young people with care experience.
- 6 Improve budgets for services:** This is our most challenging recommendation as we understand the involvement of the local authorities to make this a reality however it is vital to acknowledge that spaces for young people are getting scarcer and those prevalent are underfunded. More investment in services will provide young people with an offer that is not only engaging but allow them to cultivate skills and be a part of the future of the borough.

# MERTON PEER RESEARCH FINDINGS March 2023

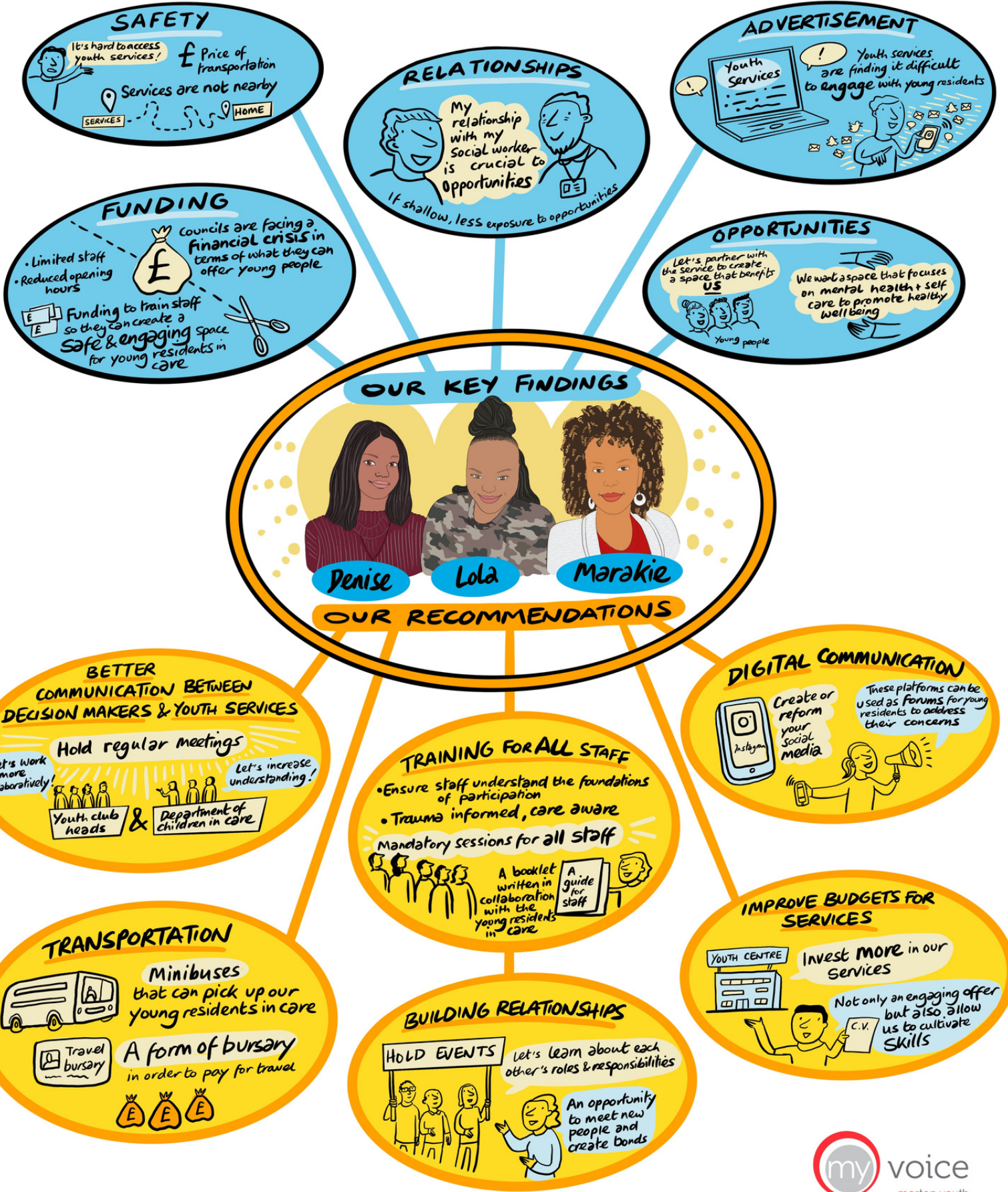
**Who are Merton's peer researchers?**  
We are Denise, Lola and Marakie - a group of peer researchers from Merton

**Why are we doing this?**  
To find out what reforms need to be made to youth services to make them more engaging for care-experienced young people

**What methodology did we use?**  
Focus groups and interviews with young people, as well as semi-structured interviews with decision makers

**Who have we spoken to?**  
We have spoken to care-experienced young people in Merton, Wandsworth and Kingston as well as decision makers from Children's Social Care and Youth Services

What reforms need to be made to youth services to make them more engaging and accessible for care-experienced young people aged 11-16 in the London Boroughs of Merton, Richmond and Kingston?



# CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

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After exploring the views and needs of care experienced young people, we concluded in exploring four themes that affect them the most. These themes are:



## Safety

Young people are aware of the rapid changes around them and the impacts that those changes may have on their day-to-day life, as well as on the community. They understand actions that affect their mental and physical health and lead them in life threatening situations. For instance, they stated that some movies are overwhelming; with high risk of encouraging them to join criminal groups.

Some concerns raised around safety includes:

- Limited confidence in traveling: young people are not very confident in traveling on public transport by themselves due to the risk of being affected by knife crime. On the other hand, young people would feel more comfortable if their friends had the opportunity to attend as well.
- Young people are concerned about issues like cigarettes, vapes, and drugs. Although they are aware of the negative impact that it has on their health, the question "why" remains unanswered; as they do not have a clear understanding as to why other young people are involved in these activities. It is essential youth services provide educational activities around this area to provide young people with the knowledge around navigating a healthy lifestyle.
- The media shapes their view on safety due to the large amount of content young people consume: **"Because when you see in movies... like drug dealers aren't really the good type. Some people are kind of like chasing drug dealers and killing them. So, I think sometimes the killer might come in [to] school and try and chase on a drug dealer, I might be shot or something in the process"**.
- Young people don't feel safe traveling in the dark: **"I'm not really out at night when it's dark which is good... in case someone tries to kidnap me"**.

After exploring our young people with care experience' views and needs, we concluded in exploring four themes that affect them the most. These themes are:



## Community

Some young people are accessing a variety of different youth services including cadets, swimming, carpentry and guitar lessons. We also heard how they would love to participate in more activities, especially those that involve other young people as well; for instance: board games, basketball, football etc. They believe those games will allow them to interact and build relationships with others.

This would be beneficial as it will support them to improve their communication and interpersonal skills. As a result, this will support them in leading happier, healthier and more independent lives.

- Young people are willing to participate in different activities and social events in the community. However, for them to feel comfortable and actively engage they would like to see some changes such as:
  - A child friendly environment
  - A judgement free environment where all young people are welcomed regardless of their socio-economic background
  - A workforce that are equipped to listen and support any challenges



## Freedom and Independence

Our young people have a clear understanding of the importance of carers and social workers in their development. Carers are vital in relaying information to the young person they are looking after.

However, young residents believe that there is miscommunication and difficulties in receiving information on time. In a question asked if 'they have a say on where they can go or what happens in their borough', the majority of the young people responded that they do not. **"Everything is happening in the borough is sent to my carer and it depends on her if she sees the email on time also will have the time to take me there"**. Furthermore, it highlights the need for better communication tools and engagement pathways to engage young people so they are able to hear about opportunities.

It is essential young people feel free to attend youth services without barriers. Young people feel that carers' commitment are barriers to them participating. **"If my carer is busy, I find it difficult to travel, but sometimes, I offer to go there by myself. Because if they're working too hard, my carers, but other than that, they normally pick me up wherever they can to be honest"**.

On the other hand, some of our young people have positive experiences around the house such as carers helping with their independence: **“they’re quite helpful and like, helped me for the future and stuff”**.

Most concerning, almost all our young people do not have time. Their social interactions are very limited due to numerous commitments such as school work, trampolining and helping out with household chore (cooking, cleaning, etc.). Additionally, the limited free time they have is usually spent on their phone which again excludes their social interaction and opportunity to develop their communication skills.



## Experience

- Overall, there is a lack of engagement and participation as well as a misunderstanding of youth services. There are numerous reasons as to why young people are not attending youth services. Some of the key barriers preventing young people to attend are:
  - **Lack of information** as to what is a youth service? What are the benefits of attending? For instance, the majority of the young people we spoke to were not clear on what a youth service is and how it could benefit them. Some young people stated a youth service is for young people who have specific needs whereas others said it was a place for younger children to play games. These responses outline the need for effective communication and accurate advocacy regarding services provided and their benefits. Outlining benefits and efficiently communicating services will positively impact the numbers on attendance and improves overall engagement. Young people will be able to attend more regularly if they identify something that matches their interest.
  - **Transport limitations**, young people face difficulties in attending youth services due to transportation. These difficulties present as some of our young people need to travel independently to youth services and in most cases their carers are busy which results in the fact they are unable to transport them. Others raised concerns regarding safety, as they do not feel safe to travel by themselves on public transport or taxi's. In a follow-up question asked what method of transportation young people prefer? Young people did not have a preference, as long as they are accompanied (such as traveling with carers, friends of the family or individuals they know, etc.).

Some of our young people's expectation and what will encourage them to engage with youth services:

- Meeting new young people: young people find it key to make new friends, socialise and have quality time where they can build their communication skills and create positive friendships
- Travel support: children and young people would like support with travel as it will give them more flexibility instead of carers dropping them.

# YOUTH SERVICE MANAGERS

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We spoke to Youth Service Managers from the London Boroughs of Merton and Kingston as well as the PAN-London Children in Care team. There were three key themes in the answers they all gave:

- Experience: Our participants all had a mixed experience in how youth services have been running especially after COVID-19
- Engagement: They all shared their issues with engaging young people in general, in particular young people in care
- Challenges: Our participants expressed various difficulties they've had to ensure that youth services are engaging and accessible



## Challenges

There was a common theme of a lack of resources when running youth services. One participant said: **“we’ve got a fraction of the team with a fraction of the resources”**. The impact of COVID-19 has caused a loss of staff and limited funds for youth services.

As seen in conversations with young people, transportation was a determining factor in not engaging with youth services. Youth Centre Managers reinforced this point by highlighting the lack of physical spaces for young people. This strengthens the belief that work needs to be done to have accessible spaces for all our young people.

Staff was a reoccurring theme within our interviews. Their significance in creating a safe and happy environment for young people was highlighted throughout all interviews. One participant mentioned: **“If you lose staff skills, for example, in specific areas, or you lose leaders... it becomes a bit of a challenge in order to deliver the youth offer you might want to do.”** This then leads to a lack of tailored sessions for care-experienced young people. As the participant articulated: **“you’ve got to build a programme with them, as opposed to for them. And some staff might not be able to do that or might not have the time.”** Furthermore, not only were there a lack of staff, but many of the remaining staff did also not feel empowered enough to support their young people. Staff members to best cater to care experienced young people must be care-aware and trauma-informed, as highlighted by the Managers of the PAN-London Children in Care Council.

**“You work very well with children and young people in non-formal, informal settings. That’s your bread and butter: actual expertise... what you need to do is really empower the staff that’s working with young people, that’s so important”.**

A quote we believe summarises the importance of staff: **“so as much as you’re putting the emphasis on the young person, you gotta [got to] remember there’s a big emphasis on how they’re supporting and enabling the part-time workers or even the full-time workers to work with those groups of young people”**



## **Engagement**

It is apparent that many youth service managers are making a conscious effort in engaging our young people, especially targeting underrepresented groups such as children in care. A participant described their service having an **“open door policy, maintaining a universal offer and providing outdoor activity”**.

Our participants understood the value in creating a welcoming atmosphere with refreshments and support catered to serve our most vulnerable. However, it can be argued that services are still unsure as to whether they are engaging enough young people as well as formally documenting their circumstances. For instance, one participant said: **“we have a mixture of young people, some of which might be involved in the care system, but we haven’t segmented and captured that evidence enough”**. Understanding your demographic is crucial in creating a tailored youth offer, therefore we ask that youth services have methods of registration so you know what young person is going through your door and what services can help them.

We believe there needs to be more opportunities for staff and young people to collaborate together thus creating a service for young people by young people. A participant explained their experience in creating a youth offer: **“sometimes you’re coming in saying we’re gonna [going to] do this and that and save the world. And they’re like we don’t want that. We just want a space to hang and talk”**.

We admire and encourage the ambition of our youth service managers however we would like to note that collaboration with young people can lead to a service that has greater engagement and in addition, young people will feel empowered in making a change. Going along the theme of empowerment, it was mentioned that outlets like Merton’s Youth Parliament are key for getting a variety of perspectives and championing the voices of all young people and not just a particular demographic.



Collaboration and open communication also applies when fulfilling Government agendas; **“we sometimes listen or respond to Government agendas. But we don’t necessarily listen to the [care-experienced] child or the young person. Because a lot of time, they just want to be the same as any other child or young person.”**

We believe this highlights having a balanced approach to youth engagement with young people with care experience. On one hand, we must ensure that they are not alienated and forgotten when creating youth services. But on the other hand, hyper-fixating on their experience in care may lead us to isolating their experiences to other young people; we do not seek to alienate, we plan to be inclusive and believe active youth participation is the key to unlocking this balance.

Advertisement is an issue for youth services. With many lacking a social media presence, they usually rely on word of mouth to attract young people. This is not the most effective strategy, evident from their decreasing numbers. Youth services need to appeal to the youth by using their preferred platforms. More evidence on using social media can be seen in our young residents in care section.

# SENIOR DECISION MAKERS

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A Senior Decision Maker has the responsibility to ensure the service they provide to children and young people is safe, accessible and based on their needs. For care-experienced young people this includes supporting them to progress in to independence when they leave care. They have the responsibility to improve the services through listening to the voice of young people and therefore providing better opportunities.

From the interviews conducted with the key decision makers, in both Youth Services and Children's Services departments, some of the key themes that were highlighted are below.



## Resources

During the interviews with different decision-makers, we found out that the Councillors decided and advised the Directors on how to locate the budget between services which means some services will get less or more.

Creating regular meetings between heads of department could help each service operate smoothly and have more knowledge around their budget.



## Relationships

We noticed that there was not only a lack of communication amongst our young people and the decision makers but also amongst our youth services managers.

Furthermore, we found that even within the same organisation, departments do not regularly engage with each other. Creating an engaging and accessible environment is a multifaceted approach which requires communication throughout all different venues. Our research found that this was not sufficient and there is room for changes.



## **Accountability**

We noticed that Managers and Head of Services want to provide a better opportunity for young people, for example establishing a Care Experienced Hub for care leavers to socialise with their peers. Other examples include supporting young people so they are able to work together to create a better living experience for themselves, and also sharing information through social media which will provide young people with knowledge around other services, such as the cost-of-living crisis, mental health services and food banks.

Moreover, decision makers wants to build better communication and relationships with their young people and youth club leads.

# CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, our research project highlighted the voices of all participants involved. We shone a light on the experiences and challenges of young people with care experience from their complications with transport to their want for an established community. We heard from our youth centre managers, which brought in a different perspective on their challenges with engagement and staff shortages. Finally, we gave a space in which we held decision makers accountable; with conversations on how to better relationships throughout their respective boroughs and better allocations of resources.

## Next Steps

### Towards the future as Young Inspectors

As Young Inspectors in Merton, we appreciate your time, your trust, your views and your aspirations to wanting a better future. We will ensure that the recommendations established by our young people are taken forward and discussed with the key stakeholders and we hold them accountable to implement change.

Having spoken and worked with you all over the last few months, we have a clear vision as to what it is young people need going forward. As young people we want to work together with local councils to ensure that they keep their promises of wanting a healthy and safe space for all young people in care.

The Young Inspectors will feedback to all young people that took part in the focus groups and interviews to inform them of the outcome, and the work that we have been completing to ensure that their voices and passion are put forward to the decision making.

It is clear that one of our key asks is regarding safety for our young people in regard to accessibility, young people with care experience have found it difficult to access youth services due to the price of transportation and available services not being nearby. Young people are less likely to access youth services in the winter months or the evenings due to worries about travelling in the dark and building better relationships with our young people and community.

It is also clear that the pressures of cost of living as affected our young people especially our young people in care in terms of having to cut back on essentials and affecting physical and mental health, stress, anxiety and depression.

# APPENDIX

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## **Merton's Youth Residents Survey report, 2021**

A survey looking in to the impact of Covid-19 on young people across Merton, alongside findings from focus groups.

## **Credits and thanks**

We want to thank all the young people who took part in this research and took time to speak to the peer researchers in either interviews or focus groups.

### Merton's Young Inspectors and Peer Researchers

Design, execution and analyses of interviews and focus groups:

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- Lola Kareem

Young people taking part in interviews and focus groups from:

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- Twickenham / Kingston
- Wandsworth

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- David Michael (Head of Service – Children in Care and Resources at Merton Council)
- Lisa Morris (Service Manager at Merton Council)
- Keni Thomas (Youth Service Manager at Merton Council)
- Matthew Angell (Youth Service Manager at Kingston Council)

Partnership for Young London:

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- Matthew Walsham (Policy and Campaigns Lead)
- Iris Bos (Youth Research Officer)