

Independent Academic Research Studies (IARS)

# Empowering Young People:

A youth-led investigation into what works & what doesn't



A youth-led research report  
by young volunteers at IARS

**vinvolvedproject**



**nep** National  
Empowerment  
Partnership

## IARS Publications

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IARS is a leading, international think-tank with a charitable **mission to give everyone a chance to forge a safer, fairer and more inclusive society**. IARS achieves its mission by producing **evidence-based** solutions to **current** social problems, sharing best practice and by supporting **young people** to shape decision making. IARS is an international expert in restorative justice, human rights and inclusion, citizenship and user-led research.

IARS' vision is a society where everyone is given a choice to actively participate in social problem solving. The organisation is known for its robust, independent evidence-based approach to solving current social problems, and is considered to be a pioneer in user-involvement and the application of user-led research methods

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'Empowering Young London: An investigation into what works and what doesn't' was carried out by a group of young people working and volunteering at Independent Academic Research Studies (IARS).

The research looked at the barriers to empowerment for marginalised young people from London. This was specifically related to mainstream empowerment mechanisms that already exist across London today such as the Young Mayors scheme<sup>1</sup>, Youth Opportunity Fund<sup>2</sup> and Young Advisors<sup>3</sup>. Young people from Black, Asian and ethnic minorities (BAME), young people with disabilities, young offenders, those not in education, employment or training, and those who are young parents are often referred to as 'hard to reach' and this study sought to bring out the reasons why that is and what could be done to overcome certain barriers and engage with these young people through empowerment mechanisms.

Eleven diverse young people led this research and engaged with over thirty other young people. The following is a brief summary of the findings and recommendations from this evidence:

IARS is a youth-led social policy think-tank that was set up in 2001 to empower and give voice to young people so that they can influence policy and democratically engage in society as equal citizens. Through volunteering, youth-led work, training, skills-development programmes and research, young people at IARS aim to improve practices that affect them and as role models participate in society and support their peers and youth-led organisations and groups in creating a tolerant and equal society where young people are respected and valued. IARS is unique in its structure and the only youth-led social policy think-tank in the UK. IARS believes in the value of the youth-led sector, and provide representation of the issues affecting it.

In the context of this research the term 'empowerment' refers to the following description,

"The outcome of an initiative that should make people feel that they have the ability, confidence, and understanding to take responsibility for the services in, and the governance of, their community."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Young people across certain boroughs of London can put themselves forward to be a Young Mayor. For example, in Lewisham the Young Mayor is voted for by young people in the borough, they have a team of young advisors, professional support & budget of £25,000 and direct access to the Mayor of the borough.

<sup>2</sup> Youth Opportunity Fund provide discrete revenue and capital budgets for young people to control and decide how money should be spent on positive activities and youth facilities in their area.

<sup>3</sup> Young people voted in to work directly with the Secretary of State on a monthly basis, advising on specific components of the department for Communities and Local Government's work programme that impact on and affect young people.

<sup>4</sup> This definition was taken from London Civic Forum's *Interim Report into the Mapping of Empowerment Activities across London (2008)*.

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>There was a lack of knowledge and communication about local or regional mainstream empowerment mechanisms in this sample of marginalised young people.</p>	<p>a) The use of simple English is essential when communicating with marginalised young people.  b) The methods of communication used by mainstream empowerment activities need to be improved in order to reach marginalised young people.  c) Young people should be empowered to design communication content and strategies.</p>
<p>To meaningfully engage marginalised young people in empowerment activities outreach is needed.</p>	<p>a) Young people should be engaged at a local level through outreach in relevant local youth settings and youth led organisations.  b) Voluntary and Community Sector and youth-led organisations working with marginalised young people should be sufficiently financed. Infrastructure organisations, including the LEP, need to recognise their existence and put the youth led sector on the map.</p>
<p>There is a need to use cash incentives for engaging with young people who have a low economic status i.e. receive benefits.</p>	<p>Cash incentives should be provided to pay, or reimburse, marginalised young people for their time spent taking part in empowerment activities.</p>
<p>The setting for ‘empowerment activities’ was important to these young people.</p>	<p>The setting for youth empowerment activities should be easily accessible to young people within a local area e.g. based in a youth club.</p>
<p>Training and learning within empowerment activities is vital to empowerment</p>	<p>a) All young people should be supported in empowerment mechanisms through specific, tailor-made training and skills development programmes (e.g. decision making, research methods, presentations, basic communications, team work).  b) Marginalised young people should be provided with ongoing support, such as mentoring, after initial training.</p>
<p>Marginalised young people need to see the rewards and benefits of taking part in mainstream empowerment mechanisms</p>	<p>a) Young people need to be positively recognised for their roles in any empowerment mechanism.  b) Recognition of the skills and personal development of young people in empowerment mechanisms should be accredited in some way.</p>
<p>‘One size doesn’t fit all’ young people with regards to empowerment activities</p>	<p>Young people should have their own youth-led empowerment and influencing structures. These should be supported by professionals who are trained to work with young people.</p>
<p>The young people preferred the idea of youth-led empowerment activities</p>	<p>Young people should lead on the design of empowerment mechanisms. Youth-led organisations are the best able to facilitate this initial stage.</p>
<p>The young people felt that they have only ever been ‘involved’ in activities rather than leading them</p>	<p>There needs to be more meaningful and long-term engagement for young people when and where they can play a major role in influencing the issues that affect them.</p>

**Representing the needs of all young people - a youth perspective.**

The young people in this study wanted to be given the tools and training to gather their own evidence and communicate this to local and regional decision making structures. These structures should have at least one or two youth representatives.

## **Acknowledgements**

The young people who led this project from design through to writing the report are:

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v, The National Youth Volunteering Charity  
City Parochial Foundation  
The Youth Offending Team, Lewisham  
Community Builders  
London Metropolitan University  
Refugee Youth  
Community Empowerment Network

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## INTRODUCTION

In October 2008, Independent Academic Research Studies (IARS) was commissioned by London Civic Forum to carry out this piece of action research for the London Empowerment Partnership (LEP)<sup>5</sup>. The LEP's mission is to improve the quality and functioning of the relationships between citizens and government, in order to increase people's ability to influence the decisions that affect their lives. This is specifically aimed at improving the quality, coordination and evidence of community empowerment in London.

In the context of this research the term 'empowerment' refers to the following description,

"The outcome of an initiative that should make people feel that they have the ability, confidence, and understanding to take responsibility for the services in, and the governance of, their community."<sup>6</sup>

When referring to empowerment mechanisms we mean those that already exist to engage young people across London, such as the Young Mayors scheme, Youth Opportunity Fund and Young Advisors.

The main aim of the project was to identify effective approaches to engaging and empowering young people who are typically excluded from mainstream empowerment activities in London. We use the term "marginalised young people" to describe this group and includes those aged 16-25.

Young people as a group (those aged 16-25) face many barriers to living independent and confident lives because of their age and relative lack of life experience. These barriers can be multiplied or increased for marginalised young people. By 'marginalised' we mean those young people who are most likely to be:

- i. Disadvantaged by economic status or class, and/or;
- ii. Affected by indirect or direct discrimination of any kind, and/or;
- iii. Excluded in anyway from playing an active role in society.

Research<sup>7</sup> has shown that young people who fall into the above categories tend to be:

- i. Not in education, training or employment, and/or;
- ii. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender, and/or;
- iii. Disabled, and or;
- iv. From families with limited income or are themselves on limited income, and/or;
- v. From Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, and/or;
- vi. At risk of offending, or are already subject to a process in the criminal justice system in some way, and/or;

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<sup>5</sup> The London Empowerment Partnership is the regional body for London under the National Empowerment Partnership. It is hosted by London Civic Forum.

<sup>6</sup> This definition was taken from London Civic Forum's *Interim Report into the Mapping of Empowerment Activities across London (2008)*.

<sup>7</sup> IARS, Homophobic Bullying and Human Rights: Shared values for a shared future.

IARS, Phase 1 Report: The Hidden Dimensions of Black, Asian and minority ethnic homelessness

IARS, Education And Black Asian And Minority Ethnic Groups



- vii. from a refugee or newly arrived migrant community

It is important to ensure that mainstream empowerment mechanisms can be developed to be more inclusive and more representative of the diversity of young people in London.

There were four main outcomes for this research:

- i.) A greater understanding of the barriers young people face to 'having a say' and influencing local decisions (particularly those young people whose voices are not normally heard, such as Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) young people, young people with disabilities, young people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, and young people not in education, employment or training).
- ii.) A greater understanding of how to enable or empower young people, in order to influence local and regional decision making, whilst considering their wants and needs.
- iii.) Development of a model that would allow genuine youth input into local and regional decision making structures in London, taking into consideration the new 'Duty to Involve'<sup>8</sup> of Local Authorities.
- iv.) To identify and observe a case study that successfully engages and 'empowers' marginalised young people through existing structures.

The initial findings from this research were presented at the (Mis) Understanding Youth Empowerment<sup>9</sup> conference on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2009. This event was organised in partnership with London Civic Forum, the London Empowerment Partnership, IARS and a host of Voluntary and Community Sector organisations<sup>10</sup>. This research was chosen specifically by a youth advisory group to be presented at the conference. The findings were debated throughout the day by the young people who presented and organised the event with those delegates from the Voluntary and Community Sector. This event will be referred to in this final research report.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a duty for all best value authorities, including local authorities, to inform, consult and involve the people they serve in the UK.

<sup>9</sup> For a full event report see [www.iars.org.uk](http://www.iars.org.uk) or request from London Civic Forum.

<sup>10</sup> London Civic Forum; Independent Academic Research Studies; VCS Engage; London Youth; UK Youth Parliament



## METHODOLOGY

### Youth-led research

The project was carried out over a period of 5 months by a core group of 11 young people. The project aimed to engage with marginalised young Londoners and a youth-led methodology was used. As a youth-led social policy think tank IARS always uses a youth-led methodology. This method means that young people designed and carried out the fieldwork, scrutinised the research and wrote this report.

The justification for using this method lies in the ability of young people to speak the language of their peers and to provide a genuine and pragmatic picture from an entirely youth perspective. The core group of young people included experienced young researchers as well as those newly trained in research methods to carry out interviews and focus groups.

**Table 1. Monitoring information of the 11 young people who led this research.**

Category	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
16-17	0		
18-19	0		
20-25	11		
<b>Male</b>		<b>4</b>	
<b>Female</b>		<b>7</b>	
White British			6
Asian Indian			2
Dual: Asian and White			1
Dual: Black African and White			1
Other			1

**Table 2: The project took the form of 4 phases.**

PHASE I: DESK RESEARCH	PHASE II: TRAINING	PHASE III: FIELDWORK	PHASE IV: FINAL REPORT
4 young people carried out desk research on the legislative and policy framework around empowerment activities across London, the role of Local Authorities and government actions and initiatives.	6 young people received training in research methods from experienced young researchers at IARS.	The core research team devised a set of fieldwork resources using the desktop research. These included questions and exercises for focus groups, questions for key stakeholders and questions for young people who would be interviewed. Separate questions were designed for the case study.	This report has been written by the young people who formed the research team. It pulls together the entire project's research and makes recommendations on how to engage more marginalised young people in mainstream empowerment mechanisms.

## Overview of fieldwork

This is an overview of the fieldwork conducted between December 2008 and March 2009:

- i. 7 face to face interviews with young people with disabilities
- ii. 4 focus groups with a total of 16 young people (young offenders, unemployed young people, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic young people)
- iii. 7 in depth interviews with key stakeholders in the public and voluntary sectors
- iv. 2 face to face interviews and observation with case study organisation

**Table 3. Sample breakdown of young people taking part in the research project.**

Category	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Employment	Other
15-17	10					
18-19	1					
20-25	9					
25-30	4					
<b>Male</b>		<b>15</b>				
<b>Female</b>		<b>9</b>				
White British			8			
Black (Caribbean, African, British, Other)			10			
Dual Heritage			2			
Other			3			
Prefer Not to say			1			
<b>Yes</b>				<b>8</b>		
<b>No</b>				<b>16</b>		
Employed					3	
Not in education, employment or training (NEET)					3	
In Education/Learning					8	
In Training					4	
Self Employed					1	
Other					5	
<b>Low Income<sup>11</sup></b>						<b>10</b>
<b>Excluded from school</b>						<b>7</b>
<b>Trouble with police<sup>12</sup>/ young offender</b>						<b>6</b>

<sup>11</sup> The label of 'low income' is applied by young people themselves and refers to either themselves or their family receiving government benefits.

<sup>12</sup> Trouble with the police refers to any cautions the young person may have received from the police for criminal behaviour. This definition does not include being stopped and searched by police.

**Table 4. Sample of interviewees.**

<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Organisation Affiliation</b>
1. Field Officer	City Parochial Foundation
2. Senior Lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Sciences	London Metropolitan University
3. Project Support Officer	v, the National Youth Volunteering Charity
4. Director	Communities Empowerment Network (CEN)
5. Volunteer coordinator and young person	Refugee Youth
6. Director	Community Builders

### **Research Limitations**

There are several limitations of this project that must be addressed. The research was designed to get in-depth knowledge from young people from a variety of backgrounds which could provide key knowledge about the barriers to getting involved in empowerment mechanisms, as well as the enabling factors. However, this research project used only a small sample of young people which means the main findings are not applicable to all young people across London, nor are these young people completely representative of their 'group' i.e. the young offenders in the focus group are not representing the views of all young offenders.

The number of focus groups for this project increased from two to four because it was discovered that holding the focus groups at the IARS offices was a barrier for some young people. Many of the young people who took part had never been to central London before and did not feel comfortable travelling out of their local area. For the last two focus groups members of the IARS research team went to where the young people were located in order to collect the data.

The first focus group was used as a pilot and the structure and design of the fieldwork materials were changed for the subsequent groups.

## THE CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

In recent years, the 'empowerment agenda' has been devolved from central government to Local Authorities<sup>13</sup> and local communities. In 2006, the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) published the *Strong and Prosperous Communities* White Paper which proposed to give more power to local government in a bid to strengthen local communities. Following this came *the Local Government and Public Involvement with Health Act* and the White Paper, *Communities in Control: Real people real power* which proposed a new 'Duty to Involve' for public bodies. This came into force in April 2009. This Duty to Involve requires Local Authorities to provide information and to **actively consult** and involve "representatives of local persons" across all authority functions; this includes young people. The aim of such measures is to deliver greater levels of citizen involvement with such bodies as Local Authorities.

At present, each Local Authority across London has agreed its priorities and targets with central government through a Local Area Agreement (LAA). LAAs set out local priorities for an area and aim to get local people more involved in decisions about local services. Local services can be anything from local bin collections to what leisure facilities are provided. LAAs also provide flexibility to the local authority, and other public sector organisations, in their delivery of services to local people. An example of a priority with importance to this research is National Indicator<sup>14</sup> Four, which aims to "increase the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality".

One of the driving forces behind Local Area Agreements (LAAs) are Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which bring together public sector agencies, private and business sectors, and the Community and Voluntary sector to provide services and support to the delivery of the area's agreed priorities. Local Strategic Partnerships are designed to ensure that the right actions and the right services are delivered to the local community.

Within the context of the new Duty to Involve, the new Local Area Agreements and the role of Local Strategic Partnerships it is clear that community empowerment is a clear focus for local government. Enabling young people in the community to influence and shape decision making and services has become an essential part of delivering democracy across London.

It is important that the mechanisms and initiatives designed to consult and involve Londoners in local decision making and service delivery take into account the diversity of needs amongst groups of people. This is especially important when it comes to young people. The *Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment* paper identified young people as an underrepresented group in local decision making across the UK. There already exist a number of mainstream empowerment mechanisms for young people in London, so it is important to note that the process of reaching out to this group has already begun. However when looking at the diversity of young people that live in London there are several groups prone to minimal engagement with mainstream activities. These groups are BAME, disabled, refugees, asylum seekers, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), offenders, ex-offenders, young parents, and those not in education, employment or training.

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<sup>13</sup> Local Authorities are local units of government.

<sup>14</sup> National Indicators are outcome measurements. They provide a clear statement of the Government's priorities for delivery by local government and its partners over the next three years. They are the only indicators on which central government can set targets for local government.

This research has identified sufficient policies now in place to encourage a more inclusive approach to empowering marginalised young people:

- i. The role of Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Area Agreements as the new mechanisms for effecting change at borough level.
- ii. The 'duty to involve' under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act should be used effectively to involve, engage and consult London's marginalised young people in local decision making (representatives of local persons).

## KEY FINDINGS

The following findings are based on what a sample of marginalised young people told IARS' young researchers about their barriers to getting involved in mainstream empowerment mechanisms, and the aspects that would enable them to take part. There is also a case study to illuminate a best practice example and a model for the empowerment of marginalised young people based on these research findings.

There were a number of significant findings from the fieldwork which are presented thematically. These themes cover the various stages of the development, implementation and use of empowerment mechanisms from young people's perspectives and include: a) engagement of young people, b) the empowerment process and c) different types of empowerment. Each of these themes has been considered within the context of two broad headers: the barriers and the enablers to empowerment for marginalised young people. Each of these findings presents aspects of empowerment mechanisms and activities that act as a barrier for these young people. The findings also provide a picture of what would enable these young people to become more engaged. Integrated into this chapter are recommendations for how to overcome the barriers identified.

### 1. THE ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

#### **A lack of knowledge of empowerment mechanisms**

The evidence showed a lack of basic knowledge from the young people about mainstream local/regional empowerment mechanisms. The young people who took part in this research were asked which mainstream empowerment activities they had heard of and which they had used in the past. Only 5 out of a total of 24 young people had heard of the Young Mayor's initiative and only 3 young people out of 24 had heard of UK Youth Parliament. 6 out of the sample of 24 had 'used' one of the mechanisms outlined in Figure 2 to try and influence local decision making structures but this 'use' had often been one-off engagements. Further discussion with the young people about their past engagement led to revelations that these experiences had not been 'empowering' experiences and some young people said they would not use them again.

During the fieldwork it became clear that of the young people were currently involved in any mainstream empowerment activities. For some this was due to a lack of knowledge about what existed locally to them,

"I think if I had more information [I'd get involved], but nothing has ever come to me like that in my area" (Male, aged 21, Black Caribbean, self-employed).

A lack of information translated to the young people that nothing much exists for them.

**Table 5. Table of the activities young people had engaged with in the past.**

<b>Empowerment Mechanism</b>	<b>No. of young people who had heard of it (out of 24)</b>	<b>No. of young people who have used it (out of 24)</b>	<b>Short Summary of experiences</b>
Young Mayor Initiative	5	1	Was able to get local change but only because they knew the Young Mayor. Would not use it again because doesn't know the new Young Mayor.
Youth Councils	6	0	N/A
Contact with local MP	7	5	Limited contact, one young person had contacted his MP for information which was provided but no other contact was pursued.
UK Youth parliament	3	1	Wanted to get involved but lacked information or further support. Is not pursuing it anymore.
Local Strategic Partnerships	0	0	N/A
Youth Advisory Groups	8	3	One young person experienced initial success but only attended 3 meetings as they suffered a drop in attendance by young people in general. Another has attended an advisory group but did not contribute to the discussion.
Local Council Meetings	9	1	One young person felt there was a lack of community and young people at the meeting and the majority consisted of local authority figures. Did not attend anymore meetings.
Campaigning organisations	8	3	All 3 Interested in involvement with local issues that they care about. Saw this as easiest activity to get involved with.
Voting in local elections	10	2	Two young people had voted but were unsure of what impact it had in reality
Consultations	4	1	One young person had a positive experience during consultation but saw that the impact was limited in its reach and outcomes.
Youth opportunity fund	6	0	N/A

For those with some knowledge about empowerment mechanisms, many were not aware of how to get involved themselves. The majority of them told us that this was predominantly due to a lack of information about how they could get involved,

“I just don't get enough information, I just hear about 'oh this is happening somewhere', that's it.” (Female, age 16, Black African, in education).

It appears that when knowledge is patchy or incomplete this acts as a major barrier to involvement.

“in a few of these situations we've talked about there's not really an option, you don't really have much opportunity... very few [young] people will probably know the official procedures I guess, coz its not really advertised in any way you'd actually have to search for it” (Male, age 22, White British, disabled).

Most young people, especially those with disabilities, indicated that when they had tried to influence decision making in their local area it was almost always reactively through complaints mechanisms for specific services, the most common being public transport, the police and the local council. Complaints procedures were the most commonly known method to these young people (11 out of 24) and was often cited as the way that young people can get their voices



heard, however it was regarded as an unreliable form of influencing decisions with only some young people seeing a complaint acted upon. It was this lack of a visible reaction that caused apathy and disillusion for these young people. *Using complaints procedures was not therefore an empowering process for those young people.*

### **Communicating with marginalised young people**

There were several communication factors that emerged from the fieldwork that were specific to the different groups of young people. Communication with young people is vital because it provides them with the knowledge they need to engage, whether that be knowledge about what is right for them to engage in or how to go about it.

One interview with a young refugee (who works with other young refugees) provided an in depth perspective on the communication issues for many young refugees. The interviewee informed us that many young refugees “do not have any consciousness about empowerment activities” during the first couple of years they live in London. It emerged that young refugees have difficulty accessing any mainstream activities without first becoming involved in support groups that can signpost activities for them. This was due to cultural and language barriers that existed for many new arrivals. It was said that engaging and communicating with young refugees can only really happen through the Voluntary and Community Sector. This response highlighted the important role that the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) can play in engaging young refugees into mainstream activities through signposting, communication and by supporting them with their language needs.

In addition, some of the stakeholders identified that young people who leave education early, have no formal qualifications or are not in education, employment or training (NEET) require more support in terms of communication about empowerment activities. This was based on anecdotal evidence from stakeholders that those out of education do not have the same chances as others,

“a lack of formal education results in young people being unaware of the opportunities out there for them” (Stakeholder from a Third Sector Organisation).

Another stakeholder stated that the problem with communicating with young people aged 20-25 is that they are often out of education and live disparate and separate lives. It was suggested that contact and communication through “digital platforms” such as the internet must be an important part of engaging these young people.

Young people in the pilot focus group had difficulty understanding ‘empowerment’ jargon terms. In subsequent focus groups the language around empowerment was simplified and the young people were able to consciously recognise a lack of ‘good’ communication between them and mainstream empowerment activities. The young researchers on this project realised that overcoming communication problems can be addressed by simply using the language of young people,

“It’s gotta be more appealing, if it’s written in your language” (Female, age 16, Dual Heritage, in education).

The methods of communication were also discussed and the young people in the focus groups suggested that alternate methods of communication be used, such as texts, e-mail and more

interactive and web based materials, “like online forums, or youth only web pages”, as well as posters and leaflets targeted at young people. However, it was also felt that barrages of impersonal communications would not necessarily be an effective way of engaging young people,

“I’ve noticed leaflets through the post but I’ve never seen anything directly going on, all there seems to be is forms to be filled out without any action” (Female, age 21, Black African, NEET).

One focus group suggested that it should be young people themselves, who create the leaflets and posters to make them more appealing to other youth to overcome communication barriers,

“you should do a competition [for an advert]” (Female, age 16, Dual Heritage, in education)

Reflected in this is the desire to have some direct control and influence over the way that mainstream empowerment mechanisms try to reach out to young people in the first place.

**The use of simple and plain English is essential as the use of jargon and complicated language is disempowering.**

**The methods of communication used by mainstream empowerment activities need to be improved in order to reach marginalised young people.**

**Young people should be empowered to design communication content and strategies.**

### **Marginalised young people need meaningful outreach**

Throughout the focus groups and interviews the young people discussed face-to-face interaction and outreach as their preferred method for being engaged with. This was mostly welcomed from people that they trusted already i.e. youth offending teams, youth workers or other young people.

“If someone comes to you to show you awareness and talk to you face to face then that’s the best way. If they want to interact with me then I will interact back” (Male, age 16, Black African, in education).

“I would probably say that the best way for us to get more involved is to access us through youth clubs. Most kids go to them and then you can speak to us face to face instead of just sending letters through letterboxes when no one replies back” (Male, age 16, Black African, in education).

This was echoed in the interviews with people who work with young people through the Voluntary and Community Sector: “to engage with disadvantaged young people you need to go to them and give them as much information as possible” (VCS Organisation). Outreach was a constant theme throughout the different focus groups; some young people felt that without outreach they would never find out about things themselves,

“[to find out about empowerment activities] It’s important to have older people in the local area who young people can talk to and get advice from, like youth workers” (Male, 21, Hispanic, recently re-entered education).

Outreach can be time-consuming, expensive and requires the expertise of those who are already in touch with marginalised young people. One stakeholder described the essential role of the “grassroots approach” to engagement with young people and indicated that if empowerment mechanisms really want to reach out further and beyond the “usual suspects” then it should be a priority to “support those grassroots organisations that engage with these young people directly already” (Academic).

Utilising those individuals already connected to marginalised young people, (for example, youth workers or frontline voluntary support organisations) is the best pathway for communication and engagement to occur. In order to improve engagement between empowerment mechanisms and young marginalised groups of people the Voluntary and Community sector needs to be utilised more and supported to communicate with these young people.

**Young people should be engaged at the local level through outreach work in relevant local youth settings (e.g. youth clubs, youth offending teams, community groups, sports clubs).**

**Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and youth-led organisations working with marginalised young people should be sufficiently financed and supported to engage them in empowerment activities.**

### **The use of financial payments for engaging with marginalised young people**

The majority of the participants supported the idea of young people ‘having their say’ and they felt it was in itself an important reason for getting involved,

“I’m better off having a say in how things are run and done in my area”  
(Male, age 16, BAME, in education)

However, this incentive alone was not enough to convince some of the young people that they should engage. This was especially true for those who were out of education, training or employment, or young offenders,

“it’s not like it [giving my opinion] would make a difference” (Male, age 16,  
Black Caribbean, young offender).

6 young people felt as though they had enough to worry about in their lives and that taking part in empowerment mechanisms was too much for them to take on,

“I think in my case right now...I don’t have time, my whole day is consumed by other things [working full time, taking care of baby son when at home]  
(Male, White British, 24, young parent).

In particular the barrier to engagement for many of these young people boiled down to financial worries,

“as you get older you suddenly realise that you got bills to pay, people to look after and it’s like in a way your priorities are changing” (Female, age 22, White British, NEET).

Different barriers existed for these groups of young people and revolved around a lack of financial resources to fund voluntary empowerment activities. They worried about problems such as housing and general living because of their financial instability and this was a major barrier to getting engaged in mainstream empowerment activities. Some young people suggested that for time spent on any activity they should be paid in some way and this would best enable them to get involved.

“in a sense you are helping someone else but at the same time you are helping yourself, I don’t know if that’s vouchers or food vouchers, but in the same way that they persuade young people to be involved in other things they should give you something for you to give something” (Female, age 22, White British, NEET).

For one young offender it was a black and white case where participation was assessed on the financial incentives he might receive,

“if I get paid to do it” (Male, age 16, Black Caribbean, young offender)

Amongst the young people with disabilities there was a strong sense of wanting to get involved in empowerment mechanisms like Youth Advisory Groups and Youth Opportunity Funds (all eight young disabled people said these were mechanisms they would be interested in). However, the practical situation for them often boiled down to what they could afford to do. All of the young people interviewed were on various disability benefits and most of them were on job seekers allowance (i.e. low income). As a consequence they were all living on a tight budget and struggling to find financial stability through jobs,

“my employment history is quite chequered because I've got learning difficulties, I find it difficult to get employers who want me to stay beyond the three month probationary period. So I've been working in coffee shops here and there to make ends meet” (Male, White British, aged 25, learning difficulties).

All eight of the young people with disabilities had a history of volunteering and wanted to be involved more in the kinds of mainstream empowerment mechanisms discussed. These young people had the impetus to get involved but there were significant financial barriers for this group. It was often said that at the very least they would need all of their expenses paid for; often those who were wheelchair users would have to travel in taxis which are an expensive form of transport for those on benefits.

These findings touch on two forms of payment: payment for time spent and reimbursement for expenses incurred. Many empowerment mechanisms offer “incentives” such as the reimbursement of costs incurred for young people. However, these findings illustrate that reimbursement is not an incentive but a necessity. What was found throughout this research was

that a large proportion of marginalised young people have very little disposable income or time and therefore would require reimbursement of expenses at the very least. On top of this many of the young people thought it justified that they receive payment on top of reimbursement to pay for their time<sup>15</sup>.

Young people without a disposable income or who give up time from work (or who are seeking work) felt justified in requesting that they be paid for their time as an incentive to take part in empowerment activities.

**Cash incentives should be provided to pay, or reimburse, marginalised young people for their time spent taking part in empowerment activities.**

## 2. THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

### The setting for empowerment

Some of the young people identified the need for their involvement in decision making to be facilitated in their immediate locality. They stated that having to travel even relatively minor distances would act as a barrier to engaging. For some it was a problem with curfews and for others it was because they would never usually travel out of their local area,

“I want it to be local, it’s more interesting that way and some people can’t go to certain areas. [You’ve got to] make it easy.” (Male, age 17, Black African, young offender).

This idea was supported by the fact that the IARS youth-led research team held its focus groups in a neutral location in central London and this was found to be a large barrier and disincentive for young people to take part. To overcome these barriers in later focus groups the IARS team engaged in outreach to inner city youth clubs and schools and participation was greatly improved.

**The setting for youth empowerment activities should be easily accessible to young people.**

### Training and learning within empowerment activities

During the focus groups the young people were split into small groups and asked to evaluate several ‘types’ of empowerment mechanisms. One group in particular focused upon the training and skills development that young people could receive through empowerment activities,

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<sup>15</sup> This was a viewpoint not repeated to the same extent at the Misunderstanding Youth Empowerment Event in February 2009. The young people taking part in the event, all of whom were engaged in some form of empowerment activity, promoted the idea of reimbursement of expenses but did not call for payment of their time.

“if you wanted to be a youth representative then training would be essential...if youth get trained to do this that would be really good” (Focus group 1).

The young people could recognise the value in developing new skills as well as see how it would enable them to contribute more effectively to a process. This was strongly supported by the stakeholders with experience of working with or supervising youth projects,

“Skills development is very important” (Stakeholder from a Voluntary and Community organisation).

“I think the training process, when it is really well structured and the model of training is quite comprehensive...it seems to be a really effective way for young people to then take that knowledge onwards and start being empowered” (Stakeholder from a Funding body).

Training was seen as *the* way to support marginalised young people and empower them. For many of the stakeholders training was the only way to empower young people effectively and was something that takes time, resources and patience. Specifically training refers to specific skills development over a period of time using expertise to illustrate and facilitate young people.

**All young people should be supported in empowerment mechanisms through specific, tailor-made training and skills development (e.g. decision making, research methods, presentations, basic communications, team work).**

**Young people should be provided with ongoing support, such as mentoring, after initial training is completed.**

### **The rewards and benefits of mainstream empowerment mechanisms**

Several young people who were unemployed or had criminal records felt that there was a need to pay for young people’s times for attending consultations, forums or any other meetings where they are working for the benefit of their local area. This money was seen as recognition that their opinions would be valued and taken seriously. However, there were other recognitions of rewards and benefits of participating in empowerment mechanisms which did not always relate directly to financial rewards.

Throughout the smaller discussions around the different ‘types’ of empowerment mechanisms the majority of young people from the focus groups identified positive rewards around the theme of ‘youth voice’,

“these things could be a good way of getting young people to care more about their issues and these things can get the youth voice heard”  
(Female, age 22, White British, NEET)

Others recognised the possibility of ‘being taken seriously’ as a young person through these mechanisms and felt that this was needed, especially in light of recent negative media portrayals,

“they [older people] sometimes look at us with that mentality that we ain’t got brains...they like to tell us that this is right and this is wrong and not let us decide because they think they understand it more” (Female, age 16, Black, in education).

“I like the idea that you can get your voice heard...it might combat the feelings of being ignored” (Male, age 16, Black African, in education).

Despite a lack of past experience one young person could see the positive personal achievements one might gain from getting involved in activities such as the Young Mayor’s initiative,

“if you get involved in something that is productive and it does change then you will feel proud, you will feel a sense of achievement. It’s good to have an achievement, instead of selling drugs being your achievements, you could get something different and better out of this” (Male, age 20, Hispanic, just re-entered education).

**Young people need to be positively recognised for their roles in any empowerment mechanism.**

Recognised achievement can be a highly motivating factor for young people and although it was not explicitly mentioned in the focus groups the youth-led research team made the following recommendation regarding accreditation in order to support this.

**Recognition of the skills and personal development of young people in empowerment mechanisms should be accredited in some way.**

### **One size of empowerment doesn’t fit all young people**

“Young people” is a generic term and does not capture nor explain the variety of differences and needs of the diverse groups of young people that live in London; this is particularly true for the sample in this study. It is because of this diversity that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to engagement and empowerment should be discouraged. A ‘one size fits all’ approach is a rigid structure that does not account for different sets of needs, i.e. it is not flexible. Instead decision making bodies and mechanisms should be sensitive to the particular needs of certain groups of young people.

The young people with disabilities that were interviewed had very distinct and particular barriers to empowerment. For example accessibility and receiving appropriate support whilst carrying out an activity are two very important features for these young people who in the past have often experienced exclusion from various activities based on these needs,

“I stuck it out for a bit [membership to a sports club], but I felt a bit isolated and made some friends but I cant do what I want to get out of it... it was if



they were saying ‘ oh here’s a disabled person and we are an able bodied club” (Female, aged 23, White British, has cerebral palsy).

The interviewees all voiced a strong wish to be more involved in empowerment mechanisms in order to influence local decision making and service delivery but they often felt there were only limited methods available for them in particular. It is important that empowerment mechanisms are completely accessible and flexible to accommodate young people with disabilities, including the provision for the right support, i.e. support workers, covering taxi travel expenses.

The stakeholder interviews provided evidence that a flexible approach to youth engagement and empowerment is essential because young people have so many different needs (language support, disability access, travel reimbursement, basic skills development) and are from diverse groups. It was suggested that some young people need smaller tasks (in empowerment activities) where,

“the goals are almost immediately achievable because long processes can be disempowering” (Stakeholder from a Voluntary and Community organisation)

**Young people should have their own youth-led empowerment and influencing structures which are supported by professionals who are trained to work with young people, are sufficiently financed and are flexible to young people’s needs.**

### **Young people and older people working together**

The focus groups were asked ‘Should young people influence local decisions?’ to which an overriding ‘Yes’ was the answer. On top of that there emerged an attraction for working together with ‘older people’ (the term ‘older people’ refers to “adults”).

In terms of influencing local decision making the majority of the young people in the focus groups felt they were not fully capable of making decisions about other young people in their local borough. This stemmed from references to themselves as unskilled or not knowledgeable enough to have an influence. They thought that any young person making decisions should work with “professionals” or members of local authorities in order to develop the skills needed to act on what they said. The majority of young people said that they respected the input of ‘older people’ because it would give the young people realistic feedback,

“While young people have more wide ideas and don’t see problems...maybe a balance between the two [younger and older] would lead to a balance of ideas in the community; then it’s got to do with young and old people.” (Female, aged 22, Dual heritage, NEET).

“I think it is better to be diverse because then you have different people who have different ways of being approached. So if you have a mixture then you might have more of a chance of getting your message across to those people.” (Male, aged 24, White British, young parent).

However, there were some contradictory remarks made that reflected a mistrust of older people. Some of the young people expressed the concern that older people don't listen and that this was a disincentive for getting involved in local decision making mechanisms,

“I feel like, coming from a younger generation, my views aren't taken as seriously as those that are from older people...when you are young sometimes you don't like to speak to adults”. (Male, aged 16, Black African, in education).

One young person focused on the need for equality between younger and older people in relation to any empowerment activity and this was seen as a vital ingredient for success,

“youth should work with adults- but it has to be someone who understands the youth perspective...it has to be an equal team” (Female, age 16, Black, in education).

### 3. TYPES OF EMPOWERMENT

#### Youth-led empowerment

The majority of young people felt that although they should sometimes work with adults to get training, they felt that young people should definitely have the opportunity to lead on issues that affect them. At the time of research these young people did not feel that, locally or nationally, young people were a visible part of decision making. These young people wanted more visible young people representing them in their local councils.

When analysing various models the young people felt that a youth-led approach, with professional support, was an excellent way for young people to represent themselves and to also engage with other young people,

“the youth voice will be heard this way” (Male, age 21, Hispanic, recently re-entered education).

A youth-led approach requires young people being trained and therefore enabled to be an integral part of the empowerment process. This can mean allowing young people to set their own agenda (with facilitation) and using their training and skills development to speak for themselves and not through “adults”.

A youth-led approach was praised by those in focus groups as giving “good amounts of responsibility to young people” and would help to unite young people together,

“young people communicating with other young people is a better model. You got to have faith in young people and giving us responsibility is good”. (Female, age 22, Black African, NEET).

It was often repeated throughout the focus groups that young people are capable of making decisions and they should be valued because of their understanding of youth issues. The young people identified a preference for not just being consulted or asked what they wanted in an anonymous fashion, but to be enabled to be a part of a decision making process.

“Young people have a contribution too and should be given the opportunity to express it.” (Male, age 16, Black African, young offender).

The youth-led approach was advocated strongly by those who work with young people. The youth-led definition that came out of the interviews was “young people being facilitated to gain the necessary skills in order to lead themselves and then take their issues forward to decision makers”. This was most often related to young people leading on research projects or policy forums. The most important element of youth-led empowerment to come out of this research was the notion of young people leading, steering and directing themselves instead of being just merely involved.

**Young people should lead on the design of empowerment mechanisms. Youth-led organisations are the best able to facilitate this initial stage.**

### Youth-involved empowerment

“Youth voice” was a term constantly used across the different focus groups and it was felt that young people should be enabled to be more involved in the mainstream empowerment mechanisms. There were a number of young people who felt that with the right support from older people, they could be an important part of decision making mechanisms. However, these young people did not necessarily want to be ‘leading’ in the capacity that the youth-led model depicts,

“I have my own things to do, my whole day is consumed, so it’s the easiest thing to have the older person make the decision” (Male, age 24, White British, Young parent).

Youth involvement mechanisms differ from youth-led in that they are not designed to be led by or directed by the young people themselves. They are more focused on involving young people through mechanisms designed by adults. For those young people with busy lives who felt that they did not have the time to commit to youth-led models they advocated for a youth-involved empowerment model whereby younger people could still be a part of the decision making in some way,

“I think we should be consulted and they should hear our points of view- (Male, age 24, White British, Young parent).

“I would agree with that because at the end of the day, they are a different generation, some things might be different and for some things they are deciding now, well it might be out of order for them to decide how to live our lives or decisions that are made that are going to impact our lives differently” (Male, age 21, Hispanic, recently re-entered education).

“I don’t think they [older people] take us seriously because of the way we speak to them sometimes [aggressively]...it may be possible to get some change if you do [learn to] speak to them properly” (Male, age 16. Black African, in education).

The stakeholder interviews strongly supported empowerment mechanisms that involved young people and facilitated them to influence local decision making. Stakeholders made an important case to avoid tokenism i.e. involving young people on a one-off basis in order to 'tick the box' for involving young people. It was advocated that for empowerment mechanisms to work better on a youth-involved level there needs to be more long term engagement with young people.

**There needs to be more meaningful and long-term engagement for young people where they can play an important role in influencing the issues that affect them.**

### Representing the needs of all young people

The focus groups also discussed different methods for representing young people's views to local and regional decision makers. It was through these discussions that many of the young people approved of having a youth representative, such as Young Mayor, because they felt that he/she would act as role model for other young people and they felt that the voting process was valuable and exciting. They also felt that he/she would be someone that other young people could relate to and who would inspire young people to care more about their own issues. However, many of the young people also felt that a single representative should not be seen as representing all the young people of a borough, but should merely be the messenger of young people's needs based on evidence gathered from all young people in an area,

"It's bad if the youth representative didn't do what the youth wanted him to, he might not be a true representative and just do what he wants" (Female, 16, Black, in education).

In the focus groups the young people looked at different types of mechanisms: A young mayor model, a youth-led research model and an open consultation model. The young people then noted down what they liked or disliked about each 'type' of empowerment mechanism. The young people generally acknowledged that there will always be a minority representing the majority however there was a consensus that efforts needed to be made to engage more youth into these activities. Across all focus groups the young people preferred using a youth-led approach to gather evidence from young people and using this to inform youth representatives.

This idea was felt to satisfy several needs for the general youth population across London:

- a. The ability to reach out and consult more young people who wouldn't put themselves forward for mainstream empowerment activities,
- b. Young people communicating with other young people is an easy way to overcome age and language barriers that can exist between younger and older generations,
- c. It enables the youth to feel properly listened to.

This approach was also felt to have an element of unity about it, with the young people advocating that,

“you need to discuss with others and hear what they are saying too” (Female, age 22, Dual Heritage White, NEET).

The most important reason for employing a youth-led approach to gathering evidence was,

“you could reach out to the youth that don’t usually take part in things, those that ‘can’t be bothered’ and those who have not grown up with ideas that you can participate” (Male, 21, Black Caribbean, self-employed).

The young people acknowledged that it’s not possible to reach out to all the young people in the borough but that more efforts were needed and more youth needed to be heavily involved, if not leading, on how this was done,

“young people communicating with other young people is a better model” (Male, age 16, Black African, in education).

From the stakeholders point of view it was said that often the most problematic young people aren’t given opportunities to engage even when there are mechanisms in place and they felt that these groups were in greater need of empowerment and representation. It was felt that more partnerships between decision making bodies and these young people could up the levels of representation for certain groups (BAME, young offenders, those at risk of exclusion, young refugees, young disabled).

**Young people should be given the tools and training to gather their own evidence (of what young people in each London borough want decision makers to address) and local and regional decision making structures should have at least one or two youth representatives to advocate for young people based on that evidence.**

## CASE STUDY

The IARS youth-led research team used the IARS membership list to identify a youth-led Voluntary and Community Sector organisation that engages marginalised young people in local decision making (BAME, those at risk of offending, young offenders, ex-offenders). The IARS research team carried out several interviews and observations of their empowerment model. This organisation was chosen because of their dedication to outreach, training/ skills development, and a youth-led ethos.

### Youth-Led organisation

This organisation is youth-led; it allows the young people to set the agenda and decide on their own training. The young person interviewed said this was a way of creating ownership and levels of responsibility for young people who have not had that before. This youth-led ethos was praised by the young people working with and through the organisation and was seen to be a genuine model for young people to develop a sense of authority over their own lives.

### Outreach

An effective programme of engagement is maintained whereby local young people are approached by young staff members in the places where they 'hang out' i.e. going to schools, shopping centres, and street corners in the evenings. This process of going to where the young people are was seen by the IARS research team as an excellent outreach methodology. It was a direct approach to the marginalised young people within the area and was "appreciated" by the young people themselves as an open and honest way to get involved in something positive.

### Training and Skills Development

Every young person that joins is offered training and skills development, chosen by the young people themselves and offered on a flexible basis. This training programme was judged by the young researchers as a near perfect model because of its flexibility to cope with young people's often busy lives but also because the young people themselves were able to choose what skills they wanted to develop. This was judged as an empowering experience from start to finish.

This organisation offers a flexible approach to engaging and empowering young people in areas they identify. This model of empowerment is viewed as a method which not only encourages skills development, but also employs a youth led and personal approach which therefore fits alongside young people's needs and interests.

## CONCLUSIONS

Under the new Duty to Involve whereby Local Authorities and other local decision making bodies must actively consult with 'representatives of local person' there will be an inevitable move towards consulting and engaging with young people. There already exist many mainstream empowerment activities for young people but what this research provides is an insight as to why the more marginalised young people are prevented from taking part in such mechanisms.

The most important theme from this research is that 'one size of empowerment does not fit all' for young people. That is to say young people are an extremely diverse group with different barriers for engagement. This research focused on understanding the experiences and viewpoints from marginalised groups of young people which provides invaluable information for any Local Authority seeking to engage or empower members of these groups (Black, Asian and ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities, young offenders, those not in education, employment or training, young parents).

This youth-led research was able to gain an open and honest insight into the lives of these young people which highlighted several barriers that often need to be overcome in order to engage marginalised young people in the first place: communication, outreach, providing a setting that is not disempowering and the provision of incentives. The provision of financial incentives was clear cut for the majority of these young people, usually because of a lack of disposable income. This was a sharp contrast to the discussions that took place at the Misunderstanding Youth Empowerment event in February 2009 at which the initial findings from this research were launched. Many of the young people at the event maintained that payment was not the reason they took part but that the experience and skills gained was their incentive. It must be noted however that most of the young people at the event did not come from the more marginalised groups (i.e. offenders, disabled, not in education, employment or training). It is perhaps not surprising that those on benefits will seek to be reimbursed for their time and therefore reimbursement or incentives should be a serious consideration for empowerment mechanisms that seek to involve those who are on limited incomes.

The main findings from this research also highlighted the importance of doing outreach into these groups as they are not likely to seek out empowerment activities for themselves due to a range of factors including a lack of knowledge, money and the inability to see the results of such initiatives. One of the most striking findings to come out of the focus groups was the young people's need to see youth representation in decision making bodies all around them. It was important for them to have more visible mechanisms for young people to get involved in. Any empowerment mechanism that aims to engage with marginalised young people should understand that providing information in an engaging format is vital to overcoming first hurdles and efforts should be made to communicate more clearly with young people.

It became very clear throughout this research that, despite initial engagement barriers, these young people recognised the value of empowerment in order to develop the youth voice in local decision making. What is the most interesting aspect of this was the confidence that they shared for young people to be able to do this themselves provided they receive the right training and professional support. It is important to young people that they can develop the skills necessary to do something for themselves. If young people are trained, supported and then facilitated appropriately they can take the lead on the issues; this youth-led method matches the criteria for



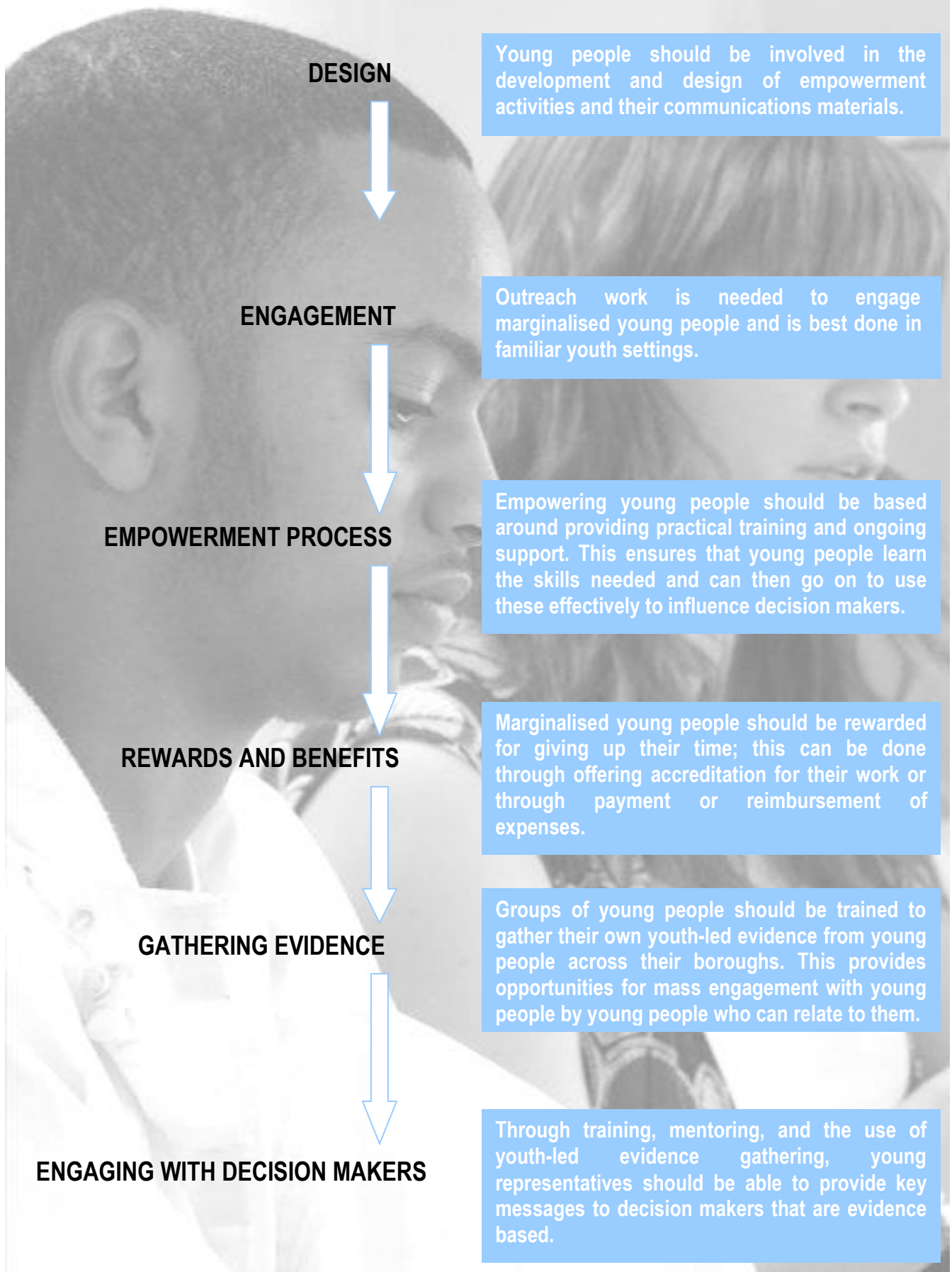
'empowerment'. Youth-led models are an enabling and invaluable way to ensure that the youth voice is heard in its most powerful format. This methodology can be utilised and set up using the Voluntary and Community Sector, particularly youth-led advocacy organisations such as IARS, which have experience and expertise in youth-led empowerment.

The process for engaging and empowering marginalised young people has many levels and involves time, effort and resources. The case study highlighted on page 26 displays in a straightforward way the findings from this research study. The model incorporates all the major themes drawn out from the evidence base on how to engage and empower marginalised young people. It should serve as a guide for government who aim to reach out within communities to representatives of local marginalised young people.

## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS: THE EMPOWERMENT OF YOUNG MARGINALISED PEOPLE**

- 1) This project and report were carried out by young volunteers at IARS. Volunteering can be a vehicle to empowerment. Genuine volunteering opportunities that are tailored to the needs and realities of young people is an essential requirement.**
- 2) The methods of communication used by mainstream empowerment activities need to be improved and linked with specialised services in order to reach marginalised young people from diverse groups.**
- 3) Young people should be engaged at the local level through outreach work in *relevant* local youth settings (e.g. youth clubs, youth offending teams, community groups, sports clubs).**
- 4) Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and youth-led organisations working with marginalised young people should be sufficiently financed and supported to engage them in empowerment activities. Infrastructure organisations need to acknowledge their existence and provide them with the necessary support. This is timely given the impact of the recession on them.**
- 5) Cash incentives should be made available to marginalised young people for their time spent taking part in empowerment activities such as volunteering.**
- 6) Young people should be supported in empowerment mechanisms through specific, tailor-made training and skills development programmes (e.g. decision making, research methods, presentations, basic communications, team work).**
- 7) Young people should be provided with ongoing support, such as mentoring, after initial training is completed.**
- 8) Young people need to be positively recognised and/ or accredited for their roles in any empowerment mechanism.**
- 9) Young people should have their own youth-led empowerment and influencing structures which are supported by professionals.**
- 10) Young people should lead on the design of empowerment mechanisms. Youth-led organisations are the best able to facilitate this initial stage.**
- 11) There needs to be more meaningful and long-term engagement for young people where they can play an important role in influencing the issues that affect them.**
- 12) Young people should be given the tools and training to gather their own evidence (of what young people in each London borough want decision makers to address).**
- 13) Local and regional decision making structures should have at least one or two youth representatives to advocate for young people based on that evidence.**

## EMPOWERING MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE: A MODEL



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