safer LONDON



From The Ground Up

Our youth voice, influence & participation journey

Contents

From the ground up 03

Our participation journey 05

Why partcipation matters 07

Building the foundations 09

Meet VIP, Joy! 13

Levelling up youth voice 15

Youth voice to youth influence 17

From influence to action 21

What this journey taught us 23

What's next? 25

Join us in shaping change 28

Acknowledgements and thanks 30



From the Ground Up

From the Ground Up captures our youth voice, influence and participation journey at Safer London - a journey that began in 2020 and continues to evolve today.

It hasn't always been easy or straightforward. It has been challenging at times, full of learning, growth and change. But through it all, young Londoners with lived experience of different forms of harm have been at the centre - shaping, questioning and reimagining what participation can look like when healing, safety and trust are the foundations.

We didn't begin with a blueprint. We began with a question - what would it look like if young Londoners who have experienced harm truly influenced the decisions that affect them?

Since 2020 that question has pulled us from quiet foundations into rooms where policy, policing and practice are shaped - and where young people are no longer simply invited, but influential.



Our participation journey

2019
Our first participation strategy is developed with a clear mission statement: by 2025, people with lived experience of violence, exploitation, and crime will work alongside Safer London staff as partners in decision-making at every level, through creative and empowering participation.

2020
The Safer London VIP programme launched. The VIPs get involved in activities that shape our services and influence decision-making.

2021
Over three years, the VIPs worked alongside researchers at the University of Sussex to explore what "resistance" really looks like in the lives of young people who have experienced harm. Their insights shaped the development of practical cards for practitioners.

2022
10 young Londoners joined us for our first young champion VIP big takover week! It was an opportunity for the VIPs to lead discussions on Safer London's big business challenges.

2022
We employed a young person with lived experience as a Youth Voice and Development Ambassador.

2023
We worked alongside 31 girls and young women affected by violence and exploitation, listening to their experiences so we could learn what support was needed to cater to their unique experiences and needs. The result was Listen to Learn - a guide which provides advice to practitioners engaged with girls and young women impacted by exploitation or violence.

2023
We launched a digital youth hub called London Youth Voices. London Youth Voices is all about inspiring young Londoners to live safe and happy lives. It's a space where young Londoners can talk about the issues that matter to them most.

2024
Developed with Safer London and in consultation with children, young people and parents, Ofsted commissioned "Who Cares?" - a report amplifying the voices of children and parents affected by serious youth violence, highlighting their experiences with multi-agency support services.

2024
We launched the Young Researchers programme which consists of a group of young Londoners who work with us to shape and strengthen our research projects.

2025
Participation and youth voice embedded!

Why participation Matters

Participation, for us, means more than being in the room. It means designing spaces with and for young people, especially those who've experienced harm, so their voices are centred, listened to and acted on. It means builing trust first, then impact.

To us, youth participation means that children and young people in London have every opportunity to take part, be heard, and see real change in the decisions that affect them.

To create spaces for young Londoners to express themselves, we must collaborate with them on what those spaces look like. It's especially important for us to create spaces where the young people we work with - who have all experienced harm - can participate meaningfully.

Too often, they're made to feel that these spaces are not for them.

That's why we set the scene early: this a space designed with and for them, where their voices are not only welcomed, but central, and where their experiences shape how we work from the very start.

We started by building the roots - establishing the VIP Young Champions, growing internal capacity and setting a clear vision - people with lived experience working alongside staff as partners in decision-making, at every level.



> When young Londoners are at the centre of things, it's always more fun, more meaningful and has a more sustainable impact

Having accessible youth voice and participation opportunities is vital for any organisation working with children and young people impacted by exploitation and violence because those with lived experience understand their realities better than anyone else.

Beyond improving outcomes, meaningful youth participation enables a sense of agency and dignity to those whose voices have often been marginalised and silenced, transforming them into active leaders and advocates for themselves and their peers.

Carly Adams Elias
Director of Practice



Building the foundations

When we began this journey in 2020, participation at Safer London was little more than a seed - a belief that things could and should be done differently.

We knew young people deserved more than consultation boxes ticked or token seats at tables. We also knew that inviting young people who've experienced different forms of harm into influencing spaces requires trust, patience and care.

For participation to be meaningful - and for it to contribute to a young person's healing journey - the foundations had to be safe, steady and co created.

So, we began quietly. We listened. We learned. We tested what it meant to build youth voice from the ground up - not as a programme, but as a cultural shift.

Progress was often slow and sometimes invisible, happening through small, foundational steps - building capacity, deepening relationships and creating safer more supported routes into participation for young people whose experiences often mean traditional participation models aren't accessible.



It was during this time that the Safer London VIP programme began to take shape. All the VIPs are young people who have accessed Safer London's services and support. Each one brings lived experience of harm and the insight that comes with it.

Their involvement makes sure that organisational decisions and developments are shaped not just by professional expertise, but by the realities of those who have lived through the issues we work to address.

Find out more about our VIP programme!

CLICK HERE!



Participation for all

From the beginning, we knew participation at Safer London needed to look different. Because the young people involved have experienced different forms of harm, traditional youth advisory models simply don't work. Participation must be flexible, supported and responsive to each young person's stage of healing.

That's why our approach offers a range of ways to take part - so young people can contribute in ways that feel right for them, whether they want consistency or something lighter, whether they feel confident in groups or prefer quieter one to one conversations.

Young people can participate through:

- Group sessions - supported spaces to build confidence and connection
- One off workshops, creative days and fun activities such as bowling and go-karting
- One to one participation for young people who feel safer sharing individually
- Research roles where lived experience shapes insight and methods
- Digital engagement for those who prefer online or flexible access
- Recruitment panels influencing who joins Safer London
- Accredited opportunities that recognise expertise and contribution





A shift in pace

As the foundations strengthened, we reached a point where the work could stretch, deepen and move forward.

The first VIP Bootcamp didn't just launch activity - it ignited confidence, connection and a sense of belonging for young people who had often felt excluded from these spaces.

The Big Takeover wasn't a stunt - it was a turning point where youth voice stopped feeling like an add on and began moving into the core of how Safer London operates. During this period, we co-created the Participation Tree with the VIPs - a simple way of showing how youth voice grows at Safer London.

The seed represents the purpose and spark young people bring. The roots reflect the shared values that ground the work. The trunk symbolises the strength and stability created when young people and staff work together. The branches show the many ways young people can get involved. The leaves represent the real world impact of their influence. And the sun and rain symbolise the support, resources and encouragement that help participation to thrive.

The Tree became a clear picture of how youth voice takes shape when nurtured by the experiences, strengths and healing journeys of young people who have lived through harm.

By 2022, with youth voice experts Participation People walking alongside us, the rhythm of the work changed. Everything began taking clearer shape. Youth voice stopped being something we "added" and started becoming something that shaped us - our culture, our decisions and our everyday practice.

Meet VIP Joy!





For Joy, being a Safer London VIP means having a space where she can speak freely, share her opinions and never feel judged.

Joy believes it's vital for Safer London to involve young people in decisions, so older generations don't rely on stereotypes and young people can shape their own futures.

> "I like the VIP group because I have done things that I wouldn't have been able to, such as the recruitment process.

Being a VIP has also opened doors she never expected, like sitting on recruitment panels and influencing how the organisation works.

One of her favourite moments? Going go-karting with the group - a reminder of the fun, connection and community she's found along the way.



Levelling up Youth Voice

As our participation foundations grew stronger, we not only broadened our approaches to reach young people beyond our core VIP group - we also created more opportunities for the young people already connected to us.

This meant expanding the ways VIPs and other young people who have never accessed Safer London's services could influence our work, shaping spaces, tools and processes in ways that felt accessible, supported and grounded in their lived experiences of harm.

What began with a small group of people started to extend outwards, offering a wider range of routes for youth voice to be heard and acted on.

Listen to Kai talking about being a Young Researcher as well as a project he's been working on

Young Researchers

Our Young Researchers take part in research as well as shape how it is done. They help develop participatory methods, co-design research approaches and contribute directly to projects exploring harm, safety, healing and resilience.

Their involvement makes sure the research is grounded in lived experience and that the questions we ask - and the ways we ask them - reflect the realities of young people who've experienced harm.

Alongisde influencing insight and practice, the programme also supports young people to build confidence, develop skills and explore new pathways for the future.

Interview panels

Young people with lived experience designed interview tasks, sat on recruitment panels and shaped hiring decisions - including for our CEO.

London Youth Voices

London Youth Voices - a digital platform created in response to what young people told us they needed - allows young people to connect safely, share experiences and access opportunities, including those who do not engage with our services directly.

Youth Voice to Youth Influence

At the start, youth participation was about creating space for young people to speak, be heard and belong.

Over time, it became more powerful. Youth voice moved into youth influence - shaping Safer London's work and influencing conversations across the systems and services that sit around children and young people who've experienced harm, violence and trauma.

One of Eliah's most powerful moments of influence was attending the House of Commons, where policymakers were discussing child poverty in the UK. Hearing other young people share their experiences made the impact of poverty feel real and immediate.



> In our VIP group we are already part of big decisions, but seeing it on a wider scale made me feel so proud.

Hearing a boy talk about having no privacy because he shares a room with 2 of his brothers, simply because housing doesn't accommodate larger families, made the issue feel more tangible. And when a girl spoke about having to walk long distances home from school in the rain because public transport outside London is too expensive

it reminded me how uneven access can be depending on where you live. Moments like these made me reflect on how grateful I am for the things I often overlook.

Eliah
Safer London VIP

Influencing system change

Read the London Assembly report!

CLICK HERE!

Children's Commissioner's Poverty Report

The VIPs directly shaped national work on child poverty, contributing to research undertaken by the Children's Commissioner's office to inform the Government's Child Poverty Strategy.

They shared their experiences and opinions during a research session, helping to inform the recommendations that will guide government action to tackle child poverty across the UK.

They were invited to Parliment for the launch of the report's findings, where they met the Children's Commissioner and connected with other young people who contributed to the project.





Stop and Search Charter

When Safer London was invited to contribute to a national conversation on the newly launched Stop and Search Charter, we wanted to make sure that the voices of young people directly affected were central.

We worked with the VIPs across two workshops to shape and inform the presentation, grounding it in the lived experience of young people who've experienced harm.

The Met Police have since asked to consult directly with the VIPs on how to put the charter into action.

Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI) on serious youth violence

Who Cares? was a consultation carried out by Safer London in which children and parents affected by serious youth violence shared their experiences of multi-agency support and what they needed from services.

Their participation informed findings and recommendations used by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HMICFRS, and HM Inspectorate of Probation as part of the Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI) on serious youth violence.

The Young Researchers designed the research approach, developing how we would listen to and work with those who participated. This participatory design helped keep the focus on what mattered most to children and parents.

London Assembly Policing Neighbourhoods Report

The VIPs directly shaped a London Assembly report exploring young Londoner's experiences of neighbourhood policing.

Their ideas, reflections and lived experiences were shared with Assembly members during an evidence gathering session, informing the report's findings and recommendations.

Influencing professional approaches

Reimagining resistance with the University of Sussex

Over three years, some of the VIPs worked alongside researchers from the University of Sussex to explore what "resistance" really looks like in the lives of young people who have experienced harm. Together, they reframed resistance not as a behaviour to be managed, but as a form of strength, survival and self-protection.

Their insights shaped the development of a set of practical cards for practitioners - tools designed to support conversations with young people about safety, agency and their own strategies for coping.

Professional Learning Event

The VIPs co-designed and facilitated an event on what safe and meaningful participation looks like for those who have experienced harm.

Through table activities, panels and open discussion they challenged professionals to rethink traditional models and highlighted how participation can support healing and more responsive practice.

Turning lived experience of violence into practical guidance

Both Listen to Learn and See Beyond were co-created with young women affected by violence - many of whom had been criminalised or viewed as perpetrators, while also being victims of harm themselves.

In Listen to Learn, young women shaped fictionalised narratives grounded in real experiences to help professionals understand what meaninful, safe support looks like.

Through See Beyond, young women with experience of the criminal justice system developed tools and recommendations that challenge stereotypes and encourage responses rooted in empathy, nuance and context.

Together, these projects turn lived experience into practical guidance that helps professionals work in ways that recognise both the complexity and the humanity of the young women they support.

Influencing public narrative

Time to Listen is a Safer London campaign calling on services, systems and society to look beyond labels and stereotypes and to truly hear young people who have experienced harm.

Built around real voices and real experiences, Time to Listen challenges how children and young people affected by harm, violence and exploitation are seen, understood and supported.

The campaign was shaped in direct collaboration with young Londoners who access our services. In a creative workshop, young people explored how they are often perceived versus how they understand their own identities, strengths and experiences.

Together they shaped the themes that sit at the centre of Time to Listen - challenging harmful narratives and inviting wider society to listen with openness rather than judgement.

At its heart is a co-created film that urges adults to stop making assumptions and start listening. Young people were closely involved in creating the film. They informed the script, supported filming, recorded lines and appeared at the end of the film.

Beyond the film, they contributed to campaign events and activities, making sure that Time to Listen was not simply inspired by



Watch our latest campaign film, Time to Listen – shaped by young Londoners!

What this journey taught us

This journey has shown us that meaningful participation begins with trust. When trust is built first, outcomes follow and influence becomes possible.

Young people have taught us that participation can't be designed for them - it must be created with them. Co-created spaces are safer, more honest and more transformative because they reflect the realities of those who have lived through harm.

We learned that youth voice is not simply about being present in a room. It is about shaping the direction of conversations, decisions and narratives. When young people influence how we think, design and act, their voice moves beyond inclusion and becomes a source of genuine change.

We also learned that participation is most powerful when it gives something back. For young people who have experienced harm, participation can support healing when it offers connection, skills, wellbeing support, recognition and moments of belonging. These are not extras - they are essential parts of creating spaces where young people feel valued and safe.

Another lesson has been the importance of meeting young people where they are. Their engagement ebbs and flows. Participation needs to adapt to them - emotionally, practically and relationally - not expect them to adapt to rigid structures.

Finally, this journey has taught us that influence must be accountable. Listening is not enough. Young people should be able to see how their insight affects decisions, budgets, practice and the wider systems around them.

Change must be visible, felt and real, otherwise 'influence' risks becoming performative rather than transformative.





> A seat at the table means nothing if decision-makers aren't prepared to be changed by what they hear.

Rooted in lived experience, our VIPs told us what matters most to them: confidence, voice, safety and belonging.

Most of them don't join to change national policy - they come because participation gives them something real: practical skills, safe connections, and a place that isn't defined by harm.

Influence matters, but it has to be anchored in those outcomes. Influence becomes extractive if it doesn't return something tangible to the person who shared it - a certificate that helps them get work; a skills session that builds confidence; a welfare check after a conversation; a peer moment that makes them feel seen.

So the future I want is two-fold: deepen what participation gives to young people now, and keep pushing for accountable influence.

But we have to be honest about the barriers. Inviting young people into decision making spaces is only the start.

Recently our VIPs spoke with honesty about safety after violence to a room of decision makers. I can't say for sure they realised how lucky they were to be in a room with the young people we work with.

That moment made something bluntly clear: organisations love to say they listen to youth voice, but too often it stops at the invitation.

We can open doors to voices that are usually absent, but opening the door isn't enough - we need people who will actually walk through it and act.

We'll keep forcing those doors open - and we'll keep naming it when rooms aren't ready to listen.

Alexandra Tran,
Voice, Influence and Participation Coordinator

What's next

As we look ahead, our focus is on deepening, nuturing and strengthening what we have built. Rather than expanding for the sake of growth, we want participation at Safer London to continue developing in ways that feel steady, supported and meaningful for the young people at its centre.

We will build on the foundations we've built over the years - creating more opportunities for young people to grow in confidence, develop their leadership and take on ambassador-style roles. These roles will support young people to speak out and step into spaces where their insight is needed.

We want to open participation up to more young people so they can meet, challenge and influence those in positions of power, making sure their lived experience shapes the systems and services that affect them - not just within Safer London, but with decision-makers across and at a regional and national level.

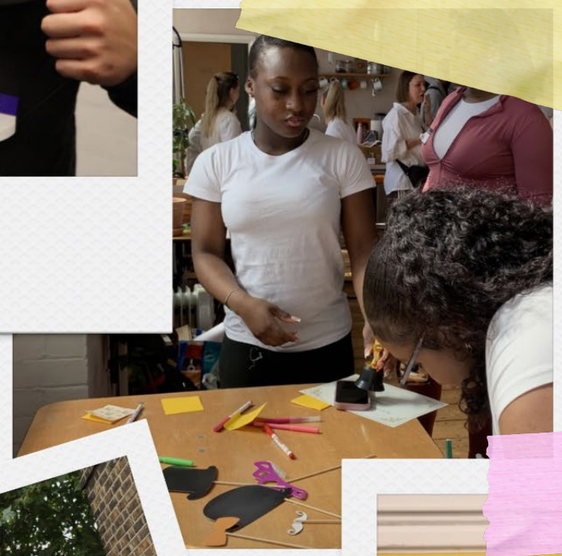
We will continue to priortise accountability - influence only matters when young people can see how their contributions have changed decisions and practice.

Most importantly, we want participation to continue being fun. We want to protect the things that make this work meaningful - the friendships that have formed, the sense of community, the laughter in the room and the moments that spark connection and confidence.

We want to keep being inspired - and to keep creating spaces where young people feel the same.



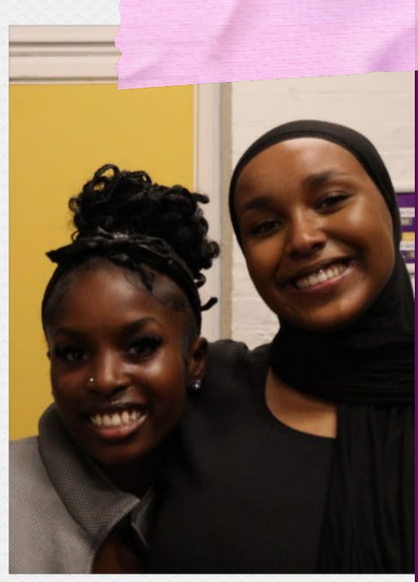












Join us in shaping change

You can partner with and work alongside young people whose lived experience drives real change.

If your organisation wants to work in ways that are shaped by the insight of young people with real lived experience of harm, we would love to work with you.

Unlike many traditional youth advisory groups, our VIPs and Young Researchers are young Londoners who have directly experienced exploitation, violence or other forms of harm.

Their perspectives aren't hypothetical - they're grounded in reality, resilience and first-hand understanding of what needs to change.

Because of this, we take great care to make sure every opportunity is safe, supported and meaningful for them. Participation must give something back - not extract from young people who have already carried too much.

Because every organisation's needs are different, we'll discuss costings with you based on the type of session, level of involvement and support required. This is so we can make sure that we can provide the right safeguarding, preparation and recognition for young people's contributions.



Involve young Londoners in an ongoing programme of activities.

This option is for organisations wanting deeper, sustained collaboration. We work with you to build a programme over several weeks or months, bringing in young people at key stages to co-create, advise, test ideas or shape direction. This may include:

- Regular workshops or insight sessions.
- Youth involvement in designing tools or resources.
- Ongoing feedback loops and reflective spaces.
- Participation in research, advisory work or co-production.

These programme create space for deeper relationships, richer insight and long-term influence - whilst making sure young people are supported, compensated and protected throughout.

Commission a one-off youth insight session

Perfect for those who want targeted insight on a specific issue, challenge or developing piece of work. We'll work with you to shape a bespoke session based on your needs. Your session includes:

- A co-designed workshop tailored to your question or topic.
- A facilitated 2 to 3 hour evening session with the VIPs or Young Researchers.
- All preparation, safeguarding and design work from our team.
- Young people's time, food and travel covered.
- A summary of key insights to take back into your planning and practice.

These sessions give organisations high-quality, grounded feedback - and give young people a supported space to influence change without long-term committment.

We'd love to hear from you!
If you're committed to meaningful youth voice – the kind rooted in lived experience, care and accountability – we'd be excited to see how we could work together.
communications@saferlondon.org.uk

Acknowledgments and thanks

Our most sincere gratitude goes to the young Londoners who've participated in of our youth voice programmes past, present and future. We'd also like to thank:

- Participation People
- Professor Kristine Langhoff
- The London Violence Reduction Unit
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- Youth Endowment Fund
- Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime
- The Safer London participation and youth voice team: Carly Adams Elias, Nabeela Yousaf and Alexandra Tran.

We are grateful that we can continue to run our youth voice programmes with the generous support of the National Lottery Community Fund.

Connect with us

saferldn

Safer London

About Safer London

At Safer London, we work with young Londoners and families who've already experienced harm and trauma as a result of violence and exploitation. The young Londoners we work alongside have been harmed, some have harmed others – all deserve someone to stand by them.

We provide consistent, trauma informed support to children and young people affected by criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation and sexual violence, violence in the community and peer-to-peer harm. We work directly in the community, walking alongside young Londoners - helping them move from crisis to stability, and from harm to hope.

Safer London is a registered charity in England and Wales No. 1109444; and a company limited by guarantee No. 5190766.

www.saferlondon.org.uk



safer LONDON

From the Ground Up

Our youth voice, influence & participation journey

www.saferlondon.org.uk