

Guidance for researchers working with youth organizations

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Why youth organizations?

We define youth organizations as third sector provision which engage young people during their free time, often in extra-curricular activities. This is a broad church, enveloping drop-in youth centres; creative organizations such as youth theatres or dance programmes; sports clubs and other special interest groups. Crucially, they are voluntary spaces, where engagement typically takes place outside of school. Young people have chosen to attend and participate in an activity which is of interest to them, perhaps simply hanging out with friends. Organisations can define young people differently, but generally speaking ‘young people’ can include people between the ages of 11 and 25.

Youth services in the UK have suffered under austerity. Since 2011, there has been a loss of 130 youth clubs, nearly half of London’s provision, and more than 600 full-time youth worker jobs (Berry, 2020). However, they still play a vital role in the lives of the young people who access them. Youth services function as “third places” (Briggs, 2025; Howard, Brocken & Sim, 2018), neither home nor school, where young people can socialize, meet new people, engage in hobbies and receive support from youth workers or other trusted adults. They are primarily leisure spaces, though their provision often has educational and/or wellbeing benefits (e.g. Helms, et al., 2016).

Youth organizations can be fruitful places to engage with young people as a researcher. They are typically relaxed, informal places where young people can have more free time and more headspace to engage with a research project than they might do at school. Like school, they can be seen as safe, convenient places for researchers to meet diverse groups of young people. Depending on the organization, there may be specific groups of young people with whom it could be difficult to engage with elsewhere, or who share characteristics pertinent to the research objectives. For researchers interested in collaborating with young people, building mutually beneficial, sustainable partnerships with youth organizations can enhance research quality and impact.

However, youth organizations are complex, contextual places with their own cultures, social rules and hierarchies. As discussed elsewhere, youth organisations are likely to be protective of their young people towards whom they have a responsibility of care. This could manifest as a reticence towards engaging with research. Transparency, flexibility, and collaboration are key principles to uphold when working with youth organisations. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Rather, we offer a set of considerations for researchers to hold in mind when planning a project which involves young people and frames youth organizations and their staff as gatekeepers.

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Which organizations?

As discussed above, youth organizations come in all shapes and sizes. Different youth organizations will have different relationships with young people (and their guardians) depending on their context and content. These relationships will inform how information about your study is communicated to potential participants. Similarly, young people will have different expectations of how they will spend their time when visiting their youth organization.

Consider:

- Why do you want to engage young people? What are your assumptions about how they will inform your research?
- What kind of young people are you wishing to engage?
- Where are they likely to hang out / choose to spend their leisure time?
- How will you develop a positive collaborative relationship with the young person and youth organization?

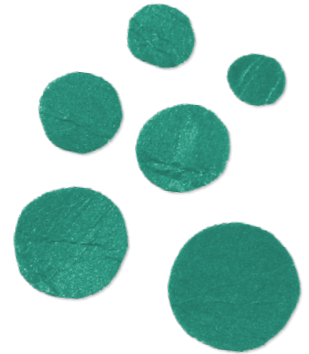
Your project

If you are hoping to involve young people and youth organisations in your project, this should be thought about and appropriately resourced from the design phase. Ideally, this process can begin at the point of developing your research

question and project aim, *prior* to seeking funding or setting protocols in place. Youth organisations hold multiple forms of expertise about young people, from engagement to delivery, and this can be essential knowledge for the appropriate design of studies. Many organisations are reticent to engage in projects that are too prescriptive and have not considered co-design principles from the beginning.

Making contact

Building a relationship with a youth organization can be challenging. Staff are likely to have competing priorities, little desk time and a high workload. If possible, try and contact an individual's email rather than just the 'hello' inbox. These can often be found by searching the organization's website, if they have one. Alternatively, introductions via a shared contact are more effective. If emailing, it is advisable to include all the important information about your study in the body text of the email, in clear, accessible language. Only include in attachments information that you are happy not to be read by the recipient. The most impactful way to make an impression is to visit in person. This will also allow you to meet multiple staff members, get a feel for the place and the young people. Furthermore, within the youth organization there may be a more informal communication culture: word of mouth, messaging via WhatsApp or social media. An awareness of how best to efficiently and reliably communicate with staff and young people will be expedient for the realization of your project aims.



The burden of monitoring and evaluation already shouldered by youth organizations and young people may contribute to a mistrust of research (de St. Croix and Doherty, 2022). Furthermore, an organization may have had a negative, extractive, or tokenistic experience of research in the past. There can be a reluctance to expose young people to researchers and a fear of adults who may ‘parachute’ in, without building the appropriate trusting relationships with the community. There may be onboarding or safeguarding processes to engage with to enter the youth organization. For example, passing an enhanced DBS check or joining the organization as a volunteer. These could impact your timelines and should be identified early in the communication exchange.

When describing your project, clear communication is key. Make explicit:

- How your project is relevant for young people.
- The benefits for young people if they participate.
- The benefits for the organization/staff members.
- What involvement in your project will ask of participants – how much time? How regularly? Will this involve research tasks, emotional labour etc?
- Your experience working with young people – do you have a DBS or relevant training?
- Payment and compensation for time, for staff and young people.

Incentives

Similarly, consider the incentive for participating in your project. ‘Participating in research’ may not be enough of a draw for some youth organizations (or young people). Start this conversation early. If the youth organisation is involved prior to submitting a funding application, consider how they are listed in the bid:

- Are they a compensated collaborator?
- How is staff time for supporting young people participating in research remunerated?
- Are you making use of their space? Has this been reflected in the budget?
- Are there other ways that staff can be compensated for their involvement? Perhaps training, skills development, or networking opportunities?

Developing partnerships

Regardless of the length of your partnership, it will be important to ascertain a clear shared structure of responsibilities. There will be elements of the research project which may be more productive for the youth organization to lead on. For example, recruitment, retention, and pastoral support of young people. If this is the case, ensure that the roles of staff members (e.g. youth workers, recruitment officers, social prescribers)

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are clearly defined and compensated. Consider whether training opportunities would be useful for colleagues outside of the research team. It is useful for the whole delivery team to have an awareness of key research procedures such as ethics, consent, research methods and dissemination strategies. Think through the problems that arise together. Collaboration will be easier if everyone feels involved in knowledge production and exchange. Similarly, youth organizations won't necessarily have prior knowledge to the complexities and timescales of some institutional procedures, such as ethics.

Timelines

The long tails of academic timelines can be at odds with the more frenetic turnover of youth organizations. Many youth organizations take a co-design approach to their programming, responding reflexively to the needs of their service users. As result, plans may be subject to change, or decisions may be made 'on the ground', as programmes develop. This can present challenges to ethical approval and upholding agreed processes. It is advisable to build an awareness of how your chosen organization typically functions. Have an open communication channel with your point of contact at the youth organization to ensure clarity around expectations and agreements regarding how the research is conducted, managed, and ethically approved. Include yourself as much as possible and appropriate with project planning update meetings so you are aware of changes as they happen.

Ethics

If youth work is an unstoppable force, ethics can feel like an immovable object. As with project design, try to include gatekeepers in the development of your ethical agreement. It is essential that ethical commitments are upheld by the youth organization as much as the research team. The fluidity and reflexivity of much youth work practice can mean that plans are subject to change (this is worth repeating). Consultation with your youth organisation will enable you to identify potential risk points, such as the consenting process, ensuring anonymity, or the development of creative outputs. Collaborate with staff to work out strategies which work for all stakeholders. It can be useful to 'walk through' the ethical processes from the perspective of all relevant parties. Consider how the project will be understood by:

- Young people,
- Parents/guardians,
- Youth workers,
- Teachers.

On arrival

Building trusting relationships and familiarity with young people and staff is paramount to the success of research with young people. It is essential that as much time as possible is given to this most important aspect of your project. De St. Croix and Doherty advocate for "methodological slowness": "this research requires 'being there'



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in an unhurried way – hanging out, being flexible” (De St Croix and Doherty, 2023, p1034). This will mean spending unstructured time at your chosen location getting to know staff and young people. Be transparent about why you are there and your research intentions, but, where possible, take time to build familiarity and trust before you invite people to actively participate in a research activity.

Consider your positionality:

- What do you bring to the space?
- How do you appear to staff and young people?
- What power dynamics will be present in the researcher/ participant relationship? How can you mediate these?
- What assumptions have you made regarding the space and demographics present?
- What does the University and ‘research’ represent for participants, will they have prior research knowledge or experience?

Which methods?

Contemporary youth studies favours research with young people, rather than of young people. This orientation figures young people as experts of their own experiences, knowledge producers, collaborators or co-researchers (Howard, et al., 2025). Ideally, your youth organisation and their young people should be involved in your project from the design stage. If this not possible, as in the case of many doctoral projects, reflect on

whether your project has been appropriately designed for young people. Methods which align with this orientation include, but are not limited to, ethnography, creative methods, digital methods and participatory action research (Howard, et al., 2025). These take time and can be resource heavy. Explore with your youth organisation what will work best for their staff and young people.

If you are proposing a quantitative method, take time to consider the participant experience of the survey measures you have chosen. It can be useful to pilot your survey with young people and/or staff from your youth organisation during the design phase of your project. Allow space for young people to suggest their own questions and give feedback.

Consider:

- What does your project demand of the youth organization and staff?
- Will you need staff support?
- Are your methods appropriate: will they be appealing to young people?
- Do your methods risk replicating problematic monitoring and evaluation cultures?
- How will you ensure that there is no data wastage?
- Will you need to book a room or make use of their equipment?
- Will you be interrupting, or taking young people out of the youth activity?
- How can you minimize disruption for young people and staff?



Consent

Consent is an ongoing and iterative process. There are likely to be tiers of informal consent as you build relationships with the relevant gatekeepers. As discussed, youth organization colleagues can be instrumental in the efficient attainment of formal consent from participants and guardians. In keeping with GDPR regulations, it is likely that youth organizations will hold the contact information for guardians and can support the dissemination of participant information sheets and consent forms. Therefore, it is advisable to induct relevant youth organization colleagues into the consent process. Wherever possible work with youth organisations who play a pivotal role in your research process in the design of your recruitment strategy and run through scenarios to develop understanding of the different roles and considerations required. This is best considered from the project outset and prior to ethical approval, as too many assumptions in this process creates problems. Remember that you may also need to gather consent from any adults involved in your project, such as youth workers or volunteers.

Legacy & dissemination

It is ethical practice to ensure that the dissemination of research findings is appropriate for participants (Paravini et al., 2021). Young people and youth organisations are unlikely to engage with academic outputs such as paper and conference presentations. Therefore, a key consideration for project design is a mode of knowledge exchange regarding the project findings which works for participants and community partners. This is best developed in collaboration with the young people and youth organisations themselves.

Similarly, it is essential to consider how to ethically and safely bring a research project to a close. Hopefully, trusting relationships have been built with the organisation and young people. Clarity throughout the research process regarding the length of engagement and clear signposts as the end point approaches will provide supportive scaffolds. Consider:

- How to celebrate and appropriate platform any appropriate findings,
- If any ongoing support or relationship is appropriate for participants / organisations,
- How to ensure that participants and organisations feel their contributions have been valued, especially in the case of participant anonymity.



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Conclusion

Developing good collaborative working relationships with youth organisations is essential for conducting research in these settings. It is also imperative for doing this type of research well. Most often, youth organisations hold essential knowledge about how to best work with the young people they care for and including them in the consideration of your project from the beginning, and as an equal collaborator, will improve the study from design to dissemination. It can be easy to think of research teams as holding essential expertise, however, this assumption is often quickly dispelled when engaging with community experts. Collaboration diversifies the knowledge base and can make your research more ethical, equitable and impactful.

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