

Engaging and
empowering
young people
in arts projects
and festivals





Cover image
NEST Performers at RSPB St Aidan's Nature Reserve
Credit JMA Photography

Youth voice and participation at LEEDS 2023

Engaging and empowering young
people in arts projects and festivals

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About LEEDS 2023

LEEDS 2023 was a transformational year of culture, drawing on the rich and diverse creative talent in the city and supporting a lasting cultural legacy.

The Youth Development programme engaged young people aged 8-30 through a range of ambitious youth voice and skills development offers. From podcasting and journalism to co-designing festival activities, the programme offered opportunities to try new things, develop new skills and shape creative activities.



The WOW Barn school workshop
Credit: Ant Robling

How to use this resource

We want this resource to inspire and spark new ideas in **arts organisations and festivals** that are looking to incorporate or develop youth voice and participation opportunities in their work.

Across the year, we delivered over a **dozen youth development projects and programmes** engaging over 200 young people from across Leeds and further afield. This resource gathers and shares ideas, advice, and learning from our young participants, collaborators and the LEEDS 2023 team.' Our **five key recommendations** are brought to life with case studies from the Year of Culture.

Please use this resource in whatever way is most useful to you and your organisation. Share it with your teams, networks and beyond, and find ways to repurpose and scale up (or down) the learnings from our programme.

Recommendation 1

Be person-led:
identify and listen to the
needs of young people



Recommendation 1

Be person-led: identify and listen to the needs of young people.

Make the conscious choice to be driven by what your participants, audiences and communities want and need.

NEST

Co-produced with National Youth Theatre and delivered in partnership with Leeds Playhouse and Compass Collective, NEST provided the opportunity for over 100 young people aged 16-30 to develop new skills ‘in performing arts and take part in a new production

By considering the needs of participants during the development of the project and removing barriers to participation, we ensured a diverse range of young people could take part, including asylum seekers and young Disabled or neurodiverse people.

The concept: Through engagement with young people, writer Emma Nuttal and director Paul Roseby devised a new piece about the climate crisis, migration and home to be performed by a large cast of young people at RSPB St Aidan’s Nature Reserve.

Young people from West Yorkshire were given the opportunity to participate in a free, ten-day acting intake course and take part in NEST alongside young people from across the UK.

The magic ingredient: We wanted this opportunity to be accessible to a wide range of young people in West Yorkshire, including those who had never performed or taken part in theatre before. A broad range of needs were considered when designing the project and we sought to ensure barriers to participation were not built in. We provided bursaries, wellbeing workers and pastoral care throughout the project, and all participants were invited to complete an access rider so that we could tailor experiences to their needs.

The impact: This approach enabled us to engage a diverse group of young people, many of whom had not taken part in a large-scale theatre production before.

The takeaways:

- Consider the needs of young people from the outset, so that barriers to participation are not built into your project.
- Explore how you can include wellbeing workers and tailored care in projects, possibly through the use of access riders.
- Explore opportunities to partner with organisations who have expertise in engaging with young people from a range of backgrounds.

Phoenix

NEST participant

“ I love that our directors made the effort to involve everyone from day one, so no one felt like a wallflower. This included things like acting games where we got to know each other and just be ‘silly’ without judgement. It’s one of the most welcoming spaces I’ve been in, where I felt an innate sense of belonging. ”

“ I like the fact that there was always a support worker available for people like me with access needs. It was reassuring to know that everyone’s needs were considered equally important...I’ve learnt to never apologise for taking up space. You deserve to be in the room as much as everyone else. Always assume that you belong there, because you do. ”

Recommendation 2

Boundaries can be freeing: set parameters and expectations

“ Young people are the next generation,
so let them do what they feel will help.”

Tanisha
WOWser



Recommendation 2

Boundaries can be freeing:

set parameters and expectations

Set clear parameters for your project and communicate these to everyone involved.

Expose the decision-making process, rather than keeping people in the dark: be clear about your intentions, the decisions you've already made and the actions you've taken.

WOWsers

The WOWsers project was a 10-week creative programme on gender equality for young women and non-binary people aged 16-18 from West Yorkshire. Eight young leaders took part in the project delivered in partnership with The WOW Foundation, which culminated in the delivery of four co-designed activities at The WOW Barn Festival Day. Activities included a poetry workshop, a rally, a zine stall, and a DIY fashion show, all exploring issues of gender equality.

The concept: Featuring weekly workshops and inspirational day trips, the WOWsers programme included opportunities for the participants to develop their skills and share their voice.

We explored the theme of gender equality through the lens of different artistic practices, inviting artists to talk about how they share their activist voice through their artwork. Through a series of hands-on workshops, the participants developed ideas for activities that platformed their voices and causes.

As the WOWsers' activities were part of a wider festival day, there were various parameters in place. Understanding the process for making decisions, and the resources available, meant that the participants could be inventive and play with their ideas.

The magic ingredient: Clear communication and managing expectations about what was possible was essential. We kept lines of communication open throughout the process so that the participants were part of the decision-making process and everyone could respond as the festival developed.

Yorkshire Dance

With support from LEEDS 2023, Yorkshire Dance delivered a youth voice project with their youth company (aged 11-15) based in Seacroft, which exemplifies the importance of setting boundaries.

The concept: The project included eight 30-minute focus groups alongside the company's regular weekly dance sessions. The focus groups were an opportunity for young people to discuss the content and goals of their dance programme.

The magic ingredient: How choice was offered was key to the project's success. Yorkshire Dance discovered that it was more helpful for young people if they gave clear options and parameters when asking for their opinions. The more they embedded opportunities for feedback into the sessions, the more the young people's confidence grew and the better they got at sharing their voice.

The impact: There was a noticeable increase in confidence, with young participants becoming able to articulate their wishes and influence the development of the performance. As the young people saw the change they were influencing, they felt increasingly empowered.

The takeaways:

- Give clear parameters when offering young people choice. Make sure there's a clear framework for young people's ideas to sit within. Be transparent about the limitations, for example budgets or programming restrictions.
- Build in plenty of extra planning time to enable the young people to develop their ideas and for teams to realise them.
- Don't overpromise – if something is requested by a young person but can't be put in place, be open and honest about this.

Seeing the direct results of using their voice has empowered our dancers. Our artists have been able to better reflect on and consider the needs of the participants within the development and design of the sessions. This allows them to be more responsive within the sessions. Having open and honest conversations has been key to the success of the project.

Holly

Fundraising Officer
Yorkshire Dance

Recommendation 3

Draw on your networks
and resources for
inspiration:

use your assets
to spark new ideas



Early Career Music Promoters' Belen DJing at Fantasma
Credit: Franco Amponseh Duah

Recommendation 3

Draw on your networks and resources for inspiration:

use your assets to spark new ideas

Make use of your existing networks, supporters and assets to provide inspiration, develop knowledge and spark new ideas.

We built in tailored support, advice, inspiration sessions and training from specialists.

Delivered in partnership with Come Play With Me, the Early Career Music Promoters programme provided young people with the opportunity to develop their skills in the music industry.

Building on Come Play With Me's established offer for young people, we invited industry professionals from across Leeds to contribute to the programme.

The concept: Ten young people participated in the paid development scheme, which included workshops and masterclasses, work experience placements, mentorship and opportunities, to develop skills through live projects.

Led by industry professionals based in Leeds and further afield, the workshops and masterclasses explored a range of skills needed to be a successful, inclusive music promoter and provided inspiration for the participants. The young people then undertook 15 days of work experience within the music sector.

The programme culminated in the early career music promoters producing a series of music events, each delivering one independently before coming together in two groups to create larger events.

Throughout, they were supported by teams at LEEDS 2023 and Come Play With Me and by industry mentors.

The magic ingredient: Over 30 industry professionals contributed to the design and delivery of the programme, each bringing experience, skills and networks to support and inspire the participants.

The impact: The participants developed skills, grew in confidence, built their networks and took inspiration from the range of practitioners they met.

The relationships built between partners, collaborators and funders during the project paved the way for youth development projects beyond the Year of Culture.

The takeaways:

- Bring in a range of contributors and facilitators in the development and delivery of a youth development programme to provide a breadth of inspiration.
- Draw on your networks to identify opportunities that benefit participants and the practitioner or organisation working with them.
- Partner with organisations who share your ambition and build relationships between those you collaborate with.

“Working alongside such an inspiring group of diverse, young professionals to upskill them and develop such a wide range of projects through this programme with Leeds 2023 has been wonderful. Some amazing events were produced and many have already gone on to programme other events themselves, or with Come Play With Me, and we're excited to see where they go next. The grassroots live events sector is challenging right now but I'm confident some of these will go onto great things in the years ahead.”

Tony Ereira

Director

Come Play With Me

Recommendation 4

Embrace risk and experimentation: empower young people to innovate

“ I would say that investing in young people is essential, and that organisations should provide more funding opportunities like this one, as we need more young people within the creative arts industry. ”

Nada
Youth Fund Grantee



Recommendation 4

Embrace risk and experimentation:

empower young people to innovate

Empower young people to take on new responsibilities in a supported way.

Don't be afraid to take risks. Trust young people to have great ideas and support them to realise them.

Young Minds Making a Change Youth Fund

Co-designed by four Young Grantmakers, the Young Minds Making a Change Youth Fund launched to support young people aged 14-30 to develop creative social action projects for communities in Leeds. Five grants were awarded to young people by a Youth Panel, enabling the development of projects to support LGBTQIA+ young people, create opportunities for young Muslim people to come together, and foster intergenerational connections.

The concept: The idea came from the LEEDS 2023 Youth Summit where young people proposed a youth fund designed by young people for young people.

Wanting to respond directly to this suggestion, we undertook research into existing youth grant schemes and developed a supportive framework.

We recruited a team of Young Grantmakers and supported them in designing a grant scheme for young people. The resulting scheme included:

- Micro Grants of up to £500 for individuals aged 14–18 looking to take their first steps into creative social action.
- Collaborative Grants of up to £2,000 for groups of young people aged 18–25 (or up to 30 for neurodiverse or Disabled people) looking to take their next steps in creative collaboration and social action.

Importantly, the funding was to be given directly to the young people rather than organisations facilitating youth voice projects.

Those considering applying for a grant were given access to an information pack and invited to workshops on bid writing, access and budgeting. This provided young people with the opportunity to develop valuable skills ahead of developing their proposal and submitting an application.

From the submitted applications, the Youth Panel selected five grantees including four Collaborative Grants and one Micro Grant.

In addition to funding, each of the grantees were provided with a mentor to support them in the development of their project.

The magic ingredient: By providing training, funding and ongoing mentorship, we created a safe space for young people to innovate, learn from failure, and create social impact projects.

The impact: The fund supported five exceptional projects including the production of a new drag show through participatory workshops, the launch of an LGBTQIA+ and mental health awareness zine and an event for Muslim families and the wider community.

Grantees have gone on to produce further events, set up their own Community Interest Company, and create partnerships with other cultural organisations across the city.

The takeaways:

- Give young people the freedom to learn, experiment and take risks in a safe and supported way.
- Make money available to young people and trust them to do good things with it. This may seem like a big step at first, but by doing it in a safe and accountable way, it can yield great results and impact.
- Provide mentorship, skills development, and paid opportunities so that young people can learn “on the job”.

Recommendation 5

Invest in young people beyond the project:
create a lasting legacy for your work



Exchanging Violets zine launch, funded by the Youth Fund
Credit: Solomon Charles-Kelly

Recommendation 5

Invest in young people beyond the project:
create a lasting legacy for your work

Our final piece of advice focuses on the experience of young participants beyond the life of a project. When working with young people and getting to know their ambitions, consider the support structures you can put in place to support your participants after a project concludes.

Agnes' journey

In this final example, we focus on a young person's journey from participating in our inaugural Youth Summit through to a full-time, paid role within LEEDS 2023.

The journey: Agnes began her journey with LEEDS 2023 as a Young Leader, supporting the design of the inaugural Youth Summit in 2022, and then as a Young Grantmaker on the Youth Fund (see Recommendation 4).

During her time on these projects, Agnes shared that she was interested in developing her skills in facilitating for young people, so we developed a voluntary opportunity for her to shadow the delivery of the **WOWsers** project (see Recommendation 3). This opportunity involved shadowing sessions and discussing her observations.

To provide her with an opportunity to gain hands-on experience, we also offered Agnes the opportunity to facilitate a session as one of our paid freelance facilitators.

An opportunity came up to join our Creative Learning and Engagement team at LEEDS 2023. We signposted Agnes to apply, and she was successfully recruited to join the team as Community Partnerships Officer.



The magic ingredient: These opportunities only came about as we created an open and honest relationship with Agnes, where she felt comfortable sharing her ambitions to develop her own practice. By taking the time to understand the skills and experiences Agnes was hoping to gain, we were able to identify and develop bespoke opportunities for her. She has since taken up a new role at a community radio in Leeds, where she continues to work with young people.

Creating the space to do this and being approachable beyond a short-term project is vital when creating legacy pathways for young participants.

The impact: Agnes thrived in her role and continually surprised us with her ability to deliver excellent results in short timescales. In turn, we focused on giving her the support she needed to build her confidence when undertaking work that was new to her.

While Agnes' development is notable, and a result of her own commitment and determination, many other young people were supported into new opportunities following participation on one of our Youth Development projects. Others have gone on to participate in further development projects, build their own projects and businesses, and find roles in the creative industries.

The takeaways:

- Invest in young people: they are the future of our sector, our cities and our communities.
- Look for the potential in every young person you work with and build an environment where they feel comfortable sharing their future plans and career interests with you.
- Proactively look for opportunities that will broaden their experiences and enable them to progress along their chosen pathway.

“ Laura being there from step one meant there was support. I'm now going into a career working with young people in radio and no way would I have been involved in that if I hadn't done the WOWsers facilitation opportunity and Youth Fund. ”

Agnes

Community Partnerships Officer

Closing thoughts

Throughout the Year of Culture, creative practitioners, organisations, and young people have collectively produced an inspirational youth voice and development offer for young people in Leeds and beyond. As the city continues to provide opportunities for young people beyond LEEDS 2023, the legacy of our work sits in these partnerships and the knowledge shared between collaborators.

We hope that the learning shared in this resource will inspire you to try something new or further develop your existing offer. Whatever form the activity takes, we all have the power to embrace youth voice and participation. We must harness our knowledge and power to support the next generation to develop their talents and fulfil their potential. The future of our cities, cultures and communities is in their hands.

“ I can't thank you enough! You've helped me grow as a young person and the fact that you took on the role of listening to us as young people, when not many people do, inspires me! You're my inspiration! ”

Tanisha
WOWser

To find out more about LEEDS 2023,
please visit leeds2023.co.uk



Making a Stand
Credit: Tom Joy



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