



Peer Action Collective Report

September 2024

What is the Peer Action Collective?

Through the Peer Action Collective (PAC) young people are working to make their communities safer, fairer places to live. Funded by the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iwill Fund (a joint investment between The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and the Co-op, the PAC is here to support young people to take the lead.

PAC is a ground-breaking network of Peer Researchers, Social Action Leads and Changemakers. Young people with lived experience of violence find out what needs to happen to make their area a better place to live and turn these insights into action. From influencing school practises, to improving local mental health services, co-producing violence reduction strategies or supporting more young people into employment – together, they are ensuring that young voices respond to issues that directly affect them.

On 20 March 2023, a further £7.5 million investment into PAC was announced to continue to support young people to make communities safer and fairer. Over the next five years PAC will impact the lives of over 11,000 young people in England and Wales through peer research and social action. By 2028 Co-op, the Youth Endowment Fund and the #iwill Fund will have invested £12.7 million into the PAC, creating long term and sustainable social action to help young people access opportunities and live a life free from violence.

Since the launch in 2021, PAC has seen over 6,800 young people taking on the issues affecting their local communities and creating solutions, from a financial literacy programme for women and girls in Lambeth to a 'Safe Bus' in Wales. They are taking on the biggest challenges, while also influencing hundreds of senior decision-makers across the country.

We are PAC Lancashire

Inclusive North, formerly known as Lancashire BME Network, in partnership with Blackburn with Darwen Healthy Living and Child Action Northwest are the delivery partners of Northwest England. We are passionate about listening to young people and supporting social action to make a difference on a local and national level.

Inclusive North cover East Lancashire (Hyndburn, Pendle, Burnley and Nelson) with BwD Healthy living covering Blackburn with Darwen and finally CANW covering Central Lancashire (Preston, Leyland through to Kirkham).

There are several other areas that are working on the national research project. There are situated in the Northeast (Gateshead & Middlesbrough), Bradford, Wales, Birmingham, London, Exeter and Bristol.

There are three aspects of PAC that are being focussed on.

1. Presence in Schools
2. Positive Activities
3. Trusted Adults

The Peer Action Collective (PAC) at its heart is a movement of 10- to 25-year-olds across England and Wales who want to help young people live a life free from violence. We aim bring

young people together, listening to what you have to say (including through this research) and turn what we learn into action. PAC is funded by the Youth Endowment Fund, the #iwill Fund and the Co-op Group.

The project has recruited and employed 12 young people from across Lancashire and has developed our Foundation research question which revolves around youth voices in schools and hope the research will answer the following – ‘Do young people affected by violence have an equal voice in decisions made at school, particularly, but not solely around behaviour?’.

Research on this topic is important as it is necessary to address the needs of all young people and ensure those young people at risk of being involved in violence can feel they are heard so that they can participate and have ownership so that they can grow and achieve and feel empowered.

Roles

The young people employed on this project have specific roles

Journey

As a project we have focussed on speaking to young people who may be at risk of being affected by violence or who have challenges in their daily lives at school. We made a conscious effort to speak to several young people in different settings and from different backgrounds. These included.

- Young people at risk of being expelled
- Young people whose learning had been affected by external factors
- Young people in care
- Homeless young people sharing experiences of their school life
- Young people with the youth offending team
- Young people with mental health issues
- Young people in PRU
- Young people with neuro diverse needs

Our Work

Research & Training

Peer Research: A Collaborative Approach

Peer research is a participatory research method where people with lived experience of the issues being studied are involved in directing and conducting the research. This approach aims to empower individuals to affect positive change by participating in research related to their own communities.

Key Characteristics of Peer Research

Empowerment: Gives individuals a voice and a sense of agency in shaping research.

Authenticity: Provides insights from people who truly understand the issues being studied.

Relevance: Ensures research is focused on topics that matter to the community.

Trust: Builds relationships and trust within communities.

One of the solutions which have been used throughout the world is PLA or Participatory Learning and Action.

Methods

PLA can be described as ‘a group of approaches or methods and behaviours that enable community members to analyse issues affecting them. This helps them to plan what action to take and to monitor and evaluate the results.

BwD Healthy Living delivered a training programme to provide the young people employed on PAC the necessary tools to carry out the research with their peers. All the young people received training in Participatory Learning and Action or PLA for short.

The successful use of PLA depends upon facilitators acting as catalysts and convenors and not dominating the process. Facilitators need to have the confidence that local community members can analyse their own situation. Central to this is the idea that local people are experts of their own reality.

Methods. To allow young people to lead the investigation, PLA uses several methods. These methods allow young people to express and share information and stimulate discussion and analysis. Most of the methods require minimal input from facilitators and require few resources.

The sharing of information and experiences is an important part of PLA practice and can take place in several different situations. Local people sharing information between themselves. Local people and facilitators sharing information. PLA facilitators sharing information and experiences amongst each other. When local people identify their own problems and solutions the results can be much more sustainable. The solutions identified by local people are more likely to be feasible and more likely to be implemented than those that are imposed by outsiders.

Ethical Review

Working with the delivery partners and the young people we ensured that we completed the ethical review before getting the approval to carry out the research.

Ethical review for the research is a crucial process to ensure that the rights and well-being of young participants are protected. It involves a careful assessment of the research design, methods, and potential risks and benefits.

Below are the key points that had to be discussed and evidenced which would be included in our delivery of the research.

- Consent and Assent:
- Informed consent: Obtaining informed consent from parents or legal guardians is essential.
- Assent: Seeking assent from the young participants themselves, especially for older children, is also important.

- Vulnerability: Recognizing the unique vulnerabilities of young people, such as their limited decision-making capacity or susceptibility to coercion.
- Implementing measures to protect them from harm and exploitation.
- Confidentiality: Ensuring the confidentiality of participants' data and protecting their privacy.
- Developing clear protocols for data storage, access, and sharing.
- Potential Risks and Benefits: Carefully assessing the potential risks and benefits of the research for young participants. Minimising risks and maximizing benefits.
- Withdrawal: Providing participants with the right to withdraw from the research at any time without consequences.
- Cultural Sensitivity: Respecting the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of young participants. * Ensuring that research methods are culturally appropriate.
- Research Design and Methods: Evaluating the appropriateness of research methods for young participants. Avoiding methods that could be harmful or exploitative.
- Debriefing: Providing participants with a debriefing session to address any concerns or questions they may have. Ensuring that research findings are disseminated in a way that protects the privacy of participants.

Top Findings

1. Teacher Relationships:

- Young people expressed a mix of positive and negative views about their teachers.
- Many expressed the loss of faith and trust when it related to teachers and trusting them with.
 - Daily issues
 - Personal matters relating to them
 - Some did not find teachers approachable
- Some had more positive feedback, with young people feeling teachers went the "extra mile," while others expressed frustration with teachers being unsupportive or even dismissive. And some had a more balanced view, with some teachers described as kind, but others as uncaring.
- There was a direct correlation between relationships with teachers and how much the young people enjoyed that lesson. It was also commented by many young people that having a lesson where their relationships and trust was impaired then it would have an impact on whether that young person wanted to attend the class or to not attend the school that morning.
- Young people have a largely negative view of teachers. They feel that while a few teachers care, most are dismissive, unkind, and even abusive in some cases. Young people expressed frustrations over not being listened to or supported by teachers, especially in cases of bullying or personal trauma.

2. Mental Health and Support:

- A lack of mental health support emerged as a significant issue across all groups, where young people felt their emotional needs were neglected, which in many cases also had an impact on their behaviour in school.
- Many young people found it difficult to express themselves especially when they have mental health issues. This would be affected further when some teachers would not show any understanding to that young person or their situation.
- Many young people commented that they felt that some teachers needed more training around managing mental health incidents and there was a distinct gap in understanding the changes in behaviours whether it was at school or homelife
- Some Young people felt they could approach teachers, but there was still an acknowledgment of a generational gap that made it hard for teachers to fully understand struggles.

3. Disciplinary Measures:

- Almost all groups expressed dissatisfaction with school rules and disciplinary measures.
- Disciplinary measures like detentions were described as overly strict and ineffective. Some young said that detentions made them more annoyed, and some rules were described as extreme. Some young people commented that they did not take detentions seriously.
- Many young people found rules around food, uniforms, toilet breaks, isolation rooms, after school detentions relating to care, transport and responsibilities. Some young people expressed their disconcert regarding the amount of prior notice regarding rule changes.

4. Student Voice and Influence:

- Across all groups, young people felt their voices were not genuinely heard or taken notice of, with little to no action taken on concerns raised. This felt more of a tick box exercise.
- Most young people were particularly critical of student councils, feeling they had no real influence. They stated teachers only listened to them on educational matters and ignored other concerns. They also feel that they have little say in shaping school rules or improving the school environment.
- Many young people felt that they did not feel as they were being represented if they were not high achievers. For those who consistently got into trouble felt that they did not belong which led to them feeling isolated and alone.
- A smaller group felt they had a voice but wanted more opportunities to express it.

5. School Environment

- Young people generally have negative perceptions of their school environment. They describe schools as boring, exhausting, and lacking in support, particularly when

dealing with personal challenges. In One school the presence of metal detectors and other strict security measures further contributes to a prison-like atmosphere.

- Racism and peer discrimination are also issues faced by some young people, which negatively affect their perception of the school environment.
- Many young people felt that they are being taught one way and school do not adapt to needs especially for those who have neurodiversity needs

What Came Up the Most?

- There was a distinct breakdown of communication and trust between students and teachers relating to disengaged students and more young people at risk of being affected negatively within school.
- Mental health was a significant theme, with YP across all groups emphasising that they did not feel supported or understood emotionally.
- There was a growing number of young people that felt there was a distinct barrier between themselves and the teachers resulting with a lack of understanding and expectations whether at school or relating to their home life.
- Teachers' indifference: While some teachers were praised, many were criticized for either being disengaged or not caring about personal well-being.
- Disciplinary issues and frustration with detentions and overly strict rules were recurring themes.
- Nearly all young people that were interviewed expressed their voices were not heard regardless of the platform to which they were invited to have a voice. Student councils were ineffective and felt tokenistic and with those who attended felt that their suggestions were not taken seriously and others who expressed an interest in getting involved felt that they teachers would dismiss their comments.

What Was Surprising?

1. Severe Distrust in Teachers: The level of distrust and hostility towards teachers was surprisingly high, in some groups teachers were described by swearing and expressed anger over how serious incidents like sexual assault were handled.
2. Physical Security Measures: Young person mentioned being scanned by metal detectors, adding to the prison-like atmosphere, which did not come up in the other focus groups.
3. Use of Phones for Emotional Regulation: YP described using their phones to calm down in class, which was viewed as crucial for their mental health but was forbidden by school rules. This highlights the disconnect between school policies and students' coping mechanisms.

4. Young people feel that their needs are not taken seriously
4. Positive Feedback: While most groups were highly critical of their schools, some had more positive views, feeling that teachers cared about them despite acknowledging the generational gap.

Recommendations

- Across all groups, there is a clear need for better mental health support and training for teachers (including trauma informed practice)
- More effective disciplinary measures, with young people having an input into improving rules and sanctions
- A genuine platform for student voices to be heard. School councils to be effective and reflective of all students especially the students who feel they don't belong. The need for schools to take student feedback seriously and prioritise both emotional well-being and academic success.
- Reduce teacher workload to focus on time relating to understanding young people. This would also reduce stress levels leading to a better relationship with students.
- Support for teachers- in a stressful environment which makes them react in certain ways
- Have a mediator between the teachers and the students in disputes so the student feels represented and understands the reason for their conduct
- Involve young people in developing anti bullying measures and responses to bullying
- Improved counselling services.
- Teachers receive training on how to make the way they teach more student-friendly, including pace, teaching styles, mental health, confidentiality, mannerisms, reading body language
 - *Inspire the children to want to learn about what they're preaching and, also, more support for after school.* Recalling the purpose of schools is to encourage young people to learn rather than abide by a system of conformity.
 - Varying teaching styles and techniques, making lessons more interactive e.g. kahoots.
- Peer mentors to support year 7 student inductions
- Increase teacher-parent communication to promote mutual understanding
- Detentions and isolation time to be better used to understand the needs of young people and their behaviour and incorporate young people views in shaping how to move forward to address repeat negative behaviour.
- More productive punishments- making them a cause of positive change rather than reciprocating negative behaviours for example, instead of serving a detention monotonously, make it a session where the teacher and student work on a plan that helps improve their behaviour. This includes looking at the root cause and addressing the reason for conduct, and how they can cooperate and make changes to prevent bad behaviour.
- School council needs to be less tokenistic and more active towards improving the quality of the education provision.

- Have a separate room that students can go to when they are feeling overwhelmed or angry. Cool down and safe space. Also an area teachers can identify triggers
- Have a safe word- a word students can say to teachers if they are feeling too much, prevents embarrassment.
- Feedback box in the classroom- make receiving negative feedback a positive action. Encourage a framework where teachers feel motivated to make a safe and inspiring space for students.
- Include a wellbeing box that contains items such as fidgets that helps thinking and regulation of emotions.