

September 2024

ASCEL Youth Engagement Network Pilot

Executive Summary

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1 Introduction

ASCEL's Youth Engagement Network programme is funded by Arts Council England. It supports the voices of all children and young people (CYP¹) including from under-represented and minority groups. A pilot phase of the programme took place between January and August 2024. During this time, seven library services across England² tested co-created approaches with young people aged 11-13 years old, to engage them with the library and give them an opportunity to share their ideas.

There are five overarching aims to the overall Youth Engagement Network programme:

- Ensure young people have power in libraries (by giving them a genuine opportunity to influence their local library services)
- Provide opportunities to co-create activities and shape the services on offer in their local library (and also the national network with the intention of influencing sector policy and decision-making more broadly)
- Encourage young people to learn something new, gaining skills and finding out about working in a library (with library staff learning new skills in co-creation and youth engagement)
- Support libraries across the country, building positive relationships between libraries and young people through the national network. Libraries taking part were also part of a pilot network which offered support, ideas exchange and an opportunity to reflect.

This is an executive summary of the main findings from a formative evaluation update report, submitted to ASCEL in September 2024 by independent evaluator, Marge Ainsley. It briefly shares some of the top line findings on progress against outputs and outcomes so far³.

The next phase of the programme will be developed using the learning gained from the pilot's impact and process formative evaluation.

¹ Note that CYP is used throughout the update report as shorthand for 'children and young people.'

² Luton Libraries, Norfolk Library & Information Service, Kirklees Library & Information Service, Newham Libraries, Slough Libraries, Libraries Unlimited (Barnstaple), Cornwall Libraries. Note that Burnside College (North Tyneside) and Churston & Torquay library (Torbay) withdrew from the process.

³ The programme's evaluation framework including full methodology and is available on request. For transparency in relation to N behind percentages, note that CYP feedback is based on a total of 21 feedback forms collected by five of the seven libraries only. Additional qualitative feedback was also gathered from CYP through a creative toolkit and adaptations for SEND and neurodivergent participants.

1.1 Pilot projects summary overview

Library service	Short project summary	Completed project?
Luton Libraries	Worked with a local high school librarian at Chiltern Academy to identify a suitable group of young people. The CYP were keen to create artwork which could be displayed in central library. The library worked with local artist Mary Hearne to boost the student's ideas. The result was eight art wall pieces which complement the new refurbished layout in the children's library at Central.	Yes
Norfolk Library & Information Service (Watton Library)	Ran weekly meet ups from March – June with CYP recruited from the community via social media and partner callouts. Activities initially focused on playing games and getting to know each other. The young people decided they wanted to create a scrapbook as a way of capturing thoughts and feelings. A volunteer helped to deliver creative activity. The group now meet once a month and continue to enjoy activities together.	Yes
Kirklees Library & Information Service (Almondbury Library)	The team met with a small group of CYP with complex autism at Woodley School and College for an initial meeting to establish what kind of project they wanted to create and to understand needs. The CYP chose to work on an art-based storytelling project. As a result, Kirklees commissioned The Children's Art School to help deliver sessions. In the library, activity was designed and delivered by the CYP including a story cube, story scenarios, props, costumes and musical instruments, location floor panels, characters and profiles and sensory components.	Yes
Newham Libraries	Newham's CYP wanted to design a games club using PS4 consoles, monitors and also table tennis. The group designed flyers for a launch event using new skills learnt via Canva.	Yes
Slough Libraries	Worked with CYP from Slough and Eton C of E Business and Enterprise College. Sessions included consultation with the CYP on barriers to engagement with the library and idea generation for making the library more appealing for CYP. Ideas such as producing a study pack, installing a	Yes

	smoothie station, poster promotion, activities to make the library more entertaining e.g. golden ticket promotion, and air hockey are being taken forward by the library service.	
Libraries Unlimited (Barnstaple, Devon)	Worked with neurodivergent CYP via On Track Education, an organisation for children who are not in mainstream education. The CYP decided they wanted to use the budget within the project to make physical improvements to the space, rather than attend workshops. Their suggestions (which have been actioned) included improved Borrowbox promotion on social media, a Comic Con, D&D sessions, enhancing a BookTok area, adding charging points for devices, graphic novels, and sensory items e.g. soft blankets for those with sensory issues.	Yes
Cornwall Libraries (Bodmin Library)	The library worked with Bodmin College and held an initial meeting with CYP to discuss potential ideas for a project at Bodmin Library. Several meetings were subsequently arranged and postponed due to staff restrictions/illness. The school eventually decided to withdraw, and the library sought alternative options including home schooled children and advertised more broadly to attract CYP for a project. A meeting has been set up with a local youth group. As stated above, activity will continue to get a project off the ground in early September. Whilst output and outcome data has been included in this report where possible, Cornwall will be integrated more fully in the final report at the end of the next phase. Lead-in times and challenges around recruitment are discussed in 4.2 and 5.2.	Delivering into phase two
North Tyneside (Burnside College)	-	<i>Withdrew</i>
Churston & Torquay library (Torbay)	-	<i>Withdrew</i>

1.2 Key Findings

1.2.1 Progression against monitoring outputs

Output target	Cumulative result	Status
60 CYP engage in the pilot (120 in total over the two years)	56	On track to achieve. Incoming changes to recruitment training and timelines should address any shortfall by the end of the programme. No concerns.
9 pilot network sites set up with at least 5 in Levelling Up Places (with 20 sites in all 9 ASCEL English regions by Q4 next phase)	7	On track to achieve overall programme target if enough libraries are successfully recruited and complete the programme in 2025/6. No concerns.

1.2.2 Progression of outcomes for young people

Young people enjoy the experience

- Although data on enjoyment levels is mixed, the majority of CYP enjoyed participating, with 86% agreeing that they had a good time. They predominantly used positive words to describe their experience, including fun, amazing, and delightful. Given that we can use enjoyment as an indicator for satisfaction, the interim findings indicate that participating libraries have (on the whole) created satisfactory experiences for those involved.
- CYP made several suggestions for improving their experience. Commonly occurring examples included:
 - More time for activities and more consistent meetings with the same group to ensure everyone is aware of what's happening (echoing findings from ASCEL and library staff in the process evaluation highlighted below).
 - Requests for additional activities or equipment, for example getting a PS5, and more visits to the library (rather than participating in school).
 - Some young people wanted to be more vocal and have more of their ideas heard.
 - Other suggestions included organising more visits from libraries into schools and having book-related competitions for younger children. One respondent also suggested having more girls involved in the activities.

Young people learn something new

- 71% of CYP reported gaining new knowledge and skills, including digital marketing, creative skills, and library-related knowledge. Bringing in external expertise indicatively added more opportunities to learn enhanced skills, for example working with artist practitioners led to a variety of additional outcomes for the CYP including developing writing skills.

Young people develop soft skills

- CYP suggested they had gained a range of new soft skills as a result of being involved, for example, teamwork, organisation, time management and communication (with 76% reporting improved communication). This indicates that the activities being co-created have not only provided enjoyment but are providing life skills which are likely to be useful in school, volunteering or work settings in the future. There is also some evidence to suggest that the CYP felt empowered, especially those projects where engagement was happening with libraries outside of school assignments or settings.

Young people increase personal resilience

- 71% of CYP reported that their confidence improved, and 86% felt proud of their achievements. There are isolated examples within the qualitative data where libraries reported specific instances of individuals gaining greater confidence. For example, one teacher working with the Kirklees Library and Information Service team described how a student was initially reluctant to participate due to anxiety, but successfully took part in the end and was keen to return to the library in the future.

Young people feel their voice has been heard

- Despite the above finding related to improvements, 100% of CYP felt that their opinions, feelings, and ideas were listened to, and 95% felt involved and included in co-designing activities. It was particularly striking to see how library services found inclusive ways to ensure neurodivergent CYP or those with SEND were able to voice their opinions.

Young people feel they have greater ownership of the library

- There is some evidence to suggest that young people felt more 'at home' in their library space as a direct result of being involved. 90% of CYP said they felt more welcome in the library, and two-thirds expressed a propensity to visit the library more often.

Unintended outcomes

- There were three unintended isolated outcomes noted in the update report. These include two parents becoming friends; an older sibling getting involved as a volunteer; and a creative practitioner team member taking their SEND learning into other future project commissions.

“[Something new that I didn’t know before is...] There are other people like me.” (CYP)

“The young people loved the idea of being involved in decision making, particularly around stock selection. They were interested in processes and the carbon reduction possibilities libraries offer.” (Library staff)

“It was a wonderful experience. I felt relaxed and calm.” (CYP)

*“Many of the young people felt the significance of a library and why they need to exist. Some had no idea just how big Central Library was and what was truly on offer for them and other members.”
(Library staff)*

“[Something it has inspired you to do?] Do art for GSCE.” (CYP)

1.2.3 Progression of outcomes for library staff

Development of skills and knowledge

- Library staff improved their skills in co-creating activities with CYP, with some notable increases in confidence and capability in designing and delivering such projects. The report suggests that defining what success ‘looks like’ for library staff skills development would be useful for phase two; now that baselines have been set.
- Staff experienced significant professional development through practical engagement in the projects, particularly in working with neurodivergent and SEND CYP. Alongside some specific learning linked to specific library service experiences e.g. how to deal with challenging or disrupting behaviour, frequently reported examples included working with schools, consulting with young people and partnership working.
- Library staff reported that they can better communicate the value of this type of work. For example, 86% suggested they feel better equipped to articulate the value of co-created work in libraries as a direct result of the programme and 86% said they can describe what successful co-created work ‘looks like’ more confidently⁴.
- Although there are isolated examples of feedback which reflect that some staff struggled with the brief from ASCEL being so open, others relished that it was not prescriptive. Alongside improvements to onboarding and recruitment (covered below), differentiated support and continuation of 1-1 tailored help is likely to be needed again in phase two.

Increased confidence in working with CYP and/or co-created projects

- 71% of library staff reported increased confidence in delivering co-created projects and greater empathy towards CYP. Being involved was also an opportunity for some staff to develop confidence in working specifically with neurodivergent and SEND-identifying CYP.
- However, there have been instances where decision-making has had to fall with the library service rather than collaboratively with the CYP. The ‘rub’ that exists between local authority managed environments and realistically implementing the ideas that CYP have has potentially reduced confidence in the co-creation process (this is interrogated further in the process evaluation and noted in the below summary).

⁴ A range of advice for phase two library staff has been collated in collaboration with pilot library staff. These can be found verbatim on page 58 of the report in a ‘top tips checklist’ format.

Library staff develop new contacts with other library services

- 86% of library staff gained new contacts at other library services, potentially strengthening external relationships. There is also isolated evidence to indicate that the project helped develop relationships within existing teams internally too.

Library staff have greater propensity to work on CYP co-created projects in the future

- 100% of library staff could see the potential of using library spaces for co-created projects, and 57% were very likely to work on such projects in the future. Staff suggested they had been inspired in some way, for example to re-run a similar project, or to work in creative ways with SEND children. Three library staff also reported that they had been inspired to roll-out the learning from the programme to other staff in their branch libraries. This suggests that some learning is potentially being cascaded outside of the immediate project teams.

Unintended outcomes

- Whilst not an intended outcome in the evaluation framework, library staff commonly described how they enjoyed being part of the programme (despite the challenges they faced). The report finds that this satisfaction can be attributed to two common aspects of the process: being given permission to experiment (learn, fail, try again) and the ongoing support provided by ASCEL.
- Conversely, there were very few suggestions for improvements to the experience of library staff. The most commonly occurring point made was the need for more training in how to recruit young people.
- There are already some isolated but important examples of legacy to note. For example, Kirklees Library and Information Service have directly used some of their SEND CYP consultation, thinking, activities and learning to inform part of their new children's reading for pleasure programme.

“You almost kind of have to go through this experience and fail, in a way, don't you, to understand what to do next time.” (Library staff)

“It gave us a deeper insight into the library from the perspective of a neurodiverse young person.” (Library staff)

“It was my first time co-creating and I was a little nervous, but it worked out really well and it has given me the confidence to do it again. It was great to have the training and support sessions from ASCEL to fall back on and know that we could share ideas with others around the country if needed.” (Library staff)

1.2.4 Process evaluation highlights

The process evaluation provides recommendations drawn directly from the evidence for improving the next phase of the Youth Engagement Network programme. It finds that the main aspects that worked well are as follows:

- The quarterly peer meetings provided a positive space for sharing challenges, ideas, and developing independence. They helped to generate a supportive and friendly

environment, with the frequency of quarterly meetings being seen as appropriate to manage within their existing workload. These should continue to be held, with pilot case study library services brought in as mentors.

- Although more encouragement is necessary (covered below), libraries on the whole appreciated having the freedom and permission to experiment and fail. This brought integrity to the projects and led to authentic relationship-building with children in some cases. Authenticity as a key message should continue to be pushed in phase two onboarding, with practical points from pilot failures used to demonstrate it is absolutely possible to fail, learn and achieve by the end of the process.
- The report finds the project was a big leap for many library services. It should not be under-estimated how much has been achieved especially by those who are working under challenging local authority conditions. The evidence suggests that finding ways to celebrate achievements from the programme to help raise morale and encourage continuation of co-created work may be useful.
- The pilot was successful in challenging perceptions about young people, for example libraries were surprised by how engaged the young people were and their capability and willingness to continue working with the library. It would be useful to consider legacy evaluation for pilot projects to track progression (or no progression, and why).
- Training by Participation People was a 'cementing point' that brought external expertise into the mix and filled gaps in ASCEL's existing expertise. This training should be repeated (and broadened to include EDI/audience development), ideally taking place earlier in the onboarding process for phase two.
- The programme provided an opportunity for library staff to engage with partners they had not worked with before. However it did highlight gaps in knowledge with this type of approach, and some level of partnership development training may be useful to bring in for phase two, for example via the NCCPE and their partnership cycle/resources⁵.
- Library staff experienced continuing professional development (CPD) through practically trying this type of work out. They developed skills in consulting with CYP, leading to useful feedback and changes in the library space. Those working with neurodivergent and SEND CYP gained a greater understanding of communication methods e.g. if children are non-verbal. This learning could be brought together in a toolkit for the sector at the end of phase two.
- Despite some issues (briefly outlined below) monitoring and evaluation requirements were reported as being at the right level. Staff valued the flexibility of data collection tools and the permission to adapt approaches based on the needs of their CYP.

Overall, library staff valued ASCEL's supportive, understanding, and collaborative approach, which significantly contributed to the success and positive experience of the programme.

The report finds that:

- 100% of library staff described their relationship with ASCEL as positive.
- Staff praised the support and communication from the Youth Programme Network Project Manager, describing it as "collaborative" rather than judgemental.

⁵ <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/tutorials/principles-partnership-working>. It might also be useful to refer to the Engaging Libraries toolkit partnership area (although this is aimed at partnerships with HEIs and IROs). https://public-engagement.librariesconnected.org.uk/toolkit/starting-project-partnership#section_7

- 100% rated the overall project design and delivery support as either excellent or good.
- 86% rated the training provided by Participation People as excellent or good.
- The Youth Programme Network Project Manager was frequently described as "positive," "engaging," "helpful," and "enthusiastic."
- Staff appreciated the encouragement and support from ASCEL, which helped them continue despite any challenges they were facing.
- 86% of library staff stated they would be very likely to work with ASCEL again in the future.

The formative evaluation finds that the main challenges and learning points were as follows:

- Due to varying factors discussed in the report, including the need to get onboarding off the ground very quickly, some library services did not fully appreciate the time commitment required, and there was variation in understanding what true co-creation entails. The time-sensitive schedule for recruiting young people, building trust, and relationship building with partners prior to delivery, was too tight - especially for those with limited partnership development experience and an already strained capacity. Two library services withdrew as a direct result of these challenges⁶. By the time CYP had been recruited, activity in some instances clashed with the school exam period which led to reduced participation. Although SEND and neurodivergent CYP were engaged, ASCEL would have wanted to see greater representation of marginalised groups within the CYP (for example across LGBTQ+ and disability). The recruitment and onboarding process has already begun to be refined by ACEL for phase two, including a new kickstarter meeting to capture attrition earlier. This new approach will include revised messaging, modelling what 'good' co-creation and partnership working 'looks like', and earlier training with Participation People (as outlined above).
- Despite the positivity of the majority of staff to continue doing this work in some way, in reality there is a concern that capacity, budget and time will hamper co-creation and ultimately embedding learning from the programme. It should be noted that pilot organisations did well to step up and deliver a project like this within the current library sector landscape (e.g. cuts, restructures, cost of living crisis etc). There is no easy solution to this. However, the report makes various recommendations around finding out the needs of participating libraries and support needed to gain senior management level buy-in, and continuing the wider ongoing work that ASCEL have underway in lobbying for co-creation and youth engagement work at a strategic level.
- The intended national network meetings did not happen during the pilot, mainly due to the needs of the target audiences (e.g. SEND, neurodivergent CYP) who reported they were uncomfortable with national-level communication either in person or online. ASCEL are already looking towards recruiting an external partner to help develop and deliver an innovative national network that more readily meets the needs of the types of CYP the library teams are recruiting.
- Perhaps unsurprisingly, frequency of engagement with the CYP was relative to the success of the project. Those working with CYP over a longer, more sustained period (e.g. those who got up to speed quickly within the existing timeframes) were able to develop a more positive and trusted relationship. Using examples from the pilot as

⁶ It should be noted that both organisations described how they left the project with resources and a greater understanding of co-creation to take into future projects.

case studies in phase two onboarding may help to show new library services the benefits of investing time in getting to know each other; building trust over multiple sessions prior to any idea generation.

- Although the pilot was seen as an opportunity to test and try out data collection tools prior to phase two, there were some challenges with monitoring and evaluation data. These included collecting demographic data about the CYP and being confident to adapt tools provided for SEND and neurodivergent participants. Recommendations have been made to address these issues for phase two, including changes to the evaluation briefing for staff, messaging around collecting demographic data (including sharing best practice case studies which show the benefits), and bringing in specialised training providers (potentially outside the sector) to upskill staff in gathering specific feedback from SEND and neurodivergent participants.
- Co-creating with non-verbal CYP was challenging, highlighting the need for more specialised support and training for those working with SEND participants. As outlined earlier, sharing this specific learning from pilot projects will be useful for phase two organisations.
- Initial targets in the bid were set too high. This could not have been pre-empted until the pilot had been delivered, and both impact and process evaluation completed. The evidence in the report suggests that this type of work is more about group need and responding to it, rather than forcing numbers i.e. depth rather than breadth. Limiting age groups to 11-13 years was also found to be unnecessary, with some library services working with children up to the age of 14. It is recommended that reviewing targets in light of this progress update report with Arts Council England would be useful.