Digital Playbook

Mindset Revolution:
youth voice on mental health

What we learnt

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MINDSET
revolution

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Content

1 Mindset Revolution: an overview

Mindset Revolution is about young people creating their own spaces of participation, where they can build a collective voice that can be heard loud and clear by mental health services and policymakers.

It combines arts-based methods like Legislative Theatre and a digital participation process to test a new approach to youth participation. Young people also evaluated if this youth-led approach works, and this playbook shares our findings.

Mindset Revolution is funded by UK Research and Innovation and the Royal Society of Arts. The partnership is led by the University of Birmingham (Sonia Bussu) and includes: Manchester Metropolitan University (James Duggan, Zarah Eve), Youth Focus North West, Katy Rubin, Platoniq, 42nd Street, Reform Radio, and GM-i Thrive.

Leading the whole process 22 young people from Greater Manchester: Ali Coleman, Bolu Onalaja, Charlie, Cicka, Chimwemwe, Dan, Destiny, Jordan, Juliet, Lee, Linton, Maame, Millissa, Mahdiyyah, MJ, Oscar, Prateek, Saira, Sam, Ummay, Zainab, Zara.
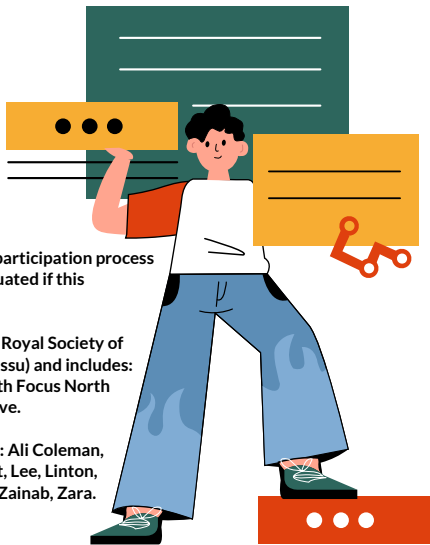
So how did it all work?

Three groups of young people designed and evaluated their own spaces and methods of participation.
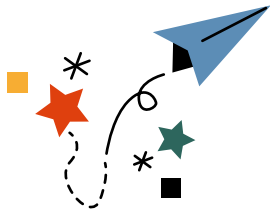
Legislative Theatre

This part of Mindset Revolution builds on a previous project called Optimistic Minds where young people worked with Legislative Theatre (LT) practitioner Katy Rubin to create a play on mental health. Under Mindset Revolution, four young people from the Optimistic Minds group trained as facilitators with Katy. They then worked with six new young people to create their own youth-led play on mental health.

Digital Participation

Six young people co-designed a) a digital process for youth participation focused on mental health support; b) an online platform where young people can create and share resources on mental health. They used a very interactive digital platform called Open Spaces (Decidim), hosted by our Barcelona-based partner Platoniq.

Youth Research

Seven young people lead on researching and evaluating the project, using various creative and innovative methods, including poetry, drawings and podcasting. Through Legislative Theatre and Digital Participation, we developed innovative ideas to better youth mental health, which we put together into a Manifesto For Change In Youth Mental Health.

This short playbook gathers our impressions on this project based on our own participation in it, as well as interviews, focus groups and reflection sessions with other young people and partners.

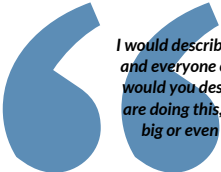# This is how the young people describe being part of this project:

"The project is, I feel, good because it's something that we've seen develop."

"It was nice to meet all different kinds of people. And things like this [mental health], we usually don't talk about where I come from."

I really enjoy working with people who have, like, a similar vision, as to what I want to change in mental health and policymaking around mental health. [W]e've made some really significant and important pieces and reflections which reflect a range of different marginalized voices. And I hope that we can continue to advocate for everybody's mental health measures in place, policies.

I feel like when we come together as a research group, we kind of all shared similar experiences, whether that be from having an intersectional background, being queer, being black , being global majority and I feel that's really informed a lot of the work that we have done, what we're continuing to try and shape and then on top of that, we also work with legislative theater and the digital group, which has only just like elevated everything we did.

I think it's been so good that we've been able to do that because we've all been able to share our ideas. [...] I mean, it was just nice to be very free, and to take charge.

I would describe it using really evocative, descriptive words that would highlight how passionate we and everyone else involved was, was, how do I describe something that you just do naturally? How would you describe something that you don't have to think so much about in the sense of why you are doing this, why are we all banding together to advocate for something no matter how scary or big or even trivial it may seem. [...] I think it's been a learning process. You want to grow your knowledge and you wanna, you just want to be involved.

As one of our partner organisations said: *"It's the relationships - it doesn't matter how shiny the project is, it's the relationships that keep people coming back."*

2 Legislative Theatre

Legislative Theatre (LT) is an incredibly powerful participatory approach for improving people's lives by developing policy and practice through a performance based on people's lived experiences. It was developed in Latin America by Augusto Boal in the 1990s.

In our project, the play, Mask To Break, is led and developed by young people in Greater Manchester, based on their lived experiences of mental health issues. Charlie, Juliet, Lee and Ummay trained as LT facilitators with our partner Katy Rubin. We then recruited new young people to work with them and develop this play.

*Flyer for Mask to Break Legislative Theatre play, by Prateek Gupta*
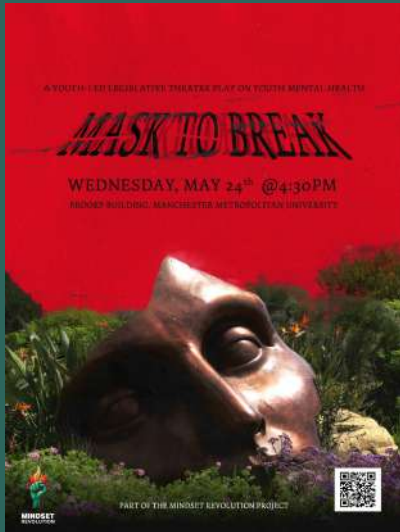
One of the peer researchers summarised the <u>main scenes of the play:</u>

A. A student fails to physically hand in their homework, not for the first time. They are embarrassed by their teacher in front of their class. In the following conversation with their teacher, they try to communicate that they believe they have ADHD but are dismissed.

B. The student's parents are then summoned for a conversation with the teacher, with the student present, regarding the issue regarding their homework. The teacher is rude and dismissive and mean, insulting the parents, and implying that they aren't trying enough regarding raising their child.

C. Following this, the audience hears a series of voicemails, presumably belonging to the student. In which seemingly some time has passed. They reveal that the individual has been forced out of their parent's home, is now homeless, and has been prescribed medication for an episode of 'psychosis'.

D. The performance then follows the individual as they attend an appointment with two doctors and a support worker, to alter their prescribed medication and gain some recognition of their self-diagnosed ADHD. Here again the individual is dismissed, with their at tempts of communication shut down and ignored. Their social worker's inactivity and seeming apathy for the appointment contributes to the suppression of the individual's voice.

E. In a powerful concluding scene, the performance follows the individual as they attempt to get any degree of help. They bounce from service to service, finding no help from their GP, charities or any other body. Endless inconsequential referrals take place. The individual being 17 is refused by CAHMS as the waiting-list would exceed the amount of time for the individual to reach 18, facing the even longer adult waiting lists. The performance ends with the individual collapsing to the ground in exhaustion of the constant circling and the failure of the system.

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Legislative Theatre is not just a play. The scenes transform through interactions with an audience of community members and policymakers that are "spect-actors". The facilitators helped the audience reflect on the problems they saw in the play and encouraged them to change the scenes to challenge oppressive rules. Then working with policymakers, the audience and the actors co-developed policy ideas to improve things. Check out the report from our performance <u>here.</u>

One of the peer researchers made some sketches to capture what she was seeing and experiencing during the play.
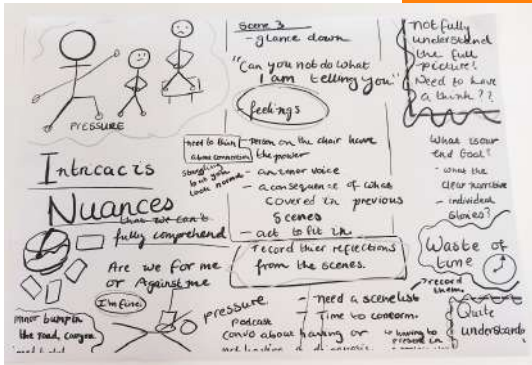
Another researcher reflected:

"I found it comforting how the audience were enthusiastically engaging with the interactive phase of the performance, where audience members were giving the opportunity to talk over issues facing characters in the performance, and even join the performance and repeat a scene, adopting the role of an existing or new character. The performance evoked a passionate reaction from the audience."

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What was it like for young people to be part of this process?

So I would say that the legislative theatre project was meant to kind of work with people who are kind of directly affected by issues around mental health.

We've provided a space for young people such as ourselves to sit and ultimately, play and look at the way certain institutions or just any, any external spaces and places that they reside in, how that certain space that they reside in the world, how that plays a part in the daily wellbeing or the lack thereof. In doing so, so that we could all come together and try to kinda like, lift, not lift each other. Yeah, be like that caring pat on the back and be like, 'Hey, we see what you're seeing.' 'Yes, this isn't right. This could be done better.' And, we, everyone in that space, in that room just has that common aim to know that we need to do something about this. And, we made, we made steps towards that in the forms of like theatre games, just like sitting down and researching or, say, sitting down and having a look into let's say key memories in our lives.

We have been meeting up with the end goal of having a non-scripted play that highlights recurring problems that people know and have been knowing, but aren't able to voice them across to the current mental health systems we have. The aim of this play is to encourage those people to speak up, and find different solutions. We also uncover this through rehearsals, games, and asking open-ended questions to each other.

A lot of work goes into facilitation! When we were participants making and performing our play, watching Katy lead, I didn't quite realise the work it takes; it's because she's been doing it for so long. Now we can see the little swan legs going under the water: Katy the duck! Like any creative process, you see someone who's been doing it for ages and you think they're really talented, but actually they've been working really hard and practicing for a long time. Which makes facilitation feel daunting but also more possible: this is something we can also learn to be good at!

To make the play, we start with games and discussions. We're learning how to teach the rules of the games, but another thing we're learning is how to discuss the games, and think about what they're leading a group to understand. Like, this game is about destabilising people so that they can imagine things differently, while this game is about revealing ingrained rules in our world. It's interesting how something that seems like a simple game – if you really think about it and engage with it, the game can yield interesting results. I've been realising how conscious you have to be about what you're saying: so that you're including everyone, going through the process with them rather than doing it to them.

What I hope that [the play] has achieved is making a really good piece of artwork [...] accurately representing what people have experienced and been through. […] And I also hoped for people who aren't policymakers who also kind of saw the play as a part of the theatre process and they can see that these are all these problems, and what can I do to kind of help people experiencing this and what can I do to kind of effect change in some kind of way? And even if that's like a very small way, like maybe they know somebody who's on anti-psychotics, so they can think okay, so things are kind of hard for them actually. And they are kind being very nice to them, and that the stigma has been kind of lessened because they thought that [the play] was yeah, moving but it's gonna have a positive impact.

Katy Rubin, the Legislative Theatre practitioner that trained the young people told us that under Mindset Revolution, they set up a programme for these 4 young people, which worked really well. She said:

> *So they got to have their own space of 8 weeks just to practice a lot of things. [...] We had a workbook that they were able to use. We had assignments. We had the process of giving feedback. So we really had created a lot of space for it, and then they were so ready to lead that project with the other young people, and I didn't come, and it was great that I didn't come, because when I'm in the room I don't shut up right. [...] So several of the young people who've been facilitating are already working on other projects with me and other people that I put them in touch with, which is awesome.*

This process produced three important policy ideas that are now part of our Manifesto. The policymakers in the room made a few commitments and now we'll keep an eye on progress.

3 Digital Participation

This was probably the most experimental part of the project and partners and the other groups for a bit didn't have a clue what was happening in this space! Between January and July 2023, a group of six young people (Ali, Bolu, Linton, Prateek, Zainab and Zarah) met weekly with the project lead Sonia Bussu and Marta Anducas from Platoniq, who connected on Zoom from Barcelona. They used an interactive, participatory platform called <u>Decidim,</u> where participants can create and engage in digital collaborations. The digital part was an attempt to bring into the project the voice and ideas of young people across Greater Manchester, including the groups that work with our partners Youth Focus North West and 42nd St.

Bit by bit the young people designed an interactive space that was both
a place where to create and share resources on youth mental health
(e.g., blogs and podcasts and an "awesome map" of non medical places
that feel safe when you're unwell) and a participatory process where to:

- Map problems surrounding mental health that young people want to
  talk about
- Create proposals to address these problems
- Discuss and vote for proposals in online dialogues on Zoom with other
  young people and policymakers. We recorded live notes of our
  discussions here

The three final policy ideas developed through this process were added to our Manifesto. They reflect the
concerns of young people experiencing intersectional discrimination within the mental health system, who
feel their diverse experiences are not recognised and validated. In this video, Bolu shows what the platform
looks like. In the end this part of the project tested a youth-led online participatory model that young people
can use over and over (and keep developing!) to discuss and influence various policy issues, not just mental
health. Anyone can now register and participate!

What was it like for the young digital co-designers?

So we're called the digital participation group, responsible for like the online platform. We also create content, blogs, and that kind of thing. New ideas about the digital platform and the digital participatory process.

Creating a digital platform has been a positive thing. I believe it's been a positive thing because we've been able to come together as people to share ideas. We worked well as a group, even having different experiences, but we also had the right guidance, because if we didn't have that kind of guidance, we'd just be going in circles.

I feel like we work together as a collective. I feel like over the past weeks, as we've seen development, seen what we've actually done and put into play the process, I think it's quite good to see it visually as well as see the actual parts working together. Being able to put your own words onto a blog and create these resources. It gives a different perspective on people's actual lived experiences. I feel the project incorporates many things, and it is quite pioneering.

I agree. We give space to different opinions, for instance through the recent survey we ran. We went out to ask other students and young people in Manchester to get their opinions on mental health.

I like what we're doing and I hope we can do it again in other places.

It's been really nice to be a part of this project. You know, we've had different elements and groups. So it's been nice to see everyone's involvement in the project and also to see the platform that we've been creating progress over time. To see things getting added on there when it comes together, like with blogs, with links to images, it's been really nice to see the process of that, like develop, like, like a little baby.

I've been enjoying it, yes […] Changing mental health and also creating new ideas. How to get young people to interact, especially people of colour.

It took time for partners and the other groups to start engaging with the platform and the participatory process, but this is a resource that young people and partners alike are starting to recognise as very valuable to support and amplify in-person participation.

We will definitely continue to explore the digital engagement element as well. I don't think that we've given it enough focus this time around. [Partner]

Platoniq, who worked closely with the young people and are experts in digital participation, were inspired by the young people's creative engagement with the various components of the platform. They told us:

So [working with young people and seeing how they are using the platform] is very, very interesting [also combined with Legislative Theatre] which is also why we are here, to learn. And we do believe [digital participation] has to do with bridging [the digital] and physical world. […] [During the online dialogues] I was really impressed by the quality of the conversation. How you position yourself… The type of questions which makes [the process] more powerful. [How you are using the platform] as a public square, which is basically the digital platform for me. So I think I was very impressed. And I, this is where we learn the most because we're missing that type of very intensive emotional preparation of what the participation space is. So I'm very thankful.

So this is the first process [that we host] that it's from outside our organization, a very interesting process. And so I think that it's the first step for us to have our Open Spaces [platform] really as an open space for organizations that maybe cannot afford, or [if it's not] necessary for them to have a a platform like this, but they need [to run a process]. And in this platform. […] [Because we were working with young people on mental health] we had already a framework about safer spaces, but now we know a lot more about it. So we have learned a lot about opening safe open spaces to different communities.

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4 A Participatory Evaluation

Being a researcher in a project like this one, with many moving parts, was challenging. We met weekly with Sonia Bussu, James Duggan and Zarah Eve, but we didn't have tasks to do, we had to shape them ourselves and decide how we wanted to evaluate the project. This was a bit confusing at first. One of the researchers reflected, *"at the start it was hard to keep [your feet] on the ground at times. It's kind of like little turtles running around the beach."*

It took us a while to find our place, but *"the open conversations about our personal experiences helped us to understand our role in the project". Some of us used poetry to convey what we were seeing and experiencing. Chim wrote two great poems to describe the work of the digital group (We're Open) and the Legislative Group (Late Legislation).*
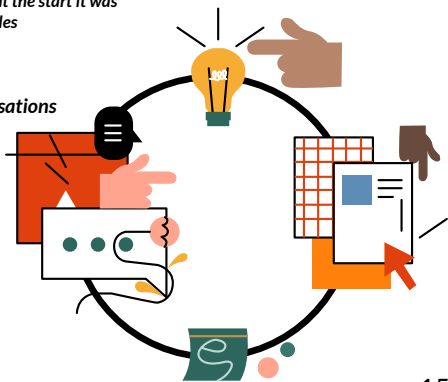
We're open

We are creating space
Soft warm and delicate in taste
Unlike the sour medicinal one we've become accustomed to
We will no longer savour wood covered in lukewarm vanilla
Can you not acknowledge that for the brain these white walls and green chairs are killer?

We are creating, curating and innovating meaningful conversations

An intimate syndicate,
A voice for a generation
That for many years was left to rot in waiting,
A system of vindication
Were not lying when we say the whole ordeal is frustrating
So we've built a platform with a new blueprint that's a little less invalidating

Where we will have open dialogue on our solution
It's a mindset revolution

Late Legislation

The liberating licks of tobacco can only linger for so long

There's not enough people in today matey boy what's going on

The corporate shadow laps up the sunshine that glisten in my eyes

They're scrapping admin jobs to absolutely no surprise
You can threaten to leave but that won't change a thing
Your capitalist bossman has already moved onto his next ting

The power you thought you had is dwindling at the picket line

You start to quite quit and tell all your other co-workers your fine

A stranger cladded in white between the exhausted crowds is waving at you

The individual calls out to you that the theatrics of your existence are about to be changed

You don't have to live your life enraged
For I am the angel for legislation
Here to build a better life for you a new foundation

Feel the sensation, vibration of your newly found spirit of affirmation
This toxicity doesn't serve you anymore
And I'm going to put plans in place so you shouldn't have to suffer in this convenience store

The theatre of your life will come into law
So you don't have to fight constantly against the bourgeois

Liberated from the shackles of institution
Don't you worry my dear you'll get your restitution

Other members of the group took pictures, wrote notes and reflections during our visits to the other groups, as part of our participant observations. We also facilitated a reflection session with partners in April 2023 and five interviews with partners in June 2023. We had several conversations and reflections with other young people throughout the project, and in particular we organised two focus groups in June 2023. All this data informed this evaluation, and in particular the next sections on what worked, what did not, and lessons for future youth participation.

But what was it like to be a peer researcher in Mindset Revolution?

As a member of the research group, the core of our part of this project was in taking an 'evolutionary and exploratory approach'. This meant a qualitative, open-ended way of working that allowed us to move with new information and to explore answers as they came to get a deeper understanding of their implications and meaning. This has been a benefit to ourselves and the project.

One of the unexpected developments of this work was podcasting. It became a really important way for young people to make sense of their experience of mental health.

" Data-collection has driven the work forward, meaning that we're following where young people lead and giving our results a clearer foundation. This has also allowed for new scope – for example, our podcast came out of the research group's discussions on why youth voice mattered and was not part of the original planning. Working on that podcast has led to some valuable discussions (which were highlighted by many members of the research group as one of the more valued aspects of the work, allowing for learning from and connecting with people of different experiences) and some developing skills – the editing, scripting, and recording was all done by us."

5 What Worked

At the heart of the project was a commitment to equality. This equality was in part a commitment to work for a more socially just and equal society but also to make sure we treated each other as equals. Being paid to participate in the project was a real demonstration of this equality, with all the academics and professionals we worked with on the project. This is what payment meant to us:

Paying for young people's time. Yeah. That's probably a big thing to create more equal relationships.

And we were paid for our work! This was a benefit practically (as paid work is useful in many ways) and ethically (as it really reinforced the democratic values and principles of this project to put all members of the team on the same footing). There was also flexibility in this, as it allowed people with more time and input to earn more as they put more into the project. Your work directly translated into a return, and this visible consequence to contribution is highly appealing and motivating to young people accustomed to a system where bureaucracy obfuscates much of the work being done. Work that visibly lives its values is more appealing to young people, who are largely disenfranchised and cynical.

We are a group of young people with experience of mental health issues and living lives that are complex and involve facing financial challenges. So, it was important that the project removed as many barriers to us taking part as possible. Some of this meant opening a space for one of us to use the internet for an online session, but for others it meant having an inclusive group space. This is how the project helped keep us involved:

The method itself is intensely flexible for us too. Young people are often busy and have many demands that they can struggle to keep up with (school, work, mental health needs, family or cultural demands, identity-based concerns, etc) and that means that people aren't always able to attend every session. Being able to participate online allowed me to still participate and be involved while having an emergency and having to pick up my kids.

I think I enjoyed that we didn't need to be perfect. That, that really made a massive difference. Like we didn't need to be perfect and that kind of made it perfect. You know, we... we came together with all sorts of ideas and, and plans and some worked, some didn't. But like we still managed to create all of this. So I think that was the best part. You know, we were allowed to be human during this project. And that was the best part.

That brings us together, it helps us to relate over... was it [name] that said before about stereotypes? That, you know, when you have no connection to someone in any sort of way, all you think of is the bad stereotypes that have been dropped on to this person or what you think this person is but we all have something that connects us. And [...] we all have something that we've probably related to each other that makes it easier for us to sit here and open up to each other about, about things. It brings a perspective as well, perspective that you're not alone. You're not the only one going through this, which means, you know, you don't have to isolate yourself. You don't have to....You don't have to feel like you're doing this whole journey by yourself.

With [researcher] being here in case anyone doesn't have internet or can't, you know, just can't join us, for whatever reason. I feel like youth participation is sustainable for young people that want to do it, like want to put in the work like a lot of people will have their own personal lives. You know, they'll have families or they'll have girlfriends, boyfriends, etc. That's just life right? But in order to make it sustainable, you need to accommodate for those people that may have a different... a different life to you, a different cultural norm and relation towards their own life.

As a project focused on communicating the voice of young people to policy makers, the process grew out of on-going dialogues that were supportive and worked to amplify each other's views if we felt that someone was not being heard.

I am enjoying this project because it's all slowly starting to come together. And I feel like we're creating a very good, safe space on our platform. I like how if someone doesn't like something, we all come together as a group and we're quite open to say how we feel and what we think, and we share our opinions and stuff. I think we work well in a team together.

You know, I mean, like, it's been, it's been very natural, and we've not really had any serious conflicts, I'm gonna say. So that's been good for me, which has made me want to participate more, because I feel like if I came into a group every week, and there was like a leader, this is what I'm talking about. With the democracy side of it. There's no one leader. There's just everyone talking about their experiences, talking about the research that we're doing, and that's great. Yeah, and I think that's effective in like... sustaining it.

If, let's say I'm trying to get a point across or say something and someone can't hear me but someone can, someone else would always speak out and be like, Oh, I can hear [name] in the background or do the same thing for others. If I see something in the chat that that you know that the people speaking haven't noticed that someone has said something in the chat. I feel like it's it doesn't seem like much but when you try to make a point, when you try to say something and you're kind of in a shutdown or not heard or not listened to, it discourages you from like talking more in the future..."

We really appreciated the project's approach to the research. It built on our life experiences and what we were interested in learning more about.

I really just enjoy, like, having like genuine conversations about things and issues that especially around like the mental health services that have like, really aggravated me in a sense and like, made me mad, but to have other people be like, 'Yeah, this makes me mad' or that, you know, these sorts of statistics make me mad, like, we need to make a change about it. And feel like you can actually be the change like, you know, I said obviously in one of the quotes, that in past projects, I felt you know, they haven't really listened to us, but I feel like with this one, it's very much is just youth led, what can I say any more than that?

I thought it could have been a lot more clinical which I was a bit worried about, you know, like I thought, you know, research. There's so many different forms, qualitative, quantitative, etc. So I was like, coming into it thinking like, you need me to know all of these things, but really, I just needed to know my own experience, appreciate other people's experiences. And then we all came together collectively to say, all right, these are the issues that we've highlighted. Let's do the research based on that.

The project was youth led. Although we had support when we needed it. We took active roles during significant phases of the research, deciding what we would do and then we, for example, conducted the interviews or analysed the policy proposals.

The difference between this research and other research is it's youth led. So normally people will just come and say, what do you think of this and that's it. Or they come and give you vouchers, and I love vouchers, don't get me wrong, I like getting food, clothes and whatnot. I got an amazon voucher the other day for telling someone what I think. It's nice. I've not spent it. It's just there... it's just chilling on my desk. I feel like a lot of research projects just take us for granted. Because we have lived experiences, that we have issues, and then think a voucher is enough.

The interviews were, like they felt very, youth led. Like we were the ones asking the questions, not just the interviews, even when we were discussing the policies and stuff. It felt like what we had to say is what was gonna you know, be put into the policies that they're discussing what to change about policy one. That was really that was really useful work, because we sat down we talked about important topics in those break-out rooms... we would never be allowed to be about usually and we gathered all sorts of ideas. We put them together, we merged them. You guys were in the background, just listening, just being there, if we needed you...

We interviewed the partners and they really recognised that this was a youth-led project that put young people at the centre of the process. For example we worked with youth participants from the Optimistic Minds legislative theatre project and trained them up to become legislative theatre facilitators during Mindset Revolution.

It really, definitely puts young people's voices at the centre. And I think it's a good way of getting people to think maybe a little bit differently about some of the problems that young people face, because it's there in front of them. And they're able to kind of... people are able to get up and think about how the situation could be different and things like that. [...] But also, I suppose what we're trying to do is put the emphasis on young people who have that lived experience being the ones who design the research, and what we're doing in terms of like the questions that we're asking other young people. They're the ones kind of delivering that. So it's very much again, trying to suppose, put their voices at the centre of that, and make sure they are the people who are kind of driving that forward a little bit and balancing that with, I suppose, what we get asked to do by people at the NHS.

I wanted to support those young people to kind of move on to that next stage, which they did in Mindset Revolution, where they were not just being [legislative theatre] actors, but also like training to facilitate that process. I thought that was a really nice way of ensuring that their voice kind of stayed on through into this project. But also they got a chance to develop more skills around actually facilitating that process.

So I think that it's has been very interesting to create and to co-create all the processes, all the components [on Decidim]. And okay now we have a lot of components... young people were so creative! [...] And what has been very interesting, this creativity, and the all the actions and the proposals than came from the young people [...] how they reflect and link these proposals to their experience [through storytelling]."

6 What could have been better

A lot of what could have been improved with the project came down to a question of time and resources. More time would have enabled us to develop better, stronger relationships within and across the project, especially at the beginning, and achieve more.

More time at the beginning to actually lay the foundations would have been good.

If we had more time… so I feel like in the first couple of months we spent quite a lot of time looking at the design parts [of the platform] or trying to make it look good and planning the process. I guess with more time we could do even more. But you look at the platform now, and it's really good.

All of this ties together in a larger issue that was raised: namely, that time was limited on this project. Due to funding, we meet once a week and only have about nine months runtime to deliver our project. This meant that some work had to happen outside the two-hour weekly sessions (putting further pressure on our communication infrastructure). In future work, we hope to see a longer time-scale and more regular touchpoints to help connect the team more and to facilitate a more efficient working environment.

The online dialogues were too short to discuss each policy idea in depth [with policymakers]. More time and more in person meetings [with policymaking] would have been good.

Another challenge was fitting the project in with our busy family, work and university schedules. We tried a number of approaches to improve communication, but it was something that we all struggled with throughout the project.

At times it was difficult for me to catch up on like, texts and stuff because I have so much on, and I feel like a lot of young people are in that position where it's like you're in lots of different [whatsapp] groups, and it's hard to follow information.

We should like improve communication within the group. [...] When we're not in the session. I think in the session we communicate really well, but when we're out the door it goes a bit [quiet].

[P]eople missing sessions leads to people missing details and some have come back after necessary time off to a very different stage of the work. This was intensely overwhelming and disorienting for them and catching people up has caused us delays.

Within the project itself, the looser structure meant less clarity on division of work and responsibilities and really highlighted the importance of communication for this work – it was an issue for some of us. We worked through weekly email and a WhatsApp group alongside our weekly in-person meetings, but this comms wasn't always easily accessible for everyone, which meant that response times varied and communication was a challenge. A young person raised the concern that many young people are already spread thin across many WhatsApp groups and many different digital conversations and how this can lead to confusion and further overwhelm those who are trying to catch up. Necessary links get lost in the spam of messages and it can be hard to follow up later on.

It's important to remember that this was a complex and ambitious project and some of us found a challenge to understand what was happening, and how things fit together. As explained by one of the project partners.

I think there's a lot of moving pieces in this project. There's a lot of groups. There's a lot of moving pieces, and it's just logistically hard for everyone to understand what's going on. And, also, the groups obviously feel a connection with the work that they are doing. So, then it's hard for them to understand sometimes how to get involved with the other groups. So, I wonder you know how there could be fewer moving pieces or a little bit more, you know, both more united and fewer moving pieces of all of those threads.

We also thought that the project could have done a better job in terms of building our capacity around safeguarding and debriefing, and training to do some of the project activities.

I feel like one thing that would have been important for us to do at the start is some level of like, safeguarding, like an even if it's just like, okay, so someone's not feeling too good. They can leave the room... Like when I, when I was in group therapy at [organisation name], like you would leave the room if it was like too much. And then you would then return to the group, explain why you left the room and then decide whether you want to go home or stay in the group and talk it up. And that would have been something that would have made people a little bit more comfortable.

One thing that I think is really important is debrief. Yeah. And I know that people have that busy, busy, busy lives, but like even just 10 minutes at the end, like the session just did something a little bit fun. Like when I work with my young people who were like predominantly black and brown people, and they're talking about their racial trauma. I can't just be like, at the end of it like, Okay, bye. Because then those kids are going to be left with those feelings. Even though they've discussed they might still be feeling it. But if you do something really fun like a cahoot, they kind of it's easier to digest. So I think just that would be good because I'm always up for Cahoot.

We needed training on how to write policy and policy briefing. It would have been good to learn aspects of policy making, like the difference between an action or a policy.

The final and possibly most important thing we think could have been improved is a crucial part of the project, the relationships with and commitments of the policy makers, but we are not really sure there is an easy solution.

So I think one thing that we definitely kind of learned in dealing with policymakers is that people don't want to claim the power that they have. And that's like a really awful thing for like most people because we all do have, like power, especially when we come together and us not realizing that is kind of how systems perpetuate [oppressions]. But also when people get to positions of power they like refuse to own up to that and they refuse to like, you know, acknowledge that and kind of trying to use that for good things. This [policymaker that] kept saying stuff like, oh, well, I'm only on this committee, so I can't put these things in place. And it's like you're on the committee. You've got so much more power than like any of us have, like […]. So it's kind of I guess, like learning but like actually, like I'm, I do have like a right to hold people accountable. And I do have like a right to kind of get angry at people, if that's what's going to be transformative.

I think it would have been nice to have more contact with like policymakers throughout the process, as opposed to just being at the end. […] Given the fact that it was youth led it came from a position of [lived] experience and opposed to people speaking on our behalf. So it could really get our message across by being such a youth led project. I think there should definitely be more projects like it as well. […] But you know, people who work for policies often like to say things and not follow through.

One of the partners told us:

If we knew that we wanted to target those issues, we could start with them from the front end. [...] But all of that takes a lot of time and and capacity and kind of you have to knock on their door over and over, and you have to put a lot of pressure on them, and you have to. You know, you have to have the sort of time and space to put that pressure on them.

Another partner commented:

Because policymaking is so complex, even where there are sympathetic political and policy champions, impact will often be quite limited and not very resilient to changes in staff/ administrations. You need community engagement and ongoing pressure. Public/ community support can give this kind of participation some ballast.

On our platform we have set up a policy change tracker, where we are going to monitor change on our policy ideas. Our partners have committed to help us - we'll keep an eye on them too!

7 Lessons for youth participation on mental health

Remember young people's differences and preferences.
Some of us were okay with the openness and the confusion of the youth-led process, with the opportunity to learn from each other and grow the conversations into research. Whereas some of us wanted more clarity about what we were doing and what we were working towards. It can be difficult to make sure everyone is on the same page and feels confident in what is happening, especially when not everyone can make it to every session.

Think about neurodivergence.
We encountered a number of activities and parts of processes that emphasised confusion, like playing an opposite game in a theatre warm-up activity. Not everyone is happy with confusion and are just doing their best to be present. So, focus on things that everyone can do.

Time and money.
A lot of the problems we faced were due to taking on a complex and ambitious project, as we engaged with the mental health crisis we are experiencing. More time at the start to bond as a group and across groups would have helped. But it was great to be paid - it meant that our contribution was genuinely recognised and it helped created a more equal environment.

The informal side of the project is really important.
We lead busy lives but it is nice to have time to talk to other young people about our mental health and find things that we are interested in and want to learn more about. This might mean not always meeting in a stuffy and generic university meeting room. We could meet outside and have a picnic on a hot day, for example.

Legislative theatre is powerful but one event is not enough to make real change.
The play we created and performed was a really powerful piece of work that communicated young people's lived experience to mental health decision-makers. It is a really simple and powerful process but we need to find ways of holding policymakers genuinely accountable. There has to be open and ongoing dialogue between young people, their communities, and policymakers.

Digital participation on its own will never be enough.
Young people are said to be digital natives, but we need human connections. A Participatory Digital Platform can be fun and a useful tool to share resources and ideas across many people and spaces. But it can only work as part of something that also happens in person. It can help build relationships that already exist, to keep us connected when we can't meet physically. We also learnt that it takes time for people to feel familiar with a new digital tool and actually use it, as part of their life.

We need to embed this work for sustainable, transformative change.

We have learned that it takes a long time for policies to change and progress can be slow. We have demonstrated in Mindset Revolution that young people can contribute to decision making in mental health - or any other policies! But we need an ongoing process to create the culture change we need for decision-makers to get used to the idea that young people can and should propose ideas for change. The Mindset Revolution movement is only just starting. We will hold policymakers to account.

It's hard to join things up.

One of the aims of the Mindset Revolution project was that we would connect with other youth mental health campaigns and projects but we were often frustrated by a lack of engagement. Everyone seems focused on their own project, with their own aims and timeline. Our hope is that by developing an ongoing and sustainable process these relationships will become easier to develop and the potential of a collaborative movement across youth mental health will be realised.

Anything can be research.

Mental health research can be a bit clinical and scientific and needs to make space for the lived experience of young people in collaboration with democratic processes to ensure there is meaningful change.

8 Recommendations for future projects

If policy change remains the goal, have someone with experience/expertise in policy involved regularly from the start. Embedding the 'professional perspective' from the get-go would allow young people time to design responses to any issues raised in making policy.

Start the project out with a set of co-produced scoping/scaling sessions with partners, delivery team, and young people to map out a combined understanding of project goals and a shared vision.

Build links with external groups earlier on. Most organisations are heavily overworked and extremely busy. Having notice and laying the groundwork would smooth over access and involvement issues.
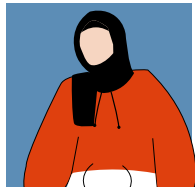
More links between the pathways of the project. If multiple streams of work are happening, having meetings, feedback, visits, and other sessions integrated into the plan of the project would help to ensure a stronger bonding and connection between the groups. Alternatively, separate the project strands out and have distinct, interconnected micro-projects focused on each area. We have proof they all work now, further individual projects could build quite effectively on this and take ownership and specialisation in each area while still remaining focused on the same goal of policy improvement.

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