



# **An Evaluation of Youth Ink**

## **Interim Report**

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## **1. Introduction**

This interim report presents the initial findings from an ongoing evaluation of Youth Ink, a charity based at Southwark Youth Justice Service (YJS), which places lived experience of the criminal justice system at the heart of its service delivery model. Youth Ink's partnership with Southwark YJS is one of six 'child first diversion' pathfinder projects funded by the Youth Justice Board (YJB, 2021). The aim of the research informing this report is to "evaluate the use of lived experience as a tool to help prevent reoffending" and to identify "good practice in relation to diversionary activity" in order that such practice can be promoted across the youth justice sector (YJB, 2021: 24).

### ***1.1 Methodology***

The evaluation to date has involved the collection and analysis of existing project records to provide contextual information regarding Youth Ink's origins and development and qualitative interviews (15) with practitioners and other stakeholders designed to obtain their views on and experiences of the organisation's operation and impact. In the second, forthcoming phase of the evaluation, the research team will be interviewing volunteer peer support navigators and current and former programme participants. We will be observing elements of the work in practice, and working with the YJS data analyst to generate quantitative indicators of the outcomes of the project in terms of reoffending, breach rates etc. The final evaluation will also be informed by a review of research into interventions of this kind.

### ***1.2 Report Structure***

The report is organised as follows. After briefly describing the methods used to gather the information for the report, we then outline the findings, beginning with an account of the project's origins and development and of the activities it provides and supports. In this section are included the reflections of both YJS staff and Youth Ink's peer support navigation on the project's aims and working methods. The perceived outcomes, for project participants, PSNs, the YJS and the wider community are then outlined, followed by an analysis of the key ingredients which explain the project's achievements.

## 2. Project Origins and Development

Youth Ink is a well-established service at Southwark YJS, having run its first project there in 2016. The Charity's CEO and founder had previously been involved in a partnership project between the YJS and 'User Voice', a national organisation working to promote the voice of offenders in prison and community settings. Youth Ink was conceived in the words of the CEO "as an independent charity sitting within/alongside a multi-agency statutory service which could offer young people an opportunity to volunteer, to have a voice, also work alongside youth offending service staff... and most importantly to use their lived experience to support other young people in the criminal justice system".

In its first year, Youth Ink delivered 'Our Journey', a 'Personal Social Health Education' (PSHE) Programme focused on developing self-esteem and confidence through providing the "opportunity for young people to build relationships with adults and peers developing social and life skills, particularly around communication (public speaking); decision making; negotiation, conflict resolution and learning to work as part of a team" (Youth Ink, 2017). 22 young people completed the programme and 10 from this group went on to become what were known originally as 'Peer Leaders'. They worked with other young people on orders at the (then) YOS.

On the basis of this successful pilot, the Youth Ink model was consolidated the following year (2017-2018). In order for its model to be grounded in the views of prospective service users, the project began with a consultation exercise which sought to establish the level of support for this kind of provision and to shape and fashion the programme itself. From an initial pool of 125 young people who completed questionnaires, 15 went on to participate in focus group discussions and 10 to complete the actual Peer Support Navigator training and so became eligible to train other young people. With the network in place, over the remainder of the year, 14 new service users engaged in activities led by the Peer Support Navigators (PSNs), including PSHE workshops, hubs and one to one support (Youth Ink, 2018).

Over time and in accordance with the charity's aims, young people who first came across Youth Ink as service users themselves have graduated to become first volunteers, then paid sessional workers and finally full-time employees. As of March 2022, there are three PSNs employed by Youth Ink in addition to the CEO/founder, whilst several other young people have undertaken paid sessional work over the years. Hence, the young people who are being referred to Youth Ink today are meeting and being supported by peers with lived experience, not only of offending and of the criminal justice system, but also of having been where the young people are now in the recent past.

### **3. Project Activities**

From the outset, Youth Ink's overarching vision of enabling young people to use their lived experience to support others has been delivered in a range of ways. The YJB Pathfinder Project involves three specific strands of work:

#### *Peer Support Navigator Network*

The Peer Support Navigator Network underpins all Youth Ink's work in the sense that it is members of the network which 'staff' the other activities delivered by the organisation. Its current objectives are to "create(s) opportunities for work experience, volunteering and employment opportunities for children" through tailored one-to-one sessions and specifically designed peer led schemes to develop their PSHE" (Youth Ink 2021). It is available to all young people on court orders or otherwise known/referred to the YJS. Referrals to the programme are typically made by YJS officers although sometimes young people will self-refer, or external organisations may approach Youth Ink direct about a young person they are working with. An initial risk assessment is undertaken followed by a meeting between one of the paid PSNs, the young person and their parent(s)/guardian(s).

Engagement is entirely voluntary, and activities undertaken will vary according to the individual young person's needs, interests and wishes. One to one support (provided by PSNs) may take the form of informal conversations (within or outside of the YJS premises), introductions to sporting or artistic programmes or organisations, support with finding paid work, support with finding and taking up education or training opportunities, referral to/liaison with YJS practitioners and services and so on. Young people can also participate in both peer-led PSHE workshops and the peer-led conversation hub (see below), both of which are delivered by PSNs who themselves have completed the programme. Peer-led workshops are centred around emotional wellbeing and mental health issues and provide a space in which young people can talk about their lives and experiences with others who have been or are going through the youth justice system. If interested, young people can then attend peer navigator training covering areas such as 'Health and Safety, Equality and Diversity, Safeguarding, Lone Working, How to run effective groups' (Youth Ink, 2018). It is graduates from previous such training who developed the two other strands of work funded by the Pathfinder Project.

#### *Peer-Led Conversation Hub*

The peer-led conversation hub shares with the peer-led workshops the general aim of providing a safe space to talk amongst those with shared experiences. The hub runs weekly and "explores and supports (opportunities with) children with the longer-term aim of developing their Personal Social Health Education (PSHE). It provides a structure for engagement (and) participation on a wide range of issues, giving support and coaching them to make positive choices" (Youth Ink, 2021). The hub can include one to one support or group-work. It is by design open ended, based

on whatever issues or opportunities the peers themselves wish to explore or have support with.

### *Just Hear Us*

This element of Youth Ink's work involves young people in the creation of "specific co-production platforms" in which they share their lived experiences and views with service providers, "enabling the collective voices to be heard from marginalised children to foster solutions that are inclusive (and) ensuring practitioners and service providers consider (their) needs, and concerns" (Youth Ink 2021). Young people have presented to and engaged with the Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board, local Judges and Magistrates and Southwark Youth Justice Service. Examples of policy areas on which the young people have been consulted through Just Hear Us include unconscious bias in the youth justice system, cannabis use and the experience of being in custody or in court from the perspective of young people.

Those involved may still be serving a court order or be a volunteer peer navigator whose sentence has concluded but whose association with Youth Ink continues. It is important to emphasise that training and support are as integral to this element of Youth Ink's work as to the others. Young people are supported to engage in Just Hear Us projects through the workshops and the conversation hub which include the development of public speaking skills, and through preparatory activities and the development of materials (posters, presentations) in advance of specific sessions on particular topics.

The above summary does not fully capture the range of activities in which Youth Ink is engaged. Within the YJS, Youth Ink's presence provides both a formal and informal sounding board on policy and practice issues. They attend YJS management team meetings and are consulted/provide advice to other YJS officers on things like new interventions, individual cases, and community matters. In addition, the PSNs support other projects that are run within the YJS by practitioners or partner organisations and in the local community. This has included a drama group ran at the YJS, the Trauma Informed Weapon Awareness Programme (TIWAP), which delivers interactive workshops in local secondary schools, residential programmes run by the YJS (in holiday periods) and a third sector project raising awareness amongst parents regarding issues such as grooming, child criminal exploitation and county lines. The roles of the PSNs in these different projects has been to simply support other young people participating or to talk to and answer questions from the various groups about their experiences, and to communicate their perspective.

### **3.1 YJS Staff Reflections**

From the perspective of officers and practitioners within the YJS, Youth Ink's work was often described in terms of facilitating engagement and participation in YJS interventions. It was noted that young people coming into the YOT often feel intimidated and anxious. The PSNs could provide an intermediate space between young people and the more formal, potentially threatening or mysterious aspects of the youth justice process:

“I think it's difficult for any young person to come into a youth offending team, not knowing what you're expecting. Also, you might have issues with other young people. So your awareness is already heightened... And then you're quite worried. So it's good for them to meet up other young people that are there and who are not going to judge them and are able to support them... So with what's going on, and day to day, maybe it's good for them to have other people that they once they feel comfortable with them, to come in and share, if they've got any issues with them and come and talk about it because some of the Youth Ink people will maybe have been through similar stuff, or just giving them a platform for having a chat about it without having to be the case manager where Youth Ink you got to be careful what you say... (YJS Practitioner)

“I think that one of the purposes and one of the things I think they do offer is they do bring us, umm better, or a different way of engaging, I suppose, some of our young people who are might be less likely to want to talk to someone who looks like me, or someone who's a bit older, or you know, It's a more accessible practitioner group I think, for some of our young people, because of the peer navigators, because of their lived experience, but because of course, even before you know about their lived experiences, because of their age, their gender, some in some cases their race, which I think is just a more comfortable set of people to be talking to for a young person who's quite anxious about talking to professional, who they might have had difficult experiences of.” (YJS Practitioner )

“It's a good point good sort of place [for] them to interact. I think if I've had young people before, who maybe have been struggling with their mental health, and have been reluctant to engage in mental health support from CAMHS, I will sort of consider a referral to Youth Ink, because they can make the young people, I think, consider the world, or maybe even just explore the area of trauma, and I think sometimes they feel a bit more comfortable to do that from someone that's maybe a little bit more relatable to them, so that maybe they know from the area or someone that maybe has been in a custodial establishment, or someone, maybe that's come through the YOS for similar offenses to them.” (YJS Practitioner)

The impact of the pandemic loomed large during the interviews and appears to have led to an increase in the extent of one-to-one support provided. As one interviewee explained:

“Okay, Well, let's go back to pre-covid you know, when everybody would come to the office. Effectively they would sit in reception and meet the child the first time they ever came in. And that would be well before the court hearing, you know you obviously were expecting a pre-sentence report, or some sort of pre-decision-making thing. So, they would often pick up children really, really early ...

(And) I suppose what's really happened is probably over the last 18 months the peer navigators have worked with a smaller number of children, but to a much greater level. So, I can think of at least 3 children, 4 children that they've worked really,

really in depth with over many months which wouldn't have happened to them Pre Covid, because they'd have moved on to some more children and the next group....

Q: I suppose I need to just ask about what 'in depth' work means?

Well, I mean both in duration, so I can think of two where there has been work for at least 6 months. Secondly, the level of contact. So, the variety of interventions that have gone into almost bringing them into becoming peer navigators themselves. But both these two – one's too young, and the other has too many other issues. But you know I would say a lot of emotional energy has gone into working with all those three children. And you know. I think that's been quite a contrast where, prior to Covid, children would work with Youth Ink for a limited time, and then they would move on and, you know, do other things, and then Youth Ink would find some other children to work with... .." (YJS Manager).

Although the pandemic has severely disrupted pre-Covid working arrangements across the YJS with most staff 'working from home' and relatively few children attending meetings within the YJS offices, the PSNs, since and insofar as it has been possible, have continued to meet regularly there and to host workshops, the hub and other forms of activity and support. Nevertheless, the sense of there having been a change in Youth Ink's activities, as described above, was quite widely shared amongst YJS officers and managers interviewed, with a note of regret to the effect that Youth Ink's and the Peer Navigators' role as a bridge or mediator between the YJS and young people coming through it had been somewhat reduced by the lack of regular, 'day to day' contact brought about as result of the virus.

Relatedly, the evolution of new strands (as summarised above) to Youth Ink's work was also noted by YJS staff as having affected the balance of their activities. Youth Ink was or is perceived as doing more external facing work than it has done previously, through Just Hear Us type work or else in supporting community-based projects. The necessity for and value of this for the young people or the other services/organisations involved was not questioned, but there is a sense that this means there is less time for YJS based activities with young people in response to direct requests and interactions with YJS staff:

"For me it's great that they're doing the YJB and the speeches and stuff like that, it's great but at the same time, as someone working in Southwark, it's about what we do for Southwark, how does it benefit us, because it's great speaking to the YJB and the ministers and all of that and I'm for all of that, but also for the grassroots and what can we change... So, we've started to see them a lot more vocal in the YOT and being a lot more involved in the meetings and in case management meetings, which is great ..., but what we need is support for the young people that we're working with, and how can they support them, for us, kind of thing, as well" (YJS Practitioner).

Whether or not any refocusing of Youth Ink's activities is temporary or more longstanding is uncertain and does not preclude one to one support with young people serving orders, as evident in certain of the comments above. Youth Ink's work with external organisations is of a different kind to that which they play within the YJS. From another perspective, as long as



young people are using their lived experience in meaningful ways and so developing their PSHE skills and achievements, the outcomes for them and their families, for the YJS and for the wider community are still being met, albeit in different ways. The key point, perhaps, is that Youth Ink activities are sufficiently broad as to encompass forms of intervention and support undertaken both independently from the YJS *and* in conjunction with YJS officers and projects. The pandemic and the evolution of the project appear to have slightly tilted the balance towards the former, at least in the eyes of some YJS practitioners. Another interviewee commented:

“I think the main thing for me is a lack of knowing, kind of, yeah, what sessions are for, what the intervention was and the outcome... I used to see it in my mind as a way of helping young people access the interventions that are available. But I think now it's moved to actually the interventions happening in the room with peer navigators, in which, in which case we need to know what those are, and how they fit with the plan that the young person has in the wider service, because it needs to be integrated in because we don't want to be trying to have the same conversation... We could somehow and again, I think this is partly because of Covid, but maybe a bit more where we're working together so, young people can see that Youth Ink want them to work with us as well. And also, we you know, we're colleagues, rather than (them being) this separate and slightly preferable entity in the building. It's like we're working together for the same thing we might do it in different ways. I think that would be. Yeah, I think that would be better....

I am glad it isn't my job to think about, to work out, because you want this, you want this sort of service that's the model that they're offering to be different from what we're doing. You don't want to become just another person in the YOS who does the same stuff. But you also want it to be integrated and working in partnership. So I think that I'm not yeah, I don't, I wouldn't want them to be sucked into the wider Youth Justice model, because that's the whole point of why we need them, that our model is not always useful, you know, I just, I'm not sure where the line is.” (YJS Practitioner)

These observations were made in the context of overwhelming support for Youth Ink's core principles and for its achievements and those of peer navigators. They are questions rather than criticisms, but do seem to reflect, nonetheless, real changes in the balance of Youth Ink activities, the nature and implications of which are not fully clear. The expansion of Youth Ink's work into other boroughs, which is funded through the YJB Pathfinder scheme, is a further factor. The first instance of this is in Bromley, where a peer navigator network and peer-led conversation hub have recently been established, led by the Southwark-based PSNs. Clearly this development is a consequence of the organisation's success to date and an opportunity to spread the model by reaching more young people. At the same time, the fact that it is occurring as the YJS 'regroups' post pandemic after a period when Youth Ink's own projects have 'taken off', adds to the sense of the organisation being in a transitional phase.

### **3.2 Peer Support Navigator (PSN) Reflections**

A group discussion with PSNs revealed elements of their approach to their work. The PSNs stressed that they didn't start their conversations with young people by disclosing their backgrounds and didn't see themselves as YJS workers. Their life experiences were tough. With one disclosing that he didn't learn about trauma until he was seventeen. He would punch people behind him as he had been stabbed in the back and was afraid of being stabbed again. He was called the paranoid one and it was when he received the support within the YJS that he realised how "alien" his behaviour was "within normal society." Now he could say:

"I tell young people sometimes that I never had a me that sat down with me and said you know bro I have been out there where you are now. I never had that...if I had had a me, I might have stopped a lot earlier and do things that focused me a lot more in school. I gave up on a football career...I would have had someone to look up to...if I got here with nothing, imagine what you can do with something." (PSN)

The differences between the PSNs and the YJS workers were attributed to a number of factors, they were able to create a comfortable environment and were from the local area. They had grown up in Peckham, knew the local people, the shops, the local beefs etc. They explained how they managed the question of sharing information with the YJS:

"They know full well we are not gathering intel on who's who and we make it very clear to the young people, don't incriminate yourselves or make it any worse for yourself. If there is something you need advice or help, we are always going to tell you to take the right path but solely the decision is with yourself but if you are going to tell me, I took my knife out yesterday and went to bore up a youth I am going to tell your YJS officer.

I understand that within a system sometimes we can lose ourselves and get angry and bug out and say things that we don't mean but the system does not see it as that. So that is one thing that I shared with young people is understanding what you are feeling and also understanding what you want to do...if you want to tell me something I have to take it as if it is serious so don't just come in here thinking you can just be comfy and bug out and say something that you don't actually mean." (PSN)

The female PSN mentioned her experience of being the only girl she saw in her YJS, when she had been on an order and how uncomfortable it had made her feel. She would have benefited, she felt, from having a role model who had been there and "come out fine." She was currently seeing a young woman who had completed her order and felt it was important to have a female PSN working in the YOS as they could offer something different to female YJS workers. For her, this related to their different roles and responsibilities.

The PSNs discussed what they saw as their role within the YJS. They commented that their conversations with young people gave them space. They could discuss a topic, such as crime beefs in the area and this could lead to "bigger" conversations. Referrals might come from a

YJS officer, and the starting point would then be a three-way meeting. They try to get the young person to join the conversation hub, which covers many different topics, including in recent times; exploitation, knife crime, fever, making money etc. Anybody in the YJS can attend and they have had attenders from the Youth Justice Board. The group runs for an hour and a half, followed by an open-door session. Covid has disrupted these activities and they hope to resume them at some point when it is deemed safe. A major benefit from the hub was that it showed young people that “people actually care.” Another programme that was mentioned was Live Trauma, where the stigma of mental illness is discussed including the barriers that prevent young people going for help. Stigma is a key factor here and the session called Broken Leg versus Broken Mind, is self-explanatory.

THE PSNs take young people out on trips after completing programmes such as Live Trauma, it might be to somewhere in Central London, it was about giving them an experience that they haven’t had at that age. The flexibility of the PSNs was that they could engage in a one-to-one relationship that did not require attendance in the YOS or the groups. They might see a person in a Wimpy bar on the border between Peckham and Bermondsey, essentially doing outreach work.

Communication with YJS staff was seen as essential, and it was explained that YJS workers were contacted after each session. They let them know when people arrive, whether they are late, so that the YJS worker has oversight and communication with them about what the young person is up to. They might make referrals to outside agencies and this experience had taught them to understand how formal agencies operated.

On the point regarding communication between the PSNs and YJS professionals, the latter presented a slightly different take to that above, saying that feedback on the work Youth Ink was doing with young people was an area that they felt could be improved upon. However, as noted already, this was a relatively minor criticism outweighed by their overwhelmingly positive evaluations of their work.

## 4. Outcomes

In the evaluation framework agreed with the YJB for the Pathfinder funding, a distinction is drawn between outcomes for programme participants, for PSNs (paid staff and volunteers), for service providers and for the wider community. The interviews completed to date with YJS professionals and managers, Youth Ink staff and external organisations do not provide quantitative indicators or measures of outcomes (which will come from Youth Ink and YJS monitoring information) but do provide examples of successful interventions and of the positive outcomes arising from these.

### 4.1 Outcomes for Programme Participants

For Programme Participants, then, three distinct, if overlapping, outcomes were identified as follows:

#### *Higher levels of engagement/participation in Youth Ink and YJS interventions*

As already described, interviewees saw increasing engagement as a primary aim of Youth Ink's work but in explaining this, they also commented on seeing the fruits of it in practice:

“There was one young person I was working with, who was kind of willing to talk to me but a little bit ambivalent about whether I could help, just a bit like, I don't think this is really for me, and everyone working with him was very keen on the idea that he needed some therapy, some therapeutic support, and he just didn't think so. And I think, I think having the peer navigators involved with him did help a little bit for him to see that, well, when they talked to me it was like, this is a colleague, you know, this is somebody who we trust and can work with and so I think that probably did help him to then be in a room with me on his own, thinking, actually maybe this person's safe, and, all right, he still didn't particularly want what I was offering, which is you know, which he had lots of good reasons not to, but I think it was at least gave us a chance to communicate and sit together in a way that we probably wouldn't have done without their encouragement.” (YJS Practitioner)

The beneficial outcomes for participants of improved engagement and participation, from the perspective of YJS professionals and managers are that it increases their chances of completing orders on time and reduces the risk of them getting into further trouble, outcomes which match those for the YJS and wider community and so are discussed separately below.

#### *PSHE Development: new skills and knowledge and improved opportunities/prospects*

Integral to Youth Ink activities is the development of personal, health, social and educational skills and knowledge. Again, this can be thought of as an outcome but one which should in turn lead to improved opportunities. These interviewees describe first how successful engagement with a young person in respect of his order led in turn to their successful engagement in training/employment:

“And then there’s also the one-to-one work referrals where I have referred young people, in particular, high-risk young people, to be doing one-to-one with the peer navigators to deliver some pieces of work... ,especially one young person that I can say, their journey from the beginning to being transferred to another borough and then doing home visits in another borough, and then actually now kind of handing over the case total to another (borough), so they've seen a journey of this young person, very high risk, very well known in the community, so to have one of the peer navigators working with them, who know the local area, who know what's going on with the young people, it was really effective. And one of the things they did do is when we did come back to face to face work is that they helped in education, they supported him to complete a mechanical course online, with 80% pass, and I know he did that, and he was able to do that because of that support that he got, because this young person is very hard to engage, and it was a real struggle to engage him and they did things like, you know, the interventions covered things like gangs, mental health and county lines, so there was loads of interventions put in with this young person.” (YJS Practitioner)

“There's a male that I'm currently working with who, he was, sort of getting into repeated trouble, and repeated arrests for sort of an acquisitive type of ending so like, offending for financial gain and he was he sort of came to me distress one day and was like I feel like I want to stop doing it. but I don't know how to stop doing it after all...This is all I know and I don't know what to do, and you could see he was like visibly upset and distressed. And I was aware, from speaking to some of the peer support navigators, that they might, one of the PSNs, might know my young person from the area and he'd sort of I think, been come through the YOS for similar sort of offences. So I asked if he would just come and speak to my own person about his own experience, because my own young person's very reluctant like, Oh, I don't want to tell anyone else about, like, what I'm going through, especially if I might know them from the area, like, I don't want anyone else. I went, it's not about that, it's about like you listening to them and you asking questions of them. So he did do that, and then I think they had their own sort of, my own person would come and meet them, when I wasn't always there, and sort of asking about what support he really wanted, and what he wanted to change, and he wanted a job, but was struggling with the fact that if he got a job, then, you'd have to wait to get, you know, you'd have to go through the application process, you might not get it, then he'd have to work, then he would have to work wait a month to get paid, and that wasn't sort of appealing to him at that time. So Youth Ink actually secured him a sort of like a trial employment position at a warehouse that we have next to our building. And because they know the supervisor there, and he's put previous young people in roles there, so they gave him that opportunity, and he's working there now, that was in November and he's really sort of turned a corner and was glad that he'd been given an opportunity and you can sort of really see a shift in his thinking, so I think that that was some real practical support.” (YJS Practitioner)

*Improved emotional and mental health, greater self-confidence; pro-social skills; new peers or peer-groups.*

Underpinning and alongside concrete achievements like training courses completed and jobs secured, a range of softer outcomes was identified. As evidenced already, interviewees said that talking with PSNs and attending workshops, or the peer-led conversation hub could be especially appropriate for young people with poor mental health (such as anxiety or low self-esteem) and again pointed to successful outcomes in this regard:

“I know for a fact that Youth Ink have supported a lot of young people with the clinical practitioners’ work, like the counselling and the input from them, and supported young people through that from a stage where, you know I know a couple of them have been quite suicidal to be able to then recognize, you know what, I can do this in my life and I don't need to go that way. So, you know, give them the positiveness and a sense of self-worth. So for me those kind of things are unmeasurable. But you know it changes young people’s lives really.” (YJS Practitioner)

“We’ve had different gangs come in, different groups of people, and when they come into the YOS they’re so sheepish, but to see them grow after a few months of going to Youth Ink, you see them grow, become a bit more chirpier and bit more confident so yeah from an ugly duckling to a swan. You can see them grow.” (YJS Practitioner)

Linked to this, some participants were also perceived as having benefited in terms of their relationships with peers:

“Another female that I managed, she's finished now, but she did a group with me called the Girls Group and then she was invited back to it, which is like a seven-week programme for females, and she was invited back to sort of come to a focus group about, like, what we should implement in future groups, but hear it from the girls themselves that have been on it. So she came back to that, and really enjoyed it and this is quite a, she's quite a complex young person, she's quite hard to reach and she has a lot going on and experienced a lot, and she sort of really enjoyed her engagement with Youth Ink, and I think, she was someone that because of how complex she was, she only sort of really engaged with adults. So a lot of her interactions were with adult professionals, not really with young people. So it gave her sort of the opportunity to sort of like meet with the young people in a safe space. She's quite vulnerable as well, so it was good that it was in a safe space....

And so yeah, they're sort of done that and you know you can really see It's boosted her confidence, and she really enjoys it, and she knows she now wants to sort of help other young people in her life .... So yeah, I think it's, it's helping giving people sort of a shift in their identity, if you like, in terms of a more pro-social, pro-social identity, and things that they can sort of strive and achieve for.” (YJS Practitioner)

## **4.2 Outcomes for Peer Support Navigators**

The second group of beneficiaries, young people who had graduated to become volunteers or sessional workers shared the same sorts of outcomes as programme participants but over a longer time. The three cases described below all illustrate tangible outcomes in terms of overcoming emotional and mental health issues, the development of social skills, desistance from offending, the acquisition of work and money and/or the pursuance of further and higher education.

“In the case of the young person I was talking about ..., he came to Southwark Youth Offending service, with a knife offence. He didn't want to engage with the service at all. So, he was very reluctant to engage with his caseworker. He didn't want to engage with the mental health service CAMHS, you know he's got a very disruptive family background, there's mental health issues within the family. So, we met him..., and he liked us and he wanted to come into the sessions. And so, he did complete the trauma programme. He completed the training to be a volunteer. And then he was employed with us for a good five months as a sessional worker, and what we realised when employing him was that he was a very, he wasn't a quiet person or a shy person, but he was very reluctant to talk about himself a lot and his feelings and amongst groups and there was a lack of confidence within him. And what I realised was that it would not be healthy for him to grow. If he stayed with us, within that environment where we were working with young people, similar backgrounds to him, because the trauma that he has experienced in his own life, and that could affect him in a really negative way, listening to other people.

... So, there was a job... that came up, at one of the warehouses we had (links with). I took him along to meet the manager, you know, and said if he wanted to work then he could do. Starting like a couple of days in a week, we would still support him, he had the option to come to the groups anytime he wanted. You could have both jobs, but the thinking behind it was that it would give him a different environment, different groups of people, and that would help him and nurture him to grow. And after about three months he said he didn't want to be at the charity anymore because he was going to take a more of a bigger role in the warehouse because they offered him it and he liked it. And then the pandemic kicked in. And during that he, we continued to support him. He finished his A Levels and stuff. And we helped him to apply for his university, to study social science... To this day, he's still working in the warehouse, he's a part time manager now and he's going to graduate this September, from De Montfort University in Social Science and he's already asked to come back and work in the charity full time once he graduates...

Then (there's) another young lad who's in for knife. You know he completed (the) programme and volunteered. He wants to be an architect, so Youth Ink supported him through his A levels because the biggest risk to him was that he comes from a single parent family and the lack of money within the family made him commit, carry a knife really, because he was hanging around with older people, he was being exploited. So, to get rid of that Youth Ink offered him sessional work and said look,

we want you in education and this will support you in education, but we can offer you work and that offers you the opportunity to work a couple of hours a week, and through the holiday period, to do it, but the condition with that was, not for him to move away from people because that's a very difficult thing to do, but to learn to manage relationships and to know who's good for him and who's going to be bad for him. You know, we don't get any police reports for him, he's moved away, his mum's really happy. And then he's been offered four university places so he can go to, Liverpool Huddersfield, and two other places that have said yes, and ... we've said we support him for the first year, while he's in university. ...

And we had a young female who was on the programme for a little while, volunteered and went back to education and wants to become a nursery nurse, and I remember her saying that this gave her that ambition if you like, that drive to say it is possible". (Youth Ink CEO)

The outcomes for the three Peer Support Navigators employed by Youth Ink, whilst involving the same kind of journey as those described above, go beyond this because these individuals, alongside the Chief Executive, have been and are responsible for the development and delivery of the organisation's services and activities with programme participants and volunteer PSNs, both within the YJS and with external organisations. Over and above the development of core employability skills (punctuality, reliability etc.) and taking up of employment and training opportunities which constitute outcomes for programme participants, for example, are skills such as leadership and project management, public speaking and liaison and co-working with partner agencies and the establishment of the Peer-Led Conversation hub. The work done by Youth Ink with external organisations would not exist without the participation of the three paid PSNs as facilitators/coordinators – so this too is an outcome as much as an output.

Accordingly, when interviewees from the YJS and external organisations were describing the ways in which Youth Ink as an organisation had enhanced the engagement of young people, or given them new opportunities, credit was almost always attributed to the skills and knowledge of the PSNs. This credit signifies a recognition and acceptance of the value of lived experience and of the positive contribution those with experience of youthful offending, of the youth justice institutions and processes as well as, for example, discrimination, trauma, family, street or police violence and youth culture, can make. As we have seen, interviewees clearly identified a 'Heineken' quality to Youth Ink's work - the PSNs were said to be able to reach parts of the young people that YJS professionals were unable to. Youth Ink's staff are spoken of as embodying its mission and its accomplishments, as 'living proof' that the model works. For the model and its practitioners to be almost part of the fabric of the YJS is a significant outcome for these practitioners.

Representatives of external organisations we spoke to could not speak highly enough of the role played by the PSNs in 'Just Hear Us' type activities. They emphasised their relatability, their openness and honesty in discussing their experiences and how much audiences welcomed this, making for 'powerful' sessions and events. One interviewee commented:



“So you know their impact is huge, and the other thing that is that I notice a lot from their engagement is, you know, when they open a conference, or when they attend an event they speak or present at the outset the engagement within the room from the professionals is always higher. And you see, you know, people really on board or understand. And I think because, because of the way that they present, and the way that they demonstrate, you know what lay behind, perhaps, some of the offending behaviour, and they kind of bring that to life. It. It allows people you know, a different perspective.” (Representative of external organisation)

In the group discussion with PSNs themselves, their personal journeys and how these had changed their thinking processes and their outlook on life, were vividly described. Their enthusiasm and gratitude for the project was evident. That isn't to say that it was an immediate change and two of the PSNs recalled their first meeting culminating in a fight. However, they later saw each other in “Pecks” (Peckham) and were able to relax and chill. The ice had been broken through Youth Ink otherwise the violence would have continued. They were now good friends and able to laugh at how “thinking about space” had been an issue. One described his involvement that went back to 2017:

“I was on an order at the Youth Offending Service, and I joined the PSN network and I joined the hub and through that I have gone through training, gone through different roles and been able to basically change my whole prospects on life around. I would say to then give back to my community and my people, which for me is great.” (PSN)

Another PSN, who had been part of the first group going through Youth Ink commented on how the process had changed his outlook and expanded his life experiences:

“I went through the whole [programme] then I got my order cut...which was a bonus for me and then because of the people I was working with and the things I was experiencing I would never have gone to Central London properly and sat in buildings with people in suits and so for me it was like wow, actually there is a way in for me to making a change. So, for me it made so much sense to drop what I was doing and continue on with this and I have just continued progressing and elevating literally.” (PSN)

That is not to say, that this immediate change of looking at the world was experienced by all the PSNs. Another talked about leaving and later re-joining, with the realisation that he wanted to change. He had what he described as lots of personal issues and was aware of ‘street life’. When his brother went to prison, he felt alone and that was when trouble started, hanging around with the wrong crowd, getting arrested for knife possession and feeling that he had to find money for his mother. This young man on the first day of going to the YOS on his order, met one of the first PSNs, who he knew ‘from the road’. This led to him trusting the Youth Ink organisation and its staff. It was only because he had seen the PSN that he had been willing to give Youth Ink a try. He had lots of talks with the CEO and his gradual realisation that there was a “bigger picture” and there was “more to life than the road.”

What was commented on, was the non-judgemental attitude of the CEO, who was there for them when they wanted to speak to him. This contrasted sharply with how they had hitherto experienced authority:

“For me it was a place to make mistakes and like gain advice and so through that, I always had a problem with getting told off and getting told what I do is wrong and I never used to listen to people giving me any sort of criticism, constructive or nor, so having that space to like be late or miss a deadline and instead of having a teacher shouting at me...or giving me a detention for not doing anything but just having a conversation like it’s about me.” (PSN)

This led to a conversation about the differences between Youth Ink and the YOS. The same PSN was very positive about his YOS worker, who he had got on with very well and he had felt comfortable with. When his order had finished, he did not contact her anymore, but he continued to see the CEO. This completely changed his outlook:

“If I wasn’t with Youth Ink, I will be honest, I probably would have gone back to straight what I was doing, either getting into trouble again or worse hurt someone or been hurt myself.” (PSN)

#### **4.3 Outcomes for Service Providers**

For Service Providers, many of the outcomes identified already apply. For example, just as higher levels of engagement/participation in the YJS represent positive outcomes for programme participants and PSNs, their translation into greater levels of compliance with statutory orders, lower breach rates and lower reoffending rates were seen to complement the objectives of the service. One interviewee commented:

“Okay for the YJS greater compliance for our young people at all levels of their intervention, whether it's court orders or pre-court orders. Quicker compliance as well, you know, it's all very well, children coming into the YJS but if they're not saying anything, it's not, so, quicker engagement...

... you know often if we're unable to get our work done during the scheduled length of an order, we might extend it, whereas I think we do that less now because we get quicker engagement. Certainly, our breach levels are really low, because, you know, most young people do actually cooperate with us, because that facilitation process works so well.” (YJS Manager)

On the other hand, the majority of interviewees declined to say one way or the other whether these ‘harder’ outcomes had actually been realised simply because they felt unable to comment without access to the relevant information. One interviewee observed that

“it would be good to know, probably quite possible to measure, the outcomes in terms of reoffending because we are there as a service to reduce reoffending. That is our main thing. And as a service within that, we are also evaluated on that, partly on that, as well. How many of the young person’s we work with go on to reoffend and

and how many don't. So, I think that is quite, that would be quite a useful measure".  
(YJS Practitioner)

There was however widespread agreement that the broad impact on the YJS had been positive. The following comments capture well the pride with which many spoke about Youth Ink's achievements and those of young people with whom it has worked:

"I think for me, it's been a really positive impact on the youth offending service, because I think you know we've got in-house service and that we can kind of go to any time, because sometimes with volunteer organizations, you're doing a referral, then it takes a week or 2 weeks to get that referral back, and then it's a long-distance communication... They're in the building. They know a lot of the young people, it is the first point of contact, sometimes, with them.... So, it's not one hand doesn't know what the other hand is doing, it's more about very much partnership work, and and yeah, and it's been in a while. it's been priceless, to be honest you know.

The fact that they're able to even talk about their own life experiences. Some of them don't even talk to me about it and haven't talked to me about it. So you know that in itself, you know, is a great credit to them because they've been able to you know, get that from young people, and work with that, and like the emotional stuff that, a lot of, especially our young men, don't want to share with us....

They've been into communities where they're able to you know put their views forward. They've been in meetings where they're able to challenge professionals. You don't get that anywhere, I mean, very rarely do you get that, you know. So those things for me have been incredible, and I think it's been a credit to us as well in a sense that we have the service here." (YJS Practitioner)

"Overall, it's a fantastic resource. I'm delighted to have it, like you know, one of my proudest experiences ... was them running a workshop at the YJB convention in 2019 and seeing how well they did that, and the fact it was the last, they got the graveyard slot you know, the last workshop before the closing speeches, you know, the fact they engaged with lots of professionals from all over the country, was, you know, really impressive, and you know they speak really well to judges and magistrates as well. So not only am I proud of what they do with the us but I think they're fantastic ambassadors for us as well." (YJS Manager)

The involvement of PSNs in YJS management meetings, or in meetings with the local mayor or community groups, or in policy making fora with civil servants and policy makers was said to have contributed to policy and practice discussions and developments at local and national levels.

"So. I mean I love my work with them. I really enjoy it. I learn a lot from them. quite honestly. They teach me a lot. They, I mean, for X to have stepped up during the course of this Pathfinder, from, you know, to start with, a young man who was obviously, you know, able to kind of join a conference and speak, to actually kind of almost leading, some project management, is, is impressive to see, and you know I

take huge pleasure in being able to feed back to them, you know, when things do make a difference, and when change is impacted, and, you know, ensuring that they're aware of that and the fundamental difference they make. There's not very many people in their lives who can say that they've, you know, made a difference to youth justice". (Representative of external organisation )

#### ***4.4 Outcomes for the wider community***

Outcomes for the wider community include all those identified above insofar as benefits for young people and service providers are perceived as benefits for all. What needs emphasis is the extent to which Youth Ink has become a community as well as a YJS resource. Amongst the specific organisations and people that Youth Ink has worked with are local schools and pupils, universities – staff and students, arts and sports projects and clubs, local employers, the YJB, police, judges and magistrates and parent groups. What they gain from Youth Ink's engagement is much the same as what project participants get: access to young people with experience of offending as well as interventions to tackle offending who are prepared and able to speak about these experiences. The outcome is higher levels of awareness of what these young people think about youth crime and youth justice, providing a voice that otherwise struggles to be heard, given the relative powerlessness of young people who offend.

## **5. Key Ingredients**

On the basis of the interviews conducted for this interim evaluation, it is possible to identify the following elements as central to Youth Ink's successes to date:

### ***5.1 Leadership, Management & Staffing***

The role of Youth Ink's founder and CEO has been critical. All interviews underlined that his energy, enthusiasm, passion, commitment and skills were and remain the driving force behind Youth Ink's development, to the extent that the question as to whether the organisation could survive without him is at least worth asking. Important skills include the ability to communicate and promote the objectives of the organisation to various audiences (young people, parents, managers, partners, funders), to create a network of partners with different things to offer young people, and personnel and project management with oversight of an increasingly diverse set of activities in a growing range of settings involving more and more people. As important is the preparedness to 'go over and above' in terms of time invested and opportunities sought after on behalf of project participants. Likewise, an unsurprising attribute, given that it is essentially his organisation, is an absolute conviction in the potential of young people going through the youth justice system to overcome current challenges and a huge desire to help them realise this potential, born out of personal experience.

The belief in, commitment to and support for Youth Ink from YJS management is also seen as crucial. The YJS has provided 'core' funding for Youth Ink since its outset. This investment is perceived as not having been without risk, given that issues of confidentiality, safeguarding and vulnerability inevitably arise. The involvement of former young offenders in service delivery within the YJS has come to be seen as beneficial in all the ways described above but it is worth recalling that the Youth Ink model was an experiment to begin with – no one could be sure it would work, albeit that the value of drawing on the lived experience of service users was well established.

Both the skills and attributes of the CEO and the commitment to Youth Ink from YJS management extend in many respects to the Peer Support Navigators (n.b. the three who are employees) on the one hand and YJS professionals/practitioners on the other. With regards to the former, Youth Ink's somewhat unique recruitment strategy and criteria would seem to have been significant, effectively providing an apprenticeship scheme that is tailored to the needs of the organisation. The commitment of YJS staff to the organisation and its staff, evident from the interviewees, must also be understood as critical to its success.

### ***5.2 Clarity of Concept – The Power of Lived Experience***

At the core of Youth Ink is the simple idea that young people with recent, lived experience of the youth justice system are well placed because of that experience to offer support and advice to young people currently experiencing the same system, as well as to those who work with them and wider stakeholders in youth justice. The 'lived experience' element is widely agreed to be the organisation's USP; if there is one magic ingredient to the model,

'lived experience' is it. Not that the lived experiences of say, victims or police officers, are any less important. The point is that the experience of young people in the system has not been effectively valued and drawn upon until recently.

As we have noted, YJS practitioners said that the PSNs appeared better able, especially in the early stages, to talk to and have talks to them, with some young people referred to the YJS. Interviewees from external organisations spoke of the power of authenticity and of the audience's appreciation of their openness and honesty. Without the lived experience element, however, the ability to empathise or to speak truthfully would be meaningless. It is at least because the PSNs have themselves offended that young people trust them, it is because they have been subject to arrest, sentencing and punishment that the YJB Convention invite them to speak. Being roughly the same age, knowing the same places, speaking the same language are all important aspects of this but above all the sense that they know of what they speak.

### ***5.3 A Clear Theory of Change***

In one sense then, Youth Ink works because it taps into a previously underused resource. At the same time the lessons of lived experience shape the activities provided by Youth Ink: safe spaces to listen and talk, education, training and job opportunities, workshops on issues affecting young people and the chance to engage with policy makers, delivered by individuals who the participants can relate to and vice versa. These activities are informed by an awareness of issues such as fear, trauma and mistrust, well known barriers to effective engagement.

In this sense, Youth Ink's model is effective because lived experience is put to good effect. The organisation's theory of change is well thought through. There is a clearly identified problem (barriers to engagement and participation), well focused aims (to facilitate engagement, develop PSHE skills and create opportunities), a logical and distinct tool (programmes designed and delivered by those with lived experience), an appropriate context to work in (the youth justice service) and demonstrable outputs (workshops, the hub, engagement with policy makers) and outcomes (statutory orders completed, job/courses acquired/joined, changes in practice).

### ***5.4 Liaison between YJS and Youth Ink***

The regularity of liaison between the YJS and Youth Ink was identified as an important success factor. Weekly meetings are held between the YOS Officer responsible for liaison with Youth Ink and the CEO for discussion but there are frequent informal contacts each week. The meetings provide an update and record of what happening in the programmes, the rate of referrals, risk assessments on these cases and whatever else had occurred that was of mutual interest. There is a spirit of open and transparent communication between the two organisations

### ***5.5 Co-location and Longevity***

Relatedly, it is widely recognised that Youth Ink enjoy a slightly different position to other partner organisations due to their location within the building and because the CEO and

some of the PSNs have been there several years. The high levels of familiarity, trust and shared knowledge of each other's work, all key ingredients (and indicators) of effective partnership, are felt to distinguish the relationship with Youth Ink from those with other third sector partners.

### ***5.6 Charitable/Independent Status***

At the same time, Youth Ink's status as a third sector charity, independent from the YJS is also key. That the PSNs are **not** YJS staff is an integral part of their role and identity and the fact that young people can open up to them in ways they may not do with their caseworker is seen as a distinct advantage. Furthermore, as a charity Youth Ink has been able to employ the PSNs directly on a sessional basis, something not possible for a statutory organisation, but made possible by their co-presence within the YJS.

### ***5.7 Flexibility***

Linked to its independent status, Youth Ink emphasises that its support for young people is not limited to the time they are serving an order and does not finish when they reach their eighteenth birthday. This enables the organisation to work with young people, albeit perhaps less frequently, over a much longer period than is the case for the YJS as a statutory body, providing a source of stability. They offer an exit strategy for those coming to an end of their orders which can be particularly helpful if a case manager still feels that support is needed. Those in transition from custody to the community were particularly vulnerable and the PSNs can continue work with them after the YJS has formally closed a case.

### ***5.8 Commitment to Children and Young People***

A Child First ethos is another important element of Youth Ink's work. The emphasis is on providing young people with the support they need to realise their potential, whilst their history of offending is transformed into a resource that they can use to support others and effect change.

## 6. Concluding note

The findings and conclusions presented within this interim report constitute work in progress and so are provisional and incomplete. It is hoped they provide an account of Youth Ink's aims and achievements as well as identifying the most important success factors or elements of effective practice. In the next phase of the evaluation young people will be interviewed about their engagement with Youth Ink, providing a further perspective on its activities, whether and why these are effective, and on the outcomes for them and for others. The qualitative picture gathered so far which is very positive, will be 'tested' against quantitative indicators and relevant findings from related research will provide a further point of comparison.

## References

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