

Giving Young People a Voice

Change Maker Volunteer Programme

As a new project we understood the need to work with young people as partners, embedding the voice and needs of young people within our work from the very start. Developing the Change Maker Volunteers Programme was our way of listening to young people and helping them to act on issues they care about. The young volunteers deliver peer-led consultations and social action projects that can create genuine change for themselves and other young people.

We started by recruiting across Newcastle, working with young people to develop their understanding of social action and democracy. The group were then trained to deliver peer-led consultations. These have been carried out with groups across the North East as our volunteers have sought to reach as many young people as possible. They wanted to know about young people's lives, the things that are important to them, their issues and potential barriers to success.

The Change Maker Volunteers went into multiple youth groups to carry out an interactive consultation.

These included: Newcastle Community Asset Trust, Hatrick, Children North East, Girls Friendly Society, Basement Project, NE Youth and Patchwork Project.

The consultations, consisting of three games; Pyramid, Corners and Barriers. gave us a lot of rich information about young people's lives. We have drawn four main themes from our findings:

- Not feeling listened to
- Mental health
- Personal safety
- Environment

Speaking to young people about the level of distress they feel within their lives was shocking. As youth workers and Change Maker Volunteers we were aware of some of the issues young people faced but listening to them speak so frankly about their experiences was very different.

What is clear from the report is that young people are affected by government policy and outside control in many aspects of their lives. What was also clear was that young people have very few opportunities to express the impact this has on their safety, education, mental health and opportunities.

"It amazes me how different the lives are of other young people who live so close to me, they are practically my neighbours. We live so differently and have different problems but are still part of the same community and share the same thoughts about it." (Change Maker Volunteer, Female, 16)

Young people report being negatively impacted by an educational system which prioritises academic achievement above all else, leaving out issues which young people say they struggle with like personal safety, mental health and coping with high stress levels. The result means that young people feel their self-worth is equated to academic achievement only, while other valuable personal qualities which cannot be measured by tests are being overlooked.

Young people are facing barriers to success in many areas of their lives and they have told us that they feel powerless to change it. When young people are discussed, or policy is created for them they feel:

- Frozen out of the debate
- Not a part of seeking solutions
- That their needs are side-lined

“I think the consultations was a real eye opener for me. I didn’t know what kind of mindset people my age had. The consultations showed that even though the type of hardships varied from person to person they all looked at life in a similar way. At the end of the day there were more similarities than differences.” (Change Maker Volunteer, Female, 17)

At the end of the consultations, we asked all of the young people to give us a one-word answer to a question. This word cloud demonstrates young people’s answers to the question ‘Can you give us one word which you think sums up today’s activities?’. The size of word is proportional to the number of times the word was given: the larger the word, the more it was chosen by the young people.

