

AVA – Case Study One

Case study: Small charities and social change
Field: Violence against women and girls

At a glance

AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) is committed to ending gender-based violence and abuse across the UK by supporting survivors and challenging social attitudes. Annual income is around £450,000 and they have 10 staff. They are funded by a mix of charitable trust foundations, and have no statutory funding.

Focus of the case study

This case study explores the three-year Young People's Participation Project. The initiative aimed to develop participative models of work that would support the well-being of young people affected by violence and abuse; raise awareness; and improve services for children and young people.

What does advocacy mean for them?

AVA undertook this project (with Chilypep as the main delivery partner) in 2013 because they were concerned that young people suffering abuse did not have a voice and were sometimes being *'rolled out as mascots in a tokenistic way'*. A previous project to develop an online web space for teachers to use in schools led them to think about doing a project that was *'more from young people's point of view and to think "what do young people actually want from services and prevention programmes" rather than us just presuming we know what they want'*.

When they started the project, the definition of Domestic Abuse had recently changed to include 16- and 17-year-olds, and although the government had launched a TV advertising campaign called 'This Is Abuse', there was little guidance on offer for young people. While monitoring a website where teenagers who had seen the ad could talk about their experiences or ask questions, AVA found that many of the young people were under 14 and only realising for the first time that what they were experiencing was abuse. *'Changing a definition doesn't support and make them safer, so projects like this hopefully help us to understand what's going on in young people's lives and what does a safe space look like for them'*.

This project involved a completely new way of working with young people, allowing them to lead the work, *'rather than us doing focus groups and then embedding that into whatever we then developed'*. They asked projects round the country working with young people affected by abuse to nominate participants. AVA worked with 15 or 16 of them, who each took part in a domestic violence awareness programme before going on a residential weekend, during which they worked towards a youth leadership qualification and chose projects to work on over the next couple of years. They then went out and conducted that work themselves to raise awareness of domestic violence and to improve future services for other young people.

What's worked?

AVA believes that, for participants, this project could be really important for their well-being and helping them to feel they are making changes in their own lives. But it now underpins every aspect of the way AVA works. This quote from a service user embodies their ethos as an organisation: *'nothing about us [young people] without us'*.

AVA has developed guidelines for working with young people who have experienced abuse which they hope will encourage organisations that are becoming increasingly willing to work with young people but have reservations or concerns about the associated safety implications and risks. They stress that *'this is a way of giving them that power back, and many of them do want that power back and it often helps on their journey of recovery'*.

Giving the young people a qualification and letting them choose what to work on, rather than telling them, was key to the project's success. Whatever AVA does now is based on what they have learnt about meaningful participation, and their approach now includes survivor voices across all of their work. As they said at the end of their report on the project, *'If you listen to experts by experience of any age, it's going to benefit everybody – that's the only way that we're going to learn and move forwards and create a more equal, safe society'*.

They have shared this learning by preparing a toolkit, giving examples of what low, medium and high participation look like. In future, when they respond to consultations, *'we will be able to say with confidence that young people have experienced this and need this and this is how best to work with them'*.

Part of this practice sharing involves the young people joining members of AVA in the work to influence policy and practice – for example, by taking part in a sexual exploitation panel with local authorities or visiting Parliament and meeting MPs. By coming together with other children's and violence against women and girls (VAWG) charities they have a shared voice, and the individual young people are also supported to advocate for themselves and be part of the conversation.

A recent example is coming together with other VAWG charities to give their view on the Domestic Violence Bill – *'doing joined up work with the children's sector ... Anything we've learnt from these projects gets fed in to this'*.

Challenges/what we've learnt?

During this project, AVA learnt about the value of their internal working and ethos, which is based on a shared vision as a team embodying feminist values and belief in the importance of survivor-led work. It is supported by a Director who has confidence in the team's expertise and will not try to monopolise.

The group of young people AVA were working with had been in relationships that were abusive and many had grown up with domestic violence at home. AVA's main challenge, therefore, as a non-frontline organisation, was managing the risk to the young people involved in the project. It's a delicate balance: *'Some people think that once you raise awareness then you're decreasing the risk but the opposite can happen ... if you don't have that outlet to make sense of it then it can really increase risks'*. It was important to select young people who were at a certain point in their recovery journey and were already in a position where they could access support outside of the AVA project.

The domestic violence awareness programme undertaken by the nominated young people was a way to check that everyone in the group was able to take part in this project. For AVA, it was also vital to carefully manage the environment at the residential weekend so that it was a safe and supported space and they could respond swiftly to any unexpected changes in group dynamics.

A core aspect of the project was allowing the young people to lead the work, but it was understood as an approach that not everyone is able or willing to embrace, perhaps through a desire to be in a more controlling position, or to protect and avoid re-traumatising young people. *'But maybe we're protecting them too much and need to be empowering them as well'*. This case study illustrates the possible ways of carrying out this variation of advocacy work, and explores what authentic inclusion can bring to a project and organisation.

AVA continues to work on reaching a place where policy makers and commissioners – and any individuals making decisions about children's lives – are actively engaging with young people. Knowing your audience is vital: *'getting your voice heard and doing something creative that will get your message heard whilst at the same time not alienating people you're trying to influence'*.

This is the case study of one of 11 organisations we spoke to from four fields: criminal justice; homelessness; migration; and violence against women and girls. These case study organisations had annual incomes between £50k and just over £1m. We are incredibly grateful for the rich and open insights that were shared with us.

The case studies are part of IVAR's study *Small Charities and Social Change*, which builds on existing research, drawing on the experience of 11 organisations, to explore the role and contribution of small charities in more depth. It asks how and why small charities are challenging, shaping and changing policy, practice and attitudes. It discusses the challenges and opportunities that they face in doing so.

The report and case studies can be found here www.ivar.org.uk/social-change.