

Integrated care systems and youth voice and action: A national conversation

Workshop summary notes

30th June 2025

Nearly 100 people attended a national workshop focused on strengthening youth voice and action within Integrated Care Systems (ICS). Following a series of regional workshops, the session brought together various partners from across the regions to connect and share learning.

This summary outlines key insights and actions from the workshop. It also includes insights from the guest speakers and any examples of good practice that were shared.

Background

The session aimed to:

- Connect ICS leads and youth engagement stakeholders across regions.
- Share learning and innovations between local systems.
- Take a deeper dive into two key themes emerging from regional conversations: engaging seldom heard groups and exploring the workforce (including the role of multi-disciplinary teams).
- Surface collective messages for national stakeholders and partners.

This session is part of a wider project supporting ICS leads across six regions in England to strengthen youth social action, set up by Pears and NHS England. IVAR facilitates the network through a flexible programme of support, allowing members to share and learn from their peers. The network offers spaces for sharing challenges and celebrating successes.

Key insights from regional sessions

To set the stage for a national conversation, we shared key insights from five regional workshops IVAR held across the South West, South East, North East and Yorkshire, London, and the Midlands¹. From these workshops, we identified common enablers and challenges related to fostering meaningful youth voice work.

Common enablers

- **Youth-led and co-produced approaches:** There are numerous initiatives across the regions, such as youth ambassador programs and training for young researchers, aimed at empowering young people to lead, co-design, and co-deliver projects. Furthermore, there is a deliberate effort to include young individuals with Special Educational Needs (SEN), care-experienced youth, young carers, and those from rural or disadvantaged areas.

¹ We are currently planning workshop #1 in North West, and workshop #2 in all six regions.

- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Having strong partnerships across the NHS, local authorities, schools, and VCSE organisations enabled joined-up, more impactful youth engagement.
- **Use of ‘trusted voices’ and peer-led models:** Engaging with community connectors, youth ambassadors, peer mentors, and other trusted community voices, such as headteachers, has strengthened relationships with young people and enhanced their participation.
- **Creative and flexible engagement methods:** We learned about various creative tools such as podcasts, digital platforms, arts, games, and informal conversations to enhance engagement and accessibility.
- **Clear feedback loops and visible impact:** Many people across the regions mentioned taking a ‘*You Said, We Did*’ approach, which helps young people see the effects of their input, builds trust with young people and sustains continued engagement.

Common challenges

- **Funding and resource limitations:** Lack of sustained investment in youth voice work makes it difficult to do this work well. Short-term funding, tight budgets, and a lack of dedicated staff time hinder consistent engagement.
- **Fragmentation and duplication of efforts:** Siloed working and the absence of coordination leads to inefficiencies and missed opportunities.
- **Access and inclusion challenges:** Marginalised groups, such as disabled individuals, those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), care-experienced youth, and asylum-seeking young people, often encounter additional systemic barriers to participation. Furthermore, individuals living in rural areas often face challenges such as limited transportation and digital poverty. Competing priorities, such as school, work, and personal obligations, can also conflict with participation, particularly when health is not viewed as a top priority.
- **Tokenism and lack of follow-up:** Young people disengage when involvement is perceived as meaningless, symbolic, or tokenistic. This occurs when their input is not acknowledged or acted upon.
- **Staff skill and confidence gaps:** Some practitioners may lack the capacity, tools or training needed to engage young people meaningfully, particularly those with complex needs. Additionally, a lack of buy-in from leadership or ‘*fear of angry parents*’ can slow down youth-centred initiatives.

Workshop attendees also outlined additional issues that were particularly pertinent or felt missing from the regional session’s discussion:



Key messages from guest speakers

Anastasia Christoforou, Research & Learning Manager, UK Youth

Young people want to be researchers and have the potential to do so: As leaders, we need to challenge assumptions about youth competence and advocate for their inclusion throughout the research process, not just as contributors but as co-creators.

'You'd be surprised how many young people are actually interested in being the researchers or being part of that research team.'

Youth involvement enhances quality: Including young people in the research process results in findings that are richer, more accessible, and more impactful.

'The quality of the entire work could have not been the same without their involvement.'

Shared power leads to real impact: By training and collaborating with young people, projects provided them with meaningful opportunities to shape tools, lead focus groups, and even recruit participants.

'We gave them access to speaking to policymakers and hopefully empowering them.'

Holly Notcutt, Head of Partnerships & Impact – #iwill, Volunteering matters and Isla Cullingham, #iwill Champion

Representation and visibility matter: Young people are more likely to engage when they see themselves represented.

'If we don't see ourselves represented in a place, we're less likely to think that we belong there.'

By intentionally highlighting underrepresented youth (such as young parents, those with special educational needs, or refugee backgrounds), the #iwill movement has expanded its reach and inclusivity. Peer-to-peer recruitment was emphasised as a highly effective strategy.

Youth empowerment requires shared power: Incorporating youth perspectives into all decision-making processes and ensuring that every team member, not just youth officers feels accountable for this responsibility is key.

'It's all about sharing power with young people and encouraging other organisations to do that too.'

Creating safe and trusting spaces is foundational: Isla emphasised the importance of trust, inclusion, and responsibility in her contributions. She shared personal experiences of being treated as an equal, which significantly boosted her confidence. Holly supported this sentiment, pointing out that small, intentional actions, such as giving a voice to quieter or marginalised youth, can lead to lasting change.

'By giving young people power and real responsibilities... this really empowers them.'

Daisy West, Project Worker and Bronte Edwards, Project Lead, NHS Youth Forum & Young Researchers, Barnardos

Youth-led research and content creation enhance impact: The NHS Youth Forum enables young people to lead research and engage creatively. Young people design tools, conduct focus groups, analyse data, and produce podcasts.

‘So much of it was off their [young people] own back... they had so much autonomy over the project.’

Their projects generated highly credible insights, which were used by NHS policy teams.

Accessibility and support are non-negotiable: They discussed practical and relationship-based approaches to inclusion, such as providing digital devices, utilising dyslexia-friendly resources, and offering one-on-one check-ins.

‘We gave one young person the option to eat in a separate room and bring a carer... That made all the difference.’

Safe spaces and shared purpose build youth confidence: They stressed the value of creating a ‘safe space agreement’ and revisiting the ‘my why’ or the rationale for engagement for both professionals and young people.

‘Your role is to set up the scaffolding and the space—not to inhabit it.’

By centring youth experience and providing consistency, they’ve helped young people grow into confident contributors to NHS policy and practice.

Angela Dunn, PMO Lead - NHS Children and Young People’s Transformation Programme

The youth voice is critical to service design: The input of young people must be central to shaping health and care services. This work has intentionally incorporated youth feedback at multiple stages, including the involvement of young people on the national programme board and consultation with them during pivotal meetings with NHS leadership. This approach has led to tangible changes such as the creation of play guidance for hospitals, prompted by young people’s feedback on the lack of play facilities.

Integrated, multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) improve outcomes: ‘Neighbourhood MDTs’ are a strategic shift to better serve children and young people. These teams aim to bring together primary care, secondary care, mental health professionals, and community partners in a more coordinated way - allowing children to access care closer to home and reducing unnecessary referrals to hospitals. Professionals reported improved relationships and communication across services, leading to quicker responses and better coordination for families.

‘[MDTs] bring an opportunity to have quite a holistic conversation about the child’s care, but also about the wider needs of the child and the family and gives a great opportunity to signpost them to support services that they may not otherwise have been aware of.’

Systemic shifts require cultural change and support: Listening to young people isn't always easy, as it challenges adult assumptions and requires professionals to adapt their approach. Staff often need support to engage confidently with young people, and effective engagement takes continuous effort and humility.

Workforce collaboration and knowledge sharing are central. Regular MDT meetings facilitate shared case discussions, enabling professionals to learn from one another and support more effective decision-making. They foster mutual understanding across disciplines, especially for practitioners less familiar with working with young people or complex needs.

Headlines from the breakout room discussion

Focus area: Engaging seldom heard young people

The workshop emphasised the ongoing gap in engagement with specific groups of young people. Underrepresented communities include those from Traveller and Gypsy backgrounds, home-educated children, young carers, boys and young men, unaccompanied asylum seekers, and young individuals with long-term conditions or non-verbal communication needs.

Attendees discussed systemic barriers, including digital poverty, parental disengagement, geographic isolation, and a lack of cultural competence. One attendee emphasised that *'trust-building is more difficult but essential in deprived and ethnically diverse populations'*, highlighting the need for patience and continuity. Suggestions included collaborating with voluntary sector partners, regularly visiting community sites, and using creative communication methods such as drawings or symbols.

Workshop attendees provided various examples of good practices and approaches. Several key themes emerged from the discussions.

Build trust through relationships and representation

- Engagement should be rooted in trusted relationships. Collaborating with local organisations, especially those already integrated into communities, is crucial.
- Representation is essential. Young people are more likely to engage if they see individuals who share similar backgrounds being involved and valued. This involves amplifying the voices of diverse groups, including disabled young people, care-experienced individuals, LGBTQ+ youth, asylum seekers, and those from rural or disadvantaged areas.

Take a flexible approach to maximise inclusion

- Develop a variety of ways for individuals to get involved that accommodate different learning styles, communication preferences, and abilities.
- Identify and address obstacles such as transportation, digital access, and scheduling conflicts, such as aligning activities with school hours.
- Use creative formats like podcasts, videos, art, and board games to make participation more engaging and accessible. Tailor activities to diverse learning styles, communication preferences, and abilities.

‘Informal and formal voice is all valuable, useful and usable.’

Ensure engagement is meaningful and non-tokenistic

- Avoid ‘tick box’ exercises, as young people often disengage quickly when they feel their input is not valued.
- Establish clear feedback loops by communicating what actions have been taken based on their input (e.g., ‘You said, we did’) to demonstrate that their contributions lead to real change.

‘We must ensure that young people’s contributions lead to visible action.’

- Involve young people in co-designing tools, conducting research, and presenting findings. Ensure they participate not just as consultees, but as genuine collaborators.
- Be honest and transparent about any parameters to engagement and decision-making.

Support both youth and adults to participate effectively

- Provide training and preparation for young people to help them feel confident in formal settings.
- Additionally, offer training for adults (such as clinicians and executives) on how to engage with young people respectfully, fostering an environment where they feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of making mistakes.

Compensate and recognise contribution

- Compensate young people for their time and effort when possible, or provide meaningful alternatives such as certificates, work experience, or references.
- Recognise the risk of over-involvement and avoid depending too heavily on a few vocal individuals and spread opportunities more widely.

Move from youth voice to youth power

- A key message was that *‘youth voice is not enough’*. Stakeholders must transition from passive consultation to active co-production and influence.

‘Go to where young people are.’

Draw upon the strengths of youth workers and VCSE organisations

Youth workers were repeatedly identified as pivotal to meaningful engagement. Their ability to build trust, navigate power dynamics, and relate informally with young people makes them uniquely suited for this work.

‘An overlooked factor can be using trained, skilled youth workers in processes.’

Voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations were also celebrated for their effectiveness in reaching underserved groups. It was noted that flexible funding, small grants, and long-term partnerships with VCSEs were essential for sustaining youth engagement initiatives.

Focus area: Workforce and the role of multidisciplinary teams

The workshop also explored how Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs) are currently utilised or could be utilised to enhance integrated care for young people.

- While the value of MDTs was acknowledged, feedback on their current implementation was mixed. In some regions, there was limited awareness of MDTs and their connection to youth services.
- Where MDTs function well, they reflect local needs and promote holistic, flexible support. Concerns were raised about over-reliance on GPs, lack of school and social care integration, and an adult-centric model that risks marginalising young people.
- Attendees discussed various structural barriers, including siloed systems, insufficient funding, limited workforce capacity, and rigid engagement models. A recurring theme was the lack of clear accountability: *'Who leads engagement? Who funds what?'*

Additionally, attendees expressed concern about the strain on existing services. One attendee asked, *'Can this method of working be effective when resources are being stretched?'* The group emphasised the need for a more systemic and coordinated approach to engagement.

Priorities for further action

We asked workshop attendees what stuck with them most from the session:

be holistic in support find your tribe
 connection across local more youth work
 finding the why youth forum
 more youth work needed third sector led
 go to them
 be creative inspiration share the power
 youth work skills
 enthusiasm for youth work
 need - structural change

Workshop participants identified key areas for further exploration and actions they would take away, either individually or collectively:

- *Creating a central platform for sharing youth voices.*
- *Promoting the NHS Youth Forum with regional representatives.*
- *Additional Collaborations to test current assumptions.*
- *Empowering young people with information about how systems operate.*
- *Improving accessibility to Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs) and Integrated Care Systems (ICS) for children and young people (CYP) and their families.*
- *Embedding co-production and implementing outcome tracking.*
- *Expanding the concept of 'health' to include factors such as school attendance, location, and identity.*
- *Establishing consistent and meaningful feedback mechanisms.*

Next steps

The second series of regional workshops is currently being organised. Please look out for further communication from the regional leads or IVAR.

The final national webinar and workshop are planned for Autumn. We will circulate information as soon as the dates are confirmed. If you have any suggestions for topics or speakers, please don't hesitate to contact Sonakshi Anand - sonakshi@ivar.org.uk.