

Young people as researchers and change-makers in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK

Executive summary



Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

Introduction

Our research offers evidence from young people about the importance of local neighbourhoods in their lives, what supports and what challenges them to flourish and what needs to change to enable them to live meaningful lives. It offers new and practical insights about how young people can be included as co-researchers and change-makers in research and policymaking about their lives in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England. It sets out a methodology and methods for researching with young people, bringing their voices into dialogue with decision-makers to ensure that young people's experiences and perspectives are considered in national and regional policymaking.

"It's quite often we don't get listened to properly. If there was someone to listen properly and take notes, I think there'd be a lot more help for young people rather than it just being 'ah you're just a kid'"

(Young people's focus group, Woughton).

Rationale

The starting point for our project is the disconnect between public health scholarship to "build back fairer" (Marmot et al., 2020a), rising child poverty and disadvantage, and the continued absence of children and young people's voices in local and national policy making (Jones et al., 2020).

"I just want them (decision makers) to know that children are alive, that we exist"

(Nicole, female, aged 11, Mablethorpe).

We need to be LISTENED TO!



Our study took place in England during 2022-2025 during which time child poverty reached record levels, with over thirty percent (4.5 million) of UK children now living in poverty, an increase of 900,000 between 2010/11 and 2023/24 (DWP, 2025). At the time of writing, the Government is consulting on its Child Poverty Strategy but has rejected calls to date to remove the two-child benefit cap that would bring 300K children out of poverty and help 700K children to live in 'less deep poverty' (CPAG, 2024, 2025). It has also proposed controversial alterations to the welfare system and cuts to benefits (over £5 billion) (DWP, 2025) that will have far-reaching impacts on children and 'challenge the UK government's child poverty commitments' (CPAG, 2025).¹

¹ Since preparing our report the UK government announced that from April 2026 it will remove the two-child limit so that families can receive the child element of Universal Credit for all children regardless of family size (DWP, 2025) and has launched the Child Poverty Strategy (Cabinet Office, 2025). Government figures suggest that this will result in 450,000 fewer children in relative low income after housing costs in the final year of parliament (financial year ending (FYE) 2030) (DWP, 2025), a number that is expected to rise due to other measures including free school meals for all children in families on Universal Credit, help with energy bills, and the expansion of free childcare.

Within these national figures exist large regional differences in the prevalence and effects of poverty, with higher rates of child poverty in the North and Midlands and along the English coast (The Health Foundation, 2024). Poverty has a major impact on children's childhoods, opportunities and futures. It affects their health and wellbeing as children and is a predictor of their health, healthy life expectancy and income as adults (Marmot, 2020a, 2020b). Poorer children living in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods are at greater risk of exploitation by gangs, violence and knife crime, exposure to road accidents and pollution, live in overcrowded and insecure homes and have less access to green space (Barnes et al., 2022). The decline in local authority funding (Hayre and Pollock, 2022) has worsened poorer children's access to preventative services, reducing opportunities for them to participate in extracurricular and enrichment activities (Sutton Trust, 2023), exacerbating childhood inequality and disadvantage in the poorest neighbourhoods (Webb et al., 2022).



While child poverty and disadvantage are policy issues (CPAG, 2025) and although where children and young people live matters for their lives and opportunities, young people are routinely overlooked in policy and policymaking that impact their everyday lives and prospects (Jones et al., 2020). Failure to include young people in decision-making ignores their capabilities (Lomax et al., 2022), reinforces their marginality and perpetuates intergenerational disadvantage - the systemic disparities in the distribution of economic resources and political power between adults and young people. These disparities are experienced disproportionately by children and young people from the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including those from poorer, minority ethnic and rural backgrounds who have less opportunity to participate or are easier to ignore (Bruselius-Jensen et al., 2022).

Aims

Our research aimed to address this participation deficit for young people, developing methods of co-producing research and knowledge exchange with them, that both recognises their universal rights to be included in decision-making (UNCRC, 1989) and is responsive to the particularities of their experiences growing up in economically disadvantaged places. The central focus of the research was therefore to understand:

- The role of local neighbourhoods in young people's lives; what supports and what challenges them to flourish in contexts of economic disadvantage and marginality.
- How young people can be actively engaged in local action and decision-making and the methodologies and methods that support the generation and exchange of knowledge with young people.

Sample and case study sites



Figure 1
The three study sites



We were privileged to research with fifty-four young people as co-researchers and change-makers in three UK neighbourhoods:

- Deighton & Brackenhall, a neighbourhood within the former industrial town of Huddersfield in the North of England in Yorkshire and Humber;
- Woughton, a neighbourhood in a high-growth area in the affluent city of Milton Keynes in South East England;
- Mablethorpe, a spatially disconnected, small seaside town in the East Midlands.

These neighbourhoods have in common high levels of poverty and disadvantage (IMD, 2019), whilst also having distinctly different geographies and social histories, different patterns of employment, crime and differing access to green space, all factors that shape young people's lives and opportunities. Our aim, in selecting these case study neighbourhoods was to explore the influence of a wide range of place-based factors and their intersections that shape young people's experiences and opportunities in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK.

A total of 257 young people aged 10-15 participated in the project as co-researchers and research participants. This included the core group of fifty-four young people who worked with us as co-researchers and change-makers, a role which involved their co-shaping of the research questions and methods and as participants in local community dialogue events. A further six young people acted as advisors on our national advisory group, shaping the study's approach and methods.

Deighton and Brackenhall

Huddersfield
County of West Yorkshire



Mablethorpe

East Lindsey District
County of Lincolnshire



Woughton

Milton Keynes
County of Buckinghamshire



Figure 2
Fifty-four young co-researchers and change-makers
in three UK neighbourhoods

Methodology and methods

'... children's voices can be seen and heard when researchers are open to and create opportunities for children... through different media (text, talk, art) and take notice of children's sense-making through attentive forms of knowledge generation'

(Lomax and Smith, 2024).



Figure 3

Young people using a place assessment tool to evaluate their local area, Woughton

Framed by the Capability Approach which recognises young people's capacities to positively influence their own lives and the lives of others around them (Sen, 1999), our methodological approach builds on previous Growing Up in Cities (GUIC) methods initiated by Kevin Lynch (1977) and developed during the second wave of GUIC studies in the 1990s (Chawla, 2002; Driskell 2002; Derr et al., 2018). Part of the third wave of studies exploring young people's experiences of their local environment and identifying methods that can be used across settings and cultures (GUIC, 2025) our study reflects more recent advances in Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Percy-Smith et al 2019), Children's Geographies (e.g. Horton and Kraftl, 2006) and Childhood and Youth Studies (e.g. Lomax and Smith, 2024; Day et al., 2022; Percy-Smith et al., 2003).



Figure 4

Researchers and co-researchers

Drawing on our attentive methodology (Lomax & Smith, 2024), we developed a rich portfolio of arts-based methods alongside interviews, focus groups and creative workshops, opening up spaces for young people to take an active role in the generation of knowledge and social action.

Study phases and activities

The project was conducted in four iterative phases of knowledge generation, synthesis and exchange with young people in each of the study neighbourhoods during October 2022 – June 2024. While these activities followed a broadly similar timeline, adjustments were made in accordance with each local neighbourhood context and young people's preferences.



Figure 5
The four phases of Participatory Action Research

Phase 1: Understanding young people's experiences of place



A total of 32 workshops across the three sites were conducted during phase one, with the core group of fifty-four co-researchers (fifteen young people in the workshops in Deighton & Brackenhall, eighteen in Mablethorpe and twenty-one in Woughton). This included the core researchers working with us in small groups over time to visually and creatively map their affective, sensory and lived experiences of place. Methods included map making, photo-methods, scrapbooking and journaling as well as collage, sculpting, paired interviews and focus groups.

Phase 2: Peer and adult perspectives

In each site the co-researchers worked collaboratively to develop and conduct peer-led workshops (n=82), peer-to-peer interviews (n=4) and a survey of 117 young people. They also conducted vox-pop interviews with adult residents and a survey of local stakeholders. Questions were developed by the young co-researchers using consensus methods to determine their collective priorities.



Phase 3: Community dialogues and youth-led change



Intergenerational community activities were organised to provide a space for young people to present their key findings and priorities for their neighbourhoods in dialogue with adult residents. These discussions – which took novel forms in each neighbourhood

(a postcard exchange in Mablethorpe, an in-person community event in Woughton and a series of workshops with a local artist and counsellors in Deighton & Brackenhall) informed change projects led by young people in each site. In Mablethorpe young people initiated a poster campaign to address their concerns about young people's vaping and the selling of vapes to young people in the area; in Woughton young people created a wellbeing and safety pack to support the wellbeing of other young people in the neighbourhood, and in Deighton & Brackenhall young people created a series of powerful artworks to be displayed as public art murals and contribute positive messages to the wider public about the area.

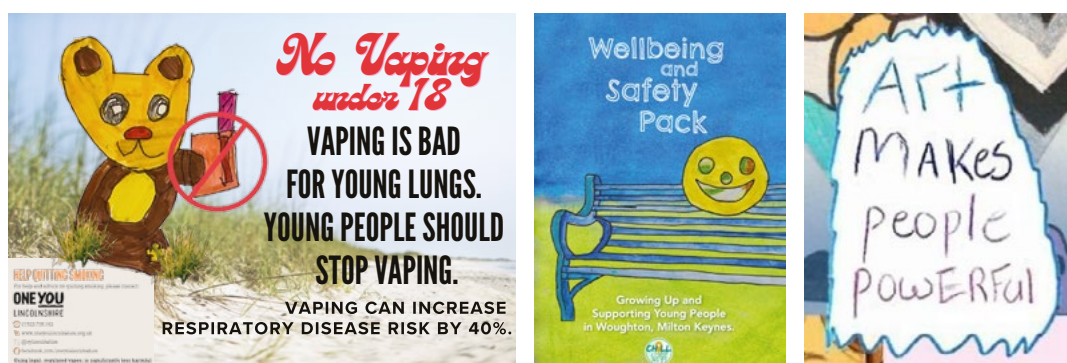


Figure 6
Young people's
change projects

Phase 4: Dissemination and impact: Local stakeholder dialogues

In this final phase of the project, we worked with young people to facilitate their inclusion in local decision-making and generate positive change. Responding directly to the challenges they told us they were experiencing in having their ideas taken on board at local authority level, we facilitated a series of local policy dialogues in each of the study neighbourhoods where young people could meet with local stakeholders and decision makers to share and discuss their research findings and identify priorities for change. To support this, we drew on and developed Brown's World Café principles (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) together with our own attentive methodology as a means of facilitating young people's participation in these policy spaces.



Findings

Our findings make two specific contributions. The first provides evidence about how place matters for young people. Here we draw on what young people told us through their creative artwork, mapping and interviews about their experiences of growing up in the study sites which brings in to focus what young people value about where they live, their strong social connections, sense of belonging and the opportunities available locally for them. It also describes the challenges young people experience living in under-resourced neighbourhoods, what prevents them from accessing outdoor and public spaces and how this impacts their wellbeing and opportunities. It sets out their aspirations for their neighbourhoods and what needs to happen to enable them to flourish. The second contribution addresses the participation deficit, setting out a model and methodology for co-producing research and knowledge exchange with young people. Our approach, which draws on the theoretical framework of 'Capabilities' (Sen, 1999) and our own attentive ways of working with young people, advances a model of youth-led and informed research and policy engagement that is inclusive of young people including those 'easy to ignore'.

"It's all about the beach town!"

(Islae, female, aged 13, Mablethorpe).

"It's got good bits. It has a bad reputation but bits of it are very community-strong and very helpful"

(Niamh, female, aged 15, Woughton).

"It is a bit of both, a good place and a bad place because a lot has happened here"

(Brandon, male, aged 12, Deighton & Brackenhall).



Place matters

The freedom to play, meet others and travel independently outside the home matters to the young people in our study. Access to local green space (woods, parks, beaches, informal green space); well-maintained outdoor space (streets and paved areas); welcoming indoor spaces (youth clubs and community centres); and the availability of trusted adults in these spaces provide vital opportunities for young people to socialise, travel independently to school and participate in activities, sports and arts, that are critical for their health and wellbeing. However, cuts to local authority budgets, poor maintenance, levels of violent and gang-related crime (in Deighton & Brackenhall and Woughton) and seasonal tourism (Mablethorpe) impact young people's safety, limiting their use of public spaces and their independent spatial mobility in their neighbourhoods.

Young people in our study value their local neighbourhoods as important places to play and meet independently with other young people. This includes a range of places outside the home such as urban squares and spaces alongside streets, public footpaths and footways (TCPA, 2024); indoor spaces such as youth and community centres, sports venues, public swimming pools, shops and arcades; publicly owned outdoor spaces such as Multi Use Games Areas (MUGA), sports fields and parks; and natural spaces such as fields, woods, beach, sand dunes and peripheral urban green spaces, cycle routes, canals and waterways.

"We like go out on the beach and just play football... but then sometimes in the holidays when we want to do it the most, there are too many people parked-up and it's busy"

(Ben, male, aged 11, Mablethorpe).

"There's a sense of belonging – looking out for each other"

(Young person, community event, Woughton).

"We have quite a lot of space to do different activities, for example like motorbikes, boxing, swimming..."

(Sophia, female, aged 13, Deighton & Brackenhall).



Figure 7
Photograph of the Multi Use Games Area in Woughton

Local, outdoor spaces encompassing woods (Deighton & Brackenhall) and sand dunes (Mablethorpe) are valued by young people as places that they can connect with others and engage in imaginative exploration (Rixon et al., 2019), for example, building dens and setting-up ramps and bike tracks. The opportunities these provide are particularly important for the young people in our study who, because of socio-economic factors including low income, parental working hours and geographical isolation (rural Mablethorpe), spend much of their free time in their neighbourhoods with little opportunity to travel outside their immediate area.



Figure 8
Young people's
drawings of
Mablethorpe
beach

However, young people in our study experienced a number of challenges that restrict and prevent them from accessing local public spaces. This includes feeling that their neighbourhoods are unsafe, ill-cared for and poorly maintained. This contrasts with how they experience 'wealthier' neighbourhoods.



Figure 9
Photographs of rubbish including a crate, a trolley, a bucket, and bottles in the green
spaces in Mablethorpe

Across the three sites young people experience fear when using outdoor public space. In Mablethorpe this is associated with antisocial drinking and drug-taking by young adults and a night-time economy dominated by tourists. In both Deighton & Brackenhall and Woughton, young people are fearful of gangs and gang-related violence while across all three neighbourhoods, young people are anxious about county lines and girls report being sexual harassed as they travel to and from school.

Access to outdoor, neighbourhood space is shaped by gender (both boys and girls are fearful but have different strategies to manage risk); family composition (having an older brother or sister or father to look out for you); friendship groups (having a group of friends who look out for you and whom you look out for) and temporal dimensions including seasonal changes (the onset of dusk in the late afternoon during the winter in the UK restricts where young people can go

and their safety as they travel home at the end of the school day). These combine in different ways to impact how young people use local space. Factors that support young people's use of public space include good quality design and the presence of trusted adults. For example, in Brackenhall (a small estate within the wider Deighton & Brackenhall ward) we observed the community centre as a thriving hub of activity with faith groups, sports, arts and holiday clubs busy with adults and young people inside and out. This hive of regular, sustained activity ensured the proximity of trusted adults (parents and community volunteers known to young people), creating a sense of security for young people playing nearby. Young people also have greater opportunities to move around and play freely in public spaces that are designed to ensure 'eyes on where children play' (Holt et al., 2015).

"Sometimes the council listens here but if you live in a poor area they won't listen to you. If you have some money, probably it's a 50 / 50 chance they will listen. Then there are the rich people, then the council will listen to you"

(Brandon, male, aged 12,
Deighton & Brackenhall).

"I feel safe when there are others around just in case you need to run to them to help you"

(Lily, female, aged 11,
Mablethorpe).

Figure 10
Family homes
and community
volunteers
overlook the places
where young
people play on
the sports field,
basketball courts
and playpark
in Deighton &
Brackenhall



"I like playing basketball in the basketball and football court. There is no gate there. We just walk in and we just play football, basketball and other sports. It's a communal thing. I play with my friends, sometimes with my family, and people here can just turn up"

(Emmanuel, male, aged 11,
Deighton & Brackenhall).

While feeling safe is vital for young people to be able to access outdoor space, the presence of trusted adults in each site offered young people much more than safety. Across each of the study neighbourhoods young people spoke about how particular adults, for example some trusted teachers in their schools and those delivering youth services, sports and arts, make them feel welcomed and valued as well as included in the social and cultural life of the neighbourhood.



Figure 11
Front of community
council youth space,
Woughton

"I really trust that teacher - really trust them. I could tell them anything. She's a mentor. Really nice"
(Stacey, female, aged 14, Woughton).



A model of youth-informed participation and policy dialogue

Young people are eager to be included in local decision-making and have knowledge and expertise about their local areas that they are willing to share. However, there is a chasm, described by young people, in which decision makers at local authority level are routinely experienced as failing to listen to young people's concerns about where they live and what needs to happen. In all three research sites, this rift stands in sharp contrast to young people's positive experiences of local volunteers, church groups and youth and community workers who work directly with them, are attentive and supportive and listen to their concerns. This suggests that local authorities need more transparent ways to include young people in consultation and planning, including explaining why things have not happened or why budgets have been reallocated elsewhere.

The arts-based approach that we developed with young people offers a way to engage young people in research and decision-making. Underpinned by the Capability Approach and our attentive listening methodology which values and is attuned to their capacities and strengths, our model provides a framework for a participatory and rights-based approach (UNCRC, 1989) that aims to support young people, taking their views and feelings seriously and including them in outcomes and social change that affect their lives. Our methodological focus has been specifically on arts-based methods and how these can support young people to narratively and textually document and share their stories, including with decision-makers, in ways which make visible young people's shared experiences of place while retaining their anonymity. Arts-based methods mean that young people's perspectives can be seen and listened to and can offer ways of actively involving young people in policymaking to support richer understandings of their lives from their perspectives.

"I learnt to express my feelings freely and I will have my voice heard"

(Nicole, female, aged 11, Mablethorpe).

"(the policy dialogues event enabled) new opportunities for young people to be heard and help make changes"

(Young person, feedback at the local policy dialogue Woughton).

"Let the kids be a part of the opinions and let the people who live in the area help"

(Sophia, female, aged 13, Deighton & Brackenhall).



Through visual and creative arts, group discussion, reflection and policy dialogues, as a means of documenting and identifying priorities for change, young people in all three research sites took action in different ways, creating diverse spaces of participation and change in their neighbourhoods. In keeping with the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) and World Cafe principles (The World Café Community Foundation, 2025) our approach offers a way of doing community dialogue which centres young people's participation in these policy spaces in order to amplify and elevate their hopes and aspirations about where they live as a catalyst for action and change (Brown and Isaacs, 2005).



Figure 12
Artwork and text created by young people, Deighton & Brackenhall

Discussion and conclusion



Figure 13
"Welcome" - Young person playing a rousing
tune at the start of the local policy dialogue,
Deighton & Brackenhall

Learning from this project challenges simplistic assumptions about young people's voice that exceeds formalised models of consultation. It offers an approach to youth participation, including utilising different media (audio, images, animation and texts) which can enable young people to give voice to a range of complex experiences of place and for adult stakeholders and decision-makers to engage directly with young people's perspectives through 'seeing' and 'hearing' (Rutanen et al., 2023).

This approach exemplifies the value of embedding children's rights (UNCRC, 1989) to express their views, access information and achieve their full potential (Articles 6, 12,13 and 17) through co-research and participatory action in the everyday lives of young people in their communities.

Actions arising from the policy dialogues include:

- The launch of a Young Leaders Award enabling young people to develop accredited community leadership skills.
- The active commitment of a local MP, informing Labour's commitment for a national network of Young Futures hubs.
- The acquisition of a Youth and Community Hut for use as a youth centre, enabling young people to organise and attend activities, where no provision had previously existed.
- The inclusion of young people's voices in a new Multi-Agency Safety Hub to improve safety in the area.
- The incorporation of young people's views in violence reduction plans to ensure their perspectives inform the approach.
- The championship of young people's voices by the local Mayor, ensuring their inclusion in the 2050 City Plan.

Recommendations



Young people have five key recommendations for local and national decision-makers:

- 1. Young people need to feel part of a community, for opportunities and a sense of belonging.**

For this they need:

- 2. Safe, healthy outdoor and indoor spaces to meet and participate locally.**
- 3. Well-maintained local green space.**
- 4. To be involved in local and national decision making.**
- 5. National and local decision makers to champion children and young people.**

Our study, and these recommendations, highlight the importance of listening to and including young people's perspectives in local and national decision-making. It contributes new knowledge about what young people need to flourish and offers novel methods to support young people in generating knowledge, identifying priorities for change and engaging collaboratively with decision makers. However, further action is needed to ensure that young people's recommendations and voices are sustained at national and local level in accordance with their rights (UNCRC, 1989). This includes their rights to express their views and be listened to when people make decisions that involve them (Articles 12 and 13); an adequate standard of living (Article 27); develop to their full potential (Article 6), protection from violence (Article 19) and opportunities to relax and play (Article 31).

Summarised in figure 14 and discussed in depth in the main report, young people's recommendations are relevant to the new government's missions, in particular the focus on 'Safer Streets' and 'Break(ing) Down Barriers to Opportunity'. They also crosscut these missions and suggest a whole government approach is required to ensure young people's needs are considered in decision-making at all levels of government and across all departments.

Whilst responsibility for the rights of children lies primarily with the Government who have specific responsibilities and are legally obligated to protect and uphold children's rights, all councils – including districts – are also obliged and should fulfil their responsibilities and effectively meet their duties to children (UNICEF, 2021-2022). This demands co-ordinated government action to ensure that children's needs, that fall across all areas of government, are represented. Recommendations include the appointment of a Cabinet Minister for Children to champion the rights of children, the full incorporation of the UNCRC into domestic law and making Child Rights Impact Assessments a statutory requirement for all new policy and legislation (Barnardo's, 2024; Longfield, 2024a; Save the Children, 2023).

Young people want:

1. To feel part of a community, for opportunities and a sense of belonging.



2. Safe, healthy outdoor and indoor spaces to meet in and participate locally.



3. Well-maintained local green space.



4. To be involved in local and national decision making.



5. National and local decision makers to champion children and young people



Figure 14
Young people's five recommendations

"I want politicians and decision-makers to know that young people care about their area and community and deserve to be listened to"

(Sabryna, female, aged 12, Deighton & Brackenhall).



Further information

To access the art outputs made by young people and read the longer report see:

Project Website:

<https://chillprojectuk.wixsite.com/chill-project>

Nuffield Website:

<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/childrens-lives-in-changing-places>



Read, watch and listen to words, images and music by young people to communicate the findings of the research to policy and decision-makers.



"We are more than our headlines" was co-produced with young people capturing their experiences of growing up in Deighton & Brackenhall through their art, music and words.

[Click here to read the Scrapbook](#)



[Click here to read the banners](#)



"10 things young people in Mablethorpe need from their town" was a booklet written and designed in consultation with young people.

[Click here to see the animated film](#)



An animated film - "It's all about the beach town" - was created using young people's art, words and music to highlight how they feel about and what they need from Mablethorpe.

In Woughton, a series of banners was created with young people as a travelling exhibition to showcase the research project.

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- Gemma Whitelock, Artist (information and consent forms), [@gemmawhitelockillustration](https://www.gemmawhitelockillustration.com)

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