

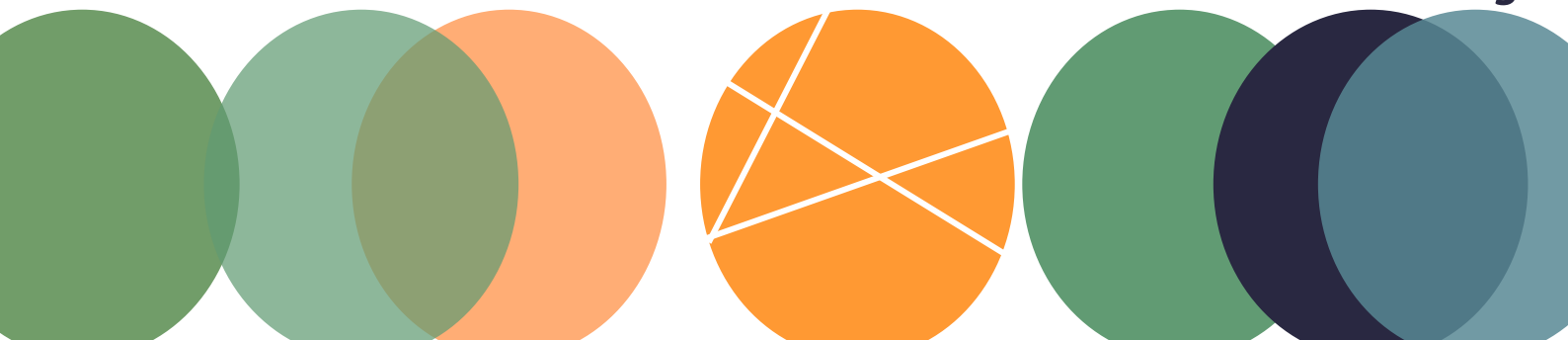
# **Evaluation of *Grown Up?***

## **Youth engagement and research component**

A report for the Nuffield Foundation

April 2026

Leah Holmes Consulting



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- Deep dive workshop participants
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- Hopkins Van Mil team



# 1. Executive summary

The Nuffield Foundation's *Grown Up? Journeys to Adulthood* is a multi-year research programme exploring what it means to become an adult in the UK today. Hopkins Van Mil was commissioned to deliver a youth engagement and research component, which included working with a Youth Insights Group (YIG) to inform and shape and a wider set of Deep dive workshops. Leah Holmes Consulting provided independent evaluation focused mainly on the process of the YIG, including formative input, and summative assessment.

This was an excellent piece of work. Its defining quality was the inclusive and relational practice that ran through every aspect of design and delivery. Great care was taken to create psychologically safe, welcoming and respectful environments, underpinned by robust ethics and safeguarding, thoughtful accessibility, and consistent practical support. Thoughtful recruitment resulted in a genuinely diverse YIG, the diversity of which was one of the project's greatest strengths, ensuring discussions reflected experiences across the UK. The inclusion of seldom-heard voices widened discussions, provided learning and benefit to the YIG members, and enriched the evidence.

The partnership between the Nuffield Foundation and Hopkins Van Mil was highly effective, values-led and complementary. Delivery was responsive, youth-centred and professionally facilitated throughout. Young people meaningfully shaped the content and direction of the work, and the adviser model – offering personal support – increased accessibility, inclusion and continued engagement. Across the evaluation, young people's experiences were overwhelmingly positive, with participants reporting that they felt heard, included and able to contribute authentically.

The project has generated valuable new evidence about journeys to adulthood and demonstrated the added value when young people are engaged as collaborators rather than research participants. Working in this way strengthened the relevance and accessibility of the research design, and created clear benefits for participants themselves, including confidence, learning, connection and personal development. It also leaves a strong legacy for the Foundation, informing future programmes, partnerships and ways of working.

Importantly, the project has already had impact on both research and policy. Its insights are shaping wider programme outputs, informing policy-facing work, and influencing future priorities and partnerships across the Foundation.

The evaluation also points to clear lessons for future practice. Early clarity about the boundary between advisory input and research participation, realistic expectations about the scope of youth-led influence, continued considerations in accessible communication, and planning for continuity beyond funded delivery should be considered in future work.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates a project of outstanding quality that has invested in and developed young people, generated valuable evidence, and established a model of youth engagement practice with lasting relevance.



## 2. Introduction

### Background and context

The Nuffield Foundation's *Grown Up?* programme is a multi-year research investment exploring what it means to become an adult in the UK today. The programme examines the social, economic, and personal dimensions of transitions to adulthood, with a particular focus on how these experiences differ across geography, background, and circumstance. Within this programme, the Foundation commissioned Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) to deliver a youth engagement and research component that would ensure a diverse group of young people's voices, experiences and priorities directly informed the research.

This youth engagement and research component had two aims. First, it sought to empower young people to shape the priorities and content of the research programme, ensuring that the questions asked, and the evidence gathered reflected what mattered to young people themselves. Second, it aimed to generate new insights about journeys to adulthood directly from young people, addressing gaps in up-to-date evidence and capturing dimensions, particularly psycho-social experiences, that conventional research methods might miss.

HVM delivered the engagement through two interconnected mechanisms: a Youth Insight Group (YIG) comprising approximately 20 young people aged 15–24 from across the UK, who met nine times over 14 months; and eight Deep dive workshops (DDWs) involving 92 further participants, recruited to explore three specific themes in depth. The YIG served as both an advisory body and a source of insight. Its members shaped the content and design of the Deep dive workshops, contributed creative outputs, and provided a sustained perspective on young people's experiences across the three research themes: Education to Work, Digital Lives, and Mental Health and Wellbeing.

### Evaluation purpose and approach

The purpose of this focused evaluation was to provide formative input into design and delivery of youth engagement activities, and gather and present robust evidence of the YIG process, with some findings relating to outcomes and potential impact of the YIG.

Evaluation data has been gathered through observation of 6 YIG sessions (both in-person and online); questionnaire responses or open feedback from all YIG meetings; observation of 2 Deep dive workshops; questionnaire responses from all Deep dive workshop participants; semi-structured interviews with 6 YIG members and the HVM Team; review of the Nuffield Foundation's learning paper; document review; and observing the majority of Project Team meetings.

In the first YIG meeting, the young people discussed and prioritised what they felt was important to evaluate about the YIG. This directly informed the evaluation framework, which is included as Appendix 1.



### 3. Project Scope, Design and Management

#### Aims and objectives

The overarching aims for the youth engagement work remained consistent throughout the project: empowering young people to shape priorities; addressing gaps in up-to-date evidence; capturing psycho-social dimensions; including under-represented groups; taking a holistic approach; and enabling direct engagement. The delivery objectives were retained throughout.

The team – across both Nuffield Foundation and HVM - was responsive and flexible within these objectives to meet the emerging ideas and insights generated by the YIG, and drawing on input and experience from across the wider *Grown Up??* programme. This included listening to the YIG members about their experiences and preferences, and making changes where possible.

The ambition was to make the project as youth-led as possible, ensuring that participation was not extractive and that young people gained tangible benefits from their involvement. However, the budget and timeline placed constraints on what could be delivered. For example some YIG members requested greater direct involvement in the Deep dive workshops, including facilitating and meeting participants, but this could not be accommodated within the available resource.

At the first meeting, YIG members proposed changing the project title from ‘Transitions to Adulthood’ to ‘Journeys to Adulthood’, reflecting their view that the original title implied a linear, gentle process that did not match their experiences. They also renamed ‘mentors’ as ‘advisers’ to reflect a relationship between equals rather than one implying that young people needed to be guided towards a better path. Finally, the YIG co-developed a set of guiding principles for how the YIG was delivered. When presented with a draft set of principles they enhanced these by making them more inclusive and accessible (addressing visible and invisible disabilities, content warnings, processing time); strengthening the expectation of active mutual support (challenging hate, not suffering in silence, trauma-informed approaches); and elevating pride and agency (growth mindset, ownership and pride, acknowledging collective expertise). The draft principles are included as Appendix 2.

These changes, adopted from the first session, demonstrated a genuinely responsive approach in which methodological choices were shaped by YIG members’ input from the outset.

*“It’s quite nice that the title of the program changed because the YIG members wanted it to, so from Transitions to Adulthood to Journeys to Adulthood in that first workshop... it was a really nice way to start off the project on that note.”* HVM Team Member 1

**The project’s aims were clear and remained consistent. Adaptations during delivery, including changes initiated by YIG members to the project title, terminology and guiding principles, reflected a genuinely responsive approach.**



## The boundary between advising, insight and qualitative research

The scheduling of the project was such that two YIG meetings would straddle the delivery of a set of Deep dive workshops, with the upstream YIG meeting influencing the scope and design of the DDWs, and the subsequent meeting focusing on reflection and sense-making of the findings.

This format achieved the maximum benefit in positioning and pitching the qualitative Deep dive research within the diverse lived experiences of the YIG members. During the report writing process for the first set of Deep dive workshops on the topic of 'Education to Work', the team considered whether insights from the YIG members should be integrated into the report as project findings. The team discussed how the YIG members might feel 'researched' and with 'respecting the YIG members' as an agreed key principle, the team decided to maintain this clear boundary, with the YIG acting only in an advisory capacity.

As the project progressed, there was a natural evolution led by the YIG members, towards the YIG contributing advice and insights that enhanced and amplified the research findings. Importantly, these types of insights were shared voluntarily by the YIG members and often served to broaden or focus the scope of the research, arguably taking a slightly different route to achieve the same aim. The team responded to this evolution by incorporating YIG's creative outputs within the Digital Lives report, and clearly attributed YIG quotes and insights into the Mental Health and Wellbeing report. All reports were shared with the YIG for review and amendment before publication.

Reflections from the HVM team were that, if they were to run the project again, they would seek clarity about this distinction at the outset, and periodically assess the role of the group and how to work collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes for all.

**The structural design of alternating YIG meetings around each set of Deep dive workshops was effective in embedding youth voice. The boundary between advisory input and research participation evolved during the project and should be explicitly agreed at the outset of future projects.**

## Partnership working

The Nuffield Foundation commissioned, oversaw and were highly involved with the youth engagement programme. HVM led on design and delivery including recruitment, facilitation, personal adviser support, reporting and all administration. The partnership drew on complementary expertise, with specialist input from affiliated organisations including the Ada Lovelace Institute, which contributed to the Digital Lives sessions, and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, whose input was described as invaluable in thinking about the needs of care-experienced young people.

HVM maintained a consistent delivery team throughout. The Nuffield Foundation team had some staffing changes during the project but consistency in the project leadership. The Foundation demonstrated a high level of commitment as a commissioner, investing substantial staff time and resource in developing and attending YIG sessions and Deep dive



workshops. They delivered interactive presentations on the policy landscape, and engaged directly with young people. This reflected the Nuffield Foundation's ambition to work with young people as project collaborators and experts by experience, rather than simply commissioning research about them.

The Foundation described HVM as highly professional, highly experienced, open and collaborative, with a strong project management approach. From HVM's perspective, the partnership was highly productive and collaborative. The only improvement suggested was for the HVM Team to have greater visibility of the wider *Grown Up?* programme. The Team reflected that if they had known more about this evolving context, they could have drawn on it more in conversations with the YIG, and Deep dive participants.

The quality and nature of the relationship between the organisations extended to their interactions with the young people. This was noted and valued by YIG members, with one interviewee describing the facilitation approach as combining professionalism with genuine relational warmth.

*"It's probably the most informal... formal sort of meeting I've ever taken part in."* YIG Member 1

**The partnership between the Nuffield Foundation and HVM was highly productive and complementary. Both organisations demonstrated exceptional commitment in all aspects of the project, including direct engagement with the young people.**

## Risk management

The project maintained a formal risk register and was attuned to risk throughout. Ten risks were initially identified with likelihood and impact ratings and detailed mitigation strategies. These included: participant drop-out, mitigated through over-recruitment; the complexity of sensitive topics, mitigated through co-designed materials, wellbeing support and a counselling service; failure to achieve a diverse sample, mitigated through multiple recruitment channels; and venue and transport disruptions, mitigated through backup plans and the ability to move sessions online.

The risks that materialised during the project, including participant drop-out, travel disruption from Storm Darragh, and the need for online delivery, were anticipated in the risk register with pre-planned mitigation strategies already in place. When Storm Darragh prevented seven YIG members from attending in person, HVM facilitated an online catch-up session the following week for five of those members. Similar catch-up sessions were arranged for members who missed later sessions.

**Risks were well identified and managed. The risks that materialised were anticipated in the register with effective mitigation strategies in place. HVM responded flexibly to disruptions, including weather events and participant absences.**



## 4. Ethics and Safeguarding

### Ethical framework

Ethical practice, with specific adaptation for working with young people, was of the highest priority from the project inception and throughout every activity. HVM created a comprehensive ethical and safeguarding framework, and - at the suggestion of the Foundation - sought independent external review from an ethics specialist which proved an effective and efficient way to access the required input and assurance.

The ethics documentation includes ten interconnected documents: ethics review cover sheet and checklist; engagement design summary; gatekeeper and young person information sheets; YIG and DDW consent forms; data protection policy; data protection impact assessment; equality and diversity statement; safeguarding policy and implementation procedures; risk register; and a draft version of the YIG guiding principles.

Ethical practice was demonstrated in every project detail. This included working with trusted gatekeepers for recruitment; age-appropriate considerations of informed consent; safe communication channels using first names only; considerations of practical and informational accessibility; provision of wellbeing and practical support; and ensuring that all activities were optional and as youth-led as possible.

No specific ethical issues arose during the project.

**The project's ethical framework was comprehensive, including independent external review. Ethical practice was embedded in every aspect of design and delivery.**

### Safeguarding

The safeguarding policy was comprehensive and followed the Market Research Society's Code of Conduct and Department for Education standards. Prevention measures included programme design to protect participants from harm, stringent staff recruitment, NSPCC safeguarding training, a dedicated safeguarding support facilitator at workshops, signposting to external resources, dedicated time-out space at in-person events, availability of a counsellor, and post-workshop reflection.

Implementation of the safeguarding process translated the overarching policy into specific operational procedures for each element of delivery. This included individual risk assessments, travel planning, venue choice, catering, overnight accommodation; specific provisions for under-16s and 16–17 year-olds requiring overnight stays; facilitator ratios of a maximum of five young people per facilitator; and clear escalation routes.

One potential safeguarding incident was raised to HVM by an external organisation during the course of the project. This related to a YIG member describing their personal experiences in a film made by the Nuffield Foundation. The safeguarding process was followed promptly, and the issue was addressed by clear and effective communication across the HVM and Nuffield teams, and followed up with the YIG member in question via



their adviser. The film was subsequently edited to remove any personal or sensitive information before being released into the public domain.

Importantly, this prompted the teams to look ahead and consider what safeguarding arrangements would be needed following the end of the contract with HVM, when the Nuffield Foundation intends to work with the YIG members, including disseminating the project via media channels.

The HVM team described that the safeguarding and care dimensions of the work were substantial. One HVM team member described the adviser role evolving into a care-based function in response to significant life events, including two YIG members who lost a family member during the course of the project.

*“I had two YIG members who lost a member of their immediate family during the course of the YIG, and one of them was on a day of the YIG. So it’s huge... I’m just sort of saying that to emphasise how important that care role was.”* HVM Team Member 2

**The project’s safeguarding infrastructure was comprehensive and operationally detailed. The care dimensions of the work were substantial. The safeguarding approach provides a robust transferable model for organisations delivering youth engagement work.**

## 5. Recruitment and Diversity

### The recruitment approach for the YIG

HVM mapped over 70 gatekeeper organisations working with young people across the UK. The Nuffield Foundation supported this process, sharing contacts and introductions across their partners, award holders and networks.

Most recruitment was delivered via HVM’s in-house approach through gatekeepers, with gaps filled by working with specialist recruitment agencies. Over-recruitment of four YIG members allowed for attrition. Scotland and Northern Ireland were the most challenging areas for recruitment. Two young people recruited from Northern Ireland did not continue after the first session. During the first half of the project, the YIG had 20 members, with one joining from YIG 2 onwards. There were 18 YIG members retained for the duration of the project.

The summer holiday period was identified as a significant barrier to recruitment, with engagement improving once the holidays were over. The HVM team reflected that recruitment via gatekeepers worked best where the opportunity aligned with an organisation’s existing offer, for example Jamie’s Farm was a particularly successful fit because ongoing activities and support were part of their offer to young people.

*“I think we underestimated the ask it was for these organisations to share the opportunity with their young people.”* HVM Team Member 1



*“You’ve just got to have such a thick skin, because most of the answers you get, whether it’s from a gatekeeper or an individual, is no, or tumbleweed.”* HVM Team Member 2

**Recruitment was thorough, drawing on over 70 gatekeeper organisations and the Nuffield Foundation’s networks. Recruitment via gatekeepers worked best where the opportunity aligned with an organisation’s existing offer. Scotland and Northern Ireland required supplementary approaches through specialist recruitment agencies.**

## Diversity of participants

The HVM and Nuffield Foundation teams took great care to define a recruitment specification ensuring diversity across demographics and experiences. This drew on the aims of the project, and the values, knowledge and experience of HVM, the Nuffield Foundation and partner organisations such as the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. There was an overarching asset-based mindset; valuing the knowledge and lived experiences of individual young people.

Target numbers were set for each characteristic, including age, disability, neurodivergence, health, gender identity, sexual orientation, geography across the four UK nations and urban and rural locations, care experience, ethnicity, criminal justice system experience, migrant status and carer status. Importantly, this was based on how young people self-identify, rather than others making assumptions about them.

Overall, the recruitment was approached flexibly, enabling an intersectional group. This met the project’s requirements of a holistic approach to exploring interconnectedness between issues. Careful thought was applied to recruitment, including consideration of overlaps between mental and physical health conditions, inclusion of young parents, migrant status, and also including young people who had experience of youth advocacy and those with no prior experience.

The HVM team was thoughtful in ensuring that there were members of the group with similar experiences, for example involving several young people from care-experienced backgrounds so that no individual felt isolated or responsible for speaking for a particular experience.

This thoughtful and detailed approach to recruitment resulted in a diverse YIG, which was essential for the rigour of the project. A standout finding was that YIG members highly valued the diversity of the group. Across open-question evaluation activities, questionnaires and interviews, the diversity of the group was the most consistently and broadly identified benefit for YIG members, in terms of the quality of the research, learning from others’ perspectives and having the opportunity to meet and socialise with people they would not otherwise have met.

*“What made it really nice for me was the diversity range, because a lot of youth groups that I’ve been a part of, we are all from the same background. And I think having people from all over the UK, different backgrounds, different religions, different living circumstances. Having that diversity is key for if projects want to work.”* YIG Member 1



*"It's good to have a varied group of people around you. You don't want to be stuck in an echo chamber of anything."* YIG Member 2

**Diversity was designed into the project with quantified demographic targets, approached flexibly. The diversity of the group was the most consistently identified benefit across all YIG evaluation data, valued for the quality of the research and the personal learning it enabled.**

## 6. Design, methods and approaches

### Inclusive and relational practice

The inclusive and compassionate way of working within this project underpinned its success. Across all evaluation data, a consistent picture emerges of intense care, time and effort from both HVM and the Nuffield Foundation in creating an exceptionally high-quality experience for young people. This was evident in the detail: the provision of wellbeing support and counselling; the supportive nature of the adviser relationships; the facilitation approach that created psychological safety for disclosure and disagreement; and the practical arrangements, from travel to dietary needs, that signalled to young people that they mattered.

The YIG did take time to establish itself and the Team took time to develop relationships and understand the individuals and their needs. Early YIG meetings required careful planning of small group membership and dynamics to maximise engagement, minimise distraction and prevent disruption by some members. From the early sessions it was evident that some YIG members needed movement breaks and verbal reminders ensuring all members could take turns to speak. The YIG members varied in their engagement throughout the project, and there were consistently members who arrived late to sessions, or who didn't always stay on task. This was handled very well by HVM and the Nuffield Foundation – who demonstrated an asset-based approach to their engagement. This approach proved successful and enabled YIG members to play to their individual strengths and interests.

Overall, the values and behaviours modelled by both organisations were adopted by the YIG members themselves, who in turn listened carefully to each other, respected differences, checked in on each other's wellbeing, and drew quieter members into conversation.

*"I just felt like it was a very supportive environment that you don't really get from many places"* YIG Member 4

*"Being part of a team where everyone is supportive and welcoming and we are able to share our lived experiences and ideas."* Anonymous YIG member

The YIG was, by all accounts, a very special and supportive project. This relational foundation was not incidental to the quality of the research, but essential to it.



## Youth-led design and delivery

HVM brought a values-led and asset-based approach to working with the YIG members, navigating how to make it as youth-led as possible within the time and budget available, with awareness of the need to meet the research requirements across the three themes.

In order to deliver a fully youth-led project, young people would have needed to be involved in designing the project before commissioning. In this case, that was not feasible as the youth engagement strand needed to fit within and complement other parts of the wider *Grown Up?* programme. This youth engagement strand was also an innovation and learning experience for the Nuffield Foundation, to consider how to work most effectively with young collaborators.

Within these constraints, the project was designed so that the YIG had a high level of influence over the Deep dive workshops throughout. YIG meetings were structured in pairs around each set of workshops: one meeting before each DDW series focused on shaping the scope and design, and the subsequent meeting focused on reflection and sense-making of the findings.

*“The fact that the YIG before a Deep dive workshop was about designing the Deep dive workshop, the YIG after was about thinking about the findings and building on them. I think that really gave the YIG voice in the findings.”* HVM Team Member 3

There was less scope for YIG members to design or co-lead the YIG meetings themselves, though suggestions for change or improvement were taken seriously and implemented wherever possible. YIG members had varying levels of influence over reporting and outputs; some YIG members were involved in the project’s outputs and reporting - providing artwork and forewords to the three Deep dive reports promoting youth voice and advocacy to the reader. YIG members were also encouraged and supported to share their experiences through their own networks. One example of this was a newsletter piece on the YIG for a different organisation, written by a YIG member with input from across the Group. Finally, the frequency and focus of adviser sessions was youth-led with young people deciding how they engaged with their adviser and what to discuss.

Specific examples of YIG member influence include: changing the project title and terminology; co-developing guiding principles for the YIG; shaping content, questions and process design across all three Deep dive themes, and in the later stages of the project, suggesting insights that enhanced the scope of the mental health and wellbeing theme; choosing creative output formats; and introducing the ‘check in and check out’ – a wellbeing check at the start and end of each YIG session.

Questionnaire data consistently showed high satisfaction with the level of youth-led design. In data from YIG 3, 12 of 13 respondents felt the YIG’s involvement in designing meetings was about right. In interviews, members described the balance between structure and youth agency as broadly appropriate.

*“Quite a lot, to be honest, much more than I expected. I wasn’t expecting us to make a charter of how the thing would go, or stuff like that, or principles. Felt more like we were making a political party at the start.”* YIG Member 2



The HVM Team was candid about these limitations. Some YIG members wanted more direct involvement in the Deep dive workshops, including facilitating and meeting participants, but this could not be accommodated within the budget. One HVM team member reflected that this constraint linked to one YIG member leaving the Group (see Section 7. YIG members' experiences).

The HVM team was responsive to feedback from this member, and increased efforts supporting youth leadership within YIG meetings. This coincided with the increased knowledge and confidence of the YIG, creating a positive and productive project that was as youth-led as possible.

**Youth-led practice was embedded throughout the project, producing tangible changes to the project's title, terminology, Deep dive workshop content and creative outputs.**

## Advisers

Each YIG member was assigned a 1:1 adviser from HVM for the duration of the project. Contact was designed to be flexible, with members choosing session-by-session whether to meet and by what channel.

The adviser model was one of the most valued and impactful elements of the YIG.

In interviews, YIG members scored the adviser approach between 8-10 out of 10, for the value of advisers to the project, or to them as an individual.

*"It was like having a friend in the group." YIG Member 3*

*"It was more kind of like a professional friend." YIG Member 1*

*"Felt like you were invested in more than just what you said at the meeting, which is important to a lot of people." YIG Member 2*

The qualitative evidence reveals that advisers served multiple functions that went well beyond project facilitation: providing clarity and sense-making after sessions; breaking down complex information for those who needed it; offering continuity between sessions; providing emotional support and check-ins; accommodating individual needs and preferences including preferences for sharing YIG input in a 1:1 setting; and connecting members to further opportunities.

The quantitative data shows strong agreement: In data from YIG 3, nine of 13 respondents strongly agreed that adviser conversations supported their role, with two tending to agree and two neutral. In data from YIG 5, six of seven strongly agreed.

The advisor model generated additional benefits:

*"I appreciate the fact that my advisor is able to help me develop my personal skills. I think it's a nice bonus that I wasn't expecting." YIG member 15*



The advisor role varied significantly during the project, some relationships focused on maximising YIG engagement, some were much broader including more personal support and development across YIG members lives outside of the YIG.

The HVM team described an important early tension about the scope of the adviser role, with an explicit decision to limit the role to YIG-related support, feeling the team was overreaching and that it was not fair or right for them to act as e.g. career advisors. However, some YIG members sought career-related support. The team reflected that their desire to avoid extractive practice may have led them to over-promise initially.

*“When we were designing the project we just really wanted to make sure that it wasn’t extractive in any way... I think in doing that, we perhaps went too far the other way.”* HVM Team Member 3

For future projects, the HVM team recommended a lighter-touch approach: a named supporter rather than adviser; an initial one-to-one meeting to establish the relationship; check-ins during or around YIG sessions rather than scheduled separate meetings; and optional one-to-ones available on request.

**The personal adviser model was a highly valued element of the YIG experience. It served critical functions in sense-making, continuity, emotional support and engaging YIG members who preferred a 1:1 context. Future projects should retain the principle of named support but adopt a lighter-touch approach, with clearer boundaries established from the outset.**

## Information and communication

This was perhaps the most challenging area of the project. There was lots of information needing to be communicated to the YIG members, lots of differing learning styles and preferences to serve, and significant gaps between sessions. Contextual information that needed to be communicated included the background for the three themes, the wider *Grown Up?* programme, how the YIG was making a difference, and the future opportunities for impact.

Practical communication about the YIG was delivered by e mail, and then switched more to WhatsApp as a preference for the group. In sessions, information was provided in a wide range of formats including through conversation, posters, presentations and informal chats with advisers.

The quantitative data on information clarity is largely positive. Across YIG sessions, the strong majority agreed that information was clear and easy to understand. Across all DDW respondents, 100% agreed that information was clear, with 79% strongly agreeing. This is a notably strong result given that DDW participants were attending a single event without having much longer term context.

However, the interview evidence reveals a more nuanced picture. While all interviewees confirmed they received sufficient information overall, a consistent theme was that information was at times complex, dense, or difficult to process in the time available. The



Nuffield Foundation acknowledged being initially overly ambitious about the quantity of data that is easily digestible and adapted accordingly. The adviser role emerged as critical in mediating this challenge for YIG members who needed additional support.

*“Sometimes I found the information a bit complex... because there was so much information all at once, and sometimes you only hear it once or twice quite briefly, and even if they do touch on it, sometimes it’s hard for me to properly process that.”* YIG Member 3

*“This is set up in manageable chunks. I would go block by block and Pauline [Adviser] would help me.”* YIG member 1

Three specific suggestions for improvement emerged from YIG member interviews: advance preparation material sent before sessions to help formulate thoughts; a visual map or timeline of the session displayed throughout, not just at the start; and greater variety in information formats to accommodate different learning preferences. Future projects might also benefit from a moderated digital space for information to be shared and accessed within YIG members own time.

## Creative and varied activities

A strength of the YIG design was building in creative activities for members to express their perspectives and feelings without needing to verbalise or write them down. Creative periods provided opportunities for the YIG to interact with other YIG members and staff, have informal conversations, and opportunities for people to move about and take a break.

Across both YIG and DDW data, members and participants consistently valued activities that were interactive, creative, and involved movement or choice. The YIG used multiple modes of expression including collage, drawing, film, podcast recording, writing and verbal discussion.

DDW participants highlighted ice-breaker activities, creative engagement and hands-on activities as positive features. One YIG member noted that not all activities suited everyone, with a preference for less physically interactive activities such as moving to one side of the room. This reinforces the importance of offering a range of engagement methods that accommodate different preferences and comfort levels.

## Online versus in-person delivery

YIG members expressed a strong preference for in-person meetings from the outset. In interviews, all five interviewees preferred in-person delivery, linking this to the quality of social interaction, depth of engagement, and ability to process information through non-verbal cues. This aligns with the HVM team’s assessment, who agreed that both formats produced good research outputs, but that in-person delivery offered greater value for young people. Some YIG members were visibly less engaged in some online sessions. One HVM Team member connected the value of in-person sessions to the project’s own findings about the disappearance of third spaces for young people, noting that the YIG sessions were creating another sort of that space.

*“In person’s definitely a lot better, more concentration. I think it’s just easier to talk to people. Being online is just a lot different, because I think people just don’t take it in the same mindset, because they’re at home, they’ve got a lot of distractions.”* YIG Member 5



However, the data also supports the pragmatic value of online sessions. One member noted that an online session fell just before her exams and she would not have been able to travel to London. The HVM team identified specific advantages of online delivery: accessibility for participants with social anxiety; practicality during adverse weather; and the potential safety benefit of joining sensitive discussions from home.

**Utilising both online and in-person formats provided important accessibility. In-person delivery was strongly preferred by the YIG and offered greater relational and engagement value.**

## Facilitation

The quality of facilitation was excellent throughout, and this was a consistent strength across both the YIG and the DDWs. Across 20 YIG questionnaire responses at sessions 3 and 5, every single respondent strongly agreed that facilitators gave everyone an opportunity to contribute. Across DDW responses, 87% strongly agreed and a further 12% tended to agree.

From the first meeting onwards, the atmosphere felt inclusive, positive, purposeful, and open. Conversations were non-judgemental; YIG members were able to disagree and describe contrasting views and experiences with psychological safety. Facilitation was excellent: positive, encouraging, inclusive, with consistency across DDWs and YIG that felt authentic.

YIG Member 1 described how, in other youth groups, he had been reprimanded for using strong language when expressing views passionately, whereas in the YIG this was handled with humour and discretion. This approach allowed him to express his views authentically. YIG Member 3 raised a nuanced point: that being asked to contribute when you genuinely have nothing to say can feel awkward, suggesting that facilitators could also validate listening as a form of participation.

HVM team members confirmed that YIG members took on informal facilitation roles within sessions. The HVM Team described certain members actively drawing others into conversation and ensuring observers were included. They noted that this was something the YIG had expressed a desire for from the outset, and that it organically materialised through the group's dynamics.

*"I quite often felt like I had co-facilitators on the table, which was just lovely." HVM Team Member 2*

**Facilitation was excellent throughout. The informal-formal approach created psychological safety and enabled authentic participation. YIG members organically took on informal co-facilitation roles, a valuable and unplanned**

## Ending well

Great care and thought went into all elements of the YIG, including how to end the project well for the young people.



The final YIG meeting was a celebration of the individual members and what the Group had collectively achieved. It included an animated presentation summarising the YIG experience and impact; personalised 'star' messages for each of the young people from another YIG member, and a member of the staff team; and a small gift from the Nuffield Foundation. YIG members were also provided with a certificate of participating in the project, and a description they could use on CVs or job applications. The team also offered to provide references for young people in these situations.

All the YIG members present, signed a new consent form for opportunities to work in an ongoing way with the Nuffield Foundation, demonstrating the trust the project has built with this group and their appetite for future youth advocacy.

## 7. YIG Members' Preparation and Experiences

### Preparation and role clarity

The relational approach described above was apparent from the first interactions with the potential YIG members. Comprehensive information and robust planning underpinned a warm, friendly and accessible start to the project for the young people expressing interest.

This included: Gatekeeper organisations receiving a detailed information sheet; a separate, youth-friendly information sheet using accessible language; introduction calls held with potential YIG members before the first meeting; and a participant handbook.

The evaluation evidence suggests that, while initial understanding of the YIG's scope was sometimes limited, this deepened substantially once sessions began. Several interviewees described being positively surprised by the depth of their involvement.

*"I actually found it a lot better than what was explained, because I didn't realise it was going to go this far. I thought it was just gonna be a series of meetings where people would just kind of nod their heads and then go, okay, you can go home now. But it wasn't, it was very interactive."* YIG Member 4

*"I didn't fully understand the aims and the depth of the involvement and the responsibility that comes with being part of the project, but it definitely became a lot clearer once we started."* YIG Member 3

One member noted that his dyslexia and processing disorder affected his ability to engage with the initial recruitment email, describing it as a little bit overwhelming. This points to the importance of a personalised and accessible recruitment process to be inclusive of all young people. In this project, the comprehensive approach including information for both young people and gatekeepers, plus the welcoming phone call, supported inclusion.

**Preparation was thorough and delivered through a range of communication channels including welcome phone calls. YIG members' understanding of their role deepened through participation, suggesting that experiential learning was an important complement to written information.**



## Expressing views, feeling included and heard

YIG members and Deep dive workshop participants reported exceptionally high levels of feeling heard and included. Questionnaire data shows unanimous agreement that facilitators provided opportunities for contribution. Similarly strong results were recorded for comfort in sharing views.

In interviews, all YIG member interviewees reported feeling listened to, and three drew explicit comparisons with other youth forums where this had not been the case.

*“Out of every sort of youth project I’ve ever been a part of, even though the young people have a voice, the YIG has been the only one to actually put the members of staff in the background, and focus solely on us.” YIG Member 1*

*“Everyone was able to express their feelings and be able to, if you didn’t agree on a certain opinion, we’d be able to have these conversations as adults and young people, instead of being shut down because it would cause issues.” YIG Member 5*

One YIG Member provided an example of how minority views were handled. He described being the only person at his table with negative experiences of the education-to-work transition, and his two minutes of perspective sparked a thirty-minute conversation that shaped the Deep dive workshop content on how living circumstances and neurodivergence affect education to work pathways.

At the final session, YIG members reflected that sessions created a comfortable space where members could open up, challenge ideas and support one another. Again this finding is testament to the relationships and tone that was set within the YIG.

*“[The] facilitators and all staff are fantastic. Attending is always a pleasure” YIG member 12*

**All young people involved in the project consistently felt included, heard and valued.**

The figures on the following pages summarise all responses from YIG members from meetings 6 and 8 about how they feel about being part of the YIG, what it means to them, and what they are most proud of.

## Benefits of taking part

Evaluation data shows that the YIG members benefitted from being part of the project, with benefits across four main categories:

### Confidence and personal development

In data from YIG 1, members highlighted ‘being part of something with future impact’ and learning to value differing perspectives. In questionnaire data from YIG 6, members described feeling that their ideas were ‘shaping the workshops’ and that they were ‘making a difference in day-to-day lives of young people.’ At YIG 8, one member wrote that the YIG



gave them 'confidence in my intellectual capabilities at a time where my self-confidence would otherwise be at an all-time low.' From interview data:

*"I feel really proud of how my confidence and my understanding of other people and how my own views have developed over time."*

This YIG member directly attributed a significant life decision - choosing a more diverse college further from home rather than the local option - to the confidence she gained from the YIG. She also said:

*"YIG sessions took a lot more critical thinking and more, thinking about my own experiences and thinking more introspectively, almost, like, I had to think back to my childhood, and what it was like growing up, and even, looking back into the world, and what I thought was ordinary, and, digging into it, and that was more, thinking than I had anticipated. I thought we were just gonna have, I'm just gonna learn from other people's experiences and chip in sometimes, but it was a lot more meaningful."* YIG member 3

## **Broadened perspectives**

Learning from diverse peers was a consistent theme. In data from YIG 2, members identified 'learning about new perspectives and experiences' and 'the differences in law between the different nations' as key learning points. In responses from YIG 6, members valued 'the opportunity to hear a variety of opinions' and 'meet new people.' in YIG 8, one member described achieving 'growth'.

*"Growth. We've all grown as individuals, learning from each other's experiences and gaining perspectives from all walks of life. Personally, I've learned to advocate for myself, and people like me, which I am very proud of"* Anonymous

*"It was good to meet, especially, I hadn't had much experience with people that had been in care before. It was kind of a separate world. Not inherently negatively, I just hadn't. And that was interesting."* YIG member 2

## **Practical and professional benefits**

Several members described tangible professional gains. One interviewee noted that their YIG participation had been added to their CV and was valuable when applying for roles in mental health and advocacy.

*"The fact that I've done a foreword for a research paper was very important to me, because you don't really get that opportunity, and it's good to be put on your resume."* YIG member 4

Two further project opportunities were taken up by young people: one with the BBC and Ada Lovelace Institute, and one contributing to a Hopkins Van Mil project about Ultra Processed Foods.

Two YIG members took part as panel members, speaking at an event, hosted by the Nuffield Foundation in December 2025.



The Nuffield Foundation hosted one YIG member for a week of work experience within the Education Department.

## Social connections

The formation of genuine friendships emerged consistently. At YIG 4, members highlighted 'seeing everyone in person and catching up with them.' At YIG 8, a member described the group as 'being part of a caring community.'

*"[I have loved] the dynamics and interactions with the whole group."* Anonymous

*"It helps develop my skills and gives me a place to socialise."* YIG member 15

In the interviews, two YIG members described plans to actively keep in touch with members of the Group they had met within the YIG.

**YIG members experienced wide-ranging benefits including increased confidence, broadened perspectives, professional development, and meaningful social connections. Several members attributed personal, education and career outcomes directly to their participation.**

## Negative aspects and attrition

Where negative aspects were reported, they were predominantly practical rather than experiential: travel distance and time commitment were the most common concerns. Members from Wales, Somerset and Glasgow all noted the challenge of travel to London. Evaluation data shows that the remuneration for the project supported inclusion e.g. for a YIG member living on universal credit, but also that the remuneration felt less fair for those travelling long distances.

The HVM team interview provided detail on two cases of attrition. YIG Member 13 left after the third meeting; the team believe it was due to life circumstances rather than the project, as they had been highly engaged. YIG Member 10 left after meeting 5, which the team linked to over-promising at the outset about the scope of the YIG role.

*"I think we did kind of start with a bit of over-promising, and I think that might have played into losing [YIG Member 10] quite early on, because I think he was anticipating being able to take more initiative and take more control."* HVM Team Member 2

YIG Member 10 provided exit feedback when he left the group. His concerns centred on four issues: unclear targets and expectations; a perceived lack of empowerment in shaping how YIG meetings were planned and delivered; long gaps between meetings that made the YIG feel less impactful; and passive participation from some other members. Notably, however, he reported having a very good relationship with his adviser and feeling supported both during the YIG and in his decision to leave.



YIG Member 10's experience highlights that even within a largely successful programme, individual expectations about the nature and pace of youth-led work can vary. His expectation of a more structurally youth-led approach was not met, though other members specifically valued the professional structuring of meetings. This tension between different models of youth-led practice, youth-led content versus youth-led process, is a relevant design consideration for future projects.

**No substantive negative experiences of the YIG were reported by any current member. Practical issues around travel and gaps between meetings were the most common concerns. In future work, consideration should be given to increasing remuneration for members travelling from long distances.**

**The departure of one member highlights the importance of setting clear expectations about the scope of youth-led influence from the outset.**



## How are you feeling about being a YIG member?

“  
I feel good about being a member as I am able to express opinions that typically would not have been brought up in general conversation, thus broadening my own opinion on such topics

“  
I like being a YIG member as I am able to contribute my ideas in a group and hear a difference in opinion

“  
I like being a part of key conversations on key issues that so many other people relate to

“  
Really glad I joined. Have gained a lot from it and enjoy it. Look forward to coming.

“  
Happy to take part and listen to multiple perspectives on current issues

“  
Being a YIG member makes me feel heard and lets me feel like I'm doing good in the world.

“  
I feel that my ideas are shaping the workshops I feel excited and positive. Really enjoy it.

“  
I'm feeling good, like I'm making a difference in day-to-day lives of young people

“  
I'm feeling really good about myself as I'm helping to contribute to policy making

“  
I really enjoy it

“  
I'm really enjoying it having the opportunity to speak openly about relevant issues is invaluable



## What has the YIG achieved so far that you feel most proud of?

“  
We have achieved successfully planning deep dive workshops that are pivotal to the project

“  
Proud of the DDW results and outcomes

“  
Growth. We've all grown as individuals, learning from each other's experiences and gaining perspectives from all walks of life. Personally, I've learned to advocate for myself and people like me which I am very proud of.

“  
Brought authentic diversity in bringing young people together to speak on their experiences. Opened opportunity for collaboration across the UK, gave young people the tools to gain confidence and skill surrounding working on creative collaborative projects

“  
The workshops, as the YIG are getting the view of many young people across the country and I think that this will benefit many young people in the future

“  
YIG has helped me see others views

“  
Helping us recognise the different issues facing young people based on where they are demographically.

“  
I am proud of everyone for their participation including those who have never done anything like this, and bringing everyone together

“  
They've been given amazing advice and views from a wide variety of different people and experiences



## What does being a member of the Youth Insights Group mean to you?

“  
Being part of a caring community

“  
Having a space where my voice is valued and heard. I feel like I matter. It gives me confidence in my intellectual capabilities at a time where my self-confidence would otherwise be at an all-time low.

“  
Being part of a team where everyone is supportive and welcoming and we are able to share our lived experiences and ideas

“  
It means doing right by helping my generation

“  
Making myself proud for being published for my words

“  
Being who I am means I can vouch for those who can't.

“  
Feel more connected across cultures of understanding the experiences of young people

“  
It means that I am able to both speak and advocate for topics that I am passionate about as the type of conversation that we have on the YIG you don't really have elsewhere

“  
Being able to expand my own knowledge and interpersonal skills

“  
Being part of the YIG means I get to share my opinion in a shared environment but also hearing the views and opinions from others

“  
It means I can provide information on important matters based on personal experience. It's nice to feel involved in matters that I can contribute to and that are something I actually understand



## 8. Deep dive Workshops

Eight Deep dive workshops were delivered across the UK focused on three topics: Education to Work (in person workshops with 38 participants in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Newport), Digital Lives (two online workshops with 30 participants, one UK wide focusing on rural areas and one with participants from the West Midlands), and Mental Health and Wellbeing (online workshops with 24 participants from Ealing, Northern Ireland and across Scotland).

The locations of the Deep dive workshops were informed by synthesising existing research and data relating to the themes, produced by the Nuffield Foundation. HVM tailored the sampling and formats to meet the research needs e.g. by recruiting young people with experience of using mental health services for the Mental Health and Wellbeing theme, and working with them online to provide a psychologically safe(r) space for discussions. In these workshops, additional wellbeing and safeguarding support was in place, with participants having access to a professional counsellor. Online workshops were also used in the Digital Lives theme, due to their relevance.

Importantly, the HVM team delivering the Deep dive workshops was a subset of the team delivering the YIG. Nuffield Foundation staff also attended the Deep dive workshops as observers. This consistently supported the YIG's connection to and influence on the YIG in an authentic way.

Members of the YIG produced a digital zine, which included talking heads video clips and illustrations, about the project which was shown within the first three Deep dive workshops. At YIG meeting 4 the Nuffield Foundation and HVM team fed back to the YIG about this:

*“It felt like it was grounded in your voices and your different perspectives” Nuffield Team Member*

*“Your stories really sparked conversations and opened people up. You set the tone with your openness and honesty, and it made the atmosphere genuine and inclusive. It was great!”*

*“There was a lad in Newcastle who was really quiet. When he saw you talking on the video about alternative provision and forest school he came straight out of his shell. Hearing you put him at ease and brought a depth to the research” HVM Team member 2*

This last example was referenced in a YIG member interview as a personal benefit of the project, with the knowledge that he was making a difference to the lives of young people.

The culture and practice within the two Deep dive workshops that the evaluator observed mirrored the excellent quality of the wider project. The HVM team created environments that were welcoming, inclusive, and productive. Facilitation was skilful in providing support and scaffolding to those who needed it, whilst retaining a respectful power balance and avoiding condescension.

At the end of a workshop focused on Education to Work, one participant approached an HVM Team member to ask them about their career path and potential opportunities in social research. This demonstrates the young person's interest in exploring a research career, which may have been created or enhanced by this experience, but also that they felt confident and safe enough to approach the team member.



## Experience of DDW participants

Questionnaire data demonstrates consistently high quality experiences across all eight Deep dive workshops. All respondents agreed that information provided was clear and easy to understand, with 79% strongly agreeing. On inclusive facilitation, 87% strongly agreed and a further 12% tended to agree. Seventy-three per cent strongly agreed they felt comfortable sharing their views, with a further 21% tending to agree. The small number of neutral responses at 5% likely reflects the inherent challenge of sharing personal experiences in a group of strangers at a single event, particularly given the sensitivity of some topics.

A short pre-workshop task introduced the Deep dive workshops. A majority found it helpful, with 52% strongly agreeing and 25% tending to agree. However, 15% were neutral and 8% tended to disagree.

Four themes recurred consistently: hearing diverse perspectives, feeling heard and valued, a welcoming and comfortable environment, and personal learning and reflection.

*“I found it really interesting to hear so many different perspectives different to my own but also hear how much we had in common.” DDW participant*

*“Felt good to be heard and make a change.” DDW participant*

*“It was really comfortable and easy to participate. The information was all clear and simple to digest.” DDW participant*

*“It helped me understand that I am not the only one in the same boat as me. It was easy to talk to everyone. Everyone was nice and welcoming.” DDW participant*

All participants were asked for suggested improvements. By far the most common suggestion raised across all three DDW series was increasing the time for discussion.

Several participants asked for more interactive and creative activities, as well as suggestions for more accessible participation methods included using the chat function more actively online, creating a mind map, and providing brainstorming time so participants could collect their thoughts before speaking.

**Deep dive participants reported consistently positive experiences across all eight workshops. Facilitation quality was as strong in one-off DDW settings as in the ongoing YIG, suggesting that HVM’s facilitation approach transferred effectively across contexts. The desire for more time was the most common improvement suggestion.**

## 9. Reporting and Outputs

YIG members made substantive and powerful contributions to project outputs. They contributed forewords and artwork to Deep dive reports, produced creative outputs including podcast recordings, films, collages, drawings and writing, and shaped the data commentaries. One YIG member was interviewed for an expert feature on care-experienced



young people. At the Nuffield Foundation's December 2025 event, two YIG members worked closely with the Nuffield Foundation to take part as speakers at the *How is Gen Z faring?* event alongside five other experts. The event was hosted at the Nuffield Foundation offices and live streamed. This added to the range of dissemination formats through which young people's perspectives reached audiences of researchers, practitioners and sector leaders. The range of this offer was highlighted by YIG members as important for inclusion.

*"There was loads of different options to be involved if, for example, you didn't want to do a little video or anything like that, you could do an anonymous quote, which is quite cool."* YIG Member 5

YIG summary reports were shared with members after each session with an explicit invitation for review and feedback, though no responses were received. This was perceived by the HVM team as a sign of trust rather than disengagement.

The Foundation took different approaches to integrating youth insights across publications: in one data commentary they were woven in, and in another they were separated into distinct sections. This reflects an ongoing area of learning about the most effective approach to presenting youth voice within research outputs.

**YIG members contributed meaningfully to project outputs through diverse creative formats. Outputs included those specific to the YIG, the Grown Up programme plus wider opportunities, some of which were led by the YIG members.**

## 10. Outcomes and Impact

### ***Grown Up?* has generated new evidence about journeys to adulthood, with significant contribution by the YIG**

The project supported a Deep dive into the three themes of education to work, digital lives, and mental health and wellbeing, adding nuanced, up-to-date and valuable knowledge to existing research in this field.

The YIG was essential in setting the breadth and scope of the themes, ensuring they were current, relevant and based on what matters to young people, including young people from groups who are seldom heard.

The project worked sensitively and successfully with care-experienced young people, and young people who have experience of the mental health system. This is important in and of itself, but also worth acknowledging that the YIG supported this work with thought and care.

The YIG also enabled greater accessibility of the questions that were asked of young people.

Without direct evidence from this evaluation, a reasonable premise is that Deep dive workshop participants found the project to be more trustworthy because of the involvement of the YIG. In the case of the education to work DDWs, participants had seen a video of the



YIG during the workshop, which may have enhanced their confidence in the authenticity and relevance of the research.

The majority of the YIG's focus was on understanding their experiences to inform the scope of the themes. There was less input from the YIG in the process design of the Deep dives, though this included shortlisting discussion questions and prompts, advising on timings and stimulus, as well as how to make sessions engaging more generally.

The inclusion of the YIG voice in outputs was important and of benefit to the YIG members. Hearing their voice directly through reports and events is a powerful message to actors, including policy makers, the Nuffield Foundation and similar organisations as future funders and commissioners, and HVM and similar organisations as deliverers of youth-focused research and engagement.

## The YIG as a benchmark for youth engagement practice

Three of the five YIG member interviewees had experience of other youth advisory groups and described their experience with the YIG as equal or more positive than their other youth advocacy work. Distinguishing factors emerging from the data were the diversity of the group and opportunity to learn from different life experiences than their own; being listened to even when their opinion was dissenting; the culture of the YIG – that the YIG members were respected and could be true to themselves e.g. they weren't 'told off' for using bad language; and the relationships with advisers who provided support and sense-making.

## Challenging existing narratives about young people

The topic discussions and outputs required knowledge, critical thinking and communication skills. Within the project, YIG members worked on a wide range of topics — from careers guidance and financial stability to technology addiction and mental health systems — with nuanced and thoughtful discussion.

The culture of the project was productive, thoughtful and caring. The YIG members listened to each other; explored and valued their differences and developed social connections.

The project challenged deficit-based narratives about young people, generating evidence that questions stereotypes about digital dependency, disengagement, and lack of civic interest. Importantly, the Nuffield Foundation is drawing on the digital-focused outputs from *Grown Up?* to inform the consultation on social media bans and other forms of digital regulation affecting young people. This is an important example of the YIG and Deep dive participants experiences and perspectives directly feeding into a national policy conversation.

*“Hearing their own perspectives challenged the boxes I'd put them into”* Nuffield Foundation team member following DDW1

*“It blew so many received ideas out of the water... things like how tech-savvy people are supposed to be... they showed us and they told us things that were so different to what you read about.”* HVM Team Member 2

*“They just want to live in the real world... they're on their phones all the time, or they want to do everything on a screen. They don't! They really don't. They want real life back.”* HVM Team Member 2



The evaluation did not directly explore YIG members' existing perceptions about adults. However, evidence from across the project suggests that YIG members had positive experiences of working with adults as part of this project. At the first YIG session, one member reflected: "I have learnt that adults do care about our generation." The relationships developed with personal advisers, and between YIG members and the HVM and Nuffield Foundation staff teams, reinforced this. By YIG 9, members reflected on how the project had demonstrated that young people's contributions are valued and taken seriously in research and policy spaces, noting that they had recognised their voice was taken seriously and that many experienced a sense of making change and being listened to.

## Personal development and next steps for YIG members

The YIG provided new experiences for members, including travel to London, the YIG sessions themselves, and opportunities to disseminate outputs at events and through publications. These experiences have invested in this group of young people such that all members present at the final session expressed a wish to continue working with the Nuffield Foundation.

Delivering the YIG over a 14 month duration encouraged both the development of the group, and that of the individual YIG members. As a group, the YIG grew in confidence over time.

The emergence of some YIG members taking on informal roles as co-facilitators was not planned but was described by the HVM team as one of the project's positive outcomes. HVM Team Member 2 described certain members proactively ensuring that quieter participants and observers were included in discussions. HVM Team Member 3 noted that the YIG had expressed a desire for a facilitation role from the outset, and that this organically materialised through the group's dynamics rather than through formal design or request.

Positive development for individuals came through strongly. In the data from YIG 1, members highlighted being part of something with future impact and learning to value differing perspectives. By YIG 8, one member described the YIG as giving them confidence in their intellectual capabilities at a time when their self-confidence would otherwise have been at an all-time low. Several members described tangible professional gains, including adding their YIG participation to their CV, writing forewords for research papers, and being recommended for additional projects. The formation of genuine friendships emerged consistently across the data, with members describing the group as a caring community and maintaining social connections beyond YIG sessions.

Overall, the YIG has been a positive and enriching experience for YIG members. The evidence of participation and outputs from the project support a lasting legacy for YIG members.

## Outcomes for the Nuffield Foundation

The project has already generated significant organisational outcomes for the Nuffield Foundation, with evidence of both direct policy impact and strategic influence on the Foundation's wider programme of work.

### Policy influence



Outputs or findings from the project have directly reached or plan to inform policy audiences. These include:

- Providing written and [oral evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry on Further Education and Skills](#) (June 2025), which was subsequently quoted in the [Committee's report](#). The Foundation's submission referenced the *Grown Up?* youth engagement, particularly around access to support with pathway choices.
- [A UK-wide policy workshop on post-16 education and training](#) (March 2025) which opened with the pre-recorded film of YIG members discussing transitions from education to work. The Foundation reported that many participants commented on the film and referred back to it in discussions, and that the event led to follow-up conversations with policy leads in Wales and Northern Ireland.
- A planned submission to the [Joint Education and Health and Social Care Select Committees' enquiry into young people's mental health](#), which will draw directly on YIG and Deep dive workshop evidence.
- Digital-focused work from the project is informing the [ongoing consultation on social media regulation](#).

### Informing wider programmes and partnerships

All three data commentaries published within the wider *Grown Up? Transitions to Adulthood* programme drew on insights from the youth engagement. The mental health data commentary reflected the YIG and Deep dive workshop work on mapping formal and informal mental health services, and a practitioner workshop was built around these insights.

The Foundation is drawing together insights and evidence gaps from the project, with the YIG featuring prominently, to inform future grant guidelines and the priorities of its partner centres, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. Nuffield staff have also referenced the youth engagement in a forthcoming Ada Lovelace Institute discussion paper on AI and career guidance, drawing specifically on what was heard from young people about unmet need for career guidance. The HVM work additionally informed the Ada Lovelace Institute's peer research on young people and AI, and the Foundation anticipates holding an internal workshop to compare participative methods across these two strands.

Learning from the HVM work is already informing other youth engagement initiatives within the Nuffield Foundation. Two new major programmes, Racial Diversity UK and the Public Right to Justice, are drawing on the *Grown Up?* approach. The approach has also had reach beyond the Foundation: following its recommendation, the Office for National Statistics Inclusion team has commissioned HVM to work with young people on questions of trust and data.

### Shaping future investment and engagement

The Foundation is planning a major new programme on improving the employability of young people, which will draw on insights from *Grown Up?* across education to work, the nature of transitions, mental health and seeing young people holistically. This programme may include opportunities to encourage youth insight for organisations who bid for funding, which would



represent a notable shift in how the Foundation embeds youth engagement within its grant-making.

The Nuffield Foundation demonstrated exceptional commitment as a commissioner throughout the project, investing substantial staff time in direct engagement with the YIG including across the Nuffield team and partner organisations. The Foundation intends to continue working with YIG members following the end of the HVM contract, and all YIG members present at the final session consented to this ongoing involvement.

**The project has generated substantial new evidence informed by youth voice, including insights that challenged prevailing narratives about young people. *Grown Up* has already had external impact; providing evidence to a range of stakeholders including policymakers through presentations, publications, and events.**

**Experience and knowledge gained from this youth engagement and research is informing new programmes, external partnerships and future grant-making, suggesting a lasting legacy from the *Grown Up?* youth engagement work for the organisations involved, YIG members, and future cohorts of youth collaborators.**

## 11. Conclusions and Lessons Learned

### Conclusions

The *Grown Up?* youth engagement project was an exceptionally well-designed and well-delivered piece of work. It was rigorous in its methods, deeply relational in its practice, and genuinely responsive to young people's needs and ideas.

The project achieved its dual aims. It empowered young people to shape the priorities and content of the research programme, and generated new insights about journeys to adulthood from young people, capturing psycho-social dimensions and addressing gaps in existing evidence.

The partnership between the Nuffield Foundation and Hopkins Van Mil was highly productive and complementary. Both organisations committed deeply to the project, leading with values, sharing knowledge and expertise, and investing time and resource into direct engagement and research with young collaborators.

The inclusive and relational practice that underpinned the project was its defining strength. The care, time and effort invested in creating a psychologically safe, welcoming and respectful environment for young people was evident in every aspect of design and delivery, and was reflected in the exceptionally positive experiences reported by both YIG members and Deep dive workshop participants. The quality and consistency of facilitation was outstanding across both the sustained YIG relationship and the one-off Deep dive settings.

The ethical and safeguarding infrastructure was comprehensive and operationally detailed, with independent external review. One safeguarding incident arose during the project and was managed promptly and effectively. The project's approach to recruitment resulted in a



genuinely diverse YIG, with diversity designed in through quantified demographic targets approached flexibly. The diversity of the group was the most consistently identified benefit by YIG members across all evaluation data.

The personal adviser model was a highly valued element of the YIG experience, serving critical functions in sense-making, continuity, emotional support and individual accommodation. No substantive negative experiences of the YIG were reported by current members. Where concerns were raised, they related to practical matters such as travel and gaps between meetings.

## Lessons learned

### **Clarify the boundary between advisory input and research participation at the outset.**

The distinction between the YIG's advisory role and its contribution to research findings evolved during the project. This was successfully navigated but not clearly defined. The HVM team reflected that, if they were to run the project again, they would seek clarity about this distinction at the outset and periodically reassess the role of the group.

**Set clear and honest expectations about the scope of youth-led influence.** The departure of one YIG member was linked by the HVM team to the expectation setting at the start of the project. In this project, the work was youth-led in its content; and the YIG had significant influence over the content of the Deep dive workshops. There was less opportunity for influencing the process of the YIG meetings themselves. Future projects should be clear in recruitment documents about which elements of the project are within scope for youth influence, and those which are not, with justified explanation.

### **Retain the principle of named personal support, but adopt a lighter-touch approach.**

The personal adviser model was the most valued element of the YIG, but the role evolved significantly and the boundaries of support were not always clear. The HVM team recommended a lighter-touch model for future projects: a named supporter rather than adviser; an initial one-to-one meeting; check-ins during or around YIG sessions rather than scheduled separate meetings; and optional one-to-ones available on request.

**Invest in diversity at the recruitment stage.** The thoughtful and detailed approach to recruitment resulted in a diverse YIG that was foundational to the project's quality. The diversity of the group was the most consistently identified benefit across all evaluation data. Ensuring that several members share similar experiences, so that no individual feels isolated or responsible for representing a particular background, was an important design principle.

**Consider the accessibility and volume of information shared with young people.** While quantitative data on information clarity was largely positive, interview evidence revealed that information was at times complex, dense, or difficult to process in the time available. Future projects should consider providing opportunities for advance thinking/preparation materials, visual maps or timelines displayed throughout sessions, and a moderated digital space for information to be accessed in members' own time. For this project, the advisers supported accessibility of information so this would need further consideration in a model where the adviser role is lighter touch.

**Provide greater visibility of the wider programme context.** Linked to above, context setting within the wider *Grown Up?* programme was provided by the Nuffield Team, but more detail about how this was happening may have been helpful for Hopkins Van Mil and the YIG



members in maximising the potential of the project e.g. in further understanding opportunities to complement other strands, or plugging gaps.

**Plan for continuity beyond the contracted delivery period.** All YIG members who were at the final session committed to continue working with the Nuffield Foundation. The Foundation recognised that the infrastructure required to do this within a larger organisation is not insignificant. Considerations such as safeguarding policies and processes, payment policies and processes, and GDPR, communications and accessibility considerations need to be in place upstream of projects ending. This is a consideration for other organisations taking on similar approaches to establishing youth engagement.

**Prioritise in-person delivery where budgets allow, with online sessions for accessibility.** YIG members expressed a strong preference for in-person meetings, linking this to the quality of social interaction, depth of engagement and ability to process non-verbal cues. However, online sessions provided important accessibility benefits, including for members with social anxiety, during adverse weather, and for those who could not travel. This preference may differ across groups and circumstances. Projects should be designed with flexibility built in to meet the needs of the group to achieve maximum benefits.

**The *Grown Up?* youth engagement project provides a transferable model for embedding young people's voices within research programmes. Its success was built on genuine relational practice, thoughtful recruitment for diversity, excellent facilitation, responsive design, and a strong commissioner- delivery partner relationship. The lessons identified, drawn from the evaluation evidence and the reflections of those involved, offer practical guidance for future projects seeking to achieve meaningful youth-led engagement within funded research.**



## 12. Appendices

### Appendix 1. Evaluation framework

Code	Category	Questions	Document review	Observation	YIG Questionnaires	YIG interviews	wasn up meeting
<b>A&amp;O</b>	<b>Aims and objectives</b>						
1.	Did the aims and objectives change throughout the project?		X	X			
<b>PM</b>	<b>Project Management</b>						
1	Were risks identified and managed appropriately?		X	X			
2	How effectively did the Nuffield Foundation Team and Hopkins Van Mil work together to achieve the project objectives?		X	X			
<b>R&amp;Y</b>	<b>Recruitment and YIG members</b>						
1	How well did the recruitment process work via gatekeepers?		X	X		X	
2	Are YIG members and workshop participants diverse groups across relevant demographics and characteristics?		X				
3	Were YIG members well prepared? Did they understand their role?			X	X	X	
4	Were YIG members/ DDW participants able to express views? Did they feel included and heard?			X	X	X	



5	To what extent (if any) have YIG members benefitted from taking part?		X	X	X	
6	To what extent (if any) were there any negative aspects of taking part?		X	X	X	
<b>E&amp;S</b>	<b>Ethics and safeguarding</b>					
1	How were ethics considered in project design and delivery?	X	X			
2	Did any ethical issues arise during the project? If so, how were they dealt with?	X	X			X
3	Was the safeguarding policy fit for purpose, clearly communicated, implemented consistently?	X	X			
4	Did any safeguarding issues arise? Were they identified as a risk? Were they dealt with effectively?	X	X			X
<b>I&amp;C</b>	<b>Information and communication</b>					
1	Was information pitched well for the group? Were different learning/communication preferences provided for?	X	X	X	X	
<b>M&amp;A</b>	<b>Methods and Approaches</b>					
1	(How) did the project encourage, support and respond to youth-led design and delivery?	X	X	X	X	X
2	To what extent did the YIG inform or influence the content design and delivery of the YIG, and the Deep dive Workshops?	X	X			
3	Did elements of the project delivery have adequate and appropriate time to support project outcomes?	X	X	X	X	
4	To what extent did the mix of face-to-face and online delivery support the project outcomes?		X	X	X	
<b>Ment</b>	<b>Mentoring/Advisers</b>					
1	Did YIG members feel supported within the process? Were they aware of how to seek support?		X	X	X	
2	(How) did the advisors add value to the project? To the YIG members?	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Fac</b>	<b>Facilitation</b>					



1	How well did facilitators ensure everyone had an opportunity to share their views?		X	X	X	
2	How well did facilitators support YIG members/ participants with minority views?		X		X	
<b>R&amp;O</b>	<b>Reporting and outputs</b>					
1	Did YIG members produce or inform project outputs?	X	X			X
2	To what extent have YIG members informed content or format of project reports?	X	X			X
<b>O&amp;O</b>	<b>Outputs and outcomes (where not covered above)</b>					
1	Has the project generated new evidence about journeys to adulthood which is informed by the YIG?	X	X			X
2	Has the project achieved any unexpected outcomes or impact?	X	X	X	X	X
3	Does the Nuffield Foundation intend to use <i>Grown Up?</i> Evidence to inform Stage 2 of Journeys and other research/policy/strategies relating to young people in the UK? (via written statements)	X				
4	Does the Nuffield Foundation intend to consider new ways of engaging with young people within their future grant funding? (via written statements)	X				
<b>Les</b>	<b>Lessons</b>					
1	What lessons have been learned that can inform future projects?	X	X	X	X	X



## Appendix 2. YIG Guiding Principles

I/ We will:

### *Treat each other with respect*

- Be kind and understanding (which means being accepting, patient, inclusive and mindful of what other people might be going through)
- Value all views and perspectives, even if they aren't shared by everyone – because it is ok for us not to all agree
- Create a welcoming environment where all voices are heard
- Make sure the environment is welcoming to everyone – who may have different needs and preferences
- Not do anything which puts anyone at risk (emotionally or physically)
- Take a trauma informed approach to how we all work together
- Talk to the HVM team about any help we need.
- Respect for the different needs and/ or disabilities that people might have in the room – and remember that not all disabilities can be seen

### *Communicate*

- Share ideas in a respectful way without fear of judgement or criticism. We need to make sure that there is space for constructive criticism
- Challenge unacceptable language and 'hate' remarks
- Listen to others
- Share only the personal experiences that we feel comfortable sharing – with no pressure to share
- Ensure there are content warnings to allow YIG members to make informed decisions about whether they want to take part in every discussion
- Share when we are feeling uncomfortable so that we can be supported
- Use our communication tools, including social media, within the guidelines
- Feedback on the YIG process to learn what works well and not so well.
- Not suffer in silence and always seek support

### *Empower and support ourselves and each other*

- Contribute to activities and discussion in the ways that work for us



- Understand that everyone may not want to work in the same way, and that should be respected (for example making sure everyone is given the time they need to process and contribute to discussions)
- Take ownership and pride in our learning and contributions
- Support each other to collaborate in activities and discussion
- Support each other to think and work creatively
- Take on a growth mindset – we can always be learning and expanding our horizons – so do not be scared to try and do new things
- Acknowledge the incredible range of expertise and knowledge in the room – with such a diverse group of people with different experiences and viewpoints there is so much for us all to learn

### *Celebrate our achievements (as a group and as individuals)*

- Reflect on our own achievements
- Showcase our work and skills
- Celebrate and be proud of our work and the work of the YIG
- Celebrate the importance of the whole *Grown Up? Transitions to adulthood*.

### *Stick to the agreements we have in place*

- Those that are in these principles
- Others that we commit to in taking part in the YIG.

