

The Voices of Children and Young People in the Narrative of Prevention and Early Help in Manchester



Community Explorers Key Findings and Takeaways

November 2025





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Introduction

This report synthesises insights gathered from table discussions during the recently held Community Explorers quarterly event focused on amplifying the voices of children and young people in Manchester within the contexts of prevention and early help.

In October 2025, the Community Explorers Forum leveraged Manchester Community Central's convening power as a conduit to bring together our sector and colleagues from across different sectors to explore and reflect on what it truly means to be a child or young person in Manchester.

We wanted to understand their experiences, specifically of those in need of support and seeking access to services, and critically examine whether the current offer meets their needs. Are their voices heard and acted upon? Do we, as a system and ecosystem, provide accessible and inclusive mechanisms that enable children and young people – our most important and vulnerable members of society – to communicate their needs? Are we shaping services that genuinely serve, support and nurture them?

Most importantly, we wanted to learn from the incredible work different organisations do in the city and explore how we can better support and enable them to do even more.

The discussions on the day spanned across the following key thematic areas:

- employment support
- mental health
- violence against women and girls (VAWG)
- youth homelessness
- knife crime
- neurodiversity
- community cohesion.

The aim was to identify systemic barriers, share innovative practices and develop actionable recommendations to inform policy and practice.

The highlights below display some of the core themes that emerged during our table discussions, along with wider insights shared by attendees and a series of considerations for moving forward, primarily directed towards our colleagues at Manchester City Council and GMP.

This is not an exhaustive report on the table discussions, and Macc will be pleased to meet with MCC and GMP colleagues to discuss any subsequent steps and actions to proceed.



General Discussion on Early Help and Prevention

“Children need to be ‘seen and heard’”

In the first session of the event, attendees discussed these questions:

- What are the current barriers in our system that prevent children and young people from having meaningful participation and a voice in decision-making and shaping services? How can we overcome those barriers?
- How do we best use the voice and experience of children to inform policy and decision making?*
- How can youth voices inform more effective interventions and early help approaches?
- How do we prevent “voice of the child” being a tick box exercise? *

*Questions provided by GMP

Below is a summary of discussions prompted by the questions.

Statutory Disconnect from Children and Young People

Participants expressed concern that children and young people often do not feel empowered to share their feelings. **Statutory agencies are perceived as too detached from young people, lacking trusting relationships that facilitate open communication.**

Discussions around community engagement criticised the reactive nature of existing community engagement teams. Attendees noted that GMP engagement relies heavily on individual efforts – there are ‘pockets of passion’ – but frequent staff turnover hampers the development of meaningful connections. Officers transferred between areas or roles disrupt sustained community relationships.

In a similar manner, the MCC teams conduct engagement without the co-design or co-ownership element, which is simply a form of consultation – feedback and outcomes are not often shared, thus affecting trust, sustainability of relationships and creating fatigue

The VCSE sector, seen as a valuable resource with deep community insight, should be utilised by statutory bodies to engage communities effectively through trusted channels. Conversely, the sector must be adequately funded and supported to fulfil this role.

Raising awareness of existing communication channels was strongly emphasised. Many grassroots organisations working with children and young people are small and often overlooked. Highlighting these groups within GMP and other statutory services would open more avenues for engagement.

An additional barrier highlighted was the **lack of open and direct communication channels.** Effective community policing requires police to be supportive and present – approachable, human and removing hierarchical barriers like titles (“PC,” “Miss,” “Sir”) that can create intimidation.

It was recommended that GMP consider offering youth work qualifications to enhance engagement skills.

A recurring theme was also the need for trauma-informed training within statutory agencies.

Recognising and Supporting Children and Young People

Building trusting relationships depends on creating safe environments where children feel confident to share. Supporting opportunities for lived experience mentorship – where young people are advocates and allies – could serve dual purposes: amplifying young voices and providing early help to at-risk youth.

Statutory services should consult expertise in youth engagement and collaborate with VCSE organisations experienced in working with young people. Children and young people need ongoing support from trusted individuals to ensure their meaningful participation.



“Utilise
VCSE
voice
seriously”

The Role of Decision Makers in Engagement

Effective engagement hinges on decision-makers’ participation, yet many seem to avoid direct interaction with young people or community groups supporting them. Participants expressed frustration over excuses related to funding, capacity and inflexible working hours. To genuinely engage children and young people, sectors must adopt flexible approaches and creative solutions – such as accommodating school schedules or adjusting working hours.

There were concerns about a lack of accountability from statutory agencies. Examples included funding being withdrawn from VCSE initiatives after collecting input, or consultation processes that resulted in guidelines never implemented.

To prevent engagement from becoming a ‘tick-box’ exercise, there must be transparent feedback loops. Young people need to see that their input influences decisions, understand how their suggestions are used and be informed if they are not.

Buy-in from leadership is crucial. Without commitment from decision-makers, initiatives lack resources and impact. For instance, Manchester City Council’s Child Friendly City initiative was criticised as performative – asking organisations to display badges without providing meaningful engagement or resources, leading to frustration.

There was recognition of lots of good work taking place, but attendees highlighted that there needs to be more effort to support those.



Establishing Sustainable, Continuous Engagement

Participants emphasised that engagement should be ongoing, not ad hoc. Children and young people's voices should influence service design and policy from the outset. A dedicated, always-available mechanism for engagement – integrated within community policing, statutory services, VCSE organisations and educational settings – is essential.

Creating spaces within schools for young people to share experiences and opinions is vital. Collaborations between schools, VCSE sectors and statutory bodies can help ensure that young people's insights directly inform service delivery and local policies, for example through school councils.

Organising events where children and young people can voice their needs and aspirations – potentially in partnership with GMP and local VCSE organisations – could also be valuable. These initiatives should recognise and respect the diversity of insights across different Manchester communities.

Many attendees were unaware of the existence of Youth Boards and Councils, and among those who were aware, there was uncertainty about whether these platforms truly reflect the voices of marginalised, isolated, or 'hard-to-reach' children and young people.

Engaging with Parents

Services must also recognise the role of parents in identifying children's needs before school age. Empowering parents with information and guidance helps them support their children early and effectively.

There was not much awareness about the existence of Family Hubs amongst the attendees and any work conducted with parents or the current offer in Manchester within the initiative.

Addressing Resource Limitations in VCSE Organisations

A significant barrier is the chronic lack of funding for youth engagement work. VCSE organisations, despite their valuable knowledge and trust within communities, lack the capacity to focus on meaningful youth participation due to limited resources.

Participants stressed that statutory bodies should fund VCSE organisations fairly, recognising their expertise and ensuring they are treated equitably alongside other sectors.

There is also a need for a co-ordinated unified voice from the VCSE sector on issues affecting children and young people to strengthen advocacy and impact. **It was noted that Children's Board representation often fails to effectively disseminate information to the sector and frontline organisations, and there is a lack of a feedback loop to ensure communication flows both ways.**

Feedback to GMP

- **Attendees expressed disappointment over GMP's limited presence in the session.** Many perceive GMP as difficult to contact and engage, with significant barriers to participation.
- The sentiment in the room showed the **urgent need for GMP to improve its engagement** with communities and build effective trust.



Employment Support

Table Discussion led by Macc

Table Questions:

- What are the main barriers young people face in accessing employment or training, and how can their insights help improve pathways?
- What VCSE sector initiatives are currently supporting children and young people into future employment?
- How can young people be involved in co-creating employment programmes and initiatives that support their career aspirations?

Financial, Digital and Mental Health Challenges

Youth-focused VCSE organisations identified mental health and financial hardship as the two most significant barriers preventing young people from entering employment. These issues often reinforce one another. Age plays a significant role in the types of barriers experienced. For example, under 18s often report a lack of confidence in their ability to gain employment. Also, in terms of more practical needs, a young person leaving education may not have access to a laptop or digital tools required to create a CV, complete an application, or write a personal statement. The frustration and isolation caused by these limitations can exacerbate existing mental health difficulties, leading to apathy and low motivation.

Young people aged 18–25 more frequently cite mental health as a direct barrier, compounded by reduced access to support services, limited digital resources and family pressures to pursue specific career paths.

Financial support for digital access was noted as inconsistent. Without a youth worker or supportive service, many young people find it difficult to access the necessary tools for job searching or skills development.

“Financial Support when seeking employment is lacking.”

Many young people lack work experience opportunities, which are often accessible only through family networks or parent’s professional connections.

This structural inequality reinforces existing social divides. While progress has been made in improving access to work placements, VCSE organisations agreed that more equitable and widespread opportunities are needed. Cross-sector organisations felt they require clearer guidance, both legal and practical, on how to provide inclusive and equitable work experience opportunities and stronger collaboration with youth-focused VCSE organisations was identified as a key step in bridging this gap.

Another recurring concern was that employment pathways have become a **“postcode lottery”**; **young people’s opportunities often depend heavily on where they live.** Limited local employment, high transport costs, and the inability to afford relocation (e.g. rental deposits) leave many young people restricted to nearby job opportunities. This dynamic encourages a short-term focus on higher starting salaries, rather than long-term career progression.

Youth-focused organisations expressed young people’s desire to earn £30,000 or more at entry level. The aspiration for immediate earnings has been exacerbated by social media, the hope to leave behind experiences of deprivation and wanting to support their own families and communities.

Financial barriers also interact with structural inequalities. For example, a young person taking on an apprenticeship below the living wage may reduce their family's eligibility for certain benefits, creating an additional disincentive to pursue training or entry-level employment. VCSE organisations highlighted this as a major concern, as it undermines efforts to promote long-term social mobility.

Social Media and Employment Expectations

Social media has become a powerful force in shaping young people's perceptions of employment. Youth-focused organisations observed that becoming a social media "influencer" is now widely viewed as an aspirational career path, often preferred over more traditional forms of work. The highly curated and glamorous depictions of influencer lifestyles distort young people's understanding of employment, making alternative pathways appear less appealing or preferable.

This trend has also influenced gendered perceptions of work. Some organisations expressed concern that content promoting the idea that women need not work, exemplified by fashion slogans such as "Too Pretty to Work", is contributing to unrealistic or limiting expectations among young women. VCSE organisations supporting young women into employment emphasised the urgent need for more visible, diverse female role models across a range of professions.

To address these misconceptions, youth organisations are increasingly developing step-by-step guides to help young people understand professional expectations and workplace norms. One organisation shared that they have been supporting young people on interview etiquette, including guidance such as not attending interviews "smelling of weed".

While many young people are aware of their rights, they often lack understanding of workplace responsibilities, creating a mismatch between employer expectations and young people's perceptions of what it means to be "work-ready."

Co-Design and Co-Creation of Employment Programmes

It was noted that it was imperative for young people to be consistently included in co-production and creation for youth focused employment programmes and pathways. This goes hand in hand with Manchester Community Central also inviting young people to Community Explorers and events that their insight will be plugged into.

Furthermore, connecting the VCSE employees who work with young people directly into the policy design of employment support, pathways and programmes rather than starting and stopping at consultation, would be an important initial step into co-design. Throughout the discussion there was a deep concern that young people were not being involved in decision making both at a local and regional level. Interlinking with this, it was encouraged that where the private sector employment opportunities are considered and shown to be best practice for employment support and pathways, it is important to share this with other businesses to share insights and learnings.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of knowledge-sharing across sectors. When private sector employers demonstrate best practice in creating accessible employment pathways, these examples should be shared widely to inform and inspire others.

Collaborative learning between businesses, VCSE organisations, and Manchester City Council will be essential to building a more inclusive employment landscape for young people in Manchester.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Table Discussion led by Jack McGeehan, Carolina Hinojosa, Salford Foundation



Table Questions:

- How can we ensure that long-term prevention programmes addressing VAWG are inclusive and responsive to the needs of men and boys who may be vulnerable to online misogynistic content?
- How can young people be actively involved in designing these prevention initiatives?
- What is the most effective role for the VCSE sector in this work, and how can we foster collaboration with schools, support services, and public sector partners to strengthen prevention efforts?
- What specific systemic changes can Manchester implement to better support youth participation in VAWG interventions?
- What actions can we request from Manchester City Council to support these goals? Are there existing strategies or projects that are already making progress in this area?

Early Intervention and the Challenge of Entrenched Behaviours

VCSE organisations consistently highlight that by late adolescence, beliefs about masculinity, relationships, sex and gender roles are often deeply ingrained. Early adolescence, particularly between ages 10 and 14, is a critical window for prevention. However, it is also when boys are least likely to engage in open conversations about respect, consent, healthy relationships and equality.

Many organisations note that excluding boys from discussions on VAWG results in them interpreting gender norms through peer influence and online spaces. Digital influencers significantly shape young men's perceptions, and their vulnerability to online misogynistic content – embedded through algorithms via fitness, aspirational and career-focused content – is a concern. Addressing this vulnerability requires a mainstream, focused approach with dedicated time and engagement with young people.

Creating Safe Spaces and Fostering Open Dialogue

The attendees emphasized that the tone of conversations matters. **Using accusatory language like “rape” or “rapist” early on can create defensiveness and hinder dialogue. Instead, building safe, non-judgmental environments where boys feel comfortable to speak openly is crucial.** This approach helps to debunk myths and address misogynistic or sexist content they may have encountered online or through peers. Successful spaces invite curiosity and inquiry. For example, asking young boys where they have heard certain words, what they mean to them and why they hold particular beliefs about gender fosters rapport and psychological safety.



Such conversations encourage critical thinking without feeling confrontational. Teachers often find these discussions challenging and require training and confidence to facilitate with sensitivity. VCSE organisations can provide external environments for exploring gender topics – free from the pressures teachers face – thus supporting education and capacity building.

Creating these environments promotes a sense of belonging. Many young men find identity and camaraderie in misogynistic communities – both online and offline. Prevention efforts should therefore offer alternative spaces that promote empathy, emotional expression and mutual respect. Evidence shows that sustained, open dialogues with boys effectively unpack gender stereotypes and promote healthier perspectives.

Understanding men's roles in healthy relationships is also vital. Many organisations question whether there are enough safe spaces for men to express vulnerability and manage anger without causing harm. Encouraging open conversations about emotions, gender expectations and empathy within schools and youth groups can help alleviate pressures and foster healthier masculinity models.

The Role of the VCSE Sector and Cross-Agency Collaboration

The VCSE sector plays a crucial role in VAWG prevention. **Cross-agency collaboration – between VCSE organisations, schools, support services and public sector partners – is consistently seen as the most effective strategy for sustainable change. Building, strengthening and utilising these relationships are essential for long-term impact.** However, sustainable engagement is challenged by a funding landscape that often emphasizes short-term projects. VCSE organisations stressed the importance of paid, stable roles to support consistent prevention work. Relying solely on volunteers or underfunded services cannot meet the ongoing needs.



Given their trusted community ties and specialised insight, VCSE groups are well-placed to design and deliver VAWG prevention programmes in schools. There is a call for more sustainable funding opportunities that enable the sector to maintain a consistent preventative presence across Manchester.

Systemic Change and Youth Participation

Many organisations see an opportunity for Manchester to strengthen youth participation in VAWG interventions. The attendees recommended that Manchester City Council allocate additional resources to fund groups that engage young people through sustained, person-centred approaches.

Prevention efforts must address the link between traditional masculinity and rejection of independent women. Supporting young men to separate their identity from dominance and control is a crucial component of prevention. While progress has been made in empowering women, there has been less focus on helping boys learn to coexist with this, contributing to a polarised gender landscape that needs addressing.





Education and Structural Alignment

Achieving systemic change requires consistent, borough-wide VAWG education across Manchester and Greater Manchester. Currently, provision varies, with some areas receiving comprehensive programmes and others very little. A unified approach, potentially involving commissioning VCSE organisations to deliver school-based sessions, could ensure equitable access for all students.

Many contributors advocate for making VAWG education a mandatory part of the school curriculum, delivered by trained specialists. Reliance on external organisations can lead to inconsistencies, and early intervention from Year 5 through Year 8 is critical for shaping young people's understanding of relationships and gender. While current funding predominantly targets prevention among men and boys, more initiatives are needed to support young girls and women.

There was a broader call for national standardisation in the room. **Limited government guidance on VAWG prevention leaves schools and local authorities to interpret best practices independently, showcasing the need for clearer, more consistent national policies to improve local outcomes.**

Rethinking Misogyny and Accountability

Practitioners agree that misogyny should be viewed as a spectrum, encompassing language, humour and everyday interactions – not just extreme acts of violence. Portraying perpetrators solely as “bad people” can hinder reflection and accountability among young men. **Recognising misogyny as part of a continuum helps foster understanding, encourages personal responsibility and reduces defensiveness, ultimately promoting cultural change.**



Neurodiversity

Table Discussion led by Sam Palmer, Respect for All

Table Questions:

- To what extent do current services reflect the real needs and priorities of neurodivergent young people in Manchester?
- In what ways can services become more accessible, inclusive, and responsive for neurodivergent young people?
- Within your own organisation, where are the opportunities to strengthen awareness, understanding and support for neurodivergent children and young people?

Neurodivergence inclusion remains a relatively new concept for many organisations. Despite a slow cultural shift within the VCSE sector, there is still a need for better education and understanding – moving away from medical models towards an individual-centred, adaptable approach to foster true inclusion.

Attendees discussed how short-term projects hinder meaningful engagement, as rigid funding often results in transient support. Effective engagement should involve adults with lived experience of neurodiversity and frontline services, reducing the need for young people to mask or explain themselves.

Early involvement of parents with schools and community services is critical to managing expectations, understanding children's experiences and providing family support post-diagnosis. Addressing late diagnoses is essential, as they impact teens' interactions with services and their ability to process earlier experiences, such as those in school.

Participants emphasised that neurodiversity inclusion benefits all children – methods like regular movement help regulate emotions and improve focus. A culture shift recognising this could positively influence service delivery and societal attitudes. Language was highlighted as vital; specific, respectful terminology should be used to support children in articulating their experiences accurately. It was also acknowledged that the education system offers limited support and lacks a comprehensive understanding of neurodiversity, which can further isolate children who are already experiencing some form of marginalisation and hinder their access to necessary assistance.



Knife Crime

Table Discussion led by Jeannine Burke, Be Part Of Change



Table Questions:

- What existing projects/ organisations in Manchester are working with young people to prevent knife crime?
- How do these projects amplify the voices of children and young people?
- From young people's perspectives, what are the root causes of knife crime, and what community-led solutions could be effective?
- How can schools, youth services and communities work together to deliver preventative education that resonates with young people?
- How can we ensure that the voices of marginalised or underrepresented young people are heard and acted upon?
- Black children (mostly boys) continue to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system (CJS) at every point, What changes are needed to address racial disproportionality in the CJS? *Question provided by GMP

Attendees noted that many **young people carry knives for self-protection out of fear, often fuelled by social media and online content. Open and honest conversations about these fears are necessary**, specifically acknowledging how online amplification of school conflicts can escalate feelings of shame and fear, leading to destructive actions.

A key issue is the **lack of opportunities for young people to voice their concerns**, especially those without trusted adults. **Community support and early intervention are vital**, and existing trusted connections should be leveraged and strengthened. **Prevention efforts should also focus on raising awareness of the consequences of knife-related violence.**

Learning from successful models elsewhere, like **Scotland's holistic approaches addressing broader societal issues such as domestic violence, could be beneficial.**

Spaces like the Be Part of Change hub provide safe environments for young people to connect and feel welcomed, counteracting the alienation they often experience in community spaces. To enhance existing projects, establishing a network for organisations and service providers to share resources and strategies is recommended, especially given limited resources within existing groups.

The issue of short-term, unsustainable funding practices was also emphasised. Due to the grants-dependent nature of the current VCSE landscape, some groups engage in work around knife crime and community cohesion primarily to secure funding, while other organisations are left to face the repercussions of misguided advice or failed projects resulting from a lack of expertise or prior knowledge.

The significance of building and maintaining strong relationships with frontline organisations was reiterated. Forums such as the Collaboration for Community Safety Network were cited as positive examples of efforts to foster connectivity within the VCSE sector. It was suggested that **GMP and MCC should strengthen their links** with these kinds of spaces, particularly during strategy consultations and similar initiatives where sector feedback is essential.

Community Belonging and Cohesion

Table Discussion led Macc

Table Questions:

- What do you think are the current barriers for young people to fully participate in and feel part of communities
- Black children (mostly boys) continue to be over represented in the criminal justice system (CJS) at every point, What changes are needed to address racial disproportionality in the CJS?*
- How can we ensure that the voices of marginalised or underrepresented young people are heard and acted upon?
- What existing projects are you aware of that are promoting community cohesion and belonging through work with children and young people?
- Where are the gaps? *Question provided by GMP

Understanding Belonging

Community belonging goes beyond mere residence in a geographic area; it encompasses safety, trust, identity and social connectedness. Many adults and young people report a decline in faith in their communities, citing unsafe or unreliable spaces, limited local support and feelings of isolation due to displacement or regeneration programmes. For example, in North Manchester, temporary housing and urban redevelopment efforts have often displaced residents from familiar neighbourhoods, disrupting social networks and diminishing feelings of security and cohesion.

VCSE organisations highlighted that relocation strategies that place individuals predominantly in areas of the same ethnic background can have unintended consequences.

While such placements may offer short-term cultural familiarity, they can also contribute to segregation, hinder social integration and potentially fuel extremist rhetoric – particularly in communities facing poverty and economic hardship.

The Role of Professionals and Services

Building effective community belonging requires that professionals within VCSE organisations, schools and youth services are equipped to engage in sensitive, informed discussions with young people about identity, safety and social cohesion. Economic disadvantage exacerbates challenges to belonging, as areas with high levels of poverty are more susceptible to division, racial tension and the influence of extremist narratives.

Public services, including the police, play a vital role in fostering community belonging. The attendees emphasized that policing should prioritise relationship-building over enforcement alone. However, strained relationships between law enforcement and communities, especially those with high proportions of people from the global majority, can lead to alienation from both residents and officers. Ensuring diverse representation within police services, understanding of cultural intricacies, pre-existing tensions, and, ultimately, establishing community police presence, alongside accessible channels for feedback, are essential steps to strengthen trust and social cohesion.

An increase in anti-Semitism was also highlighted, particularly around Crumpsall and mainly involving groups of young people aged 10-13 – “parents have been involved but don’t seem to care”. Additional reflections were shared on community conversations organised by MCC community engagement officers in the North, and how the lack of similar spaces in other areas, along with the way communications have been handled, have led other areas and community groups to organise their own initiatives. There is a need to channel this through a more collaborative, centralised approach to ensure interconnectedness and prevent the creation of siloes.

Mental Health

Table Discussion led Sharon Doyle, Manchester Mind

Table Questions:

- What early intervention and preventive approaches are currently in place to support young people's mental health, and how effective are they?
- How can we better identify at-risk youth early to prevent escalation of mental health issues?
- Where can we already see the impact of involving young people in the design of mental health support?
- How can young people be involved in designing mental health services that are youth-friendly and stigma-free?
- What role can digital tools and peer-led initiatives play in promoting mental health awareness and prevention?
- Where could we improve prevention efforts and early interventions for children and young people's mental health?
- What resources would the VCSE sector need for these improvements?
- What early intervention and preventive approaches are currently in place to support young people's mental health, and how effective are they?

Current support measures include mental health practitioners in schools (expected to be in all schools by next year), health visitors supporting families from a young age, parent courses on SEND, and Citizen Advice services – though awareness remains limited. There's a need for a cultural shift in schools to promote mental health openly and integrate emotional health into the curriculum. Digital tools are viewed with some scepticism due to potential negative effects of phones, but they can be used to promote wellbeing and reach young people where access is limited. However digital exclusion needs to be considered when developing such tools. Emphasis was also put on the accessibility of in-person support for mental health support provision, as moving things to digital can further isolate individuals at risk.

Collaboration across sectors was also mentioned as being hindered by siloed working; stronger connections and shared resources could improve engagement. The example of 42nd Street's peer-led research illustrates effective youth involvement.

Attendees emphasized the importance of increased funding for early intervention, recognising its long-term benefits. Addressing wider issues like inadequate housing is also crucial, as they impact mental health. Incorporating paid lived experience roles within statutory services can improve youth input.

Collaboration with community organisations on early help and prevention also came up, particularly in leveraging existing relationships and trust with vulnerable individuals. These individuals often access a range of services and can be effectively signposted to the support they need at an early stage. Activities such as coffee mornings, breakfast sessions, group sewing and cooking classes are valuable for early detection and can help prevent issues from escalating, especially when working with families – providing that friendly environment can help to direct people to other support early on.

Currently, many organisations in the sector are facing challenges in funding these activities, as they are often seen as extras or 'add-ons' to their core services. However, these activities are consistently emphasized as vital for creating a safe, trusting environment where people feel comfortable to voice their concerns and be heard.

Youth Homelessness

Table Discussion led by Emma Nay
from Shelter

Table Questions:

- What does 'Home' mean to young people?
- How can we prevent children and young people from experiencing homelessness? How can we address social and economic determinants driving young people into homelessness? (What larger systemic changes are needed to prevent childhood homelessness?)
- What is the most useful tool you've accessed when supporting young people experiencing homelessness or unfit housing?
- How can young people experiencing homelessness be involved in shaping responses and support systems?
- What innovative approaches can improve engagement with homeless youth and ensure their voices influence policy and service design?
- Which communities are more acutely affected by the housing emergency and how do we ensure they can access support?

Understanding 'Home'

For young people, home is much more than just a physical space; it embodies stability, safety, warmth and family. It serves as the foundation for their sense of security and belonging. The conversations in the room emphasised that homelessness should not be viewed solely as the absence of a house but as the loss of these vital supports that underpin well-being and development.

Drivers of Youth Homelessness

Multiple interconnected factors contribute to youth homelessness. Family breakdowns, conflict and cultural differences are frequently cited, alongside experiences within the care system that leave young people without adequate support as they transition into adulthood. Systemic issues such as domestic abuse and poverty are key drivers, proving the importance of addressing both social and economic determinants to prevent homelessness.

VCSE organisations highlighted several challenges faced by young people in temporary accommodation, including:

- Prolonged stays without clear guidelines on maximum durations
- Inadequate facilities that hinder meal preparation, leading to reliance on costly or unhealthy takeaways
- Limited access to mental health and wellbeing support for both young residents and the adults influencing their stability
- Transitions into adulthood often amplify vulnerability, with young people turning 18 potentially losing access to vital services and support systems, highlighting the critical need for continuity in care and housing provisions during this transitional period.





Supporting Young People Experiencing Homelessness

Our VCSE participants identified several effective tools and approaches to support youth homelessness:

- Housing-first models for adults, which prioritise stable accommodation before addressing other issues
- Mediation and family support, including educating families about the potential consequences when young people are forced to leave home
- Skills development programmes that equip young people to manage independent living, including financial management, tenancy responsibilities and wellbeing
- Holistic, cross-sector support that addresses material needs, mental health and social factors collectively
- A recurring theme is the importance of training practitioners, including school staff, to recognise signs of youth homelessness and to respond appropriately, including understanding the steps to take when disclosures are made.



Key Themes & Takeaways for Manchester

1. A Shared Vision and Unified Approach

- A city-wide strategic framework that aligns priorities across sectors, focusing on early intervention, informed by youth voice
- Clear pathways for youth engagement and participation, such as youth councils and boards, supported by Macc to involve inclusive youth representatives, working in collaboration with the police and local authorities to ensure co-ordinated decision-making

2. Strengthen Long-Term Investment and Funding

- Sustained funding streams from the council, GMCA and national government dedicated to early help, youth services with a focus on mental health and VAWG prevention
- Flexible funding models that enable long-term relationships, community-led initiatives and innovative approaches, including out-of-hours and community-based engagement.

3. Improve Cross-Sector Collaboration and Communication

- Centralised forums (e.g., through Manchester Community Central) for regular information sharing, joint planning and storytelling to raise awareness of grassroots initiatives
- Formal partnerships between VCSE organisations, schools, public services and the police to co-design programmes, share best practices and co-ordinate responses.
- In order for this to happen, a culture shift is necessary with a strong buy-in from senior leaders.

4. Embed Youth Voice and Participation

- Inclusive Youth Boards and Youth Sounding Boards across Manchester and Greater Manchester, ensuring consistent youth input in policy, service design and community initiatives (Youth Boards do exist across GM but there is lack of knowledge about how they operate and who are the representatives)
- Youth participation into local decision-making bodies, ensuring young people's experiences shape interventions, especially around homelessness, VAWG and community cohesion
- Youth mentorship programmes, peer-led initiatives and co-production models that empower young people to lead change.

5. Foster a Culture of Belonging and Respect

- Community-led regeneration that strengthens social networks and cultural understanding
- Promotion of open dialogue about identity, safety and belonging through school curricula and VCSE sector spaces.



6. Focus on Systemic and Educational Change

- Standardisation of VAWG, homelessness and community cohesion education across Manchester and nationally, making them mandatory parts of school curricula delivered by trained specialists.
- Early intervention programmes from Year 5 through Year 8 that include all genders, with dedicated external spaces for boys and young men to explore masculinity, emotions and respect
- A regional Youth Employment Strategy that involves young people in co-creating pathways, connecting VCSEs with employers and addressing barriers like digital exclusion and transport.
- A VAWG Strategy for Manchester to reflect local needs and also ensure better accountability and transparency.

7. Build Trust and Improve Community-Police Relations

- Increased police representation from diverse communities and embedded community policing models to foster trust
- Police and public services to routinely seek feedback, hold and attend community forums and actively address concerns about safety, identity and inclusion
- Cultural awareness and trauma-informed training for all frontline staff.

8. Leverage Data and Evidence for Continuous Improvement

- Data collection tools and methods (e.g., ARIS funding, youth surveys, feedback from grassroots organisations) to monitor progress, identify gaps and evaluate impact
- Sharing successful models, such as Housing First or community-led cohesion projects, across sectors to inspire wider adoption.

9. Implement System-Wide Standardisation and Best Practice Sharing

- Advocating for national guidance on VAWG prevention, youth homelessness and community cohesion to ensure consistent standards.
- Facilitation of regular learning exchanges between private sector, VCSE and public agencies to embed innovative, inclusive practices.

10. Promote Equitable Access and Inclusion

- Incentivisation of local employment, addressing postcode disparities, improving transport links and ensuring equitable access to housing, education and mental health support
- Culturally competent approaches that address racial disproportionality, especially in the criminal justice system and housing
- Targeted programmes for marginalised groups, including BAME communities, young women and vulnerable populations.

