

YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATION:
YOUNG PEOPLE'S
ACTION GROUP

INFORMATION BROCHURE

VRU

MAYOR OF LONDON
VIOLENCE REDUCTION UNIT



Welcome!

London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) is committed to a Child First approach, centred on putting children and young people at the heart of everything we do.

The VRU's approach has been to embed the voice of young people in its work to tackle violence and to provide and support access to opportunities for young people, families and communities.

This guide has been created to support organisations of any shape and size to meaningfully work alongside young Londoners.

The VRU's commitment to fostering genuine participation means that young people are not consulted with in order to tick a box, but instead are involved in decision-making and their voice, their views, are front and centre of our approach. It means young people are given an opportunity to lead change in areas of society they are most passionate about, and do so through their own social action work.

A passion and determination to embed young people in all aspects of work, led to the development of the Young People's Action Group (YPAG).

The YPAG is a team of young people aged 16-24 with diverse range of experience, including lived experience of school exclusion, exploitation or violence. The YPAG model is unique as the team are paid members of staff who co-design, co-develop and co-deliver on policies and programmes as part of the VRU's Child First approach.

The YPAG scrutinises the VRU's investments, programmes and its focus to ensure maximum impact for young people.

The VRU's unique balance of high-quality mentoring and direct collaboration with young people echoes our call to put young people at the forefront of our initiatives.

The YPAG's motto is: Nothing About Us Without Us. It's clear, it's simple and it speaks to exactly what we've set out to achieve by building a platform to ensure young people are not only part of the discussion around violence affecting young people, but they're part of the solution to addressing some of the root causes.

As well as co-designing and co-producing programmes invested in by the VRU, part of the approach is also giving young people skills and training and using our connections to open up pathways to achieve progress through education or employment when they leave the team.

Over the last three years, our team of young people have organised and led major events such as the London Hope Hack and Youth Takeover Day, spoken about youth participation with Ofsted and the Department for Education, and used research to lobby the Met police to change its policy on positing images of seized knives on social media.

Through this model of true youth-led participation, we're seeking to inspire other organisations to adopt the principles of this model by putting children and young people at the heart of their work and giving them the opportunity to create and deliver change.

The main takeaways we hope you get from this guide are:



Participation not engagement
Aiming for true co-design with young people.



Removing any barriers
This includes paying young people for their time and providing them with any equipment they need to truly participate.



Learn as you grow
Youth participation is a learning experience for all the young people and adults involved- you must be prepared to learn from your mistakes, it won't always go down as you planned.



Trust and confidence
We must ensure young people are consistently given the opportunity to develop and lead on programmes, we as adults are possibly the only adults that they have in their lives that they trust and have confidence in.

A photograph of a young woman with long dark hair and a name tag that says 'Ishani' and a man wearing a black turban and a dark shirt, both focused on writing on a piece of paper at a table. The background is a colorful wall with a wheelchair symbol and other abstract shapes.

PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATION

True participation, not just engagement, means young people being front and centre of an organisation, and with genuine roles that are backed up with personal development opportunities, high-quality training, mentoring, support and pay.

The VRU has proved that it's achievable to recruit and properly embed young people with lived experience in a public sector organisation and all the challenges that presents. It's led to young people being supported to not only contribute their views to approaches, to funding programmes or to new policies, but given them the platform to develop their own solutions and lead on bringing about social change.

Our key learning has been that only by embedding young people in an organisation and making their contribution and integral part of your culture does participation become meaningful, genuinely important and crucially, sustainable.

All of this can only be achieved through the VRU taking a Child First approach and the team supporting and creating opportunities for the YPAG to take centre stage.

There are three main reasons why youth participation is key:



Understanding

Young people are uniquely placed to understand their communities in a way that adults are not. Close collaboration with this, i.e., via peer research, will aid in a better understanding of how to approach the root causes of violence.



Unique perspective

Young people often bring solutions to issues around violence that are reflective of current times, provide an authentic connection to communities and consider cultural sensitivity.



Equality, Diversity, Inclusion

By working with and providing opportunities for those who are not usually heard we teach young people the importance of their voices and empower their experiences.



YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF OUR WORK

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London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) set up the Young People's Action Group (YPAG) to amplify the voice of young people and to support them to lead change.

The YPAG is a team of young people aged 16-24 with a diverse range of experiences, ranging across school exclusion, exploitation, or violence, that was set up to amplify the voice of young people. This includes scrutinising the VRU's investments, programmes, and its focus to ensure maximum impact for young people.

The VRU's Young People's Action Group are paid for their time, they have access to equipment, get support in travel costs when going out to engagements – putting them on the same level as members of VRU staff. It shows that they are valued for their insights and gives them the tools they need to thrive.

Young people work on social action programmes focused around their priorities, which are:

1. Changing the narrative on school exclusion
2. Exploring online harm experienced by children and young people
3. Developing effective pathways for young people into employment and further education
4. Amplifying the voices and experiences of young women and girls



The YPAG has been a big part of my journey and I wouldn't change anything about my experience. I wouldn't be the youth advocate, speaker, and facilitator that I have grown into if I wasn't presented with the opportunities, development and support that was given to me.



The YPAG has led change in all the VRU's priority areas.

Some of the highlights include:

- ✓ Amplifying the voice and experiences of young Londoners on police boards, recruitment processes and community engagement. Earlier this year, a YPAG member chaired a panel including the Met Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley.
- ✓ Working with charity Catch 22 to develop a workshop focused on positive digital engagement for young people. Six members delivered this workshop to over 40 secondary school students aged 13-16. This will now be rolled out in wider London schools from September.
- ✓ Creating positive opportunities for young people at events over the last year which saw over 60 organisations promoting education, employment and training opportunities to over 450 young people across London.
- ✓ Conducting research into supporting young men into fatherhood through the VRU's parent carer champion network – a support network for families across almost all 32 London Boroughs. They have also supported with designing the VRU's inaugural Children and Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse event.
- ✓ Co-designing and leading the VRU's inaugural education summit, which centred around building a coalition of support for a London Inclusion Charter. The team are now leading on researching and developing the charter for London schools focused on reducing exclusions. Eight members spoke at the IncludEd conference, hosted by The Difference earlier this year and were also invited to speak to the Department of Education where the team called for the Government to ensure SEND leaders had first hand understanding of SEND needs and for the DfE to have its own youth advisory group.
- ✓ Being trained in conducting peer research which was used to support evidence around the Met police's use of knife imagery on social media. This supported research also commissioned by the YPAG which has led to the Met police working to change its policy on posting images of knives online.
- ✓ Three members sit on the Mayor's board for the Trusted Adult Consultation, four members sit on a board managing £19 million of funding for youth sports in London and three members sit on the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime's Disproportionality Board focused on understanding and seeking to change the high rates of stop and search among the black community.

STRONGER FUTURES



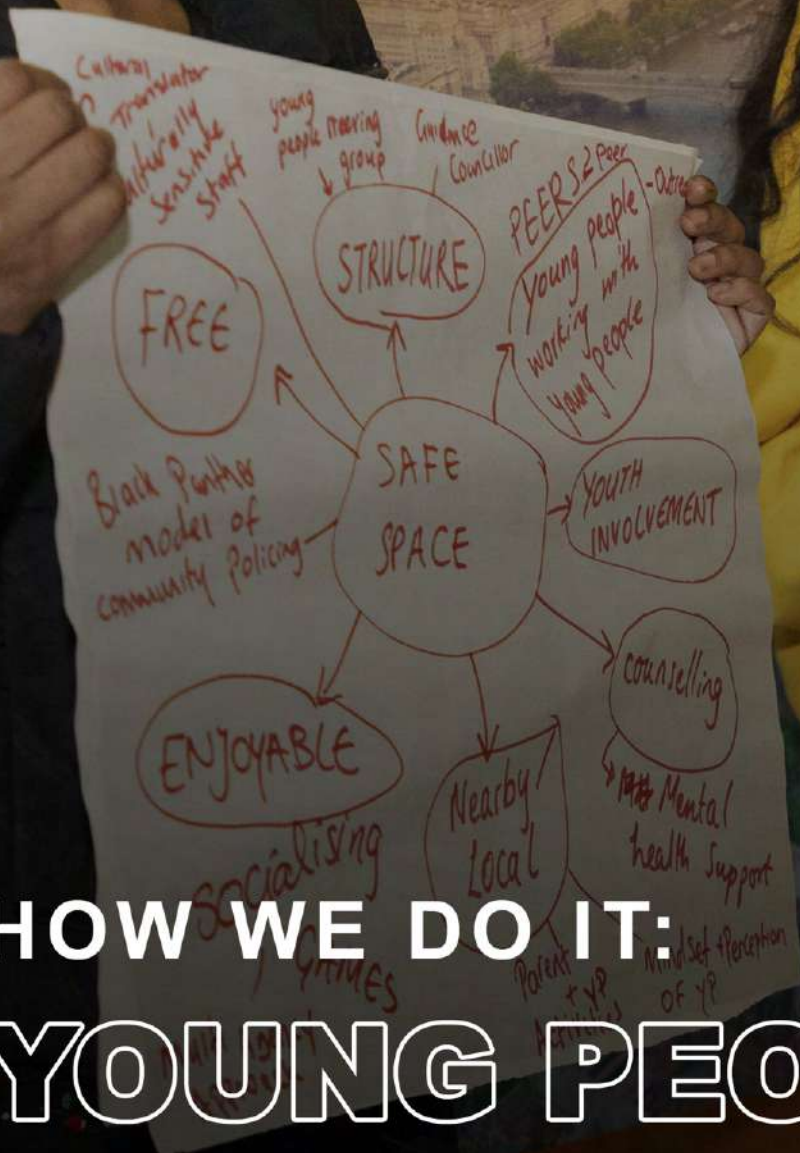
These results demonstrate how we foster genuine participation through actionable improvements. The success of the work done by the YPAG has provided its own challenges. We've had to adapt and learn as we go and that includes how to manage more than 1,000 young people applying for just 45 positions since the team was set up.

The VRU has been keen to support and work with those young people not selected to join the YPAG and has now formed a 'Wider Voices' network spread across all four corners of the capital. This cohort of young people now works to support the YPAG and are being trained as peer researchers to stretch our reach and influence even further by providing greater opportunities for participation for even more young people in London.



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HOW WE DO IT:

YOUNG PEOPLE'S
ACTION GROUP

The VRU set up the YPAG as a part of its Child First approach to amplify the voice of young people and to support them to lead change.

In the spirit of co-production, there is a cycle of participation that communicates how young people continue to contribute throughout the stages of introducing new strategies. The YPAG has contributed to the commissioning, design, evaluation and delivery of £31 million worth of tenders across the VRU portfolio, including Missing People's 'Is This Ok?' campaign, the Your Choice programme and the Advance mentoring programme.



Our Mission

1. Sharing our views and experiences to help shape how we target concerns that impact our communities.
2. Challenge perceptions and change the narrative around violence affecting young people.
3. Strengthen our peer-to-peer network and ensure the wider voice of our peers is captured in our body of work.

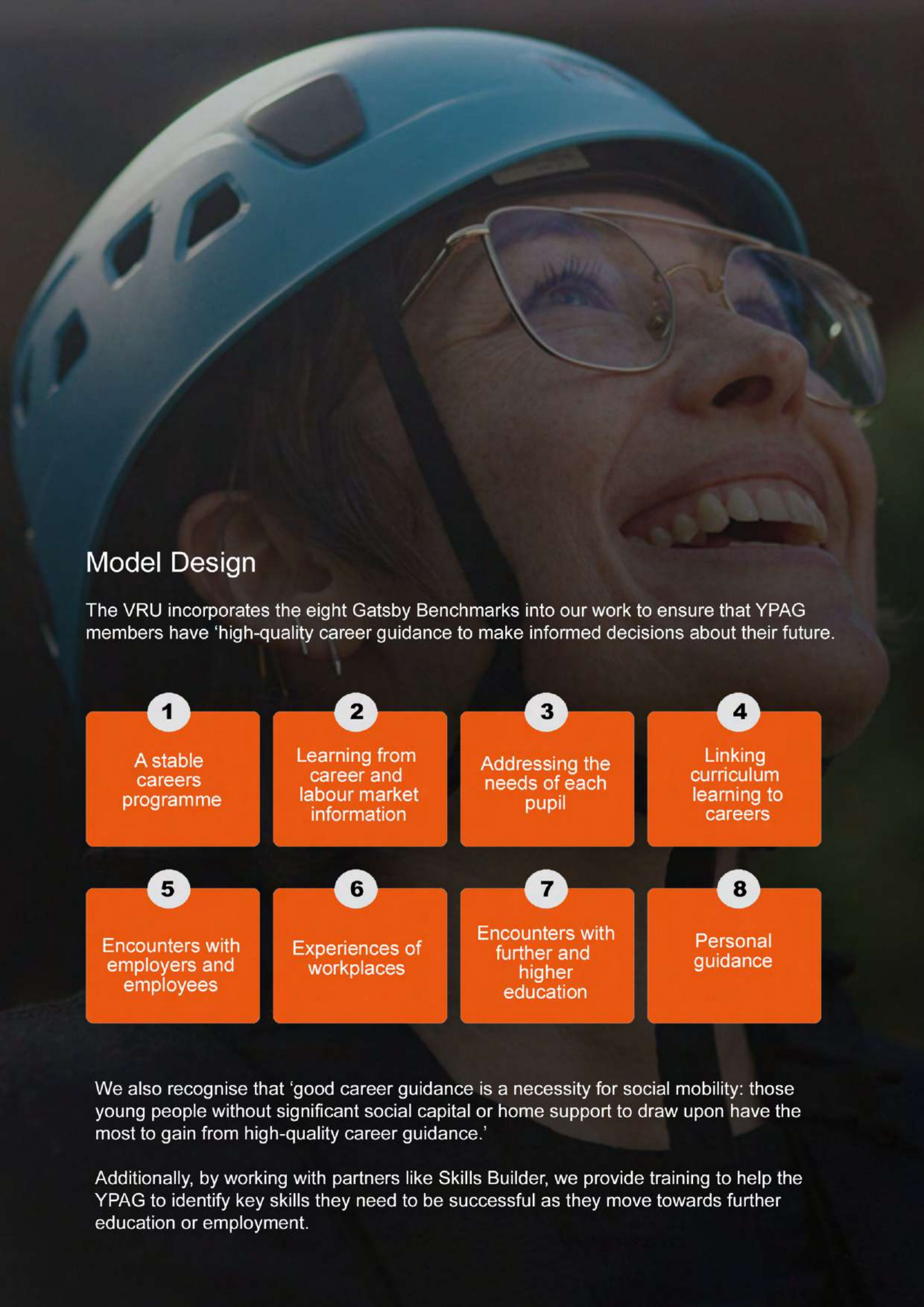
How do we support young people?

Young people join the team for two years, focusing on personal development and creating a series of actionable goals informed by individual needs assessments.

Young people meet three times a week to develop social action plans, to scrutinise work and to form partnerships.

All young people are supported by two youth participation leads and receive regular individual coaching, group work, and access to training, which includes public speaking and finance management to ensure that they are developing key skills.

- ✓ We recruit youth workers with the lived experience and knowledge to help us set up the necessary governance including safeguarding protocols and funding commitment
- ✓ Our team is trained in NSPCC safeguarding and child protection and uses the My Concern software to log concerns
- ✓ The VRU provides a wrap-around support offer together with external partners and wider community groups



Model Design

The VRU incorporates the eight Gatsby Benchmarks into our work to ensure that YPAG members have 'high-quality career guidance to make informed decisions about their future.'

1

A stable
careers
programme

2

Learning from
career and
labour market
information

3

Addressing the
needs of each
pupil

4

Linking
curriculum
learning to
careers

5

Encounters with
employers and
employees

6

Experiences of
workplaces

7

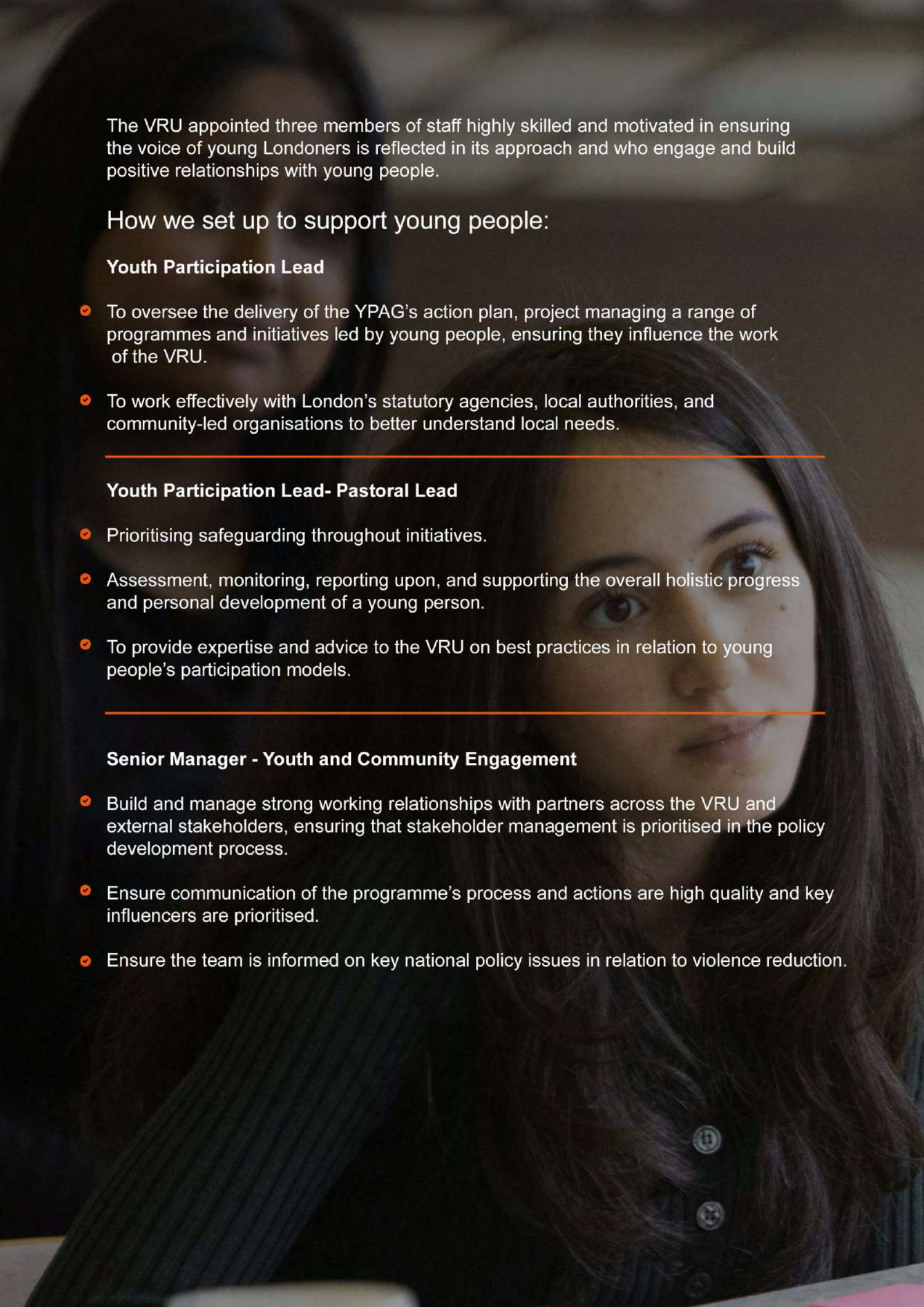
Encounters with
further and
higher
education

8

Personal
guidance

We also recognise that 'good career guidance is a necessity for social mobility: those young people without significant social capital or home support to draw upon have the most to gain from high-quality career guidance.'

Additionally, by working with partners like Skills Builder, we provide training to help the YPAG to identify key skills they need to be successful as they move towards further education or employment.



The VRU appointed three members of staff highly skilled and motivated in ensuring the voice of young Londoners is reflected in its approach and who engage and build positive relationships with young people.

How we set up to support young people:

Youth Participation Lead

- ✓ To oversee the delivery of the YPAG's action plan, project managing a range of programmes and initiatives led by young people, ensuring they influence the work of the VRU.
 - ✓ To work effectively with London's statutory agencies, local authorities, and community-led organisations to better understand local needs.
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Youth Participation Lead- Pastoral Lead

- ✓ Prioritising safeguarding throughout initiatives.
 - ✓ Assessment, monitoring, reporting upon, and supporting the overall holistic progress and personal development of a young person.
 - ✓ To provide expertise and advice to the VRU on best practices in relation to young people's participation models.
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Senior Manager - Youth and Community Engagement

- ✓ Build and manage strong working relationships with partners across the VRU and external stakeholders, ensuring that stakeholder management is prioritised in the policy development process.
- ✓ Ensure communication of the programme's process and actions are high quality and key influencers are prioritised.
- ✓ Ensure the team is informed on key national policy issues in relation to violence reduction.



SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO THRIVE

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1: Targeted Outreach

We promote the YPAG through Pupil Referral Units, children in care and care leaver services, youth offending teams, schools, and youth clubs to reflect the variety of different experiences lived by young people.

We consistently review how best we can work with young people with protected characteristics to prioritise safeguarding.

In our 2022 recruitment round, we saw a 309% increase in applications between 2020 and 2022 as a mark of the YPAG's success and a reflection of the desire of young people to have a say on issues affecting them.

2: Applications and interviews

Young people are asked to complete an online application form, which could be independent or supported by trusted adults.

Four questions are centred around their passion for wanting to join YPAG, their knowledge of challenges facing young Londoners and solutions for addressing the challenges they have stated as well as what skills they feel they can bring to the group.

3: Induction and training (minimum standards)

- We provide a variety of training opportunities throughout the year:
- Conflict resolution and peer research
- Understanding safeguarding and the public health approach to violence
- Facilitation training and business start-up

Young people are given platforms to showcase their skills, their views and to reflect the voice of young people across London.

Alumni

After two years with the YPAG, members automatically graduate into the YPAG Alumni Network. This is instrumental in championing the YPAG's work whilst allowing members to benefit from events that cater to their professional pursuits.

This equation shows how we focus on using our network to support them and set them up for success:



Support

We provide a range of tailored support to fit young people's needs

Development

We continuously update our development toolkits to provide access to updated learning and development courses.

Opportunities

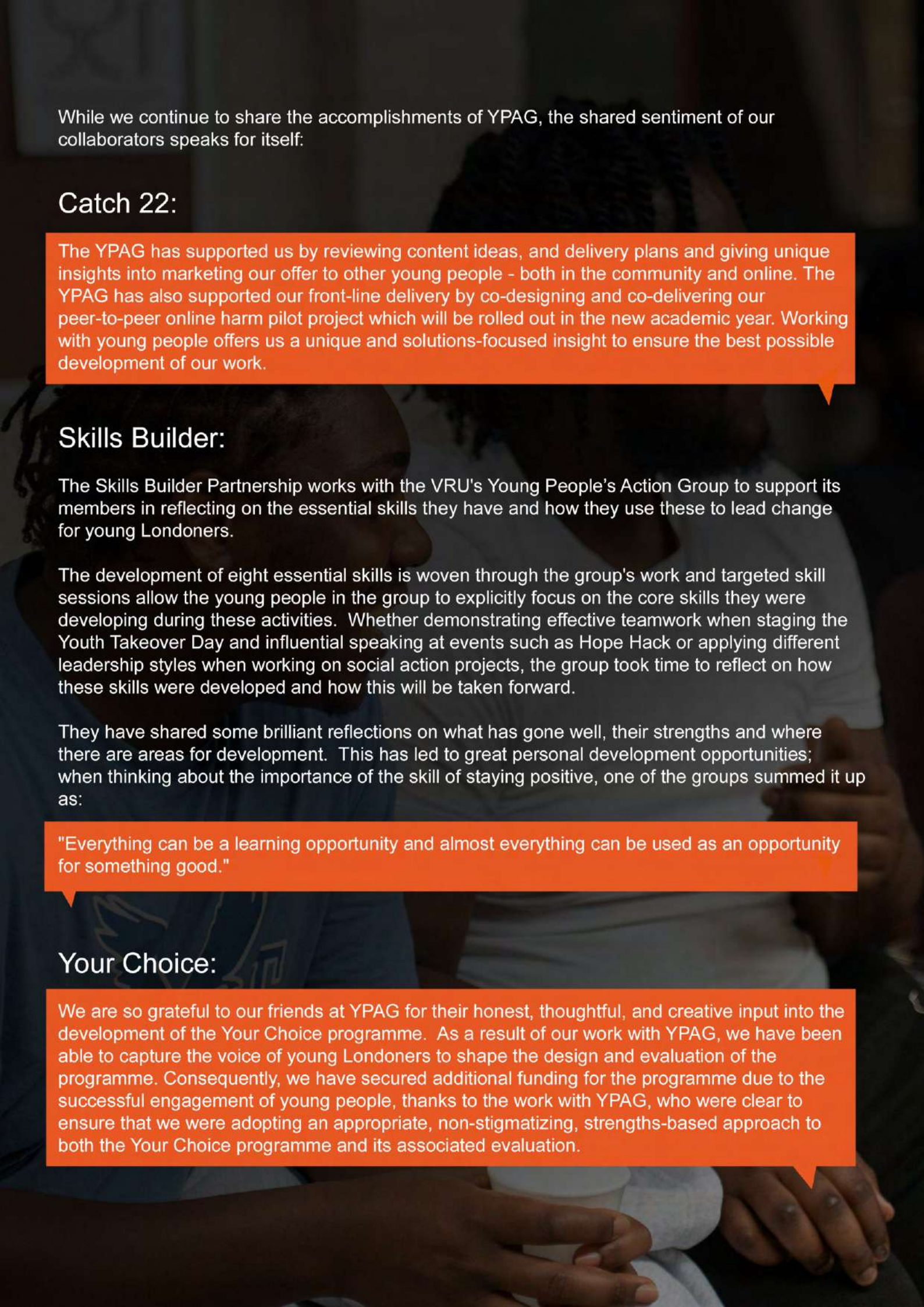
We share all opportunities from internships to full-time work and support young people during the application and interview stage.

This structure has allowed our young people to go on to achieve great things:

Lewis (YPAG 2020) focused on parenting initiatives and is now studying History and Politics at the University of Pennsylvania in the United States of America on a \$320,000 financial aid package. Lewis' application drew upon his experiences in the YPAG both in developing his skills, the work he had done and the networks created.

Jade (YPAG 2021) leads the youth worker portfolio that matches her personal goals and is now working full-time for the Prince's Trust as an Outreach Youth Development Lead. Jade has also set up her own business where she delivers keynote speeches and workshop facilitations across London.

Leonita (YPAG 2022) passionately addresses violence against women and girls. The network she developed allowed her to engage with the Kosovan Embassy as well as chair discussions on behalf of the Mayor of London centred around community voices. Leonita has also chaired meetings with the Met police to put forward changes in policing for young people.

A background image showing a group of young people, mostly Black, in a meeting or workshop setting. They are seated around a table, looking towards the left side of the frame. The image is slightly blurred and has a dark, muted color palette.

While we continue to share the accomplishments of YPAG, the shared sentiment of our collaborators speaks for itself:

Catch 22:

The YPAG has supported us by reviewing content ideas, and delivery plans and giving unique insights into marketing our offer to other young people - both in the community and online. The YPAG has also supported our front-line delivery by co-designing and co-delivering our peer-to-peer online harm pilot project which will be rolled out in the new academic year. Working with young people offers us a unique and solutions-focused insight to ensure the best possible development of our work.

Skills Builder:

The Skills Builder Partnership works with the VRU's Young People's Action Group to support its members in reflecting on the essential skills they have and how they use these to lead change for young Londoners.

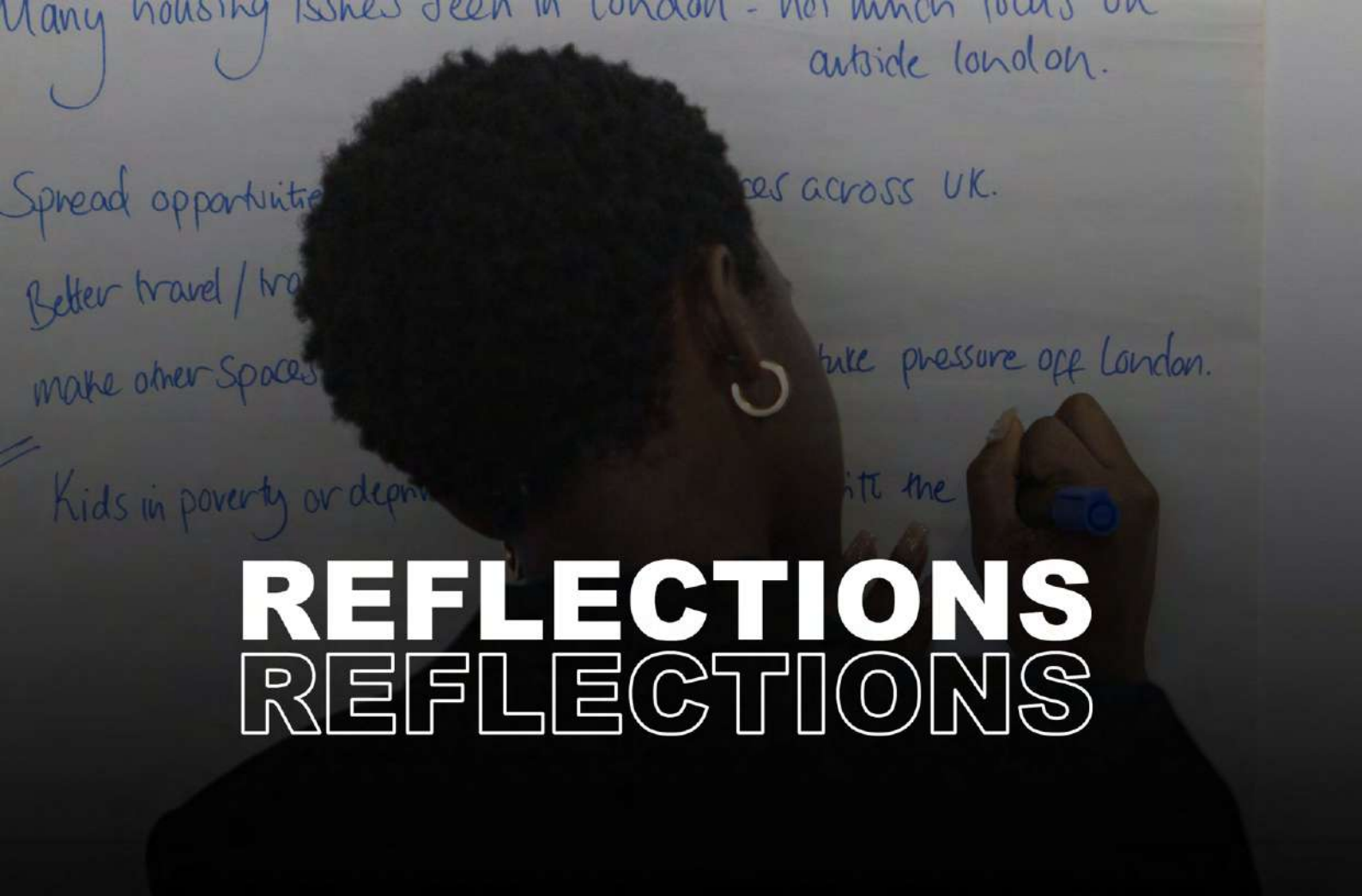
The development of eight essential skills is woven through the group's work and targeted skill sessions allow the young people in the group to explicitly focus on the core skills they were developing during these activities. Whether demonstrating effective teamwork when staging the Youth Takeover Day and influential speaking at events such as Hope Hack or applying different leadership styles when working on social action projects, the group took time to reflect on how these skills were developed and how this will be taken forward.

They have shared some brilliant reflections on what has gone well, their strengths and where there are areas for development. This has led to great personal development opportunities; when thinking about the importance of the skill of staying positive, one of the groups summed it up as:

"Everything can be a learning opportunity and almost everything can be used as an opportunity for something good."

Your Choice:

We are so grateful to our friends at YPAG for their honest, thoughtful, and creative input into the development of the Your Choice programme. As a result of our work with YPAG, we have been able to capture the voice of young Londoners to shape the design and evaluation of the programme. Consequently, we have secured additional funding for the programme due to the successful engagement of young people, thanks to the work with YPAG, who were clear to ensure that we were adopting an appropriate, non-stigmatizing, strengths-based approach to both the Your Choice programme and its associated evaluation.



REFLECTIONS

REFLECTIONS

Recognising the value of a young person's contribution should be seen as equal to that of any other team member. That requires a mindset and culture of an organisation that puts co-production and youth-led participation front and centre of its approach.

This must be backed up with everything a new member of staff would expect when being employed: training, equipment, support and crucially, pay. These elements all combined are pivotal in supporting young people to engage and to make a significant and meaningful contribution to approach and to direction.

The YPAG's impact has been transformative, not just for the young people involved and the programmes and policies it influenced, but because it's also working to change systems and inspire other organisations to provide access to opportunities by properly embedding young people in their decision-making processes to deliver social action and change.

Young people are uniquely placed to understand their communities, but too often decisions are made for them without any real understanding of how they will work, be received or its overall impact. This is even more acute for young people with lived experience of violence who typically already feel alienated or disassociated with society and establishments. The YPAG was born out of the VRU's Child First approach and its belief that violence is preventable, not inevitable. The fundamental principle behind that approach is about championing the voice of children and young people.

That can only truthfully be achieved if young people are part of the decision-making process and are given the support and tools to develop solutions to tackling violence and leading interventions that work towards or contribute to social action.

The YPAG is now firmly embedded in the VRU, and has established a reputation for not only providing inspiration, but is influencing key policy decision-makers not only in London, but nationally. Alongside this the YPAG has created and led events that bring together hundreds of young people, providing access to opportunities and connections that have led to employment, apprenticeships and re-introduction to education. They have also scrutinised investments and programmes – often resulting in changes of approach from the VRU and its partners to ensure interventions fully work to maximise the impact for young people. They have also listened to their peers and acted on concerns.

The VRU is passionate about young people and it means more than just words. It's about a mindset, it's an environment and it's a culture that is all centred on one thing: participation.

It's what drives the VRU's work and we're determined to help support others to use this model to create change, to foster inclusivity and to thrive.

Nothing about us, without us.

VRU

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