

Community Network

Bedford Borough Council Youth Cabinet Presents: Engaging with Young People

Bedford Borough Council Youth Cabinet lead our first Community Network Event of 2025, helping us to explore how we engage with young people.

Tuesday 11 March, 6:30–8:30PM



Summary Report

Introduction

The Community Network Event was held on Tuesday 11 March 2025, at Addison Centre, Kempston, where 60 individuals from 33 different local organisations and charities came together to discuss how we can better engage with young people. This Community Network Event was an opportunity to:

- Hear from the [Bedford Borough Youth Cabinet](#) about the work that they are doing, and how they engage with decision makers on the campaigns that they are currently working on.
- Share learning and discuss ideas of how we can engage with young people in different capacities (as participants, volunteers, and strategic partners)
- Hear from [Link 2 Change](#) about the ways that they engage with young people as strategic partners
- Hear from **Dynamic Decisions** about how they engage with young people to shape their services
- Network with other organisations.

[Deputy Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Dr Joan Bailey, MBE](#) opened the event, welcoming the organisations to listen to the voice of the youth cabinet, and was eager to hear what work was being done within the room to allow young people to feel empowered and able to influence positive changes in our community. Dr Joan Bailey is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Bedford with over 35 years of experience working with young people. She has been part of community development in many European countries as well as the US and Canada, and is passionate about seeing young people as active partners in all things that affect them.

Bedford Borough Youth Cabinet

[Bedford Borough Youth Cabinet](#) gave the room a presentation providing an overview of what the Youth Cabinet is, and what they are working on this year. The Youth Cabinet is a group of 11-18 year olds living, working, or studying in Bedford Borough that are passionate about discussing issues that affect young people. The group is led entirely by young people, and includes an elected committee that often work alongside council officers, local MPs, and other organisations. They meet on a monthly basis to:

- Discuss and develop campaigns

- Discuss current issues
- Partake in policy scrutiny
- Learn from guest speakers

They support and facilitate the School Pupil Voice conferences, meet with partners and council officers to discuss how young people can be involved in service development and delivery, deliver school roadshows, meet with decision makers and elected officials, and attend youth meetings across Bedfordshire.

They also have an elected member of youth parliament (MYP), who works at a national level with the [National Youth Agency](#) to represent the young people of Bedford in discussions on all sorts of topics! The National Youth Agency established the UK Youth Parliament in 1999 to provide opportunities for young people, including those from marginalised communities, to influence the parliamentary process to represent their peers and be involved in roundtable discussions and events, attend conferences with decision makers and elected officials, and inform policy development and participate in annual debates in the House of Commons.

In February 2024, the Youth Cabinet promoted the ‘Make Your Mark’ survey, which allows young people to vote on what their top issues are. The top three for young people in Bedford Borough were:

1. Crime and Safety – 865 votes
2. Culture, Media, and Sport – 515 votes
3. Health and Wellbeing – 454 votes

Nationally, the health and wellbeing theme won the vote, but in Bedford Borough it is clear that young people are most concerned about community safety, with a particular passion in supporting young people and preventing knife crime, violence, and exploitation of all kinds. The results of the *Make Your Mark* survey informed the campaigns that the Youth Cabinet are working on for the year.

2025-26 Campaigns

The group have split into two committees looking at the areas ‘Crime and Safety’, and ‘Culture, Media, and Sports’. Their four campaigns include:

Ask for Angela

- Ask for Angela is a nationwide campaign that the Youth Cabinet aim to adapt for young people
- Focus on the fact that young people feel unsafe walking around the town in the dark
- We have identified two areas to start our pilot scheme
- Our next step is to email and speak to the proprietors of the shops in these areas and see who would be willing to roll out Ask for Angela and act as a pilot

Sharp

- Many schools do not have a system for anonymous reporting of issues, sharp is a digital platform that allows students to anonymously voice concerns and report incidents
- We have met with SHARP to agree to a 2-month trial period absolutely free of charge
- Our next step is to meet with school governors and education leads in the Borough to decide which schools should be part of the trial period

Make Space for Girls

- Initiative that aims for public spaces to be designed with girls and young women in mind
- Working with developers to ensure that women and girls are considered through construction processes within new developments
- Our next steps are to discuss the delivery and way of working with developers

Culture Day Packs for Schools

- Working with young people across the Borough to develop a culture day or week 'how to guide' which will be sent to all schools
- Focusing on the cultural competency and education that should be available to and within schools to ensure that everyone feels represented, and celebrated
- Offer ideas for materials and activities that can be utilised as a resource by all schools and organisations

Anyone interested in finding out more about the Youth Cabinet, or collaborating with them on any work, can contact them by emailing voice@bedford.gov.uk.

Group Discussion: How do we engage with young people?

The young people then facilitated table discussions on how the organisations in the room currently engage with young people as volunteers, strategic partners, and as participants. The Youth Cabinet had received ‘Facilitation Skills Training’ to fully equip them for the session. Below, you can see the key areas that were mentioned through the group discussion.

Participants	Strategic Partners	Volunteers
<p>Each group discussed how they reach young people, emphasising the importance of utilising existing networks with other organisations as well as the usual pathways such as schools and youth services. Organisations noted that it is often difficult to reach young people through schools, as it can take some time before you are able to build a connection with schools without the right contact, and school newsletters and posters are rarely picked up by young people. It was raised that connecting with pastoral officers is often the best way to reach young people and/or receive referrals from schools.</p> <p>The groups focused on the need to be empathetic and appreciate the experiences of young people, thinking about any additional needs they might have to make services and activities as accessible as possible. Organisations felt that when engaging with young people its important to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How you utilise social media platforms to reach your target audience 	<p>An important theme of this conversation was regarding creating safe spaces, and curating an environment that gives young people a voice. Organisations wanted to find ways to allow meetings and activities to be youth-led, allowing young people to participate in board meetings or team meetings so that they can directly influence the service or activity that an organisation is providing.</p> <p>The group also felt it was important to recognise young people of experts of their own experience. By ensuring that young people from a variety of backgrounds are consulted through surveys, focus groups, board meetings; you are able to ensure that you understand different experiences and opinions. ‘When you value young people and invite their innovation and creativity, they will create ideas for solutions to your problems!’ – just allow them to lead the conversation, and allow the adults to sit back and facilitate the discussion.</p> <p>The key things that were seen through this conversation included:</p>	<p>Many organisations feel that it is difficult to offer volunteer opportunities to under 18s, as they are unaware of the implications that this may have on policies. Thinking about safeguarding, GDPR, and employment law can scare organisations into procrastination when planning volunteer roles suitable for young people or those with additional learning needs. There was also a feeling that it would be hard to gain interest in unpaid work among young people.</p> <p>After discussing the barriers the groups came to consensus about what can be done to allow for opportunities to become available for Young People.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the benefits of becoming a volunteer • Adapt volunteer roles so that they are suitable for young people • Let young people lead on social media platforms that are targeting young people

- Being open and honest with young people about what you can and cannot provide
- Be mindful of the trauma that each young person may be facing, and be patient with them as it can take time for young people to 'come out of their shell' in new situations or environments.
- Organising meetings at inclusive times (i.e. not during the day during term time) to include youth voice in spaces that are usually adult-dominated
- Be aware and mindful of the power dynamic between adults and young people when inviting both groups to work together in meetings
- Consult using a range of methods to reach as much young people as possible, but involve young people strategically through smaller focused working groups and meetings.
- Reach young people that would not normally engage by sharing success stories from others

Actions Identified from the Discussion:

- **Living It Up** to connect with Youth Cabinet regarding 'The Make Space Safe for Girls' and 'Ask Angela' campaign
- **Bedford Borough Council Public Health Team** to discuss youth cabinet campaign involvement in the Stronger Communities implementation groups
- **Blues Foundation** to connect with Youth Cabinet on sports campaigns
- **Youth Cabinet** to connect with **Dynamic Decisions** and meet to discuss community safety and crime
- **Be Active** to share volunteer opportunities in Youth Tennis Groups
- **Stevington Hub** to think about how they can expand their services to include the voice of young people
- **PCC** to attend Youth Cabinet meetings related to crime and community safety

Link To Change: Engaging With Young People as Strategic Partners

Link to Change then gave a presentation explaining how their organisation engages with young people. They spoke about the importance of youth voice in strategy development, as young people are experts of their own experience, they know how to design services for their peers. The way they enable this to happen is through a participation group that is made up of their past and present beneficiaries. This group of young people are then invited to work with them to influence their organisation and how they operate.

For Link to Change, participation is important as the young people that they support have experienced a life of exploitation, and by giving them a voice that can influence change they are able to empower young people and build their confidence and skillset. The participation group works with them on recruitment panels, attending trustee board meetings, marketing meetings and creating promotional materials and much more. They also invite the young people to external meetings with other organisations such as Bedford Borough Council, the Police, Creatives and Doctoral Researchers.

As the participation group isn't just about creating changes, it's also about creating opportunities for young people, they also support them to volunteer and take part in social action projects. An example of this can be seen through Bedford Foodbank volunteer days with the group.

The top tips from Link to Change include:

- Give young people the opportunity to (constructively) criticise, judge, and say when things are 'cringe'
- Be reasonable with expectations and ensure they are reimbursed for their work and contributions
- Help young people understand how to talk about what they have done – e.g. how to add it to their CV
- Use different methods, practical activity, diversify what you do to engage different brains
- Give young people autonomy with what they do and how they can be involved They can shape their own influence
- Work with their schedules, make influence accessible.
- Prove that they are making a real change, show the difference they can make, highlight how valuable their help is
- Update young people on what they've helped achieve, even if it's months or years later

Dynamic Decisions: Engaging with Young People as Participants

Dynamic Decisions then gave a presentation, explaining how the views of young people shape their work, and the issues that they prioritise when addressing youth violence and exploitation. Channitta Lendor, director of Dynamic Decisions, began the organisation following the tragic death of her brother Isaac. Isaac was stabbed and killed on Midland Road at the age of 19, and had not long left school with his four attackers and the friends he was with at the time. This traumatic event inspired Channitta to create Dynamic Decisions, and support not only those that are affected by knife crime and exploitation, but to prevent it from occurring by supporting young people that can become perpetrators of serious crimes, as she believed lack of support and opportunity can lead people to dark paths of crime.

Drawing on lived experience, Dynamic Decisions began delivering sessions to young people in schools around knife crime, and highlighted the issue on the TV and radio. This expanded their reach and, and they were able to provide more support to young people, families, and communities that were affected by violence by focusing on additional needs and educational outcomes. They conducted a series of video interviews with young people to understand why they felt unsafe and what their views are on knife crime, which they used to advocate for young people in conversations with the Police and Crime Commissioners Office to develop community strategy and operational approaches to the *Victim's Hub* and *Operation Sceptre*.

As the video interviews with young people were so helpful in providing staff with insight on young peoples views and feelings, these views were considered when shaping Dynamic Decisions services, and then in meetings with decision makers and collaborative spaces. Video interviews are now completed on a yearly basis across schools in Bedford and Luton to help Dynamic Decisions understand the changing environment that young people are living in and how they see the world. This not only informs the way that the organisation work with school and the services they deliver in the community, but it also shapes the work that they do with perpetrators and has been a catalyst to delivering restorative sessions in prisons and secure training centres to educate on the affects of knife crime on all involved, as well as how decisions are made in the Multi-Agency Gang Panel – paving the way for other organisations to take similar approaches to youth centred discussions and services related to community safety.

Four videos were then show during the presentation, which can be played back here: [CM](#), [Aliyannah](#), [Mikael](#), [Joseph](#)

Appendix 1 – Event Feedback

Participants were invited to complete a feedback form. This can help us to identify how we can improve the community network events, and understand what topics and discussions are most relevant to the voluntary and community sector. 11 people completed the form, and the charts can be found below.

- 56% of attendees were from Charities, 33% from Community Interest Company, 11% from other organisations
- 60% of attendee had never attended a Community Network Event before
- 100% of attendees either ‘Agreed’ or ‘Strongly Agreed’ that attending was a valuable use of their time
- 90% of attendees made new contacts at the event
- 90% of attendees said they would recommend these events to other groups, 10% answered maybe
- Key takeaways from the event include:
 - “The Bedford community is strong and wants to work together”
 - “It is possible to involve young people in developing strategies”
 - “If your organisation serves young people then their voice needs to be part of the strategy”
 - “Bedford has a passion for its young people”
 - VCSEs must work together, and with public services

Appendix 2 – Contact Directory

Organisation	Website	Contact Email	Details
Be Active	https://www.beactivebeds.co.uk/		Be Active is Bedfordshire's Active Partnership, who work with community organisations, governing bodies, coaches, clubs, and volunteers to support, develop, and promote physical activity.

Bedfordshire Open Door	https://www.bedfordopendoor.org.uk/	counselling@bedfordopendoor.org.uk	Bedfordshire Open Door is a friendly and welcoming counselling service for young people
Bedford Blues Foundation	https://www.bluesfoundation.org.uk/	info@bluesfoundation.org.uk	Delivers projects to inspire our community through the values of rugby for the advancement and promotion of positive and informed lifestyle choices.
Bedford Creative Arts	https://bedfordcreativearts.org.uk/	info@bedfordcreativearts.org.uk	Contemporary arts charity producing socially-engaged art projects across Bedfordshire.
Bedford Foodbank	https://bedford.foodbank.org.uk/	info@bedford.foodbank.org.uk	Foodbank providing food to those that need it.
Bedford Radio	https://bedford.radio/	studio@bedford.radio	Local radio station for Bedford
Bedford Samaritans	https://www.samaritans.org/branches/bedford/	Bedford.Outreach@samaritans.org	Mental Health helpline (24/7)
Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation	https://blcf.org.uk/		Local grantmaker and funder
Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service	https://www.bedsfire.gov.uk/	contact@bedsfire.gov.uk	Public service
Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner	https://www.bedfordshire.pcc.police.uk/	pcc@beds.police.uk	John Tizard was elected as Police and Crime Commissioner for Bedfordshire in May 2024 to ensure that there is an effective and efficient police service and wider criminal justice system.

BLMK ICB	https://bedfordshirelutonandmiltonkeynes.icb.nhs.uk/	blmkicb.contactus@nhs.net	Brings together health and care organisations across Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes to collaborate and share responsibility for the health and care of our local population.
Bright Paths Support CIC	https://brightpaths.org.uk/	support@brightpaths.org.uk	Emotional support and mentoring for children and young people.
Carers In Bedfordshire	https://carersinbeds.org.uk/	contact@carersinbeds.org.uk	We support carers of all ages over the phone, through face-to-face contact, support groups and workshops.
Dine With Us	https://www.neighbourly.com/project/5c7a6e44c7ac8e1e98d9a7ad	dinewithusbedford@gmail.com	
Dynamic Decisions	https://www.facebook.com/p/Dynamic-Decisions-knife-crime-programme-100065203582189/	dynamicdecisionsproject@gmail.com	Youth support and knife crime programme
ECP Bedford	https://oneymca.org/what-we-do/family-work/ecp/		Family support through community centres and venues
English heritage	https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/wrest-park/		Care for historical sites
Everyones Gang	https://www.everyonesgang.co.uk/	Tyrrel@everyonesgang.co.uk	Support young people and individuals who are vulnerable to, or already involved in crime to create safer communities
FACES	https://www.facesbedford.org/	office@facesbedford.org	local independent charity offering practical and emotional support to families under stress.
HAWAA Empower	https://www.hawaaempowerment.org/	hawaaempowerment@gmail.com	
iCash	https://www.icash.nhs.uk/where-to-go/icash-bedfordshire/kings-brook-bedford		Sexual health service

Just Purple Presents	Justpurplepresents.co.uk	jo@justpurplepresents.co.uk	Art and culture projects within the community
Link to Change	https://www.linktochange.org.uk/	info@linktochange.org.uk	Supporting vulnerable young people at risk of exploitation
Living It Up	https://www.lovelivingitup.org/	info@lovelivingitup.org	Providing social and educational opportunities for adults with learning disabilities and autism in and around Bedfordshire.
Mary Seacole Housing Association	https://maryseacoleha.com/	mail@marlyseacoleha.com	Housing association offering support to communities.
National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)	https://www.nyas.net/	main@nyas.net	Mental health advocacy support and safeguarding vulnerable children and adults
Parallel Lives Programme	https://parallellives.org.uk/	info@parallellives.org.uk	Co-parenting and unhealthy relationships support and advice service.
Rebecca Blamo's Mental Health Awareness and Wellbeing CIC	https://www.rebecca-blamo.com/	rebeccablamo2@gmail.com	Mental health and wellbeing support for black communities and refugees
Smart CJS	https://smartcjs.org.uk/	info@bedfordwhocharitycon.co.uk	ongoing support for people at a point of crisis and help to prevent future homelessness.

Stevington Community Hub	https://stevington.org.uk/community-hub/	Fosmteam@gmail.com	Community space and shop supporting local charities and churches - available for booking
Sue Ryder St Johns Hospice	https://www.sueryder.org/end-of-life-care/our-hospices-and-care-centres/find-a-local-care-service/sue-ryder-st-johns-hospice/	contact.stjohns@sueryder.org	provide expert palliative and end-of-life care in the hospice and the community.
The Chellington Centre	https://www.chellington.org/	admin@chellington.org	provide an inspirational and rural setting for young people to develop their personal potential.
Williams Welfare Childrens Home	https://www.williamswelfare.co.uk/	info@williamswelfare.co.uk	provides care and accommodation for children and young people aged between 11-21 who have experienced extreme disadvantages
Youth Television	https://www.youthtv.co.uk/	office@youthtv.co.uk	Youth led news platform dedicated to empowering young creators and captivating young audiences.
YouTurn Futures	https://youturnfutures.com/	neill.waring@youturnfutures.com	Supporting youth services related to community safety
Youth Voices	@youthvoicesconnect	vanessa@youthvoices.co.uk	Podcast platform for young people by young people