



WEST YORKSHIRE YOUTH COMMISSION

2024/25 REPORT TO THE WEST YORKSHIRE VIOLENCE REDUCTION PARTNERSHIP

MAY 2025



ABOUT THE WEST YORKSHIRE YOUTH COMMISSION

The West Yorkshire Youth Commission (WYYC) was established in 2023 with funding from the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership.

The WYYC enables young people aged 14-25 to have a stronger voice and influence on serious violence and exploitation issues across the region. This peer-led project enables young people to get involved and have their say about urgent issues that affect their lives and help build a safer community.

Between June 2024 and January 2025, the Youth Commission conducted a Big Conversation with 1702 young people across the county. We then analysed the responses from this research to produce our key findings and recommendations for change.

The West Yorkshire Youth Commission members are a diverse range of young people, who each bring different backgrounds and experiences to the group. Of the group:

- 52.7% Identified as female
- 44.4% identified as male
- 2.7% identified as Agender
- 8.3% identified as transgender
- 66.6% identified as belonging to an ethnic minority
- 19.4% identified as having a disability
- 22.2% identified as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community
- 5.5% identified as not in education, employment or training

ABOUT LEADERS UNLOCKED

The West Yorkshire Youth Commission is facilitated by Leaders Unlocked, a social enterprise that enables young people to have a stronger voice and influence on the decisions that affect their lives. Leaders Unlocked has established Youth Commissions in 18 regions in England and Wales and continues to grow.

For more information about Leaders Unlocked please see www.leaders-unlocked.org

WHAT WE'VE DONE

At our first meeting, we reviewed our four key priority topics and updated our key aims for each. These aims helped to guide our work throughout the project and provided a focus for the Big Conversation.

To prepare for the Big Conversation and to conduct effective peer research we took part in active listening, interviewing skills and peer-facilitation training. This included practicing interviewing each other to prepare for our peer research.

To capture young people's responses, we developed a Youth Commission postcard showcasing the four key priorities and providing young people with a structure to record their views and suggested solutions anonymously.

Through the Big Conversation, we engaged in peer research with 1702 young people over 81 consultation events and online surveys, including peer-led workshops, engagement stands and one-to-one conversations across West Yorkshire.

We held five Youth Independent Advisory Group (YIAG) meetings together with the VRP. These focussed on a range of issues including Attitudes & Violence towards Women; Knife Crime; Opportunities for young people in the community; rehabilitation and a special YIAG in partnership with the Domestic Abuse Commissioners Office.

YOUTH COMMISSION CAMPAIGN I TOOK A SEAT FOR...

Following our research and recommendations in 2023 we worked with the Violence Reduction Partnership and communications company, Resource to co-produce a major campaign to raise awareness around the four key priorities of the 'Big Conversation' report.

We used our own lived experience of the issues to raise awareness and encourage young people to take positive action. Our campaign was launched alongside the West Yorkshire Mayor's Police & Crime Plan 2024-28.

OUR CAMPAIGN COVERS:

Attitudes & Violence Towards Women

- Image-Based Abuse
- Street Harassment and Public Safety
- Spiking Awareness and Prevention

Drugs, Gangs & Knife Crime

- Knife Crime and Community Fear
- Young People Being Exploited by Drug Gangs
- Glamorisation of Gangs and Drug Culture

Find out more about our 'I took a seat for...' campaign here:

westyorks-ca.gov.uk/policing-and-crime/west-yorkshire-violence-reduction-partnership/i-took-a-seat-for/

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the support of a wide range of local partners who have allowed the Youth Commission to consult with the young people in their organisations and supported the work of WYYC. Thanks go to:

Leeds West Academy (Alternative Provision Center)
Calderdale Youth Offending Team
Manor Croft Academy
Orange Box
Calderdale Youth Justice Service
Leeds Trinity University
Bradford Children & families Trust
Newground Together
Castleford College

The Hunslet Club
Leeds Pride
Kirklees Pride
Shelley College
Huddersfield New College
University of Leeds
Kirklees College
University of Leeds
Horsforth School

A special thanks to the individual Youth Commission Members who have offered their time and efforts to make this project a success.

Olya Gudareva
Subhaan Naeem
Lois Skelton
Theo Peaker
Simrah Noor Ahmed
Holly Sharpe
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Oluwatosin Ewetuga
Lemeka Smithen
Daaniyal Azam
Haidi Rayes
Chanel Wilkinson
Adam Mangru
Poppy Durrans
Laraib Sjah
Joedan Butterworth

*Some WYYC members names have not been published



PRIORITY 1: ATTITUDES AND VIOLENCE TOWARDS WOMEN

WHAT WE FOUND:

Almost all girls and young women we spoke to had a **personal experience of sexism or gender-based violence**. Many reported that harassment such as 'catcalling' and 'being followed home' were highly **normalised and 'expected'** as part of being a woman.

Young people felt that the media, including online influencers such as Andrew Tate, were a key driving force behind rising negative attitudes towards women. Many young men reported **gaming forums encouraged sexist attitudes and behaviour**. They felt **more positive online role models were needed**.

We heard from young people that there is a **lack of education on what behaviour is acceptable, as well as what laws are in place to protect women & girls**. Many were unsure what acts they could report to police and what would be considered serious enough to seek support for.

A key area where the law is not understood well enough is image-based abuse. Many young people did not know it was illegal and did not think there would be any repercussions for perpetrators. There also remains a strong culture of victim blaming surrounding online image-based abuse.

Young people were often **reluctant to report violence against women & girls**, either to authorities or their educational organisation. Key reasons for this were embarrassment, fear, and not believing the act was serious enough. Many said they would report anonymously or online but were not aware this was an option. Young people were also more likely to report as a witness than a victim.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

"You can say it's illegal or this is the sentence, but it doesn't actually happen. People send private photos all the time with no consequence."

"It's a standard thing that occurs every day to millions of women and has almost become a norm for women to accept these behaviours. There's a fear of not being believed."

"Boys turn to people like Andrew Tate to feel good about themselves and then they think it's okay to do that."



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE:

FOR WEST YORKSHIRE PARTNERS:

Widely promote the Youth Commission's 'I took a seat for...' campaign focusing on Attitudes & Violence against women, with partners, online and at engagement events to ensure young people's lived experiences are at the centre of the conversation.

Support young people's organisations, including schools and colleges, to make the reporting process as easy and trauma-informed as possible.

Raise greater awareness of online reporting options. Too many young people do not know about these options.

For the VRP and all services working with children & young people, further promote support services, such as Victim Support to children and young people. Include anonymous support options.

For West Yorkshire Police, demonstrate to young people the actions you take against those who commit image-based abuse and share others' private images. Too many young people believe nothing can be done to stop this abuse.

Ensure professionals including educational organisations and authorities, treat online sexism and VAWG just as seriously as in-person incidents.

FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION:

Promote the Youth Commission's 'I took a seat for...' campaign focusing on Attitudes & violence towards women at our Big Conversation events and online. This will both raise awareness of the issue and ensure that lived experience voices are heard.

Hold Big Conversation events with women's support organisations to make sure we hear from those most affected by the issues.



PRIORITY 2: COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS & LIFE

WHAT WE FOUND:

Many young people were **proud of their communities** and wanted to see community relationships developed further. However, West Yorkshire sometimes feels unsafe for young people, particularly at night. Many told us they **don't feel safe to go out alone**, or to certain areas within their community.

We heard how a **lack of affordable and accessible activities** can lead to boredom, antisocial behaviour, and crime. More community-based opportunities such as sports and youth clubs would provide positive opportunities for young people and help to build community relationships. We also learned that many **young people didn't know about existing local opportunities**.

Young people felt unfairly **negatively stereotyped by the wider community** and authorities as well as online. They are often disproportionately blamed for community issues such as anti-social behaviour. It was felt that unreliable media made this problem worse.

Young people from **marginalised groups highlighted issues of discrimination**. This included experiencing racism and religious discrimination in their communities. Disorder and increasing violence towards minority groups also increased fear amongst those who hadn't been direct victims.

Mental health was highlighted as an issue across all of our priorities. A **lack of mental health support** is a concern for young people. Long waiting times for services and the limited availability of affordable options for services like therapy leave people without the support they need. **This makes existing challenges worse**.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

"Safety when walking alone in the dark. My Dad sends my brother to get me from the bus stop to keep me safe."

"There is no opportunity for young people to come together. More activities could prevent so much crime as there will be something that people can do instead of turning to crime."

"My family has been experiencing a large issue with other residents of the neighbourhood concerning our ethnicity and the blatant disrespect shown because of it."

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE:

FOR WEST YORKSHIRE PARTNERS:

For the VRP and young people's organisations, better promote current opportunities for young people to allow them to **make the most of existing services**.

Support young people's groups to offer more opportunities across West Yorkshire. These should be easily accessible and affordable and will support stronger communities.

Develop more safety initiatives to help young people feel safe at night.

Challenge negative stereotypes of young people by **showcasing positive stories about young people** and their communities.

All partners across West Yorkshire should demonstrate **zero tolerance for racism and discrimination in West Yorkshire** and support initiatives and events that bring different communities together.

FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION:

Support the VRP in **raising awareness of existing support services and opportunities** for young people in their local area.

Ensure we are **including an even wider range of young people in the Big Conversation**. We want to reach the right audiences with our workshops and include everyone in the community in the discussion. Get involved in and support community-based events to achieve this.

Tackle negative stereotypes about young people and crime. We will do this by promoting our lived experience campaigns and **highlighting positive action by children and young people in the community**.





PRIORITY 3: REHABILITATION AND PREVENTION

WHAT WE FOUND:

We found that societal **stigma and 'reputation' are key factors preventing young people who have become involved in crime to successfully rehabilitate.** They felt that both professionals and the community continue to judge them on past actions and label them as 'bad'. Some young people felt that once they had a negative reputation, they 'may as well live up to it'.

Rehabilitation and prevention support for young people does not feel well organised. Education, police, youth justice, support services and parents/guardians should be **working together and communicating with each other more to provide support for young people.**

Young people we spoke to felt that family and wider 'life' issues and struggles need to be more carefully considered in prevention and rehabilitation processes. Professionals need to recognise the impact family relationships have and how they affect a young person's behaviour. For successful rehabilitation, the **reasons behind offending should be addressed.**

The cost-of-living crisis has strongly affected young people. Many **feel pressure to earn an income** but struggle to find jobs and opportunities. This leaves them more **vulnerable to criminal exploitation.** Young people we spoke to described increasing pressure to become involved in crime. 'Money' was also listed as a top reason for reoffending.

Similar to other priorities young people also highlighted the **lack of positive activities and opportunities** for young people. They felt this made reoffending more likely.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

"If you make the wrong decisions early in life, or maybe it's not even your choice, it shouldn't affect the rest of your life. There should be help available to get you out of the situation, rather than labelling you as a criminal or trouble."

"Schools should ask the young person if they need support rather than waiting for them to ask for it."

"Young offenders or those going through probation aren't always given the support they need. I was in a bad place at the start of the year, the doctor made me feel dismissed and I felt it would have been better if I never said anything."



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE:

FOR WEST YORKSHIRE PARTNERS:

Support and facilitate educational organisations; authorities and parents/guardians to work more closely together to **provide the specific support young people need.**

Develop an online 'hub' for young people and professionals to use for **awareness raising, to find support services, and for connection.**

Work with the wider West Yorkshire Combined Authority to **ensure jobs and opportunities are advertised successfully** to young people engaged in prevention & rehabilitation.

Invest in services that support all areas of a young person's life to make prevention more effective. This should include **family and mental health support.**

FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION:

Expand our Big Conversation reach to young people with experience in Young Offenders Institutions to **hear directly from those most reliant on rehabilitation services.**

Investigate what **types of support young people feel are most needed** for successful prevention and rehabilitation.

Encourage partners, including police, authorities and educational organisations to **avoid labelling and judging young people** with criminal justice experience. Support the **breaking down of unhelpful stigma.**



PRIORITY 4: DRUGS, GANGS AND KNIFE CRIME

WHAT WE FOUND:

Young people feel **unsafe in their communities because of gangs, drugs and knife crime**. Many told us they knew of others who carried knives, and some told us about their personal experiences as victims or witnesses of knife crime, which had serious and **long-lasting impacts on their mental health and feelings of safety and security**.

We learned that knife crime amongst young people in West Yorkshire is also often not gang-related. Lots of young people are carrying knives for personal safety reasons and **do not know this puts them at higher risk**.

Many young people we spoke to were against gang crime but saw carrying a knife for safety as reasonable. More **education on the dangers of carrying a knife** is needed.

Culture surrounding gangs has been glamorised by the media. Young people associated gangs, drugs and knife crime with TV shows and music artists. We also heard that a **fear of being seen as a 'snitch'** was young people's main reason for not reporting knife crime.

Similar to last year's research, young people wanted more **safe places to hang out and positive opportunities** as alternatives to becoming involved in gang crime. Top choices included sports clubs and more paid opportunities such as apprenticeships.

Young people wanted to see a balance between **support for those trapped in gang and knife crime and stronger punishments** for those committing serious crimes. It was felt that stronger consequences for offenders would act as a deterrent and highlight the seriousness of the topic.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

"One of my classmates was murdered outside of our school. It has had a major impact on everyone in the area and was devastating to all."

"Young people are being peer-pressured into gangs and feel they have to do it to be included and be cool."

"Stronger punishments and better recovery places. More mental health help for youths and prevention in schools."

A young man with short brown hair, wearing a blue hoodie, is seated and speaking into a microphone. He is gesturing with his right hand. To his left, the back of a woman's head with long brown hair and glasses is visible. The background is a plain white wall.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE:

FOR WEST YORKSHIRE PARTNERS:

Whenever possible, include **lived experienced voices in discussions** and decisions surrounding drugs, gangs and knife crime.

Promote the Youth Commission's 'I took a seat for...' campaign focusing on Drugs, gangs and Knife Crime, at events with young people to further highlight lived experience voices and raise awareness of the issue.

All engagement with young people on knife crime should include **education on anonymous reporting** to tackle the current fear of reporting.

Promote successful knife crime prosecutions in West Yorkshire to reassure young people and to act as a deterrent for potential offenders.

FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION:

Share the Youth Commission's 'I took a seat for...' campaign focusing on Drugs, Gangs & Knife Crime at our Big Conversation events and online to raise awareness of 'glamourisation' 'fear' and 'exploitation'.

Promote the message that carrying a knife puts you at greater risk of harm. Lots of young people are not aware of this.

Listen to and **champion the voices of young people affected by drugs, gangs and knife crime.** Their stories deserve to be heard.



CONCLUSION: TAKING THINGS FORWARD

We are extremely grateful to all the members of the West Yorkshire Youth Commission, local partners and the Violence Reduction Partnership who have been involved in making this piece of work a success.

Through their 'Big Conversation' peer research with over 1700 young people, the Youth Commission has managed to reach and engage with a hugely diverse cross-section of children and young people across West Yorkshire. They have made particular efforts to hear from those whose views are often overlooked. This peer-to-peer process is of enormous value, both as a piece of research and as an engagement exercise.

Our hope is that the West Yorkshire Youth Commission will be further developed as a channel for engaging young people in the work of the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership. As shown through the project, the WYYC can help bridge the gap between young people and authorities.

TESTIMONIALS

West Yorkshire's Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, Alison Lowe OBE said:

"There are so many things that influence the safety of our young people in modern society, and it is vital that we listen closely to what they have to say."

"The Youth Commission's Big Conversation gives us a real window into their collective experiences and insights into how we can drive change as a partnership."

"Only by giving young people a seat at the table, can we offer what they need to thrive within our communities and this report is a great vehicle to achieve it."

Director of the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership, Detective Chief Superintendent Lee Berry said:

"The 'Big Conversation' has been crucial in our partnership approach to tackling key community safety issues and has already helped to shape the Mayor of West Yorkshire's new Police and Crime Plan."

"Previous recommendations from the Youth Commission report have led to a campaign 'I Took a Seat' co-produced with the Violence Reduction Partnership, addressing priority themes."

"This is a perfect example of how such collaboration can make a huge difference in reaching those who are most vulnerable, helping to make West Yorkshire safe, just and inclusive."

Youth Commission Member, Lemeka Smithen Said:

"I joined the Youth Commission because I'm passionate about creating positive change and amplifying the voices of young people. Being part of this team has given me the opportunity to contribute to meaningful projects that impact our community. I'm motivated by the collective drive of like-minded individuals, and it's been incredibly rewarding to see our ideas come to life and make a difference."

Youth Commission Member, Boden Dudley Said:

"I wanted to understand why young people committed serious crime and how they are rehabilitated once labelled as a 'young offender'. I believe rehabilitation is so vital in ensuring young people are safe and ready to integrate back into society- free from the events of the past and any stigmas."

The WYYC has enabled me to speak openly about issues I am passionate about and has allowed me to form an informed opinion about highly important and relevant issues.

Additionally, whilst a member of WYYC, I have met and engaged with like-minded people who deeply care about making a positive difference for young people across the whole of West Yorkshire, as a result I have felt optimistic about the future young people can shape through resilience and serious action."

Pastoral Lead & Senior Youth & Intervention Worker at the Hunslet Club, Soe Smith-Leung said:

"The sessions delivered by the West Yorkshire Commission focused on important topics by engaging our young people through group discussion and relatable real-life anecdotes. This gave our young people the opportunity to discuss and explore their thoughts and feelings in a safe space."

Alternative provision lead at Leeds West Academy, Sadie Cooper said:

"The sessions delivered by the West Yorkshire Youth Commission were invaluable to our students. It allowed them to share their views and reflect on our local community in terms of current and potential issues."

"Many of our students are involved in the community and these workshops allow students to understand the impact of their words, behaviour and social activities taking into consideration their own and others safety."

The Enrichment Team at Kirklees College said:

"Participating in the Leaders Unlocked workshops has been an incredibly enriching experience for students at Kirklees College. Covering crucial topics such as community relationships, Drugs, Gangs, and Knife Crime, Rehabilitation, and Violence Against Women and Girls, these workshops were both engaging and thought-provoking."

Our students were particularly impressed by how their voices were genuinely heard and valued throughout the sessions. The interactive format allowed them to actively contribute their perspectives and ideas, fostering a sense of empowerment and involvement. They are keen to stay updated on the outcomes of these workshops and see how their contributions will be put into action.

This experience has not only deepened their understanding of these important issues but also inspired them to be proactive in their communities. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with Leaders Unlocked and witnessing the positive impact of these discussions."

CONTACT US

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