



# **WEST YORKSHIRE YOUTH COMMISSION:**

## **FINAL 2023 REPORT TO THE WEST YORKSHIRE VIOLENCE REDUCTION PARTNERSHIP**

**NOVEMBER 2023**



# INTRODUCTION

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

The WYYC enables children and young people (hereafter referred to as 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 issues that affect their lives and help build a safer community.

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is grounded in extensive peer-to-peer research and engagement with over 1300 young people across West Yorkshire between May 2023 and October 2023. These conversations were conducted through interactive workshops, one-to-one interviews, outreach stands and engagement stalls.

The report is structured into four key priorities that outline the WYYC's key areas of peer-led research. Each section features a comprehensive analysis of young people's responses, verbatim quotes from individual participants, and recommendations for change that have been put forward by the Youth Commissioners as a result of their findings.

This report is intended to be a genuine, independent record of what young people have told us through the WYYC 'Big Conversation'. The report is intended to support any future actions by the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership and relevant partner agencies.

The content of this document contains sensitive, potentially triggering themes from the outset including but not limited to violence, trauma, sexual abuse, and suicide. We appreciate this may lead to negative emotional responses and readers are advised to prioritise their emotional wellbeing when reading this document.

# ABOUT THE WEST YORKSHIRE YOUTH COMMISSION

The WYYC works in partnership with the West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership to help shape approaches to youth-led initiatives, particularly in response to violent crime and exploitation across West Yorkshire.

A key part of the WYYC's role is to gather views of other young people across the country through peer-to-peer research in the form of a 'Big Conversation'. This peer-led research process provides a safe environment for young people to talk to their peers about relevant issues. The views gathered from young people are analysed by the WYYC in order to create a final set of key findings and recommendations to report back to the VRP.

The West Yorkshire Youth Commission members are a diverse group of 22 young people, who each bring different backgrounds and experiences to the group. Of the group:

- 56.5% identified as female
- 43.5 identified as male
- 4.3% identified as transgender
- 34.8% identified as belonging to an ethnic minority
- 30.4% identified as having a disability
- 8.7% identified as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community
- 17.4% identified as not in education, training or employment

The West Yorkshire Youth Commission is facilitated by Leaders Unlocked, a social enterprise that enables young people and underrepresented groups 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](http://www.leaders-unlocked.org)

## IDENTIFIED KEY PRIORITIES AND AIMS

At their inaugural meeting, the WYYC members worked together to select their key priorities relevant to young people. The group then developed a set of aims to underpin the priorities and help guide the project and provide a focus for the 'Big Conversation'.

The key priorities chosen were:

- 1) Attitudes and Violence Towards Women
- 2) Community Relationship & Life
- 3) Rehabilitation and Prevention
- 4) Drugs, Gangs and Knife Crime

## SKILLS TRAINING

WYYC members took part in active listening and practical training sessions to acquire the key skills and knowledge needed for their role. This training included how to successfully plan workshops, interview techniques and peer facilitation training.

## CREATED YOUTH COMMISSION RESOURCES

WYYC members were actively involved in creating the tools that they would use for their peer-led research. They co-designed interactive workshops to address each of their four priorities, which included quizzes, games, presentations and discussions.

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. (Appendix 1)

## THE 'BIG CONVERSATION'

This 'Big Conversation' was taken to a wide range of local voluntary organisations, educational and alternative educational organisations, youth clubs, youth justice services and statutory partners across the region.

To gather vital insights from those who are most affected by some of the priority topics, the WYYC put particular effort and energy into engaging with underrepresented groups of young people. WYYC carried out workshops and consultations with those with first-hand experience of the criminal justice system, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, non-mainstream education settings and rehabilitation centres.

The workshops and engagement events were peer-led by Youth Commission members and were designed to include a range of activities to suit a wide range of engagement styles. The workshops included activities such as 'what would you do' scenarios; awareness raising quizzes; card games; and standing debates, all designed to facilitate open and honest conversation.

In total, we engaged in peer research with 1,309 young people across 39 consultation events and 2 surveys.

## 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:

Calderdale Youth Offending Team  
Castleford College  
Conscious Youth  
Hunslet Club  
Kirklees College  
Kirklees Youth Council  
Kirklees Youth Justice Services  
Leeds Trinity University  
Orange Box Halifax  
Positive Stepz

Prism Youth Project  
Calderdale PRIDE  
Wakefield PRIDE  
Leeds PRIDE  
Reflections Yorkshire CIC  
University of Huddersfield  
Wakefield College



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

Charlotte Barton  
 Claudia Costa  
 Llana Richards  
 Theo Life  
 Thomas Wintersgill  
 Olya Gudareva

Subhaan Naeem  
 Lois Skelton  
 Theo Peaker  
 Simrah Noor Ahmed  
 Kelly McClelland  
 Troy Njenje Mbanga

\*Some WYYC member's names have not been published for safeguarding reasons

## OUR SUFFOCATING DILEMMA

Youth Commission member, Llana, is passionate about the priority of Drugs, Gangs and Knife Crime. At the WYYC 'Big Conversation' Conference, she shared her personal experience and passion for making positive change in this area through her speech, entitled 'Our Suffocating Dilemma':

"Seven months ago, I found myself sharing this very room we are in today with a group of like hearted people. Some are here with us now, others were unable to make it. All of which however were, like myself, immensely impassioned by the current nature of the surrounding communities. Our Insightful journey has blossomed, as a result of our hunger for sustainable change. My job this evening is to accentuate our ongoing dilemma that suffocates our region. If you're curious about what I'm referring to, then fortunately for you, your curiosity keeps you safe. Your innocence, your shield of inexperience that acts as a partition between 2 very contrasting worlds. The justified naivety that sets you apart from the everyday reality of the concrete Jungle. What predicament am I referring to you ask? The violence + criminal activity that constrains its foot upon the neck of our children of tomorrow." (Continued in Appendix 2)





# PRIORITY 1: ATTITUDES AND VIOLENCE TOWARDS WOMEN

We spoke to 389 young people about the topic of Attitudes and Violence Towards Women across 13 engagement events and 1 survey.

## WHAT WE FOUND:

Negative attitudes, misogyny, and even violence against women and girls was widespread, with almost all young people we spoke to having experienced or witnessed it in some form. The extent of these experiences made some feel as though they were 'normal' or 'to be expected'.

*"Casual misogyny in school as boys think it's just banter."*

*"Often verbal – it involves shaming and degrading."*

*"I feel undermined regularly by men who have a negative attitude to women. I have also been in an abusive relationship with a man who would gaslight me into thinking I was the problem. Now working with younger kids I find males at youth club are less likely to respond to me telling them what to do."*

Young people were often reluctant to report gender-based violence to authorities, with only 25% saying they would report to police. Reasons for this included not believing they would be taken seriously or that any action could be taken. Some told us that they had previously reported incidents and were unhappy with the outcome.

*"When I was younger, I was the victim of a rape and I didn't go to police because I didn't know if they'd believe me and I also didn't want to go through it all again and have to go to court so young."*

*"I don't think they would help you either, probably blame you for being drunk too."*

Another significant concern for young people was street safety, with many girls and young women not feeling safe on the streets, on transport or elsewhere in public. Some reported changing their lifestyle and habits to avoid walking alone or going out at night as they did not feel safe.

*"We need ways to protect ourselves at night or walking without getting in trouble ourselves for it. I carry my keys between my fingers."*

*"I'm scared of the men out there so it's better to not leave the house."*

*"I don't leave the house at night because it's not safe."*

*"I wouldn't want my little sister to go out alone. It's different for me as a boy, it's not fair but that's the world."*

Alongside this, spiking was a big worry for many young women. Many said it affected their behaviour and feeling of safety on nights out. Additionally, lots of young people didn't know how to respond to a spiking incident or how to support a victim.

**"Spiking is just another thing you expect when you go on a night out."**

**"My auntie has been spiked on a night out. There's certain pubs and bars where it happens all the time and basically everyone knows it."**

**"It's something that I'm more aware of as I've gotten older. From what I remember it didn't use to be a big thing, but it is now and it's more common. It makes you less able to have a good time because you have to be careful."**

Image-based sexual abuse, known often to young people as revenge porn, was an issue raised frequently by young people of all ages. They felt that educational organisations were often limited in their ability to respond effectively because of social media. Many were also unaware that such abuse could be reported to authorities.

**"It's a regular thing, like once a week at college. It's expected if you send something it's going to be spread around."**

**"You wouldn't expect it was a crime because it happens all the time and not much gets done. It's the gossip for a week and then a new one or something else is shared."**

Troublingly, there was a perception amongst some young people that image-based sexual abuse was the fault of the victim for voluntarily sending images. Education on this area is needed.

**"Other girls can be just as bad for shaming you on it and talking about it, it's not just boys."**

**"At the end of the day, they shouldn't have sent it- They should of known it would get shared, it happens all the time."**

Across all forms of violence towards women, it was perceived that there was not enough mental health support or aftercare for victims. Young people were either unaware of existing services or faced barriers to accessing them.

**"Nowhere to go for help or be believed."**



## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR THE WEST YORKSHIRE VIOLENCE REDUCTION PARTNERSHIP

For West Yorkshire police, provide more training for officers on the impact of gender-based violence and how to support victims after they report. Utilise specially trained officers to deal with these incidents.

Provide more awareness both to the public and professionals within the night-time economy on how to spot spiking; where to report it; and how to properly support a victim.

Ensure that all environments where victims may report gender violence, including educational organisations, support services, and police routes are comfortable, safe and supportive.

Support the Youth Commission in developing a campaign aimed at young people to tackle image-based sexual abuse.

Ensure local safe spaces are consistently well-signposted and easy to find for young people who may need them.

### FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION

Build on this year's peer research to continue to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of girls and young women in West Yorkshire.

Support the VRP in promoting and signposting to safe spaces and support services that are available to young people.

Develop a campaign within our 'Big Conversation' on image-based sexual abuse; how to report it; and where to access support.



## SECTION 2: COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS & LIFE

We spoke to 381 young people about the topic of Community Relationships and Life across 8 engagement events and 1 survey.

### WHAT WE FOUND:

Within our Community Relationships and Life priority, young people consistently raised four key areas of concern. They were: the cost-of-living crisis; lack of positive role models; lack of opportunities for young people and there not being enough opportunities for the community to come together.

The cost-of-living crisis affected young people of all ages and backgrounds, with some reporting impacts on their education due to lack of access to uniforms, transport and even food. Those we spoke to also highlighted the links between financial vulnerability and exposure to violence and exploitation, particularly from gangs and organised crime.

*"I'd say cost of living crisis is one of the biggest problems because other crimes and violence probably come from this. If people can't afford something they might turn to crime to get it."*

*"A lot of people had to move out of their homes as the rent rising in response to the cost-of-living crisis made it impossible. I myself lack the comfort to ask family for additional funds but have experienced a lot of people having to reach out and do so. I currently have to take up employment besides my studies."*

The need for positive role models was highlighted in our peer research. Many felt that the lack of relatable, community-based role models had left room for bad influences and exploitation in the form of gang leaders and negative online role models. Additionally, young people highlighted a desire for the guidance and support that role models can provide.

*"If you grow up without a dad as a lad, you don't feel like you have a role model."*

*"Without role models that is when a kid could get involved in a gang or drugs because the gang leaders will take advantage of that and step in as a bad role model."*

*"Having a queer role model would have helped me a lot when I was younger to feel proud of my sexuality."*

*"People don't have good role models nowadays, it's just TikTokers or Youtubers. It's also not real what they post online so it sets people up for unrealistic body standards and causing things like not feeling good enough, anxiety etc."*

We heard how positive opportunities, including youth clubs, jobs, and internships were good ways of diverting young people from crime but that not enough are currently available, or that barriers such as cost are preventing access to some young people.

*"Young people feel restricted from opportunities due to the prices of things that are basic essentials. They feel as if they should either overwork themselves to live a somewhat decent life or have to get involved in unethical behaviour to get what they need to live."*

There are currently not enough opportunities for different communities across West Yorkshire to come together, share their experiences and learn from each other. Many young people would like more ways for their community to build relationships.

*"There's lots of different sections of the community and it would be good to bring them all together more I think so people can understand each other's cultures. Festivals and things like that."*

*"I believe there should be more opportunities and events surrounding helping communities come together e.g. live events- market stalls - music events for new artists."*

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR THE WEST YORKSHIRE VIOLENCE REDUCTION PARTNERSHIP

Support young people's organisations, including educational and youth services to provide awareness and education around financial literacy and how to cope with the cost-of-living crisis.

Support the delivery of more development opportunities, jobs and internships for young people, with additional support for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Utilise safe spaces, community hubs, and the Youth Commission to promote and signpost to a range of community services including food banks, mental health support and services such as uniform swaps.

Wherever possible utilise professionals with lived experience to act as role models and recognise the benefits of such experience in engaging with young people.

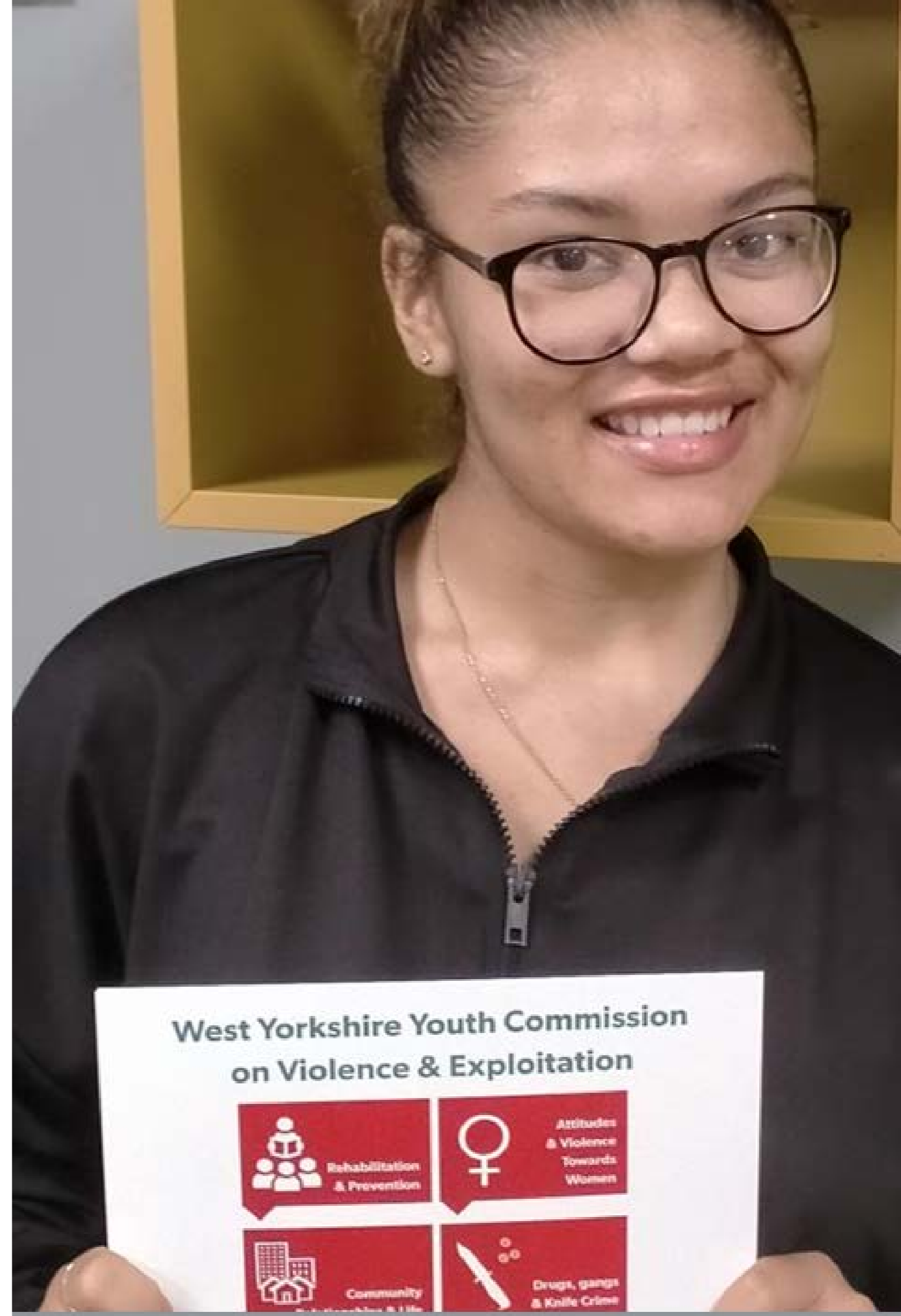
Support local groups to hold social events and festivals that celebrate and promote community relationships.

### FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION

Support the VRP in the delivery of community events by attending and engaging young people in our 'Big Conversation' on community issues.

Include more lived-experience voices across all of our priorities to highlight relatable and positive role models for young people.

With the help of the VRP, learn about different support services available to young people and promote these both in Big Conversation workshops and through a social media campaign.







# SECTION 3: REHABILITATION AND PREVENTION

We spoke to 198 young people about the topic of Rehabilitation and Prevention across 10 engagement events.

## WHAT WE FOUND:

Many young people expressed the need for more rehabilitation and prevention measures to address issues like drug addiction and reoffending cycles in their community. It is important that these services are locally based, and wherever possible utilise lived experience professionals.

***"All the rehabilitation places are either booked up for months or are private and not everyone has the financial funds for that. Need more support in the community."***

***"There is not enough awareness around rehabilitation facilities there are available and where they are – When I needed help, I didn't know where to go."***

The importance of relationships and support networks was shown in our research. Lived experience mentors were chosen as the most beneficial intervention for successful rehabilitation and prevention, while lack of support from social workers, family and friends was highlighted as the most harmful.

***"Family kicking you out is the worst thing that could happen because you need that network of support around you if you're going to get your life back together."***

***"You wouldn't listen to someone reading out of a textbook, it needs to be someone who knows what they're talking about for real."***

***"There needs to be more people talking about lived experience, so can hear their life story, factor and barriers that they faced."***

Young people discussed strained relationships with police and authorities. Areas of friction included understanding of mental health and negative stereotypes of young people. This has created distrust between authorities and some young people, making rehabilitation and diversion from crime more difficult.

***"Police at pride is uncomfortable based on history with queer people and people of colour".***

***"The Police don't treat me like I'm innocent until proven guilty, the police have called me a gypsy when arresting me."***

Many young people felt that stigma, shame and judgement from others including peers, family and the community are barriers to seeking help and successful recovery and rehabilitation for many young people. This could include exclusion from jobs and development opportunities.

*"It needs to be more focussed on mental health and getting professional help from people who really understand."*

*"It's hard not to go back to your old ways when others don't understand and treat you differently because you're an addict."*

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR THE WEST YORKSHIRE VIOLENCE REDUCTION PARTNERSHIP

Prioritise support for locally based services that utilise lived-experience professionals for both rehabilitation and diversion initiatives.

Invest in programmes that offer young people lived-experience mentors. This was the most favoured method of support.

Work with the Youth Commission on a campaign to build trust on both sides of the relationship between young people and police and authorities.

Promote the view that young people with experience of the criminal justice system should not be stigmatised and isolated from the community.

Ensure that professionals, from all services, who work directly with young people are properly equipped to handle a range of topics including understanding mental health and anti-bias training.

Ensure existing support services are well-signposted and easily accessible to all young people

### FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION

Work with the VRP on a campaign to develop stronger and more productive relationships between police & authorities and young people, breaking down negative stereotypes on both sides of the relationship.

Continue work to break down the stigma and isolation surrounding young people with experience of the criminal justice system.

More greatly include the voice of lived experience in our Big Conversation on Rehabilitation and Prevention.





# SECTION 5: DRUGS, GANGS AND KNIFE CRIME

We spoke to 341 young people on the topic of Drugs, Gangs and Knife Crime across 8 engagement events.

## WHAT WE FOUND:

We found that young people are highly concerned about the impact of drugs, gangs and knife crime across West Yorkshire. It has led to many young people feeling unsafe in their communities.

*"You duck if you hear a noise because you're so used to gang violence on your doorstep."*

*"There's been a lot of violent incidents some leading to deaths and there's been so much it's led to anxiety within the community. At the same time, it's made the community numb to these types of incidents."*

In some areas, knife violence has had a high impact on the mental health of young people and the wider community. We heard how there is not enough meaningful aftercare or support for victims, families and the wider community when violence occurs.

*"I have experience with knives and gangs, you just get groomed into it and there's nothing you can do at a young age, not if you are from around here."*

*"I'm too scared to go past areas in my community due to area/postcode war."*

*"Knife crime is rapidly rising in my area, and it is making people feel unsafe and anxious."*

*"Schools and council seem not to care enough about the youth's wellbeing especially those who have experienced gang violence or been affected by it."*

More 'safe spaces' in the community where young people can go to escape the violence on the streets are needed. These should be positive places that can provide opportunities and alternative routes to young people.

*"There needs to be more safe spaces for young people to go, there are not enough about."*

Drug use has become highly normalised with large amounts of people using them especially on weekends and in the 'party scene'. Young people reported this often leads to disputes and violence. Some also reported being drawn into crime unwillingly.

**"Films and Netflix series like Top Boy glamourise drugs and make them look like a good idea."**

**"People don't understand how serious selling drugs are, they think they're hard because they're a 'drug dealer' but they are actually being taken advantage of and are being used."**

**"Drugs are common and accepted. Even those who are normal and functioning it's not a surprise for them to do some coke or weed on the weekend."**

Amnesty boxes were highlighted as a valuable solution to knife crime, with many feeling the anonymity would encourage hand-ins by removing barriers such as fear of repercussions. However, we also found that boxes must be accompanied by education to ensure they are understood and used correctly.

**"Young people would be more likely to hand in their knives in places like the boxes if they knew they wouldn't get done for it."**

**"Knife amnesties are not widespread like they only had them at Huddersfield carnival and not day to day."**

Young people explained that creative outlets, such as recording music, helped them to deal with the impacts of such serious violence. More opportunities to express themselves and be listened to by professionals and decision-makers are needed.

**"Need to channel energy into more positive outlets such as music instead of drugs."**



## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### FOR THE WEST YORKSHIRE VIOLENCE REDUCTION PARTNERSHIP

Work with the Youth Commission to develop a campaign for young people impacted by drug, gang and knife crime to share their experiences in creative ways.

Deliver an amnesty box campaign to provide a safe way for people to dispose of knives. This needs to be accompanied by public information on the boxes, how to use them, and where to gain further support.

Support community-based youth organisations to provide safe and secure spaces for young people to get off the streets and escape gang violence.

Provide greater signposting to existing victim support services. And work alongside young people, including the Youth Commission, to reduce barriers faced in accessing these services.

Utilise social media to deliver a campaign targeting drug, gang, and knife crime, highlighting the harms caused and where to access support.

### FOR THE YOUTH COMMISSION

Work with the VRP to develop a campaign inviting young people to creatively share the impact of drug, gang and knife crime on their lives. This will both raise awareness and give us further insight into the harms caused.

Include within our Big Conversation more discussion around the mental health impacts of violence. Ensure to follow these conversations up with signposting to available support services.

Be the voice of young people in advising the VRP on how to make support services more accessible to young people impacted by serious gang and knife violence.

# 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 1300 young people, the Youth Commission has managed to reach and engage with a hugely diverse cross-section of 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.

They can provide youth-centred advice on a range of violence and exploitation matters affecting young people. They also have an important role to play in the development and evaluation of the recommendations they have set out in this report. Over the next phase of the project, the WYYC will work closely with the VRP and partners to implement and address the recommendations in this report.

# TESTIMONIALS

*"It is absolutely critical that we understand the lens through which young people experience life in West Yorkshire, and how we can work better together to protect them from harm. The findings and recommendations of the Youth Commission will help shape the partnership response to serious violence, putting their voice at the heart of our approach. It ensures organisations are tuned into the barriers, challenges and concerns, but crucially it allows them to recognise the type of action required."*

**Ch Supt Lee Berry, Director of the West Yorkshire VRP**

*"The members of the West Yorkshire Youth Commission have shown great determination and passion, using their position to support the safety of young people across our communities. I care deeply about inclusion, and we can only tackle serious violence effectively if we listen to those it affects, working together to arrive at the solutions."*

**Alison Lowe OBE, West Yorkshire Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime**

*"It was very impressive to hear about the breadth of work the young people involved with the Youth Commission had undertaken, and the eloquence with which they expressed themselves."*

**Jackie Gilbank, Lived Experience Engagement Lead, Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office**

*"The Youth Commissions Big Conversation was a good event and I was amazed at how the young people fed their opinions to the group. I was present at some of the workshops and did some of the community-based work with them too. Tom, who spoke about addiction is one of our guys and he has significantly grown through the works with Leaders Unlocked. I would like to compliment Leaders unlocked work and hope that their good work continues as I saw how the young people were empowered in their process. Also, the findings of this type of work are useful to organisations like ourselves as we plan and deliver our Intervention & Diversionary work for young people."*

**Niraj Mistry, Reflections Yorkshire CIC**

*"Working with the Youth Commission has opened so many doors, especially ones where it's clear I as a young person, can make a difference."*

**Theo Peaker, West Yorkshire Youth Commission Member**

# APPENDIX 1:

**West Yorkshire Youth Commission  
on Violence & Exploitation**

Rehabilitation & Prevention

Attitudes & Violence Towards Women

Community Relationships & Life

Drugs, gangs & Knife Crime

**What matters most to you?**

**The West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit  
wants to hear your views**

Issue I talked about today: \_\_\_\_\_

Please tell us your current opinions and experiences of this issue in your area:

My idea to address this issue is:

Your area: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for sharing your views

Twitter @LeadersUnlocked  
Instagram @leadersunlocked

**LEADERS UNLOCKED**

West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Unit

# APPENDIX 2: OUR SUFFOCATING DILEMMA

Seven months ago, I found myself sharing this very room we are in today with a group of like hearted people. Some are here with us now, others were unable to make it. All of which however were, like myself, immensely impassioned by the current nature of the surrounding communities. Our Insightful journey has blossomed, as a result of our hunger for sustainable change. My job this evening is to accentuate our ongoing dilemma that suffocates our region.

If you're curious about what I'm referring to, then fortunately for you, your curiosity keeps you safe. Your innocence, your shield of inexperience that acts as a partition between 2 very contrasting worlds. The justified naivety that sets you apart from the everyday reality of the concrete Jungle. What predicament am I referring to you ask? The violence + criminal activity that constrains its foot upon the neck of our children of tomorrow.

In his captivating book "The Great Prayer" Ervin Seale shared with us that. "The body of the ideal self is concealed in the mood which fathers it, just as the tree's body is concealed in the seed". Essentially, this supported my idea that young people are a product of their environment and whatever dynamic that surrounds them, nurtures their future self. However, that's just the thing. These children fighting for survival in what I previously and will continue to refer to as the Jungle, are not at all being nurtured and that is our problem.

Instead, they need to be seen, stable and supported. Their need to seek a sense of belonging is leaving our children susceptible to grooming, manipulation and coercion. Their vulnerability is played on by Ego driven dictators who exploit our young people by making them feel worthy. However, these dictators are just simply in pain. For whom we must carry compassion for. They have usually gone through, or are still going through, very traumatic experiences in their lives. Their inability to regulate and express their emotions from their trauma builds up pain and this hurt eventually conjures up rage. With most of them coming from an underprivileged background, they feel deprived. As though they were set up for failure. As though this game we call life is not at all equal and that many above them were given a head start.

Where we underprivileged come from, we were taught if the rules are rigged, then we ought to break the game. These individuals who you may refer to as criminals, were at one point in time just children who endured a lot of physical and physiological pain. They are currently faced with detrimental circumstances because institutions weren't built for individuals like them.

The average young person is struggling and in pain. For those caught up with the burden of gang affiliation, most feel they can't open up to loved ones- If they're fortunate to have any. Yet they know they can't fake their emotions to those who know them best, so instead they avoid them by striking a disconnect. Now this person is dealing with everything going on by themselves, secluded & isolated from any means of reparation. For them, it hurts to be disconnected from family, but opening up hurts more. For many, their family dynamic is in fact a catalyst for their current circumstances. Whether that be the family's absence or the suffering & pain they once, or still do expose you to.

To many these people are just statistics. They're just facts and figures. Many will go home at the end of their day, forget about life and sleep peacefully...So picture this. You're in a deep sleep. You're dreaming blissfully. All is well & you and your best friend are happier than ever. I want you to picture your best friend for a moment...In this dream, you do everything together: holidays, movie nights and day trips. You're happy because you can tell your best friend anything & you know they know they can confide in you- which they do...Then things start to change. You don't hang out as much as you used to. They no longer confide in you and things don't seem at all that great anymore. Then one day, your best friend enters an acute phase of psychosis.

You jolt up out of bed and realise (sigh of relief) - it was just a dream.

Except it wasn't. And not only is this person your best friend but it's your 15 year old brother, who had been suffering in silence for some time now as a result of drugs and gang affiliation.

See many sleep and wake up feeling rejuvenated but for others, people like my brother, go to sleep and awake in a nightmare. Desperate for a way out, clinging onto the last bit of ambition of escapism. By any means necessary. By. Any. Means. Necessary. Hustling in the only ways you know how. The concrete Jungle. Like animals in a food chain, getting it out of the mud. Eat or be eaten.

My brother was lucky enough to have a supportive network of people to fight for him when he could no longer fight for himself. But for people less fortunate than my brother, they desire a way out. It is natural for us to indulge in the illusions of our mind. The illusions of our desires, or at least what we think we desire. Yet their misconceptions force them to believe this cycle is inescapable. Making them unaware that their only restrictions are within. The self-imprisonment of their own mind. Oblivious to the fact that they are the ones with the key.

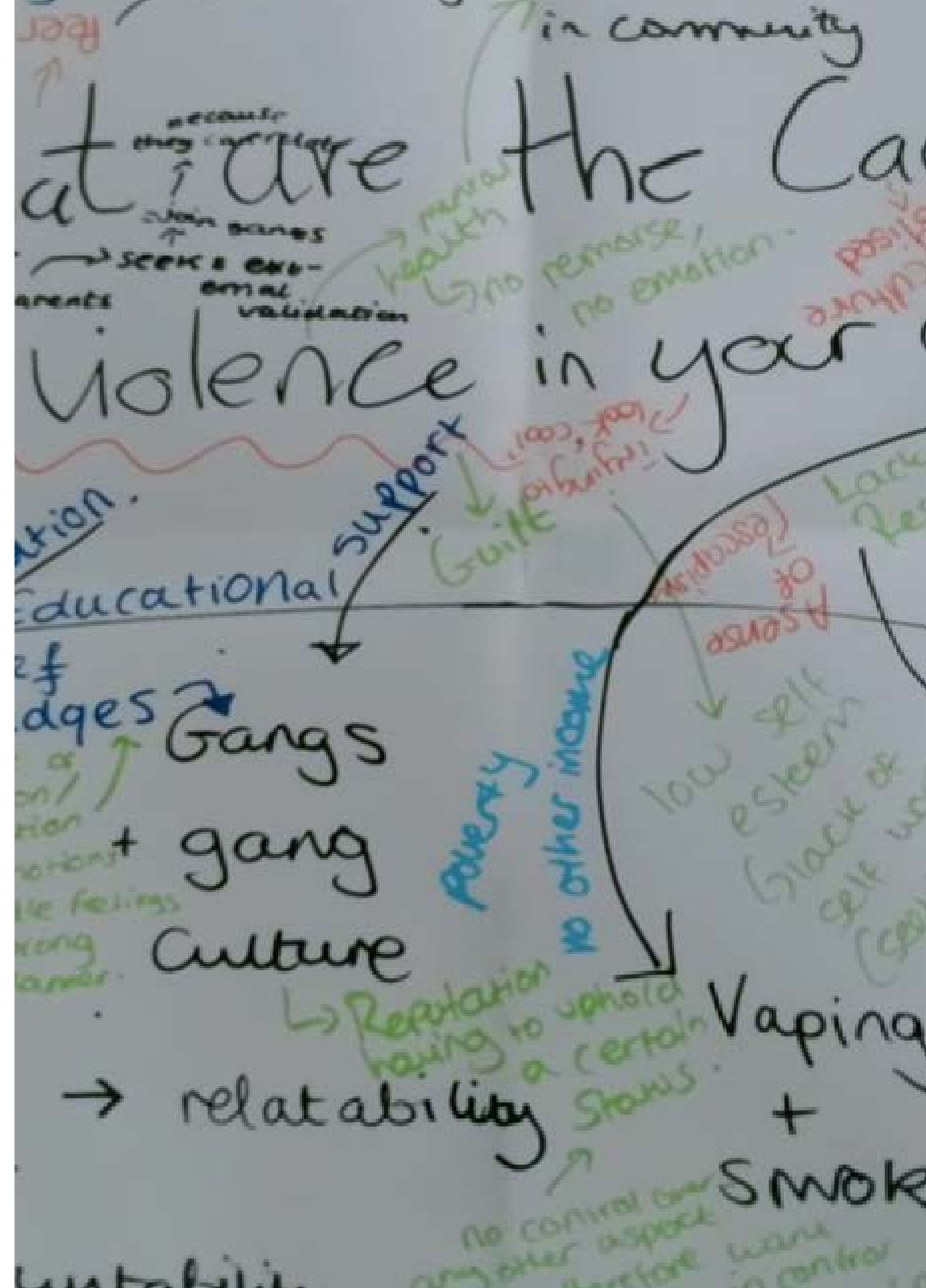
So how do we move forward? The answers are simple, yet so over complexed buried under the stubborn ideas that our community will forever remain this way. In order to prosper, we must make it our mission to strip back and reform the misconceptions of crime. We must do everything in our power to de-glamourise these narratives. After all, what we focus on is the energy that will begin to cultivate our lives.

It is my calling to re-establish what it means to be a part of a community. I hope myself & the rest of the Youth Commission will have your continued support with our undertakings. As I'm sure I speak not only for myself when I say, I will do whatever it takes to bring about a refreshing positive change.

We must build solid, trusting foundations for connection within communities in order for relationships to thrive. We must re-establish bonds between members of the public and establishments such as the police force. Ridding anyone- dimensional prejudice views certain individuals may have of others. As well as implementing solid educational systems and influential structure in order to invite opportunities for those at a less advantage to most.

Penultimately, we must become collaborative and encourage each West Yorkshire Citizen to do the same. For true transformative power does not take place in isolation it occurs through teamwork. We need to be exposed to healthy & constructive forms of celebration in order to progress. Our young people need visuals. We need charities and campaigns to promote peace and make a visible & tangible change in order to instil belief in the idea that our communities really do have the potential to flourish.

Most importantly we must advocate harmony. Where peace abides, everything of that which is good must thrive. Everybody had power. I will do everything in my power to promote peace and heal our region. What will you do with yours?



## **CONTACT US**

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