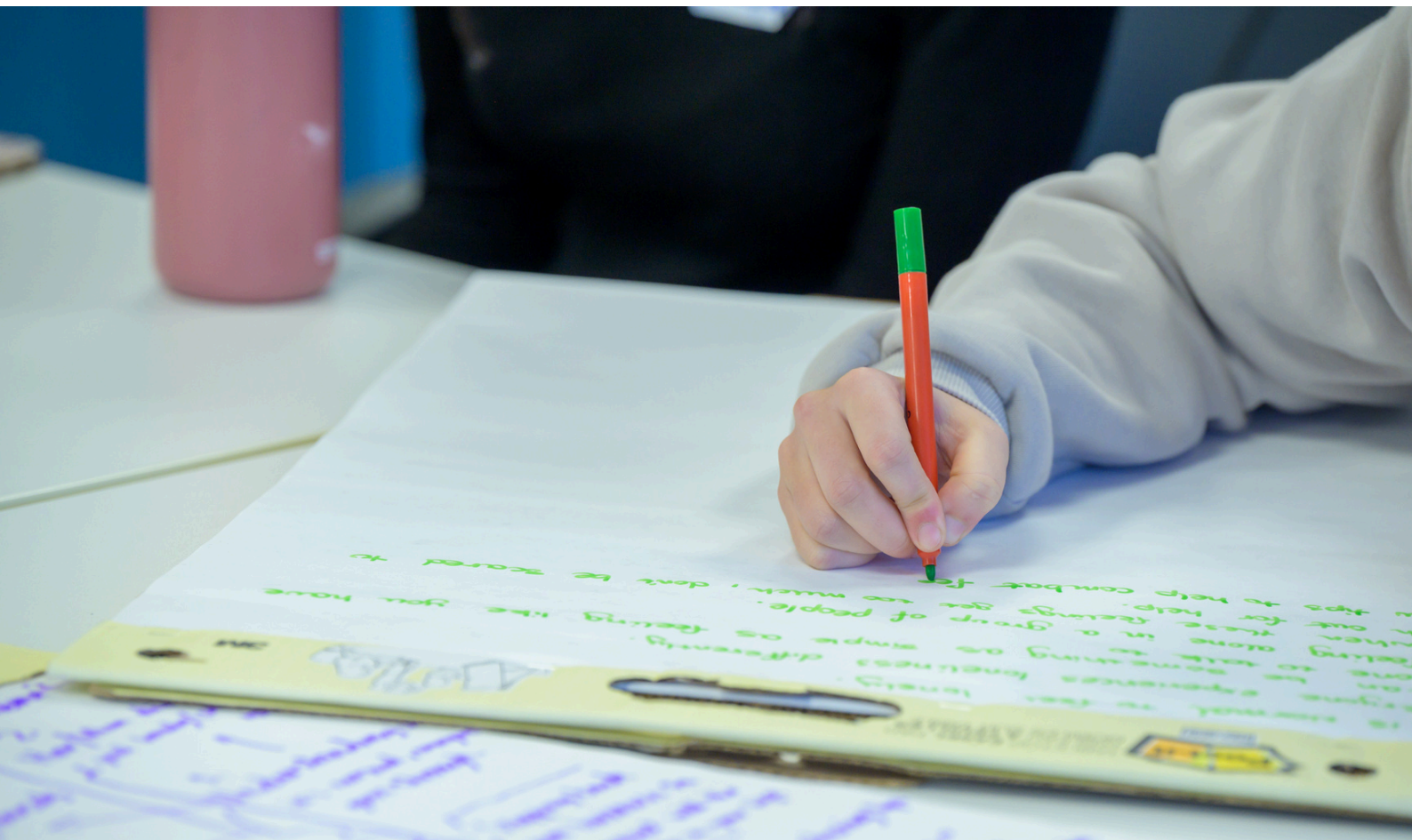


Meaningfully involving young people in your work

Feedback from our first online hackathon



Background

This report has been written to share learning with our networks and the wider sector to help them better understand how to meaningfully involve young people in their work.

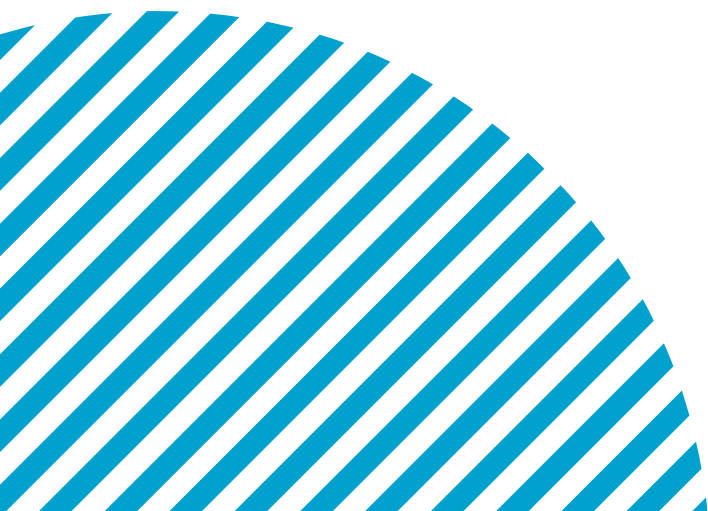
On July 13 2024, a group of young facilitators, with support from HUDL Youth Development Agency, co-designed and facilitated an online hackathon for Co-op and Co-op Foundation.

A hackathon is an event where people of all ages and backgrounds come together to collaborate and come up with new, creative ideas on a specific topic. This event was part of a larger, ongoing effort from both Co-op and Co-op Foundation to engage young people in decision-making.

12 young facilitators and 10 Co-op Foundation staff members led and delivered the event with the support of HUDL. We recognised that there is a need to include a broader range of perspectives when making decisions with young people. That's why we brought together 34 young people from across Co-op and Co-op Foundation networks to take part in this event. This included young Co-op colleagues, the Co-op Young Members Group, members of Co-op's Barnardo's Youth Advisory Group, members of the Peer Action Collective and students from the Co-op Academies Trust.


Thank you to all the young facilitators and attendees for all the time, effort and energy they put into making our first online hackathon event a success.

All the learnings they shared during the hackathon will help inform our future youth engagement work and strategies. It will also help us to build on and improve the way in which youth voices influence our work at Co-op and Co-op Foundation, including our organisational practices. We look forward to sharing more about how we will work with young people to do this over the coming months.




How the event was structured


We began with a check-in where participants were introduced to the aims of the event and encouraged to share what they hoped to bring to the discussions. This was followed by an icebreaker activity that helped participants connect and set the stage for the conversations that followed. Attendees were then divided into breakout groups where they introduced themselves and established community guidelines.




Next, participants engaged in a series of sprints—intense, focused brainstorming sessions—exploring key questions. Our young facilitators helped guide these conversations, ensuring that everyone's voice was heard and that discussions stayed on track.




During the first sprint, participants were asked to consider questions like "What should Co-op prioritise when working with young people?". They were also asked to explore what meaningful youth participation looks like. This sprint aimed to identify the key elements that contribute to successful engagement.



The second sprint focused on identifying the barriers young people face when working with organisations like Co-op. They were also asked to suggest steps to prioritise youth-led initiatives. Participants considered questions such as "What innovative ideas can be developed?"



After the sprints, the groups came back together to share their insights and proposals. Each group had two minutes to present their ideas. An online poll was conducted to gauge the most appreciated ideas, providing a snapshot of the group's overall priorities.



The day concluded with a debrief where participants reflected on their discussions and the ideas generated. Final thoughts from participants, facilitators and the Co-op Foundation staff highlighted the significance of the day and the commitment to seeing these ideas come to life.



Young people's ideas for removing barriers to youth participation

Below, you can find each group's proposals. They wrote these during the hackathon:

Group 1 : Improving access and representation

Barrier: Limited access to opportunities, particularly in underrepresented communities.

Idea: Launch an ambassador programme to raise awareness of opportunities more effectively, especially in harder-to-reach areas. Ambassadors, trained in public speaking and resource creation, would promote these opportunities in schools and youth groups.

Outcome: Greater inclusivity and a stronger, more connected Co-op youth community across all regions.

Group 2 : Simplifying communication and engagement

Barrier: Inaccessible communication due to jargon and complex titles within Co-op.

Idea: Create a 'jargon buster' and produce videos that explain roles and projects in simple terms. Include 'Day in the Life' videos to make senior staff more approachable.

Outcome: Easier, more comfortable engagement between young people and senior staff. This will help to reduce barriers to participation.

Young people's ideas for removing barriers to youth participation

Group 3: Building trust and accessibility

Barrier: Lack of trust, accessibility and development opportunities for young people.

Idea: Implement restorative and fun/creative practices; provide tech and financial support; offer flexible, accessible communication methods; provide mentorship and role model programmes that reflect diverse communities.

Outcome: Enhanced trust, improved accessibility and greater personal development for young participants.

Group 4: Improving accessibility and engagement

Barrier: Time management; digital barriers; ensuring young people's voices are heard in complex discussions; accessibility for disabled youth; building confidence to attend events.

Idea: Focus on in-person meetups with tailored teaching methods; increase outreach in areas that are less accessible; provide funding for youth centres; technology training.

Outcome: Improved engagement, greater awareness of opportunities and stronger participation from all young people, including those with disabilities.

Group 5: Amplifying youth voices in decision-making

Barrier: Limited opportunities for young people to suggest and vote on targeted projects across Co-op.

Idea: Create a platform for young people to propose and vote on projects. This should be supported by an accessibility fund to ensure all can participate.

Outcome: Enhanced youth leadership and involvement in decision-making, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity in projects.

Young people's ideas for removing barriers to youth participation

Group 6: Building awareness and engagement

Barrier: Lack of awareness about Co-op's youth participation initiatives.

Idea: Develop targeted messaging that is co-designed by young people; promotion through social media, billboards, schools, and youth groups to increase visibility.

Outcome: Broader awareness of Co-op's projects, leading to higher engagement and more opportunities for young people across different regions.

Group 7 : Financial empowerment and inclusivity

Barrier: Inadequate financial support and inaccessible resources for young people.

Idea: Provide direct payments/scholarships instead of vouchers; ensure young people have access to necessary tech; create inclusive environments, including diverse food options at events.

Outcome: Financial empowerment for young people, better resource accessibility and increased participation through inclusive practices.

Group 8 : Recognising and rewarding contributions

Barrier: Feeling undervalued and unable to capitalise on opportunities due to location and resources.

Idea: Introduce scholarships or funding for young people who have contributed to Co-op initiatives; offer public recognition on website or platforms like LinkedIn.

Outcome: Increased motivation and sustained involvement through recognition and tangible rewards, enabling wider participation and impact.

Other key points made by young people during the session

The following notes capture the key themes and learnings that emerged from each group's wider discussions throughout the event:

Inclusivity and accessibility

Ensuring that youth participation is inclusive and accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds was highlighted as a priority. This includes addressing barriers such as:

- Access to technology
- Financial constraints
- Logistical issues (including travel)
- Strict delivery times that do not allow for flexibility
- Access to free Wi-Fi

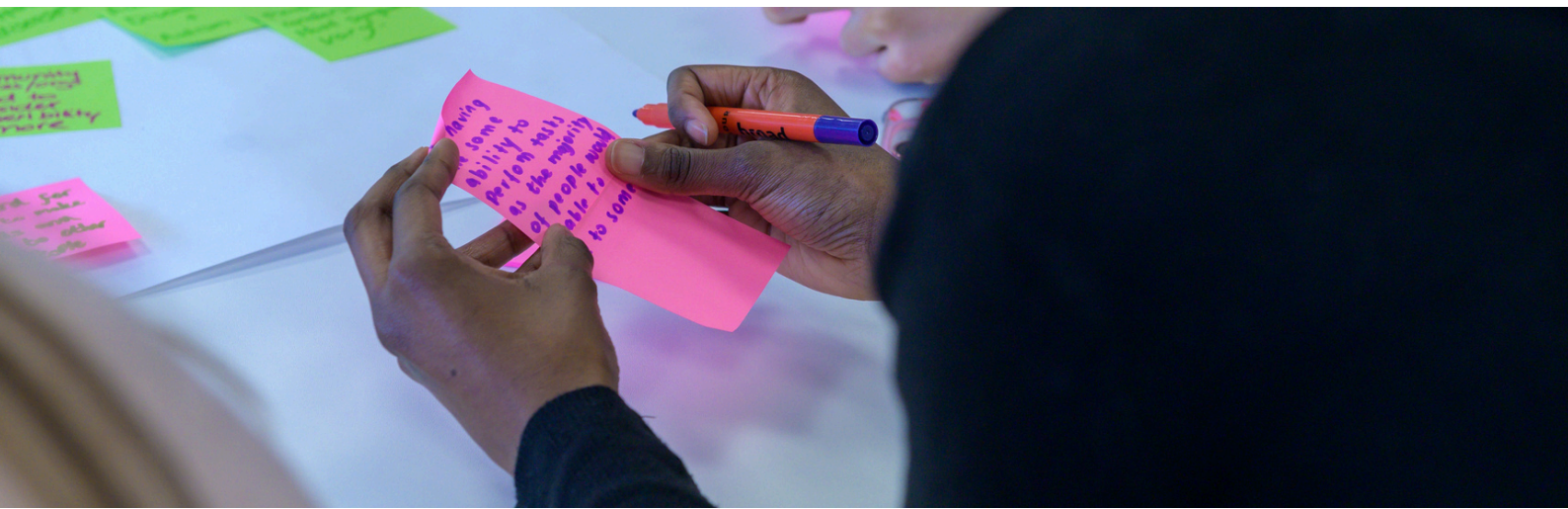
Additionally, valuing diverse perspectives and creating culturally sensitive environments were seen as crucial to fostering inclusivity.

Leadership and empowerment

Young people emphasised the need for more opportunities where they can be involved at every stage of a project, rather than just being consulted at the beginning or end. Sharing power with young people through leadership roles, coupled with seeing tangible outcomes, is crucial to be able to achieve this.

Additionally, offering relevant upskilling and training opportunities, especially those that focus on leadership, is essential for building confidence.

Mentorship from experienced individuals was also suggested as a means of supporting young people's development.



Authenticity and respect

Participants stressed the importance of authentic, non-tokenistic engagement where their voices are respected and valued equally to those of adults.

Young people explained that they want their contributions to lead to real, tangible results. At the same time, they emphasised the importance of fair and timely compensation for their contributions where appropriate.

The event also highlighted the need for a collaborative approach, with shared power and knowledge between young people and adults. This would help to ensure that youth engagement is genuine and impactful.

Safe and supportive environment

Creating a safe and supportive environment, where young people feel respected and valued, is crucial. This includes offering emotional and psychological support for those who are vulnerable or facing personal challenges.

Additionally, fostering a creative, fun, and enjoyable atmosphere was seen as essential, enabling participants to engage fully and think outside the box.

The event highlighted the importance of providing spaces where young people feel comfortable expressing themselves and contributing to discussions.

Impact and recognition

Participants want to see the impact of their contributions and receive constructive feedback as their ideas are put into practice. Continuous engagement, rather than one-time participation, is essential for sustained involvement.

Acknowledging and celebrating young people's contributions through certificates, awards and public recognition was also suggested as a way to add credibility. Additionally, ensuring that young people see tangible outcomes from their efforts is important for maintaining their motivation and commitment.

Structural and systemic changes

Efforts should be made to change organisational practices to meet the evolving needs and perspectives of young people. This includes being mindful of power dynamics, cultural sensitivities, and representation at all levels.

Participants emphasised the importance of organisations adapting their approaches to better accommodate and integrate new perspectives, ensuring that young people have a meaningful and lasting impact on decision-making processes.

Practical suggestions for implementing projects

Clear, open communication about project goals, progress, and roles is necessary. Participants suggested using a variety of communication methods to reach and support young people on an ongoing basis to achieve this.

The introduction of mentorship programmes, where young people can learn from senior members and peers, was recommended to build confidence and provide support. Addressing logistical and accessibility barriers, such as travel and scheduling, was highlighted as essential for ensuring effective participation.

Next steps

Embedding youth voices into our organisation is really important to us. That's why we really appreciate all the thoughts and suggestions young people put forward to help shape our youth participation work. We're looking forward to working with them over the coming months to implement and embed their valuable suggestions.

To stay up to date with how our youth engagement work is being influenced by the ideas young people shared at this event, sign up to the Co-op Foundation blog or follow us on X (formerly Twitter) or LinkedIn.

You can also find out more about Co-op membership and how we involve our young members by following the Co-op Young Member's group on Instagram @coopyoungmembers



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