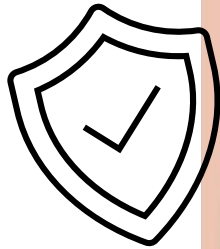


Authoring Our Own Stories

A neurodivergent perspective on civic Identity

Why do we have to recreate ourselves in adulthood? why are we not allowing children and young people with different identities to express themselves during the formative years of their lives? Social subscription? Toxic social culture? Neurodiversity has historically and to this day is formed on a medical model, highlighting an inability or disorder of some sort. This is an inability to fit 'inside a box' and disorderly because these identities push the boundaries of convention and social construction.

Young People, specifically neurodiverse young people need the spaces in society to express themselves safely. As part of the project 'Authoring Our Own Stories', we recruited 6 young leaders from different parts of Yorkshire and the Humber to lead a piece of peer research. Together we coproduced and delivered workshops to other SEND young people, targeting LA local offer services and other youth and education services. Overall, there were a total of 103 SEND young people that took part in the workshops and fed into the research. Most of the young people involved in authoring our own stories said that they have limited opportunities to be themselves with almost all young people reporting that they only really feel safe to show who they really are at home in their bedroom.



What is your ideal safe place to share who you are?.

Anywhere that noone judges you

bedroom, no fear of being their selves

With people that understand, online friends, therapy and counselling

specific teachers and mentors, they understand and make it a safe space

with little brother

with mates can be chaotic or not need to fit in with societal norms

therapy and counselling, pets

people that you trust, the people who get to know the real you

Bedroom

Groups with same identity

Study support - college

Flying High

Certain venues

Around friends/bf. Those you trust

Northallerton club night for those with disabilities

Family

All the young people said that they feel safe in a youth work environment, most of the publicity for these services are however aimed at parents with most of young people reporting that they've "never even heard of the local offer'. A lot of the young people said that they felt like they had more control over who they were online, using this as a space to express themselves, when we explored this further with the young people they said it was because online they have a choice, they can make decisions for themselves, giving them a sense of independence and autonomy.

"I feel safe to be me at the youth centre"

"Ad astra is one of my safe spaces"

"Nightmare castle, I can be Geno, I don't have to be Lydia"

The local offer pages themselves after doing some research and targeting these groups to enable the collection of data for the research are also extremely limited and some of the statutory local offer services that were contacted at the time were no longer available due to lack of attendance and funding. Most of the services available are arts and crafts or general respite type activities for parents and carers of SEND young people rather than services designed to empower and educate young people around the Youth work curriculum.

Education services, specifically secondary schools were deemed as unsafe by young people with most of the young people saying that they mask who they are including suppressing ticks and stims to prevent themselves from being alienated and discriminated against.

Some students said that certain teachers and support staff were supportive and have influenced them during school, with young people saying that there are few places they can share who they are in school and that there are only certain teachers and support staff that give them a space to do this. Most young people felt as though professionals, especially teachers had lower expectations of them, making less of an effort to provide them with support

or guidance in certain areas of their education< especially when transitioning to higher/further education.



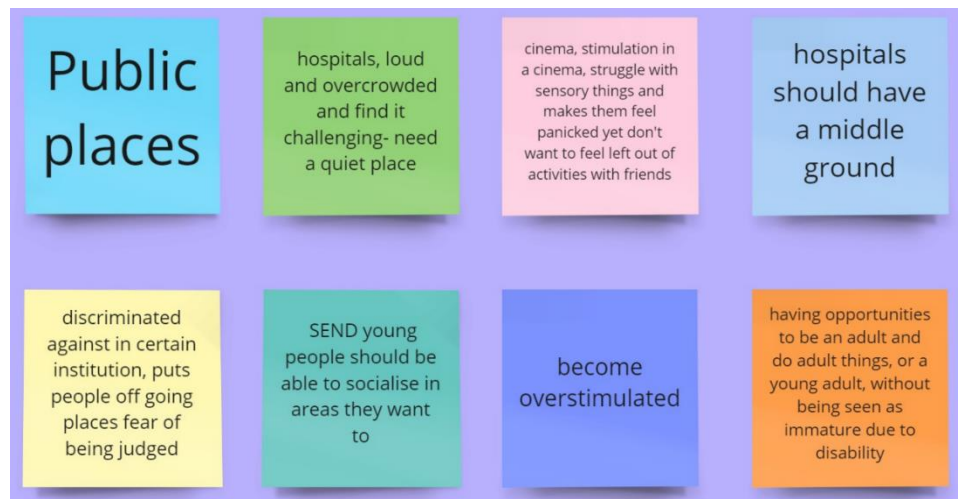
Which services/people/places support who you want to be?

Hard to find the services without knowing someone else who may use it	Transport doesn't in NY as free transport to places of education only for under 16s	DSA makes you prove your disability each year	Youth groups for disability
Teachers trained/understand us	Other people with SEND	SEND forum and youth choir	my games and online community
their okay but most are neurotypical and sometimes aren't services they feel comfortable with	not clubs specifically for certain interests eg. gaming club, LGBTQ+	don't allow young people with SEND to do anything productive	expected to just chat after being put in a room with people
area, could never access much without travelling far	services like send forum or catered towards SEND gives good opportunities for young people	once SEND is tagged into a club/service you don't feel the need to explain yourself	Judged for conditions when submitting things off, their own private business




Are there other places that don't support who you want to be?

Hospitals	Education doesn't always support young people with SEND	Employment isn't always as easier for those with SEND	Government financial symptoms for disability
Wheelchair accessibility - getting an	Places that say they are disability	I feel like high school supported me less than	Masking doesn't equal coping in



"Teachers think that we are low achievers... because I have autism they just didn't want me to disturb".

"I had to pretend I wasn't autistic to feel comfortable and confident in my university interview".

"I was scared of going to University because of my experience at school"

There was a clear lack of agency with 'other people' making decisions for most SEND young people without consulting, negotiating or in some cases even discussing choices/decisions/options with them beforehand, including parents, teachers, youth workers, professionals and other family members.

"I'm forced to be gender fluid when I'm actually trans, my parents won't accept my pronouns".

"I don't like the colour pink but I have to wear it, my parents buy me my clothes so I have no control over what I wear or how I dress".

Do you think Identities are forced upon you, and if so how much?
-Is there always a choice?

feel like empowering young people when in SEND groups and proud of it but have to suppress it when in school etc.	in particular instances you have to tell everyone a personal part of identity when sometimes not completely comfortable with it	having to suppress yourself after late diagnosis, people not understanding fully	depends on whether your in an accepting environment
In schools students placed in lower sets and viewed as low target students			



Family pressuring certain identities	Peer pressure	Some identities are just what you are. E.g. Disability and LGBTQ+	Some disability identities are comorbid with conditions like autism and ADHD
Outsider in a social group even when they have similar interests to me			



Specific Themes that were common throughout the data

- Lack of youth services specifically those that allow YP who are neurodiverse to engage with decision makers and influence change and there are limited or in most cases no transition services post 25.
- Parent/carer/education provider gatekeepers can become barriers to young people's progress and their access to support and there was a general lack of support specifically for YP-local offers were outdated/very limited when looked at in 2022.
- Decisions made for young people rather than with them/ Lack of agency; others choose their pathways, identities-parents, carers, teachers, societies expectations of them as a disabled person in the first instance rather than as a YP
- Made to feel different/isolated and outcast-lack of awareness and education/Treat like a problem-Negative/derogatory language around neurodiversity used by professionals, other people.
- Youth services are highlighted as being safe spaces for young people but need to cover subjects such as sex education, careers, voting, finances, mental health etc, following the National Youth Work curriculum.
- Schools are highlighted as negative places for neurodiverse YP in terms of their identity-having to mask, seen as a problem amongst students and staff-the medical model and system/ Young people build a lack of trust mentality/anxiety around who they really are/masking/withdrawing.
- Challenging for parents to get the right support battling with the system-YP feel like they're the problem again.
- A lot of neurodiverse YP reported feeling angry, confused and alone as part of their exploring identity exercise; putting this feeling inside their box, symbolic of the things they try not to show or share. All the young people that took part said that they prefer to share their feelings with people who they can relate to and who share their own lived experiences.
- Safe spaces for SEND young people need to be accepting, where young people feel valued, respected, and emotionally supported.

Feedback from some of the SEND young people that took part in 'Authoring Our Own Stories' Year One

SEND council groups should be ran by people with SEND as they can relate

Teacher training should include a module on supporting SEND pupils

Disability minister should be a disabled person

Just because you can explain a condition, doesn't mean you can manage it

What our young leaders would like to achieve...the big picture

More transitions services for SEND yp reaching adulthood post25 (education and employment, sexual health, independence, cooking, finances, politics)

Greater representation of SEND people and positive role models in the media, careers, decision making/politics, services-teachers, doctors etc

Safer spaces for young people with SEND such as the cinema/theatre showings for older yp, nightclubs and other social spaces catering for older young people. Currently most of these leisure activities for neurodivergent young people are aimed at younger children.

More services/opportunities for young people to actively engage in decision making. -stamp out ableism and the assumption that neurodiverse young people can't make decisions for themselves or that they're not capable of voting, going into higher education or forming their own identity/identities.

Education reform-secondary schools need to be able to create a nurturing, inclusive and accepting community, allowing all young people to explore who they are. The current secondary education system is out of date and needs reforming to include a comprehensive curriculum tailored to its individual students, covering important life skills and the fundamentals for adulthood-finances, politics and voting, health and wellbeing. Staff need adequate training; even support staff-other adults/professionals working with SEND young people.

Youth services need to focus on the National Youth Work Curriculum covering subjects such as sex education, finances and employability.

SEND yp need to be made aware of the local offer, aimed at yp rather than just parents-needs to include more services for young people to actively engage in decision making, networking locally and regionally.

Next steps...

-Use findings from AOOS to inform SEND Alliance campaigns (regional group for SEND young people)

-Recruit more young people to join the regional SEND alliance/offer this to young people from the settings we have engaged with over year one, giving them an opportunity to actively engage in campaigning and influencing the decisions made about the services which directly affect them. Build on regional network to help support SEND young people and SEND workers and help them have a voice.

-Offer Youth work Training (youth work bursary) to volunteers and other unqualified youth workers to improve and help inform their practice. Helping Youth workers understand and follow the Youth Work guidelines and standards in line with the Youth Work Curriculum.

Final comments from the young leaders.

-Daniel James

“Authoring Our Own Story has empowered young people to think creatively about their identity and how it impacts their services. This project has created an understanding of how we can influence decision-makers and co-produce services locally, nationally and regionally with councilors, ministers and other professionals. In order to unlock growth for the UK economy, we must ensure that young people access youth services, free, fair and accessible services making these opportunities accessible for all.”

-Muneerah Al-Yafai

“Throughout the project I have been able to see first-hand the effects poor services have on SEND young people and the ways we need to improve our institutions and culture in society. I’ve had amazing conversations with people all over Yorkshire and Humber who are ready to make the necessary change to become more inclusive and make services more effective with the right funding. One of the findings which we would like to investigate further is the lack of BAME and neurodivergent young people in youth clubs, perhaps due to a lack of inclusivity.”

-Olivia Harrison

“I’ve really enjoyed being a part of something and finding new friends. It’s helped me find a safe space to just be me, somewhere I can say what I feel with a group of people who are there to support each other, we want to get other people to join the alliance to get their voices heard on the issues important to them”.

Reece Spanton

“I’ve loved being part of the project, it has helped me in terms of my own identity, exploring concepts around what it means to be ourselves and where we feel safe to show this, highlighting that there are no safe spaces for SEND young people to just be themselves and that there is a huge funding gap in SEND youth services. I am now training to become a professional Youth Worker”.

Kacie Hodgson

“I have loved being able to discuss some of the most important issues, which I myself experience every day with other SEND young people and I have loved the opportunity to be able to represent other SEND young people who feel underrepresented and alienated, highlighting the need for more funding for SEND youth services and a cultural change to include more social spaces catering for older neurodivergent and disabled young people such as cinemas and nightclubs”.

Theo Madden

“It’s been an incredible journey, helping me explore my own identity and helping others to think about how they fit into the world and experience the world around them in relation to how others see them, I’m interested in advocating for all SEND young people and campaigning for better services and for greater representation of SEND young people in politics, the media and Youth Voice”.

