

Authoring Our Own Stories (AOOS)



Year 5 Annual Report Summary (April 2025 – March 2026)

Overview

Authoring Our Own Stories (AOOS) continued to provide meaningful opportunities for young people from Barnsley and former coalfield communities to explore their experiences, develop new skills and contribute to conversations about education, employment and community life.

During the reporting period, the project focused on supporting a dedicated group of 5–7 Young Leaders and Peer Researchers who played a central role in shaping activities, supporting outreach, contributing to research and ensuring that young people's voices remained at the heart of the project.

Year 5 fieldwork was completed during the reporting period, engaging around 70 young people through workshops, research activities, creative projects and community engagement. Analysis of the findings is now underway and will contribute to a deeper understanding of young people's experiences of education, inclusion, identity, belonging and future opportunities.

Key Achievements

During 2025–26, AOOS:

- Supported 5–7 Young Leaders and Peer Researchers.
- Engaged around 70 young people through Year 5 fieldwork, workshops and research activities.

- Completed a significant programme of youth-led research exploring young people's experiences of education, identity and belonging.
- Continued development of neuro-affirming employment resources in partnership with the University of Huddersfield.
- Produced a range of creative outputs including podcasts, short films, graffiti artwork, poetry, photography, creative case studies and careers-focused media content.
- Strengthened partnerships with schools, colleges, community organisations, youth services and academic institutions.
- Participated in regular national AOOS steering group meetings, contributing to programme-wide learning, planning and strategic development.
- Shared young people's experiences with practitioners, academics and policymakers to influence discussions around education, employment and opportunity.

Youth Leadership and Peer Research

A key focus of Year 5 was supporting young people to develop as leaders and researchers. Young Leaders and Peer Researchers played an active role in planning activities, supporting engagement, contributing to outreach and helping shape the direction of the project.

Young people continued to explore issues affecting their lives through peer research, building on previous work examining the experiences of young men within education and the barriers faced by young people growing up in former coalfield communities. This approach ensured that research remained grounded in lived experience and reflected the realities of young people's lives.

Participation in research activities enabled young people to develop confidence, communication skills, leadership abilities, critical thinking and experience in gathering and analysing information. Throughout the year, young people were supported not only to share their views but to become active contributors to research, discussion and decision-making.

Creative Storytelling and Youth Voice

Creativity remained central to the project throughout the year. Young people participated in a range of activities that provided opportunities to express their experiences, identities and aspirations in meaningful and engaging ways.

Activities included:

- Podcast production

- Film-making
- Graffiti and visual arts
- Spoken word and poetry
- Photography
- Creative writing and storytelling

Young people also worked alongside project staff and partners to develop individual case studies that captured lived experiences of education, support, employment and personal development. These stories helped bring research findings to life and ensured that young people's voices remained central to project outputs.

Planning also continued for a youth-led exhibition, with participants helping to shape ideas around how their stories, experiences and creative work could be shared with wider audiences.

Employment, Skills and Future Opportunities

Employment remained an important theme throughout the reporting period. Young people explored future aspirations, different career pathways and the opportunities available to them through discussions, workshops and creative media projects.

The project continued to develop careers-focused content through @thecollectiveyouthhub, including a careers film featuring an Esports tutor from Shipley College. These resources provided young people with insight into a range of career journeys and highlighted pathways into both traditional and emerging industries.

AOOS also continued its partnership with the University of Huddersfield to develop neuro-affirming employment podcasts. These resources explore the experiences of neurodivergent young people preparing for employment and will contribute to professional learning and teacher education programmes, helping professionals better understand the barriers and opportunities experienced by young people entering the workplace.

Partnership Working and National Collaboration

Partnership working remained a significant strength of the project throughout the year. AOOS continued to build relationships with schools, colleges, community organisations, youth services and academic partners to increase opportunities for young people and strengthen the reach of the project.

Partnerships supported workshop delivery, outreach activity, creative projects, research development and future planning. The project also continued to engage with stakeholders working across education, youth services, employment and SEND,

ensuring that young people's experiences informed wider discussions about policy and practice.

Alongside local partnership work, project staff participated in regular national Authoring Our Own Stories steering group meetings with delivery partners from across the country. These meetings provided opportunities to share progress, reflect on emerging findings, exchange learning and contribute to the strategic direction of the wider programme.

The steering group enabled partners to consider national trends affecting young people, identify common themes emerging across different communities and explore how local learning could contribute to wider discussions around education, inequality, youth participation and community development. This collaborative approach ensured that the experiences of young people in Barnsley were connected to a broader national conversation while also helping to shape future project planning and delivery.

Impact

Throughout 2025–26, AOOS demonstrated the value of youth-led research, creativity and participation. Through the leadership of 5–7 Young Leaders and Peer Researchers and engagement with around 70 young people, the project created opportunities for young people to develop confidence, skills and influence.

Young people were supported not only to participate, but to become researchers, storytellers, advocates and decision-makers. Their experiences, ideas and creative outputs have helped shape conversations about education, employment, belonging and opportunity, ensuring that young people's voices continue to be heard and valued within their communities and beyond.

As Year 5 fieldwork concludes and analysis progresses, the project continues to build a powerful evidence base that will contribute to future learning, partnership development and opportunities for young people across Barnsley and former coalfield communities.

This version reads as a strong National Lottery-style annual report narrative, focuses solely on Year 5 activity, includes the confirmed participation figures, highlights the steering group involvement, and demonstrates both local impact and national contribution.