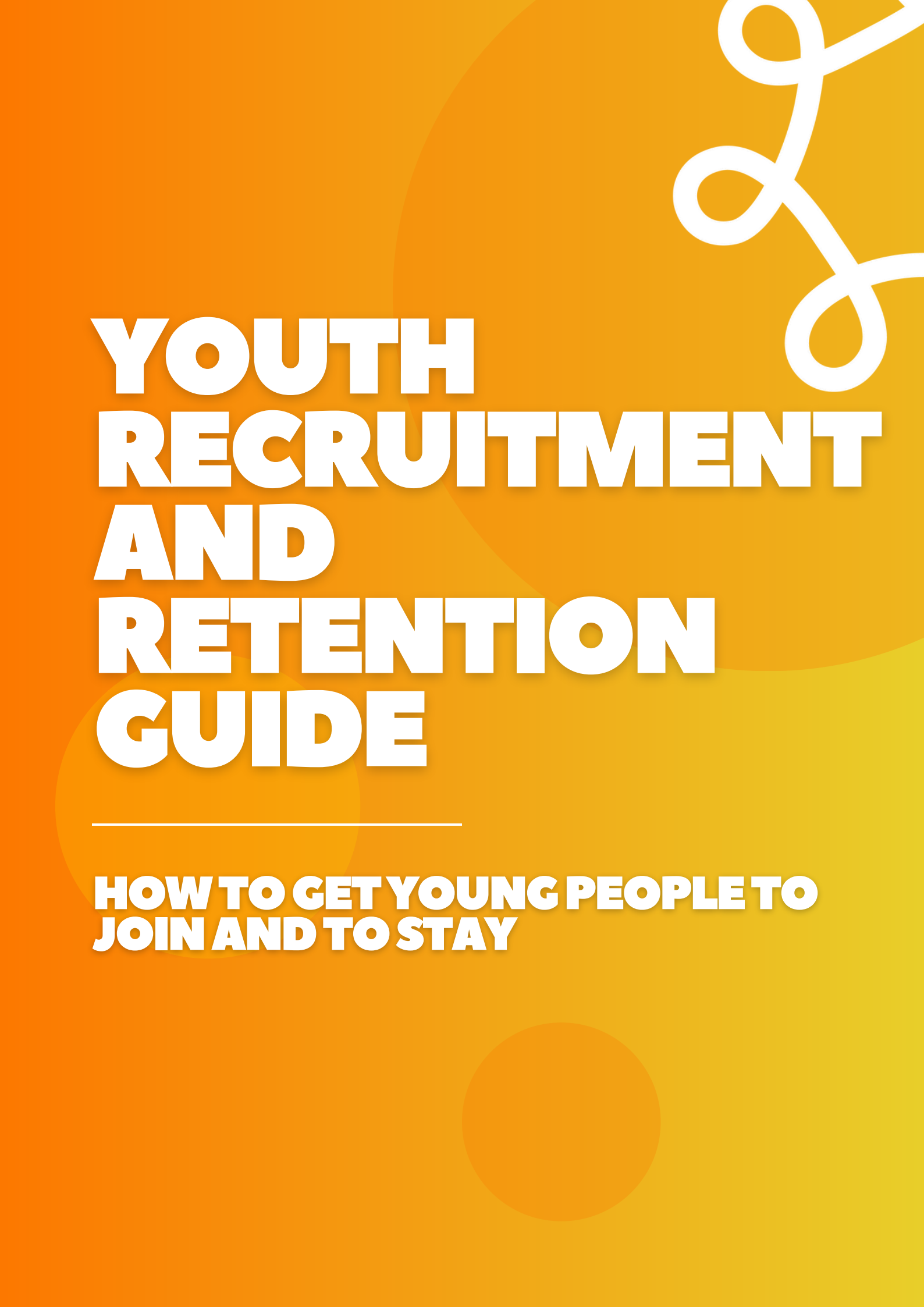




YOUTH RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION GUIDE

**HOW TO GET YOUNG PEOPLE TO
JOIN AND TO STAY**

WHY RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION MATTER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Every child and young person has the right to be heard, valued, and actively involved in shaping the decisions that affect them.

To have meaningful engagement, young people need to be seen and respected, and they need to see the difference their voices make.

Recruitment and retention are about creating spaces where young people feel welcome, supported, and celebrated. It is a necessary step for meaningful inclusion, equity, and genuine participation.

The aim of this guide is to support organisations to build inclusive and effective recruitment pathways for diverse young people based on three cornerstone principles:

- **Motivation and Incentives:** encouraging participation through meaningful opportunities.
- **Recognition and Rewards:** celebrating and valuing effort, progress, and impact.
- **Retention and Growth:** ensuring long-term engagement through care, development, and belonging.

WHY RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION MATTER FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Organisations that prioritise how they attract, value and keep young people see measurable benefits across performance, reputation, and long-term sustainability. Smart businesses recognise young people are an essential asset necessary for long term success.

Here are just a few of the benefits that come with recruitment and retention that make it the only logical choice.

Stronger Results and Higher Impact

When young people feel motivated and respected, projects run smoother, insights are richer and outcomes are more relevant. Well-retained youth participants carry knowledge and reduce the learning curve for new projects.

Greater Return on Investment

Recruitment takes time and resources. By retaining young people once they're involved, organisations lower the cost of re-recruiting and re-training participants for each cycle.

Increased Innovation and Relevance

When young people are retained, they shape projects with lived experience and creativity that is responsive to changing needs. This continuous feedback loop leads to better design, more inclusive delivery and higher public trust.

Investing in youth recruitment and retention is not an optional extra, it's a foundation for efficiency, credibility, and long-term impact.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN RECRUITMENT

Our building blocks are the non-negotiables that need to be considered in order to create inclusive practises within recruitment. Every singles block if we want out house to stand (or have successful recruitment).



BUILDING BLOCKS OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN RECRUITMENT

BUILDING TRUST FROM THE START

Young people are more likely to participate when they feel that their involvement is meaningful and valued. Recruitment therefore, should communicate:

- **Purpose:** why their voice matters and what it will influence.
- **Transparency:** how decisions are made and what impact is realistic.
- **Value:** what's in it for them personally and professionally.

VALUE - WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM?

Participation should not be one sided. Young people are an integral part of the process and should be getting something out of it. They should clearly see how participation benefits them, such as:

- **Development:** Both personal and professional (skills, CVs, references)
- **Networking:** Building friendships and professional networks
- **Passion:** Contributing to change that matters to them

PRINCIPLES OF RECRUITMENT

There are some key considerations to factor in at the start of the recruitment process to ensure it is truly inclusive:

- **Diversity and Access:** Proactively reach out to young people from a wide range of backgrounds, abilities, and experiences.
- **Overcoming Barriers:** Remove obstacles such as travel costs, digital exclusion, or accessibility challenges
- **Youth Voice as the Norm:** Ensure all recruitment processes reflect youth voice values - feedback, visibility of impact, and acknowledgement.

THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS: STEP-BY-STEP



Step 1: Understand the Brief

- Clarify the project purpose and expected outcomes for what is being recruited to
- Identify the target demographic (e.g., age, experience, location, or protected characteristics).
- Establish measurable KPIs such as the number of young people, diversity goals, and engagement levels.

Step 2: Create Recruitment Assets

- Prepare materials that are eye-catching and youth-proofed, such as: Social media posts, flyers short videos, invitation letters and email templates.
- Ensure materials are:
 - Accessible (easy read, alt-text, clear font)
 - Tailored (matching the tone to your audience e.g. schools, parents, councils, youth groups)
 - Co-designed (reviewed by young people before distribution)

Step 3: Build Contact Networks

- Update and maintain a database of relevant contacts (schools, youth groups, SENDCOs, parent/carers forums etc) and identify the correct individual contact (not just generic inboxes).
- Combine digital and in-person approaches:
 - Attend assemblies, events, and fairs.
 - Send targeted emails and follow-up calls.
 - Post consistently on social media and tag partner organisations.

THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS: STEP-BY-STEP



Step 4: Deliver the Recruitment Drive

- Launch the campaign with a clear plan:
 - Send first contact emails, then follow up with phone calls or DMs.
 - Schedule posts and reminders weekly or bi-weekly.
 - Use peer recruitment (“bring a friend”) to widen reach.
 - Run taster or trial sessions to attract undecided participants.
- Keep messaging positive and consistent. Highlight success stories and fun aspects of involvement.

Step 5: Confirm and Onboard

- Once applications are received:
 - Send personalised confirmation and welcome messages.
 - Provide care packs or digital resources before the first session.
 - Introduce facilitators and explain expectations clearly.
 - Offer one-to-one support for any questions or access needs.

Step 6: Continue Recruitment Throughout the Project

- Maintain visibility by:
 - Posting updates about ongoing activities.
 - Sharing youth experiences and testimonials.
 - Keeping sign-up options open where appropriate.
 - Inviting past participants to mentor or co-lead new groups.
- Recruitment doesn’t end at sign-up, it continues as long as young people remain engaged and motivated to stay involved.

Keep the language human.

Ditch the jargon, acronyms and over-polished comms.

Say “help us make this better for young people like you”, not “we’re seeking participants for a youth engagement pilot evaluation project.”

Authentic, accessible tone = instant trust.

Go where they already are.

Recruitment doesn’t start with posters — it starts with presence.

Show up where trust already lives.

Work through trusted messengers: youth workers, community connectors, peer recruiters.

That’s how you reach the quiet ones, the busy ones, the ones who think “this isn’t for people like me”.

5 TOP TIPS FOR RECRUITING YOUNG PEOPLE

Design with them, not for them.

Before you recruit, co-design the opportunity with a small group of young people.

Let them shape what the project looks, feels and sounds like — from the invitation language to the incentives and even the title.

If young people don’t recognise themselves in the design, they won’t recognise the opportunity as for them.

Make joining feel like belonging.

From sign-up to session one, create moments that say “you matter here.”

Welcome packs, personal intros, creative icebreakers, clear expectations, and no assumptions. We use short pre-join chats to check access needs and comfort levels — that tiny investment builds psychological safety from day one.

Reward fairly and visibly.

Respect young people’s time and energy.

Offer vouchers, payment, accreditation, or portfolio credits.

But also show recognition through visibility — quotes, reels, shoutouts, leadership opportunities.

When young people see their work out in the world, it validates their voice.

BEWARE OF BAD PRACTISE

Not every form of participation is meaningful. Bad practice in recruitment and retention often happens unintentionally, when deadlines, targets or assumptions take priority. You can lose the opportunity to engage with young people authentically and once that trust is broken, it's very hard to rebuild.

Let take a look at what bad practise is and how to begin fixing it.

	Bad Practise	How To Fix It
Tokenistic Involvement	Trying to "tick a box" undermines trust and authenticity. When views are not acted on, fed back or valued, participation feels hollow.	Make sure every young person's time has purpose and every voice has influence.
Last-Minute or Rushed Recruitment	Starting recruitment too late or using copy-and-paste outreach results in low engagement and cannot build the kind of relationships that lead to genuine youth involvement.	Start early, plan ahead, and give people time to respond thoughtfully.
Overcomplicated or Exclusive Messaging	Long emails, jargon-heavy resources and inaccessible designs can put young people off before they've even started. If the offer isn't clear, simple, and relevant, it will be ignored.	Keep communication short, visual, and focused on what matters to young people.
Ignoring Accessibility and Inclusion	Assuming that all young people can attend and engage unsupported excludes those most in need of a platform. It goes beyond "we invited everyone", genuine inclusion isn't just opening doors, it removing barriers to entry.	Budget for access needs, provide options, and asks what support each person requires.
Poor Follow-Up or Communication	A lack of updates after sign-up or between sessions signals that the organisation doesn't really care.	Keep the conversation going, through reminders, updates and feedback.

BEWARE OF BAD PRACTISE

	Bad Practise	How To Fix It
No Recognition or Feedback	Failing to acknowledge effort or impact quickly leads to disengagement. Young people need to see that their time matters and that they're valued.	Celebrate milestones and shares appreciation publicly. Show how their ideas led to real change.
Over-Professionalising or Under-Valuing Youth Expertise	Sometimes organisations expect young people to behave like adult consultants, punctual, polished, and formal, while treating their input as less credible. Both extremes are harmful.	Balance professionalism with empathy, providing fair pay or recognition while honouring lived experience as real expertise.
Staff Burnout and Inconsistency	When delivery teams are unsupported, overworked, or unclear on expectations, the quality of engagement drops. Young people feel this inconsistency immediately.	Ensures staff are trained, confident, and looked after because sustainable youth engagement depends on healthy teams.
No Exit or Retention Plan	Many organisations put energy into getting young people in but not enough into keeping them involved or celebrating their journey when it ends. Bad practice lets engagement fizzle out.	Plan for retention and closure from the beginning ensuring young people can progress, stay connected or move into new roles.
Ignoring Learning and Reflection	Repeating the same methods without review leads to stagnation. Processes should constantly be adapting and evolving as young people feedback their experiences.	Build in time for reflection asking "What worked? What didn't? What can we do better next time?" with both staff and young people contributing equally.

Bad practice happens when youth participation becomes transactional instead of transformational. True engagement takes planning, humility, and follow-through — but the reward is a culture where young people trust, return, and thrive.

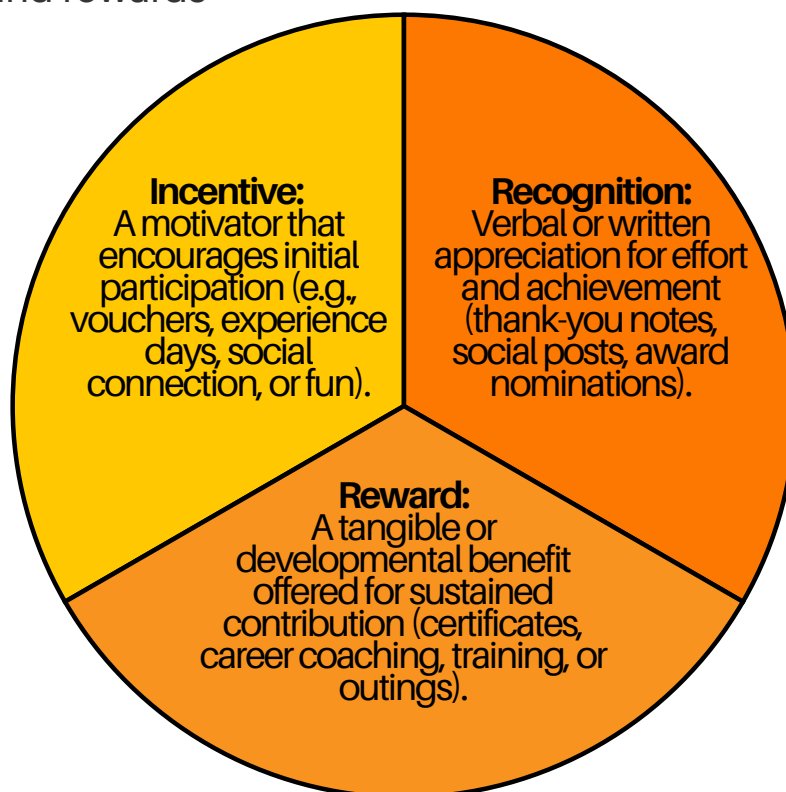
MOTIVATING, RECOGNISING AND REWARDING YOUNG PEOPLE

Recruitment gets young people through the door, motivation and recognition keep them coming back.

It's important to explore how to value young people's time, effort, and expertise in ways that feel fair, personal, and meaningful.

From small gestures of appreciation to structured reward systems, organisations can design incentives that celebrate growth, encourage participation, and show genuine respect for every contribution.

First, it is important to understand the difference between incentives, recognition and rewards



MOTIVATING, RECOGNISING AND REWARDING YOUNG PEOPLE

Next it's important to consider how you go about designing meaningful incentives.

- Always co-design with young people, ask what would feel valuable or meaningful.
- Align incentives with personal growth and social value, not just material gain.
- Keep recognition visible and timely (don't wait until the end of the project).

When young people act as experts by experience, contributors, or co-facilitators, they deserve to be compensated fairly. However, there are key considerations to take into account when paying young people.

Organisations must balance:

- Ethical participation (avoiding coercion).
- Equality of access (recognising lived experience, not status).
- Legal and tax implications (particularly under-18s, Universal Credit and employment law).

Payments should never replace support or participation rights (such as travel costs or lunch) but can complement them as recognition of professional input.

(More information can be found in our Young People Incentives Policy)

THE RETENTION PROMISE

Retention is about creating relationships and experiences that motivate young people to stay. A strong retention plan should focus on four elements:

Support and Accessibility

- Personal connections with staff (1:1 meetings, mentoring)
- Cover transport costs in advance and help plan routes
- Tech support for online sessions
- Sensory-friendly environments in person and care packages for online sessions
- Mental health awareness and safe spaces
- Ensure venues are safe, accessible, and comfortable

Development and Progression

- Accredited learning opportunities (AQA awards)
- Coaching for job, college, or university applications and CV support
- References and recognition for their contributions
- Ongoing communication and feedback on their impact (while encouraging their own reflection)

Belonging

- Create fun, social, and team-building moments (games, shared meals, celebrations).
- Keep young people informed about wider organisational work or new projects.
- Share successes publicly to build pride and visibility.

Voice and Progression

- Ensure young people see real impact from their involvement.
- Provide opportunities to take on leadership or ambassador roles.
- Encourage peer-to-peer mentoring and co-facilitation.
- Celebrate transitions, leaving a project should feel like a graduation, not a goodbye.

Close every feedback loop.

Tell them what changed
because of them.

Send update reels, share
screenshots of policy shifts, or
invite them to present outcomes
to decision-makers.

It's not just good practice — it's
how you turn participation into
purpose.

Keep growing the room

Young people stay when they
keep growing.

Map out progression routes —
from participant to consultant.

Rotate roles, invite leadership,
celebrate milestones.

Development is the ultimate
retention strategy.

Match projects to passions.

Don't pigeonhole by
background — empower
through interest.

Ask: "What lights you up?"
Then tailor opportunities to that
spark.

That alignment builds intrinsic
motivation and long-term
commitment.

**5 TOP TIPS
FOR
RETAINING
YOUNG
PEOPLE'S
INTEREST**

Make care part of the culture.

Retention starts with
relationships, not rules.

Check-ins, emotional debriefs,
care packs, flexibility around
school, work, and wellbeing.

When young people feel seen
beyond the project, they bring
their full selves to the work.

Celebrate the messy middle.

Momentum dips happen. Keep
playfulness alive.

Bring snacks, memes, curiosity.

Acknowledge burnout and
boredom — then mix it up with
creative methods, new voices, or
unexpected formats.

Joy is the glue that keeps young
people coming back.

STRENGTHENING STAFF AND ORGANISATIONAL RETENTION

The retention of young people depends on the consistency and well-being of the adults supporting them. It begins with the adults who deliver the work.

Strong youth engagement is sustained when organisations also invest in their staff and systems:

- Regular check-ins and supervision: Keep delivery teams supported, reflective, and aligned.
- Observations and reflection on facilitation quality
- Team wellbeing: Ensure balance, recognition, and celebration of staff achievements.
- Ongoing professional development and training
- Opportunities for feedback, recognition, and well-being support
- Transparent compensation reviews and pathways for progression
- Shared learning culture: Use away days or retreats to reconnect with mission and values.

When teams feel valued, they are better equipped to model that same value and respect for the young people they work with.

PLANNING PROMPTS

Good recruitment and retention don't happen by chance, they're the result of thoughtful planning, reflection, and collaboration.

These simple prompts act as a starting point that teams can adapt to design, review, and improve their youth engagement work.

Use them with young people and partners to make sure your activities stay purposeful, inclusive, and grounded in real impact.

Planning Question	Purpose
What are the 3 aims of your activity/programme?	Clarifies purpose and focus.
What's in it for young people?	Ensures fairness and motivation.
What's in it for your organisation?	Clarifies mutual benefit.
What barriers might stop participation?	Identifies where support is needed.
What incentives or recognition will you use?	Encourages co-design and ownership.
What's your budget and timeline?	Sets realistic expectations.
How will young people help shape delivery?	Embeds co-production and trust.

THE PARTICIPATION PEOPLE SECRET SAUCE



There's a reason people turn to Participation People to learn what to do. Our recruitment and retention rates speak for themselves, we know what we are doing and we've got the stamp of approve from the young people themselves. So, what makes us so special?

1. We build belonging before branding.

Young people join people, not programmes. Our recruitment starts with human connection, not forms, flyers or corporate comms. We show up where young people already are: online, in communities, through trusted peers. We talk with them and we invite curiosity before commitment. That's why our panels, hackathons and creative spaces fill with young people who want to be there, not just those who can.

2. We design for difference, not sameness.

Every activity, tool and space is built from a "universal design" lens — accessible, flexible, trauma-informed, and neuro-inclusive by default. We use visual tools, gamified activities, and creative facilitation so every learning style and comfort level has a way in. Our mantra: If a young person can't access it, it's not inclusive enough yet.

3. We balance structure with spontaneity.

We know young people thrive when they feel safe and seen. We hold just enough structure for clarity — but leave space for improvisation, humour, and chaos (the good kind). Our teams bring playful professionalism — turning uncertainty into opportunity, tension into insight, and ideas into action.

4. We match motivation, not demographics.

Instead of chasing quotas, we ask: What makes this young person tick? We use our Youth Recruitment Matrix to identify strengths — activists, artists, analysts, advocates — and match opportunities to passions. That's how we get care-experienced coders, disabled dancers, neurodivergent policy-shapers, and anxious teens who become podcast hosts.



THE PARTICIPATION PEOPLE SECRET SAUCE



5. We make feedback a superpower.

We close every loop. Young people see what changed because of them — in emails, reels, and meetings. This turns participation from a one-off event into a movement they belong to.

Our retention isn't accidental — it's built on trust, transparency, and tangible proof of influence.

6. We reward effort with experience.

We don't rely on "exposure" as a reward. We offer paid opportunities, AQA accreditation, mentoring, and skills portfolios. Every project is a stepping stone — from "having a go" to "leading the room". That's how our Young Consultants stay with us for years — they grow with the organisation, not out of it.

7. We lead with love, not labels.

Behind every framework, there's a feeling — "You matter here." We use radical empathy, humour, and honesty to connect. We treat every young person as an equal, whether they're non-verbal, outspoken, or somewhere in between. That's the Participation People promise: everyone has something to teach and something to learn.

We don't just engage young people — we belong with them.

That's how we turn difference into brilliance, participation into partnership, and one-time projects into lifelong changemakers.



COMMON PITFALLS AND TIPS & TRICKS

Outdated contact lists or unclear referral routes.



Persistence pays off. One message isn't enough



Failure to use social media effectively (e.g. irregular posting, missing hashtags etc)



Show impact: Regularly show what young people have achieved through your projects.



Consistency matters. Post on a predictable schedule and keep branding unified.



Youth-proof everything. Get young people testing your messaging before it goes live.



Over-reliance on cold emails without relationship-building follow-up.



Information-heavy packs that overwhelm young people.



Time-block recruitment tasks: Treat outreach as a dedicated activity.



EDI by design. Include diversity and inclusion in your planning from the start.



Mix methods. Use both online (e.g. socials) and offline (e.g. assemblies) channels.



Ask directly. Personal invites or peer recs work better than open calls.



Unrealistic project goals that restrict inclusivity.



Short lead times for recruitment, leaving contacts unable to respond in time.



Be creative: Use short videos, GIFs, or quotes to bring projects to life.



TO SUMMERISE

Recruitment and retention are not one-time tasks, they're an ongoing cycle of listening, learning, and valuing.

The most successful programmes are those where:

- Young people understand their value and feel their contributions matter.
- Staff and partners actively remove barriers to participation.
- Recognition, communication, and care are woven into every step.

By treating recruitment as relationship-building and retention as shared growth, organisations can create youth programmes that are not only attended but where young people want to join, love to stay, and are proud to lead.