

SUII Knowledge Exchange Programmes

Designing Socially Just Institutions for 18-25-year-olds

Final Report

October 2021



A. Summary

Socially Just Justice for Young Adults aged 18-25

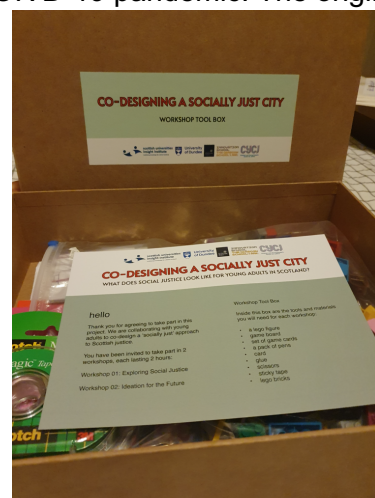
Young adults aged 18-25 are increasingly recognised as a distinct group who are caught in a liminal space between child and adult systems in which they do not receive the special protections afforded to children nor the opportunities and entitlements that the majority of adults expect and receive. This is particularly evident within the justice system whereby young adults are treated as adults, yet are still developing the physical, emotional and social maturity to assess risks, consider consequences, make decisions or fully understand and participate in justice processes (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2018). Subsequently, young adults are overrepresented in the justice system, experience poorer outcomes and are more likely to be reconvicted (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2016).

While young adults have received specific attention in other policy areas (e.g. care experienced young adults are eligible for aftercare until age 26) and in other jurisdictions, there remains a distinct policy, practice and knowledge gap in relation to justice involved young adults in Scotland. For example, there is currently no specific policy/approach for working with justice involved young adults in Scotland.

This programme aimed to support young adults to co-design an approach to justice that upholds their rights, meets their needs, and contributes to a peaceful, socially just and inclusive society. While it predominantly focused on SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), there was a strong interrelationship with poverty (SDG1), inequality (SDG10), wellbeing (SDG3), and gender (SDG5). A series of activities engaging young adults and justice professionals, drawing on design-led approaches, was used to facilitate participation, stimulate thinking and promote innovation.

Key Insights

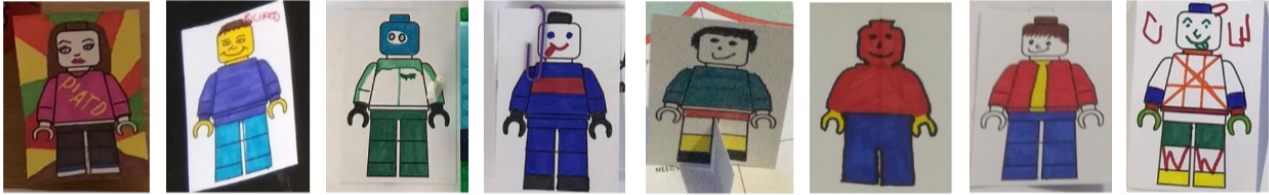
First of all the programme was a huge learning experience in terms of adapting face-to-face design-led approaches to online workshops in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The original plans involved large face-to-face meetings where young adults and justice professionals could work creatively with design professionals and share their perspectives. In being forced to adapt these to remote delivery we encountered a multitude of challenges as well as unexpected opportunities, and we learnt a lot about how to make online engagement with vulnerable or marginalised young adults safe, accessible and meaningful. We eventually went with a hybrid model where we delivered a 'workshop in a box' containing all of the materials required for participation (including snacks and pre-paid data cards where needed) to participants prior to the workshop. We then engaged with the participants online using the creative resources provided to foreground and support a design-led approach. Young adults took part in two 1.5 hour workshops, and professionals participated in one two-hour workshop. We intend to submit a journal article (currently in progress) on the **methodological journey and approach**.



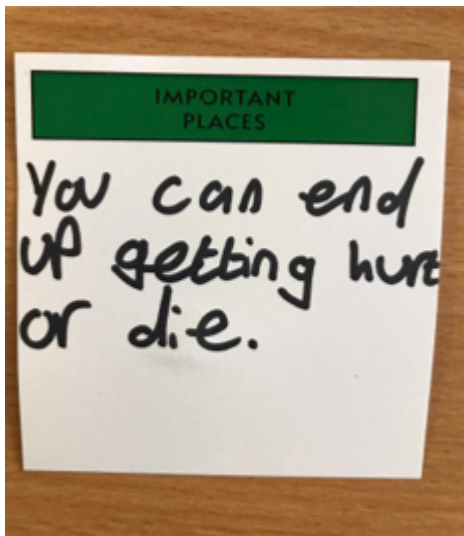


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We also learnt a great deal about what it feels like to be a young adult in conflict with the law, and **what social justice means** (as well as what has not been socially just about their experiences). The community was a central theme, either as a factor in becoming in conflict with the law, or as a barrier to desistance and reintegration.



Young adults described multiple, persistent and prolonged challenges in their communities, where 'the street' was an unsafe place to be because of community violence, peer pressure, substance use and cultural norms. Loss, bereavement and grief were also dominant experiences, that the young adults linked to their involvement in offending behaviours and to reduced health and wellbeing.

Relationships with 'the Polis' were particularly fraught, with young adults feeling targeted and discriminated against because of who they were or what they wore: *"They all ken all the faces and if you are known to the Police they just target you all the time...they just jump out the car and get in your face and that and try and get you to kick off wi them"*. Despite these challenging relationships, the police were also identified as a key component of social justice, by having the

potential to provide a protective and supportive relationship in a new socially just community.

Young adults found it difficult to find accessible and welcoming spaces in their communities for fun, purposeful activity or support. Professionals also identified that young adults did not fit easily into services for children or adults, describing the transition as a 'cliff edge' between often inflexible services: *"Whilst we're supposed to treat people in a kind of person-centred way, I don't think we're always very good at doing that. We want to put people into nice neat little boxes..."*

A lack of hope for the future was pervasive in the young adult's accounts and they often found it hard to envision a future in which they belonged and had a valued place in a community that supported them. Instead it appeared that their experiences of marginalisation, discrimination, shame, stigma and adversity had left them isolated with no-one to rely on but themselves *"I'd just moved house and we were thinking how are we gonna get food this week, we don't have parents we can ask to borrow a tenner from, no loan place would go near us because of our past."* Yet young adults felt that safe and trusted relationships were crucial to their potential for growth and development. It was clear that the community, and community organisations could play an important role in the growth and reintegration of young adults in conflict with the law, but that there would need to be healing and understanding first.



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From the young adults experiences and perspectives we distilled the **key components of social justice** for young adults in conflict with the law, that included:

- Feeling safe and protected
- Fair and equal treatment; a level playing field
- Person-centred, timely and holistic support, across the life course
- (Justice) responses that help and don't harm
- Easy access to essential public services
- Restorative relationships
- Opportunities and alternatives, 'pathways out'.



What was heartening and provided a positive indication for the future was that justice professionals wanted exactly the same for young adults in conflict with the law, and this synergy provides a framework for tangible change.

Key Outputs

The initial findings and an online exhibition of the creative assets from the workshop were launched at an event on the 3rd June, with around 200 registered participants. Attendees also heard about the methodological approach and heard directly from the young adults about their experience of participation and what their key messages were. In breakout rooms, participants also had the opportunity to discuss, debate and reflect on the findings and begin to identify potential policy and practice actions for change.

Other outputs include:

- An accessible report for young adults
- A poster for the SUII SDG conference
- A journal article on the methodological approach (in preparation)
- A journal article on the key findings (in preparation)

Planned follow-up activities include:

- Applying for further funding to host a series of design workshops bringing a small group of young adults and justice professionals together to translate the insights into action, considering the policy, practice and cultural changes needed to implement change.
- Applying for further research funding to develop knowledge and action around the theme of community in relation to social justice for young adults in conflict with the law.