GCIL

COMMUNITY FUND

YOUNG PEOPLE PROJECT
REPORT



DECEMBER 2025

Prepared By

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Glossary of terms

GCIL- Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living

YDP- Young Disabled People

GDPR- General Data Protection

PAs- Personal Assistant

YNP- Young Neurotypical People

BSL-British Sign Language

Introduction

GCIL (Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living) has worked with and supported disabled people for over 30 years. In recent years we have been working with a growing number of young people and families, supporting them to access the support they need to lead meaningful and positive lives in their community.

We sought to engage with young people and their families, to better understand their needs and challenges to inform a future young person' service.

GCIL was awarded a grant of £19,110 in November 2024 by the National Lottery Community Fund for the Young People Project.

The project was designed to work with young disabled people (YDP) and their families from the outset, centering the active participation of young disabled people themselves. Our aim was to identify and understand the main issues affecting their lives and to gather their insights on how services could be improved to support a more inclusive life.



Engagement with young disabled people and their families took place through a range of strategies and methods: The Living Voice Group (one-to-one sessions, group discussions, storytelling, school-based sessions) and a Survey Approach.

Evaluation took place October - November 2025 and the report was completed in December.

Project Context

Young disabled people and their families often find themselves shut out of conversations about the support they need. Many still face barriers when trying to navigate services, communicate their needs, or access the right help at the right time. This can leave families feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unsure where to turn. Despite this, young people's own experiences and insights are rarely asked for or listened to, even though they understand better than anyone what would make their lives easier and more fulfilling.

GCIL has supported disabled people for more than 30 years, and in recent years we've been working with more and more young people and families. Through this work, we could see that existing services weren't always meeting their needs, and that many young people didn't feel fully heard or understood. We wanted to gain a clearer picture of the challenges they face, what matters most to them, and what kind of support would genuinely make a difference. This project grew from a need to listen more closely, learn directly from young people and families, and ensure GCIL can continue to develop support that is helpful, responsive, and truly centred on their experiences.

Project Delivery Staff & Partners

Project Coordinators: Miura Lima, Lisa Paul and Harriet Machlachlainn
Project Support Team: Joanne McGee, Policy & Participation Team Lead, Jenny Marshall, Head of Operations
Project Partners: The Hope Project, Hazelwood School

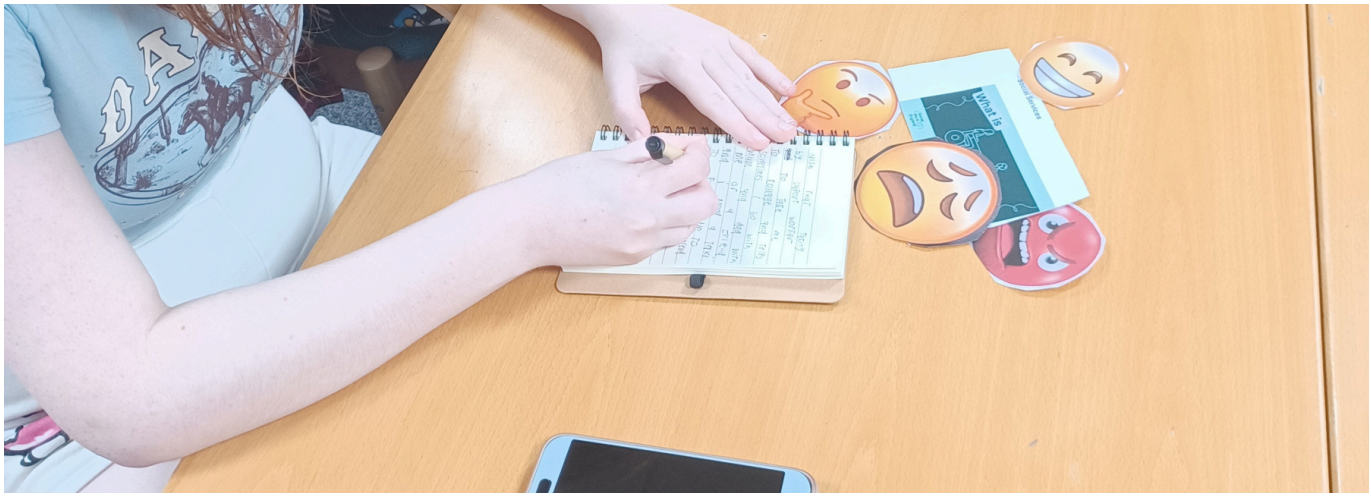
Our Approach

We designed our engagement strategies with the understanding that this was a nine-month project, including three months of preparation. We began by designing the project flyer for social media and other communication channels. Our promotional campaign aimed to reach a wider audience through social media, emails, and networking with other organisations.



At the outset, we reached out to YDP people, and their families who are already supported by GCIL services. Our second approach focused on identifying and prioritising key stakeholders such as schools, third-sector organisations working with YDP, the local council, and government bodies.

Our initial target group was YDP aged 12 to 25. However, due to slow early engagement, we extended the age range to 27.



We sent 172 emails to YDP and their families who were already registered with GCIL. Initially, eight young people and their families expressed interest in participating. However, due to low engagement, we followed up with 65 direct phone calls. After each call, we sent additional information about the project and upcoming in-person panel sessions.

This approach led to increased interest, but retention decreased over time due to several factors:

- Changes in participants' health,
- Families' lack of confidence, particularly where children were non-verbal,
- Concerns about the child's capacity to participate,
- Unanswered follow-up calls,
- Personal circumstances leading to withdrawal.

Our approach emphasised co-creation, creativity, inclusivity, and accessibility through different methods such as living voice groups and survey.

Engagement - Living Voice

We took different approaches to engage with young people and their families, to maximise involvement and participation. Our Living Voice groups comprised of in person and online sessions, storytelling sessions and sessions with a school.

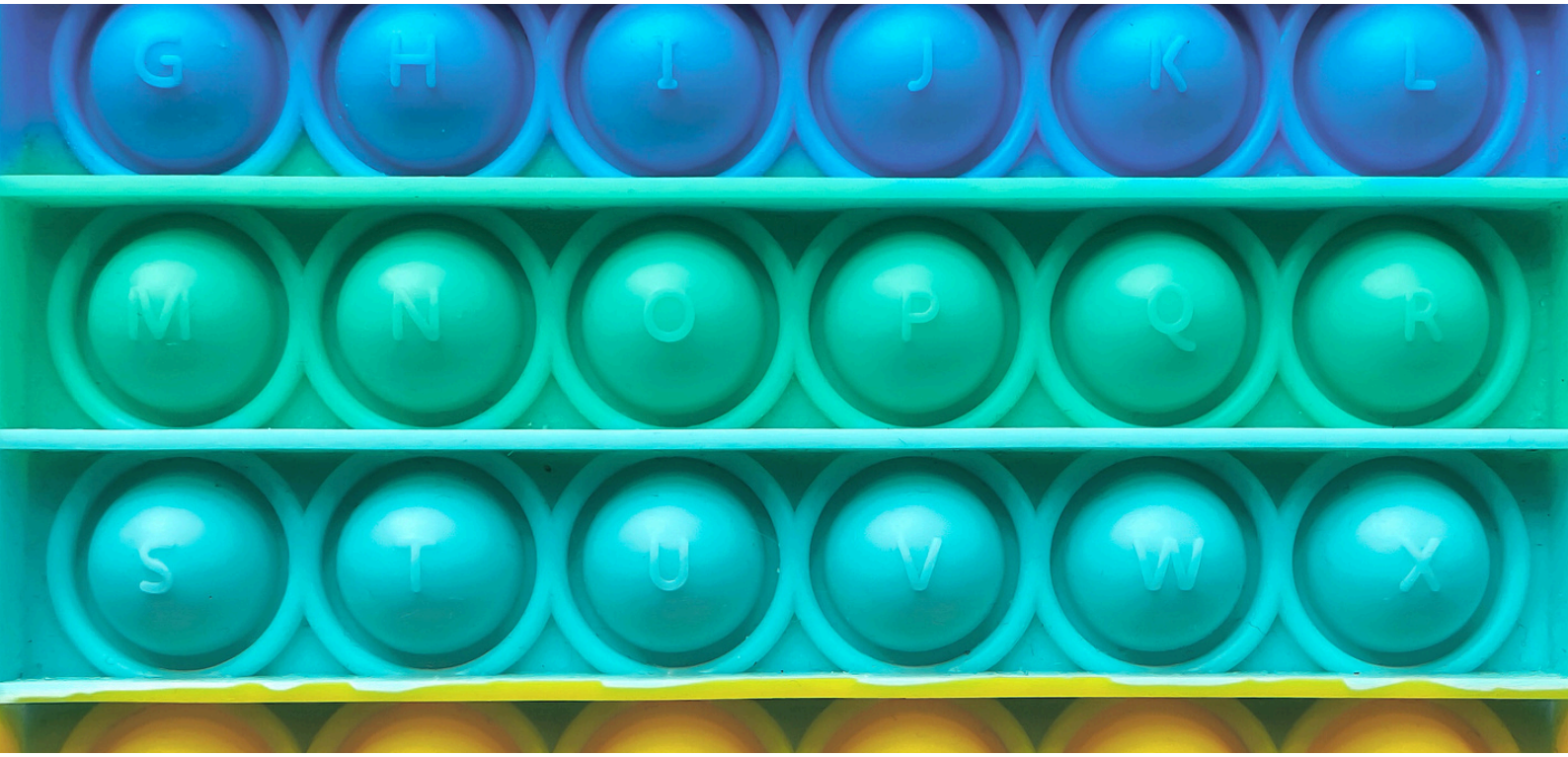
In Person Sessions

The initial sessions with participants were primarily practical and preparatory. We spent time listening to the young people to learn what would help them feel included, safe, and welcome. For example, we went over the consent forms, media consent forms, project information sheet, the safe inclusion of young people policy, and the community agreement. All documents were provided in an easy-read format to promote understanding and inclusive communication.



We assessed all needs:

- Physical barriers.
- Dietary preferences and offered snacks during sessions.
- Provided fidget objects, sensory tools, game materials, and emoji icon sets.
- Ensured the noise level met the needs of our participants, particularly those who are neurodivergent.
- Used a digital presentation incorporating plenty of communication icons and images to make discussions more accessible.
- Included short videos and calm background music for those who benefited from them.
- Used visual tools and encouraged participants to draw and express their thoughts and emotions.
- Used the British Sign Language (BSL) word list was also used to promote inclusive communication.





Breaks were built into the schedule, allowing time for rest and play. Many of the games involved physical activity to keep energy levels high and maintain engagement.



The facilitator used clear, plain, and calm language and tone. They provided extra explanations for any complex words or ideas and ensured that every YDP was fully supported and accommodated.



We also made sure that YDP were at the centre of the process using creative tools, such as drawing, to help them express their ideas.

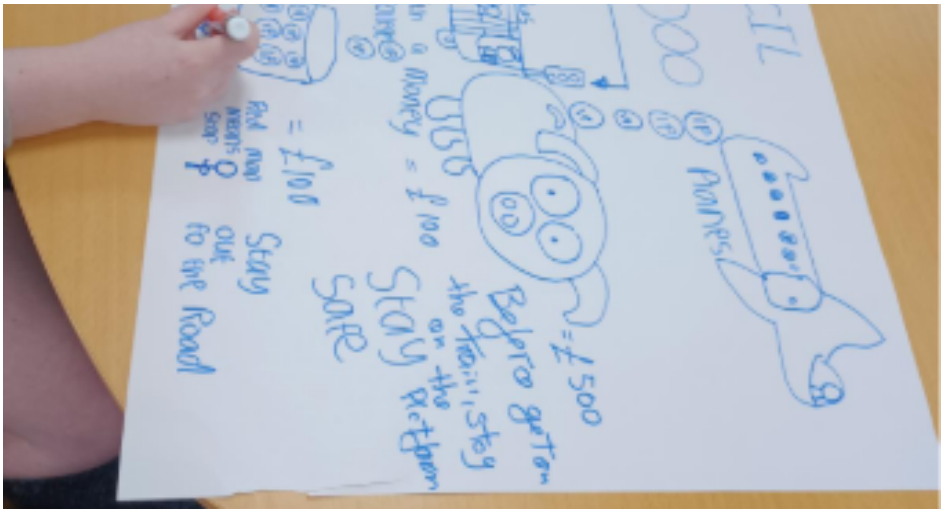
Online Sessions

As with the in-person sessions, the first sessions focused on the practical aspects of the project. Following the initial informative and consent session, we held a series of discussions centred on the main barriers that YDP face in their daily lives.

The questions were open-ended and followed up with gentle prompting or closed questions to support a natural and comfortable flow of conversation.
To prepare for these sessions, we created digital presentations using plain language, communication icons, and pictures to enhance accessibility and engagement. We also included ice-breaker activities and scheduled plenty of breaks to give participants time to recharge. During these breaks, we encouraged young people to drink water, stretch, or simply relax.

Storytelling

As with the other approaches, the first meeting was about the practical aspect of the project. For the storytelling activity we developed five key questions below, that were relatively simple to answer and included a mix of open and closed formats.



- What would a good life look like for the next five years?
- What makes a place safe and welcoming?
- What support and spaces do you wish existed?
- Give 5 words to describe your (or your child's) best experience with a service? And 5 words for their worst?
- What's the highlight of you (or child's week)?

During the session, we used a clear, visually engaging presentation designed to promote inclusive communication.
We also included an initial, poem writing activity to help participants feel comfortable sharing their stories. The poem the group wrote is shared below.

Stormy Day:

It has been a mix of beauty and rain.
The clouds caught me without an umbrella, I leapt into a puddle with a splash.

When you're jumping in puddles, there is the rain.
And after the rain? A story begins.
Who calls the storm?
Not a fairy, but a witch.
Stormy, the bad witch. What is she doing?
She's annoyed, isn't she? Why?
What happened to her?
Stormy is angry and spills the rain.
Because she was asked to do something small, a task she didn't want.
But hidden in her storm is a challenge, and also an opportunity, for me.
To turn her heavy clouds into release, to sing beneath the rain,
to let go of weight, to feel lighter.
What's your favourite song?
Mine drifts back, Soursop, from that old cartoon.
I hum it while the rain dances down.
And as I sing, I am happy. I am free.
The storm softens, and everyone around me begins to smile.

School Sessions

First, we met with teachers and staff to help them understand the project and explore how this collaboration could be designed around their students. The teachers then selected the students they felt would be most engaged with this type of project. After the initial engagement and preparation, the teachers decided that online sessions would be the most suitable approach due to their time constraints.

During the sessions, we included both open and closed questions about the main barriers to their life, allowing students to either elaborate or respond using icons and emojis.

Some students found certain questions challenging but still enjoyed discussions about themes like graduation and leaving school. Overall, most of the students expressed excitement, while two shared that they felt sad or nervous.

2 online sessions

- **4 students aged between 15 and 16 years old in session one, and**
- **6 students aged between 15 and 17 years old in session two.**



Engagement - Survey

Following the completion of our Living Voice Group approach, we designed an online survey to understand how the issues they highlighted to us resonated with other disabled and YNP.

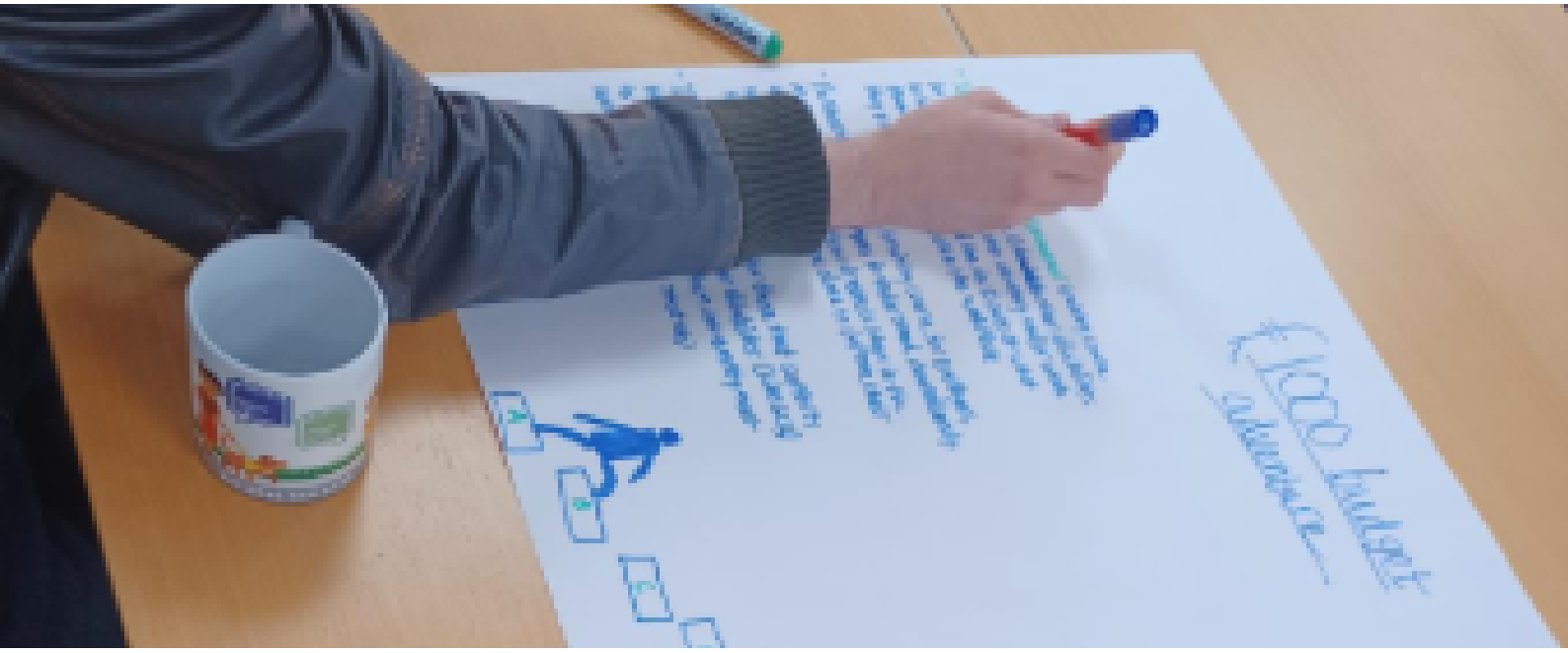


We sought to test if what the young people said in the living voice group was replicated on a larger scale. We launched the survey using our GCIL database of individuals known to be aged between 14-27 or supporting someone aged between 14-27. We also contacted thirty eight organisations whose work focuses on disabled and YNP to disperse our survey amongst their own networks.

Of the 24 viable responses, 16 were submitted from parents/carers, 7 were from young people, and 1 was from a personal assistant (PA).
We were not surprised that more parents/carers than young people responded to the survey due to how common it is for the parents of disabled young people- especially of those who have a learning disability and/or autism- to manage their child's support on their behalf.

What we learned from young people - Key Barriers to a Good Life

This section presents the key issues identified by young people through the various engagement strategies we used to listen to their voices. It reflects the different stages and aspects of their lives, capturing their lived experiences and the priorities they believe are essential for a good life.



Isolation and Loneliness

Young disabled people expressed that communication difficulties and misunderstandings affect nearly every aspect of their lives. Because of these challenges, they are more vulnerable to losing social connections and, with them, their sense of belonging. They highlighted that YDP and especially those individuals on the autism spectrum may not always have access to the right information, or may act in ways beyond their control, which are then misinterpreted as impairments or intentional behavior. Such misperceptions limit their social opportunities and further intensify their isolation.

The loss of meaningful connections and the experience of being left out reinforces a sense of invisibility. Many described feeling ignored, overlooked, or treated as though their voices carry less weight, an experience that deepens the gap between them and the communities they long to belong to.

“Like whenever I'm talking to other people, they're just like they don't get it. They just say, what do you mean by that? Or just ignore me? And it is just like that”.

The lack of empathy significantly affects how YDP and YNP interact with those around them. Members of the living voice group expressed deep frustration, noting that many individuals make little to no effort to understand the experiences of those disabled people. They highlighted that this lack of understanding impacts not only their daily lives but also their relationships with service providers and professionals. The group described this as a systemic issue, where minimal investment is made in addressing the barriers faced by YDP and YNP. As a result, their interactions with professionals are strained, leading to diminished trust in services.

The young people reported feeling disempowered, perceiving social care as something shaped by professional assessments rather than support that truly reflects their identities, needs, and lived experiences. This left them feeling invisible and increasingly frustrated, as such barriers obstruct their ability to progress in life.

“Overall, it is a kind of frustration with the fact that almost none of them know how to deal with autistic people, use the right language, listen attentively, or demonstrate empathy.”
Many young people reported that, after leaving school, there is a significant lack of accessible services and opportunities. Some expressed that their primary aspiration after school or college is to build friendships, while others described feeling profound loneliness due to the absence of support structures for people their age. They emphasised that there is a gap between leaving school and transitioning to adult life.

The group highlighted the absence of spaces where young people can develop their potential, connect with peers who share similar experiences, and cultivate a sense of belonging and purpose. They emphasised the need for a transitional space that allows them to exercise skills, learn new things, and engage with others in meaningful ways

Some YDP's aspirations include:

- "To have more friends to go out with."
- "To be able to go out and hang out with others."
- "Having a much safer and secure environment".

"Like whenever I'm talking to other people, they're just like they don't get it. They just say, what do you mean by that? Or just ignore me? And it is just like that".

Transition from school

Our YDP expressed that there is very little guidance or support available for YDP once they finish school. Many pointed out that the transition period after leaving school or college is particularly difficult.

They described feeling as though they are stuck in limbo, a stage of life that feels uncertain and unclear. During this time, they receive minimal support and often lack clear direction for their next steps. Several participants spoke about feeling isolated and having little control over their future. From their experiences, there appears to be a significant gap in services designed to support them through this crucial transition.

Some young disabled students also expressed mixed emotions about leaving school. On one hand, they felt excited and proud of their achievements; on the other hand, they felt anxious, sad, and even angry about the uncertainty of what comes next.
Most participants described this stage as frightening, as they are unsure whether they will find employment, go on to further education or training, maintain friendships, or have a safe space to belong.

“There’s a lack of structured services for the transition stage for young people.”

Social Work and Financial support

There was a clear dichotomy of YDP's views toward social work services. While they appreciate and respect the work that social workers do, and enjoy engaging with them, their experiences often reflect neglectful or harmful practices in need of improvement. They described the system as a mix of harmful practice, neglect, bureaucratic approval, and poor communication.

In their view, engagement and relationships with social workers are difficult because the system is overly bureaucratic, and young people are rarely placed at the center of their own support. One young person shared that their post-school experience with social work services was "very frustrating." Meetings were cancelled repeatedly, often without notice, leaving them confused and anxious, particularly during a key transitional stage in their life.

Young people also said that information provided by social services is often complex, bureaucratic, and inaccessible, making social work a "hard-to-reach service." When it came to helping with financial benefits, the level of support frequently failed to meet their needs. Those transitioning from school felt especially confused and unsupported during one of the most important times in their lives.

"I got annoyed because they're always cancelling meetings and stuff. Sometimes I get confused, I don't even know the dates of the meetings."

Another young person shared that, at one point, they were unable to access care and financial support due to a lack of communication and follow-up from their social worker. Their family had to cover accessibility expenses out of pocket.



“The more I engage with these systems, the more I realise that the people who work in these jobs to help you, choose not to communicate with the disabled people they’re supposed to support.”

From their perspective, while social work services are vital, they remain unaccommodating and overly bureaucratic.

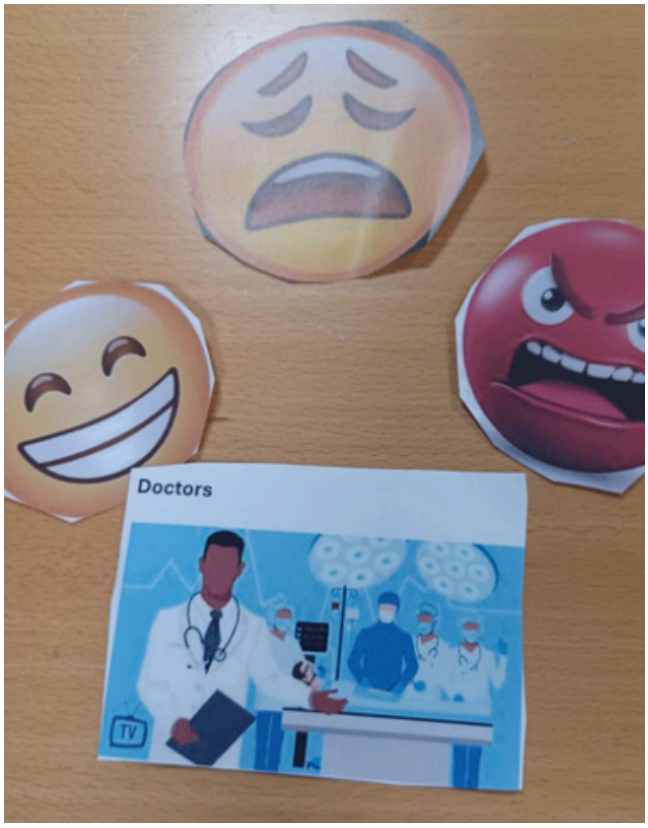
Healthcare Transition

Another key issue raised by the YDP concerns the significant gaps in healthcare services, particularly during the transition from child to adult health care, and more broadly in the care provided to YDP. They pointed to long delays in accessing healthcare services and the lack of a centralised system for YDP.

The young people said that since Covid-19, access to healthcare for disabled youth has worsened, with many services unavailable when most needed. In mental health care, for instance, several reported poor access, placing additional emotional and practical strain on their families, and leading to increased stress and anxiety. Even when services were available, the care often failed to reflect their individual needs.

“I think hospitals and medical staff should have actually autistic training.”

They also noted that many healthcare professionals lack understanding, empathy, and training in supporting autistic and disabled patients. They felt hospital staff would greatly benefit from consistent, autism-specific training.



Transitioning to adult services presents additional challenges. Young people said they often lose contact with familiar professionals and feel disconnected from new adult services. When attending A&E, they are treated as adults despite not feeling ready for that responsibility, and their pain is not taken as seriously. Many described feelings abandoned as professionals “dropped the ball”.

“You know, in the past decade, medical institutions had a parent speak for you, and now you're just expected to do it all by yourself. That’s not fair.”

Transport

Another key issue highlighted by our YDP concerned transport accessibility and the need for stronger advocacy in this area of their lives.

Several young people expressed a desire to travel across Scotland and explore new places but said they felt very limited in doing so. They also described feeling anxious when using public transport, citing frequent delays that make them late for appointments or social activities. Physical accessibility within transport itself also poses difficulties. For example, one participant explained that if a bus already has a pram or another wheelchair on board, there is no space for a second wheelchair.
As a result, they must wait for the next service, which can make them late and cause additional stress. Some also reported feeling anxious about waiting in queues.

“If there’s a pram on a bus, a wheelchair isn’t getting on.”

The panel emphasised the urgent need for stronger advocacy around accessibility. They believe that YDP would benefit greatly from:



Having passenger assistance available to support them.

Receiving more training on using public transport and travelling independently.



Increased advocacy and collaboration between different organisations.

Societal Views of Disability

“The issue lies in how people engage with disabilities. Sometimes they think it’s something to overcome.”

Our YDP highlighted that the lack of societal understanding of how disability intersects with other parts of a person's identity is a major issue, as they feel it negatively affects their lives.

They explained that society’s way of thinking often dismisses their disabilities and is closely tied to the absence of person-centered care. In their experience, many of the people and professionals they have interacted with show limited empathy towards them.

They also emphasised that the lack of recognition of invisible disabilities leads people to categorising them as “others” and assigns more value to certain lives over others.

For example, they mentioned that hypothetically, if someone who lived most of their life as an able-bodied person suddenly became disabled after an accident, society often tend to show more compassion toward them than to someone who was born disabled. They described this as profoundly unfair, as it makes them feel unworthy. One young person described their experience with healthcare professionals as disrespectful and dehumanising.

“I don’t think my doctors see my condition as a full-fledged disability that affects all aspects of my life.”

Instead of understanding disability as a lack of accessibility that prevents people from living more inclusive lives, society often views it as a burden, further driving disabled people toward exclusion and poverty.

Workplace Communication

“There were so many communication issues within employment.”

Communication barriers are one of the key issues highlighted by our living voice group. They identified workplace communication as a major obstacle, as it can lead to misunderstandings, create difficulties in finding employment, and make it harder to stay at work once employed. When employers fail to recognise the different ways, people may communicate and express themselves, young disabled people are left unsupported and misunderstood.

The lack of accessible and inclusive communication results in exclusion and disadvantage for YDP and neurodivergent people, who are too often perceived as a burden rather than recognised as individuals with potential and skills.
For many disabled people, the communication styles used by non-disabled, neurotypical people represent a different reality.

“In workplaces, most people lack understanding of autism, learning disabilities, or neurodiversity and that can be a real issue.”

Survey results

In summary, all the barriers identified by the Living Voice group were reaffirmed by the survey respondents. The survey asked people to choose which of the issues raised by our Living Voice Group were most important to them and prompted them to elaborate on how their chosen issue impacts their life. They were also asked to disclose what type of service or support they think would help to meet their needs and those of the person they support. Loneliness and social isolation were perceived as the most significant barriers to their lives.



- Other: 5%
- Transport: 6%
- Communication: 11%
- Social work and finances: 17%
- Education and transitions: 22%
- Loneliness & social isolation: 28%

Impact

Overall, feedback from participants highlighted a positive and supportive experience throughout the project. Many YDP said that they felt comfortable, informed, and well supported during their involvement. One participant noted that the one-to-one session met their needs promptly, with clear and thorough explanations, which contributed to their sense of inclusion and understanding. Others described the experience as a valuable introduction to the subjects and recognised its potential to support many young people, particularly those on the spectrum. Some participants mentioned that they enjoyed the session as it was engaging and fun.

01. **Increased their confidence and empowered them.**

02. **Strengthened social connections and peer support.**

03. **Amplified YDP voices in shaping services.**

04. **Generated actionable insights for future programs.**

This positive feedback reinforces the importance of person-centered engagement, adaptability, and open communication in future projects.

Learning

This section sets out the key learning from planning and delivering the project, focusing on what worked well, what was challenging, and what we would do differently in future. For each area, we describe the challenge we encountered and the changes to practice that followed. Much of this learning has already been put into place, strengthening how we work with young people and families and informing the design of future projects.

01.

Recruitment & Engagement

Challenges

- Recruitment of YDP progressed slowly despite multiple outreach methods.
- Initial recruitment focused mainly on young people already supported by GCIL, which limited early diversity.
- Some YDP joined after the project had started, affecting continuity.
- Social media updates were shared but had limited reach among young people.

New practice

- Engage internal and external networks simultaneously to broaden reach from the outset.
- Begin recruitment earlier and allow for a longer lead-in period and strengthen relationship-building with partner organisations.
- Start school outreach earlier, plan around academic calendars, and offer flexible formats for participation.
- Co-design accessible publicity materials with YDP to improve clarity, appeal, and inclusivity.

02. GDPR

Challenges

- Initial GDPR and consent documents raised questions among young people and families.

New practice

- Provide detailed, easy-to-understand GDPR information from the beginning.

03. Attendance & Participation

Challenges

- Attendance at sessions rarely exceeded five participants, below the target of ten.

New practice

- Allocate additional staff or collaborative partners from start to finish to support outreach and deliver more sessions.

04. Engagement with schools

Challenges

- School engagement was affected by summer holidays, limited staff availability, and scheduling constraints.
- Some students struggled to understand certain questions.
- The idea of “adult services” was confusing for some students.

New practice

- Allow for time limited resources and holidays when working with education.
- Allow more time for discussion to help students understand difficult concepts.

05. Staffing & capacity

Challenges

- Project staff changes meant it was challenging to maintain consistent engagement with schools and external organisations.

06. Compensation for lived experience

Challenges

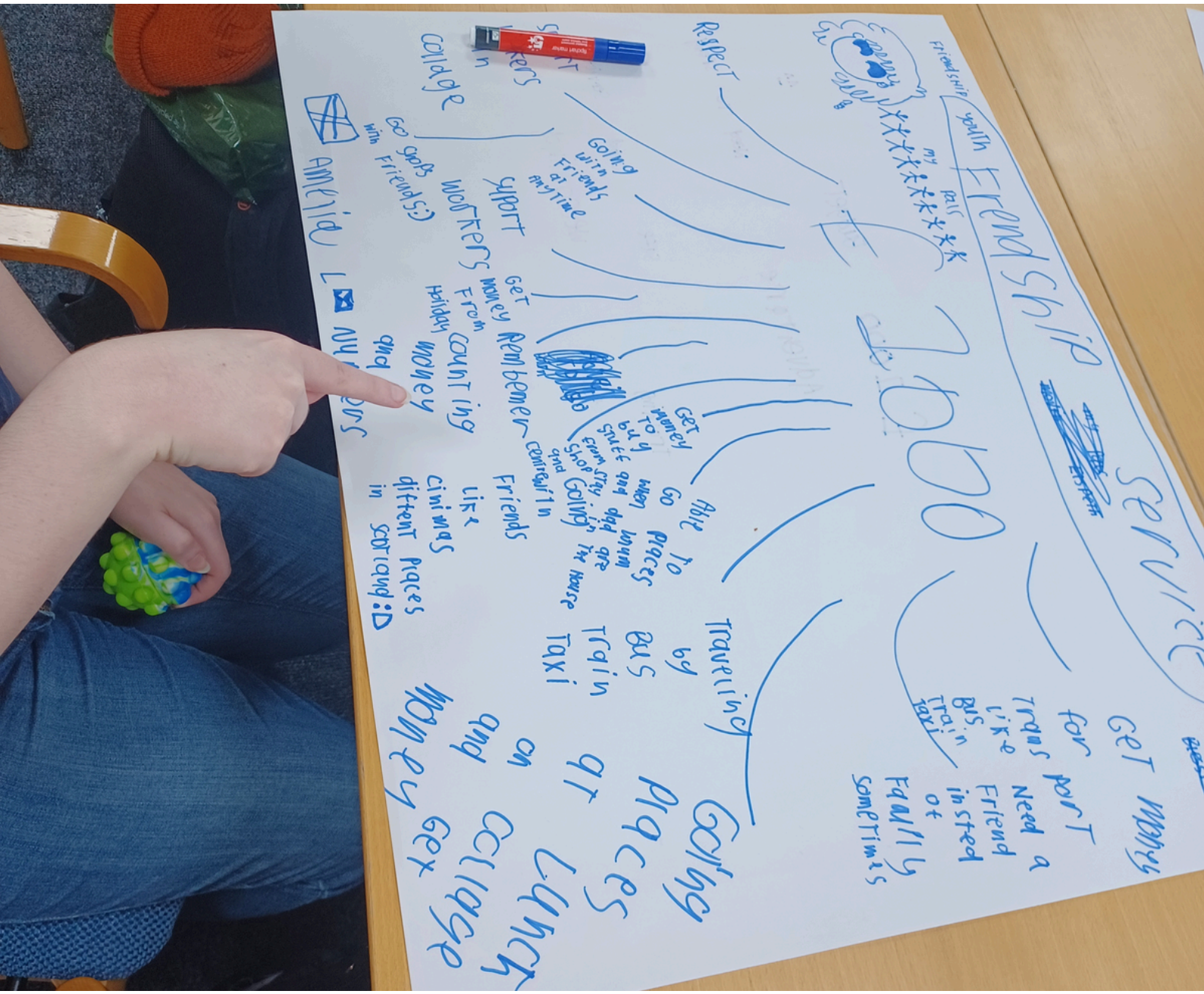
- Compensation for young people's expertise was limited.

New practice

- Include payments for participants in all future funding applications.

Next Steps

According to our YDP, there is a lot to improve in terms of reducing the barriers to their life. YDP shared their views and perspectives on what matters most to them, as well as their vision for future progress in their lives. To ensure genuine involvement and inclusion, we held a dedicated session where YDP were supported to visualise and draw their ideas on paper.



Building on the ideas shared during the visualisation and drawing session, we brought together what young people told us with our own learning from delivering the project. The next steps outlined below reflect this combined thinking. They focus on practical ways to begin addressing some of the barriers young people identified, while remaining grounded in their ideas, priorities, and experiences. These steps are intended as a starting point, helping to shape future work and guide how we continue to develop support alongside young people and families.

01. Education and Life Transitions

- Make personal transition plans for each young disabled person.
- Support further education and career opportunities.
- Offer skill-building, volunteering, internships, and peer connection opportunities.
- Provide training on life transitions and human rights for youth, families, teachers, and social workers.
- Improve access to housing support.
- Create advocacy and peer support groups, including paid youth panels to amplify voices.

02. Social Inclusion and Community Participation

- Connect disabled youth to after-school programs, clubs, and community groups.
- Encourage independent participation without relying on parents.
- Offer respite care and expand personal assistant services tailored to disabled young people.
- Provide opportunities for visiting spaces and services they may use after school.

03. Healthcare Transitions

- Develop individual healthcare plans.
- Train healthcare professionals on disability and neurodivergence for youth-centered care.
- Strengthen partnerships between healthcare providers and organizations supporting youth.

04. Communication and Relationships with Services

- Improve communication between social services and young disabled people.
- Train professionals in disability, neurodivergence, and person-centered care.
- Offer transition and communication training for youth, families, and professionals.

05. Transportation and Mobility

- Support independent travel training.
- Advocate for personal assistants on public transport.
- Expand transportation-focused personal assistant services

What We Plan to Do Next

Develop ongoing young people–focused services, particularly around transition

GCIL will build on what we learned through this project to develop ongoing support for young disabled people, with a particular focus on key transition points in their lives. This includes times when young people are moving between education, services, or levels of independence, which were identified as especially challenging. Our aim is to offer support that is consistent, flexible, and shaped around what young people say they need at these stages.

Embed learning into GCIL's long-term strategy and practice

The learning from this project will be used to inform GCIL's wider strategy and day-to-day practice. We will reflect on how we plan, deliver, and evaluate our work with young people and families, ensuring that the approaches developed through this project are not one-off, but part of how we work going forward. This will help strengthen the quality and consistency of support across the organisation.

Continue co-designing with young people for sustainable impact

GCIL is committed to continuing to work alongside young people to design and shape future services. We will build on the co-design approaches tested through this project, creating ongoing opportunities for young people to share ideas, test approaches, and influence how support is developed. This will help ensure our work remains relevant, responsive, and grounded in young people's lived experiences.

Conclusion

This project sought to understand the challenges faced by children, young people, and their families across Glasgow. By recognising and addressing systemic ableism and classism, it prioritised building trust, ensuring accessibility, and amplifying YDP's voices.
Through a co-design approach involving varied engagement methods, such as individual and group sessions, storytelling, and surveys, the project created inclusive spaces where participants could share experiences and influence service improvement. There was a total of 36 people who participated in the project:

- **5 members of Living Voice group**
- **6 students**
- **24 survey respondents and**
- **1 storytelling participant.**

It became clear that the main issues affecting YDP's life are related to the transitional period and stages of their life as they become adults.
Although the recommendations from young people may seem complex and wide ranging, one urgent need that GCIL could address is to develop a structured and holistic transition service that supports YDP and their families from the age of 12/14.

While GCIL, some partners and external services in Glasgow are already working toward these goals, consistent and comprehensive provision is still lacking. A unified approach would ensure that every YDP receives the support they need to thrive.

Consistent, and well-coordinated services can ensure that every young person receives equitable opportunities for education, employment, health, transportation, housing and social inclusion, laying out the foundation for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Acknowledgements



We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the young disabled people who took part in this project. Their openness, enthusiasm, and willingness to share their lived experiences made this work both meaningful and impactful. We are especially thankful to the members of the Living Voice groups for their continued support, encouragement, and understanding throughout the project. Their engagement and trust allowed us to create a safe and inclusive environment where young people's voices could be heard and valued.

Our appreciation also extends to the Hazelwood School, teachers, and staff who made time in their busy schedules to collaborate with us, as well as to all the organisations and partners who helped promote the project and facilitate connections including the Hope Project. Their cooperation and commitment were instrumental in making this initiative possible.