

‘MY BEST LIFE’

Priorities for digital technology in the youth sector

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¹ We worked with 19 young people throughout the project. In order to protect their privacy we made it clear we would not use their names without their permission. Following the completion of the research we attempted to contact all of them (by email when this was available and, if not, by phone) to see if they wished to be mentioned in the report. Only those who actively, positively, replied to this have been named.

ABOUT THIS WORK

Making sure the ‘digital revolution’ works for everyone

Digital technology has already changed the world beyond all recognition. It’s hard to remember how we used to get by without it.

Yet this digital revolution may seem irrelevant to many of the most important challenges that face real people in their lives today. To a young person who’s struggling financially, is lacking stable housing and a meaningful career, is trying to plot a path towards their goals, accessing technology may seem low-priority.

Meanwhile, it often feels as though the driving forces behind the ongoing technological revolution have lost sight of the important challenges that technology could address—instead focusing on products and solutions that are driven by short-term profits. We think the charity sector can help—building on its existing knowledge and trusted role to identify the problems that technology can tackle and the opportunities it brings.

The question is: how can we ensure that digital technology creates the greatest possible social impact?

Asking young people about their lives to see how tech could help

This project is an inquiry into two approaches that we think could help charities increase their impact:

- Getting better at *asking* people about their experiences, strengths and needs, and designing products and services around them
- Harnessing digital technology to find solutions to problems, and to join up complicated systems and services

Over the past twelve months, we have been working with a group of young people experiencing multiple disadvantages in the London Borough of Camden. We sought to understand their experiences—as told in their own words—and identify how digital technology could help.

Much of what follows is the result of a series of workshops with the young people who agreed to participate. Taking a user-mapping approach (see overleaf) we worked with them to map out their goals—what they described as their ‘best life’—and the things they felt were holding them back from achieving them (pages 7–12).

We then used these insights—alongside insights we gained by talking to youth workers and tech experts—to consider how tech solutions could help overcome barriers and support young people to reach their goals (pages 13–17).

Finally, we pulled together some ‘possibilities’—examples of the types of digital interventions that might make a difference to young people’s lives, based on what they told us (pages 18–28).

For more detail on our research approach, see appendix. We have also reflected on what we learned in a blog: www.thinknpc.org/blog/working-with-experts-by-experience

About user-mapping approaches

Well-established in the technology sector, and growing popular in the social sector, user mapping involves investigating and visually representing people's experiences. The approach can help those funding or designing and delivering products, services or organisations to build empathy with and understanding of the people they intend to help—their 'users'.

The final output will normally be a graphic illustrative 'map' which is likely to include information on the user or potential users' needs, wants and expectations at each stage. Mapping the perceived or lived experience of users or potential users presents a unique opportunity to explore interactions, dependencies, efficiencies and inefficiencies between products, services and organisations. This insight can uncover gaps and/or duplications in provision and support decision-makers to develop solutions that better address need and drive greater impact for the individuals in question.

For a short guide to this approach, see www.thinkNPC.org/UserMapping.

Using some key principles to guide us

We at NPC are in the process of trying to tackle this challenge—bringing the best of charity and tech sectors together. We set out a conceptual approach to this challenge in our earlier publication [Tech for common good](#), and are now moving from theory to practice in trying to help the youth sector in the UK to harness the potential of technology.

Our approach with this particular work has been driven by the [principles for digital transformation](#) we identified in [Tech for common good](#). These principles were informed by best practice from private, public and charity sectors on digital technology—in particular the [design principles of the Government Digital Service](#) (GDS), and the learning shared by key players in the digital space and the charity sector—the Centre for the Acceleration of Social Technologies (CAST), Nominet Trust, and Shift Design.

Start with beneficiaries' needs

We have undertaken a research process to identify the challenges, needs and opportunities that are most important to young people themselves, informed by practitioners working with them.

It's not always about building something new

We have sought to find existing technology, products and solutions that could address the priorities young people identified, and only then thought about new products and services.

Develop the business case

Focusing on what's most important to young people, we have tried to identify the critical problems they face, and how they could be tackled. We believe this can only be done by working together—individual charities and social enterprises cannot make the business case for working beyond their own products and services, and their funding structures strongly disincentives the development of collective solutions.

Get the right people in the room

We started with young people themselves, working with them to map their lived experience and use that as the foundation of exploring potential tech solutions. In addition to working with young people, we have drawn on the expertise of youth sector charities, public services, and the tech sector. Getting the right people in the room isn't

just about research and knowledge sharing—it's also critical for development and implementation if we want to achieve scale and joined-up solutions.

It's not about tech for tech's sake

We have focused on practicality, real user needs and sought an understanding of whether, why and how tech solutions would be adopted. That often means that the tech solution itself is much less important than an understanding of the context young people find themselves in, as well as the context for youth organisations—their incentives, drivers and constraints.

This work was a scoping project, and what follows is a starting point. We think it raises some interesting insights, and even more interesting questions to be taken up in future about using technology to support young people.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US ABOUT THEIR LIVES

Mapping the journey towards ‘My best life’

Over the course of several workshops—facilitated by NPC and Revolving Doors—the young people worked together to map their lives. They discussed their experiences—their hopes, challenges and frustrations—identified commonalities, and talked through the help they’d need to reach their best life: the life they want to lead.

The result is a large user map (Figures 1 and 2), based on the game snakes and ladders—which the young people felt best captured their experiences.

Figure 1: The original ‘My best life’ experience map created in the workshops



Shona Curvers, NPC Consultant, and the original ‘My best life’ map.

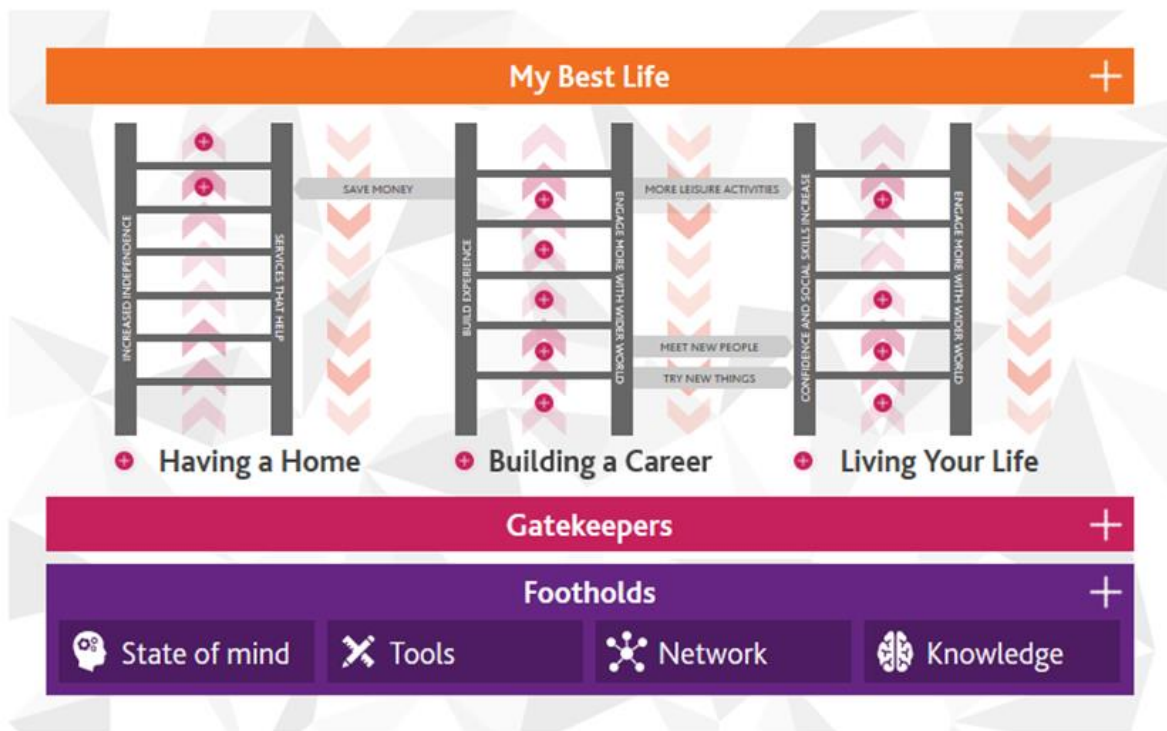
To even make a start, the young people said they need **footholds**—fundamental skills and resources young people themselves need—and **gatekeepers**—key individual who can make the initial introduction and open up access to the right services.

The paths that young people were most interested in taking were broken into three **ladders**: having a home, building a career, living your life. These sets of outcomes link to and build off each other, ultimately representing a young person’s progress towards living their **best life**. But along the way there are things that can prevent them

from progressing, or even set them back entirely. These are the **snakes** and include things such as debt, discrimination and poor mental health.

Each young person’s journey follows a different course through these ladders, so the map is a high-level version of everyone’s journey, not a representation of the exact route any one person will take. What’s more, the journey up each ladder will not be linear—the ladders are more like a climbing wall in that respect.

Figure 2: Screenshot of an interactive version of the map. View it here: thinkNPC.org/MyBestLife

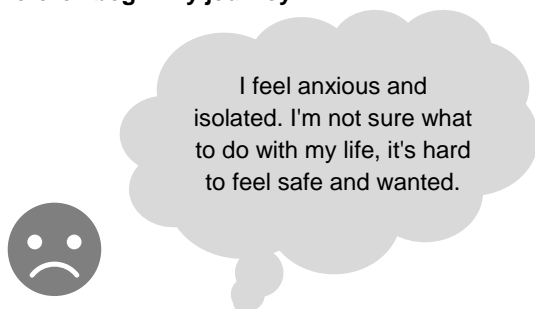


The ‘My best life’ map: explained

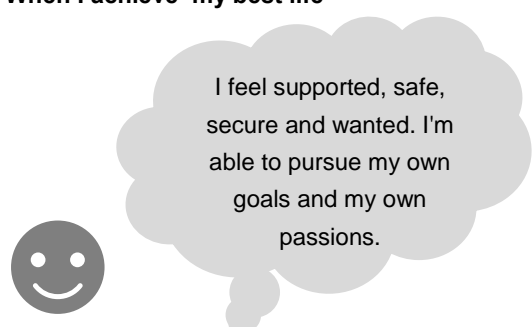
My best life

The final goal of climbing up the ladders is reaching ‘My best life’: a point where a young person can live the life they want to live. Each young person’s best life will be different, as will the things they are interested in and the challenges they face. But there was a clear consensus around what this best life felt like, and how it contrasts to where young people were before.

Before I begin my journey



When I achieve ‘my best life’



Images drawn from the original user map.

Footholds

The young people identified four fundamental skills or resources without which they cannot even begin to engage effectively with those services that might help them climb the ladders:



State of mind



Tools



Network



Knowledge

State of mind

This means feeling confident and comfortable enough to start to engage with services and think about the future. It takes hope, resilience, and confidence to build a life, and our research identified this as one of the hardest areas for young people to tackle. An equally important part of the right state of mind is having the mental tools and methods to deal with additional pressures eg, anger management. State of mind isn't about being completely able to deal with these challenges. And we know that well-being and social aspects like good housing are mutually reinforcing, meaning state of mind is always a work in progress as young people progress along their ladders. State of mind as a foothold is about having enough of a baseline to be able to start to engage with services.

Tools

These are basic practical resources that enable a young person to spend time engaging with services, particularly within the context of using digital technology—like money or a smart phone. Some of the young people we worked with talked about not being able to access services because they were too busy trying to make enough to money to survive. In short, if you're so busy trying to fulfil your basic needs for shelter or food you can't realistically be expected to engage with services that help you build a better life in the long term.

Network

Young people reported that their first step to engaging with youth services came about when a close friend or family member gave them essential support. A minimal network of people who can be trusted to provide encouragement is an essential motivator to engaging with services.

Knowledge

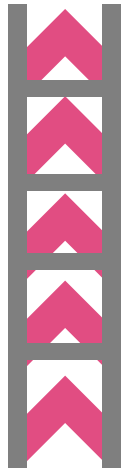
A young person needs a simple awareness that services exist, and where to access them. Many of the young people we spoke to just didn't know where to start. For example, some young people told us they had experienced discrimination in the work place, but didn't know about employment advice offered by organisations like Citizens Advice.

Gatekeepers

Even with the proper footholds in place, it is not possible for young people to effectively engage with some services without there being someone to open the door. Gatekeepers who first open up opportunities for young people to engage with the right service and guide them in making their first decisions were highlighted as essential by both young people themselves and sector experts. The exact nature of these gatekeepers varies from more traditional figures like youth workers or housing officers at the council, to less formal gatekeepers such as youth mentors. We discuss this in more depth on page 13.

Having a home

Most of the young people who took part in the project had experience of extremely unstable housing. Many of them were homeless, or living in hostels, or in a family home where they didn't feel comfortable. Due to these experiences, they saw a pathway to getting a home of their own as very important.



LADDERS

- Get own good quality home
- Secure stable accommodation
- Develop positive relationships within household and community
- Progress into independent living
- Learn independent living skills
- Secure shared temporary housing
- Understand rights and entitlements



SNAKES

- Debt
- No longer fulfil benefit criteria eg, single mother getting a partner
- Benefit rules change
- Affordability/housing market crisis
- Poor mental health
- Prison/institutionalisation

Key considerations

Stable: There was a low level of trust in the housing system among the young people we spoke to. In the long-term, they want somewhere where they are secure, either through protections on their tenancy or by owning their own home. The challenge is finding housing that fulfils these requirements but is also of sufficiently good quality and affordable.

Part of the community: There was a real concern that moving into more independent living might mean becoming isolated from their family, friends and communities. Young people need to be supported to engage more with their local community. But this is a two-way street—during our youth work interviews, it was highlighted that stigmatisation of disadvantaged young people can make it hard for them to acclimatise to a new community. Communities need to be open and accepting of young people too.

'When you're in a hostel if you're bored you can find someone to chat to, when you're on your own it can get really lonely.'

Workshop participant

Support with change: Most young people we spoke to had very little experience of living on their own and felt that doing so, would be hard. Here was an example of a positive step bringing new challenges. Many said they were worried about getting stuck in halfway points and temporary housing. They stressed the importance of slowly increasing their independence as they got into more and more independent living.

Limits of technology

Especially near the top of some of the ladders, the barriers young people face are due to wider structural factors. Many expressed interest in homeownership in their local area (Camden). Yet the current housing market would make this very difficult, even if they were to get well-paid work. In such instances, single services or technological applications are unlikely to make any meaningful difference—the scale is simply too large and a wider response is needed. Though technology could help with campaigning, or demonstrating the impact of structural challenges, in order to help encourage wider changes.

Building a career

The young people we worked with were very focused on trying to get a good quality job. The majority of them were unemployed or heavily underemployed, although some were in education or work. Some of them had experienced exploitative working practices.



Key considerations

Money matters: The young people we spoke to said they want to try new things, to travel and to be independent, but are aware of the costs of day-to-day life. So there was a key focus on earning a good wage. This is more than just a matter of avoiding minimum wage or living wage work: they want to build a career where they can become financially comfortable.

A career, not just a job: Alongside concerns about income, there was a real fear of getting trapped in dead-end work. They are ambitious—they want a career, not a job. To stay motivated, they would need to understand how a job would slot into building a rewarding career. Many were interested in opportunities to develop their own business and become self-employed.

Harnessing ongoing support: Experts in the sector were keen to stress that young people experiencing multiple disadvantage need support to maintain employment once they have found it. It is important that there is support available when they first engage with work, to help them adapt to a new environment and continue to build their experience.

Criminal records and the hard no: Some of the young people who took part in the research had criminal records. Some of them had achieved significant progress around skills and experience, yet found it impossible to make the leap into work due to discrimination they face based on their criminal record.

Links between the ladders

All of the ladders are interconnected—by strengthening one, you reinforce the others. But this is especially true for building a career, as one of the things that young people strongly felt held them back from having the home and living the life they want was the lack of funds. They saw developing their career and career options as a key part of achieving this. A sense of isolation and inability to make friends, especially outside their pre-existing social groups, was linked to unemployment. Starting on the early stages of the career ladder, such as going to university or beginning training for an apprenticeship, was key to many people achieving the social life they wanted to live.

Living your life

The young people we worked with generally reported a complex picture of social engagement. They would have a collection of people they can engage with socially day-to-day, but they often weren't people they felt could be relied on when things were hard. There was a strong belief in the need to create more meaningful social links, even among those who had a relatively robust informal network.



LADDERS

- Feel happier more of the time
- Enhanced resilience when things are tough, and have people you can rely on
- Maintain healthy relationships with friends and family
- Make new friends, and disengage with bad influences
- Engage in social activities
- Get info on social, music or sporting opportunities



SNAKES

- Family breakdown
- Negative influence by friends and family
- Poor physical health
poor mental health
- Prison/institutionalisation

Key considerations

How to escape the bubble: Especially for young people in hostels, one of the challenges around living the life they want to live, was how to reach out to and meet new people. Some said they have a set of people they can mix with but find it much harder to find opportunities to engage with the wider community. This was particularly difficult if the people they are engaging with were encouraging them towards unhelpful behaviour. Some felt they have to choose between social isolation or engaging in actions that could hurt their life chances in the long term.

When other ladders to do harm: A major concern was the impact that having a home or building a career could have on a young person's social life. Over-work, leading to high levels of stress and a decline in family relationships, was a worry—as was having to move outside of the local area to get a good quality home that they feel secure in. It is important to consider not just the positive impact of advancing up the ladders but the challenges that come with change, and how to balance this.

Current funding map

Resources, particularly from state funds tend to be strongly focused around finding work. Support at least for the initial steps of building a career, means that it is comparatively well funded compared to having home, or living the life they want to live. This means when considering how digital technology can support the sector, if the tools are designed to engage with pre-existing services, tools focusing on finding young people work may have the simplest time.

Having said this, all three areas suffer from both a lack of services and high levels of underfunding.

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY COULD HELP

There are some priority areas for digital support

Through interviews with youth sector experts and talking with young people themselves it became clear there is a wide need for additional support across young people's experiences. Youth services are facing raising demand, and declining resources, while disadvantaged young people perceive a wider culture and working world that is moving further and further away from them. Across the 'My best life' map, there were clear areas of opportunity for enhancing digital support.

Gatekeepers

One of the most common frustrations reported by young people was poor quality or distant gatekeepers, particularly those in the public sector, such as housing or benefits officers. There was a sense many of the young people we spoke to feel that gatekeepers do not know enough about their circumstances and needs. Some also reported gatekeepers who were dismissive of young people with certain backgrounds or certain experiences.

Young people could feel that the only way to fully engage gatekeepers is to give them the narrative they want to hear, regardless of accuracy. One participant noted they had to '*not lie but edited the truth to play the game*' so as to get their housing officer on side.

Gatekeepers are highly overworked and overstressed making it hard for them to fully engage with young people. They also noted that in some cases young people don't have a realistic view of what could be offered and weren't aware of what other factors were slowing down support.

Clearly there is a need for better communication on both sides. Technology could be helpful both in freeing up gatekeeper's time in turn enabling them to better engage with young people, creating more genuine connections between gatekeepers and young people, and helping both sides to understand the other's circumstances and needs.

It is also important to stress that young people spoke of good quality gatekeepers as one of the most positive things they had experienced. Far from using technology to replace the role of the gatekeeper, technology could support good gatekeepers, while minimising the need for young people to interact with bad ones.

Snakes and ladders

Participants made clear that the journey to achieving their goal wasn't always a straight line. Sometimes things happen that force them off the ladders completely so they have to start again—the 'snakes' on the snakes and ladders. These could be because of negative obstacles—like a change to benefits—but it could also be the result of taking a positive step that brings additional pressures—like starting a new job.

One of the biggest themes that emerged was the need for awareness that a young person might make progress but be unable to sustain this progress due to other challenges and pressures.

Many of the problems that young people face can occur quickly and without warning, meaning there is a narrow window to provide support. The speed and accessibility that digital technology offers could be particularly impactful.

Footholds

Tools: One of the challenges around building digital tools to support young people was how even the most basic of digital interventions requires a platform like a phone or a computer—a barrier for young people facing financial hardship. One suggestion was to offer free data credit on phones so that disadvantaged young people have the chance to access the digital world.

State of mind: When we discussed current interventions with youth sector experts, they raised the sheer volume of different mental health and well-being apps available for helping a young person to develop the right state of mind to engage with their journey. It is often not clear which application is most useful to a young person, and many of the current means of marketing these tools are not helpful to young people. It is important to ask whether something already exists and if it does, why it is not currently being utilised to its maximum capacity. Digital technology should help simplify access to what is needed, not complicate it.

The youth sector's strengths and challenges must be worked with

To understand how technology can best support young people facing multiple disadvantage we need to understand what the youth sector is already good at, and where it faces challenges.

Strengths: Local, person-focused services

Community based service delivery: Disadvantaged young people tend to be disengaged from traditional routes of service provision, so are not aware of forms of signposting that the sector uses. They also tend to lack the money to travel a great distance. Due to difficult and, at times, chaotic experiences many prioritise a place where they feel safe secure and part of a community. The youth sector's ability to embed itself at a local level and create a safe hub from which to provide services is vital.

Empathic holistic support: Youth workers display a personal understanding of the young people's needs and empathy for their situation. This is essential for creating the relationship necessary to support young people. When this can be sustained in a local, trusted service, young people feel safe and secure—the ideal environment for them to grow and develop.

Challenges: A sector under constant strain

The youth sector faces strain from many different directions:

- It is dealing with the rapid upswing in demand.
- It's financial demands—particularly in London—are increasing due to the cost of living and the shortage of affordable space.

- The funding environment is fragmented, which tends to lead to a constantly shifting patchwork of available services. This creates additional strains as gatekeepers try and identify appropriate organisations to signpost to.
- The perception communities have of disadvantaged young people—and, in turn, the perception that many disadvantaged young people have of their communities—is, according to our interviewees, becoming more and more hostile, putting further strain on effective reintegration.

What does this tell us when designing technology?

The greatest strength of the sector is its ability to engage with young people at a tailored and personal level. Digital technology cannot replace this link, nor should it try. Meanwhile, the sector is under extreme strain from all directions. Technology should be used to supplement and support this empathic holistic approach, focusing on areas where it can reduce the stress and the strain both for gatekeepers, youth workers and young people themselves.

Organisations should be particularly wary of any technological intervention that seeks to completely remove the community-based personal element, as this is likely to alienate or disengage young people.

The youth sector's digital skills must be bolstered

Digital technology could be transformative, but only if the people who could most benefit from it can access and engage with this new technology. This is one of the areas where the social sector must think differently to the private sector—considering whether our users have the skills needed, rather than reaching out to highly skilled initial consumers and wealthy trendsetters. This means understanding the different levels of digital skill that people have:

Different levels of digital skills

James Dellow, Digital Amplifier at Dragon Hall and SoapBox Youth Centres, a charity dedicated to enhancing digital inclusion for young people highlighted three different categories of skill.

- **Basic:** Initial digital literacy, knowing how to navigate online use commonly used technology eg, MS Word, social networks etc. Generally having the baseline of skills needed to engage with the digital world.
- **Higher level:** Critical thinking and navigation-based skills. Understanding how to identify the right tool for your task. Feeling comfortable assessing different tools and from this selecting the best method for your levels of skill and for the task at hand
- **Technical:** Advanced 'doing' skills such as coding or 3D Printing. Skills needed to create products in the digital space.

Young people and digital literacy

A common assumption is that young people—raised in 'the digital age'—have a high digital literacy. But our interviews with youth sector experts highlighted this isn't necessarily the case. Digital literacy requires having access to computers and to the internet—something that is not true for many disadvantaged young people, particularly those who have experienced poverty in early life. The basic skills they do have tend to be very concentrated, for example feeling comfortable navigating social media. Other skills such as using word processors may be less common.

Anyone developing a digital product must speak with those people who accurately represent the people that they are targeting.

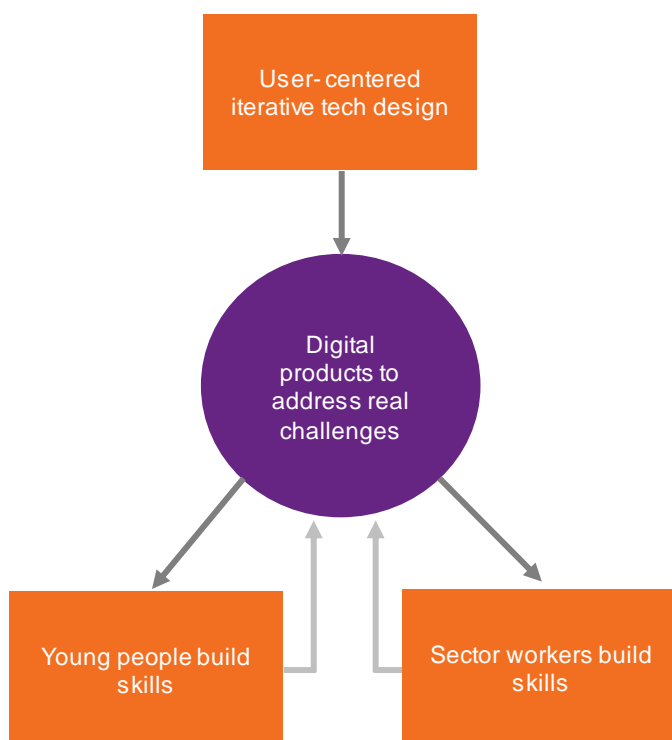
Digital skills of youth workers and gatekeepers

Here there was more concern around digital skills—particularly high-level skills. Many of those we spoke to feel that the youth sector lacks the ability to adapt to new tools, as well as identify what is already out there. There was also a feeling that some pockets of the public-sector benefit system have very low levels of basic digital skills amongst staff.

Building products helps build skills

There is a welcome focus in policy and funding on building young people’s digital skills. Yet often this is delivered in a very generalised way, and it’s hard for people to engage in training if what they’re learning doesn’t seem relevant or useful to their lives at the time. From what we heard, teaching digital skills in the context of young people’s specific goals, aspirations and challenges is a much better approach. So building relevant digital tools that help young people address their problems, also offers them—and the adults that support them—the opportunity to ‘learn by doing’ (See Figure 3). And as skills improve, there is a greater impetus to build more, useful digital tools.

Figure 3: Products built for service users give more opportunities to develop relevant skills



Digital solutions in the youth sector must have certain qualities

Given the various strengths and challenges in the youth sector, and the level of digital skills found there, what should digital solutions look like?

Simple and mobile

Smart phones were by far the dominant way the young people we spoke to engaged with technology. Yet many of them reported patchy, poor-quality, Wi-Fi and limited access to data. This meant they wanted solutions that are: mobile based but do not take up a great deal of their limited data; downloadable onto the phone itself without taking up much space.

Horizon-raising but safe

There was clear consensus that mobiles are the best technology choice for young people. But there was less agreement on whether digital product should be built around existing platforms like Instagram, or developed as stand-alone products such as apps they need to specifically download. Young people themselves gave no clear guidance on this while youth experts were split.

Some felt it was best to utilise the spaces young people already engage with; doing so creates a sense of safety for the young person, who can access help and support in a place that they already know and feel comfortable. It could also maximise uptake and habit of use. Many felt tools or products should be able to move from platform to platform as tastes changed—for example, as more young people choose to use Snapchat over Facebook. This way, services targeting young people remain relevant.

Others were wary of using these platforms. They were concerned that such services would intrude on the young person's private space. There was also the worry that young people would associate services purely with staying within their current, known environment, disincentivising them from expanding their experiences. Instead they suggested either custom-built platforms, or engaging with platforms more common to the working world—such as LinkedIn—before focusing on ways to channel young people into these spaces to expand their horizons.

We think there's room for both.

Solutions-based

Young people reported frustration with interventions and tools that they couldn't see leading to their best life—usually because the goals were so abstract, or so far-off that they could not identify and celebrate step-by-step progress towards it. Youth sector experts said that to continually engage young people with services it is important that they provide young people with useful information that they need at that time. Tools need to provide practical support, and stress how the support is going to contribute towards the young person's goals in order to keep them motivated and engaged.

Peer-recommended

Young people expressed far greater confidence in something that their peers had recommended. This was also reflected by the feedback from the youth sector. Youth workers might be able to provide this recommendation, but the most effective would be from someone who had similar experiences to the young person.

There is a tension here though. Young people value peer recommendations. But for youth workers—as well as the public sector and other bodies that might fund or implement a tech solution for young people—academic or technical validation are much more valued. This is an ongoing tension in fields like mental health, and requires trusted organisations to combine user preferences with approaches that are shown to work.

IDEAS FOR DIGITAL TOOLS THAT COULD SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE

Based on the ideas of young people, youth sector professionals and tech sector experts we have pulled together five possibilities for digital services and products that could support the youth sector. These are intended to illustrate how technology could help join up services and bridge gaps in provision. They are designed as examples, or 'possibilities', rather than as finished proposals for a product.

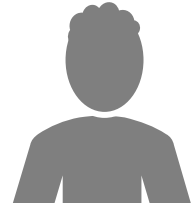
In these five possibilities you'll find four young people and one youth worker. In each case we have invented a persona and a back story based on the experiences of the people we spoke to during this research. We present a digital tool, and look at each persona's journey with and without this tool to consider how it could help.

None of these tools are technically radical. They build on developed digital technology used in the private sector and elsewhere, showing how established methods can be harnessed and used for social good.

We hope these ideas inspire further user-led development of digital tools, which we believe could lead to impactful support of young people and youth-sector professionals working to support them.

How could tech help young people: Jared's story

Jared is working his first full-time job in a hotel. He has struggled with anxiety in the past and spoke to the school counsellor. Since then he has been using coping mechanisms he learnt from his counsellor to manage his illness.



Jared is living at home, saving up enough money for a deposit so that he can move out. But he tends to dip into his savings when he's feeling particularly anxious or down, limiting his saving and making him feel worse in the long run.

Without tech

Jared does not know where to turn for support. He does try a Google search but there are so many services and he doesn't know which one is right for him. Some of them are also a bit of a journey, which he would struggle to fit around work. He spends a few weeks worrying and getting more ill. His girlfriend pushes him to get some help and suggests he goes to see his GP.



Jared has never spoken to this GP before and doesn't feel comfortable explaining everything he has been feeling. The GP refers Jared to wellness course. It helps, but isn't quite the right fit for his needs.

The support from the wellness course is enough for Jared to keep going but not really to push forward and he ends up feeling stuck and despondent.

Jared is battling with the *snakes* of housing affordability and poor mental health. He lacks the foothold of *state of mind* and *knowledge*, and his *gatekeeper*, the GP, hasn't quite got him on the right track.

The tool: Services map

Why it is needed: Young people often are not sure where to get help, at the same time they do not trust a lot of the authority figures that offer signposting.



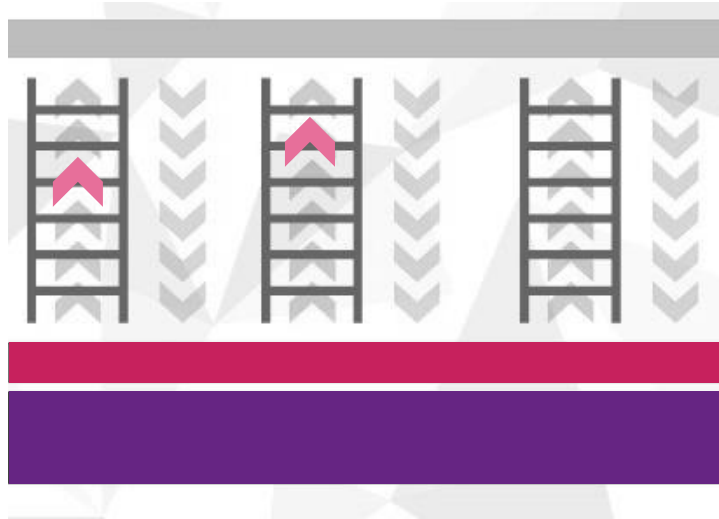
How it would work: Using a pre-existing platform (eg, Google maps), the tool would let users select the type of support they require (eg, mental health), alongside other fields (eg, open late). It would then show them services in their area flagged on the map. Users could also rate and review services to let other young people know which ones they would feel comfortable in.

Key things to consider: The biggest challenge with this intervention is keeping the database of organisations up to date and provides an accurate picture of services.

With tech

Jared does not know where to turn for support. He tries a Google search and finds the services map. He searches for somewhere that is near his job and that has flexible opening times so he can go before or after work.

The map shows him a couple of places, one of which has a good user reviews. He checks it out and, knowing so many other people have trusted them, feels comfortable telling them about his experiences. They provide him with some counselling, which he finds helpful, as well as referring him to a money management advice service.



The counselling helps Jared to feel much more confident going forward. This shows at work and he gets promoted. He is handling his money better, and is able to save more as a result of this and the promotion. The counselling service is also able to help him with the new challenges the promotion brings.

With help from *gatekeepers* at the counselling service, helping his *state of mind*, Jared has *expanded his income options, feels more happy more of the time, and is progressing towards independent living.*

How tech could help young people: Magan's story



Magan moved to London from Somalia to live with his father. He doesn't have a great relationship with him. He is quite comfortable reading in English but can't speak it fluently, which makes it hard for him to engage with services. As a result, he spends a lot of time sleeping rough or staying with friends when he isn't able to stay at home. Magan wants to open his own business one day.

One day, Magan and his father have a big row, and he has to leave the family home.

Without tech

Magan uses his phone to search for help. He finds a local hostel to stay at. When he arrives there are some leaflets about different services but he can't see how they help him to get out of his current situation.

He manages to get a job handing out flyers for a local nightclub. It's irregular work, and it doesn't give him a chance to get a feel for a stable working life.

Magan thinks about talking to some of the youth workers in the hostel but they always seem too busy. He continues to muddle along doing short-term part-time work but struggles to get on the right track to start to live the life he wants to live.



Magan lacks the footholds of *knowledge* and *networks*, and is struggling to build relations with the *gatekeepers* that can help him. He also faces *family breakdown*, *housing affordability*, and a *lack of employment opportunities*.

The tool: Virtual caseworker

Why it is needed: To remain motivated, young people want to understand how the steps they take and services they are access are helping them progress towards their best life.

How it would work: Young people download an app containing an interactive version of the 'My best life' diagram. They would select the outcome they wish to achieve and identify where they feel they are now. The tool would then suggest nearby services or organisations that could help them to get to the next step on the ladder, or face a challenge they are currently experiencing. The app would also provide a way for them to record their thoughts, activities and achievements as they advance, to help them track their progress.

Key things to consider: This would need a significant amount of data about different services (similar to the services map). It would also require a feel for how these services interact. In particular, it would need to know how to signpost for urgent interventions when challenges are encountered.



With tech

Magan uses his phone to search for help and finds two things: a local hostel to stay at, and a link to the virtual caseworker app. He downloads the app and tells it he wants to work full time.

The app directs him to a local careers advice charity, who identify that Magan will first need a lot of help with his language skills. They pair him up with a volunteer from the Somali community for language coaching, and mentoring. She also introduces him to some others in the community.

Magan makes notes on the app recording his progress. This helps to keep him motivated as his language skills improve. His mentor also helps him get some part-time work at a restaurant, which gives him some reliable income and a little work experience.

After a few months, the app prompts him to see if ready to go to the next step, and points him towards some local opportunities for education and training. He sees one local project which he likes the look of offering apprenticeships.

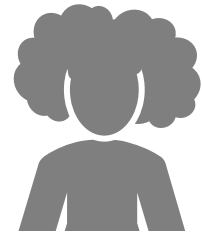
While he is preparing to apply Magan does a few fewer shifts at the restaurant and finds he is not managing to pay his bills. This starts to worry him, so he selects the debt is a concern on the app. It points him towards a charity that provides a short interest-free loans to help him plug the gap.

With references from his mentor and restaurant, Magan lands an apprenticeship to become a plumber, putting him on the first step to one day owning his own business.

With greater *knowledge, networks, and support from gatekeepers*, Magan is able to get *more experience and learn new skills*, as well as increase his *social activities*.



How tech could help young people: Zoe's story



Zoe is a single mother. She and her son Tyson are currently living with her cousin. She is not employed or in training or in education. She would really like to find a job, but she feels she can't even consider it, as she spends all her time trying to find a place where Tyson is comfortable and safe. She wants to find a place to live for her and her son that is closer to her friends and her grandparents.

Without tech

Zoe looks up information on how she can find a home of her own on the council website. She is directed towards information on the bidding process. It's quite technical, and she doesn't fully understand how the points system works.

Put off by the system, she delays her application, which puts real strain on her relationship with her cousin. After a lot of late nights she manages to complete the application.

Zoe attends a few viewings. There are a few things she is unsure about, like condensation on the windows, but she feels too embarrassed to ask anyone. She accepts the third property she sees. When winter comes it has a bad case of damp, which upsets her.

Zoe gets in touch with the council about the state of the property but they do not send anyone to make repairs. She keeps chasing up the council and trying to tackle the damp herself, but this means she has much less time to get to know her local community, leaving her feeling alone and stressed.

Zoe is struggling to access the *knowledge she needs*, as well as being up against *housing affordability* and a lack of *employment opportunities*. This is taking its toll on her *family relationships*.



The tool: Chat bot

Why it is needed: A lot of pre-existing information services fail to provide disadvantaged young people with the information they need in the right way. They can be hard to use and require absorbing a large amount of information at once. Young people are more interested in bite size chunks of information relevant to the problem at hand.



How it would work: Young people download a chat bot onto their phone. They can ask questions about simple day-to-day support, related to areas like benefits navigation or the housing system. The bot would then extract answers from reliable online sources. In cases where the questions are too complicated, or it doesn't understand, it could also signpost them to other services or information sources.

Key things to consider: For a chat bot to be most valuable to any young person, it needs to draw on good advice from as wide a range of sources as possible. This either requires agreements between organisations to share their content, or a data standard to be developed across the advice sector that everyone uses to mark up their content.

With tech

Zoe looks up information on how she can find a home of her own on the council website. She is directed towards information on the bidding process, but the website also recommends the chatbox for support.

Zoe uses the chat bot which is able to navigate the bidding process. It also makes some general suggestions, like '*don't just take the first place you see—make sure you view a few properties*'.

Zoe attends a range of viewings, some of which have odd black marks on the walls. She asks the chat bot about it. After answering a few yes/no questions finds out it is probably damp and it could be a real pain to remove. It sign-posts her information on spotting risk of damp and reducing chances of getting it. She accepts the seventh property she sees.

It takes Zoe a few weeks to settle into her new place, but once she's sorted everything out and is feeling a lot less stressed. She has some time to join a local women's group and feels much more settled in the community. A friend in the group is able to point her towards another local charity, and they help her in the first steps towards finding work.

With the knowledge she needs, Zoe is able to progress to *independent living* and build her social networks. This takes the pressure off her *family relationships*, and enables her to get *progress into work*.



How can tech help young people: Anna's story



Anna lives at home with her parents and is trying to get a job so that she can move out. She is struggling to get interviews as she spent some time in prison. Employers have told her that they can't progress her application for that reason.

Anna is particularly worried about being able to get a good job that she enjoys. She is having a hard time feeling motivated to work in her current job washing dishes in a restaurant where she's not engaged and is working long hours for low pay.

Without tech

Anna talks to the local youth centre she attends and they offer to help her. The youth centre supports Anna to write a CV and signposts her to job listings. They also support her with how to write about her conviction in her application, and how to talk about it constructively at interview. This builds her confidence.



Anna finds an interesting job in a company where she sees lots of opportunities to progress. They decide not to progress her application to the interview round due to the time she spent in prison. She loses all motivation and stops going out as much. She doesn't feel as though there is anyone who is on her side and can help her.

Anna has support from some *gatekeepers*, but is facing *discrimination* and a *lack of opportunity* as a result of her time in *prison*.

The tool: Targeted job application website

Why it is needed: Young people want to advance into paid and meaningful work. But many of them face barriers that exclude them from normal recruitment processes. Meanwhile, many employers want to hire young people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, but don't tend to be willing to commit time or effort to this.



How it would work: With the support of a youth worker or other member of their network, a young person would add their information into the portal: their CV, some key skills, and information about what's been holding them back from the mainstream process. The app then pairs them with employers that are offering suitable roles and that don't see these problems as a barrier. This automated process reduces the emotional damage of continuous rejection for the young person, and makes the initial buy-in of time easier for the employer.

Key things to consider: Technology can act as a great medium to connect the young person and the employer. But many young people who find themselves in this position will need additional help to sustain work. It is important additional support is in place.

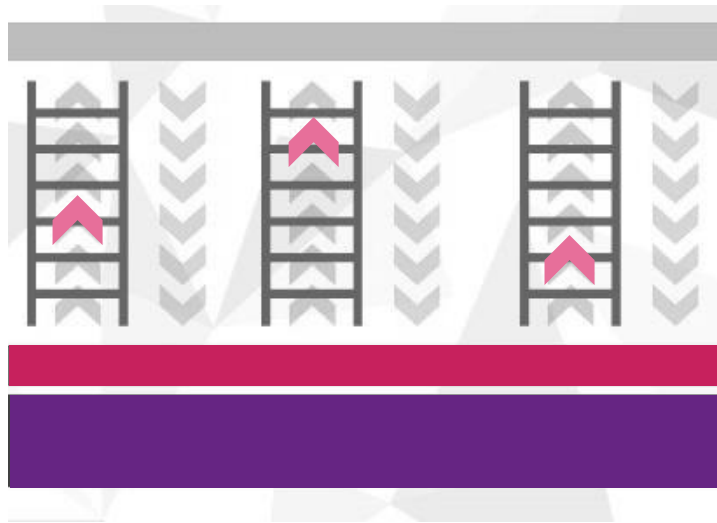
With tech

Anna talks to the local youth centre she attends and they offer to help her. The youth centre supports Anna to write a CV and upload it onto the job app website. The application matches her skills to jobs, and to employers willing to accept people with criminal records. Anna is invited to an interview for their paid internship.

Anna receives some one-to-one coaching from her youth centre in preparation for the interview. She uses what she's learned and a couple of weeks later finds out she's got the job.

Anna works at the marketing firm for a couple of years receiving some ongoing support from her youth centre. She gets promoted to a branding officer her first step to a longer-term career. It also pays a bit better, which means she can finally afford to move into a flat on her own, and this improves her social life.

With an increased network, and support from the wider sector to increase her *work experience*, Anna is able to progress to *independent living, working full time, and increased income options*.



Helping young people to build work experience

Building software that helps young people into work is an area where there has already been some significant thinking.

Zinc is a collaborative organisation of tech founders interested in tackling major social issues. One of its members, Ben Miller, has been investigating how to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds through his project [Flint Futures](#).

Flint Futures tackles youth unemployment by providing young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds with work experience. They are building a technology product to make the safeguarding process related to work experience easier for schools. In parallel they are working with businesses to give them access to people from more diverse backgrounds.

How tech could help youth workers: Amy's story

Amy works as an engagement officer for a youth employment charity. She spends most of her time working directly with young people. Demand for services has increased, meaning her workload has become harder to tackle. She finds she has less and less time to keep an eye on important developments and policy changes in the youth sector, and feels isolated in her role.



Without tech

Amy talks to Jan, a youth worker from another organisation, after a meeting about referring a young person Amy's been working with. They talk about what is going on in the youth sector, and how Amy could help the young person find a coaching programme that would work for them. They swap mobile numbers and agree to keep in touch.

Amy thinks about calling up Jan a few times to meet for a chat and talk about making the referral to the coaching programme, but she just doesn't have the time. She feels increasingly isolated and stressed in her role. And she has been so busy fighting fires that she doesn't hear about an important change to local council funding until the last minute.

She rushes to sort things out and, in the nick of time, makes the deadline. But the stress of so many late nights getting it done is the last straw. She decides to quit youth work, and her valuable knowledge and expertise is lost.

The tool: Digital youth worker community

Why it is needed: Youth workers have stressful jobs with scarce resource and limited support structures. Throughout their careers they develop valuable experience and insights, but this is rarely shared as well as it could be. There is also a risk it disappears from the system altogether when they leave.



How would it work: A website, forum, or social media platform in which youth workers can interact, share their experiences and support each other. This already exists in the benefits advice sector in the form of rightsnet (www.rightsnet.org.uk) where advisors can ask questions about specific challenges clients are facing, as well as keeping up with developments in policy and practice.

Key things to consider: Building a platform that works for youth workers isn't just about the technical functionality—the key to success is how to build a critical mass of users. Overcoming this challenge will mean: partnering with membership bodies that youth workers and youth centres belong to, user design that identifies pain points and successful approaches for youth workers, active community management to generate content and usage, and marketing to ensure people know about the platform. If it's to succeed, a platform needs to be somewhere that youth workers feel comfortable and engaged, and that helps them tackle real problems in their busy working lives.

With tech

Amy talks to Jan, a youth worker from another organisation, after a meeting about referring a young person Amy's been working with. They talk about what is going on in the youth sector, and how Amy could help the young person find a coaching programme that would work for them. Jan mentions that the digital youth worker community is a really good way to find programmes to refer young people to, and keep track of what is going on in the sector.

Amy signs up, and uses the spare time she has on the bus travelling between appointments and waiting for young people to arrive to check into the forum on her phone. She asks a question on the forum about making a referral to a local coaching programme, and soon gets some replies suggesting two local charities' programmes. She also finds some helpful threads about upcoming funding changes, which she gets started on right away.

Over the next few days, Amy spends time in the chat section and makes some friends. She feels much less isolated in her role thanks to a greater awareness that other people face many of the same challenges. She feels connected with the wider sector and spending time talking to people with the same experiences helps to reinvigorate her passion for her work. Amy starts to contribute to the forum with some of her own threads on how people can deal with periods of high stress.

Back in the youth centre, Amy makes a referral to one of the coaching programmes to the young person she's working with. She hears from them after a few weeks that they've started at the programme and are really enjoying it, and Amy thanks the person on the forum who made the suggestion.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This work is not a complete set of answers, but a starting point—an initial inquiry into the question: where can tech best improve the lives of young people experiencing multiple disadvantage? We're clear about its limitations (see page 31). We share this publication in the hope that others will join with us to take this work forward.

Our priorities beyond the publication of this report are as follows:

Encourage others to replicate, build on, and develop this approach

Our work has focused on working with a small group of young people in a specific location—Camden, London. The context, needs, and assets of young people in other places may be different, and possible tech solutions will need to reflect those different circumstances. We hope that others will want to build on and adapt the approach we have taken in their own location, and will share the results of that work, so collectively we can build the knowledge base for the benefit of all young people.

Explore opportunities to adapt existing tech products and solutions

Many of the possibilities we have outlined are underpinned by relatively simple technology that already exists in the private sector. We hope that tech companies with relevant assets—skills, experience and products—will be interested in collaborating to explore the possibility of adapting those existing products. Such adaptation would make sure technology fits the needs and context of the young people we have worked with. It would also explore the business models that may be needed to drive their involvement in such collaborations.

Work collaboratively to take forward the development of tech solutions

We believe collaboration is essential if tech solutions are going to be taken up and implemented at scale. The youth sector (mirroring the charity sector in general) is made up mainly of small and micro-organisations which will never have the resources to develop meaningful tech solutions on their own. Meanwhile, even large organisations are constrained by their funding models to working mainly on their own isolated products and services. What's needed are joined-up solutions that deliver on the reality of young people's journeys through multiple challenges and opportunities. The first stage of this work has been to undertake user research and publish it as an open source resource for the youth sector to build on. From here, NPC's aim is to work collaboratively with the youth sector to start making these ideas into reality.

We will be seeking funding and partners to develop tech solutions, and would be delighted to hear from funders, investors, tech companies and youth charities who want to partner with us in the future. Interested? Get in touch via info@thinkNPC.org.

APPENDIX

More about our research approach

Why Camden and why highly disadvantaged young people?

During the initial scoping our charity partners identified highly disadvantaged young people as the group currently least well served by the youth sector.

To obtain in-depth feedback from young people, we felt it was important to focus on a relatively narrow geographic area. We selected Camden as it has a relatively high level of social deprivation and inequality, and at the same time is home to significant technological innovation. We also believe our ideas are most likely to find traction in areas where the public, private, and social sector can work together for common good. Camden is home to the Camden Young People's foundation (CYPF)—an organisation that works in partnership with the local council to support youth organisations, and is well-placed to manage multi-sector projects, and potentially to take this work forward.

Our research processes

We began the process by recruiting a user panel of six young people (aged 18 to 25) who provided feedback on the overall strategic direction of the programme. They introduced many of the key elements of the final project including how the user mapping journey has been based on the board game snakes and ladders.

Building from the initial feedback of the steering group we ran four user workshops. We put together small groups of young people, initially having them each design their own user journeys. Then in the later workshops we talked about individual elements of the work so far, and used that feedback to iterate new versions.

- Two of these workshops were general purpose.
- One was an all-women workshop designed to engage young women—who often are excluded from the narrative in user research as they can find it hard to speak up in a mixed environment.
- One worked with 16/17-year-olds to make sure we had the voice of younger young people, particularly those who are still engaged in education.

This primary research and co-design has been a new experience for NPC, so we wanted to make sure we meaningfully engaged with service users. We therefore partnered with the Revolving Doors Agency—a charity whose research team specialises in supporting organisations to more meaningfully and effectively engage with service users. We co-produced and delivered the workshops with them and through their expertise were able to create a model that we believe accurately reflects young people's wants and needs.

To help validate the results of the workshop we checked our findings through a small online survey (10 respondents) drawn from a wider pool of youth focused charities.

Following the completion of this initial phase we then interviewed a series of experts in the youth and technology sector to fine tune our model and build the recommendations and example possible technological solutions.

If you want to hear more about some of the specific challenges we faced in developing an approach in partnership with service users, how we overcame them and some practical tips for your own research, you can find it at <http://www.thinknpc.org/blog/4-insights-from-working-with-experts-by-experience/>.

Limitations of the work

- The experience map is high-level—future work to develop tech solutions would need to get into much more granular detail.
- We've focused on young people experiencing multiple disadvantage in Camden—future work on tech solutions aiming to have broader geographic relevance would need to test the findings and priorities that came out of our localised work.
- The possibilities we suggest for tech solutions are just that—far-from fully fledged and tested products. There's work to do to turn these concepts into future products and solutions, prototyping, testing, learning and iterating towards tools that will make meaningful impact.