BE REAL WITH ME:

USING PEER RESEARCH TO EXPLORE THE JOURNEYS OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO RUN AWAY FROM HOME OR CARE

Jane Thompson, Sarah Lanchin and Dan Moxon

RAILWAY children

Fighting for street children

RAILWAY CHILDREN FIGHT FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN WHO LIVE ALONE AND AT RISK ON THE STREETS, WHERE THEY SUFFER ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION.

IN THE UK, SOCIETY OFTEN DENIES THEIR EXISTENCE, AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES THE PROBLEM IS SO PREVALENT THAT IT HAS BECOME 'NORMAL'.

The peer research discussed in this report was part of Railway Children's 'Reaching Safe Places' research. Visit **www.railwaychildren.org.uk/safeplaces** to download the full and summary reports, or see the peer researchers talk about their experiences in a short film.

SAFE PLACES

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Railway Children carried out their 'Reaching Safe Places' research. A vital part of this was listening to young people describe their runaway and homeless journeys, and the things that had helped them to find a safe place. It has been estimated that every year 18,000 children under 16 run away and sleep rough or with someone they have just met (Rees, 2011). The research aimed to identify the features of the journey that made it more likely that young people would reach a safe place and the role that services needed to play to achieve this.

Participatory research was a key element of this initiative. Whilst there are different models of participatory research (see ARACY, 2008) the commonality is in empowering the group being researched to be active participants in the research process, enabling them to take decisions that shape and form how the research is conducted, and its outcomes. In the case of 'Reaching Safe Places' this meant supporting young people with experience of running away or homelessness to design and carry out the research in partnership with other members of the research team.

Taking account of the views and opinions of young people on issues that affect their lives is a key part of protecting and supporting the rights of children and young people, as defined by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As an organisation, Railway Children is committed to this concept and wants to ensure that its beneficiaries directly influence programmes of work and policy positions. Youth forums and similar models of participation are unlikely to successfully engage young people whose lives are in transition, meaning that these young people's voices are not always heard by decision makers. Adopting a participatory research approach in 'Reaching Safe Places' provided a flexible model for young people to engage with, and an opportunity for Railway Children to listen to young people in a way that would inform its programmes and campaigns.

This report gives a brief overview of the peer research process, the decisions made, the challenges, and the learning that emerged. These reflections are intended for practitioners who already have experience of participatory work with young people: those looking for more introductory materials, toolkits or academic references can find links and references in section 6. In writing this report we wanted to reflect our own experiences as adult researchers of working with young people in this way. The young people's own reflections on the process can be seen in a short film we produced. This, and the full and summary versions of the 'Reaching Safe Places' report, can be downloaded at www.railwaychildren.org.uk/safeplaces

2. PEER RESEARCH PROCESS

This chart details the tasks that workers and peer researchers undertook at each stage.

NOV-FEB	MAR-JUNE	JULY	AUG-SEPT	OCT-DEC
PREPARATION	**FIELDWORK**	**ANALYSIS**	**TESTING**	**FINAL REPORT**

WORKER INPUT

PREPARATION	FIELDWORK	ANALYSIS	TESTING	FINAL REPORT
• Prepare materials • Recruit Consultant • Recruit Research Advisory Group • Get ethical approval from RAG • Identify local worker support • Recruit Peer Researchers • Initiate DBS checks • Train Peer Researchers	• Recruit interviewees • Set up meetings • Arrange travel • Buy fieldwork equipment • Oversee fieldwork • Check in sessions • Arrange transcription • Log data	• Write up between sessions • Reflect back • Facilitate peer analysis sessions • Present early findings to RAG	• Arrange testing workshops • Write survey and circulate	• Write up final report • Have input into design of report • Arrange launch event • Arrange ongoing dissemination

PEER INPUT

PREPARATION	FIELDWORK	ANALYSIS	TESTING	FINAL REPORT
• Apply for role of Peer Researcher • Complete an interview • Take part in training • Make sense of the research question • Decide on research method and develop research tools to use	• Travel to different parts of the country • Carry out interviews with young people • Review what data is coming back • Make changes to the interview questions where needed	• Read the transcripts of the interviews • Log key points on a journey sheet • Group journeys into themes • Participate in final analysis session and develop initial findings	• Participate in testing workshops • Review survey questions	• Review final report • Participate in session on report design • Make a video about the experience of doing the project • Participate in launch event

3. DECISIONS, STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES AT EACH STAGE

This section identifies the key decisions made at the stages shown on the timeline, the thinking behind those decisions, and the strengths and challenges of this approach.

STAGE 1: PREPARATION

We made a conscious decision to recruit peer researchers only from projects where support from a named worker could be guaranteed, and to run the recruitment process in a fairly formal manner, by application and interview, to reflect real-life job search. As the work would only be for a few hours a week it was not practical to offer it as a paid role, though we did investigate options such as self-employment. It was therefore advertised as a volunteer role.

Six peer researchers aged 18-21 were recruited. This number allowed for the fact that their personal circumstances might change or differ and they might not all be equally involved at every stage.

Alongside this, an Advisory Group was recruited, made up of professionals with expertise in practice, policy or research. This group approved the ethical framework, gave feedback on the process, and supported the dissemination.

A consultant experienced in participation and peer research was engaged at an early stage and supported the planning as well as facilitating the training and analysis sessions. All learning was accredited through the AQA Unit Awards scheme.

During the preparation workshops the peer researchers were supported to develop key themes for enquiry based on the research question. The method of enquiry was a decision that had been entirely devolved to the peer researchers, and they decided emphatically that the method should be one-to-one interviews because of the sensitive nature of the research. The peer researchers developed interview schedules, and practised interviewing other members of the research team. Alongside this they did bespoke safeguarding training and discussed how to deal with sensitive situations and disclosures.

STRENGTHS

The formal recruitment process emphasised how much the role was valued and helped to define the relationship between the peer researchers and other workers, as team members undertaking a common task on behalf of Railway Children.

The mixture of youth work and research experience within the team meant that activities such as exploring the research question could be facilitated in ways that were interesting and accessible, whilst still retaining academic rigour. The support from youth work trained staff in New Horizon Youth Centre and Railway Children was a key factor in the success of those days.

The expertise of the consultant in working with young people using participatory groupwork enabled the peer researchers to select the fieldwork method, identify key areas of questioning, and write interview schedules with relative ease. It created space for everyone to have an input and allowed the conversations to be guided by an adult facilitator, ensuring the process stayed on track, without influencing the outcomes of decisions and discussions.

The range of skills and experience in the Advisory Group provided valuable validation of the process and their engagement and prompt responses enabled us to maintain steady progress.

CHALLENGES

For practical purposes peer researchers were all recruited from the same project. Inevitably, they reflected the young people that typically accessed that project, most of whom were 18 or older with experience of being homeless in London, and a large number of whom were of BME or dual heritage. This common background and experience can be seen as the perspective from which young people conducted the research, and whilst it was certainly a highly relevant perspective, it is arguable that it is only one of many possible perspectives that may have emerged if we had been able to recruit young people from a wider range of locations, with different ethnic backgrounds, ages and experiences.

STAGE 2: FIELDWORK

Interviewees were recruited only through existing projects, to ensure that there was support in place. Workers in the research team were responsible for liaising with youth projects to arrange interviews, and the peer researchers were accompanied by a youth worker on each site visit. Peer researchers conducted 34 interviews with 32 people in three different cities. Interviews were audio recorded (with participants' consent) using a digital voice recorder with password protection and encryption, and were then sent for transcription.

The follow on questions that peer researchers chose during the interviews showed how their perspectives and experience began to influence the fieldwork. Generally, they focused on areas that they themselves felt were the most important, and thus began to work from a perspective rooted in their own experiences: for instance some placed less emphasis on physical space and places their interviewees visited, and more on the social and emotional impact of the relationships they experienced.

STRENGTHS

The fact that the peer researchers were based at New Horizon Youth Centre, a drop-in centre for young people with housing issues, provided easy access to potential interviewees.

Recruiting interviewees through this and other projects meant that we could be sure that young people would have an available source of support if they found the interview distressing.

The opportunity to listen to audio recordings and read transcripts of the interviews the peer researchers had conducted provided real insight into the dynamics of peer led interviews. In most cases there was a genuine authenticity present from the outset in the way they interacted with their interviewees. An understanding of youth culture and perspectives, often reflected in a shared language, enabled the peer researchers to put their interviewees at ease.

Having a named worker to liaise with in New Horizon Youth Centre made the process of overseeing the research remotely more manageable.

CHALLENGES

Obtaining Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for some of the peer researchers was problematic, due to a lack of identity documents such as passports and driving licences and/or having stayed at multiple addresses. This delayed the interviews starting.

One peer researcher was well-known to the project, came with excellent references, but was completely unable to supply the documents needed for a DBS check, and therefore interviewed with a worker in the background throughout. This was not a 'young person only' space, as we had envisaged, but it did not seem to inhibit discussion.

Contacting projects was a time-consuming process and several were unable to take part because of internal capacity issues.

The nature of the projects we were able to access influenced the stories the research team were able to uncover. We would have liked to have spoken to more under 16s, whose journeys were often of shorter duration, and were more likely to have social care involvement, but it was projects working with these groups who were most likely to decline because of capacity issues. It was slightly easier to access projects whose focus was on youth homelessness. This meant that we reached higher numbers of older young people (18+) and lower numbers of under-18s than we had expected.

STAGE 3: ANALYSIS

An interim analysis session was held after ten interviews had been completed to review progress and fine-tune the interview questions. Some minor changes to the interview schedules were agreed by the peer researchers, mainly to explore certain research themes more deeply. Prior to the two main analysis days, there were two reading sessions where each peer researcher read and summarised a selection of the journeys using a pre-prepared template that asked them to identify and comment on key stages and features of the journey.

In the first full analysis day these templates were used by the wider group to analyse and theme journeys. Workers on the research team were familiar with the transcripts, which were consulted when clarification was needed or there were differences of opinion.

The peer researchers found some journeys were difficult to place in a category, and others were distinct but there were only two or three of them, meaning that there was not enough information to construct a separate category. This was unsatisfactory to some extent, but those journeys that had some atypical features were marked, and their distinctiveness was acknowledged where appropriate in the final report.

On the final analysis day, the peer researchers worked collaboratively with the rest of the research team in a groupwork process to begin identifying key findings relating to the interview question. We commissioned a graphic illustrator to draw our discussions and findings as they emerged. Her input brought our thoughts to life and were used in the final report, though as she was drawing live she naturally drew some things that we discussed at one stage but deprioritised as the analysis developed.

STRENGTHS

Having a research team that includes people with personal experience of the issue being researched is simultaneously a strength and a challenge. It undoubtedly enhanced and enlivened our discussions during analysis, and introduced perspectives that might otherwise have been lost.

Having a team with very varied perspectives made the older members of the research team reevaluate some of their assumptions, particularly about the relative importance of money, shelter and relationships in keeping young people safe.

CHALLENGES

During the analysis stage groupwork was much more challenging. Reading transcripts was the least popular part of the process, and the volume of data generated by the interviews meant it was hard for the peer researchers to physically read and take in all of the transcripts, even with the additional sessions that were scheduled. We questioned whether having less familiarity with the interview transcripts meant that the peer researchers' own experiences became more prevalent during the analysis workshops.

It was clear that participatory groupwork alone would be insufficient for analysis, and it required the commitment of one of the adults working on the project full time to analyse the transcripts and ensure some of the messages from the interviews were not lost. This moved us further away from the youth led process we had been aiming for at the outset of the process, but was something we discussed and agreed with the peer researchers before making this decision. Were we to approach the process again, we would certainly explore alternative ways of analysing the data perhaps by using the participatory groupwork to generate instructions and tasks for an individual analyst.

STAGE 4: TESTING THE FINDINGS

We had originally planned to test the peer research findings solely through a young people's survey. Some of the findings were complex and did not lend themselves easily to a survey format, so we ran two workshops to test out the findings in a more qualitative way, before translating them into a survey. This idea came from a young person and a member of the Advisory Group, and peer researchers attended one of the workshops.

The extra time needed to arrange and run the workshops meant we had only four weeks to carry out the survey, which limited the response rate. We tried to keep closely to the terms and descriptions that peer researchers had used, but the survey was still relatively complex and response from the younger age range was low. It would have been desirable to have the time to build in some support for discussion and completion of the survey by under 16 year olds, or to pick out some key points and create a much simpler version.

STRENGTHS

Using participatory groupwork with young people as part of the testing phase allowed us to fully explore some of the complex concepts that had come from the analysis days. It made for more complete and reasoned responses, and showed that the peer researchers' findings resonated with other young people.

CHALLENGES

It was difficult to make the survey accessible to the younger age range within the timescales, and it was completed mainly by young people aged 16 and over.

STAGE 5: REPORT WRITING AND DISSEMINATION

Peer researchers agreed at an early stage that they would like to give verbal input into the final report rather than writing it. The report was therefore written by one of the adults on the research team, but peer researchers' voices were included through direct quotes and key elements such as the composite journeys were amended after their feedback. They also met with a designer and had input into the visual appearance of the report.

Researchers were asked to reflect on their experiences of the project in a recorded interview and two peer researchers who were still actively involved took up this offer. They also agreed to appear in a video about the research which we could use to ensure their perspective was heard when we disseminated the findings at conferences and seminars. Two peer researchers attended the launch event, having decided that they did not wish to speak from the front, but were happy to chat to attendees informally afterwards.

Ongoing dissemination of the report at seminars and conferences was undertaken by workers on the research team.

STRENGTHS

The peer researchers were able to make informed choices about the extent of their involvement in different stages of the research. Those who were able to see the project through to the end found it a very satisfying experience.

CHALLENGES

There were six peer researchers in the team, but by the time of the launch there were only two still actively involved. We had been fully prepared for this, but it would have been desirable to have more peer researchers still engaged at the end.

POWER SHARING AND DECISION MAKING DURING THE FIVE STAGES

Throughout this research, we aimed for a high degree of partnership and transparency, and devolved decision-making on issues to the members whose experience suggested they were best placed to make that decision. However, not all decisions were negotiated with peer researchers: the research question, for example, had been decided before they were recruited. Decisions about the interview process, the themes and the questions to be asked were decided by peer researchers with workers acting in a supporting role. Decisions about the approximate numbers of interviewees and timescales were taken by workers, based on their experiences of previous projects, the budget that had been allocated, and the deadlines for delivery of the research report. Many decisions that were worker-led occurred before the involvement of the peer researchers, or were confined by the practical requirements of the project. However there were areas, particularly the report writing, where young people chose to let adults take the lead.

The table below summarises the division of decision-making

| Worker-led decisions	Peer-led decisions
Research question	Method of enquiry
Recruitment process	Themes to explore
Nature of facilitation and training	Interview questions
Approximate number of researchers	Categories of journey
Approximate number of interviewees	Peer recommendations
Ethical framework	Role in writing up findings
Timescale	Inclusion of sense-checking workshops
Budget	Extent of involvement
Structuring of final report	
Design of young people's survey	

4. KEY LESSONS

LESSON 1. WHAT CONSTITUTES A 'PEER' IS A COMPLEX ISSUE.

We challenged ourselves a number of times on what constitutes a peer. Did it matter that we were asking a 20 year old black male from London who had been homeless to understand the experiences of a 14 year old white female from Sheffield who had run away from home? Were the identities and experiences of these young people really quite different, or does the common experience of needing to find a safe place create a sufficient commonality? This research was predicated on the assumption that young people who have run away have, in some way, a shared perspective and can offer an 'insider' view or standpoint from which the research can be conducted. This assumes that the experience of running away is the dominant identity for both the peer researchers and research participants. However the peer researchers will have held multiple identities informed by race, class, ethnicity, gender and many other factors all of which will have influenced the research process.

We were asked, and asked ourselves, 'Do the peer researchers really represent young people who have run away or gone missing?'. After considering this, we concluded that in this context, peer should be regarded as a qualitative term. The peer researchers' backgrounds and experiences were clearly more similar to some interviewees than others, however they were always 'more' peer than older adult researchers, who had never run away, gone missing or been homeless. This research was not about generalising the experiences of six peer researchers, but asking them to use their experiences as a filter to understand and view the experiences of 32 other young people, because the filter the peer researchers would use is closer to the filters of those 32 than anything an adult researcher could create.

Qualitative research is arguably always influenced by the researcher, their subjectivity and the experiences they bring. In one sense, this is bias, which is a term usually used pejoratively, but an awareness of this personal position and vested interest can also provide extra depth. But this conundrum still remains one of the challenges of peer research: whilst the bias of the peer researchers was clearly different from the bias of the adults involved, would it have been different again, if we had recruited under 16s from outside London to the research team? When, if ever, is it possible to have a common bias that is shared by both research participants and peer researchers?
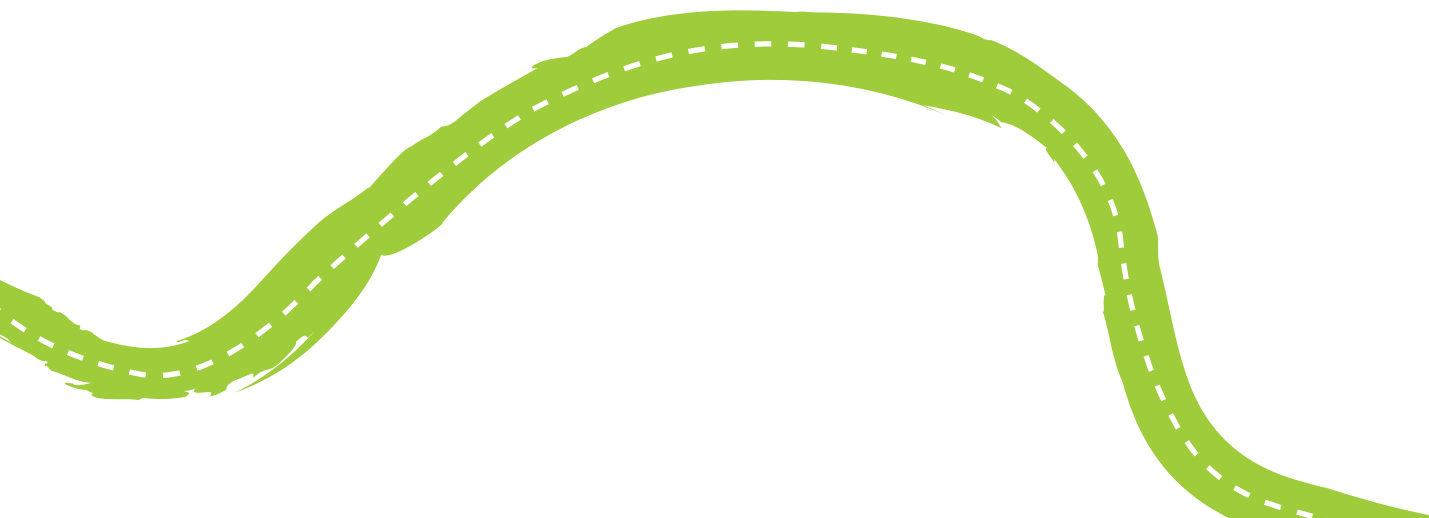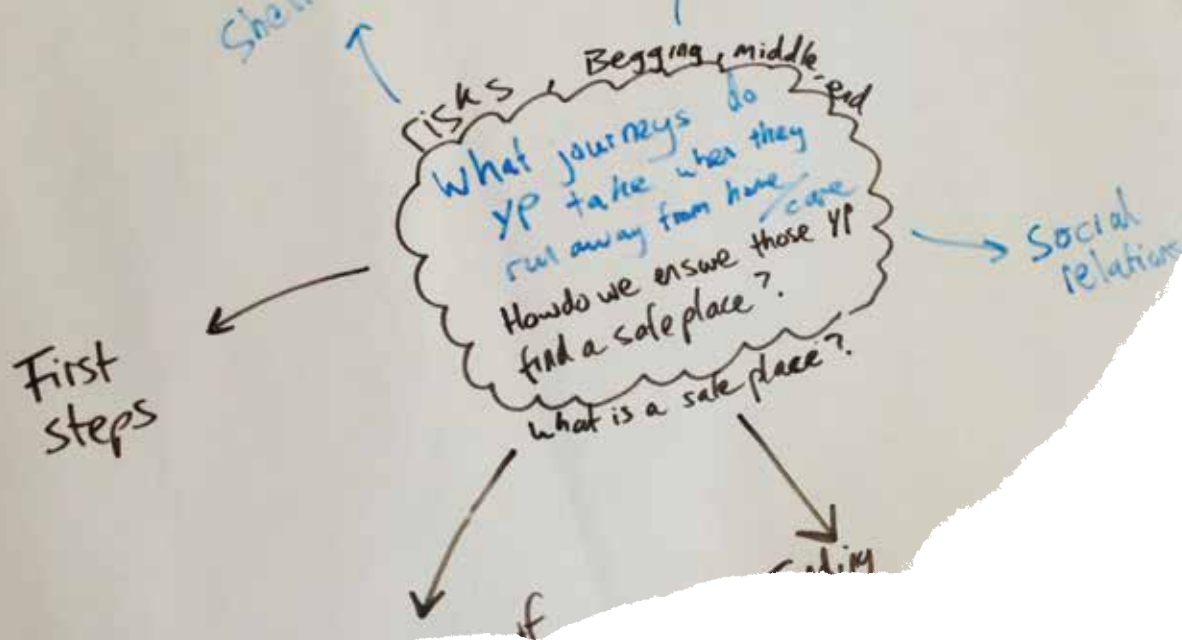
LESSON 2. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PERSPECTIVES OF ADULT RESEARCHERS AND PEER RESEARCHERS VARIED THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT.

In the planning phases, the research themes and interview questions the young people designed seemed only marginally different to the sort the workers would have chosen. By the analysis stage the peer researchers' emphasis on the importance of relationships was significantly stronger than the adults, almost to the extent that some of the research team felt the importance of providing food and shelter for young people who run away or go missing was being overlooked. This divergence was made more striking by the closeness of earlier perspectives.

LESSON 3. WORKING WITH DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES WAS SIMULTANEOUSLY ONE OF THE STRONGEST AND MOST CHALLENGING PARTS OF THE PROJECT.

On one level this showed clearly that the involvement of young people throughout the research process was producing a different process and findings than if adults had led it alone, helping us get a new perspective on the experiences of young people who run away or become homeless, built around the voices and views of young people who have been in similar situations.

On the other hand it left us continually questioning ourselves: how did we know that we had supported the peer researchers well enough to conduct interviews? Were the differences in questioning styles really just mistakes? Was the emphasis on relationships partly created by working with peer researchers who were at the end stages of their journey, where rebuilding relationships is a key factor? If so, would young people at earlier stages of the journey agree?

Ultimately these sort of questions cannot be answered definitively, but taking a critical perspective of our own work throughout the process and challenging ourselves with questions like these was an important part of the process.

LESSON 4. HAVING A SHARED LANGUAGE IS PARTICULARLY VALUED.

Although there were sometimes age, gender and cultural differences between peer researchers and their interviewees, peer researchers felt there was still a shared language, compared to the way in which they would talk to older adults. This was felt to be an important factor in the way that peer interviews were conducted and the way that interviewees responded. One peer researcher said that she felt her past experiences helped interviewees to 'be real' with her.

There were examples within the interviews of a particular word or phrase triggering a positive response and demonstrating a shared language. In this example, the use of the word 'random' seems to trigger a shared understanding and a very honest response:

Q. YOU SAID YOU WERE AWAY, ROUND AT PEOPLE'S HOUSES, HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANYTHING, LIKE ANYTHING RANDOM HAPPENED, NOT JUST FOR YOU, OTHER PEOPLE LIKE?

A. ER, I'VE BEEN AT PARTIES BEFORE WHERE I'VE WOKE UP AND THERE'S BEEN LIKE THREE OR FOUR PEOPLE IN THE BED AND I'VE HAD LIKE NAKED PEOPLE BEHIND US AND STUFF AND I'VE BEEN LIKE, OH.

An older interviewer may well have got a similar response in another way, but the reaction to the word 'random' seems to bear out researchers' earlier comments about feeling relaxed around people who share the same language. The full 'Reaching Safe Places' report contains further instances and discussion of this.

LESSON 5. PRACTICAL CHALLENGES CANNOT BE UNDERESTIMATED.

Working with young people who had run away, gone missing or been homeless created a number of practical challenges that would not generally affect an adult research team.

Some of the peer researchers were in supported accommodation when they were involved in the project, and faced a variety of challenges at different times that needed to take priority for them over engaging with the research project. During the project, some of the peer researchers found jobs and moved into more stable housing. This was great news for them but also meant they had less time to be involved with the research team. It was always clear the peer researchers' engagement in this project was, and should be seen as, time limited, forming part of their own journey and transition.

Having a large research team worked really well but also presented its own challenges. Simply ensuring that six people had enough secure access and time to read and think about over 30 interview transcripts, in a way that was engaging to young people, was one of the hardest parts of the project.

There were numerous administrative challenges such as gaining DBS checks for people who had lived at multiple addresses, or balancing the desire to provide payment for participation against disrupting benefits. All of these were ultimately resolvable in some way, however it was clear that working with peer researchers requires an additional level of planning and coordination that would not normally be required with an adult only research team.

LESSON 6. ACCESSIBLE DAY-TO-DAY SUPPORT FOR THE PEER RESEARCH TEAM IS ESSENTIAL.

Supporting the peer researchers effectively would have been impossible without New Horizon Youth Centre. They provided an outreach support worker who was responsible for providing holistic support to the peer researchers as part of his day to day role and provided the link directly to the research. This day to day relationship, contact and support for the peer researchers was crucial to ensuring they had a relationship with the research team as a whole and were properly supported to participate, as well as supported in other aspects of their lives.

LESSON 7: WORKING IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IS BENEFICIAL.

Railway Children and New Horizon Youth Centre are both charities whose mission is to work with young people at risk. Approval of peer-designed fieldwork and minor adjustments to the research model were decisions that were devolved to the research team and were not dependent on ethics committee approval as in larger academic institutions, though of course the project had an ethical framework. This meant that the research model was flexible and could be developed and adjusted to the needs of the peer researchers as some of the practical barriers described above arose. The funding arrangements for the research meant that the research team also had direct control over the budget, and were able to implement minor changes to the programme design quickly and efficiently without waiting for approval from third parties. Thankfully we were also fortunate to be adequately resourced: participation requires investment, and can be more expensive and time consuming than other forms of research.

5. CONCLUSION

This research was a challenging and dynamic project to work on, and we believe that the inclusion in the research team of young people who had experiences of running away, being forced out or being homeless brought a genuinely different perspective to the research. Qualitative research always faces the challenge of how to approach the bias of the researcher, the influence it has on the research findings, and whether to embrace or minimise this. Our response to this was to construct a research model that embraced the bias of the people being researched i.e. young people with relevant past experience, and we attempted to design research that was rooted in the lived experiences of those young people.

In doing this we found that the value of working with young people as researchers is about what they bring to the process as well as what they hear and perceive from their contacts with the other young people participating in the research. The experiences the peer researchers brought to the table shaped and formed the research at each stage and this influenced the way they connected with, responded to and interpreted the comments of the young people they interviewed. Alongside this, shared language, experiences and understanding of youth culture enabled them to connect with interviewees in a way that adults could not.

However, acknowledging the influence that peer researchers' own experiences have on the research, raises the question 'when is a peer a peer?'. Was it fair to assume that their bias and the viewpoint they held could represent a commonly held position amongst young people who need a safe place or is this too much of a generalisation, ignoring other divides such as race, class and gender? Ultimately we have no easy answers to these questions and they remain areas for future exploration, by ourselves and others working with peer research.

Finally, one of the key lessons we can draw is the crucial role of youth work support in facilitating meaningful and inclusive peer research. From recruitment through to dissemination, having youth work support built into this research was vital to its success. This was most notable in the direct support provided to the peer researchers, to empower them to act as members of the research team.

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Railway Children
1 The Commons
Sandbach CW11 1EG

T 01270 757 596
E hello@railwaychildren.org.uk
W www.railwaychildren.org.uk

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