

A joint publication by Act Build Change
and The National Survivor User Network



The **Shape** of **Safety**

A guide to reimagining safety
and safeguarding alongside
young people with experience
of distress, trauma and
mental ill-health

Produced by:



Act Build Change



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In partnership with:



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2024

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Partners

Revoke

Revoke is a grassroots organisation, advocating for the rights and welfare of displaced young people, living without advocates, families, power, or a voice. By recognising the brutality of the political, economic, and bureaucratic systems they battle every day, we take a holistic approach to their care, prioritising compassion and respect. Our values are rooted in abolitionism and trauma-informed practices.

www.revoke.org.uk

 [@revokecic](https://www.instagram.com/revokecic)

Voice Collective

Voice Collective is a UK-wide project that supports young people who hear voices, see visions, or have other sensory experiences or beliefs. They offer peer support groups, online support and community, and deliver training for professionals and family members. The project is based within Mind in Camden.

www.voicecollective.co.uk


 [@voicecollective](https://twitter.com/voicecollective)

Act Build Change

Act Build Change is a transformative organising school. Our mission is to make the methods of organising and collective care accessible to everyone who wants to end injustice in their lives and to build better worlds for all of us.

www.actbuildchange.com

 [@actbuildchange](https://www.instagram.com/actbuildchange)


 [@actbuildchange](https://twitter.com/actbuildchange)

National Survivor User Network

The National Survivor User Network (NSUN) is a lived experience-led organisation connecting, supporting, and amplifying the work and voices of people with lived experience of mental ill-health, distress and trauma. Our mission is to shift power and resource in mental health.

www.nsun.org.uk

 [@NSUNnews](https://www.instagram.com/NSUNnews)

 [@NSUNnews](https://twitter.com/NSUNnews)



“I think in an ideal world we need a total change of how we view mental health, how we treat people who are showing and experiencing distress. We can't just change one bit.”

– Young person, Voice Collective

Introduction

THIS GUIDE OFFERS PRINCIPLES, EXAMPLES AND REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS DESIGNED TO SUPPORT PEOPLE WORKING ALONGSIDE YOUNG PEOPLE (18-25) WITH EXPERIENCE OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH, DISTRESS OR TRAUMA, WHO WANT TO MOVE THEIR SAFEGUARDING PRACTICE AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES TO A MORE COLLABORATIVE, TRAUMA-INFORMED AND ANTI-OPPRESSIVE MODEL.

“People have really different ideas about safety – I see it like a pyramid, it can't be easily explained how it has come about because for each person it's totally different.

Understanding safety also doesn't happen overnight – it happens stone by stone, and brick by brick – that way you move towards understanding safety.”

– Young person, Revoke



We hope that this guide can offer language, inspiration and tools for this work, and can be used to begin conversations within organisations about safeguarding practices.

What we offer here is drawn from a collaboration between the National Survivor User Network (NSUN), Act Build Change, Voice Collective, and Revoke. Act Build Change and NSUN held workshops on reimagining safeguarding with staff and young people from Revoke and Voice Collective, and have presented the insights from these workshops in this guide. You can read more on the process of how we approached these sessions in the Methodology section below.

This work developed from observations by practitioners that many young people with experience of mental ill-health, distress and trauma end up being harmed rather than protected by safeguarding processes.

Revoke and Voice Collective intentionally set out to create safety for and with young people who have experienced significant trauma, including institutional harm, within the immigration and mental health systems respectively.

To safeguard effectively in these contexts, staff and young people in these organisations have had to do things differently and develop new practices and tools to support their work.

Trying to change practices and perspectives around safeguarding can be challenging and isolating. We produced this guide to share and celebrate methods

of fostering cultures of safety and care that foreground lived experience, young people's agency and anti-oppressive practice. The guide also names tensions and challenges that can arise in this work, and shares approaches to help navigate them. We hope that this guide can be a practical tool that supports practitioners to continue this work and create change in their organisations.

How we use language

SAFEGUARDING

Safeguarding is a legal term which describes an organisational responsibility to prevent and respond to the abuse and neglect of children (under 18s) and adults at risk (defined as people over 18 with care and support needs who as a result of those needs would struggle to protect themselves from abuse or neglect).

This guide and this project looks at safety broadly, including but not limited to the legal definition and requirements of safeguarding. For that reason, the principles are intended to be useful both within safeguarding processes and more broadly.

YOUNG PEOPLE

The conversations we had through this project were all with people over the age of 18. Some of those people connected with the term 'young people' and some didn't. For the purposes of safeguarding, they would all be considered adults, though some of them reflected on experiences of 'being safeguarded' under 18.

For ease of communication, we use 'young people' to refer to participants, but we want to acknowledge the complexity of the term. There is no standard 'young person' and we can't make generalisations based on the category.

THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

'The hostile environment' refers to a set of policies introduced by the Government since 2010. The idea behind these policies, as Liberty puts it, is "to make life in the UK as unbearable as possible for undocumented migrants."¹ In practice these policies compel teachers, landlords, employers and public servants to act as border guards that check immigration status before providing services, offering jobs or signing tenancy agreements. This, in turn, means many are blocked from accessing safety and essential services and are effectively pushed into extreme poverty.



The Shape of Safety

WHEN INVITED TO DEFINE SAFETY, MANY YOUNG PEOPLE SPOKE ABOUT THINGS THEY EITHER DIDN'T HAVE RELIABLE ACCESS TO, OR HAD EXPERIENCED BEING DENIED IN THE PAST, FOR EXAMPLE:



[When asked to draw the 'shape of safety'] I made a circle with me in it – and glasses, food, and some hearts, and a door. Being protected from what's not needed, and having a door so I can leave and go out into other spaces where safety might not be guaranteed.

– Young person
Voice Collective



• **SECURE HOUSING**

• **ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION**

• **EDUCATION AND ROUTES INTO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT INCLUDING PRACTICAL COURSES, CERTIFICATION, TRAINEESHIPS AND WORK EXPERIENCE**

• **RELIABLE LEGAL REPRESENTATION, HEALTHCARE, WATER, HYGIENE**

• **GOOD FOOD**

• **COMMUNITY AND BEING ABLE TO DO INTERESTING, ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES**

• **CONTROL OVER HOW THEIR INFORMATION IS SHARED, AND WITH WHOM**

• **THE POWER TO LOCK A DOOR - CHOOSING WHO CAN ENGAGE WITH THEM, WHEN AND HOW**

• **RESPECT FOR THEIR CHOICES AND BOUNDARIES**

In many cases, young people are made unsafe due to broader circumstances which neither they nor practitioners supporting them can fully control, and which formal safeguarding mechanisms are not designed to address.

No organisation can solve all of these problems alone, but our conversations suggested that in Revoke and Voice Collective, creating proactive cultures of safety helped to mitigate their impacts. These cultures enabled practitioners to work in ways which foregrounded lived experience, young people's agency and anti-oppressive practice, including when engaging with more formal safeguarding processes or having to make difficult and complicated decisions alongside young people.

This is particularly important because of the potential for actions taken around safety and safeguarding to end up actually disempowering and harming young people, particularly those who are already marginalised. Acknowledging this potential and taking proactive steps to create cultures of safety, as opposed to only reacting in moments of crisis or in response to risk or perceived risk, helps to minimise this potential for harm.

We also heard from staff about the importance of supportive workplaces, shared responsibility and good working conditions for being able to safeguard effectively. Cultures of safety support both the wellbeing of staff and the young people they work with.

From our conversations with staff and young people, we have identified four essential and related themes which can help to create cultures of safety. These themes are meant to layer on top of each other and connect - "*stone by stone, brick by brick*", to quote a young person from Revoke. They are intended not to

replace but to build on and enhance existing guidance around safeguarding, and enable greater consideration of safety as an ongoing practice and culture within organisations. They are:

1 Building autonomy

2 Working relationally

3 Sitting with uncertainty and making mistakes

4 Acknowledging and addressing structures of oppression

Under each of these themes you'll find **INSIGHTS** from conversations with staff and young people and **REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS** for you to consider. At the end of the guide, you'll find **KEY TAKEAWAYS**, a **PRACTITIONER'S CHECKLIST** and **RESOURCES** for further reading.



1 Building autonomy

AUTONOMY, AGENCY, EMPOWERMENT AND DECISION-MAKING POWER WERE ALL DISCUSSED IN DEPTH BY BOTH YOUNG PEOPLE AND STAFF.

In many cases, the young people we spoke to connected a lack of autonomy in their lives to a lack of safety. For example, a young person from Revoke identified that safety would look like *“support to get work and be independent - this is part of the machinery of the hostile environment that means people like me can’t live a safe life.”* Others spoke about the positive impacts of feeling listened to, having their choices matter and being able to exercise control over their environments.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAID ABOUT AUTONOMY:

“Autonomy is very important for me to feel safe in any way. When I’m struggling I often want to put myself somewhere I can control who is there and what goes on, so I can choose, and that’s important for me.”

“[The ‘shape of safety is’...] people respect my boundaries, my choices.”

“People make assumptions – they think you can’t make your own decisions or don’t know what you’re experiencing.”

“Having autonomy taken away (especially when you have trauma) usually makes the situation worse. Asking is always a good idea.”

What emerged in our conversations is that just respecting autonomy isn't enough, particularly when young people have had experiences in which their agency or choices have been repeatedly devalued. Young people described not being able to make choices for a variety of reasons, including not knowing what their options were; one young person said, of their experience within the mental healthcare system, *"I wish that things would be explained more, rather than threatened,"* which underlines how unequal power dynamics can produce threat and uncertainty which make young people less likely to name what they want or expect their needs to be met.

Additionally, there are often broader circumstances which limit people's control over their lives. Furthermore, some young people had experience of services using language associated with autonomy, agency, capacity and decision-making to avoid offering support - what we refer to here as 'false empowerment'.

So, what can practitioners do to build meaningful autonomy? Speaking to young people and staff from Revoke and Voice Collective, we identified some key approaches which helped to put power into young people's hands, even in complex and difficult contexts. They are:

A Building power by sharing knowledge

B The importance of transparency and boundaries

C Avoiding false empowerment

A Building power by sharing knowledge

REVOKE STAFF MEMBER TALKING ABOUT SOME OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 18-25 THEY WORK WITH:

Some of the people we are working with have travelled alone across continents to get to the UK – they don't need anyone making choices on their behalf! We have to remind ourselves that a paternalistic approach isn't empowering and it doesn't build agency. Sharing clear information and choices so that people are empowered and fully understand the options that they have is one of the most important things we can do.



Young people from Voice Collective and Revoke emphasised that exercising autonomy requires knowledge, which some of them described as 'knowing your rights'. In the context of safeguarding, 'knowing your rights' underlines the importance of clear policies and communication. Sharing information that might be hard to hear, around risk for example, was often discussed in a positive light: *"When you're educated around the risks and the options you have more of a choice."*

Young people also emphasised the importance of 'knowing your rights' in other contexts, ranging from knowing what to do if stopped by the police, to being given full information about medication. This highlighted a key question, which kept coming up: given that practitioners in youth sector organisations often have limited interaction with the people they work alongside, how can they reduce risk in contexts where both they and young people may not have much power?

One of the solutions suggested by young people was for youth organisations to help young people equip themselves with the skills and knowledge they may need to keep themselves and others safe. For example, a young person from Revoke shared about a time she was stopped and asked for ID in a train station. She didn't know whether this was legal and knowing her rights would have helped her feel more in control in this situation. *"Coming from different backgrounds and countries means we are used to completely different rules and legal systems. Legal education would be really helpful and teaching us what rights we have if we are e.g. stopped by the police. It's empowering to know how the system works."*

B The importance of transparency and boundaries

A key takeaway from this work is the importance of boundaries.

BOUNDARIES ARE LIMITS AND NORMS THAT CLARIFY TO US AND COMMUNICATE TO OTHERS WHAT WE CAN AND CAN'T DO.

We all have different boundaries for different people, circumstances and areas of our lives, with some boundaries being more difficult or easy to maintain depending on who and where we are. There will be boundaries in our life that feel clear and those that feel blurry.

As a staff member from Voice Collective shared *"we put a big focus on making sure that young people are informed on what is happening right from the beginning - we make sure they know what the boundaries of confidentiality are, and what the pathways are that we can offer."*

It will also be important for young people and adults accessing services to have an opportunity to communicate their boundaries. This can be a helpful way to support staff not to make assumptions and to support the autonomy of those you are working with.

One young person from Voice Collective shared that it would be helpful to have the opportunity to communicate clearly in writing how they might want to be supported, and not just what their symptoms are. We spent some time in the workshop imagining what 'personal manuals' for support might look like in different spaces.

PERSONAL MANUALS

A useful way to communicate boundaries could be through a 'personal manual' with responses to a series of prompts e.g. 'you will know I need support when,' 'good support for me looks like,' 'things you should know if I am distressed' etc.

If organisations are using 'personal manuals' these should be revisited regularly to acknowledge that boundaries will change often and we can never encompass a fixed picture of our individual responses, wants and needs. It will be important to think about confidentiality around personal manuals and to communicate this to anyone who will be completing one.



PERSONAL MANUALS ARE:

An opportunity to share boundaries that are important to us or things about ourselves that we would like others to understand better.



PERSONAL MANUALS ARE NOT:

An obligation to overshare or a mining of information. People should only share what they would like others to know

A fixed expectation of how a particular person will respond. We know that we are all learning about ourselves constantly and that our responses in particular times of difficulty or stress will be unpredictable. We aim to approach each other with grace and understanding.



As staff members we have to have the humility and self-awareness to know our own limitations – and to know that it won't be helpful to the people we are working with to try to be 'saviours' or 'rescuers.' The most helpful thing we can do is to say I'm going to be alongside you and do what I can – but to be clear about the limitations of that support and to create space for them to step up and be involved in whatever ways are possible.

– Staff member, Revoke



Young people also pointed out that when it comes to safety, not only will each person have different needs, but sometimes we may not be aware of what we need ourselves. It can be difficult to know 'hypothetically' what we might want our boundaries to be until we are actually in a situation where they are tested, and what might have been helpful in one situation may not be helpful in another. For this reason it is important to prioritise actively asking questions, seeking consent and active listening.

Boundaries can be supportive in strengthening systems of care in a range of ways and acknowledging organisational limitations are an important part of that. This is why organisations should pay particular attention to boundaries around process, ways of working, staff working hours and staff roles.

As a staff member from Revoke said, ***“transparency around what we can and what we can’t do is important - we can aim to be as safe as possible but we can never entirely monitor and contain things.”***

Communicating boundaries clearly and establishing clarity and transparency around process and roles will be empowering for young people and adults accessing services. Blurry boundaries can create difficult dynamics that will often undermine agency in a safeguarding context.

There will be times when practitioners won’t or can’t do what young people want them to do. What we heard from staff at Revoke and Voice Collective was that communicating realistic limits and communicating transparently can be a helpful way to navigate these moments and that this also helps build autonomy.

For example, reflecting on not being able to respond to particular requests, a staff member from Revoke said, ***“It’s useful to establish clarity that at times we will be having to balance the wants and needs of individuals versus the collective. Sometimes it can help to actually have a conversation as a group about this.”*** This practice helped to build tolerance for disagreement and the space for compromise.

Both young people and staff discussed the use of terms like ‘safe space’ and the importance of acknowledging that no service or organisation can provide a totally ‘safe space’ where nothing can ever go wrong. Being realistic about this was agreed to be useful and empowering.

The language of ‘safer spaces’ can be a more honest way of setting up expectations for what a space will actually be. An empowering way of setting up a space can also be to collectively create a group

agreement - this can include things like trying as much as possible to park assumptions (acknowledging that we all do make assumptions), being compassionate and curious, or that we acknowledge that mistakes happen but that we try to understand each other. The *Healing Justice London* principle ‘hard on ideas and soft on people,’ can be a helpful one to include. A group agreement can also be a valuable reference point to return to in a session if conflict or difficulty does emerge.



There’s value in having and fostering robustness towards spaces that won’t always feel safe – it’s helpful to be upfront and transparent about what we can and can’t do.

– Revoke staff member



Avoiding false empowerment

One young person from Voice Collective shared that for them, *“questions like ‘what do you want to happen?’ aren't useful if they don't include explanations or showing different possible pathways.”* This isn't to say that questions which aim to clarify people's needs and wants are never useful: both staff and young people named the importance of curiosity and asking questions. However, it's important to recognise the difference between fostering autonomy and using language which sounds empowering but can actually present a barrier to someone making an informed decision.

We also heard other examples of how language and practice which seems to prioritise agency and autonomy can actually have the opposite effect. After a decade of devastating government cuts, many community mental health services are now chronically under-resourced. In this context, the language of false empowerment is often seen as a means of erasing the need for community mental health and social support, which normalises this by framing such support as an infringement of the individual's autonomy.

Speaking about interactions with mental health services, a young person from Voice Collective said, *“It's either at one of two extremes, you either get sectioned or told you have capacity, which has happened to me, and I think there needs to be some middle ground.”* In this example, being 'told you have capacity' refers to support being removed or denied on the basis of someone having capacity to choose their next steps, with the implication being that

mental ill-health, distress and trauma, and particularly experiences of suicidality, are choices.

In the context of working alongside young people with experience of mental ill-health, distress and trauma, including abuse survivors and those who are undocumented and navigating the immigration system, enabling autonomy is particularly important due to the myriad of ways their power has been taken away from them.

Reflective Questions

• **How can you support the young people you work with to understand and communicate their boundaries? What could a first step be?**

• **What are some of the ways you or your wider team could be creating clearer boundaries with the young people you work with?**

• **What could support you and your colleagues to understand and communicate your boundaries to each other? What process could support this?**

• **What boundaries could you strengthen on your team to support more person-centered and trauma-informed safeguarding?**



2 Working Relationally

STAFF AND YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS BOTH REVOKE AND VOICE COLLECTIVE IDENTIFIED STRONG, TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS AS A VITAL PART OF CREATING SAFETY ALONGSIDE YOUNG PEOPLE.

Strong relationships contributed both towards an increased sense of safety, and supported staff and young people when they had to respond to moments of crisis, conflict and potential or actual harm. The general reflection was that building relationships formed the container for everything else.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID ABOUT WORKING RELATIONALLY:

“Safety comes as a by-product of focusing on other things – listening to what the young people want support with and embodying an ethos of compassion, empathy and no judgement.”

Staff member, Voice Collective

“Trying to connect in some way makes a difference. If someone just totally shut me down when I was talking about my experiences, I lost trust in them – but if they asked questions, the conversation went on.”

Young person, Voice Collective



Despite how central relationships are, spending time building them can often be less visible and less valued. Because relational work is hard to quantify, it's hard to fund. This means that when resources are lacking, the time and space to build relationships often vanishes.

Staff identified that working in this way required dedicating more time, resource and capacity, and that forward-planning and building in time for reflection and pause is important in working towards more relational approaches. This paid off in terms of being able to support young people better.



We know how to assess risk because we know our young people well and we spend a lot of time developing those relationships.

– Revoke staff member



Building strong relationships in a professional context requires communicating boundaries clearly and establishing clarity and transparency around process and roles, as described above.

A key takeaway from our discussions with staff in particular, is that no youth practitioner can build strong relationships with clear boundaries in an organisation which is not structured to enable that. Organisational cultures can often create challenges for practitioners trying to maintain appropriate boundaries. Where organisations fail to recognise and take responsibility for their role in supporting their staff to maintain appropriate boundaries, they are often held accountable as individuals for failings that are in fact structural and will therefore repeat until they are addressed. Our reflections on working relationally speak to a mix of things which staff can do unilaterally, and which organisations need to encourage and create space for. In later sections, we will specifically consider organisational culture in relation to responsibility, mistakes and learning.

Things which support staff to build strong relationships are:

A **Consideration of lived experience**

B **Seeing people, not problems or stereotypes**

C **Cultivating broad support networks**

A Consideration of lived experience

It's often supportive - even transformative - to have staff who have lived experience that is similar to those accessing a service, e.g. experience of migration, experience of trauma, similar identities, language or nationality.

A member of staff from Voice Collective shared *“our service has been created by people with lived experience and we see that as an asset in how we're able to prioritise the people we work with in a trauma-informed way. Because we have staff who have experience of trauma or being harmed by services, we're able to empathise differently with the people we work with. We know what it's like - we don't know exactly - but we can definitely relate.”*

We also heard about the more difficult aspects of staff using their lived experience when working with young people. For example, if someone has experienced trauma within a particular close-knit community, knowing a staff member is from that community may be a barrier to engagement. For staff, working in an environment where their own lived experience is relevant can be extremely emotionally-charged; it can also make staff more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and unfair treatment within their workplace.

Staff also spoke about the importance of resisting over identification with young people. A number of staff members acknowledged that there can be times when it is difficult not to overly identify with particular young people when they are experiencing shared challenges. This can lead to assumptions being made that

may not best serve the young person and their own unique context. Similarly, staff members spoke about the challenge of young people asking questions like 'what would you do though?' and attaching too much importance and reverence to the views of a youth worker based on similar life experience. Practicing active listening and asking open questions are important tools when you find yourself drawing - or being asked to draw - on your own experiences when supporting a young person.

As well as considering shared experience, it is equally important to reflect on how differences between the practitioners' and young persons' lived experience might be influencing perspectives and reinforcing conscious or unconscious bias. Developing structures so that staff members can collectively reflect on safeguarding together can be an important way to minimise the influence of individual assumptions and biases.²

Organisations need to be able to support staff who are drawing on their lived experience, through embedding support in supervision and management structures and acknowledging the complexities and value of lived experience. Further insights can be found in *Lived Experience Leadership - Mapping the Lived Experience Landscape in Mental Health*, by Rai Waddingham on behalf of NSUN.³

B Seeing people, not problems or stereotypes

Young people identified positive relationships as humanising and reassuring. As one young person described, *“When you're seen as a patient instead of a human, that's what you become to yourself. You get a fear of getting better because you only get support through being ill and having symptoms.”*

Young people from Revoke also described the importance of being seen; they

particularly stressed the importance of not making assumptions about one person based on others from the same country, context or even from the same family, and one young person said, *“if people can see me, it's more likely they understand me.”*

The Personal Manual referenced above is one helpful tool that supports a better understanding of the needs and wants of young people.

Cultivating broad support networks

While building strong relationships between practitioners and young people is key, it is important to acknowledge that no one person or organisation can ever provide everything. One staff member at Revoke described a personal practice of checking in with herself *“whenever I start to feel important”* - this was a tongue-in-cheek way of noticing situations where reliance is being built only on one person, and a way of avoiding a ‘saviour’ mindset.

Both young people and staff named the importance of having a broad community of support. Staff identified that they try to support people they work with to strengthen their support networks and encourage them to reflect on the other relationships that they have. This is an important part of building agency and avoiding a situation where someone feels they can only rely on a single service or person which is not a sustainable

dynamic. Staff acknowledged the need to do this carefully and to work to not make assumptions.

Promoting supportive relationships between young people was named as an important element of reducing the pressure on relationships between practitioners and young people. Not just that, but in relationships with their peers, young people are able to support each other and learn from each other.



Being in peer groups and meeting people with the same experiences is really helpful to remember you're not alone and your experience isn't unique.

– Young person, Voice Collective





When we hold our peer support groups – we have faith in the process of people being in groups together. A lot of the time when we train new peer supporters, people really worry about people being triggered or groups being unsafe, but what I come back to is having faith in the group to hold stuff – faith in individual autonomy yes, but also group autonomy and a group’s ability to self-regulate. Obviously we do also have group expectations and we lay the groundwork that way, but safety is a byproduct of a focus on what people want and need – and acknowledging we’re not the only people who can provide that. That in itself is a process of respecting autonomy.

– Staff member, Voice Collective.



Reflective Questions

• How can you value and celebrate relationship-building in the work that you do?

• Without extra resources or authority, what is one way you can ensure those directly impacted are at the centre of the work you are doing?

• Where is there opportunity in your work to create space for young people to share their needs and how they want them to be met?

• How can you create space for young people to have the opportunity to support each other?

• How can you support the young people you work with to identify significant relationships in their life, and ways they would like to strengthen those relationships?



3 Space for uncertainty and learning from mistakes

WE HEARD YOUNG ADULTS SPEAK ABOUT THE HARM THAT CAN BE CAUSED WHEN PEOPLE ARE UNABLE TO SIT WITH EXPRESSIONS OF DISTRESS.

“
Sometimes you just need to do nothing. Sometimes you have to resist the urge to be the hero. You need to put aside your discomfort with other people's distress and focus on the needs of the person – if someone is saying 'please don't do this thing' that needs to be listened to.

– Young person, Voice Collective



In the context of Voice Collective, this often related to young people wanting space to speak about their feelings without worrying about whether they would end up being dismissed, pathologised, detained or criminalised.

Revoke staff described part of their work as ‘sitting with uncertainty’ and felt that being able to hold uncertainty helped to mitigate the dangers of making assumptions or jumping to conclusions that might undermine the agency of young people.

While staff acknowledged that ‘sitting with uncertainty’ can be difficult and at times feel risky, both staff and young people shared that more ‘risk-averse’ approaches often cause more harm to young people. Being able to sit with uncertainty meant being able to work in ways which were more flexible, more responsive and more honest, which altogether meant being less coercive. Ultimately such an approach prioritises listening and has the needs and wishes of young people at the heart of it - as opposed to focusing on hypothetical ‘risk.’

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM VOICE COLLECTIVE SHARED:

“What works is when people just sit with the feelings people have. People are either way too quick to jump in and diagnose, or they're too flippant.”

“My examples of what's gone well include when people have just heard me out and sat with me instead of pressing alarm buttons.

“Try to match the person who is coming to you – e.g. if they're looking for help, be ready to give options. If they just want to sit and talk, then that can be enough. Jumping in can make things worse.”

“When suicide is mentioned, there's often an immediate 'we have to tell someone', even though feeling suicidal is a part of so many experiences and people need to talk through it. People also brush suicidality off, say 'oh if you were really suicidal you wouldn't be talking about it' or 'you're asking for attention'. Or they go the other way and they jump on it and they pathologise it. They start seeing you as an illness and not a person.”

“Don't jump immediately to the worst case scenario, sometimes it's just useful to have a listening ear.”

As a staff member from Voice Collective said: *“the way we look to establish as much safety as possible in a space is by focusing on the needs that have to be met. When places get too focused on risk aversion or prevention it can end up in quite coercive territory. We're more free-flowing and that actually ends up being more safe.”*

Through conversations with staff, we identified a number of ways that support staff to work this way:

A Differentiating between emergency and discomfort

B Working collectively, with support for staff and a non-punitive ethos

C Extending that non-punitive ethos to young people

A Differentiating between emergency and discomfort

A staff member from Voice Collective shared: *“people who hear voices often feel ignored or shut down based on assumptions - [the alternative is] sitting with people in their distress even if this is uncomfortable - e.g. if you want to shout, let’s allow that.”* In other words, as part of the ethos that Voice Collective works with, there’s space to consider what is and isn’t an emergency or a crisis. For instance, in the example above - if someone wants to shout, is that an issue in and of itself? Maybe it’s likely to worry other people around the person shouting: so is there somewhere they can do that safely, with someone who’s able to listen?

Key to this is understanding that ‘not an emergency’ doesn’t mean that there is no action that needs to be taken. In fact, sometimes removing the language of ‘emergency’ or ‘crisis’ helps with taking proactive action and creating more intuitive safeguarding processes. For example, Voice Collective now asks for a ‘trusted contact’ instead of an ‘emergency contact’: *“We make it clear why we are doing this. If we are worried about a person we work with we will always try to speak to them directly. If we are worried about them and can’t speak to them - then we would reach out to the trusted contact.”* This helps create space for staff to exercise judgement based on what they know about the person they’re working with, and foregrounds the importance of trust.

B Working collectively, with support for staff and a non-punitive ethos

Holding safety and safeguarding as a collective responsibility as opposed to an individual one can play a powerful role in bringing a more trauma-informed, caring, person-centered and anti-racist approach to safeguarding practices.

Staff members reflected on the toll of having individual responsibility for the safety of the young people that they work with. Opportunities to think together and make decisions together were described as an important part of caring for each other in this work, and countering feelings of isolation and fear.

Staff who deal with high amounts of uncertainty need more support. Working in a non-punitive culture which acknowledges that mistakes happen and having support from colleagues were named as enabling factors in this context.

Like building relationships, being able to encounter and sit with discomfort and uncertainty is a foundational element of effective youth work which is often taken for granted. The case study below explores how Voice Collective’s induction and onboarding process for new workers seeks to equip and support staff to do this work.

STAFF FROM REVOKE AND VOICE COLLECTIVE SHARED:

"A whole team holding each other accountable and supporting each other is crucial – having set times to check things with other team members, play out scenarios, express emotions and thoughts and get different opinions and options. It shouldn't fall on one person's shoulders. Humour helps as well"

"We try to create a culture that isn't punitive and where we can speak about failures and learn from them."

"I definitely worry a lot and sometimes struggle to trust my own thoughts or judgement – it's hard not to worry about doing the wrong thing. Holding safeguarding as a collective responsibility and knowing that we have each other's back has supported me to feel more confident with this."

"When I know I'm not bearing the responsibility alone I'm able to be less risk averse. Knowing people have your back allows for more active listening and a 'high-risk' appetite."

CASE STUDY:

A staff member from Voice Collective shared how important it is to support new staff members and scaffold their learning through a structured induction so that a 'common approach' to safeguarding is maintained and strengthened.

Structured induction and ongoing support is particularly important because Voice Collective are trying to 'do things differently' - by centering lived experience, sitting with uncertainty and trusting in young people's autonomy and ability to support each other in peer settings.

"During induction new starts will shadow peer support groups to understand real-life examples – they're not going to be directly involved in decisions at this stage so they have space to reflect. After peer support there'll also be a debrief to discuss what happened, what could have gone differently. We have reflective practice sessions – this has included going through our safeguarding policy together, workshopping situations (either hypothetical or things currently ongoing if appropriate).

When we offer training to new starts we include scenarios drawn from real examples that we have experienced. We offer supervision and during supervision I try not to tell people what to do because it's important people develop their own approach and come to their own decisions, although if I think it will be useful I will share based on my own lived & professional experience. We offer debriefs after difficult conversations and we see support as something that needs to be ongoing."



Extending a non-punitive ethos to young people

A culture which intentionally decides not to take punitive measures supports young people because it means that their access to support is not dependent on 'good behaviour'. This is not to say that, in the case of either staff or young people, harmful or dangerous actions should be ignored. The idea is to address that harm meaningfully. Staff at Revoke gave examples of times when they have had to limit a young person's access to certain spaces in order to preserve the safety of those spaces for other people, but stressed that taking that action did not cut the young person off from essential support.

Mariame Kaba and Rachel Herzing offer a useful framework for distinguishing between punishment and consequences: "*Consequences should be determined in direct relationship to the harm done and should involve input by people impacted by the harm.*"⁴ In the examples we heard from Revoke, refusing to "*see people as disposable*" meant finding ways to respond to harm which didn't involve harming people further.

"There will be times when the young people we work with say things that are discriminatory. We don't have to agree with people to support them. Our values around abolition support this and have contributed to what has made the work so beautiful and different – we don't see people as disposable and we know that making mistakes is a natural thing."

– Revoke staff member

Reflective Questions

• **What can support you to 'just sit with the feelings' young people bring to the space?**

• **What could support you and your colleagues to 'sit with uncertainty' in the work that you do?**

• **Where is there opportunity to create space for reflection and sharing around safeguarding?**

• **When something goes wrong in your organisation, what are the processes for responding to the issues and repairing the harm? What do staff and young people need from these processes, and what changes could help meet those needs?**

4 Addressing oppression and harm

TO SAFEGUARD EFFECTIVELY, AND TO CREATE CULTURES WHICH PROMOTE SAFETY, WE HAVE TO BE AWARE OF THE WAYS IN WHICH SAFETY INTERACTS WITH PRIVILEGE, OPPRESSION AND POWER.

When we spoke to young people, we heard about how their feelings of safety were directly impacted by experiences of racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia or classism. We also heard how safeguarding processes in themselves can often enable and reinforce these systems of oppression.

Youth organisations can address privilege, oppression and power in their work by:

- A** Acknowledging the realities of young people's lives
- B** Resisting harm in safeguarding practice
- C** Building solidarity to shift power



"Safety has to address every level of a person, it's not just your physical safety... sometimes safeguarding focuses on keeping people physically safe but doesn't address other kinds of harm you can come to."

– Young person, Voice Collective

"Give people a chance to share their voice."

– Young person, Revoke



A Acknowledging the realities of young people's lives

In our work with Revoke and Voice Collective, we heard that individualising distress and failing to acknowledge wider context and systemic injustice can destroy trust.

Young people spoke about how the frustration and pain of their experiences of state violence were compounded when those experiences were denied or minimised. They also described a feeling of despair when so-called 'sources of safety' are actually sources of harm. In contrast, acknowledging wider context and its impacts on both young people and practitioners was identified as important for building trust and therefore a key part of creating cultures of safety and safeguarding.

Young people bring their experiences from the outside world into spaces created by youth organisations. As we've already identified, young people are often made unsafe by the wider contexts and oppressive systems they live in, which often fail to provide for their basic needs. This became particularly clear in our conversations with young people who didn't have refugee status and as a result were unable to work, or access income, or stable housing.

Young people also discussed the toll of racial profiling and judgement based on appearance, gender, religion, sexuality, or nationality. Stereotypes and assumptions often led to a sense of being misunderstood and not fully acknowledged, impacting the development of trusting relationships, curtailing the support they received and at times compromising their safety.



Other people have similar experiences, which is not great...but when you're going through something like this, it's just you and a lot of older people in positions of power, who think the same way and don't understand you. It's good to know that other people think the same way and to feel that solidarity.

– Young person, Voice Collective



Staff at both Revoke and Voice Collective try to mitigate the impacts of these external conditions through advocacy, sharing knowledge and building community, and have also found that acknowledging the limits of what they can do is important to being able to carry out any of this work. Just because organisations are not able to solve every problem at once does not mean that acknowledging those problems has no value. Acknowledging people's contexts and needs is an important part of seeing them as whole people. This is why a holistic rather than a siloed approach to safeguarding and care is so valuable and why the sustainable, long term resourcing it requires is so important.

In the organisations we worked with, relationships between staff and young

people were not the only space where it was important to acknowledge the impacts of oppression and marginalisation. It was also extremely significant that young people had space to discuss these issues together, both in groups which shared particular experiences and in situations where they had opportunities to learn about each other's differences.

At Revoke, young people spoke about the importance of having opportunities to learn about each others' cultures and discussed how in different cultures, social norms, language, body language and expectations will be very different. Young people at Voice Collective emphasised the importance of peer support and solidarity.

Finally, acknowledging the realities of young people's lives is also an important factor in supporting staff, who may be particularly prone to burnout in situations where they have limited power to help. Staff can only balance a commitment to flexibly and holistically supporting young people within an organisational culture that also supports staff to set their own boundaries.

B Resisting harm in safeguarding practice

Ideas around safety can be used to oppress, exclude, demonise and harm people. For example, racist stereotypes and moral panics about the supposed dangers posed by migrants and refugees have been used to justify draconian measures such as an ever intensifying 'hostile environment' for those seeking asylum and increased policing of working class and Black and brown communities.

'Young people' are often viewed as being particularly dangerous or as unable to make safe decisions for themselves. This is particularly pronounced for young people who are Black or from other racialised communities, young people with experience of mental ill-health, and young people who are migrants, refugees or asylum-seekers.

The harm enacted by police in the UK on working class, Black and brown and disabled communities, often in the name of 'safeguarding', is well documented. Liberty's *Holding Our Own* report, for example, shows how the policing of young people, particularly young people of colour, is damaging their futures. The report, which is written by a coalition of grassroots groups and campaigning organisations, calls for police powers to be rolled back and for the long-term funding and support required to allow for young people to thrive.

Resources such as *Holding Our Own* and *The Radical Safeguarding Workbook* map out the ways that 'safeguarding' strategies such as Prevent and The Gangs Matrix pathologise, criminalise and harm young people, particularly those from oppressed communities. The authors of *The Radical*

Safeguarding Workbook present alternative models for understanding child safety and strategies that practitioners can use to guide them to foster safety in more supportive ways.

When young people's emotions and ways of expressing themselves are considered to be dangerous, it enables punitive approaches to 'safety' and 'safeguarding' which focus more on controlling how young people act than listening to how they feel.

It is vital to recognise that this is not simply an 'individual' experience. The weaponisation of safeguarding language as a means of oppressive control is deeply embedded in the history of British colonialism and the historical development of our mental health system. Whenever current practices replicate this pattern,

it amplifies and reinforces the collective impact of centuries of intergenerational trauma, reinforcing a culture of deep mistrust.

While these problems are vast and complex, many of the approaches to interpersonal relationship-building which we have already named can be part of creating more supportive and caring cultures. For example, practising active listening and incorporating person-centred approaches to avoid making assumptions are both vital in this context.

Organisational cultures which prioritise collective decision making and avoid punitive responses to harm can also help address these problems by creating checks on biases and assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE WE WORKED WITH SHARED EXAMPLES OF TIMES WHERE ACTIONS SUPPOSEDLY TAKEN FOR THEIR OR OTHERS' SAFETY ACTUALLY ENDED UP CAUSING MORE HARM:

"I can't think of a time that safeguarding has helped me... it's always been about protecting the other person from liability professionally rather than me being safe, and often the things they've done have put me in more danger."

"Police are the worst with me... they've tried to grab and restrain me and that triggers off my PTSD attacks."

"I can think of a friend who was sectioned and who was repeatedly called by the wrong name. That made him angry and upset and then that "reflected badly on him" even though he had been triggered by something that professionals around him were dismissing and not taking care with."



Building solidarity to shift power

Youth work, and any kind of casework or support work, is often about fighting fires and responding to immediate needs. There is often a tension between responding to these short-term needs and challenging the broader systems which produce and maintain those needs long-term.

Revoke try to connect their day to day work with systems change work through quarterly Abolition Roundtables: *“At Revoke we’ve started running roundtables with a network of groups that we work with. These offer a way to check in around safeguarding with partners, build on each other’s expertise and experience, and offer moral and practical encouragement when we’re trying to do things differently.”*

These began to ensure partners working with young people who are part of the Revoke community were committed to creating safety and committed to building strong trusting relationships with Revoke itself. They have now developed into spaces for people working across a wide variety of sectors with common values to learn from and support each other while working towards a collective vision.

Finally, working with young people in transformative ways can enable them to have an impact on the world around them and this in turn can be enormously beneficial for their mental health and overall wellbeing.

The restoration of agency is a key principle in trauma recovery precisely because the loss of control of our own bodies and lives is a key feature of so many experiences of harm, whether it is interpersonal or institutional.

This has profound implications for the shape of safety and speaks to the ways in which a re-imagined approach that centres the principles emerging from this work can not only change the lives of young people but also support them to imagine and help build a better world for all of us.



I’m looking forward to young people like us getting into positions of power and changing things. I’m optimistic that people in this group and other groups can change things.

– Young person, Voice Collective



Reflective Questions

• **How can you and your colleagues safeguard the young people you work with against profiling based on their identities?**

• **What can support you and your colleagues to resist the identity-based profiling and surveillance that many safeguarding strategies demand?**

• **How can you connect your day to day work with a broader vision for change, and how can young people be involved in that?**

• **Who should you be in solidarity with in order to build the power necessary to make change alongside young people? What is one step you can take to build those connections?**

• **How are you involving young people in political education, and how could you strengthen this practice?**

Endnotes

1. Liberty, <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/fundamental/hostile-environment/>
2. Latifa Akay and Alex Johnston (2022) <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/blog/radical-safeguarding-in-practice/>
3. Rai Waddingham, NSUN (2021) <https://www.nsun.org.uk/resource/lived-experience-leadership/>
4. Mariame Kaba and Rachel Herzing, “Transforming Punishment: What is accountability without punishment?”, in We Do This ‘Til We Free Us (2021)

Collected Reflective Questions

1 Building autonomy

- How can you support the young people you work with to understand and communicate their boundaries? What could a first step be?

- What are some of the ways you or your wider team could be creating clearer boundaries with the young people you work with?

- What could support you and your colleagues to understand and communicate your boundaries to each other? What process could support this?

- What boundaries could you strengthen on your team to support more person-centered and trauma-informed safeguarding?

2 Working relationally

- How can you value and celebrate relationship-building in the work that you do?

- Without extra resources or authority, what is one way you can ensure those directly impacted are at the centre of the work you are doing?

- Where is there opportunity in your work to create space for young people to share their needs and how they want them to be met?

- How can you create space for young people to have the opportunity to support each other?

- How can you support the young people you work with to identify significant relationships in their life, and ways they would like to strengthen those relationships?

3 **Sitting with uncertainty and making mistakes**

- **What can support you to 'just sit with the feelings' young people bring to the space?**

- **What could support you and your colleagues to 'sit with uncertainty' in the work that you do?**

- **Where is there opportunity to create space for reflection and sharing around safeguarding?**

- **When something goes wrong in your organisation, what are the processes for responding to the issues and repairing the harm? What do staff and young people need from these processes, and what changes could help meet those needs?**

4 **Acknowledging and addressing structures of oppression**

- **How can you and your colleagues safeguard the young people you work with against profiling based on their identities?**

- **What can support you and your colleagues to resist the identity-based profiling and surveillance that many safeguarding strategies demand?**

- **How can you connect your day to day work with a broader vision for change, and how can young people be involved in that?**

- **Who should you be in solidarity with in order to build the power necessary to make change alongside young people? What is one step you can take to build those connections?**

- **How are you involving young people in political education, and how could you strengthen this practice?**

The Shape of Safety Practitioners' Checklist

- Take proactive steps to create cultures of safety, as opposed to only reacting in moments of crisis or in response to risk or perceived risk. This helps to make sure young people do not have to reach the point of 'emergency' or 'crisis' to receive help.
- Help create a culture of safety by acknowledging the impact of wider contexts that neither you nor the young person can fully control. These may be personal, organisational, social or political.
- When asking a young person about their needs and wishes, make sure you are also offering clear information about their rights and what options are available for them to choose from.
- Practice transparency and honesty to avoid 'false empowerment'.
- Maintain clear boundaries with accountability and transparency. Blurry boundaries create difficult dynamics that undermine agency.
- Acknowledge the limitations of what you can do and support the young person to cultivate the broadest possible network of other supportive relationships.
- Consider the influence of lived experience and how both similarities and differences between yours and theirs could either strengthen the relationship or lead you to make assumptions and generalisations.
- Talk about safer spaces rather than 'safe spaces.' The permission this gives to be honest and realistic can empower both young people and practitioners.
- Differentiate between emergencies that require intervention and distressing or uncomfortable situations which may benefit more from accompaniment. Whether or not something is an emergency, don't underestimate the value of simply being alongside someone who is distressed.
- Hold space for peer support and honest reflection not only amongst young people but also amongst the practitioners who work with them.
- Maintain a non-punitive ethos not only for young people but also for the practitioners who work with them.
- Whenever possible, make important decisions collectively to mitigate the influence of individual biases and to promote a supportive culture of collective responsibility.
- Do what you can to make sure you have the time, resources and capacity for forward-planning and reflection, which is essential to relational ways of working.
- Acknowledge and do what you can to address structures of oppression and histories of institutional harm, which is essential to building trust.

Resources

- [Holding Our Own: A guide to non-policing solutions to serious youth violence, Liberty](#)

- [Decriminalise the Classroom, Kids of Colour and Northern Police Monitoring Project](#)

- [Radical Safeguarding Workbook, Alex Johnston and Latifa Akay](#)

- [Aftercare Menu, Healing Justice London – an example of how to encourage safety and care outside of 'safer spaces'](#)

- [Safeguarding Hub, Youth Music – suggests ways for organisations to move beyond safeguarding compliance into a safeguarding culture](#)

Appendix 1: Methodology

In October and November 2023, workshops with young people and staff from Revoke and Voice Collective were held by Act Build Change and NSUN to facilitate a series of participatory discussions which shaped the principles outlined in this toolkit.

Each of the four workshops were two hours long and ran in the following formats:

- **AN IN-PERSON, BILINGUAL WORKSHOP WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM REVOKE, FACILITATED BY ACT BUILD CHANGE.**
- **AN IN-PERSON WORKSHOP WITH REVOKE STAFF FACILITATED BY ACT BUILD CHANGE WITH SUPPORT FROM NSUN.**
- **AN ONLINE WORKSHOP WITH YOUNG PEOPLE FROM VOICE COLLECTIVE FACILITATED BY ACT BUILD CHANGE AND NSUN.**
- **AN ONLINE WORKSHOP WITH VOICE COLLECTIVE STAFF FACILITATED BY NSUN AND ACT BUILD CHANGE.**

A total of fourteen young people and four staff members took part from Revoke, and seven young people and one staff member from Voice Collective.

Young people were invited to take part by their respective organisations, and were paid for their time.

With the young persons' session held for Voice Collective, a member of Voice Collective team was present alongside a staff member from Act Build Change and NSUN respectively to support with the session and hold space.

With the young persons' session held for Revoke, staff were less involved but present to set up and address any logistical issues as the session unfolded. The role of the organisation was agreed beforehand and tailored to their understanding of the needs of the young people, as were the decisions around holding the session in-person or online.

The chosen method catered to each organisation's understanding of the young people they work with, including geography, access needs and language support that may be needed. This information was gathered through planning meetings with staff from Revoke and Voice Collective leading up to the workshops.

Prior to the workshops, consent forms were signed and a group agreement was set for the young persons' groups to support with the creation of a safer space.

With the young persons' groups at Revoke and Voice Collective, a range of media including Lego, Play-doh and colouring pens was used to create a response to the prompt '*the shape of safety*'. The aim was to help people articulate things beyond the verbal. Each young person was given time and additional guiding questions where needed to support them with creating this. This was then shared as a group and collated. Photos of the creative output were taken by staff (Revoke) or emailed over by the young people (Voice Collective).



The shape of safety and the lego gave people a way to articulate unexpected things. What they created was super powerful and framed things in a way we wouldn't have had access to without that activity. That reminded me of how when we're doing things, creative approaches can help pull us away from the narratives we might be used to and get us out of entrenched phrases!

– Voice Collective staff member



Following this with Voice Collective, additional questions were asked under the theme 'If you were in charge of shaping safeguarding, what would it look like?' and responses were captured through padlets.

- **WHAT IS WORKING WELL IN SAFEGUARDING AS IT IS - WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BUILD ON?**
- **WHAT PARTS OF SAFEGUARDING PRACTICES AREN'T WORKING WELL - WHAT WOULD YOU GET RID OF?**
- **IN AN IDEAL WORLD WHAT WOULD SAFEGUARDING LOOK LIKE WHEN WORKING WITH ORGANISATIONS OR IN UNIVERSITIES OR COLLEGES? WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD LEAD TO MORE PEOPLE WITH SIMILAR EXPERIENCES TO YOU BEING KEPT SAFE?**

The Revoke group, on the other hand, was split into smaller groups and following a discussion on examples of safeguarding practices they are familiar with, each group was invited to write an alternative safeguarding manifesto on flipchart paper.

After this, a plenary session was held to compare ideas across groups. The Act Build Change team documented the outputs.

With the staff sessions, a similar format was used for both organisations, with responses documented on flipchart paper (Revoke) or Google Jamboard (Voice Collective). Staff were first presented with a summary of the findings from both of the young person sessions and invited to share their thoughts by answering the question: did anything stand out/surprise you? Following this, staff were asked to jot down and discuss their responses to the following questions:

- **WHAT IS GOING WELL IN YOUR CONTEXT WHEN IT COMES TO APPROACHING SAFEGUARDING DIFFERENTLY - WHAT HAS FACILITATED THAT? (WHAT WOULD YOU WANT OTHER GROUPS TO KNOW?)**
- **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BARRIERS TO PRACTISING SAFEGUARDING DIFFERENTLY AND WHAT WOULD NEED TO BE DONE DIFFERENTLY IN ORDER TO ENABLE THAT?**
- **WHAT IS ONE THING THAT YOU'D LIKE TO BE DOING TO SAFEGUARD DIFFERENTLY BUT THAT YOU'RE UNABLE TO DO CURRENTLY?**

NSUN staff took notes throughout the staff sessions to document the discussions taking place. Debriefs were conducted following the workshops and data was synthesised and analysed to identify principles that emerged across the four workshops.

Thanks and acknowledgements

A huge thank you to the collaborators who shared their ideas, experiences and hopes in workshops, including young people and staff from Revoke and Voice Collective.

Those who wished to be credited were:

Cherif

Fiona Malpass

Gurpriya

Hali

Hannah

Hannah Theodorou

Jabra

Kholoud Alotaibi

Laura Barker

MD Nazir Uddin

Mona Bani

N Mattocks

Owen

Peach

Prati

Shog Alhajri

The Yemeni Lad

Zarith

& eight others who chose to remain anonymous.

With thanks to The Blaggrave Trust who funded this work.



**National Survivor
User Network**

Produced by Act Build Change LTD (a Registered Private Company Limited by Guarantee Without Share Capital in England, company number 11959425, contact: info@actbuildchange.com) and the National Survivor User Network (a Charitable Incorporated Organisation in England, charity number 1135980, contact: info@nsun.org.uk)

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Citation: Akay, Elwakil and White, 2024. The Shape of Safety. Act Build Change and National Survivor User Network.