

Review of Surviving Estrangement

Executive summary

The Surviving Estrangement project aimed to explore the experiences of young people estranged from their family during the pandemic. Funded by the KPMG Foundation, it was delivered with seven young co-producers, all of whom had experienced estrangement.

This was the first piece of co-produced research delivered by Buttle UK. Our young co-producers were involved in every aspect of designing, delivering and writing up the research. They co-designed the methodology, undertook almost all interviews with 21 frontline workers and 37 estranged young people, analysed the findings and wrote the majority of the [final report](#). To support the launch of the report, our co-producers created a [video animation](#) explaining the themes of the report, wrote a [blog](#) for the report launch, recorded talking head videos and spoke at a live webinar with our funders, and spoke to [Channel 4 News](#).

This short report presents the findings of the review of the project, which involved reflection sessions with the project manager and five of the seven young people involved in Surviving Estrangement. Below are the key lessons learned.

Engaging young people

- If at first you don't succeed, change your approach and try again!
- One-to-one meetings are less daunting than group sessions for young people to initially engage with.
- One-to-ones allow you to explore the experiences and support needs of young people and start to build a relationship before they join a group session.
- Young people are motivated to take part because they want to create change. It is important to think about this when developing messages to engage young people.
- Relationships are key to keeping young people engaged – with facilitators but also the other young people on the project.
- Offering payment can also keep young people engaged as it makes them feel valued and they can afford to commit the time needed to the project.

Payment and expenses

- Paying young people for their time is important, as it removes financial barriers to participation and makes them feel their time is valued.
- It is important to have a payment policy for co-production in place and talk this through with young people at the start of a project, so they are clear about limits and potential implications of payment and expenses. This should include whether they get paid if they are sick. You can then refer back to this when queries arise.
- Encourage all young people to speak to their work coach and check whether being paid will affect their household benefits. Setting them up as self-employed can reduce this risk but may create other responsibilities in terms of tax and national insurance.
- Be as clear and upfront as possible about the amount of paid work available to young people and when this will take place.

- When meeting in person, ensure as many costs as possible are covered upfront. Consider providing young people with a prepaid card so they can buy refreshments and travel fares without being out of pocket.

Delivery

- Planning a co-production project can be difficult as there are necessarily some “unknowns”. Make sure you plan in lots of contingencies and additional time for activities.
- Be clear about parameters and “red lines” upfront to manage young people’s expectations. Young people appreciate facilitators being upfront and honest.
- Plan and deliver each stage of a project at a time, so that each step informs the next. This also builds momentum, confidence and interest amongst young people, rather than overwhelming them.
- Give young people a choice in what they do on a project and match these to their skillsets where possible.
- Break down larger pieces of work into smaller, manageable tasks and go through these one at a time.
- Provide a range of ways for young people to participate in sessions to suit different learning styles, levels of confidence and skills.
- Ahead of group sessions, ask young people to individually think through their ideas and suggestions. This can give more structure to discussions and ensure that everyone has something to contribute.
- Give lots of notice of deadlines.

Facilitating the group

- Young people appreciate the opportunity to meet others with similar experiences. This creates opportunities for peer support and shared learning.
- Where possible, support young people to build friendships outside of sessions, for example, by setting up a WhatsApp group. You may need to set some ground rules for this and it may not always be appropriate, but the benefits can be huge for young people.
- The benefits of peer support are enhanced when meeting face-to-face and young people really value the opportunity to meet in person.
- When organising in-person meetings, consider the location, what young people need to travel safely, and that the timing fits with young people’s other commitments. You may want to consider combining different types of travel (e.g. public transport, taxis, covering petrol costs), giving young people a choice over where they stay, and offering to pay for a companion to accompany them. The options you can offer and that young people can take up may be limited by your budget and young people’s situations.
- Remember you are the facilitator, not the director of the group. You should encourage young people to be ambitious and take ownership of work, and welcome their ideas and feedback. Your role is to make things happen for the group and you should view yourself as accountable to them.
- Clear, regular communication is key to ensuring young people stay engaged and feel included throughout the project. Continuing to update young people about what is happening with the outputs of their project and the impact it is having is also important.

Training and support

- Having a main point of contact that young people can go to with questions and for support is important. This person needs to be open and non-judgemental, and show they care about the project and the young people involved.

- Be prepared to allocate a lot of time to providing training and support to young co-producers. This includes emotional as well as practical support.
- Provide a training/briefing session before each stage of a project, along with information that young people can refer to afterwards, provided in a range of formats if possible (e.g. written, voice recording, pictorial).
- Your project may be the first time young people get to share their experiences and challenge those in positions of power. You may need to work with them to understand different perspectives and set an appropriate tone for their work, whilst recognising that their feelings and experiences are valid.
- Depending on the activity, you may need to be on-hand throughout delivery in case co-producers need support. However, it is important that you do not take over or interrupt the activity unnecessarily – ensure that the co-producer is in the lead.
- Debriefing immediately after activities is important, especially if they are challenging or potentially triggering.
- Anonymity is likely to be important for vulnerable young people. Make sure you are clear about this upfront and check in regularly to ensure they are comfortable about what they are sharing. Let them review any case studies or mention of their experiences before they go public.

Safeguarding young people and staff

- You will be working with vulnerable young people, so need to ensure you have appropriate risk assessments and safeguarding processes in place. Before starting a project, carry out a risk assessment on both the activities and the young people involved, so you can put measures in place to keep them safe. Ensure you know what to do if a safeguarding issue arises, who to report to and how to follow it up afterwards.
- Be prepared for things to go wrong, especially in terms of young people's mental health.
- If you know a young person struggles with their mental health, check they have some support in place. Being aware of support services near to them that you can signpost to in times of crisis is also useful.
- Working with vulnerable young people can take a toll on your own mental and emotional health. Ensure you have support in place for yourself, including supervisions with your manager, peer support and/or access to an EAP or mental health first aider. Informal opportunities to "offload" can be very important. These support frameworks need to be in place at the start of the project so you feel confident to ask for help when needed.

Benefits of co-production

- A co-production approach can create many benefits for those involved, above and beyond what might be expected at the outset of the project.
- Young people are likely to benefit from new friendships, peer support and a reduced sense of isolation. They may develop new skills and self-confidence, along with developing their understanding of the wider, systemic context of their situation. This can help them feel empowered to make a change and campaign for improved practice and support.
- For organisations, co-production results in more powerful, insightful and impactful projects. It can also provide valuable opportunities for professional development and pride.

Buttle UK will use these findings to plan our next co-production project and ensure we are building on our successes and lessons learned from Surviving Estrangement.

Inception

The Surviving Estrangement project was funded by the KPMG Foundation, as an extension to a grant they awarded Buttle UK to provide financial support to estranged young people.

The aim of this project was for it to be an opportunity to learn about how co-production works in practice, and to start involving young people more meaningfully in our work.

Consequently, the application stated that the project would be co-produced with young people. However, as it was our first co-produced research project, we did not have a full understanding of how the work would develop or the full extent of young people's involvement.

The project manager shared that they had a high level of ownership over the project. They were able to decide what co-production meant for this piece of work. To prepare, they spent the first month of the project looking at what co-production really meant, what it could and should look like, and what it could be for this project.

“The control was entirely in my hands. No one was advising me what they wanted really. And therefore, it was a happy accident in some respects that I decided, ‘Well, co-produced means we have to have young people doing it, too’.” (Project manager)

The project manager commented that management were “pleasantly surprised” that they were training young people to do the interviews themselves, and that they would have such a deep level of involvement in developing and delivering the project.

Engaging young people

The project manager initially tried recruiting young people to focus groups as they felt this would be a less daunting activity than a one-to-one interview. However, very few young people opted into this. When the project manager switched approach and went back out again offering one-to-one interviews, 10 young people agreed to take part. At the end of the interviews, the project manager asked these young people if they wanted to help them deliver the rest of the project; seven of the 10 agreed and these formed the project's “core group”.

On reflection, the project manager felt that starting with one-to-one discussions with young people worked well. It enabled them to explore the young people's experiences and support needs before they joined a group session. It also gave young people a chance to get to know the project manager, which gave them more confidence to join the group.

“...after having done the interviews, when I found out more about these young people and each of them have their own completely unique circumstances and I felt better equipped actually to run the focus group.” (Project manager)

Our young co-producers said that their main motivation to get involved in the project was to raise awareness of estrangement and help other young people with similar experiences. Some also recognised that it was a good opportunity for them to develop skills and experience.

“I'm really passionate about making a change. Obviously I've been estranged and suffered the consequences of not having anyone there, other than Buttle. So I wanted to get involved and make a change to the fact that it's not very nice for estranged young people.” (Young co-producer)

Co-producers said that the other young people in the core group and the facilitator helped them stay engaged, because they were fun, interesting and supportive. They also felt

passionate about the project and the change it aimed to make for young people. Finally, getting paid for their time was a strong reason to stay engaged, both from a practical perspective and because they felt valued.

Lessons learned:

- If at first you don't succeed, change your approach and try again!
- One-to-one meetings are less daunting than group sessions for young people to initially engage with.
- One-to-ones allow you to explore the experiences and support needs of young people and start to build a relationship before they join a group session.
- Young people are motivated to take part because they want to create change. It is important to think about this when developing messages to engage young people.
- Relationships are key to keeping young people engaged – with facilitators but also the other young people on the project.
- Offering payment can also keep young people engaged as it makes them feel valued and they can afford to commit the time needed to the project.

Payment and expenses

Co-producers were paid for the time they worked on the project at the London Living Wage rate. Young people said the fact they were paid and the level of pay made them feel valued, but also on a practical level also allowed them to commit the time needed to the project.

“When I take part in other things, I don't feel like my time is valued... it's just taken for granted. I felt like being paid for it made it feel like I was being taken more seriously.”
(Young co-producer)

Buttle UK established the process for paying people involved in co-production as the project developed. Young people were set up as self-employed consultants who invoiced us on a monthly basis, rather than being employed by Buttle UK on a zero-hour contract. This aimed to avoid impacting young people's benefits.

“But it does leave them quite a lot of responsibility on their shoulders... as it is self-employed, invoicing, they're their own employer, so they have to deal with things like tax, benefits, all the different things that could go wrong.” (Project manager)

The potential impact on household benefits was a key consideration when paying young people. The project manager encouraged each young person to speak to their work coach and inform them about this paid opportunity before they started on the project.

However, offering payment did create some ethical challenges. At times, the project manager was unsure to what extent young people were doing the work required because they were motivated and interested, or because they needed the money. For example, some young people signed up to write sections of the report even though their confidence in writing was quite low.

There were some instances where co-producers were unable to attend sessions due to ill health. This raised the question of whether they should be paid for the time they had set aside. The project manager was aware that some of the co-producers had turned down shifts at other workplaces to work on the project. Consequently, they were likely to pay co-producers when they were sick, and on balance they think this worked in the project's favour as it showed trust in the young people. Certainly, the project manager never felt “cheated” or that any of the co-producers lied to them to get extra money.

One issue experienced by the project manager was co-producers asking for extra work when they were struggling for money. They passed on as much work onto young people as they could, but there was not always work for them to do. The project manager tried to be clear about this at the start and set that boundary, but these requests still came through.

Finally, some young people flagged that, while they enjoyed meeting in person and attending events for Buttle UK, paying for extra costs such as lunch and bus fares upfront and then claiming them back was difficult, as they had very little money to spare. They suggested that in future, young people could be given some kind of prepaid card that they could make these kinds of purchases with, to avoid them being out of pocket at any point.

Lessons learned:

- Paying young people for their time is important, as it removes financial barriers to participation and makes them feel their time is valued.
- It is important to have a payment policy for co-production in place and talk this through with young people at the start of a project, so they are clear about limits and potential implications of payment and expenses. This should include whether they get paid if they are sick. You can then refer back to this when queries arise.
- Encourage all young people to speak to their work coach and check whether being paid will affect their household benefits. Setting them up as self-employed can reduce this risk but may create other responsibilities in terms of tax and national insurance.
- Be as clear and upfront as possible about the amount of paid work available to young people and when this will take place.
- When meeting in person, ensure as many costs as possible are covered upfront. Consider providing young people with a prepaid card so they can buy refreshments and travel fares without being out of pocket.

Delivery

The project manager found that it was difficult to judge how big this project would become because it was co-produced, and there were not many restrictions on its scope. This created some challenges in terms of judging how much time different tasks and outputs would take.

Having said this, there were some parameters and restrictions the group had to work within. For example, when writing the report, young people had to adhere to Buttle UK's quality expectations and report format.

“This flagged that although it's co-production, there are parameters that you have to work within. It's not just a case of doing what you want all the time – we are a professional organisation.” (Project manager)

The project manager tried to be clear with young people about any restrictions or requirements from the start and again at each stage of the project. This was appreciated by the young people involved.

“[Project manager] was very clear and upfront from the start and this meant we knew what we could and couldn't do through the project.” (Young person)

The project manager and co-producers planned and designed each stage of the project at a time. This meant each stage was informed by the findings and reflections from the previous one, and it also built momentum and interest amongst young people, rather than risking them feeling overwhelmed by thinking about the whole project at once.

Although the project was co-produced, there were still a set of activities that needed to be done. When allocating tasks, the project manager gave the co-producers a choice in what they did on the project and matched these to their skillsets where possible. The aim of this was to recognise their different strengths and abilities, without making anyone feel ashamed or embarrassed that they did not have a particular set of skills.

“Be mindful of each unique ability, capacity, mental health, all of those different things. Each person in my core group is completely unique and every single one of them has brought me new stuff to learn about and think about. And that includes how they're able to do certain activities.” (Project manager)

However, a few of the co-producers felt some of the tasks were a bit unclear or lacked structure. A couple were also upset when they were not picked to do a task they wanted to do. The project manager agreed that this was a challenge at times, but they had to ensure they were allocating work as equally as possible amongst the group.

The delivery of activities was very flexible, and the project manager provided a range of ways for co-producers to participate and share ideas. Online, this included writing in the chat, raising your hand, using a whiteboard and using breakout rooms. When providing training, the project manager created guides, delivered group sessions, and offered one-to-one coaching. Young interviewees could take part online, by phone or by text.

“The comment box has always been used much more so than I've ever had as a meeting tool because sometimes they just want to get their thoughts down before they go out of their head and then that sparks a conversation. So we could be talking, but also, there's a separate conversation going on the chat box.” (Project manager)

The flexibility of the sessions was appreciated by young people. However, they highlighted a challenge in finding a time for group sessions that suits everyone.

“Sometimes I think we needed more sessions or different time slots for sessions, because different people could make different times, so if you always go with when the majority can make it then the same people miss out every time. So it would be better to run the sessions on different days and times each week to fit different people's situations.” (Young co-producer)

The project manager found that starting with young people thinking of ideas individually and then bringing them to the group sessions worked well. This meant that discussions were more structured and everyone had something to contribute. Giving lots of notice of deadlines was also key, and the project manager found that things tended to go wrong when there was a quick turnaround on tasks.

Lessons learned:

- Planning a co-production project can be difficult as there are necessarily some “unknowns”. Make sure you plan in lots of contingencies and additional time for activities.
- Be clear about parameters and “red lines” upfront to manage young people's expectations. Young people appreciate facilitators being upfront and honest.
- Plan and deliver each stage of a project at a time, so that each step informs the next. This also builds momentum, confidence and interest amongst young people, rather than overwhelming them.
- Give young people a choice in what they do on a project and match these to their skillsets where possible.
- Break down larger pieces of work into smaller, manageable tasks and go through these one at a time.

- Provide a range of ways for young people to participate in sessions to suit different learning styles, levels of confidence and skills.
- Ahead of group sessions, ask young people to individually think through their ideas and suggestions. This can give more structure to discussions and ensure that everyone has something to contribute.
- Give lots of notice of deadlines.

Facilitating the group

For our co-producers, one of the most positive aspects of the project was meeting other young people with similar experiences. This created opportunities for peer support and shared learning, which was enhanced when they met face-to-face.

“I really enjoyed it when we were all together in group sessions – telling our stories, sharing ideas. We all understood all the bad things that had happened because we’d all been through similar things... It is the people who have been through the worst that care the most.” (Young co-producer)

The co-producers set up their own WhatsApp group so they could discuss the project outside of the sessions. This was not facilitated by Buttle UK in any way. However, the project manager did ask young people to confirm they would not discuss anything that they heard in the interviews they conducted, as this was confidential.

Because it was not facilitated by Buttle UK, the WhatsApp was not monitored or checked by any staff, but there were no problems associated with this and it became a strong source of support for the co-producers, in their wider lives as well as within the project.

Co-producers fed back that meeting in person towards the end of the project was one of the highlights of their experience. Meeting face-to-face enabled them to learn more about each other, understand concepts and ideas more quickly, and be more productive as a group.

“It helped when you met up in person because it felt like you had more connection with each other than via the phone.” (Young co-producer)

All the young people would have liked more in-person meetings, although they also acknowledged the challenges associated with this. For example, finding an accessible location was a challenge, as the young people lived across England. The meeting was held in Sheffield as this was fairly central to most of the young people, with good transport links.

To address logistical challenges around travelling, all the co-producers were offered a choice of public transport and taxis to/from their public transport, or for the full cost of petrol and overnight parking to be refunded. This was appreciated by the young people, and they felt it was important to offer this flexibility in the future.

However, this did not overcome all challenges, as one young person who was due to travel by car with their partner in the end had to travel by public transport instead. They had a young child and struggled to get their pram onto the trains, so found the experience very stressful. They felt that offering more options around taxis would have been useful, but this would have been very costly. This highlights that, while flexible options can be offered, the project budget and young people’s situations can mean that options are still limited.

Other challenges included young people fitting in the meeting with other commitments and feeling anxious about travelling so far on their own. They all appreciated the project manager’s offer for them to bring along a partner or buddy and this eased much of their anxiety. They also all agreed that the benefits of meeting up far outweighed the challenges.

The project manager felt that a key success of the project was enabling co-producers to take ownership over the work. This was achieved by the project manager viewing themselves as a facilitator rather than the director of the work, and they actively encouraged young people to be ambitious about what they could achieve.

“You need to get young people to see you as the facilitator; you can make things happen for them. And that’s OK too – co-production is not about everyone being the same, it’s about people being valued equally but recognising we bring different skills, leverage and opportunities. Our role as facilitators is to use our position, contacts and so on to make things happen.” (Project manager)

The project manager was also very open to feedback from the young people on the project, and felt they were accountable to them. This resulted in a very open and honest relationship across the group, and young people felt able to share their ideas and challenge the project manager when they did not agree with their approach.

“I love it because they just hold me to account. They’re almost like having a board of trustees... When they gave me advice or their opinions, I welcomed them with open arms. They were never rude. Never, not once.” (Project manager)

The co-producers agreed with this and said that they genuinely felt in control of the project and listened to by the project manager.

“I liked that [project manager] wasn’t the boss; it felt like we were all doing it together... There wasn’t a part of the project where I didn’t feel heard.” (Young co-producer)

Underlying all of the above was regular, ongoing communication with the young people involved. This ensured that all of the members of the group knew what was happening, felt included and did not miss out on opportunities. This communication has been ongoing past the end of the project, while the report is still creating impact.

Lessons learned:

- Young people appreciate the opportunity to meet others with similar experiences. This creates opportunities for peer support and shared learning.
- Where possible, support young people to build friendships outside of sessions, for example, by setting up a WhatsApp group. You may need to set some ground rules for this and it may not always be appropriate, but the benefits can be huge for young people.
- The benefits of peer support are enhanced when meeting face-to-face and young people really value the opportunity to meet in person.
- When organising in-person meetings, consider the location, what young people need to travel safely, and that the timing fits with young people’s other commitments. You may want to consider combining different types of travel (e.g. public transport, taxis, covering petrol costs), giving young people a choice over where they stay, and offering to pay for a companion to accompany them. The options you can offer and that young people can take up may be limited by your budget and young people’s situations.
- Remember you are the facilitator, not the director of the group. You should encourage young people to be ambitious and take ownership of work, and welcome their ideas and feedback. Your role is to make things happen for the group and you should view yourself as accountable to them.
- Clear, regular communication is key to ensuring young people stay engaged and feel included throughout the project. Continuing to update young people about what is happening with the outputs of their project and the impact it is having is also important.

Training and support for young people

Co-producers really appreciated the level of support they received from the project manager. Their open and non-judgemental approach meant that young people had no hesitation about going to them with questions or requests for help, and they felt that the project manager genuinely cared about them and the project.

“[Project manager] was really easy to talk to and really kind. You could tell that she really cared about the project and about us.” (Young co-producer)

Co-producers were offered a lot of training and support from the project manager. This included emotional as well as practical support, and it was offered in a range of ways. For example, they delivered group briefings, offered one-to-one support and chats, carried out regular check-ins, and developed guides and written instructions that young people could refer to. Young people appreciated all this support, especially the one-to-one coaching.

“It really helped that [project manager] was there the whole way. When I got stuck with the write up I had to ask her for extra help, and she went through the bullet points with me one-to-one and talked about what to cover.” (Young co-producer)

Before the interviews started, the project manager delivered training on how to interview a young person, including what to do if they are upset, how to probe for more details and ask follow-on questions not in the script, and covering ethics and confidentiality. The group also agreed what approaches they would take in different scenarios, for example if an interviewee became upset, and this helped co-producers feel more confident about interviewing others.

When designing the interviews with professionals, the initial questions the group brought together were very strongly worded, due to their experiences and perceptions of being let down. The project manager coached the young people through this and encouraged them to think about how they could ask questions in a way which was challenging but not offensive, but meant their experiences and opinions were still valid.

During the interviews, the project manager was on the call but stayed in background in case they were needed. They only needed to step in a couple of times when an interviewee became upset, and the co-producer needed some support. But most of the time interviewers could empathise with the interviewee's situation and managed the interview professionally. The project manager never stepped in and took over an interview, even if it was a challenge.

The project manager held a debrief with the co-producer after each interview. Where the interview had been difficult, the debrief enabled a young person to decompress and reflect, and the project manager could suggest some ways they get more out of the next interview.

The co-producers really appreciated the interview debriefs as they enabled them to talk through how they were feeling if it was a challenging interview and reflect on what went well and what could be improved next time.

“I heard a lot of stories that were very emotional in the interviews but I got a lot of support with this because [project manager] stayed at the end of each call to debrief and check in on how I was feeling.” (Young co-producer)

The project manager offered a lot of group and one-to-one support with writing the project report, which was the stage that most of the young people found the most challenging. They wrote a guide, delivered a group briefing and did a lot of one-to-one work with individual co-producers. The young people appreciated all this support and made suggestions about other things that would have helped, including breaking down the report into smaller sections and

giving out one at a time; offering drop-in support sessions; and being very clear about the style and format of writing at the start.

“My ADHD makes it difficult for me to stick to deadlines. With all the interview findings it felt a bit overwhelming so I could have done with having it broken down into smaller chunks and given to me one bit at a time... it was just a bit too much in one go.” (Young co-producer)

A key element of support was ensuring the anonymity of young people, which was very important for our co-producers. Young people reviewed and signed off sections about their own experiences and did not include their real names in the acknowledgements. This continued into the report launch: one young person did not want to be on film, so their voice recorded themselves and this was played over images relevant to the findings.

Lessons learned:

- Having a main point of contact that young people can go to with questions and for support is important. This person needs to be open and non-judgemental, and show they care about the project and the young people involved.
- Be prepared to allocate a lot of time to providing training and support to young co-producers. This includes emotional as well as practical support.
- Provide a training/briefing session before each stage of a project, along with information that young people can refer to afterwards, provided in a range of formats if possible (e.g. written, voice recording, pictorial).
- Your project may be the first time young people get to share their experiences and challenge those in positions of power. You may need to work with them to understand different perspectives and set an appropriate tone for their work, whilst recognising that their feelings and experiences are valid.
- Depending on the activity, you may need to be on-hand throughout delivery in case co-producers need support. However, it is important that you do not take over or interrupt the activity unnecessarily – ensure that the co-producer is in the lead.
- Debriefing immediately after activities is important, especially if they are challenging or potentially triggering.
- Anonymity is likely to be important for vulnerable young people. Make sure you are clear about this upfront and check in regularly to ensure they are comfortable about what they are sharing. Let them review any case studies or mention of their experiences before they go public.

Safeguarding young people and staff

Safeguarding the wellbeing of both young people and staff was a challenge. The young people involved in the core group and the interviews were drawn from Buttle UK grantees, so they brought a wide range of adverse experiences. The project manager looked up young people’s details beforehand to ensure they avoided any obvious triggers and could put some safeguards in place in advance. However, things had changed for some young people since they had received their grant, so this did not always cover all potential pitfalls.

The main safeguarding issues that arose were experienced by the core group. These young people were very isolated, and the project manager found they were often the only person they could turn to for help. This placed a lot of responsibility on the project manager.

“I’m that the only person they have, some of them, which I find terrifying... I don’t mind that they turn to me, I’m glad they have someone they can. But yeah, that’s been immensely stressful.” (Project manager)

This was exacerbated by the national scope of the project and the fact that Buttle UK does not provide direct support to young people. Consequently, if a young person shared a concern with them, the project manager checked whether a professional local to them was aware of their situation. Often this was not the case, and the project manager researched support services near where the young people lived and signposted them appropriately.

When one young person from the core group had a significant mental health crisis that was an immediate safeguarding concern, the project manager realised that the safeguarding policy Buttle UK had in place was not fit for purpose, as there were no processes in place to escalate concerns. The project manager felt that they received very good support from SMT in this situation and it was dealt with promptly and professionally, but it highlighted an urgent need for Buttle UK to review and update its safeguarding policy, procedures and training.

The interviews with young people could also be very emotive and difficult for both the co-producers and the project manager, especially when they were still in very difficult situations. The project manager would discuss this with the co-producer in the debrief after the interview, but often found they were then taking on the emotional load themselves.

“It's knowing that that person is still living in that hostel afterwards, it's really disappointing... So, yeah, adjusting to people's emotional responses and helping others go through their emotional responses – that was a burden; that was quite heavy.” (Project manager)

The project manager also highlighted that, while they knew they had support from managers, reaching out and accessing this support could be difficult as a remote worker. While they had regular meeting with their manager where they could discuss they project, they did not have opportunities for quick, informal chats over the desk with colleagues.

“...sometimes I felt it was too trivial to go and say to someone, ‘I'm just having a week of heavy interviews and this has left me feeling really depressed.’” (Project manager)

This, combined with the additional workload the project created and the difficult content of some of the interviews, meant that at times the project took quite an emotional and mental toll on the project manager.

“There's also quite a mental load that's gone with it. I'm holding a lot of information about a lot of people and it's their lives... I've had to stand by some of them through their worst times.” (Project manager)

However, the project manager also reflected that much of this was due to them needing to feel confident enough to ask for help, rather than the support not being there. They were very positive about SMT's response when they did raise concerns, and felt that they were quick to listen, act and provide support. This left the project manager feeling that SMT genuinely cared and would have responded well to requests for support earlier in the project.

Lessons learned:

- You will be working with vulnerable young people, so need to ensure you have appropriate risk assessments and safeguarding processes in place. Before starting a project, carry out a risk assessment on both the activities and the young people involved, so you can put measures in place to keep them safe. Ensure you know what to do if a safeguarding issue arises, who to report to and how to follow it up afterwards.
- Be prepared for things to go wrong, especially in terms of young people's mental health.

- If you know a young person struggles with their mental health, check they have some support in place. Being aware of support services near to them that you can signpost to in times of crisis is also useful.
- Working with vulnerable young people can take a toll on your own mental and emotional health. Ensure you have support in place for yourself, including supervisions with your manager, peer support and/or access to an EAP or mental health first aider. Informal opportunities to “offload” can be very important. These support frameworks need to be in place at the start of the project so you feel confident to ask for help when needed.

Benefits of coproduction

For young people

The young co-producers involved in this project were overwhelmingly positive about their experience and identified a range of benefits they had experienced as a result of being involved.

A key outcome of the project for our co-producers was the **strong, supportive relationships they developed with one another**. Their shared experience of estrangement enhanced this; they all said that this was the first time they had met others who had also been estranged. This meant they felt more confident to talk about their experiences.

“I loved meeting other people who were going through the same things as me as it gave me the courage to speak out about what I’ve experienced.” (Young co-producer)

The friendships our co-producers developed through the project also provided them with strong **peer support** which they had not experienced before, and many of them drew on this throughout the project when they were facing difficult situations in their wider lives.

“It sounds a bit too much, but it’s kind of like therapy, the experiences we’ve all had... We’ve all been able to make new friends and go to nice places and just share that experience that we’ve had with each other, so it’s not just helping other people, it’s helping ourselves too.” (Young co-producer)

Linked to this, the knowledge that they were not the only one experiencing estrangement was comforting to co-producers and **reduced their sense of isolation**. This came both from working with members of the core group and conducting interviews with other young people.

“I thought, ‘Wow, it isn’t just me.’ It gets really lonely feeling like you’re the only one.” (Young co-producer)

All the co-producers **gained new skills** through the project, especially in research, writing, video making and public speaking. Other, softer skills developed included time management and prioritisation, communication and digital skills (especially using Zoom and other online tools). Alongside these skills came a **boost in self-confidence and belief**, as many felt they had done and achieved things through the project they never thought possible.

“I felt validation that I can juggle a lot of things at once... When I started the project, [my daughter] was a newborn. One week there was a lot of interviews, so I was managing that and sterilising bottles and feeding her and changing nappies while doing the interviews!” (Young co-producer)

Conducting the research also enabled our co-producers to **understand the wider, systemic context of estrangement** and the challenges facing young people and the workers supporting them. This not only made them realise the scale of young people experiencing

estrangement, but also helped them to understand their own experiences. Some also said it was good to know that organisations like Buttle UK were advocating for young people.

“When I was struggling to access support, no one ever explained why they couldn’t help... Doing the research made me realise why I didn’t have the support before, that there’s not enough funding, and that this is happening all over the country. It’s opened my eyes a whole lot more.” (Young co-producer)

Doing the interviews with professionals also **challenged co-producers’ perceptions** of workers not caring about them or their situation. These interviews also put young people in a **position of power** in relation to professionals, which again was not something they had experienced to date.

“Young people were surprised at how nice referrers were... they learned a lot about the other side of the experience and that it’s lack of funding, not lack of care, that creates problems.” (Project manager)

Overall, co-producers said they felt even **more passionate about making a change** for other estranged young people as a result of the project. They felt more confident to speak out about their experiences and advocate for change, locally and nationally, and had high aspirations for the impact that their report might have. This has been demonstrated in their involvement in media interviews, webinars and training to raise awareness of estrangement and improve the support for the young people it affects.

“I would like more support services to know about the project so that they are aware that a lot of young people suffer from estrangement, even if the young people aren’t aware of it themselves.” (Young co-producer)

For professionals and organisations

Engaging young people with lived experience as co-producers of this project has made it **more powerful, insightful and impactful** than we could have achieved otherwise.

“The project has been more than I hoped it to be, the young people got involved in ways that I could never have imagined... We never would have achieved the outcomes we did without their perspectives because I’ve never been estranged, and you can’t understand it properly until you’ve been through it.” (Project manager)

Having young people conducting the interviews made this process much richer for interviewees and interviewers. The project manager reflected that the common experiences between young interviewees and co-producers meant that the **interviews were more meaningful and detailed** than they would have been if they had conducted them.

“There was always that shared experience. So sometimes the young people who were being interviewed would say something, my interviewer would say something else and that would spark so much more.” (Project manager)

The project was also a valuable **professional development** opportunity for staff. The project manager gained new skills and experience, and the empathy they developed for this group of young people has informed their own practice in their wider work. In particular, they have learned to have an open mind and not make assumptions before they start working with a group. They also felt extremely proud of what they achieved with the co-producers.

“This has mushroomed into something much bigger, perhaps, than it was originally intended. I’m proud of that though. I’m really proud of that.” (Project manager)