

Unlock Young Adult Panel: what we learned

About the panel

Between December 2023 and March 2024, Unlock convened a Young Adult Panel. This group was comprised of four young adults. The goal of the panel was to better understand how Unlock is perceived by this demographic with the aim of improving our engagement with young adults. The panel examined our digital and communication activities, our advice service and helpline, and our policy work. This involved us asking for their opinions on various webpages and publications on our site, as well as their general impressions of how we operate in each of these areas and what their priorities for us would be. The panel was important for Unlock because of how different a criminal record is for a young person compared to later in life, making the support we need to offer slightly different. For example, the panel felt that a criminal record was more likely to be seen by others as representative of a young person's personality, as there is less other life experience to compare it with. This therefore could present more issues around employment, insurance or education than it may for older people. This briefing focuses on key themes that emerged from the panel's discussion, particularly the ones that are translatable for organisations like Unlock, who provide services and want to increase engagement with young people. Some specific recommendations from the panel are currently being discussed internally, with plans to actualize changes over the next year.

Advice and helpline

The advice and information we provide about criminal records is central to what we do. As such, it was encouraging to hear that the young adults felt we provide plenty of useful information and that Unlock is seen as a trusted source of information in this area. We heard that the lived experience of our helpline operators further adds to our credibility, which encourages people to engage with our services.

However, the panel highlighted the fact that ease of access to information about how to contact the helpline is key. Similarly, providing information about how to get the most out of a call was said to be potentially useful in supporting people to use our services and overcome any nerves they might have about getting in touch.

In terms of advice, the panel were sceptical about the value of online chat tools. They felt that any form of integrated chat bot on a website would lack authenticity, even if it were operated by a real person rather than a bot. This would be seen as off putting, undermining the personal advice that they felt was a strength of what we do.

These recommendations form part of a wider lesson: that streamlining the way important information can be accessed is key to boosting engagement. Making it as easy for the user as possible to utilise a service is essential in enabling them to interact with it.

Website and presentation

Our written advice on the website was also seen as a reliable and broad source of information. However, the panel stressed the importance of considering accessibility issues in how such information is presented online. Lengthy pages of text can be a barrier, particularly for those with lower reading comprehension. Two key suggestions were proposed by the panel to tackle this issue: chunking up text under drop down headings phrased in FAQ style and creating video/text-to-speech formats for advice pages. This is not to say that young adults necessarily have issues with reading lengthy text, but that there is benefit to all in ensuring that information is as accessible as possible.

More generally, the breadth of information on our website was cited as something that could make it overwhelming for some people, making it hard to navigate to specific information. Something that could help combat this issue is ensuring that pages which are now outdated, perhaps due to new legislation or societal changes, are removed in timely fashion. This is an example of where the information provided, as well as the way it is provided, is crucial to credibility. Grouping information that is especially relevant for young adults, or organisations, could also help different demographics of users navigate the site more efficiently.

Increasing the diversity in images across the website was also an important issue for the panel. This could be in relation to race, gender, age and even clothing. The feedback we received was that a more diverse selection of images would increase confidence, trust and familiarity for users. Showing images of young adults, especially on pages that are most relevant to them (e.g. education) would be particularly useful for building a positive view of Unlock. More generally, this shows the value organisations can find in ensuring that they reflect the people they are seeking to support.

Social media

Now more than ever, social media is important in understanding how young adults access information. Therefore, social media was viewed as a valuable tool to increase engagement with young adults. The panel highlighted four key themes.

Improving the possibility for interaction with our social media posts was cited as important. For example, on X (formerly Twitter) this could be done by publishing infographics with key figures and points from publications or creating polls with questions relating to a relevant publication. These approaches were thought to be more likely to create interest than a simple link to a new publication. Including hashtags with key words in was also suggested to increase our reach.

Targeted advertising campaigns on social media were also seen as effective, especially if related to specific barriers faced by young adults.

YouTube was highlighted as central to young adults' consumption of long-form content. This content could take a variety of forms, for example disseminating information and advice or discussing relevant current legislation. The latter in particular may be a good way to engage young adults in debate around Unlock's policy perspectives. The content created for YouTube could even serve as a foundation for short form content on other platforms (e.g. TikTok, Instagram).

Online communities were seen as important to young adults, such as via platforms such as Reddit. It can help to cope with feelings of loneliness or anxiety, which can be common among young adults with criminal records. This type of platform can also give motivation to seek information.

Policy, practice and lived experience

Unlock's work with higher education institutions was seen as valuable. The panel felt that we should more actively showcase campaigns that we have been a part of as it would increase confidence in us. An area felt to be particularly important was support for those with criminal records already in higher education, particularly regarding support for progressing into employment. Although Unlock does engage in this area, the panel seemed unaware of this, signaling that we need to promote this work more clearly. It was therefore felt that proactively engaging with university careers teams, whilst ensuring that our work is seen, would be a worthwhile course of action. This is a prime example of the value in listening to those who use a service in informing where to focus.

Similarly, the panel felt that Unlock should make efforts to comment, write and research more often on issues that intersect with criminal records. Areas relating to socio-economic disadvantage, race and education would all be fitting to explore in this way. Recognising multiple forms of disadvantage and how they play into Unlock's niche of criminal records was something that it was felt would increase credibility.

We also discussed with the panel what they thought would be the best ways to involve the voices of young adults in the future work of Unlock. Focus groups like this panel were seen as valuable, especially because of the discussions that this kind of setting generates. In-person outreach was thought to be the most viable method to engage with demographics of young adults who we currently struggle to reach. This could be done through work with community centres and youth clubs, for example. Trusted sources such as mentors, or peer workers would also increase engagement in a similar way. The value in these approaches for organisations such as Unlock comes because instead of hoping that these demographics will find us independently, we would be actively presenting ourselves to them. This then greatly increases the chance of engaging and learning from them.

Conclusion

We would like to thank the four contributors of the panel. We at Unlock really enjoyed working with everyone on the panel over the last few months, and the effort of all members has provided us with valuable insights for our future work.

We plan to conduct further work concerning young adults with criminal records, so anyone reading this who feels they have relevant experiences and would like to get in touch can do so through this email: policy@unlock.org.uk.