Principle 9: Shape the programme around young people and communities

leaders like us

SHAPE THE PROGRAMME AROUND YOUNG PEOPLE & COMMUNITIES *you work with*



Principle 9: Prioritise cultural and contextual fit

Why this matters

Programmes are easier to trust and take part in when they fit the lives, routines, values and realities of the young people they are trying to reach. This is not about assuming that every young person in a community needs the same thing. It is about listening carefully, noticing what makes participation easier or harder, and designing around real-life conditions from the start.

When programmes do not fit their lives, young people may appear “hard to reach” or “not interested”. In reality, the programme may be asking them to navigate avoidable barriers around timing, travel, clothing, cost, communication, family expectations, faith practices, safety or trust.

“Find out what’s important to people culturally and personally and then embed that into the programme.” (Young person)



What this can look like in practice







If you notice:	Try:
Young people or families seem unsure whether the programme is safe, appropriate or “for people like them”	Choose trusted venues and share clear information in advance. Include access routes, facilities information such as quiet spaces, prayer spaces if relevant, and information on who will be there and what the sessions will involve
Attendance drops around busy times	Check whether exams, religious holidays, local events, caring responsibilities, work patterns or transport are affecting attendance. Adjust session timings where possible rather than assuming young people have lost interest
Kit or clothing expectations are creating discomfort or barriers	Offer flexible clothing options, kit loans, and support modesty-sensitive clothing options. Explain any safety requirements clearly, without promoting narrow or stereotypical clothing expectations
Recruitment feels slow, narrow or unrepresentative	Use locally trusted channels and plain language to support recruitment. Test images, wording and examples with young people before making them live. Ask who might not seethe invitation, or who might not feel it is means for them
Families or community partners are unsure about the programme	Build trust through clear, consistent communication. Explain the purpose of consent, mechanisms for safeguarding and practical details aswell as what young people will gain from taking part

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What you can do to make the programme fit

- Check what would make the programme feel safe, realistic and worthwhile for the young people you want to reach.
- Consider travel, cost, timing, exams, caring responsibilities, faith commitments, family expectations and local events.
- Use venues that young people and families see as safe, accessible and legitimate.
- Share what to expect before sessions, including who will be there, what to wear, where to go and what support is available.
- Avoid assuming one style of sportswear, uniform or appearance will work for everyone.
- Work with local partners, young people and families to understand how information is best shared.
- Preferences and circumstances change, so build in regular opportunities for feedback and adjustment.



Signs it’s working

Young people and families describe the programme as safe, respectful and “for people like them”

Attendance and engagement become more stable and consistent

Families, trusted partners or community members understand the purpose of the programme

Young people do not have to explain or justify every cultural, practical or personal need individually

Young people begin to use the communication routes that have ben established because they work for them



Continue exploring the toolkit

Ready to move on? Continue to the next section:
Principle 10: Design for overlapping life experiences

You can also return to the Leaders Like Us toolkit at a glance page to explore the modules and principles in any order.

Contact us

If you have questions about the Leaders Like Us toolkit, would like to discuss how to use the resources in your setting, or are interested in working with us, please get in touch.

Dr Jamie Crowther
Born in Bradford
Email: jamie.crowther@bthft.nhs.uk

We welcome feedback on the toolkit, including how you have used or adapted the resources and what you have learned.

