

Reframing recruitment: How Sheffield Futures Designed an Inclusive Recruitment Process for Youth Consultants



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This case study explores how [Sheffield Futures](#), a charity supporting young people in Sheffield, designed and implemented a new and more inclusive recruitment approach as part of its [NextGen Consulting Programme](#).

The programme employs young people aged 16–25 as youth consultants to review working practices (including recruitment) across private, public and third sector organisations. The organisation used the project as an opportunity to rethink its own recruitment processes, with a specific focus on inclusion, accessibility, and candidate experience. The result was a pilot recruitment model that combined targeted outreach, simplified applications, and an assessment process designed to prioritise confidence-building, reflection, and multiple ways to demonstrate capability.

This case study draws on insights from an interview with Charmaine Myers, a Service Manager at Sheffield Futures, who led the design and delivery of the recruitment process.

Starting Points and Motivations

The pilot emerged from Sheffield Futures' broader work supporting young people into employment, and from its recognition that traditional recruitment processes often disadvantage this group, as young people face multiple barriers to accessing work, including limited work experience, lack of confidence, and anxiety about the working environment. To address these barriers, the organisation designed and piloted a more positive and supportive recruitment process to capture how lived experiences might reflect potential skills as employees, enable them to demonstrate capabilities beyond formal criteria, and create a more positive and supportive recruitment environment.

What the Pilot Involved

Sheffield Futures approached recruitment as a holistic process, beginning with how job opportunities were advertised. This stage combined standard channels, such as websites, universities and voluntary sector platforms, with more targeted engagement through youth organisations and community networks they already work with. As the interviewee explained: 'We were trying to reach out to as many young people as we possibly could, ensuring a diverse pool of candidates was engaged'.

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The application process to recruit youth consultants for the NextGen programme was also simplified. Instead of asking candidates to demonstrate how they met a detailed person specification, applicants were invited to reflect on their experiences of young people's barriers to employment. This approach positioned young people as knowledge holders: 'They are the experts by the very nature of their age group'. This change improved the quality of responses, making it more difficult to shortlist candidates because many were strong, but ultimately leading to more meaningful selection decisions.

The selection stage was redesigned through an assessment centre model, involving a series of structured activities such as group discussions, short interviews and practical tasks. This enabled candidates to demonstrate their abilities across multiple activities and avoid placing them under unnecessary pressure: 'by putting people on the spot, you just don't get the best out of them'. Candidates were therefore informed in advance about the process and encouraged to prepare for specific questions and tasks.

The assessment centre was designed to create a supportive environment, including informal time for candidates to meet, refreshments, and access to a quiet room if needed. A notable element was a wellbeing session led by trained practitioners, using breathing and grounding exercises. This reflected recognition of the emotional demands of recruitment: 'Whether you're 16 or 60, recruitment is terrifying... so what we're going to try and do here is give you a little bit of advantage'.

The first task involved a group discussion on the barriers young people face in accessing and staying in employment. This was not designed solely to test knowledge but to observe how candidates interacted with one another, focusing on communication, teamwork, and the ability to listen and include others.

Reflection was embedded throughout the process, with candidates asked to consider what they would do differently after each task. While the content of these reflections was not formally assessed, it allowed Sheffield Futures to observe candidates' capacity to reflect, which is considered an important professional skill for the role.

The interview component was reimagined through a 'speed interview' format, in which candidates rotated between assessors, responding to the same question in short, timed interactions. This ensured consistency while reducing the intensity of a traditional panel interview.

Finally, candidates were asked to explain why they were suited to the role, with flexibility in how they presented their response (e.g. written, audio, or other formats). This enabled them to demonstrate their strengths in different ways and reduced reliance on a single mode of communication.

Candidate Experience and Feedback

Sheffield Futures gathered both quantitative and qualitative feedback through pre- and post-assessment surveys. Results showed increased confidence levels, suggesting the process helped reduce anxiety. Feedback highlighted that candidates felt supported, valued the wellbeing elements, and appreciated the opportunity to learn about recruitment. As one participant noted, 'this made me feel confident and comfortable'. Another participant shared that they 'found it really fun, relaxing and engaging. Better than a typical boring interview. Could contribute more and showcase myself'.

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I thought the assessment centre was very unique. [...] It gave me a variety of options to best express my best skills.

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Outcomes

The recruitment process resulted in the selection of eight youth consultants, exceeding the original target of six due to the high quality of applicants. The cohort was also more diverse than Sheffield Futures would traditionally recruit, which the organisation attributes to its wider outreach activities and adapted recruitment process, bringing a broad range of lived experiences. During the induction programme, candidates are already demonstrating strong engagement and collaboration, supporting early group cohesion.

The pilot prompted broader reflection from the leadership team on recruitment practices. Simplifying the application process helped candidates by enabling individuals to draw on their lived experience of barriers to employment, while the inclusive design improved the experience for both candidates and staff. For candidates, this created a more supportive and less pressurised environment, while for staff it reduced the fatigue associated with repeated interviews and provided a richer understanding of candidates by observing them across a range of tasks. The use of multiple assessment tasks therefore enabled a more holistic understanding of candidates' skills and potential.

The process also highlighted the limitations of traditional recruitment approaches, which may overlook individuals who are less confident in written applications but perform better in interactive settings. Overall, Sheffield Futures felt that this model broadened the definition of a 'strong candidate', shifting the focus from formal credentials towards potential, engagement, and lived experience.

This model required greater resource investment than the organisation's traditional recruitment process, including additional staff time, involvement of colleagues across the organisation (such as wellbeing practitioners), and more sustained engagement with candidates.

Learnings and looking ahead

The NextGen Consulting Programme is ongoing, and its recruitment phase is already informing wider organisational learning. The pilot highlighted several benefits for Sheffield Futures. It enabled the organisation to recruit a diverse cohort with a broad range of lived experiences and strengths that may not have been identified through more traditional processes. It also supported high levels of candidate engagement, early group cohesion, and a more positive and inclusive candidate experience, reflecting the organisation's values.

However, these outcomes came with a clear resource implication. The approach required greater upfront investment of time and support for candidates, raising questions about scalability. However, Sheffield Futures also found that the process brought operational advantages: the use of group-based assessment reduced interviewer fatigue, proved more time-efficient than conducting multiple individual interviews, and provided a framework that could be adapted and reused in future recruitment.

Overall, the pilot suggests that while inclusive recruitment requires additional investment, it can generate both values-based benefits—by creating a more inclusive and supportive experience—and practical advantages, by enabling organisations to identify and recruit candidates with a wider range of skills, experiences and potential.

Get in touch

Belen is part of the cross-sector, collaborative team working on the ['Good Work and Better Business'](#) work package of the Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP). Contact [Belen](#) to find out more about this case study.

Yorkshire Policy Innovation Partnership (YPIP)

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