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Youth Futures Foundation: WWC user research report

May 2021

1. Background and context

Our Vision and Mission as Youth Futures Foundation

Our Vision:

A society where all young people have equitable access to good quality jobs.

Our Mission:

To narrow the employment gap by **identifying** what works and why, **investing** in evidence generation and innovation, and **igniting** new ideas that change behaviour and practice.

Our ambition to adopt a 'What Works' approach

We believe that a **'What Works' approach** -- the creation, curation, sharing and translation of high quality evidence -- is the most effective way for us to enable our stakeholders to make decisions on future policy and practice affecting young people's prospects.

2. The aim of this project

What was the
aim of this
project?

To inform **our strategy and direction** of the development of a 'What Works' approach by increasing our understanding of our key stakeholders.

Who are the stakeholders we wanted to understand?

This project has focused on Youth Futures' main **stakeholder** groups:

1. Employers
2. Practitioners
3. Policymakers

Within these groups, this research has further identified specific **audiences** to target with our messaging, and **users** who will engage with our research and evidence outputs directly.

What did we want to learn about the different stakeholders groups?

We focused on learning about them as potential **users** of Youth Futures Foundation's research and evidence outputs/services, specifically:

- Their needs for research, evidence and information
- How they are likely to best engage with Youth Futures Foundations outputs and services
- How it's best to tailor the presentation of evidence to different needs, and through what channels.

3. Our approach

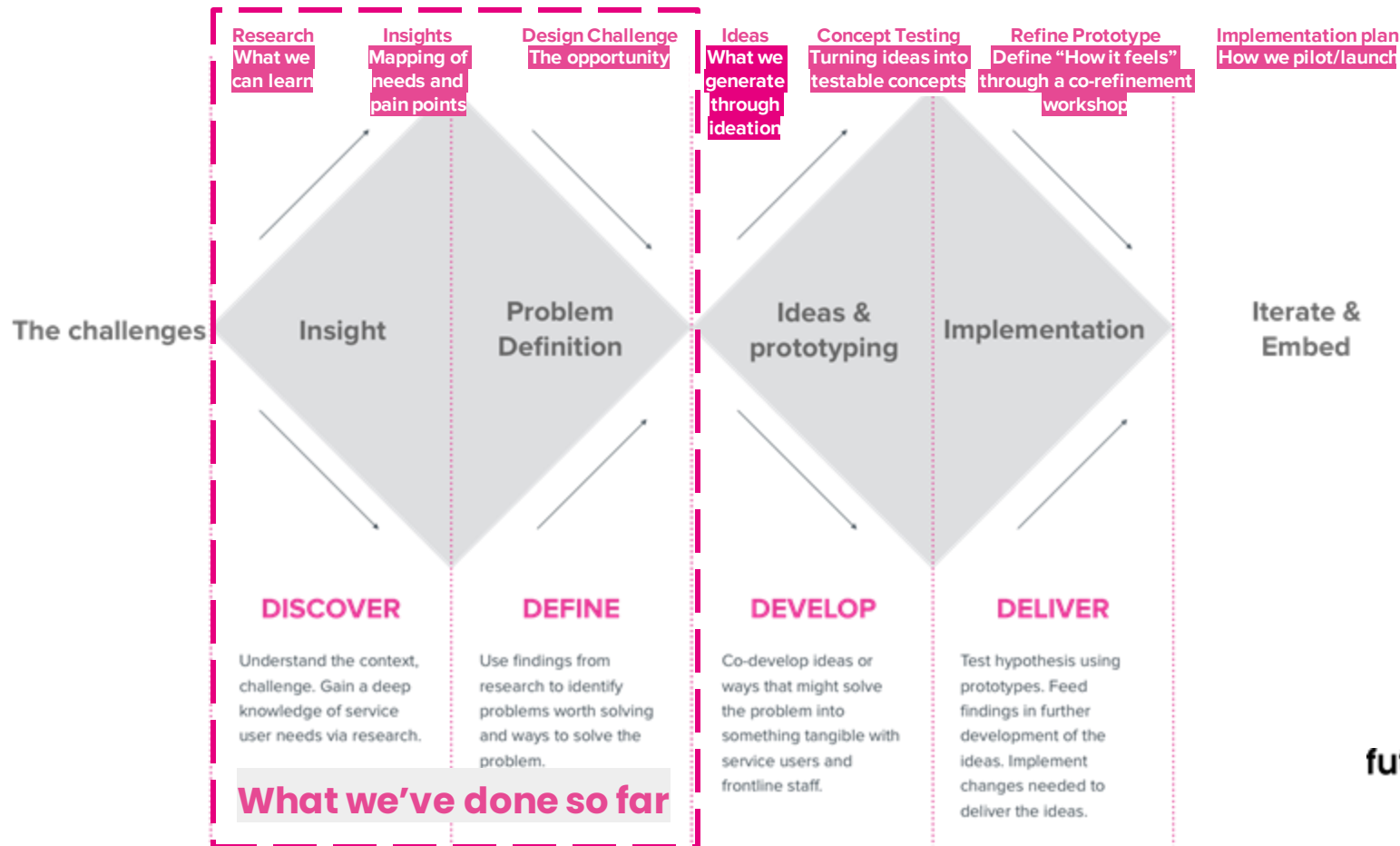
Using design research as a methodology

Design research is about **learning**, building enough **evidence** in order to have confidence in decisions, and plan **what to do next**.

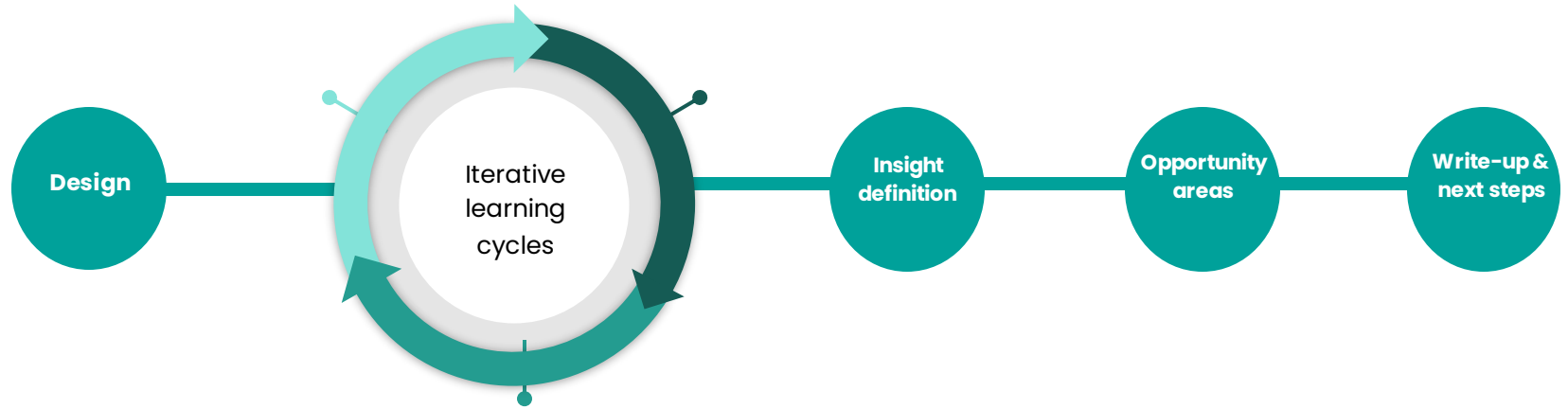
Throughout this project we have been rigorous in our thinking about methodology, sampling, running interviews, synthesis, forming and testing hypotheses, in order to validate/invalidate our riskiest starting assumptions.

If you're interested in reading more about design thinking and research - take a look at these sites: [Design thinking defined](#) IDEO / [Doing research that makes a difference](#) Kiran Dillon / [Asking the right questions to frame the problem](#) Ben Holliday

Where does this project fit in the design process?



Our approach: iterative learning cycles



Designing research plan

We gathered existing assumptions and hypotheses from within Youth Futures Foundation as well as identifying more open-ended questions to design our research activities.

Conduct, analyse, iterate

Continuously learning throughout our research, we created space to analyse and reflect on the themes and patterns coming through the research, so we could iterate our approach to make sure we could answer all our lines of enquiry.

Insights and user needs

Following our final synthesis session we were able to turn themes and patterns into clear insights and user needs.

'How might we' questions

Using our insights and user needs, we identified potential opportunity areas in the form of 'How might we' questions, following a logic model to illustrate opportunities for change in line with Youth Futures' theory of change.

Project report

In this report we have outlined all our insights, needs and opportunity areas to inform the next stages of Youth Futures Foundation's work to define their What Works strategy.

Working together as a blended team

Working together as a blended team with Youth Futures Foundation and FutureGov team members allowed us to have **regular and effective learning cycles**, and **jointly own** the direction the research was taking

From a commissioning perspective, it was easier to **stay close** to the research

From a supplier perspective, we were able to get a **greater understanding** of organisational strategy and how best to design our research approach and frame our findings in the most useful way for Youth Futures Foundation

Who we've spoken to...

Our plan throughout has been to measure our sample by **quality of findings, not by the number of people we have spoken to.**

We paused at the halfway point to reflect on what we were learning and any sample changes we needed to make to ensure all our lines of enquiry were answered with confidence.

Following that pause (4 weeks ago), we spoke to 9 more participants and gained a greater understanding of the 'support provider' segment for employers and practitioners.

Throughout, we prioritised the **employer and practitioner perspective** in line with the business plan focus.

We recommend that any further research captures the experiences of policymakers to a greater degree.

The Employer perspective:

6 participants overall; an even mix of employers and support provider organisations e.g. specialist recruiters, external consultants, impact/evaluation specialists, HR professional bodies.

The Practitioner perspective:

7 participants overall; 3 practitioners/service providers and 4 support provider organisations e.g. skills support, trade member organisations.

The Policymaker perspective:

5 participants overall; 3 local and 2 central government policymakers.

The What Works Centre perspective

2 participants overall; two different What Works Centres.

The Young Person perspective:

1 x 90 mins workshop with 8 Future Voices members
Engagement to re-start when prototyping of possible options for Youth Futures Foundation's evidence product/service begins.

4. What have we learnt?

How to use the findings from this section

The following slides present **key findings** from the different participant group's perspectives and the summary of their needs.

Here's how you can use this content in the next steps:

- **Insights** about how employers, practitioners, policymakers and their support providers engage with What Work Centres (WWC) and academic evidence, to inform future development of Youth Futures Foundation's WWC strategies
- **Opportunity areas** around how to support and engage target groups for Youth Futures Foundation to explore
- **User needs** to enable Youth Futures Foundation to design and test prototypes which truly solve a problem for target groups (see this GDS link for more information about ['user needs'](#))

Youth Futures Foundation's stakeholders will not all benefit from toolkits and evidence reviews; some will require more practical guidance

The ambition of Youth Futures Foundation is to influence a broad range of **stakeholders** across the Youth Employment system. We tested the hypothesis that employers, practitioners and policymakers would engage with toolkits and evidence stores in the style of What Works Centres and thereafter feel compelled to change their practice.

We tested this hypothesis using existing toolkits with employers, practitioners, their support providers and policymakers.

We've found that a traditional WWC toolkit **will not meet the needs** of **employers and practitioners** who require **more practical, immediately applicable guidance** to help them make use of evidence about what works. However policymakers will continue to benefit from more detailed and rigorous toolkit models.

Another WWC - Early Intervention Foundation - have recently published a [paper](#) which articulates similar findings around the need to frame evidence differently to support practitioners and policymakers to change their behaviour in an evidence-based way.

More detail on the specific behaviours and needs of each group to be found [on the following slides](#).

What we learned about the **employer perspective**

Contrary to our initial hypothesis, the size of an organisation is not necessarily the determining factor as to whether an employer is likely to engage with research and be compelled to set up youth-focussed interventions. Rather having the **capacity** (time/resource), **capability** (training and skills) **and motivation** (drive and interest) to spend time engaging with research to/policies is more influential.

Alongside these capabilities, we believe there are also **conditions required for change**, for example: a non-traditional organisational culture, leaders who care enough to make change happen, financial incentives to change (e.g. apprenticeship levy).

However, even if all the right conditions and capabilities for employers to be motivated to engage in research and develop their own interventions are in place, we have observed that they may still opt to **buy in support** to help them design a more **bespoke initiative** (tailored to their org, industry, including all the right pastoral support etc.)

Quotes

“Size of the org and attitude makes a significant difference – though not all big orgs are doing something [around youth initiatives]...it’s very complex” – Employer

“How interested is the organisation – are they just ticking a box? Resource will be needed if orgs want to make meaningful change” – Employer

“We link up corporations...to share stories of what worked in practice and how successful it was with other corporates. Not many corporates want to be a pioneer in doing this kind of thing. Hearing from other corporates makes it feel less risky”. – Specialist support provider

“Interpreting [research and evidence] and adapting for your environment requires skills, knowledge, motivation, time etc” – Employer

What we learned about the **employer perspective**

If a purely research/evidence offer won't meet their needs, **how might Youth Futures Foundation offer other types of support to support employers** to develop the right capabilities and conditions (motivations, management, structure, culture etc.) required to be more 'youth-friendly'? For example, can Youth Futures Foundation be a convener, bringing together best practice from industry?

If employers are buying in bespoke support from specialist providers, **how can Youth Futures Foundation help them use research and evidence in their work** so that their support is evidence-based? Through the people we spoke to, we observed that there is a 'use of evidence' spectrum, along which we found some support providers who deeply engage in evidence to inform their offer, while others play more of a convening role for employers, to support the sharing of best practice rather than research about what works.

Is there **an opportunity for Youth Futures Foundation** to occupy the empty space on this spectrum? For example, producing and effectively disseminating content about what works that employers can easily apply to their own contexts.

Quotes

"[On WWC] Very academic feel...not sure employers would know it exists or what do Having someone to help interprwith it. They don't have the time or experts..."What am I going to do with that?". et this will be really important" - Employer

[Talking about reasons for buying in external support to set up youth-focussed interventions] "Bringing someone in - make it more bespoke...(but) more costly so will need to weigh that up" - Employer

"They really want to know the actual business case - how it ties into productivity etc. in the long run". - **Specialist support provider**

"We provide a free toolkit and framework to better improve their recruitment and offer to young people. How to write a good job description, how they onboard, how can they provide quality employment to young people. The external research and reports feed into that, the things that young people are telling us feed into that." - **Specialist support provider**

Employers & their support providers as users

As an employer I need **guidance** that I can pick up and use, that tells me **what to do** and **how to do it** to motivate me to change my organisational practices/set up youth initiatives.

As an employer I need **guidance** that feels **relevant** to my industry/sector context and helps me make the **business case** for changing our practices

As an employer support provider, I need **accessible analysis of up-to-date** evidence that feels based on the day to day realities, concerns and pressing **challenges** of my employer clients, and allows me to provide them with bespoke guidance, programme design support, quality assurance and robust evaluation frameworks

As an employer support provider, I need **easy to digest** evidence about what programmes and interventions are **best and most effective** to design and deliver **better programmes**

What we learned about the **practitioner perspective**

Practitioners are **not always incentivised by the system** within which they work to engage with high quality evidence when designing interventions/services to support young people. Examples of these disincentives include a **limited culture of learning and development** for practitioners in the youth sector space. This is either caused or impacted by the lack of time and resources available for such activities.

Practitioners tend to **value the voice of their users and clients** much more than evidence from secondary research when designing strategies or solutions. We heard that much of how they understand their context is based on direct consultation with the groups they're working with, rather than data not connected to their users. It seems that this human-centred approach might clash with the distant, academic feel of secondary evidence.

As such, for practitioners - especially smaller ones - **academic evidence frameworks**, such as impact, evaluation models, and rapid evidence reviews from other programmes, **do not feel applicable to their practice**, due to the fact that they do not immediately relate to the context (subject/issue/locality) the practitioner is working within. Practitioners delivering support or a service do not feel able or motivated to spend their **limited time and resource** analysing evidence and identifying what they can use to improve their practice.

Quotes

"Now, youth employment - is it a learning sector? Is it evidence based? No. They'll all tell you it is...So much of it is cultural. And the children's social care culture doesn't have the same professional standards as medical professions. And then in youth work, you get even further away." - **Specialist support provider**

"Our team come with a lot of experience about the problems that young people face and knowing the place...its legacy...culture e.g. 'second generation miner...that (intervention) works in that leafy suburb but might not work here'...we don't try and parachute in with the solution." - **Practitioner**

"Advisors - they would say they haven't got time to read that - we need to give people the space [if we want them to do the reading]- If I shared this with the team I don't think people would read it, not through a lack of wanting to." **Practitioner**

What we learned about the **practitioner perspective**

Support provider organisations can help fill the **practice-knowledge gaps** by tailoring evidence about what works best to the context of the practitioners they're working with. Whether it relates to designing the most effective programmes or how best to evaluate the impact they're achieving.

The practitioner support providers we spoke to are offering **a range of different offers**, from impact evaluation support to regulatory/compliance support. Many have found that the most useful role they can play is to help the practitioners **benefit from evidence about what works** by offering tailored support, to alleviate the burden on practitioners to analyse the evidence themselves.

Since the most exposure practitioners may get to evidence about what works is via the bespoke support from specialist providers (when funding allows), **how can Youth Futures Foundation help support providers consistently use research and evidence** in their work so that their support is evidence-based?

Quotes

"We were established to help orgs working with young people to evaluate their work..realised this was a simplistic perception...the youth sector were not sitting around wondering how to do evaluations – actually the opposite. There was some resistance... approaches to evaluation – sector did not like them – not (seen to be) fit for purpose of the type of orgs" – **Specialist support provider**

"[Research and evidence] needs to be published openly; to be applied – evidence heat maps are interesting but I can't use that; needs to be more than just interesting; granular (e.g. does it need to be two weeks work experience); tangible; feasible; need to know what orgs need to do to change their practice" – **Specialist support provider**

"We spread good practice, we have a lot of channels for bringing members and providers together to disseminate good practice...we leverage our members to talk to each other, people who are doing frontline delivery etc, we use them to get information about what delivery looks like". – **Specialist support provider**

Practitioners & their support providers as users


As a practitioner I need **guidance** that I can pick up and use, that tells me **what to do and how to do it** to motivate me to change my practices


As a practitioner I need **guidance** that feels **relevant** and applicable to **the place** I'm working in and the **people I'm trying to serve** in order for it to be useful for my practice

As a practitioner support provider, I need to offer **information and support** to practitioners that will help them **attract funding** and design more effective programmes

As a practitioner support provider, I need **accessible analysis of up-to-date** evidence that feels based on the day to day realities, concerns and pressing **challenges** of my practitioner clients, and allows me to provide them with bespoke guidance, programme design support, quality assurance and robust evaluation frameworks

As a practitioner, I need **access to evidence** about what works that will **convince funders** that the service/programme I'm proposing to deliver is the best, most effective option.

 Validated stories (i.e. supported explicitly by research findings)

 Requires further validation (i.e. an assumption extrapolated from research findings, but requires further research to validate)

What we learned about the **policymaker** perspective

Policymakers are the more obvious **direct users** for any future Youth Futures Foundation's toolkit offer as they more readily **engage with evidence** about what works as part of their policy analysis work.

More research is required to substantiate our observations, but so far in our interviews we've identified that for policymakers to engage with research about what works they need it to be **free at the point of access, easily navigable** (e.g. must be able to filter by geography (within the UK), outcome, needs etc.); **accessible when short on time** and come from **'credible' sources** (i.e. both evidence that meets a standard of scientific robustness, as well as evidence that comes from timely primary research with people they are designing policy for).

Policymakers engage with research about what works so they can gain a **'full picture'** of what's going on in a certain policy area and seek to identify where policy is or isn't linking up so they can understand **where gaps may exist** e.g. where particular groups may be unintentionally excluded.

Further research is required to establish substantial opportunity areas for further testing.

Quotes

"[What policymakers need from evidence] It's about making it easy and accessible...this is what young people have told us they would like. This is what employers have told us would be useful to them. Everybody wants that, this is a solution, this is what you should do." **Support provider**

"In a council, locality and geography matters, so we've taken a sort of neighbourhood approach. Which is why understanding the lives of people was important to us. For a council that wasn't as well resourced, I think evidence would be even more vital. A lot of evidence exists in ERSA, but it sometimes feels slightly outdated. Would actually go to the Institute for Employment Studies more". - **Local gov policymaker**

"Wider applicability based on geography is tricky. If something is based in (council's local city) it might be seen as more useful, but potentially it's not." **Local gov policymaker**

"How the research is conducted is important. How on the ground it is and how involved are the people who are actually being affected. Are their voices and experiences taken into account?" - **Local gov policymaker**

Policymakers & commissioners as users

As a policymaker I need my questions answered with **high quality research** and to be supported to understand what the implications are for policy solutions and other interventions

As a policymaker I need easy access to high quality evidence about what works that allows me to **make policy and programmatic decisions** in a **political environment**

As a policymaker or commissioner, I need to make decisions about **how to invest the resources** we have available to deliver the greatest impact

As a commissioner, if evidence around best practice is different from what we are funding currently, I need **compelling evidence** about **potential impact** and **cost efficiency** that will make me change my mind about where to put our funding/resources

**What does this
mean for a 'What
Works' approach?**

What does this mean for a What Works approach?

As we start to explore what this means for a What Works approach, we can consider three dimensions of design when identifying opportunities to test.

Product

Design effective content on a website (whether it's in the form of a toolkit / evidence map or something else) that meets users' needs for evidence and supports them to engage with youth interventions

For more detail on product design and what it entails, take a look at these definitions by Invisionapp: [link](#)

Service

Design the wider experience of users, stakeholders and audiences interacting with Youth Futures Foundation's evidence offer - considering how to collect, synthesise and disseminate evidence and translate it into product and engagement strategies

For more detail on service design, take a look at these definitions by GDS and Design Council: [link](#) and [link](#)

Org strategy

Develop a shared understanding of Youth Futures Foundation's place in the system of youth employment that identifies how Youth Futures Foundation can best bring about change and design an effective, holistic org strategy to deliver on it

For more detail on organisational strategy design, take a look at these definitions by Nobl: [link](#)

Employers - example opportunities

Opportunity areas identified in research (slide 21)

If a purely research/ evidence offer won't meet the needs of employers, **how might Youth Futures Foundation offer other types of support to employers** to develop the right capabilities and conditions (motivations, management, structure, culture etc.) required to be more 'youth-friendly'

Example ideas to be developed and tested

Product: an employer 'how to' document/workbook with various topics (covering recruitment, retention and progression)

Service: Youth Futures Foundation as a convener, bringing together to employers to share best practice from across the industry

Org strategy: Youth Futures Foundation to identify impactful levers for change around employer behaviour including mapping the current system of support offers targeting employers

Further research: reviews into effective models of support that increase employer uptake of evidence-based approaches to recruitment, retention, and progression of young people

Practitioners – example opportunities

Opportunity areas identified in research (slide 24)

Since the most exposure **practitioners** may get to evidence about what works is via the bespoke support from specialist providers (when funding allows), **how can Youth Futures Foundation help support providers consistently use research and evidence** in their work so that their support is evidence-based?

NB. *These support provider organisations are similar to the infrastructure organisation Youth Futures Foundation are currently working with. They are a range of organisations, from consultancies, member orgs to impact/evaluation support orgs.*

Example ideas to be developed and tested

Product: a practitioner framework (skills builder example) to develop youth employment interventions. Designed to give practitioners parameters around what types of interventions are proven to work

Service: opportunity for practitioners to engage with a service that supports them to use the framework to design and implement an intervention e.g. careers support for young people leaving care

Org strategy: this product and this service must be powered by robust evidence, curated and generated by the Impact and Evidence team. What strategic internal and external partnerships should we think about developing if we want to deliver a product and/or service like this?

Further research: literature review on effective approaches to changing practitioners' research uptake and usage

Policymakers

Example research questions and activities to be conducted in the next stages of this work

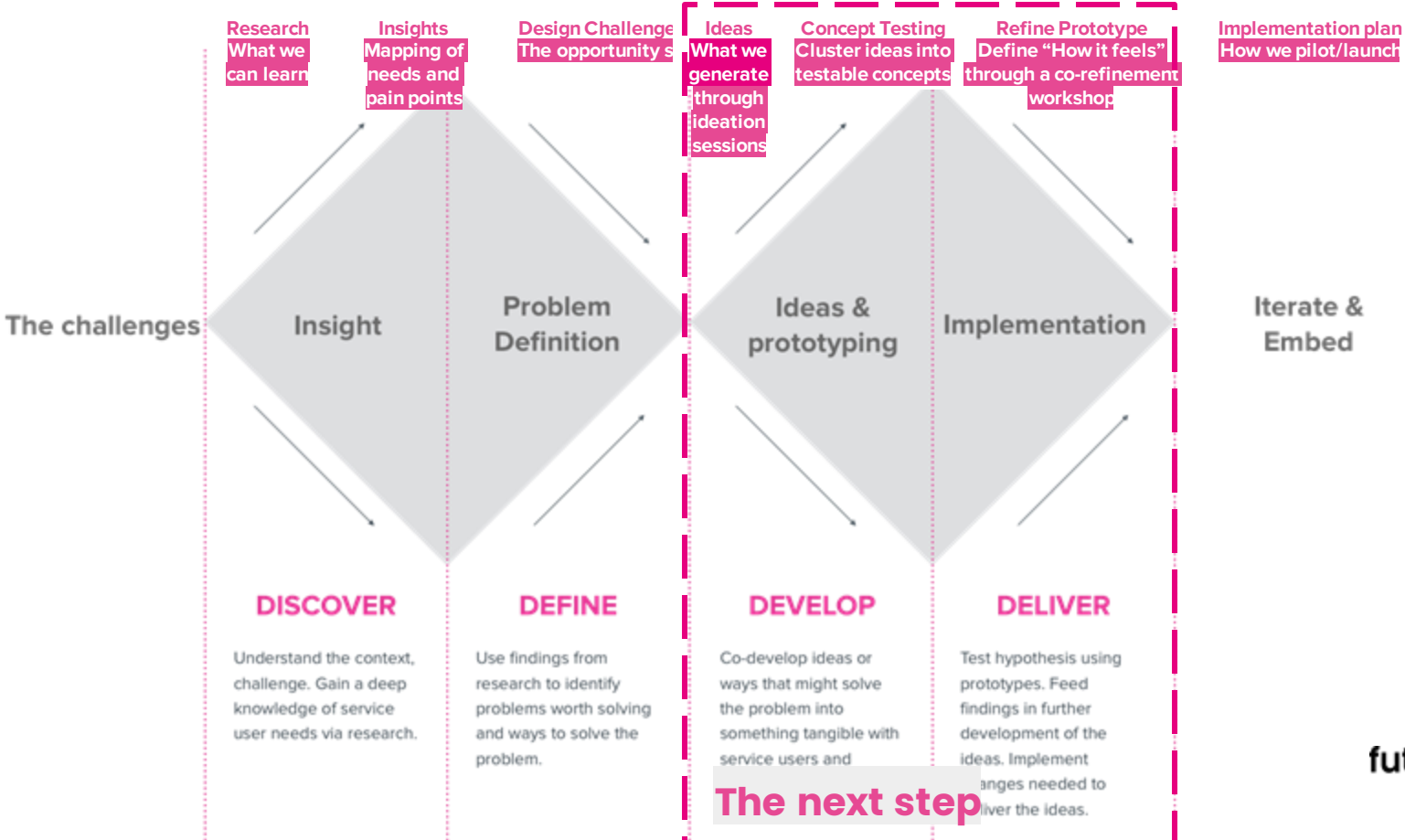
Further research:

Substantiate initial findings about what works best in terms of compelling policymakers to engage with WWC offers e.g. what do they define as 'credible', 'high quality' research, by conducting further interviews with a wider sample of central and local government policymakers

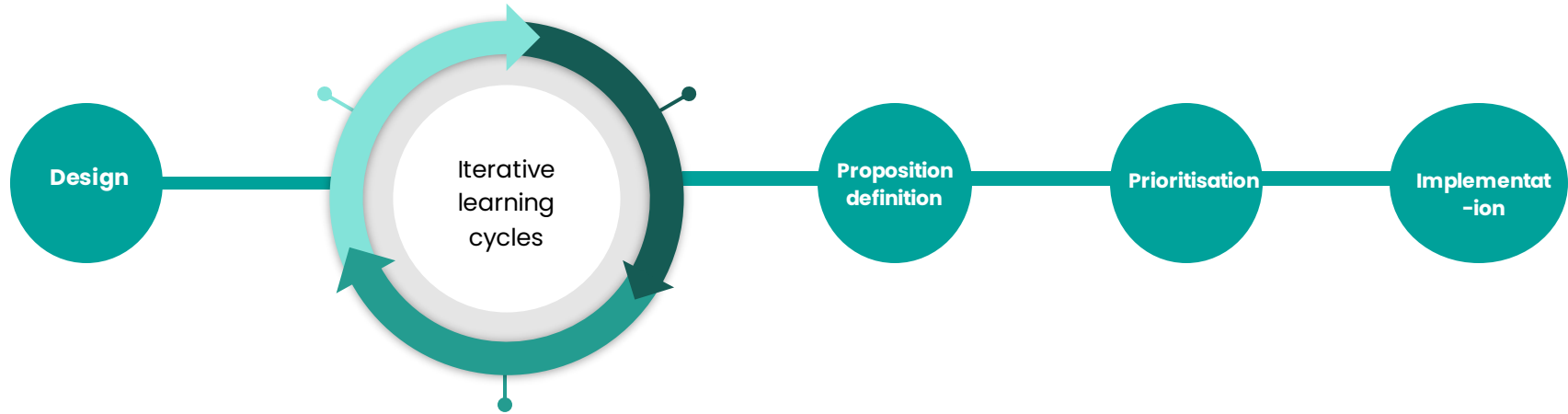
Develop, test and iterate different models that work well for policymakers from other WWC to test with policymaker research participants

**How do we take
this work forward?**

Where would the next steps fit in the design process?



The next steps for this work



Planning the next stage of design & research

Identifying questions for planning the next stage of the project e.g.:

- Who will sponsor the next phase of this work?
- What is the scope of the next phase?

See more detail on the [following slide](#)

Ideate, test, reflect

Develop ideas to test with users to substantiate our insights and build a model for Youth Future Foundation's evidence as a service. This could involve:

- Testing different (digital) product ideas
- Testing how we deliver an end to end evidence service, broader than digital products
- Thinking differently about how we organise our services etc.

Defining future evidence proposition

Following a cyclical learning process in which we've created and tested different approaches to a Youth Future Foundation's evidence service, we will use that data to refine a shortlist of options for the future approach.

Prioritisation

Having defined user-centred options for Youth Futures Foundation's evidence proposition, we will go through a rigorous prioritisation process, selecting the option that meets organisational requirements and outcomes as well as user needs.

Implementation

Finally, a plan will need to be put into place for further testing in a live context, as part of a wider implementation plan.

Planning the next stage of design and research

Here are the questions we will need to answer as we plan the next stage of design and research

- ❑ **Who/which teams will sponsor the next phase of this work?**
- ❑ **What is the scope of the next phase?**
 - testing different product ideas (digital and other)?
 - testing how we deliver an end to end evidence service, that is broader than digital products?
- ❑ **What is our ambition for the next phase of work?**
 - new ways of working (design and agile)?
 - thinking differently about how we organise our services?
- ❑ **How will we resource the next phase of work?**
- ❑ **What capabilities do we need at YFF to move from design to research e.g. product/service design, delivery management?**
- ❑ **What parts of YFF would need to work together to deliver the next phase?**
 - a multidisciplinary team with representation from research, marcomms, strategy, grants etc?
- ❑ **What external support would we need (design, etc.)?**
- ❑ **What conditions do we need to create at YFF to move from research to design?**
 - for example, a 'test and learn' framework that allows us to try things without knowing exactly where they will go or whether they will work
- ❑ **When do we want to have accomplished the next phase?**

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Thank you

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