Case Study 1: Working to effect change in policymaking at regional, national and systems levels

This case study forms part of the youth employment infrastructure research and evaluation project[2] carried out by RAND Europe on behalf of the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF). The objective of this case study is to explore how infrastructure organisations (IOs, see Box 1) across England work to effect change at various levels of policymaking as part of their mission to improve youth employment outcomes. It aims to understand the impact of these activities on frontline organisations and the young people they seek to support, as well as the key barriers and facilitators that may play a role. These findings are based on semi-structured interviews with two IOs (The Traveller Movement and Youth Access) and three

Box 1. What is an infrastructure organisation (IO)?
While there is no standardised definition, for the purpose of this study[1] IOs are understood as third sector organisations whose main purpose is to provide support and services to frontline organisations working directly with young people. IOs may offer support, training, information and advice, act as advocates, promote communication and collaboration between frontline organisations, or seek to influence policy on behalf of them, amongst other activities.

policymakers (from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the Department for Education (DfE)). Interviewees were identified through the Youth Futures Foundation and desk research as part of the project. The interviews were complemented by a targeted review of relevant literature (see References). The case study also refers to other organisations mentioned by the interviewees or in the reviewed literature (Box 2).

Box 2. Who's who?	
The Traveller Movement is a national civil society organisation that takes a community assets-based approach to addressing ethnic Romany Gypsy, Irish Traveller and Roma inequality, exclusion and discrimination, and to promoting their rights.[3]	**Youth Access** is the national membership organisation for youth information, advice and counselling services – organisations rooted in local communities that provide free, easily accessible and age-appropriate support to young people across a wide range of issues.[4]
The Department for Education (DfE) is the governmental body responsible for children services and education, including apprenticeships and further education policy, across England.[5]	**Greater London Authority** (GLA) is the strategic regional authority for Greater London with powers over areas such as arts and culture, business and economy, and education and youth.[6]
Youth Employment Group (YEG) is the UK's largest coalition of youth employment experts, advocating for full and inclusive employment for young people in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.[7]	**Employment Related Services Association** (ERSA) is the national membership body campaigning for high quality services for the UK's jobseekers, low earners and for the employment support sector.[8]

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[1] RAND (2022).
[2] RAND (2022).
[3] The Traveller Movement (2022).
[4] Youth Access homepage (2022).
[5] DfE homepage (2022).
[6] London Assembly (2022).
[7] See Impetus (2022) and Youth Employment UK (2021).
[8] ERSA homepage (2022a).

Effecting change at the regional level

IOs are well-placed to represent frontline organisations to regional policymakers, as smaller local organisations tend to lack the resource, expertise and networks to influence relevant decision-making at this level.[9] Moreover, this regional work is more targeted in creating change in a specific area, supported by a greater knowledge of the terrain, than equivalent work at the national level.[10] Consequently, it has the potential for significant impact on frontline organisations and the young people they support.[11] Yet, action by IOs to influence regional policymaking remains relatively limited.[12] Some IOs may be interested in working at the regional level, for example, by using disaggregated local and regional data to put pressure on policymakers, but they lack the resources necessary to achieve this coverage.[13]

There are benefits that can be gained from collaboration between policymakers and IOs at this level. In particular, local or regional IOs can support policymakers in gaining a better understanding of needs and the strengths and weaknesses of social action in their area (see Box 3), as well as acting as a contact point through which policymakers are then able to access a large number of frontline organisations.[15] IOs can also act as a conduit for the voice of frontline organisations at a regional policy level.[16]

Box 3. Consultations to optimise programme provision
The GLA's Skills & Employment Team draws on IOs like Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP)[14] and Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) to act as the voice of the sector in supporting the development of GLA programmes. While no specific examples were given, the GLA draws on these IOs to test their thinking and use their inputs to understand different perspectives to ensure that their programmes work for all relevant parties. This helps to ensure that the GLA is not duplicating provision that is already available, and that their work adds value. This engagement is an iterative process of feedback loops from an early stage in the programme development, with the GLA proactively seeking inputs from IOs.

Source: Interview with a policymaker.

IOs can help ensure wider community representation in local decision-making bodies,[17] and enable regional policymakers to reach communities with which they otherwise lack a connection with (and would struggle to represent) minority and disadvantaged groups.[18] The example in Box 3 illustrates how IOs and the GLA can work together. Thanks to such collaboration with IOs, the GLA has a better understanding of the needs of frontline organisations and what they do and can connect – via IOs – with the most appropriate frontline organisations for the task at hand, however, no concrete example was provided to illustrate it.[19]

The expertise IOs have in building and maintaining strong relationships with both policymakers and frontline organisations working with young people also enables them to act as a mediator between the two in relation to points of potential conflict.[20] None of the interviewees, however, shared a real-life example of how this worked in practice.

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[9] Donahue (2011).
[10] Interview with a policymaker.
[11] Donahue (2011).
[12] Donahue (2011).
[13] Interview with an IO.
[14] AELP homepage (2022).
[15] Bell (2014), NAVCA (2015).
[16] Bell (2014).
[17] NAVCA (2015).
[18] Interview with a policymaker.
[19] Interview with a policymaker.
[20] NAVCA (2015).

Effecting change at the national level

In many ways, IOs working to influence policy at the national level play a similar role to those working at the regional level: they represent frontline organisations and facilitate communication with policymakers.[21] For some IOs, however, work at this level carries additional strategic significance: with most organisations focused on 'firefighting tactics', IOs are able to consider the broader, long-term picture.[22] IOs are well placed to both represent and amplify the voices of individual communities as a unified force at the national level.[23] In return, national policymakers gain access to a diversity of perspectives that would not have been possible through interactions with individual frontline organisations.[24]

To achieve influence at this level, IOs employ a range of approaches, adapted and targeted for the most relevant policymaker(s).[25] These approaches largely involve attending meetings and participating in working groups, policy groups or steering boards. Such activities are complemented by the dissemination of pertinent briefing papers, and the engagement of relevant members of parliament (MPs), parliamentary groups or other stakeholders.[26] For example, the Traveller Movement is currently engaging with policymakers in this manner in relation to the nature of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill[27] being proposed.[28]

> **Box 4. Kickstart Forum, research and campaign**
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> **KICKSTART SCHEME** Kickstart[29] is a government scheme that provides funding to create jobs for people aged 16 to 24 who are on Universal Credit. ERSA mobilised over 400 frontline organisations and employability experts, including the YEG, to set up the Kickstart forum on Microsoft Teams.[30] The Forum works closely with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre Plus through a series of meetings and consultations to support the implementation of Kickstart. Drawing on their collective experiences and research, the Forum identified challenges with the scheme and proposed solutions for administration difficulties, basic IT and communication problems, payments issues, etc. These recommendations to the DWP were informed by sharing good practices among Forum participants and research conducted by ERSA. The research resulted in a policy paper[31] that calls for:
>
> - Extending Kickstart beyond the end of 2021
> - Expanding it to all young people at risk of long-term unemployment
> - Empowering clients to access Kickstart jobs.
>
> Launched by ERSA and partners in February 2021, the campaign to keep Kickstart attracted media attention[32] and goes on. The Forum also continues and discuss the National Audit Office's findings which question the likelihood of positive impact of the scheme.[33]
>
> **Source**: Based on ERSA (2021b) and ERSA (2021c)

IOs may also host conferences or briefing sessions to inform policymakers of relevant issues (Box 4), as well as support policymakers as ghost writers and researchers to help disseminate the desired messages.[34] Building and maintaining relationships with relevant policymakers is likewise key.[35] At the

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[21] Bell (2014).
[22] Interview with an IO.
[23] Interview with an IO.
[24] Interview with a policymaker.
[25] Interviews with two IOs.
[26] Interview with an IO.
[27] DfE (2021).
[28] Interview with an IO.
[29] DWP (2021).
[30] ERSA (2022b)
[31] ERSA (2021a).
[32] See FE News (2021), HR Magazine (2021).
[33] NAO (2021).
[34] Interview with an IO.
[35] Interviews with two IOs.

same time, bottom-up influencing through traditional and social media can also place public pressure on policymakers to prioritise certain agendas (see Box 5).[36]

Box 5. Multi-pronged influencing for government investment

In 2021, Youth Access led a lobbying campaign that resulted in over 20,000 emails sent to MPs calling for a national rollout of 'early support hubs' that offer all types of mental health support to people aged under 25. This was done in collaboration with several mental health charities to increase the reach of the campaign.[37] At the same time, Youth Access was part of a collaborative effort to disseminate policy briefings,[38] build relationships and organise meetings and roundtables with relevant policymakers. These combined efforts contributed towards the Department of Health and Social Care requesting the HM Treasury to fund the roll of the hubs (thus improving provision in currently not serviced areas).[39] While the campaign ultimately failed to secure the governmental funding in 2021,[40] the Health and Social Care Select Committee's inquiry into children and young people's mental health resulted in a recommendation for the government to fund a national rollout of these hubs.[41,42]

Source: Interview with an IO.

IOs can also provide policymakers with a more nuanced understanding of the issues at play and ensure they do not miss any important information, such as when inconsistencies emerge between official and anecdotal data.[43] Policymakers may also look to IOs guidance around specific ways of working that are less familiar to them. For example, when seeking to engage more with young people, the DfE turned to IOs and their expertise in the area to ask them what greater government investment in youth (re)engagement could look like.[44]

Box 6. Supporting policymakers to see the bigger picture

The DfE draws on the support of the Youth Employment Group (YEG) to bring the voice of the youth work and employment sectors into their policymaking. The DfE and YEG meet regularly and have flexible agendas to discuss ideas, priorities and upcoming research. As the YEG liaises with different government departments, local authorities and third sector organisations, their inputs can equip the DfE with a broader context. As a result, the DfE considers the YEG a conduit to the 'bigger picture' that the Department is trying to understand, particularly during such difficult times as the COVID-19 pandemic. In return, the DfE creates networking opportunities for the YEG by inviting them to events with other policymakers that provide a platform for meeting relevant stakeholders and creating new connections and relationships.

Source: Interview with a policymaker.

Effecting change at the systems level

The issue of youth employment lies at the intersection of multiple systems, including the education system, statutory and charity support services, workplaces and the labour market, as well as less individual circumstances and broader social inequalities.[45] Systems change involves deliberately seeking to transform the components and structures that make these systems behave in ways that produce barriers to positive and universal youth employment outcomes.[46] Effecting systems change involves working at different levels to change the system and address root causes of the challenges beneficiaries are facing. Participants in this case study did not identify their work as primarily seeking to achieve systems change.

In some cases, IOs may lack specific plans or actions that actively seek to achieve systems change while still hoping that their policy work will contribute towards it.[47] Whether systems change can be achieved without a coordinated and comprehensive strategy is not certain. Also, without an explanation of how the change is expected to happen, it is difficult to examine if such efforts lead to

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[36] Interview with an IO.
[37] Youth Access (2021a).
[38] For example, see Youth Access (2021c).
[39] Centre for Mental Health (2022).
[40] NAO (2021).
[41] Youth Access (2021b).
[42] UK Parliament (2021).
[43] Interview with a policymaker.
[44] Interview with a policymaker.
[45] Youth Futures Foundation (2022).
[46] https://londonfunders.org.uk/systems-change-what-it-and-how-do-it
[47] Interview with an IO.

the change (if it did take place). There are cases, however, where the work that IOs are performing carries potential for systems change, even if the IO may not necessarily identify this as such (see Box 7).

Box 7. Breaking down minority group silos

The Traveller Movement is working to remove Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) policies and services from the silo within which they are currently contained. For example, by joining the YEG, rather than sitting exclusively with the other minority group representatives in the Race Disparity Unit,[48] The Traveller Movement engages with big employers and raises the absence of the GRT community in their workforce. The Traveller Movement also seeks to build relationships with general youth services in order to create pathways for GRT young people. While this was not explicitly identified by The Traveller Movement themselves at the interview, embedding GRT representatives within mainstream services and organisations carries the potential to transform and promote a more inclusive system.

Source: Interview with an IO.

Key challenges and facilitators for effecting change at these levels

In seeking to influence policy and effect change at these different levels, IOs face a number of challenges.

Funding: IOs often struggle to secure funding for their work, as funders often perceive support for frontline organisations as having a more direct impact.[49] Moreover, the funding IOs do receive is often tied to specific projects and does not often include core funding or funding for policy work.[50] At the same time, public funding is restricted in how it can be distributed and tied to specific government priorities.[51]

Policy landscape: Policy priorities are constantly shifting, and constraints to IO funding may mean they are unable to address new issues as they emerge.[52] IOs working with certain vulnerable populations, such as the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, may also struggle to engage policymakers as certain relevant issues may be stigmatised.[53] Conversely, organisations working with vulnerable populations may at times attract actors looking to promote a certain image of themselves, rather than achieve meaningful change.[54]

Roles and responsibilities: The role of IOs is often not clearly defined in terms of how they interact with frontline organisations, networks and policymakers and to what extent IOs can speak on behalf of their networks.[55] While there is collaboration among frontline organisations, there may also be some competition between these. This can potentially lead to tensions, as smaller organisations might feel like they are not being represented accurately and can only interact with policymakers through an intermediary whom they may not necessarily trust.[56]

Relationships: Close relationships between policymakers and IOs and IOs and frontline organisations are needed in order to achieve the maximum impact on policy.[57] Building these relationships is resource intensive, both for policymakers and

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[48] Cabinet Office (2022).
[49] Osborne et al. (2006).
[50] Interviews with two IOs.
[51] Interview with a policymaker.
[52] Interview with an IO.
[53] Interview with an IO.
[54] Interview with an IO.
[55] Osborne et al. (2006).
[56] Interview with a policymaker.
[57] Osborne et al. (2006).

IOs, and with scarce resources on both sides, it can be difficult to achieve the necessary levels of communication and collaboration.[58]

At the same time, a number of factors may facilitate IOs' work to effect change at these different levels:

Measuring impact: Demonstrating the impact the work of IOs has on frontline organisations and service users provides policymakers and funders with evidence of value for money.[59] Using the same language of policymakers to measure impact and link IOs' activities to the relevant policymaker's objectives is likely to further facilitate engagement from policymakers.[60] Qualitative impact measures, such as impact statements and case studies, can also be powerful tools for demonstrating impact.[61]

'Funders plus': This is an emerging funding approach where funders are more involved and flexible in their engagement with IOs they support (beyond simply providing the funding) promoting a more relationship- and trust-based approach.[62] This can allow programmes to be designed more flexibly, facilitate the development of staff in IOs and ultimately increase fit-for-purpose programmes for service users.[63]

Collaboration: Strong relationships with frontline organisations are essential for IOs to be able to connect them with relevant policymakers as and when needed.[64] These strong relationships can also legitimise the representative role of IOs in the eyes of policymakers.[65] Moreover, by positioning themselves as experts rather than lobbyists, IOs can facilitate a more relationship of greater openness and trust with relevant policymakers.[66]

Understanding impact on frontline organisations and the young people they support

The work IOs carry out with policymakers bears an indirect impact for the employment prospects of vulnerable young people. For example, the literature and interviews suggest that IOs can play a key role in identifying gaps and unmet needs in service provision (see Box 3), increasing broader awareness of relevant issues (see Box 4), providing informed consultation to the statutory sector and, of course, influencing policy at various levels in a direction that will better support young people in need (see Box 6).[67] IOs can also have an indirect impact on young people's opportunities by alleviating strategic pressures on frontline organisations. This enables them to concentrate their resources on service delivery without feeling that influencing work within the policy space is being neglected.

Lessons for increasing positive impact on frontline organisations and young people

1 **Greater collaboration and knowledge-sharing** between all relevant stakeholders (frontline organisations and IOs, policymakers and funders) would help to limit instances of duplicated activities, to identify and address gaps in support provision, and to promote good practice.

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[58] Interviews with a policymaker and an IO.
[59] Bell (2014).
[60] Interview with a policymaker.
[61] Interview with a policymaker.
[62] IVAR (2020)..
[63] Interview with an IO.
[64] Interview with an IO.
[65] Interview with a policymaker.
[66] Interview with a policymaker.
[67] Bell (2014).

2 Robust evidence of impact can be difficult to obtain and IOs should aim to spell out their aspirations, and capture and quantify their impact on policy, frontline organisations and young people where possible. Funders and policymakers should be open to understanding impact through **qualitative evidence**, while IOs should ensure the evidence they provide is **aligned with the language** that is most easily understood and accepted in the policy sphere.

3 Funders could better support IOs if they allow a **funding plus** approach. This, however, needs to be accompanied by the better ability to better demonstrate impact by IOs.

4 **Open door policies** mean that IOs have more opportunities to engage with funders and policymakers and can spend less resources on securing access to them. Through having good relationships with policymakers and funders, IOs will also be able to express their needs and insights more freely which can result in higher quality and more relevant support for frontline organisations and young people.

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Annex. About the youth employment infrastructure research and evaluation project

Support for young people in England has gone through substantial changes over the last several years, in part due to underfunding, structural changes and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have had profound effects on youth employment, especially on young people from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds, who have been disproportionately affected.

These effects have been also acutely felt by organisations which help young people into employment, education or training, including by IOs (third sector organisations which provide services to frontline organisations working directly with young people).

RAND Europe has been commissioned by the YFF to conduct a study on IOs. The study draws on a theory-based approach and mixed methods including interviews, surveys, case studies and workshops to:

- Show how IOs support the youth employment sector and effect change

- Support IOs to improve practice and delivery to stakeholders

- Improve the evidence base of what works by sharing good practice between IOs.

The research questions are:

1. How do infrastructure bodies support the needs of organisations working towards youth employment?

2. How do IOs effect change (at regional, national and systemic levels)?

3. How do IOs network and collaborate?

4. What impacts do IOs have on the youth employment organisations they support, and young people?

5. How can IOs be better supported by policymakers and funders to improve youth employment outcomes?

The case studies contribute to research questions 2-4. They focus on the different roles that IOs may play, namely: (i) effecting change in policy and practice; (ii) embedding and championing youth voice; (iii) supporting data collection, analysis and learning; (iv) capacity building; and (v) enabling networking and collaboration. This case study examined the role that IOs have in effecting change in policymaking at the regional, national and systemic level.

For more information about this research, please visit:

https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/evaluating-englands-youth-employment-infrastructure.html

This case study is part of the of evaluating England's youth employment infrastructure, 2022.

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