youth futures FOUNDATION

Case Study 2: Working to embed and champion youth voice in infrastructure organisations

Working to embed and champion youth voice in infrastructure organisations

This case study forms part of the youth employment infrastructure research and evaluation project[1] carried out by RAND Europe in 2021-22 on behalf of the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) (see Annex). It aims to understand: (i) how infrastructure organisations (IOs, see Box 1) support frontline organisations (FOs) through embedding youth voices in their own work and championing youth voices in interactions with other stakeholders; (ii) the challenges and facilitators involved; (iii) the impact this has on young people: and (iv) any lessons learnt.

This case study draws on interviews with three IOs[3] (the Centre for Youth Impact, Ubele and UK Youth) and two interviews with organisations that support other organisations in embedding and championing youth voices[4] (The British Youth Council (BYC) and Youth Employment UK (YEUK)). Data from interviews with policy makers from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the Department for Education (DfE) that were used in Case Study 1 (on effecting change in policymaking) were also incorporated into the analysis.[5] Interviewees were identified through the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) and through previous research activities in this study. This case study also draws on a focus group discussion with representatives of the Future Voices Group of the Youth Futures Foundation.[6]

Box 1. What is an infrastructure organisation?
While there is no standardised definition, for the purpose of this study[2] 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.

Box 2. Who's who?	
THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH IMPACT The **Centre for Youth Impact** is an organisation who aim to support shared approaches to learning and evaluation to ensure access to quality services for young people across the UK.[7]	The **Ubele Initiative** is an IO that works to empower BAME communities in the UK. They work through an intergenerational approach.[8]
UK YOUTH **UK Youth** is an open network for more than 800 youth organisations and other stakeholder who work to improve youth work practices across the UK.[9]	The **Future Voices Group** is a group of young people from marginalised backgrounds who support the work of the YFF through their expertise and lived experiences.[10]

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[1] RAND (2022).

[2] RAND (2022).

[3] Cited in this case study as interviews with an IO.

[4] Cited in this case study as interviews with supporting organisations.

[5] Cited in this case study as interviewee consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[6] Cited in this case study as focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[7] Centre for Youth Impact homepage (2022).

[8] Ubele (2022).

[9] UK Youth (2022).

[10] Youth Futures Foundation (2022).

British Youth Council logo	The **British Youth Council** (BYC) supports people under 25 years to be part of of various bodies and structures to make their voices heard and influence decisions that affect their lives.[11]
Youth Employment UK logo	**Youth Employment UK** (YEUK) is an independent, not for profit social enterprise focused on youth employment. A team of youth ambassadors supports their work.[12]

Box 3: We use a few key terms in this case study

(hand icon)	**Infrastructure organisations** (IOs): Organisations that provide valuable support at the local, regional and national level for civil society organisations, for example by providing training, acting as advocates or enabling communication and collaboration between civil society organisations.
(microphone icon)	**Youth voice**: We use Roholt and colleagues' definition of youth voice as 'a stance, where young people will not be expected to speak like adults to be listened to; rather, adults and other young people together, will find ways for young people to express what they know and believe, and have these ideas used for program improvement, policy-making, or social change.'[13]
(puzzle piece icon)	**Embedding youth voice**: An ongoing process of co-production within an IO that aims to foster a culture where: (i) young people make a meaningful contribution to the development of their policies and activities by expressing their own thoughts and opinions; and (ii) there is a sense of partnership between young people and adults in the work.[14]
(megaphone icon)	**Championing youth voice**: The work of IOs aimed at encouraging and facilitating meaningful contributions from young people to the work of other bodies, including frontline organisations, policymakers and funders.

Approaches to embed youth voice in IOs

A common approach reported by the interviewees is having youth boards or advisory groups on projects or as an organisation.[15] Some IOs (which also identified themselves as youth-led) reported that they have youth boards which are involved in the organisation as a whole and actively participate across projects and project

> **Box 4: Example of IO with youth advisory board working across the whole organisation**
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> Youth Employment UK (YEUK) has a Youth Ambassador network involving over 40 young people with different experiences across the UK. The young people in this network participate in activities such as webinars on policy matters impacting young people and provide feedback, for example on the spending review. In the webinar on the spending review, YEUK provided the young people with impartial information on the spending review, what it means and why it is important for young people. The young people were then invited to give their opinions and thoughts on the spending review which informed YEUK's statements on the topic. Young people also join meetings and panels with other stakeholders or write content for blogs or articles. Their work and opinions impact the activities of YEUK as an organisation when choosing priorities or how policy issues are addressed.

[11] BYC (2022).

[12] YEUK homepage (2022).

[13] Roholt et al. (2013).

[14] This understanding is informed by Roholt et al. (2013) and Hart (1992).

[15] Three interviewees from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations, one interviewee consulted as part of Case Study 1.

stages.[16] Other IOs reported that they opt for the approach of having youth advisory

groups involved in specific projects or specific project stages.[17]

Several interviewees from IOs and the young people in the focus group explained that engaging young people in projects or youth boards looks different – and should look different – depending on the focus of the organisation and their experience working with youth voice.[18] Interviewees explained that organisations (particularly those with less experience working with youth voice) may be more hesitant to include youth voices, believing that youth voice immediately needs to be a large scale project. As such, organisations do not believe that this can be achieved and, as a result, they tend not to include youth voices.[19] The focus group participants however considered that the gradual building and inclusion of youth voice is more beneficial to young people and organisations.[20] Ubele, for example, began their Young Emerging Leaders Group[21] working on just one project.[22] During the lockdown the young people supported Ubele's work on the impact of COIVD-19 and lockdowns on mental health for young people. As a result of gradually including the Young Emerging Leaders group in projects, such as the work on Covid-19, and seeing the benefits of having a direct inclusion of youth voice, Ubele are expanding the inclusion of the Young Emerging Leaders Group in the day to day business of the organisation.[23]

Many interviewees agreed that building relationships and maintaining these relationships is important when engaging with young people and embedding youth voice.[24] This engagement can be facilitated by having specific staff members in the IOs who work with young people.[25] Training staff includes safeguarding procedures which ensure appropriate engagement with young people and creates a safe

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[16] Two interviewees from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations, one interviewee consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[17] One interviewee from IOs.

[18] Three interviewees from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[19] One interviewee from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[20] Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[21] Ubele (2022b).

[22] One interviewee from IOs.

[23] One interviewee from IOs.

[24] Three interviewees from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[25] Three interviewees from IOs.

environment.[26] UK Youth, for example, work closely with youth workers of the young people involved in their projects. As these youth workers often already have a good relationship with the young people they are working with, the interviewee considered that the involvement of already trusted youth workers can make it easier for the young people to get and to stay involved in UK Youth projects.[27]

Related to the importance of creating relationships, interviewees and focus group participants mentioned the importance of respectful interactions with young people.[28] Using trained staff (as mentioned above)[29] and appropriate language and manner when speaking with young people encourages meaningful engagement and participation.[30] The young people in the focus group highlighted specifically that overly complicated language and speaking to them in a patronising manner will lead to disengagement of the young people.[31] Focus group participants and a number of interviewees also stated that including young people throughout different stages of the project development and planning can help with setting expectations on both sides and respectful interactions.[32] At the moment, a lot of contributions of young people are only included in specific parts of the projects which often seem disconnected to the rest of the project to the young people. This type of isolated work can seem tokenistic to them, as it may be perceived as a 'tickbox' exercise by the organisation rather than meaningful inclusion in the work.[33]

Interviewees highlighted that to engage young people respectfully and to build relationships different means of communication can be useful.[34] YEUK specified that for them the approach that works best is to engage with the young people through multiple channels. YEUK engages with young people through one-on-one interactions, such as phone calls or direct messages, through events and group sessions and through a Jamboard[35] when engaging a large group of people to ensure everyone has a chance to contribute.[36] The BYC also highlighted the importance of ensuring engagement is appropriate to young people with different needs, such as young people with disabilities or learning difficulties, so they ensure that information can also be accessed in different forms such as voice notes, podcasts, simple texts and others.[37] Interviewees from IOs mentioned that there is not a one-size fits all solution: different young people often respond to different

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[26] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

[27] 1 interviewee from IOs.

[28] 3 interviewees from IOs, 2 interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[29] 3 interviewees from IOs, 2 interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[30] 2 interviewees from IOs, 1 interviewee from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[31] Focus group with the Future Voices Group

[32] 2 interviewees from IOs, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[33] Focus group with the Future Voices Group

[34] 2 interviewees from IOs.

[35] Part of the Google Workspace, Jamboard is a digital whiteboard that enables collaboration in real time.

[36] 1 interviewee from supporting organisations.

[37] 1 interviewee from supporting organisations.

means of engagement or have different needs.[38] A few interviewees/focus group participants considered that peer-led approaches can also be a powerful tool when engaging young people in the work of IOs.[39] Ubele uses peer researchers in their work and the interviewee considered that this encouraged more participation, as young people may find it easier to engage with other young people.[40]

Many interviewees also considered that, in order to embed youth voice, it was important not only to involve young people in projects and plans, but also to act on their suggestions and recommendations, even if it feels uncomfortable or contradicts original plans.[41] The Centre for Youth Impact highlighted that the result of youth voice should cause changes to plans and programmes as young people's perspective should have an impact.[42] In addition to acting on suggestions, not diluting youth voice was named as a powerful approach.[43] YEUK gave an example of the minimum wage consultation. Young people provided their feedback, and it went unedited to the policy makers to have the unfiltered voice of the young people presented. This included direct quotes and statements.[44] The focus group supported that sentiment. When young people can see their work being taken up and feel like they are being heard, youth engagement is more meaningful and young people are motivated to do more.[45]

Interviewees also reported the importance of ensuring that youth voice engagement features a diverse group of young people to represent different experiences.[46] There are different approaches to ensuring diverse recruitment of young people. For some organisations a continuous open recruitment of young people works well to attract a diverse group of young people.[47] Other organisations use more targeted approaches through to engage young people.[48] Interviewees and young people also highlighted that the language used in the recruitment process is a crucial aspect to attract a diverse group of young people.[49] For YEUK, having an open recruitment process from the start has worked to attract a diverse group of young people although they have no explanation as to why it works for them.[50] Other organisations, such as the BYC, invest more time in trying to reach out to specific young people who are less likely to engage with activities in this field. They work closely with their member organisations to engage with these groups and to unpick

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[38] 2 interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[39] 1 interviewee from IOs, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[40] 1 interviewee from IOs

[41] Three interviewees from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations.

[42] One interviewee from IOs.

[43] One interviewee from supporting organisations, focus group participants.

[44] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

[45] Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[46] One interviewee from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[47] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

[48] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations.

[49] Two interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[50] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

barriers before engaging them. This approach is very resource intensive, but effective.[51]

The focus group highlighted the language used in the recruitment process influences who will engage with an opportunity. For example, using language of how specific groups are disadvantaged may deter the targeted young people, as they might not see a specific characteristic as a disadvantage. Using language of empowerment is more likely to engage young people in these activities.[52] Focus group participants also stated that as young people they are often asked to speak on behalf of all young people. As young people are not a homogenous group, they feel uncomfortable speaking on other young people's behalf. The focus group participants highlighted that having a diverse group of young people can mitigate putting young people in that position.[53]

Approaches to embed youth voice are diverse and different approaches suit different projects or organisations. Yet, interviewees and focus groups participants agreed that no matter the approach used **it is important to value the time of young people participating in the project or youth board**.[54] Incentives given to young people encourage participation and show young people that their contributions are valued and respected. They also encourage young people who may not be able to volunteer to participate in this work. This can increase the diversity of young people participating.[55] The participants of the focus group highlighted that these incentives do not need to be monetary, but that learning skills (for example CV writing) can be a helpful incentive for young people to contribute.

Key challenges and facilitators to embedding youth voice in IOs

There are a number of challenges faced by IOs when trying to embed youth voices in their work:

Limited and fixed funding[56]: For some IOs (or the organisations they work with), it is difficult to devote already scarce resources and staff towards embedding youth voice.[57] UK Youth reported that fixed funding was a challenge as it limited how involved young people could be in all stages of the projects or programme development. For example, funders were sometimes reluctant to include young people in the bid writing process/interview stage. This means that in those instances it is difficult to embed youth

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[51] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

[52] Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[53] Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[54] 2 interviewees from IOs, 2 interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[55] 1 interviewee from IOs, 2 interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[56] 3 interviewees from IOs, 1 interviewees from supporting organisations.

[57] 2 interviewees from IOs, 1 interviewee from supporting organisations.

voices from the development stage of a project. As a result, young people often enter the project at a later stage when decisions have already been made which can a negative impact on their motivation and engagement in a project, as they do not feel a sense of ownership.[58]

Time of the young people[59]: Young people have a lot of other commitments, such as education and other extracurricular activities, meaning that further commitments can be challenging. Young people's lives also change frequently which means it is difficult for them to commit to long term projects.[60] The focus group participants explained that this can be mitigated by having open conversations between young people and IOs about expectations on commitments and, where possible, setting up flexible arrangements.[61]

There are also some aspects which currently make it easier for IOs to include youth voice:

Requirements to include youth voices in bids[62]: The intention of funders is to ensure more meaningful contributions from young people in the development in services and programmes for them.[63] In addition, interviewees reported increasing interest in programmes (such as Funding Plus)[64] that aim to build more reciprocal relationships between funders, policymakers and organisations.[65] UK Youth said that their established relationships with funders encouraged their organisation to ask for more flexible funding: for example, asking Comic Relief to provide money for a project that was not defined at the time of funding allocation, which allowed them to co-create the eventual project with the young people that were involved in it. For part of the project, young people were able to use the money as they saw fit, within reason, and in cooperation with UK Youth. The trust placed in UK Youth by the funder afforded UK Youth the space to fully embed youth voices in the project.[66] Focus group participants voiced the concern that while making youth participation mandatory can result in

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[58] 1 interviewee from IOs, Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[59] 2 interviewees from IOs, 2 interviewees from supporting organisations.

[60] 2 interviewees from IOs, 2 interviewees from supporting organisations.

[61] Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[62] Two interviewees from IOs, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[63] Two interviewees from IOs, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[64] IVAR (2011).

[65] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations, one interviewee consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[66] One interviewee from IOs.

more meaningful contributions, it may also cause challenges by making the youth voices used in funding bids tokenistic.[67]

Organisational culture and support from senior staff[68]: Having the support of seniors staff and an internal structure and culture of embedding youth voice gives confidence and reassurance to staff to fully embed youth voices.[69] UK Youth stated that their management's support of youth voices means they can get honest feedback from young people on programme design and adapt programmes accordingly, no matter how extensive the feedback, without worrying about the reaction of the senior management.[70]

The impact of embedding youth voice on young people or IOs

Interviewees talked about the difficulties in measuring the impact of embedding youth voice in their work on young people.[71] While some interviewees collected ad hoc qualitative evidence of how working on a youth advisory board or group affected young people (e.g. by developing case studies or impact statements), fewer collected this systematically or reported using indicators.[72] YEUK explained that they handed out 'reflection cards' to young people at the end of sessions to ask them about their experience of a programme and which skills they used in the activity with the aim to be able to share this with i.e. potential employers. The interviewee highlighted, however, that this only showed the short-term impact of attending the sessions on those who participated in a project or programme. At the moment, it is difficult to evaluate the impact on the wider population of young people across the country. For example, if an organisation has the goal to improve the employment prospects for young people in general through influencing policy, they may find it difficult to measure the impact of a policy change on the lives of young people. Similarly, organisations are able to measure the impact on young people while they are undergoing a programme or measure with them, but they cannot measure the long-term impact of a programme on a young person's life beyond their participation in the programme. This also means that measuring the impact of embedding youth voice in this long-term impact is difficult to assess.[73] Interviewees and the focus group participants stated, anecdotally, that they saw increased confidence and increased participation in projects or programmes as the most common impacts of participating in such sessions on young people.[74]

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[67] Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[68] One interviewee from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations.

[69] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations.

[70] One interviewee from IOs.

[71] Two interviewees from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations.

[72] Two interviewees from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations.

[73] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

[74] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

Challenges and facilitators to champion youth voices in other organisations

Interviewees and focus group participants explained that it is difficult for them to differentiate between championing and embedding youth voices.[75] Some interviewees and focus group participants explained that to them championing youth voices (promoting youth voices externally) includes leading by example and showing good practices of embedding.[76] As a result, it was difficult for interviewees and focus group members to come up with distinct challenges, facilitators and approaches concerning championing.

The key challenges identified by the interviewees and focus groups are:

Willingness of policymakers and funders: not all policymakers and funders are willing to engage with young people directly and have them included in policy or funding processes.[77] This is one factor that contributes to young people feeling like they are not being heard.[78] Some interviewees felt that this is changing as more funders and policymakers are opening opportunities for engaging with young people in different processes. Examples for this are engaging young people directly in consultations or including youth engagement in bids[79]. A few interviewees considered that this was the result of shifting mindsets of policymakers and funders, as well as IOs being more proactive about including young people.[80] One example of this engagement by YEUK was that they were asked to present their data about young people's experience (collected through their Youth census and direct interactions with young people) to the DWP and were able to invite young people who spoke about their experiences directly to policymakers.[81] According to two interviewees, the position of policymakers on engaging directly with young people is changing, as they have seen that the direct statement from young people are having a more powerful impact on senior people in their institutions and it helps to facilitate change.[82] One interviewee highlighted that not all IOs have the internal capacity to engage with policymakers

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[75] Two interviewees from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[76] Two interviewees from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[77] One interviewee from IOs, two interviewees from supporting organisations, one interviewee consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[78] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations.

[79] One interviewee from IOs, two interviewees consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[80] One interviewee from supporting organisations, two interviewees consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[81] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

[82] Two interviewees consulted as part of Case Study 1.

and funders to this extent to champion youth voices, especially if they are not youth-led and it is not a core part of their programmes.[83]

Fast paced policy landscape[84]: Short deadlines within policymaking creates obstacles for IOs to consult with young people and ensure meaningful inclusion of their ideas.[85] YEUK explained that having a reliable youth board is helpful to mitigate this – as they feel confident to engage with their youth board even on short notices as they have an established relationship with the members.[86]

These facilitators make championing of youth voices easier:

Leading by example: This can be the most effective way to champion youth voice. This way, IOs model these approaches to all other stakeholders.[87] Some interviewees highlighted that exchanging good practices with other IOs, and within their own networks and memberships, is essential to improve championing across their sectors. To them, peer-learning is one of the most effective ways of learning in this area.[88]

Unfiltered voices of young people[89]: This direct input can be in written formats, such as policy consultations or through direct impact statements to policymakers or young people participating and being able to ask and answer questions in funding interviews.[90] The focus groups participants warn, however, that there is a fine line between engaging young people meaningfully like this and young people feeling exploited through this work. It only becomes meaningful instead of tokenistic if action is taken based on the expertise of the young people as well.[91]

Conclusion: lessons learned, and further support needed

The main lesson learned that interviewees and young people reported to us is **there is not one single way of embedding and championing youth voices**. Organisations do not need to be youth-led to embed and champion youth voices in a meaningful way. Sometimes it can be more meaningful to gradually

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[83] One interviewee from IOs.

[84] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations, one interviewee consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[85] One interviewee from supporting organisations, one interviewee consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[86] One interviewee from supporting organisations.

[87] One interviewee from supporting organisations, focus group with the Future Voices Group.

[88] Two interviewees from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations.

[89] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations, two interviewees consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[90] One interviewee from IOs, one interviewee from supporting organisations, two interviewees consulted as part of Case Study 1.

[91] Focus group with the Future Voices Group.

include youth voices in one project or programme than trying to change organisational structures to become more proactive in engaging youth voices all at once. Once youth voices are implemented in one part it can gradually grow to ensure sustainability.

2 **The lines between championing and embedding are often blurred**. This means if organisations work on embedding youth voices meaningfully in their work this will also lead to better championing through the sharing of good practices. It also means these organisations become role models for the inclusion of meaningful youth voices.

3 **Current funding structures may make it difficult for young people to be involved in all stages of the development process of new programmes and practices**. They can be restrictive and set for specific timeframes. This could be mitigated if funders and policymakers were to be more open to include young people earlier on in funding bids and policy processes.

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Annex. About the youth employment infrastructure research and evaluation

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 that help young people into employment, education or training, including by IOs (e.g. 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 different roles 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 capacity building activities offered by IOs to frontline organisations.

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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