

Call for Proposals: Connected Futures, Action Research for D2N2 Partnership

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1. Introduction

Youth Futures Foundation is the What Works Centre for youth employment. It aims to narrow employment gaps for marginalised young people by identifying what works and why and investing in evidence generation to improve policy and practice.

Connected Futures – Phase 1 and Phase 2

Connected Futures is a £16m programme that seeks to change the journey from education to employment for young people facing exclusion and disadvantage. We aim to support the development of local approaches to youth employment that put young people at the heart of the system, from schools and employers to housing, health, and care. We want young people to get the right support from the right place at the right time to help them find the right jobs.

We are currently funding 8 partnerships, in Blackpool, Brent, Burnley, the East Midlands, Haringey, Hastings, Hull and Lewisham to explore local systems from the perspectives of young people, employers, education and employability services, and other stakeholders. This exploratory phase aims to discover key systemic barriers facing young people and identify potential opportunities and levers for change. At the end of Phase 1, we hope to see a shared analysis of the problem and a shared ambition for change among a wider range of local stakeholders. In Phase 2, we will make larger grants in support of these ambitions. Young people are at the forefront of the process, setting the direction for partnerships, carrying out research and shaping ideas and solutions for Phase 2.

As well as funding, partnerships receive support from a dedicated Youth Futures Relationship Manager, and a Learning Lead from our commissioned Learning Partner, Renaisi. We have also commissioned analysis of labour market data and post-16 funding flows to provide partnerships with more granular information on their local context.

We recommend reading the following outputs:

[Connected Futures - Youth Futures Foundation.](#)

[Connected Futures: A different approach to funding - Youth Futures Foundation.](#)

[Renaisi – Insight Report about Connected Futures](#)

2. Proposal response process and timetable

2.1 Deadlines

The deadline for proposals is **10am 26th January 2024**.

Proposal timescale	Date
Call for proposals issued	19 th December 2023
<i>Deadline for submission of questions</i>	14 th January 2024
Indication to submit a proposal	15 th January 2024
Deadline for submission of proposals	26 th January 2024
Interview day for shortlisted proposers	1 st February 2024
Preferred proposer identified and notified	2 nd February 2024
Induction meeting with stakeholders	Week commencing 5 th February 2024
Mobilisation commences	Week commencing 5 th February 2024

2.2 Application Process

Responses should be submitted to: evaluation@youthfuturesfoundation.org

2.3 Budget

The total budget for this project from February 2024 to September 2024 **is in the range of £80,000 - £100,000.**

3. Overview of requirement

3.1 Local Partnership summary

The Connected Futures Partnership in D2N2 is made up of 3 core partners, D2N2 LEP, Nottinghamshire Voluntary Council and Direct Education Business Partnership (DEBP). The partnership is working across the Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, and Nottinghamshire (D2N2) region to gain a better understanding of what works and what doesn't work to support young people with Learning Disabilities (LD) and/or Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) to move towards, secure, and sustain employment.

The partnership aims to change the system across the East Midlands, increasing the visibility and voice of young people, so as to foster new approaches to decision-making as well as delivery.

In the first year of research, partners have conducted systems mapping, interviews, and focussed group discussions to gain a better understanding of the systems currently in place, identifying success criteria, enabling factors, and barriers.

Through this work, the Partnership has identified 4 key themes for further exploration and testing of approaches:

1. Foundational Skills in Education: experiences in school that support young people to understand careers and how to get a job.
2. Transition and consistent pathways into employment.
3. Strengthening Youth Voice across the system
4. Employer support

The Partnership has already begun working on testing new approaches to strengthening Youth Voice. DEBP now employ 4 Youth Voice Ambassadors, 1 representing each of the 4 upper tier Local Authority Areas. The young people in these roles will take ownership of the project and platform the voice of other young people in the region to support changes.

The Partnership will be receiving a 'testing' budget from Youth Futures. This budget will allow the partnership, led through the Youth Ambassadors to begin leading commissioning processes. A key aspect of action research will be to support and observe how this process increases the power of youth voice within the system and effects change.

4. The requirements

The following information should guide the overall design of the approach.

4.1 Iterative research, observation, and support

Purpose

The purpose of this component is to support the Partnership and particularly the Youth Ambassadors leading the deployment of a 'testing budget' to commission services within the D2N2 area.

The role of the action researcher will be to encourage Youth Ambassadors to reflect on their practice, through observation and through reflection activities, to support the Ambassadors to understand any core challenges that exist, to notice the changes they effect within the system and to support their empowerment to effect further changes.

This could come in a variety of forms, including:

- Embedded researcher(s)
- Frequent contact in-person and virtually by research team
- Regular attendance at partnership steering / development board meetings as well as observations of practice, document reviews etc

Research themes and core questions

Due to the iterative nature of this component, it is likely that the Action Researcher & local partnership will develop the main research themes and refine these proposed research questions during the course of the work, in tandem with the emergence of new themes. The initial research questions are:

- How do Youth Voice Ambassador roles strengthen youth voice within the local system?
- How does transferring commissioning power within the system to young people begin to impact intervention designs within place? What is working well and should be further developed?
- What barriers do Youth Voice Ambassadors experience working within the system and what role can they play to destabilise these barriers and power structures?
- To what extent do intersectionality issues such as ethnicity, gender, and disability impact the experience of young people within the system, including those who are working to change it?
- How does an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) or diagnosis impact the experience of young people within and working to change the system?

Expectations & Outputs

There are three core principles of this component that we expect will shape the approach for this research. These principles are highlighted to demonstrate the flexibility of this component to support the partnership to develop and refine their understanding.

- **Participatory** – as much as possible, we expect young people to shape the research and collaboratively design creative participatory methods.
- **Iterative** – for any workstream, we expect reflection to be embedded in the process to ensure there is opportunity to refine each area and substantiate what areas to take forward.
- **Continuous learning and support** – we expect all those within and involved with the partnership to support collaborative reflection and action. We expect to see the Action Researcher facilitate this and identify where additional support is needed, working with young people, the D2N2 partnership, Youth Futures and others.

We expect these principles to be embedded in the research, but enacted as the D2N2 partnership and Action Researcher see fit.

4.2 Identifying evidence potential

As the Youth Voice Ambassadors and the D2N2 partnership begin to commission and test new activities, we expect the Action Researcher to identify emerging or indicative signals of wider systems change. We would like proposals to consider the potential for further evidence generation, including appropriate evaluation methodologies for the future.

Purpose

The purpose of this component is to create or articulate guiding principles that reflect the D2N2 partnership's intention to address system failures. It will capture the evidence potential for future evaluations.

We anticipate that this may result in a Theory of Action or the identification of research hypotheses but encourage the D2N2 partnership and Action Researcher to identify the most appropriate methodologies.

Research questions

- What are the (main) mechanisms through which the Youth Ambassadors effect change within the system?
- What changes within the system can be isolated? What are the key hypotheses for further investigation?
- What evaluation methodologies would support further evidence generation and hypothesis testing?

Expectations & Outputs

We expect that this component also follows the above principles;

- **Participatory** – we expect guiding principles, including any visuals, to be built collaboratively with young people and the partnership, in ways that are designed to be fully inclusive.
- **Iterative** – we expect these principles to be built *iteratively* as the D2N2 partnership develop their thinking and refine their solutions. This should encourage frequent reflection and connections between themes.
- **Continuous Learning** – as the partnership work through their thinking, we expect the process of building and refining principles to embed learning and encourage further testing.

We expect a visual output for this component, but this should be designed and built collaboratively with the D2N2 partnership so we have not defined what it looks like, only request that it answers the above research questions.

4.3 Observations of the system

Purpose

To assist with future decision making, it is important that we understand how the system responds to intervention. We need build a foundation for how we monitor this, planting markers when the partnership are already operating and areas they intend to influence. Building on the systems map the D2N2 partnership already have, the purpose of this component is to identify key levers in the system and start monitoring how these levers are influenced by the partnership's intervention.

Research questions

- How can the Youth Voice Ambassador model influence the system? What individual, group, and systemic changes can be observed?
- How does the system respond to youth-led initiatives? Are there differences observed between co-production initiatives versus consultative initiatives?

- What evaluation framework can effectively capture system changes?

Expectations & Outputs

We anticipate that this will be done collaboratively with the partnership to collectively identify levers and how to capture movements in the system. We expect a framework to be developed to depict monitoring processes. This will support future evaluation and analysis.

Next steps

Once the D2N2 partnership have completed this stage of their work, Youth Futures will make a decision on future funding for the local partnership. The findings of the action research will be important factors supporting decision-making.

However, it is important to be clear that this decision will be made solely by Youth Futures and we do not expect the Action Researcher to participate in the process.

If awarded further funding, the D2N2 partnership will enter into Phase Two of Connected Futures. This will give them the opportunity to invest in further developing, refining, and delivering a Theory of Change. Youth Futures will determine how best to commission an evaluation of this Phase. It is our expectation that the outputs of the action research will be key in shaping our evaluation approach.

5. Project Management

5.1 Working with the East Midlands partnership

We would like proposing organisations or consultants to consider how best to support a partnership developing and supporting Youth Voice Ambassadors working across several sites within the D2N2 area. The partnership generally works from a Chesterfield office and other venues in Nottingham.

We anticipate that the Action Researcher will need to work with the partnership in the following way, including:

- Attendance at all partnership board meetings and participating in regular planning and delivery meetings
- Undertaking monthly check-ins / meetings with the partnership leads to monitor research progress across all components
- Establishing effective and inclusive ways of working with and involving Youth Voice Ambassadors and other young people
- Providing sufficient time and space to Youth Voice Ambassadors and partnership leads to engage with and shape the research, comment on outputs, reflect and raise questions
- Immediate flagging to the partnership of any risks, delays and/or new opportunities

5.2 Working with Youth Futures

We would like proposers to cost for monthly update meetings with the Evidence Generation lead for Connected Futures and the Relationship Manager for the D2N2 partnership.

Youth Futures are starting an Advisory Group for Complex & Theory-based Evaluation. We suggest proposers cost for attending a meeting to present principles and their framework to discuss with experts.

5.3 Working with the Learning Partner

We would like proposers to consider that the D2N2 partnership has an independent Learning Lead they have worked with closely since the beginning of Connected Futures, supporting them with systems thinking and quality assurance. There isn't a clear delineation between the Action Researcher and the Learning Lead for this partnership. We expect that the Learning Lead will continue to support the partnership with sense-making and systems thinking as the Action Researcher helps them progress through testing, learning, and refining.

6. Response Format

When writing your response, please follow these formatting guidelines:

- Page limit: 10 pages (biographies can be appended)
- Font size and spacing: Font size 12 or above, line spacing 1.0 minimum.

1. Expertise and experience

- Your experience of effectively engaging and conducting research with young people experiencing labour market disadvantage, especially those with LD and/or ASC, and stakeholders who work with them
- Experience facilitating iterative reflections with stakeholders and systems thinking
- Your track record of delivering similar evaluation and research methodologies
- The proposed team and the extent of their involvement in the work

2. Methodology and approach

- Your overall design for delivering a multi-component research project with different stakeholders over a large geography with a changing political landscape
- Your approach to delivering action research; a clear explanation of how this will be delivered consistently, and how you will deliver high quality, robust methods
- Your approach to building and refining guiding principles; a clear explanation of approach to demonstrate evidence potential of East Midlands's approach
- Your approach to monitoring a system and a clear explanation of methods used
- A high-level timeline / Gantt chart for research components, deliverables

3. Project Management, data security and risk mitigations

- Your approach to project management
- How you will work with the East Midlands partnership to securely & ethically collect and hold personal data from participants (if required)
- Brief details any industry standards for this – e.g. ISO 27001 certification and/or in-house data protection/compliance officers, ethical approval committees for research (if required)
- Your appraisal of the risks likely to arise in this research, and mitigations.

4. Costings

- A full budget and costs for the overall research project, including the daily rate for different staff, their projected days on different components, travel costs and non-staff costs such as transcription and participant incentives
- All budgets should be inclusive of VAT

7. Quality criteria

Proposals will be assessed against the following criteria:

1. Expertise and experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Recent and/or extensive track record of the organisation and proposed team in conducting similar approaches & methods b) Comprehensive understanding of how to effectively conduct research with the cohort of young people c) Clear explanation of how power dynamics will be addressed and equalised between Action Researcher and young people with learning disabilities and/or autistic spectrum conditions
2. Methodology and approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) A clear framework that meets the brief and research questions b) Recommended, high quality participatory methods for the action research component that suit the workstream objectives c) Clear articulation of how guiding principles will be designed and developed collaboratively d) Design a clear plan for further evidence generation activities and evaluation
3. Project Management and risk mitigations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) A clear project timeline with well-phased deliverables and milestones, supported by strong project management protocols b) Robust policies and procedures for collecting and storing personal data from participants c) Sensitivity to potential project risks and clear strategies to support the mitigation of these
4. Costings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) A clearly costed proposal that demonstrates high quality delivery b) High quality processes, including ensuring sufficient time for analysis, costing for transcriptions and sufficient staff seniority and time to effectively quality assure all outputs c) Proposed costings demonstrate value for money (number of research days, quantity and quality of outputs, appropriateness of proposed team composition and management)

Scoring criteria

Each criterion will be scored out of 5 using the below criteria.

Score	Criteria
0	Totally fails to meet the requirement - information not available
1	Meets some of the requirements - limited supporting information
2	Meets some of the requirements - reasonable explanation and supporting evidence
3	Mostly meets the requirements - good explanation, supporting evidence
4	Fully meets the requirements - detailed explanation and evidence
5	Exceeds requirements - extensive explanation and evidence, adds significant value and where appropriate, provides innovative approaches/ options to fully deliver the stated aims and objectives

Scores will be weighted as follows:

Weighting	
25%	1. Experience
35%	2. Methodology and approach
20%	3. Project Management and risk mitigation
20%	4. Cost effectiveness

Proposers will be given an overall score based on these weightings and highest scoring proposers will be invited to interview.

Appendix A: Approach to data protection

For this project, we expect for there to be data transferred between the Action Researcher and the D2N2 partnership. Youth Futures will support the appointed Action Researcher to meet YFF's data protection policies and procedures. This will be reviewed once an Action Researcher is appointed for suitability for this project.

As co-commissioners of this work, Youth Futures Foundation and the D2N2 partnership's approach to data protection and GDPR is guided by data protection law and we will apply best practice where possible, operating on a relationship of trust and good guidance.