

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

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1. Introduction

Youth Futures Foundation is a What Work's Centre for youth employment. It aims to narrow employment gaps for young people facing the greatest challenges 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 good jobs.

We are currently funding 8 partnerships, in Lewisham, Blackpool, Brent, Burnley, the East Midlands, Haringey, Hastings and Hull 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 for Phase 2.

As well as funding, partnerships receive support from a dedicated Youth Futures Relationship Manager. 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. There will also be a Learning partner working across Connected Futures to support with synthesis and facilitating networks.

We recommend reading the following outputs:

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

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

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

2. Proposal response process and timetable

2.1 Deadlines

The deadline for proposals is **24th May 2024 at 12pm.**

Proposal timescale	Date
Call for proposals issued	Week of 8 th April 2024
<i>Deadline for submission of questions</i>	5pm on 24 th April 2024
Indication to submit a proposal	5pm on 8 th May 2024
Deadline for submission of proposals	24th May 2024 at 12pm
Interview day for shortlisted proposers	3 rd and 4 th June 2024
Preferred proposer identified and notified	6 th June 2024
Induction meeting with stakeholders	Within two weeks of decision
Mobilisation commences	Week of 24 th June 2024

2.2 Application Process

The call for proposals will be released the week commencing 8th April 2024.

Please let us know if you will be sending us a proposal by 5pm on the 8th May 2024.

The deadline for submission is **12pm on 24th May 2024**. Any proposals received after this deadline will not be considered.

Responses should be submitted to: evaluation@youthfuturesfoundation.org

2.3 Budget

The total budget for this project from June 2024 to November 2025 **is in the range of £80,000 - £100,000**. Our projects are structured as a grant. Please refer to our VAT guidance.

3. Overview of requirement

Youth Futures and the Lewisham Connected Futures partnership (formally called 'Downham Futures partnership') are seeking an Action Research partner to work alongside the local partnership as they enter a new phase of testing ideas and exploring potential solutions for youth employment in the town.

We are describing this as Action Research¹ to make explicit our expectation of ongoing / "live" feedback between the research partner, the partnership and wider stakeholders². We anticipate that the Action Research will actively contribute to shaping and refining the work of the partnership during the testing phase, as well as generating findings and recommendations for future work.

This research will have three components:

- carrying out iterative research collaboratively with the partnership.
- developing a Theory of Change to depict the partnership's approach and support the final component.
- carrying out an evaluation framework to develop options for evaluating the local partnership's approach and along with the ToC, the evidence potential.

In addition to supporting the further development of work in Lewisham, this will help Youth Futures generate insights and evidence for our systems change priority.

3.1 Local Partnership summary

The Downham Futures partnership is made up of Lewisham Council, Phoenix Community Housing and Circle Collective. The partnership has established strong working relationships, with each leveraging its roles and assets, including its unique connections with local young people, in support of a shared aim.

Downham is a large interwar housing estate in the South of Lewisham. The estate is home to a mix of long-term residents, some with roots going back to its establishment in the 1920s, and more recent arrivals with Black, South Asian and Eastern European heritage. Downham is extremely isolated with limited economic activity, and poor transport links to areas of higher opportunity.

¹ Magenta Book (2020) 'Supplementary Guide: Handling Complexity in Policy Evaluation' Page 52. [Magenta Book supplementary guide. Handling Complexity in policy evaluation.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90444/magenta-book-supplementary-guide-handling-complexity-in-policy-evaluation.pdf)

² Dick, B (2001) 'Action Research; action and research' in 'Effective change management using action learning and action research: concepts, frameworks, processes, applications' [\[PDF\] Action research: action and research \[On line \(researchgate.net\)\]](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228211111)

Phase 1 of the Downham Futures programme has sought to understand the root causes for youth unemployment in this area that are affecting the young people of today, with a goal to break the generational cycles of disadvantage faced by local young people.

As part of their activities in phase 1, the partnership has conducted extensive peer-led research with young people living in Downham to understand the key drivers and root causes of this situation, and to identify levers and opportunities for change. A team of 16 local Young Ambassadors aged 17-28 have engaged over 200 young people through surveys, interviews and focus groups. Local partners / stakeholders have also contributed through surveys, systems mapping workshops and other consultation activities. Young Ambassadors synthesised the findings into themes and potential priorities for future action / exploration. The following themes emerged as key challenges for young people in Downham: lack of suitable and local information, advice and guidance around careers, lack of local job opportunities and, therefore, the need to connect young people with opportunities outside Downham and, finally, a lack of confidence, self-belief and motivation and lack of preparation for job applications and the labour market more generally.

Moreover, young ambassadors and research participants have voiced consistently that a lack of youth led space is a challenge and navigating a complicated system of support available locally can be daunting. Therefore, in this next phase Downham Futures intends to establish an asset-based solution: A physical shared space in a shop front location that is youth led and holistic and will host activities and services which address the needs identified: wellbeing services and health provision, careers information, professional mentorship, advice and guidance and support for parents and families.

Thus, by bringing together these services and opportunities, in Phase 1.5 we intend to test if the creation of a physical 'single point of access' space to navigate the support positively impacts the aspirations of young people, their access to employment opportunities and the support available to them from parents and carers by working with services to support the whole family and support system.

The **hypothesis** is whether bringing together agencies into a single space in Downham can better support both the young people moving towards EET outcomes (employment, education or training) by providing relevant information in a friendly, accessible and inclusive manner?

The partnership is currently trying to identify a suitable venue in Downham and will initially provide a more limited number of services in a different venue outside Downham. This two -stage implementation is an opportunity to reflect and refine the provision as well as the evaluations but also means that the timetable is likely to remain fluid for some time.

4. The requirements

The following information should guide the overall design:

4.1 Iterative Research

Purpose

The purpose of this component is to work directly with the partnership to support and facilitate the generation of evidence on how the proposed asset-based solution can address system failures.

Research questions

Due to the iterative nature of this project, it is likely that the Action Researcher & local partnership will develop these questions over time. A number of options have been discussed such as repeated surveys, focus groups, auto-ethnography as well as service mapping.

- What are the key features of the asset-based solution that address system failures?
- Will these features improve the likelihood of young people securing EET (Education, Employment or Training) outcomes?
- Do young people feel that the evidence generated through activity & iteration align with what they feel is important for young people in Downham?
- How can Downham Futures reach the most disadvantaged young people?
- What roles are key in the local system, and what risks are there in how they hold up the system?

Expectations & Outputs

The Youth Ambassadors have been centrally involved in phase 1 carrying out a range of research projects and the expectation is that they will be involved again, potentially leading on projects. Working with them to support their research activities, including analysis and presenting them in meetings should be considered an important part of this component.

Outputs: regular research updates and learning workshops with the partnership. The iterative nature of the partnership's activities will continue throughout the lifespan of this project. A key decision will be made in May 2025 for future funding for the local partnership, therefore consider the last six months to be quite flexible. We welcome you to not have this fully planned out but have budget remaining to support the partnership.

4.2 Creating a Theory of Change (ToC)

Purpose

The aim of the theory of change workshops is to gain agreement and refine the aims, mechanisms and outcomes across the partnership. The overarching aims of the ToC are to update and refine the ToC focusing on the proof of concept of physical space in Downham leading to wider reach and cross-pollination of advice and, therefore, better outcomes for young people. Moreover, the Downham Futures partnership are hoping that the ToC workshops will provide a platform to integrate organisations that have joined the partnership for phase 1.5, develop ways of staying up-to-date and share information across the partnership, and identify a governance model for the partnership.

Research questions

- What are the intended outcomes of the proposed interventions?
- What qualitative and quantitative evidence supports the underlying theory?
- What are the mechanisms of change that lead to the intended outcomes of the ToC?
- What are the roles of the individual partners within the wider ToC?
- What mechanisms can the partnership adopt in order to share knowledge and stay up-to-date with local and national developments?
- How does the partnership make collective decisions?

Expectations & Outputs

As mentioned before, the evolving nature of the project delivery provides an opportunity for reflection and refinement of service delivery as well as the ToC, which would suggest running several workshops over the course of the project.

Outputs

A Theory of Change agreed and supported by all partners to form part of the future funding bid. This will need to be at a stage to present by March 2025. This will support the local partnership's

proposal and Youth Futures decision for further funding, due to be made in May 2025. However, consider this may need further iterations past this deadline.

4.3 Evaluation Framework

Purpose

One central task for the action researcher is to work with the partnership to establish the current data availability, any gaps and the potential for monitoring and evaluation of the proposed project. This assessment will be a key part of the decision making for phase 2 funding. This will have to be done iteratively as the project ideas are developing.

Research questions

- What monitoring data is being collected already by the partners?
- What are the intended outcomes and how can they be measured?
- Which evaluation methods and approaches will be feasible for further evaluation? What changes might be required to increase feasibility?
- What capacity building would be helpful in terms of analysis skills across the partnership and young people?

Expectations & Outputs

We anticipate that this will be done mostly through desk research and strongly recommend reviewing the systematic review we have commissioned – currently being internally reviewed. We expect the Action Researcher to workshop their thinking with the Lewisham partnership as well as discussions with Youth Futures and relevant stakeholders regularly throughout the project. Once a framework has been drafted, we expect this to be presented to Youth Futures advisory panel of experts in complex and theory-based evaluations. This process exists to support, advise and guide the process and offers opportunities to discuss thinking with experts in the field. We expect that the Lewisham partnership is engaged and implications of the evaluation options are discussed with them throughout, but especially

Outputs:

- Presentation(s) to various stakeholders; Lewisham partnership, Youth Futures, Advisory Panel
- An document that sets out the evaluation framework; options for monitoring and evaluating the proposed initiatives.
 - This will need to be presentable to Youth Futures by March 2025 to inform decisions made in May.

Next steps

Once the Lewisham partnership have completed this stage of their work, Youth Futures will make a decision on future funding for the local partnership, this will likely be in May 2025. The findings of the Action Research will be important factors supporting decision-making – in particular the Theory of Change and evaluation framework.

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 Lewisham partnership will enter into Phase Two of Connected Futures. This will give them the opportunity to invest in further developing, refining and delivering their ToC. Based on the evaluation framework, Youth Futures will determine how best to commission an evaluation of this Phase.

5. Project Management

5.1 Working with the Lewisham partnership

This will likely be established once the Action Researcher is in post but please use the following as a guide:

- Attendance meetings with the partnership, likely twice a month
- Immediate flagging to the partnership of any risks, delays and/or new opportunities
- Supporting the Lewisham Youth Ambassadors to design and carry out relevant research amongst their peers
- Working with the Youth Board to prepare for Quarterly board meetings

5.2 Working with Youth Futures

We would like proposers to cost for monthly update meetings with the Evidence & Evaluation lead for Connected Futures together with the Relationship Manager for the Lewisham partnership.

Youth Futures Foundation expects to take an active role in the design and quality assurance of the evaluation framework and outputs. We would like proposers to allow sufficient timescales for the Impact and Evidence Team at Youth Futures to review presentations and reports for this component. This will likely require at least two rounds of review, a workshop as well as review from external

5.3 Working with other partners

There are a number of research, analysis and learning projects that are happening across Connected Futures. We are commissioning a Learning Partner to support with the coordination of these activities alongside Youth Futures project managers. The Learning Partner will also create a network of Evaluation and Research partners who are either supporting other partnerships in the Connected Futures portfolio or delivering research and analysis projects. This is an opportunity to share learning and ways of working with peers, as well as troubleshooting issues. This will likely be a bi-monthly or quarterly meeting.

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 and stakeholders who work with them
- Experience facilitating iterative reflections with stakeholders and refining activity collaboratively
- Your track record of delivering similar evaluation and research methodologies
- The proposed team and the extent of their involvement in the work
- Proposed members of the team working directly with the partnership should have experience of working on similar housing estates/small local place-based interventions

2. Methodology and approach

- Your overall design for delivering a multi-component research project with different stakeholders
- 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 a Theory of Change; a clear explanation of your approach to mapping across all activities to demonstrate evidence potential of Lewisham's approach.
- Your approach to delivering a thorough evaluation framework; a clear process to demonstrate potential sources you will review and how you will involve various stakeholders, how you will present to different audiences
- 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 Lewisham 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 work with the cohort of young people in a collaborative partnership.
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 iterative research component that suit the partnership's activities c) Clear articulation of how learning will be shared with the partnership to draw out evidence potential of the Theory of Change. d) Deliver high-quality, appropriate outputs that can be shared with a variety of audiences.
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

- 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 Action Researcher and the Lewisham partnership. Lewisham Council (lead partner of the local partnership) have a template that has been used previous that they believe is appropriate. 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 Lewisham 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.