

# Call for Proposals: Connected Futures, Action Research for Brent 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 young people facing the greatest challenges by identifying what works and why and investing in evidence generation to improve policy and practice.

### Connected Futures

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 10 partnerships, in Blackpool, Brent, Burnley, the East Midlands, Haringey, Hastings, Hull, Leeds & Bradford, Lewisham and Walsall to explore local systems from the perspectives of young people, employers, education and employability services, and other stakeholders. Phase 1 was an exploratory phase, aiming to discover key systemic barriers facing young people, and identify potential opportunities and levers for change. As we come to the end of Phase 1, local partnerships have produced a shared analysis of the problem and begun to foster a shared ambition for change among a wider range of local stakeholders. Young people are at the forefront of the process, setting the direction for partnerships, carrying out research and shaping ideas for future direction. We are now moving to a new phase, in which local partnerships begin testing their ideas to deepen their understanding and strengthen their shared ambition for change. In the future, we intend to make larger grants in support of these ambitions.

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, including between Action Research partners working with different partnerships.

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 **12pm on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 2024**.

Proposal timescale	Date
Call for proposals issued	Beginning of May 2024
<i>Deadline for submission of questions</i>	5pm on 17 <sup>th</sup> May 2024
Indication to submit a proposal	12pm on 31 <sup>st</sup> May 2024
<b>Deadline for submission of proposals</b>	<b>12pm on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2024</b>
Interview day for shortlisted proposers	24 <sup>th</sup> and 25 <sup>th</sup> June 2024
Preferred proposer identified and notified	27 <sup>th</sup> June 2024
Induction meeting with stakeholders	Early July 2024

### 2.2 Application Process

Please let us know if you will be sending us a proposal by **12pm on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2024**

The deadline for submission is 12pm on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2024 Any proposals received after this deadline will not be considered.

Responses should be submitted to: [evaluation@youthfuturesfoundation.org](mailto:evaluation@youthfuturesfoundation.org)

## 2.3 Budget

The total budget for this project from July 2024 to March 2026 **is in the range of £80,000 - £120,000**. Our projects are structured as a grant. Please refer to our VAT guidance.

## 3. Overview of requirement

Youth Futures and the Brent Connected Futures partnership are seeking an Action Research partner to work alongside the partnership as they enter a new phase of testing ideas and exploring potential solutions for youth employment in the borough.

We are describing this as Action Research<sup>1</sup> to make explicit our expectation of ongoing / "live" feedback between the research partner, the partnership and wider stakeholders<sup>2</sup>. 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
- designing an evaluation framework to articulate how the partnership's approach could be evaluated and the evidence potential.

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

### 3.1 Local Partnership summary

The core Brent Connected Futures partnership includes Young Brent Foundation (lead partner), a youth board, Hyde Housing, Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing (MTVH), Brent Council, and Peabody Housing. The partnership applied to Connected Futures because their vision seeks to address both the individual and system-level impact of youth unemployment.

Current youth employment programmes in Brent offer a limited range of services that fail to meet young people's diverse needs. A disjointed and often inconsistent offer has resulted in low levels of participation and minimal positive impacts on youth employment. Current figures suggest there are almost 3000 young people on the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) caseload in Brent aged 18-24 who are in receipt of Universal Credit and looking for employment. Racially minoritised young people aged 18-24 are significantly less likely (29.4%) than white peers to be in employment (49.5%).

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<sup>1</sup> 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/901111/magenta-book-supplementary-guide-handling-complexity-in-policy-evaluation.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 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 \(researchgate.net\)\]](#)

The Brent partnership has carried out year-long, youth-led research, rooted in the experiences of young people in three estates. These areas, Chalkhill, Church End, and Stonebridge, grapple with high unemployment rates, especially among racially minoritized groups. A key finding has been to confirm the picture of poorly coordinated and often inaccessible support services, which young people experience as incoherent and unwelcoming.

The research also uncovered a significant disconnect between local business clusters (Park Royal) and the adjacent estates. Despite the geographical proximity to Park Royal business clusters, there is a lack of awareness of these opportunities among young residents. Initial investigation suggests that employers are not engaging with local young people either. Flourishing Futures aims to bridge this information gap with a fresh and comprehensive investigation.

The goal is to create a Brent where young individuals are aware of and able to seize the opportunities offered by the Park Royal clusters. Through dialogue and collaboration, we strive to bridge the gap between local businesses, the community, and young researchers, ultimately paving the way for a brighter future where every young person can flourish.

Drawing from Phase 1 research, the Partnership has refined its approach for Phase 2:

- **Narrow focus:** In Phase 1, we cast a wide net to gauge the employment barriers for young people in Brent. This was crucial for an overview of the Brent landscape, but it left us with the feeling of only scratching the surface of the issues. Shifting to a focused study on business clusters will generate deeper insights.
- **Smaller cohort:** It was incredibly motivating to work with 15 dedicated young people during phase 1. However, managing a large group proved time-consuming. The wide age-range (16-24) meant that young people had different commitments, which made scheduling and coordinating meetings more challenging. For Phase 2, we have decided to scale down to 5-6 researchers and raise the age limit to 18+ to increase efficiency.
- **Youth engagement:** We found the peer-led research model to not only benefit the young people involved, but to improve our research methods and inform our analysis. Continuing to work with young people who have grown up in the tri-estate area will provide a unique insight as well as access to the local communities often disregarded as being “hard-to-reach”.

The aims of this next phase of work are therefore to:

- Implementing a **Youth Employment Ambassador Programme**, where young people act as mentors and guides for their peers in partnership with employers, work coaches, and youth organisations, will effectively improve access to employment for young people in Brent, and will enhance the overall employment system in the area.
- **Peer-led Approach:** Young voices will shape and execute the research, ensuring ownership and space for experimenting methods. Our research methods will be tailored to the stakeholders, using surveys with employers and consultations and interviews with members of the community to delve deeper into the local industries and barriers of engagement.

The Flourishing Futures Youth Board are essential to the ongoing work and as such we will continue to work with them through the pilot phase. This will provide Youth Employment Ambassadors with additional peer support and knowledge transfer for the new ambassadors, introducing the research, relationships, and partnerships which the Youth Board have been involved with since inception.

### 3.1.1 Activity and Outcomes

The programme areas, key resources, roles and programme outcomes are outlined in the table below.

Testing	Exploring
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Youth Employment Ambassador Pilot Programme	Understanding the gap between local employers and young people
<b>Preparation (4 months):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruitment and onboarding of YEAs</li> <li>Mobilization of service providers, agreement of MoUs etc</li> <li>Planning / organization of YEA delivery</li> <li>Appointment of action research partner</li> </ul>	<b>Preparation (4 months):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruitment and training of young researchers</li> <li>Refinement / development of research questions and tools</li> <li>Engagement with employers facilitated by the Forge</li> </ul>
<b>Pilot delivery (12 months):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deployment of YEAs in services across Stonebridge</li> <li>Delivery of support to young people</li> <li>Involvement of YEAs in service- and employer-facing activities</li> <li>Regular multi-agency meetings / coordination</li> <li>Action research and refinement / iteration of approach</li> </ul>	<b>Youth-led research (12 months):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investigation with employers of existing practices and attitudes towards employment of YP</li> <li>Community research to understand barriers to accessing opportunities</li> <li>Analysis of key factors / dynamics underpinning current situation</li> <li>Identification of good practices / opportunities for change</li> </ul>
<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved access to employment opportunities for participating young people</li> <li>Empowering young people to take an active role in their career development</li> <li>Building sustainable collaborations between employers, youth organisations, and the community</li> <li>Developing a scalable and replicable model for youth employment support</li> </ul>	TBC
Proposition (months 15-16) so 2-month period <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of future proposition integrating learning and insights from testing and research</li> </ul>	

## 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 the two strands of work (youth-led research and the Youth Employment Ambassadors) and facilitate the generation and delivery of evidence in relation to the key lines of inquiry.

#### **Lines of inquiry**

Due to the iterative nature of this component, it is likely that the Action Researcher & the Brent partnership will develop these questions over time:

##### **Insights about employers**

- How do employers in Park Royal perceive themselves and the wider site as a place for employment and where does local employment fit into that?
- What is the 'need' from an employer's perspective and how can those opportunities be presented to young people in an appealing way?

### **Role of young people**

- How important is the role of young people in supporting local young people's journey into employment (e.g. peer-to-peer support)?
- To what extent and how is having young people in the Park Royal space an important factor in changing the relationship between young people and employers?
- To what extent and how is the youth-led research helping employers and young people to build a shared definition of, and aspirations for, the local community?

### **The system**

- To what extent is the Partnership building a better understanding of the bridge between education and place of employment?
- What are the signals that the work of the Partnership is changing attitudes and perceptions among the different components of the system (community, schools, parents, employers) about employment challenges and opportunities?
- How can the system be strengthened to bring about change in local employment rates for young people? What is within the gift of the Partnership?
- What is Park Royal's role/potential role in the wider system of supporting local people's journey from education to employment? And what role can other key partners best play in the system?
- What unique role can young people play to strengthen the system? To what extent is placing young people within the support system changing behaviours or decisions?
- To what extent is there alignment between what the Partnership is trying to achieve and what is actually being achieved? Does our work in the way it's evolving continue to be a priority from a young person's perspective?

## **Expectations & Outputs**

There are four core principles of this component that we expect will shape the approach for this research. These principles were selected to demonstrate the flexibility of this component to support the partnership to develop & refine their understanding.

- **Participatory** – as much as possible, we expect young people to shape the research and collaboratively design creative participatory methods.
- **Iterative** – 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** – this is not just a philosophy of Connected Futures, but a commitment we expect for all those within & involved with the partnership to support collaborative action.
- **Creative and explorative** – an open minded, curious approach to the research.

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

Outputs will be agreed with the Brent partnership, but may include:

- Visual/interactive feedback (e.g., posters, videos, podcasts)
- Digital outputs
- Thought pieces

## **4.2 Creating a Theory of Change (ToC)**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this component is to create a ToC that illustrates the Brent partnership's intention to address system failures in Brent. It will enable robust evidence to be captured for future evaluations & evidence generation. The ToC should be grounded in and reflective of the local

context and its demographics and should reflect how pathways to impact could play out differently for different groups.

We anticipate that the ToC will be developed, tested and refined over a series of sessions with the Brent partnership.

### **Lines of inquiry**

- What is the theory of change for the Brent Partnership? How can this be refined to facilitate evaluation?
- How can the theory of change best reflect the local context and how pathways to impact may play out differently for different groups (e.g., gender-responsive approach)?
- What qualitative and quantitative evidence supports the underlying theory?
- How can the theory of change be further substantiated in evidence (e.g., evidence from past employment programmes such as 'Connections')?
- What are the mechanisms of change that lead to the intended outcomes/impact of the ToC?
- How will the theory of change be practically applied by the Brent partnership? How can it be tested with different groups (e.g., gender and employment opportunities)?
- What is the potential impact of the programme on the system?
- What elements of the programme are likely to make the biggest impact on employment levels in Brent?
- How does the Partnership make collective decisions, based on this evidence, on which elements of the system to focus on in the next phase?

### **Expectations & Outputs**

We expect that this component also follows the following principles:

- **Participatory** – we expect the ToC to be constructed collaboratively with the Brent partnership and young people, and the process should be designed to be inclusive.
- **Iterative** – we expect the ToC to be built *iteratively* as the Brent partnership develop their thinking and refine their activities. This should encourage frequent reflection and connections between the two areas of work.
- **Continuous Learning** – as the partnership work through their thinking, we expect the process of building and refining the ToC to embed learning and encourage further testing. The ToC is a live piece of work that will evolve over time.

A Theory of Change is the only expected output for this component, but this should be designed and built collaboratively with the Brent partnership so we have not defined what it looks like, only request that it answers the above lines of enquiry.

## **4.3 Evaluation framework**

### **Purpose**

To assist with future decision making, it is important for Youth Futures to understand the potential of evidencing place-based systems change robustly. Therefore, the purpose of this component is to produce a framework that captures which evaluation approach(es) feels the most feasible to evaluate the Brent partnership's Theory of Change.

### **Lines of inquiry**

- What kinds of change would we expect to be generated by the operation of these workstreams on the system?

- Which evaluation methods will be feasible for further evaluation? What changes might be required to increase feasibility?
- How could the theory of change be tested with different groups?
- What is the evidence potential for the Brent partnership's ToC?
- What are the cost implications for the different approaches?

## 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 Brent 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 evaluation framework and offers opportunities to discuss thinking with experts in the field. Once the framework is finalised, we expect that the Brent partnership is re-engaged and implications of the evaluation options are discussed with them.

- Presentation(s) to various stakeholders: Brent Partnership, Youth Futures, Youth Futures advisor panel
- Final report with recommendations.

## Next steps

Once the Brent partnership have completed this stage of their work, Youth Futures will make a decision on future funding for the local partnership. This is currently anticipated to be in September 2025. The findings of the Action Research will be important factors supporting decision-making – in particular the Theory of Change and the 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 Brent 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 Brent partnership

- Attendance at all monthly project board meetings
- Attendance at all quarterly advisory group meetings
- Participating in all planning & delivery meetings
- A willingness to co-locate at the Park Royal offices frequently to attend ad hoc discussions with the local partnership and community
- Attendance at monthly check-ins with Youth Employment Ambassadors
- Bi-weekly project management meetings with programme lead, Young Brent Foundation
- Where possible to allow two weeks' notice to review any outputs
- Bringing questions to the Partnership that can be explored and built on together
- Providing a 'check and challenge' role to the partnership and 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 fortnightly update meetings with the Evidence & Evaluation lead for Connected Futures together with the Relationship Manager for the Brent 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 an external review.

### 5.3 Working with other partners

There are a number of research, analysis and learning projects 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, communicating and conducting research with young people experiencing labour market disadvantage (especially) due to racialised discrimination, and stakeholders who work with them (e.g., through use of social media/technology)
- Experience facilitating iterative reflections with stakeholders and refining activity collaboratively and at pace
- Your experience using an appreciative inquiry approach showing curiosity, empathy and flexibility
- Your track record of delivering similar evaluation and research methodologies
- The proposed team and the extent of their involvement in the work and experience of working on similar small local place-based interventions
- Proposed members of the team working directly with the partnership should have lived experience, cultural sensitivity and deep understanding of the local issues

### 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 apply 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 Brent'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 and deliverables

### 3. Project Management, data security and risk mitigations

- Your approach to project management.

- How you will work with the Brent partnership to securely & ethically collect and hold personal data from participants (if required)
- Brief details of 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:

<b>1. Expertise and experience</b>	
a)	Ability to meet the desired expertise of the organisation and proposed team as outlined in section 6
b)	Ability to meet the relevant experience of conducting research and working with young people and partners collaboratively, as stipulated in section 6
<b>2. Methodology and approach</b>	
a)	A clear framework that meets the lines of inquires
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, including young people, 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.
<b>3. Project Management and risk mitigations</b>	
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
<b>4. Costings</b>	
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:

<b>Weighting</b>	
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 Brent partnership.

As co-commissioners of this work, Youth Futures Foundation and the Brent 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.