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THE
SOCIAL
INNOVATION
PARTNERSHIP

Learning from funding Connected Futures

End of Phase 1 report

Youth Futures Foundation

July 2024

Executive Summary

Introduction

[Connected Futures](#) is Youth Futures Foundation's £20 million fund, which aims to address youth unemployment through systemic change. Eight place-based partnerships were initially funded over 18 months to develop a collective understanding of the 'problem' that is driving youth unemployment locally, to identify possible routes to change, and to strengthen the local relationships required to bring about that change – with young people playing a leading role throughout this process.

In the next phase of this work, partnerships will work to test and deliver systemic solutions to youth unemployment, bringing together local stakeholders to support young people into good jobs.

What is the Connected Futures approach?

Connected Futures was designed to move away from traditional funding models, to fund in a new and more ambitious way, to facilitate systemic (deep-rooted or lasting) change. This has driven a range of additional programme principles:

- **Open-ended and exploratory.** Recognising that systemic change cannot easily take place within short-term funding cycles, nor can it be prescribed by any one individual actor, funding allowed time to collectively interrogate the [deep and entrenched causes of youth unemployment](#) with stakeholders across the system, before identifying solutions. Each partnership had 18-months to undertake a process of engagement and consultation, often centring around youth-led research. In this initial phase there were no set outcomes or deliverables, with partnerships able to respond to where the research takes them and learn from young people's experiences. The programme design was also adapted during the process, introducing more time for evaluation options appraisal.
- **Youth-led.** Recognising that [systemic change always requires a shift in where power is held within a system](#), to ensure the system is more informed by those with lived experience of the issues, youth voice was at the centre of the process. Each partnership has developed their own approach to embedding youth voice, with young people typically involved in one or more of the following: governance and decision-making; project work e.g., as peer researchers; as employed staff on the project; through consultation activities.
- **Partnership-led and rooted in place.** In recognition of the fact that systemic change requires change across the whole system around a person, through

a collaborative approach and rooted in place, each project is delivered by a local partnership which typically includes a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Organisation, a statutory organisation, and other partners, such as local schools/colleges or housing associations.

Programme resource

Each partnership is supported by a relationship manager, who works closely with a small number of partnerships (between two and four), attending regular operational and steering group meetings, and key workshops, and offering ongoing and intensive coaching and support calls with lead partners. The relational and embedded role means Relationship Managers can go on the journey with partnerships and offer expert advice, support, and guidance where needed.

Alongside this, partnerships have been supported by ‘Learning Lots.’ This includes Renaisi-TSIP as the learning partner, who provided 1-1 support to each partnership to understand their system and facilitate cross-programme learning. IPSOS and City-REDI provided additional data and insights, through local labour market analysis and local funding analysis respectively.

What have we learnt from this way of working?

Designing for long-term, systemic change

- The open and exploratory approach taken in the discovery phase provided partnerships the time and space to explore the drivers of youth unemployment in greater depth before suggesting interventions, meaning approaches could be iterated and developed to align with local needs. Most importantly, this approach allowed for co-design with young people, with many partnerships supporting young people to lead on carrying out exploratory research, oversee work, or design interventions. Partnerships felt that engaging in open-ended co-design with young people provided fresh insights and deepened understanding around the issue of youth unemployment.
- Despite the clear benefits of the open and exploratory approach, this was a new way of working for partnerships, which brought challenges. At time, gaps in knowledge and skills led to partnerships feeling out of their depth. The openness and flexibility in the process also led some partners to feel uncertain around whether they were doing things “right”, and what would be needed to progress to the next stage. Some of these challenges emerged from partnerships being used to working within strict funding approaches, with set expectations, measured outputs, and a lack of trust between funders and grantees.

- This process has shown that the funders seeking to move away from a traditional funder-grantee hierarchy have a role in navigating the balance between ensuring the process is open and flexible, whilst ensuring partnerships have enough structure and information to feel confident in their work and reassured that there aren't expectations they aren't aware of. While the support, capacity, and resource that was brought to each partnership through their Relationship Manager and Learning Lots was high relative to most funding programmes, some partnerships have since reflected that they required more intensive capacity building, support, guidance and reassurance whilst becoming comfortable with a different way of working.
- A particular skills gap that many partnerships highlighted as presenting a challenge was a lack of in-house research. As facilitating peer research was new to almost all partners, those doing it struggled to balance ensuring the design of the research was youth-led while remaining mindful of the views and expertise of professionals, and ensuring that insights from wider stakeholders and additional data sets were integrated with young people's experiences. The capacity support, advice, and training from the Learning Partner around this aimed to be bespoke and flexible, but partnerships shared that a more intensive and standardised approach could have given them more confidence.
- Working towards systems change was also a new concept for partnerships. The programme focused on deepening partnerships' understanding of systems change through learning sessions and events, but this took a long time to develop, and many partnerships reflected only beginning to understand systems change at the end of their work. This was perhaps driven by how different a systems change approach is to establish ways of approaching social change. Similarly to the research process, this highlighted that more intensive 1-1 support to each partner would have helped partnerships feel comfortable and confident with the ambition of the programme.

Young people's involvement in the programme

- Youth voice has been a key success of discovery phase, with partnerships going beyond their established approaches for working with young people or approaches outlined in their bid, to build more ambitious approaches that seek to genuinely embed youth voice. By centring youth voice in this way, partnerships have been guided by the needs and priorities of young people. These ways of working have also started to impact the wider system with partnership members and wider stakeholder considering how they can centre youth voice more intentionally going forward.

- The flexibility of the programme has facilitated this, with partnerships having the time and space to figure out their approach and make mistakes. The flexibility of funding and the absence of set outcomes meant partnerships were able to work with young people to trial new approaches and pivot funding towards youth voice. Equally, as a funder YFF were able to provide more funding for youth voice where needed, to support the development of more ambitious and equitable approaches.
- Partnership expertise around youth engagement and youth voice also enabled strong approaches to youth voice. Several partnerships included a core partner with specialism in youth work, who led on activities with young people, drawing on their expertise to develop flexible and inclusive approaches to engagement, alongside holding the wider partnership accountable around more ambitious models for youth voice and pushing back where there was a temptation to jump to solutions.

Taking a partnership-based approach

- Working in partnership brings clear benefits, with each partner bringing their own skills, expertise, and networks to the table. Partnerships were most effective when strong and trusting relationships were established around a shared ethos, with a deep understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, and each partner bringing something specific to the table. The partnership model also allowed partnerships to connect to a wider range of stakeholders in place, with each partner able to leverage existing relationships to raise the profile of the work with others.
- Nonetheless, it has been important for partnerships to be responsive and rethink roles, membership and approaches to working together as the programme has progressed. The exploratory nature of the programme made it hard to ensure the partnership that came together at the start of the process would remain strategically relevant. As the programme has progressed partnerships have started to evolve and adapt, to ensure they core partnership remain relevant.
- Ensuring smaller partners took the largest share of funding was an effective way to design out some of the inequities and power imbalances between larger statutory organisations and smaller VCS organisations. This ensured VCS organisations were recognised as a primary contributor, taken seriously, and valued for their expertise. Even so, there were persistent challenges around equitably dividing roles and responsibilities, and ensuring organisations were able to stay within budget. Smaller VCS organisations tended to feel the impact of this the most. As the lead partners they took a larger responsibility for the work and were therefore more likely to go further over budget, whilst also being more likely to feel the impact of this more

acutely than smaller organisations. More broadly, partnerships struggled to predict the capacity and resource that might be needed for this process at the start, given it was a new way of working.

Learning and recommendations

As Connected Futures partnerships move into a new phase of their work, we believe that the following recommendations would help build on the success of the programme so far.

1. **Offer more intensive support and coaching to partnerships to ensure they are confident and skilled in core elements of the programme, especially systems change and research.** There is a role for both Relationship Managers and Action Researchers to work closely with partnerships to offer bespoke coaching.
2. **Define systems change within the programme, and support Relationship Managers, Learning Lots, and Action Researchers to confidently communicate this.** This will help ensure partnerships are supported in a structured and consistent way, with a clear language and approach for talking about system change, which can be tailored to their specific context.
3. **Continue to work relationally and build trust with partnerships.** To ensure partnerships feel comfortable in these new ways of working they will need continued support, reassurance, and guidance from their Relationship Manager.
4. **Consider how successful approaches to promoting youth voice within the programme could influence other elements of programme support.** Youth voice has landed well with partnerships and has been enabled by the programme structure, leading to ambitious approaches. Understanding why this has been so successful could help shape coaching around other programme principles, such as system change.
5. **Frame youth voice as a core element of systems change and support partnership to embed this in the system.** Whilst partnerships have strong processes for youth voice within the partnerships, they have not always recognised how promoting youth voice can be an important part of systems change. As partnerships move forward in designing and delivering interventions it will be important to ensure youth voice doesn't remain exclusively within the project structure, and instead begins to influence the system.
6. **Identify best practice around youth voice, both within the programme and more broadly.** Identifying best practice in youth-led ways of working,

both within programme partnerships and beyond the programme could be used to support partnerships in their approaches to youth voice going forward, particularly as they seek to embed youth voice within the system.

7. **Support partnerships to develop the skills to facilitate co-production and youth-led approach.** To do justice to young people and their input, approaches to working with them need to be honest and open, listening and acting on young people's suggestions wherever possible, but also being upfront about limitations and providing them with the guidance and upskilling needed to engage in their roles. Relationship Managers and Action Researchers have a role in supporting partnerships to develop the skills to manage this delicate balance.
8. **Promote partnership changes as projects develop and define their scope.** It will be important for YFF and Relationship Managers to continue to encourage partnerships to think strategically about who should sit in their partnership, and ensure partnerships feel able to move away from the partnership they started with if it no longer suits their ambitions.
9. **Support partnerships to identify their roles and responsibilities going forward.** Relationship Managers have a role to play in ensuring partnerships clearly identify what they are bringing to the table, and responsibilities of each partner, as the programme develops. This will be particularly important in ensuring the skills, networks, and influence of each partner can be fully leveraged. Relationship Managers could play a role in facilitating activities and discussions around this, such as asset mapping.
10. **Support partnerships to continually reflect on their capacity and consider how they might expand their capacity.** This might not necessarily mean providing more funding to the lead organisation, especially if they don't have the infrastructure to manage this, but instead considering where additional capacity support could come from additional partners. Partnerships should also be encouraged by Relationship Managers to reflect on if they are overcapacity, and to consider how responsibility sits across different roles.

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Introduction

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What does this report explore?

Renaissi-TSIP is the learning partner for Phase 1 of the Connected Futures programme. Alongside supporting learning at a local partnership level and between partnerships, Renaissi-TSIP has been gathering and combining insights from across partnerships to build a deeper understanding of both the root causes preventing young people from accessing good employment, and how to address these through systems working.

This report draws together insights from Phase 1 of the programme, including reflections from working alongside places, interviews with partnerships and Relationship Managers, and iterative analysis both internally and with YFF. We explore what has worked well about this approach to funding, the challenges that have emerged, and the lessons that can be taken forward by Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) and other funders.

What is the Connected Futures approach?

The Connected Futures approach is rooted in a set of founding programme principles.

Programme principles

Systemic

Connected Futures was designed to move away from traditional funding models, to implement learning from systems thinking and approaches to systemic change, and to fund in a new and more ambitious way. Shifting the system that perpetuates challenges in youth employment in a meaningful and lasting way is at the heart of the approach taken by Youth Futures Foundation.

This aim to make systemic (or deep-rooted and lasting) change has driven a set of additional programme principles that distinguish Connected Futures:

- **Open-ended and exploratory**, recognising that systemic change cannot easily take place within short-term funding cycles, nor can it be prescribed by any one individual actor.
- **Youth-led**, recognising that systemic change always requires a shift in where power is held within a system, to enable that system to create different outcomes which are more informed by those with lived experience of the issues.
- **Partnership-led and grounded in place**, in recognition of the fact that systemic change requires change across the whole system around the person, through a collaborative approach, rooted in place.

Youth Futures Foundation's hypothesis is that funding in line with these principles will support systemic change in youth employment. This report explores how these principles have played out over the first phase of Connected Futures.

Open-ended and exploratory

Why?

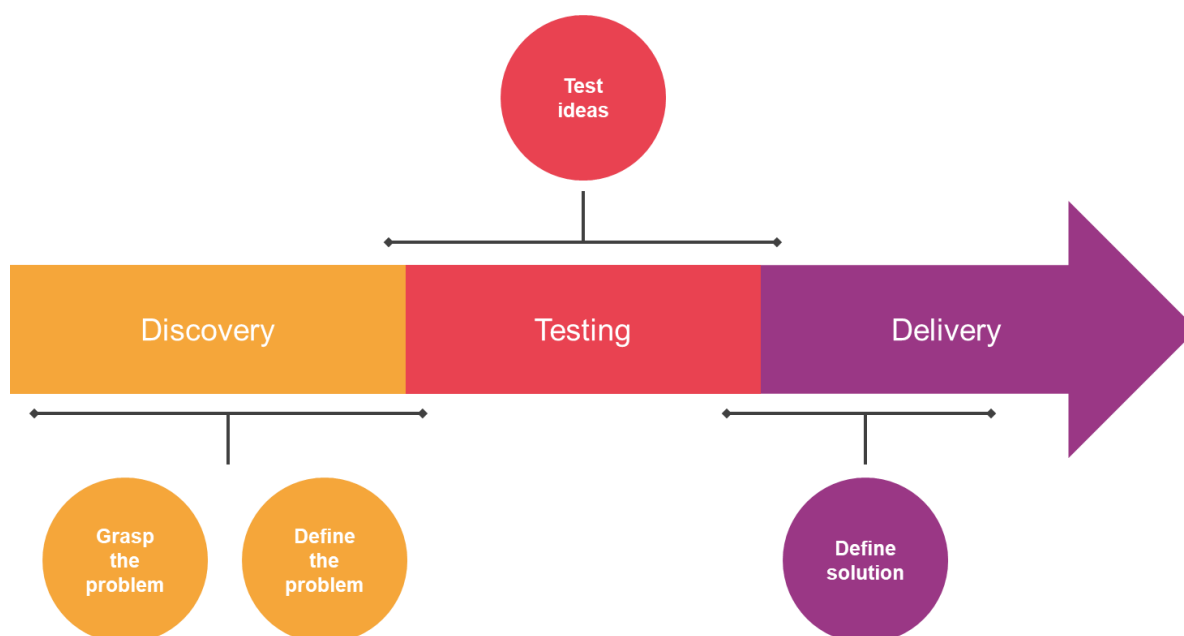
Traditional funding approaches tend to encourage projects and programmes which have pre-determined solutions and promise to deliver immediate, tangible results. When applying for funding, organisations are often expected to provide a ready-made intervention, without having time to consider entrenched structural factors and root causes which cause social issues to persist.

This means that more flexible, exploratory, and collaborative approaches to social change have historically been excluded from funding opportunities and have lacked the resource to be driven forward. Increasingly, funders are challenging this,

exploring approaches which aim to work with the whole system around a person to really understand why problems persist for that person, and the beliefs, ways of being and working, structures, policies and practices that hold problems in place.

How?

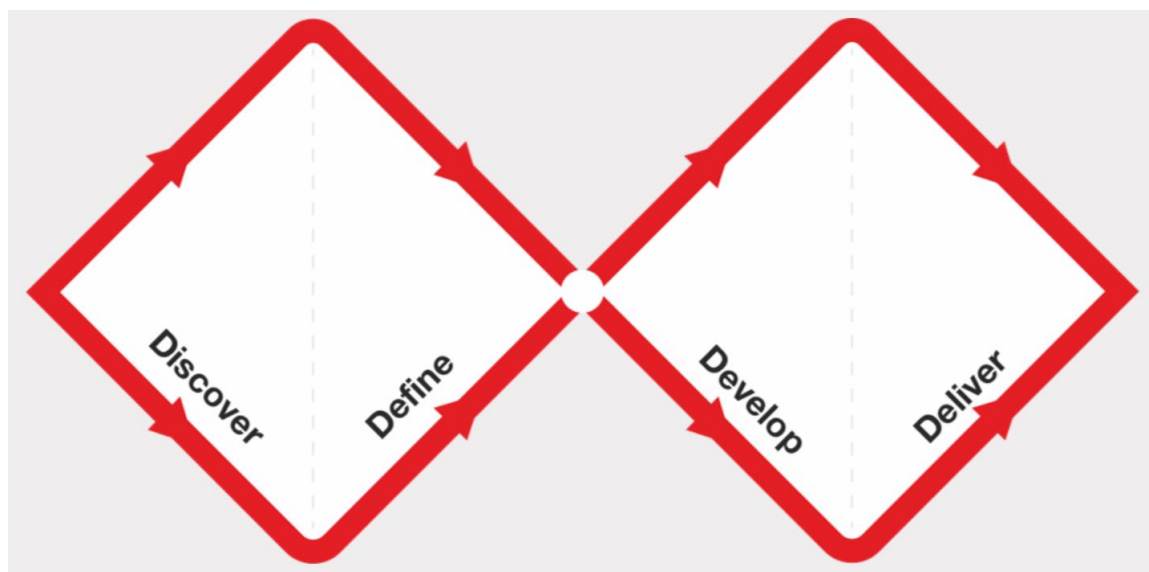
Connected Futures aims to take an exploratory approach to give partnerships the time and space to really interrogate the deep-seated and entrenched [causes of youth unemployment](#) in a place, before identifying solutions based on their findings. Place-based partnerships were funded to undertake an 18-month process of engagement, consultation, and exploration with young people at the centre of this, sharing their views on what needs to change. Most partnerships have taken a research approach, often incorporating peer research, to conduct activities like surveys, focus groups, and interviews with young people and other system stakeholders. The diagram below outlines the structure of the exploratory process:



In this initial phase of the work, there have been no set outcomes or deliverables. Instead, partnerships have been given the space to be responsive and go where the research takes them. Whilst there has been a broad timeline of 18 months, with a few key milestones along the way, partnerships have been able to use the time flexibly. The ambition is to learn from young people’s experiences and allow solutions to develop based around this, rather than having set outcomes in mind.

The programme’s design was also responsive and intentionally adapted throughout the work. Initially the programme set out to see partnerships complete both exploration and options appraisal during Phase 1. Over this time the initial intention was for partnerships to map the system, identify root causes and issues affecting youth employment locally, and then select an area of focus. Following this, they would be supported to explore a range of potential responses and solutions,

considering the feasibility of each before landing on an option for Phase 2. This process follows the 'double diamond' approach (below) for exploration and design:



© *The Double Diamond, The Design Council*

During Phase 1 it became clear that achieving all of this within Phase 1 was incredibly ambitious, with exploration and research taking up most of the resource. To respond to this, a new interim Phase, sometimes called Phase 1.5, was developed to give partnerships more time and resource to test ideas and define solutions. Partnerships are now developing more substantial approaches to testing, moving beyond the rapid and small-scale testing that was initially anticipated, to something more resource-intensive. Following Phase 1.5, partnerships will develop a proposed solution for Phase 2.

Youth-led

Why?

Connected Futures have also taken an approach which shifts power to young people, recognising that concentrations of power in certain organisations, people and places in a system can hold entrenched issues in place. Interventions and programmes that affect young people typically fail to involve young people in their design and decision-making. This is not only hugely disempowering to young people, but also means approaches are less likely to meet the real needs of young people as they have not been designed through a lens of lived experience.

How?

Connected Futures aims to address this by putting youth voice at the centre of the process. Partnerships have multiple mechanisms for embedding youth voice and ensuring young people hold meaningful power within the project. Each partnership has developed their own approach, but have typically embedded one or more of the following:



Partnership-led and rooted in place

Why?

Organisations often work in siloes, generating solutions or initiatives that are not joined up or holistic. Connected Futures aims to promote place-based partnership working to bring stakeholders together around a local issue, to share resources and work collaboratively to address it in a context-specific way.

How?

The programme encourages the whole system around young people in a place to come together to drive collaborative change. In each place the programme is delivered by a partnership which typically includes a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Organisation, a statutory organisation, and other partners, such as local schools/colleges or housing associations. The smallest partner in each partnership was allocated at least 40% of the funding to give them an equitable seat at the table, in recognition of the need to intentionally consider the distribution of power in the partnership.

Each partnership worked together to identify the nuances of youth unemployment in their context, the local stakeholders and resources that could be leveraged, and the solutions that would be most suitable. Partnerships also worked across a different scale of geography from whole regions, to towns, boroughs, or individual estates. This reflects the young people they are focused on, and the systems they are seeking to change. As demonstrated in the diagram below, partnerships are

orientated around young people and aim to work collaboratively within the wider system.

Programme resource

Funding

Each partnership received an initial funding package of between £110,000 and £125,000 for Phase 1. This funding could be used flexibly but typically went towards covering the time of staff and young people working on the project.

YFF has also provided additional funding where partnerships wanted to further develop core elements of their project, for example funding a more ambitious strand of work around youth voice or funding an additional partner to support with youth engagement.

Relationship Manager

Each partnership has worked closely with their Relationship Manager from YFF. Relationship Managers work intensively with a small number of partnerships (between two and four), attending regular operational and steering group meetings and key workshops, alongside offering ongoing and intensive coaching and support calls with lead partners. Partnerships are not expected to ‘report’ progress to their Relationship Manager in the traditional format. Instead, reporting has taken a more reflective format, encouraging partnerships to consider their learning against core themes such as youth voice and partnership working. Alongside this, partnerships have regularly reported on expenditure. Therefore, rather than solely monitoring outputs, Relationship Managers travel the journey with partnerships and are aware of the challenges and complexity in the process that each partnership is undertaking.

This role aimed to move away from more transactional funding relationships, towards a more relational, trusted, and embedded way of working. This was intended to allow Relationship Managers to support and coach partnerships towards the goals of the programme, alongside understanding where challenges are emerging to offer additional support.

Learning Lots

Each partnership has access to learning and evidence support through organisations commissioned as programme-wide ‘Learning Lots’. This includes:

1. **Learning Partner:** As the learning partner for Phase 1 Renaisi-TSIP has provided learning support and capacity building at the following levels of the programme.



a. **At local partnership level,** each partnership is allocated a learning lead who supports partnerships to

explore their local system and root causes. This has included facilitating system mapping workshops, advising on research design, and supporting with analysis and decision-making.

b. **Across the partnerships,** the learning partner supports peer learning and capacity building, primarily through facilitating whole-cohort learning events around key topics such as peer research, equity, systems change, and youth participation.

c. **Across the programme,** the learning partner identifies insights to build a deeper understanding of the issue and approaches to addressing this.

2. **Labour Market Analysis:** Ipsos provides each partnership with bespoke data on their local labour market, which includes nuanced analysis of work opportunities and unemployment rates. This is delivered in two stages, a first stage which explores the broader picture, followed by a deep dive into specific areas that are of most interest to the partnership.

3. **Funding Flows:** the funding flow analysis is provided by City-REDI and explores the local post-16 funding landscape within each place. Initially this was intended to include 2 case studies of places, alongside a broader overview. However, the case study component was extended to all partnerships due to interest from partnerships. Each partnership is provided with information on the current funding and resource flows locally, to inform an understanding of the resources that can be drawn on in the design of solutions.

Programme expansion

Alongside the eight partnerships funded through the programme, YFF have recently commissioned a programme expansion. This was in recognition of the fact that no partnerships led by people with Bangladeshi and Pakistan heritage were being funded, and that grassroots and experience-led organisations working in this space were less likely to meet funding requirements due to their size and historic lack of access to funding and partnerships. As a result, the expansion of Connected Futures takes a more bottom-up approach, working with Bangladeshi and Pakistani-led VCS organisations to explore the issue of youth unemployment and identify local partners to work with.

What have we learnt from this way of working?

The following section explores what we have learnt from the Connected Futures approach to funding, focusing on the core programme principles. We look at how the programme design supported working to these principles, what worked well and less well, and how this impacted partnerships' ability to create local solutions to getting young people into good jobs.

It is important to recognise that this programme represents a unique way of funding that experimented with many new approaches. Due to this, it was assumed that there would be both successes and things to learn from and adapt moving forward. This report highlights how partnerships experienced the funding approach as unique, intentional, systemic, and supportive to them, alongside setting out how YFF and other funders can develop and learn from this approach going forward.

Aiming at long-term, systemic change

Key findings

Understanding the system

The programme's open and exploratory approach provided valuable space to understand the 'problem' in greater depth.

Partnerships suggested the programme structure was different to many other funding approaches. They appreciated having substantial time built in for exploration which allowed space to consider the issues before proposing solutions. This was seen as distinct from existing funding systems, which put funded organisations under pressure to deliver in line with a funder's expectations without a full understanding of the issue, and often results in organisations shoehorning projects into a funder's requirements instead of delivering what is really needed. In contrast to this, partnerships felt the Connected Futures approach established a positive, relational way of working between partnerships and the funder, where partnerships felt trusted to deliver the programme and do what was right in their context.

This approach allowed partnerships the time and space to understand the factors affecting young people's access to employment, alongside enabling them to meaningfully engage young people to ensure the programme was focusing on the issues that matter to them. Equally, partnership viewed the test and learn approach as beneficial as it allowed any intervention to be iterated and developed to meet the needs of young people.

"From YFF's perspective, Connected Futures was a very different way of funding. It's moving away from programmatic delivery funding, that's intervention based... to take a more

systemic approach requires a different approach to funding, which is quite different both as a funder, and I think on the receiving end of it as well.”

Relationship Manager

“The flexibility has allowed us to truly listen to young people’s voices about what the issues are, without being outcomes-driven around what’s coming out of that.”

VCS partner

Youth-led research provided unique insights and made stakeholders in place look at systemic problems afresh.

Centring young people’s voice and experiences has been a core ambition of the exploratory phase. For several partnerships, young people had a key role in the research process. For example, young people were involved in developing research questions, designing research tools, carrying out data collection activities (such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups), and analysing the data. This meant the focus of the research was largely decided by young people, as well as the details of the approach taken. Several partnerships praised the benefits of this, sharing that peer research had shed new light on the issue and deepened their understanding of it. Young people were able to come up with insightful questions, think of creative approaches to engaging other young people, solicit more open and honest responses from their peers, and interpret data drawing on their own insights and experiences. In particular, the process of analysing data with young people added additional depth and nuance.

“We wanted to have their [young people’s] experience in the forefront. We couldn’t have identified these issues and questions [without young people]. It made the quality of the research better.”

VCS partner

Working in this way brought to light that partnerships didn’t always feel that they had the skills or resource to truly understand the experiences of young people who are most marginalised by the system.

Most partnerships did not have in-house research expertise, much less experience in facilitating youth-led peer research. This meant that there were some challenges around developing strong research approaches and upskilling young people in research skills.

Facilitating the peer research process could be particularly challenging, with partnerships sometimes struggling to find the delicate balance of ensuring the research process was genuinely youth-led, without simply saying ‘yes’ to everything young people suggested, and remaining mindful of the views and expertise of professionals. For example, young people sometimes proposed interview questions

that were leading rather than open-ended, which were then included in the research despite potential bias they might create. Staff were often cautious of pushing back because they wanted young people to have overall control of the research, and were unsure about the extent to which imposing more traditional research concepts would undermine this. Equally, in the analysis process young people resonated more with approaches to qualitative analysis where they would collectively reflect on data to identify themes that they felt were most important, rather than a thematic analysis process that required counting ‘codes’ or themes that came up most often, which is often considered more rigorous in traditional research. This reflected a shift away from an approach to qualitative analysis that aims at to transform rich and varied data into measurable and “objective” findings towards an analysis approach that leans into the subjectivity that those with lived experience bring, which enables them to offer deeper understanding of data.

This balance was harder to strike when the young people engaged were not representative of the different demographics at risk of NEET. Often young people were recruited by partnerships through a few set routes, for example through one organisation that worked with young people or through the peer networks of those young people already engaged. Therefore, for some partnerships, the young people engaged represented a narrow range of experiences or were missing representation from demographic groups that are most at risk of NEET in their local area. In these circumstances, there was a risk that the youth voice that was guiding the research was not representative of all the young people it needed to include.

“It’s great having youth voice, but you’ve got to be a little bit careful about the breadth of that youth voice, because it can become quite narrow.”

Statutory partner

Stronger knowledge and skills around research within the partnerships could have helped them better facilitate this process and identify potential biases. Equally, earlier consideration of how to balance being meaningfully youth-led with bringing in the expertise of professionals in the partnership to co-design a reflective and flexible approach would have been valuable

“[The challenge] was trying to find a balance of helping them create a good survey, for them to have written a survey and for it to be their questions, but at the same time wanting to get good research out of it.”

VCS partner

Several partnerships suggested they would have benefitted from more guidance around the research process, particularly related to facilitating peer research. It was suggested that this might have been delivered through cohort training sessions frontloaded in the programme, to ensure each partnership was starting on an equal footing. Whilst as learning partner Renaisi-TSIP delivered a range of place-specific support on research (including design of research plans, delivering training for young people, review of research tools and facilitation of co-analysis) as well as two cohort

training sessions on research and peer research early in the process, partnerships suggested there could have been more frontloaded, standardised, and comprehensive support.

As partnerships were undertaking an intensive research process with limited in-house research experience, the level of support offered perhaps didn't match the upskilling needed to give partnerships confidence to carry-out the research. Equally, the one-to-one research support offered by the learning partner was intentionally open and flexible, therefore each partnership had to have an active role in identifying a need for support and taking up the Renaisi-TSIP offer, which ultimately meant each partnership accessed support in a different way. More standardised support could have helped upskill partnerships and young people, quality assure the research, and ensure partnerships could develop a strong evidence base. However, there is a balance to strike between supporting partnerships to develop the skills needed for the process, whilst also providing an open support offer that doesn't mandate certain approaches to research.

“Slightly more structured guidance would have really helped us, to make sure that the research that we got was from the young people’s perspective but was also good robust research. With the peer researchers [I would have appreciated] a bit more guidance on how many peer researchers should you hire, how many surveys should you aim for.”

VCS partner

Partnerships often focused on understanding young people’s experiences, but could have benefited from broadening their understanding of the local system at the same time.

Partnerships were able to develop an understanding of the wider employment system around a young person through some of their research activities, for example conducting surveys with employers and convening local voluntary and public sector stakeholders in system mapping workshops facilitated by the learning partner. However, exploring the wider system around youth unemployment and capturing the views of professional stakeholders (e.g. employers, educational professionals, services etc.) and wider community members was typically less comprehensive than engagement conducted with young people.

Some shared that this was due to partnerships' limited capacity to carry out in-depth engagement with the wider system as they were focusing much of their resource on intensive research with young people. As a result of this, partnerships have shared that they have gaps in evidence around why the wider system, including employers and statutory services, is not able to meet the needs of young people. A number of partnerships are now responding to this by broadening their partnership, developing wider advisory boards, or carrying out further research to include stakeholder groups that they feel have been missing in the first phase of Connected Futures.

Partnerships often found additional data on local systems to be challenging to engage with.

Each partnership was provided with additional (place-specific) data on their local labour market and funding landscape to help them to understand the local system. For some partnerships the data was useful in helping them understand the broader picture of the problem in their place and could uncover specific local nuances, such as the types of industries and opportunities that exist locally.

However, partnerships often faced challenges in engaging with the data. For some partnerships this was driven by an expectation that the data would provide a clear answer as to why their problem around youth unemployment exists. In reality it was not possible for the quantitative data to provide these answers independently of the qualitative research, which led some partnerships to be disappointed with the findings. Equally, it was challenging for partnerships to understand how to integrate quantitative data alongside their other research and use it to support the design of a solution. This became particularly challenging where labour market and funding data was delayed, meaning that partnerships had to build it into their findings at the end of the process. The data may have been more useful at the start of the process, to help partnerships use existing evidence to focus their research and guide their design. Other partnerships also reflected that the data they were provided with included information they were already aware of or could access via their local authority, so did not further their understanding of the system.

However, the challenges in engaging with additional data also stemmed from the need for guidance and support in analysing, triangulating and using this data once it was available. Whilst support was offered around this, there were limits to uptake and engagement. This was evidenced by those partnerships that had organisations with in-house data specialists making most use of the data, while those that did not made little use of it when designing their solutions.

Designing for systems change

Shifting to thinking about issues and solutions through a systems lens requires relational support over time.

The open and exploratory process of Phase 1 has been a core element of the programme's systemic approach, giving partnerships the time and space to understand the root causes of youth unemployment and develop approaches that make sense in their context. As part of this, the programme intended to support partnerships to take a systemic approach to their work, through both cohort events and 1-1 support over Phase 1.

Cohort events throughout the programme, including the first event in September 2022, focused on systems change. Equally, elements of the learning partner support from Renaisi-TSIP aimed to support partnerships to take a systemic approach to their work. For example, each partnership was supported to facilitate system mapping workshops to help understand the local system and develop research questions that interrogated the root cause of the 'problem'. These workshops were

designed to support partners to understand the depth of the system (i.e. the issues 'sitting under the surface' of the system), in addition to understanding the breadth of it (i.e. who sits within it).

However, despite this, some partnerships struggled to grasp the concept of systems change and how it applies to their work until the final months of the Phase 1 process. Partnerships shared that they struggled to visualise what systems change would look like in practice and to think of interventions that would lead to systems change in their context. Although language and concepts around systems change were embedded throughout the programme, including in one of the first sessions which brought all the partnerships together, this did not resonate with all partnerships as expected. Some partnerships felt that systems change had not been talked about consistently and explicitly enough.

There are several factors that could have contributed to this. The complexity of systems change language may have made it challenging for partnerships to engage with it or apply it to their work. Whilst the language used to describe systems change was frequently revised to respond to partners needs and requests for clarification, this may have instead compounded a sense of confusion. Equally, YFF and Renaisi-TSIP were both going through a process of understanding and defining systems change throughout the programme, with YFF commissioning work by the Institute of Employment Studies (IES) to identify what works in systems change¹ and Renaisi-TSIP in the process of undertaking an inquiry to [understand the process of systemic change](#). The learning processes that both Renaisi-TSIP and YFF were undergoing meant that they developed more tools, frameworks, and criteria to design for systems change throughout the programme, which perhaps also contributed to some partnerships feeling that messaging around systems change was not clearly defined and consistent from the beginning of the programme.

While each partnership contained an organisation that had worked on projects designed to be youth-led (or with this intention), designing for systemic change was often a newer concept for partnerships. This may have caused partnerships to focus more heavily on the elements of the programme that resonated with them and their previous experience.

These challenges in understanding systems change affected the extent to which partnerships felt they had incorporated systems thinking into their work over Phase 1. In some cases, there was concern that their research did not always shine a light on systemic issues, root causes and how to shift them, and thinking more intentionally about systems change earlier on might have facilitated this.

This is also reflected in partnerships struggling to identify how the process they have undertaken so far is contributing to systems change. Each partnership underwent (to varying degrees) a process of bringing together local stakeholders, interrogating the root causes of youth unemployment and building youth voice, which are all core

¹ The IES review will be published later in 2024.

elements of systemic working and critical to systems change. However partnerships did not always recognise their work as systemic, perhaps because some partnerships understood Phase 1 as a research process and were not always thinking about how this was part of a systemic approach.

Although systems change was explored throughout Phase 1, reflections from partnerships suggest that a more intensive and practical focus on systems change throughout the research process would have been beneficial. Equally, these findings also highlight the time and space partnerships need to grasp systems change and make sense of it in relation to their own work. Whilst it was acknowledged that frequent sessions on systems change, as well as discussions about this with Relationship Managers and Learning Leads, helped them gain an understanding over time, partnerships felt that more time could have been dedicated to this topic earlier in the programme, with exploration of tangible examples of what systems change looks like in practice.

“It took us a while to get our heads around what it was they were asking for. Maybe we needed it in layman’s terms, it still didn’t feel like we properly understood the systems change element of it until recently. [Now] we’re clear on the concept of systems change, but we’re still a bit unsure what it will look like in reality.”

VCS partner

There was still a need for structure and guidance in an open and flexible funding process.

The flexible and exploratory programme structure was designed to address issues and inequities within the funding system – a departure from many more traditional ways of working. Interestingly, working in such an open way brought its own challenges for partnerships, alongside benefits. Advice and guidance around expectations tended to come to partnerships on an individual basis, through Relationship Managers, alongside a few standardised programme-wide milestones. This information was typically shared with partnerships on a case-by-case basis once they had progressed to the appropriate stage. In practice, this meant that each partnership received information and guidance at slightly different times depending on where they were up to. Ultimately, the level of guidance and structure was kept to an overall minimum to ensure partnerships had the ability to follow the emerging trends in their place.

Partnerships identified several benefits to this flexible approach and felt that being funded in this way was ultimately a positive experience. At the same time, they also suggested that they would have benefitted from slightly more information, advice, and guidance throughout the process. Several partnerships felt that having such an open process meant they had, at times, felt uncertain about the process, whether they were doing things right, and what was needed to progress to the next phase. Working in a bespoke and relational way with each partnership also meant that each

partnership was progressing at a different pace and receiving information at different times. Whilst partnerships shared that a cohort approach created valuable opportunities for learning and sharing, and frequently reassured partnerships that their own challenges were being faced elsewhere, some also found that these led them to compare themselves to others, play down challenges, and worry about their progress. This has particularly been the case as the programme has developed, with each partnership on a slightly different timeline and trajectory.

Some of these challenges emerged from partnerships being used to working within strict funding approaches, with set expectations, measured outputs, and a lack of trust between funders and grantees. The power imbalance between funders and grantees inherent in the funding system, and the impact that has on how grantees relate to funders, made it harder for partnerships to believe YFF when they said they had no set expectations beyond the overall strategic aims of the programme. This process has shown that the funders seeking to move away from a traditional funder-grantee hierarchy have a role in navigating the balance between ensuring the process is open and flexible, whilst ensuring partnerships have enough structure and information to feel confident in their work and reassured that there aren't expectations they aren't aware of.

In this context, partnerships identified a particular challenge related to the way that progress towards the next phase of funding was managed on a place-by-place basis, depending on where each partnership was in their journey. While partnerships were all made aware of what the overall journey to Phase 1.5 and Phase 2 would look like, they were invited to submit a proposal for the next phase based on YFF's judgement of their progress. This approach aimed to support a relational and flexible way of working, where each partnership could go at their own pace and their funding journey was tailored to their needs, but at times this left some partnerships feeling that there was a lack of transparency. This was particularly felt by those who were slower to progress towards Phase 1.5, some of whom shared experiencing a lack of agency and clarity about how and if their work could progress, when they realised that other partnerships had already submitted funding proposals. In this context, more detailed programme-wide guidance about how the shift from Phase 1 to 1.5 practically happens, shared consistently across partnerships at the same time could have helped each partnership feel empowered with the information needed to plan for the next stages well in advance.

“I think what would be helpful is really clear, transparent process, timelines, funding and understanding of levels of funding. It's also about managing expectations, both amongst partners, but also much more importantly about managing young people's expectations about what will come out of this.”

Statutory partner

Facilitating systems change is extremely ambitious, especially against a backdrop of time and funding limitations.

Taking an ambitious and exploratory approach to funding has been particularly challenging against a backdrop of more traditional funding approaches. For Connected Futures, the programme was still bounded by time and funding limitations which could act as a barrier to these ambitions. Having relatively short timelines around the programme inevitably restricts the extent to which partnerships can be genuinely exploratory and developmental. Whilst this began to emerge as a challenge in Phase 1, the introduction of a Phase 1.5 for testing has been a positive development and has allowed more time for partnerships to explore possible solutions. However, partnerships suggested that the ambition of testing solutions in less than a year, and initiating systems change in 3 years, will still be incredibly ambitious going forward.

“In my ideal world, if we’re talking about place-based change, collective impact programmes, systems change, I would want a funder that’s like, we’ve got X amount of money over 15 years... because yes, we’re talking about youth unemployment here, but ultimately, all of these systems overlap and intertwine so closely, that really we are talking about outcomes for young people, and how they go on to succeed in life. I think we could focus from the very beginning to actually be looking at where our system is letting young people down from the moment that they’re born, because you can’t look at issues in isolation... just looking at the system around youth unemployment isn’t really gonna crack it. And only doing that for three years is probably not going to do it.”

VCS partner

Alongside working to develop a shared understanding of systems change within each partnership, partnerships have also faced the challenge of communicating their ambitions for systems change to wider stakeholders and securing their buy-in to work in a systemic way. Again, the concept of systems change can be difficult for wider stakeholders to understand. Equally, buying into systemic approaches often requires stakeholders to recognise that their existing ways of working are failing or making things worse, which can be hard to confront. Partnerships also have their own journey to go on in considering the power dynamics, policies, and practices that might need to shift within their organisations to lead to systemic change, with many in the early stages of this process.

Relatedly, systems change depends on stakeholders being willing to change their ways of working, which can be hard to encourage and incentivise. Ultimately, there was a sense that the aim to facilitate systemic change through the programme was an ambitious ask, as it requires fundamentally shifting the ways things are currently done, and the structures, such as funding processes, incentives and attitudes, that hold this in place. Whilst partnerships recognised the value and importance of aiming to work in this way, they also reflected on how challenging might be to achieve it.

“The ambitions are kind of scary, as it [the external system/ current ways of working] all feels so set and rigid, like how are we going to make those changes?”

VCS partner

Partnerships also recognised where there might be limitations to the systems they are able to change at a local level. The exploration and research brought out common themes and issues around youth unemployment across partnerships, such as the lack of focus on employability skills in school curriculums, with some of these issues shaped by policies and decisions at a national level. Whilst partnerships recognised their role in shifting the system locally, they also suggested that many of the issues facing young people are held in place by systems and structures that exist beyond their context. This made it challenging for some partnerships to see how they could enact change within the limits of their place.

“We’re doing all this research spotlighting [the issue], but we as actors within [a place], we are within a system that is failing the communities from well beyond [the place]...because it’s coming from education, it’s health, it’s access to affordable transport to jobs in the area.”

Housing Association partner

Partnerships therefore saw YFF having a key role in advocating for change at a national level by drawing on the evidence base generated through the programme, which is indeed a key aim of the programme. They felt that YFF could particularly target the Department for Education and the Department of Work and Pensions. This is something that YFF has started and will be continuing as the programme develops.

“[To] be able to raise really key themes that are across eight, quite deprived, areas of the country will be really helpful, if it’s shared with government.”

Statutory partner

How can these findings influence the next stage of Connected Futures?

Summary of key findings:

- The open and exploratory approach taken in Phase 1 has represented an important shift away from traditional funding practices, offering partnerships valuable time and space to explore the issue of youth unemployment in greater depth, and importantly from the perspective of young people.
- Across partnerships this approach represented a new way of working; including working with no set outcomes, working systemically, and carrying out research and exploration.

- Whilst partnerships were offered support, capacity, and resource from their Relationship Manager and Learning Lots, there were still gaps in knowledge and skills within partnership. Therefore, at times partnerships required more intensive support and reassurance whilst becoming comfortable with a new and emergent way of working.

How could YFF take this forward?

1. **Offer more intensive support and coaching to partnerships** to ensure they are confident and skilled in core elements of the programme, especially systems change and research. There is a role for both Relationship Managers and Action Researchers to work closely with partnerships to offer bespoke coaching. This will be particularly important in relation to systems change. As partnerships move closer to delivery, they will need to be encouraged to engage in systems thinking, considering what systems change means in their context, what their role in the system is, and how the system is responding.
2. **Define systems change within the programme, and support Relationship Managers, Learning Lots, and Action Researchers to confidently communicate this.** This will help ensure partnerships are supported in a structured and consistent way, with a clear language and approach for talking about system change, which can be tailored to their specific context.
3. **Continue to work relationally and build trust with partnerships.** To ensure partnerships feel comfortable in these new ways of working they will need continued support, reassurance, and guidance from their Relationship Manager.

Ongoing reflection and learning around following questions will strengthen this approach going forward:

1. How can a funder support and facilitate systems thinking and working in the programmes they fund? What support do grantees need to work in this way?
2. What do we mean when we talk about changing the local youth employment system? What do partnerships understand this to mean?
3. What is the connection between local and national systemic change? How might we support national change via local systemic change? And what is the role of a national funder in amplifying this?
4. How does the system respond when new ways of working are introduced? How do we continue to respond to this in real-time as a funder

Young people's involvement in the programme

Key findings

The programme timeline and flexibility enabled partnerships to design their own approach to youth voice in collaboration with young people.

Partnerships reported that Connected Futures enabled them to go further and be more ambitious in centring young people's views and experiences, with youth voice being genuinely embedded and central to decision-making, rather than simply consulting young people.

Giving partnerships 18 months to explore the systemic issues in their place allowed for the time required to navigate how youth voice can be incorporated, extending beyond consultations, to create structures for youth leadership and genuine co-production. This was often shaped by young people themselves, as those initially recruited to the partnerships worked with staff to design an approach to youth voice that went beyond initial plans. The flexibility in funding and the absence of pre-determined outputs meant partnerships could make mistakes, pivot funding, and trial new approaches. This included flexibility to reallocate funding where needed, as well as providing additional funding around areas considered particularly important, such as youth voice. For example, where partnerships hadn't initially budgeted enough for paying young people, YFF agreed to provide additional funding towards this.

Equally, as a funder, YFF provided more support and funding where needed, to ensure partnerships could develop approaches to youth voice that met their ambitions and went beyond consultation. Particularly crucial within this was recognising that each partnership would need to take their own unique approach based on their own starting point around youth voice and the cohort of young people they were working with. YFF responded to this need, providing support to partnerships who wanted to develop more ambitious and embedded approaches. This included providing extra funding to develop an approach, or connecting partnerships to organisations who could bring additional expertise. This was particularly useful for partnerships who had previously done little work on youth voice or where they were working with more marginalised cohorts such as young people with Learning Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Conditions, and young people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds.

“Young people have been integral. We've had young people doing the data gathering, as well as the data analysis. Mostly young people's discussions facilitating what direction we go in as a whole.”

Youth partnership member

Partnerships also noted that, as a funder, YFF were supportive of youth voice, and clear from the outset that this should not be a tokenistic approach. The ambition for youth voice was clearly communicated, and this was modelled across different elements of the programme, such as programme events involving and led by young

people. YFF also developed a Youth Steering Group for Connected Futures, made up of young people from across the eight partnerships.

“We have always been encouraged [to be youth-led], it’s at the programme’s core.”

VCS partner

Youth voice shaped the direction of projects and influenced the wider system to take youth voice and experiences more seriously.

Both partnerships and young people recognised that embedding youth voice has fundamentally shaped the scope of their work over Phase 1, offering suggestions and perspectives that would have otherwise been missing. In some cases, working with young people has also encouraged partnerships to question what they think they know and prevented them from jumping to solutions, instead encouraging a more open approach that takes stock of the issue from young people’s perspective. Equally, where young people’s perspectives were in conflict with other stakeholders and professionals, lead organisations backed young people, with explicit support from YFF to do this.

“Youth participation really has coloured which particular groups we look at of young people. When we go to a group of young people to interview them, we know what sort of background they might have come from because we have a very varied demographic within our own group [of young people], so there’s always someone who can understand where they are coming from.”

Youth partnership member

“Having young people involved has had a positive impact. We carry out interviews and we talk to other young people, and bring back feedback into our partnership. We have a different perspective over things. So in a way, it shapes the partnership.”

Youth partnership member

This way of working had a wider impact on partnership members and system stakeholders. Several partnership members shared that because of their involvement in this programme they are rethinking their approach to working with young people within their organisation or on other projects, and considering how they can be more ambitious with centring youth voice going forward. For example, one partnership has been inspired by another to hire a young apprentice to support with delivery going forward. Another organisation has been encouraged to think about refreshing their youth participation strategy based on learning from Connected Futures.

Alongside this, key system stakeholders have started to take youth voice more seriously. The programme has created spaces for young people to share their findings and views with key stakeholders and decision-makers, such as council officers and local employers, and this has typically been well received and genuinely listened to. This has also led to several partnerships working with system stakeholders to develop permanent models for youth voice, such as developing youth boards within the local authority.

“Young people are telling us where we’ve got it wrong. And we’re taking them to meetings with quite senior people, and they’re telling them, and the people are listening, because it’s directly from young people as well. Rather than just saying what young people have said, it’s them in the room.”

Statutory partner

Working with a partner with expertise in youth engagement enabled strong approaches to youth voice.

Several partnerships included an organisation with experience in youth engagement. In some cases, this has also included a dedicated member of staff, often with a background in youth work, working on the project. These organisations have been able to draw on their expertise to lead the recruitment of young people, work with young people throughout the programme, and support young people with their skills development and wider needs. They have also played a central role in pushing for youth voice, including driving more ambitious models for embedding youth voice, as well as pushing back where there has been a temptation to jump to solutions or move away from young people’s priorities.

Drawing on this expertise, youth engagement organisations have been able to work in a way that genuinely shifts power. They have often been intentional about recruitment, seeking to bring in young people with a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds, including young people who have been long term out of work or education. They have also worked in ways that recognise the value of youth voice, seek to amplify young people’s experiences, and treat young people as equitable partners. For example, one organisation has hired young people from their target cohort (those with Learning Disabilities and/ or Autism Spectrum Conditions) to work on their Connected Futures project in order to demonstrate the value of young people’s role, as well helping them learn what it takes for an organisation to support young people with these specific needs in the workplace.

Partnerships sometimes faced challenges in ensuring consistent engagement from young people, linked to the open nature of the programme.

The first phase of Connected Futures has been a long and intensive process. When recruiting young people to the programme, the roles were often poorly defined due to the emergent nature of the work. Equally, young people haven’t typically had full-time or consistent hours through the programme, meaning they often have other

work or education commitments. This has created challenges in keeping young people consistently engaged, with involvement sometimes being transient or fluctuating over time, rather than a consistent group remaining involved from start to finish. In some cases, struggling to engage young people impacted the momentum of the programme or the quality of work being undertaken.

Partnerships also shared learning around the adaptations needed to address these challenges. It has been important for partnerships to be flexible, to ensure their approach is inclusive and that young people can still take part, in whatever capacity suits them. Practically this has included being flexible in shifting meeting schedules to suit young people, allowing varying levels of time commitments across one group, and allowing young people to drop in and out of the project. Demonstrating the value of young people's roles and contributing to their personal development has also been essential. For example, young people have been paid for their time across partnerships. Equally, some partnerships also offered project-specific training around topics such as research and provided mentorship on young people's wider aspirations such as supporting them to apply for jobs.

Empowering young people to lead requires upskilling both young people, and partnership staff, to be able to participate in a co-produced process.

Whilst partnerships have developed ambitious and empowering approaches to working with young people, it has sometimes been hard to strike a balance between being youth-led and bringing in the insights and experience of professionals in the partnership. This presented a challenge in both the research process, where partnerships did not push back on the methods young people proposed, and in defining the scope and next steps of the exploration phase, where young people shared that they did not have all the skills and knowledge needed to make informed decisions. This approach risked misleading young people around what is possible, and subsequently letting them down later. For example, in one partnership, the process of developing solutions was challenging for young people, as they struggled to articulate exactly what solutions should look like without knowledge or experience of how to design and resource an employability programme or labour market intervention. This meant that we saw paid staff take on a more active role in the design of solutions, but they often did so with concerns that this wasn't a youth-led way of working.

Dealing with these challenges requires young people to be upskilled and provided with the expertise needed to deliver the project, alongside partnerships having the facilitation skills to work with young people in a way that is both empowering, honest and co-productive. It will require partnerships that have developed youth voice to continue to centre this while maintaining confidence in their own perspectives on what is needed, and recognising that developing systemic interventions requires bringing together a wide range of perspectives on the system. This will be particularly important as partnerships move towards developing solutions and embedding youth voice into the broader system, as they will need to feel confident in facilitating youth voice and working with young people in a way that is empowering,

honest, and provides them with the tools, relationships and constructive challenge needed to develop systemic interventions.

How can these findings influence the next stage of Connected Futures?

Summary of key learning

- The development of youth voice has been a key success of Phase 1 and the programme principle that was facilitated most effectively. Partnerships went beyond their established approaches to working with young people and often even beyond the approaches outlined in their bid, to build something more ambitious. This impact has also started to spill into the wider system.
- The flexibility of the programme has facilitated this, with partnerships having the time and space to figure out their approach and make mistakes, alongside YFF supporting pivots in funding and approach, and providing more funding where needed.
- As the programme moves into Phase 1.5 and 2 it will be interesting to see how youth voice sustains, and how partnerships move from embedding youth voice within their project towards embedding youth voice within the system.

How could YFF take this forward?

1. **Consider how successful approaches to promoting youth voice within the programme could influence other elements of programme support.** Youth voice has landed well with partnerships and has been enabled by the programme structure, leading to ambitious approaches. Understanding why this has been so successful could help shape coaching around other programme principles, such as system change.
2. **Frame youth voice as a core element of systems change and support partnership to embed this in the system.** Whilst partnerships have strong processes for youth voice within the partnerships, they have not always recognised how promoting youth voice can be an important part of systems change. As partnerships move forward in designing and delivering interventions it will be important to ensure youth voice doesn't remain exclusively within the project structure, and instead begins to influence the system.
3. **Identify best practice around youth voice, both within the programme and more broadly.** Identifying best practice in youth-led ways of working, both within programme partnerships and beyond the programme could be

used to support partnerships in their approaches to youth voice going forward, particularly as they seek to embed youth voice within the system.

4. **Support partnerships to develop the skills to facilitate co-production and youth-led approach.** To do justice to young people and their input, approaches to working with them need to be honest and open, listening and acting on young people's suggestions wherever possible, but also being upfront about limitations and providing them with the guidance and upskilling needed to engage in their roles. Relationship Managers and Action Researchers have a role in supporting partnerships to develop the skills to manage this delicate balance, to avoid disappointing young people or putting them in positions they do not feel fully equipped for.

Ongoing reflection and learning around following questions will strengthen this approach going forward:

1. How can YFF best support partnerships to embed youth voice in the wider system, and to see shifting power towards young people as a key element of systemic change?
2. What is the impact of having youth voice embedded with the system? Does this change how the system supports young people, and who this reaches? Does it shape elements of the system beyond the direct reach of this programme?
3. What is the impact of having youth leadership and participation in specific solutions and interventions? Does this improve the reach and impact of services?

Taking a partnership-based approach

Key findings

Developing a place-based partnership allowed organisations to collectively leverage their different skills and networks.

Successful partnerships saw each member bringing a different set of skills, expertise, and networks to the table. Several partnership members acknowledged that they would not have achieved the same impact working alone.

“Because no one organisation can do everything, it’s that collection of expertise that allows you to achieve that common goal. It’s like ingredients to a cake, everyone has got their part to play. That’s allowed us to progress further than we ever would have been able to if we had done it alone.”

Housing Association partner

Partnership working was particularly effective where partnerships included a member with expertise around youth voice and youth engagement, which was often those engaged with delivering frontline youth services. This partner was able to use their skills and reach into the community to establish models for youth voice and engage young people in the area. Often larger and statutory organisations lacked this kind of expertise and reach, making this dedicated role within the partnership essential for enabling youth voice.

Place-based partnership working has also allowed partnerships to connect with a wider set of stakeholders in their local context. Where there is an existing ‘ecosystem’ within a place, such as stakeholders who work specifically in that place, or existing networks of stakeholders within a place, it has been possible to draw on these networks and deepen relationships. This has been particularly effective where partnership members are embedded with a place, and work specifically within that context, meaning they have connections, knowledge, and existing work that can link into the programme. Each partner has therefore been able to leverage their own networks, such as links to local businesses, statutory partners, VCS organisations, and young people, to raise the profile of the project across a wide range of stakeholders.

“We’ve got existing ecosystems that we’ve been able to connect with, so different partnerships around employment, that are all local organisations.”

Housing Association partner

However, some partnerships recognised the limitations of working with partners in a set geography. This was particularly the case in places where the local system is more fractured, or where there is no natural boundary to place-based working. There was also a risk that place-based working could be ‘claustrophobic’, with the same

stakeholders working on the same issues in that place over many years. These places always rely on the same leaders and stakeholders to make change.

Building consensus and trust within partnerships was key.

Effective partnership working has relied on each partner buying in to a shared goal and being committed to the ethos of the programme. Partnerships noted that it was essential for members to be committed to a shared recognition of the problem and vision for change, rather than simply coming to the project for funding. Alongside this, partners needed to buy in to the ethos and ways of working of the programme, such as being open to the exploratory process and being flexible as plans, timelines, and roles changed. Where one partner had a different ethos, approach, or agenda to the wider partnership this could create challenges. For example, if one partner had set ideas about what they wanted to get out of the project, rather than being open to exploration, this created challenges.

“What [has] helped us is the problem, for want of a better word. [It] is universally acknowledged by all of the partners. Everybody wants to improve that situation. So we haven’t come up against barriers [within the partnership].”

Statutory partner

Building strong and trusting relationships has also been essential to partnership working. In some cases, partners had worked together in the past and were therefore already familiar with each other’s skillsets and ways of working. Where these relationships weren’t initially as strong, having time for team building, becoming familiar with ways of working, and establishing clear roles and responsibilities was essential. For example, one partnership had weekly team meetings to establish relationships and progress the project.

“It’s about people really buying into what you’re doing. It can’t just be about getting some money in the door for their organisation. They have to really believe that the approach you’re taking is the right one. It’s a matter of time and giving it the time to develop, [for] the partnership to feel like a partnership. Just because you come together around a pot of funding, it doesn’t mean that everyone is there with the same buy-in and the same agenda.”

VCS partner

Where challenges emerge in partner relationships, the funder can play an important role in navigating this. Whilst the role of the Relationship Manager and Learning Partner were designed to support with this, and often did so successfully, certain partnership members noted they would have appreciated more support in managing challenges within the partnership, for example where there were disagreements over project direction or roles and responsibilities. This could include advice and

guidance on how to deal with these challenges, and support in facilitating difficult processes. However, it was challenging for Relationship Managers and Learning Partners to always offer this support, as some partnership members didn't always feel they could be honest about the challenges they were facing as they wanted to present themselves as effective to the funder.

It was sometimes challenging to sustain a core partnership with a shared ambition through an exploratory process.

Effective partnership working has required partners to come together around a shared vision and ethos, as well as ensuring each partner can offer relevant expertise and skills. However, it can be challenging to do this at the beginning of an exploratory process, when the exact direction and focus of the work is not clearly defined. This meant that in some cases, partners joined a partnership with a specific idea of how work would progress and how they would contribute their expertise, only to find they weren't well-placed to support with the project when the remit has become better defined and more focused. This was at times rooted in partners having preconceived ideas around what they wanted from the programme rather than bringing an openness and flexibility to being led by exploration, therefore risking partnerships coming together without being open to working in a way that is youth-led and systemic. Partnerships also reflected that there was a broader challenge around the ability of organisations to establish a strategic and effective partnership when the exact remit of the project is unclear.

There have been several cases of partnerships evolving and changing as Phase 1 has progressed. Taking an exploratory approach required partnerships to be responsive and flexible, and shift membership as their focus developed. This is a common theme within place-based partnership programmes, especially those with a more exploratory focus, where partnerships evolve and develop over time to align with priorities and needs. Where Connected Futures partnerships have done this, they have been able to ensure their partnership continues to be made up of relevant members, with the right expertise and remit to help the partnership achieve its goals.

In contrast, the Connected Futures expansion work seeks to work closely with one experience-led organisation to develop their capacity and build a partnership as they go. Whether this approach creates different results, will reveal a lot about how to shift power and build the relationships needed to drive change, alongside revealing which relationships are really critical to systems change. Being in a partnership that brings together system actors that hold institutional power such as local authorities, universities, and housing associations can also present challenges, as these actors may not have historically engaged with or been supportive of smaller partners who may be more connected to the communities they work with. Their very involvement may lead smaller more grassroots partners to retreat. At the same time, engaging with these entities that hold formal power any local area is likely to be critical in systems change.

Allocating at least 40% of funding to the smallest partner had a positive impact, however there were still challenges in equitably dividing funding and workload between partners.

Within the funded partnerships each organisation was allocated a portion of the funding, with the smallest partner (a VCS organisation) receiving at least a 40% share of the funding. Partnerships reflected that each partner receiving a share of the funding was beneficial in promoting early buy-in and commitment and encouraged each partner to play a role in delivery. Equally, ensuring the largest share of funding went to the smallest partner was effective in promoting equity in several partnerships as the smallest partner, a VCS organisation, was recognised as a primary contributor. Partnerships and Relationship Managers recognised that typically small VCS organisations are rarely compensated equitably for their knowledge and relationships to the community when collaborating with larger and statutory organisations. Allocating the funding in this way meant VCS organisations were being recognised for their value and were being taken seriously, with an understanding that they were doing some of the most important elements of the work.

“It started to feel, like, oh we might be the smallest partner, but YFF are recognising that we potentially have the most to say that’s accurate...It meant for the first time those statutory organisations, or bigger organisations, had to say ‘oh we do need you’. Quite often in the charity sector, you’re thrown a few crumbs, or you’re brought in when your expertise is needed, but you’re not paid for your expertise. The weighting of the payment of this, is weighted in favour of the smallest partner, and that recognises how much work goes into it.”

VCS partner

While this approach went a long way towards supporting a greater feeling of equity within partnerships, it did not always ensure that delivery was shared across the partnership. With the smallest partner often taking the largest share of the funding, this also often led to the majority of work falling to them. Other partners often had a very small portion of funding, making it challenging for them to consistently engage and support delivery, particularly where they worked on other projects or had other demands on their time.

“When we first started we thought it would be a great big partnership, where we would all be involved with lots of elements of it, but really it’s rested on us [one partner]...we’ve maybe been left on our own quite a bit. We thought there should be a great deal of involvement from other partners, but it evolved into us doing everything – there was very little involvement from other partners.”

VCS partner

This led to organisations across partnerships working beyond their allotted budget, in the case of lead organisations because they were carrying a large burden of delivery, and in the case of other partners because they had very little budget to engage. These challenges in resource and capacity were felt most acutely by smaller organisations who were typically leading delivery. They were perhaps more likely to go further over budget than other partners due to the amount of work they were responsible for, whilst also feeling the impact of this more acutely as a smaller, VCS organisation.

Several partnerships recognised that they had not anticipated the time and budget that was required to deliver this kind of programme, meaning they had underestimated costs at the beginning. Given the exploratory approach was a new way of working across partnerships, with much of the process being intangible, it was challenging for partnerships to conceptualise how much resource would be needed. This has been particularly challenging for partnerships who did not budget for a dedicated project manager or coordinator to work full-time on Connected Futures, meaning staff were working on the project in addition to other roles and responsibilities. There were instances where this led to tension and frustration within partnerships, with resentment towards partners who weren't seen to be pulling their weight.

“I think the reality is it hasn't always worked that way for us, like several times, I think the onus has still been on [the lead partner], even though in an ideal world, it would be on the rest of the partnership as well.”

VCS partner

In interviews partnerships suggested that it could be helpful to have additional support from YFF around partnership formation and capacity requirements for this type of work at the outset of the programme. This could include guidance on the project management capacity needed, realistic budgets, funding allocation, and the division of responsibility within the partnership. YFF has recognised this within the programme expansion, which incorporates support for VCS organisations to establish a partnership, and they have also aimed to account for any capacity gaps by granting additional funding to the partnerships as requested. Building on this going forward will require both guidance and trust between RMs and partnerships so they can reflect honestly on the burden that this work presents and challenges they are having around capacity.

“I don't know how much guidance or support they [the lead partner] were given about what their role should be. I don't think the lead partner knew what they were getting themselves into, in terms of the resource that was needed to manage this. There could have been more support about infrastructure and project management from YFF. And clearer guidance on how many hours they expected this to take. Because certainly the staff time did not reflect the funding.”

VCS partner

How can these findings influence the next stage of Connected Futures?

Summary of key learning:

- Working in partnership brings clear benefits, with each partner bringing their own skills, expertise, and networks to the table. Partnerships were most effective when each partner was able to bring something specific to the table, making their role and responsibility clear.
- Having a formalised partnership with agreed roles at the start of the process was somewhat challenging, as the exploratory nature of the programme made it hard to ensure the partnership was strategically relevant from the beginning when it was not clear quite what the project could lead to.
- Ensuring smaller partners took the largest share of funding was undoubtedly an effective approach to designing out some of the inequities between larger statutory organisations and smaller VCS organisations. Even so, there were still persistent challenges around equitably dividing roles and responsibilities, and ensuring organisations were able to stay within budget, with smaller VCS organisations most likely to be affected by this.

How could YFF take this forward?

1. **Promote partnership changes as projects develop and define their scope.** It will be important for YFF and Relationship Managers to continue to encourage partnerships to think strategically about who should sit in their partnership, and ensure partnerships feel able to move away from the partnership they started with if it no longer suits their ambitions. Exploring whether there should be a shift or expansion of the core partnership could be an expectation of moving to Phase 2.
2. **Support partnerships to identify their roles and responsibilities going forward.** Relationship Managers have a role to play in ensuring partnerships clearly identify what they are bringing to the table, and responsibilities of each partner, as the programme develops. This will be particularly important in ensuring the skills, networks, and influence of each partner can be fully leveraged. Relationship Managers could play a role in facilitating activities and discussions around this, such as asset mapping.
3. **Support partnerships to continually reflect on their capacity and consider how they might expand their capacity.** This might not necessarily mean providing more funding to the lead organisation, especially if they don't have the infrastructure to manage this, but instead considering

where additional capacity support could come from additional partners. Partnerships should also be encouraged by RMs to reflect on if they are overcapacity, and to consider how responsibility sits across different roles, ensuring those working on the project have enough time carved out, as well as considering where dedicated roles are required.

Ongoing reflection and learning around following questions will strengthen this approach going forward:

1. What has been the impact of taking a different partnership approach in the place expansion?
2. How have partnerships adapted and evolved through this process? What has enabled this?
3. How can YFF, as a funder, support partnerships to manage their composition, capacity, and resource?

What have we learnt?

In seeking to move away from traditional funding practices and instead fund systemically, Connected Futures has given partnerships the opportunity to work in new and more ambitious ways. The exploratory and flexible approach offered partnerships the space to interrogate the issue of youth unemployment in their place, understanding this in more depth, and crucially from the perspective of young people. Being able to trial new approaches, make mistakes, and pivot plans has made it possible for partnerships to build new and exciting approaches, particularly around youth voice. The experience has been overwhelmingly positive for partnerships, with a sense that as the programme moves towards design, testing, and delivery, exciting and innovative approaches are developing.

Nonetheless, this way of working was new to partnerships, who were not able to fully anticipate what this process would require from the start. Working with flexibility and an absence of outcomes has importantly facilitated a shift in power and enabled a deeper understanding of the local system. At the same time, this has at times created uncertainty, as well as making it challenging to predict the resource and capacity required. Partnerships did not always feel they had the knowledge or skills to work in an exploratory and systemic way, particularly when it came to facilitating a research process and designing systems change interventions. Whilst bespoke and relational support, and efforts to capacity build were valued by the partnerships, they also reflected a desire for more investment of support, upskilling, and coaching to shift towards the programme ambitions. Going forward, it will be essential for Relationship Managers and Action Researchers to work closely with partnerships to coach and support around key areas, such as systems change, codesign, and partnership working.

Connected Futures has been an exciting period of rich and deep learning for everyone involved, including the local partners, young people leading the work, the Connected Futures team at YFF and us at Renaisi-TSIP. The programme was designed with deep intentionality and reflection around how to support systemic change, and the learning that has emerged from it is valuable for any funder looking to work more systemically:

1. **Funding systemically means funding according to principles rather than outputs.** These principles need to be clearly articulated and communicated intentionally and repeatedly with grantees so they can understand what is guiding decision-making and ways of working, in absence of set processes. Working in this way can offer grantees the flexibility and space to gain a richer understanding of the social issues they seek to address, bring key stakeholders around the table to work together, and centre the voices of those with lived experience.

2. **Recognise the need for shifts in thinking about social change, alongside processes.** Moving to new ways of working that are more co-productive, systemic, emergent, and power shifting is not just about changes in how things are done, but changes in how we think about our own roles in the system, and what we hold as valuable and true. If a funder wants to fund in line with these more ambitious principles, they will need to support grantees to go on this journey, to shift their attitudes and practices. This means not just offering practical support, but also relational guidance and reassurance.
3. **Create the safety and confidence to change.** Linked to the two points above, the Connected Futures approach to funding worked most effectively where there was a genuinely trusting relationship developed between YFF and the partnership. This allowed for honest conversations about knowledge gaps, capacity issues, discomfort and uncertainty, which allowed YFF to adapt its support and offer reassurance that these challenges were to be expected in emergent and unpredictable systems working. Funders aiming to adopt this approach should be intentional about creating a safe space for reflection on challenges and confidence to change, with attention to how the inherent power dynamics in their relationship can hold that back, and what behaviours might mitigate that.

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