



Connected Futures Insights Report

Youth Futures Foundation

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Introduction

Renaisi is the learning partner for the first phase of Youth Futures Foundation’s £16 million Connected Futures Fund which aims to support young people into good jobs through pioneering local partnerships.

Its purpose is to join up support for young people across different agencies and services, starting in seven places in England with some of the highest NEET rates and deprivation indicators. The flagship programme will see local partnerships receive funding to establish new systems that provide young people who face more barriers to employment, with the connected and consistent support they need to get good jobs. The first phase of this work is for each of the seven partnerships to develop a collective understanding in each partnership of the ‘problem’ that is driving youth unemployment locally, to co-create a plan for change and strengthen the local relationships required to bring about that change – with young people actively involved throughout. Youth Futures will select the most promising plans to invest in to deliver solutions over the next few years.

Youth Futures appointed Renaisi in July 2022 to work with partnerships in this first phase of work to build and develop innovative research approaches, encourage reflection on their local systems and what they are learning, and support sharing of skills and knowledge between partnerships. We are also working to understand common themes and share what we learn about place-based youth employment support, with Youth Futures and the wider sector.

Renaisi is supporting the programme with three connected levels of learning for the first phase of the fund. At each level, Renaisi is providing learning support and capacity building:

- 1. Local partnership** – supporting each local partnership to develop strong collaborative relationships, from better understanding the root causes of issues, to exploring entry routes and collaborative activities that might leverage lasting change.

- 2. Across local partnerships** – creating environments where peer-to-peer learning (and inspiration) can happen across all local partnership groups, in the spirit of being part of a bigger movement of change, rather than of competition. This is designed to enable local partnership groups to expand learning and develop a stronger collective voice about what needs to change for young people to thrive.



3. **Youth Futures Foundation & stakeholders** – comparing and combining insights from across the partnerships, as well others, to understand the system, build a deeper understanding of the root causes preventing young people from accessing good employment and how to address them through a place-based approach.

This report captures experiences, and reflections from the first six months of the programme (July 2022, to December 2022), drawing from experiences of the Renaisi learning leads, and Youth Futures Foundation relationship managers, which have been assigned to each partnership. It also draws on monthly reflections that have been shared by partnership leads.

We did not directly engage with partnerships and the young people involved in the programme in putting together this report, as at this critical stage, we did not want to place additional burden on partners whose capacity was focused on setting up the project, and many partnerships were at early stages of involving and building their own trusting relationships with young people.

As a result, this report reflects Renaisi's and Youth Futures' experiences and perceptions from working with partnerships so far. Its purpose is to pull together initial learning on how the programme is working so far at both at a partnership level, and across the programme. To understand how it is working, we explore:

- Some of the key context of the **core partnerships**, and what has been more and less effective in setting up this unique programme
- How partnerships have been **involving young people**, and what has helped to support youth participation in different aspects of the programme
- Learnings from the beginnings of the **consultation and research process**, including what supports equitable participation
- How partnerships have approached engaging different stakeholders in the **local employment system**, and what has helped to gain buy-in for the programme

Lastly, the report explores what we have learned about how to effectively fund and support an innovative place-based approach to tackling youth unemployment, seeking to understand:

- What has worked well so far, and what has been more challenging for partnerships;
- How Renaisi and Youth Futures Foundation can learn from this to be flexible and adapt to what partnerships need;
- And what this tells us about how to fund flexible place-based programmes more broadly.

In places

Who are the partnerships?



Developing the core partnerships

The Connected Futures partnerships were selected based on their experience working on youth employment or related issues, their existing relationships across the place and a track record of working together. Partnerships needed to include a mix of voluntary and community sector partners, and partners with statutory responsibilities to qualify for funding. The mix of organisations in the successful partnerships includes housing associations, councils, youth-focused organisations, educational institutions and employability specialists.

The partnerships have approached working together and setting up the project in different ways. For example, in some areas, project management has rested more so with existing staff in a lead partner organisation, while in other areas the partnership has hired new staff to be responsible for key aspects of the project (note that Youth Futures makes a distinction between ‘Accountable Partner’ who is responsible for the grant, and ‘Lead Partner’ who is responsible for the work).



The launch of Connected Futures.

What has supported the partnerships to get going?

Partners’ existing skills, experience and connections

While all the partnerships have existing strengths, these skillsets differ from partnership to partnership, and we can see how these different starting points have affected what partnerships have found they can do more effectively or quickly in the outset.

For example, the Hull partnership has existing structures for youth governance in place through its partner the Warren Youth Project, where young people are already involved in taking decisions that affect them. This has meant that compared to other partnerships with less experience in involving young people, Hull has had youth involvement from the outset, while others have taken longer to establish how they will involve young people and have needed more guidance on this aspect.

Experience with youth work and engagement in partnerships does help identify and engage young people to join partnership groups, as in Burnley, where one of the partners Participation Works, an experienced youth work charity, has supported a diverse range of young people to join a youth leadership panel for the partnership. This is also starting to be seen in Brent, Hastings, and Lewisham, and it will be useful to explore further how this youth work experience benefits young people across the life of the programme, including how this compares to partnerships that do not have youth work experience.

Existing contacts can also help speed up the start of the consultation process, or engagement with wider stakeholders. For example Blackpool included the Blackpool Football Trust as a partner, which meant they were able to kickstart the research and engagement as early as July 2022, reaching 500 young people through existing holiday clubs and work in schools. In Hastings, securing the participation of a well-networked and respected local VCS leader to chair the project's wider Reference Group has opened doors to more strategic contacts and opportunities.

Recruiting specific roles for Connected Futures

Recruiting dedicated staff can provide the capacity for more rapid progress, and the expertise for a deeper focus in their area. For example the partnership in one area has hired a youth worker with a lot of experience and connections, which they have tapped into to recruit peer researchers, and to engage wide range of young people who are not the 'usual suspects'. This has also been the case in Hull, where they have recruited a Research Lead and Research Assistant, to manage the research process, which has helped the project to pick up pace now that they are in post.

What has been more challenging in establishing partnerships?

Capacity to work on the project

In some areas, capacity to drive the project has rested with the lead partner in the first months, with other members of the core partnership less involved. Therefore, progress has depended on the capacity of that lead partner – in a couple of areas there has been one individual managing the set-up, which has been stressful for the individual and slowed progress.

Time to find the right people

In Hull, where the partnership is led by the Warren Youth Project, they identified the need to hire two roles – a Research Lead and Research Assistant – to lead on the research and widen engagement to young people that don't attend the youth hub. The researchers only came into post in November, which meant the partnership had less time to plan out the research, compared to some other partnerships.

In another area, they did not manage to recruit anyone when they first advertised as they received very few applications, so they had to go out for recruitment again, which delayed the process. In the second round, they were clearer about the requirements of the role, highlighted that it is not an academic role and increased the salary and hours provided, which led them to successfully recruit.

Process delays

In Burnley, delays in completing the grant agreement as a result of one partner's legal decision-making processes prevented that partner from commencing the work. The delay in completing the grant agreement also meant that the smallest partner began significant engagement work prior to payment.

Data sharing agreements have also held up working together in some areas.

Working in partnership

Communication can be challenging. Some partners have struggled to get timely responses on the work from other partners or felt that other partners aren't as involved as expected. This has often been the case when partners have less financial stake in the project. Even where local authorities are part of the partnership, it can be difficult to get their commitment to attending meetings and being involved.

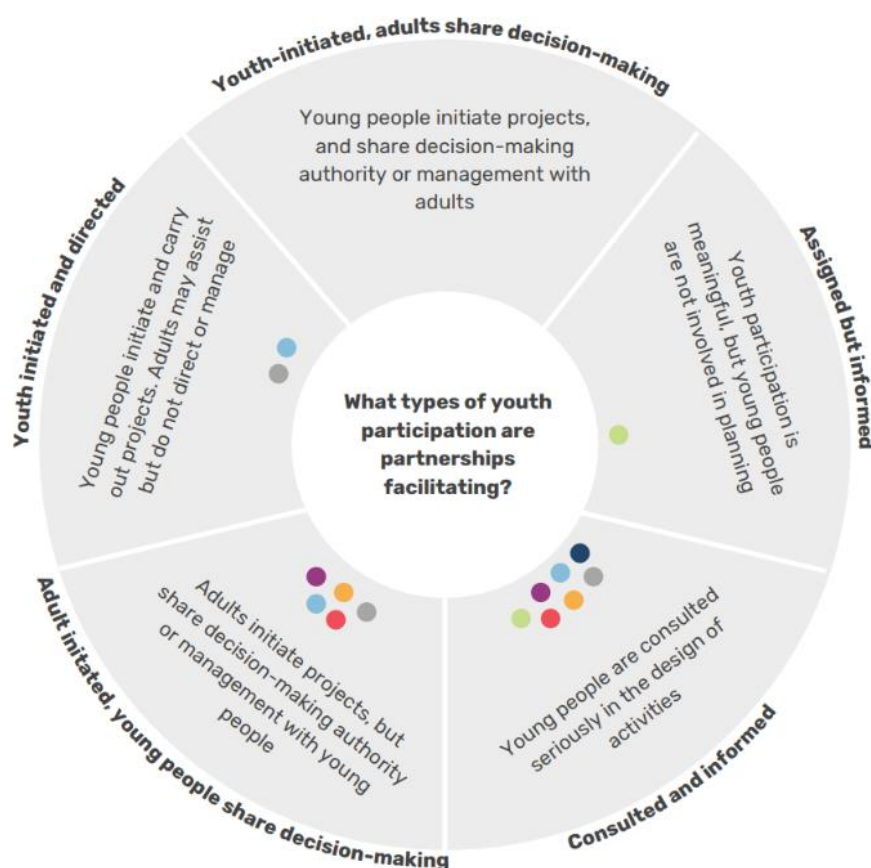
What does this mean for the programme?

What can we adapt now?	This learning around specific roles, governance structures and existing skills and connections is all useful for future rounds or similar projects. However, there isn't a great deal that can be adapted at this point, aside from understanding constraints around capacity, and using the Relationship Manager and Learning Lead roles to spot these early and talk through potential solutions. As the programme progresses it will also be worth understanding how well the specific roles are working in practice, and collecting Job Descriptions that can be used as resources by others in the cohort (this has already been shared on a case by case basis).
What have we learned for future programmes?	Support in helping partnerships to recruit members of staff (e.g. advice on appropriate salary, identifying gaps in organisational skill sets and how to advertise the role) would be beneficial. Providing advice, guidance and training on the specifics of data sharing agreements and GDPR regulations up front, so that this doesn't slow down progress.

Involving young people in the partnership

Youth Futures has developed a ‘Youth Participation Wheel’ (see below), a development of the well known Youth Participation Ladder, to highlight that while there are many forms of youth participation, one is not necessarily better than the other, that partnerships can be involving young people in different ways at the same time, and that the way they involve young people might change over time.

On the Wheel below, Connected Futures partnerships are plotted, to provide a sense of the diverse ways that partnerships are approaching youth participation. Five of the areas did not have previous youth involvement in the partnership, and as part of the programme are recruiting young people from scratch to be involved in decision making, and mostly propose to define roles according to young people’s interests:



- **Brent:** young people are engaged on the project board and oversee delivery of the project.
- **Lewisham:** 18 youth ambassadors sit on the project board, and form different subgroups to oversee the different aspects of the programme.
- **Blackpool:** young people have been involved in decision-making from the inception of the project through the engagement of youth advisors in their steering group.
- **Burnley:** the partnership have an active Youth Leadership Panel, with representatives from the panel on the project partnership group.

- **Hastings:** young people are leading and managing the research process as peer researchers. Young people are also engaged in the project partnership group.
- **D2N2:** young people are being consulted through the research, and the partnership are working to build their involvement in the wider project.
- **Hull:** young people have been engaged in decision-making since the start of the project on the young people's working group, which reports to the project steering group.

What has supported youth participation?

Using existing structures to engage young people

Partnerships who already have connections with youth governance structures have been well placed to reach young people. For example, Blackpool Youth Council and Blackpool Youth Advisors, The Warren (Hull) and the Young Mayoral Group and young people's groups at Phoenix (Lewisham) have all facilitated youth engagement.

Engaging young people through existing structures such as Kickstart apprenticeships (Brent) can provide an additional budget to pay young people, and help provide a structure for training.

Young people's commitment, energy and skills

Youth Advisors in Blackpool (a pre-existing role through Blackpool Youth Council, that has been reoriented to be part of this piece of work) have been very involved from the start, designing research activities, facilitating at workshops or focus groups, participating actively in Steering Group meetings and over email.

Compensating young people for their time

Paying young people for their time is important and a good incentive to take part, but this can be difficult to navigate when young people involved in an organisation may not be paid for other work they are doing and or they are used to compensating young people in different ways, for example through vouchers.

Support from Relationship Managers and sharing ideas with other partnerships has encouraged at least one partnership to find a way to pay their young people. Partnerships have found that being led by young people's preferences and circumstances is effective. For example, Burnley have agreed to let each young person choose whether to be paid, or have equivalent in vouchers. They have also planned for young people to be paid for work activities – such as attending project management meetings, or carrying out research in schools – but not when taking them for social activities.

Designing a process that works for the young people

Being flexible and responsive to young people's schedules, according to what each set of young people prefers. For example, avoiding early morning meeting times, and holding evening and weekend meetings so young people can attend after college or work

commitments, and being considerate of pressures around exam times and in peoples' personal lives.

Scheduling meetings week to week, worked better than having regular meetings for young people in Hull, whereas in Blackpool the Youth Advisors preferred to mutually agree a set number of working hours per week, to provide clarity and structure.

Making meetings more accessible

In Hull the lead organisation has less of a focus on process and procedure, and more of a focus on creating an open and relaxed atmosphere so that young people feel at ease to contribute, this includes things like creating space for smaller group discussions.

Time to support young people to build confidence and skills

It takes time to meaningfully equip young people with the skills and confidence to participate. At the same time, young people have different backgrounds, and support should be tailored to individual needs. This was widely acknowledged by partners.

Both group and 121 support is important. For example, in Burnley, the partnership did team building workshops with their Youth Leadership Panel, to support them to build bonds as a team and grow in confidence, so that they can speak up and challenge others in the partnership meetings. Another area has designed a series of trainings including space to get to know each other.

What has been more challenging in involving young people?

Risk of relying on 'usual suspects'

Participation can be dominated by young people who are already active, and not those who are more likely to be affected by youth unemployment. For example, in one partnership the young people involved in the project board tend to be mostly active and politically engaged, and some are involved in similar opportunities. This has led to the partnership considering ways they can reach young people who wouldn't normally take up such opportunities.

Lack of experience in youth participation

While all partnerships are committed to involving young people, not having previous experience or a 'blueprint' for doing this can mean they find it difficult to involve people beyond consultation. Support from Relationship Managers and sharing ideas with other partnerships have been useful in developing approaches here, for example in a learning session run by the British Youth Council.

Commitment

With the complexity of some young people's lives, and their other commitments, combined with the unfamiliarity of working on a project like this, retention is likely to be a challenge, and partnerships will need to recognise this through 121 support and flexibility, and being aware of the need to recruit on an ongoing basis.

What does this mean for the programme?

What can we adapt now?

At this early stage of involving young people in the Connected Futures partnerships, it will be critical to continue to deepen our collective understanding of what is and isn't working, so that we as Relationship Managers and Learning Leads can share learning across the partnerships. We also plan to run a peer learning and reflection session in April, as a follow up from a session run by British Youth Council in January, to create space for partnerships to reflect on how they are involving young people and share ideas around common issues or challenges.

The biggest risk in some partnerships appears to be not engaging with enough young people experiencing systemic barriers to employment or who are genuinely representative of disadvantaged young people in the partnership, and therefore not designing a solution that fully responds to what is needed by those most affected.

It will be essential to understand which approaches are successfully allowing partnerships to identify and engage young people that weren't previously known to the partnerships, so that these can be replicated elsewhere. At this stage there are early indications that the research roles in Hull could do this, and will be something to keep an eye on. Additionally, using existing structures and organisations to engage people appears to have been working, though it could be pushed further to include more grassroots groups with real reach into communities, or schools. This approach coupled with a decent, clear, bounded, paid offer, as indicated by the enablers section feels most sensible, but is of course what many of them are trying already.

What have we learned for future programmes?

As outlined above, this part of delivery is far from straightforward and one that we will continue to gather learning around to share for future rounds or programmes. However, there are some emerging lessons around the time, capacity and planning that needs to go in to doing this effectively. Recruitment in itself is a long process, often with a number of false starts. Young people with complex lives need to feel safe and supported before they can commit, learn new skills and develop their confidence, and retention is likely to be an ongoing issue. This period can be underestimated, but probably needs more time than most of the partnerships initially gave it.

Consultation and research process

Partnerships are using a variety of engagement and consultation approaches but all have an ambition to be participatory in their approach in some form. Four of the partnerships taking an explicit peer research approach, training and recruiting young people to carry out research and engage with young people and in some cases employers and parents and carers. This takes more time, and can be a steeper learning curve, but has the potential to really reveal what local employment systems look through young people's eyes. Other partnerships are more adult led in their approach, engaging young people and other stakeholder groups through surveys, focus groups and interviews. This might involve young people in some of the design or facilitation of these activities :

- **Brent:** a peer research approach is being taken, with young people engaging their peers through workshops and pop-up events; outreach activities; community channels; drop-in events; and other listening activities such as one-to-ones, resident forums, social media engagement.
- **Lewisham:** young people are leading research activities as peer researchers. They will be engaging other young people through focus groups; forums; events; outreach activities.
- **Blackpool:** partners are facilitating consultation with young people, as well as parents, carers, families, employers and community representatives through a range of methods, including: surveys/questionnaires; focus groups; town hall meetings; workshops. The Youth Advisors also carried out and designed some focus groups.
- **Burnley:** one of the partners, a youthwork organisation, is carrying out research with young people, and UCLan is leading on a desk review of good practice. Young people are being brought together in a steering group to understand the challenges and barriers for young people in the system, and may be involved in carrying out some of the research. The partnership has also hired an Employer Liaison Officer, to carry out research and engagement with employers.
- **Hastings:** Peer researchers are being trained by members of the core partnership and will speak to other young people to understand their experiences.
- **D2N2:** The research phase is underway and involves professionals conducting interviews with young people, as well as parents and carers. This is being complemented by surveys with key services/ organisations that support young people, including education providers, and with employers who currently have inclusive practices.
- **Hull:** The project is using a participatory appraisal approach, empowering young people through co-production and peer research to engage with their peers, discuss their needs and explore solutions to barriers.

What has supported the consultation process?

Developing research questions collaboratively

Renaissi has supported most of the partnerships to develop 'lines of enquiry' as a group, to build clear overarching research questions to structure the research process. Feedback from some partnerships has said that this has helped clarify their objectives and give them a clear direction for the next steps.

Being intentional about recruitment of peer researchers

Being intentional about outreach has also been important, for example following Renaisi's peer learning session on peer research, one partnership paused the recruitment of peer researchers so that they could take more time to consider the design of the role and outreach methods, and to create engaging recruitment materials, which has led to them successfully recruiting a group of peer researchers who will also be involved in the project board.

Using existing connections to reach people

In Hull, use of existing contacts working with young people, and reaching out through existing groups has been key to success so far. This has included, reaching out to a youth disability group, organising multiple drop-ins for young people to hear about the research and what it would involve, and speaking at some of their partner organisations' youth events.

Diversifying engagement and recruitment has been facilitated by working with trusted local organisations, in order to reach key cohorts. For example, in Brent, the partnership has worked with local organisations to ensure they reach young Black men. Similarly in Hull working through existing partners and project has been an effective way to engage relevant young people.

Training for peer researchers

Training for peer researchers has included confidence building, and support in basic interview skills, understanding what makes a good researcher, with a focus on highlighting the skills young people already have (such as listening, curiosity), and gaining practical experience. For example, for peer research training in Brent, young people were asked to leave the session to practice some basic questions on the local high street. Training in safeguarding and data privacy has also been important.

Piggy-backing on existing events

Making the most of events attended by young people has also been an effective mechanism to engage a range of young people in the research. In Blackpool, young people have been reached through events for International Men's Day and the Big Education Conversation.

What has been more challenging in the consultation process so far?

Lack of existing research expertise

Many of the partners in the partnerships do not have a research background, and none have worked with peer researchers before. As a result, there is a learning curve, which means it may take more time and trial and error to develop the approach, though the learning partner support has been geared to encourage this, through training sessions and bespoke support to help partnerships design their approach.

Deciding whether to go broad or deep, and which methods should be used to explore this

For partnerships, it can be tricky to strike a balance between a broad and a 'deep dive' approach when deciding what issues or groups of young people to address in the research. Taking a broad approach is an attempt to identify the issues that matter most to young

people across a cohort, and ensure the findings are widely applicable – though it runs the risk of lacking the specificity or detail from which to develop a meaningful solution. On the other hand, taking a more targeted issue focus can help make the research manageable, ensure deep coverage of the issue leading to clear actionable findings – while potentially missing out on wider issues that matter to young people, or limiting the scope of the solutions. Renaisi has supported partnerships in this process through helping them to develop ‘lines of enquiry’, but partnerships have in some cases still struggled to define collectively what approach best works for them.

Partnerships have also needed to make decisions on the balance of quantitative and qualitative research in their approach, and what this means for their ability to design an effective solution at the next stage. The benefit of quantitative research is seen by some as providing more robust or generalisable evidence to share with systemic partners and create buy in, and a sense of what the key issues are across the cohort – though without qualitative research to supplement those findings it is not as explanatory of why particular themes are emerging. And depending on the way survey data is collected may explain much less about how issues differ for key groups of young people and is likely to reflect the experiences of young people who are more engaged. Qualitative and particularly peer research offers a more exploratory, open way of understanding the problem, but presents a challenge in the amount of data presented, and how to best analyse this. It may also reflect more strongly the experiences of those that engaged, who may or may not represent the most relevant experiences. Some partnerships planned to take an iterative approach to carrying out the research process, to be able to balance the benefits and risks of each approach.

Managing and interpreting data

Partnerships are collecting a mix of survey, quantitative and qualitative data which they flagged might be difficult to manage due to volume of information, and the different types of data coming back. To support with this, Renaisi developed a training session in December 2022 to provide practical guidance on tools for collecting qualitative data, and tips for collective analysis. However partnerships fed back there could have been more around understanding findings across a range of data types.

A focus on traditional research methods

Broadly there has been assumption for the partnerships doing peer research, that peer researchers should be focusing on 121 interviews and focus groups and the learning partners support has not so far supported partnerships to think differently.

While there is a value in carrying out interviews, it might not always be the best method to engage young people, and the training sessions have highlighted this might not be the most comfortable method for some of the young researchers themselves, for example some who are neurodiverse and may struggle to focus for long periods of time. When this came up in a training discussion, it was suggested that ‘walk and talks’ may be a better way to have the research conversation.

What does this mean for the programme?

What can we adapt now? As partnerships move into a greater focus on consultation, the learning partner support will be valuable in supporting partnerships to think critically about what they are learning about the youth employment system, who they are reaching, and which experiences are being more represented, to encourage them to maintain a focus on hearing the voices that are most critical to understanding where the system is letting down young people, and developing a collective understanding, with young people, of what the research insights are. Beyond this, when partnerships move into the stage of co-designing solutions to tackle youth unemployment, it will be important to support partnerships to maintain the focus on participatory engagement with young people, and support partnerships to learn from each other about what works well.

What have we learned for future programmes? The focus around peer research for many of the partnerships is commendable, due to the unique insight it can bring, and the ability to develop young people's own skills and confidence through the research process. Partnerships have many of the skills required to support young researchers, including many who have extensive experience in engaging young people. However given the lack of experience in managing peer research specifically, it is critical that the programme delivers support early and intensively to provide partnerships the thinking they need to support the process effectively – partnerships would benefit from this happening iteratively, with support around recruiting young people, coming before support around developing the research approach collaboratively, and training them in the core research skills, as well as how partnerships can support researchers with GDPR, and safeguarding.

Building on this, the learning partner could also support partnerships to think more expansively about the methods they or researchers use in the research process, and how more participatory or creative methods could increase engagement with young people who are less comfortable in a more formal or interview setting.

Systems working

The partnerships in this cohort were selected on the basis of having relationships across the formal local system, with the hope this would mean that partnerships can easily mobilise these and would not have to spend time in this Discovery phase on building relationships. So far, stakeholder engagement by the partnerships has primarily been operational, with engagement of external strategic and high-level stakeholders fairly limited. Engaging such stakeholders will be important going forward to ensure partnerships can influence change. This engagement may come at a later stage, once partnerships have something tangible to ‘show’ that will prompt buy-in. However, it will be important for partnerships to be able to take strategic stakeholders on the journey with them, rather than taking a finished product to them. A key focus for Relationship Managers and Learning Leads will be to continually assess the best approach and time for doing this as partnerships progress.

In the wider context, there are a number of challenges and barriers that partnerships are navigating:

- The end of European Social Fund (ESF) funding will impact local provision. Alternative funding, such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), will not be able to completely fill the gap.
- Ongoing significant cuts for the public sector severely impact on local authorities, placing sharp downward pressures not only on more “discretionary” spending such as youth employment, but on statutory duties to young people. For example, local authorities are reducing the number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) ¹available for young people.
- Cuts and funding pressures also impact on the voluntary and community sector, housing associations and other partners.
- The cost-of-living crisis continues to intensify, impacting the ability of services to meet increasing need. There is concern that the cost-of-living crisis will also impact engagement from young people, who may not be energised to talk about employment when they are facing so many other challenges.
- There has been a shift back towards siloed working, following a period of intense collaboration during Covid.
- Increased policy attention to economically inactive over 50s diverting resources away from young people, with examples of DWP withdrawing funds from local Youth Hubs.

What has supported engaging with system stakeholders

¹ An **Education, Health and Care Plan** (EHCP), is required for children who have significant and long-term special educational needs.

Mobilising networks

For example, in Brent the range of partners in the partnership has meant they are able to reach different groups of stakeholders. The lead partner, the Young Brent Foundation, has strong connections with the youth sector, whilst Spark! provide connections to employers. The involvement of housing associations also provides links into the community.

For some partnerships, this has included engagement of stakeholders who have previously been missed in similar work on youth employment. For example, in D2N2 the Integrated Care Board (ICB) has been engaged and provides an important link to health sector, having previously been missed on other similar projects.

Governance structures

Governance structures have been a useful tool for engagement across sectors, including with strategic stakeholders. The governance employed within the Hastings partnership for example has been useful regarding rules and procedure as well as the division of responsibility and decision-making processes.

Using consultation as relationship building

For example, the person in the Employer Liaison role in Burnley, has been using a broad survey to engage with a wide range of employers. This is not only useful as a data gathering exercise, but is creating visibility for the project, with people who could be useful partners in future.

Purposeful engagement

Partnerships have also used different events and networking opportunities to reach stakeholders and get the word out, including community engagement events and existing meetings within networks.

Support with systems mapping

Renaisi have started conducting systems mapping workshops with partnerships, which is helping them think about their system in a more tangible and approachable way. Through the systems mapping, partnerships have been supported to identify gaps and opportunities in their system, as well as areas that may be within their gift to influence.

Opportunities in the wider context

There are also some opportunities emerging in the wider context that partnerships could tap into. For example, in D2N2, devolution is a significant opportunity, especially as it includes a strand around youth services and youth voice.

What has been more challenging in systems working?

DWP, education and local authority engagement

Partnerships have struggled to engage with key stakeholders, including employers, schools, and JCP/DWP. Whilst there is recognition that some of these sectors are under significant pressure, their engagement and support will be crucial for many partnerships given their influence in the system.

Managing scale and complexity of system

The scale and complexity of the system can be overwhelming, particularly for partnerships who are engaging in a systems approach for the first time.

There is also recognition that creating system change involves challenging power and shifting the status quo which can meet resistance.

What does this mean for the programme?

What can we adapt now?	<p>It is important to have a deep understanding of local needs around systems mapping, and their understanding of the current systems they are working in. Partnerships tend to have done some forms of systems or stakeholders mapping previously, so the focus should be on building on what has already happened, and helping partnerships to think critically by highlighting how different types of systems mapping can add value. This involves Learning Leads understanding what they have done already and what parts of the process they need more support with (i.e. stakeholder mapping, root cause mapping, power mapping, or asset mapping); and for funders like Youth Futures to actively support this relationship building process.</p> <p>Partnerships need to find ways to make inroads with system actors, and it may be that extra time and capacity needs to be focused on this relationship building. Renaisi have scheduled a learning event in June, to explore how to balance bringing operational and strategic stakeholders on the journey. The event will showcase other place-based or employability partnerships who have done this, bringing in relevant lessons from elsewhere.</p>
What have we learned for future programmes?	<p>Because of the critical nature of understanding the local system, we suggest this is done earlier in the process, before the research and consultation, so that the insights from the systems mapping can inform the lines of enquiry for the broader engagement piece.</p>

Funding support

Approach to the Connected Futures way of working

The Connected Futures Fund is designed differently, with an initial phase of flexible funding to explore the local youth employment system, design a solution with young people at the heart, and mobilise stakeholders around this. Youth Futures Foundation have estimated this phase may take 18 months. While partnerships welcome being afforded time and funding for a new way of working, they have acknowledged that it will take intention to adapt and unlearn the usual way of doing things. In addition, while having time to think is valuable, partnerships need to maintain sight of their wider mobilisation and influencing agenda, so that what is learned in research and engagement can connect with the right people to create real impact locally.

Effectiveness of Connected Futures support across the programme

The Connected Futures programme has been designed with multiple forms of support, to enable places to think critically in this phase. Each partnership is assigned a Relationship Manager, from Youth Futures, and a Local Learning lead, from Renaisi, who also help the partnerships to engage with the research and analysis carried out by Ipsos Mori and City-REDI. The table below summarises the purpose of each of the forms of support, and how they are provided across the different learning support contracts:

Organisation / Role	Relational working (space to think, encouragement, setting expectations, enabling critical thinking and relational working)	Resources for critical thinking	Highlighting opportunities
Youth Futures Foundation, Relationship Managers	X	X	X
Renaisi, Local Learning Leads	X	X	
Ipsos, local labour market analysis		X	
City-REDI, funding flows analysis		X	

Youth Futures believe that designing a systemic approach to youth unemployment requires relational ways of working, so the support reflects that approach. The Relationship

Manager and Learning Partner role have significant overlap, but with slightly different emphasis:

- The Relationship Manager has expertise in the youth employment sector, and levers and opportunities within this, has more contact time with partnerships, and has a greater role in aligning expectations.
- The Learning Lead has more expertise in research and consultation methodologies, facilitating peer learning, and has an external standpoint to the funder, enabling a different point of view.

At this stage, we have not consulted partnerships about their experiences of the support so far, so the following reflections are in brief and broadly based on Renaisi and Youth Futures's collective observations and discussions about their support. The other support partners have had limited engagement with partnerships, but this will increase as they support partnerships to understand the results of the data which will be released around March/April.

Partnerships have benefited from the connections and resources Youth Futures has provided.

For example, Youth Futures have in some areas facilitated connections to DWP (Brent and Lewisham), and across the programme have connected partnerships to national experts and others working on supporting young people to access employment. For example, the Youth Futures relationship manager for Brent and Lewisham facilitated a meeting between the lead partners and DWP.

Sessions and resources have been useful for helping partnership reflect on different issues e.g., Blackpool reflecting on different levels of youth participation following resources shared in Birmingham event.

There is a tricky balance between providing flexibility as a funder but also giving a sense of direction and allowing partnerships to know where they are at:

Many partnerships have been reassured by flexibility in the timelines, which has allowed them to take time, for example to recruit staff, without worrying about 'falling behind'. At the same time, they have tended to find it helpful to think of work in the stages that Youth Futures has set out, to give them a sense of key milestones. In addition, partnerships welcome having key events such as in person events and learning sessions diarised as far in advance as possible at the start of the programme.

Youth Futures also asks each partnership to regularly reflect on:

- What they are learning
- Youth Voice
- Partnership

This provides some structure in terms of the areas Youth Futures are expecting progress in without it being time-bound to particular milestones.

It is better to frame the learning partner support as an offer rather than a prescribed programme.

While it can be welcome to have a defined offer of core support, such as workshops to develop research questions, and systems mapping, in some cases, this offer can lead to partnerships feeling like they lack ownership of the process, or are being asked to duplicate existing work. For Learning leads/RMs then, it is important to be flexible with the content of the support, and to adapt what is offered based on partnership's needs. In reality, the partnerships are engaging in multiple workstreams at once (for example doing systems mapping while doing the consultation), so having a 'linear' programme of support does not work for a programme like this, which encourages flexibility and learning through trial and error, going back to the drawing board if necessary.

The way the funding has been allocated is designed to support equitable partnerships, although there have been some unintended consequences to this.

The smallest partners in the partnership receive at least 40% of the funding, which in most cases has been effective as a way of promoting equity, as it allows the partner with the least resources, to access more resources allowing them to participate.

At the same time, there are considerations to bear in mind about the capacity of the smallest organisation to take on more than 40% of the resource, with both the operational and more systemic complexities falling on their shoulders.

In addition, it is not always the smallest partner leading on engagement, which is where most of the resource tends to be spend. At least one partnership felt it would be fairer to split the majority funding between the smallest partner, and the one leading on engagement if they are not the same organisation.

Effectiveness of learning partner support

Our reflections on the learning partner support so far:

There are some key learning needs that emerged, to help partnerships to carry out their project.

This included practical support and advice on the research process such as: quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis; bringing together different forms of data; training and managing peer researchers; taking participatory approaches to data collection and analysis; and engaging young people in research in an equitable and inclusive way. Other key learning needs related to broader governance and stakeholder engagement in the project including establishing collective decision-making and governance structures; embedding youth voice in governance structures; managing power dynamics; encouraging reflective practice in the partnership; building relationships; and engaging strategic stakeholders.

It is also apparent that some partnerships are more confident in certain areas, where they have skills and knowledge that could be shared with other partnerships. Some topics partners feel they have the most capabilities and skills to share include: establishing

collective decision-making and governance processes; embedding youth voice in governance; managing power dynamics; developing partnerships and relationships; working with young people with SEN and diverse learning needs; and taking an equitable and inclusive approach to engagement.

Partnerships that do not have previous research experience may have benefited from more up-front training before thinking about delivery

Renaissi's initial plan was for two hour bi-monthly peer learning and capacity building sessions. However it became clear that partnerships would benefit from more upfront training to support them to plan out the research, so we adapted our plan and held two half day sessions in November and December to support them to do this. This was effective, however partnerships suggested they would have been more useful before they started planning (funding was announced in June 2022), as some felt it was either too late to fully take the learning on board, or they shifted their approach based on the learning session, which delayed planning. In addition, we felt there were further topics that could have been useful. Going forward, when the next round of partnerships is appointed, we suggest delivering the training before they consider delivery, and understanding if there are more topics that partnerships would benefit from training at that stage. In future, appointing the learning partner with more lead in time could help ensure the support offer is more defined at the critical early stages.

To support with the research, both 1-1 support and learning sessions are critical.

Renaissi have, through the learning sessions (see below), offered practical training around participatory research approaches, including peer research. Partnerships have told us the learning sessions are effective. They seem to work best when learning leads have a follow up with their local partnerships as needed, to further discuss what it means for them.

Partnerships feel that the learning lead can provide external challenge and build reflective practice, however there have been varied levels of take-up of this type of support.

While there has been good attendance from all partnerships for the learning sessions, there has been more of a mix of engagement with the 1-2-1 support from the learning lead. Some partnerships have found it easy to identify how the learning partner can support them or work with them, while others have felt less sure how to benefit from the support, or have seemed to lack capacity to engage in the 1-2-1 support. Many partnerships have not worked with a learning partner before, and this is another new way of working. In addition, the less embedded a learning partner is, the harder it is for them to provide critical reflections.

While we have not asked partnerships for their thoughts on this, potential reasons could be: lack of capacity to engage with the learning partner support as well as the relationship manager, or feeling that there is not 'added value' or enough distinction between ours and the relationship manager support; not feeling the support is relevant to them; a preference for learning from the other partnerships and group discussion; or feeling that the support will be more relevant to them later down the line, when they are more fully engaged in delivery. This will be an area to explore in a future insights report.

There have been some concerns around the perceived level of prescriptiveness of the learning partner support, which we have made steps to address, by reframing the ‘core’ offer as flexible.

For example, a concern was highlighted around the feeling too many workshops are ‘mandatory’. In this case, it was useful for Renaisi to discuss this challenge openly, and reinforce that the offer is flexible according to their needs, and is designed to help them progress towards particular goals, without being delivered in particular formats.

Learning between partnerships

The structure of the programme facilitates learning between partnerships, primarily through the learning network. Sessions are facilitated by Renaisi and Youth Futures, and are held bi-monthly. Sessions include presentations, guest speakers, and opportunities for partnerships to share their progress and learn from each other. Since starting the network in November sessions have included peer research, qualitative data analysis, and fostering youth participation. Session topics were identified as areas that partnerships would benefit from learning more about and building their confidence on, through a Learning Survey conducted by Renaisi at the outset of the programme.

Partnerships have a lot to learn from each other and the opportunity to share progress and learning has prompted partnerships to reflect on what they are doing.

Partnerships appreciate the opportunity to hear about what others are doing, and to discuss their approaches to specific issues. This can prompt them to reflect on their own approach and what else they could be doing. For example in Blackpool, learning about other partnerships is prompting them to reflect on who else they could be engaging, such as housing associations, DWP, and public health.

Partnerships have also benefitted from meeting more informally, outside of learning sessions, and there is an appetite for more of this.

Blackpool and Hastings have met to share learning, given the similarities between their towns and local issues. Other partnerships are keen to take up the opportunity to learn from another partnership around a specific issue, for example, Burnley is keen to meet with Hull to learn from their expertise in engaging youth leadership.

Partnerships are keen to continue engaging in future sessions and have shared feedback on what they want to see.

In particular, there is a desire for more of a safe space to discuss more sensitive issues, without the funder being present. Partnerships are keen to spend more time in breakout groups, discussing learning around a specific task or topic. Partnerships are also keen to hear more about what others are doing including what is working well, and what could be working better.

What does this mean for the programme

What can we adapt now?

Based on these experiences, learning leads and relationship managers have agreed to work more closely together, developing a shared understanding of each partnerships' specific strengths and support needs, and meeting one another consistently, to identify the best ways to deliver this support. This approach is designed to be flexible to needs that arise in partnerships, while having a clear shared objective to work towards that shapes engagement with local partners.

To ensure that learning leads are sufficiently embedded to be able to identify needs, and provide critical challenge, this will involve ensuring that learning leads are meeting with partners regularly, to help them offer nuanced and responsive support.

Now that the programme is more underway, there will be more and more opportunities to identify links across partnerships, and facilitate meet ups and in person visits, including linking up young people across the partnerships. The peer learning sessions will continue be critical to this.

What have we learned for future programmes?

In the context of a programme where partners are working in new ways – adapting to flexible funding, engaging in participatory research, designing more systemic solutions –peer learning and reflection feels particularly critical, as a way of affirming the strengths partners already have, and how they can be used in this programme, and in being inspired and reassured by others on the same journey.

While we presented a 'core support offer' (a flexible series of workshops available to all partnerships) to help create a structure for engagement, there emerged the risk that this felt mandatory to partnerships, and like a required stepping stone to reach the next stages of the project and secure follow on funding. Equally, mapping this out in a linear way did not feel appropriate to the way in which projects actually developed in reality. In future, proposing an offer for a programme like this could be more framed around core objectives that the learning partner can assist with – such as engaging partners in the local system, or different aspects of the research process – rather than around specific outputs. This would make it clear from the outset that the support will be tailored to partnerships' needs.

In future it would be worthwhile frontloading more of the capacity building support – particularly around research methods and developing peer research approaches. Partnerships have benefited

from specific training and support for this, but have told us it would have been even more valuable at an earlier stage.

Appendix

Place	Partnership members (lead partner in bold)	Aims	Governance structure
Brent (the three estates of Chalkhill, Church End and Stonebridge in Brent)	Young Brent Foundation , Brent Council, MTVH, Hyde Housing, Spark!, Catalyst Housing	<p>To understand supply and demand of labour within the local labour market, and the barriers for young people in these sectors.</p> <p>To better prepare employers to employ and support YP who face disadvantage into employment.</p> <p>To develop personalised support offers that are guided by young people.</p>	The core governance structure is the Project Board, which is formed of the partners and five young people who have been recruited to oversee the project. They also have now recruited a group of young people to lead and carry out the research activities.
Lewisham (the Downham ward in the south-east of Lewisham)	London Borough of Lewisham , Circle Collective, Phoenix Community Housing	<p>To adapt mainstream services to better meet the needs of young people in Downham in a way that is guided by young people.</p> <p>To increase integration and awareness of employment-support solutions for unemployed young people.</p> <p>To create an evidence base that will facilitate</p>	The core governance structure is the Project Board, which is formed of the partners and 18 young people who have been recruited as youth ambassadors. Out of these 18 youth ambassadors they imagine that there will be sub-groups who oversee different aspects of the research and engagement activities.

		<p>long-term planning and promote new approaches.</p> <p>To demonstrate successful partnership working between employment support, VCS, and Black and young people led provision.</p>	
<p>Blackpool</p>	<p>Right to Succeed, Blackpool Football Club Community Trust Blackpool Council, Blackpool and the Fylde College, Business in the Community</p>	<p>To develop a more cohesive NEET and employment system, guided by local knowledge and insights from young people, that can deliver personalised support for all young people and especially those experiencing multiple disadvantages.</p> <p>To improve early identification of those most likely to become NEET in order to instigate preventative interventions.</p> <p>To bridge the gap between employers, local training, and education partners, particularly by increase the role of employers in NEET systems, to ensure young people are developing the relevant skills and experience for employment.</p> <p>To improve accessibility and navigation of systems at key points of</p>	<p>The partnership is governed by a steering group which meets quarterly. This includes all partners and three youth advisors.</p>

		<p>transition in order to increase the number of young people in EET.</p>	
Burnley	<p>Calico Enterprise Ltd, Participation Works, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)</p>	<p>To provide a single point of entry into employment services for all young people, to ensure engagement from those who services are failing to reach.</p> <p>To organise and connect partners so that providers to improve delivery and efficiency.</p> <p>To better prepare employers to employ and support young people who are facing disadvantage.</p>	<p>The partnership is governed by a project management group attended by all partners, and a youth leadership panel.</p>
Hastings	<p>CXK Youth Employability Service, East Sussex County Council / Hastings Opportunity Area, Hastings Borough Council</p>	<p>To support NEET young people through commissioned services.</p> <p>To improve social mobility as part of the wider Hastings Opportunity Area.</p> <p>To facilitate partnership working and joined up services to ensure disadvantaged young people at risk of long-term disengagement can access suitable employment or education.</p>	<p>The governance structure is made up of 3 working groups. Firstly, the Young Person’s Research Group, made up of three peer researchers. Secondly, the Core Partnership Group, including the three core partners and young people. Finally, the reference group which is made up of a wider group of stakeholders.</p>
D2N2 (Ashfield, Chesterfield, Derby, Mansfield,	<p>D2N2 LEP, Direct Education Business Partnership (DEBP), Nottingham</p>	<p>To connect support, agencies and sectors so that young people can access the right organisations at the right time.</p>	<p>They plan to set up two Development Boards, one for young people and one for parents/ carers. There is also a Partnership Board, made up of key influencers and decision-makers and an Action Group</p>

<p>Nottingham)</p>	<p>shire County Council</p>	<p>To strengthen the pathways and process that enable young people with Learning Disabilities and / or Autism to access equitable employment.</p> <p>To provide young people and parents / carers with roadmaps to prepare for and enter employment; high quality support and data to facilitate decision-making; and employers who are able to embed inclusive recruitment practices.</p>	<p>that will look at key strands with the project, including education, transition and employment.</p>
<p>Hull</p>	<p>The Warren, Humber Learning Consortium, Hull City Council</p>	<p>To understand the systemic causes of long-term unemployment in Hull, particularly for those with additional barriers e.g., experiences of the care system, disabilities, or mental health challenges.</p> <p>To understand the factors that prevent young people filling vacant opportunities.</p> <p>To make adaptations to the local labour system to improve supply and demand.</p>	<p>The partnership have recruited a Young People's Working Group, who will oversee the project and manage the community researchers. This YP Working Group reports to the Steering Group, which comprises the three core partners, who will report to “the Thing”, the young people's board that governs The Warren.</p>



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