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National Institute of Economic and Social Research

Creating Systems Change via Youth-Led Commissioning

Transferring commissioning power to enhance access to employment for young people with Learning Disabilities and Autistic Spectrum Conditions

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Executive Summary

Research Context

Funded by the Youth Futures Foundation, the Connected Futures (CF) Partnership in the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) was established to address the barriers to employment faced by young people with Learning Disabilities (LD) and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) in the Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, and Nottinghamshire (D2N2) region through youth-led, placed-based service commissioning and delivery. Currently, only 1.8% of working-age people with LD and/or ASC in the region are in employment—significantly below the national average of 4.8%. This group remains one of the most overlooked in employment policy and practice.

Launched in 2022, the partnership brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including local government, voluntary and community organisations, service providers, and employers. In 2023, the partnership set up the Youth Voice Ambassador (YVA) programme, whereby they employed five young people with LD and/or ASC as Youth Voice Ambassadors (YVAs) to lead the partnership's commissioning process to improve employment opportunities for their peers.

Government organisations and practitioners increasingly recognise the importance of involving service users at every stage of service commissioning, development, and delivery. For example, in England, public involvement is a core principle in health and social care, grounded in the belief that lived experience is vital for designing effective and responsive services. The UK Government also promotes "collaborative commissioning", where service users actively co-design services, make decisions, and contribute to delivery.

Although research on user-led and youth-led commissioning is growing, there is still limited evidence on the leadership role of young people with LD and/or ASC in these processes. This study contributes to address this gap by taking as a case study the YVA programme developed by the partnership to understand how youth-led commissioning works in practice, the unique value it brings, its wider impact on inclusive service design, and its potential for systems change.

Research Aims

This report analyses the YVA programme developed by the partnership in order to:

- Examine the **impact of youth leadership in commissioning services for driving systems change** and improving employment access for young people with LD and/or ASC.
- Provide a **potential model of how institutions can transfer commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC**, and how youth-led commissioning can be embedded within local and national governance.
- **Support the partnership in assessing and refining their practices to strengthen youth leadership** in service commissioning and identify potential areas for improvement.

Research Questions

1. What is youth-led commissioning and how can it be defined?
2. How can commissioning power and leadership be transferred to young people?
3. How do young people experience leading and being involved in commissioning processes? What opportunities and barriers do they face?
4. What is the impact of youth-led commissioning on young people, service providers, and systems in place?
5. What kind of cultures, policies, and practices enhance young people's leadership and power in commissioning processes to effect systems change?

Methodology

This report draws from **qualitative data** collected between March 2024 and March 2025 via:

- A review of documents produced by the partnership.
- Participant observations in the partnership's meetings.
- Regular meetings held with partnership stakeholders.
- Interviews and focus groups with YVAs and partnership stakeholders.
- Reflective diagries completed by YVAs.

Key Findings

Defining Youth-Led Commissioning

Our research identified **eight key principles for commissioning to be 'authentically' led by young people with LD and/or ASC.** Youth-led commissioning is about:

Why Youth-Led Commissioning

Participants highlighted why youth-led commissioning is needed, particularly within their context of LD and/or ASC unemployment in the D2N2 region. Youth-Led Commissioning is a means to:

- **Addressing the historical lack of inclusion of young people with LD and/or ASC** in conversations, processes, and services concerning their access to employment, training, and other opportunities.
- **Valuing lived experience**, **offering insights into systems failures and innovative solutions**. This is especially important in addressing systemic inequalities faced by young people with LD and/or ASC transitioning from education to employment, as they have first-hand experience of the support services and the gaps in support that need to be addressed.
- **Creating opportunities for young people with LD and/or ASC** to express their agency and fulfil their aspirations to drive social change through paid employment.
- **Challenging misconceptions about the real potential of young people with LD and/or ASC**, particularly among key stakeholders such as local authorities and employers.

Transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC

The partnership transferred commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC via the YVA Programme. Key elements of this programme were the following:

- The YVAs were employed by one of the partnership's members, Direct Education Business Partnership (DEBP)—a charity that supports children, young people, and vulnerable adults to access educational opportunities, enhance their employability, and provide career support. They have extensive in-house experience in working with young people with diverse needs and disabilities.
- DEBP also employed a Youth Voice Facilitator whose role was to offer support and contribute to making reasonable adjustments to allow YVAs to fulfil the role.
- YVAs' roles and activities included identifying needs and gaps in support provision, engaging in meetings with service providers, brainstorming ideas for services and interventions to commission for pilot testing, shortlisting these, and beginning the procurement process for four of the shortlisted services.

This research identified **potential and actual challenges** institutions can face when transferring commissioning power to young people. Below we present the specific challenges faced by the partnership in transferring commissioning power to YVAs and the mitigations put in place to address these.

Challenges	Mitigations
Securing equal level of buy-in from all members of the partnership to transfer commissioning power via the YVA programme.	• Youth Futures, the partnership's funder, demonstrated a clear commitment to youth-led commissioning, modelling the behaviour of partnership members. • Raise awareness about the fact that funders across the system (e.g., foundations, charities, and government) are increasingly prioritising projects and initiatives that actively centre youth leadership. • Conversations amongst partnership members were held without assigning blame for existing failures in policy and practice to date and instead focused on ways forward.
Some partnership stakeholders having no or little previous experience in recruiting young people with LD and/or ASC.	• YVAs were recruited by one of the partners, DEBP, who have extensive experience and expertise working with young people with LD and/or ASC, helping other partners to trust the process.
Partnership struggling to reach prospective applicants for the YVA role.	• DEBP advertised the YVA role to companies and job coaches hosting and aiding young people with LD and/or ASC in supported internships, which are work-based study programme offered to young people with Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND). • The role was shared via the Youth Development Board (YDB). Ran by the YVAs and the Youth Voice Facilitator,

	the YDB was set up to provide a safe space for young people with LD and/or ASC to share their experiences and ideas to improve current educational and employment systems and grow their own employment skills. • DEBP adjusted the language of the job description used to recruit YVAs to sound less formal. • DEBP had input and feedback from young people with LD and/or ASC on the recruitment and hiring process.
Intimidating or inaccessible interview processes.	• The model used by DEBP to interview candidates for the YVA role was an informal 'selection day', where DEBP shared with candidates ahead of time the agenda, format, activities, and what to expect from the selection day. • Young people's families and carers were engaged in the recruitment processes. • Transport was provided and any other reasonable adjustments were made on the day. • Adaptations were made to the interview process for following cohorts of applicants based on feedback from the first cohort of YVAs recruited.
Navigating support systems for LD and/or ASC employees.	• DEBP, specifically the Youth Voice Facilitator, spent time with YVAs to help them access support schemes such as Access to Work—a government scheme helping people with disabilities start or stay in work. • Where YVAs struggled with accessing Access to Work, DEBP advanced all costs, such as travel and equipment for YVAs.
Ensuring individualised needs were met.	• DEBP employed a Youth Voice Facilitator to focus on supporting and meeting individual needs of the YVAs, including having regular meetings with the YVAs to create a culture of support through listening and acting on any concerns.
Managing parents' expectations about the support that can be offered to YVAs by their employer.	• DEBP ensured clarity over what support they were responsible for providing to YVAs via open conversations, involving parents/carers in the hiring process, and helping them to navigate existing support schemes such as Access to Work.
Slow progression in the commissioning process when commissioning power is	• Practices were introduced by DEBP that helped to progress youth-led commissioning tasks steadily. These practices included 'reset sessions' that recalibrated the

transferred to young people with LD and/or ASC.	focus of YVAs, giving specific commissioning training to the YVAs, and using YVAs' strengths and skills strategically in the commissioning cycle.

YVAs' Experiences in Leading Commissioning

The YVAs had a shared understanding of their role, which was about connecting with other young people to understand their experiences and amplify their collective voices, identifying system failures, and leading the commissioning process to enact systems change.

Some of the **challenges** YVAs experienced were:

- **Inaccessible information leading to unequal engagement with the commissioning process.** YVAs with dyslexia or a learning disability shared that they were less able to access materials that involved reading and understanding large amounts of text.
- **A hybrid work schedule fit some the needs of some YVAs, but for others it hindered their engagement.** This was due to a combination of reduced access to support from the Youth Voice Facilitator, a lack of structure that could help with time management and staying organised, and potential increased distractions that come with working from home.
- **The Access to Work application being stressful and confusing.** For some YVAs, the process of applying for Access to Work funding took over six months, with little communication from Access to Work regarding the progress of the application.
- **Sometimes the needs of YVAs went unrecognised because they were not presenting the need for support**. This was the case for one YVA who expressed that their academic background coupled with their frequency to hide their needs to present as neurotypical would result in their needs being overlooked unknowingly.

However, YVAs highlighted the **support they received from DEBP** and particularly from the Youth Voice Facilitator to overcome these challenges, which included breaking down large chunks of information or tasks for the YVAs; developing their transferable skills; and helping with their time management by scheduling weekly meetings to help YVAs staying organised.

YVAs highlighted that their favourite parts of their roles included connecting with other young people with LD and/or ASC across the region.

What is the Impact of Youth-Led Commissioning?

Below we summarise the impact the YVA role has had so far on the **YVAs themselves, the partnership, and on wider systems**.

Impact on YVAs

Youth-led commissioning:

- Enabled YVAs to contribute towards real change in the lives of young people with LD and/or ASC.
- Allowed YVAs to build and improve skills, such as public speaking and administration, that will support their future employment.

- Gave the YVAs hope that there are employers that respect and understand neurodivergence.
- Encouraged personal growth in terms of, for example, their confidence.
- Provided YVAs a greater level of financial freedom, leading to a stronger sense of self-worth.

Impact on the Partnership

Youth-led commissioning:

- Changed beliefs and challenged misconceptions among partnership stakeholders about what young people with LD and/or ASC can and cannot do.
- Helped stakeholders to better understand the challenges experienced by young people with LD and/or ASC in the workplace.
- Led to partnership stakeholders, such as local authorities, considering inviting the YVAs to be a part of youth boards at their own organisations.
- Built interest amongst the partnership stakeholders of adopting DEBP's YVA programme as a model for hiring young people with LD and/or ASC in their own organisation.

Impact on Wider Systems

This has been difficult to assess without conducting further research with wider stakeholders. However, the research has shown that:

- Having YVAs lead on commissioning put them in conversation with decision-makers, including employers, humanising them and encouraging decision makers to reflect on how involved young people are in their decision-making processes.
- Having YVAs visit local schools meant that they presented as aspirational role models, particularly for other young people with LD and/or ASC.

Recommendations

For the Partnership

- **Embed youth-led commissioning within the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA).** Embedding youth-led commissioning within EMCCA will allow for 1) expanding resources to support young people leading commissioning processes to ensure sustainability of youth-led commissioning in the long run; 2) informing EMCCA's work in delivering its key priorities on economic development in the region and ensure these are inclusive of young people with LD and/or ASC; and 3) setting the example for other organisations, from local authorities to service providers such as schools and the National Health Service (NHS), so that these may consider adopting youth-led commissioning.
- **Collectively advocate for youth-led commissioning.** Members of the partnership should continue advocating for youth-led commissioning and sharing good practices on transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC both within their respective organisations as well as key decision-makers in the region.
- **Conduct research on the process of embedding youth-led commissioning in local government**. Further study is needed to understand how youth-led commissioning—like the

YVA programme—can be embedded within local government structures, identifying key steps, enablers, and barriers to scaling and sustaining this approach systemically. This would help guide both EMCCA's efforts and those of other local governments considering similar models.

- **Enhance funding for voluntary/community sector (VCS) organisations.** EMCCA and its partners should invest in VCS organisations like DEBP that champion youth voice—especially for young people with LD and/or ASC—by providing sustainable funding and promoting collaboration across the sector.

For Employers of Young Commissioners

- **Build workplace cultures that value diversity.** Building inclusive workplace cultures is a long-term commitment that, at the minimum, requires organisations assessing their existing inclusive practices; identifying ways to improve organisational inclusion strategies sustainably and in the long term; and providing training to all employees on LD and/or ASC to uncover biases and challenge misconceptions and stereotypes. There are several toolkits[1] available to help employers in the UK build inclusive workplace cultures, offering guidance that spans the entire employee journey—from inclusive recruitment practices to creating supportive environments for all staff. Employers should make use of these toolkits and adapt them to their organisation to foster an inclusive workplace culture.
- **Make recruitment accessible.** Drawing from the lessons learnt by DEBP in recruiting young people with LD and/or ASC to lead commissioning, employers should: 1) ensure the language of job adverts is accessible and explicitly invites young people with LD and/or ASC to apply for the role; 2) share job vacancies with organisations working with young people with LD and/or ASC; 3) replace formal interview procedures with more accessible format, such as "selection days", where candidates are introduced to the organisation, its staff, the role and asked to complete various tasks to assess suitability in more informal settings; 4) engage families in the recruitment process; and 5) gather feedback and input from young people themselves on how to enhance the accessibility of the recruitment process.
- **Offer supported internships.** Employers—including those involved in commissioning, such as local government—should consider offering supported internships in partnership with education providers. These could serve as a stepping stone to more permanent and secure roles within commissioning and related areas, while providing young people with opportunities to develop relevant skills in areas such as commissioning and youth leadership. Within supported internships, job coaches play a key role in supporting both young people and employers, helping to ensure that appropriate adjustments are in place to enable success in the workplace. For employers, this also offers valuable insight into the types of support that facilitate the inclusion of young people with additional needs.

[1] Examples of existing toolkits providing employers with practical steps, templates, and sector-specific advice to embed inclusivity at every level of an organisation include: The Socio-Economic Diversity and Inclusion Employer Toolkit by the Social Mobility Commission; Inclusive Employer Toolkits by the Greater London Authority; Age-Inclusive Recruitment Toolkit by the CIPD; Recruitment Toolkit by the Business Disability Forum; Stress Talking Toolkits by the Health and Safety Executive.

- **Provide individualised support and reasonable adjustments.** Given that the workplace needs of young people with LD and/or ASC are highly diverse, individualised support means getting to know young people, establishing a relationship of trust so that they can communicate their needs, and working out with them what reasonable adjustments and support looks like for them to succeed.

For the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

- **Streamline the application process for Access to Work and enhance transparency over how decisions are made.** This is important as delays in the application process can prevent people from accessing crucial workplace adjustments, affecting their ability to work effectively. Furthermore, a simplified and more transparent process removes barriers, helping more disabled people enter and stay in work, reducing the administrative burden for employers and employees applying to Access to Work. Streamlining the application process for Access to Work may require 1) reducing complexity by using plain language and shorter forms tailored to different needs; 2) creating a list of common workplace adjustments (e.g., software, ergonomic equipment) that can be approved within days rather than weeks; 3) providing applicants with real-time updates on their application status; 4) publishing clear guidance on how funding decisions are made to improve transparency and consistency; and 5) allowing people to apply both before and after securing a job.
- **Support employers in developing inclusive workplace cultures.** DWP already provide various forms of support to employers, including through its Disability Confidence Scheme. DWP should provide further support to employers considering hiring young people with LD and/or ASC in various roles, including to lead commissioning, to develop inclusive workplace cultures and practices. Additional support could include, for example, training on how to apply for and navigate Access to Work, as well as convening knowledge exchange initiatives on good practices to employ and retain young people with LD and/or ASC.
- **Develop a systematic and nation-wide policy for job coaches.** Job coaches constitute a type of support provided by Access to Work. Better funded follow-on job coaches for employees and employers could enhance retention of young people with LD and/or ASC once in employment.

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List of Abbreviations

ASC	Autistic Spectrum Conditions
CF	Connected Futures
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EMCCA	East Midlands Combined County Authority
D2N2	Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, and Nottinghamshire
D2N2 LEP	D2N2 Local Enterprise Partnership
DEBP	Direct Education Business Partnership
DfE	Department for Education
DWP	Department for Work and Pension
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LD	Learning Disabilities
LGA	Local Government Association
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NHS	National Health Service
NIESR	National Institute of Economic and Social Research
ONS	Office for National Statistics
SEND	Special Education Needs and Disability
VCS	Voluntary/Community Sector
YDB	Youth Development Board
YVAs	Youth Voice Ambassadors

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Connected Futures: Tackling NEET Across the Country

By the end of 2024, an estimated 13.4% of young people aged 16–24 in the UK were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2025). Certain groups face disproportionately higher NEET rates, including young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and some ethnic minority groups—particularly those of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black ethnic backgrounds (Crowley et al., 2023). Young people with disabilities are especially affected: they are significantly more likely to be NEET and less likely to be employed, regardless of socioeconomic status (Youth Futures Foundation, 2025). These figures highlight a systemic failure to provide young people with the consistent, coordinated support they need to access and sustain secure employment. Moreover, young people are rarely involved in shaping the policies and interventions meant to support their transition into work (Youth Futures Foundation, 2023; Crowley et al., 2023).

To address these issues, Youth Futures Foundation launched the Connected Futures (CF) programme in 2021—a £16 million initiative aimed at transforming the transition from education to employment for young people facing exclusion by funding partnerships across the UK bringing together diverse stakeholders—including local authorities, voluntary and community organisations, service providers, and employers—to identify and tackle the local drivers of youth unemployment and NEET. Since 2022, YFF has funded ten CF partnerships in Blackpool, Brent, Burnley, the East Midlands, Haringey, Hastings, Hull, Leeds and Bradford, Lewisham, and Walsall. At the time of writing, the programme is ongoing and is being delivered through three main phases:

- **Phase 1** (2022–2023): CF partnerships conduct in-depth research to identify the key factors driving youth unemployment in their region and submit a proposal to Youth Futures to progress to Phase 1.5.
- **Phase 1.5** (2023–2025): CF partnerships pilot solutions, services, and interventions aimed at addressing the identified barriers to employment. At the end of this phase, each partnership submits a proposal for Phase 2 to scale their most effective pilots.
- **Phase 2** (2025–2028): Youth Futures selects the partnerships with the most promising proposals: those demonstrating the greatest potential for long-term systems change.

At the time of writing, partnerships were developing or finalising their Phase 2 proposals.

1.1.2 The CF partnership in EMCCA: Tackling NEET among young people with LD and/or ASC

The CF partnership in East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) (hereafter referred to as the 'partnership') was formed in 2022 to tackle the factors driving unemployment among young people with Learning Disabilities (LD) and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) in the Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire (D2N2) region through youth-led, placed-based service commissioning and delivery.

At the time of writing, the partnership includes the following core partners:

- **Direct Education Business Partnership (DEBP),** a charity supporting children, young people, and vulnerable adults to access educational opportunities, enhance their employability, and provide career support.
- **East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA).** Formed in March 2024, EMCCA is led by an elected Mayor and covers the four local authority areas of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Derby and Nottingham. EMCCA replaced the D2N2 Local Enterprise Partnership (D2N2 LEP) as a core member of the partnership. D2N2 LEP was a non-statuary body convening local stakeholders to develop evidence-based economic strategies in the East Midlands. In 2024, all LEPs across England were officially closed as central government core funding ceased, and their functions were transferred to combined authorities and local authorities (Gunne-Jones and Taylor, 2024).
- **Nottinghamshire County Council**
- **Derbyshire County Council**

The partnership also includes **other stakeholders** such as representatives from Youth Futures, Derby City Council, Nottingham City Council, Mansfield District Council, Chesterfield Borough Council, Department for Work and Pension (DWP), and AtkinsRealis.

During Phase 1, the partnership conducted research to understand what works and what doesn't work to support young people with LD and/or ASCC to move towards secure employment in the D2N2 region. Currently just 1.8% of the working age population with LD and/or ASC secure employment in the region (D2N2 LEP, 2022), well below the national average in England (4.8%) (Cordis Bright, 2023).

In Phase 1.5, the partnership then employed young people with LD and/or ASC in the role of Youth Voice Ambassadors (YVAs) to lead the partnership's testing and commissioning processes to identify, develop, and commission place-based solutions tackling youth unemployment using the dedicated budget provided by Youth Futures. Through the YVA programme, the partnership aimed to test whether transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC could drive system change in how they are supported into secure employment.

At the time of writing, the partnership was reviewing both the youth-led commissioning approach and the place-based solutions developed by the Youth Voice Ambassadors (YVAs) during Phase 1.5. The aim was to inform their **Phase 2 proposal** to Youth Futures and decide which interventions had the most potential for wider, long-term impact.

1.1.3 NIESR's role

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) was appointed as the 'Action research' partner of the CF partnership in EMCCA for Phase 1.5. First coined by Kurt Lewin in the 1930s, the term action research refers to the collaborative, democratic, and participatory approach to systematic inquiry into a problem of practice within a local context (Johnson, 2020). Specifically, NIESR's role was to:

- Conduct research to assess the partnership's approach to strengthen youth voice and leadership in service commissioning and delivery during Phase 1.5.
- Co-produce a Theory of Change outlining the partnership's systems change approach to improving employment outcomes for young people with LD and/or ASC in the region.
- Develop an evaluation framework to help the partnership assess the impact envisioned in the Theory of Change.

1.2 Research Focus and Questions

Drawing from interviews with the partnership stakeholders and the YVAs, participant observation in the partnership activities and meetings, and analysis of the partnership's documents**, this report examines to what extent, how, and why youth leadership in commissioning services leads to systems change and enhances access to employment for young people with LD and/or ASC**.

This report addresses the following research questions:

1. What is youth-led commissioning and how can it be defined?
2. How can commissioning power and leadership be transferred to young people?
3. How do young people experience leading and being involved in commissioning processes? What opportunities and barriers do they face?
4. What is the impact of youth-led commissioning on young people, service providers, and systems in place?
5. What kind of cultures, policies, and practices enhance young people's leadership and power in commissioning processes to effect systems change?

1.3 Aims and Relevance

The aims of this report are to:

- To support the partnership to assess and reflect on their practices to strengthen youth leadership in service commissioning and identify how these can be improved.
- To provide a case study documenting how and why commissioning power can be transferred to young people with LD and/or ASC and how youth-led commissioning can be embedded within local and national governance.

1.4 Outline of the Report

This report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 1** provides the background and focus of this report and the research questions addressed.
- **Chapter 2** defines key terms used in this report.
- **Chapter 3** provides an overview of the methodological approach and methods informing the research presented in this report.

- **Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7** present the findings on the extent, how, and why youth leadership and involvement in commissioning services leads to systems change and enhances access to employment for young people with LD and/or ASC.
- **Chapter 8** recaps key lessons and recommendations for transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC.

Chapter 2 – Key Terms & Concepts

2.1 Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a term used to describe the expansive and varied ways of neurocognitive functioning that is present within humans (Walker, 2021). Neurodiversity should not be confused or conflated with **neurodivergence** which refers to the way a person's mind functions when it deviates from the expected societal standard of "normal". For example, a person with dyslexia, autism, or learning disabilities would be considered neurodivergent, or as having neurodivergence, whereas a person whose mind functions according to societal standards would be **neurotypical**.

2.2 Disability

According to the **social model of disability**, individuals are not disabled, rather, society causes disabilities through a lack of accommodations for those with impairments, whether physical or mental (Scope, n.d.). This results in barriers that often affect the daily lives of people with an impairment, such as an absence of accessible toilets or ramps to enter buildings. As it is barriers that make people disabled, not the impairments that people have, the social model of disability recognises that disabilities are a product of society (Spectrum Community Health CIC, 2018).

2.3 Autism Spectrum Condition

Autism spectrum conditions (ASC) are neurodevelopmental conditions that affect the way individuals communicate, experience and interact with the world around them (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). No two autistic people are the same, hence why the term "**autism spectrum**" is used to describe a range of characteristics that an autistic person may or may not relate to. Some of these characteristics include a strong preference for routine, delayed or absent speech, and repetitive behaviour called 'self-stimulating behaviour' or 'stimming' (Sense, n.d.). Autism is **not a learning disability**. However, some autistic people do also have a learning disability that may make it harder for them to look after themselves and they therefore may need extra support with daily life (Sense, n.d.).

2.4 Learning Disability

A **learning disability** affects the manner and time an individual needs to learn new and complex information. Learning disabilities can range from mild to severe and affect each individual differently. Examples of learning disabilities include Down's syndrome which can affect a person's memory, speaking and literacy (Mencap, n.d.), and Rett syndrome, which affects movement and speaking and becomes more severe as the individual ages (International Rett Syndrome Foundation, n.d.). Learning disabilities often arise during childhood and are often caused by a developmental condition. Many people with learning disabilities can live independently, however, some need support to do everyday tasks (National Health Service [NHS], n.d.).

2.5 Learning Difficulty

Learning difficulties differ from learning disabilities in the way that a learning difficulty does not hamper one's intellectual ability or general intelligence, rather, it indicates that there is a barrier present that they may need to overcome in order to learn new information (Seashell, 2023). For example, someone with a learning difficulty such as dyslexia may need to have information presented to them in a way that is not literacy heavy in order for them to learn new information quickly.

2.6 EHCP

An **Education, Health and Care plan** (EHCP) is a legal document provided by the local authority to a child or young person aged up to 25 that outlines their special educational needs, the support they need, and the outcomes the child or young person would like to achieve (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.). An EHCP can give a child or young person extra educational support. It can also give parents and young people more choice about which school or other setting the child or young person can attend. An EHCP can only be issued after a child or young person has gone through the process of an Education, Health and Care needs assessment. There is debate and controversy around the funding and processing of EHCPs by local authorities among both parents/carers and education providers as only 50.3% of EHCPs are issued within 20 weeks, the appropriate timeframe according to government guidance (Department for Education [DfE], 2024).

2.7 Young People / Youth

In the UK, young people / youth is an age range that encapsulates those within the ages of **16 to 24** (NHS, 2024). This group is of particular importance as they gain greater agency and power as they become adults and enter the workforce and/or further and higher education.

2.8 System

The use of the term **'system'** in this report refers to the **structures, policies, and beliefs and values in society** that, in this case, contribute to the **recruitment and retention** of young people with learning disabilities and/or autism into **employment** (Orlando et al., 2024). Structures may include mainstream education or specialist support for young people with special educational needs within mainstream schools. Policies may include employers' policies around accessible recruitment. Beliefs and values can include those about the abilities of young people with learning disabilities and/or autism.

2.9 System Failure

Systems failure refers to the breakdown in the interconnectedness of institutions, services, and policies such that it no longer achieves its intended purpose. Currently, the **system** is not fit for purpose as currently just **1.8%** of the working age population with LD and/or ASC secure employment in the region (Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, and Nottinghamshire) (D2N2 LEP, 2022)—a figure that is **well below the national average** in England (4.8%) (Cordis Bright, 2023).

Youth Futures have mapped out the systems failures for young people using the Iceberg Model which includes events, patterns and trends, underlying structures and mental models to understand these system failures (Youth Futures Foundation, n.d.).

2.10 Systems Change

In order to address and resolve the system failures that have been identified, **systems change** is needed. According to Orlando et al. (2024), this refers to making widespread and sustainable changes at multiple levels. This goes beyond single interventions and is a comprehensive effort to change the interactions between different processes and actors involved in young people's journeys into employment, education and training, and their experiences as workers and learners in local labour markets. Systems change include efforts aimed at changing the formal and informal "rules of the game", from resourcing flows and incentives to professional norms or discriminatory attitudes, that shape the operation of the system as a whole in order to make different outcomes possible for young people facing disadvantage. As proposed by the Spheres of Systems Change Model, such change is inherently complex and relational, requiring sustained collaboration, partnership and relationship building across organisations and sectors (New Philanthropy Capital, n.d.). It relies not only on technical solutions but also on building trust and shifting mindsets to change the culture and shared behaviours.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Action Research

First coined by Kurt Lewin in the 1930s, the term **action research** refers to the collaborative, democratic, and participatory approach to systematic inquiry into a problem of practice within a local context (Johnson, 2020). As the action research partner for the CF partnership in EMCCA during Phase 1.5, NIESR's role was to assess the partnership's efforts to strengthen youth voice and leadership in service commissioning and delivery **through research**. Emerging **research findings were used iteratively to inform the partnership's approach to enhance youth leadership in service commissioning.** Importantly, **our action research approach was collaborative and participatory**. While NIESR led the research, including data collection and analysis, the research process was co-designed with the partnership and the YVAs. We worked closely with core members to develop research questions, agree on methods to understand partnership stakeholder and YVAs' perspectives and experiences, guide strategic decisions on the presentation and dissemination of findings, and collaboratively review and validate the analysis.

3.2 Methods

This report draws from qualitative data collected between March 2024 and March 2025 via:

- A review of documents produced by the partnership.
- Participant observations in the partnership meetings.
- Informal conversations during regular meetings held by NIESR, with DEBP and Youth Futures and training sessions delivered by NIESR to YVAs.
- Interviews and focus groups with YVAs and partnership stakeholders.
- Reflective diaries completed by YVAs.

3.2.1 Documents Review

To begin understanding the processes, rationales, and mechanisms through which the partnership transferred commissioning power to young people, we reviewed documents produced by the partnership. These included:

- Documents outlining the goals and modus operandi of the partnership (e.g., Memorandum of Understanding signed by core partners; partnership funding proposals to submitted to Youth Futures).
- Research findings from Phase 1, where the partnership investigated what works and what doesn't work to support young people with LD and/or ASC to move towards secure employment in the region.
- Documents produced for the partnership meetings (e.g., minutes, power point presentations).
- Documents and materials produced by the YVAs as part of their role (e.g., commissioning briefs).

3.2.2 Participant Observation and Informal Conversations

We also conducted participant observations in the partnership meetings (i.e. meetings involving all partnership stakeholders) and during meetings involving the core partners, namely DEBP, EMCCA, Nottinghamshire County Council, and Derbyshire County Council. Fieldnotes from these meetings allowed us to record and note the involvement of YVAs in the partnership and discussions around the youth-led commissioning process, including any challenges throughout the process.

This report is also informed by informal conversations with Youth Futures and DEBP held since the beginning of the research in March 2024. NIESR meetings with Youth Futures occurred monthly whilst meetings with DEBP were held weekly. While these meetings were scheduled to share research updates and plan research activities, DEBP and Youth Futures would share reflections of what was going well and what was challenging in transferring commissioning power to young people.

In addition, we draw from informal conversations held with DEBP staff and YVAs during the two in-person YVA training sessions delivered by NIESR at the DEBP offices. The first was held in May 2024 and focused on reflexive diaries as a research method (see section 3.2.2 for further details). The second was held in September 2024 and focused on commissioning. YVAs would typically use these in-person meetings to discuss or highlight their experiences in the role, what was going well and the challenges they were facing in the commissioning process. This again helped us develop in-depth understanding of YVA's roles and their experiences with the commissioning process as it developed.

3.2.3 YVAs Reflective Diaries

Between May and September 2024, **YVAs were asked to complete diaries in any medium (digital, paper, audio) with entries in any format (e.g., notes, pictures, voice notes) where they could record their ongoing reflections during their activities and the commissioning process**. YVAs were given prompts to record the activities they had taken part in as part of their role. Prompts included:

- Summary of the event: What happened? What did you observe?
- Who did you speak with and what did they tell you? What key themes or topics were mentioned?
- What are your key insights? What is the most interesting or important thing you learnt?
- From this visit, are there any plans you would like to make for the future, for example, any ideas to discuss with colleagues, or any topics to research more?
- What went well about the visit? Why?
- Would you do anything differently for future field visits?

Diaries were used to allow YVAs to have a flexible, participant-centred method for expressing their experiences in a medium/format that felt most natural to them (Wang & Burris, 1997). The various available formats that the diary entries could be in (e.g. voice recordings, written notes, and typed notes) provided the YVAs with the opportunity to express themselves in a way that was personal and accessible to them (McCombie et al., 2023). The diaries enabled YVAs to record their experiences, which aided them in recalling key details throughout the commissioning process. In

addition, they provided a medium that allowed YVAs time for deeper reflection, and to record their evolving thoughts and actions, in the commissioning process, over time. The diaries also enabled NIESR researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the range of activities the YVAs were involved in, as well as their perceptions of the impact of their work on themselves and on those they engaged with.

Ahead of asking YVAs to complete diaries, NIESR delivered training on diary completion, comprising of a short self-paced online course using the e-learning platform Articulate, and a subsequent in-person training session at the DEBP building. The in-person training session provided an opportunity for YVAs to try out a range of different diary formats, so that they could choose which format worked best for them.

YVAs were given individual links to upload their diary entries to their own secure folders saved in NIESR's SharePoint. NIESR suggested that YVAs try to upload a diary entry a week, but it was stressed that this was not a hard rule, to allow YVAs the flexibility to fit diary entries around their other work commitments, and to reduce participant burden. Once received, the diary entries were collated into a single document for each YVA, organised into chronological order, and key themes were drawn out and summarised below each entry to support analysis.

3.2.4 Interviews and Focus Groups with YVAs

Following diaries completion, we conducted **semi-structured interviews with four YVAs** in September and October 2024, when YVAs were in the process of starting procurement for the services they wanted to commission. YVAs were asked questions on the following themes:

- Their role as a YVA.
- Their experiences to date as a YVA, including the main activities they have been involved in and any challenges.
- Their experience of the commissioning process so far, including how they express their views and the impact they hope to achieve.
- Reflections on their wider impact.
- What they see as their next steps as YVAs.

An accessible version of the topic guide was shared with YVAs ahead of their interviews, so they knew what questions to expect and could prepare for these if they wanted to. The interviews took place in person and lasted 45 minutes. Three interviews took place at the DEBP building the YVAs were familiar with and regularly worked from. One interview took place at another office in Heanor where the YVAs often work from.

In December 2024, we organised **a focus group with the YVAs** to gather their reflections on the procurement stage as by that point they had advertised, evaluated and awarded two organisations for two of their commissions. The focus group included the four YVAs that took part in the interviews in addition to the fifth YVA employed in late Autumn 2024.

All interviews and the focus group were professionally transcribed.

3.2.4 Interviews with Partnership Stakeholders

This report also draws from **semi-structured interviews with 11 partnership stakeholders**. Of these, three were staff from DEBP, one was from Youth Futures, one was from EMCCA, one was from Derbyshire County Council, and one was from Nottinghamshire County Council. The interviews were conducted online in September and October 2024. They would typically last 60 minutes and included questions on the following themes:

- Their role and organisation.
- Their views on the partnership.
- Their views on youth led commissioning, including what has worked well and what could be improved.
- Their perceived impact of the YVAs including on youth led commissioning so far.
- How they see the future of youth led commissioning.

All interviews were professionally transcribed.

3.3 Analysis

To analyse the data, we first created a **"live developments" document** to track important milestones in the YVAs roles and the commissioning process. This helped us put together a timeline for the commissioning process that illustrated how ideas were generated and the YVAs' input at key stages. The document also recorded any back and forth between the partnership, YVAs and other stakeholders, such as Youth Futures, whilst they decided what to commission and the process for this. The document was developed based on analysis of key documents, such as commissioning briefs, as well as a collation of fieldnotes from meetings and interim communication, such as emails. This document allowed us to start understanding the process of how commissioning power was being transferred to the YVAs, and the structures the partnership put in place to do so. It also helped us to capture challenges in power sharing and having YVAs leading the commissioning, such as differing opinions or delays caused to the process.

We then conducted **thematic analysis of the interviews and the diaries**. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2005). It involves systematically coding the data to capture key features, grouping these codes into themes, and interpreting these themes within the broader research context (Braun & Clarke, 2005). Analytical frameworks can be used to provide a structured approach to thematic analysis. We developed two analytical frameworks when analysing the data: one for YVAs and one for partnership stakeholders. The analytical frameworks included codes that identified cross-cutting themes across the interviews. The diary entries made by the YVAs provided additional data to the interviews, capturing perspectives that may have been forgotten or overlooked during retrospective accounts. Analysis was done iteratively to allow for any emerging unanticipated themes to be reflected in our findings.

Core members of the partnership—particularly DEBP and the YVAs—contributed feedback on the evolving analysis through review of preliminary research findings drafts. This process was not

intended to influence the findings but to validate them and make the research process inclusive and participatory.

3.4 Ethics

This research received **ethical approval from the NIESR Research Ethics Committee** in April 2024.

3.4.1 Informed Consent

In line with best practice in social research (Social Research Association, 2021), we obtained **informed consent from all research participants**. We began by introducing ourselves to the partnership via an online meeting and to the YVAs during an in-person session, where we explained who we were and the purpose of the research. Prior to interviews, all participants received a written information sheet outlining the aims of the research, their rights as participants, and how their anonymity and data would be protected. A verbal summary of this information was also provided at the start of each interview. Participants were then asked to provide written consent confirming they had read and understood the information and were willing to take part. For the YVAs, we worked closely with DEBP to ensure the consent process was accessible and meaningful. In advance of interviews, we shared information materials with DEBP, including a simplified summary of the interview questions. DEBP then reviewed these with the YVAs to clarify expectations, raise any concerns, and support their understanding of the process. YVAs were also asked to submit diaries entries. Prior to this, we held a training day to explain what the diaries were for and how the data could be handled.

Importantly, **consent was negotiated throughout the project**. We held weekly meetings with DEBP to maintain open communication with YVAs, address any emerging concerns, and seek advice on how to ensure their voices remained central to and continue to shape the research. For example, some requested additional focus groups to better capture how their learning around commissioning had developed over time. YVAs were also given opportunities to review how the findings were presented, which led to the decision to create an easy read of this report. YVAs were also invited to review how extracts from their interviews were interpreted by the researchers, not to influence the findings of the researchers, but to ensure their views were accurately represented and not misinterpreted.

3.4.2 Accessibility and Inclusion

Throughout our research, **our ethics was grounded in creating an accessible and inclusive environment for all participants**. We followed the Centre for Applied Autism Research (CAAR) and the University of Bath (n.d.) guidance, ensuring a neurodiverse-inclusive environment and paying attention to sensory comfort, clear communication, and predictability. This included providing fidget toys during longer meetings and interviews, ensuring there were frequent breaks, that information was broken down into accessible chunks, and that timetables were shared ahead of any meetings. Additionally, the NIESR research team had regular consultations with DEBP on how to adapt and best suit the diverse needs of the YVAs throughout the research.

3.4.3 Anonymity

In reporting, we used numerical identifiers such as "YVA1" and "YVA2" to refer to the YVAs, and referred to all other participants as "partnership stakeholders." Any information that could disclose participants' identities was either removed or changed to protect their anonymity.

3.4.4 Data Handling and Protection

Prior to undertaking the research, we completed a **Data Protection Impact Assessment**, which was reviewed and approved by NIESR's Data Protection Officer. All identifiable data was kept strictly confidential and stored securely in accordance with NIESR's privacy policy. Transcription was carried out by an external UK-based transcriber, and the use of external transcription services was clearly communicated to participants via information sheets and reiterated before interviews. For the YVAs, we worked closely with DEBP to ensure they remained involved in decisions about how their data was used. When drafting sections of the report that included their quotes and diary entries, we shared early versions with DEBP, who reviewed the content with the YVAs to confirm they were comfortable with how their contributions were represented. We also delivered presentations showing which quotes and diary excerpts were being included, giving YVAs the opportunity to provide direct feedback.

Chapter 4 – Defining Youth-Led Commissioning

This chapter first provides an overview of the commissioning process. Drawing from the qualitative data collected, it then defines youth-led commissioning by outlining its key principles and its potential for tackling systems failures concerning the transition to employment for young people with LD and/or ASC in the D2N2 region.

4.1 The Commissioning Process

Commissioning is the "strategic activity of identifying need, allocating resources and procuring a provider to best meet that need, within available means" (Local Government Association [LGA], 2011, p. 6). Commissioning is an "on-going process that applies to all services, whether they are provided by the local authority, NHS [National Health Service], other public agencies, or by the private sector or civil society" (LGA, 2011, p. 6).

Commissioning involves the following key steps (**Figure 1**):

1. **Conducting needs assessment**—namely, identifying the needs and inequalities of the local population and the groups whose needs are not met or who experience poor outcomes (LGA, 2011). Needs assessment is a systematic process, which may involve both quantitative analysis and qualitative research and analysis, ongoing discussions with partners, communities, practitioners, and analysis of existing provision and any gaps in this (LGA, 2011).
2. **Setting priorities based on available resources**. This process is also referred to as "options appraisal". Options appraisal is about evaluating objectively and systematically the best way to meet needs using available resources (LGA, 2011). Options appraisals are a tool to maximise the chances of achieving the desired outcome (e.g., meeting specific local needs and addressing inequalities without replicating existing services), identify the nature and level of risk relating to the chosen option, and ensure strategic use of available resources (e.g., funding available, availability of suppliers that could deliver the programmes, policies, or projects being commissioned) (LGA, 2011).
3. **Procurement**—namely, "the process of acquiring goods, works and services, covering both acquisitions from third parties and from inhouse providers" (LGA, 2011, p. 23). Procurement involves various steps, including building a specification outlining the requirements, evaluation criteria, timeline, and bidding procedures; inviting tenders, which can be done via open calls and/or by sharing the invitation to tender with potential bidders; evaluating proposals; and awarding the contract.
4. **Monitoring and evaluation.** This is the stage where "the commissioner and the provider need to keep track of whether the service is meeting the needs of the community as defined in the needs assessment and delivering the outcomes required as specified in the contract" (LGA, 2011, p. 26). It involves the systematic and routine collection of information from projects and programmes to check progress against plans to evaluate how well the commissioned activity is achieving the intended goals to ensure that the resources provided

(e.g. budget) are being used for the right purposes, and to make informed decisions on the future of the initiative.

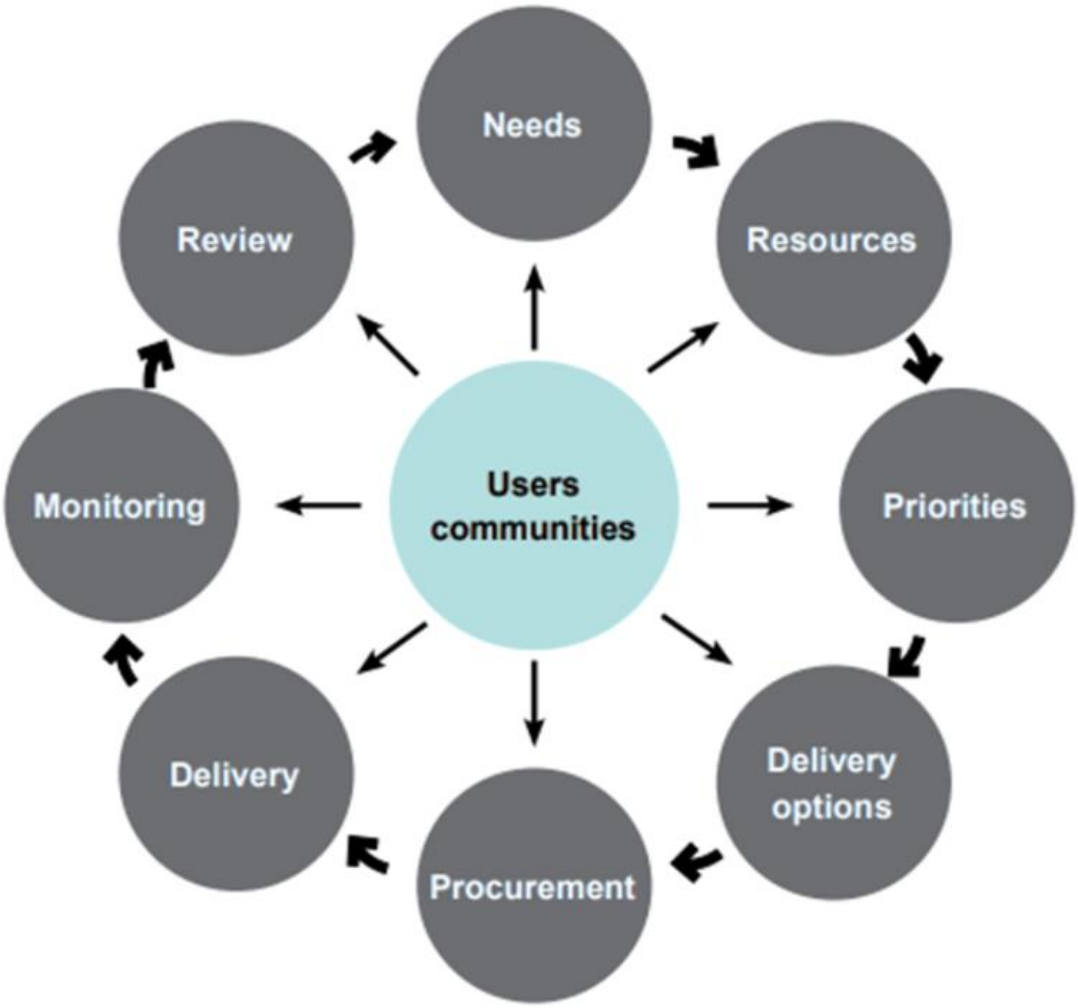

Figure 1. The commissioning cycle. Retrieved from LGA, 2011, p. 7.

4.2 When Does Commissioning Become Youth-Led?

The Local Government Association guidance highlights the importance of "consulting and involving a range of stakeholders, service users and communities in the whole process" (LGA, 2011, p. 6). Public involvement in health and social care services is a key commitment made by many service providers in England. It is rooted in the belief that **knowledge derived from lived experience is essential to ensuring that services are appropriately designed for the communities they aim to serve** (Health Research Authority, 2025). This is also supported by the Government, which has stated that the future of public services must involve "collaborative commissioning"—that is,

commissioning led by service users who co-design, make commissioning decisions, and are involved in service delivery (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2018).

Literature on youth-led commissioning highlights the importance of a sustained commitment to youth participation and youth voice from all those involved in commissioning youth services (National Youth Agency, 2012). **For commissioned services to be effective and offer value for money, service users should have control over budgets, given their direct experience of the issues at hand** (The Education Committee, 2011). Notably, youth-managed funds such as the Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund have been considered successful, with nearly all participating local authorities agreeing that young people had administered the funds effectively (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2008).

To support meaningful youth involvement in commissioning, the National Youth Agency (2012) offers ten key recommendations:

1. Trust young people's perspectives
2. Avoid tokenism by ensuring young people's contribution add value
3. Make clear young people's role
4. Young people should contribute throughout the process
5. Young people's input does not only need to be through formal processes, but can be through indirect ways
6. Allow time for young people to adjust to the process
7. Involving young people will require support and training
8. Ensure clear and timely feedback to keep young people empowered and on the right track
9. Involving young people should be positive for them
10. Recognise and celebrate young people's work and achievements

Although there is a growing body of literature on user-led commissioning in health and social care, as well as on youth participation in commissioning processes, there remains a significant gap in research specifically examining the role of young people with LD and/or ASC in leading commissioning activities. **This research aims to address this gap by exploring what commissioning led by young people with LD and/or ASC entails in practice, the unique value it brings, and the broader implications for inclusive and participatory approaches to service design and delivery**.

Our research teaches us that **youth-led commissioning is more than consultation**. We identified eight key principles for commissioning to be "authentically" led by young people with LD and/or ASC presented visually in **Figure 2** and discussed below.

Youth-led commissioning is about transferring power. For the partnership, youth-led commissioning entails shifting power into the hands of young people with LD and/or ASC and with lived experience of the opportunities and challenges they experience when transitioning from education to employment. As put by one interviewee:

> *"I think [youth-led commissioning is about] putting power into the people that have got the lived experience of this [the system], and recognising that doing it*

[means] more than just consulting [and] using young people as a consultation board or a forum, but actually [it is about] them [young people] being involved in co-creating, co-developing and co-designing what's needed. Yes, I think there's a real difference"

Partnership Stakeholder

Figure 2. Key principles of youth-led commissioning

The partnership, particularly those core partners working closely with the YVAs, highlighted that **for commissioning to be "authentically" youth-led, young people should be "involved in every single aspect of that commissioning process**" from identifying needs to shortlist potential solutions and leading the procurement, monitoring, and evaluation process.

In youth-led commissioning, adults and other institutional actors become "enablers", as put by one interviewee from DEBP**.** This means providing the support, guidance, training, and resources for young people to exercise their agency and leadership at each stage of the commissioning process. It requires adults **having trust in young people's ability to lead and not taking over when challenges arise**. This is key when commissioning is led by young people with LD and/or ASC as their abilities, capacities, and skills are often questioned by adults and service providers.

Acting as enablers also means **adapting the process of commissioning to the pace of young people**, who may have different needs and ways of working. The importance of this was well captured by one interviewee from DEBP when reflecting on the work done by the YVAs during Phase 1.5:

> *"I think our project is fully youth-led because everyone making the decisions is a young person. That doesn't mean that [DEBP staff] aren't involved […] [It means that] the adults who are involved… having a trust in the young people and having, kind of, a conversation, a participatory conversation, rather than just a token gesture of having young people in the room. It's about listening to young people and maybe, kind of, going at a pace that suits them, rather than an adult taking over and doing all the work for them. So, it might potentially take a bit longer with more young people in the room but having that patience and trust that a young person's ideas probably can be as good or even better when they're talking about these kinds of issues… Yes, having that patience to work with them"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Acting as enablers also means making sure that adequate resources, such as funding**, are in place** for young people to be able to commission the solutions they envision, and that young people are aware of what these resources are as well as the type of change that various institutional actors can execute. This is key to **manage young people's expectations over the change they can aspire to**, as captured by one interviewee:

> *"If we're building them up to say: 'We want to understand what you want' and then the first time they do it, we turn round and say 'sorry no, we can't do it.' Then, that just needs to be managed really, really well. It can't be an open house of 'tell us everything that you think is wrong and let's do that different'. Because we might not be able to commit to that. So, I think there's a fine balance. There's a definite need for them to be engaged in the commissioning, but it just needs to be managed appropriately, so everybody gets the right outcome"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Importantly, youth-led commissioning requires **young people having control over the budget available for procurement**. One interviewee from DEBP explains why this is important:

> *"The budget that we've got to spend… the youth voice ambassadors know it is their budget, and I think that's quite important, that they know that they're involved, and they know that anything that they say will be listened to, and most of the time, the final decision is theirs. If you ask them about the budget, they won't say, 'Oh yes, it's [name of the DEBP CEO] budget.' No, they know that it's their budget and [name of DEBP's CEO] is there to almost advise and support them spend their money"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Many of the key principles of youth-led commissioning identified in our research closely align with the National Youth Agency's (2012) recommendations for meaningful youth involvement in commissioning—for example, the importance of providing support and guidance, adapting processes to the pace of young people, and valuing lived experience. However, a key distinction lies

in the degree of control and leadership afforded to young people. While the National Youth Agency focuses on youth involvement in commissioning, the partnership has taken a further step by placing young people at the forefront, leading the commissioning process.

4.3 Why Youth-Led Commissioning?

The partnership highlighted several reasons as to why youth-led commissioning is needed, particularly when tackling systems failures concerning the transition to employment for young people with LD and/or ASC. These are presented visually in **Figure 3** and discussed below.

Young people are not always consulted as to what is needed to help them get access to employment, training, and other opportunities nor are they necessarily included in the process of finding solutions to foster youth employment (Youth Futures, 2023; Crowley et al., 2023). This is particularly true for young people with LD and/or ASC whose abilities, skills, and agency in expressing and advocating for their needs and for change is often questioned, as most interviewees from the partnership highlighted. As emphasised by one interviewee, young people with LD and/or ASC remain the most underrepresented in programmes meant to amplify youth voice:

> *"Decisions have always been made about young people without young people. The whole structure of support around young people is decided by other people that are probably quite a long way from having been a young person […] Definitely, the most under-represented group in any infrastructure that is about youth voice is those with learning disabilities, or who are neurodivergent. Particularly [young people with] LD… They don't appear in it, and I think it's because it's been seen as hard, or they're*

separate. It's almost, like… kind of 'Let's separate them off, they're a different group, they require something different'. Well, they don't!"

Partnership Stakeholder

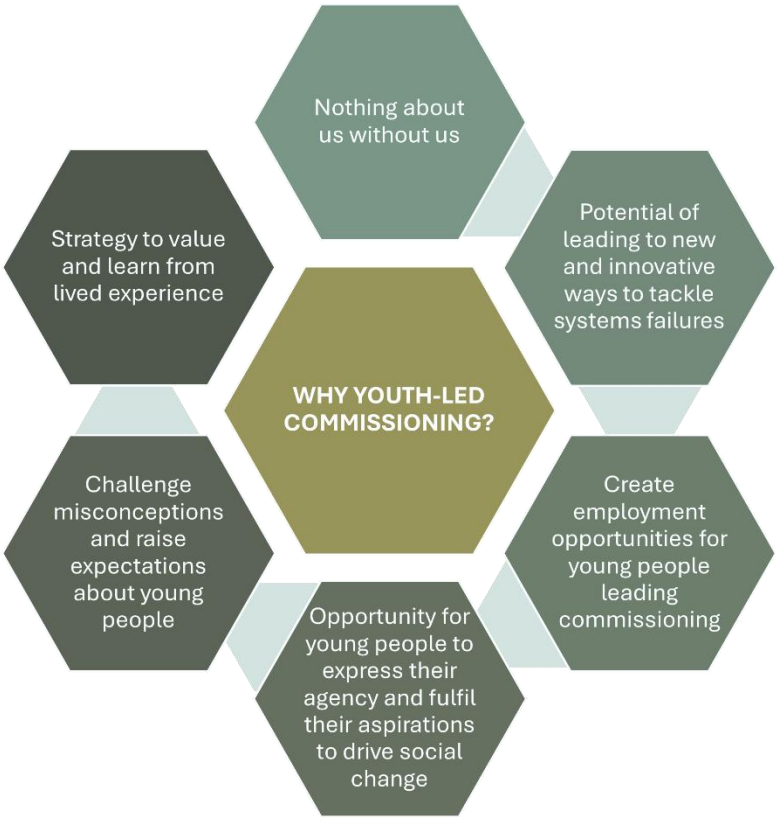

Figure 3. Rationale and potential of youth-led commissioning

As such, within the context of the partnership and their specific focus, **youth-led commissioning embodies the ethos of "nothing about us without us"** that also underpins the disability movement. **Youth-led commissioning becomes a means to value lived experience, learn from it, and identify innovative ways of addressing systems failures**, as highlighted by some of our interviewees across the partnership. Lived experience is particularly important when tackling the systemic inequalities faced by young people with LD and/or ASC in transitioning from education to employment as they have firsthand experience of the services that are meant to support them in this transition. One example of this is the concept of "vocational profiling". Drawing on both their own experiences and those of other young people they consulted across the region, the YVAs highlighted that students with LD and/or ASC in schools often receive little guidance on understanding their employment aspirations and how they map onto existing employment sectors and options. They also observed that vocational profiles were not consistently used by education providers to support this process. A vocational profile is a personalised discovery document, tailored to each pupil with LD and/or

ASC to help them identify their interests and skills and potential career options in line with these. In response, the YVAs proposed the development of a vocational profile toolkit to support educators in building their confidence and capacity to use vocational profiling effectively.

Youth-led commissioning can **create opportunities for young people to express their agency and fulfil their aspirations to drive social change through paid employment** (Ofsted, 2011)**.** The desire to improve employment outcomes for young people with LD and/or ASC was one of the key reasons one YVA applied to the role:

> *"I saw this job listing, and it just looked absolutely perfect. Like, when you grow up as an undiagnosed autistic person, you can identify the patterns in the world that are unspoken, and nobody really speaks about. [...] So, I always had this drive to, like, 'I want to change the system […] The system is terrible, let's change it".*
>
> *Youth Voice Ambassador*

Additionally, youth-led commissioning has the potential to challenge misconceptions and facilitate the understanding of the real potential of young people with LD and/or ASC. Interviewees from DEBP stressed how service providers ranging from schools to local authorities as well as employers tend to make several assumptions about the abilities of young people with LD and/or ASC, what they can offer, and what they need. Having young people with LD and/or ASC leading commissioning processes requires them to engage in conversations and meeting with various service providers and employers. This process can contribute to challenging misconceptions and raising expectations. As put by one interviewee from DEBP:

> *"There are always people… I mean, I take employers into special schools with me, because they've got an image, and the image is always the same, and I always know what that image is: it's somebody that's probably got profound, and multiple learning difficulties… [someone who] is being fed through a tube, needs personal care to get through their day, and has got limited speech. Those things formulate in somebody's mind when you say 'learning disabilities' and that unconscious bias piece of work is there. Once you show the reality of these are representative young people, that, kind of, dissipates… but you're not blaming them for having those thoughts […] The bit for us [partnership] is, kind of, making sure we can centre youth leadership, really, and then use that centring to alter hearts and minds […] Ultimately, the end goal is improved outcomes and definitely raised expectations across all stakeholders for that group [i.e., young people with LD and/or ASC]"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter defined youth-led commissioning and explored its purpose and potential. Drawing on interviews with partnership stakeholders and the Young Voice Ambassadors (YVAs), we identified

eight core principles for making commissioning genuinely led by young people with LD and/or ASC:

1. Going beyond consultation with young people
2. Transferring power to young people
3. Involving young people in every stage of commissioning
4. Positioning adults and institutions as enablers—offering support, guidance, and resources
5. Trusting and valuing young people, their lived experience, and their ability to drive change
6. Adapting the commissioning process to meet the pace and needs of young people
7. Ensuring transparency around funding, resources, and institutional influence
8. Giving young people control over budgets and resources

Youth-led commissioning offers a powerful tool to redress the historic exclusion of young people with LD and/or ASC from decision-making about services and opportunities that directly affect them; value lived experience as a vital source of insight; create meaningful opportunities for young people with LD and/or ASC to express agency and pursue their aspirations; and challenge persistent misconceptions about the potential of young people with LD/AS.

Ultimately, **youth-led commissioning is not just a method—it is a shift in power, perspective, and practice that puts young people at the heart of systems change**.

Chapter 5 – Transferring Commissioning Power

This chapter describes the partnership's approach to youth-led commissioning in order to provide a case study and potential model for how institutions can transfer commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC. We then present the challenges that the partnership faced in the process and how these were addressed.

5.1 The Partnership's Youth Voice Ambassadors' Programme

5.1.1 Aims and set up

In Phase 1.5, the partnership aimed to identify and test potential solutions, services, and interventions with the potential to tackle the factors driving unemployment among young people with LD and/or ASC in the D2N2 region. To ensure these were informed, shaped, and led by young people themselves, the **Youth Voice Ambassadors (YVAs) programme** was established. The partnership formally defined the YVA role as:

> *"A person-centred role model for young people with additional needs. We hear and share lived experiences concerning education and employment. We aim to create a community of young people; being their mouthpiece to educate wider society and turn problems into solutions"*

The programme employed YVAs on a part-time basis to lead the testing and commissioning process during Phase 1.5. This was a time-limited role, with the expectation that YVAs would contribute for the duration of Phase 1.5 rather than remain involved with the partnership indefinitely. Their role was designed to provide meaningful, time-bound opportunities for young people with LD and/or ASC to shape and influence systems change during this critical stage of the programme.

The programme was **hosted by DEBP** for two main reasons. First, DEBP accounted for the delivery partner during Phase 1 and Phase 1.5 of the partnership. Secondly, this provided an opportunity to pilot test the YVA programme as a model of youth-led commissioning with the view of potentially embedding it within local government responsible for service commissioning and service delivery, such as EMCCA and local authorities.

Between November 2023 and December 2023, DEBP recruited four YVAs. In August 2024, DEBP recruited a fifth YVA. DEBP sought to recruit young people from across the D2N2 region, with at least one representative from each of the areas covered by the partnership, namely Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, and Nottinghamshire. DEBP recruited YVAs with varied needs, experiences, and background both in terms of LD and/or ASC, but also in terms of other key demographics, such as race, ethnicity, and gender. DEBP was committed to **ensure diversity among YVAs** to maximise the potential of YVAs to represent and being able to "connect" with the lived experiences and needs of different groups in the region.

Prior to recruiting and hiring YVAs, **DEBP employed a Youth Voice Facilitator**, whose role was to support and contribute to making reasonable adjustments to allow YVAs to fulfil the role.

5.1.2 YVAs Doing Commissioning

In line with the definition and key principles of youth-led commissioning described in Chapter 4, **DEBP viewed as key YVAs' leadership and involvement in every step of the commissioning process**, from needs assessment to procurement:

> *"So, they [YVAs] helped identify where the gaps are and what the issues were and doing the research, defining what the need was, you know, where the gaps are, what that could look like, what could be some of the potential solutions. Then, taking that to the Partnership board to agree the funding, to then doing more work to helping to develop the specification, further work on identifying the need, identifying how things will be monitored, you know, that whole process around identifying what needs to be done, who it can be done by, and then working with the organisation that's been commissioned to do that work to help them progress it really"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Below we detail the concrete ways in which the YVAs were involved in all stages of the commissioning process, alongside the contributions of other partnership stakeholders. This is illustrated in the timeline presented in **Figure 4.**

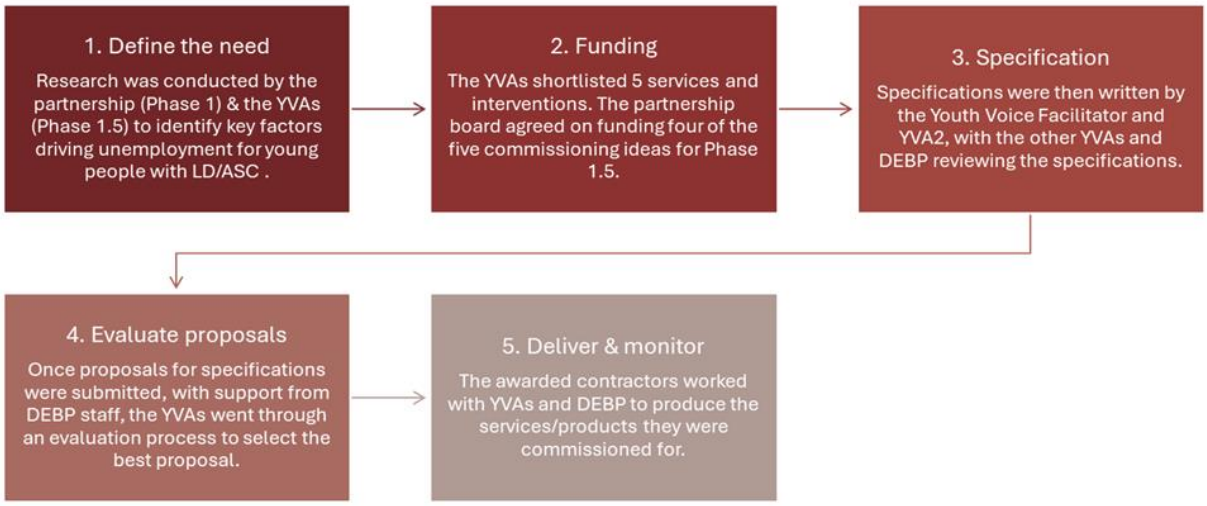

Figure 4. Timeline of YVAs involvement at each stage of commissioning process

Define the need

Following an induction period where YVAs were familiarised with the partnership and their role, YVAs began **identifying needs and gaps in provision that could be tackled**. This involved reviewing and becoming familiar with the research conducted by the partnership during Phase 1, which highlighted four main priorities to tackle to enhance employment for young people with LD and/or ASC in the region:

- *Foundational skills in education* – Providing young people with LD and/or ASC with the skills to understand the labour market and how to navigate it through work-related learning activities.
- *Transition* – Supporting young people with LD and/or ASC to transition from education to employment.
- *Employer support* – Supporting employers understand how they can adapt their practices and policies to be more inclusive for young people with LD and/or ASC.
- *Strengthening youth voice across the system* – Enhancing the inclusion of young people with LD and/or ASC in the design of services and systems that impact them.

As part of the process of needs assessment, YVAs held **meetings with service providers** ranging from schools, colleges, charities and the NHS to local authorities and **employers** to better understand the provision available to support young people with LD and/or ASC to transition to secure employment and to discuss with them potential, viable solutions to address the four thematic priorities identified above. These meetings would be arranged by the Youth Voice Facilitator, leveraging the connections of DEBP and the wider partnership.

Additionally, with the support of the Youth Voice Facilitator, YVAs set up the **Youth Development Board (YDB)**, defined by the YVAs as "a safe space for young people with ASC and/or LD to share their experiences and ideas for the educational and employment system and grow their own employment skills". The YDB aimed to foster group discussions on what works and does not work in fostering the education and employment of young people with LD and/or ASC across the region and identify potential solutions, while providing young people with an opportunity to socialise and connect with peers sharing similar values and goals. The YDB was established to ensure that YVAs maintained regular contact with young people and their work was grounded in the lived experiences of young people across the region:

> *"The youth development board allows us to regularly keep contact with young people […]. It allows us to get their opinions, get their view, rather than us just, kind of, doing it just for our motivation, what we want to do. Yes, we feel like they're kind of, representing and we [the partnership] want them [YVAs] to represent as much young people as possible, and then we can be that mouthpiece for what they're saying to take to the links that we've got. So, I think it [YDB] keeps us honest, it keeps us in the right direction"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

YVAs then began brainstorming ideas for services and interventions to commission during Phase 1.5, supported by the Youth Voice Facilitator. DEBP produced a document capturing 35 ideas identified by the YVAs, their purpose, the issues they would tackle, and the budget and timeframe that would be needed for these to be commissioned.

Funding

YVAs proceeded to shortlist five ideas to commission for pilot testing during Phase 1.5, which they presented to the partnership meeting held in July 2024 to gather feedback. The five shortlisted ideas were:

1. **Running a role model media campaign** to showcase what young people with LD and/or ASC can do in different careers and inspire others by improving representation. The role media campaign aimed to encourage and inspire young people with LD and/or ASC to enter the workforce, while also demonstrating to employers that young people with LD and/or ASC can succeed in employment. The campaign consisted of seven videos featuring young people in their place of work whilst discussing their job, the support that their employer provides to them, and how being in work has helped them.
2. **Producing a video highlighting supported internships** as a pathway to employment, which can be included within the local offer and used by education partners and shared with families. Supported internships are six months to one year work-based study programme offered to 16- to 24-year-olds with Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) and who are in possession of an EHCP. The aim of supported internships is to support young people to gain paid employment by developing skills valued by employers, confidence in working within employment, and to display what value they can bring to the workplace (DfE, 2022). The purpose of highlighting supported internships in the video was to promote their value to education providers, with the intention of encouraging more institutions, in partnership with employers, to offer these work-based educational opportunities.
3. **Creating a toolkit for vocational profiling** and pilot test it within selected schools and colleges. This is a discovery document specifically related to work and meant to support a young person with LD and/or ASC to find a job by showcasing the young person's interests, skills and work experience. The toolkit aims to upskill educators in vocational profiling, which can help facilitate the transition from education to employment by providing a document that can be shared with employers. It also helps young people identify job roles that align closely with their work-related strengths and support needs.
4. Developing and piloting **Individual Employment Plans—**a document to help employees with LD and/or ASC explain their needs and advocate for reasonable adjustments in the workplace and to enable employers to be responsive and supportive to their employees. The aim is to empower young people with LD and/or ASC in employment to advocate for themselves through a document that clearly outlines the support they require. In addition, the plan signposts employers to relevant resources and guidance to help them provide appropriate and effective support to their employees.
5. **Trialling transition coaches**: a person that works with families to support young people with LD and/or ASC transition from education to employment. The role of the transition coach is to signpost, connect, and advocate for the young people and their parents/carers as they move from education to employment.

Four of the five ideas were approved by Youth Futures, who was funding the testing budget to commission these activities in Phase 1.5. Transition coaches were not approved due to concerns over the feasibility of commissioning this activity within the timeframe for Phase 1.5.

Specifications

YVAs then began the procurement process. This included holding sessions to identify the elements of the specification for each of the activities to commission, such as requirements, evaluation criteria, timeline, bidding procedures, as well as to map out channels, networks, and potential bidders to share the invitation to tender with. The specifications were then written up by the Youth Voice Facilitator, reviewed by the YVAs, and advertised by DEBP and other core partners in the partnership.

Evaluate proposals

Once the deadline for proposal submissions had passed, the YVA began the process of evaluating the proposals they received. Initially, each YVAs assessed the proposals individually, with support from DEBP staff where needed, using a RAG (red, amber, green) rating system to score how well each proposal met the criteria. After completing their individual evaluations, the YVAs came together to discuss their scores and reach a consensus on the final ratings for each proposal. Once agreement was reached, the YVAs selected the winning proposal, and a contract was awarded to the successful organisation.

Deliver and monitor

The YVAs then worked collaboratively with each commissioned organisation to support the delivery of the commissioned products. All YVAs were involved in overseeing and contributing to each product, ensuring their approval of the final outcomes. For example, they took on roles such as interviewing the young people who featured in the role model media campaign.

5.2 Transferring Commissioning Power: Challenges and Mitigations

Below we present the key challenges the partnership faced in transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC during Phase 1.5, namely:

- Securing buy-in from across the partnership to transfer commissioning power.
- Challenges faced by DEBP as an employer in recruiting, hiring, and retaining young people with LD and/or ASC to lead commissioning processes.
- Challenges related to progressing effectively in the commissioning process when young people with LD and/or ASC lead commissioning.

As challenges are presented, we highlight the mitigations put in place to address them.

5.2.1 Securing Buy-In

The first challenge faced when it came to transferring commissioning power was securing buy-in from across the partnership. When the core partners proposed transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC to identify, develop, and funds place-based solutions tackling youth unemployment during Phase 1.5, there was some "cautiousness" among some of the partners

due to 1) some of the partners lacking experience in directly working with young people with LD and/or ASC; and 2) nervousness around young people's ability to lead commissioning processes:

> *"There was a bit of cautiousness around it [youth-led commissioning], but the core partners were 100% committed to doing that […] Yes, because you're dealing with people in organizations, some who are really confident and comfortable within the arena of working with young people with learning disabilities, and or ASC, but you've also got people that just hadn't experienced that, and there was a bit of a nervousness: 'Well, can they? Will they? How?"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

The fact that Youth Futures, which provided funding to the partnership, was committed to youth leadership in service commissioning and delivery was key to secure buy in from all stakeholders. **The partnership was also aware that other funders across the system (e.g., foundations, charities, and government) have been increasingly prioritising projects and initiatives that actively centre youth leadership**.

Buy-in was also achieved by ensuring that discussions with partners providing services to enhance employment and education outcomes for young people with LD and/or ASC were underpinned **not by assigning blame for existing systems failures but by the shared commitment to tackle these with an open mind**.

> *"What we started off… a lot of our large-scale discussions was… there was no blame. So, we weren't going to look at somebody and go, 'You've done it wrong, and you've done it wrong,' we were just going to let the facts and the figures speak for themselves. The stats [about employment for young people with LD and/or ASC] were so low you couldn't argue that. I did have a dissenting voice in a room of about 100 people who was really strongly, 'Well, we know what needs to be done, just let us get on with it,' and you can't combat that, but the easiest way to say [was]: 'Well, okay, but we've been doing the same thing for 20, 30, 40 years, and the stats have got worse.' So, you know, from that sense, we didn't want to assign blame, and we wanted to start from: 'This is the baseline, we want to go up from there'"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Importantly, buy-in from the partnership was not a one-time achievement but something that was continuously negotiated and strengthened throughout Phase 1.5. This was achieved by regularly demonstrating the capabilities and progress of the YVAs in advancing the commissioning process and identifying solutions to improve employment outcomes for young people with LD and/or ASC in the region. YVAs presented their work and insights during partnership meetings with both core and wider members, which helped to build credibility and trust in the model. This ongoing engagement was critical in encouraging partners—particularly those with commissioning authority and budgets, such as local government bodies convened by EMCCA—to consider embedding youth-led commissioning within their own organisations.

5.2.2 Employing Young People with LD and/or ASC

Previous Experience

Lack of experience in employing young people with LD and/or ASC can, in principle, represent a barrier to youth-led commissioning. Prospective employers such as service providers, local authorities, or other key decision-makers may be put off by the idea of hiring young people to lead commissioning processes due to lack of experience in employing young people with LD and/or ASC. This is because:

> *"They [employers] feel like it might cost them time and hours that they don't feel they can afford, which, I think, is untrue. I don't think they see the positives of hiring a diverse workforce and I think they might be worried about, kind of, the culture changing, yes, and the reasonable adjustments that they have to make but yes, they're not seeing that for the positives"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

DEBP are a charity that aims to support children, young people, and vulnerable adults to have a positive future by equipping them with the opportunities and tools for success. They have extensive in-house experience in working with young people with diverse needs and disabilities, which made them feel confident in their ability to recruit young people with LD and/or ASC for the YVA role. For example, they employ a SEND Careers Lead with over 30 years of experience, they are partnered with 16 SEND schools where they provide career guidance as well as a supported insight scheme (a pre internship programme supporting the transition from education to an internship or employment). DEBP also act as a supported employment partner for five employer partners and provide follow on job coaching for graduates of their supported insight programmes. DEBP are also a member of the British Association for Supported Employment, which their staff receive training through. This helped other partners to get behind the YVA programme.

Recruitment

A second set of challenges that employers can face when hiring young people with LD and/or ASC to lead commissioning concerns recruitment. **Employers may not know how to reach young people and advertise the position**.

> *"A lot of organisations… they kind of, don't know what to do, so when they send their applications out, they don't get many young people or young people with LD applying […] They've got the motivation, or at least to some extent, but they don't actually know what it is they can do to change, to get a more diverse workforce"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

This issue is compounded by the fact that **young people with LD and/or ASC may lack the confidence to apply for roles**:

> *"The lack of employment opportunities means that young people themselves maybe end up feeling like they can't or don't want to find employment or that it's not worth it because, a lot of the time, people who they might see who they can relate to aren't in employment, I think. So, they don't have the confidence to then apply, and that all comes from the lack of trust and motivation"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Recruitment of young people with LD and/or ASC becomes even more challenging when the **hiring process is made inaccessible through formal interview procedures and the expectation of formal dress during interviews** which can be "nerve-wracking" for young people with LD and/or ASC, as our interviewees highlighted.

DEBP tried to make the hiring process more accessible by **adjusting the language of the job description used to recruit YVAs**:

> *"We try and keep it as informal as possible. I think it's important as we want as many young people as possible to see the job being advertised and believe they can do it. We do feel like it's a job [YVA role] that everyone can do, as in every young person with a lived experience of a learning disability can do because it's about them […] But when you describe what they're going to be doing, it can be quite scary. So, if you put 'Presenting at Partnership boards, going into schools' and stuff, yes, it sounds quite high level!"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Prospective candidates were then invited to **attend a "selection day", rather than a formal interview.** DEBP shared ahead of time the agenda, format, activities, and what to expect:

> *"When we get the applications, we have, we call it a selection day… All the applicants will come into our office and go through, kind of, a range of tasks that are designed for them to understand the role and, yes, see how they feel they would fit and whether they're still interested. Then also, how we think they'd fit with the team. So, we do an IT task and stuff like that and it's not a test to actually see their IT skills and knowledge, it's just more about their problem solving and patience with themselves. It's more of a fun day to see how they'll interact and get on with the team, and yes, we do a small interview with [name of DEBP staff member specialized in SEND and inclusion] who isn't trying to test them, catch them out. It's almost more of a careers interview […] talking through what they've done before, as well as their aspirations for the future, rather than any really tough interview questions"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

This "selection day" was meant to minimise feelings of anxiety and nervousness among the candidates:

> *"There's no point in making someone nervous for an interview. I feel like that for any interview, to be honest, because, like, I know myself, if I'm nervous, I'm not going to give my best, almost my best version of myself. So yes, I think, a lot of the times, interviews are maybe trying to catch you out or yes, can be maybe too formal when someone's nervous and then you might be missing out on someone who would be brilliant at the job"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

DEBP stressed the importance of **engaging young people's families and carers** in recruitment processes as well as **making sure that transport and any other reasonable adjustments were made** on the day to contribute to a positive and welcoming atmosphere. In this respect, **having the input and feedback of young people with LD and/or ASC on the recruitment and hiring process is key**:

> *"We all [YVAs and Youth Voice Facilitator] designed it [recruitment process for the 5th YVA] together and then, on the selection day, all four YVAs were there, and they probably did more talking than me. So, we presented, in the morning, to the two applicants that came along, what we've been doing and what you will do as a YVA, so it allowed them to talk about their role and their experiences as a youth voice ambassador, which obviously is best coming from them, rather than me. Then, in the afternoon, it was the different tasks that they had"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Retention

Employers hiring young people with LD and/or ASC can face several **challenges related to retention**. DWP offers the **Access to Work scheme**, "a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work [and which] can provide practical and financial support if you have a disability or physical or mental health condition" (DWP, 2024). The scheme **provides diverse support to employees with disabilities**, including but not limited to workplace aid and equipment, adapting equipment to make it easier to use, money towards any extra travel costs to and from work, an interpreter or other support at a job interview, and job coaches (DWP, 2024).

DEBP supported YVAs to apply to Access to Work to cover travel expenses and for job coaches to work alongside the Youth Voice Facilitator to support YVAs perform their role. Yet, navigating the Access to Work scheme was challenging. **When an application is submitted after an employee has started their job, it takes a minimum of 24 weeks for a decision to be made. This was something that DEBP were not made aware of**:

> *"The actual process [of applying to Access to Work] was awful […] The youth voice ambassadors applied in January [2024] and they said it would be three months and we still hadn't heard anything by July. They're [DWP] really hard to get through to on the phone, so you're waiting in a queue for over an hour to try and get through to someone. They didn't send confirmation emails to everything, and*

> *yes, and then what, kind of, makes it even weirder is if you apply for it before you actually secure employment, it's very different. [Name of YVA employed in Summer 2024] applied before, and all it is ticking a box, saying that, 'I've not started this job yet. I start on this date'. The application came back within a week but it took the other YVAs who were already employed about five months"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

In addition to DWP staff being hard to reach, DEBP perceived **inconsistency in how application procedures and decisions were applied**:

> *"[Access to Work was] a nightmare, to be fair. Really complex, difficult as an employer […] There seems to be a lack of consistency about how things are managed. We've [DEBP] got experience of Access to Work for another programme and everything has to be done by post, you know, and things get lost. You get told different things by different people. And sometimes people can be a bit condescending. I think that's more of a cultural thing […] Not always, because obviously some people that work there are lovely and helpful"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

These delays and challenges **contributed to further stress and anxiety among YVAs and delayed access to the job coach** for one of the YVAs who required additional support. It also meant that **DEBP had to advance all costs, such as travel and equipment** for YVAs:

> *"As an employer, we have paid for the travel element, and we've had to wait 24 weeks for it to be approved, and we're still waiting for any travel payment. […] So, I think that's the frustration […] We're dealing with predominately four people's [four YVAs] travel, which is thousands. It's tens of thousands of pounds paid out before you know whether you're even going to be able to recoup it. And the process to get it back is just tedious"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Individualised Support

Employers hiring young people with LD and/or ASC need to be able to provide individualised support to ensure young people feel confident to perform their role. **The workplace needs of young people with LD and/or ASC are highly diverse** due to the nature of neurodivergence, as outlined in Chapter 2. Furthermore, providing individualised support may be particularly difficult for employers since young people with LD and/or ASC may not necessarily voice their needs, and aim to present as non-autistic/neurotypical (National Autistic Society, n.d.). This process is referred to as "masking". Whilst this can help neurodivergent individuals integrate into society built for neurotypical people, this often comes with detrimental effects to the wellbeing of the individual, such as exhaustion/burn-out (National Autistic Society, n.d.).

DEBP addressed this through its Youth Voice Facilitator, who was responsible for providing individualised support to YVAs. In addition to **making reasonable adjustments** such as allowing YVAs to keep their cameras off during meetings, or making time and space for breaks when needed, **the Youth Voice Facilitator would hold weekly individual meetings** with YVAs to go through any concerns, discuss how YVAs were finding the work and team dynamics, and any potential adjustments that could be introduced. This was part of a larger effort to **establish a workplace culture where young people feel they can share concerns and feel these are taken seriously** and listened to.

> *"I think I always really try and instil in them that they can talk to me about anything at any time, and them having that belief that, if they, kind of, come to me honestly with something, I'm not going to pass it on or judge them or look at them differently for how they're feeling"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Parental Expectations

A final key challenge faced by employers hiring young people with LD and/or ASC to lead commissioning relates to **managing parental expectations**. DEBP explained how there were times when expectations of YVAs' parents regarding how much support DEBP staff should have provided to YVAs could be unrealistically high:

> *"Sometimes parent expectations can be quite high as well. They're used to their young person being in education or a supported internship role. Then they get a lot of support, but actually, when they're in employment, the role is very different, and I think, yes, expectations of what we can do are sometimes unrealistic, like wanting us to break everything down into, sort of, really bite size steps, and then debriefing. And that's just not within our… we just don't have capacity to do that"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

DEBP highlighted the importance of managing parental expectations by **ensuring clarity over professional boundaries via open conversations**:

> *"It's about getting them [parents and carers] to recognise what's inside, what's outside, what do they need to focus on, what can they forget, it's not in their gift to change, and nor should it be. I think it's the same as we [DEBP's senior staff] do with other staff, 'Where are your professional boundaries, and why do we always adhere to them?' And that's what DEBP do all the time, 'That's beyond our scope, that's not for us. That's for somebody else to deal with"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Importantly, managing parental expectations means also listening to families and **identifying potential ways to outsource the support parents expect employers to provide**. This can take for

example the form of applying to Access to Work for an in-job coach that can support employees with specific needs to perform their role.

5.2.3 Advancing in the Commissioning Process

Transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC may result in longer timelines. **Youth-led commissioning takes time as there is a need to ensure that:**

- Each commissioning-related activity is accessible.
- Young people are provided with the right training to fulfil their role.
- There is balance among young people's voices as some voices "may be louder than others".
- The needs of all young people are met.

Young people are required to work together to lead the commissioning process, yet they may have diverse needs when it comes to the workplace dynamics that allow them to perform best:

> *"The team's very diverse in terms of how they like to work, and that brings me onto what one of the challenges was because… Their diverse needs in terms of working has become a challenge at times, as it would in any team. For example, we're all working together and one person's additional needs is… for them to work best, they need to just be in the zone without distractions, whereas in our team we [also] have people who may be the complete opposite. […] It's hard to go at the right pace for everyone, and it's the same with any team! People learn and understand things at different paces. You have to go at the right pace, so that you're not leaving someone behind but also the person who maybe learns more quickly isn't bored and frustrated"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Youth-led commissioning may result in longer timelines for commissioning also because it requires ensuring that young people make recommendations not solely based on their own lived experience but on the accounts of the young people they are representing. This was one of the challenges DEBP observed during Phase 1.5:

> *"We've got right young people, but it's making sure there's a structure around the young people to think beyond their own need, and recognise that they're representing other people. They're not there just because of their own story. They're there as a representation"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

The fact that youth-led commissioning takes time may lead to conflicts of interest as service providers and decision-makers may be tempted to "take over" rather than continuing to act as enablers in line with the principles of youth-led commissioning defined in Chapter 4, which would defeat the purpose of youth-led commissioning.

In addition to getting to know YVAs and their needs so that working patterns could be adjusted, DEBP held reset sessions that YVAs to re-align their focus with the aims of the programme. They provided tailored training sessions to equip YVAs with a solid understanding of commissioning terminology and concepts. Moreover, DEBP intentionally harnessed YVAs' individual strengths and skills by assigning roles that matched their competencies and passions, making their contributions both impactful and personally meaningful throughout the commissioning process:

> *"It's not easy for them all to write a commissioning brief, so I think, in terms of that, kind of, long-winded, quite high level of writing is where it's probably best for myself and [name of one of the YVA] who is a really good academic writer, to write it and then go back to them and talk through it with them and get their feedback on what's been wrote.*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Whilst the commissioning briefs were written by the Youth Voice Facilitator and YVA2, their content was designed collectively with all YVAs through a series of workshops and meetings.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter addressed the question of how commissioning power and leadership can be transferred to young people. **The YVA programme developed by the partnership shows that transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC is both possible and impactful, but it relies on several critical enablers**, including building trust and credibility through inclusive and accessible processes; adapting language, expectations, and timelines to the needs of young people; and creating support structures to address emerging challenges. Importantly, shifting power also means enabling young people's genuine ownership of the commissioning process, including decision-making, budget control, and agenda-setting. This requires systems and stakeholders to trust young people with LD and/or ASC and to commit to working at their pace.

Chapter 6 – Young People's Experiences in Leading Commissioning

This chapter introduces the five YVAs and their experiences in education and employment before joining the partnership. It then describes what holding the role of YVA was like for them, including the barriers YVAs faced and overcame.

6.1 Who are the Youth Voice Ambassadors?

The five YVAs employed by DEBP to lead commissioning represented a **diverse range of young people with LD and/or ASC who lived in the D2N2 area**—two in Nottingham, one in Nottinghamshire, one in Derby City, and one in Derbyshire.

At the time of writing, the youngest YVA was 21 years old whilst the oldest was 23 years old. They also had a range of different learning disabilities and learning difficulties as well as autism, that allowed them to draw from their lived experiences to connect with other young people with LD and/or ASC in the region. Between the YVAs, the learning disabilities and difficulties included mild to moderate learning disabilities, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia.

The YVAs as a collective team represented a wide range of young people with regards to both their educational background and experience in work. The YVAs attended a variety of post-16 educational pathways. Four of the YVAs attended college where they completed courses on subjects such as business administration, professional catering, and applied science. One of the YVAs also completed an apprenticeship working at a museum, which upon completion became a long-term position. Two of the YVAs attended university, completing degrees in Counselling Psychology and Medical Physiology and Therapeutics, respectively.

Prior to joining DEBP, three of the five YVAs had been in paid employment, and two were in either education or training such as supported internships. For example, YVA1[2] worked in catering roles whilst YVA2 worked in various support roles with vulnerable people. A common challenge experienced by the YVAs was that they did not feel supported and understood in their previous workplaces due to their neurodivergence. This is summed up by YVA1:

> *"Before joining this job, I'm not really understood in other jobs, because not everybody will have the same conditions, or the way of learning, or the way of thinking as me. At other jobs, I've been perceived to be slow, and not learn as quick as others, but here [DEBP], I'm fully understood, and have more support and more hope."*
>
> *YVA1*

[2] All YVAs were given numerical identifiers to protect the identity of the participants.

YVA2 experienced being left burnt-out after working as a support worker. This was because she was left to balance her own needs, the needs of her family members and the needs of vulnerable people she was supporting at work, which left her with little opportunity for caring for herself:

> *"I'd basically been out of work for two years almost, and pretty much the only work that they try and push you into when you have a psychological background is support work. Which is kind of like the reason that I got so burnt out in the first place because they were, like, 'Oh, you have a lot of experience with people with high support needs,' because I've got siblings with very high support needs. Because I have that resilience and that ability and that skill, they, kind of, were always giving me the very, very emotionally and physically intense clients, and it was really hard for me because I also still live at home with those disabled siblings. So, I basically just found that I wasn't having any time to unmask. I wasn't having any time to prioritise my own needs, and as a disabled person, you have a lot of them. So, I was basically just burning out."*
>
> *YVA2*

6.2 How and Why Did They Apply for the YVA Role?

All the YVAs but YVA2 discovered the role through either a parent/carer or another adult finding the job listing. This may speak to a wider occurrence of parents/carers of young people with LD and/or ASC searching for job opportunities on behalf of young people. As discussed in the previous chapter, DEBP's decision to include young people's parents/carers within the YVA hiring process appropriately reflected parents/carers' involvement within young people's job searching, as they sought to make the process more accessible and manageable for the young people.

Although not all the YVAs found the role themselves, there were driving factors that attracted them to this opportunity. One of these factors was their lived experience of navigating education and employment as neurodivergent young people, which they found to be challenging due to a lack of support and their voices being unheard by older adults and neurotypical people. **The role was a unique opportunity to be given a seat at the table from which young people with LD and/or ASC had historically been excluded. The role also gave them the opportunity to contribute to "fixing the system", informed by both their own and their peers' lived experience**:

> *"I saw this job listing, and it just looked absolutely perfect. Like, when you grow up as an undiagnosed autistic person, you can identify the patterns in the world that are unspoken and nobody really speaks about. And then when you try and speak about them and point out the patterns and point out how unfair life is and how disabled people aren't supported and, you know, whatever it might be, the adults just basically tell you to shut up because you're a kid, and you don't know anything. So, I always had this drive to, like, 'I want to change the system, I want to change the world. The system is terrible, let's change it. Why aren't people listening to me, I know how the world should work?' So, like, seeing this job listing that was, oh, you know, 'advocate for people with additional needs and get them*

> *into work and make genuine systemic change', I was, like, 'Wow, that sounds perfect.'"*
>
> *YVA2*

YVA5 saw this role as an **opportunity to meet other like-minded young people with similar experiences to her own**. When YVA5 attended the selection day, four of the YVAs had already began working for DEBP. Meeting the YVAs on the selection day made YVA5 feel **a sense of belonging and confidence** as she could see that there were other young people with similar experiences to her thriving in paid employment and being supported and understood by their employer.

Another reason for applying for the role was **personal development, as YVAs wanted to become more comfortable working with a learning difficulty and be able to help other young people do the same.** YVA1 believed the role gave him the best opportunity to do this:

> *"I thought it was the best opportunity for me to grow as a person, to also accept my learning difficulty, and also have the opportunity to help others that have probably got the same disability as me, or if not, a different one, and empower them, and teach them how they can use it to the best of their ability"*
>
> *YVA1*

6.3 How Did They Navigate the YVA Role?

6.3.1 Understanding the Role

Between the YVAs there was a shared understanding of what their role was: **to use their lived experience to connect with other young people with LD and/or ASC to share their experiences of navigating the system and use their position to enact systems change by leading commissioning processes**. This YVA interviewed summarised this as:

> *"To work with young people with learning disabilities, to listen to the shared lived experiences from education to employment and also if those young people don't understand the system, we can share our lived experiences to help them amplify their voice and help them understand the system better."*
>
> *YVA3*

6.3.2 Shared and Individual Responsibilities

The YVAs shared a range of general activities, including:

- Attending partnership board meetings where they often presented updates to the other members of the partnership.
- Visiting local SEND schools to promote the partnership and the importance of youth voice.
- Recruiting for the Youth Development Board and developing its members' employability through working on their members' skills portfolio.

- Brainstorming commissioning ideas.
- Researching past commissions to learn about what has already been done and the success or lack of.
- Evaluating proposals they receive from the commission specifications.
- Speaking at conferences and events e.g. skills and employability conferences.

The YVAs also had **individual responsibilities for three specific workstreams aligning with the priority areas of the partnership**: Transition workstream, Employer workstream, and the Education workstream. These workstreams involved attending specific events and working with various other staff at DEBP. For example, YVA2 who was assigned to the employer workstream worked alongside the DEBP Employer Researcher to:

> *"Get links with different employers so that we can start doing one of our, like, core ideas and basically mould workplaces to be inclusive and supportive of people with additional needs"*
>
> *YVA2*

Adaptations were made to their roles as DEBP became more aware of their respective strengths and future ambitions. For YVA2, who had an academic background, this included writing briefs, public speaking and delivering presentations. Whilst for YVA3, who wanted to go into administration work, she had become responsible for arranging transportation for the YVAs. This is her response when asked how their role had changed from when she first started:

> *"[The Youth Voice Facilitator] is really happy with how I've progressed in this role, and it's really good that I've experienced it all. He is really happy with me so he's given me a new responsibility so we've got an administrative worker, so she books all our transport for us, [...] but rather than him emailing, can I do it? Would I be willing to do it? Like, an administrative task, and I said yes, I would"*
>
> *YVA3*

These new responsibilities and adaptations to existing responsibilities were welcomed and often requested by the YVAs who felt supported to develop new and existing skills.

> *"I work fifteen hours a week. So, two days at the minute, but I'm projected to start working another day a week once they hire, I think it's an inclusion rep [...] I'm going to be working alongside them quite closely once we hire them. So, I'll be working another day a week [...] I just wanted a little bit more responsibility, so I asked, and they were happy to give it to me"*
>
> *YVA2*

6.3.3 Barriers and Challenges

Inaccessible Information

Although all of the YVAs were involved in the contribution of commissioning ideas and understood the commissioning process, **some of the YVAs, particularly those with dyslexia or a learning disability, shared that they were less able to access materials that involved reading and**

understanding large amounts of text. At first, this resulted in YVAs either feeling uninterested in the commissioning process or finding some sessions hard to follow along.

> *"My least favourite aspect of the role is doing the commissioning stuff. I just find that a bit boring sometimes because obviously, you have to process everything, and it's all different stuff that we're doing, but I do try my best to present my ideas to the group [...] Sometimes I don't really, like, fully understand what's being said"*
>
> *YVA3*

> *"I would say, because of my dyslexia, I struggle to read, and it's not very enjoyable for me, because I struggle with it. I think when it comes to reading information in large quantities, and also doing, like, lots of information-based work, I find it hard because I'm a visual learner. [...] I think, just when it comes to research, I've struggled. It's not that I dislike it, it's just that I find it challenging"*
>
> *YVA1*

However, YVAs grew into the role. For example, during a focus group held two months after conducting the interviews with YVAs, YVA3 explained how her understanding and enjoyment of commissioning had changed (for more insight into how the YVAs grew into their role and overcame barriers, see section 6.3.4):

> *"At first I wasn't enjoying the commissioning process, but now that we've gotten to this stage, I've really enjoyed it. Yes, so I got to understand it a bit more, now that it was broken down, so that was really good"*
>
> *YVA3*

Although some of the YVAs found it challenging to access materials involving large amounts of text, this was not the case for all the YVAs. For instance, when tasked with reviewing a spreadsheet and removing any unneeded information, two of the YVAs found the process difficult due to the volume of data and the layout of the spreadsheet. However, YVA2 enjoyed the task, as it aligned with her preferred way of organising work. This highlights the importance of recognising that **neurodivergence is not uniform among individuals with LD and/or ASC who have different learning and working styles, requiring person-centred adjustments to task delivery and information presentation**. The YVAs found that working independently before reconvening as a group allowed for them to work at a pace most comfortable for them and break down tasks in a way that suited them best whilst also allowing for them to share ideas and new ways of thinking with each other.

The YVAs had a hybrid work schedule, which allowed for them to work from the office as well as from their homes. **This fitted the needs of some of the YVAs. However, others found working from home troublesome due to their learning disability as it hindered their engagement specifically with meetings and tasks that involved substantial amounts of reading.** This was due to a combination of reduced access to support from their Youth Voice Facilitator, a lack of structure found in the workplace that helps with time management and staying organised, and potential increased distractions that come with working from home. DEBP were aware of this and made

accommodations by planning meetings and tasks that may have required support from the Youth Voice Facilitator to be done on days that they were working from the office.

> *"We had, like, a commissioning proposal meeting [...] and it just took about two hours and because I'm just staring at one screen, having to take all that in, and then it's not nice for me to take it all at home. So, she [DEBP staff] says, 'Do you know what? I would do this face to face next time'"*
>
> *YVA3*

Access to Work

Access to Work is a scheme offered by DWP which is "a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work [and which] can provide practical and financial support if you have a disability or physical or mental health condition" (DWP, 2024). **The Access to Work application had proven to be a stressful and confusing experience**. For YVA3, the process of applying for funding for travelling to and from work took over six months, with little communication from Access to Work regarding the progress of her application. This left YVA3 frustrated as it meant they were not able to receive the support that was meant to be available to them. For a more in-depth discussion of how DEBP and the YVAs navigated Access to Work see section 5.2.2.

> *"In January my colleagues asked us to fill out an online application form to get help and support in the workplace [...] My access to work application got submitted on the 15th January and got to the Access to Work team by 22nd January [...] they haven't contacted me about my application and I now have been in my job for 6-7 months. It is currently in the beginning of July now and I haven't heard anything. Unfortunately, I have been highly stressed, angry, annoyed and frustrated about the whole application and not being in touch with me or my HR Manager."*
>
> *YVA3, Diary Entry*

Masking and Overlooked Needs

Sometimes the needs of one YVA went unrecognised because they were not presenting the need for support in a manner that was obvious to their employer. This was the case for YVA2 who expressed that her tendency to mask and highlighted that her academic background could lead to her needs sometimes being overlooked unknowingly:

> *"I think because I mask so heavily and because I'm quite academic, I think that I, kind of, fly under the radar a little bit in terms of my needs. So, at one point, I did, kind of, have a little bit of a freak-out because I just felt that I hadn't let people know how important it is when I ask for help with something. [...] when I ask for help for something, it's because I'm at the end of my tether with that thing. [...] I present as a lot more capable than I am"*

YVA2

6.3.4 Overcoming Barriers and Growing into the Role

Although there were challenges and barriers experienced by the YVAs, the YVAs did believe they were being supported by DEBP to overcome these:

> *"Well, I think the support I get is very helpful. [...] sometimes we have one to ones where he'll [Youth Voice Facilitator] sometimes tells me, he's like, 'If you need a break, have that break. You can have it, it's not mandatory that you don't have this break when we do this work.' [...] the support I get is very simple, very helpful with, like anything from technology all the way to figuring out what this word means and what definitions of some parts of employment. It's very helpful"*
>
> *YVA4*

DEBP supported YVAs to overcome the barriers presented above in many ways, including by **making materials and information more accessible for the YVAs**:

> *"My youth voice facilitator, he breaks it down to me and verbalises it to me a lot, so I get to understand it, and I'm quite grateful for that, because it makes me understand a lot more."*
>
> *YVA1*

DEBP also implemented adjustments to the evaluation stage of the commissioning process to ensure that all YVAs were able to understand and engage in the procurement of their commissioning ideas. Examples of adaptions made included evaluating received proposals using a red, amber and green scoring system, as well as requesting bidders to present both a written proposal and a visual presentation of their proposal. Adaptions like these made the evaluation of proposals more accessible to the YVAs as a cohort as they varied in their preferred learning styles.

The support received by the YVAs also included **mentoring to develop skills valuable in the workplace more generally**. When YVA1 was interviewed, he told us that alongside the Youth Voice Facilitator, other DEBP staff involved with the team of YVAs provided him with out-of-hours support to help him develop his organisational skills:

> *"I'd say [DEBP staff] have given me a lot of support in my role, and also out of my role, which has been really helpful. But I think, also, the support that I've seen in terms of organisation and planning, because I'm not really organised, I find it hard to have structure. [...] they put me on, like, a programme where we would have a meeting every week to see if I've checked my emails, if I've put everything in my calendar, and everything's in order. That lasted for, like, I think a month, or three weeks, and since then, I've been able to stay on top of it. So, they were using it as, like, a guide to help me to be more independent"*
>
> *YVA1*

Where DEBP were unable to provide the level of support required for one of the YVA, they reached out to Access to Work for them to assign a support worker that supported the YVA with their comprehension of tasks, particularly when working from home.

Once the YVAs had awarded the first of their commissions, they reflected on their understanding of procurement within commissioning, how they felt at the start of the commissioning process, and how they grew into the role. They highlighted that initially their understanding of commissioning was limited and that they felt anxious and stressed about the process. However, **once they had gone through the process of writing a specification, evaluating proposals and awarding a contract, they then felt confident, able, and prepared to commission more of their ideas**.

> *"I didn't have any idea on commissioning, and I wasn't aware of all the factors and the different levels and specifications of commissioning. So, I think I've learned a lot, I've been educated on it and also now I've got experience and confidence in commissioning as well, making me prepared for the next thing we commission."*
>
> *YVA4*

> *"I thought it was going to be a lot stressful [...] but looking at it now it's, like, it's really simple now. Yes, I was feeling a bit anxious and a little bit stressed out. Like, it's a new area of business I'm going to be a part in, I don't really know what I'm going to be expecting, but then going through it, going through the whole process I was, like, I'm ready for another one now. I think I am ready for another commissioning phase to do."*
>
> *YVA1*

As discussed in section 6.3.2, the YVAs were given additional responsibilities that aligned with their interests and strengths on an ad hoc basis. Both the YVAs and DEBP welcomed this, illustrating that the YVAs were able to grow into their role and take on further responsibilities.

6.3.5 Highlights From YVAs' Perspectives

As part of their role, YVAs **engaged with young people across the region by visiting SEND schools and colleges in the area as well as by convening the YDB meetings**. Connecting with other young people had been very important to the YVAs:

> *"We've gone to quite a few schools. We've worked with schools in Mansfield, Chesterfield. We've gone to the schools and presented Youth Voice, the Youth Development Board and what we have to offer, what our aims and objectives are, what young people-, what the opportunities are. It's been, like, a really good experience, I've liked each trip [...] The young people, it opened their minds, and they came across with lots of ideas"*
>
> *YVA1*

The YVAs had also expressed that they had found meeting with other young people involved in other CF partnerships insightful and enjoyable. They had the opportunity to do this at the Youth Futures Conference held in Birmingham, where all the CF partnerships came together to discuss

what each partnership's goals were and how they aimed to achieve these. This was a youth-led event and provided an opportunity for young people to share knowledge and network:

> *"We just spoke about what all of the different Partnerships do, what our focus is, and how we plan to execute all of our goals. So, we all worked in different groups and spoke about young people, how the system needs to improve, what needs to change, and it was really youth led and youth focused, because other young people from the different Partnerships did presentations, literally round the whole event. And it was just really engaging, I met some really good young people, and got to network, and from that day, it's built up my confidence and made me more vocal. [...] the information that they don't know about people with learning difficulties, we can share that with them, and the information that we don't know with young people that are homeless, [...] which we could learn from with their Partnership. I'm looking forward to there being another event, yes."*
>
> *YVA1*

Reflecting on what she enjoyed within the commissioning processes, YVA2 highlighted that she found the whole process to be enriching. She particularly felt valued for being trusted to carry out research on young people with LD and/or ASC's experiences of employment, education and training in order to identify useful ideas to commission. The YVAs' findings aligned with the findings of the partnership in Phase 1 described in section 5.1.2, which was affirming for YVA2 and made the experience more gratifying.

> *"I enjoyed all of it. Like, I found all of it really, really fun. I think that because they all fun for different reasons. Like, the research part was fun because we all-, so the big adults if you want to say that, the other DEBP staff, they did a lot of research before we were employed and it was so fun and so interesting to see us gather our own information and our own research and have it match up so perfectly with what they'd researched as well. So, that was really cool, and then, like, narrowing those down to the four core ideas, they were really fun and yes. It was all just so fun, I've really, really enjoyed it, yes. It was great fun."*
>
> *YVA2*

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter explored how YVAs experienced leading the commissioning process. It looked at what challenges they faced, how they worked through them, and what they found most rewarding in their roles. YVAs explained that their job was to connect with other young people, speak up about shared experiences, highlight problems in the system, and help lead changes. They faced some barriers, like hard-to-read information, confusing funding applications, and difficulties with remote working. However, with support from DEBP—especially from the Youth Voice Facilitator—they overcame these issues by breaking tasks down, building key skills, and staying organised. Many YVAs said the

best part of their role was meeting and working with other young people with learning disabilities and autism across the region.

Chapter 7 – The Impression Left by the Youth Voice Ambassadors

This chapter explores the impact that leading the commissioning process had on the YVAs and their families. It highlights how the role provided the YVAs with opportunities to learn new skills and build on existing ones as well as encourage personal development. The chapter also reflects on the YVAs' impact on the partnership and wider systems. The findings suggest that, when young people are meaningfully and authentically involved in commissioning—as described in earlier chapters—there may be potential for positive changes within systems. This approach could serve as an early indication of how things might be done differently in service design and delivery, with the aim of improving access to employment and progression opportunities for a broader range of young people, not only those with learning disabilities or autism.

7.1 Impact on YVAs and their Families

According to the YVAs, they were given a wealth of opportunities to build on existing skills and learn new ones. Building these skills were noted by the YVAs as an important aspect of how they had grown in their role and as people. YVA4 explained that communicating with partnership stakeholders, employers, and schools provided him with a valuable opportunity to improve his public speaking skills which he believed would better his chances of finding future employment:

> *"I think I've improved my employment areas, like, talk to different companies and businesses and districts as well. I'm speaking to, like, different teams and different councils, or different teams and different schools, or speaking-, I think mainly my speaking and listening has improved in this role, and that I think it's a big improvement."*
>
> *YVA4*

A similar sentiment was shared by YVA3, who expressed that she was able to enhance her administration skills through the added responsibility of organising transport for the YVAs. This was key for her as her long-term career plan at the time was to work in administration.

Skills were not the only thing that the YVAs were able to gain from the role. The YVAs also revealed that compared to before they joined DEBP, **they had much more hope that there were employers that respected and understood neurodivergence like DEBP had**. As cited above:

> *"At other jobs, I've been perceived to be slow, and not learn as quick as others, but here, I'm fully understood, and have more support and more hope"*
>
> *YVA1*

The impact that leading on the commissioning process has had on the YVAs was witnessed by stakeholders in the partnership too in the form of **personal growth.**

> *"I think what's worked well is, I think, the youth voice ambassadors have grown their confidence, their skills in terms of commissioning and presenting,*

> *articulating the issues that we're speaking about. Yes, they've grown tremendously, and I think that is brilliant to see"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

This personal growth was also noted by YVAs' family members. workplace. YVA2 shared a message she received from her father, who is not part of the partnership, in which he expressed how, since becoming a YVA, he had seen her grow in resilience, maturity and steadfastness, as well as recognising her potential to achieve great things. YVA1's mother who attended a partnership meeting where her son engaged in discussion throughout felt proud of her son:

> *"[YVA1's] mum, she's involved in the project, and she came up to [Partnership Stakeholder] after one of the meetings and said, 'I've never heard YVA1 speak like that before, it's just amazing.'"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

As paid employees of DEBP, the **YVAs gained a greater level of financial freedom**, especially those who had not previously been in paid employment. This increased autonomy led to a stronger sense of self-worth, as they were able to do things that were previously out of reach, such as visiting different cities and purchasing newly released smartphones.

Within her digital diary, YVA2 made the reflection that **the role of YVA finally gave her the ability to make progress towards real change in the lives of young people with LD and/or ASC**. This meant a great deal to her as improving employment outcomes for young people with LD and/or ASC does not only affect her, but also her siblings. Furthermore, she was grateful for having the position and took the responsibility it came with seriously, as she details in this extract from her digital diary:

> *"Despite it being a very difficult experience to grow up as an undiagnosed and unsupported disabled person required to give an inordinate amount of support to my siblings at the expense of my own boundaries and health, all of these experiences have led to me being incredibly aware of where our system falls short at supporting and accommodating people with additional needs. It reminded me about how in the past, people like us were institutionalised or kept hidden in attics and the fact that I am involved in this project that is putting us at the forefront of positive change – the first of its kind no less – is an incredible responsibility and an even more incredible privilege."*
>
> *YVA2 Diary Entry*

The examples provided above show the range of meaningful impact that youth-led commissioning can have on the aspirations, skills, confidence and autonomy of the young people involved.

As Phase 1.5 comes to a close in July 2025, the current cohort of YVAs will conclude their roles. A new group of young people is expected to take the lead on youth-led commissioning, particularly if funding for Phase 2 is secured. At a recognition event held by the Partnership in July 2025, the YVAs reflected on their experiences, expressed gratitude to the Partnership, and shared their enthusiasm for the future of youth-led commissioning. They also outlined some of their next steps, including taking on new roles that continue to centre youth voice and leadership. For two of the YVAs, this includes joining EMCCA's newly formed youth advisory board.

7.2 Impact on the Partnership

Before the YVAs were employed by DEBP, there was some apprehensiveness among some of the partnership's members around whether young people with LD and/or ASC would have the ability to effectively lead on the testing and commissioning process for Phase 1.5 (See Section 5.2.1). However, this was quickly dispelled by the YVAs who exceeded expectations, contributing to **changing beliefs and misconceptions about what young people with LD and/or ASC can and cannot do**.

Many of the stakeholders interviewed shared that the YVAs reaffirmed the need for youth-led interventions and that these can be successful. This is essential for stakeholders, as well as key actors in the system to **believe in and respect youth-leadership and co-production and its potential for systems change**.

> *"They really bring a lot to those partnership meetings I think, and they are really impressive. I mean, if any one of them were my child I'd be really proud of them, because I think it's quite a big thing, isn't it, to sit in a room with a lot of adults some of whom are in quite senior positions. Nevertheless, you know, if [named YVA] doesn't understand he'll say so, and that's great. They're very articulate, I think. Again, you know, I think it's almost proved the hypothesis that they are capable, they can contribute"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

A stakeholder with limited direct experience of working with young people with LD and/or ASC prior to joining the partnership used their time with the YVAs as a learning opportunity. This helped them **better understand the challenges experienced by young people with LD/ ASC in the workplace**, as well as disrupt misconceptions from an employer's perspective.

> *"I didn't have any experience working with LD or SEND and I think, yes, it makes you empathise with other people. Yes, I can put myself in other people's shoes, and yes, people might have almost a predetermined idea of what it would be like, hiring people with learning disabilities, and it's probably wrong"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

The impact that the YVAs had on the partnership led some partners to invite the YVAs to be a part of their own organisations' youth boards. For example, a stakeholder from EMCCA expressed that they were hoping that the YVAs could be represented in the youth voice panel established by EMCCA's Elected Mayor to better understand how to support young people get into employment.

> *"I think the Mayor is also very focused actually on young people. It's one of her manifesto pledges. So, she's currently looking at setting up an EMCCA youth voice panel, which we hope that some of the members of our youth YVAs will be able to join that panel as well."*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Other partners expressed interest in adopting DEBP's YVA programme as a model for hiring and caring for young people with LD and/or ASC into their own organisation because of the success of DEBP and the YVAs.

> *"It's difficult for me to speak on behalf of my organisation but, yes, I'd like to think so given our mission and aims as an organisation. We aren't a large organisation, so we don't recruit a lot but I think, for employers generally, there is a lot to learn from DEBP's approach in terms of recruiting, accessible recruitment. And I also think there is a lot for us to learn around the wider systemic barriers that disable that from happening."*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Finally—and perhaps most importantly—the YVAs had a significant impact on the Partnership's confidence in youth-led commissioning. Their success in Phase 1.5 demonstrated that young people could effectively lead the testing and delivery of commissions, strengthening the belief that youth-led approaches are both achievable and impactful. As a result, the Partnership made youth-led commissioning a core element of their Phase 2 proposal submitted to Youth Futures, aiming to extend funding and scale up the YVA programme by moving it to EMCCA at a regional level. This proposal reflects the Partnership's commitment to embedding youth leadership in local government commissioning and their belief in its potential to thrive within regional structures and formal institutions.

7.3 Impact on Wider Systems

The impact that the YVAs had on wider systems (e.g., schools, local authorities, employers and other service providers in the region) is difficult to assess as we did not conduct interviews with the institutions and organisations that the YVAs interacted and worked with. However, we can present the *perceived* impact reported by the stakeholders interviewed.

One of the main reasons why key decision-makers were often not involving young people within their decision-making was due to a lack of meaningful dialogue between young people who would be impacted by the decisions and the decision-makers themselves. This resulted in the overlooking of young people's opinions and how they will be impacted by decisions made. However, **the YVAs presence and engagement with decision-makers encouraged the latter to get to know them and their stories, humanising them and encouraging them to reflect on how involved young people are in their decision-making processes**.

> *"If we put young people at the front, and we're behind as enablers for them to, kind of, speak, that's the human face I just spoke about. So, loads of decision-makers never really go and meet a young person that their decision-making has impacted, they might go on a nice photo shoot, and stand there, and shake somebody's hand, or have a cup of tea, but they don't genuinely get to know them. Through the YVAs they are getting to know them, and I think that humanises, and ..the whole mentality is, if they're in a room making a decision, we want them to stop and think, 'Can I actually legitimately make this decision on my own, or do I need to share that decision-making power?' And that's what we want to change, that's the reason for centring them and elevating them on the programme, because we saw partners go, 'That's great information, we'll take*

> *that and do that on our own over there.' They weren't, kind of, committing to it, so by bringing them into the foreground, they couldn't ignore them"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

Partnership stakeholders felt that the YVAs had a limited impact on local employers. This was mainly because employer engagement was mostly handled by local authorities, not the YVAs. However, the YVAs did involve some employers in the **role model campaign** YVAs commissioned in Phase 1.5. They worked with employers who hosted young people in supported internships to help identify participants for the campaign. These young people took part in filming. They spoke about what they had learned about themselves, how they were supported, and what they enjoyed about their internships. Employers gave feedback to the YVAs and the Youth Voice Facilitator. They said the campaign made them feel recognised and appreciated for their efforts to include and support young people.

The partnership stakeholders identified the biggest impact on the wider systems to be with schools. The YVA role involved significant engagement with pupils at local SEND schools and colleges since YVAs delivered various workshops to promote the importance of youth voice, recruit for the YDB, as well share information on the work they were doing with the partnership. The feedback and support they received from schools was overwhelmingly positive, and schools indicated that they would invite them back to give further workshops and presentations as the pupils responded better to the sessions with the YVAs than they did to similar sessions with their teachers. This was largely because pupils were able to see representation of young people with LD and/or ASC in paid roles where they can be themselves and be trusted to make decisions. This made the **YVAs great role models for other young people**.

> *"The local schools are saying it's the biggest influence that's coming out of anything they've done, is to see people being trusted to make decisions. And I think that's because experience says there's always been somebody else that's spoke, or speaks, for a young person, particularly with learning disabilities, or neurodivergent. And for the first time, they're speaking for themselves, essentially."*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

> *"We've also started, this year, with a school in Chesterfield [...], we visited their school and they've now, kind of, set up regular termly meetings, for us to go in and talk to their learners, and I think that's a testament*
>
> *that they want us there speaking to their learners often. I think we, well, it's not me, it's the youth voice ambassadors are quite inspiring and really good role models for young people. [...] I think schools seeing that there are jobs out there that are for young people with LD and where you're allowed to be yourself and you're allowed the patience and the time to work, I think is quite inspiring."*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter addressed the question of what impact youth-led commissioning has on young people, service providers, and wider systems. It showed that the YVA role has created real change for young people with learning disabilities and autism—boosting their confidence, skills, and sense of value. It also helped shift attitudes among service providers, encouraging more inclusive practices and interest in youth participation. While system-wide change is harder to measure, early signs show that youth-led commissioning is beginning to influence decision-makers and inspire younger generations. Overall, the YVA role is proving to be powerful, not just for those involved but for the wider community too.

Chapter 8 – Conclusions and Recommendations

The Connected Futures programme by Youth Futures Foundation aims to transform how young people facing exclusion transition from education to employment. The programme's overarching goal is system change, which means creating widespread and sustainable shifts across multiple levels. It's not about one-off interventions but about reworking the way processes and people interact within young people's educational and employment journeys.

The Connected Futures partnership in the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) was formed in 2022 to tackle unemployment among young people with Learning Disabilities (LD) and/or Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) in the D2N2 region (Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire). The partnership trialled youth-led commissioning—placing young people with LD and/or ASC in leadership roles—as a pathway to system change.

This report investigated how commissioning power can be transferred to young people with LD and/or ASC and explores its potential for broader transformation by using the Youth Voice Ambassador (YVA) programme as a case study. Below we present key lessons and recommendations for transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC for the partnership, employers of young commissioners, and DWP.

8.1 Key Takeaways

Here's what we learnt, and key take aways

- **Youth-led commissioning is a transformational approach**. It goes far beyond consultation by handing real power to young people with LD and/or ASC, placing them at the centre of decision-making and systems change.
- **Eight guiding principles can ensure meaningful youth leadership.** These include involving young people at every stage, trusting their lived experience, adapting processes to their needs, and giving them control over resources.
- **Transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC is possible but must be intentionally enabled**. The success of the YVA programme shows that inclusive processes, trust-building, and tailored support make it feasible for young people to lead commissioning.
- **Young people with LD and/or ASC can face barriers challenges leading commissioning, but support structures help overcome them**. Challenges like inaccessible information, confusing systems, and inconsistent support can be addressed through strategies such as clearer communication, skill-building, and scheduled guidance.
- **Youth-led commissioning has direct impact on the lives of young people with LD and/or ASC**. YVAs developed confidence, employment skills, financial independence, and a sense of value through their leadership roles.
- **Youth-led commissioning has potential to drive systems change.** The involvement of YVAs in commissioning has prompted service providers to rethink assumptions about young people with LD and/or ASC, leading to more inclusive practices and structures. YVAs'

engagement with decision-makers and their visibility as role models signal promising early shifts in how systems include and empower neurodivergent youth.

8.2 Recommendations for the Partnership

8.2.1 Embed Youth-Led Commissioning Within EMCCA

This report provided evidence of the impact of youth-led commissioning and its potential for systems change in the D2N2 region to enhance outcomes for young people with LD and/or ASC. During Phase 1.5 of the partnership, the infrastructure for youth-led commissioning (i.e. the YVA programme) sat with DEBP, a charity with limited resources and political influence. Embedding youth-led commissioning within EMCCA has potential for:

- Expanding resources to support young people lead commissioning processes. This report showed that facilitation capacity is key for commissioning to be effectively and meaningfully led by young people. Expanding facilitation capacity and resources for youth-led commissioning is key to ensure that young people are involved in every stage of the commissioning cycle, in line with the key principle for youth-led commissioning presented in this report.
- Informing EMCCA's work in delivering its key priorities on economic development in the region to ensure these are inclusive of young people with LD and/or ASC.
- Setting the example for other organisations, ranging from local authorities to service providers such as schools and NHS, so that these may consider adopting youth-led commissioning.

8.2.2 Collectively Advocate for Youth-Led Commissioning

Members of the partnership should continue advocating for youth-led commissioning and sharing good practices on transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC, both within their respective organisations as well as key decision-makers in the new political landscape of EMCCA. This is key to contributing to changing cultures within existing organisations responsible for providing services to young people with LD and/or ASC across the D2N2 region and to expand buy-in for youth-led commissioning from key decisions-makers in the region.

This kind of advocacy can be advanced in practical ways. For example, the partnership could:

- Establish an online presence within EMCCA's website to showcase the work undertaken by the partnership. This page could serve as a reference point in advocacy efforts and a repository for emerging good practices on youth-led commissioning.
- Document and share examples of good practice in youth leadership and co-production taking place in the region through regular briefings. These could be published on the website and shared via relevant stakeholder channels, such as employer and school newsletters distributed by local authorities.
- Convene events to share and disseminate learning on youth leadership and co-production across local authorities and other partners.

- Deliver training sessions for local authority teams on how to meaningfully strengthen youth voice in commissioning.

> *"The manoeuvring I think we need to do as a Partnership is how do we take what we are doing here, elevate it so everybody knows about it as much as humanly possible, and understands what it is? For us the biggest opportunity to do that is with the Mayor [of EMCCA] and to bring it to them to be (a) aware of it, and (b) scrutinise it […] As partners, we've all got a responsibility to enable that to happen […] Because it's fine doing it [youth-led commissioning] at this level [the level of the partnership] with these partners, but whilst the partners are committed, they're not necessarily the people that can change everything down the line. They can enact change in their own organisation, but as a whole system, you know… with the power that is going to be wielded by the mayor's office, it [youth-led commissioning] needs to be there"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

8.2.3 Research the process of embedding youth-led commissioning in local governemnt

This study explores the process of transferring commissioning power to young people with LD and/or ASC through the YVA programme, delivered by the charity DEBP. The findings demonstrate that such a transfer of power is both possible and promising. However, as a charity, DEBP benefits from greater flexibility and agility than larger institutions like local government, enabling it to provide more tailored and responsive support to young people with LD and/or ASC. This flexibility may not apply to statutory bodies. Further research examining in detail the structural and organisational challenges of embedding youth-led commissioning within local government is therefore needed to understand what it takes to implement and sustain this approach at a systemic level. **As the partnership continues its work, it is essential that it documents and investigates the process of embedding youth-led commissioning within EMCCA and its constituent local authorities**. Such research should identify key steps, enablers, and organisational barriers, helping to guide both EMCCA's efforts and those of other local governments considering similar models.

8.2.4 Enhance funding and support for voluntary/community sector organisations driving youth voice

The report highlights the crucial role that VCS organisations, such as DEBP, play in facilitating youth-led commissioning and more broadly youth voice. However, the funding environment for VCS organisations remains precarious. It is therefore important that EMCCA and its partners actively commit to identifying, supporting, and investing in VCS organisations already committed to enhance youth voice, particularly for young people with LD and/or ASC, in service commissioning and delivery. This could include providing long-term funding streams to ensure the sustainability of VCS organisations and encouraging collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the sector to amplify impact.

8.3 Recommendations for Employers of Young Commissioners

8.3.1 Build Workplace Cultures that Value Diversity

There is a need for employers to build workplace cultures that value diversity in order to recruit and retain young people with LD and/or ASC in various roles, including leading commissioning, and ensure young people are supported and feel confident in their role and in the workplace. Building inclusive workplace cultures is a long-term commitment that, at the minimum, requires organisations assessing their existing inclusive practices; identifying ways to improve organisational inclusion strategies sustainably and in the long term; and providing training to all employees on LD and/or ASC to uncover biases and challenge misconceptions and stereotypes. There are several toolkits[3] available to help employers build inclusive workplace cultures, offering guidance that spans the entire employee journey—from inclusive recruitment practices to creating supportive environments for all staff. Employers should make use of these toolkits and adapt them to their organisation to foster an inclusive workplace culture.

8.3.2 Make Recruitment Accessible

This report highlighted the importance of making recruitment accessible when hiring young people with LD and/or ASC to lead commissioning processes. Drawing from the lessons learnt by DEBP in recruiting young people with LD and/or ASC to lead commissioning, employers should: 1) ensure the language of job adverts is accessible and explicitly invites young people with LD and/or ASC to apply for the role; 2) share job vacancies with organisations working with young people with LD and/or ASC; 3) replace formal interview procedures with more accessible format, such as "selection days", where candidates are introduced to the organisation, its staff, the role and asked to complete various tasks to assess suitability in more informal settings; 4) engage families in the recruitment process; and 5) gather feedback and input from young people themselves on how to enhance the accessibility of the recruitment process.

8.3.3 Offer Supported Internships

This report highlights that young people with LD and/or ASC see supported internships as important pathways to employment. Employers—including those involved in commissioning, such as local government—should consider offering supported internships in partnership with education providers. These could serve as a stepping stone to more permanent and secure roles within commissioning and related areas, while providing young people with opportunities to develop relevant skills in areas such as commissioning and youth leadership. Additionally, within supported internships, job coaches play a key role in supporting both young people and employers, helping to ensure that appropriate adjustments and supports are in place to enable success in the workplace.

[3] Examples of existing toolkits providing employers with practical steps, templates, and sector-specific advice to embed inclusivity at every level of an organisation include: The Socio-Economic Diversity and Inclusion Employer Toolkit by the Social Mobility Commission; Inclusive Employer Toolkits by the Greater London Authority; Age-Inclusive Recruitment Toolkit by the CIPD; Recruitment Toolkit by the Business Disability Forum; Stress Talking Toolkits by the Health and Safety Executive.

For employers, this also offers valuable insight into the types of support that facilitate the inclusion of young people with additional needs.

8.2.4 Provide Individualised Support and Reasonable Adjustments

This report highlighted the importance of taking a person-centred approach, recognising employees as individuals with unique needs rather than defining them by their disability. It emphasised the need to provide individualised support and reasonable adjustments to retain young people with LD and/or ASC and ensure they can effectively lead commissioning processes. At a minimum, individualised support means getting to know young people, establishing a relationship of trust so that they can communicate their needs, and working out with them what reasonable adjustments and support looks like for them to succeed.

> *"I'd say any predetermined idea of a young person that you've got, because of their learning disability, kind of, get rid of that. Just treat this person as the individual they are but also understand that you might have to make one or two reasonable adjustments, and you might have to be patient whilst the young person grows into their role. It's often hard for a young person to come into a team and integrate with everyone. I think having accessible inclusion strategies to get them involved in the team, it means you might have to change certain parts about the culture, but I think doing it with a young person's best interest at heart is important and, yes, having the patience to allow them to grow and become the best them in that role is key"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

8.4 Recommendations for DWP

8.4.1 Streamline the Application Process for Access to Work

This report highlighted the challenges faced by YVAs and DEBP in navigating the Access to Work scheme, including long waiting times, unclear application procedures, and lack of transparency over decisions. There is the need to streamline and simplify the application process for Access to Work scheme and to enhance transparency over how decisions are made, given how key Access to Work is in supporting and encouraging employers to recruit young people with LD and/or ASC in various roles, including to lead commissioning processes.

> *"Obviously, brilliant funding […] Access to Work, as a grant for travel, is really good […] through Access to Work, you can apply for, kind of, counselling sessions, equipment that support someone's back better or laptops and stuff like that. There's a very, very long list of stuff you can apply for, and I think that maybe is good because, a lot of the time, a company might feel like, 'Why should I have to pay extra for this, yes, or do that?' Having that funding there does definitely encourage employers to maybe take the time and, yes, learn more about young people with LD and […] hire more in the future"*

Partnership Stakeholder

This is important as delays in the application process can prevent people from accessing crucial workplace adjustments, affecting their ability to work effectively. Furthermore, a simplified and more transparent process removes barriers, helping more disabled people enter and stay in work and reducing the administrative burden for employers and employees applying to Access to Work. Streamlining the application process for Access to Work may require 1) reducing complexity by using plain language and shorter forms tailored to different needs; 2) creating a list of common workplace adjustments (e.g., software, ergonomic equipment) that can be approved within days rather than weeks; 3) providing applicants with real-time updates on their application status; 4) publishing clear guidance on how funding decisions are made to improve transparency and consistency; and 5) allowing people to apply before and after securing a job.

8.4.2 Support Employers in Developing Inclusive Workplace Cultures

DWP already provide various forms of support to employers, including through its Disability Confidence Scheme. DWP should provide further support to employers considering hiring young people with LD and/or ASC in various roles, including youth-led commissioning, to develop inclusive workplace cultures and practices. Additional support could include, example, training on how to apply for and navigate Access to Work, as well as convening knowledge exchange initiatives on good employer practices to employ and retain young people with LD and/or ASC.

> *"I think one is around their understanding of LD and ASC, and how that might present what, you know, just a better understanding, definitely, awareness raising and understanding [...] a better understanding of Access to Work, what support they could get through that and how it all works. There's a lot that we didn't know as an employer at the beginning, which I wish we knew now. And probably, quite possibly in-work job coach support to help people remain in work"*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

8.4.3 Develop a Systematic and Nation-Wide Policy for Job Coaches

Job coaches constitute a type of support that the Access to Work scheme provides. Job coaches are key particularly when hiring young people with LD and/or ASC for complex roles, such as leading commissioning processes. Commissioning requires engaging in a wide range of activities, various forms of information that may not be accessible, as well as engaging with a wide variety of

stakeholders. Better funded follow-on job coaches for employees and employers could enhance retention of young people with LD and/or ASC in roles such as leading commissioning.

> *"The job coach is not just there for the employee, they're there for the employer. And that is really badly funded, the funding for that is diabolical. And there is no systematic approach to that across the country, at all [...] Without it, the retention, you know..."*
>
> *Partnership Stakeholder*

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