THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH IMPACT

Listening Fund (England) Case Study Report

Sarah Williams and Dr Jo Hickman Dunne

June 2020

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Listening Fund supports youth-focussed organisations to develop their practice of listening to young people and responding to what they hear. The Listening Fund in England is supported by the Blagrave Trust, Comic Relief, the National Lottery Community Fund, and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The fund is worth £900,000, which is shared across 22 youth organisations (referred to as 'partners') each receiving up to £20,000 per annum for two years, from 2018 to 2020.

The Centre for Youth Impact was commissioned to evaluate the Listening Fund. The evaluation aims to understand and assess the impact of the Listening Fund on the practice of the organisations who are in receipt of funding, whilst also making a broader contribution to the evidence base around organisational listening. The central research question for the evaluation is:

What is the impact of dedicated funder support on organisational listening practice?

The evaluation focusses on capturing learning through understanding process alongside impact. Our intention is that the evaluation will not only offer insights for the youth organisations and funders that are directly involved in the Fund, but also that this will support the wider youth sector and its funders to enhance understanding of how to embed good listening practice.

As part of the evaluation, case study research was conducted with six of the Listening Fund partners for an in-depth investigation of their funded projects, with emphasis on the successes and challenges associated with listening and responding to young people's voices. This report explores the case study findings.

This report accompanies the final learning report for the Listening Fund in England, where the findings from the overall evaluation are taken together to identify key learning. This report can be found on the Centre for Youth Impact website[1].

We would like to reiterate our thanks to the Listening Fund partners who took part in this phase of the evaluation. Their generosity with their time and reflections made this process particularly valuable and added to the richness of the overall evaluation findings.

---

[1] www.youthimpact.uk/the-listening-fund-evaluation.html

Case Study Research Overview

Research for the Listening Fund case studies was conducted from January to March 2020 – in the final stages of the Listening Fund – to allow for a comprehensive look at the partners' experiences throughout the entire funding period. Each case study involved a site visit that incorporated interviews and focus groups with a range of stakeholders, including leadership staff, frontline staff, young people, and external stakeholders (such as trustees, delivery partners and parents).

Given the variety in the nature of listening activities across the partners in the cohort, it is not possible to be entirely representative. Nevertheless, the cases aim to give a varied picture in terms of organisational size, geography, experience in listening, and mechanisms for listening. It should also be noted that the partners that participated in the research were self-selecting, based on those who felt they had the appropriate level of time and interest to take part. Table 1 offers an overview of the partners that were researched as case studies.

Table 1: Overview of the Listening Fund partners investigated as case studies

Partner	Target Group	Mechanisms for Listening	Page No.
Gendered Intelligence (GI)	Young people aged 8-30 who are trans, non-binary or questioning their gender, in London, Bristol and Leeds.	Youth board, impact analysis process	5
Investing in Children	Young people aged 5-17 across County Durham.	Youth-led Agenda Days™	10
Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)	Young people aged 16-24 who are refugees or seeking asylum in the UK. KRAN is based in Kent.	Youth forum, youth ambassadors, traineeship scheme, involvement of young people in recruitment	15
Prison Reform Trust	Young people aged 18-24 in prison custody.	Face-to-face consultations; individual correspondence via telephone and post	20
Trelya	Young people living in disadvantaged regions of West Cornwall.	Listening 'telephone booth', collaboration with journalists, cultural listening practices	25
Youth Access	Young people engaging with the mental health and wellbeing services in Youth Access's membership.	Digital feedback tool, youth ambassador workshops	30

Gendered Intelligence

Gendered Intelligence (GI) is a national charity working to increase understandings of gender diversity and to improve the lives of anyone who is trans, gender diverse, or questioning their gender. It works directly with the trans community as well as those who have an impact on trans lives, including schools, colleges, employers and parents. GI specialises in supporting young trans people aged 8-30 through youth groups, mentoring, arts-based programmes, and residential trips. It offers young trans people safe and supportive spaces to socialise, to get information and advice, and to explore their gender identity if they are questioning.

Overview of listening at Gendered Intelligence

Gendered Intelligence applied to the Listening Fund to implement systems to enable its youth community to raise their voice and to contribute to decision-making across the organisation. The two key components to its listening project, and how these have evolved, are explored below.

1) Youth board

GI experienced some difficult decisions in determining what the project should look like over the first year of the Listening Fund. In GI's original application, the flagship listening activity was to recruit three young people onto its main board of trustees. However, after speaking with the young people it works with, GI came to realise that many were not keen on the idea of becoming a trustee due to the high levels of legal and financial responsibility that came alongside this, which they would have to balance with many other responsibilities and challenges in their own lives. Furthermore, through consultation with the wider staff team, GI reflected that it was important to implement listening activities that enabled the organisation to hear from a diverse range of young people, whereas the trustee project would only enable it to reach a very select group.

Through these conversations, with input from staff and young people, GI's listening project evolved to become a separate youth board that sits alongside the main board of trustees. This enabled space for a range of young people to influence the running and delivery of GI's services, without the responsibilities associated with full trusteeship.

GI's youth board met for the first time in January 2020 and will convene every three months for a 'Youth Board Day'. It is open to all young trans people, from ages 8 to 30, across the various youth groups. The activities held at each youth board will vary, but the first day involved the following:

- Introduction: An open conversation with young people about what the youth board is, where the idea came from, and what they thought its purpose should be within GI;
- Getting to know GI: A session exploring what young people already knew about the whole organisation, and where more information would be helpful. This involved making a group 'sculpture' of GI using arts and crafts;
- Budget breakdown: In teams, young people interpreted parts of the budget and presented their interpretations using creative methods, such as drawings or marbles and cups; and
- Reflection: young people discussed how they had found the experience of the first Youth Board Day, and they were given time to discuss this both with and without staff present.

2) Impact analysis

Prior to the Listening Fund, the collection of impact data within GI tended to be done in an ad hoc and sporadic way, using long surveys that typically garnered low response rates. The second component of GI's listening project has been to make improvements to the way impact data is collected, in order to: a) make the process more fun and engaging for young people, and therefore reflective of GI's youth work practice, and b) to enable GI to obtain actionable data to improve service delivery, through hearing directly from young people on areas of need and interest.

GI has simplified and scaled-down the surveys used to collect impact data. GI thought carefully about its priorities, and thus decided to shape the surveys around its three core youth work aims: to build pride, to increase resilience, and to reduce social isolation. The surveys involved young people rating themselves on each of these factors on a scale of one to five, with the option to add further commentary. The data was collected systematically on a three-month basis.

> *"Impact analysis is now a more enjoyable process for young people, whilst also collecting information that gets to the heart of what we want to accomplish. It enables young people to speak directly as to whether and how we are achieving our aims."* (Residentials Lead and Assistant to the Youth Service)

GI has also made improvements to the process of analysing impact data. This has involved investing in Lamplight, an online database system, and GI has assigned one staff member with primary responsibility for analysing the data across all of GI's youth groups. This means the data is analysed and presented back to the youth work teams in a comparable and consistent manner. This then enabled the whole team to discuss the findings in quarterly youth work meetings, and to use them as the basis for developing future activities. For GI, implementing processes for data analysis is a key "*behind the scenes*" component of listening that should not be overlooked.
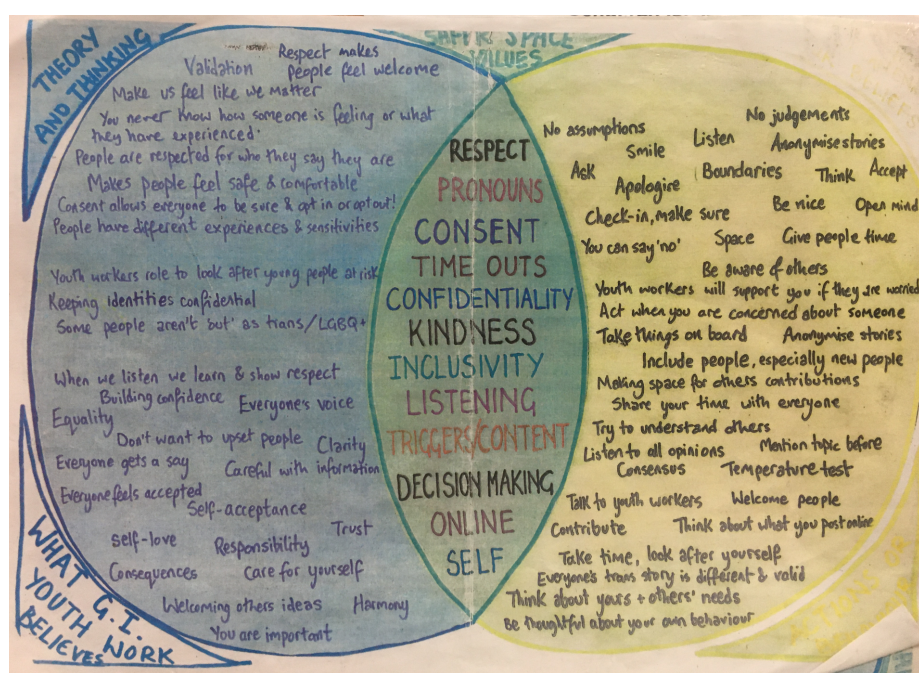

Figure 1: The GI Working Agreement, which is discussed at the beginning of youth group sessions, with 'listening' at the centre

What is the key learning and impact of this work?

Developing the right mechanisms for listening takes time

GI staff were 'ambitious' in their original application to the Listening Fund and required additional time "*to properly and deeply think through what listening could look like in our context, in a safe and sustainable way*". The Listening Fund has given the organisation the time and resource to do this deep thinking and to explore the youth board approach. GI acknowledges that it is at the beginning of a long process to improve the way the charity listens to young people, and must continue to reflect on and refine the processes that enable the youth board to have a say within GI.

> *"It's easy to say, 'let's set up a youth board!' but there's lots of considerations to ensure this is done meaningfully. We may have underestimated this, but it's been a real learning process that we're going to keep working on until we get it right."* (Youth Service Lead)

Making listening valuable to young people

For GI, like most of the partners in the Listening Fund, the process of listening must offer tangible benefits to young people as well as to the organisation. GI has found it is advantageous to gather identifiable impact data (i.e. young people's responses are not anonymous unless they opt for this specifically). This has enabled GI to capture the individual journeys of each young person. As explained by one member of staff, "*it's our job as youth workers to support young people to look back on different points of their journey, to learn from the harder times or to see how far they've come".* By improving the systematic process for collecting data, GI has obtained a clear picture of young people's journeys and has used the database system to present this back to them in a visual way. This starts a conversation with young people, to reflect on whether the data accurately represents their experience, by what it was affected, and how it could be different.

GI has also encouraged the youth group leaders to use creative techniques to gather the impact data, so that the process is embedded within the existing activities, rather than feeling like a distraction or an 'add-on'. This has involved, for example, holding a large group discussion focussed on breaking down what the key concepts (such as resilience) really mean, or encouraging young people to create artwork to represent their feelings. As suggested by the CEO:

> *"We're learning that impact analysis doesn't have to feel like a dry, evaluative process"*

Increasing reach and accessibility

In GI's original proposal to recruit young trustees, staff expressed concerns that those who put themselves forward would likely be young people who are the most confident, and potentially who have experience sitting on boards at school or university. There are also legal requirements in England that mean trustee positions can only be open to young people over the age of 16. On reflection, GI staff felt it was important that all young people are given equal opportunities to take part in listening, and in particular, to encourage engagement from those who would be less likely to put themselves forwards. Accordingly, the youth board has been effective for enabling a wider range of young people to participate, and to do so in a relatively informal manner, which is enabling for young people who have less confidence. GI has taken additional steps to ensure the board is accessible, such as offering an adapted, simplified version of the board papers as these can be highly dense and technical. This has reduced the likelihood that young people feel intimidated by the materials and has increased the transparency of how decisions get made.

What changes have been made as a result of listening?

GI's focus has been working out the best processes to enable young people to engage with the youth board effectively. For most of the young people, sitting on a youth board has been a "*very new experience*" and it will take time for both the young people and the staff to become comfortable and confident with the set up and to use it to the maximum potential.

> *"At our first Youth Board Day the young people definitely felt confused, and maybe even overwhelmed at times. This is part of the process, working through areas of complexity so young people can have a full understanding of the context, and therefore give their input in a meaningful way."* (Youth Service Lead)

For example, for many of the young people, the main thing they knew about GI is that they run youth groups and the annual residentials. For some, it came as a "*massive realisation*" to recognise the many other components of GI's work, such as training and advocacy work. For young people to genuinely contribute to decision-making within GI, first they needed to be supported to think comprehensively about all the components that make up the organisation.

During the first youth board day, young people started to explore and ask questions about GI's funding streams. For example, the group identified a funder who they felt it was inappropriate to accept a grant from because they were unhappy with some other components of its work. Staff recognised this as a valid concern but wanted to ensure that the young people understood the potential implications of what it would mean to no longer accept the funding. It is only by building this understanding of the broader context that GI can start to involve young people at the board level in a full and empowered manner. Through these processes, young people "*will naturally move to a point of being able to make decisions at increasingly higher levels of the organisation*".

> *"The youth board has been interesting to find out about how things at GI actually work, things like financing and the budget. At first, I thought 'wow you have a lot more money than I thought', but then I started to realise how much money goes into the running an organisation like this."* (Youth board member)

There are various examples where GI has already implemented changes at the service-level based directly on what it has heard from young people, for instance:

- **Identifying areas of need**: The data gathered through GI's impact analysis process has enabled staff to identify where additional support is required, and to shape services accordingly. Last year, the data allowed GI to recognise that resilience was especially low among some demographics of young people, and it implemented activities to address this.
- **Developing youth-led activities**: GI has a process to enable all young people to have a say in its youth work delivery. This starts with the young people brainstorming ideas for activities and trips, and staff research these ideas to see if they are practically and financially viable. The staff then return with a list of viable options and collaboratively develop a plan and timescale with young people. 'Temperature testing' is used to check all are happy with the agreed plan, and GI continue discussing and developing the plan until everyone is satisfied.
- **Creating trans-inclusive guides and resources**: Through formal and informal consultation with young people, GI use their views and experiences as the basis to develop guidance

documents to help other organisations to develop trans-inclusive spaces, such as schools and other youth clubs. These are created by staff with direct input from young people.

Ongoing challenges and next steps

Making listening diverse and representative

As an organisation with a diverse reach - in terms of age, race, and gender identity - it is important that this is reflected in GI's listening practice. It is already apparent to GI that it has had disproportionately lower engagement in the youth board from young people under the age of 18 and young people of colour. Going forwards, GI plans to do targeted outreach to understand why some groups feel less motivated to take part, to understand how it can redress this balance. This will start with asking open questions within GI's Under-12s group and the BAME group, to ask what doesn't appeal and what might make them more likely to attend.

Connecting the youth board and the main board of trustees

After each Youth Board Day, two young people will also attend the quarterly meeting of GI's main board of trustees, to represent the youth voice and to report back on the experience to others. This is intended to make sure GI's two boards stay connected, and GI is still working out the logistics to ensure this is effective. For instance, GI staff are deciding whether the same two young people should attend the board of trustees each time (to build up their experience and understanding) or whether the young people should rotate (so that more have the opportunity to experience the main board meeting). Additionally, GI is planning activities where the main board of trustees will "*meet with each other and the young people within the youth space",* to avoid a power dynamic where young people "*are always expected to go to them*".

Fostering critical feedback

GI predominantly receives positive feedback from young people. On the one hand, this is a positive reflection that young people highly value GI as an organisation: however, GI want to work towards obtaining more critical feedback. The reason for this trend is, in part, because young trans people often report feeling misunderstood and unaccepted in many areas of their lives, whereas at GI they enter a fully accepting and trans-inclusive space. As suggested by one youth worker:

> *"It is difficult to solicit critical feedback because many young people are just grateful that we exist and see it as a luxury to be here."*

GI is undergoing a long-term process, which will be affected by broader societal trends, to support young trans people to feel entitled to inclusive spaces of support. Doing so will increase the likelihood that young people will offer critical feedback and will enable another level of depth and complexity in their listening. As described by one youth worker, "*young people need to be supported to feel they deserve this space in order to tell us how we can make it better.*"

Read more about the work of Gendered Intelligence on the organisation's website[2].

---

[2] genderedintelligence.co.uk

Investing in Children

Investing in Children (IiC) is a children's human rights organisation based in County Durham in the North East of England. IiC works in partnership with children and young people to exercise their rights to participate in decisions that affect them. For over two decades IiC has worked towards two key objectives: to create spaces for young people to discuss the issues they face and the changes they want to see, and to persuade those who hold power to listen and to make those changes. IiC's aim is to have an impact on youth systems and services to ensure they are taking account of young people's voices.

Overview of listening at IiC

Investing in Children's key tool for listening has long been its Agenda Day™ model: the creation of adult-free spaces facilitated by children and young people. In essence, an Agenda Day™ is an event where young people get together without adults, to talk about issues that affect them and to decide what to do about them. At any given time, IiC is working with approximately 15-20 groups of young people, to tackle issues in services such as social work, schools and mental health. IiC also runs a Membership Award Scheme that gives organisations national recognition for the active inclusion of children and young people in dialogue that results in change.

> *"What we are trying to do is support kids to be listened to by somebody else."* (IiC Founder)

Understandably, IiC considers 'listening' to be its USP. The very reason the organisation exists is to create spaces for young people to be heard, and to promote better listening practices within its partners. But does being an authority on listening automatically denote being good at this practice yourself? IiC wanted to challenge itself on its own listening agenda, and to look more widely at how young people engage in systems, services, and in the community.

Through the Listening Fund, IiC aimed to:
- Learn what motivates its partners to engage in listening and what barriers they face in these endeavours;
- Explore the diversity of listening experiences of the children and young people it works with, bringing this into sharper focus in its everyday work; and
- Better understand the benefits of youth-led projects for children and young people, and in doing so contribute to the evidence base for a rights-based approach that centres on young people as competent decision makers in societal change.

To address these aims, IiC adopted a three-stranded approach in the Listening Fund project, as explored below.

1. Research into motivations for listening

IiC commissioned a piece of research with organisations who have received the IiC Membership Award, to understand their perspectives on and motivations for listening to young people. This has involved IiC improving how it listens to its members, to understand how and where it can support them to listen effectively. IiC wanted to ask itself some critical questions:

"We engage with other organisations who are doing listening, but the questions we asked ourselves are: How do we extend that? How do we make it better? What messages are we giving when we go out to visit members, and are they the right messages?" (Co-Director)

2. Exploring young people's views around who and who does not listen

IiC opened itself up to consider *"in terms of power, who listens to young people and who doesn't."* The organisation recruited a group of young people to undertake a series of Agenda Days™ to explore their views on which adults listen to them, and where they feel they are not heard. This is referred to as the 'Listening Project' and it has involved five Agenda Days™ in total that addressed the following questions:

- How adults do and do not listen
- Where young people do feel or do not feel listened to
- How and where younger age groups are listened to
- How and where older age groups are listened to
- How young people are listened to in (disadvantaged) community settings

3. Longitudinal research into IiC's impact on young people's lives

IiC commissioned a longitudinal research study to understand if the experience of being involved in IiC (i.e. to have direct involvement in rights-based and youth voice activities) had impacts on young people's behaviours and attitudes later in life. This has included an understanding of the extent that young people:

- Have raised political awareness and engagement;
- Have increased awareness of, and were more likely to, advocate for equality, dignity or human rights issues; and
- Have more active engagement as citizens (e.g. at the community or institutional level, face-to-face or online).

This strand of IiC's project feeds into a long-term strategy to improve evidence of the benefits of engaging young people through a rights-based approach.

What is the key learning and impact of this work?

The three strands of IiC's Listening Fund project build on already strong foundations, and all have potentially powerful implications for the practices of social institutions engaging with children and young people. To this end, some useful and diverse learning outcomes have been identified.

1. Partner organisations need ongoing support in listening endeavours

In exploring the motivations of membership organisations to engage in listening, IiC has been able to understand how it can improve the Membership Programme to better support its members. The research has highlighted some potential gaps in the programme, including:

- A question around whether the award captures the voices of enough young people;
- The lack of a wider support network beyond receiving the award;
- The need for more ideas and advice for members to move their practice forward; and

- The view that a strong and consistent working relationship with an IiC member of staff was beneficial, but that not all the member organisations currently have this.

These learning outcomes have demonstrated to IiC that effective approaches to listening are not universal, and that services working with children and young people need continued support. It has also given the organisation more confidence to know how to implement this support when developing the Membership Award. As one Co-Director suggested:

> "The research findings consolidate some of what we already know, in terms of where our gaps are and, therefore, where we should work on upscaling our Membership Award. But the research has given us a real focus, to know that this is not just what we think but what the people involved are feeling as well".

2. Not all young people are listened to equally

Capturing the different experiences of different cohorts of children and young people has been a challenge for IiC. However, through its Agenda Days™, IiC has gained some important learning in understanding how particular groups of young people experienced barriers to being listened to within particular services. Specifically, this learning has included:

- Within the education system, young people often do not feel they are listened to or that their views are taken seriously;
- Younger age groups do not feel they are listened to as much as older age groups; and
- Both of these factors can be compounded by a young person's social environment, whereby young people living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas feel that this negatively impacts on who listens to them.

3. Impacts of empowering young people extend beyond a single project

The Agenda Days™ have also demonstrated the empowering nature of the process of providing dedicated spaces for listening. IiC found that young people took a high level of initiative in the Agenda Days™ and "*just did them the way they wanted to*". While IiC provided administrative and logistical support, such as with writing follow up reports, the entire process was driven by young people.

The Agenda Day™ approach was also endorsed by young people, who felt that it is an effective process that allows them to voice their views and to facilitate tangible change in response to those views. As reflected by one of IiC's Young Directors:

> "At IiC everything is taken on board. In meetings and stuff, it's like 'what can we change?'. We have a discussion and notes get taken, reports get written, things get changed."

What changes have been made as a result of listening?

IiC has made some changes to its membership offer to better support its members with their listening practice. The biggest of these changes is the creation of bronze, silver and gold 'packages' that reflect how long an organisation has held the IiC award. Different packages have

different associated benefits, including discounted Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses and learning resources.

The delivery team is also looking to build more consistent relationships with its membership organisations, as this has been identified as an opportunity for IiC to embed its systematic approach to listening more widely. These changes will be showcased in a launch event in summer 2020. As one member of staff noted:

> "We have to change the way we have relationships with other people if we intend to have a greater impact on young people's ability to engage in decision making processes and to be taken seriously. Improving relations with our members is big and is going to be really beneficial."

Additionally, IiC is acting on what it has learnt from the Agenda Days™ in the following ways:

- Focusing on younger age groups within its work: for example, through increasing the focus on and activity of its existing Under-13 'Children in Care Council', to improve mechanisms for them to engage;
- Building stronger relationships with schools who hold the IiC membership, and using this network to trial a peer mentor programme;
- IiC has recently recruited a Volunteer Coordinator, who works one day a week, to help support young people to develop their ideas and to manage the time of those who want to be involved with IiC beyond existing groups. This is a first step towards conducting more focused listening with particular communities of young people; and
- IiC has recently opened a Residential Care Home for young people. Through this it is aiming to create a financial surplus that will be directed to provide unrestricted funding for young people engaged in IiC to take action on issues important to them.

Ongoing challenges and next steps

Engaging membership organisations

IiC staff do not view 'listening' as an easy task and did not expect the listening projects to be plain sailing. Ultimately, there have been some key challenges, both in getting to this point and moving beyond the life of the Listening Fund. The initial challenge for IiC was getting membership organisations to engage with its research: over 30 organisations were contacted to take part, but only seven responded. It has also been difficult to engage organisations who did not fully buy into the IiC approach and therefore who had not renewed their membership beyond one year.

Meeting and managing the enthusiasm of young people

Throughout the project, IiC has developed a "*core group of young people*" who have become highly connected with the organisation through co-designing and leading the project. The project has "*lit the fire in the belly*" of these young people, who are consequently spending more time at IiC offices without necessarily having a defined project or purpose.

IiC has found that the issues and ideas raised by young people often relate to projects that IiC *"is not commissioned to work on"*. In other words, staff face challenges in translating young people's

ideas into action if the ideas do not align with the existing requirements and demands of their funders. The competitive funding environment in the youth sector, and lengthy funding application processes, heighten this issue as it can make it difficult to find new pots of funding to implement young people's ideas and respond to their issues. IiC had already recognised the need to provide a pot of unrestricted funding for young people to develop their own projects, but the Listening Fund has created urgency around this in order to harness their enthusiasm. As mentioned above, this will be implemented through the financial surplus generated through the recently opened Residential Care Home.

Challenges with capacity

For IiC, capacity has always been, and always will be the biggest challenge to this type of work. As one Project Worker highlighted, the Listening Fund provided the resources "*to be able to take stock of what is going on and the capacity to capture that information".* Specifically, the Listening Project has shown that not all young people are listened to equally, and IiC is taking actions to address these imbalances. But finding the room and resources to undertake these actions is the most challenging part.

Practical challenges with longitudinal research

Finally, although the longitudinal study is still in its infancy and the potential evidence it will provide is exciting, it will not be without its difficulties. Practically, the challenge will be in maintaining contact with participants to minimise drop-out and non-response rates, as well as the continuity of staffing and resources to manage the research. IiC staff are also aware that it is difficult to demonstrate causal effect in longitudinal research, given the array of influences on young people's lives. As suggested by IiC's Founder and Co-Director:

> "We've got kids who have been with us for seven, eight, or nine years, so there is something that we're doing that they obviously place quite a lot of value in, but actually trying to separate it out is a challenge."

IiC will continue to adapt the research in its longitudinal study as it progresses beyond the Listening Fund, in order to measure and draw out these assets as effectively as possible.

Read more about the work of Investing in Children on the organisation's underline website[3].

---

[3] www.investinginchildren.net

Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN)

Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN) is an independent charity that works to enable young refugee and asylum-seekers aged 16-24 to live fulfilling, independent and successful lives in the community. KRAN is the largest charity provider of services to young refugees and asylum seekers in East Kent, having been established in the region for over 15 years. It offers practical and emotional support to young people who have often led very turbulent lives and, upon arriving in the UK, may speak no English. KRAN offers a range of services, from advocacy and support, education and language skills, drop-in and casework, mentoring, and community engagement activities.

Overview of listening at KRAN

KRAN staff applied to the Listening Fund because they wanted to prioritise and amplify the voice of young refugees and asylum seekers in delivery and decision-making within KRAN itself, as well as in the other services received by young refugees and asylum seekers locally, and the wider narrative about them in the media. There are four key components that KRAN uses to listen to young people, as explored below.

1. Youth Forum

KRAN's Youth Forum is a monthly space for young refugees and asylum seekers to come together and discuss any issues important to them. It is an open group, usually attracting around 15-20 attendees each time. The first year of the Listening Fund was focussed on establishing the forum and building young people's capacity to talk about challenges they were experiencing and to collectively think through solutions. This included topics ranging from mental health issues, employment, and campaigning.

Subsequently, in the second year of the Listening Fund, KRAN initiated an Action Learning programme. Through this programme, the youth forum met regularly with external stakeholders who had an influence over their lives, in structured group discussions to explore challenges experienced by young refugees and to agree actions to address these challenges. Six Action Learning Sets were held in the second year of the Listening Fund, with attendees including representatives from local colleges, social workers, the police, and the Department for Work and Pensions. The sessions offered a challenging yet productive space where people from different sectors could bring their views together and work towards practical solutions. In the words of KRAN's CEO:

> "The Action Learning Sets have been an eye-opening experience, where people from different sectors come together to increase understanding of one another's perspectives and challenge each other's programmed knowledge and assumptions."

Outside of the Action Learning Sets, KRAN's Youth Forum have also met with the MP for Canterbury and a range of other service providers to raise issues and discuss potential solutions.

2. Traineeship Scheme

Young people have been recruited as paid trainees to assist in KRAN's operations, thereby, in the words of the CEO, "*bringing the perspective of youth directly into the day-to-day running of the services*". The trainees are employed for seven hours a week, with varied responsibilities that include: work shadowing, data processing, computer troubleshooting, supporting the delivery of classes, and administering feedback. 24 young people have had the opportunity to be a trainee, as KRAN has recruited 12 young people in each year of the Listening Fund. This role not only supports the young people to develop skills and experience to support their futures and to gain confidence accessing employment, but also offers KRAN an invaluable operational service.

3. Youth Ambassador Programme

KRAN's Youth Ambassadors support the organisation to listen to a wider range of young people's voices, by gathering others views and opinions directly, and by informing them what the youth forum is and how they can get involved. As the ambassadors have been through the process of arriving in the UK, and they speak a number of different languages, they are a valuable point of contact for other young people who are accessing KRAN's services. The youth ambassadors also follow up on the actions that had been agreed at the Action Learning Sets to help make sure the discussions translated into practical solutions. Figure 2 shows a diagram where KRAN's youth ambassadors have outlined their priorities, and these were presented at a Youth Forum meeting in January 2020.
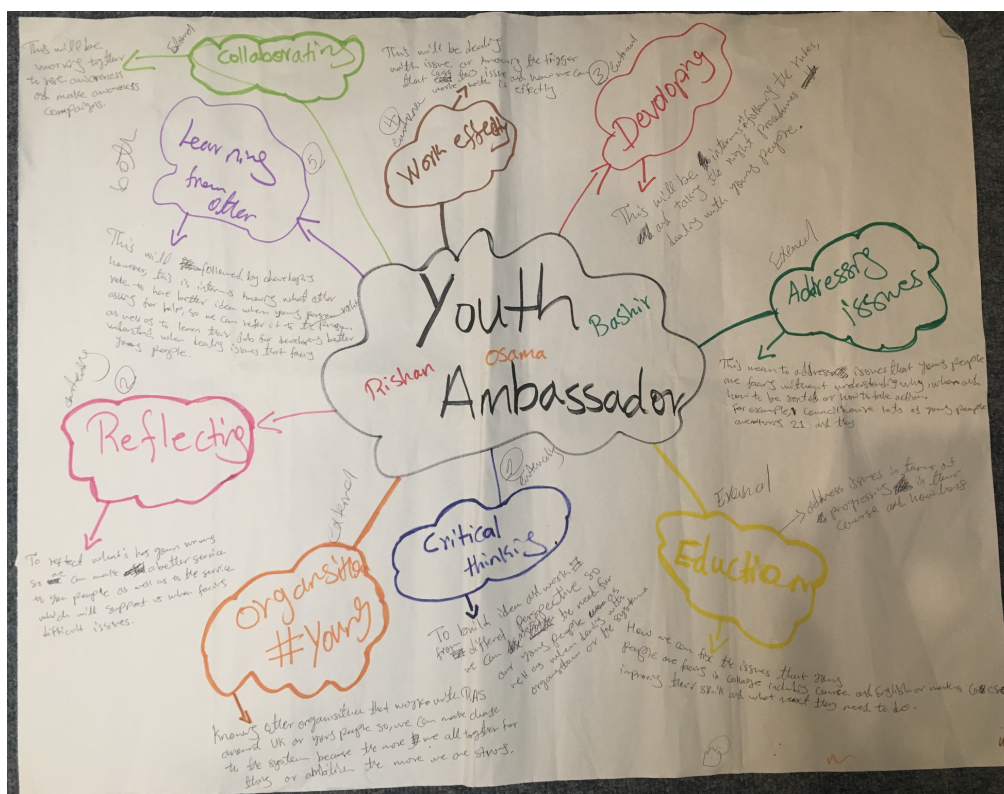

Figure 2: The priorities of KRAN's youth ambassadors

4. Staff Recruitment and Young Trustee

Over the course of the Listening Fund, KRAN has developed its recruitment processes to further incorporate a youth perspective. Candidates for every new role at KRAN not only meet with a formal interview panel of staff and trustees, but also go into an informal space to speak with young people. Sometimes young people design recruitment activities: for instance, where recruiting for a teaching role, designing an activity where the candidates come prepared to teach them on a particular topic. The 'formal' and 'informal' interview panels share notes on the candidates before a decision is made, and KRAN has found that "*it is amazing how often the attitudes towards candidates by the two panels match up*". It was initially considered that young people could sit on the formal interview panels, but KRAN has found that this alternative model enables young people to have "a *more genuine interaction in a space they are comfortable, rather than reading from a list of prescribed questions*". KRAN has also recruited a young refugee onto its main board of trustees during the Listening Fund, who further brings a youth perspective to strategic decision-making, such as staff recruitment as well as other components.

What is the key learning and impact of this work?

Building young people's capacity

Prior to the Listening Fund, KRAN had attempted some ad hoc methods of hearing young people's views on issues, such as asking them to attend and speak at a staff or trustee meeting. KRAN found these interactions sometimes "*felt tokenistic and awkward*" because young people were not used to or necessarily comfortable in those spaces. Young refugees and asylum seekers in particular can face challenges in their confidence and language skills that exacerbated these issues. It was due to this that KRAN chose not to start the Action Learning Sets programme until mid-way through the fund, as the first year was spent building young people's experience and confidence in raising their voices. This involved internal and formal training on topics such as public speaking and the basics of action learning. For KRAN, working with young people to develop their skills and confidence is a fundamental component of the listening that should not be underestimated.

> "*It was important we spent the first year helping young people to practice feeling comfortable raising their voices before going to more high-pressure situations. We support the young people to know how to take advantage of the space, to get their points across in an empowered way.*" (Project Lead)

The impact of a staff member dedicated to listening

KRAN's grant from the Listening Fund was used, in part, to fund a new position within the staff team of a Youth Support and Outreach Worker, who takes the lead on all the organisation's listening activity. For a long while before the fund, KRAN had "*wanted to systematically improve listening, but we needed somebody whose job it was to make that happen*". In other words, recruiting a dedicated staff member had transformative impacts in getting the structures in place for listening and for making sure these were embedded across all of KRAN's projects.

Acknowledging that change takes time

Many of the issues addressed in KRAN's youth forum are sufficiently complex and significant that they are "*bigger than what can be solved in one meeting*", particularly at the policy level where

change can require campaigning over many years. Nevertheless, even when changes are slow to emerge, there are significant benefits to listening. Firstly, young people feel validated when they are able to air their concerns to people who have a genuine influence over their lives. This is important because refugees and asylum seekers often feel misunderstood, but they can address this by speaking openly about how they experience the world. Secondly, the Action Learning Sets enable the young people to build long-term relationships with people in positions of power, such as the ongoing interactions they have had with the police and with the MP for Canterbury.

> *"Change is not guaranteed because of the scope of the issues we are dealing with, but we can't give up. It's about keeping on returning to the issues and trying to tackle them from different directions, in the hope of making things better for [young refugees] in the long run. KRAN gives us the tools to do that."* (Youth Forum member)

What changes have been made as a result of listening?

The youth forum is consulted on all the activities and services that KRAN runs, to ensure they are reflective of young people's interests and needs. The forum is often directly involved in decisions about the best use of funding when a new grant has been received. What often starts off as a 'wish list' where young people tell KRAN all the activities they want to do, this evolves into a learning process where young people help to make decisions about what is practically and logistically feasible. Once decisions are made, young people are involved throughout the planning stages, to decide when and how activities will run, right through to evaluation stages, to consider what has been successful, what has not, and why. This has included activities such as organising a trampolining trip in Maidstone, co-producing KRAN's Saturday Club, and arranging football matches both within KRAN and with teams in the local area.

> *"Young people are always part of the conversation now. Their presence has noticeably shifted so that whatever KRAN does young people are at the centre."* (CEO)

The youth forum has also enabled KRAN to recognise areas where young people would benefit from additional support. For instance, young people told KRAN that upon first arriving in the UK it can be difficult to understand the process for seeking asylum, given the technical jargon, the many different service providers they are expected to interact with, and conflicting information about their rights and entitlements. Through hearing this, KRAN recognised it would be helpful for young people to have a colour-coded visual guide, with clear and explicit information that takes them through the process and all the different stakeholders involved. A leaflet was developed, in partnership with the Refugee Council, to respond to this need from young people, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Guide to claiming asylum

As highlighted above, when advocating for external changes, many of the issues addressed by young people at KRAN are sufficiently complex that they require system-level changes that typically happen very slowly, over years or even decades. Nevertheless, KRAN has already "*seen progress in some areas on a scale that is much quicker than you might usually see*". For example,

young people participated in an Action Learning Set with representatives of local Kent colleges to explain some of the additional challenges they face in conducting independent study compared with their peers: for instance, lacking access to a laptop and living in shared housing arrangements that are chaotic and noisy. As a direct result of the discussions, the college has decided to hold additional training days with its tutors that will be led by staff and young people at KRAN, to help them understand and accommodate for these challenges. This includes, for instance, making a glossary of terms to support young refugees' language development. This highlights an area of progress for creating an educational environment where young refugees can thrive, and therefore to go on to obtain meaningful employment.

> *"I don't have the authority to know I'm going to change it, but I'm going to listen, I'm going to take the issue to the right person and do what I can."* (KRAN Youth Ambassador)

Ongoing challenges and next steps

Engagement and representation

KRAN staff are aware of the challenges of fair engagement and representation. KRAN finds that its youth forum is primarily attended by young refugees and asylum seekers "*who have been here for a while, who are in a better place and more established*". As KRAN moves forward, staff hope to expand involvement to reach more young people "*who are actually facing the key problems in the here and now*". The nature of their situation means that these young people often have less time, confidence, or the English language skills to engage. KRAN hopes to tackle this through increasing the role of the youth ambassadors in gathering information from, and representing the voices of, a broader range of young people, to create more diversity of views in the room.

Closing the feedback loop

Finally, KRAN find that young people are proactive in recognising changes that have happened as a result of listening and chasing staff if they feel like change is not happening quick enough. This is part of the positive and open culture that exists between staff and young people. However, going forwards, KRAN hopes to implement more systematic processes for closing the feedback loop, as it is currently very informal. KRAN is still exploring what the best mechanisms are for achieving this and integrating it into the new strategic plan, which is currently being developed.

Read more about KRAN's work on the organisation's [website](#)[4].

---

[4] kentrefugeeactionnetwork.wordpress.com

Prison Reform Trust (PRT)

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. PRT does this by inquiring into the workings of the system, informing prisoners, staff and the wider public of its findings, and by influencing the government and other officials towards reform. Whilst PRT has carefully built relationships with decision-makers at all levels, the organisation's power lies in its relationships with those who are in prison, their trust and belief in PRT, and PRT's willingness to learn from those it seeks to represent.

Key to PRT's objectives is to improve the treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families and promote equality and human rights in the justice system. To meet these aims, and as part of its 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, PRT has recently developed its Prisoner Policy Network (PPN). The PPN is a network of serving prisoners, ex-prisoners and supporting organisations that collectively aim to ensure prisoners' experiences are part of prison policy development nationally and has listening at its core.

Overview of listening at PRT

For PRT the Listening Fund was an opportunity to improve the Prisoner Policy Network, and to build it in a more impactful way through listening purposefully to young people. PRT adopted a progressive approach to its Listening Fund project, acknowledging that there has never been a sophisticated understanding of listening within PRT, particularly with young people, and reflecting a need to build engagement from the bottom up. PRT's project was divided into three stages, as explored below.

> *"The beginning of the Listening Fund was about examining self and organisational culture and vision, in order to be ready to listen."* (Head of Prisoner Engagement)

1. Learning to Listen

This first stage of PRT's project was about learning to listen, and this required reflecting on power and privilege within the organisation and examining assumptions around what its role was and what it should be.

> *"The Prison Reform Sector has traditionally been focussed on the question: 'how do we help poor vulnerable prisoners'? We are trying to reshape that to be about assets and strengths. We need to examine our frames of reference about how we are approaching the problem."* (Project Lead)

The aim of this stage was to gather and explore different perspectives to ensure that PRT's involvement work was not tokenistic. To do this, PRT conducted whole staff training to focus attention on the inherent biases and assumptions that underlie all approaches to listening, and what conditions PRT needed to create internally to allow listening to happen effectively. As suggested by the Project Lead, as PRT embarked on the PPN project, the Fund enabled the organisation to ask the question: *"'what does listening mean?"* and to recognise that *"it doesn't mean just hearing, it means examining your own assumptions about what you're listening to"* .

2. Understanding young people's lives and social contexts

The intention of stage two of PRT's listening project was to prepare the organisation to listen to young people. Young offenders have a reputation for being disruptive and difficult to manage, and there was a concern they would not want to engage in the PPN. PRT employed two peer researchers, who had lived experience of prison, to conduct life story interviews with people who had spent time in custody as young offenders. This provided insight into the social contexts through which young people end up in the prison system.

3. Incorporating Young Offender Institutions into the PPN

Having undertaken the first two stages that enabled PRT to feel more confident in its ability to listen, the next step was to implement processes where it would purposefully incorporate young people's voices into the PPN. PRT already had a routine process where it consults prisoners on a particular topic every six months, to learn about their views and experiences. For the Listening Fund project, PRT made a concerted effort to include Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and young offenders in these PPN consultations.

The very first PPN consultation involved visits to approximately 16 prisons, with only one having a YOI function. The following two rounds of consultations, which have had the support of the Listening Fund, have incorporated visits to 26 and 32 prisons. This has increased predominantly due to seeking out prisons with YOI functions or with significant young adult populations. PRT now regularly liaises with prison staff to ensure there are a range of demographic groups represented at PPN consultation workshops, including young people.

What is the key learning and impact of this work?

Understanding the power of lived experience

> *"Historically we have been seen as advocates for prisoners and therefore as having 'expert knowledge'. But if you say that expertise lies in lived experience, then that requires you to change your way of working"* (Project Lead)

Through its organisation-wide work on 'learning to listen', the Prisoner Engagement Team challenged how PRT approached involvement work. The aim was to move to a position where PRT is serving the prisoner population by directly consulting with and responding to prisoner concerns. One aspect of this involved understanding "*the power of lived experience*" as a prerequisite for enabling PRT staff to listen. PRT has drawn on and learnt from the work of Baljeet Sandhu[5], a leading UK human rights lawyer, to explore how lived experience of being in prison can strengthen the legitimacy and accountability of its social purpose work. For PRT, acknowledging the role lived experience could play has been essential to counteract tokenism and paternalism in

---

[5] Sandhu, B. (2017). 'The value of lived experience in social change: The need for leadership and organisational development in the social sector'. thelivedexperience.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Lived-Experience-Baljeet-Sandhu-VLE-summary-web-ok-2.pdf

its work. This learning has resulted in a step change in its recruitment process over the last two years, as now 40% of PRT staff have lived experience of prison.

Young people are capable of and willing to engage

The Listening Fund has pushed PRT to give attention to a group that were often overlooked within its work. Internally, this has helped to erode the stigma around young people in prison. The particular experience of one of PRT's Prison Engagement Officers is outlined below, highlighting how the assumptions around young people's engagement within PRT have been challenged.

> *"I spoke to a lot of colleagues and the dominant narrative is that 'young people are really difficult to engage, difficult to reach, and they won't speak to you unless you coerce them with some sort of incentive'. What I found was that actually these guys are more than willing and capable. They were really engaged and pleased to have someone to dedicate time to them to listen to what they had to say."* (Prison Engagement Officer)

PRT staff working on the PPN came to realise that young people were interested in working with them on the project, and they just needed to find the right 'hook' to encourage them to engage. For one Prisoner Engagement Officer, this was about 'authenticity': showing your real self to the young people you are working with, as part of creating an open dialogue. Crucially, PRT found that having a shared lived experience between the staff member and the young person in prison became a rapid way of breaking down barriers and building meaningful relationships.

> *"My takeaway is that having lived experience is more important than being a young person for involvement work. At the end of the day, regardless of age, the real question is: can you relate to each other's experiences?"* (Prison Engagement Officer)

PRT has focused on building relationships with prisoners in the PPN, using various different methods of engagement. Prisoners can participate in the face-to-face consultation workshops, write letters to PRT staff, and use a freephone number to call PRT to share their experiences, opinions and ideas. PRT has found that young offenders engage through all of these channels and having various options to suit young people's differing preferences is beneficial. PRT has therefore increased its direct correspondence with young people in prisons and has had positive feedback that they value and enjoy engaging in the consultations and reading the PRT newsletter.

PRT is now starting the process of collecting equality and diversity figures for the PPN, to provide a clearer picture of the network and to ensure it is capturing the voices of traditionally underrepresented groups such as young offenders.

There are blind spots in all organisations

The Listening Fund has demonstrated that even where organisations have a strong reputation and are confident they are doing things right, there are always blind spots and areas of complacency in every organisation that must be the focus of continually reflection. The Listening Fund drew PRT into a process of critical self-reflection and gave the organisation time and space to analyse its strategy and practice. PRT questioned things, like the dominant narrative around young people, and the way it listens and acts on this listening, that are not often questioned in this line of work.

"What became apparent to me was that maybe the charity sector, that thrives on people who think they are doing good in the world, can have blind spots to how young people are represented and listened to." (Prisoner Engagement Officer)

What changes have been made as a result of listening?

PRT has made significant strides in its listening practices across the organisation. Much of this change has been cultural, offering a starting point for PRT to think about what counts as effective and meaningful listening. A number of practical changes have also been put in place, including:

- PRT has updated its Strategic Plan to include an explicit focus on the 18-24 age group;
- By developing direct links with YOIs through the PPN, PRT has opened the door for its *Active Citizens* programme to engage with young offenders in prisons, which was not previously the case. This highlights how PRT is reaching young people more broadly in other components of the organisations work;
- PRT has expanded and incorporated new elements into its staff training, including the value of lived experience and the need to challenge dominant narratives about young people's engagement; and
- PRT has plans to undertake an equality and diversity review of PPN members as part of the next consultation.

Ongoing challenges and next steps

Rapid culture change

PRT staff did not know where the Listening Fund journey would take them. They are certainly further down the road than they expected to be, but that road has not been totally smooth. An ongoing challenge has been the rapid culture change within the organisation. This has not been met with resistance, however, shifting the balance of the team toward those who have lived experience leaves those without this knowledge in danger of not feeling competent or confident to do their work. This culture change needs embedding, and it was acknowledged that there needs to be a period of stabilisation beyond the duration of the Listening Fund.

Honouring the commitment to young people

Staff have also found themselves asking the question **"***what do you do when you hear something you don't agree with?***"**. PRT staff had to find ways of honouring the commitment to the views of prisoners when they did not align with their own, as well as communicating this back to the PPN network. PRT has developed a system whereby strongly held, controversial views from the PPN are presented to the Board of Trustees, who had the final decision. Even where PRT's position does not change in line with the opinions of the prisoners, this is shared and published in PRT's newsletter as the views of the PPN.

Learning how to sit with uncomfortable truths

As is often the case across the youth sector, staff at PRT were confronted with young people who do not have positive or uplifting stories to tell. As suggested by the Project Lead, one of the most immediate challenges for the work is:

"Learning how to sit with really uncomfortable truths in these young people's realities. What we learnt from the life story narratives was that these young people have lived in hell, and then you are going to hell to see them. So just getting yourself in the space where you know that you've got the expertise to hold that is a challenge in itself."

Making the network sustainable

PRT is just at the beginning of its listening journey. Staff appreciate that listening, with all its facets – making room to listen, hearing and acting – is difficult, and it takes concerted effort and practice. PRT's project has been about listening to young people, but also the organisation challenging itself on how it listens more broadly across the PPN with all prisoners.

The ultimate goal is to make this network sustainable, through identifying individuals in prison who have the skills to drive the network from within, and the potential to take up leadership roles on their release. Whilst the PPN continues to grow, PRT will work with these individuals to upskill them. This is a step towards shaping a movement, empowering prisoners through allowing their voices to be heard, and creating wider systems change to make space for the expertise of lived experience.

"We are building a network. We have definitely engaged the interest of all those powerful people that we know. We've definitely got them taking notice of the fact that we are en route to something interesting and worthwhile. We have produced a lot of accumulated wisdom and established that this is a good way to find things out and come up with ideas, but it is fragile – terribly fragile. And the thing we haven't yet got is anything close to a network that would survive without us." (Director)

Read more about the work of the Prison Reform Trust on the organisation's website[6].

---

[6] www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Trelya

Trelya is a youth work charity supporting young people from highly disadvantaged areas of West Cornwall. Since 2001, Trelya has worked to engage young people who are deemed the most 'hard to reach' on the Treneere estate in Penzance, which is in the top 3% most deprived wards in England[7]. Trelya works with young people who experience multiple issues and who often refuse engagement with other services. Trelya's work varies from light-touch activities, games and trips, to more intensive interventions, such as supporting young people through legal, financial and educational issues. At the core of all of Trelya's work, large and small, is the building of trusting relationships and offering support tailored to individual circumstances.

Overview of listening at Trelya

Trelya applied to the Listening Fund to initiate its 'Pass the Mic' project, aiming to enable young people to collaborate with local services to challenge and remove barriers that restrict their engagement. The project has undergone significant changes throughout the Listening Fund as Trelya has spent time reflecting on the best ways to capture and share young people's voices.

1. Telephone Booth

Trelya's initial application to the Listening Fund focussed on working with young people to explore processes to enable them to collect feedback from their peers, such as interviews or social media. Young people would then use the information they had collected to work with services across Penzance to improve access for young people. However, in the early stages, young people told Trelya that before they were ready to collect peer feedback, they wanted to have their own stories and experiences heard and presented through high quality and accessible platforms.

In response, Trelya redesigned its listening project to be centred around the Pass the Mic Telephone Booth. Trelya has built a vibrant, life-sized phone booth to showcase the stories of young people living in Treneere. Created using computer-aided design and 3D printing, and designed by a group of young people, the phone booth is decorated with quotes about listening from influential writers and figureheads throughout history. By picking up the phone and dialling a number, you can hear a monologue directly from a young person about an experience of engaging with local services. Current monologues include, for instance, experiences of being taken into care, of being long-term unemployed, and of engaging with health services as a teenage parent.

Each young person involved in the project was paired with a professional local writer who supported the development of their monologue, which was then read aloud, audio recorded, and transferred to the phone booth. There is also a space on the outer wall where any young person can write their own story to contribute their voice. While the nature of the project has changed, the aim remains the same: to improve access to services across the locality by sharing the insights and experiences of young people who are typically excluded, in a sustained and systematic way.

---

[7] www.cornwall.gov.uk/media/40596801/imd-2019-cornwall.pdf

Figure 5: Trelya's Telephone Booth

Over the course of the Listening Fund, Trelya had also worked with journalists to share its learning about the multi-faceted challenges faced by young people in disadvantaged communities like Treneere, and how these challenges "*can cast a long shadow over their whole lives*". Notably, since 2019, Trelya has had ongoing involvement with the BBC, as part of their initiative to ensure underrepresented voices in the community are heard. Trelya, and the young people and families it engages with, has worked closely with two BBC Cornwall journalists for this project and has been featured in a number of news and radio segments[8,9]. Trelya looks out for such opportunities where it can support young people to share their experiences to wide audiences, and to ensure this is done a way that is truthful, captures complexity, and is empowering for all those involved.

2. Culture of listening

Trelya has grown into an organisation where flexibility and responsiveness are defining elements of the organisational culture. Because of the complex, ever-changing needs of young people, Trelya places emphasis on deeply embedded listening. In practice, this means that listening is often unstructured, ad hoc, and reliant on positive relationships and an open, ongoing dialogue. Trelya also puts emphasis on developing links with young people's families and wider networks - via "*intergenerational listening*" – as this helps staff to achieve a holistic understanding of a young person's history and circumstances, and therefore to provide them with specialised support.

> "*We gather information from young people as they say it, which could be when driving them to a football game, supporting them with homework, or on a trip to the beach. It's a long process that involves carefully teasing out young people's views and reflecting that back with them at an appropriate time.*" (Director of Programmes and Operations)

---

[8] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cornwall-49878467
[9] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07qjpw7

Trelya finds that structured mechanisms for listening, such as a survey or a focus group, are largely ineffective within its context. Over time, Trelya has come to realise that when using these mechanisms, very often young people will give feedback that does not genuinely reflect their views (which is uncovered through informal conversations later on), or that young people are reluctant to engage at all. Additionally, many young people face practical challenges in reading, writing, and holding their attention, which can limit their ability to engage. As a result, running such activities "*has a tendency to feel tokenistic and to shine a spotlight on young people's areas of insecurity*", and therefore is not where the most the effective listening takes place.

> "*I come here and have normal conversations about things going on in my life. Where social workers bombard me with questions, Trelya treats me like family.*" (Young person)

Given this context, for Trelya, listening is a long-term and deeply cultural activity that is enabled when young people believe that staff truly care about them, without any sense of judgement or hierarchy. Indeed, a key reason why young people often lack engagement with other services "*is because they feel judged, unsafe and like they are in a rush to get you out the door and onto their next appointment*". Therefore, Trelya places emphasis on giving dedicated attention to each young person, in a developmental process that allows them to dig deep into their true feelings.

What is the key learning and impact of this work?

Developing young people's capacity to raise their voice

Many of the young people Trelya works with have not developed the "*emotional language*" to express how they are feeling, often because "*it is very rare for them to have ever felt truly listened to in their lives*". Trelya plays an important role in helping young people to learn the skills to express themselves, and this is a key first step to enabling them to share their voices through more structured mechanisms, such as the Telephone Booth. Trelya achieves this through acting as a calm and consistent point of contact over many years, giving young people the extended time and attention needed to build the capacity to articulate their views and feelings.

> "*For some young people, it is difficult to get them to say anything at all. The activities we run are a vehicle to get them to open up and come out of their shell. Eventually, they are excited to come here because know they'll get a quality interaction.*" (CEO)

Coordinating the staff team

Trelya puts emphasis on developing effective communication channels within the staff team. This is important because the nature of its listening is highly conversational: each staff member needs to share their interactions, so that what they are hearing from young people can be addressed in a coordinated manner across the team. This is achieved through open door conversations and regular supervision, as well as through Trelya's central Child Protection Online Monitoring and Safeguarding database (CPOMS), where all interactions are recorded centrally. These processes also support staff to debrief when dealing with sensitive and emotive issues.

Acting as a gatekeeper

Trelya has a responsibility to act as a 'gatekeeper' to ensure that journalists are only given access to young people when they have positive intentions to accurately and respectfully represent their

voices. This is important because some young people at Trelya have previously had negative and disempowering experiences working with journalists. Staff have a number of conversations with any external organisations or individuals before connecting them with their community, to "*ensure they are the right people to do the work, and to help them obtain a more in-depth understanding of the vulnerabilities faced by our young people*". Because of this process, working with the BBC has been a positive experience for all those involved, with staff, young people and the journalists feeling that they benefitted from ongoing interactions over many months. This enabled a holistic understanding and the establishing of long-term relationships, and because of this, Trelya and their young people will continue to work closely with the journalists in the future.

> "*Working with Trelya has allowed us to hear and share the experiences of a community that doesn't get heard. Without the established connection and relationship Treyla has, I don't think the individuals would have spoken to us, or if they had it would have been a more shallow interaction.*" (Journalist for BBC Cornwall)

What changes have been made as a result of listening?

Trelya relies on the voices of young people to shape all the activities and services it offers. As well as giving young people opportunities to come up with "*weird and wonderful*" ideas for activities, which have ranged from axe throwing to sailing, Trelya finds it is equally important "*to hear the things that are not being said*". That is, to recognise young people's deeper and more complex areas of need. A group of young people, for instance, is unlikely to directly ask for a session on online safety, but through listening to them talk about the level of time they spend online, the apps they use, and the temptations to speak to strangers, Treyla has identified this as an area where support would be beneficial. For young people with complex needs, these areas of support are often subtle and can be identified only through careful, long-term one-to-one interactions.

Trelya not only identifies activities through listening, but they also collectively with young people agree principles on how they are going to behave during sessions, as in Figure 6. These principles are continually reviewed and adapted with young people's input.
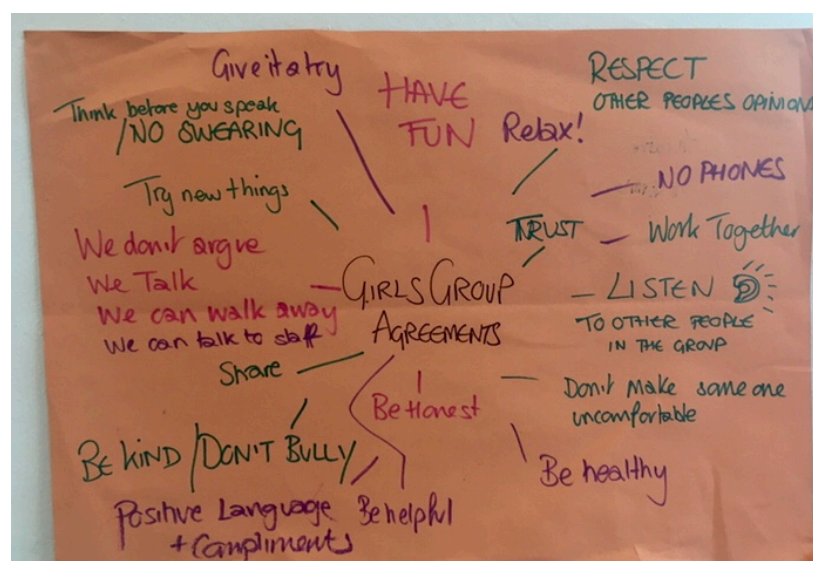

Figure 6: Agreements from Treyla's Girls Group

Treyla also acts as an intermediary to support young people to engage with other services. For example, Trelya recently supported a young person who is a teenage parent and who had received a viability assessment from the local social services department. The young person was upset because she felt she had not been listened to in the process: the follow up assessment report was unrepresentative of her experience, and she feared it would serve as a "*black mark*" against her name. From hearing this, Trelya organised a meeting with the social worker, supporting the young person to articulate what she was unhappy with in the assessment in her own words.

> "*There are so many services where I walk in and I'm already pinned as a 'problem child' or a 'lost cause', they don't get to know me for who I am.*" (Young person)

The viability assessment was revised as a result, and the young person was more accurately represented and listened to in her battle for guardianship. This highlights how Trelya supports young people to be heard by other services, and therefore to help them establish positive change in their lives more broadly through listening.

Ongoing challenges and next steps

Expanding the Pass the Mic Telephone Booth

A key challenge for Trelya has been finding ways to enable a meaningful and consistent dialogue between local services and young people. The monologues in the Telephone Booth will keep being added to, and Trelya intends to increase them from six to 20 in the months following the Listening Fund. Additionally, a key next step for Trelya is to design a second, portable version of the Telephone Booth that will be transported to different locations where it can be readily accessed by the professionals it seeks to influence. This may include school staff rooms, the local MPs office, social care training events, and doctor's surgery waiting rooms. Trelya is in the initial stages of working with partner agencies to secure locations across the region.

Engaging young people in listening

It is sometimes challenging to get young people initially involved in the Telephone Booth project, as they are unsure what it involves and they "*don't have the confidence to believe they have a story to tell*". Trelya hopes that, as more young people engage with it and hear the monologues, others will be more inclined and excited to be involved as part of a positive cycle of engagement.

Exploring alternative ways to represent young people's voices

Trelya has been exploring alternative ways to represent young people's voices to complement the Telephone Booth monologues. For instance, young people have worked with local artists to create images that challenge the stereotypes used to stigmatise them in society. There is also the potential that young people could work with professional actors to create live performances or music tracks and videos. Finally, Trelya is also exploring the idea of combining the monologues and other creative works into an interactive youth-led training programme for local services.

Read more about the work of Trelya on the organisation's [website](#)[10]

---

[10] www.trelya.com

Youth Access

Youth Access is a national membership network of 188 Youth Information, Advice and Counselling and Support services (YIACS). Youth Access works to ensure that every young person has access to free and high-quality advice and counselling. It does this through working across its membership to promote good practice via the YIACS model[11], which is a holistic response to young people's emotional, social, health and practical needs, and to ensure that links are fostered between the different sectors that have an impact on young people's lives.

Overview of listening at Youth Access

Prior to the Listening Fund, Youth Access developed the 'Altogether Better Charter': a guide for person-centred mental health and wellbeing services. The Charter was created by hundreds of young people all over England, who participated in consultations to inform the content. It sets out seven criteria for services to ensure they are putting service users at the heart of their provision, such as to 'treat us with respect' and to 'have skilled workers that take us seriously'.

The Altogether Better Charter acted as a precursor to Youth Access's Listening Fund project. The immediate feedback Youth Access received from young people was that, while the Charter is hugely valuable, they wanted services to sign up to it and to be held directly accountable. In other words, young people wanted to ensure it did not go unnoticed or lead to tokenistic action. Youth Access's Listening Fund project is centred around the creation of a feedback scheme that holds organisations accountable to the Charter, and therefore, to young people. The two components of the scheme are explored below.

1. Digital Feedback Tool

Youth Access recruited an ethical design agency, Clear Honest Design, to create a digital tool that lies at the heart of the feedback scheme. In essence, this is an online survey that gives young people a say, based on their experiences, as to whether the service is achieving the seven charter points.

The questions in the tool draw directly on the ideas of over 200 young people who originally fed into the Altogether Better Charter, and these were further developed through a series of advisory workshops with 13 young people and with staff from across the membership. The workshops were structured around the seven criteria in the charter: young people developed and short-listed questions to capture each charter point, and these were then finalised in consultation with staff.

> "There are currently a million different types of surveys, forms, and suggestion boxes used between our members for collecting feedback, with varying degrees of reliability and effectiveness. The digital tool has the potential to be attractive, as a free and standardised approach to obtaining feedback, learning from it, and improving." (CEO)

---

[11] www.youthaccess.org.uk/about-us/the-yiacs-model

Youth Access has since worked with three of its member organisations to pilot the digital tool. A key concern was making the tool flexible enough to be applicable in a range of YIACS settings, and so the pilot organisations were chosen based on their diversity. Initially, each of the services was supported to embed the Altogether Better Charter within their service, because *"it is important that staff and young people know what the Charter means and why it is important before the feedback tool is introduced"*. This involved giving presentations, putting up posters, and having ongoing discussions about what the Charter involves and why they need to be held accountable. Each of the three services has then undergone a period of data collection, to gather responses from service users over six months.

2. Youth Charter Ambassadors

To supplement the digital feedback tool, a selection of young people within each member organisation in the pilot has been recruited as 'Youth Charter Ambassadors'. Youth Access acknowledges that there is limited depth and dialogue that can be achieved with young people through an online tool, and the ambassadors re-balance this through collecting qualitative, face-to-face and conversational feedback. The ambassadors have two specific roles:

- To champion the feedback scheme in the service, by offering advice on the feedback tool, giving presentations, and having discussions; and
- To co-facilitate feedback workshops (with an experienced member of staff) using an activity pack provided by Youth Access.

The activity pack for the feedback workshops provides guidance on planning and structuring the sessions, and activities to obtain feedback on each charter point. It is designed to be flexible to ensure it fits the needs of the service and to enable young people to co-design and co-facilitate the process. All feedback from the workshops is recorded on flipcharts, via writing, stickers or drawings, and is then photographed and subsequently analysed by Youth Access's central team.
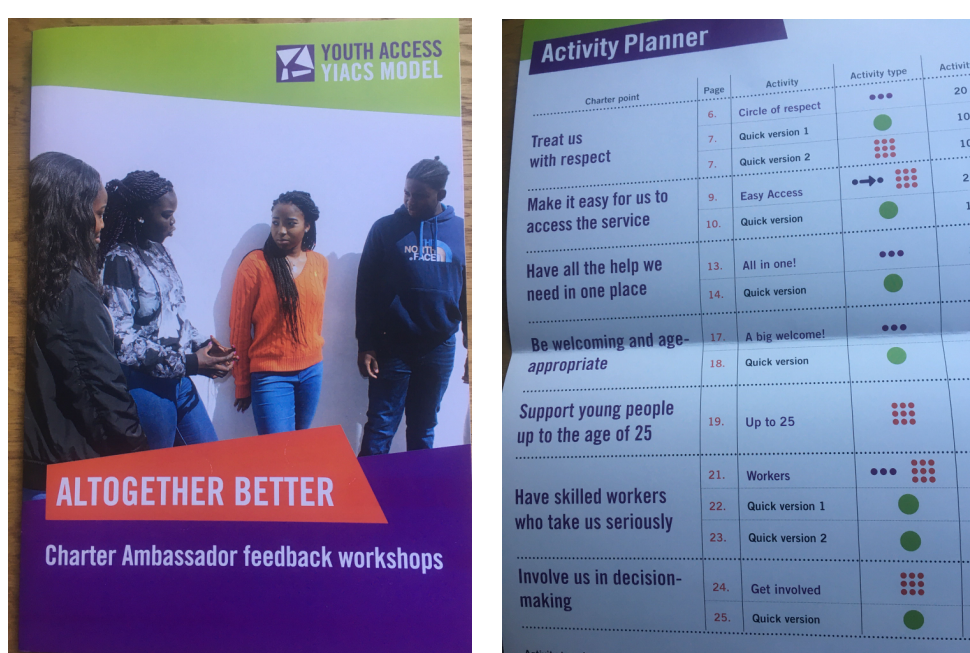

Figure 7: Resources designed to support the Youth Charter Ambassadors

What is the key learning and impacts of this work?

Co-production is an organic and multi-stage process

Through the feedback scheme, Youth Access is putting young people's voices at the heart of measuring quality, as part of a broader, rights-based approach to mental health services[12]. It was essential that young people were involved in the design of the tool since it is about being accountable to them. The process of developing the Charter with young people, prior to the Listening Fund, lasted over a year, and the feedback tool built directly on this process. This was not the original purpose of the Charter, but it has grown organically through the process of taking on board young people's views. Likewise, the current feedback tool is not in its final incarnation but is still being revised and reviewed in a collaborative way. From this experience, Youth Access appreciates that co-production is a time-consuming process that is not always straightforward:

> *"To do listening where young people are given lots of power and responsibility is quite long-winded and can be messy. Sometimes you have to go backwards before you can go forwards. Sometimes you have to scrap an idea if it's not working. In reality, it takes a lot of resources and a lot of time – it's not just about reading some guidance and getting on with it."* (Programmes Manager)

Having been through this process, Youth Access is proud of the digital tool it has ended up with: the simple appearance of the tool masks the level of time and resources that have gone into building it, and staff feel the conciseness is a sign of high quality. Indeed, it takes a significant amount work *"to take all that learning and condense it into something of high value"*.

Design and accessibility

Youth Access worked with young people to ensure the tool met their needs and preferences. Youth Access found it was important to young people that it was quick to complete and relatively light touch, and so staff have worked with the developers to ensure it was easy to use, aesthetically pleasing, and mobile-optimised. A large proportion of Youth Access's Listening Fund grant went to developing the tool, reflecting the high cost often associated with this kind of digital development.

Each service taking part is also given business cards and posters with unique QR codes to enable young people to access the survey quickly via their phones. Accessibility is a key consideration here; some services have communal iPads for those young people who do not have their own devices, and one service required a paper version of the survey to increase response rates.

Making listening useful and actionable

Very often, organisations are required to report feedback to many different funders and commissioners via multiple systems and forms, and they experience delays before they see results, often leading to duplication, reduced value, and frustration. For Youth Access, it was

---

[12] Kenrick, J. (2020). 'How human rights can help us to humanise the mental health system for young people', Evidence-Based Nursing Blog. https://blogs.bmj.com/ebn/2020/02/06/how-human-rights-can-help-us-to-humanise-the-mental-health-system-for-young-people/

important that its members come to see the tool as a valuable and free resource that is there to benefit them, rather than as an additional burden or as something they 'have to do'.

Youth Access's pilot suggested that being able to access data easily and instantaneously motivates organisations to collect it and to act on it. As such, Youth Access staff thought carefully about how the data could be presented in the most useful way. Each participating service has been given a login to the 'back end' of the tool, to see a statistical and visual breakdown of its data in real-time, and to see how it is performing with respect to different areas of the Charter.

Creating a culture of low-stakes accountability

Youth Access is keen that services do not 'cherry pick' young people to give feedback, in the hope of influencing the responses. As such, staff work carefully to promote a culture of low-stakes accountability, where organisations do not feel pressured or judged based on their scores. This is a challenge with the nature of feedback across the youth sector, and Youth Access primarily tackles it through ongoing communications to remind services of the original purpose of the tool.

> *"We continually reiterate the message that this is not about getting a good score, it is about learning and improving on the basis of what you find out."* (Programmes Manager)

Additionally, Youth Access has heard from young people on numerous occasions that they would like there to be a 'charter mark' where organisations would receive accreditation if they receive a certain feedback score. This would serve as a "*stamp of approval*" so that the young person can be sure they are entering a service that is friendly and respectful. While there is value in this concept, there are concerns it would lead to a situation where members are less inclined to collect legitimate, representative feedback. In other words, there are concerns that the focus would switch from 'improving' to 'proving'. Youth Access staff are keeping an open mind as to how this dilemma could be overcome but are primarily interested in maintaining an effective way to improve services through acting on what young people say matters to them. A current compromise is to provide services with a standardised logo to demonstrate their commitment to achieving the Charter via continuous improvement, without adding pressure to get a high score.

What changes have been made as a result of listening?

The tool has proved popular during the pilot, but success ultimately depends on how dedicated each service is to the process, and this will always be variable. As a consequence of taking part, one organisation has already embedded the tool into its regular feedback processes, which is a positive and hoped for outcome. There are reports across all three pilot services that the feedback tool has challenged them to think about how to truly involve young people in decision making, how they take account of the needs of all service users, and how they act on what they have heard.

For Youth Access, the process of producing the Charter and the feedback scheme has also changed the way it works with young people on other projects, who are being given a more leading role across the organisation. Specifically, it has encouraged thinking around what listening looks like at different levels, beyond traditional models that focus on youth boards and youth governance.

> *"Now we have an embedded process to ensure young people have power over what we produce. Now what we say is co-produced actually is."* (Programmes Manager)

Ongoing challenges and next steps

Navigating the trade-off between consistency and flexibility

In the next phase of the pilot, the tool will be rolled out across ten services in Youth Access's membership to understand how it works in a wider range of settings. As a support organisation, Youth Access needs to strike the right balance between consistency, to ensure members are supported to collect data to an equally high-standard, and flexibility, to ensure the approach is adaptable to individual circumstances. There is a trade-off between these, with ongoing discussions regarding the expectations that will be placed on participating members.

For instance, Youth Access has currently decided not to enforce a minimum number of responses, appreciating that different organisations will have different targets. It has also not defined an optimum 'testing period', realising that some organisations may want to embed the tool consistently over a whole year, while others may wish to use it as a 'snapshot'.

> *"Our membership is highly diverse in nature of services, and therefore in approaches to evaluation and learning. If directions for adopting the tool become overly prescriptive, there is a danger that organisations will not engage at all."* (CEO)

Longer term, there is potential to 'white-label' the tool for use more broadly across the youth, mental health and advice sectors (i.e. to provide the functionality so that organisations outside of Youth Access's membership can add their own branding and questions). There will, however, be challenges ensuring it is used in the intended way to support continuous learning. As the Programme Manager reflected, *"the tool is the nice shiny thing that everyone can see, but it's not the thing that makes this process effective"*.

Ensuring capacity to grow the feedback tool

The feedback scheme generates outputs that require processing by Youth Access's central team. This includes inputting responses from paper versions of the survey, and analysing outputs from the Youth Ambassador workshops that are captured through flipcharts. As the feedback tool grows, Youth Access will need to consider if and how it can manage this process of listening across its members, as the administrative responsibilities will increase significantly.

Creating a community of practice

Youth Access hope that the feedback scheme will lead to some cultural changes across the sectors it supports. To facilitate this, as the scheme becomes used more widely, Youth Access intends to develop a 'community of practice' for organisations to collectively share and reflect.

> *"We are excited about this process, that is about creating a safe space where people can discuss what they are doing well or not well and what they are learning, rather than just trying to prove they are the best."* (Programmes Manager)

Read more about the work of Youth Access on the organisation's [website](#)[13].

---

[13] www.youthaccess.org.uk