



Listening Fund (Scotland): Interim Learning Report

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
1. Introduction	6
1.1 <i>The Listening Fund</i>	6
1.2 <i>The Listening Fund Evaluation.....</i>	6
1.2 <i>Defining ‘listening’</i>	7
2. Methodology	8
2.1 <i>Partner self-assessment.....</i>	8
5.2 <i>Telephone interviews</i>	9
5.3 <i>Case studies</i>	9
5.4 <i>Young people’s listening feedback surveys</i>	10
3. Partner Self-Assessment Data	11
3.1 <i>Reflections and limitations of the self-assessment.....</i>	11
3.2 <i>The type, regularity and nature of listening undertaken.....</i>	12
3.3 <i>Who is engaged in organisational listening?.....</i>	13
3.4 <i>Listening practices across the staff team</i>	15
3.5 <i>Skills in organisational listening.....</i>	16
3.6 <i>Communicating listening.....</i>	18
3.7 <i>Use and framing of listening</i>	18
3.8 <i>Listening during the coronavirus pandemic</i>	20
4. The design of the Listening Fund	22
4.1 <i>The process of designing the Fund with children and young people.....</i>	22
4.2 <i>Recommendations from children and young people</i>	23
4.3 <i>Reflections and learning from the process</i>	24
5. Summary and Conclusions	27
Appendix A: The Listening Fund partners.....	29

Executive Summary

Background and aims

The Listening Fund aims to advance the ability of the youth sector to listen and respond to their core constituents: young people. The Listening Fund Scotland is supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, Corra Foundation, Comic Relief, the Gannochy Trust, and the William Grant Foundation. The fund supports 11 organisations (referred to as ‘partners’) to develop their listening practice over two years, from 2019 to 2021.

The Centre for Youth Impact is conducting an evaluation of the Listening Fund, which aims to learn about specific aspects of listening to support the learning of the funded organisations and to advance practice in the sector as a whole. A parallel Listening Fund ran in England from March 2018-March 2020, and the Fund in Scotland draws on the experience and learning from the England Fund, for which the final learning report can be found [here](#). The central research question for the evaluation of both cohorts is: *‘What is the impact of dedicated funder support on organisational listening practice?’*

The Fund in Scotland includes a further research question, that reflects the addition of a ‘development phase’ at the start of the fund to allow young people to input into fund design. The evaluation of the Fund in Scotland also aims to answer: *‘To what extent have young people shaped the development of the Fund and the actions and decisions of the funders themselves?’*

This interim learning report explores findings from the Listening Fund Scotland at the half-way point. This evaluation is being conducted using a combination of light touch quantitative methods and more in-depth qualitative methods. All methods were designed to provide direct insights for each partner organisations to improve their listening practice and to enable the evaluation team to draw out learning at the level of the cohort. The partner self-assessment and interviews with fund managers and young people form the basis of the findings presented in this report.

Partner-self assessment

Partners have identified positive changes in their organisational listening practices between the start of the Fund and the mid-point. These key changes can be considered in terms of:

The type and regularity of listening

There is a significant increase in the use of external evaluation, case studies, focus groups and interviews as forms of listening to young people. This is indicative of the time consuming or costly nature of these practices – which may mean that they often only become an option when dedicated funding is available. **Partners are also intentionally listening more regularly**, with nearly all partners (91%) undertaking some form of listening weekly.

¹ https://www.youthimpact.uk/uploads/1/1/4/1/114154335/listening_fund_report_final.pdf

Engaging with young people

Partners have **increased the number of young people they engage in listening practices**, with 64% of partners now engage 76-100% of young people they work with (a 22% increase from the baseline survey). Partners feel the young people they listen to is now **more representative of those they work with**, and 91% of partners now undertake specific outreach activities to try to connect with young people who they have found it difficult to engage in listening.

Staff listening skills

An increase focus on developing listening capabilities across organisations is demonstrated by 73% of partners **include listening skills** in staff job descriptions (up from 43% at the start of the Fund. There is perceived skill **improvement** in *how* partners listen (i.e. they have trialled and make use of a range of different forms of listening). However, they still perceive weaknesses in analysing qualitative data collected through these forms of listening.

Communicating listening

At the start of the Fund partners rated themselves poorly **in terms of communicating what they heard** from young people and actions they had taken. There is a **significant perceived improvement at the mid-point in all areas of communicating** listening, with the most significant improvements in communicating action taken/non-action back to young people who have engaged in listening practices.

Uses of listening

The most common use of listening is to give young people a chance to express themselves. However, listening has become more central: **73% of partners report that listening is now used to influence development of services significantly**. All partners are also engaging young people more fully within listening practices, e.g. analysing responses to listening with young people or creating actionable recommendations with young people.

Listening during COVID-19

Partners have been **putting into practice skills learnt through the Listening Fund** to develop their digital delivery e.g. consulting young people on which online platforms are best for them. Listening is more difficult to do digitally, but partners have become more attune to the importance of listening, and **have responded by increasing the regularity of their listening**

Evaluation of the development phase

Young people's views and opinions on fund design were captured through: workshops (delivered by *Children in Scotland*); focus groups with two partners (Rosemount Lifelong Learning and The Junction); and a young people's survey. These were turned into six recommendations (outlined below). All recommendations were accepted in the design of the Fund except for one (recommendation 6 – due to GDPR constraints). Young people were also integral to deciding which applications would be supported, although they had no input into the amount of money that each organisation should receive.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Age range	Partner size	Topic area	Grant size	Involving young people	Application writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Fund should support a mix of ages from 5-25 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small and large organisations can apply but focus on smaller organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No strong theme highlighted so fund should not be too prescriptive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people felt there should be no upper or lower limit put on applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicants advised to include input from young people in their applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people felt they should have a direct role in writing applications

From the Fund managers' perspectives, undertaking the development phase meant that:

- Young people had meaningful participation in shaping the Fund and the efforts made to include their voices was a worthwhile process;
- Applications were improved by the involvement of children and young people (recommendation 5);
- The funders became more aware of the challenges involved in listening to young people's voices, in particular the resource-heavy nature of these processes; and
- They will consider carefully how young people can continue to be involved in meaningful and valuable ways in the Fund moving forward.

Key areas of interest

This report gives some key insights into the progress of the Listening Fund in Scotland that can be actioned over the next year of the Fund. In particular, there are three key areas that, in discussion with the funders, the Centre for Youth Impact propose will be of interest for both practice and evaluation over the next year of the Fund:

1. Given the consensus that the process of completing the partner self-assessment was valuable in terms of generating discussion and creating time for self-reflection, the Fund(ers) should focus on ways of maintaining open lines of communication and conversation around listening practice with, and across partners.
2. In light of the increase in the use of listening practices to shape organisations at a strategic level, the evaluation should further explore the impact of engagement with listening practices on senior leadership and organisational strategy, to highlight examples of good practice.
3. Following on from the Fund development phase, a youth advisory panel has been established. It will be valuable for the Funders to further explore and trial ways to engage young people in the Fund, for example considering how to increase the presence and participation of young people in partner learning days.

Listening Fund (Scotland)

Interim Learning Report

1. Introduction

1.1 The Listening Fund

The Listening Fund supports youth-focussed organisations to develop their practice of listening to young people and responding to what they hear. The Fund's objective is to advance the ability of the youth sector to listen to the voices of young people, to enable them to have a greater say in shaping the provision they receive and to be agents of change on issues affecting them.

The Listening Fund in Scotland is supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, Corra Foundation, Comic Relief, the Gannochy Trust, and the William Grant Foundation. The fund supports 11 organisations (referred to as 'partners') to develop their listening practice over two years, from 2019 to 2021. A parallel Listening Fund ran in England funding 22 youth organisations from 2018 to 2020. The Listening Fund in Scotland draws on the experience and learning from the England Fund, for which the final learning report can be found [here](#)².

The partners in the Listening Fund Scotland vary in terms of the region in which they operate, the type of services or provision they offer, and the young people they reach. Some organisations work to support young people who have a particular set of experiences and needs, such as young carers, young people facing physical and mental health issues, and young people who face disadvantage moving into education and employment. Others work to support a broad range of young people, either in a particular city or region of Scotland, or on a national scale. The full list of organisations involved in the Fund can be found in Appendix A.

1.2 The Listening Fund Evaluation

The Centre for Youth Impact was commissioned to evaluate the Listening Funds in both Scotland and England, in order to optimise learning from the investment in 'listening capacity' across the youth sector. The evaluation aims to understand and assess the impact of the Listening Fund on the practice of the organisations that 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?

² https://www.youthimpact.uk/uploads/1/1/4/1/114154335/listening_fund_report_final.pdf

To answer the above research question, the evaluations for the Listening Fund in Scotland and in England address the following sub-questions:

1. What changed for partners as a result of the Listening Fund? (in listening practice and in organisational practice)
2. What changed for young people as a result of the Listening Fund? (in experience of provision and in outcomes)
3. What are the enablers to meaningful practice in organisational listening and responding to young people?
4. What are the barriers to meaningful practice in organisational listening and responding to young people?

In addition, the evaluation of the Listening Fund Scotland aims to answer:

5. To what extent have young people shaped the development of the Fund and the actions and decisions of the funders themselves?

The additional research question is included because, in the early stages, all five funders in the Listening Fund Scotland flagged it as a key priority to hear the views and opinions of children and young people to help shape and develop the Fund itself. Therefore, it was agreed that a three-month development phase would be initiated prior to the roll out of the Fund, which aimed to listen to youth organisations and young people about what the focus of the Fund should be. The learning and outcomes from this process are explored in Section 4 of this report.

Our intention is that the Listening Fund evaluation will not only offer insights for the organisations and funders that are directly involved in the Fund, but also that this learning will be shared and applied much more widely. Our ambition is to enhance the understanding of the wider youth sector and its funders of how to embed good listening practice into their work, with greater knowledge of the enablers and barriers to meaningful practice when responding to young people. This interim learning report focusses primarily on data collected from the partner self-assessment and from telephone interviews with the funders. More information on these research methods, and the upcoming research in the second year, can be found in Section 2.

1.2 Defining ‘listening’

By ‘listening’ we are referring to an active process where young people are given tangible opportunities to have a say in, and shape, youth provision, or to influence wider policies and practices. There are two related but distinct types of listening that are relevant to this evaluation:

- Internally-focussed listening: a process where an organisation takes account of young people’s views, opinions and experiences with the aim of developing their offer, in terms of the activities and services they deliver and how they are delivered; and
- Advocacy-focussed listening: a process where an organisation provides young people with opportunities to influence external organisations, such as local authorities or national organisations, on the basis of their views and experiences.

For the vast majority of partners in the Fund, their listening projects span both types, with internal and advocacy-focussed components.

2. Methodology

The Listening Fund evaluation adopts a mixed-method approach, drawing on light touch quantitative methods across all 12 partners and more in-depth qualitative methods for a subsection of partners.

These methods were selected and designed with two aims: firstly, to provide insights for each partner organisation to develop and improve their own listening practice, and secondly, to enable the evaluation team to draw out learning at the level of the cohort in order to identify effective approaches, as well as areas of challenge. Table 1 shows the timeline of evaluation activities. The areas of the table highlighted in blue are scheduled to take place over the second year of the Fund. More information on each method is set out below.

Table 1: Timeline of evaluation activities

Evaluation Activity	Project Year and Date
Partner self-assessment (baseline)	Year 1 (April 2019)
Telephone interviews with the fund manager and young people involved in the design of the Fund	Year 1 (March 2020)
Partner self-assessment (mid-point)	Year 1 (April 2020)
Young people’s listening feedback survey*	Year 2 (Winter 2020/2021)
In-depth organisational case studies with three partners	Year 2 (Winter 2020/2021)
Partner self-assessment (end-point)	Year 2 (April 2021)

*Delayed due to disruption to youth provision by the UK lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

2.1 Partner self-assessment

A self-assessment tool was designed to explore different elements of how the partners listen to young people: as far as we are aware, this is the first of its kind. The self-assessment was originally designed for the Listening Fund in England and it was adapted for the context of the Scotland Fund. The self-assessment takes a broad conception of organisational listening, drawing on Jim Macnamara’s ‘Architecture of Listening’ framework³, which adopts the following definition:

“Organisational listening is comprised of the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies and practices applied by an organisation to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and publics.” (Macnamara, 2015)

³ Macnamara, J. (2015). *Creating an “architecture of listening” in organizations*. UTS, Sydney.

The self-assessment contains 27 questions, related to the above definition, which are adapted for the context of working with young people. It includes questions on listening practice, culture, skills, resources, communication, and acting on what is heard. The assessment tool was tested and refined through engagement with four organisations not funded as part of the Listening Fund. The purpose of the tool is both to aid the partners' reflection on their listening, as well as enabling the evaluation team to identify change in the cohort over time. In addition, two questions were added at the mid-point self-assessment to understand changes and adaptations that have occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The partners are being asked to complete the self-assessment at three time-points throughout the two-year funding (baseline, mid-point, and end-point). Data is gathered through an online form, and partners are encouraged to complete it with at least two staff members present, to prompt discussion and capture different perspectives. Participation in the self-assessment, as in all elements of the evaluation, is voluntary. However, response rates have been high for the baseline and the mid-point (with all 12 partners completing the baseline survey and 11 partners completing the mid-point survey⁴). The data from the self-assessment has been analysed using Microsoft Excel 2010 and open responses were subjected to thematic analysis.

The self-assessment tool is publicly available for any organisation across the youth sector to use to reflect on and analyse their own listening practice. The tool can be found [here](#)⁵ and on [the Listening Fund website](#)⁶, alongside other supporting resources.

5.2 Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted with the two Listening Fund managers⁷ at Corra Foundation in March 2020, as well as with two young people who were involved in the Fund's development phase. This research activity was conducted to explore the extent that young people shaped the Fund's design, as in the fifth research question. The interviews used a semi-structured format, with an emphasis on identifying what went well and what was challenging in involving young people in the Fund's development.

5.3 Case studies

Three organisational case studies will be conducted in Year 2 of the evaluation, in Winter 2020/21. The case studies will aim for an in-depth perspective of organisational listening, including successes and challenges faced in day-to-day settings. The case studies will primarily include one-

⁴ The data presented here is from all 12 or all 11 respondents (for the baseline and mid-point surveys respectively) unless otherwise stated.

⁵ https://www.youthimpact.uk/uploads/1/1/4/1/114154335/listening_fund_report_final.pdf

⁶ www.thelisteningfund.org/resources-for-partners

⁷ There are two fund managers due to the original manager going on maternity leave. The telephone interview was conducted with both the outgoing and incoming manager.

to-one interviews and deliberative workshops. The findings will be explored in the final Listening Fund Evaluation report in Spring 2021.

5.4 Young people's listening feedback surveys

The Centre has developed a listening feedback survey, intended for organisations to gather systematic feedback from young people directly on their experience of organisational listening. It is designed to be light-touch, anonymous, and to provide clear and comparable insights. The survey questions were developed with input from young people involved in Listening Fund England, via two focus groups, and is publicly available [here](#).

The collection of survey data was originally scheduled to take place in Spring 2020, but this has been rescheduled due to the disruption caused by the UK lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey data is now scheduled to be collected in Winter 2020/21.

3. Partner Self-Assessment Data

This section presents some initial key findings and analysis from the partner self-assessment, drawing comparisons between baseline and mid-point data, as well as with the baseline data from the Listening Fund England.⁸ The additional questions added at the mid-point also allow us to share some insight into how partners are responding to social distancing measures as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 Reflections and limitations of the self-assessment

Before exploring the findings, it is worth outlining the strengths and limitations of the self-assessment. The overall feedback from partners is that the survey is both valid as an assessment of organisational listening practice, and useful as a reflective tool to plan improvements. Some felt that the self-assessment had given new insights and as one partner put it *“by completing this survey it has prompted some thinking around what we do not currently do. And it has given us some ideas of what we need to do”*. The mid-point self-assessment was also viewed as a timely opportunity to recognise and celebrate progress and look ahead to the next stages of individual projects. Importantly, for some partners it also acted as an injection of motivation and direction to continue focussing on listening, whereby *“staff team came away with an appetite to improve our listening practices”*.

The self-assessment does have some practical limitations that have been highlighted by partners. Firstly, as an organisational self-assessment, the tool was potentially limited in capturing the variance within organisations between different projects, teams and individuals. As one partner suggested, it was *“difficult to talk about different elements within generic self-assessment, [as] some things [are] true for some elements but not others”*. In an attempt to integrate this in to the assessment, partners were strongly encouraged to involve multiple perspectives in completing the survey. A second perceived limitation of the tool was the time it took to complete, which for several organisations was over one hour. In light of the call for partners to involve multiple perspectives, this may have had a negative impact on the number of staff able to engage in the process. However, lengthy completion time was also seen as a (positive) consequence of the questions generating *“a lot of discussion”*. One partner commented that the self-assessment was useful *“for giving us protected time to allow self-reflection on our listening and discuss with colleagues”*, which indicates that the tool has been used as an opportunity to reflect as a team. Finally, some partners reflected on the wording of the questions, with one partner commenting that *“we found it difficult to understand some of the questions being asked. Giving examples may have been useful”*. The complex nature of the questions may be a factor in completion time. Two partners also pointed to potential bias in the questions. It was reflected that overall, *“self-assessment assumes [that] listening is already integral”*, and the wording of some questions was challenged for making assumptions around decision-making processes in organisations.

⁸ When comparing baseline and mid-point data, the total number of respondents varies (baseline n=12, mid-point n=11) unless otherwise stated. This means that small percentage changes will be because of this as opposed to any actual change between the two time-points (e.g. 75% at baseline equals 82% at the mid-point).

Despite these limitations, the appreciation of the tool as an assessment of listening practice has led organisations to ask for a copy of their responses to allow them to evaluate their own progress over the life of the Fund. As one partner suggested, it “*provides a clear framework to measure quality and performance levels of our listening practice*”.

3.2 The type, regularity and nature of listening undertaken

As can be seen in Table 2 below, partners in the Listening Fund Scotland were already engaged in a number of different forms of listening at the start of the Fund. In particular, almost all (92%) were undertaking *ongoing listening within their practice*, and over four fifths (83%) operated an ‘*open door*’ policy. *Surveys* (both using closed and open questions) are also a popular means of listening, with three quarters of organisations making use of these at the start of the Fund. Half of partners already made use of *youth forums*, which is in line with the England cohort. Noticeably, all forms of organisational listening have increased since partners started their projects. The forms of listening that have seen the biggest increase are the commissioning of *external evaluation, case studies of individual young people, focus groups* and *interviews*.

Table 2: Forms of listening that organisations undertake

Form of organisational listening	% of LF partners engaged in this form of listening	
	Baseline (n=12)	Mid-Point (n=11)
Surveys – with closed questions	75%	82%
Surveys – with open questions	75%	82%
Focus groups	58%	82%
Interviews	33%	55%
Case studies of individual young people (that involve listening)	50%	82%
Youth forums	50%	55%
Comment and suggestion boxes	42%	45%
‘Open door’ between staff/ volunteers and young people	83%	91%
Ongoing listening within practice (e.g. informally asking for feedback)	92%	100%
External evaluation (that involves listening)	17%	55%

The findings in Table 2 are reflective of the Fund in England, where over 70% of organisations used *closed question surveys* and again, nearly all partners (92%) undertook *ongoing listening within practice* in their baseline self-assessment. This suggests that these are the types of listening that organisations working with young people feel most comfortable and adept at using. The large increase in the use of *external evaluation, case studies, focus groups* and *interviews* in the Scotland cohort at the mid-point self-assessment is indicative of the time consuming or costly nature of

these practices – which may mean that they often only become an option when dedicated funding is available. It is noticeable however that in the England cohort, four fifths (81%) of partners used individual case studies prior to the Listening Fund, showing some disparity between cohorts.

At the start of the Fund, over half (59%) of Scottish partners reported that listening practices varied across their organisation (e.g. across different projects) significantly (rated 4 or 5 on a five-point extent scale where 5 = ‘to a great extent’). Interestingly, variation across organisations is perceived to have decreased at the mid-point. This suggests that in trying out and establishing new forms of organisational listening, partners are finding out ‘what works’ with their young people and are able to embed this more widely – and perhaps surfacing disparities in their practice along the way.

At the start of the Fund, three quarters (9 out of 12) of Scottish partners said they undertook some form of listening weekly, one partner undertook some form of listening monthly, one undertook listening quarterly, and one partner undertook some form of listening less often than on an annual basis. Encouragingly, at the mid-point self-assessment the regularity of listening has increased with nearly all partners (10 out of 11) undertake some form of listening weekly and all partners doing this on at least a quarterly basis. As one partner suggested in the baseline self-assessment, *“we need to take more time to listen – at present our ‘listening’ takes place when it is required e.g. for funders, reports etc.”*. It is clear partners are purposively planning listening activities to take place on a more regular basis at the mid-point.

The nature of listening practices has also changed since the start of the Fund, with an increase in the anonymous engagement of young people in organisational listening and a corresponding decrease in forms of listening that identify young people. This indicates that partners have a growing awareness of how young people want to be listened to and are developing their practices accordingly. As one partner explained in the mid-point self-assessment, they have *“designed different entry points for young people to access projects which includes anonymous (Facebook live events), 1-2-1 as well as group work”*. Despite the range and regularity of listening practices within the cohort, no partners had an organisational listening policy at the start. This has increased with two partners reporting some form of listening policy at the mid-point.

3.3 Who is engaged in organisational listening?

Scottish partners were asked to estimate the proportion of young people who engage in at least one form of listening through their provision. As can be seen from Figure 1 (below), this varies considerably. At the start of the Fund, two fifths (42%) engaged 76%-100% of young people, a third (33%) engaged 51%-75% of young people and a quarter (25%) estimated they engaged no more than a quarter of the young people they work with in at least one form of listening. Although these figures are likely to be an approximation, there is clearly a perceived marked increase in young people engaged in at least one form of listening at the mid-point. All partners now engage at least a quarter of the young people they work with, and the number of partners engaging 76-100% of young people has increased by two (22% increase).

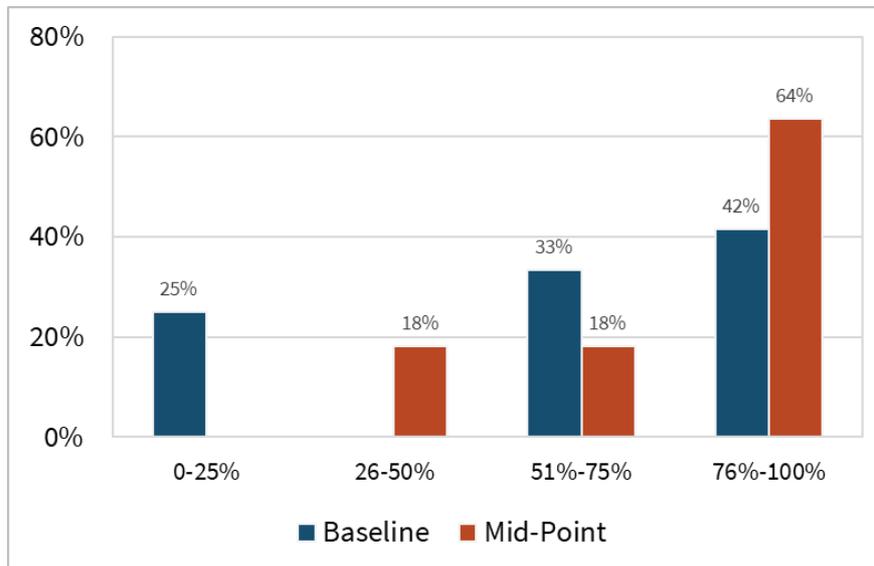


Figure 1: The proportion of young people engaged in at least one form of listening

Figure 2 shows the extent to which partners listen to a representative sample of the young people that they work with – although, again, these figures are likely to be an approximation. By representative we mean that the types of young people that engage in listening activity are the same types of young people who engage more broadly in their organisation’s work. As can be seen, perceived representativeness varied considerably at the start of the Fund. Around a quarter (27%) felt their organisation listened to a representative sample of the young people they work with ‘to a great extent’. Two partners rated themselves on the bottom two scales of the five-point scale (n=11 responses in baseline data).

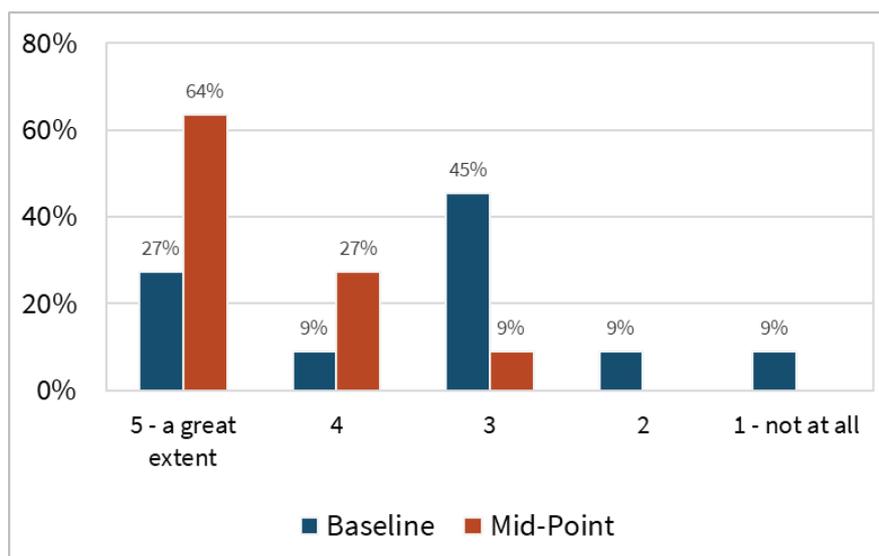


Figure 2: The extent to which the organisation listens to a representative sample of the young people that it works with

At the start of the Fund, three quarters of partners actively undertook outreach activities to try to connect with young people who they found it difficult to engage in listening. This has increased to almost all organisations (91%) at the mid-point – it was indicated by one partner that this is a particular focus of their Listening Fund project. Outreach activities included those in a specific place (e.g. a school or within a specialist organisation) or through targeted detached youthwork projects or one-off workshops. Two partners also reported undertaking outreach activities via social media, which is interesting and encouraging given the current move to digital delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Listening practices across the staff team

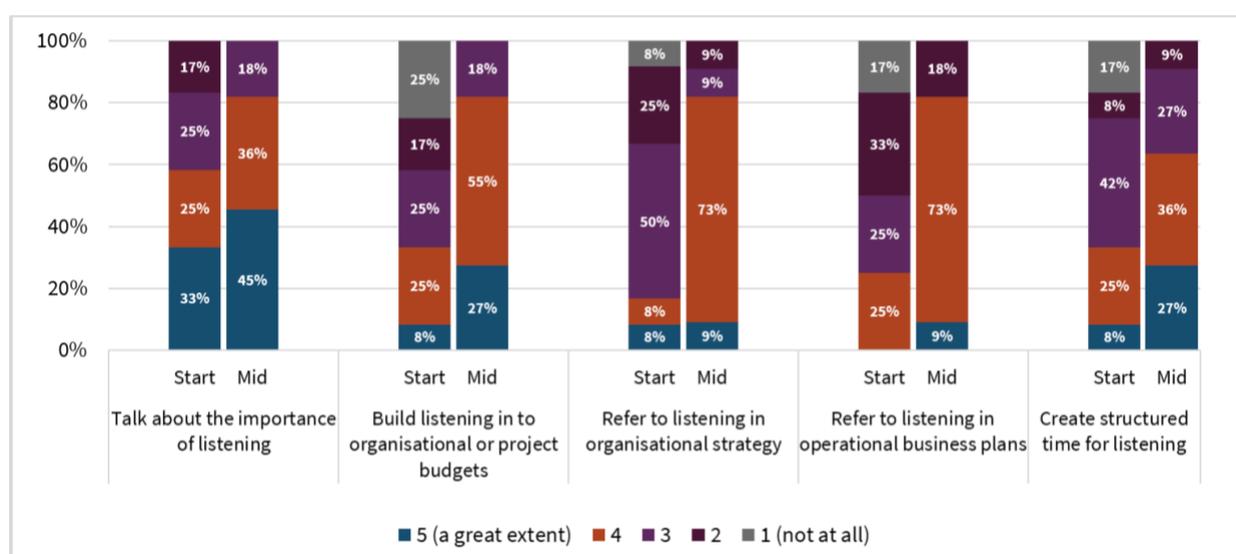


Figure 3: The extent to which the leadership of the organisation does the following

Figure 3 gives insights into the ways that listening is promoted at leadership level. Whilst noting that the self-assessment of leadership will likely be affected by whether a member of the leadership team within the organisation was involved in completing the self-assessment, we can still draw out some useful indications of changes over time. At the start of the Fund, the highest scoring area for leadership was *talking about the importance of listening* (33% assessing this as being done ‘to a great extent’). Other areas for incorporating listening into leadership were not rated quite so highly, with just a quarter of Scottish partners (25%) rating the way they *build listening into projects budgets*, *refer to listening in operational business plans*, and *create structured time for listening* as a 4 on the five-point scale. Importantly however, overall, the leadership of listening practices has improved across all dimensions at the mid-point. Most noticeable is the greater extent to which listening is referred to in organisational strategy and operational business plans, which suggests there is a heightened awareness of the importance of listening at a strategic level. A key focus of the Listening Fund Scotland evaluation is considering the impact of buy-in at a senior level on organisation’s listening projects. Progress in this area will be a point of interest as the Fund progresses.

Figure 4 shows that at the start of the Fund, over 55% of Scottish partners assessed that staff and/or volunteers *talked about the importance of listening* (58%), *created opportunities for listening* (75%) and *actively passed insights gained onto leadership* (75%) to a good extent (rated either 4 or 5 on the five-point scale). Generally, the extent to which these activities are done is perceived to have improved at the mid-point. Just one organisation rated itself as a 2 in terms of both actively listening and passing on insights at both time-points.

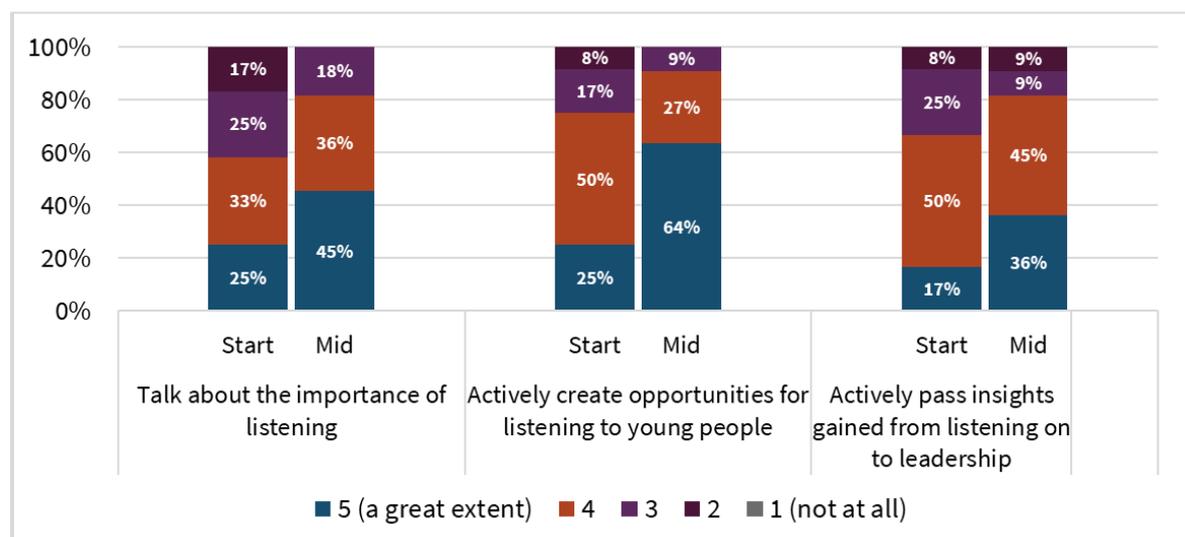


Figure 4: The extent to which staff/volunteers who work directly with young people do the following

3.5 Skills in organisational listening

Table 3 shows the perception of organisational skills in different areas of listening and provides useful context for some of the data presented so far. At the start of the Fund, few partners rated themselves as 5 ('very highly skilled') and between 30-60% of partners rated themselves as 3 ('neither high nor low skilled') in any area of listening. Perceived skill improvement at the mid-point is most commonly in the area of different forms of listening: the area that has seen the most increase in organisations rating themselves as 'very highly skilled' is producing *case studies of individual young people* and those that have seen the most increase in organisations rating themselves as 4 ('highly skilled') are *focus groups* and *interviews*. This increase in skill level across a range of forms of listening is reflected in the increased use of these forms of organisational listening (Table 2). The lowest rated skill in the baseline self-assessment was in the area of *analysing qualitative data* (two partners rated this as 2). This has shown improvement to the mid-point and it will be interesting to see if partners perceive a further improvement in the final self-assessment, given the increased use of, and reported skill in using forms of listening that produce qualitative data.

Table 3: Organisational skills in different areas of listening

Skill area	Time-point	5 (very highly skilled)	4 (highly skilled)	3 (neither high nor low)	2 (low skilled)	1 (very low skilled)
Surveys	Baseline	0%	50%	50%	0%	0%
	Mid-point	9%	55%	36%	0%	0%
Focus groups	Baseline	8%	25%	58%	8%	0%
	Mid-point	0%	55%	45%	0%	0%
Interviews	Baseline	0%	42%	42%	8%	8%
	Mid-point	0%	90%	10%	0%	0%
Case studies of individual young people	Baseline	8%	50%	33%	8%	0%
	Mid-point	36%	36%	27%	0%	0%
Youth forums	Baseline	9%	18%	55%	9%	9%
	Mid-point	20%	20%	50%	0%	10%
Analysing quantitative data	Baseline	0%	50%	42%	8%	0%
	Mid-point	0%	55%	45%	0%	0%
Analysing qualitative data	Baseline	8%	33%	42%	17%	0%
	Mid-point	9%	45%	45%	0%	0%

The variety of perceived skills across partners is indicative of the different stages that partners are at in developing their organisational listening practice. As one partner fed back, *“there is a clear desire and ability across the organisation, [...] but, as highlighted through this self-assessment process, we require a focussed period of development and implementation to realise our ambitions for greater depth and consistency in our listening, feedback and analysis practices and to establish improved practices”*.

Listening is included in at least one staff or volunteer’s role description in three-quarters (73%) of partners, which is an increase from 42% at the start of the Fund. This includes a diversity of roles ranging from assistant directors, programme managers, policy, frontline staff, mentors as well as dedicated engagement or involvement roles. Importantly, just over a half (55%) of partners now have a specific budget line within the organisation for listening – a 50% increase from the start of the Fund.

In the baseline self-assessment, over half (58%) of partners reported using some type of technology to support their listening practices, which is a similar percentage to the England cohort. Of those who make use of technology a wide diversity was mentioned including a range of communication tools (e.g. Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Step Chat, text message) and a range of data collection tools (e.g. SurveyMonkey, audio/video recording, and purpose built databases). The number of partners using technology to support their listening practices has

increased from seven to nine at the mid-point (82% of partners), attributed by one partner to the “*current situation*” in terms of social distancing. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Listening Fund projects is discussed further on page 20.

3.6 Communicating listening

As Table 4 shows, at the start of the Fund partners generally rated themselves low in terms of the extent to which they communicated what they heard from young people and the actions taken (or not taken) as a consequence. For one partner, the self-assessment process has highlighted that they “*need to consider how we listen and importantly what we then do and communicate based on that listening.*” Only one or two partners rated themselves as a 4 or 5 in any type of communication. Partners have assessed there to be a significant improvement in all areas of their communication of listening, in particular in *communicating what they have heard to people engaged in the listening process and explaining why they have not acted on something.*

Table 4: Types of communication undertaken

Type of communication	Average score of extent (5 = high, 1 = low)	
	Baseline (n=12)	Mid-point (n=11)
Communicate what you have heard to people who have engaged in your listening processes	3	4.2
Communicate what you have heard to people who have not engaged in your listening processes	2.5	3.4
Communicate your actions to people who have engaged in your listening processes	2.6	4
Communicate your actions to people who have not engaged in your listening processes	2.6	3.3
Include an explanation of why you have not acted on some of what you have heard	2.5	3.8

3.7 Use and framing of listening

Figure 5 shows what listening is used for within partner organisations. The data shows that although partners use listening for a range of purposes (with none rated as ‘not at all’), both at the start of the Fund and the mid-point the most common use of listening is to give young people a chance to express themselves. This finding is reflective of the England self-assessment and shows that organisations are often concerned with giving young people confidence and space to talk, but says little about the influence that young people’s voices have. However, the changes at the mid-point self-assessment indicate that listening to young people has taken on a much more central role within organisations’ development, with three quarters (73%) of partners reporting that listening is now used to influence how their organisation develops its services ‘to a great extent’ (5). This is an important finding which points towards young people having greater influencing

power within partner organisations as a result of Listening Fund projects. Despite this shift, it is important to remember the value of listening in and of itself – as an opportunity for young people to express themselves. As one partner pointed out, *“in our organisation when we listen to young people it can be just to listen or bear witness to their experiences”*.

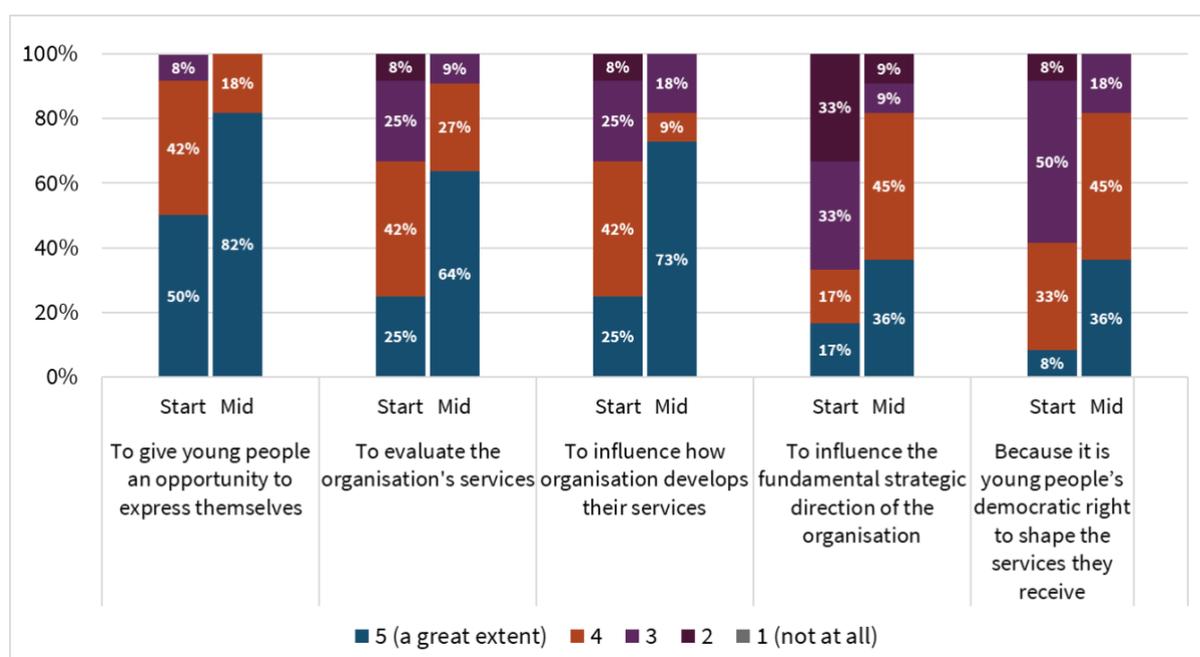


Figure 5: The extent of different ‘uses’ of listening within organisations

Figure 6 relates to a question that asked directly what the role of young people is within listening. The results show that the extent of engagement of young people in these different elements varies markedly across partners. It is clear that at the mid-point however, all partners are engaging young people within listening practices to a greater extent, with no partner reporting any of these elements at less than 3 on the five-point extent scale. One partner gave a good example of how they have adapted their approach to engage young people in listening more fully:

“Each year, our annual report is written and designed by young people - but to date, these voices have been gathered and curated by one individual team member (the Assistant Director). This year though, she led a series of training/coaching sessions with the rest of the youth work team, and tasked each youth worker to intentionally work with young people to capture their quotes, stories and case studies. This has been transformative - both to the young people, who have benefitted from being asked different questions in a variety of styles. But also to the team, who have spoken frequently about how much they have grown in confidence and skill around this area of listening practice. And overall, it's led to a new annual report that feels fresher, more interesting, and offering an expression of deeper listening.”

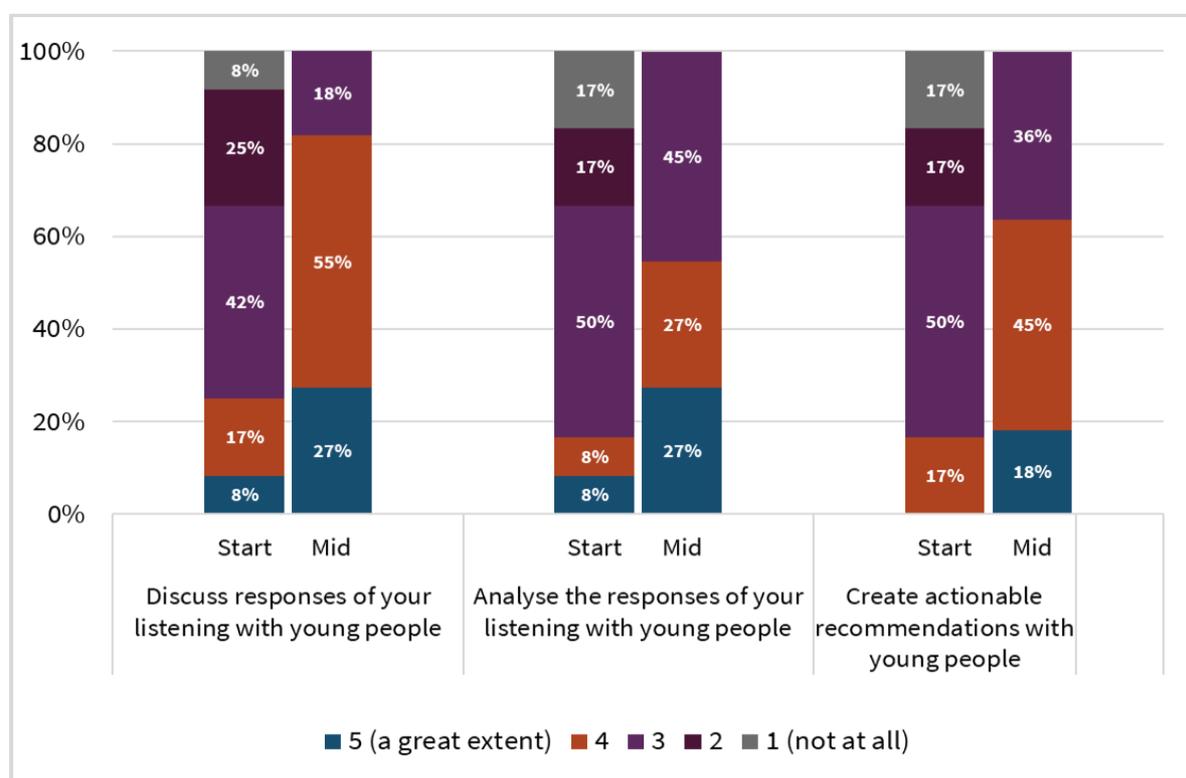


Figure 6: The extent to which organisations engage young people within their listening in different ways

3.8 Listening during the coronavirus pandemic

At the mid-point self-assessment (April 2020) partners were asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their listening practices and whether a specific focus on listening may have supported them to respond to social distancing measures effectively.

Unsurprisingly, partners have reported an increased use of technology to support listening practices. This includes:

- Purchasing new equipment (laptops and smart phones) for young people to combat digital poverty;
- Relying more heavily on communication platforms such as Zoom, Facebook and WhatsApp to support remote listening; and
- Adapting data collection platforms to help to identify which young people are absent from listening practices as a consequence of COVID-19.

Some have also reflected on this situation as an opportunity to improve the way they use digital communication platforms to support their listening practices. For one partner, “we had identified social media as an aspect of listening which we need to improve but lacked motivation/capacity. The pandemic has made this a priority. We have updated our social media strategy, project workers are

upskilling and time is being dedicated to doing posts and engaging.” Similarly, another commented that they are “using social media platforms more creatively and effectively to engage with our young people”.

In being forced to develop new ways of working, some partners have also put into practice skills and knowledge gained through the Listening Fund to consult with young people on the development and functioning of online youth work. Partners have reported more actively listening to young people to gain feedback on their digital delivery, with one partner developing “*a short Survey Monkey questionnaire to gather anonymous feedback from young people who have used our new service*”.

Partners have acknowledged that listening is much harder to do digitally (without the usual communication cues such as body language and tone of voice). In many cases they have increased the regularity of their listening to ensure their online efforts are meeting the needs of the young people they work with. Partners have also indicated the need to act quickly on what they have heard and be strongly guided by the feedback they received from young people. This has included using different media for different groups of young people, for example offering an alternative where young people feel self-conscious about appearing on camera (using Zoom).

Positively, some partners have commented that as a result of their work on listening, they are more attuned to the importance of listening actively, and young people are more engaged in this process and willing to offer feedback. Partners also commented on the benefit of listening to other organisations, whereby several services that work with children and young people have shared resources and expertise to support the delivery of online youth work.

4. The design of the Listening Fund

As noted in the Introduction, a three-month development phase took place prior to the roll out of the Fund, which aimed to listen to a range of children and young people about their opinions of what the focus of the Fund should be. As a result, the evaluation incorporates an additional research question, to explore: *to what extent have young people shaped the development of the Fund and the actions and decisions of the funders themselves?*

The evaluation team investigated this research question through interviews with the Fund managers and with two young people who were involved in the process, and through analysing the development phase reports.

Below we explore how young people were involved in the Fund's design, to what extent their views were incorporated, and some key reflections and learning from the process.

4.1 The process of designing the Fund with children and young people

Various approaches were undertaken during the development phase to obtain a breadth of input from children and young people. This included:

- **Children in Scotland workshops:** Children in Scotland is a charity and membership organisation working to bring together people working with and for children across Scotland. Children in Scotland was commissioned to hold two workshops with children and young people. Each workshop had a specific focus:
 - Workshop 1 (December 2018) – Setting the Criteria: A session with six young people to involve them in developing the Fund's application process and success criteria. This included getting their input on who would be invited to apply, how much money they could apply for, the age range of children and young people, etc.
 - Workshop 2 (March 2019) – Reviewing Applications: A session with five young people to involve them in reviewing the applications that had been submitted to the Listening Fund. This involved developing the criteria for what would be considered a good or a poor response with regard to different areas of the application.
- **Focus groups with partners:** focus groups took place with two Listening Fund partners: The Junction and Rosemount Lifelong Learning. These sessions enabled input from young people who were already actively involved in participation within youth organisations, with a particular focus on what listening approaches have worked well in their experience and what has not worked as hoped.
- **Young people's survey:** A SurveyMonkey form was sent to children and young people across Scotland via the Scottish Youth Parliament and Children in Scotland in December 2019. The survey explored similar topic areas to the first Children in Scotland workshop, by focussing on the Fund's application process.
- **Youth advisory group:** Over the first year Corra Foundation have set up a new youth advisory group who will have ongoing input in the Fund, particularly the design of the second partner convening event which is scheduled for Autumn/Winter 2020.

4.2 Recommendations from children and young people

The views and opinions that were expressed by the children and young people involved in the above activities were turned into a series of six recommendations. All of these recommendations were accepted in the design of the Fund except for one. The recommendations are outlined below, as well as the action that was taken to implement them in practice (or not taken in one instance).

Recommendation 1: Age Range

The majority of young people felt that the Fund should support organisations working with a mixture of ages, from 5 to 25. In the words of one workshop participant, “*children are children, age shouldn’t matter*”. The funders highlighted this as a particular area where their initial assumptions about the Fund had been challenged, based on being aware of the criteria in the England Fund (which had a more specific age focus), as well as “*the common expectations that it is just more difficult to get information from a younger age group and to engage them in listening*” (Listening Fund Scotland Manager). However, the Funders allowed this assumption to be challenged upon hearing young people’s input, and hence the Fund was open to organisations working with a wider range of ages.

Recommendation 2: Organisation size

There was a general preference for the funding to be granted to smaller, community-led organisations. This was based on a view that larger organisations should be in a position to already be actively listening to the young people, whilst the funding would be more appreciated by smaller organisations. However, it was also recognised that by having a mixture of small and large organisations, children and young people could have a greater impact at a national level. As reflected by a young person in the survey, “*small organisations are good because they are local but they are sometimes harder to hear about, so if it was both it would be available to everyone*”. As a result, both small and large organisations were invited to apply, but there was a cap of £2 million annual turnover so that a greater focus was given to smaller organisations.

Recommendation 3: Topic area

There was a preference for the Fund to focus on organisations supporting children and young people to influence local or national policy decisions. However, no particular theme could be highlighted as the key area that should be focussed upon: this was a difficult criterion for young people to address with limited background information. As a result, the funders were not overly prescriptive as to which organisations could apply, in the hope of receiving a variety of proposals.

Recommendation 4: Grant size

There was a strong feeling that there should not be a limit to the amount an organisation could apply for. As suggested by one workshop participant, “*you should be able to apply for what you want but know you might not get it*”. As a result, no upper or lower limit was put in place.

Recommendation 5: Involving children and young people from the outset

There was an overwhelming consensus that children and young people should play an active role in funding applications, “so that we know that [the organisations] are sincere to young people’s needs” (survey respondent). As a result, applicants were advised to include input from children and young people in the content of their application, and were later asked to explain how this took place.

Recommendation 6 (not taken): Application writing

Following on from the above, many felt that children and young people should have a direct role in writing the applications to the Listening Fund. This was the only recommendation that was not taken forward, as a result of GDPR constraints that meant this would not be legally viable.

Finally, in the second Children in Scotland workshop, having read the applications the participants were asked to make a series of suggestions as to which applications should be approved for the Listening Fund grants. All the organisations that were suggested by the young people during the workshop were subsequently selected for grants. However, it should be noted that young people had no input into how much each organisation received: this was not covered in the workshop, largely due to time constraints.

4.3 Reflections and learning from the process

Overall, the three-month development phase was considered by the funders to be a success in ensuring that children and young people had meaningful participation in shaping the Fund. Given the ethos behind the Fund, this was important for ensuring the funders were able to “*practice what we preach*”, to ensure youth voices were heard and acted on throughout. On reflection, the Funders felt confident that young people did not merely have snippets of tokenistic input, but that their views were fundamental in comprehensively shaping the Fund.

“It wasn’t just a few things it was the whole criteria for the Fund’s design. We took on every recommendation that was put forward by children and young people barring one for very specific practical reasons.” (Listening Fund Manager, Corra Foundation)

There was initially concern that each of the funders may have their own ‘agenda’ in the design of the Fund, as is often the case, which may lead to young people’s view being overlooked. However, it was found from the outset that all were committed to taking on board the ideas that were put forward, so the process of turning young people’s recommendations into action was easier than anticipated.

The funders also felt confident that the efforts made to include young people in the developmental phase was a worthwhile process that improved the nature of the Fund. For instance, the recommendation that organisations should be advised to involve young people in their applications was beneficial to improving the ideas that came through for the listening projects:

“When we looked through the applications, there was a clear difference between the ones who had involved children and young people, and the ones you could clearly tell had an idea and had moulded the children and young people into agreeing to go along with that. They stood out like sore thumbs, and that was the clear thing between a good application and a bad application.” (Listening Fund Manager, Corra Foundation)

The developmental process was also useful for the funders because it helped them to become more aware and appreciative of the challenges involved in listening to young people’s voices, such as how time-consuming and resource-heavy the process can be to get right. In particular, the funders acknowledged that they had to navigate a trade-off, to ensure that the three-month development phase was properly funded, but at the same time to ensure this did not detract from the amount of funding that was directly available for the Listening Fund grants. This fed into the decision to commission Children in Scotland to facilitate young people’s involvement, as they already had experience and systems for this kind of work, meaning that it was more efficient to outsource.

Despite the involvement of Children in Scotland, the funders considered it important that they had representatives ‘in the room’ during face-to-face discussions with young people, rather than simply reading about their views in a report afterwards. In doing so, the Fund Manager was challenged on their assumptions about young people’s willingness to engage in listening activities and their ability to take agency in the process:

“I was expecting lots of awkward silences, lots of agreeing with the adults in the room. But to be honest, myself and the two representatives from Children in Scotland didn’t do an awful lot. We presented the information and it was the children and young people who led on it and steered the content on the day. That surprised me, how involved they were and how passionate about it they became.” (Listening Fund Manager, Corra Foundation)

This reinforced the notion that children and young people really do want to and are capable of taking an active role in shaping the services they receive, as well as having an input on the societal and political issues that impact them. The young people who were involved in the developmental process and who were interviewed as part of this research further reinforced this idea:

“It was challenging on the day to make those choices about which organisations were more or less important to give money to, but I’m interested in that sort of thing. I’m not sure if others do but I enjoy reading and analysing information and then making decisions based on that.” (Workshop participant)

“I liked the idea that the activities were applicable to real life, where we can use our input to actually have an impact on something real, not like what we do at school or college.” (Workshop participant)

Nevertheless, it is likely that the positive engagement from young people would not have been as successful had careful consideration not been given to the format of the workshop sessions. On the surface, the workshops had *“quite dry content”* (Listening Fund Manager, Corra Foundation), so it was important this was presented to children and young people in creative and accessible

ways. For example, an activity was held that explored the success criteria for the applications, and this was conceptualised using a game of snakes and ladders. The group were asked to think about what would be an answer that would allow an applicant to go up the ladder (i.e. a good answer to the question) and what would send them down the snake (i.e. a poor answer). Young people highlighted that they found this creativity valuable and that it made the process more enjoyable and engaging:

“A lot of things I’ve done before have just been sitting and talking. This one was fun when we got into it because there were lots of different tasks on the day and we were given different roles at various points, it all felt quite real. I’ve never done something like that before.” (Workshop participant)

There was a wide mix of ages in the focus group and workshop sessions, ranging from 8 to 18. However, it is worth noting that Children in Scotland primarily recruited young people to take part with whom they had a relationship through other projects, who were already comfortable and confident in a focus group setting and familiar with decision-making processes. While the funders and Children in Scotland would have liked to include a wider range of young people, this was limited by the time that was available for recruitment.

Geographically, the representation of young people was also somewhat limited. As the workshops were held in Glasgow and Edinburgh, most of the young people came from Scotland’s Central Belt and there were fewer participants from further afield. The funders were aware that geographical representation is a common challenge with focus groups, and intended to overcome this through the survey, to get a broader range of perspectives. However, due to issues with the distribution of the survey, this method only obtained five responses, which is lower than the funders had hoped. The funders also reflected that the survey method was not particularly effective in facilitating young people’s input compared to the workshops and focus groups:

“In hindsight the ‘dry’ content of the survey, along with there being a limit to how much background information and support was able to be provided as part of the completion, may also have put off some respondents from participating. This became increasingly more apparent once the content of the Children in Scotland workshop was developed which helped to address the content of the survey in a much more child focussed way.”
(The Listening Fund Development Phase Report)

This parallels what some of the Listening Fund partners have found, where qualitative, face-to-face listening activities were more valuable for gaining real insight into young people’s thoughts and expectations when dealing with complex issues. This highlights a trade-off between the broader reach of quantitative, remote methods compared with the in-depth dialogue that can be achieved through qualitative, face-to-face methods.

The funders also acknowledged that, whilst the three-month development process at the outset of the Fund was largely successful, children and young people have not been involved in the funder meetings on an ongoing basis. There are questions around how young people could continue to be involved in a way that is meaningful with the available resources.

5. Summary and Conclusions

This report has introduced the Listening Fund Scotland evaluation, explored some emerging findings from the first year of the Fund, and considered the learning that has come from engaging young people in the Fund's design. Overall, we have been pleased to find that the first year of the Fund has had positive impacts for many of the partners, enabling steps towards improving practice in meaningfully listening and responding to young people. Some key successes from Year 1 include: an increase in the regularity and skill with which partners feel they are listening to young people, thus leading to more appropriate and embedded listening approaches; an indication that listening to young people has taken on a much more central role within organisations' development; and the way in which an explicit focus on listening has helped organisations to adapt in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The partner self-assessment, which supports findings from the Listening Fund England evaluation, demonstrates that listening in a meaningful way is challenging. This is highlighted, for example, by the difficulty partners have had in ensuring that approaches to listening encourage consistent and representative involvement of young people. The increase in regularity and communication of listening, and range of types of listening being drawn upon since the start of the Fund are indicative of the dedicated time and funding needed to carry out this work. These challenges were also apparent in the co-designing of the Fund, where limitations in the process, such as the geographical representation of young people and the time and cost of delivery, have been explored.

Learning from the Listening Fund development process suggests that young people shaped the development of the Listening Fund Scotland significantly. The funders were challenged in their initial assumptions about what the Fund would look like through hearing young people's input, and were subsequently open to taking on board their recommendations. This process has encouraged some organisations in the funding partnership to think more widely about how young people's voices can be involved in other strands of their work where this is not a routine aspect of their work currently. We would encourage other funders in the youth sector to take account of this experience, as part of a wider appetite in the UK to give beneficiaries more agency to influence the direction and approach of funding decisions.

Finally, in line with reflections from the funders during the writing of this report, and considering the overall aims of the fund and the evaluation, there are three key areas that the Centre for Youth Impact propose will be of interest for both practice and evaluation over the next year of the Fund:

1. Given the consensus that the process of completing the partner self-assessment was valuable in terms of generating discussion and creating time self-reflection, the Fund(ers) should focus on ways of maintaining open lines of communication and conversation around listening practice with, and across partners.
2. In light of the increase in the use of listening practices to shape organisations at a strategic level, the evaluation should further explore the impact of engagement with listening practices on senior leadership and organisational strategy, to highlight examples of good practice.

3. Following on from the Fund development phase, a youth advisory panel has been established. It will be valuable for the Funders to further explore and trial ways to engage young people in the Fund, for example considering how to increase the presence and participation of young people in partner learning days.

This report will be combined with findings from the evaluation activities in Year 2, as well as drawing comparison with Listening Fund England to produce a final learning report in Spring 2021. Visit the Centre for Youth Impact website (www.youthimpact.uk) or get in touch (hello@youthimpact.uk) to find out more about the Listening Fund evaluations.

Appendix A: The Listening Fund partners

The 12 organisations that are supported by the Listening Fund in Scotland were selected in 2018 and their projects began in Spring 2019, lasting for two years. The full list of organisations is below.

- Access to Industry
- Toon Speak
- Edinburgh Young Carers
- Impact Arts
- Elgin Youth Development Group
- Hot Chocolate
- Creative Therapies
- Girvan Youth Trust
- Moira Anderson Foundation
- The Junction
- Reeltime
- Rosemount Lifelong Learning



The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations that work together to progress thinking and practice around impact measurement in youth work and services for young people. Our vision is for all young people to have access to high quality programmes and services that improve their life chances, by enabling embedded approaches to impact measurement that directly inform practice. Our work, therefore, is dedicated to three objectives, together with our expanded networks and other organisations from across the youth sector: curating the debate, building the movement and shaping the future.

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