

Youth-led social change: early recommendations for funders

Chrisann Jarrett, Summer 2021

Key recommendations for Funders (commissioned work completed by Chrisann Jarrett June 2021¹)

Clarity of purpose and strategic funding is necessary to build on the funded work and momentum created so far. This leads to the following recommendations for funders when considering investing in youth led change or something similar. The full report provides further insights into each of these recommendations.

1. **The role of the funder in advancing youth-led activism and social change:** the funder is seen as having five primary roles, these roles contribute to the proactive engagement of the funder to support the field of youth-led change, this engagement is not limited to financial support:
 - a) **Funders should be active listeners:** practicing deep listening to understand context, identify gaps and move resources to support groups/organisations to build power.
 - b) **Funders should act as convenors:** creating spaces for reflection, facilitate conversations so that organisations can share knowledge and forge connections.
 - c) **Funders should bridge gaps:** having identified gaps, funders should respond to the needs of the field through financial and non-financial interventions.
 - d) **Funders should use their power to help the field:** funders should recognise their own power and use it in a way that helps to leverage the work of organisations and youth organisers. This should be done in a way that compliments what is already being done by organisations and activists on the front-line.
 - e) **Funders should provide research and use learning for amplification:** funders should organise the rich learning provided by organisations within their portfolios and to offer a case for supporting youth-led activism.
2. **Network/Cohort creation to facilitate the development of alliances:** Community events and networking opportunities are a rich resource for organisations to learn from each other, find synergies and prevent duplication of work. Funders have access to broad portfolios of funded organisations in the sector and can assist with brokering relationships, collaborations and partnerships between organisations to accelerate the change.
3. **The 'Adult-Led vs Youth-Led' dichotomy should be abandoned in favour of an intergenerational approach:** the adult vs youth dichotomy oversimplifies the ecosystem for social change. Investment in youth-led activism should not be approached by funders in an 'all or nothing' manner where organisations with pure youth-led traits are prioritised and those that are fronted by adults seen as diluting the field of practice. A multi-generational approach should be encouraged with youth-led activism organisations having different formations.
4. **Resources need to be deployed to enable movements not organisations:** Youth-led activism and social change does not take place in a vacuum, strategic collaborations with other change focused organisations must be facilitated. In addition, Young Activists have a broad affiliation not limited to one organisation, their shared identity and the complexities around intersectionality need to be considered so that they can be better connected with other young changemakers.

¹ Brief methodology at the end of report

5. **Activism should be seen as bursts of energy that is a not always best supported by funding through organisations:** activism can be spontaneous and reactive, young people wanting to respond to social issues creativity. Funding through organisations may not be the best way to support youth-led activism in the UK due to constraints organisations impose on the types of activism allowed. Funders and organisations need to think about how they can best support the ideas of young people through subgrants and by signposting funding opportunities that are not dependent on the young people having formal organisational structures.
6. **Greater consideration of benefits of the Incubator model:** organisations under this model are seen as temporary accommodation for young activists, creating the infrastructure and conditions for them to do the work. This incubator model supports the growth of youth-led organisations/groups over time as well as showcasing a cohort/pipeline of talented young leaders ready and willing to rise to the occasion.
7. **Activism facilitates the redistribution of power and so it is important where the ‘ask’ comes from:** organisations working with young people play a key role in redistributing power and brokering relationships with institutions. With organisations being protagonists of change, they need to be aware of how their internal practices, governance structures and programme of activities contributes or prevents them from sharing power with young people.
8. **Long-term investment with a ‘Grants Plus’ element:** This is in recognition that achieving external change can be slow and organisations need to be sustained and supported over time with specific interventions, with support to organisations of at least three years, ideally five. This will enable them to build capacity and achieve greater impact.
9. **The ‘Pipeline to Pathways’ Problem needs to be fixed:** there is a pipeline of empowered young people but no clear pathway for young people to engage in activism within organisations and their communities. Investment in the youth voice and development of young people are crucial to develop the pipeline of empowered young people but strategic input is needed to help organisations identify and create opportunities for young people to lead social change. These pathways should not reduce a young person’s involvement to membership of focus groups and sharing lived experience.
10. **Promote the holistic development of young people:** The Youth Organizing Model in the US² shows that it is possible to address the needs of young people and also proactively offer opportunities for them to take action. The creation of a holistic development package of support that enables young people to understand the issues they face, the power dynamics within society and ways in which they can influence change would benefit the emergent practice in the UK.
11. **The wellbeing of individual young people and youth groups are paramount:** Pastoral care and responding to present needs should be prioritised over change in the policy, political or social arena which

² <https://fcyo.org/info/youth-organizing/>

was considered to be a longer-term objective and end goal. This is particularly important when working with young people whose activism comes from a place of lived experience.

12. **Acknowledgement that young people are leaders of now:** young people are to be recognised as leaders of 'now' and not 'leaders of tomorrow'. The latter contributes to the gatekeeping of young people and can impact their participation in social change as adults act as assessors who decide the types of opportunities a young person can get involved in. Organisations and funders need to operate with urgency so that they are creating opportunities for young people to lead in the present and not solely focussed on developing young people for the future.

1. **Learning & Insights (commissioned work completed by Chrisann Jarrett June 2021)**
 - A. **Section One:** Reflections from the organisations funded and panel members
 - B. **Section Two:** A Closer Look at AFCF portfolio and young engagement
 - C. **Section Three:** Interrogating Power- Comparing approaches in the USA and the UK
 - D. **Section Four:** The role of the funder in advancing youth-led activism & social change
 - E. **Section 5:** The Question of Sustainability
 - F. **Section 6:** Hopes for the Future

- A. **Section One:** Reflections from the organisations funded and panel members

i. What has been the best thing about AFCF?

License for organisations to invest in youth-led social change:

Organisations stated that the funding provided them with the '*license to focus on this important work*' and the additional resources to embed youth-led practices within their organisations. This was a welcomed fund as youth-led social change and activism was not in the remit of some of their existing funding guidelines or a priority area for the trusts and foundations supporting their work. This was particularly the case for organisations who had received government funding or funding from local authorities which imposed additional constraints and prescribed the types of social action that young people could do.

'A dedicated fund for this work is an important signal'- Funded organisation

The added benefit of the fund is that it increased the credibility of smaller organisations. As a result of being a funded organisation organisations, institutions and potential funders wanted to work with them.

'AFCF funding as a springboard – broadened co-production element, enabled external relationships and shaped internal thinking.'- Funded organisation

'We were able to identify and fund practice in the UK that we were not aware of'- Panel Member

Youth voice and lived experience becoming more central in organisations and with stakeholders:

A crucial first step for the sector to contribute to the development of young people and recognise that they are equal partners within civil society organisations and society at large, is to pay young people to co-deliver any sessions or training of members. This has a double-benefit of empowering and valuing expertise, especially when working with young people with lived experience (which many felt is 'trauma work'). As a result of reimbursing young people for sharing their stories or being involved in focus groups and meetings, lived experience was more positively viewed as necessary expertise to contribute to wider change.

For the first time, at a higher-level organisations could employ young people to deliver project work and build necessary youth-led governance structures internally. This has had a positive impact on engagement with young people within their networks as lived experience is valued by young people and it was believed that cultural shifts were taking place.

'We wanted to scale up and this funding enabled us to consolidate the work and improve staff capacity and pilot a new initiative on youth-led advocacy'- Funded organisation

Flexibility of relational and responsive funders

The pandemic led to disruptive change within organisations who had to adapt quickly and prioritise young people, this meant that they could no longer deliver the programmes or partnership work that they had initially committed to. The AFCF team played a proactive role in helping organisations respond to the crisis and assisted with solution finding.

'PHF attitude [was] encouraging of emergent solutions and understanding through the pandemic and the upheaval' – Funded organisation

'These changes were welcomed and met with high quality communication and listening from the Act for Change team who showed a genuine commitment to hearing from funded organisations, this was exemplary for a funder' – Funded organisation

'The collaboration with #iwill fund 'enabled the three partners to do something that they would not have done on their own'- Panel Member

Organisations felt trusted to do what is best:

There was a sense that the unpredictable nature of the pandemic and uncertainty within the policy and external environment mirrored the youth work sector where work with young people can be 'uncertain' and 'spontaneous' with organisations needing to be nimble and reactive to constant changes. This is something that is not accommodated for in traditional funding that has a lot of 'strings attached' and rigid expectations for reporting, delivery of outcomes and emphasis on 'big wins' in the policy or social action field.

'The flexibility provided by the AFCF team and the reassurance that funders are okay with provocative work [was important]. We felt that we could take more risks and not manage participation in a coddled way'- Funded organisation

'Social action work- cannot be described with programmatic constraints, these need to be removed for youth-led work to truly be promoted and for young people to do what they want to do'- Funded organisation

Funded organisations believed that the fund understood that working with vulnerable groups with multiple complex needs meant that organisations often have to employ an intersectional approach when addressing the different facets of these difficulties. During the pandemic staff felt there was a conflict between delivering outcomes and the wellbeing of the young people they worked with.

'The pandemic has caused trauma for children and young people and so we focussed on caring for them'- Funded organisation

Whenever this conflict arose, the wellbeing of individual young people and youth groups was paramount. Pastoral care and responding to present needs was prioritised over change in the policy, political or social arena which was considered to be a longer-term objective and end goal.

For youth-led activism and youth work to be authentic it must be adaptive with failure welcomed as a key learning metric. Responding to the needs of young people cannot easily fit within formal structures of traditional funding. Organisations therefore described AFCF's flexibility and understanding as 'unusual' in traditional funding, although it was understood that PHF and EEF were 'progressive funders'.

Network creation and partnership development:

Community events and networking opportunities were seen as a rich resource for organisations to learn from each other, find synergies and prevent duplication of work. In many cases, the space provided by the fund helped organisations (varying in size and expertise) to learn from the mistakes of others and most importantly gain inspiration from organisations that were considered pioneers and had tried and tested innovative models to accelerate the pace of change in the youth-led social activism space.

Relationships have organically developed between some funded organisations, especially those working on women and girls' issues or refugees and migrant rights.

'The Cohorts unearthed are extremely resilient particularly in this pandemic'- Panel Member

ii. What has not worked so well?

Time pressures and online communications 'Zoom fatigue':

As all activity moved online, it was understood that the fund also had to adapt and increase digital engagement. While this was welcomed as it fostered an online community and helped with some network building, there is no substitute to in-person connections. In addition, the volume of activities on offer at times felt overwhelming for young people and staff. Organisations wanted the fund to be a success and funders must understand better the power dynamics at play when funded organisations receive correspondence inviting them to join events. Though there was no pressure to attend these events, organisations felt obliged to get involved even when they did not have the capacity to do so.

'The spirit behind the number of opportunities is fantastic but greater thought [is] needed about what young people and staff actually need, bearing in mind the limited resources'- Funded organisation

'Young people have had a particularly challenging and emotionally draining year with the pandemic, BLM, Kill the Bill and social isolation. We needed more spaces for young people and staff to discuss rather than space to work on a particular programme of activity'- Funded organisation

Role of adults in youth-led programme of activity:

We must be mindful of the overstretching of young people who are involved in many charities and work non-stop. Organisations accepted that a lot of the areas for improvement was due to the unique environment that the fund, funded organisations and young people had to operate in.

On the other hand, some organisations felt that because there was a heavy-handed approach to making things youth-led (which should be lauded) the fund has not created enough space for higher-level strategic conversations that young people might not be able to contribute to just yet. This was a missed opportunity given that the field of youth-led activism and social change is still an emerging field in the UK.

The fund needs to be clear on what youth-led activism is and recognise that one-size does not fit all:

All 32 organisations vary in size, expertise and at times it is difficult to identify synergies. It was thought that the AFCF team could apply a more tailored approach to the cohort to assist with building connections. For example, some organisations focus on ‘youth voice and youth development’ and some on ‘youth activism and social change’. There is a difference between pioneer organisations in the latter group and those in the former group who were at the start of their journey.

‘There is a risk of diluting the word youth-led. Funders need to recognise the metrics and the tone of their approaches as this informs the prioritisation of the sector’ – Funded organisation

iii. What support do organisations need when supporting young people to lead change?

Support Needed	
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term funding in the form of multi-year grants to sustain and embed this work • Grants for 3-5 years were preferred • Flexible funding to test new approaches (particularly, enabling the trial and error required for activism to flourish) and SPACE to EXPLORE • Focus on ‘Core Costs’
Access to connections and networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster co-production amongst organisations and cohort creation • Encouraging generosity with Intellectual Property • A central hub/network that can be accessed to prevent <i>‘knowledge gained from disappearing at the end of programmes’</i>
Infrastructure support-nuanced according to organisational size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller charity CEO’s often act as ‘a jack of all trades’ due to the start-up nature of the organisation. More resources are needed to help find stability and build a team, freeing up leadership’s time to focus on strategy
Fundraising capacity	<p><i>Risk: ‘Bigger players are getting more money as they have the right systems in place to complete applications and consequently, they are getting bigger’- Funded organisation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative support needed to manage grants • Finances are the ‘backbone’ of organisations
Monitoring and Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To track impact and innovate • Facilitate learning and identification of gaps within services and ensure adequate reflection within the sector
Platform for young people to build movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amplifying the work of young people in youth-led social action • Training young people with workshops on power and privilege • Resources deployed in the right way to enable movements instead of individual organisations
Support to influence Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connections with thinktanks and policy strategists so that organisations can influence legislation and ensure young people are at the helm of decision making
Communications support/Digital Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital vs on the ground activism: Expertise and best practice approaches when responding to post-pandemic social action environment • Investment in digital skills and comms content will ensure visibility of the work, foster trust between organisations and young people and also help with long-term sustainability in the form of donations from the general public
Effects of activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wellbeing support should be factored into the programmes as a package of support. Current funding packages do not accommodate for this and this has a knock-on impact on sustainability of youth-led activism, especially lived experience campaigning.

iv. Young people: What support do you need as a young person leading change?

Young people engaged in AFCF organisations had positive experiences of the programmes. They felt trusted and were not pushed in any particular direction; the spaces created for them to build community felt safe. All welcomed being given new responsibilities, this includes leading sessions alongside staff, building campaigns and joining staff teams as paid ambassadors. This transition was a difficult one due to the pandemic and constant online engagement, in addition they felt ill-equipped at times to understand what their new role demanded of them and how to monitor their success especially when working on deep systemic issues.

'How can you be an activist yet not get involved in social action, Covid19 really held us back'- Young person

'You cannot win people over and convince them to join online, many of the young people we wanted to reach had internet connectivity issues, they could not participate'- Young Person

Though group and community building activities were welcomed, young people wanted assistance from their organisations to develop themselves and opportunities to support their individual talents, enabling them to find their own pathways.

'We are dynamic, we are all so different and so we need different things to fulfil us. In our role we are expected to challenge government, but this takes time. We need more tools so that we can improve in public speaking and be more persuasive'- Young Person

'Funders and organisations need to offer more of a legacy for someone to create a long-lasting career'- Young Person

Collaboration and partnership with other youth groups was something the young people wanted more of. They understood that the more they joined forces the bigger their movements would be, and this would create the momentum they needed for changemaking.

'We joined together with another group and we trusted each other, this has been a great network because it has improved our knowledge and skills when we speak to others about the issues we are facing'- Young person

v. Activism as bursts of energy

The backdrop of the pandemic provided space for funded organisations and the young people they work with to rethink modes of working. Activism for them was in the 'doing' - the ability for young people to take action on things that mattered to them, free from rigid structures of organisational culture, charity commission constraints and charity governance.

Young people are able to organise and mobilise around a particular 'IDEA' that generates sparks of civic engagement. This idea sets the direction of travel, the modes of engagement and the tactics being used to raise awareness and move people in power to act. If activism materialises in an organic, spontaneous, flexible and often unpredictable manner, then funding organisations might not be the way forward due to the constraints organisations impose on young people and the types of innovation and advocacy they can practice. This can be the place where radical change happens.

This is not to assume that by viewing activism through the lens of 'bursts of energy' means that young people cannot organise in a structured manner. The Black Lives Matter protests

in London and around surrounding cities were organised by young people in reaction to the death of George Floyd in the US. Within a short space of time young people created groups online, locations where they would gather and speakers who would represent them in making demands for racial equality and an end to police brutality. The asks were clear and despite the multiplicity of actors from different subsections of society and class, this is not necessarily the case for organisations who have additional considerations (for example safeguarding), making them unlikely houses of reactive activism.

It was considered a more risk averse approach to fund organisations instead of groups and individuals due to the fact that AFCF was providing a considerable amount of funds and support. Organisations passed the viability test due to robust structures of governance and financial management system.

'I understand why they fund organisations but should this always be the case, young people can do a lot with a little bit of money, they want to focus on action, they don't think about formal structures'- Funded organisation

Some organisations recognised the tension in grant-makers providing funding only for organisations and that this could potentially thwart youth activism. In response, a funded organisation has provided sub-grants to young people who had innovate ideas but would not otherwise get the capital to or trust of a funder to make things happen.

'The young people have ideas but don't have funding or clout to pass the due diligence test, but we had the credibility, we can report to the funder on how the money is spent, where additional funds are needed, we apply grant funds to young people in instalments and help them manage the money, they focus on delivering' – Funded organisation

Organisations also claimed that funders are always wanting something new and so they have to repackage their programme and delivery to prove innovation. This prevents them from following things through, work is reshaped too soon in the cycle. If more organisations connected to young people, providing a programme of activity and sustained relationship building along with access to subgrants, this would enable young people to do the innovative work, to try and test new things with the support of organisations but with freedom from reporting and fundraising pressures.

The incubator model was also suggested as a way forward for organisations whose youth groups/young networks had grown and leaders were clearly identified. This incubation model would be similar to that described in NVCO's report 'Our Time Is Now' ³which evidences Just for Kids Law's relationship with its migrant youth led project Let Us Learn which spun out of the charity to become independent as We Belong. Support was granted through internal comms, finances and governance to help We Belong's co-founders develop a strong case for spinning out. Organisations under this model are seen as temporary accommodation for young activists, creating the infrastructure and conditions for them to do the work, this involves mobilising other young people.

United We Dream, is one of the United States largest immigrant youth-led network, funded by Unbound in the US were previously incubated within the National Immigration Law Centre (NILC). The host organisation providing the back-office support and financial assistance to young people volunteering in their masses who did not want to or were yet not ready to become standalone organisations and register their movement within a formal structure. This incubator model works only when there is a shared understanding between the young people involved and the organisation as tensions can arise when the activism that young people want to perform is more radical with the potential of compromising the status of the

³ ['It's Our Time' Learning from We Belong's Journey to becoming an independent charity- NVCO](#)

charity within which they operate. A clear 'terms of reference' will prevent organisations from being a 'block' or from being the main protagonist in social change as the incubator model carves out the role of organisations as 'temporary homes' for youth-led social change. Their sole purpose is to support and facilitate development and working to respond to the needs of the young people. In some ways youth-led programmes developed in this manner operate with some level of autonomy distinct from other programmes of activities that are permanently held by the accommodating organisation.

Funding pots have also emerged within and outside of the AFCF cohort for young people to test ideas where eligibility is not dependent on constituted status⁴.

B. **Section Two:** Analysis of AFCF funded organisations and models of youth engagement

- i. **The AFCF:** A fund for organisations supporting young people working for change. This is done through the provision of resources for **young people to challenge** social injustice, find ways of **overcoming inequality** and **give voice to issues** they are experiencing.

The three outcomes of the fund are:

- **More opportunities for disadvantaged young people** to lead social change
- **A greater understanding of how youth-led social change impacts** on young people and the communities they live in
- **Organisations** supporting young people to lead social change are in a **more sustainable position**⁵

The Blagrave Trust Report '**Youth-led Change Landscape and Possibilities**⁶ breaks down youth-led change into two areas:

1. **Youth Leadership:** young people having **AGENCY** and **DECISION-MAKING POWER**
 - Provision of resources and programmes to facilitate the development of young people this is essential in building the pipeline of empowered young leaders
2. **Change:** external change in society- building and distributing power to address structural barriers
 - The strategic deployment of young change agents from the pipeline to influence the external environment

Only 10% of the 120 organisations within the Blagrave Trust research report had youth-engagement strategies focused on external change. A review of the 32 organisations within the Act for Change Fund's portfolio shows a variety of strategies including Youth Leadership, and external change and harnessing the potential of young people to lead wider social change.

If we have a look at the **PHF Youth Continuum which upholds a linear model and gradual progression of youth-engagement**⁷ (see below) young people are being supported and great work has been done by organisations who have expertise in engaging the youth voice and developing a programme of activity and spaces for young people to build community. However, Civic engagement and Youth organising are neglected areas, or

⁴ See Appendix for examples (Act for Change Fund and other Funders)

⁵ [Act for Change Fund Partnership](#)

⁶ [Blagrave Trust 'Youth led change in the UK- Understanding the landscape and the opportunities](#)

⁷ PHF 'Youth Engagement Mapping the Landscape'

areas where organisations lack strategy, expertise or vision. Organisations are therefore ill-equipped to support the full range of youth engagement⁸.



In addition, the AFCF only funds constituted organisations. Most are adult-led organisations with access to thousands of young people including potential young activists and change agents. On one hand, it might be that for organisations this is a novel area and they do not recognise or fully accept the true nature of youth-led activism and how to facilitate it. On the other hand, there is a risk that organisations are repackaging⁹ their ‘youth development’ work as ‘youth-led activism’. Whilst repackaging is inevitable due to finite funding sources, funders need to play a proactive role in ensuring organisations are held to account regarding the genuine nature of their activism and engagement with young people. In addition, funders need to be mindful of the strict adherence to the linear model of engaging young people in the UK that is currently being reinforced by funding pots.

ii. **The impact of the Pipeline to Pathways Problem:**

There is a pipeline of empowered young people but no clear pathway for young people to engage in activism within these organisations and in their communities. Investment into youth voice, development and leadership comes to a halt and is not harnessed or deployed in a strategic manner, opportunities are therefore missed and where opportunities for young people do emerge there is a risk that organisations are ill-equipped to respond. Where they do respond, the efforts are contained, reducing young people’s involvement to membership of focus groups and sharing lived experience. This in turn affects the sustainability of the field, and the momentum that is created is then lost.

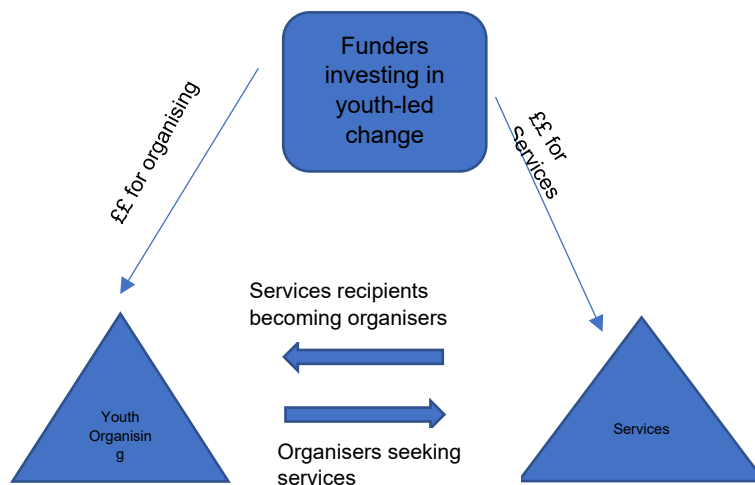
It must be acknowledged that organisations do not have to do it all nor are they expected to. Many vary in size, issues focused on, and expertise, and were established to serve young people in different ways with different specific principles and funding responsibilities that guide their work. This does not have to be to the detriment of the field.

For example, some organisations can focus solely on providing service point solutions to young people facing chronic mental health challenges whilst others focus on organising young people to challenge the systemic issue around inadequate mental health provisions. In both cases young people are being helped and their voices centred. The fact that organisations within the AFCF portfolio operated on different points of the youth continuum above is not necessarily a criticism, the role of a funder could be to facilitate the collaboration between organisations advancing youth engagement and participation for social change.

⁸ Paul Fenton’s paper PHF Symposium ‘Youth Activism, engagement and development of new civic learning spaces’

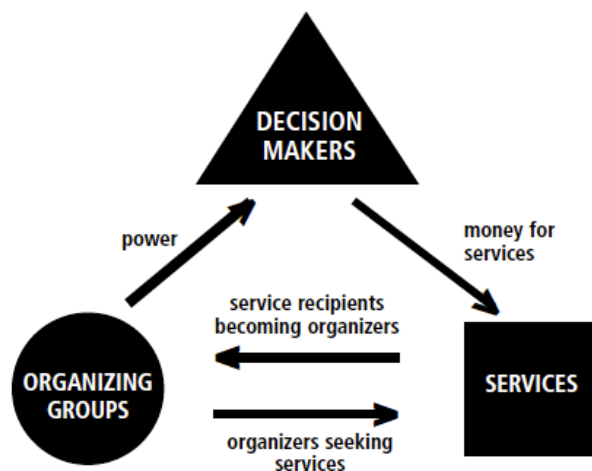
⁹ [Blagrave Trust 'Youth led change in the UK- Understanding the landscape and the opportunities](#)

This can be best illustrated by this diagram:



Over time, the culture of collaboration and linking of resources could lead to a positive change in the sector with different stakeholders uniting against inequality and systemic injustice. This can also be illustrated by a further diagram:

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C. **Section Three:** Interrogating Power- Comparing approaches in the USA and the UK

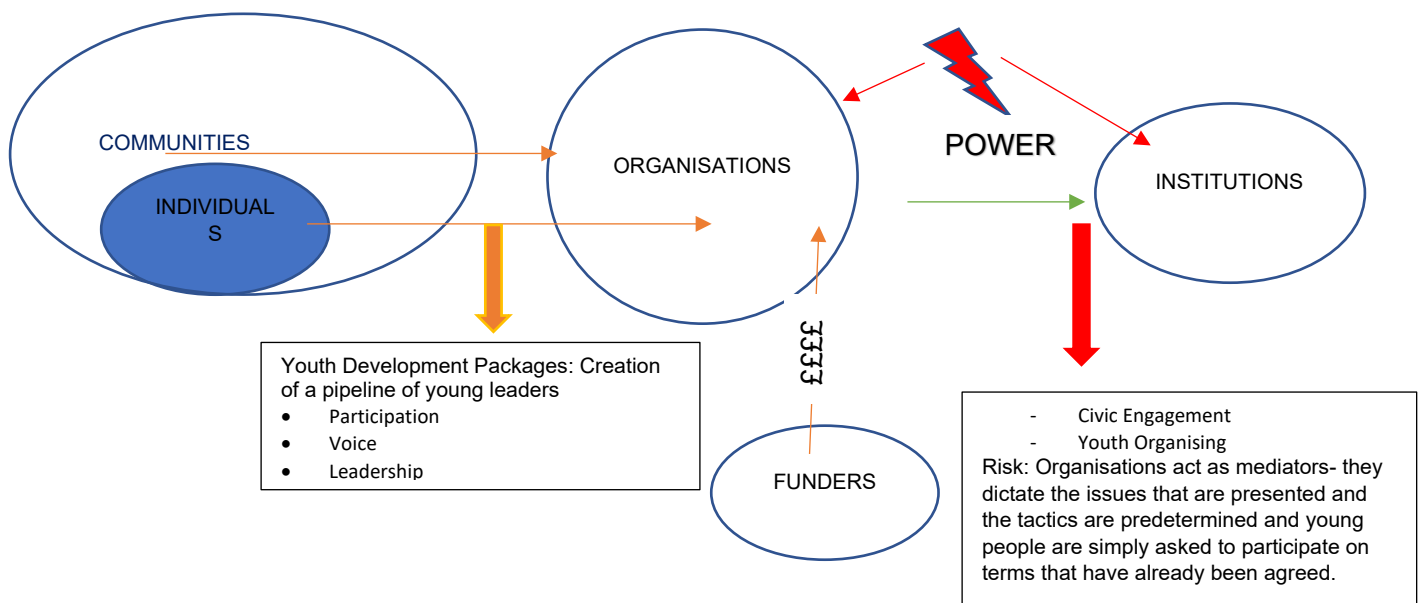
i. **Activism is about the redistribution of power:**

Within the UK, organisations serving young people are the key players in redistributing power and brokering relationships with institutions. Coupled with the loose focus on civic engagement and youth-organising, organisations can be a block to the emerging practice of youth-led activism and social change. Likewise, funders can be a potential block if they continue funding more of the same. As organisations continue to be funded, it is incumbent on them to evidence where the 'ask' is coming from, the problems identified, and desire

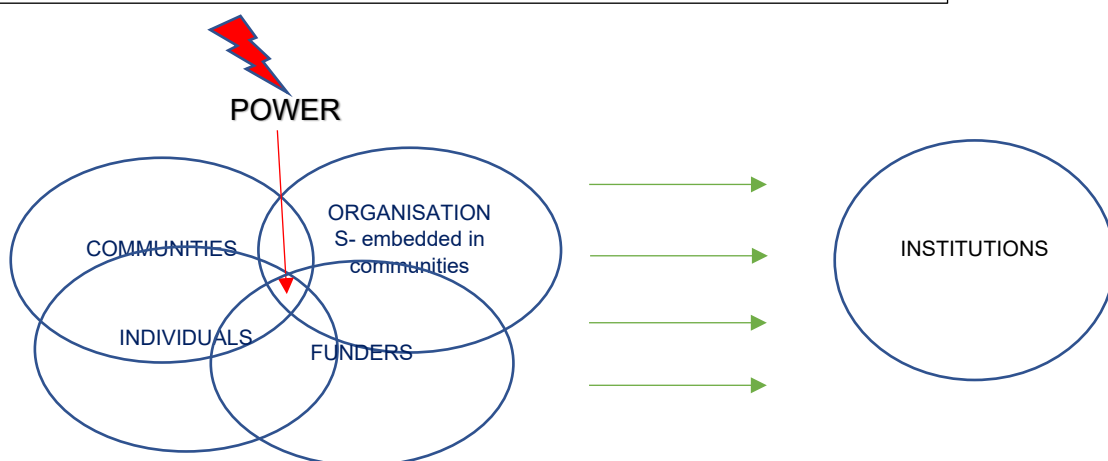
¹⁰ [Bringing it Together: Uniting Youth Organizing, Development and Services for Long-Term Stability](#)

solutions need to be created directly from the communities impacted and individuals with lived experience. The role of the organisations is to be an ally, a facilitator, an active participant using their power and connections working in partnership with communities/individuals to achieve the change.

UK: Organisations are the main protagonists for change



US: Communities are the protagonists for social change. Organisations and funders act as allies with communities brokering relationships with



ii. **Civic consciousness of young people:**

Using the AFCF portfolio as an example there are few organisations teaching political literacy which is a crucial part of civic engagement. Political literacy is described as the

ability to engage in, challenge, and change the systems that shapes an individual's life¹¹. This is in contrast to the context in the US where the communities are often recognised as the protagonists for social change¹². In this context organisations engage young people and provide a holistic package of activity, there is a fluidity in young people's engagement in socio-political life that is facilitated by opening up spaces for those affected by injustice to discuss power and form alliances. This fluidity is preferred to the linear approach applied in the UK where young people are engaged at the 'right time' after adults assess the level of 'developmental needs' of these young people.

Whereas in the US young people are seen as 'leaders of now', the methodology of gatekeeping the access points of youth activism here in the UK means that young people are stuck as 'leaders in waiting' waiting for the direction of well-meaning adults. This heavily contrasts with funders engaging in international development in the Africa where there is an urgency to activate and facilitate young people as social entrepreneurs and problem solvers of the present.

'Leadership cannot be created in a vacuum; we must present opportunities for young people to lead'- US based young activist

'Pathways from youth development to youth organising are still being grappled with'- US funder

In addition, organisations and funders within the US working on youth-led social change often start from the vantage point of assessing the origins and systemic causes of socio-political and economic issues. The power dynamics within society are therefore presented and interrogated by young people as a crucial part of their development; this is often described as 'civic consciousness'. This approach is in recognition that the political structures in the USA were designed to exclude specific communities, e.g., immigrants, LGBTQ, women and people of colour. And because activism is political by nature and involves to reallocation/redistribution of power, lived experience leadership is more advanced in the US due to the need to reimagine society and include the excluded that have historically been disbarred from decision-making. It could be argued that the most disadvantaged young people will have more obstacles to overcome before they can fully participate in activism. Even so, if civic consciousness can be integrated within organisational approaches here in the UK as part of empowerment processes this can contribute to the pipeline of young leaders.

'Civic education is uneven and inconsistent within the US education system and during the Trump-Era it has definitely come under attack with issues such as slavery seen as not so bad and history being open to interpretation. It's crucial that young people debate social issues and in doing so create a compelling case and argument'- US Funder

The Camden Center for Youth Development¹³ is a non-profit organisation in New Jersey which prides itself on using the assets of young people to meet their needs to successfully address the complex work they must do to transform their communities and neighbourhoods. Working predominantly with young people who have accessed the social care system they work with and for young people of colour and partner with local and national institutions.

¹¹ Paul Fenton's paper PHF Symposium 'Youth Activism, engagement and development of new civic learning spaces'

¹² Jennifer Gordon: Concluding Essay: The Lawyer is Not the Protagonist: Community Campaigns, Law and Social Change

¹³ [Camden Center for Youth Development](#)

‘Young people have lateral input and are remunerated for their involvement with programmes, this is because if we want people to believe that something is of value then we must value it’ – US Director

Young people on their programmes receive support to resolve their individual issues while simultaneously being upskilled with a deep dive into the root causes of the socio-economic challenges they face. This enables them to firstly understand the power structures in their local community and the rules of navigating them if they want to engage in advocacy. They then mirror the power structures by creating mock sessions and debates as a way of preparing them and develop defensive briefings before they have meetings with local institutions and government bodies where they lay down their recommendations for change. The organisation then provides a package of resources to improve their leadership, financial literacy, health and wellbeing, and sustain their involvement within the community.

‘You must first understand the system within which you are working, only after can you know the tools that support change’- US based young activist

iii. **Youth Organising: What is it and how is it different from community organising?**

The Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FYCO)¹⁴ in the US was established in response to social change movements in the 1990’s in the US where young people were at the forefront of challenging decisions being made by their future, both locally and nationally. Youth curfews and education system divides were disproportionately affecting young people of colour who organised through protests and made strategic demands. FYCO was developed in response to this as funders wanted to know how to support and organise 14–20-year-olds to continue to do this work and provide the conditions for sustainability. Today the FYCO have 25 youth organising funders who sit alongside youth organising practitioners to make decisions on grants. The aim was to increase investment to youth organising and leadership of young people of colour.

The FYCO offers the following definition of youth organizing:

‘Grounded in racial, gender, and economic justice, youth organizing is the process of engaging young people in building power for systemic change while supporting their individual and collective development’.

¹⁴ [FYCO Website](#)

Under this model, youth development and youth organising are seen as co-dependent interventions necessary to build power. The essential features of youth organising are: ¹⁵



Addressing the needs of young people whilst also proactively offering opportunities for them to take action facilitates the transformative impact of youth-led social action and long-term engagement in social justice movements.

‘Community organizing is widely understood as a practice: however, when we put youth in front of the word organising, funders have questions they want to know what this means. Young people cannot vote and so there was an argument to be made about why we should invest in this area’ - US Funder

Community organising is prevalent in the US and developed during the Civil Rights movement with a rich history of building alliances across community bases to protest, challenge and demand justice. This exists in the UK with organisations like Citizens UK being a national organiser of people for social good with local chapters offering a system change approach, engaging a multiplicity of stakeholders rooted in local communities from civil society, faith groups and marginalised communities.

Youth organising can be understood as the intentional investment in youth leadership due to the recognition that as a cohort, young people are driving change and offering dynamic solutions.

'With the largest youth population in history, there is an unprecedented opportunity for young people to take an active role in shaping the future. This generation has inherited enormous global challenges but has the ability to confront the status quo and offer youth-led solutions for change.' - World Economic Forum- Global Shapers

Whilst the focus of this organising model is on youth, both youth organising and community organising share the same aim: they both provide the conditions for communities to be transformed.

iv. **Adult-Led vs Youth-Led dichotomy:**

It should not be assumed that there is one clear definition of youth organising that is subscribed to in the US. This is due to the fact that organisations serving young people, offering the platforms and opportunities for them to lead, all have different contexts in which they were birthed. This impacts on the ways in which youth organising is adapted and the level to which practice is accepted as a valuable means to engage the younger demographic.

'Pathways from youth development and youth organising is still something that we have to grapple with. Definitions of youth organizing is still wavering' – US Funder and Youth Organising Practitioner

The genesis of organisations differs, some came out of grassroots movements, some founded by young people and many developed a result of an institutional decree to support youth-led action. A lot of social change movement organisations investing in youth-activism are adult dominated and tend to minimise the engagement and participation of young people. The egalitarian relationship between adults and young people can create tension, this tension can in some cases lead to young people organising themselves outside of traditional organisational structures¹⁶. The DREAMers are a good example. This is a movement which proposed the DREAM Act so that undocumented young people could have a pathway to becoming US citizens. In the early stages the movement employed subdued and anonymous forms of activism, with tension between adult leaders and undocumented youth leading to many young people moving away and organising themselves¹⁷. This in turn led to an escalation of protest tactics, and organised sit-ins in the offices of senators.

It could be argued that adultism can cause problems, however, the adult vs youth dichotomy oversimplifies the ecosystem for social change. Investment in youth-led activism should not be approached by funders in an 'all or nothing' manner where organisations with pure youth-led traits are prioritised and those that are fronted by adults seen as diluting the field of practice. Such a divisive approach undermines the need for partnership and collaboration between the different actors advancing towards equality, justice, fairness and power redistribution. A multi-generational approach should be encouraged with youth-led activism organisations having different formations.

'Some organisations we support have a multi-generational status. The intergenerational point should not be understated, young people want to be seen as building on the efforts of their ancestors, so it is an imperative part of strengthening the youth leadership sector'- US Funder

¹⁶ [Organising the Next Generation: Youth Engagement with Activism Inside and Outside Organisations- Thomas Elliot and Jennifer Earl](#)

A good example of this is **The Movement Strategy Center (MSC)**, a Californian based organisation which focuses on physical and mental aspects of movements and leaders and explores the unconscious habits that limit movement builders and movements. They act as intermediaries engaging youth and adults across issues and regions to respond to the 'now' by providing research and alliance building networks to support youth organising. They created a *Youth and Intergenerational Organizing programme* which helps build capacity at regional and state level¹⁸.

D. **Section Four:** The role of the funder in advancing youth-led activism and social change

i. Funders should be active listeners

Funders should practice deep listening to understand context, identify gaps and find ways of filling these gaps. By doing this, funders will be able to map their field and ask strategic questions such as 'What is our funder identity?' 'Where do we fit within the ecosystem?' 'What are the gaps?' 'Are we able to act alone when resourcing this need?' 'If not, which other stakeholder or funders do we need to collaborate with?'

'The role of philanthropy is to move resources and support groups to build power to win'- US Funder

'Profound and deep listening, the philanthropic sector is part of the problem. We want young people to be like us, we impose what we think is useful as opposed to asking young people what they need'- International Development Funder

The Blgrave Trust has participated in active listening and mapping of the youth-led sector and have responded by taking incremental steps to restructure their internal governance to actively engage young people. As well as creating funding pots specifically for young people engaged in social activism, through their Challenge and Change Fund, they have supported youth-led programmes and organisations through their multi-funder collaborations with the Opportunity Fund, Listening Fund and Restart Youth all of which aim to change the conditions for young people leading change in the UK.

ii. Funders should act as convenors

Spaces for reflection and active listening contributed through funder facilitation has the benefit of enabling organisations to learn and forge connections.

'Funders should provide a space for organisations to think strategically and look ahead and be cognisant of the evolving landscape'- UK Funder

A good example of this is the approach taken by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, where their strategic-funding places emphasis on peer learning communities. FCYO's Youth Power Lab brings together a small cohort of strategically aligned groups to test out new approaches for building power. Membership of this cohort is contingent on organisations doing the internal first step of understanding what it means to build power and showing a commitment to shifting their practices so that they can play a meaningful role in the movement ecosystem.

iii. Funders should bridge gaps

¹⁸ [The Movement Strategy Center \(MSC\) Website](#)

It is assumed that grant-makers have a bird's eye view of different sectors, projects and actors operating in specific fields. With this overview of the landscape, they can help bridge the gaps between stakeholders in the form of introductions, convenings, capacity building and infrastructure support. This covers both financial and non-financial interventions. For example, the majority of the Wellsprings Philanthropic Fund is allocated towards social change work however they also offer facilitated field building by strategically coordinating engagement at field level whilst also building organisational capacity.

'Thinking in terms of movement ecosystem and the different ways you can support the movement as a funder- what does the movement need and what can they best provide'- UK Funder

The Bill & Melina Gates Foundation¹⁹ aim to bridge the gaps between private and public actors. There is a recognition that private actors are good at developing products and services whilst the public sector are good at delivering solutions to people who need them. They step in when governments and businesses leave gaps to strengthen global cooperation. Whereas the Ford Foundation²⁰ through their *Civic Engagement and Government* priority area build bridges between grassroots organisations, policy and legal advocates.

Collaborations might be a key part of bridging gaps, the formality of a partnership agreement between funders with aligned aims; pooled resources; trust; knowledge sharing maximises efforts to support the youth-led space. However, funder collaboration can happen in looser and less formal frameworks through side conversations, introductions and championing the work of funded organisations to other funders who might be able to assist the organisation or leadership develop.

'Social change and justice takes a long time and so we need a range of funders and bodies to support that'- US Funder

iv. Funders should use their power to help the field

It was suggested by AFCF funded organisations that funders should recognise their own power and use it in a way that helps to leverage the work being done by organisations and organisers. This implies that funders should be active participants in social change as they have access to private partners, institutions and have considerable interest. Funders should therefore use their influence to present social issues and solutions.

This approach can be problematic as funders are in the business of funding 'organisations that are doing the work' not 'doing the work' themselves. This enhanced participatory role of the funder should be approached with caution as it contributes to the tension in the field where funders are seen to use resource to direct/refocus the sector on a priority area that they have assumed should be prioritised. Conflict might also arise in the representations being made by funders on behalf of activists and organisations that do not align with the priorities of the sector.

'The experts are the activists not the funder, our role is to get behind them and then get out of the way'-Funder International Development

'The philanthropy sector should be bold – funders should name the oppressions and make strong stand'. - Funded organisation

¹⁹ [Gates Foundation- Website](#)

²⁰ [Ford Foundation- Website](#)

'Funders do not come from activist backgrounds and are far removed. Their perceptions of what activists have to contend with on a daily basis is very different'- UK Funder

v. **Funders should provide research and use learning for amplification**

Here the role of the funder is to help organise the rich learning provided by organisations within their portfolios and to offer a case for supporting youth-led activism. This requires narrative building and use of communications to amplify youth-led changemaking and increase its visibility. This in turn will generate more interest from funders who might be hesitant about supporting the field, sharing the learning could also strike up new partnerships and foster better collaboration within the philanthropic sector. For this to be effective there must be evidence of practice and track record of impact.

E. **Section 5: The Question of Sustainability (Sustainability can be best understood as a combination of interventions that improve the operational, financial, leadership and governance structures of organisations.)**

i. **More money equals more sustainable organisations:**

Based on the responses in conversations and focus groups there were divergent views on what facilitates long-term sustainability in youth-led change. ACFC funded organisations primarily focussed on the need for long-term flexible funding that will enable them to continue doing work without having to worry about finances. Some organisations asking for enhanced infrastructure support to scale projects, core funding being seen as the chief cornerstone for stability and sustainability.

There was a reliance on grant funding from trusts and foundations amongst ACFE funded organisations but US funders also stated that this reliance is present in the US context with fewer groups focussing on alternative models of fundraising to help sustain their programmatic and operational work. Some ACFE funded organisations thought about developing membership models but were hesitant about asking beneficiaries for monetary support due to fear that beneficiaries might assume that their donations or lack thereof will impact on the way they access services and the level of help they are granted.

'It is possible to have a membership model and be clear that donations are not a prerequisite for organisation supporting individuals' – Funded organisation

'I am part of a programme in the US and they speak about membership, communities there are willing to pay for justice'- Funded organisation

ii. **Supporting sustainability through the provision of technical assistance:**

'Our grant-making focuses on investing in the leadership of organisations' – UK Funder

'Our role is twofold- strengthening individual organisations and strengthening the leadership'- US funder

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The Queen's Commonwealth Trust (QCT) support young people leading change in Africa to accelerate the progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals. They focus on Africa not just because of the unbridled optimism of young people but also due to the fact that 60% of Africans are under the age of

25 with the median age being 19²¹. Young people are therefore a group that offer dynamic solutions to inherited societal problems and climate change.

Over the last two years QCT have focussed on connecting, championing and providing unrestricted seed funding to 11 young founders in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) with additional technical assistance. They wanted to trial a new way of grant-making by supporting youth-led organisations already doing the work with a hyperlocal focus. The aim is to ensure that youth-led organisations are more resilient, sustainable and able to do more and better.

Providing tailored infrastructure support to youth-led organisations included conducting assessments of individual organisations and responding directly to needs, recognising and filling gaps. In the case of the 11 QCT funded organisations, this support saw positive improvements in the following areas: governance; safeguarding; strategy & business planning; programmatic; financial management & systems; people; and engagement & story telling.

F. Section 6: Hopes for the Future

Future Hopes	
Identified and valued practice from youth-led activism in the UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream and recognised as the norm • Stigma attached to young people removed • Young people are listened to, not just heard • End of divisive media • Tangible examples of wins as a result of youth-led activism <p><i>‘Young people won’t be on the margins or society’- Funded organisation</i></p>
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility- Socio-economic norm of who gets involved in social change is broadened • Barriers to participation removed
Young Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Powerful generation who are recognised for their involvement • Valuing young people’s contribution • Young people’s voices are more valued than adults- this is due to the understanding that societal issues impact their lives now and in the future • Clear pathway for young people wanting to engage in youth-led activism and social change • Transformational impact of activism on young people who will become young adults (better/good citizens) <p><i>‘Individual actions can contribute to making the world a better place’ – Panel Member</i> <i>‘Social entrepreneurialism is valued’- Young Activist</i></p>
Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are seen as equals within organisations (intergenerational approach) • More organisations ran by young people with Lived Experience • Partnerships and strategic collaborations • Continuation of funding for youth-voice and agency • End of tokenism <p><i>‘Youth activism should not be institutionalised or disciplined by the sector’ – Panel Member</i> <i>‘Larger organisations are youth-led - a shift in current culture and practices of the sector’- Funded organisation</i></p>

²¹ [Article- Africa the Youngest Continent- Bill Gates](#)

	<i>'The 'Role of adults- advise and inform where necessary but the young people lead the charge'- Funded organisation</i>
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funders are emboldened to say they will not fund work that is not youth-led • Corporates willing to fund youth-led movements • Strong ecosystem of 'change funders'
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear impact and learning • Strong beliefs in asset-based approaches • Better understanding of what youth-led activism means and how it is done properly • Better understanding of social movements and the role of organisations to support this, including upskilling young people to do the activism with organisations focused on implementing the change

Accepting that hope is not a strategy, it is incumbent on stakeholders, funders included to understand where they fit within the ecosystem and contribute to creating the conditions to develop, embed and share impact in the emerging field of youth-led activism and social change here in the UK.

2. Key Questions to support funders investing in youth led change

1. What level of change are you looking to support through youth-led activism?
 - a) In the lives of **individual young people**: young people feel empowered, they have an understanding of the system in within which they exist/are oppressed and are equipped with the tools to engage and lead change
 - b) Within **Communities/Social groups**: community resilience, changes in the way young people are viewed, the creation of spaces and the ability for young people to harness their collective voice
 - c) Within **Organisations**: inclusive governance structures within organisations where young people can action change, having opportunities to develop their skills and a clear pathway for engagement in social change
 - d) Within **Institution**: changes in the political arena, this includes inclusive decision-making, young people are engaged and can shape policies/legislation/narrative and culture at a local, regional and national level
2. Do you have representation at decision making level from those with specific expertise in community and youth organising?
3. How will the learning from funded organisations be best utilised to advance practice?
4. Have you considered sustainability?
5. What barriers does your grant making practice and governance lead to?
6. Who else could you work alongside in this endeavour?

3. References & Further Reading for interest

We have provided some further references for information and to illustrate the learning, practice and insights that have informed our delivery, learning and insight work to date.

- Funders Collaborative on Youth Organising - [A Case for Youth Organising](#)
- Foundation for Young Australians [shifting focus to backing young people's power and participation](#)
- [Learning from the tide of youth activism](#)
- [Youth Power & Leadership – emerging learning](#)

- Centre for Effective Philanthropy – [supporting youth led work](#)

Methodology

The consultation focussed on facilitated focus groups with 24 funded organisations and 5 young people involved from AFCF organisations reflecting on the impact of the fund, challenges and recommendations for change. In addition, interviews were conducted with 9 AFCF Panel Members. All participants welcoming the creation and development of this fund and highlighted the importance of flexible funding and responsiveness of the funders in light of the Covid-19 pandemic which created unprecedented leadership and governance challenges for the youth sector, many organisations changing their programmes of activities to prioritise and respond to the needs of the young people they work with.

In addition, looking beyond the AFCF to wider partners, allies and funders across the field both in the UK and the US interviews were conducted to gain inspiration and thought leadership from those supporting and leading. The pertinent questions for the AFCF on how best to invest and support the field of youth-led activism; how to support organisations to build power; how to encourage a learning and sustainability outlook; how to facilitate conversations and broker relationships were not unique to the UK funding landscape. These are questions that US funders are still grappling with even though the field of youth-led activism and the practice of youth organising in the US is more advanced and benefits from a conglomerate of youth organising funders. Interviews were conducted with the following groups to provide a broader context and understanding of how young people can be better supported to lead change. These stakeholders included:

- 7 UK based funders
- 3 allies in the UK working on youth-led change
- 5 funders not connected to the AFCF: including those from the US and two with an outlook on International Development
- 5 young activists: from US, Italy and Africa
- 1 US based Director of a Youth Center

Note: 24 of 33 funded organisations were involved in the focus groups. This sample represented a cross section, comments may not reflect those of the whole cohort. The current programme has nine months of delivery and learning to run so will continue to develop and progress.

Examples of funding young people directly

Within AFCF cohort:

1. **Peace First**- offers small start-up grants to young people alongside mentoring support and a community of changemakers;
2. **Forward UK**- provide smaller subgrants to their beneficiaries to support the development of creative campaign ideas;
3. **Beatfrees**- FUEL microgrants of £500 are awarded to young people to support ideas for change. Applications are via WhatsApp voice note with the majority of the decision-making panel being other young people;
4. **Off The Record**- provide small grants of £250, £500 or £1,000 to young people that they can use to help their creative endeavours;
5. **Praxis**- developing a microgrant model for developing changemaking within their youth project sBrighter Futures.

Beyond AFCF:

6. **PHF's 'Ideas and Pioneers Fund'**- providing grants to nurture ideas at early stages of development, this includes radical and effective ideas to tackling social issues;
7. **The Blgrave Trust's 'Challenge and Change Fund'**- providing small grants to young people to take social action free from constraints;
8. **Edge Fund Network**- a participatory grant-making group funding individual and grassroot groups to take actions;
9. **The Opportunity Fund**: joint funded PHF and Blgrave Trust Opportunity Fund that offers a living wage and support for youth activists to develop their ideas over an 18-month period