



Strength in Solidarity:

How Listening Practices Helped Youth
Organisations Respond to the Covid-19 Crisis

'Executive Summary'

From a research report produced for The Listening Fund
by Colin Falconer of InspireChilli

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'it is important to have your finger on the pulse to adapt and stay relevant. The quickest way to be out of date is to not listen'

Executive Summary

This executive summary has been reproduced from the *Strength in Solidarity* research report and refers to findings drawn from all sections of the full report.

The research was conducted over April to May 2020 with eleven organisations from the Listening Fund: Beatfreeks, Carefree Cornwall, Foyer Federation, Drive Forward Foundation, The Junction, Just for Kids Law, Leap Confronting Conflict, Prison Reform Trust, Magdalene Group, Moira Anderson Foundation, and Trelya. The research set out to understand how the listening practices and cultures developed in these organisations had been affected by the Covid-19 crisis, based on interviews with practitioners and young people.

The research identified six main findings:

1) The ability to listen to young people improved how organisations responded to the crisis

'It's easy to presume things in a crisis; it's more effective to identify and respond to things that matter to people'. The research highlighted that being able to listen with young people helped organisations be more confident at allocating resources. It meant that organisations could adapt delivery processes at speed, make effective decisions in line with young people's different needs, and creatively overcome challenges. Adaptions shaped through listening practices encouraged organisations to focus on services being able to prosper rather than just survive. Drawing on intelligence and involvement from young people strengthened the likelihood that organisations could respond to the right things and communicate decisions clearly. There was also a positive impact on young people: feeling listened to increased personal wellbeing and generated greater levels of trust, both key for organisational impact.

2) Organisations reacted quickly to the crisis by listening to young people

The research showed how organisations used listening approaches with young people to react quickly to the crisis. Organisations were under increased pressure but generally thrived through the quality of their 1-1 listening relationships with young people. Frequency of contact was increased, and services adapted, based on understanding the personal needs and preferences of young people for social connection, communication, and support. Young people appreciated the higher levels of 1-1 contact they received, which organisations used to invest in young people's wellbeing as well as to learn from and connect with them. While a crisis might suggest that taking immediate decisions should be the priority, organisations demonstrated how 'listening first' was a more important step to accelerate an effective response. Rapid approaches to 'double down' on listening proved vital to success. Many organisations also benefited from encouraging peer-to-peer listening practices.

3) Organisations were able to sustain and grow their listening practices during the crisis

Most organisations felt that prior involvement in the Listening Fund had equipped them to deal with the pandemic by becoming more mindful of listening. A 'listening mindfulness' equated to three key things: investment in ongoing listening practices through an

organisation's person-centred ethos and culture; the development of processes to codify and respond to what is heard; and, where possible, enabling young people to have more direct power to lead activity areas. Those organisations who felt that listening had flourished and developed most appeared to have embedded more adaptive cultures and spaces for listening. It was noted that listening needs to pre-exist at a certain level of capability for it to sustain and adapt itself positively during a crisis. Investing in the capacity of staff also proved important to help organisations adjust to demands from changing support environments and increased service personalisation.

4) Effective listening activity promoted increased solidarity with young people

Some listening characteristics changed during the crisis, with digital adaptations in particular producing additional benefits around access and connection that are worth sustaining. While the fundamental demands for listening generally remained the same, what the crisis did most of all was increase pressure on practitioners to respond to young people's individual preferences for communication and support. The research concludes that the principle of 'solidarity' offers a powerful way to describe the increased relational approaches used by organisations to connect with young people. A focus on 'solidarity' draws attention to five features: the person-centred ethos, feedback loops, accelerated contact, emphasis to understand needs and take action on challenges, which collectively determined how organisations best shaped their provision with young people. It helps demonstrate how, in the words of a young person, *'The way the organisation listens to me makes me feel like I have someone on my side'*. The principle of solidarity also highlights the significance of listening as a way to overcome the threats of increased social disadvantage posed by a crisis. To learn from this, the report introduces a 'solidarity health check' tool for organisations and funders to reflect on ten listening areas identified in the research where solidarity with young people proved most likely to be nurtured.

5) Young people were interested and able to influence their services and other stakeholders during the crisis, but were not always fully aware of this impact

70% of young people felt they had been able to influence their service, reflecting that organisations made decisions rooted in the listening practices used to understand young people's personal needs. Where young people felt involved in influencing their service or stakeholders, they reported positive benefits on wellbeing. Practitioners were also influenced by the inspiration from young people's compassion and optimism. Involvement of young people in more formal influence and co-production roles, however, was variable across organisations, often dependent on existing processes and capacity to support this.

Organisations were very attuned to the social challenges faced by young people and keen to take action on these as part of their work. Thus, organisations continued to actively share young people's voices with wider stakeholders during the pandemic. While young people valued knowing that their organisation was seeking to influence others, they were frequently not fully aware of those activities or their impact. This is an area where stronger feedback loops with young people would improve engagement in influencing. Some young people expressed that, while their organisation was committed to sharing decision making on such topics, not enough young people were in actual positions to lead action. One suggested that increasing the numbers of practitioners from lived experience backgrounds *'would change decision making to be more focused on sharing power with young people'*.

6) Funders and decision makers can actively support the listening work of organisations to respond to a crisis

'Once organisations listen to young people, they get loads from the experience'.

The *Strength in Solidarity* report details how organisations found an increased focus on listening practices equipped them to deal with the Covid-19 crisis, and how young people recognised the importance that such listening plays for organisations working with and supporting them. The research suggests that funders should review how far their own communications, assessment processes and funding programmes encourage listening practices to be promoted. In the context of a crisis, listening work appears to benefit from flexible approaches to grant making and monitoring that can match increased needs for personalisation and service adaptations. Funders prepared to invest in the core ethos and culture of organisations are most likely to help listening practices flourish. Other areas that stood out in the research were the additional resources required to increase access to digital services, and the need for space to reflect on learning from any adaptations. Both young people and practitioners also sought more reassurance that current crisis funding would not preclude future investment in emerging capacity, support and opportunity requirements.

It is important to be mindful of the message from young people when reading the full *Strength in Solidarity* report, that *'listening is the bare minimum'*. What matters most is what we choose to hear and do in response. The report's final list of forty recommendations identify how and where we can all take concrete steps to support stronger and more meaningful listening practices with young people. Hopefully, these recommendations will provide positive impetus to future actions.

To read a full copy of the *Strength in Solidarity* report, or for further information on the Listening Fund, please visit www.thelisteningfund.org.

For further information on InspireChilli, please visit www.inspirechilli.com.