



# Strength in Solidarity:

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

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Full Research Report

Produced for The Listening Fund by  
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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 The quickest way to be out of date is to not listen'*

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## BACKGROUND to the research report

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, The Listening Fund (1) has set out to understand how the listening practices and cultures which have developed over the last two years have been affected; what has enabled deep listening to survive or even flourish; and where organisations have been able to draw on their listening practice, how this enhanced their response to Covid-19. The Fund has sought to detail how a small number of partners have changed during the pandemic, surface some practical lessons which the wider youth sector can draw on during crises, and continue to make the case for further investment in work around listening, voice and lived experience.

The research project set out to explore:

- A. How organisations' listening practices have been affected by Covid-19
- B. Where listening has survived or flourished, what enabled it to do so
- C. How listening has enhanced organisations' response to supporting young people through the pandemic and lockdown
- D. How well partners have been able to share what they've heard from young people with other stakeholders during the crisis
- E. When decisions have been made about changes to services, what role young people have played in that process
- F. If the type of listening young people want during the crisis expanded or changed
- G. What role funders can/should play in supporting listening work during a crisis

InspireChilli was invited to lead a research process over 6 weeks from April 27<sup>th</sup>. The research activity was based on interviewing practitioners and young people across 11 organisations who volunteered to participate. The organisations were: 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 benefitted from the diverse experiences of these organisations, reflected in the range of young people they work with, the geographical context of their services in different regions from Cornwall to Edinburgh, and delivery locations that varied from youth centres to accommodation-based projects.

The number of organisations and young people selected to provide feedback represent a small sample size to produce accurate statistical findings but offer a strong learning base for qualitative insights. Where ever possible, the language of young people and practitioners has been used to illustrate research findings in the report.

On behalf of the Listening Fund, InspireChilli would like to thank all the young people and practitioners who found time to participate in this research, without whose generosity, clarity of insight and inspiration the final report could not have been produced.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 to 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 some 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. 'Section seven of 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. It demonstrates 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'*. 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. The principal 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, section eight of 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 able to influence their services and other stakeholders during the crisis, but they 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 this 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 40 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.

## SECTION ONE: How organisations increased listening with young people

This area of the research explores the extent, and characteristics by which, organisations increased their listening with young people during the pandemic period. This includes responding to Research Aim A) to show ‘How organisations’ listening practices have been affected by Covid-19’.

### Reflections on survey responses:

Identically high levels of practitioners (90%) and young people (90%) agreed that organisations had listened at increased levels during the pandemic, with more practitioners (54%) strongly agreeing compared to 40% young people. The difference in those strongly agreeing reflected that young people recognised organisations were already listening at a deep level prior to the pandemic, with the increase still notable but marginal in comparison to practitioners’ heightened appreciation of this.

Survey responses demonstrated how young people believed organisations had ‘sustained’ their approach. Regardless of how organisations needed to adapt services, their nature was still likely to be focused around the young person and *‘how they want to communicate’*.

### Insights from interviews:

The majority of young people emphasised how organisations had kept in touch at increased levels and responded to them quickly. In particular, the frequency of contact to connect and relate was identified as something young people would like to see continued in future. A defining characteristic of this increased contact was its two-fold nature. Listening was not just being used to engage and check on young people, but also to invest in their wellbeing and seek out their views. Feedback on this partly aligned with the insights of Gini Dietrich that effective communications with people during a crisis should ‘shift the focus from engagement to wellbeing’. (2)

Examples of changes to listening practices included referring to how offers had moved online, how the content of group sessions evolved from young person feedback, and how project workers had contacted young people more frequently by phone, email or WhatsApp. There were lots of examples of more peer-to-peer contact, either through group chat on platforms such as WhatsApp, or simply by virtue of online group sessions proving a more accessible way of connecting young people across geographical distances. The latter meant that many young people had been able to experience increased access to listening activities. Listening Fund organisations were already meeting one of the strong recommendations from the Beatfrees *Take the Temperature* report, that ‘Services for young people should focus their attention on peer-to-peer support and connection’. This reflected the responsive awareness of organisations that ‘The main way (45%) young people are aiding their mental health is by communicating with friends’. (3)

Some young people drew attention to an unexpected positive from alternatives to face-to-face support channels, that those feeling more anxious might find it easier to take the first step in connecting with an organisation. For example, a young person described how their organisation had set up a digital drop in via text, phone and email as an alternative to a face-to-face offer at a physical location, which they felt made contact easier to initiate.

In terms of specific technology, young people noted the usefulness of WhatsApp to overcome reliance on phone credit, and the power of Zoom for more activity-based group sessions. It was also stressed that, for some young people, reliable online access was not possible, meaning that traditional forms of contact by phone and letter were equally prized.

For practitioners, the pandemic experience had made them more mindful of listening approaches in general and their significance. This included receiving *'feedback from external organisations on their service's ability to listen to and engage young people more flexibly than others at this time'*. As part of this mindfulness, some organisations had invested more in reflecting on and codifying feedback from young people. This was described as *'to double-down on the listening'*, taking a conscious effort to focus on how to connect with and respond to young people's needs and involve their insights in shaping responses.

Although adapting listening was a prevalent trend in responding to the crisis, organisations stressed that this did not mean simply replacing everything or moving existing practice and offers online. Adaption required a nuanced approach to consulting with young people and tailoring responses to individual preferences, circumstances and needs. The common trend was around personalisation. Organisations noted how 1-1 and trauma-informed approaches adapted more easily and seamlessly to the pandemic crisis, a point that again drew attention to the importance of organisations' person-centred ethos. Typical examples of adaption included new types of digital activity through online groups, or finding alternative platforms for 1-1 contact and support. Where organisations were using online platforms, it was significant how thoughtful they had been about behaviours and approaches to ensure safety and impact. The sensitivity towards service adaptations showed how Listening Fund organisations were leading on best practice insights found in the BeatFreaks *Take the Temperature* report, in particular the recommendation that: *'What young people are looking for in lockdown is not purely the digital equivalent of your offer pre-virus. Communicate directly with your audiences, ask them what they want and respond to that.'* (4)

There were many strong examples of building from existing capacity and skills, some developed during the Listening Fund. These included: having a youth ambassador or advisor group in place to consult with; experience of co-production approaches; 1-1 listening practices that were easier to adapt; robust risk assessment processes that could quickly safeguard new platforms of communication; or simply being able to rely on listening embedded in everyday activities and communication practices rather than as a stand-alone activity or staff post. However, the ability of organisations to respond effectively through listening often appeared to depend more on their core ethos and culture than any specific process or practice.

The majority of approaches fitted the definitions of listening in a crisis helpfully described by Richard James as *'attending, observing, understanding and responding with empathy, genuineness, respect, acceptant, nonjudgement and caring'*. (5) These listening qualities are given further emphasis in section seven of the report.

## **SECTION TWO: How listening practices helped organisations provide the right services and support, and how far listening to young people was deemed essential for an organisation to survive and thrive during a crisis.**

This joint area of research explores how resilient listening practices have proved during the pandemic, and whether they might have any impact on the ability of an organisation to survive and thrive during a comparable crisis experience. This area responds to Research Aims B and C; to show, 'Where listening has survived or flourished, what enabled it to do so'; and, 'How listening has enhanced organisations' response to supporting young people through the pandemic and lockdown'.

### **Reflections on survey responses:**

100% of young people either strongly agreed or agreed that listening practices had positively influenced the provision of the right services during the pandemic, but only 73% of practitioners agreed that their listening practices had actually developed or flourished in this time. Practitioner responses were more likely to recognise that some elements of provision (such as face-to-face support) had been unable to continue, while young people responded more positively to the high levels of 1-1 contact they received from organisations rather than those elements that had been lost through the decline in face-to-face activity.

100% of practitioners and young people agreed that it was essential for an organisation to survive and thrive in a crisis to listen to young people, with 70% of young people strongly agreeing compared to 90% practitioners. The higher scores from practitioners reflected that they were slightly more attuned to the consequences of listening on an organisation's wider operational delivery.

Together with Research Aim A, these areas received the highest and most comparable levels of agreement among practitioners and young people, emphasising how important listening was viewed by both as integral to the purpose and approach of a youth organisation.

In terms of how organisations' listening had grown or declined during the pandemic, 73% of practitioners felt that listening had actually increased, with 18% believing it had flourished and 55% developed, compared with 18% believing it had declined and 9% putting it at the same level as before the pandemic. This varied response reflected the diversity of the different organisations' contexts and the young people they worked with, while the majority numbers point to the shared person-centred ethos that characterised common listening practices. Those who felt that listening had flourished and developed appeared to have embedded more adaptive cultures, processes and capacity for listening, reflecting a view expressed by a young person that listening needs to pre-exist at a certain level of capability for it to sustain and adapt itself positively during a crisis.

The views of practitioners and young people strongly suggest that, while a crisis like the pandemic will have some impact on how organisations can listen, it will not in any way diminish the importance or scope of listening already established as part of an organisation's culture.

## Insights from interviews:

Young people were keen to positively describe the increased frequency of contact they received since the pandemic started, and the ways in which 1-1 and group offers had been shaped in response to what they had asked for or suggested. As well as recognising the impact of this for emotional support and relational connection, young people drew attention to the various benefits that organisations gain by listening to them more deeply and directly during a crisis period. These included:

- 1) Being authentic to the purpose of the organisation's work with young people.
- 2) Drawing from the '*creative ideas and energy*' young people can offer.
- 3) Utilising the '*positive defiance*' by which young people can challenge decisions.
- 4) Tapping into the more '*contemporary knowledge*' young people have (cultural and digital) to help communications and support responses to be more relevant.
- 5) Learning from how young people may have previously adapted to similar challenges through their lived experiences of disadvantage.
- 6) Gaining sufficient levels of insight and trust to tailor highly personalised responses, which are more likely to have a positive impact given the wide range of needs and challenges arising from young people's different experiences of the crisis.
- 7) Making '*informed decisions*' from young people's direct insights instead of relying on a '*shot in the dark*' response based on assumptions that might prove false.

Young people's comparison between their experiences of disadvantage and the experiences of wider society in the pandemic (summed up by one interviewee as: '*this is nothing new to us – we know what it feels like to be isolated and alone*') emphasised three key things:

- 1) That young people have often gained coping and adaptation skills from their experiences that give them strengths not always recognised by others, which means they are worth listening to during a comparative period of challenge and stress.
- 2) This comparison might help create some empathy opportunities for wider society to appreciate issues around isolation and mental health that young people face, which could offer a way to reframe future campaign and influencing work.
- 3) However, it remains '*dangerous to draw generalisations*' about young people's experiences given the highly differential ways disadvantage presents itself and shapes young people's lives pending on various social and personal factors. Respondents were wary that generalised responses have '*traditionally stigmatised young people in negative ways*', and were mindful that the power of organisational listening lay in being '*highly personalised*' in approach. This connects with recommendations in the

Beatfreak's *Take the Temperature* report that 'young people are going through a vast range of experiences, need different support and therefore different communication'. (6)

Practitioners were also able to reflect on the 'rapid' nature of listening activity and the importance of this to offer a relevant service response that was more proactive than reactive. As one practitioner noted, *'When you realise people's experiences are so different and varied during a pandemic, rapid listening becomes more relevant to fully hear those differences'*. Similarly, a different practitioner felt that: *'With so many changing needs, you are likely to miss needs if you don't listen in more carefully'*. Another organisation stressed how *'staying true to the ethos'* put aside any initial pressure to act without listening:

*'We have gone from 'what do we think we should do' to 'what do young people want'*.

Most organisations agreed that involvement in the Listening Fund had better equipped them to deal with the pandemic, primarily by giving them more awareness of the significance of listening in their work, which meant they were more attuned to its relevance. For example, one organisation described how the Listening Fund gave them the impetus to *'focus more on the impact of listening in terms of serving the needs of young people rather than policy makers'*. This insight on accountability seemed to inspire many organisations to *'double-down'* on listening activity as an essential form of response to the crisis, which went hand-in-hand with sticking to the organisation's core ethos as the best way to survive and thrive.

Organisations' fast-paced responses tended to cover six steps:

- 1) Communicating quickly to connect
- 2) Asking what young people want and need
- 3) Adapting 1-1 and group offers in response to insights gained
- 4) Increasing opportunities for peer-to-peer as well as practitioner contact
- 5) Reviewing needs and responses on an ongoing basis
- 6) Ensuring young people knew how the organisational offer was adapting.

Across these steps, it was important that organisations listened during different periods of the crisis. Listening should not just be rapid at the beginning of a crisis, but part of an ongoing process to support an organic response. The research interviews were greeted by most organisations as a useful opportunity to pause and reflect on learning, which they felt would also be a valued activity in the post pandemic period. There is an important theme to stress here: that a crisis requires more than just a response to immediate needs, but also effective listening to adapt to different pressures as a crisis evolves, including preparing for the transition beyond it. This reflects similar insights from Mick Kaine's report on *Our Journey Through Crisis*, regarding the value of distinguishing between different phases of a 'crisis curve'. (7)

The theme of a crisis requiring fast, personalised responses, resonated across organisations, for which listening was identified as key to success. *'More so than any other time, people change from day-to-day, so 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'*.

As another practitioner concluded: *'It's easy to presume things in a crisis; it's more effective to identify and respond to things that matter to people'*.

It was clear that time invested in 'listening first' was a positive form of rapid response to a crisis, rather than a source of delay. Given the 'high velocity' nature of the pandemic, listening had to be carried out at a similar level of speed and intensity. (8)

Reflections emphasised both the need to listen and its positive impact on young people: *'If you're not responding to their needs, how do you know you are responding to the right things? To give value, you need to listen, and young people need to know they are being heard'*.

One organisation described how the 1-1 listening dynamic created a more '*comfortable space*' for young people to influence the organisation than a formalised involvement or survey process might create. This enabled organisations to be organic and evolutionary in their response to young people, avoiding any need to impose a formalised top-down approach. Adaptions shaped through listening practices appeared to help organisations focus on prospering rather than just surviving, another important characteristic of organisational resilience during a crisis identified by David Denyer. (9)

The heightened use of digital responses, from WhatsApp communications to group-based Zoom sessions, meant that some organisations were able to reflect further on the impact that digital platforms had on listening practices. In particular, how digital communications sometimes increased the need to actively engage young people's participation in a listening exchange. For example, using an online environment for a conversation requires a young person to take the necessary steps to be present even before a word has been exchanged. Young people have to choose to be there, as well as remain attentive. More detailed reflections on lessons learned from digital activity during the pandemic is likely to be useful for organisations to shape future approaches, particularly since the majority of organisations recognised that features from their digital response would be useful to sustain ahead.

Alongside rapid changes and adaptions to practice, organisations noted an increased importance to invest in the capacity of their practitioners to sustain highly personalised listening approaches. This included recognising the need for other staff posts across an organisation to be better listeners, not just front-line youth workers. There was great value in *'having someone to focus on the listening and wellbeing side in any interaction with a young person'*. This is an important observation for organisations providing specialist advice services using staff without specific youth work expertise. From a wellbeing perspective, some practitioners were dealing with challenges in working from home without having a space to leave behind some of the emotional stress and trauma they dealt with during the day. One ingenious way of responding to this was to set up a virtual staff room on WhatsApp, providing a different type of space for practitioners to check in with each other and transition between home and work activity. This example typified the imagination by which services adapted their provision.

Listening enabled services to flourish due to both the person-centred nature of their ethos (1-1 approaches being identified as *'the easiest to adapt to a crisis'*), and the creativity of practitioners to adapt approaches at pace in response to identified needs by using *'a lot of imagination'* in how they listened. If organisational resilience in a crisis can be defined as *'an ability to anticipate, prepare for, respond to and adapt to learn from challenges and disruptions in order to survive and prosper'*, then an investment in mindful listening practices is likely to boost all the required elements for organisations to effectively thrive at the same time as express their core values. (10)

## **SECTION THREE: How organisations have shared insights from young people to influence other stakeholders at a local or national level.**

This area of the research explores how far organisations responded to listening through campaign and influencing activity that acted on or promoted issues raised by young people. This area responds to Research Aim D, to show ‘How well partners have been able to share what they’ve heard from young people with other stakeholders during the crisis’.

### **Reflections on survey responses:**

Practitioners agreed far more to this statement than young people, with 90% of practitioners compared with only 50% young people. 50% of young people were either unsure of the answer or unable to agree or disagree with it, reflecting the fact that young people were not always aware of what organisations were sharing or acting on with others. Significantly though, of those young people who did agree, they did so more strongly than practitioners (40% to 36%). This response highlights feedback that young people did value knowing that their organisation was seeking to influence and challenge others, even if many young people had limited knowledge of what was actually taking place.

### **Insights from interviews:**

Practitioners and young people responded widely to different insights on potential future campaign areas of significance to raise from the pandemic.

For young people, the top 5 themes, based on frequency of reference, were:

- 1) Compensating for the disruption to education
- 2) Understanding and supporting mental health and wellbeing needs
- 3) Sustaining aspirations for learning and work in the future
- 4) Improving access to IT
- 5) Connecting young people together to help combat isolation and encourage activism.

For practitioners, the top 5 themes, based on frequency of reference, were:

- 1) Supporting emotional and mental health and experiences of trauma
- 2) Overcoming isolation and loneliness
- 3) Overcoming the disruption to and exclusion from education
- 4) Responding to rises in youth unemployment and financial insecurity
- 5) Improving access to resources such as IT.

While there might be some potential differences in the order of priorities, there was close alignment on the categories most important to focus on. It was also interesting to note how some young people were more likely to see peer connection as an opportunity for both social contact and action.

Responding to influence and campaigning work in their own organisation, young people in general felt organisations were good at influencing others using insights from young people, *'making connections happen'* and *'getting messages out there'*. However, young people often did not know about this work until it had happened, or were aware of work going on but not necessarily what that work was always about. Examples of where young people spoke with greater confidence about wider influence activity included a national research exercise surveying young people's views on the pandemic, and work to challenge stigma about young people from care. Some young people were suspicious about the actual impact of influencing activity on real change; or, in the words of one, *'just because it's in the media doesn't mean someone is doing anything about it'*. Similar to practitioners, young people also noted potential opportunities from the pandemic experience to connect society's wider empathy for themes such as social isolation with young people's ongoing life challenges.

All organisations referenced the importance of feedback loops and felt they had improved practice in this area through involvement in the Listening Fund. Some of the above points might suggest that this does not always happen to the same degree when developing wider communication, policy and influence activity as it clearly does when shaping direct service delivery. This might be one area for greater attention in future listening support. The significance of closing feedback loops is further detailed in the Centre for Youth Impact's *Final Learning Report (11)*.

Organisations were still involved in an impressive range of activity to share insights from young people, including voluntary sector forums, reporting to local authorities and funders, work with the council and police, research, partner sharing, and national campaign forums or working groups. Topics of external conversations included a balance between what was working well with young people alongside specific issues of need and expressions of young people's strengths in the face of ongoing challenges. One of the most inspiring examples was the effort taken by one organisation to inform young people locked-down in prison of campaign progress on the early release scheme – going the extra mile to keep young people connected to influence activity despite the challenges in communication. Other examples included work to counter negative views about young people; communicating young people's frustrations about limited messaging from schools; national work on youth trends; and efforts to tap into more direct insights from young people to shape future policy work.

## **SECTION FOUR: How young people were able to influence service changes**

This area of the research explores if young people were able to influence service responses to the crisis, in particular how listening practices helped organisations to proactively provide the right supports that young people needed. Consideration is also given here at a broader level to the future potential for increased youth activism. This area responds to Research Aim E), to show ‘When decisions have been made about changes to services, what role young people have played in that process’.

### **Reflections on survey responses:**

The majority of young people identified that they had been able to influence services, more so than actually practitioners did, with 70% of young people either agreeing or strongly agreeing compared to 63% practitioners. Similar levels of young people (20%) and practitioners (25%) strongly agreed with this statement. A significant number of practitioners (37%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. These figures reflect the detail in research conversations that, while practitioners recognised their organisations involved young people, they were also aware of some of the limitations on how this could take place, particularly during a time of increased pressure on operational survival. It appeared to be more common for organisations to inform and consult with young people and share power with them, than for young people to be involved at a higher level of leading action. This seemed to be more a reflection of existing culture and practice than a direct result of the pandemic, although the latter clearly made it harder for organisations to share some aspects of decision making. However, the high numbers of young people who felt able to influence services suggests that power was also being shared in more horizontal forms through the principles of solidarity reflected in organisations’ person-centred ethos.

### **Insights from interviews:**

Conversations with practitioners and young people offered various descriptions of how young people had impacted on service changes. The ten most concrete examples included:

- 1) Participating in weekly and monthly group meetings to discuss how the organisation could improve its work.
- 2) Being asked for recommendations on which digital platform the organisation should use.
- 3) Being on a steering group or youth advisor group to choose questions for a survey or evaluation approach.
- 4) Having roles to work as part of the staff team or as peer mentors.
- 5) Having power to decide on funding decisions to invest in local community projects.
- 6) Participating at board level to advise trustees on action at the start of the pandemic, and running a session with the senior management team based on an agenda determined by young people.

- 7) Offering feedback on service experiences through different communication channels and spaces highly tailored to young people's personal interests and preferences.
- 8) Using dialogue as a form of 'community organising' to create an active conversation that invites young people to shape organisational responses.
- 9) Making personal requests for services or equipment, ranging from ideas on specific content for group sessions, or simply asking for a laptop.
- 10) Taking over an organisation's Instagram account for a period of time to shape its communications, or writing blogs to influence other young people.

Most examples highlighted how young people's voices shaped service responses tailored around their needs and interests. As a consequence of these experiences, young people felt confident they were in a position to influence service delivery at other levels. For example, *'we can ask for what we need, or they ask us for our ideas on what they should do. Both will get acted on.'* Ensuring feedback loops were in place was important to stress actions taken in response to young people. As one young person described, *'Seeing the execution is always important'*. This produced far more results than just increased levels of trust. A number of young people noted that knowing the outcome from their involvement also had a positive impact on wellbeing: *'It is good for self-esteem to feel that your voice counts'*. These references are significant given findings from the Princes Trust and You Gov report, *Young People in Lockdown*, which show that almost half of young people (47%) 'say they don't feel in control of their lives'. (12) The ability for 70% of young people in Listening Fund organisations to feel they were influencing services was strongly connected by young people to their overall sense of greater wellbeing during the pandemic.

The list of ten examples above illustrates that young people's influence on services, although very widespread, was more commonly directed on delivery activity than organisational operations and strategy. Involvement in shaping communications, survey approaches and funding decisions appeared to be the most effective ways of giving young people greater power over how the organisation worked. When it came to *'business decisions'*, young people were more likely to be in positions of consultation than co-production or leadership. Practitioners were often very aware of this, as noted in their survey responses to this area. A number of conversations reflected on tensions in balancing an organisation's survival alongside the need to involve young people, or the difficulties posed in reaching out to groups of young people who were harder to engage in activities.

Some young people expressed that, while their organisation was committed to sharing decision making, not enough young people were in actual positions to lead action. One young person suggested that more practitioners should come from lived experience backgrounds, concluding that: *'This would change decision making to be more focused on sharing power with young people'*. In the organisation where young people appeared least involved, it was notable that practitioners also had little say on decisions that were *'taken higher up and*

*imposed on health and safety grounds*'. How far delivery staff have autonomy over their own decisions may also impact on young people's involvement too.

For practitioners, there was a profound level of influence gained from young people's compassion for others and optimism for the future. This picked up on findings echoed in the Prince's Trust's and Beatfreaks' reports already cited that young people still remained hopeful and positive. Services noted that recognition of this was likely to shape future programme design and strategy. A number of practitioners felt deeply inspired by young people's positive energy and resilience, commenting that *'we have a lot to learn from their approach to the world'*.

Practitioners were able to identify various examples where young people's voices had directly influenced current and future activity in the organisation. These included:

- 1) Developing activity groups in response to challenges with mental health and isolation.
- 2) Introducing more fun social activity such as a *'funky Friday'* group connecting people through online dancing.
- 3) Influence on shaping a future social media strategy.
- 4) Investing in more laptops for young people to use.
- 5) Developing a new mental health partnership to refer young people for support.
- 6) Improving service information on the website.
- 7) Increasing the frequency and focus of 1-1 contact and support
- 8) Plans to run a targeted listening activity, collating insights from this to influence strategic actions, thereby creating capacity for young people to be more in the lead.

The one organisation that was less able to involve young people now was still fully committed to do so in future, with plans for a more radical strategic plan in which youth activism and leadership was at the centre. There was a healthy sense that organisations were open to experimentation in this area and keen to learn from young people's participation. As one practitioner noted, *'we're learning everyday what is possible'*.

As a follow on from this question area's focus on influence, some conversations with practitioners and young people explored whether increased youth activism was either a desirable or realistic outcome for the future. Of course, youth activism is about much more than how far a young person can influence within a particular service, but conversations on the topic of involvement and influence led naturally into questioning how and if young people could play a bigger role through the rise of youth activism, responding to the huge potential for this identified in the *Youth Led Change in the UK* report. (13)

Young people tended to have less awareness of what youth activism meant, but once the concept was explained to them, they were interested in the idea of young people leading action for themselves. A number of young people felt that youth activists were likely to be able to influence other young people more positively due to their generational connection and understanding, which some young people illustrated by describing a similar impact from working with younger practitioners. Where young people had more interest in being an activist themselves, this appeared to be linked to how strongly they felt about their own lived experience. Two young people saw themselves as youth activists of the future, with one noting that funders should do more to communicate with and invest in these roles.

Practitioners had a more balanced approach to the potential for youth activism. It was noted that, while young people have a lot of energy for youth activism, there were still a lot of barriers to contend with, meaning that young people would continue to need support from organisations to facilitate their participation as activists. For instance, the economic impact of the pandemic might mean that more young people will be driven by income needs likely to limit their capacity for involvement in youth activism and campaigning. One practitioner also questioned the implied meaning of 'youth activism', suggesting it should be more about how young people choose to be active in any way that is important and relevant for them rather than how we might define activism or impose this label on their activity. In other words, *'we need to create space for young people to direct this for themselves'*.

Creating more space for young people, from 1-1 conversations through to involvement in formal influence activities, is a good definition for how organisations in the research used listening practices as a way to help their young people and services survive and thrive. Not surprisingly, space is identified as one of the enablers for listening in the Centre for Youth Impact's *Final Learning Report* (14).

## SECTION FIVE: How far the type of listening young people want changed.

This area of the research explores how listening preferences and needs were affected by both the impact of the pandemic experience and any service adaptations required. This area responds to Research Aim F), to show 'If the type of listening young people want during the crisis expanded or changed'.

### Reflections on survey responses:

60% of young people felt their listening preferences had changed, at a comparable level to 64% practitioners. Interestingly, of those who strongly agreed listening had changed, significantly more were young people (at 20% compared with only 9% practitioners). This variance can be partly explained by young people's dominant feedback that changes in listening were more evident to them in how there were being listened to by others rather than changes in how they themselves wanted to be listened to. This is also reflected in the numbers of young people (20%) who neither agreed nor disagreed with this question statement.

### Insights from interviews:

Young people mostly felt that face-to-face physical contact remained their preferred listening channel, but they also recognised that online, phone or text channels had some benefits for social connection, easier access to services and, in particular, overcoming anxiety for initial contact. Young people gave significant importance to listening activities with other young people, and efforts made by organisations to '*keep the spirit of connection and activity alive online*'.

In terms of how habits had changed, young people stressed that it was important not to underestimate how their own channels of listening had to adapt online, including becoming more confident with communicating online for support or giving feedback in group Zoom meetings. Some had appreciated support with and inductions into using new platforms. As with other areas in this research, what was most valued by young people was the ability of organisations to be personalised in their approach and to shape listening based on individual preferences for different communication platforms.

Feedback loops were also recognised as important. The Centre for Youth Impact's *Final Learning Report* highlights this as an area where young people wanted most improvement. (15) Many young people noted how a need for trust, linked to increased two-way communication, was even more important during a crisis period. In the words of one, '*young people need reassurance and confirmation on what is happening in a crisis*'. Others were able to identify how a decrease in physical contact meant that feedback loops required more intentional communication from practitioners to ensure they were understood. These points help to emphasise why higher levels of trust might be important in a crisis, and how such trust can be built through the quality and capacity of listening inside an organisation, as described by Marvin Bower in *The Will to Lead*. (16)

The most significant insight from young people was that the change in listening was more about how practitioners needed to be attentive to how and where '*young people are speaking from*' – a reference to circumstances where young people might be with or

overheard by others in their home setting, or more broadly how *'listening now is not just about a young person's past, but how young people are feeling and thinking in the present'*.

Some young people recommended that services also invest in channels of communication that can protect young people's ability to disclose any concerns without anxiety of being exposed.

In tune with these observations from young people, practitioners felt that changes in listening were more about discovering how young people want to communicate and be listened to rather than young people's actual listening preferences changing. One organisation noted that *'Staff are used to building relationships with and listening to young people in challenging life circumstances – it's just that now the sense of what the challenge is has changed'*. There were inspiring examples of organisations being able to sustain highly personalised, face-to-face contact within social distancing rules. For example, putting on a social distancing picnic for a young person to give their feedback on their time at the service. This reflected how some organisations were still able to respond to the reality that most young people prefer face-to-face contact.

The general reduction in face-to-face services meant that organisations were not reaching the same numbers of young people, with some young people unlikely to engage until those services were back in place or until trust could be developed through extended contact over other platforms. The Centre for Youth Impact's new Youth Sector Data Standard findings, for 20<sup>th</sup> May, recorded that 66% of youth organisations were reaching less than 50% of their normal cohort. (17) While a reduction in reach is true for the majority of organisations in this research, of equal if not more significance is their increase in frequency of contact rates, clearly responding to the needs expressed by young people for more communication in a crisis. Organisations reported how they had increased platforms and channels for conversations, with rapid action to connect with individuals and engage them in ongoing dialogue and activity. Indeed, in some cases this had led to organisations actually increasing their listening relationships to include other networks around a young person, such as family members and foster parents. Together with increases in the frequency of listening, organisations had also invested more time in closing feedback loops. In some cases, staff had actually been redeployed onto listening activities such as writing letters and aggregating feedback data.

As one organisation concluded, *'the pandemic has changed how we listen but not its importance'*.

An area where practitioners felt that listening needs had clearly changed was in the emphasis and nature of conversations. In linguistic terms, one practitioner noted how conversations had changed from starting with *'how are you'* to *'what have you been up to?'*. Some organisations reflected that it proved easier to engage young people in 1-1 conversations through alternative communication platforms than it was to provide effective group activities. Others emphasised the increase in emotional check ins and relational conversation rather than any project specific support. A practitioner eloquently described how the act of relational communication had replaced the comfort and safety provided by a physical space, referencing how many young people wanted connection to compensate for loss of face-to-face contact in a building. Another brilliantly summarised a central finding in this research, that the real power and emphasis in listening was on *'showing solidarity – that we hear and respect you, we are not trying to fix you'*.

The general consensus on listening adaptations was the need to offer multiple channels that gave young people more choice on how and when to engage. Typically, it was often *'harder for practitioners to get used to online than young people'*, although practitioners noted that some young people were still anxious about new platforms and what they might require or how they might impact on their privacy and safety. It was also noted that online platforms often required more direct action from young people to choose to engage with them, rather than simply *'hanging around'* in a physical space. Where online platforms were at their best appeared to be in opening up networks of contact across a geographical area to widen the capacity for listening.

As an alternative to online solutions, three of the eleven organisations reported using letter writing in inspirational ways to connect with young people and open up a dialogue. In one brilliant example, services had sent young people a personal letter accompanied with envelopes and stamps for them to use for their own correspondence, resulting in just over 30% of the young people writing back. Old fashioned communications can be just as effective as digital options when used to support highly personalised listening responses.

## **SECTION SIX: How funders can best support organisations to listen with young people**

This area responds to Research Aim G, to show ‘What role funders can/should play in supporting listening work during a crisis’.

Conversations with young people and practitioners afforded some time to consider how funders might support future listening activity. This was not included as a survey question. Young people had less understanding of funders in terms of their identity and role, but they were equally as clear as practitioners on potential recommendations for action.

### **Insights from interviews**

Young people tended to focus on the importance for funders to change how investment decisions were made, including seeking increased evidence of lived experience roles and greater involvement of and accountability to young people in organisations seeking funding. They were also keen to see funders target outcome areas associated with listening activities, such as those highlighted in the ‘Solidarity Health Check’ tool in section eight, along with greater support for digital inclusion. There were five main recommendation themes:

- 1) Invest strategically in the future as well as the now, particularly to ensure what will be needed next for young people has not been lost from existing services.
- 2) Demand increased evidence of lived experience involvement in funding applications to help safeguard services that are more likely to listen to young people.
- 3) Communicate more directly with young people in order to be accountable to them as funders, and listen more deeply to the insights of youth activists and excluded groups through a listening campaign or research activity with young people.
- 4) Invest in access and capacity requirements for young people to utilise digital and communication resources, both as a safety net for future challenges, and as a practical way for young people to receive more support from their peers and staff.
- 5) Take the pressure off service organisations by investing proactively in them, and recognise that they are likely to be able to do their jobs better if they do not have to worry about their own future while supporting young people’s.

Practitioner viewpoints followed some similar themes to young people, including suggestions to encourage more evidence of listening activity in funding applications and concerns whether sufficient funding will be available to invest in the future period beyond the pandemic. There were also some reflections on how funders could best support organisations in a crisis period.

The full range of practitioner recommendations included to:

- 1) Be flexible with and trust the organisations funded.

Practitioners stressed that funders should trust organisations to *'do the right thing rather than prescribe how they should be working'*; allow organisations to *'keep being creative in how they use funding to deliver their services'*; and encourage organisations to *'follow what they learn rather than be stuck with delivering what they thought they should do'*. This included support for *'adapting monitoring and evaluation practices'* and being *'flexible with outputs and reporting needs'* to allow for more qualitative solutions to measurement, particularly to embrace the reality that young people's lives were less likely to fit within normal outcome expectations.

- 2) Encourage listening practices in all areas, and *'be more accountable to whom the funding serves'*.

This included suggestions for requiring more evidence of listening to young people in funding applications, and making listening an aim for all organisations receiving funds, particularly those who might not already have a strong person-centred or asset-based ethos. Funders were encouraged to support organisations to adapt their listening practices by offering to bring organisations together to *'give space, resource and capacity'* for organisations to reflect on and develop their listening.

- 3) Be aware of what organisations will need to increase spending on during a crisis.

Even where organisations might make savings from reduced travel costs, there were other financial pressures to contend with that ranged from increased IT demands and additional resources for young people, through to loss of income from training and use of buildings.

- 4) Avoid allocating all funds to meet immediate crisis needs without also reassuring that investment will be provided to develop future capacity and support provision that is likely to emerge at the end of the pandemic period.

It was very evident that, while practitioners and young people were consumed with current pressures under lockdown, both groups were mindful of the future ahead, and sought reassurance that funding would be available to invest in this.

Further recommendations for funders are signposted elsewhere in this report, including to: facilitate reflections on learning from any digital adaptations made during the pandemic (section two); support the growth of listening with young people in their own communication, policy and influence activity (section three); and, as the report concludes in section seven, direct more investment towards the core ethos and culture of organisations, which the research suggests will encourage effective listening practices to flourish.

## SECTION SEVEN: How the principle of ‘solidarity’ can help us understand the characteristics demonstrated by organisations’ listening during the pandemic.

The principle of ‘solidarity’ characterises how organisations’ listening responded to the crisis. The research has shown that listening was not just about seeking to help and engage young people or deliver services, but also to learn from, involve and act with and for young people in a reciprocal, respectful and highly personalised way.

### Insights from interviews

A focus on solidarity usefully emphasises four enablers for listening emphasised by young people and practitioners throughout the research:

- 1) The authenticity of person-centred approaches.
- 2) Increased use of contact and feedback loops to invest in empathy, trust, and sharing.
- 3) Commitment to the understanding of and response to young people’s needs.
- 4) The recognition of, and direct action taken on, the challenges faced by young people.

Expressing solidarity feels a natural human response to the Covid-19 crisis, in which many of us have witnessed huge disparities in experience linked to social inequalities. Listening through solidarity expresses both the relational strength of organisational responses to young people’s needs and also their eagerness to understand and take action on the challenges that young people face. It captures the essence that organisational listening was about respecting young people, connecting with them and giving young people more power to act, not just helping to deliver the bare minimum service. As quoted in the introduction to this report, in terms of relationships and communication for young people, *‘listening is the bare minimum’*. What is most important for young people is the action and impact that follows from and is part of deeper listening. It is crucial, therefore, that listening practices can stimulate a responsive power dynamic in which young people feel they have influence on what and how services provide support to them.

Recognising the connection between listening to and working in solidarity with young people offers an appropriate conclusion to this research. A focus on ‘solidarity’, as it is defined by Eduardo Galeano (18) has been a characteristic of each Listening Fund organisation, and captures how all have shaped their practice through a strong person-centred, ‘asset-based’ ethos supporting more equitable power relations. Solidarity helps to signal how organisations conducted listening as part of a ‘working with, not doing to’ culture, using open communication channels and relational exchanges that enabled service responses to be directly informed by and shaped from young people’s insights.

These elements of solidarity appear to be just as important a foundation to support listening in a crisis as any specific pre-existing listening tools or processes. This is reflected in three sources of evidence. Firstly, examples of how existing levels of trust enabled listening to flourish with those young people that services were already working with, more so than with

new young people referred after the pandemic started, where the same relationship of solidarity could not be achieved. Secondly, in the ability of those organisations most removed from direct access to young people during the pandemic period to still engage in meaningful activity to further their listening response to young people and shape new strategies from the focus and commitment of their ethos. Thirdly, in the attentive understanding shown to the different challenges experienced by young people, and active engagement in raising those challenges in national and local networks.

Developing effective listening, therefore, is as much about the underpinning ethos and approach within an organisation's culture as it is about having physical infrastructure and processes in place. This fully reflects Jim McNamara's conclusion that 'organizational culture pre-determines the extent and effectiveness of listening'. (19) It seems significant that the majority of organisations in this research spoke about how the Listening Fund had helped them be more '*mindful*' about the role of listening already present in their practice but which, in many cases, needed to be recognised further to be given greater emphasis and direction within the organisational ethos. This quality of mindfulness can be connected to the confident speed by which organisations sought to act through consultation and co-production of responses with young people. What has been most impressive about Listening Fund organisations is how fast they were to listen at the outset of the pandemic, paying dividends ahead as their responses aligned more closely with needs and emphasised to young people that they were being heard and cared for in solidarity with them.

The high-velocity nature of the crisis described by David Denyer has clearly been matched by a high-velocity response through listening activity. (20) Indeed, the actual frequency of organisations' contact with young people increased in the majority of cases. Demonstrating that listening does not have to be slow and can form part of an accelerated response to a crisis is an important lesson that connects with insights from Yuval Noah Harari. Centralised power might seem more attractive for decision making in a crisis, but it carries greater risk of making judgement errors, which power distributed through deeper consultation and involvement can mitigate against. (21) Feedback from young people supports the conclusion that organisations got their offer right because they had invested in listening to them first. Taking time to listen had helped to 'youth-test' organisational approaches, challenging the logic behind them to ensure greater likelihood of impact. This also reinforced to young people that, however changing the world appeared, an organisation's supportive ethos and relationship with them could be relied upon.

*'The way the organisation listens to me makes me feel like I have someone on my side. At a time like this, that's been a great comfort to me'*. For young people, knowing that an organisation was in solidarity with them during a challenging period had real value.

By reflecting on these points, a focus on the principle of solidarity can help support organisations to sustain and develop listening practices in a crisis period. Looking beyond specific involvement posts, co-production processes or physical infrastructure needs, funders and decision makers should also be prepared to invest more directly in the ethos, values and culture most likely to drive an organisation's solidarity with young people. Funders should be willing to show their own solidarity with the organisations they fund by being flexible with monitoring and delivery expectations. Also, by providing opportunities to understand and respond directly to the experiences and needs of both services and young people, which in the latter case will need careful consideration. The insights highlighted for the Listening Fund through this research represents one way such solidarity can be nurtured.

## SECTION EIGHT: How to health check an organisation's ability to 'listen with solidarity'.

The 'solidarity health check' tool has been compiled based on trends identified from interviews on areas of most impact and influence on organisations' listening practice.

The tool is not meant to provide an exhaustive set of questions. It is framework designed to offer a starting place for organisations to health check current listening practice and identify opportunities to explore the principle of solidarity reflected across its ten assessment areas. While not all areas listed may be possible for an organisation to act on, the first six have been identified in the research as common priorities for focus.

The ten areas will also prove useful for funders to consider the likely strength of listening characteristics in organisations seeking investment from them.

Organisations may wish to rate themselves in each area against a scale of 4 listening levels:

**Beginning** level (where areas identify most gaps that require significant development)

**Emerging** level (where areas identify some practice that requires further development)

**Proficient** level (where areas identify secure practice with the potential for enhancements)

**Advanced** level (where areas identify strong practice that is or should be celebrated)

Where areas are rated between 'Beginning' to 'Proficient', organisations should be able to identify actions to improve future practice. Since mindfulness about listening is likely to support its growth, it is worth celebrating any areas where practice is more advanced.

## Solidarity Health Check Tool:

- 1) Is a person-centred, asset-based ethos ('working with, not doing to people') consistently embedded in the culture and practice of the organisation?
- 2) Does organisational practice demonstrate that staff are mindful to be always listening with young people and able to constantly close any 'feedback loops' with them?
- 3) Can frequency of contact with young people be quickly and reliably increased to engage and support their wellbeing during a crisis?
- 4) Can the organisation offer multiple communication channels to connect with and mobilise young people in ways able to respond to their individual preferences and needs– from digital platforms to phone calls or letter writing correspondence?
- 5) Has the organisation developed an internal process to collate, codify and share appropriate insights on what is being heard from young people on a regular basis?
- 6) Is enough support in place to invest in the resilience and wellbeing of practitioners to sustain personalised listening practices with young people during periods of increased pressure?
- 7) Are there accessible approaches in place to connect young people together for peer-to-peer support, shared inspiration and social activities?
- 8) Is there an influencing forum, group or other process for young people to offer advice on leadership decisions, practice or specialised delivery needs?
- 9) Can the organisation invest more power in young people by enabling them to take ownership over external communications activity and/or targeted funding decisions, and/or by recruiting young people and those with lived experience into staff roles?
- 10) Is the organisation connected with sufficient local and national organisations to partner with and influence campaign activity on areas important to young people?

## SECTION NINE: Recommended Actions

The 40 recommended actions listed in this section are targeted at the main audiences for the research: Listening Fund partners, co-funders, and the wider youth sector. The actions are organised under the different sections of the report they derive from and serve as a summary of the main research findings. Some have been described in greater detail than others, but this does not reflect any weighting in importance.

### SECTION ONE: Actions for organisations to increase listening with young people:

- 1) Increasing frequency of contact to both engage young people and invest in their wellbeing has significant value and should be considered an ongoing service activity for organisations to improve listening practices beyond the pandemic.
- 2) Young people gain benefit from connecting with other young people, which, where appropriate, organisations should use online platforms to invest in as part of future strategies for strengthening wellbeing and peer support opportunities.
- 3) Alongside face-to-face services, organisations should consider offering more alternative access and communication options for young people to overcome anxiety when making initial contact, such as phone, text and messaging based services.
- 4) Given unequal access to digital communications, organisations should be mindful to deploy a range of communication methods for listening with young people, including letter writing.
- 5) Best practice in listening includes investing in the time required to fully reflect on, codify and process what is being said by young people, in order to respond meaningfully. This includes an increased focus on learning from the listening carried out in 1-1 conversations (see recommendation 10).
- 6) Adapting services during a crisis requires listening with young people to tailor an organisation's offer to meet personal preferences, circumstances and needs. This means that investment in person-centred approaches will significantly help to support adaption processes.
- 7) While developing specific listening capacity and skills will offer strengths to face a crisis, the most important thing is how an organisation's existing ethos and values supports listening activity. Being mindful about how an organisation's culture expresses a listening approach is an important starting point.

## **SECTION TWO: Actions for organisations to provide the right services and support during a crisis, including their ability to survive and thrive through it:**

- 8) Listening practices are likely to increase in frequency and intensity during a crisis to compensate for impacts on people's wellbeing and connections. The success of this will depend heavily on the strength of an organisation's person-centred ethos and the 1-1 approaches which tend to be easier to adapt. Thus, investment for practitioners to be mindful of how listening and feedback loops operate will have a positive impact.
- 9) Increased frequency for listening should not only focus on meeting immediate support needs at the beginning of a crisis, but follow the curve of a crisis for an organisation to adapt through and transition beyond it. This means that organisations and funders will need to invest in listening space at the end of a crisis.
- 10) The value of personalised listening approaches includes enabling young people to more directly influence an organisation's response, producing an organic 'always listening' way (22) for services to identify and respond to needs without relying on more formalised survey approaches that can alienate some young people. Rather than additional surveys, organisations should first look to learning from their 1-1 listening practice as a means to identify what is happening and what needs to be done.
- 11) Organisations had different experiences of digital adaptations, with some gaining value from utilising specific platforms for different 1-1 and group communication needs. Digital approaches bring additional listening, learning and access considerations and should be planned and resourced for the future in a conscious way. Further capacity to reflect on learning from digital experiences would benefit organisations.
- 12) Listening demands on practitioners bring increased pressures that require specific listening and communication responses to support personal wellbeing. It is important that organisations and funders continue to invest in staff capacity, including options for there always being a skilled practitioner available to listen in any communication with a young person.
- 13) Examples from practitioners and young people support the view that listening is a key component for effective leadership in a crisis. This could be a stronger theme to stress in future sector leadership programmes.
- 14) While young people's lived experiences can give them significant strengths to survive and adapt during a crisis, which organisations can learn more from, it is important not to generalise or assume these characteristics given the highly personalised nature of young people's experiences and their fears of being stigmatised by them.

### **SECTION THREE: Actions for organisations to share insights from young people to influence other stakeholders at a local or national level:**

- 15) A range of campaign areas have been emphasised through the pandemic, from mental health needs through to educational disruption and digital access. It is important to embrace all of these issues given their reflection of people's diverse experiences. This is likely to require more investment in campaign and influencing capacity in the post pandemic period, and greater recognition for the vital role that organisations such as those in this research play in contributing insights from young people to shape and support the work of other organisations at a local and national level.
- 16) The ability of organisations to articulate how young people are responding to a crisis means they can offer powerful insights to influence other services, if they are externally connected to local and national forums where this exchange can take place. It is important for organisations working with young people to see this as part of their listening activity rather than an add on, particularly given the benefits from promoting more positive messages to impact on the practice of others.
- 17) Young people care about campaign and influencing impact but are not always aware of what activity is taking place in an organisation to achieve that impact. More explicit focus on this in future listening work would help to close feedback loops better and engage young people in seeing campaigning as something more relatable to their own potential to influence positive action.
- 18) The pandemic may provide opportunities to reframe some campaign messages around increased empathy for experiences challenging young people that have become more common to others through social distancing and economic impacts.

### **SECTION FOUR: Actions for young people to influence service changes:**

- 19) Funders need to be mindful of the pressures on operational survival that are likely to limit the capacity of organisations to help young people participate with greater power. However, what MAC UK recommend in terms of giving young people 'tangible power and influence over what changes are made and how the service will meet young people's needs' does not always necessarily equate to high level participation actions. (23) Influence over delivery can also be secured through the quality and receptiveness of the person-centred ethos used by organisations to support young people, and the space afforded to listening activities with young people. These fundamental listening factors should also be a priority focus for any additional investment targeted at empowering young people.
- 20) The most effective ways of involving young people at higher levels of participation proved to be young people leading activities such as external communications, survey approaches and funding decisions to benefit others. Organisations might find these useful to prioritise more opportunities for young people to take the lead on.

- 21) Closing feedback loops to show young people how they have influenced services will impact positively on young people's self-esteem and give them greater confidence that they can influence other aspects of an organisation's work. Strategies to increase young people's influence should begin with how young people are involved in 1-1 conversations where practitioners 'work with' young people. Practitioners also need to feel that they operate in a culture where they are allowed to take decisions.
- 22) Youth activism offers a powerful role for young people to express their lived experience and an effective way of increasing positive influence among wider groups of young people. However, the concept may not always be understood by young people, and should be something that young people define for themselves rather than be imposed upon them. For funders to encourage more youth activism, they need to invest in the capacity of organisations to facilitate its support, be willing to overcome economic barriers to participation, and create more space for young people to direct what youth activism should mean for themselves.
- 23) While influence is normally judged in terms of young people's involvement in feedback and decision making roles, the pandemic experience has also emphasised how young people's positive attitudes and pro-social behaviours can also be a powerful source of influence on practitioners and services. This is likely to be particularly the case in organisations with greater receptivity to listening, increasing the likelihood that young people's inspiration will be fully recognised and responded to. Young people's ability to inspire could be given more space in future influencing strategies, and should certainly feature in external communications to promote what MAC UK characterise as the strengths 'invisible to mainstream society'. (24)

#### **SECTION FIVE: How far the type of listening young people want changed:**

- 24) Trust is a distinguishing characteristic in the ability of organisations to accelerate connections with young people and close feedback loops during a crisis. Having an established currency of trust is an important element in a listening organisation's culture. Funders and organisations should be prepared to invest in capacity to provide more time for relational exchange with young people and for building stronger connections between conversation and decision making channels. Both of these activities will support the growth of trust in the culture of organisations.
- 25) What is more significant in a crisis is not the reach of an organisation but its ability to increase frequency of contact among those young people who wish to engage. In future, funders and researchers should focus more on measuring the frequency and quality of contact, and the capacity of organisations to support this, than just prioritising the numbers of young people reached. Attention should also be given to recognising the wider family networks that organisations often support through their contact with young people, for which more flexible investment would help organisations sustain value-added listening activities with those who may not be seen as a relevant beneficiary of funded provision. The need for more investment in this is also noted in the Centre for Youth Impact *Final Learning Report*. (25)

- 26) While face-to-face physical contact remains young people's preferred listening style, other listening benefits can be gained through alternative online, phone or text channels, including easier access to some services or communication options, which organisations should look for ways to sustain in the post pandemic environment.
- 27) Practitioners need to be especially attentive to how and where 'young people are speaking from' when using 'non-physical' communication channels, which might require additional expertise or mindfulness to successfully adapt 1-1 services into online or phone support options.
- 28) Listening adaptations should include an increased focus on relational exchange, being mindful of 'solidarity' with young people (see recommendation 37), offering multiple channels that give young people more personal choice on how they wish to communicate and engage, and being attentive not to assume that everyone (whether practitioners or young people) will feel confident and safe in using new channels without additional supports in place.
- 29) Digital platforms should not be seen as the only solution for adapting services, but are most likely to be prized as an effective way to connect people together across a geographical distance and support some group activity. Services and funders should also be open to other options, such as traditional letter writing, to provide equally innovative ways to deliver the highly personalised responses best suited to a crisis.

#### **SECTION SIX: How funders can best support organisations to listen with young people:**

- 30) Review funding processes to consider where increased evidence of listening, lived experience and involvement practices could be encouraged through applications and programme criteria.
- 31) Review communication and engagement practices to consider how funders can be more directly accountable to young people, which is likely to need further work to understand and develop a response to.
- 32) Show solidarity with organisations and promote trust in them by offering flexibility for organisations to adapt their delivery and monitoring expectations during times of challenge.
- 33) Invest in providing 'space and time' for organisations to be more mindful of their listening practices by facilitating listening-focused convening and research opportunities.
- 34) Offer proactive investments in organisations in order to: cover increased capacity needs during a crisis; increase the likelihood that young people can benefit from

accessibility to digital and communication options that may not be affordable to them; give both organisations and young people greater levels of confidence that they can influence positive outcomes during a crisis.

35) Be prepared to offer core funding to invest in the ethos, values and culture that drives an organisation's solidarity with young people (see recommendation 37).

36) Show solidarity with funded organisations (see recommendation 37) by being flexible with monitoring and delivery expectations, and by providing more opportunities to understand and respond directly to the different experiences and needs of services and young people.

#### **SECTIONS SEVEN AND EIGHT: Using the concept of solidarity and assessing ability:**

37) Invest in the principle of 'solidarity' to nurture the four underpinning elements from which effective listening will flourish: organisations' person-centred ethos, increased contact and feedback loops, accelerated responses to understanding young people, and direct action on the social challenges experienced by young people.

38) The principle of 'solidarity' should be used to promote stronger listening practices across the wider sector, for example by supporting programmes for asset-based practice and lived experience approaches to be mindful of its characteristics.

39) Organisations should take time to listen to young people at the beginning of a crisis not only to improve their quality of response but to strengthen people's trust and belief in the organisation's service, which will help safeguard effective operations.

40) Assess the strength of organisations' ability to listen against the 10 recommended areas outlined in the 'solidarity health check' tool as a way to identify development needs for support or make appropriate funding decisions.

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