

How Funders Can Support the Listening Work of Organisations

Recommendations to funders from young people and charity partners

The recommendations detailed below from practitioners and young people have been reproduced from the full 'Strength in Solidarity' research report, produced by InspireChilli in June 2020. This can be accessed at The Listening Fund (TLF) website: www.thelisteningfund.org/resources-for-partners

The research set out to understand how the listening practices and cultures developed in TLF partner organisations had been affected by the Covid-19 crisis, based on interviews with practitioners and young people. This particular section from the report considered 'What role funders can/should play in supporting listening work during a crisis'.

Responses from Young People

While young people had less understanding of funders in terms of their identity and role, they were equally as clear as practitioners on potential recommendations for action. Young people tended to focus more 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 the full report, along with greater support for digital inclusion.

Main Recommendations from Young People

- 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.

Responses from Practitioners

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 would 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. 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.

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Main Recommendations from Practitioners

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 digital 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.

Further Recommendations

Additional considerations for funders are signposted throughout the Strength in Solidarity report, which concludes with a comprehensive list of forty Recommended Actions. These include specific recommendations for funders to also:

- 1) Facilitate reflections on learning from any digital adaptations made during the pandemic
- 2) Support the growth of listening with young people in their own communication, policy and influence activity
- 3) Direct more investment towards the core ethos and culture of organisations, which the research suggests will encourage effective listening practices to flourish.

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