

Feedback Fund 2016: Lessons learned

At the Blagrave Trust, we believe passionately in the importance of listening and responding to those we seek to serve – both the organisations that we fund, and the young people that they support. We launched the [feedback fund](#) in June 2016 to support the youth sector to build their capacity to listen and respond to young people, and funded 12 youth organisations across the South East and South West of England with small grants of between £1,000 to £4,000.

The funding was used in a range of ways: to trial a new approach to gathering feedback; to consult young people on a specific area of work; to support individual young people to share their stories; to train young people to be future advocates for the services that are designed to support them or to provide specific tools to enable the capture of feedback. In some cases the approach taken did not work, but in all cases, having some dedicated resource triggered rich internal learning and reflection.

We asked funded organisations to write a short blog by way of reporting, highlighting the project, what came out of it, and what they learnt, including unanticipated results or elements that did not work.

The following provides a summary of the main points of learning from a **total** investment of £40,000.

Summary of main learning points

- Recipients reported the grants had made a real difference to their ability to respond to young people's views: ["The Feedback Fund pilot has helped to embed a more proactive approach to young people's participation within \[our organisation\]"](#). The rich learning reported by the charities demonstrates that even a relatively small investment can unlock learning and insight.
- Organisations see the benefits of introducing more user feedback and ideas for listening to beneficiaries – but resources are scarce: ["The fund has enhanced our capacity to listen to young people. We now have the tools and the experience to take this forward"](#). ["Realising our ambitions of young service user involvement in our monitoring and evaluation takes dedicated time and space – we now have a framework and approach."](#) One organisation now includes user feedback in its bi-monthly management meetings.
- When they know how their views will be used, young people are very positive about the opportunity to give feedback: ["It is great to be asked what we think. It makes us feel that this \[project\] is for us."](#) At the same time, young people generally understand and accept the limitations of what can be done in response to issues raised – the important thing is that they are told what happens to the information they provide.
- Varying techniques are required to engage those who feel excluded from society in an ongoing dialogue: it is crucial to build relationships before the young people will commit to expressing their views.
- When feedback mechanisms are co-produced with young people they are more effective in generating a response from other young people.
- It is important not to make assumptions about young people's willingness to give feedback – ["They value being able to access our service when they need support, \[but\] otherwise we are not particularly high priority in their lives"](#).
- Staff skills are crucial: they need to be empathetic and deal with issues that arise through deep conversations with vulnerable young people. Much of the insight seemed to be generated from the qualitative discussions.

- It is particularly challenging to get feedback from young people who have used a one-off service, such as a drop-in advice service or one to one services such as counselling. Organisations that are successful in getting this kind of feedback do so by building in agreement at the start of a relationship with a young person. Consent and up to date contact details need to be carefully maintained.
- There is a need to ensure the ‘vehicle’ for feedback – whether text, phone, focus group – is convenient for the participants, rather than the collecting agency, as otherwise response rates will be low. Technology has a clear role to play, but it has to be used appropriately. *“Offering a variety of ways to participate seems to be the answer.”*
- The importance of sharing what is heard from young people with the broader community of organisations and youth workers concerned with the particular issue, is imperative for change. In one instance the work around feedback both influenced other organisations as well as opening up opportunities for collaboration.
- A number of the funded projects aimed to make films but often found it was difficult to recruit young people to share their stories on camera, the learning being that for young people to have a voice they don’t necessarily need to or want ‘do the talking’ publically. *“The learning has been to not make assumptions on what having a voice will look like. Not thinking it has to be involved or complicated .. We have carried out a small piece of work asking young people in all our services some simple questions and .. learnt what the support offered to parents means to the children of the families as well as the things they don’t like about our services and we are putting in places in response”.*
- Partners told us that good feedback practice involves increased workload for staff and an investment in time, but to really listen to young people it is essential to make this a priority.
- To invest in meaningful feedback you have to be open to whatever arises *“If we are going to really listen and take note we have to be an open book ready for its pages to be filled. I feel in the past we might have already written the contents list and only asked young people to fill in the details”*

What changed as a result of our funding?

It is important to recognize both the small size of these grants and the short time-frame for work (9 months). In many cases organisations are reflecting now on what they will do next. Nonetheless, changes range from recognizing the need for adaptations to existing programmes, to shining a light on an area where more in-depth thinking or consultation is required, to shifting organisational thinking and practice more broadly on the value and importance of listening to young people. In one instance a whole new area of work has been developed and funds raised as a result.

The following provides a summary of the difference made within each organisation:

- **The Roberts Centre** in Portsmouth made a film with young people about their experience of care to educate and inform other young people and staff. Seeing the power of feedback to improve services has led the Roberts Centre to make a number of changes to their organisational practice. For example, staff are now actively asking for young people’s views within their case recording and this has been embedded in the relevant tool. **Grant amount: £1,500**
- **Asphaleia Action** in Brighton works with vulnerable refugee and asylum seekers with limited English and young people with SEN and was getting little feedback from them. Our funding allowed them to buy ipads on which they installed programmes using icons and animation and

they now get feedback from 100% of the young people they work with. The charity has acted on feedback received as a result, for example providing workshops on anger management in response to young people's requests, and allowing young people to plan details of their own trips and outings. **Grant size £2,094**

- **It's Your Choice** in the New Forest was able to trial using different approaches to get feedback from young people to find out which has the best response rate. They are now planning to trial using WhatsApp and incorporate regular focus group sessions into their annual work planning cycle as these were the most promising approaches. They are conscious that they need to go further in looking at how they can address issues such as reducing waiting lists for counselling and that this exercise is challenging them to think how they can do so. **Grant amount: £3,908**
- **Education Futures Trust** in Hastings set up a youth consultation group to allow them to test out future strategic development ideas with their target audience. Our funding allowed them to spend time planning and supporting the sessions so they were meaningful. In particular, they were able to reach some of the most vulnerable young people in Hastings, an area of high deprivation and a clear theme that came out was the need for a safe space in the town for young people. **Grant amount: £3,950**
- **PACT** in Reading, who support adopted children and their families, are now going to run an awareness campaign with their beneficiaries on the Adoption Support Fund after research they supported with our funding highlighted low awareness of this vital source of support for families after adoption. **Grant amount: £3,930**
- **Relate** in Wiltshire recruited a young volunteer to review all their communication and literature for young people and give the young person's perspective. They made numerous changes as a result to wording and content which has made the material more effective. They also looked into recruiting a young Board member, but realised that they were not ready for the support and changes that would entail. **Grant amount: £2,230**
- **Rose Road** in Berkshire used our funding to take 12 young people with SEN on a 3-day residential to examine their own leadership potential as part of their role on the West Berkshire Youth Forum representing other young disabled people to inform service delivery. All of the young people achieved a Young Leadership Award and have committed to staying involved in the group in order to influence local provision for young people with special needs. **Grant amount: £4,000**
- The film made by **Survivor's Network** in Brighton gave young people a safe and supported platform to share their experiences of seeking help after sexual violence. One young woman said the process was empowering and gave her closure and others commented on how important it was to have their words and language represented. Survivor's Network now have a resource to encourage other young people to come forward for help and to train workers on how to best respond to them. Crucially, the film was shared with other service providers at an event and was seen as unlocking collaboration. **Grant amount: £3,950**
- **Youth Action Wiltshire's** 10 'Young Listeners' have interviewed 61 other young carers about what they value in the service and how they think it should change. The results are being compiled to inform organisational change. Themes arising were the importance of one to one and mentoring for young carers and the desire to increase the respite available (currently approx. 5 hours p.

month) including residential that allow the young people to develop new skills and meet new people. Each Young Listener was a previous service user themselves and had their volunteering hours recognised with an accredited award. YAW are now going to roll out this approach to other areas of their work such as with NEETs. **Grant size: £3,980**

- **Youth Options** in Hampshire made three films to give a voice to young people who benefit from their services. The charity found young people much more willing to give feedback in this format than by filing in forms, and as a result have now built in regular focus groups with young people to their annual reporting cycle. They plan to look at how this approach can inform their ongoing monitoring and evaluation. **Grant amount: £1,170**
- **Extratime** a West Sussex disability charity used a component of a core funding grant from the Blagrove Trust to conduct research with disabled children and their families on which local services they use. They received 160 survey responses and results highlighted a lack of out of school leisure services for young people with additional needs aged 16 plus. In response, the charity developed and won funding to set up new provision. Listening to what young people and their families wanted was key in giving them the confidence and credibility to secure necessary funding from their local authority. **Grant amount: £5,000**

Next steps

These findings, and the interest and enthusiasm of our partners in trialling new approaches, have given us sufficient confidence to invest in a second and larger round of the Feedback Fund to be launched by close of 2017. Early conversations with partners emphasised the need for more investment and capacity to develop their listening work and drive sustainable change.

Ideas they put forward include the development of monitoring and evaluation processes to include feedback; reviewing every element of service delivery to identify how practically young people can give input; investing in new technology to allow easier and more systematic capture of feedback; much wider consultation with young people – both those who use services and those who don't; consultation with young people about opportunities for greater participation and user involvement, and meaningful co-design of projects to allow for young people to lead.

We believe that a well-designed next phase of funding could be transformational in putting young people at the heart of organisations' work, shifting organisational culture and generating evidence for effective service design, and/or policy and campaigns. We intend to make larger grants available that can support sustained change; work with other funders to grow the fund; embed cross-organisational learning and collaboration and proactively disseminate best practice and findings.