

A review of our Annual Partner Meeting 2018

Reflections on accountability

Every year we get our partners together for a day to connect, share, reflect and learn from each other. This year we explored the question “*who holds us accountable to our missions*”?

You can watch our summary film [here](#)

This simple question opens up so many more. What do we mean by accountability? Is it compliance with rules and regulations or the terms of a grant? Is it ensuring young people are able to direct and influence the services our individual organisations provide? Or is it broader than all of this - and actually about ensuring we are being bold enough and brave enough in supporting young people to hold those in power to account for themselves?

Trying to summarise the rich and diverse contributions, ideas and next steps discussed on the day across all these challenging questions is an impossible task. Part of the beauty of the partners’ day is that it provides so much space for new connections and relationships to be built, for new ideas to emerge, for those little sparks to fly over lunch or coffee. However, we were still keen to try to gather some of the themes that appeared most often on the day and across all the feedback we’ve had since. So here goes...

The challenges ahead

The challenges for young people remain stark. Carole from the Young Women’s Trust shared some recent research with us that brought that message home. For example, 40% of young women and 29% of young men struggle to make their cash last to the end of the month. 44% of young women and 34% of young men are worried about their mental health, driven by uncertainty over their future financial situation and the impact of Brexit. Getting accountability right matters - listening to these concerns and supporting young people to take their own power, to demand a better future has never been more critical.

You can download Carole’s slides from her presentation [here](#)

The processes of accountability

Whilst we might all have a different view on what accountability means, if done right there is no need for different views to be in competition with each other. We clearly want to be managing our organisations well in line with the law and good practice, and at the same time be fully committed to advancing our missions, engaging young people and supporting them to hold others to account.

The challenge really lies in making sure there is harmony between all the structures and processes we put in place to support this work. When it comes to allocating resources to support accountability there is an immediate pressure that places emphasis on the more legal and compliance definition. We are asked to prepare impact reports to satisfy funders, not as often supported to create evaluation that will help us learn and improve our ability to achieve our mission. We have an immediate pressure to manage risk and compliance to satisfy the law so we need to ensure our boards and executive teams have the necessary finance and legal expertise, but we do not have the same external pressures to take bold action and ensure the voices of young people are represented.

All this doesn’t mean we don’t do all these things, we do, but in the end when resources are tight and teams are stretched it can take a lot of concerted effort and fight to keep these in balance. How you do this will differ for every circumstance but we did discuss some important principles:

- **Human accountability:** Developing open, trusted and equal relationships with young people is at least as important as ‘formal’ structures or processes for accountability – what Kathy from Children England called human accountability. That is not to say formal structures and processes aren’t important, they absolutely are. Just that they often take over and don’t always support and enable the human side to function well e.g. collecting impact data in standard forms with set questions may often miss the most important feedback that only a conversations based on a trusted relationship would uncover.
- **Part of the culture:** In the end it comes down to being able to show how accountability to young people is driven deep into every part of each of our organisations’ work – both ‘formal’ and ‘human’. In other words, that it is embedded in our individual cultures. Otherwise whatever we put in place will always risk being tokenistic. We heard from a number of young people who felt like they were being ‘wheeled out’ to demonstrate how young people are involved, for example
- **Data versus voice:** One of the challenges raised was how to balance human accountability, which often relies on deeper relationships with a smaller number of young people, with hard evidence or data when those might sometimes be in contradiction with each other. There is no clear answer, other than to recognise that all forms of evidence are valid and should carry weight. Having open discussions about any contradiction and the reasons for that will usually lead to a deeper understanding of what’s most relevant to your own organisation’s work.

It was striking how many partners made commitments to look again at their processes of accountability – both ‘formal’ and ‘human’ – to better achieve a balance and relationship between them. The specifics of what some of those changes might look like in practice really started to come through as we explored some themes in a little more detail...

Watch Rachel’s take on processes for accountability to young people [here](#)

Young trustees

There was a great deal of lively debate about the role of young trustees. Many partners were unsure whether having young trustees was the right way for them to hear the voices of young people, as opposed to say advisory panels or other forums. There was some concern expressed that board meetings might, for example be too formal to effectively engage young people. Whilst views varied, the overriding feeling was that having more young trustees was by no means sufficient on its own, but was nevertheless a critical step. It was also generally agreed that simply having young people on the board, regardless of their specific skills, added significant value. However hard you try the views of young people heard directly, rather than filtered through our own unconscious bias, are much more powerful, honest and relatable. It also forces existing board members to look at a given question directly from a young person’s perspective. If achieving this means we need to shift the way our own meetings are run, for example then this is worth doing.

We weren’t short, however of inspiring examples of how young people can themselves adapt and more often than not exceed our expectations of them when given such a role. One such example was Amanda, the newly elected Chair of the British Youth Council who shared with us her ‘three tests for accountability to young people’ – the ‘no’ test, the ‘dollar’ test and the ‘challenge’ test.

Watch Amanda talk about her ‘three tests for accountability to young people’ [here](#)

There was a great deal of interest in the Young Trustees project being run by the Social Change Agency on behalf of the Blagrove Trust which will explore the challenges and opportunities of growing the number of young trustees in more depth. This project includes a series of regional roadshows which partners may be interested to attend.

Sign up to the mailing list for the Young Trustees project [here](#) and read Betsy from the Social Change Agency talk about the project further [here](#)

Diversity & inclusion

A significant theme throughout the day was how we make our organisations more inclusive to diverse views. Rachel reminded us how much easier it is for people to engage when the people they are talking with, and the space they are in is familiar - when you aren't just surrounded by people who come from a different class, for example and have a set of life experiences completely removed from your own.

We talked about how to recognise this by working hard to create not just shared spaces, but also safe spaces where we as organisations and as a sector can really listen to what is being said, unfiltered. Programmes like the Lass Class and the Advocacy Academy were cited as opportunities to create just such spaces. Chloe from Beatfrecks also reminded us how easy engagement can actually be, in particular emphasising the important role of the arts as a means to engage young people and allow them to express themselves freely. Many partners picked up on this as an area to explore more fully after the event.

Watch Chloe talk about how easy getting diverse views can really be [here](#)

We also explored how critical employment of people from a wide diversity of backgrounds was – young and old – in helping create the kind of inclusive organisations we are all committed to. Having a diverse set of people directly employed means issues around recruitment techniques, inclusive language, methods of engagement all become much less pronounced because the people designing those approaches are already coming from an experience that enables them to relate to those they are trying to reach – for example, including young people directly in designing recruitment processes which aim to attract young people.

The challenges of making those first steps to becoming more inclusive in recruitment, and then in retaining that diversity over time (from the board, through the workforce, into advocacy and engagement) are not insignificant. Many partners expressed the desire to share ideas and tools more regularly and find ways to support each other in this work. This could be an area for further exploration amongst Blagrove Trust Partners in future.

Funders & Commissioners

The role of funders and commissioners were explored, and in particular the questions of whether they help or hinder our efforts to hold ourselves accountable to our missions. Of course it all comes down to the individual funders or commissioners - but we did talk about the increasing trend to move away from purely a distant outcomes based approach, to a more relationship based approach built on partnership. Partners can be a part of accelerating that shift, for example by inviting all key funders and commissioners to visit projects together and opening up a more partnership based dialogue, or by pushing back on unrealistic demands or contracts. Some partners even discussed whether they should start to turn away certain contracts or funding relationships where such flexibility was not built in, or where the direct alignment with their mission was not fully clear.

Find out more about the Blagrove Trust's Listening Fund [here](#)

Support to enable those in power to hold people to account

Whilst much of the morning had focussed our attention on work within our own organisations, there was a great deal of discussion over the course of the day on our collective role not just in holding ourselves to

account, but in supporting and enabling young people to take their own power. We all acknowledged that funders, policy makers and regulators have more power; providers of youth services and especially young people on the whole have less. Correcting that imbalance is precisely why many of our organisations exist: to enable young people to hold those in positions of power to account for the impact of their choices on young people.

Chloe from Beatfreaks gave us a great example of this in practice through Brum Youth Trends in which young people designed and led a creative process to gather the views of young people across Birmingham – the result of which they themselves presented back at an open Brum Youth Trends Summit to local influencers and council leaders. The plan is to continue to use that evidence to present back and carry on the debate movements in those key trends every year. Programmes like those run through the Advocacy Academy or the Reclaim project were also cited as other examples of how young people can be supported to take power for themselves.

*Get access to the research outcomes from Brum Youth Trends [here](#).
Find out more about the Advocacy Academy [here](#) and the Reclaim project [here](#).*

Whatever our mission we discussed how all of us have a role to play in helping realise a shift in these power dynamics. This led us back into a conversation about how we might best work together to show collective leadership...

Collective leadership

The need for joint working to bring about lasting, systemic change to some of the fundamental issues facing young people - mental health, housing, employment discrimination to name but a few – came through clearly, as did the acknowledgement that we can't talk about these without focussing on supporting young people in their fight to secure and protect their rights. Given there are c. 98,000 charities in the UK with a focus on working with young people there is huge potential here.

Even on the day itself partners were already starting to find ways to support each other, including sharing ideas, tools and cross referrals, for example. This felt like a significant theme to take forward from the day and reflect further on – and as a starting point we should start to share opportunities where these kinds of discussions and actions are already happening.

Find out more about Losing Control [here](#) - a network, event and resources for people who want to explore together how to let go of power to unleash social change.

Haven't we all been here before?

We discussed whether these conversations on accountability and the promotion of youth voice had moved on much over the years: many felt we had been having similar discussions for decades. However, the emphasis on power and accountability felt important and timely given that the challenges facing young people have never been starker, and given that it appears the will to move towards a shift in power has never been greater amongst those in positions of influence. The government's own recent Civil Society Strategy emphasises the need for such a shift, and the emerging findings from the [Civil Society Futures Inquiry](#) equally focus on the role of civil society as a whole in putting power in the hands of people and communities, connecting us better and humanising the future. Funders too are increasingly taking notice, for example Blagrave Trust's own recent reflections and focus through activity such as the [Listening Fund](#).

Just do it...

Perhaps one of the most important sentiments from the day was the call to put aside our fear of the unknown, to experiment and try new approaches so we can start to tackle the many questions and challenges raised during the day. We shouldn't, for example delay action because we worry about the potential for being accused of tokenism. Instead we should act, not fear failure but instead learn from it. Given this, perhaps 'accountability' is the wrong term, in that it conjures up a sense of apportioning blame, or protecting our own individual reputations. That in itself runs counter to the kinds of actions we need to bring about genuine accountability to young people – within our own organisations, as well as outwards in considering how we support young people to take power for themselves. In other words, 'just do it'!

The future for us all is young people

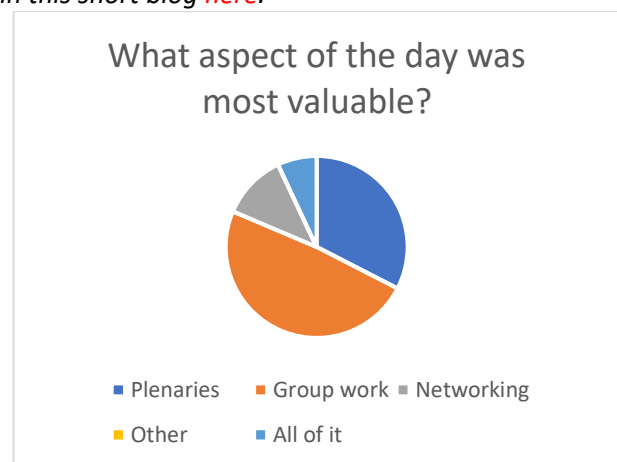
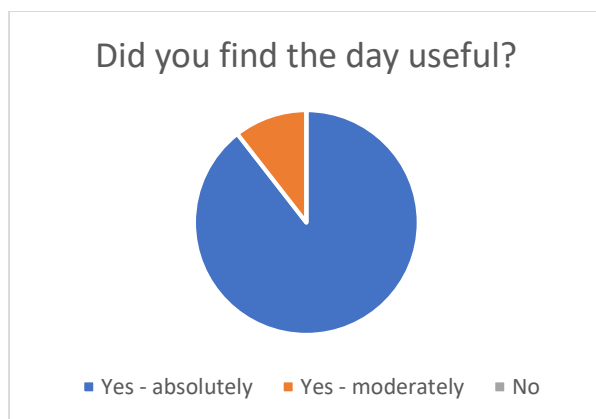
The final word really needs to be from one of the inspiring young people who contributed to the day – after all they are the next generation of social leaders and will be active citizens for life.

Watch Darren perform his inspiring poem [here](#).

An endnote – overall feedback from the day

57 partners attended the day and we received feedback on the day or post event from just under 40 of you.

Read a short reflection from Lucy and Norrine from Artworks on the day [here](#), watch Jo from the Enthum foundation reflect on the day [here](#) and read her thoughts in this short blog [here](#).



Lots of useful feedback was shared, but in particular some of the most mentioned areas for us to consider for the future include:

- How we continue to bring more and more young people into the room – their voices and input were considered invaluable and a big step up from previous years
- How we pick up on themes of collective support and leadership to try and tackle some of the systemic issues facing young people so we can help bring about a fundamental shift in power and accountability
- How we continue to encourage connections and ongoing conversations between meetings

We hope this summary will provide us all with a good basis from which to continue to reflect and build on the momentum from the day. We'd like to thank all attendees for contributing to what was a lively, inspirational, practical and thought-provoking day – demonstrating to us once again the exceptional difference you are all making, how hard you are working to bring about that change – and ultimately how powerful it can be for us to share our experiences and work in partnership.