DO I HEAR YOU?

Exploring the Listening Culture of Funders in the UK

The Listening Fund

PHASE 1

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DO I HEAR YOU? EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The landscape that makes up who funders listen to is inherently complex and varied. Also, as organisations that distribute money, this colours all interactions and impacts many of the listening relationships funders hold. Over the last 18 months funders within the Listening Fund have reflected on where listening does and doesn't work, whilst also discussing the unique context that funders listen within. At present, listening takes place within funders to: develop their self-awareness; so that they can gain knowledge; and to support them to devolve power. It can take place in many different ways such as in monitoring and evaluation, governance, decision making and to inform strategy. Funders listen to a range of different audiences including current and prospective grantees, lived experience, their own experts and advisors, community members, other funders, networks and umbrella bodies, research bodies and sector leaders as well as their own personal external influences such as their personal relationships and the media. Through our reflective sessions four key areas of development emerged which were integral to funders improving their listening practices and cultures when considering all these audiences. These are summarised below.

Closing the Listening Loop
Funders shared that actions that stemmed from listening were inconsistent. For funders to listen well they need to see listening as a whole process which includes responding to what is heard.
Key questions: What is needed to allow knowledge from listening to flow around an organisation, to make an impact, and then flow back to who is being listened to? How open are your future plans and strategy to what you hear and how does that interact with you own internal agenda and interests? What are the accountability structures that you have for those that you listen to, and who are you and who should you be accountable to?
How this can be addressed: improved accountability structures for listening e.g. governance, feedback systems

Inclusive Listening
Funders shared that they needed to become more inclusive in how they listened. Many reflected they tended to listen to the same people and that there was a lack of diversity in who they listened to e.g. class, race, political views
Key questions: How does unconscious bias show up in who you trust, make time to listen to and if and how you close the listening loop? What are the methods that you use for listening and do you tend to listen in the same ways and rely on people coming to you – conversations, surveys? What space is there for you to reflect on the diversity of who you listen to and manage this?
How this can be addressed: Reflections on implicit and unconscious bias and actions to manage this

Equitable Listening
Listening for funders happens within a skewed power dynamic. Funders spoke about the ways power impacted their ability to listen effectively, from whether they were really being open and led by what they heard, to how they listened and what they did with their listening.
Key questions: How can you make the process of listening feel safer and what capacity is needed to listen in a way that is ethical? How can you question your entitlement over knowledge and create space to support others to take what they have shared forward and devolve power to others? How can those being listened to become decision makers? How can power be shared and devolved so that the agenda for listening is held more collectively by those being listened to and you can be more transparent about your agenda and assumption?
How this can be addressed: By understanding what extractive and equitable listening practices look like

Capacity to Listen
To listen effectively, build relationships and act on what we hear, what resources are needed? Almost all participants described not having the time needed to listen in the way they wanted to.
Key questions: What does it take to listen well – time, skills, space, people? How can we reimagine ourselves as listening organisations – could this provide us with a way to make listening sustainable within our organisations? What is the right thing to do if and when we are unable to listen well and may cause harm?
How this can be addressed: Investment in listening so it is well-supported and systematised

Do I hear you? Exploring the listening culture of funders in the UK

The Listening Fund Funder Reflection Phase 1 report

Introduction

The months since the pandemic hit the UK in spring 2020 have been ones that have exposed the power dynamics and fractures in our sector. They have also made us see the role that philanthropy can play in crisis and the possibilities that can be realised when philanthropy listens to those it looks to serve and power is transferred.

But as a sector do we have a good understanding of the power dynamics that we operate within and what is needed to disrupt them at their core? For example, evidence shows us that many of those that work within the voluntary sector do not feel listened to by the majority of funders, despite many funders reporting feeling confident about their listening practices and relationships. There is a potential mismatch between how funders think they are listening and how the sector is experiencing them. More needs to be done to support funders to reflect on how they listen and the challenges and barriers within this process. To contribute to this discussion the funders within the Listening Fund have come together to collectively reflect on how they listen and what is needed for them to listen more effectively, inclusively and equitably.

Why Listening?

The Listening Fund was established in England in 2018 and Scotland in 2019, supporting a host of organisations across these two countries to further their listening practices with young people. Listening is a term which intentionally moves organisations' focus beyond gathering feedback – often undertaken once decisions are made – and encourages them to engage with the power dynamics that inform which voices are heard during the decision-making process. The Fund's ambition is to advance the ability of the youth sector to listen and respond to their core constituents - young people; and by supporting and enabling change in listening practice at an organisational level, to empower young people to influence and challenge at a systemic level.

As well as supporting the youth sector to strengthen their listening, the programmes' funders also committed to going on their own learning journey. Over the last 18 months these funders have come together separately and collectively to explore what listening meant to them and how it takes place within their organisations. They have reflected on where listening works well, where it doesn't work as well, whilst also discussing the unique context that funders listen within. The report outlines some of our findings from this phase, looking at what funders have in common, no matter their size, governance approach or strategy. It is not meant as an academic study or analysis, but more the articulation of our group reflections and the patterns that have emerged. From our perspective, many funders seem to be grappling with the same questions and issues when it comes to listening.

We are hoping this report helps others reflect on how we in philanthropy truly hear others and act on what they say.

This report is made up of two halves. The first section looks at where listening practice is now, asking questions such as:

- What is the context funders listen within?
- What does listening mean to different funders?
- Why does listening take place within funders?
- What are the key groups that funders listen to?
- Where are funders failing to listen?

The second section focuses on how listening practices within funders needs to develop, sharing four key areas of development that have been common themes in our reflections. This section touches on the following questions:

- What must funders be mindful of when they listen?
- What do funders need to do to listen well?
- What are the key questions that we need to address?
- What are the collective areas of development that funders should concentrate on?

This report is primarily for funders but we feel there is much here that speaks to the wider sector we work in and shows the issues we are exploring.

Section One: Where Listening Practice is now

The context within which funders listen

Organisations in many different sectors try to create a culture that 'listens', whether that's market research, customer feedback, monitoring and evaluation, relationships, learning etc.[1] Listening is therefore not something that is unique to philanthropy, but the context within which funders operate – and listen in – is unique. This context was the basis for some of the key reflections that emerged from conversations.

Many funders do not know how well they listen and are fearful of reflecting on this

Without self-awareness our ability to improve and learn is stunted. One of the more interesting immediate findings of this reflective exercise was that many funders taking part did not know how well they listened. When asked to reflect or comment on how well a particular funder listened, colleagues would often struggle and the majority of those taking part in this exercise did not have an awareness of how well their institutions listened. This included understanding where there was good practice as well as speaking clearly about gaps and areas for improvement. In many cases the organisational awareness of listening practices seemed low.

Sometimes colleagues within philanthropy spoke very changeably about how well they felt their organisation listened. There was also sometimes resistance to looking at listening. The process often brought up emotions such as fear, hesitancy and shame. This seemed to be tied into the lack of awareness and confidence funders had, worries about what the process would show up about their institutions, and how far away they might be from the listening cultures they aspired to. There is a need to create safe spaces for reflection for funders to understand how they listen.

The landscape that makes up who funders listen to is inherently complex and varied

Funders listen to a wide range of voices which exist at many different levels of the systems in which we all operate. From small service delivery organisations and those that they serve, to government, other funders, lived experience, colleagues and their own friends and family.

Whilst there is a need to recognise that there are many groups funders may not listen to and need to listen to better, it is also important to note the variety within funders' relationships makes listening more complicated. Individuals often hold these very diverse relationships within their roles and therefore need the skills and experience to manage them effectively and know who to prioritise, but they are rarely given the support, training or guidance to fulfil this function.

The power dynamics of being a funder impacts almost all listening dynamics

Another unique aspect of listening as a funder is the power dynamics within listening. As organisations that distribute money this colours all interactions and impacts many of the listening relationships funders hold, impacting relationships beyond those they hold with their 'grantees'. These power dynamics affect what people say, how honest they can be, how free they may feel to

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disagree and challenge etc. Funders often felt trapped within their roles and identities unable to create neutral and safe interactions for those they were listening to.

What does listening mean and why does it take place?

Listening was a powerful framework to use when asking funders to reflect. It enabled them to engage with their values and power dynamics, as well as the way their organisations functioned and their relationships and practices with others. Reflective workshops covered a large breadth of content including power dynamics, feedback, monitoring and evaluation, decision making, relationships and trust.

At the start of our journey it became clear that the term listening was being used very differently with funders. Rather than try to find a narrow common ground around listening, we used our workshops to explore what listening meant to different funders, who they were listening to and where and how it took place. In this report, listening was a term that could be applied to many different audiences, not just grantees or community members. Listening was also used to talk about relationships with other funders, umbrella bodies and research institutions, the media or the government. Listening could happen directly through direct interactions and communication with others. It could also take place indirectly through learning via other organisations or institutions like grantees, research bodies and experts. [2]

The key interpretations of the term listening are summarised in the table below

Table 1: How do funders see the term Listening

Interpretation of the term listening	Examples of how this may take place in a funder
Listening practices to set organisational and long-term strategy	Organisational decisions about devolving power e.g. trustees, decision making approaches
Listening to learn regarding a programme of work	Listening to learn about a particular area of need or sector e.g. Climate justice, mental health, education Listening to learn about a particular demographic's experiences, assets and needs e.g. looked after children Listening to understand the context, assets and needs of a particular place and geography
Listening to make decisions around grant making	Participatory funding approaches Lived experience experts and leaders The make-up of decision making committees The role of experts and advisers Inform knowledge of grant making staff used to assess applications
Listening to manage relationships with grantees	Relational approach with grantees Capacity building
Listening to improve systems and processes	Listening to unsuccessful applicants for feedback about application processes

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[2] Bridging the Gap – Foundation Listening Practices

Listening to show impact	Monitoring and evaluation Key performance indicators

Funders tended to lean into one or two of these interpretations of listening when they spoke about listening without being guided to a single definition. This seemed to be due to the following two reasons.

1) Role

The role of the person within the organisation would guide how they saw listening e.g. if they were involved in learning and monitoring and evaluation this is what they saw listening as being, whereas if they were involved in participatory or community led funding approaches this was the primary way they spoke about listening. This raises questions around whether anyone in the organisation holds a holistic picture of how the funder is listening and also if there is room for listening to take place without an agenda of feedback, monitoring and evaluation etc. It is also connected to leadership and the role leadership can play in drawing together the different listening practices within an organisation and how this can impact the organisation more widely. The role that leadership play in listening is something that should be further explored.

2) Organisational priorities

Funders within the Listening Fund had made a commitment to listening and were aware of this term and language. This often connected to their own internal priorities around listening and where they were on their journey to create a culture of listening. For those at the earlier stages of this journey listening was about building relationships with grantees. For others who were building their listening practices it was about devolving power and using listening to more deeply direct and change the organisations they were a part of.

The chart below shows why listening occurred in their organisations according to some foundation staff in participating funders from our survey. What is clear is that there are many different reasons that funders listen, from learning, to decision making to evaluating impact with no one purpose for listening being clear.
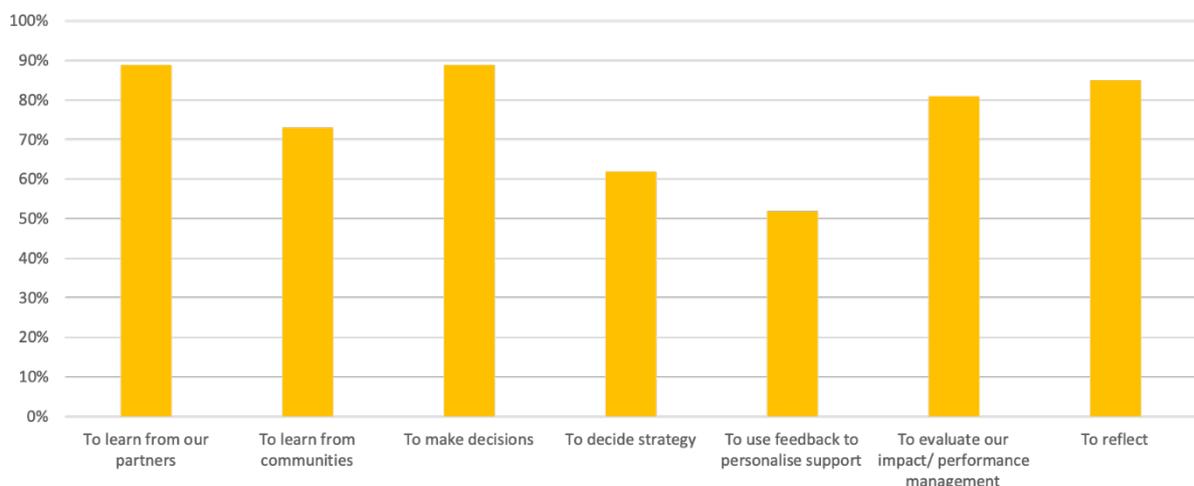
Figure 1: Survey Results - Why does Listening occur in funders?

Key reasons why funders listen were also shared within workshops. These comments could be grouped in 3 key areas shown in the diagram below which are then broken down further.
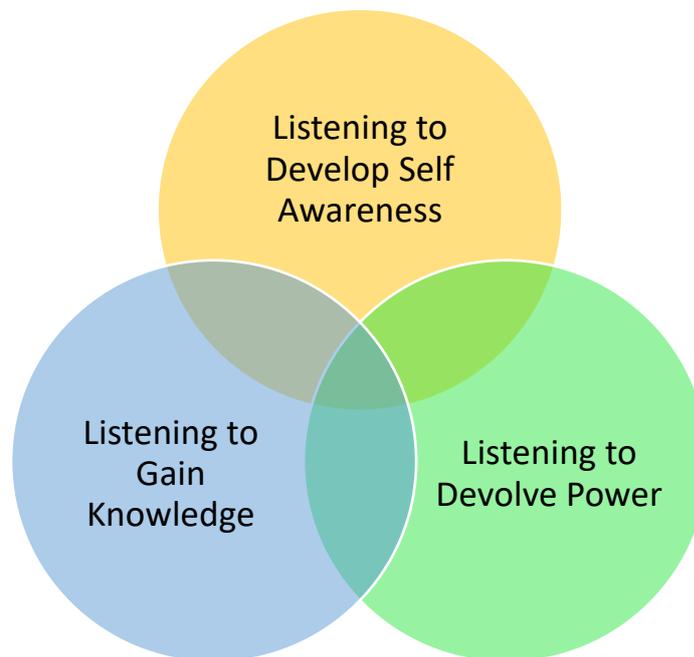

Figure 2: The Purpose of Listening for Funders

Listening to develop self-awareness
- To become aware of ourselves and how we work in order to improve
- Validation and support e.g. to understand how we fit into the wider environment

Listening to gain knowledge
- Learning about needs and issues to form views
- To consider the views and experiences of others and use listening to amplify voices and tap into the richest sources of knowledge
- In order to identify and understand needs, patterns and trends

Listening to devolve power
- Using listening to create practical changes informed by others
- To devolve power and be led by others

Funders use the term listening in many different ways and listening takes place in many different activities and organisational function. Everyone taking part in this reflective exercise described multiple ways in which they listened within their roles. Listening was described as a practice that could have great impact on a funder from feeding into learning, to devolving power and developing self-awareness.

Whilst many funders shared they had a long way to go when it came to listening and in many cases showed a limited awareness of how well they listened, all spoke confidently about why listening was important and the impact it could make.

Who are funders' key audiences?

A central part of this reflection was to map out funders' key audiences and to explore who funders listened to either directly or indirectly to identify the commonalities and differences in these groups. Funders also reflected on why they listened to different groups and shared their own agenda for this relationship.

The Listening Landscape was the term used to describe the different audiences that funders listened to. Figure 3 is a general overview of the Listening Landscape of funders based upon workshops and survey results, collating the different audiences that funders listen to. The following sections describe some of these listening dynamics in further detail.

Figure 3: Listening Landscape of Funders

Grantees and prospective grantees

Current grantees were by far the group funders felt they listened to most. All funders spoke extensively about the different mechanisms they used to listen to those they supported and funded, and how they also used these relationships to listen indirectly to other groups such as communities and service users. Another group that funders spoke about were other organisations that had applied for funding and been unsuccessful and those that were in the process or considering applying for funding.

It is important to note that there can be a mismatch between how strong a funder thinks their listening practices are and how grantees and those in the voluntary and social sector experience this. Workshops really pushed funders to explore not just where listening was taking place but when this was inclusive and equitable allowing for real learning, honesty and not just an interaction on a more superficial level.

Funders shared that they did have grantees that they listened to more than others and multiple funders had discussions around hierarchies of relationships or unconscious biases when listening to grantees. There were also reflections about the relationships of influence that some grantees held e.g. with trustees and leadership which led to them being listened to more. Funders also spoke about relationships being developed more with grantees where communication felt easier. This could be due to personality, confidence, similar political outlooks, the demographic backgrounds such as class and race. This could also be grantees who had similar outlook and views to funders and were saying the things that funders were looking to reinforce what they wanted to hear. How funders listen to grantees is therefore not always systematic and equitable.

This was also true of prospective grantees whose chance to engage with funders was often dependant on hidden hierarchies. Interactions ahead of applications processes tended to be based on existing relationships, networks and recommendations. Also the capacity and confidence to reach out to funders at this stage was by no means universal, and access was dependant on demographics such as geography, class, size of organisation etc. This also impacted the nature of the interaction which could go from brief emails to one to one meetings or calls. These interactions were also impacted by the type of application processes e.g. open or invitation only. For some funders with second stage application processes, grant managers often listened to and worked with organisations in order to understand them better and advocate on their behalf to decision making panels.

The mechanisms and systems developed by funders to listen to prospective grantees tended to be light touch and in most cases didn't give space for listening, often being more of a tick box exercise or one that gave the appearance of care. For example mechanisms such as surveys that were anonymous or other feedback about application processes tended to only make superficial changes to application processes and larger more sustainable feedback for example about eligibility criteria or funding strategies were not taken onboard. The framework within which funders listened to prospective grantees seemed so narrow as to raise the question; was this really listening? Also how inclusive are these methods? Concerns were shared about which applicants took part in these feedback processes and what groups these methods worked well for.

Finally funders spoke about some of the mechanisms they had in place to provide unsuccessful applicants feedback about their application via emails or calls. Some funders felt these were really important interactions which allowed for dialogue and learning on both sides. Others felt that the interactions were seldom honest or transparent and only offered the appearance of care.

There were also reflections regarding both current and prospective grantees about the space for honesty and the impact that a current or prospective financial relationship had on the power dynamics when listening. Funders reflected on both the assumptions being made about grantees and also the level of openness, honesty and transparency funders felt they had and were comfortable with. Whilst funders spoke at great length about listening to grantees, this listening was often undertaken with grantees' leaders and senior members of staff. Relationships with more frontline and project staff at grantees seemed rare and listening to this group was more indirect. This made sense in terms of capacity and who held relationships but also impacted the nature of what was being learnt.

Fundamentally trust and relationships seemed key when listening to grantees, as did the capacity needed to build trust and relationships to create meaningful opportunities to listen well and

effectively. Trust was also referred to heavily by social justice activist and writer Adrienne Maree Brown in her writing about how to apply her book Emergent Strategy to funding relationships.[3] She speaks about the importance of pace, adding to momentum rather than workload and the importance of trusting boldly. She also spoke about the importance of space for making mistakes which also brings growth for trusting relationships.

Why do funders listen to grantees?

Current
- To build trust and develop relationships with grantees
- To learn about the communities they support and tap into a different knowledge
- To build local relationships and networks
- To understand their organisational needs to support them
- To manage grants and risks effectively and to remain compliant
- For storytelling and to show our own impact
- To benchmark ourselves against other funders
- To understand their approaches for change and the challenges they face to inform strategy
- To facilitate collective learning
- Due to other wider politics e.g. the relationships they hold with trustees

Prospective
- To provide advice and learn from enquiries and interactions
- To learn and gain feedback about application processes and the barriers within it
- Listening for trends and threads
- To hear and acknowledge frustrations
- To build relationships with potential applicants to judge the fit with organisations, gain knowledge for application processes and to advocate on their behalf
- To assess risks effectively
- To show care or to try to make the application process useful and informative for prospective applicants
- To learn about needs and to inform funding strategies

How do funders listen to grantees?

Current
- Check ins, emails and conversations
- Visits to projects
- Reports
- Surveys
- Anonymous feedback

Prospective
- Surveys
- Emails and telephone conversations
- Events
- Anonymous feedback

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Current

- What space is there for grantees to set the agenda and hold more power?
- How can we be more aware of what leads us to listen more to certain grantees and less to others and how do we make this fairer and more equitable?
- Are grant holders telling funders what they want to hear and is there space for honesty and transparency?

Prospective

- How can we be aware of what leads us to listen to certain applicants and not others and how to open up these processes in a fairer and more equitable fashion?
- How can we create ways for this listening to inform wider change and close these feedback loops?
- How much honesty is there in interactions with unsuccessful applicants and what can be done to address this?

Communities

Funders all worked to listen to communities whether that was community leaders, service users or those not engaging with services. However, the levels of this interaction was very varied with some funders listening to communities indirectly through grantees of experts whilst in some rare cases funders had dedicated staff building relationships with communities outside of funding relationships. Certain funders had regional or place based approaches to funding which led to more efforts to listen to communities to inform these strategies and understand more about needs in the area and impacts made by projects funded there. Learning played a core role in why funders listen to communities. Funders described wanting to hear communities in their own words, and to understand the systems and places they were trying to change.

Again, there were reflections on who was it that funders engaged with within communities and the reflection that more marginalised groups were often not engaged with. Certain funders spoke about their relationships being based more in mainstream systems and structures such as public services; schools, the local council, faith leaders and other community leaders and representatives. Funders also reflected on the methods they used to engage with communities and how open and inclusive they were. Funders spoke about the capacity needed to listen to communities and the public. Many funders did not have the space in their roles to build these relationships or develop mechanism to develop wider ways to engage with people outside of grant making. Hence there was a tendency to engage with the most easy to reach individuals within communities or rely on existing and mainstream structures such as the local authority or bodies such as schools.

In the majority of cases, listening to communities was framed around compliance, rather than to devolve power or inform ongoing strategy. Listening took place for learning and to assess impact of funding that had been distributed. In most cases funders listened to communities indirectly through others such as grantees or consultants. This could be though informal check ins and conversations but could also be through more formal listening such as research conducted by grantees. Funders also spoke about how they listened directly to communities often through face to face visits to grantees' projects or other community facing events and gatherings. Whilst many funders found these visits useful there were uncomfortable reflections on the levels of honesty in these conversations and how safe and ethical they sometimes were. Certain funders spoke about hearing sensitive stories or being around vulnerable groups and questioned whether these interactions were really needed and well executed. Also there was a recognition that funders needed to have the

capacity and skills required to handle face to face interactions. Many frontline staff in different sectors from psychology to firefighting are provided with guidance about how to work with communities and also to manage interactions with vulnerable groups. For example training and guidance on how to hold sensitive emotions, maintain healthy boundaries and create safe environments for others. Many sectors use approaches such as supervision[4], mental health first aiders[5] or trauma risk management[6] to provide emotional support especially when people may be exposed to difficult subject matter in their roles. Most funders spoken to did not have this support in place and said there hadn't been a consideration of the emotional impacts of listening.

Why do funders listen to communities?
- To learn directly from communities, understanding the systems that funders are trying change
- To assess impact and for monitoring and evaluation
- To gain buy in and legitimacy within the wider sector of funders
- To check against existing strategy

How do funders listen to communities?
- Indirectly through grantees, research or experts
- Through face to face visits to partners
- Community based events and meetings
- By attending existing community meetings and connecting to existing local networks for building relationships

Areas and further question to explore
- What capacity, support structures and skills are needed for funders to listen to communities?
- What are the ethics of interactions with vulnerable groups and what are the power dynamics funders need to be aware of when engaging directly with communities?
- How honest are these interactions and how are they influenced by prospective funding?
- What is lost when this listening happens indirectly and how much do agendas to the intermediates impact what funders hear?
- What can be done to listen to communities not just to learn but to also involve them directly in decision making and to genuinely devolve power further to them?

Lived Experience
Lived experience is 'the experience(s) of people on whom a social issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct impact'[7]. Lived experience was spoken about in all workshops and experts by experience were recognised as a critical group to listen to. Lived experience was engaged with in very different ways from listening to service users to engaging with lived experience leaders and elders. Whilst all funders recognised the importance of lived experience and referred to the wider awareness in philanthropy and the social sector of lived experience, most funders also reflected that this was not a group they listened to as well as they would want to. Philanthropy has traditionally been reliant and led by learnt experience such as academic research or the public sector and its

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[4] https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/listen/201905/why-good-supervision-in-psychotherapy-matters
[5] https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/one-million-people-to-receive-mental-health-first-aid-training/
[6] https://www.hantsfire.gov.uk/about-us/what-we-do/trim/
[7] http://thelivedexperience.org

knowledge of a need such as mental health or criminal justice. Those directly with experience of these issues have often been outside of funding strategy around these areas or decision making. This meant that many funders involved in this reflection saw themselves as very early in engaging and listening to lived experience and reflected that they was much more to do. There were many reflections about the considerations that needed to be taken into account when funders engaged with lived experience. Some of the Listening Fund funders also explored the power dynamics that came into play when engaging with children and young people to inform their work. Below are some of the questions that emerged that funders felt needed to be asked when engaging with lived experience.

- Do they have a clear understanding of the context and why they are there?
- Are they set up to be equals?
- Who is the broker e.g. an adult, an organisation?
- Is the interaction seeking to engage in lived experience and someone's story without thinking about whether there is real consent, if the interaction in safe and if there's been real thought to the terms around story?
- How does the method being used for listening meet their needs e.g. innate confidence, what makes them feel comfortable, language?
- How genuine are these interactions and what are the power dynamics within them?

Some funders engaged with lived experience through their engagement with grantees and communities, using direct and indirect listening methods with service users as has been described in this report. However many grantees also reflected on the limitations of these interactions and the need to move on from service user conversations to the devolvement of power to lived experience so that this listening made a deeper impact on strategy and organisational culture. Certain funders had done this through ensuring that there was lived experience on their board of trustees, others had created structures such as advisor boards or sector specific lived experience groups. Others had attempted to involved lived experience into the design of their grant making or brought in experts by experience as advisors and consultants.

Certain funders wondered about the real impact of listening to lived experience and whether this was really taking place or was more tokenistic. They also reflected on the fact that there might have been good practice in certain projects or funding streams but this was usually isolated and did not become wider organisational practice. Funders also spoke about the mistakes they felt they had made around working with lived experience and the need for knowledge, skills and capacity to do this effectively and authentically. There were also concerns around the methods used to engage with lived experience and whether more could be done to create deeper and more inclusive conversations. Discussions around engaging with lived experience sometimes brought to the surface a lack of confidence and difficult emotions such as guilt and shame.

Why do funders listen to lived experience?
- To learn and gain knowledge
- To make better decisions informed by experience
- Organisational values and culture
- Pressure brought about by wider conversations in philanthropy and advocacy about the importance of lived experience

How do funders listen to lived experience?
- Through existing methods to engage with communities such as visits and events as well as indirectly through grantees
- Representation on trustee boards
- Other advisory groups and boards used internally
- Consultants and advisors
- Within participatory grant making mechanisms

Areas and further question to explore
- How can funders do more to listen to lived experience across their organisations and practice?
- At what levels in an organisation does listening to lived experience take place?
- How can foundations move beyond conversations with service users to engaging more deeply with lived experience and transferring power to do this?
- To what extent are funders engaging with lived experience because they see its value or because of wider pressures in philanthropy to 'shift power'?

Sector Leaders/ Research bodies /Umbrella bodies
Another group mention by all funders involved in this reflection were those described as sector leaders or thought leaders. This was sometimes used to describe individuals and in other cases used to describe organisations such as research and advocacy bodies or umbrella groups. Listening to this group informed learning and could shape the strategy and decision making of funders for example for funding programmes around young people, climate change or mental health. These voices also sometimes could feel more like a 'neutral source' of knowledge, as they could provide valuable learning outside of funding relationships. They could also provide a wider picture of sectors and issues, often speaking beyond the experiences of one organisation or geographical area.

Many funders spoke about listening to this group through reports, articles, blogs and social media. Listening could also take place through events and conferences. Other funders also listened though relationships and calls, emails and face to face meetings. Reflections showed concerns around if funders were essentially listening to the same groups and voices and where there was room to engaging with more diverse views and marginalised voices. However funders also spoke about engaging with bodies that specialised in and advocated for missing voices and groups.

Why do funders listen to sector leaders?
- To learn and gain knowledge
- To inform strategy and decision making
- To gain specialist knowledge or hear indirectly from certain communities or groups

How do funders listen to sector leaders?
- Publications such as reports, blogs and articles
- Events such as conference, webinars and smaller meetings and round tables
- Relationships

Areas and further question to explore

- How can funders be more aware of and share who they collectively see and listen to as sector leads?
- What gaps are there in this knowledge?

Advisors and Experts

All funders when mapping out their listening landscapes began to mention particular names of external individuals that they listened to which was either a paid or unpaid relationship. These names were often different but sometimes did overlap, but it became clear that all funders operated within a group or trusted advisors that they listened to. This seemed to be an important group that provided knowledge and informed learning from those seen as an 'expert'. This could be a sector lead, lived experience leader, researcher or freelance consultant. These individuals often had longer term relationships with funding organisations and were brought in in different ways e.g. to design new funding streams and inform strategy, to provide expert knowledge, to support indirect listening of other groups.

Reflections were shared about how these listening relationships could sometimes feel easier and less pressured than listening to groups such as grantees and communities which could raise expectations around funding. There was a lot of trust for these individuals and this was an important place to think things out, learn and develop new ideas in a safe way. This was described as feeling more safe due to some of the following reasons:
- Seen as more confidential which was useful for new strategies or to inform new funding programmes
- Felt like there was less of an agenda or the potential for people to sell themselves
- A way to engage with expert knowledge outside of funding relationships and the power dynamics and expectations associated with this
- These individuals often had longer term relationships with funders and therefore had a good understanding of their circumstances and internal politics.

On further reflection funders did share concerns about the diversity of the groups they saw as experts and becoming overly reliant on certain perspectives and views which upheld their existing practice and thoughts. However other funders spoke about developing trusted relationships with diverse voices and viewpoints that they felt challenged them whilst understanding their organisation well and internal politics.

Why do funders listen to advisors and experts?
- To learn and gain knowledge
- To inform strategy and decision making
- For an external perspective from someone

How do funders listen to sector leaders?
- Informal relationships
- As consultants and through paid relationships leading to workshops or reports
- To support decision making

Areas and further question to explore
- How can funders be more aware of and share their communities of experts that they each sit within and how and where these overlap?

- How can funders reflect on the limitations of these viewpoints and how they can continue to bring in new voices and opinions?
- How can there be more understanding of the agendas we all hold including experts and advisors and how this impacts what is being listened to?

Other Funders

Funders all spoke about how they listened to other funders within their sector. These relationships seemed important for learning as well as benchmarking and self-awareness. Funders often acted as a community using their relationships to share knowledge, test ideas and challenge one another. However, the capacity to engage with other funders also depended on the role people were in and the time and opportunity to speak to others externally. Many networks and events also facilitated these peer relationships as well as close one to one relationships leading to regular check ins. The Listening Fund was an example of a structure and project that brought different funders together to share and learn from one another as well as to look at collective ways to work and move forwards. Funders were often also in other relationships with funders through different projects or even as delivery partners.

These relationships again were cited as a safe place to discuss, learn and be challenged. However, it was also shared that funders often formed clusters which could be positive as it allowed for deeper ways to collaborate but also meant there was a real danger of group think. This danger of group think has also been described by other funders outside of the Listening Fund who spoke about their tendency to engage with the same experts and grantees leading to marginalised voices being listened to less, unable to break into these networks. There were also concerns about the diversity of viewpoints held by different funders who usually had similar views and backgrounds. Comments were also made about the lack of diversity in foundation staff when it came to demographics such as class or race.

Why do funders listen to other funders?
- To learn and gain knowledge from others in similar roles and addressing similar needs
- For an external perspective from someone in a similar context

How do funders listen to other funders?
- Informal relationships
- Networks and events
- Formal collaborations and though projects
- Delivery partner relationships

Areas and further question to explore
- How can funders be aware of the risks of collaboration and avoid group think or creating new hierarchies of those they collectively listen to?

External voices e.g. personal relationships, the media

Finally, funders also spoke about how much they turned to other external sources outside of their day-to-day roles to listen and learn. In some cases this external influence came through their personal relationships such as family, children and young people or friends they had that might have relevant knowledge and experience. This could also include other networks that funder may be involved in a professional context. These seemed to be trusted people funders turned to think things

out, learn and test ideas. Those with children spoke about they drew upon these relationships to learn and reflect about children, young people and sectors such as education.

These relationships were a way for funders to listen outside of funding relationships and some participants spoke about the value of listening without the agenda of money and resource. However there were also reflections of the lack of diversity of these groups and relationships and how representative this listening was.

Certain funders also referred explicitly to listening to the media in different ways whether this was newspapers, TV, radio, sector press or other news sources. The majority of funders involved in this reflection said they looked to the media to listen to the views of the wider public or to understand how things sat with others. The media could also be a source of knowledge about needs and gaps and could also influence the language funders used. Funders also listened to the media to support the management of risk, being very aware of how press attention could impact organisations and trying to stay away from conflict and what could turn into a scandal. Funders were mindful of the pressure they could be put under via the media and there were admissions that this could impact decisions and behaviour sometimes very reactively.

Many funders had not been aware of how voices outside their direct relationships informed their thinking and perceptions. Whilst this was usually quite unstructured it was potentially very influential and something that funders should reflect on so that they can also be aware of the benefits and challenges that can come from listening to these sources.

Why do funders listen to external voices?
- To listen outside of grant making or formal engagements with experts and escape some of the power dynamics within this
- To test ideas with those external to their organisations
- To manage and avoid risk
- To learn and gain knowledge
- To indirectly listen to the public
- To learn and draw on lived experience

How do funders listen to the external voices?
- Informally through existing relationships
- Through reading and listening to media sources
- Through relationships with journalist and sector press.

Areas and further question to explore
- How can funders draw on their own relationships whilst also being aware of the limits of this knowledge?
- How does the role of being a funder and the power dynamics associated with this impact listening?
- What are other ways funders can learn and test ideas that is outside of the power dynamics of monetary relationships?
- How are funders impacted by media voices and fear of media attention?
- What aspects of the media impact philanthropy and how does this change with different funders? What is lost when funders do not listen more closely to the media?

- How can we be aware of risks and public scrutiny whilst also not making decisions out of fear?

Where are we failing?

Whilst there is much good practice and places where funder listen well, it became clear through our reflections that this was not always the case. When looking at all audiences described in this reflection, from grantees to other funders, what was made apparent was the hidden power dynamics often at play that impacted who funders listened to, how listening takes place within funders and the actions that emerge from this. Much of what was shared is not isolated to funders but a reflection of the wider system philanthropy exists within.

The listening cultures within funders reflect the systems of oppression in our society. When listening takes place it does so within a system that is inherently based around cultures of sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia and racism and cannot escape these. The philanthropic sector lacks diversity and lived experience as highlighted by 2027, Charities So White and Future Foundations UK among others. This is especially true at board and decision-making level.[8] This can amplify the way inequalities play out within funding organisations and impacts who is listened to and what is heard. Listening also take place within roles which are often overstretched and there is often not the capacity, support and prioritisation needed for good quality listening to take place.

We cannot explore listening without acknowledging how inequalities manifest in our organisational cultures and relationships and the capacity, skills and support that is needed to challenge this. The impacts of power and inequity flowed through many of our conversations around listening showing that there was much more that was needed for funders to address in their listening practices.

Who funders listen to
There has been a clear indication from funders taking part in this reflection that there was a need to listen to more voices within different audiences, whether this was by creating capacity, building relationships, questioning who they engaged with and who they didn't, or creating different mechanisms to listen that were more inclusive. Funders were also aware of groups that weren't listened to and that they needed to do more to identify, amplify and address missing voices.

How funders listen
As well as listening to more voices, funders made clear that they wanted to 'listen well' which required capacity and space, support and also wider organisational structures and cultures that supported listening. Funders shared that even when listening was taking place, more could be done to make the processes for listening more inclusive and equitable.

What happens with listening
Listening needs to be seen as a whole process which includes action, rather than an isolated activity. When funders did listen in most cases this did not impact organisational practices and strategy in the way that it could. Listening could become trapped within a framework of

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[8] https://www.inclusiveboards.co.uk/

compliance and gathering knowledge rather than devolving power and developing accountability and self-awareness.

Section two: how listening practice needs to develop
Key Areas of Development Needed for Funders to Listen

<u>Four key areas of development and some key questions which underpin them</u>
<u>How these areas and questions can be addressed, with examples</u>

Through our reflective sessions four key areas of development emerged which were integral to funders improving their listening practices and cultures. These are summarised below.

Area	Description	Questions
Closing the Listening Loop	Funders shared that actions that stemmed from listening were inconsistent. For funders to listen well they need to see listening as a whole process which includes responding to what is heard.	What actions are taken when listening occurs? How can the learning from listening be embedded? How can funders be more accountable to those that they listen to?
Inclusive Listening	Funders shared that they needed to become more inclusive in how they listened. Many reflected they tended to listen to the same people and that there was a lack of diversity in who they listened to e.g. class, race, political views	Who do we listen to? What are the unconscious biases that play out in listening? What methods could be used to make listening more inclusive?
Equitable Listening	Listening for funders happens within a skewed power dynamic. Funders spoke about the ways power impacted their ability to listen effectively. From whether they were really being open and led by the what they listened to, to how they listened and what they did with their listening.	Have we interrogated how and why do we listen to someone? What is needed to be ethical and equitable in how we listen? What do extractive listening behaviours look like?
Capacity to listen	To listen effectively, build relationships and act on what we listen what resources are needed. Almost all participants described not having the time needed to listen in the way they wanted to.	What structures and capacity do organisations need for listening? How does a lack of capacity impact listening? How does listening take place?

This section explores these areas and the questions that underpin them. It starts a conversation around what is needed in order to listen well and in a way that is not superficial and tokenistic, sharing key questions and dilemmas funders need to engage with. If we fail to address these areas listening can become a 'navel gazing' or unethical exercise no matter how well intended.

Closing the listening loop: What happens when we listen?

The listening loop was a term that was used to describe listening as a process that involved both hearing and a response. This reflection revealed that many funders taking part did not close the listening loop in many of their listening relationships.

By 'closing the listening loop' we are referring to:

Taking an action based on what has been heard
As has been described earlier in the report what was learnt or heard through listening was often lost. Funders were not consistent in responding to what they heard and struggled to do this due to a lack of capacity or understanding around how to translate what they had heard into wider organisational change.

Feeding back to those that have been listened to
Listening was also often described as a one-way activity. Even if there had been an effort to address what had been heard, funders did not prioritise feeding this back to those they had listened to. This again reinforces unequal power dynamics around listening and who it is for, and the way that those who are being listened to are engaged and treated throughout a process.

Questions we encourage funders to consider:

What is needed to allow knowledge from listening to flow around an organisation, make an impact and then flow back to who is being listened to?

How open are your future plans and strategy to what you listen to and how does that interact with you own internal agenda and interests?

What are the accountability structures that you have for those that you listen to, and who are you and who should you be accountable to?

Inclusive Listening: Who do we listen to?

Another core theme that emerged from this reflection was the hierarchies around who funders listen to. Many funders reported that they tended to turn to trusted voices and acknowledged the lack of diversity in who these were. Interestingly even though this was a strong theme in workshops many participants shared that this was not something they had reflected on or looked at closely. Our surveys showed that only a third of participants would describe who they listened to as very diverse. Just over 20% described those that they spoke to as having very different views, values and perspectives. Who are the voices that make up the groups we don't listen to and what is the impact of leaving these voices behind? Also, even when funders were listening to diverse groups, who did they engage with more frequently and who did they hold the strongest listening relationships with?

There is a lack of data in UK philanthropy around the diversity of who we fund. There is even less analysis and reflection on who we listen to. How diverse are the experts our organisations tend to engage with? Are the sector leaders we listen to giving us the diversity of views and perspectives that we need? Do the ways we tend to want to engage with people bring in the same views and groups? We know from evidence that nomination processes are inherently biased. Familiar pools develop and we there is a lack of diversity in our connections and the ecosystems we are a part of.

There was a sense that those working in philanthropy had to take more responsibility to shift who it is that we were listening to.

Questions we encourage funders to consider:

> *How does unconscious bias show up in who you trust, make time to listen to and if and how you close the listening loop?*
>
> *What are the methods that you use for listening, do you tend to listen in the same ways to different voices, and do you rely on people coming to you?*
>
> *What space is there for you to reflect on the diversity of who you listen to and manage this?*

Equitable Listening: How and why do we listen?

Power was mentioned repeatedly in every conversation about listening. It became clear early in this reflection that without the right power dynamics listening could not be meaningful or effective. Whilst there have been more and more conversations about the importance of listening, listening well and being aware of the power dynamics in listening was not widely understood. Without equitable practices at the heart of how we listen, listening could be unsafe, damaging and extractive.

By equitable listening we are referring to:

Transparency about the agenda for listening — When engaging with experts, grantees, communities as well as others, funders described having an agenda in mind. They were listening in order to prove something rather than to be open and led by what they were hearing. This agenda was rarely explicit or transparent and the lack of a closed listening loop meant that agendas were often not changed by what others said.

A safe space for listening — Funders often did not think about the experience of those that they were listening to. Often listening could impact funding for grantees of commissioned work of those engaged as advisers and experts even if this was unsaid. When engaging with lived experience there was not enough thought into if the interaction emotionally safe for those involved and who had power in the sharing of these stories. Was it safe for those being listened to speak truth to power and be honest? How open were funders to what was being said?

The power dynamics in listening — Often funders were in a position of power about what was listened to and if and how to take this forward. Certain groups such as communities and lived experience were seen as valid sources to gain knowledge but funders did not tend to listen to these groups by putting them in positions of leadership or decision making. Knowledge could be extracted from certain groups who were not in position of power moving forward. There were also interesting patterns on who was expected to give knowledge and insight for free which was also based around biases and who was valued.

Questions we encourage funders to consider:

How can you make the process of listening feel safer and what capacity is needed to listen in a way that is ethical e.g. time, space, environment, emotional support, financial payment?

How can you question your entitlement over knowledge and create space to support others to take what they have shared forward and devolve power to others? How can those being listened to become decision makers?

How can power be shared and devolved so that the agenda for listening is held more collectively by those being listened to and can you be more transparent about your agenda and assumption?

Capacity to listen: How can we create the space and skills to listen?

One of the key barriers to listening shared in this reflection was a realisation of the capacity needed to listen well, whether this was time, skills and space. As funders began to engage with the need to listen and learned about what it took to listen well and effectively, many spoke about being overwhelmed or uncertain about how listening could take place in their organisations. Whether we look at closing the listening loop, creating more inclusive listening practices or being more ethical in how we listen, the first step is to address capacity. We had a large workshop planned in late March to dig deeper into the issue and see if there were ways the funder community could come together to come up with collective solutions, however this has been postponed due to the current pandemic. For the second phase of the Listening Fund one key focus will be how we make listening sustainable.

Questions we encourage funders to consider:

What does it take to listen well — time, skills, space, people?

How can we reimagine ourselves as listening organisations — could this provide us with a way to make listening sustainable within our organisations?

What is the right thing to do if and when we are unable to listen well and may cause harm?

How can these areas and questions be addressed?

How do we close the Listening Loop?

The lack of accountability structures around listening was a key theme which emerged from our conversations. Funders felt that these structures were needed to support them to better act and respond to what they heard, and to enable this to be more of a priority. Over half of those that took part in our survey did not feel that they had an accountability structure or system that supported or encouraged listening. In March 2020 a group of Listening Fund funders came together to explore the idea of accountability structures for listening and what this might look like though the opportunity to follow up this initial conversation was impacted by the pandemic. This is an area that we want to build on in the next phase of the Listening Fund. However, key questions, early ideas and concerns around accountability and listening shared at the discussion included:

- Is there is a need to align reporting structures for listening, either between funders, or internally?
- What role do KPIs have in supporting listening without losing the richness of listening as a process?
- How can we build on the use of surveys such as Centre for Effective Philanthropy[9] whilst being mindful that this is a superficial tool and doesn't address the nuances and complexities of listening?
- What are the basic standards for reporting internally for listening?
- Can annual reports be used to draw out strategic themes in listening and provide an overview of what a funder is hearing and how it can react to this?
- Who are we accountable to? How can we involve those we listen to in the accountability process?
- How do we resource our partners for the capacity needed to take part in any new infrastructure to support closing the loop?
- How do reporting structures for listening allow for building trust and the pace needed?
- What does an iterative design process of accountability structures for listening look like?
- Does the framework allow for listening to be strategic and led by scoping or will it make listening and action more reactive?
- What are the measures that could be used to judge how we listen e.g. how we are perceived, trust, how we make wider impact with what we have learnt

Learning from Best Practice
Fund for Shared Insight / Listen 4 Good https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good/
Listen4Good is a Fund for Shared Insight initiative designed to help nonprofits build sustainable, high-quality, client-focused feedback loops that lead to meaningful change. Their goal is to provide widespread access to tools and resources that help organisations systematically listen to and respond to the people they seek to help, especially those whose voices are least heard. Working with funders and nonprofits, L4G is building key infrastructure for feedback in the social sector and creating a community of organisations committed to using feedback and constituent input to bring about positive changes in the way they make decisions, deliver services, and partner with clients. The initiative emphasizes the critical importance of building trust between nonprofit organizations and funders so that feedback can be honestly shared.

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[9] https://cep.org/donors/

They describe that for feedback to be of greatest use to an organisation and empowering for the people giving feedback, the process should involve more than asking for people's opinions or putting out surveys. They recommend that feedback first be framed as a loop in which an organisation takes in feedback but also must do something with it. L4G recommends a multi-step process that includes designing the survey, collecting the responses, interpreting the results, responding; and going back to those who were surveyed to share what was heard and how the organization is going to respond to the feedback. This last step — often the most challenging but critically important — is called "closing the loop." Other examples from Listening Fund partners can be found at the end of this chapter.

How can we Listen in a more Inclusive Way?

Unconscious or implicit bias describes the preferences we hold in who we listen to and trust. It could be affected by gender, race, religion, sexuality etc. and will be fed by the media and wider systems of oppression that informs our world views. Professor John A Powell, Director of the Othering & Belonging Institute, a UC Berkeley research institute, stated in the 2015 edition of Responsive Philanthropy - a special edition exploring how implicit bias affects philanthropic giving - that "the influence of implicit biases in grant making and philanthropic work is of critical concern".[10] He explains that implicit bias helps us to understand how we can embrace fairness at the conscious level, and yet undermine fairness at the implicit (nonconscious) level. Many grant makers involved in our reflection felt committed to embrace fairness but through reflection saw the ways they were working were not inclusive or supporting more marginalised voices and communities. Powell recommends many ways to challenge implicit bias in philanthropy such as doubting objectivity, improving the conditions of decision making and using data and evaluation. These are described further below. Powell describes that these interventions will not completely end implicit bias and that should not be our aim. The goal is not to end all bias but to change behaviour and outcomes. We must continue to look for better interventions and engage the structure and social context where decisions are being made.

- Doubt objectivity: Seeing yourself as objective actually tends to increase the role of implicit bias; teaching people about nonconscious thought processes ultimately allows us to guard against biased evaluations.
- Increase motivation to be fair: Seeking fairness, rather than being driven by fear of external judgment, tends to decrease biased actions.
- Improve conditions of decision making: Implicit biases are a function of automaticity. Engaging in mindful, deliberate processing prevents our implicit biases from kicking in and determining our behaviours.
- Count: Implicitly biased behaviour is best detected by using data to determine whether certain patterns of behaviour lead to racially disparate outcomes. Once one is aware of such a link, it is then possible to consider whether the outcomes are linked to bias.
- Monitor and improve the environment: Because your environment both primes and helps create bias associations, it is important to continuously monitor and improve it.
- Collect data and monitor outcomes: Because implicit bias cannot be reliably self-reported, it is important to set goals and collect data to see if they are being met.
- Involve a cross-section of decisionmakers: Research shows that including a critical mass of underrepresented groups in the decision-making process reduces bias.
- Affirmatively state and pursue inclusive outcomes: Focus on changing outcomes.

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[10] https://www.ncrp.org/publication/responsive-philanthropy-spring-2015/implicit-bias-and-its-role-in-philanthropy-and-grantmaking

Reflection Exercise

Using the pandemic to review how inclusive your listening practices have been

In an online conversation with funders based in Scotland in August 2020, both within and external to the Listening Fund, there was a reflection around who they listened to at the start of the pandemic and guided their early decisions and dynamics. There was a reflection shared towards the end of this workshop that many people had cited the same organisations and people. The pandemic provides us with an interesting opportunity to look at our listening practices. We ask funders to ask themselves the following questions which we shared in our workshop.

Step 1: Map out all the individuals, organisations, networks and groups you listened to during the pandemic

Ask yourself the following questions and map out your listening landscape during the start of the pandemic in 2020

During the recent pandemic who did you listen to:
- to work out your next steps and strategy?
- to understand the needs of the grantees and communities you wanted to support?

How did this listening take place?
- How did these opportunities come about?
- What methods did you use?

Step 2: Reflect on how inclusive your listening practices have been
- Consider how different your map is to other funders you know
- How much diversity is there in the voices you have listened to? Consider political views; demographics such as geography, race and class; lived vs learnt experience etc.
- Consider who is missing from the picture – whose voices did you not listen to, why was this?
- How do you think you implicit and unconscious bias showed up in this listening map?
- What could you do to create a more inclusive listening approach?

Step 3: Develop a plan to listen more inclusively

Based on your learning and reflections create a plan for how you will listen more inclusively as an organisation
- Promoting Awareness - How will you make sure the organisation is more aware of how it listens and where it needs to be more inclusive?
- Plan for improvement – What are the practical steps you can take to become more inclusive? What are the new ways you can listen? Who do you need to build networks and relationships with? What support and skills do you need? What are your first steps?
- Crisis planning – In a crisis we tend to fall back into practices that are not inclusive. This can be due to our own capacity, who we trust and who our strongest relationships are with. Think about ways you can ensure in a crisis you and your organisation can be more inclusive in how it listens?

How can we Listen more Equitably?

Extractive vs equitable listening was a concept that many funders involved in this reflection exercise found difficult to understand and the power dynamics within listening could be hard to navigate. As the listening practices between funders and those they listen are often very entrenched it was sometimes a challenge to imagine more equitable approaches and relationships. Based on a workshop held in March 2020 with Listening Fund funders a number of tools have been developed by Farzana Khan and Nusrat Faizullah to help funders to understand the concept of equitable listening.

Tool 1: Empathising with those that share their stories
Funders listening can often relate to a person's lived experience and stories. However do funders understand how it feels to share stories and what are the power dynamics when a story is shared? Also what is the ownership of a story and how can we reflect upon how lived experience and stories may be used by a funder? The diagram below captures how it can feel to have your story told with each box describing a different group of emotions and experiences. By being more aware of these impacts and feelings funders can understand what they need to consider to create safer and less extractive listening interactions.

The Feelings Experienced when Sharing your Story

Tool 2 : Moving from Extractive to Equitable Listening
Our reflections showed that funders and organisations often normalised very extractive approaches to listening. Funders did not have a clear understanding of the practices that made up both ethical and extractive listening. The following grid captures and breaks down these practices to make good and bad practice clearer and the multiple areas that need to be considered by funders when listening.

Moving from Extractive to Equitable Listening Practices

Area	Extractive	Equitable
Relationship	Relationships that don't acknowledge power dynamics and assumes people are engaging equally	Trust has been built through time, openness, action and an acknowledgement of the different power both parties hold.

| | Interactions and influence that are dependant on supporting the narratives and agendas of a funder/ person with power | Relationships that can hold different views and narratives without making those in less power feel exploited

An effort made in ways that balance participation and contributions, regarding the different power people hold and their role |
|---|---|---|
| Extent of impact | Tokenistic involvement and not invested in utilising what has been heard in an impactful way

Using listening to prove rather than learn and be led by what is heard

Pathways and decisions already in mind and pretending decisions haven't already been made

Selective listening to assumptions and narratives that affirmed the funders own position/ agenda | Structures and space for listening to make a meaningful impact.

Listening leads processes and doesn't just reinforce existing strategies and direction

Power has been devolved to those being listened to so that they can be decision makers

Capacity to communicate dissatisfaction and safely express feedback and critique without facing negativity and/ or hostility |
| Ownership of the story | Entitlement to someone else's knowledge and appropriating lived-experience

Using own privilege to make use of this knowledge for own agenda and organisation

Picking out parts of a story that they feel is of value

Using lived experience to gain authenticity without investing in person/org | Sharing learning in a way that uplift and visibilise with permission and consent

Seeing the person as a knowledge producer

Being invested in the story and the contributions made irrespective of the consequence to the organisations internal plans and agendas |
| Expectations | Expectation of training and upskilling

Based around time scale/pace of funder

Expectation of input and people's time and knowledge without remuneration or at a much lower payment to others | Timescales and pace is based around people's capacities and is not performative

Those listened to have been remunerated and also inform what this looks like

Remuneration that does not follow inequitable hierarchies of knowledge, own biases |
| Spaces for listening | Space can feel exposed to those that are being listened to.

There has not been careful thought into how the listening is taking place | Safe spaces are carefully designed and held for listening

Funders are aware of when they should not be directly involved in listening |

	and who is listening on behalf of the funder	

Tool 3: By the end of the listening interaction or conversation who has gained more?

The final tool developed was a reflective tool for funders to consider how equitable a listening interaction has been and also to support them to take action to address the power dynamics of each listening interactions.

At the end of a listening interaction, relationship or conversation please consider the following questions and think of actions you should take to address any power imbalances revealed.

Who Has Gained More?

What did it take to source this knowledge?
- Where has this knowledge you have listened to come from?
- Have you understood and acknowledged what was needed for someone to share what you are listening to e.g. emotional labour of lived experience, resources and time to create policy documents?
- How does sharing this impact them and you?

Who has the ability to act on and transfer what has been listened to?
- Who can catalyse and take forward action based on what has been shared?
- Who hasn't learnt something that is transferable beyond a work environment?

How does this relationship impact social capital?
- Does this relationship or knowledge provide a funder with credibility?
- How might a relationship with you jeopardise someone's work e.g. some grassroots groups are impacted negatively by relationships with funders?

How vulnerable has someone been made by this listening interaction?
- How has sharing this knowledge impacted how safe or vulnerable someone feels in the short and longer term?
- Has this listening interaction exposed someone in any way?

These tools are only a starting point to help you to understand and reflect upon power dynamics in how you listen. The Listening Fund hopes to build upon this and to continue having conversations about how the philanthropic sector can move to more equitable listening practices.

Examples of Practice from the Listening Fund Funders

The Blagrave Trust – Developing our accountability to young people

The Blagrave Trust, which is one of the Listening Fund partners, has invested in addressing accountability at different levels of the organisation to support culture change. There has been a recognition that – as a youth funder - young people are ultimately who the funder is accountable to and that there needs to be a variety of ways to both devolve power and support accountability to this group. This needs to be across the organisation and not just the good practice that is easier to achieve within standalone projects.

This has included transforming the board into one that has a number of young people directly involved in the governance of the Trust. The Blagrave Trust has not only recruited young people to the board but also carefully considered how to involve these trustees in activities and in their reporting so that this does not feel tokenistic. This is not the only way the funder has created ways to be accountable to young people. For example, their recent Challenge and Change Fund was developed and launched in partnership with the Centre for Knowledge Equity, and a group of young advisers - Daze Aghaji, Jovan Nepaul and Chloe Deakin – to directly fund young people campaigning for social change.

Comic Relief - Putting people at the heart of decision making

Comic Relief have continued to develop their approach to meaningfully involving people with lived experience in their decision making. Last year a Mental Health Collective was created, to bring together ten people from the UK, Nigeria and Uganda, each with lived experience of mental health issues and services. They worked with staff to shape the design and funding choices for the 'Bridging the Gaps' funding call. The Collective brought some incredibly rich insights to this work, particularly around what effective mental health programming looks like in different contexts.

More recently, for 'Future Lookin' Good', a partnership with KFC that focuses on youth, Comic Relief designed a shortlisting process that prioritised the active engagement of young people throughout. Proposals were made via short videos in the hope of giving more space to the voices of young people being supported. The first stage of the shortlisting process was then led by youth groups around the country. Here, young people were asked to watch a selection of videos and provided detailed feedback on which they saw as strongest. Lastly, for London Together, a partnership with the Mayor of London, a panel of experts by experience was created to support them to make better funding decisions. The panel was made up of social change actors with a depth of experience of delivering programmes to improve social cohesion and reduce social isolation across London. A series of workshops with Comic Relief staff followed these three pilots, to understand which participatory elements are more appropriate to which type of programmes, and to ensure that key learnings where captured; findings will be used to shape future funding processes and will inform the next phase of participatory approaches

Corra Foundation – Building capacity to listen to our communities

Corra Foundation's People in Place programme is committed to working alongside communities by listening, bringing people together for conversations and to identify shared priorities. Focused on inclusive engagement and seeking out voices that are seldom heard. The programme was developed as a way of engaging and connecting with communities that traditionally funders weren't reaching. The aim for Corra is to better understand how to be more accessible.

Listening and building relationships is at the heart of the programme. To deliver this each area has a dedicated Community Co-ordinator. Their role is to listen, build capacity and enable communities to take forward locally led actions. Each place is unique and at each community are at different stages. In some places the focus is on listening, building trust, relationships and participation. In others, communities are using increased participation and voice as a platform to engage with local decision makers and democratic structures.

During the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown, the Co-ordinators had to find different ways to engage with people with use of local Facebook pages being the preferred method for many people. While this has been effective, there is an awareness that many community members don't have access and / or aren't comfortable in using digital tools. Local connections are even more critical; Co-ordinators have held smaller get togethers compliant with Government safety guidelines and provided step-by-step support to help people set-up and deliver online groups.

National Lottery Community Fund Scotland – Understanding the impact of the pandemic

Earlier this year The National Lottery Community Fund in Scotland decided we wanted to learn alongside Minority Ethnic (ME)-led organisations about the impact of the pandemic on their organisations and their communities. In August we ran a series of weekly learning sessions with a cohort of 14 BAME led organisations. We spent a lot of time with each organisation discussing the shared learning approach of this work, and understanding from them what they wanted get out of this experience. With them we co-produced the learning questions, which explored themes of sustainability, health and wellbeing, and improving connectivity. We tried to take an equitable approach, using a range of online engagement tools so that folk were able to contribute in ways that they were most comfortable. We will use this learning to help us understand how we can better support these groups in future. We will be analysing the learning from this over the coming weeks. An unexpected outcome of this work was that the groups involved found that the experience was really valuable to them as enabled them to better connect and compare experiences with each other. The cohort is keen to stay engaged with each other and the Fund to continue to share learning. We plan to host the next catch up in January.

National Lottery Community Fund – Putting young people in the lead

One third of the organisations we fund at TNLCF have a focus on Children and Young people [CYP], hence leading to the recruitment of a thematic lead- Head of Youth Voice [HoYV], in Sept 2019. The HoYV began by proposing a Pyramid of Involvement of Youth Voice which would add value to our directorates and grant making, while also enabling us to be a catalyst for change to external stakeholders across civic society. This has been achieved through putting Young People in the Lead in a number of ways as it is important to note that young people represent the diverse communities that our funding aims to reach and have lived experiences of the causes we aim to solve. Some examples of their achievements to date are their involvement with informing funding priorities, representing youth voice on our England Committee and Board; while also holding information sessions to inform organisations what 'a good quality youth programme' should include and the 'importance of Youth Voice'. All of which has acted as knowledge and learning sessions for internal staff to lead to better quality grant making in the youth space, as well to influence others stakeholders to embed youth voice.

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation – Our journey listening to young people

We have always believed that young people should be at the heart of decisions that impact on them. But while we ask organisations we fund to listen to the views of young people, we have done little of this ourselves. Working with others on the Listening Fund made us reflect on what we could do. We also have seen the insight and expertise our Youth Advisors brought to the Panel for the Act for Change Fund, run with our partners the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and have set up the Care Experienced Young People's Network as part of our Leaving Care Learning Programme. Beyond these specific initiatives, we also wanted to look more strategically about how young people's insights and expertise could enrich and inform decision-making within Esmée to increase our impact. As we hadn't done it before, we wanted to work alongside young people to think about where their involvement would be most meaningful for them and us. Therefore we commissioned Keji Okeowo and Floree Zama Neagra at Hudl to help guide this process, facilitate sessions, and capture learning. Alongside Hudl, we recruited an incredible group of young consultants who form our Involving Young People Collective and who are working with us to develop and test different approaches. We are only at the start of this process but already we have learnt a lot. We are committed to sharing our learning as we go.

5. The Way Forward

This report is not an in-depth study or evaluation, but has shown a picture of who a group of funders listened to and the complexities and power dynamics that came up when considering each of these groups.

This reflection feels like only a small first step into understanding the complex dynamics when funders listen and what they need to do in order to listen well. However, the chance for collective conversations with the broad anchor that listening provides has been deeply revealing and exposing. By working together and creating safe spaces for reflection and challenge the funders that took part in this exercise were able to identify common patterns, opportunities and challenges. They were able to consider how issues of power, inequality and systemic oppression are tied in to how we listen. Whilst there was much good practice, funders could also see there was more to do to challenge this.

Funders know that listening is important and there is a deep commitment to it from all the funders involved in this reflective exercise. There is a wider movement for change that the Listening Fund is a part of which is challenging the power dynamics within philanthropy. Whether we are talking about listening, lived experience, participatory funding, being bottom up, place based approaches, systems change or power, there is a broad consensus that there is another way. Funders want to better serve their purpose and the communities they are wanting to impact. This report shows this deep and collective commitment to change but also demonstrates how far we are from where we want to be. Listening superficially or in a way that is tokenistic does not provide us with the knowledge and relationships we require. Listening needs to take place within equitable power dynamics, with a diverse group of communities and across an organisation from projects to governance.

It is often in the face of complexity that the solutions feel too difficult or there is a want to turn away or freeze. However this report should not be read in this way. If we really want to listen we have to do this well and invest in creating the organisational cultures we need to support listening. We have to build on good practice from projects and drive for listening in areas such as governance, strategy, accountability and decision making. Listening cannot happen without intention and investment. Listening is a practice that needs to be resourced – with time, training, investment, external

expertise. Listening is a practice that needs to be systematised — for consistency and accountability. Finally listening is a practice that needs to be constantly developed and prioritised at all levels of an organisation.