

## Draft Report to Blagrove Trust Evaluating the Restart Youth Programme

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### Introduction

This draft report was prepared for Blagrove Trust by Mary Mulvey-Oates<sup>1</sup>. Interviews were conducted in June and July 2021, as part of an MSc Dissertation using a multiple case study approach to investigate factors that enable meaningful participation of young people in transformational grant making in England. The study considers the decision-making of grant management, the impact this approach can have on the individuals and organisations involved, and on the wider community. This report provides an initial summary of the key themes and analysis drawing on data from the focus group with the five young people, an interview with the Grantmaker and facilitator, and with one grant holder. Interviews were conducted online. In addition, documentation was provided on the Young Advisor's Working Agreement and the published grant call.

### Summary

Overall, the sense from the Restart Youth programme is of a group of carefully recruited Young People with lived experience of services and a genuine passion to make a positive impact for other young people who may be facing adversity. This assessment found evidence of a robust logic model between the organisation's needs analysis, their purpose in involving young people and the strategy for enabling participation to reflect the diverse needs of young people in the communities they support. In turn, this created greater potential for the young people's work to have impact beyond the individuals in the group, to benefit the communities they aimed to support.

### Themes

The thematic review below is structured in terms of the most significant areas for the Young Advisors group, either because they were referenced most frequently or came across strongly from the different sources.

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<sup>1</sup> The report is labelled as draft as the full comparative analysis was not completed at the stage of writing.

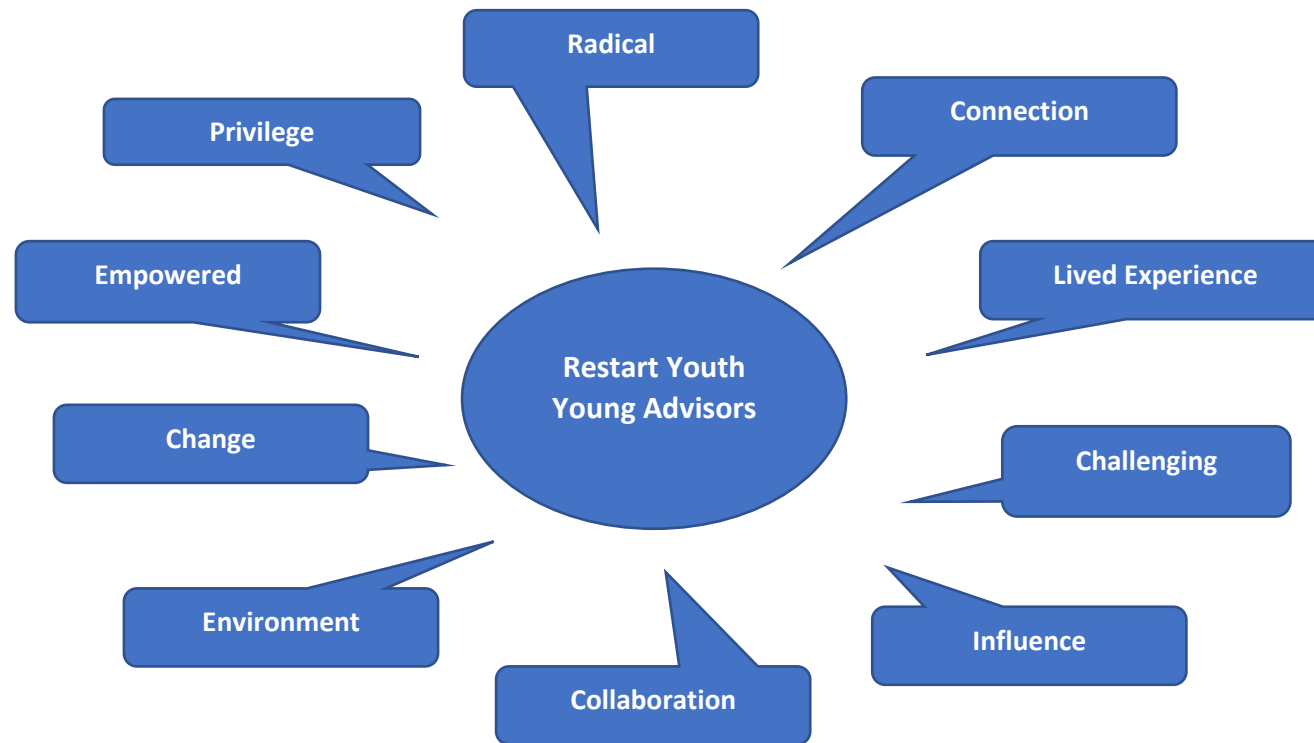
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### Fig 1. Word Association

Responses provided by young advisors to the question:

‘What two or three words come to mind when you think of your experience of the grantmaking work you’ve been involved in with Blagrove Trust?’



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### 1. Creating a safe space to share, debate and decide

The most referenced point throughout the interviews was the deliberate and thoughtful way in which Blagrove staff and the independent facilitator have worked to support the group. Within this cluster of references, the most frequently noted theme relates to how the facilitators, and the group itself, created a sense of psychological safety for the individuals to carry out the discussion and decisions.

*'They [the facilitators] have focused a lot in fostering chemistry with us as advisors, which is difficult to do but has gone a long way in making us feel safe and comfortable in sharing and doing this exercise – and I don't underestimate how powerful that has been in this whole experience.'* (Young Advisor)

*'It would have been quite daunting and confusing to follow along and get started without us having such a great influence from the start.'* (Young Advisor)

To help build this sense of rapport between the young people, support was planned and developed before and during the course of the two programmes:

*'We put in place a couple of sessions where we deeply explored our own personal values, what was driving us to do the work, we were able to identify that we were united in a common purpose, it changed everything, there was a sense of utter respect, ... it became a very safe space. People sharing their personal experiences [meant that] in discussions when that person spoke on a topic [like criminal justice, refugees], others really listened and that carried weight.'* (Grantmaker)

A key contextual factor of this theme is that the young advisors were recruited in part because of their own experiences of using services and facing adversity due to protected characteristics, and also to create a group with varying levels of experience that would gel effectively.

*In the interview process – [Name] really focused on the fact that, we don't want you for your expertise, we want you for your life experience, how your opinions influence you. I was a service user, [and others in the group have experience to know], this charity does this, we speak about different ones.* (Young Advisor)

The presence of psychological safety is illustrated by the Working Agreement developed by the group, and in the following exchange between the two young advisors in the focus group, who discussed issues around intersectionality:

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*'I think charities ... really need... to ensure... whether you're a person of colour, white whether you have a disability, that everyone is catered for. [Name] do you want to come in on that point?'* (Young advisor)

*'...I wish I could give you a hug for bringing that up. Thank you for asking me – ...a lot of the charities are dominated by white people to the point where I was shocked. ...charities had applied to fund some of the most marginalised, some of them having anti-racism statements described how they were taking action – but then their application to us doesn't mention race even as a factor of marginalisation. I've found that disturbing.'* (Young advisor)

The open rapport between the young advisors suggests an underlying assumption that it's safe and valid to share emotional responses and relate these to decisions in a way that can be deconstructed and challenged.

Aside from the immediate outcome for the young advisors themselves, who experience a sense of safety to share their views and appear to develop deep and active listening skills, the young advisors are also creating the conditions for a potentially more strategic outcome around greater accessibility of service provision, thereby potentially increasing a sense of safety and space to be heard for other young people in their communities.

This was also described by the staff facilitating:

*'Young people felt there wasn't sufficient awareness of ... how [grant holder or applicants] work is accessible and reaching YP from different backgrounds, and how it might be contributing to the exclusion of some young people at the expense of others. [I'm] speaking to charities and give that feedback and say, we'd like to give you this money, this is an aspect of your work, and basically issue the challenge.'* (Grantmaker)

As well as being a factor for staff and advisors, this theme also featured for the grant holder organisation, who describe the freedom they've experienced through this funding project, which is driven by a sense of safety to innovate and learn from mistakes:

*'The freedom has been fantastic, they're not a funder that we're worried about going – actually this didn't quite work out – we're going to try this instead – there's no fear about sharing, they're open to a dialogue, if things end up not as we expected, they want to hear...'*

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### 2. Young people shaping decisions

A significant theme coming through the interviews relates to the role of young people in shaping the decisions in the grant making process. A particular aspect frequently highlighted in this relates to the role of young people in setting the grant criteria in Phase 2 of the programme, which the following examples illustrate, including the nuance of how they went about this and what drove their decisions on which organisations were selected and the amounts of funding organisations would receive to create maximum impact:

*'We wanted to support more smaller charities, who are more directly helping YP, and we wanted to help YP directly as well, we wanted to see more YP getting paid, so we all discussed this one by one. It was very organised. With some discussion, creativity and writing it down'* (Young advisor)

*'If your aim is to support the most under privileged, the people right at the fringes, they're unlikely to have charities that are fully established and have a big presence in the sector, so it makes sense to fund ... people doing important outreach work [who] don't necessarily need a lot of funds, and they aren't going to be able to approach it in the traditional route.'* (Young Advisor)

This point illustrates the freedom the young people had to take a calculated risk with innovative providers (Anheier and Leat, 2019). One structural element supporting this is the small amounts of funding (maximum £14k) which allow for this where larger grants could have created more risk averse behaviour.

The quality of the end product created by the young people came across:

*'We knew what that pot of money was for, we had an idea of who we wanted to benefit, the fact that it was in response to covid, we had a clear and concise direction as to where we wanted to allocate that funding. So, I think that helped shape the application process.'* (Young Advisor)

The focus and clarity of the objectives was reinforced by the grant holder, who described how, rather than experiencing them as restrictive objectives:

*'They were good objectives, because it's a short-term piece of work, when you work with YP everyone gets really passionate and it grows and grows, so having that, - this is what we need in short period of time, - really helped.'* (Grantholder)

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The young people reflected on the dynamic of the facilitators, who they said might ‘steer conversations’ but ‘wouldn’t aim to influence decisions’, which the group seemed to agree. Reflecting on this dynamic the facilitators interviewed discussed the difference in their role between phases 1 and 2:

*‘They were listening to me in that phase, I would say, ‘I’m not sure about that’, but if I’d tried to do that in phase 2, well I did, and they would [stop me] pretty damn quick. And that’s been very challenging, ... as this is my job.’ (Grantmaker)*

This candid description of the professional ceding control to the young people suggests a genuine shift, acknowledged as challenging, which resonates with the organisation’s appetite for pushing beyond traditional boundaries where participation is concerned.

### 3. Learning by Doing

The theme of learning by doing comes across at a number of points, as the young people increasingly appear to have taken on responsibility for leading the discussion and making key decisions over time. A shift from adult-initiated to young person-initiated decision comes across from the sources of evidence in this evaluation<sup>2</sup>. The structure of the grant programme and the decision to weight the funding to a greater amount in the latter phase also suggests a commitment to this process on the part of the Grantmaker, whose actions suggest a drive to innovate and take a reasonable risk to do so.

The deliberate approach to light touch ‘learning by doing’ rather than formal training, was considered a benefit from all sides:

*‘it felt like part of the radical thing, as in not treating it as if there’s one way to think about this the stuff. They wanted our raw opinions but then they gave us the guidance we needed when we were like we didn’t know where to start. So the lack of training meant we could shape our own group’ (Young Advisor).*

*‘I’m not trying to train them up to be my apprentice or to take a job as a grantmaker, they’re there in a distinct role which is bringing their lived experience of services into an informed and intelligent conversation so that we can have equal weight on their priorities’ (Grantmaker)*

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<sup>2</sup> With reference to the academic literature on the subject of young people’s participation, Hart’s (1992) model describes a ‘ladder of participation’ in which children increasingly take control, leading eventually from adult-initiated shared decisions with children, to child-initiated shared decisions with adults. This model is used in various sources relating to citizen participation and co-production.

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The grant panel structure used majority decision making where decisions were contested, and the facilitators described their approach to supporting young people who may have disagreed with the majority on certain decisions:

*'...they might text and say, I felt a bit crap leaving then tonight. They had that voice and that ability and not just leave the meeting and say, right done, I'm expected to feel ok about this. We kept communication channels open.'* (Facilitator)

Without using formal training, still the thread around Blagrove values ran through the discussions, and comes across in the grant call documentation. The facilitators describe three ways in which Blagrove Trust explains the purpose of putting young people's voice in the centre of their work:

*'One, it's our values, it's who we are, as the Blagrove Trust we're a youth focused funder that promotes youth empowerment and leadership, so it's a values-based thing. The second is that it's good for the young people themselves... [explains why]. The third is, it's better grant decisions... they chose to fund the work that would be effective in our mission.'* (Grantmaker)

The organisation's strategic focus on purpose creates a robust logic model for understanding why they want to involve young people, which in turn enables an effective set of tools and approaches to achieve some tangibly different outcomes from a traditional grantmaking model.

However, learning by doing can have a challenging side, which is highlighted by the facilitators in terms of their own learning, and the impact of the funding restrictions imposed by the source funder (the funding came from HM Government in response to the Covid-19 crisis and timeframes for spending were constrained).

*'This is genuinely an evolving thing – it's a new area of work for Blagrove and for me, I was learning how to do it, and big lessons learned around time constraints because of what was imposed.'* (Grantmaker)

The organisation is applying the learning from this experience in a separate funding programme:

*'[this time they have] allowed much longer for induction period, ...for that shared values work. [Ideally], we would have had a specific session around some of those key sensitive themes around things like race.'* (Grantmaker)

The required pace of the work did create pressure, noted in several sources, including the grant holder in reference to the application deadline. However, in the discussion on impact below, this evaluation finds that the time constraints also provided a drive for focus and potential impact.

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### 4. Impact

Having experienced the opportunity to make key decisions, a number of references were made to the development of individual skills, including soft skills of working as a group. In addition, it was clear that critical thinking and analysis skills were developed by the young people involved. This came across in the focus group when one of the younger members of the group pointed out:

*'we saw these problems because we wrote the criteria – when we wrote what we wanted to see in the application, we would not expect to see these issues, ... And the issues were quite big and quite frequent. This just shows how we reflect on our own decision on what we wanted to see, and how we can see the gap of things as well.'* (Young Advisor)

Another key theme throughout the interviews was around the tangible impact of the funded organisations that was expected from the grant programme. At the point of writing, this cannot be fully evaluated however, the ambition is clear and there is potential for strong outcomes:

*'I think because we funded small charities, and with small charities even small money will make a difference. We can't expect a lot in 6 months, but with the ideas behind the applications, it can make a difference.'* (Young Advisor)

*'There's no question about it making a difference. There are some applications that are very concise, and direct about how they want to achieve it. They had 6 months to spend in, that was part of the criterium. I think these charities, especially those more established, are going to be clear and concise and hit that target.'* (Young Advisor)

Speaking of the young people's demands for grant holders to go further, for example on how they respond on intersectionality, the staff agreed *'...there will be a tangible impact'* beyond the initial choice of organisation.

### 5. Listening to needs and responding to diverse communities

A key outcome of the Restart Youth programme is to create space for diverse youth voices which reflect the variety of needs and challenges facing young people in communities where they live.

The theme around young people making decisions which support providers to respond to the needs of more diverse communities comes across from the grant holder, who describes their objective to hear from young people in the way they develop their services (in this case in mental health provision), because young people from Black and ethnic minority communities currently lack culturally sensitive and appropriate provision.



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*'It's so good to work with a funder who's completely aligned in that sort of thing – so many of them are older white male groups, so it can be quite challenging when we say to them, we need to diversify, this is a challenge for us, because they don't quite get it. So to have a funder who's pushing us to do it as well is really good for us. It came at the perfect time'*  
(Grant holder)

The ethos and commitment of Blgrave has supported the provider through a sense of shared endeavour:

*It's championed and fuelled our way of working and allowed us to be a bit more brave with it, because we've got the backing of funders who say they're so committed to youth voice, and that's given us the confidence in the way we're working'* (Grant holder)

*It felt like our application was our young ambassadors talking to their young trustees, and it was a dialogue between the young people rather than a management team talking to a formal board of trustees, ...we felt we could say things in our application we felt it would be understood because it was being received by young people.* (Grant holder)

### 6. Looking forwards

There was a sense of uncertainty from the Young People on whether they would be involved in the next stage of the cycle, which served as a reminder of the potentially time bound nature of the engagement:

*'At the moment [the positive impact for smaller charities] it's hypothetical - we won't necessarily see that or I don't know how much we will see that after this meeting, I don't what the plan is.'* (Young advisor)

However, from the strength of camaraderie it is clear this group has created bonds that will not be forgotten.

*'The connection between all of us has been massive. Coming out of the pandemic, its so important to harness that creativity with such brilliant people.'* (Young Advisor)

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### Thank you

My thanks go to the Blagrave Restart Young Advisors, to the staff who facilitated their work and to staff at the grant holder organisation who agreed to be interviewed. Thank you for your time, energy and insights into this fascinating and valuable process.

### Fig 2. Word cloud

Developed (using Nvivo), from the Young Advisor's full responses to the question:

'What two or three words come to mind when you think of the whole experience of the grantmaking you've been involved in with Blagrave Trust?'

