



Actions Speak Louder Than Words

**Lessons for funders from
Challenge and Change**

**CHALLENGE
AND CHANGE**

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The Challenge and Change Fund invests directly in young people who are emergent and have lived experience of the injustices they are trying to change. The Fund was designed by young changemakers for young changemakers, with the aim of supporting them to create meaningful and lasting change for themselves and their communities.

In 2022, The Blagrave Trust began a process of storytelling to support the second cohort of Challenge and Change Partners to reflect on their journeys and learning, help them to communicate their activities and visions and build momentum in support of their work.

In the process, the Partners often raised the same challenges and asked important questions about mapping the future of their work; many of these directed, specifically, at the funders with whom the Partners have interacted and the funding sector more broadly. Below are three of these crucial points of discussion.



This article is a call to action from the Partners to funders who want to meaningfully support young leaders with lived experience.

Funder expectations effectively exclude young people from marginalised communities. Let's address this from the jump.

“I look at a lot of funders’ websites and they’re like, ‘we don’t want you to reach out to us. We don’t take unsolicited requests,’ and I’m like, ok, that means you’re either funding people you already fund or based on the networks you have. So how likely is it that you’re lessening the barriers that young people or minoritised communities are facing?”

It is well documented that young people are affected by exclusion, racism, ageism, ableism, unconscious bias, underrepresentation and discrimination of various forms in all industries in the UK, including the funding sector.



Racist and micro-aggressive behaviours around ideas of worthiness arise, in particular, when young people are asked to prove themselves. Funders who typically rely on application assessment processes are, therefore, at risk of perpetuating racist ideas about who is and is not worthy of support and which causes matter.

Several Challenge and Change Partners told the Blaggrave Trust that they had been asked irrelevant and invasive questions by funders and employers about their lived experience. They often felt pressured to share beyond their comfort and were unsure about how sharing or oversharing their lived experience would affect the outcome of their applications for funding or employment.

Disabled and Black young leaders felt, at times, that people they tried to engage in their work had not taken them seriously; describing them as ‘an inspiration’, for example, but failing to meaningfully engage with their ideas. Similarly, young women, especially those working in groups of young women, said their ideas had been belittled and their projects, even massively impactful projects, had been spoken about on terms they found disrespectful; described as a fun activity to do with friends during the school holidays rather than work of great consequence and impact, for example.



LGBTQ+ young leaders felt that the funding sector believed it had ‘done its job’ to uplift LGBTQ+ people and had abandoned or deprioritised them in recent years. As an emerging generation of changemakers, they felt they were broadly supported in principle, but not in practice.

Partners suggested that funders should:

- **Have realistic expectations** about the time, skills and resources that young people have to develop, deliver and document their projects. Young people with lived experience of tackling an issue are often still experiencing the issue. If they have heard about traditional methods of documenting work such as preparing a theory of change or monitoring their outputs and outcomes, they often simply do not have the time to do this. They may also be ‘living the work’, meaning that they might not be able to prove the validity of their ideas or their capacity to deliver it

by the standards of the funder they have approached because of a fundamental misunderstanding about how changemaking is an essential part of the daily lives of many young people, not an extracurricular activity. Young leaders with lived experience may also find it problematic to prove the viability of their work and approach if they work with communities and focus on qualitative and intangible outcomes that are more difficult or they don't know how to document.

- **Be clear about eligibility** and, as a minimum contribution towards the work of young leaders with lived experience, **provide feedback** about unsuccessful applications for support.
- **Put measures in place at the earliest possible opportunity to prevent exclusion** by ensuring programmes are conceived and designed by the people they aim to reach.
- **Educate themselves** and establish an operational knowledge about community work, co-design and complex demographic identities. This should include deep and effective consultation with the people they aim to support, including by recruiting a more representative staff team. They also advised funders in the UK to make an urgent assessment about their relationship with colonialism, particularly funders distributing historic wealth, and how colonialist legacies manifest within their institution.
- **Show fairness and flexibility about meeting and reporting outcomes.** Changing long-term, systematic and widespread issues is not linear. Applying undue pressure upon young people through overly prescriptive grant agreements only hinders them.
- **Be ambitious leaders within the funding sector** and advocate for more equitable and accessible processes overall.
- **Market opportunities more directly to young people and minoritised communities.** Partners typically only heard about funding opportunities when other organisations or older mentors shared them; they were engaged directly by funders very rarely.

- **Consider awarding standardised amounts of grant funding.** More than one Partner observed that young and disadvantaged people may not ask for what they need.
- **Rule out reimbursement based systems and processes** for grantholders to access their funding, which exclude most young grantholders from safely spending their grants.

To solve long term issues, we need long term investment.

“What’s six months in the course of the sixty years that the movement has been going?”

Partners often feel that the funding opportunities they’ve explored would leave their work on the edge of a cliff. They spoke of the chronic short-termism in the UK funding sector and the lack of understanding demonstrated by funders about how change actually happens on any level, from community development to legislative changemaking.



They generally expressed their disbelief that funding programmes commonly last for a period of one to three years, which they felt indicated that some funders are out of touch with the issues they claim to care about and the communities they want to support. They interpreted the short-termism of the funding sector as an indicator that the people designing and distributing

funding do not understand the historic, systematic and structural nature of the issues that young people are reckoning with.

To meaningfully support young leaders with lived experience to create change, they recommend that funders should:

- **Provide consistent, multi-year funding** that is adequate for young leaders to deliver their most ambitious work. Partners often felt that the funding opportunities for which they were eligible significantly limited their ability to deliver their strategies with the maximum potential impact and the urgency with which they wanted to respond to an issue.
- **Collaborate with other funders** by pooling resources, multiplying the amount and duration of funding available to young changemakers.

Actions speak louder than words.

“It’s important for funders to move away from organisations that don’t understand lived experience leading this work, but do we set people up with the expectation that you have to prove you deserve to be in certain spaces by constantly reliving things?”

Partners overwhelmingly described the Challenge and Change application process as accessible, straightforward, unique and innovative with its focus on ideas and individuals. They noted the tension between sharing their lived experience while also not retraumatizing themselves or crossing their personal boundaries. Some of them noted that they had never heard the term ‘lived experience’ before making an application to the Fund and had not realised that their experiences and ideas alone were sufficient. Others who had engaged with funders more regularly shared their concern that, while many funders speak about the value of resourcing leaders with lived experience, their funding programmes did not reflect this.



The Partners suggested that a process of relationship building between funders and young leaders with lived experience, which often begins when they make an approach for support, would be truly responsive and impactful if:

1. Funding programmes defined lived experience more explicitly. For young people, in particular, whose ideas and experiences may have been dismissed, this would provide welcome validation that their ideas and experiences are enough.
2. Applications made questions about lived experience optional to answer. If lived experience has been clearly defined, applicants should be able to confirm whether or not their work is led by this.

3. Grantmaking processes included an informal or conversational stage, during which both funders and young people can assess if they can build trust and, crucially for young people, if funders can give them the support they need.
4. Grant application processes were more accessible and inclusive, inviting applications in a range of formats and providing short, clear and accessible guidance that sufficiently prepares applicants who have never written a funding application, or even about their work, before. Lived experience may be of protracted and systemic issues and young people may be fighting to challenge and change an issue every day. In the midst of this, they are unlikely to have formalised their actions, reactions and approach to changemaking by describing it in writing, for example. They should be supported to do this as early in the process of seeking support as possible.
5. Funders adopted a trauma-informed approach to all their activities by providing staff with training and establishing a continuous feedback and communication process with grant holders.

If you want more information and would like to discuss any of the insights or wider Challenge and Change learning please contact the Youth Engagement Manager Rochell Rowe: rochell.rowe@blagravetrust.org