

The Young People in Policymaking Fund

Final Learning Report

2022-2025

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young people

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Foreword

When Blagrove Trust funded 10 organisations back in 2022 to enhance young people's involvement in policy change, we anticipated a wide range of approaches to influence and were hopeful for some rich learning on what it takes to shift power in practice.

What has emerged over the course of the programme has been exceptional in both scope and depth. Partners have explored multiple routes to policy change — from engaging directly with ministers, parliamentarians, and civil servants, to influencing local authority strategies, service design, and public narratives. These approaches have shaped successful campaigns such as care experience being regarded as a protected characteristic, supported youth-led contributions to local decisions on issues such as highways and parks, and generated important advances on how to engage young people in practice.

Whilst incredibly diverse, all the organisations we funded not only put young people's voices at the heart of their work, but committed to ensuring their wellbeing was central too. The project has also demonstrated the value of supporting staff to learn and develop skills in policy change, and to spend time sharing and learning within a cohort.

When we launched the programme we did not dare to hope that youth voice would be central to the UK's new National Youth Strategy, and the restoration of the Erasmus scheme. We hope that the commitment by Government to co-develop policies with young people through initiatives like the national Youth Advisory Group and national listening campaigns will mean more opportunities for the incredible approaches we have seen on this programme to become embedded across the wider sector.

Our thanks to all the partners on this programme.

Tessa Hibbert
Head of Grants, Blagrove Trust

Author's Note

It has been a genuine pleasure to act as learning partner for Blagrove Trust's Young People in Policy Fund. I have felt privileged to co-facilitate the cohort meetings over the past three years. During this time, we have seen cohort members build strong relationships, exchange ideas and emerging practice, and develop in both personal and career confidence.

I would like to thank all cohort members for their commitment to the programme, and for the generosity with which they shared their learning, challenges, and insights. The learning sessions were consistently well attended and the collective knowledge gained helped make real-time impact. They also highlighted a clear infrastructure need for spaces where organisations can openly explore what good practice looks like in a field where there is no single blueprint or recognised gold standard for engaging young people in policy change.

The partners conducted their work during a period of significant political change, spanning a general election and the transition to a new government. They had to balance navigating a rapidly shifting policy landscape, staying focused on the strategic objectives they set out to achieve, and being responsive to young people's needs and interests. It is also important to note that, of the ten organisations involved, three have closed since the programme started. This speaks to the wider pressures facing the youth and voluntary sector, and the additional challenge of sustaining work that is intentionally experimental or seeks to do things differently. Ultimately, it is young people who feel the impact of these pressures most acutely. I hope that funders and government recognise the importance of a diverse sector with a shared commitment to ensuring that young people have been embedded into decision-making at all levels.

Caroline Macfarland
Directo, Common Futures

Executive Summary

In spring 2022, the Blagrave Trust launched the Young People in Policymaking Fund, providing multi-year grants to charities and non-profit organisations across England. The Fund aimed to support young people aged 16–25 with lived experience of social injustice to influence policy decisions shaping their lives – from national legislation and consultation processes, to funding or strategy decisions made by local authorities and public bodies.

Ten organisations were funded, each piloting or extending initiatives that centre young people as active participants in policymaking:

- **Become** is a national charity for children in care and young care leavers. It supported care experienced young people to lead the #GoneTooFar campaign, leading to other opportunities for young people to shape other initiatives and become embedded into the charity's wider operations.
- **The Centre for Education and Youth (CFEY)** trained young people with lived experience of injustice and marginalisation to conduct peer research as part of its Young Expert Citizens pilot. Each young person was then matched with a professional so that their insights shaped service design.
- **The Challenging Behaviour Foundation (CBF)** is a charity supporting children and young people with severe learning disabilities and communications challenges. Its What Matters to Me project worked with non-verbal young people, their families and carers to demonstrate the ways in which young people with complex needs can be supported to shape their own services.
- **Mancroft Advice Project (MAP)** used its network of youth clubs in Norfolk to support young people to lead a campaign on accessibility in parks. This worked to influence local council strategies as well as national recognition of 'the right to play'.

- **POMOC** is a migrant-led organisation building power, dignity, and justice among Eastern European women and gender nonconforming people in the UK. It employed young community organisers in three cities to codesign and lead campaigns and build community power and solidarity.
- **RECLAIM** worked with its existing youth groups in Bolton and Wigan to support working-class young people to become leaders and changemakers in their communities. This work evolved into a project focused on the future of the high street, enabling young people to apply their local lived experiences to national conversations about regeneration and equality.
- **The Warren** in Hull provides a range of services and creative opportunities for young people. By engaging its internal youth parliament, The Thing, The Warren has delivered policy interventions on suicide prevention, education reform, and policing, working with a range of public authorities and institutions.
- **We Belong** is a migrant youth-led organisation, working to influence the national debate around settlement and citizenship. It has enabled young people to engage directly with parliamentarians and civil servants to seek policy commitments on immigration fees.
- **4Front** worked with young people affected by trauma, violence, and racial injustice, combining community healing and peace building with policy and advocacy.

Common Futures was appointed as the programme's learning partner to create spaces for reflection and peer learning across the funded organisations. Learning activities included seven in-person cohort meetings, five online sessions, annual one-to-one interviews, and ongoing engagement online.

The final learning report shares key insights from the three-year journey – highlighting stories, strategies, and lessons to inform the work of

civil society organisations, funders, and policymakers committed to meaningfully shifting power to young people and enabling the conditions for them to play an influential role in public life.

Project design and iteration

The **three-year timeframe** proved appropriate for a programme of this scope and ambition, allowing time for set-up, co-design, and relationship-building with both young people and policymakers.. For some organisations, funding acted as a **springboard for piloting new initiatives** whilst for others, it provided stability to **consolidate and sustain core work**.

Across the cohort, the process of identifying topics for research, advocacy, and campaigning was varied. In some cases, **issues emerged directly from young people's lived experiences** — such as MAP's campaign for accessible parks or The Warren's work on suicide prevention. In others, topics **aligned with organisational priorities**, such as Become's focus on reforming the care system and WeBelong's work on immigration fees. Many partners intentionally bridged both, **reframing individual hardship as evidence of systemic injustice**.

The direction of several projects evolved in response to **external events, emerging opportunities, and shifting political contexts**. Partners described the importance of blending strategic intent with responsiveness to the realities facing young people.

Youth engagement

Across the cohort, there was a shared conviction that **policy change is more effective, legitimate, and sustainable when shaped by lived experience**. The vast majority of projects had a central aim to equip young people with the skills, confidence, and networks to engage directly with decision-makers and policy discussions.

A range of engagement methods were deployed across the cohort, from

youth work approaches, to peer research to community organising. Some partners sought to **embed young people within formal structures of influence** (e.g. youth boards, parliamentary groups), while others adopted more **distributed approaches which focused on nurturing young leaders**.

Meaningful engagement was achieved by **balancing structure with informality and creativity**, ensuring **accessibility**, integrating **healing and trauma-informed practice** in policy and campaigning work, and investing in young people as **leaders and knowledge holders**, not simply as participants.

Partners noted that the **relationships and sense of belonging** built among young participants were as significant as the policy outcomes themselves. Organisations that treated youth engagement as an **ongoing cycle of action, reflection, and influence** — rather than a one-off activity — fostered deeper commitment and long-term leadership.

Influence and policy impact

The Young People in Policymaking cohort demonstrated a wide spectrum of influencing tactics. These ranged from **direct engagement with policymakers to grassroots mobilisation and creative campaigning**.

Many partners sought to **balance participatory and representative tactics**, with peer influence and community building seen as important routes to power alongside formal policy channels.

Balancing **short-term wins with long-term systems change** was important in terms of managing young people's expectations. Some partners reported that young participants felt discouraged when meetings with councillors or MPs did not yield immediate outcomes — highlighting the need for clear communication about the “long game” of influence.

Creative storytelling and communications were central to many projects, serving simultaneously as evidence, campaigning tools, and confidence-building mechanisms. To address a tension between enabling young people to communicate on their own terms, and using formats which resonated

with conventional policymakers, most adopted a multi-dimensional communications approach.

Partners also recognised that **wellbeing and relational care are central to power-building**. The need for safe, informal spaces alongside formal advocacy was often necessary to sustain participation and prevent burnout, particularly for young people who had experienced persistent marginalisation.

Across the cohort, **perspectives varied on the importance of relationships with institutional actors** – while most partners saw these as necessary and of positive benefit, some viewed them as extractive and reinforcing power imbalances.

Infrastructure and funding

The **skills, experience, and adaptability of individual project leads** emerged as a critical success factor. In the early stages of the programme, recruitment challenges were common and some projects faced enduring training, skills, and capacity gaps.

Other **resource and capacity constraints** were a recurring challenge across the cohort. Cuts to youth services and unstable funding structures limited the ability of organisations to sustain long-term engagement, invest in staff development, and maintain institutional memory. **Staff turnover and organisational churn** disrupted both youth participation and policymaker relationships.

Since the programme began, three of the ten organisations have closed, reflecting the **fragility of the youth and civil society sector**. These closures also provided powerful lessons in **how to manage endings with integrity and care** – as shown by 4Front’s legacy archive and RECLAIM’s structured handover process for young participants.

Across all projects, **cultural sensitivity and responsiveness** to the emerging experiences of young people were notable strengths. Youth organisations played a **brokering role**, listening deeply to young people’s lived experiences and translating them into the language of public policy and national debate – examples include The Warren’s work on misogyny and extremism and POMOC’s amplification of young migrants’ experiences.

Beyond the specific goal of policy influencing, in several cases these projects acted as **testbeds for wider organisational change**, embedding young people more fully in advisory, governance, and leadership roles.

Learning programme and role of the learning partner

As learning partner, Common Futures undertook a dual role of **facilitating** the learning cohort and **gathering and synthesising emerging insights**. Learning activities were iterative, with formats and content refined through regular feedback from participants.

Participation in the learning activities was encouraged but not a mandatory condition of the grant. While attendance across the cohort was high overall, averaging over 80%, **smaller grassroots organisations were less likely to engage – particularly when funding was supporting their core operations** rather than a distinct project.

The most valued components of the learning programme were the **action learning sets, thematic knowledge sharing sessions, and informal networking opportunities**. Most participants reported leaving with clear, actionable takeaways; the action learning model was particularly praised as a practical and transformative tool for collective learning and reflective practice.

Concluding insights

We hope that the insights captured through the Young People in Policymaking Fund provides useful learning for civil society organisations seeking to work more deeply and meaningfully with young people, for policymakers who want to listen and be responsive to their views and experiences, and for funders who can support the space, trust, and resources to make impact.

This work has taken place within a **complex and shifting policy landscape** – including a General Election and new government. As public debate continues to grapple with the balance between populism and community power-building, and as votes at 16 becomes part of the national conversation, there is a renewed onus on **developing young people’s knowledge, capacity, and leadership**. Yet

the infrastructure to support this is fragile. The end of dedicated programmes such as Erasmus+ KA3 has left a **significant funding gap** for youth policy dialogue and cross-sector influencing and the closure of several long-standing youth organisations underlines the **precarity of a sector that is expected to do vital democratic work with limited, short-term funding**.

In this context, **strategic and collaborative investment between funders** is more important than ever to strengthen organisational capacity, and ensure that young people's policy influence does not depend on isolated, time-limited projects. Crucially, this programme also shows that when it comes to new forms of power-sharing, **reflection, adaptation, and collective inquiry are not ancillary to systems change — they are how it happens**.



1.Introduction

In spring 2022, Blagrove Trust launched the **Young People in Policymaking Fund**, offering multi-year grants to charities and non-profit organisations across England. The fund was created to support young people aged 16–25 with lived experience of social injustice to influence the decisions that affect their lives. Blagrove Trust adopted a deliberately broad definition of “policy” for this programme. It includes not only lobbying for new legislation but also inputting into government guidance, consultation processes, funding decisions, and strategies employed by local authorities and other public bodies.

Ten organisations were funded, each piloting or building on existing initiatives working directly with young people to influence policy outcomes. Partners were selected for funding by Blagrove Trust on the basis of having a strong model for change and potential for impact.

- **Become** is a national charity for children in care and young care leavers. It supported care experienced young people to lead the #GoneTooFar campaign, leading to other opportunities for young people to shape other initiatives and become embedded into the charity’s wider operations.
- **The Centre for Education and Youth (CFEY)** trained young people with lived experience of injustice and marginalisation to conduct peer research as part of its Young Expert Citizens pilot. Each young person was then matched with a professional so that their insights shaped service design.
- **The Challenging Behaviour Foundation (CBF)** is a charity supporting children and young people with severe learning disabilities and communications challenges. It’s What Matters to Me project worked with non-verbal young people, their families and carers to demonstrate the ways in which young people with complex needs can be supported to shape their own services.
- **Leicestershire Cares** is a regional organisation creating opportunities for care-experienced young people in Leicestershire. Its Joining Up Joining In project supported a group of young people to conduct research and campaigning activities which led to the recognition of care experience as a protected characteristic across three local authorities.
- **Mancroft Advice Project (MAP)** used its network of youth clubs in Norfolk to support young people to lead a campaign on accessibility in parks. This worked to influence local council strategies as well as national recognition of ‘the right to play’.
- **POMOC** is a migrant-led organisation building power, dignity, and justice among Eastern European women and gender nonconforming people in the UK. It employed young community organisers in three cities to codesign and lead campaigns and build community power and solidarity.
- **RECLAIM** worked with its existing youth groups in Bolton and Wigan to support working-class young people to become leaders and changemakers in their communities. This work evolved into a project focused on the future of the high street, enabling young people to apply their local lived experiences to national conversations about regeneration and equality.
- **The Warren** in Hull provides a range of services and creative opportunities for young people. By engaging its internal youth parliament, The Thing, The Warren has delivered policy interventions on suicide prevention, education reform, and policing, working with a range of public authorities and institutions.
- **We Belong** is a migrant youth-led organisation, working to influence the national debate around settlement and citizenship. It has enabled young people to engage directly with parliamentarians and civil servants to seek policy commitments on immigration fees.

- **4Front** worked with young people affected by trauma, violence, and racial injustice, combining community healing and peace building with policy and advocacy work.

Common Futures was appointed as the programme's learning partner to help capture and share insights from the work. Over the three years, our role has been to create spaces for reflection and peer learning across the funded organisations, and to capture insights and lessons that can benefit the wider youth, policymaking, and funding communities.

Learning activities

Learning activities have included:

- **In-person cohort meetings:** A total of seven in-person meetings over the three years brought together between one and three representatives from each partner organisation. They provided opportunities to track progress, share learning across the cohort, explore a shared learning question, and work through challenges together. Each meeting also included an action learning set, helping participants apply peer support and problem-solving methods to real issues.
- **Online cohort meetings:** We held five online sessions focusing mainly on action learning sets, as a space where partners could bring practical, policy, or personal challenges to the group and receive thoughtful peer coaching.
- **Annual one-to-one interviews:** Each year, we offered semi-structured conversations to partners as a chance to reflect in depth on their progress, challenges, and learning journeys. These provided richer qualitative insights to complement the group sessions.
- **Ongoing monitoring and engagement:** Throughout the programme, we regularly tracked partners' work by reviewing newsletters, social media activity, and project updates on their websites.

This continuous monitoring ensured we could capture emerging developments without placing an additional burden on partners to share information. We also curated a learning cohort newsletter to foster real-time learning and a sense of community amongst the cohort.

Together, these activities created a cycle of reflection, collaboration, and shared learning. This final learning report shares key insights from that journey — highlighting stories, strategies, and lessons to inform the work of organisations, funders, and policymakers committed to meaningfully shifting power to young people, and to building a strong civil society that recognises and invests in them as vital contributors.



Learning questions

Blagrove Trust outlined a number of learning questions for the programme:

- 1. What are partners doing: What models for creating change, what policy issues in focus, and what policy outcomes are being pursued?**
- 2. What are they learning about how young people can have policy impact, and what changes are they making to their work as a result?**
- 3. How are young people being supported to influence?**
- 4. How does this support affect their experiences of being involved in policymaking processes?**
- 5. How useful is the funding: what level and type of funding is needed to support this work; how can we maximise the impact of our resources in years to come?**

2. Learnings about project design and evolution

The three-year timeframe proved well-suited to a programme of this scale and ambition, providing the necessary space for careful set-up and relationship-building with young participants, partners, and policymakers. Over time, many projects naturally evolved in focus and approach, adapting to emerging opportunities, shifting contexts, and the interests of the young people involved.

New initiatives or extensions of core work?

The Young People in Policymaking Fund supported a deliberately diverse mix of approaches. For some organisations, the funding acted as a **springboard to pilot new initiatives or extend existing projects**. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, Become, Leicestershire Cares, and CFY used the opportunity to trial new models of peer research, deepen youth engagement in policy campaigns, and embed learning into their wider organisational strategies. These projects often had a strong experimental character, with clear cycles of testing, reflection, and iteration.

For others, the grant was more about **consolidating and sustaining core work**, ensuring that young people remained at the centre of established campaigns. We Belong, 4Front, and POMOC used the funding to deepen youth involvement and leadership within their ongoing advocacy. Meanwhile The Warren and MAP had pre-existing strands of youth-led campaigning, but the funding allowed them to continue this work more deliberately.

Rationale behind project design

- A natural extension of **youth development and leadership work**. For youth organisations (e.g. MAP, The Warren, Reclaim), supporting

young people to strategically influence policy was framed as part of helping them flourish, gain confidence, and build leadership skills, while also tackling the systemic barriers they face.

- Strengthening **credibility and legitimacy** of established policy influencing work was another driver, particularly for national service delivery and policy organisations (e.g. Become, Challenging Behaviour Foundation, CFY). These organisations often had strong policy track records, but saw value in becoming more porous and inclusive of young people with lived experience.
- Building **community power and solidarity** was another key goal for organisations (e.g. POMOC, WeBelong, 4Front) who view policymaking not just as a technical process but as part of developing young people as organisers and leaders. For these organisations, embedding young people in leadership and advocacy roles is a core strategy for movement-building.

Across the cohort, the process of selecting topics for research, advocacy, and campaigning was varied, reflecting different balances of the lived experience of young people and the strategic priorities of the organisations supporting them.

A few broad patterns emerged in how topics were identified:

- **Individual stories of lived experience:** In some cases, topics emerged directly from the lived experience of a specific young person, who was then supported by their peers to kickstart a campaign. MAP's focus on local parks and green spaces was inspired by one member of the group whose sibling used a wheelchair. The Warren's Black Holes campaign similarly stemmed from the personal experience of one of the members of their internal youth parliament.
- **Organisation-led strategic focus:** Some of the partners set out to explore campaign topics which aligned with the strategic aims of the organisation, with young people shaping the direction or

implementation. Become, for example, identified the systemic challenges around care-experienced young people and set a strategic agenda, further to which young people led on engagement, communications, and advocacy tactics.

- **Reframing individual experiences as systemic issues:** A number of projects deliberately worked to shift the narrative from individual hardship to systemic injustice. POMOC brought together Eastern European migrants to explore common barriers around housing, engagement, and community cohesion, turning personal struggles into collective demands. We Belong reframed the issue of immigration fee waivers as a structural injustice that locks young people into precarious legal status and damages their wellbeing. 4Front placed systemic racism at the centre of its work, showing how young people's experiences of criminalisation, policing, and exclusion cannot be solved through individual behaviour change but require structural transformation. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation demonstrated that non-verbal young people with complex needs can be included in policy discussions, challenging a systemic failing in how they are currently engaged.

Project iteration and evolution

One of the clearest lessons from the cohort is that policy work requires patience and persistence, alongside responsiveness and adaptation. Progress often came through persistence and the steady building of relational trust, both with and between young people and policymakers. This meant that in some cases, the direction of projects was **shaped by relationships with policymakers** as much as by the interests of young people themselves — illustrating a delicate balance between strategic intent and opportunism. For example POMOC's young community organiser in Cambridge focused on the private rental sector in part due to links with specific councillors and a new Renters' Forum, while RECLAIM chose to hone in on high streets because of emerging opportunities to influence local policy.

Some partners shifted focus to reflect **wider cultural or political events**.

At The Warren, conversations with young men led to new work tackling misogyny and racism, while at Leicestershire Cares young people moved from peer research into campaigning for care experience to be recognised as a protected characteristic after engaging with wider movements. This flexibility helped to ensure authenticity and relevance, but also relied on funders creating the conditions for experimentation, trust, and adaptation — recognising that meaningful policy influence is rarely linear.

Partner spotlight

Become - #GoneTooFar

How important is it to stay close to the people and places that matter to you most? This is the question at the heart of the #GoneTooFar campaign. Since 2023 a group of care-experienced young people have been working with Become to urge national policymakers to prioritise stability in the lives of children in care.

Over the last three years the group of young advocates have met regularly to shape the campaign's direction and outputs, growing more confident and taking on more responsibilities over time. They have joined conversations with Ministers and MPs, taken part in media appearances, and have co-produced communications outputs including a podcast and a video. In the run-up to the 2024 General Election, they launched a youth manifesto and gathered over 80 signatures on an open letter amplifying their message nationwide.

This work has fostered a deep sense of community and care. Young people have stepped up to facilitate check-ins and group meetings, have supported each other on social media and have learned valuable skills that enable them to continue to be involved in policy discussions on other issues. Participants have said that they've felt seen, validated and empowered. Their work is influencing not just policy conversations, but the strategic direction of Become itself, who are now using the lessons from this work to focus on community building and empowerment across the whole organisation.



Partner spotlight

CFEY - Young Expert Citizens

The Young Expert Citizens project, run by the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY), brought together two cohorts of young people from East Sussex with lived experience of navigating public services — including care, homelessness, and neurodivergence.

Training focused on research skills, ethics, and building trust, enabling participants to design and carry out individual research projects of their own. These projects investigated issues young people had faced personally, ranging from support in school to gaps in social care and housing systems.

After completing their peer research, each young expert was paired with a senior changemaker working in the area they wanted to influence. These connections allowed young people to directly inform policy and service development, and to gain insight into the professional decision-making spaces that shape their lives. The process helped young people to shift from being seen as service users to being recognised as researchers and policy contributors in their own right. The initiative deliberately emphasised valuing young people's time and perspectives, with paid opportunities, accessible sessions, and support beyond formal meetings.

Although CfEY closed in March 2025, the project has helped embed lived experience into different service design and policymaking contexts, modelling what it takes to meaningfully involve young people as collaborators, not just service users.





Story of Change: Young person

Daveena

Finding community and confidence by
#JoiningUpJoiningIn

When Daveena first connected with **Leicestershire Cares**, she was a care-experienced student navigating university life. Although confident enough to speak on a student Q&A panel, she lacked a sustained platform, peer community, or clear route to influence decisions affecting care-experienced people.



Over the next three years, Daveena became a core member of the **Joining Up Joining In** programme. Trained as a peer researcher, she worked alongside a group of young people who shaped campaign priorities themselves, adapting the focus as their interests evolved. Daveena describes the group as a place where she “found her own community” — forming friendships with others with shared experiences. She played a role in one of the programme’s most significant achievements: influencing Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland local authorities to recognise care experience as a protected characteristic. As her confidence grew, she stepped into public leadership roles — speaking at conferences, visiting Downing Street, and appearing on ITV News.

Daveena has since graduated and taken part in international volunteering. She describes feeling equipped with the skills and know-how to campaign independently and now aspires to become a public speaker on education and the care system. Her story shows how sustained, peer-led engagement can foster community, nurture leadership, and enable young people to see themselves as capable agents of change long after a project ends.

3. Learnings about youth-led approaches

Across the cohort, there was a conviction that policy change is most effective, credible, and lasting when it is shaped by lived experience. On this basis, each funded organisation sought to equip young people with the skills, confidence, and connections needed to engage meaningfully with decision-makers and policymaking processes. However the means and methods to achieving this goal varied, reflecting the different missions and working styles of each organisation.

Engagement models

Each organisation, in different ways, sought to create spaces where young people were not only supporters or signatories of a cause, but were shaping and leading the design and direction of influencing activities. This included:

- **Employing young people as paid coordinators or peer researchers**, as in POMOC’s decision to hire young organisers from migrant backgrounds, MAP’s original model employing a youth activist coordinator, or the CFEY’s model training young citizen researchers.
- **Engaging young people in campaigning activities through a youth work ethos**, building trusted relationships, providing safe and informal spaces, and centring wellbeing as much as policy outcomes. The Warren, RECLAIM, Leicestershire Cares and 4Front exemplified this approach.
- **Embedding young people in formal structures of influence**. We Belong’s Parliamentary and Policy Working Group gave young migrants a platform to influence legislative debates, while The Warren’s internal youth Parliament ‘The Thing’ set agendas and ratified campaigning decisions.

Recruitment and initial engagement

- Signposting/ referrals with service users or youth group participants.
- Open recruitment for paid or voluntary positions.
- Community organising activities – workshops and listening sessions; building grassroots networks.

Engagement tactics used across the cohort



Co-creating outputs

- Campaign co-design – co-developing campaign goals, messages, tactics and outputs
- Storytelling and media training – podcasts, videos, blogs, and media engagement to amplify voices and share experiences.

Building knowledge and evidence

- Research with (and by) young people – peer interviews, youth-led surveys.
- Creative dialogue spaces – using sport, art, and music to open up conversations on sensitive issues.
- Study visits – trips to different towns/ cities to understanding of issues, or to Parliament/ Downing Street to learn about the policy process and engage directly.

- **Supporting young people to lead others**, with an emphasis on community organising and collective action. Projects like POMOC's positioned young people as organisers themselves – running campaigns, building networks, and cultivating successors to carry the work forward.

Effective and impactful engagement

A number of direct insights have emerged around what it takes to success motivate, engage, and retain young people:

- **Blending structure, informality, and creativity.** Across the cohort, organisations created spaces that combined structured training and campaigning with informal, youth-friendly environments. A balance of social, cultural and creative activities, alongside knowledge transfer and skills development means young people can bring their whole selves to the table. Sometimes this balance is achieved through the wider work of the organisation – The Warren's creative activities, from music-making to games, enables young people to build trust, share perspectives, and challenge harmful ideas. In other cases, the project is delivered using methods and formats which encourage informal dialogue and community-building, for example Leicestershire Cares podcasting training.
- **Attention to accessibility.** Recognising specific learning needs and providing flexibility was key to sustaining engagement over time. CFEY built accessibility into its training for young researchers through hybrid online/ offline participation, enabled the attendance of support workers if needed, and offered payment for the young participants. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation started by observing young people in familiar environments such as in educational settings or with family or carers, to understand their communications needs and develop a highly tailored approach.
- **Young people at the centre of knowledge creation.** In recognition that lived experience can drive rigorous, ethical research, organisations such as CFEY and Leicestershire Cares demonstrated that with the right support, young people can conduct authentic and

insightful research. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation explored a different model where professionals unlocked the insights from young people through a range of tailored activities which suited their needs and communication styles.

- **Youth voice doesn't automatically mean diversity.** Youth participation is powerful, but it does not automatically guarantee diverse representation. Become highlighted a need to proactively engage young Black men, while POMOC deliberately broadened its Eastern European base to build solidarity with other racialised groups. These examples also show that identity-based campaigns can be powerful but they need not be uninclusive.
- **Healing is political.** Several partners demonstrated that supporting young people to influence policy must also attend to their wellbeing and sense of identity. Become and Leicestershire Cares worked with care-experienced young people where healing from trauma was inseparable from campaigning for systemic change. 4Front showed how community safety, justice, and abolitionist principles can reframe work with young people criminalised by the state, centring healing, cultural identity, and collective power. This reinforced that policy change is not just technical but deeply bound up with belonging, recognition, and care.
- **Investing in leadership, not just participation.** Across a number of projects, there was a shift from simply enabling young people to "have a say" to investing in their long-term leadership. POMOC trained young migrants as community organisers, The Warren and We Belong embedded youth leadership into governance, Become and Leicestershire Cares cultivated confident media spokespeople. This focus on leadership development has created pipelines of young strategists and campaigners who can carry skills and networks forward beyond individual projects.
- **Identity, experience, and collective belonging.** Partners reported that the relationships forged between young people were just as important as the policy outcomes. Leicestershire Cares' JUJI project



Story of Change: Young person

Aimee

Communicating through care and creativity

Young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities are often excluded from participation, with their views dismissed as "too difficult" to access. Aimee's story challenges that assumption. Through the **What Matters to Me** project, Aimee was placed at the centre from the outset.

Taylor, the Project Lead at the **Challenging Behaviour Foundation**, spent time getting to know Aimee in her everyday environments, visiting her at home and at college to understand how she communicates, what she enjoys, and what helps her feel comfortable and engaged. Activities were carefully planned to be accessible, relevant, and enjoyable – from accessible swimming with peers to personalised art and sensory sessions.

By placing Aimee at the centre of the project and investing time, care, and creativity in understanding how she communicates, the project challenged prevailing assumptions about whose voices count in policy and practice. The impact of this work extends beyond Aimee's individual experience, offering a compelling case for rethinking how inclusion, engagement, and influence are defined and designed.



Theories of participation

There are various established theories of democratic engagement and civic participation which provide a lens through which to consider the different ways young people can influence decisions and exercise power within policymaking spaces.

The Lundy Model of Participation

This framework proposes four interrelated elements that must all be present for meaningful engagement with young people:

- **Space:** A safe and inclusive environment to express their views freely;
- **Voice:** Enabling access to information and using appropriate communication methods;
- **Audience:** Their views must be listened to by those with the power to make decisions.
- **Influence:** Potential for young people's views to be acted on and inform change.

In practice, the Lundy Model has been widely adopted across education, youth policy, and public services because it offers a structured yet adaptable approach to sharing power responsibly.

Hart's Ladder of Participation

Adapted from the Arnstein model of citizen participation, Roger Hart's ladder visualises eight "rungs" of young people's involvement. These range from manipulation and tokenism, where engagement is not meaningful or influential, to a hierarchy of participation where young people's input meaningfully shapes an outcome and structures ensure power is shared.

The model emphasises participation as an evolving process of empowerment, where young people understand how their involvement leads to real influence over decisions.

8. Young People-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults

7. Young People-Initiated and Directed

6. Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions

5. Consulted and informed

4. Assigned but informed

3. Tokenism

2. Decoration

1. Manipulation

Kirschner's Framework of Youth Activism

Drawing from research on collective action and social justice in community and educational settings, Ben Kirshner positions youth participation not just as involvement in adult-designed structures, but as a process through which young people develop critical consciousness and build collective power. Participation is framed as:

Collective: Rather than focusing solely on individual empowerment, shared identity and solidarity create the conditions for lasting impact – this is particularly relevant when young people face systemic barriers such as racial injustice, economic inequality, or political exclusion.

Relational: Young people's agency emerges when they are supported to link personal experience with structural issues. Adults play a facilitation role, providing mentorship, access to resources, and opportunities for reflection, but young people drive the agenda and determine strategies.

Transformative: By linking youth engagement to wider power structures, it encourages practitioners and policymakers to consider not only how young people are involved, but how that involvement challenges or reconfigures existing systems of authority.

helped care-experienced young people feel seen and supported by peers with similar backgrounds. 4Front created healing and solidarity spaces where young people could process trauma while organising collectively. These dynamics reinforced the value of community as the foundation of political work. On the other hand, some partners reported that some issues (e.g. care experience, mental health) carry a clearer, more unifying identity than others (e.g. homelessness). Identity, stigma, and intersectionality matter deeply in engagement strategies. Some groups deliberately chose issues which they saw as universal – for example MAP’s focus on accessible parks and RECLAIM’s focus on high streets.

- **Engagement as a cycle, not a project.** While a common challenge was sustaining motivation amongst young people, organisations that positioned youth involvement as an ongoing cycle of action and cross-pollination helped build lasting momentum. Become framed its work not just as a single campaign but part of a cycle where young people develop skills, take action, and then carry those capacities into future advocacy projects. Even in the midst of closure, RECLAIM sought to connect its young people to other programmes and organisations before closure. The concept of good endings and legacy through networks was also exposed in 4Front’s closure.

What does Youth-Led really mean? Applying participation theory to practice

One of the liveliest discussions with the learning cohort centred on what it means for a project, or organisation, to be ‘youth-led’.

Some organisations had strong **youth governance** models in place, with young people driving and ratifying all aspects of the organisation. This included The Warren’s youth parliament and We Belong’s core group.

For some, youth leadership meant positioning **young people as strategists**, who drew on their lived experiences and perspectives to identify the issues and priorities. Adult staff then played the role of

facilitators – brokering meetings, coordinating logistics, and translating ideas into policy engagement. Examples include MAP and Leicestershire Cares. This model recognises the pressures on young people’s time and the fact that they may not always have the experience or networks to carry out every aspect of a campaign themselves.

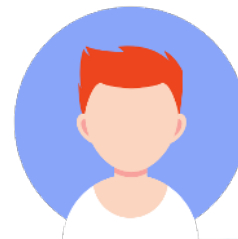
For others, being youth-led required **young people to directly execute research and campaigning activities**, whether as paid peer researchers at CFEY or community organisers at POMOC, or the letter writing undertaken by Become’s group or RECLAIM’s public surveys in high streets. These approaches aimed to actively develop the skills, confidence, and authority to influence decision-makers themselves.

Discussions surfaced the contradictions and risks on both sides. Having young people “rubber stamp” ideas could be seen as tokenism, whereas if young people are expected to shoulder all the work, there is a danger of exploitation. If adults have free reign in implementing an idea, then this might be pragmatic, or inauthentic. In some cases enabling young people to work through challenges and experience making mistakes may have been seen as the best way of fostering leadership, however could also lead to demotivation and fatigue.

Comparing these insights with established theories of youth engagement, the Young People in Policy cohort demonstrates that the ladder analogy may not fully reflect the complexity and dynamism of youth engagement. Engagement in formal governance structures and processes (the higher ‘rungs’ of Hart’s ladder) may rely on a narrow group of young people who already are confident enough to engage. Conversely, looser, more relational, or more informal approaches can foster deeper trust and therefore feel more meaningful to young people, but may demand a higher level of adult support and facilitation to be truly inclusive and translate insights into policy impact. Hart’s ladder nevertheless provides a useful tool for organisations to critically reflect on whether participation builds genuine agency and power.

Kirshner’s framework adds an important complementary perspective when it comes to distinguishing between youth engagement in representative democracy and youth participation within participatory

democracy (forms of collective decision-making and civic action that include community organising, social movements, mutual aid, and grassroots campaigning). Kirshner's model situates youth engagement within wider movements for equity and systemic change, emphasising that participation is both a developmental experience and a political act. This is reflected in insights from the cohort which have challenged the assumption that policy impact is separate to individual impact on the young people involved. Developing participants' identity, sense of personal/ collective power, and building skills and leadership pathways for individuals was seen as crucial to achieving not just policy change in the near-term, but also long-term systemic impact.



Story of Change: Young person

Harry

From exploitation to leadership

Harry, now 24, first came to **The Warren** as a young person carrying deep experiences of exploitation, addiction, and disconnection. As a teenager, he was groomed by far-right groups who exploited his vulnerability, offering him drugs, accommodation, money, clothes, and a sense of belonging in exchange for adopting racist and misogynistic views. Looking back, Harry describes how easy it was to be drawn in when there was a lack of positive role models and direction.

After entering rehab, Harry received sustained support from The Warren, which became a turning point in his life. He trained as a substance misuse worker and now works at The Warren two days a week, supported by a youth worker as his mentor and a SEN specialist. When conversations about misogyny, racism, and far-right narratives began emerging on a national level — influenced by online figures like Andrew Tate and popular culture such as Netflix's *Adolescence* — Harry raised these issues as an agenda for The Warren, and was invited to lead what became the **Manipulated** campaign.

Through **Manipulated**, Harry leads conversations that many organisations struggle to have — not by condemning young men or delivering simplistic messages that “misogyny is bad,” but by building trust and offering credible alternatives. Drawing on his own journey, he speaks openly about how young men are groomed both online and offline, and why awareness alone is not enough. As Harry has argued publicly, including in national media interviews, young men need something to belong to — and if positive alternatives are absent, harmful ideologies will fill the gap. His story demonstrates how, with the right support, lived experience can be transformed into powerful cultural leadership.

Partner spotlight

The Warren - Youth-led campaigns

How does a youth work approach empower young people to set the agenda for youth policies locally and nationally? At The Warren in Hull, young people meet fortnightly to steer the organisation's work through its internal parliament, The Thing. The result is a string of bold campaigns and influencing initiatives.

Young people's perspectives have shaped suicide prevention work with National Highways, which secured mandatory training for contractors working on bridges. This led to The Warren's further involvement influencing suicide prevention and mental health strategies with public health and the NHS. Another campaign called "Black Holes", calls on schools to appoint governors with lived experience of poor education, and has been adopted by the largest sixth-form college in the region and discussed with the Department for Education. A third strand of activity has sought to change the way that Humberside Police works with young people, and has led to steps towards a new Charter focusing on the needs of neurodiverse young people.

Responding to young people's lived experiences is a key part of The Warren's influencing activities. In the last 18 months, tackling rising misogyny and racism among young men has emerged as a new focus area. Through trusted relationships and creative projects like its music programme, the Warren creates space for honest dialogue while actively countering extremist narratives. Work on a local level, such as the Hold Onto Hope campaign, is amplified by a national partnership with Hope Not Hate and a consortium of other organisations around England fighting extremism. This has been recognised with an invitation to Downing Street in autumn 2025.



Partner spotlight

POMOC - Young Migrant Organisers

How do you ensure young people are at the heart of movement building in local communities? POMOC's answer has been to employ young people as community organisers in its hubs in Cambridge, Birmingham, and beyond — training and supporting them to lead campaigns and build grassroots networks.

In Birmingham, a young community organiser spearheaded a number of actions which brought together Eastern European migrants, other migrant communities, and British residents for training on workers rights and creative discussions on the concept of home. This work has resulted in a group of 15 regular participants, with emerging leaders stepping forward to take ownership of ongoing community organising. In Cambridge, another young coordinator worked with local ESOL students on renters' rights, sharing knowledge from advice charities, gathering migrant stories, and liaising with councillors to push for change in the private rental sector. In other hubs such as Liverpool and London, young migrants have been engaged through broader community engagement on issues including housing justice, trans rights, and anti-racism.

Across all its hubs, POMOC aims to support and invest in young migrant organisers so that they are not only empowered to make changes in their own lives but also to shape longer-term change through solidarity and collaboration.



Partner spotlight

RECLAIM - Young Policymakers youth groups

RECLAIM's Young Policymakers project empowered working-class young people in Wigan and Bolton to influence policy by grounding it in lived experience, local identity, and collective imagination.

Young people were supported to explore civic issues, develop campaigning skills, and connect with each other, eventually honing in on a specific theme: the future of high streets.

Young people led local surveys, contributed written evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Built Environment, and produced a powerful animated video sharing their vision for inclusive town centres. Participants took part in field trips to other town centres and cultural spaces to inform their views on what good high streets might look like and how policy can achieve this.

Although RECLAIM closed in May 2025, staff acted swiftly to conduct a thoughtful closure session that celebrated the work and relationships built over the programme. RECLAIM's legacy lives on in the skills, networks, and self-belief that young people gained – and the seeds of influence are carried forward by these Young Policymakers.



4. Learnings about influencing approaches and policy impact

The Young People in Policymaking cohort demonstrated a wide spectrum of influencing tactics and targets, ranging from formal political engagement to grassroots organising and creative campaigning.

Influencing activities

In many ways, the policy ambitions of the projects were not specific to young people or youth organisations, however the ways in which participation was designed to achieve these outcomes required youth engagement expertise (see previous chapter). Broad categories of work included:

- **Supporting young people to participate in formal policy processes and structures.** Across many of the projects young people were guided and supported to present evidence, contribute in consultations and inquiries, and participate in representative forums. This included Parliamentary groups such as All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) and Select Committees, local authority forums, and government calls for evidence.
- **Brokering direct relationships between young people and policymakers.** This varied from one-off meetings with MPs, civil servants, and councillors, to more sustained engagement such as CFEY's approach to pairing peer researchers with senior professionals for mutual learning.
- **Building other strategic relationships and partnerships.** In some cases the organisation worked behind the scenes to build relationships with policymakers (MPs, councillors, civil servants, commissioners, police officers) and sector stakeholders to build support and alliances for the young people's work.
- **Pursuing specific procedural activities.** In some cases, the relationships with policy makers were linked to legislative interventions such as a Private Members Bill, Early Day Motion, or Parliamentary Question. Specific interventions such as FOI requests were used to obtain evidence and hold institutions accountable
- **Influencing institutional or sector practice.** This included drafting charters to shape institutional responses and commitment to change (e.g. The Warren's work with Humberside police, MAP) or working with sector organisations to embed knowledge and best practice (We Belong, TCBF).
- **Amplifying young people's voices and lived experiences.** Young people were supported to communicate their experiences, including through media interviews or by creating multimedia outputs which authentically shared their stories.
- **Campaigning and mobilisation.** This included petitions and co-signed letters to demonstrate public or sector backing (e.g. We Belong's visa fee campaign), and engage a wider group of young people.
- **Empowering young people within the organisation.** Some organisations used formal structures like Youth boards/ parliaments/ structured forums (The Warren, We Belong) to ensure young people set priorities and oversee decisions, while others aimed to foster leadership and capacity building of young people/ young employees within the organisation (MAP; POMOC; The Warren).

Effective policy influencing

At the beginning of the programme, most partners had identified who they wanted to influence and how. However their focus often shifted or expanded over time, adapting for a range of reasons:

- **Balancing participatory and representative tactics.** Influence wasn't just about formal levers of power but also about culture-shaping and community-building to open up policymaking spaces in different ways. Many projects focused on the power of peer influence and community building in addition to formal policy channels, while some organisations, particularly those with a radical or grassroots campaigning ethos, chose to limit their involvement with institutional decision-makers in favour of community power approaches.
- **Adapting focus to local/ national/ institutional sources of power.** Most projects started with an ambition to either influence national or local policy – this focus tended to reflect devolved governmental powers and statutory obligations (i.e. where policy is decided). However over the three years, projects changed their focus for a number of reasons – being opportunistic in response to changes in policy direction or political interest, emerging relationships, or changes within the organisation. For example, CBF's early ambitions included targeting central government, but focus shifted to local authorities, schools, and practitioners to be more impactful in shaping practice. MAP and The Warren found that their national alliances influenced their local work.
- **Balancing short-term and long-term goals with the expectations of young people.** A number of partners reported the challenge that young people felt demoralised if their immediate actions and activities (such as a meeting with a councillor) didn't result in a tangible result. To this end there was a need to balance immediate impact in young people's communities and longer-term systemic influence.
- **Multi-directional influencing and unusual alliances.** While creating opportunities for young people to directly engage with policy makers was an important component of every project, building strategic partnerships and coalitions was equally important, particularly as projects progressed. Some projects found credibility and traction by working with partners outside of

the traditional youth or charity sector (e.g. The Warren with Balfour Beatty on suicide prevention), by joining national coalitions and aligning with broader movements (e.g. POMOC working with renters' rights and workers' rights groups), or by proactively training and upskilling sector partners (e.g. We Belong training community sector organisations; CBF sharing resources with SEND advocacy groups). These alliances and coalitions helped to amplify young people's voices.



Representative vs. Participatory democracy

Representative democracy

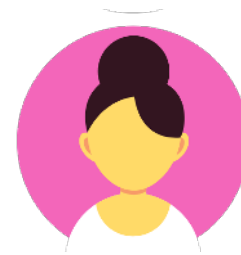
In representative democracy, citizens effect change through institutions, and elected officials or appointed decisionmakers act on behalf of the public. Young people's engagement in this context is about using formal mechanisms – such as elections, consultations, and legislative processes – to influence decisions. This may require training or support to gain knowledge, confidence, and institutional literacy.

Participatory democracy

Participatory democracy emphasises collective action, shared decision-making, and people organising together to build power within a specific community. Young people's engagement in this context may resemble community organising, grassroots movements, or mutual aid networks. Participation seeks to build collective power, shift public narratives, and push institutions to act.

Many of the Young People in Policy partners have engaged with both representative and participatory systems and processes, recognising that systemic change requires influence inside and outside formal decision-making arenas.

- **The power of storytelling.** Creative communications and storytelling was used for a range of different reasons – as qualitative evidence, as campaigning and awareness-raising tools, and as a way for young people to engage authentically. From Leicestershire Cares' My Care Journey publication to CBF's work amplifying the voices of families of children with learning disabilities, sharing stories helped humanise complex policy issues and add depth to policy asks. Creative approaches weren't just seen as outputs – they were central to building young people's confidence, visibility, and power. However, some projects reported a challenge in finding the balance between enabling young people to tell stories on their own terms using formats that felt authentic to them, and using formats which resonated with conventional policymakers. Many found the answer was to employ a multi-dimensional approach to communications
- **Wellbeing and relational approaches create power.** One of the early challenges which surfaced was around how to support marginalised young to campaign effectively in therapeutic ways, without retraumatising or overburdening them. Intentionally embedding healing justice and peer support into political practice was viewed as an important element of creating structural change (e.g. 4Front's abolitionist, trauma-informed model). Other projects were rooted in the need for safe, informal spaces alongside formal campaigning, where young people could bring their whole selves (e.g. The Warren's blend of creative and relational practice).
- **The effects of deep-seated power imbalances.** Across the cohort, there was variation in how organisations perceived – and therefore approached – engagement with institutional influencers and policymakers. For some, traditional lobbying and influencing models were extractive; one participant described a meeting with a local council as "free consultancy," reflecting a sense that their organisation received little in return. This perspective highlights the way in which power imbalances between grassroots organisations and policy structures impact not only outcomes, but propensity to engage in the first place.



Story of Change: Staff member

Taylor

Translating unheard voices into policy and practice

Taylor joined the **Challenging Behaviour Foundation** in December 2022 as Engagement Officer, leading the **What Matters to Me** project. She had previous strong experience in relational work with young people with complex needs, but limited exposure to policy influencing.

Taylor developed highly personalised engagement approaches, working closely with young people with severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities, working closely with families and support networks to understand what mattered most in their lives. Taylor also worked across teams within CBF, and was supported by the project's steering group, which brought together family carers, academics, and policymakers. Their collective expertise supported her to experiment with new engagement methods and think creatively about how insights could be shared and used. Participation in the Young People in Policy learning cohort further strengthened her confidence and gave practical advice on running parliamentary events and navigating political spaces.

Taylor developed a stronger understanding of policymaking systems and the incremental nature of influence. The project marked a professional shift – from engaging young people with complex needs in deeply relational ways, to ensuring that their lived experiences are recognised as essential evidence for policy and practice.

Partner spotlight

We Belong - #OutOfTheLoop

We Belong is a campaigning organisation working with 1,300 young migrants nationwide across the UK. Its #OutOfTheLoop campaign seeks to address the financial toll of Home Office fees, which prevent many eligible young people from securing permanent status under the new 2022 Immigration Rules.

Originally focused on securing a shorter route to settlement, the campaign expanded when visa fees rose from £2,608 to £3,845 between 2023 and 2024, with further rises in 2025. These unaffordable increases have led We Belong to advocate for an extension of the fee waiver for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) applications.

The campaign combines grassroots mobilisation, direct support, and parliamentary advocacy. Young migrants participate in information sessions, legal advice clinics, and storytelling workshops to reframe their experiences as systemic issues rather than personal challenges. In 2024, We Belong organised a parliamentary event attended by cross-party MPs, launched an Early Day Motion, and contributed evidence to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's review of the fee waiver system.

By centring lived experience, We Belong has built a strong coalition of young leaders, policymakers, and sector allies. The #OutOfTheLoop campaign has led to the establishment of a Parliamentary and Policy Working Group for young people who are interested in political campaigning and influencing.



Partner spotlight

Leicestershire Cares - #JoiningUpJoiningIn

What does it mean to be care-experienced — and how can those experiences shape the future of care itself? At Leicestershire Cares, young people have been stepping into the role of peer researchers through the Joining Up, Joining In project, using their lived experience to explore, question, and influence systems around them.

From campaigning for care experience to be recognised as a protected characteristic to developing podcasts and creative media, participants have gained not only new skills but a renewed sense of confidence and purpose.

Young people have focused on policy influence in three local authorities — Leicester City, Leicestershire County, and Rutland — successfully advocating for formal recognition of care experience in local equality and inclusion policies. They've also made a short film about their experiences and taken the campaign all the way to Downing Street to challenge housing barriers caused by 'local connection' rules.

But perhaps the most important transformation has been personal. The project has not only helped young people influence local and national systems — it's fostered a sense of belonging, shared purpose, and mutual support amongst the young participants, empowering them to speak up about big issues like identity and their hopes for the future.



Partner spotlight

Mancroft Advice Project - Everyone has a Right to Play

How can children and their families benefit from inclusive play spaces in their communities – and who decides what these look like? At Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) in Norfolk, young people have been working to ensure that play spaces are accessible to all children. Sparked by a personal story shared in a youth group session, the Right to Play campaign has grown into a movement involving over 30 young people who are influencing policy conversations at the local and national level.

From field trips to accessible playgrounds across the country, to meeting with councillors, planners and play equipment designers, the young people have developed an informed and compelling vision of inclusivity. Their advocacy led Norfolk County Council to sign the Right to Play Charter, and some young campaigners now sit on local planning boards. Nationally, MAP also has a seat on Play England's strategy committee – giving young voices a platform in shaping policy across the country.

This campaign has been as much about growing confidence as it has been about growing impact. Youth workers used their unique skills to support the young campaigners, providing a consistent source of support, signposting routes to influence, and celebrating tangible wins along the way. Moving forward we look forward to hearing more about other advocacy efforts supported by MAP, including on youth homelessness, trans rights, and mental health – driven by the evolving interests and identities of the young people they support.



5. Learnings about sector infrastructure and funding needs

Beyond youth engagement and policy influence, learning from the Young People in Policy programme offers insights into the infrastructure and conditions that youth organisations need in order to sustain meaningful work in the face of pressures that are felt across the wider civil society sector. On the other side of the coin, these needs are also distinctive strengths which are important to effect systems change. This chapter draws these threads together, offering reflections that can guide funders, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to strengthen the ecosystem that enables young people to shape the structures and decisions that affect their lives.

- **Recognising and supporting lived experience leadership.** Like other groups who have experienced marginalisation and disadvantage, the young people's lived experiences helped open doors, win over support, and build community. ***However, while funders increasingly specify this as desirable or essential funding criteria, there is a need to recognise that the intensive and patient nature of supporting lived experience must be resourced appropriately.***
- **Being culturally sensitive and trusted.** One of the strongest lessons from this programme is that meaningful and effective work relied on the partners' strengths in being culturally sensitive and responsive – able to pivot their work in line with the real, evolving experiences of young people. This underscores the distinctive brokering role that organisations play: they listen deeply to young people's lived realities and translate these insights into the language of policy and public debate. Trusted relationships enable sensitive conversations, whether with young people who have experienced structural marginalisation or trauma (e.g. migrants and care leavers), or with those who are at risk of harmful cultural narratives like misogyny. In

different ways, all the partners worked to foster and enable mindset shifts within young people themselves, growing young people's confidence and self-perception so that they moved from seeing themselves as recipients of services to recognising their own power as changemakers. ***The lessons for funders here is that investing in the scaffolding and conditions that allow trust, confidence, and agency to grow is vital and takes time.***

- **The importance of individual practitioners.** Across the cohort, the skills, experience, and commitment of individual project leads emerged as a critical success factor. In the early stages of the programme, many organisations faced recruitment challenges in finding individuals who had the existing skills needed to balance youth engagement with influencing. Youth workers often bring deep relational expertise but can find the technical and procedural world of policymaking difficult to navigate. Conversely, policy professionals may have strong influencing skills but less experience in youth engagement or trauma-informed practice. The most consistent initiatives were led by adaptable staff who could learn and evolve in post. In some cases, project leads undertook specific training or proactively sought mentoring to strengthen their skills in either youth work or policy influence. Relationships were crucial to every project and staffing churn disrupted continuity of relationships with both young people and policymakers. ***However these dynamics are less likely to be reported to funders.***
- **Sector-wide instability and capacity limitations.** As well as individual skills and expertise, other resource and capacity constraints were a recurring theme across the cohort. Years of cuts to youth services and chronic underfunding have left organisations operating on limited budgets. Tight budgets meant that recruitment of young participants may have not been as expansive or inclusive enough to ensure diversity and representativeness. Meaningful youth-led influence relies not only on the enthusiasm of young people and the creativity of practitioners, but also on the organisational infrastructure and stability needed to maintain relationships over time. ***Funders therefore have a crucial role to play***



Story of Change: Organisation

RECLAIM

Scaffolding young people's collective power

RECLAIM was founded on the belief that inequality prevents working-class young people with talent, imagination, and drive from fulfilling their leadership potential. Its Young Policy Makers programme reflected this ethos, bringing together young people from Bolton and Leigh to identify and campaign on the issues that mattered most to them.

Through the programme, young people explored issues rooted in their everyday lives, including the decline of high streets and the lack of accessible green spaces. Participants were supported to connect these local realities to wider conversations about regeneration, investment, and inequality, taking inspiration from other national examples of community-led regeneration, Transition Towns, and community wealth building. This sometimes involved productive tensions – for example some young people expressed a desire for Starbucks or Primark on their high streets, which did not neatly align with RECLAIM's critical stance on multinational businesses; staff nevertheless treated these views as legitimate expressions of young people's preferences for affordable, familiar, and accessible spaces.

RECLAIM's closure in 2025, shaped by sector-wide pressures such as underfunding and staff capacity, highlighted the importance of responsible endings. Despite uncertainty, the programme manager facilitated careful transition planning, including a dedicated closure event with young people and personalised referral summaries to other networks. RECLAIM demonstrated that even in closure, the role of the organisation is crucial to protect relationships, honour young people's contributions, and support them to carry forward the confidence, skills, and sense of agency they have built.

in providing flexible, longer-term funding that allows organisations to build capacity, retain skilled staff, and broker relationships with policymakers without compromising their values or mission.

- **Wellbeing of staff as a key resource consideration.** The wellbeing of individuals, particularly those who deal with campaigning, frontline support to beneficiaries, and trauma-related advocacy, has been increasingly recognised by funders as important to stability of the organisation. In the second year of the programme Blagrove Trust began offering supplementary wellbeing grants to all partners to fund self-selected activities such as team away days and self-care initiatives for staff. These grants were not intended to be linked to the policy influencing work, but to support the resilience of the people leading and executing this work. ***This shows that 'funder plus' initiatives can be tailored to reflect an ethos of care.***
- **Navigating endings strategically.** It is important to acknowledge that three of the ten funded organisations have closed since the programme began. While each closure was driven by specific circumstances, collectively they reflect broader structural challenges in the youth and civil society sector, including chronic underfunding, staffing pressures, and the emotional toll of frontline work. Importantly, these closures also offer lessons in how to manage endings with care and integrity. 4Front, for example, approached its wind-down proactively, providing thoughtful transition packages for both young people and staff and establishing the 4Front Legacy Archive to preserve learning and impact. RECLAIM created individual handover plans for young participants, mapping campaign skills, support needs, and referral options, and involved them in shaping their next steps. These examples demonstrate that even as organisations close, it is possible to prioritise the wellbeing of participants, preserve knowledge, and maintain continuity of relationships, offering a model for others navigating transitions. ***It is therefore important that funders are open and approachable about endings so that organisations can discuss their plans in advance and be intentional about closure.***

- **The potential for organisational transformation through youth voice.** The projects often reshaped the organisations themselves, adopting young people in advisory and governance roles within their organisations and externally. Become's work influenced its wider strategy, leading to investment in new community engagement roles such as a Community Manager. At CFEY, peer research with young people shifted the organisation's methodology, embedding more participatory and accessible practices into its research model. The Warren's campaigning has strengthened its reputation as a trusted local anchor, deepening external partnerships with bodies like Hope Not Hate. In each case, youth voice initiatives produced ripple effects inside the organisations as well as externally. ***This evidences the potentially significant impact of funding for pilots and experimental work.***

A final insight concerns the broader conditions that made this work possible. None of the projects operated in a vacuum: every partner brought existing infrastructure, relationships, and organisational capability – however stretched – to mobilise and support young people to influence policy. All the funded organisations were already established enough to secure funding in the first place, and all but one partner (CFEY) had pre-existing youth communities or participation structures to build from. The outcomes achieved over three years were therefore not simply the product of a discrete £30,000 per year grant, but of organisations leveraging their accumulated expertise, trusted brands, and long-standing networks.

This raises an important systemic question: if we want youth influence on policy to become more widespread, deeper, and more sustainable, what would it take to build the underlying resilience of the sector itself? The cohort's experience suggests that meaningful youth-led policymaking depends on a stable ecosystem of organisations with the time, trust, and capacity to scaffold young people's engagement. Strengthening that ecosystem – not only funding individual projects – is therefore essential to enabling young people's voices to shape policy at scale.



Story of Change: Organisation

Become

From campaign delivery to community-led change

Become's #GoneTooFar campaign began as a focused effort to challenge the widespread practice of moving children in care far from the people and places that matter to them. Care-experienced young people were supported to engage directly with MPs and Ministers, co-produce campaign materials, and mobilise national attention through media appearances and petitions.

As the campaign developed, young people moved from contributors to co-designers – leading sessions, shaping messaging, and supporting one another. Participants built confidence, skills, and strong peer relationships, describing feeling “seen, heard and validated”. Relationships between participants became a central outcome in their own right, with peer support, humour, and care sustaining engagement even when progress felt slow.

The project has reshaped Become's organisational approach. What began as an experiment has influenced wider strategy, including investment in new staff roles such as a Community Manager, in recognition that regular convening, trust-building, and sustained connection with care-experienced young people are not add-ons but core to effective influence. This journey illustrates how youth-centred policy work can act as a catalyst for organisational change – reshaping not only what an organisation campaigns on, but how it understands participation, power, and long-term impact.

Partner spotlight

Challenging Behaviour Foundation - #WhatMattersToMe

What does meaningful youth voice look like when a young person doesn't use words to speak? The Challenging Behaviour Foundation (CBF) has been working to answer this question with #WhatMattersToMe – a project led by young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

Through gentle, personalised support and partnerships with hospices and education providers, 11 young people from Kent, Sussex and southeast London have helped shape the direction of the project.

From sensory outdoor spaces at schools to influencing local SEND policy through learning disability partnership boards, the project has demonstrated that systems can be shaped by those with the most complex needs – if the right structures are in place. Family members, carers, and support workers have played a key role alongside the young people themselves, offering insights that have already informed Kent County Council's learning disability and autism strategy. CBF has also shared learning at national events, including with MPs and sector leaders.

With a multimedia manifesto, co-produced resources, and a growing peer learning network, CBF is equipping other organisations and councils to do better when it comes to involving young people with severe learning disabilities in shaping services and policy from the ground up.



Partner spotlight

4Front

4Front was a youth-led organisation rooted in community and resistance, working with young people who had experienced trauma, violence and racial injustice. Through holistic support — including one-to-one casework, peer workshops, skills training, and liberation education — 4Front enabled young people to heal, build collective identity, and take action. Its members, many of whom had direct experience with the criminal legal system, were equipped to challenge injustice both locally and nationally.

4Front's model was one of legal empowerment and narrative justice: Projects and campaigns addressed the root causes of harm, including joint enterprise laws, the gang matrix, and systemic racism across housing, education and policing.

Young people were not only supported to process their experiences, but also to articulate, document, and use their stories to influence policy and participate in strategic litigation. Funding from Blagrove Trust supported efforts to scale and codify this community-based model, and to deepen understanding of how grassroots experiences can shape legal and structural change.

In 2025, 4Front made the decision to close. The closure process prioritised care: support packages for members, closure funds for staff, and the creation of a permanent archive to honour 4Front's legacy. The young people and staff continue to use the skills and knowledge they have gained to be involved with other movements and alliances.



6. Insights about learning design and implementation

As the learning partner, Common Futures was tasked with facilitating the learning cohort and gathering and synthesising insights from the learning activities.

We set out to gather the learning insights that would be useful for:

- **Sharing best practice** with organisations working with young people and supporting them to influence policy;
- **Informing policy makers** who want to learn more about how to work alongside young people and the impact/ added value this can create;
- **Providing insights for funders**, including Blagrove Trust and others who are interested in funding and supporting targeted interventions and structures to support young people's influence on policy and address power imbalances in the policymaking process.

This final section reflects what we heard from participants on the learning programme itself, in terms of the value of learning content and activities and how learning activities have contributed to impact.

Designing and iterating the learning activities

The learning activities were initially outlined at the start of the programme, but we adopted an iterative, participant-led approach, adjusting meeting agendas in response to what partners needed at each stage. Two main design principles shaped the early framework. First, we were mindful of the **limited time and capacity** of both individuals and organisations, and of the **power dynamics** that can influence engagement in funder-led learning programmes. Participation



What is action learning?

An action learning approach is a structured method for solving problems and building skills through group reflection and questioning. In an action learning set, a small group of peers comes together to explore real-life challenges brought by its members. Rather than giving advice, participants practise active listening and ask open, probing questions that help the person presenting the issue to think differently and generate their own solutions. This creates a supportive environment where people learn from both working on their own challenges and hearing how others approach theirs, blending action with reflection in a way that builds confidence, accountability, and shared learning.

in the learning offer was encouraged but not a condition of funding, ensuring that organisations could engage on their own terms. Second, the learning programme was designed to be **responsive and directly useful to partners in real-time**. We aimed for sessions to offer tangible value for organisational development, practice, and personal learning. To support this, partners were asked in their grant applications how they hoped to contribute to and benefit from the cohort, and what they wanted to learn from others. We tested our proposed model and learning framework through annual one-to-one interviews, and we sought regular feedback after each meeting to refine the content, format, and facilitation of future sessions.

How the learning activities were received

At each of the Young People in Policy learning cohort meetings, at least two hours were set aside for **action learning sets** to explore and share practice-based, policy, or personal challenges amongst the cohort. Participants were encouraged to try applying their new knowledge and insights in practice. These were consistently and almost unilaterally the most popular element of the learning programme. Most respondents

reported having actionable takeaways and the format has been widely praised as a practical and effective learning tool.

Participants also highly valued the **thematic knowledge sharing**, and the majority of participants reported that the meetings promoted them to reflect on methods for making policy changes and improving youth engagement, as well as personal skill development.

The opportunity for **informal networking** and building professional relationships across the sector was another consistent positive for the participants.

Finally some participants valued the safe space (via the action learning sets) for **reflection on their organisation's internal operations and team dynamics**, though this was not a primary focus of the meetings.

Learning challenges and contradictions

The learning programme was relatively simple and activities ran smoothly and achieved consistent attendance over the three years. There were nevertheless questions and challenges to navigate:

- **Capacity of different organisations to engage.** Although overall attendance in the online and in-person learning meetings averaged over 80% (despite participation being non-compulsory), smaller grassroots organisations were less likely to attend or to recognise the value of participation – particularly when funding was supporting core operations rather than a discrete project. This raises questions about whether the learning offer should have been co-designed at the outset, or whether it is inevitable that a funder-led programme may present a capacity burden for some partners.
- **Mixed skills and roles of participants.** The cohort included a mix of chief executives and senior leaders, project managers, and youth workers, and project managers. While we intentionally grouped peers with similar experience levels for some breakout sessions,

it remained challenging to design activities to suit a range of knowledge and confidence levels.

- **Staffing churn affecting continuity.** Changes in organisational staffing meant that different representatives joined the learning cohort over the three-year course of funding. Although this stabilised towards the end of the programme, it limited the potential for deeper peer relationships within the cohort.
- **Mismatch between learning priorities and preferences.** In the feedback questionnaires, participants expressed interest in developing technical skills e.g. communications, community organising, and policy processes. However, when asked what sorts of activities they wanted, learning from external speakers was consistently rated as a low priority, meaning we focused mainly on sharing existing knowledge within the cohort than bringing external expertise in.
- **Capacity and confidence to lead peer-learning.** Many participants said they wanted more peer-led contributions and presentations from fellow organisations, but the majority were hesitant to lead or facilitate sessions themselves.

Specific learnings for Blagrove Trust and other funders

The following insights may be useful considerations for funders designing and commissioning learning programmes in the future:

- **Balancing funder presence and power dynamics.** From the outset we were mindful about the way that funder presence could shape conversations. Representatives from Blagrove Trust joined whole-group updates and thematic workshops as equal participants but deliberately stepped back from action learning sets, so that these remained spaces for candid reflection and challenge. The consistent

praise for the action learning sessions suggest this was a positive decision.

- **Clarity of roles between the funder and the learning partner.**

Some changes in Blagrove Trust's staffing meant that relationship management changed over the course of the programme. As a result, the learning partner was sometimes assumed to be the de facto point of contact, with a degree of ambiguity around oversight and monitoring risks.

- **Evolving programme design and uncertainty about funding continuity.**

At the outset, partners received multi-year grants (most applied for three-year funding), but it was not yet clear whether the programme would continue beyond the initial cohort. When Blagrove Trust later shifted its strategic priorities and confirmed that the fund would conclude after three years, some partners may have experienced uncertainty or disappointment. In hindsight, clearer framing as a pilot or time-limited initiative might have helped manage expectations from the start.

- **Shifts in funder strategy and definitions of youth-led practice.**

During the programme, Blagrove Trust launched other new initiatives and commenced a strategic review, which included a more precise definition of the criteria for 'youth-led' initiatives. Some of the cohort partners felt that they, as well as the young people they work with, could have made an informed contribution to this work. This highlights a tension between the desire to avoid burdening partners with extractive requests for engagement or feedback on other initiatives, and involving existing partners in shaping the future funding ecosystem.



Story of Change: Staff member

Jo

Bridging young people's lived experiences and policy change

Jo joined **Become** as Campaigns Manager in December 2022. She previously spent over 16 years in youth engagement at The Children's Society, after which she worked with the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. While Jo already had a strong background in youth engagement, this project offered a new opportunity to deepen her skills in policy influencing and campaigning.

Through the **#GoneTooFar** campaign, Jo supported young people to meet ministers, create media content, and shape campaign strategy. This journey required upskilling herself in some areas and she actively to deepen her knowledge through training with Sheila McKechnie Foundation and through close collaboration with other teams at Become including the communications team. Jo also highlighted the value of being part of the Young People in Policy learning cohort, finding inspiration in practical ideas shared by peers — such as using shared meals to create welcoming spaces for young people.

For Jo, the project has reinforced that effective youth-led campaigning is not about having all the answers, but about building the right relationships, staying open to learning, and creating the scaffolding that allows young people's voices to genuinely shape the future of care. Peer learning and shared challenges strengthened her practice and expanded collaboration both within and beyond the organisation.

7. Conclusion

The Young People in Policymaking Fund has demonstrated what becomes possible when **young people's lived experience is treated as central—not supplementary—to policy development, campaigning, and systems change**. We hope that the insights captured through the learning programme are informative for civil society organisations seeking to work more meaningfully with young people, for policymakers who want to be responsive to their views and experiences, and for funders who can support the spaces and resources to make impact.

The ten partners took a diverse range of approaches to enabling young people to shape agendas, build relationships with policy makers, and deepen their individual agency and collective power. The cohort shows that there are many interpretations of what youth-led truly means in practice. Partners emphasised that their organisations act as essential infrastructure, providing **scaffolding, safeguarding, expertise, and continuity** required for young people to participate meaningfully in what can often be technical, slow-moving, or emotionally demanding policy work. For many, the priority was not to meet a fixed definition of youth-led, but to ensure that young people's insights were genuinely heard, respected, and integrated, even when adults were required to translate ideas, hold responsibility, or navigate institutional systems on their behalf. A critical principle shared across the cohort was that young people should always have agency over how and to what extent they participate.

This work has taken place within a complex and shifting political landscape – including a General Election and new government, as well as race riots and the resurgence of extremism and misogyny. Projects had to evolve over time to be **responsive to the lived experiences of young people** as well as the **opportunities for strategic influence and relationship-building**.

Partners consistently emphasised that the developmental impact on young people was inseparable from effective policy impact. Many

projects intentionally built skills, confidence, and leadership capacity, recognising that **normalising young people's involvement in policy spaces** is itself a powerful form of influence. Many partners intentionally sought to reframe young people's own **sense of identity**: from service users to legitimate political actors shaping the systems that affect their lives. This shift was evident in approaches that helped young people recognise the significance of their everyday experiences, develop as leaders, and hold decision-makers to account. In this sense, participation functioned as both a developmental experience and a political act.

As public debate continues to grapple with the balance between populism and community power-building, and as votes at 16 becomes part of the national conversation, there is a renewed onus on developing young people's knowledge, capacity, and leadership. Yet the infrastructure to support this is fragile. The end of dedicated programmes such as Erasmus+ KA3 has left a significant funding gap for youth policy dialogue and cross-sector influencing and the recent closures of several long-standing youth organisations (including three of the ten funded organisations on this cohort) underlines the **precarity of a sector that is expected to do vital democratic work with limited, short-term funding**.

In this context, **strategic and collaborative investment** between funders is more important than ever to strengthen organisational capacity, and ensure that young people's policy influence does not depend on isolated, time-limited projects. Crucially, none of the achievements documented here occurred in isolation: partners drew on existing infrastructure, expertise, and relationships – assets that require long-term investment to maintain.

This report also underscores the value of **reflective, non-extractive learning processes** when organisations are trialling or evolving new forms of power-sharing. Space to test ideas, share uncertainties, and exchange practical knowledge with peers proved valuable. As funders increasingly invest in youth voice, community power, and lived experience leadership, the sector must continue to create environments where experimentation is supported, challenges can be surfaced safely, and learning is recognised as a core component of systems change.

About Blagrove Trust

The Blagrove Trust works to bring lasting change to the lives of young people; investing in them as powerful forces for change and acting upon their right to be heard in pursuit of a fair and just society.

Blagrove has been practising a relational and trusting approach to partnership for many years – this continues to sit at the heart of how we fund. We treat our partners – young and old, grassroots and growing, or well-established charities – as equals. We approach those relationships in a spirit of humility, collaboration and mutual learning.

About Common Futures

Common Futures is a think-and-do tank specialising in participatory research and engagement which supports and strengthens young people's role in local and national public life.

We work directly with young people to share their experiences, build dialogue and public leadership skills, and codesign policies and services which improve their lives. We also support organisations and institutions to work more effectively with young people, respond to their perspectives and priorities, and share learning with others.