

Final learning report DRAFT v1.1

Blagrove Trust Young People in Policymaking Fund

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Executive Summary

In spring 2022, the Blagrove 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. 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 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 their local lived experiences with 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 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 the role of the learning partner

The **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**.