YOUNG PEOPLE ACCESSING FUNDING

2025

BARRIERS, CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

WE DON'T SETTLE

ef Esmée Fairbairn FOUNDATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROJECT DETAILS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GLOSSARY

CAVEAT ON LANGUAGE

Some of the terms included in this glossary, such as "BAME," do not reflect the preferred language of We Don't Settle or SBA Consulting. These terms appear only where they are referenced in secondary data sources reviewed as part of the desk research, or where they were quoted verbatim by research participants.

Throughout this report, We Don't Settle and SBA Consulting use the term minoritised communities to reflect our understanding that groups are actively minoritised by structural and systemic processes, rather than naturally existing as minorities.

WHEN WE SAY	WE MEAN
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BFI	British Film Institute
DBACE	Deutsche Bank Awards for Creative Entrepreneurs
DYCP	Developing Your Creative Practice
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
FUEL	micro-funding programme for social action for young people by We Don't Settle
STV	STV Children's Appeal
Minoritised Communities	The term Minoritised was coined by Yasmin Gunaratnum in 2003. Gunaratnum used a constructionist approach to explain why people are actively Minoritised by others rather than naturally existing as a minority.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people from racialised and minoritised backgrounds continue to face significant barriers when trying to access funding for creative and community-based work. While funding opportunities for youth-led projects have increased in recent years, many systems remain inaccessible, opaque and unresponsive to the needs and realities of young people. This research explores those barriers, foregrounding the voices and experiences of young people themselves.

Commissioned by We Don't Settle, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and delivered in partnership with SBA Consulting, this research project set out to understand the everyday and systemic challenges young people encounter when applying for funding in the arts, heritage and community sectors. It builds on the learning from We Don't Settle's FUEL programme, a micro-funding initiative designed by and for young people, and responds directly to frustrations shared informally by those trying to access traditional routes to support.

The research combined a detailed desk review with three strands of primary data collection:

- A focus group with young people engaged in creative and community projects
- A youth survey completed by 59 participants
- Interviews with funding representatives across the sector

The findings highlight several recurring barriers:

- Funding opportunities are difficult to find and often circulated within closed networks
- Application processes are time-consuming, unclear, and full of institutional jargon
- Formats often exclude neurodivergent applicants and those without professional experience
- Young people report feelings of overwhelm, self-doubt and exclusion throughout the process
- Many funders lack understanding of youth-led or community-rooted ways of working

Despite these challenges, young people remain deeply motivated to deliver creative and community projects that reflect their identities and experiences. The research also identifies examples of good practice, such as open-format applications, peer support, and direct relationships with funders.

This report offers a call to action. It invites funders and sector leaders to listen to young people, reflect on their current practices, and commit to creating more inclusive, accessible and youth-centred funding systems. By challenging the norms that currently shape who gets funded and how, we can move towards a more equitable cultural sector where all young people have the opportunity to thrive.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

We Don't Settle commissioned this research, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and delivered in partnership with SBA Consulting, to better understand the barriers young people face in accessing funding for arts, heritage and community projects. The aim was to explore these challenges in greater depth and open a wider dialogue with funders about how funding systems can become more inclusive and accessible.

We Don't Settle supports racialised and minoritised young people to lead change through creativity. Its programmes are rooted in the belief that young people deserve power, opportunity and recognition in shaping the cultural sector. The FUEL programme, developed by We Don't Settle, was a direct response to the difficulties young people face in accessing funding. It offers micro-grants, peer-led decision-making and wraparound support to enable young people to deliver their own creative or community-based projects.

FUEL has had strong outcomes. Young people have successfully launched projects, built confidence, and shaped funding decisions for their peers. But it also surfaced deeper frustrations. Many young people shared informal feedback about how difficult it remains to access traditional funding, even after gaining experience through FUEL. They spoke of inaccessible processes, institutional jargon, and a lack of trust in youth-led initiatives.

This research was commissioned to respond to that feedback and create space for young people's insights to inform sector-wide learning. Through a desk review, focus group, survey and funder interviews, it builds a picture of the systemic and everyday barriers young people face. The report is both a reflection and a call to action. It invites funders and sector leaders to listen, reflect and collaborate on practical steps to make funding more inclusive, transparent and youth-led.

1. 2 METHODOLOGY

This research explores the challenges young people face when accessing funding, particularly within the creative sector. It draws on insights from a focus group with eight participants and a survey completed by 50 respondents. The aim was to understand key barriers, identify gaps in existing funding structures, and highlight potential improvements to ensure more equitable access to funding opportunities.

1.2.1 DATA COLLECTION

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights from a focus group discussion with quantitative and qualitative responses from a survey. The focus group provided an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, while the survey allowed for broader data collection, capturing a wider range of perspectives from young people navigating the funding landscape.

The focus group was facilitated by researchers from SBA Consulting, using a semi-structured format to encourage open discussion while ensuring key themes, such as accessibility, transparency, and systemic barriers, were consistently explored. The survey gathered both structured and open-ended responses, offering insight into common funding challenges and unmet needs.

1.2.2 PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

The research engaged young people aged 18 to 30, many of whom have experience applying for funding to support their creative projects. Participants represented diverse backgrounds, with varying levels of engagement with formal funding processes. Some had successfully secured funding, while others had encountered significant barriers or disengaged entirely due to accessibility issues.

1.2.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participants, all responses have been anonymised. Focus group discussions were conducted in a safe and open environment, allowing participants to share their experiences freely. Informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants were given the option to withdraw at any time.

Discussions around project rejection and funding challenges were anticipated to be sensitive topics, with the potential to bring up feelings of frustration or disappointment. Researchers adopted a trauma-informed approach, ensuring that participants were supported throughout the discussion. Participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable with, and the facilitation approach prioritized active listening, empathy, and a non-judgmental space.

1.2.3. DATA ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis was conducted on the focus group discussion, identifying key recurring themes across participants' experiences. The survey responses were analysed using a combination of quantitative analysis (to identify trends and common barriers) and qualitative coding (to capture nuanced experiences and suggestions for improvement).

1.2.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

While this research provides valuable insights, it is based on a small sample size and may not fully represent the experiences of all young people seeking funding. However, the findings align with existing concerns raised by young creatives and emerging professionals, reinforcing the need for systemic improvements in funding accessibility and distribution.

2. DESK REVIEW

2.1   POLICY SHIFTS AND THE NEOLIBERAL TURN

Years of government underfunding and austerity, compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, have left the arts, heritage, and community sectors severely under-resourced. With an Arts Council increasingly criticised as no longer fit for purpose (Omer, 2025), and a continuing shift in responsibility for cultural and community provision onto philanthropy, it is not surprising that young people face significant barriers when trying to access funding for arts, heritage, and community projects. As the current government signals its intention to reinvigorate arts and culture, albeit under tight fiscal constraints, this desk review is both timely and necessary in examining the realities of the funding landscape in Britain.

A review of the literature reveals several intersecting themes: changes in public policy, the impact of structural inequality, the limitations of the current funding process, and the challenges organisations and individuals face in simply accessing available funding. These themes collectively illustrate the difficult terrain young people must navigate to secure resources for their work. The desk review also exposes a major gap in the literature: there is currently very little research that focuses specifically on young people's experiences of accessing funding in these sectors.

To understand the barriers young people face in accessing funding, it is crucial to examine the wider political and policy context that has shaped the UK's funding ecosystem over recent decades. Since the 1980s, neoliberal ideology has significantly influenced funding policy.

Under Margaret Thatcher, the British government introduced measures that encouraged philanthropy to take the place of public funding in the arts, heritage, and community sectors. These shifts were rooted in a broader ideological project to reduce the size of the state, what Thatcher referred to as "rolling back the frontiers of the state" (The Guardian, 1999). This neoliberalisation of the arts was heavily criticised at the time for undermining the principle that access to culture should be a right for all citizens, regardless of class, race, or geography.

> **THE ARTS, HERITAGE, AND COMMUNITY SECTORS, ALREADY MARGINALISED IN GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES, EXPERIENCED SEVERE CUTS**

The austerity agenda introduced by David Cameron's government in 2010 deepened these shifts. Presented as a necessary response to the national deficit, austerity involved widespread reductions in public spending, combined with tax increases. The arts, heritage, and community sectors, already marginalised in government priorities, experienced severe cuts. Greer (2020) outlines three major consequences of austerity for the cultural sector: immediate reductions to the Arts Council's grant-in-aid, the amalgamation of public bodies responsible for cultural administration, and direct cuts to arts organisations themselves.

This period entrenched a model of funding that privileges resilience, self-reliance, and market competitiveness. As a result, organisations are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only artistic or social value but also entrepreneurialism and financial sustainability. This model disproportionately disadvantages smaller organisations, those working in under-resourced communities, and groups led by or serving minoritised populations. At the same time, the rhetoric of "resilience" has often masked the structural inequalities that limit some organisations' ability to survive without core support.

2.2 STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND INEQUALITY

Accessing funding is not only shaped by policy changes and economic factors, but also by deep-rooted structural inequalities. Individuals and organisations seeking funding for arts, heritage, and community projects often face barriers related to racism, classism, Islamophobia, and sexism. These barriers are not incidental, they are embedded in the systems that govern who receives support, whose work is recognised, and what is valued.

One significant barrier is racial and religious bias. Research by Butt et al. (2021) found that 79% of Muslim-led organisations believed they would find it easier to access funding if they were not Muslim. To navigate this bias, some groups have even resorted to using 'less Muslim-sounding' names on Charity Commission registrations to avoid discrimination. These workarounds reveal the extent of institutional bias and the psychological burden placed on minoritised organisations simply to be taken seriously.

> ## THE ARTS, HERITAGE, AND COMMUNITY SECTORS, ALREADY MARGINALISED IN GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES, EXPERIENCED SEVERE CUTS

Although some funders now ring-fence funding for specific racial or ethnic groups, this is not always accompanied by an understanding of broader structural barriers. Ereira-Guye and Godfrey (2023) argue that funders frequently lack the lived experience and contextual understanding required to assess applications from organisations led by and for marginalised communities. As a result, these groups "have to work twice as hard to make sure their work is understood and valued." Structural issues are also perpetuated by the underrepresentation of certain communities within local authorities and funding bodies themselves. Without diverse representation at the decision-making level, issues affecting minoritised communities are often not recognised as priorities, and systemic change remains elusive.

2.3. ACCESS TO FUNDING: PRACTICAL AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Beyond structural discrimination, many organisations face practical and systemic issues in the day-to-day reality of applying for and securing funding. The pandemic disrupted traditional funding streams, leaving organisations uncertain about the post-Covid landscape and how future funding will be distributed. Organisations that had previously relied on corporate partnerships, for example, reported that support "fell off a cliff edge with immediate effect" (Butt et al., 2021). Similarly, those who depended on individual donations, often a core funding stream, saw a steep decline, with contributions still not returning to pre-pandemic levels. For many, diversifying income has become a matter of survival.

However, expanding funding streams is easier said than done. A recurring theme in the literature is the over-reliance on public donations, particularly among smaller or religious organisations, due to a lack of capacity or expertise to explore alternative income sources. Some do not have the resources to pursue competitive grants or corporate sponsorships, making public donations the only accessible route. Butt et al. (2021) highlight that "the lack of income, stretched resources, huge reliance on voluntary support, and the fall in community fundraising" are among the most pressing challenges faced by many organisations.

The pandemic further depleted already scarce reserves, yet this impact has not been sufficiently recognised by funders. Despite the extraordinary work delivered during the crisis, few organisations received support that acknowledged the income lost or the increased demand on services. There is a strong argument that funders should consider both historical loss and crisis contributions when assessing need and determining awards.
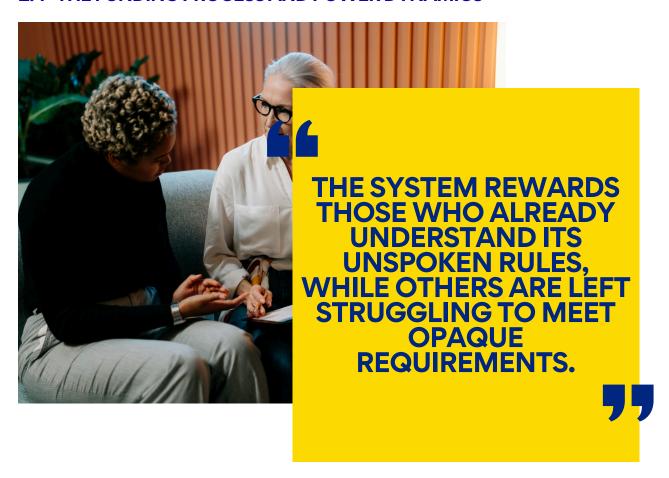
Smaller organisations are often forced to prioritise service delivery over fundraising because the application process is time-consuming, technical, and rarely aligned with their operating capacity. Many are volunteer-led, and few grants cover core costs, resulting in a cycle where a lack of funding forces continued reliance on unpaid labour, and that same reliance limits the time and skill available to pursue new funding. The funding system, in this sense, is not neutral - it favours organisations that are already well-resourced and well-connected.

These barriers are intensified for organisations without paid staff, fundraising experience, or institutional networks. As a result, many avoid applying altogether, believing they are unlikely to succeed. This creates a landscape in which the organisations most embedded in their communities, and often best placed to deliver meaningful impact, are systematically excluded from the resources they need to thrive.

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2.4 THE FUNDING PROCESS AND POWER DYNAMICS

> **THE SYSTEM REWARDS THOSE WHO ALREADY UNDERSTAND ITS UNSPOKEN RULES, WHILE OTHERS ARE LEFT STRUGGLING TO MEET OPAQUE REQUIREMENTS.**

A recurring theme in the literature is that funding systems, far from being neutral mechanisms for distributing resources, often reinforce existing inequalities. The way funding is structured, administered, and evaluated tends to benefit larger, more established organisations while marginalising those that are community-led, grassroots, or working informally. The system rewards those who already understand its unspoken rules, while others are left struggling to meet opaque requirements.

Larger organisations tend to have the "hallmarks of success" that funders look for, polished governance structures, prior grant history, and formal networks of influence (Ereira-Guye & Godfrey, 2023). These traits are not neutral; they are often rooted in privilege, capacity, and historical access. As such, funding frameworks that favour track records and reputation risk reproducing exclusion. Smaller organisations, particularly those led by marginalised groups, often lack these "success markers" through no fault of their own, but are then penalised for it.

There is a clear power imbalance between funders and applicants. The process of applying for funding is rarely collaborative or transparent. Centralised systems and top-down governance models, particularly in public funding, can force local authorities to fund priorities dictated by central government, even when these do not reflect community needs (MiFriendly Cities Network, 2021). Decisions are often made without genuine engagement or understanding of local contexts, leaving applicants feeling disempowered or misjudged.

Some organisations report that they "have to work twice as hard" to make their work understood by funders who lack the lived experience to assess it properly (Ereira-Guye & Godfrey, 2023). This problem is compounded when funders place rigid expectations on how applicants should demonstrate value, often privileging quantitative metrics, formal evaluation, or institutional language over community impact and lived experience.

As the MiFriendly Cities Network highlights, "it can be difficult to explain the complex needs of vulnerable migrant, refugee and BAME communities and how our projects will meet those needs to funders." Organisations that operate more informally, common in grassroots or culturally specific contexts, are often dismissed as lacking credibility or rigour, even when their work is deeply embedded and effective.

There is growing consensus in the literature that funders must take more responsibility for equity. This includes recognising how their processes create barriers, and shifting their role from gatekeeper to enabler. Funding criteria should be designed with an understanding of diverse organisational structures, especially in communities where informality is not a weakness, but a response to lived realities of exclusion. Funders must also move beyond the assumption that financial sustainability or "professionalism" looks the same in every context.

2.5 TRANSPARENCY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

For many individuals and organisations, the funding application process itself is a significant barrier. Complex forms, unclear criteria, inaccessible language, and inconsistent terminology all contribute to confusion and frustration. Organisations often find themselves second-guessing what funders are looking for, without adequate feedback or support.

These issues disproportionately affect those who are less embedded in institutional networks or do not speak the dominant 'language' of the sector. There is a growing call for funders to improve the clarity and accessibility of their application systems. This includes simplifying language, explaining funding criteria more clearly, and offering concrete examples of what "success" might look like. But beyond written processes, the literature also points to the importance of direct communication. Simply creating more opportunities for applicants to interact with funders, through webinars, one-to-one advice sessions, or informal Q&As, can build understanding and trust on both sides (Butt et al., 2021).

Organisations report that when they feel heard and supported by funders, they are more confident and more likely to apply. Initiatives like coaching, pre-application workshops, and transparent scoring rubrics can significantly reduce anxiety and level the playing field for less experienced applicants. These changes are not just cosmetic, they represent a shift in power. They signal that funders are willing to share knowledge and demystify the process, rather than hoard expertise behind bureaucratic language and unwritten rules. Funders also need to reflect on their assumptions about what organisations need.

> **" TRUE ACCESSIBILITY MEANS ACKNOWLEDGING THE HIDDEN LABOUR BEHIND THE FUNDING PROCESS, AND RESOURCING IT PROPERLY. "**

A frequent criticism is that funders often dictate project design or deliverables without understanding the realities of delivery. Community-led organisations are best placed to identify what their communities need; funders must resist the urge to impose pre-determined models of impact or success. Empowering applicants means trusting them to define their goals, and resourcing them to achieve them, this includes providing unrestricted or core funding, not just project-based grants.

Many organisations avoid applying for funding altogether because core costs are rarely supported. Rent, utilities, staff time, and administration are essential to keeping organisations afloat, yet these are often excluded from funding packages. Without core funding, organisations must rely on volunteers who are already overstretched. This model is unsustainable and reinforces the marginalisation of those who cannot afford to work unpaid hours in pursuit of funding. True accessibility means acknowledging the hidden labour behind the funding process, and resourcing it properly.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings presented in this section draw on three strands of data collection designed to explore both young people's experiences and funders' perspectives on accessing funding in the arts, heritage and community sectors. These included: a focus group with young people who have engaged with creative or community-based projects; a survey distributed to young people aged 18–30; and semi-structured interviews with representatives from funding organisations. Together, these strands offer insight into the barriers, enablers and systemic issues shaping access to funding, and help to contextualise the challenges identified in the desk review.

3.1 YOUNG PEOPLE'S BARRIERS TO ACCESSING FUNDING

3.1.1. Red Flags and Jumping Hoops: Fundraising Challenges

Much of the Focus Group session was dedicated to exploring barriers and challenges to accessing funding - barriers to applying for funding, barriers which emerge during the application process, and barriers to funding application success. The first barrier the young people had encountered was difficulty in finding funding opportunities in the first place. Those that had been successful in finding relevant funding for their projects were met with sector-specific jargon, which was a challenge for them to decode. This was exacerbated by a lack of access to support for neurodiverse applicants. Battling these issues alongside part or full-time work inevitably led them to come up against the clock: these time restraints were identified as a fourth barrier.

The survey data revealed similar barriers and challenges to those identified in the focus group discussions. When asked why they hadn't looked into funding opportunities, respondents cited the following reasons:

- 36% reported that they didn't know where to find funding opportunities
- 20% stated that the application process seemed too complicated

In terms of logistical challenges, respondents identified the following key barriers to accessing funding:

- 61% cited a lack of information about available funding opportunities
- 61% also reported that complicated application processes were a major barrier
- 40% identified a lack of guidance or support as a significant challenge

3.1.2. Knowing Where to Look: the Difficulty of Finding Funding Opportunities

The first barrier to funding which emerged from the Focus Group was knowing which funding opportunities were available. One participant summarised with, "there's more out there than just BFI and [creative agency], but I don't know who they are or where they are for the other options" - Focus Group PID5.

This was a sentiment echoed particularly by those participants who were looking for funding for their own creative work and did not have an organisation behind them - there was a sense that, having been successful with one or two funds, they did not know where to look for their next opportunity. Even participants who had received multiple funds in the past said that they struggled to find funds which would fit the nuances of their projects - for one participant, for example, this was funding for international work.

Meanwhile, throughout the Focus Group, several participants mentioned themselves or their peers finding funds close to the deadline for funding, making it more difficult to get a strong application in, or to access additional support with their applications.

The pressure of these last-minute applications made the funding process more overwhelming for them, and they felt that their last-minute applications were less likely to be successful. Difficulty in finding opportunities (either finding them at all or finding them on time) is both a barrier to accessing funding and a barrier to success.

Our survey data further highlights the challenge finding funding applications has on young people. One respondent had found that, "Social media pages where people will collate funding opportunities," were useful, "but usually are long processes with short deadlines" - Survey Respondent ID24. They, similarly, were struggling with finding last-minute opportunities that did not give them enough time to have a strong chance of success. A significant majority of respondents (61%) identified lack of information about available funding opportunities as a logistical challenge, suggesting that this is a common obstacle for young people seeking funding. Moreover, a staggering 80% of respondents felt that information about funding opportunities is not widely available to young people, implying that there is a significant gap in awareness and access to funding information.

This lack of visibility and accessibility of funding opportunities can lead to missed deadlines, rushed applications, and reduced chances of success, ultimately hindering the ability of young people to secure the funding they need to pursue their projects and goals.

3.1.3 MAKE IT MAKE SENSE: JARGON IN FUNDING APPLICATIONS

When asked for key 'red flags' that might put them off applying for a specific fund, several young people identified the industry-specific language that funders used, and the language they required applicants to use, as a barrier to accessing funds:

"

THEY USE ALMOST LIKE SEMI-JARGON THAT, LIKE, YES, I'VE BEEN ON A COURSE, BUT LIKE, THIS ISN'T SOMETHING THAT I CAN DO EVERY DAY. THAT'S ANOTHER THING. WHERE I'M AT THIS IS A RED FLAG, BECAUSE THE CALIBER OF WHAT YOU WANT ISN'T EVEN JUST 'PUT YOUR IDEAS ON THIS PAGE'. MAKE IT MAKE SENSE. YOU WANT SOMEONE WHERE IT IS THEIR PAID PROFESSION TO KNOW EXACTLY HOW TO SPEAK THIS FUNDRAISING LANGUAGE.

- FOCUS GROUP PID1 "

This participant was one of the more experienced young people on the course and had been running her own organisation and fundraising successfully for several years. However, her suggestion that you need to be "someone where it is their paid profession to know exactly how to speak this fundraising language" suggests that the level of training required to be able to access this level of industry-specific language is unattainable to most young people looking to fund their own work. This came up at several different points during the Focus Group, with other young people suggesting that they struggle to understand what funders are looking for, or that the wording of the questions were unclear.

Industry-specific language was the cause of overwhelm and confusion during application processes, which put some young people off applying for certain funds altogether, and was perceived as a barrier to success in funding applications because the Focus Group participants did not feel they had access to the toolkit of language necessary to unlock these questions.

These difficulties with funding jargon were echoed in our survey responses: "I feel like we don't know what they are exactly looking for and it's hard to know what the right buzzwords are" - Survey Respondent ID56.

3.1.4 BID-WRITING WITH NEURODIVERSITY

Many of the Focus Group participants wished that there was more support for funding applicants, suggesting phone-calls with funders as useful vehicles for this support. Others said that they found it difficult to access the large amounts of copy that came with a funding application, or write a large amount of copy for their applications. Another participant, who identified herself as dyslexic and potentially neurodiverse, suggested that the strict word counts were unhelpful for her. Whilst there were some good examples given of support put in place for some participants, one participant made a point about the nature of this support:

> **Technically, there is support with applying for it, but I needed like support to access that support, that makes sense. So I haven't accessed that support because that was another sub step within all the tasks.**
>
> **- Focus Group PID2**

Having identified the time taken to write funding applications as a barrier to access, particularly when there were additional steps like submitting supplementary documentation, the difficult process of asking for support can be off-putting for young people. This participant suggests that she not only struggled to access the support available but, by becoming another "sub-task", it added to her sense of overwhelm.

23

The Focus Group suggested that having support for neurodiverse applicants tacked on to the application process, rather than embedded into it to remove barriers like word count and inaccessible copy, was unhelpful to the point of exacerbating difficulties for neurodiverse young people.

Whilst there was less mention of neurodiversity-related issues in the survey, one participant did reference the Deutsche Bank Awards for Creative Entrepreneurs as a funder who provided a good level of support in this area: "The DBACE fund was very accessible and catered for people with learning difficulties including dyslexia" - Survey Respondent ID54.

3.1.5 FIGHTING TIME WHEN APPLYING FOR FUNDING

The time it takes to tackle a funding bid came up throughout the Focus Group as a clear barrier to access, which puts undue pressure on young people when they try to overcome it:
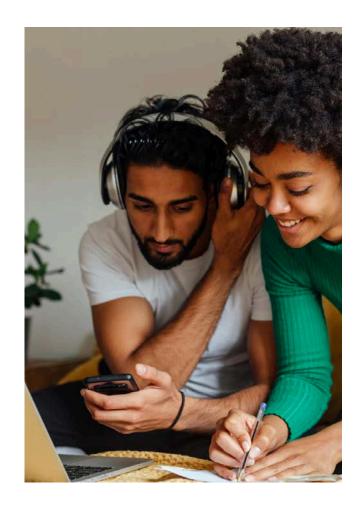
> "
> I'm a bit overwhelmed, because obviously, like, I also work on the side as well, so it's like, yeah, having the time capacity to give that, to give that capacity, but also learning a whole new skill on top of that that I don't have as someone who works individually, if that makes sense, yeah, it's a source of intimidation in that sense.
>
> - Focus Group PID3
> "

The majority of the young people in the Focus Group worked full or part time jobs alongside pursuing funding and opportunities for their creative endeavours. As this participant states, this leaves little room for writing long and complex funding bids. Another participant told us that she had had to take time off work to put in an Arts Council DYCP application - suggesting that the time needed to put in the bid was not manageable without disrupting her usual working patterns. Whilst funding can bring in income for young people if applications are successful, with no guarantee of success, the time put into writing bids might well be unpaid. Therefore, making the decision to spend time on bid-writing rather than on paid work, is a significant gamble.

The majority of the young people in the Focus Group worked full or part time jobs alongside pursuing funding and opportunities for their creative endeavours. As this participant states, this leaves little room for writing long and complex funding bids. Another participant told us that she had had to take time off work to put in an Arts Council DYCP application - suggesting that the time needed to put in the bid was not manageable without disrupting her usual working patterns.

Whilst funding can bring in income for young people if applications are successful, with no guarantee of success, the time put into writing bids might well be unpaid. Therefore, making the decision to spend time on bid-writing rather than on paid work, is a significant gamble. The stakes of this gamble are only heightened by the pressure of the cost of living crisis on young people. Other Focus Group participants shared that multi-step processes made these time constraints less manageable, suggesting that having to send additional documents or financial information across put them off applying entirely because it would take too much of their time. The length of the application process is a significant barrier to accessing funding for young people.

Survey participants agreed that multi-step processes which required applications to additional documents to be sent alongside the application, put additional pressure on them: *"Understanding of the fact that young people might not have the "right" or "enough" policies/trustees in place not because they don't care about governance, but because they haven't been given the time & opportunity to learn what is needed."* - Survey Respondent ID11.

> **" Understanding of the fact that young people might not have the "right" or "enough" policies/trustees in place not because they don't care about governance, but because they haven't been given the time & opportunity to learn what is needed.**
>
> **- Survey Respondent ID11 "**

3.1.6 FROM COMMUNITY TO CREATIVITY: WHY YOUNG PEOPLE NEED FUNDING

The young people who attended the Focus Group were looking for funding for projects ranging from personal creative development; to Jamaican heritage projects; to community music projects; to making films. Each of them look to external funding because they lack the resources to fund them out of pocket, and they are dedicated to keeping the work financially accessible for the communities they work with. They felt that the autonomy which funding gave them to pursue ambitious ideas which added value to our communities, could not be easily found in a day job.

Across the board, focus group participants were interested in funding creative and community oriented projects. The survey data echoes these findings and provides a broader snapshot of the types of projects that young people are eager to fund.

Survey respondents, when asked what projects they are most interested in funding, the top three answers were:

ARTS AND CULTURE - (63%)

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT - (58%)

EDUCATION AND SKILLS TRAINING - (44%).

Overall, the survey data suggests that young people are driven to apply for funding to support projects that are meaningful, impactful, and aligned with their values and passions.

3.1.7 OUT OF POCKET: LACK OF RESOURCES TO RUN PROJECTS

Perhaps the most obvious motivator for the young people in our Focus Group applying for arts and heritage funding, was that they do not have the personal resources to be able to fund the work they want to do:

"just covering the cost of things so that it's not coming out of pocket, because I don't have the money for that" - Focus Group PID4.

Most young people do not have access to the level of resources required to run their own projects and, in order that they are able to build a creative career for themselves, they need to be able to access external funding opportunities. This participant recognised the "massive privilege" of having a full time job, that meant his funding applications were focussed on resourcing his projects, rather than paying for his time. However, other young people emphasised that they needed to be paid for their time:

"it is a valuable thing to do, to create work that connects with people that sort of thing. And you should be paid to do that." - Focus Group PID3

This participant recognises the value that arts and heritage projects add to our society, and the fact that the young people facilitating this work should be paid for their time. Another participant added to this by identifying himself as someone on a "low income" - (Focus Group PID5). Unlike some young people, he would not necessarily be able to work for free on creative projects and therefore his time needs compensating.

 If the only young people who are able to produce arts and heritage projects in the UK are those who are able to self-finance both resources and their own time, which no one in our Focus Group could do, this could be at the detriment to a sector which generally claims to aspire to diversity.

Multiple survey responses strongly reflected a lack of access to resources as a motivation for applying for funding. One respondent summarised this succinctly with, "If there is no funding, it doesn't happen!

- Survey Respondent ID46

3.1.8 CREATING EQUITY IN OUR COMMUNITIES

The young people in our Focus Group were not only aware of the financial barrier to accessing creativity for them, but also for the participants and audiences they make work for. A common alternative to seeking external funding is charging people to access your work, in order to finance it. One participant's work connects young people to their Jamaican heritage through visiting the country. Whilst they do pay a small amount to be involved, the trips are heavily subsidised by external funding:

> **I want to make it as accessible to young people as possible. So if I wasn't accessing grant funding to be able to fund these things, they either wouldn't happen, or would be at a cost that is just not, not even remotely accessible to young people.**
>
> **- Focus Group PID1**

Other Focus Group participants expressed similar concerns about making sure that their projects were financially accessible to the communities they were designed for, in order to improve access to the arts for other young people, and people on low incomes more generally. The above participant elaborated, speaking about her experience of running an event which was part-funded through ticket sales:

> "
>
> **Even though we were selling tickets between, like, five to ten pounds and it was sold out, we didn't even get close to breaking even, you know.**
>
> "
>
> **- Focus Group PID1**

Funding a project entirely through sales is also a model which simply does not work for many projects. This participant's reasonably priced event was a huge success yet, the cost of running arts and heritage events is such that they could not break even without external funding. Once you get much beyond this pricing of "five to ten pounds" for the grassroots events that young people might be running, a large proportion of their audience would not be able to afford to attend. The Focus Group's dedication to keeping projects financially accessible for their communities, and their experience of different funding models, made it evident that asking people to pay to access their work was not a viable alternative to external funding.

The drive to re-invest in their communities by keeping projects and opportunities affordable and accessible, was a motivator for applying for funding for many of our survey respondents as well. One participant was interested in, "Giving back to people and building communities in difficult times for underrepresented people" - Survey Respondent ID5. They acknowledge, as well, that their community specifically was underrepresented and might lack resources to access more profit-driven creative opportunities.

3.1.9 CHANGING THE WORLD: CREATIVE AMBITION

Approaching the question, "why do young people need arts and heritage funding?" from a different angle leads one to ask why young people do not take different routes to employment in the culture sector: perhaps getting a job running projects through an organisation which has its own fundraising department. One participant answered:

> **"**
>
> **I think another thing, like, whether you're running an organisation or, like, bringing, like, an arts project to life, is the autonomy, because no one, or you think at least like, no one's coming up with the same idea that you are in order to, like, bring to life, in order to create that sort of impact.**
>
> **- Focus Group PID3**
>
> **"**

She emphasised the impact that fully-funded, youth-led creative projects could have. When given *"autonomy"*, young people are able to create the kind of bold and ambitious work which cannot exist within the confines of an established organisation which is not youth-led. Her feelings were broadly echoed by the group - there was a general sense that funding was the only thing which prevented their ideas from materialising into projects which add value to their community.

ne participant did work a job within the creative industries but the very fact that he is still applying for funding for his own creative ideas, suggests that it is not possible for all of his projects to be facilitated through his day job.

Indeed, few job roles, especially at the level at which most young people can enter the workforce, would facilitate these projects. Perhaps the fact that only one of the young people in the group had a day job at an arts organisation which was not their own, also indicates how difficult it is to find a job role in the creative sector, let alone facilitate your creative ideas through that role.

One of our survey participants plainly stated their reason for applying for funding:

" I'm a creative wanting to change the world.

- Survey Respondent ID1

3.2 YOUNG PEOPLE'S FEELINGS AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT FUNDING

3.2.1 BARRIERS TO ACCESS: HOW COMPLEXITY AND TIME-CONSUMING APPLICATION PROCESSES EXCLUDE YOUNG PEOPLE

The funding application process can be a daunting and exclusionary experience for many young people, particularly those with neurodiverse needs. Characterised by lengthy forms, formal language, and mathematical requirements, the process can be overwhelming and create a significant barrier to access. This sentiment was echoed by a focus group participant, who described the application process as, "very intimidating. It's got lots of sections, it is quite hard, you know, motivation wise, it's kind of like another job" - Focus Group Participant ID2.

These findings are reinforced by the survey data, with the majority of survey respondents (61%) citing complicated application processes as a barrier to accessing funding. Moreover, the complexity of the application process is not only a hurdle for those who attempt to apply, but also a deterrent for those who might otherwise be interested in pursuing funding opportunities. According to the survey, 1 in 5 respondents reported that they haven't even looked into funding due to the perceived complexity of the process. Simplifying and streamlining application processes is crucial to making funding more accessible and inclusive for all young people.

When asked to give one word to describe their feelings and perceptions of funding, several survey respondents felt similarly challenged by the funding process, with two people who felt "frustrated," (Survey Respondent IDs17 & 31) and another suggesting it made them feel, "dumb" (Survey Respondent ID12).

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3.2.2 UNCLEAR EXPECTATIONS: HOW LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AFFECTS YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF FUNDING

A lack of transparency and clarity in the funding application process is a significant obstacle for many young people, leaving them uncertain about what funders are looking for and how decisions are made. This uncertainty has led to frustration and confusion, as participants struggle to understand the requirements. Key areas of confusion include:

- **What funders are looking for in an application**
- **How decisions are made**
- **What the criteria are for selecting successful applicants**
- **Why some applications are successful and others are not**

This lack of transparency was a major source of frustration for young people. Participants expressed concerns that the funding landscape is not always merit-based, with some feeling that personal connections and prior relationships can play a significant role in securing funding. This perception was echoed by a focus group participant, who noted, "I don't want to say it's like a mates thing, but, you know, people kind of bring people they know into it." - Focus Group Participant ID4

Overall, the lack of transparency and clarity in the funding application process can create a sense of mistrust and unfairness, undermining the confidence of young people to apply for funding.

Survey respondents had experienced a similar lack of clarity, resulting in four of them feeling, "confused," (Survey Respondent IDs4, 16, 34 & 38) and the words, "doubtful," (Survey Respondent ID3) "unclear," (Survey Respondent ID20) and "bamboozled," (Survey Respondent ID45) occurring in responses as well.

3.2.3 FUNDING RELATIONSHIPS: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE PERCEIVE DIFFERENT FUNDERS

Interestingly, participants tended to view different types of funders in distinct ways. Grassroots funders were often spoken of positively, while larger, more established funders - especially corporate ones - were viewed with more skepticism. There was a consensus that grassroots funds tend to have simpler, more flexible and supportive application processes. This highlights that young people's perceptions of funding are significantly influenced by factors such as transparency and accessibility.

"

[THE FUNDING PROCESS] IS RATHER OVERWHELMING AND I EXPERIENCE A LOT OF EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION

- FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT ID2

"

3.2.4 OVERWHELMED AND UNDER-CONFIDENT: THE IMPACT OF FUNDING PROCESSES

Many young people find the funding application process to be a daunting experience. For focus group participants, lengthy and complicated application forms, combined with the low success rate and competitive nature of the process, were major sources of overwhelm. One participant highlighted the significant emotional and psychological toll that the application process can take, "[the funding process] is rather overwhelming and I experience a lot of executive dysfunction" - Focus Group Participant ID2

The intimidation and overwhelm can be particularly pronounced for young people, who may feel that their age and lack of experience put them at a disadvantage. Being a young person can be a source of self-doubt and insecurity, with many feeling that they are viewed as less capable or less deserving of funding by potential funders. This can make it even harder for young people to stay motivated and confident throughout the application process.

Three survey respondents experienced this, "overwhelm" (Survey Respondent IDs15, 23, & 57) as their most prevalent feeling and perception about funding, with two more writing that applying for funding is, "daunting" (Survey Respondent IDs30 & 44).

3.2.5 PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT: HOW FUNDING APPLICATIONS AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING

The funding application process can take a significant toll on a person's emotional wellbeing. The competitive nature of the process, combined with the high stakes and personal investment, can lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, and self-doubt. Participants pour their heart and soul into their applications, and the uncertainty of the outcome can be overwhelming.

As one participant shared, "I'm really passionate about it [the funding application]. However, I'm very, very stressed out about it too…. I've had to take some time off [work], literally, just to be able to kind of give myself that time." - Focus Group Participant ID2.

This personal account highlights the intense emotional labor that goes into applying for funding, and the significant impact it can have on a person's mental health and daily life.

Furthermore, the challenges of applying for funding as an individual, especially a young person, can be particularly daunting, with many feeling isolated and alone in the process. The added pressure of balancing the application process with other responsibilities, such as work or education, can exacerbate the stress and complexity. This raises important questions about the nature of funding and how it can be made more accessible, sustainable, and supportive for individuals, particularly young people.

The toll that applying for funding can take on young people was evident in the four people who responded that their feelings towards funding were, "tired," (Survey Respondent ID52), or, "exhausted," (Survey Respondent IDs10, 13, & 22) and in another five people who responded with the word, "stressed" (Survey Respondent IDs7 27, 33, 35 & 55).

3.3. YOUNG PEOPLE'S SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

3.3.1 PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS: STRATEGIES FOR SECURING FUNDING

The focus group participants shared valuable insights into the approaches that helped them secure funding. A range of effective strategies emerged, including the use of alternative application formats, leveraging personal networks, showcasing past work, targeting smaller and less competitive funds, and exploring alternative funding sources, such as university resources.

One participant attributed their success to the use of an alternative application format, noting, "we decided to do the video application. And I truly do believe that that is one of the reasons why we were successful."- Focus Group Participant ID1. The use of video format made the application process more accessible, a common theme that resonated throughout the discussion.

> ## "
> ## THE TARGETED SUPPORT AND CLEAR GUIDELINES MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE
>
> ## - (SURVEY RESPONDENT ID53). "

For the participants, accessibility meant more than just ease of use - it encompassed a range of factors, including:

- Easy to understand: applications that were clear and straightforward
- Easy to complete: applications that didn't require a huge amount of time or effort
- Inclusive of neurodivergent and/or disabled individuals: applications that were designed to be accessible to everyone, regardless of their abilities

By highlighting these successful strategies, the participants showed that there's no one-size-fits-all approach to securing funding. Instead, they identified common threads that can increase the chances of success, emphasising the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and inclusivity in the application process. This nuanced understanding of accessibility can inform the development of more effective and supportive funding systems.

Accessibility was a priority for survey respondents as well, with The Schwab & Westheimer Trust being heralded by one student as a good example of this: "The targeted support and clear guidelines make it accessible" - (Survey Respondent ID53).

3.3.2 ALTERNATIVE AND SIMPLIFIED APPLICATION PROCESSES

The focus group participants reinforced the need for a simple and straightforward application process, with clear guidelines and minimal paperwork. As one participant succinctly put it: "I just wish there were more [organisations] in this country that made simplified forms and were open to other methods." - Focus Group Participant ID5

> " **SOME PARTICIPANTS ADVOCATED FOR A MORE HOLISTIC APPROACH TO FUNDING, WHERE SUCCESS ISN'T ONLY DEPENDENT ON A PERSON'S ABILITY TO NAVIGATE COMPLEX APPLICATIONS.** "

This sentiment was echoed throughout the discussion, with participants seeking a more straightforward and accessible application process.

Building on this idea, participants suggested that alternative methods, such as video and voice recordings, or visual explanations, could be used to explain their ideas and make the application process more engaging and effective. By leveraging these alternative formats, participants believed they could showcase their projects and passions in a more compelling and authentic way, ultimately making the application process more accessible and inclusive.

The importance of accessibility was again highlighted, with participants emphasising the need for application processes that are inclusive and easy to navigate for everyone, especially for disabled and neurodivergent applicants. Furthermore, some participants advocated for a more holistic approach to funding, where success isn't only dependent on a person's ability to navigate complex applications. Instead, they suggested that funders could provide more transparency around the likelihood of securing funding, as well as clearer signposting to help applicants find the most suitable funds for their projects.

The critical role simplified and alternative application processes can play is further highlighted in the survey data. A majority of respondents (51%) stated that simplified application forms would make them more likely to apply for funding, demonstrating the significant impact that streamlining the application process could have on encouraging young people to apply. By simplifying and streamlining the application process, and offering alternative methods and approaches, funders can make it easier for young people to access the support they need to bring their ideas to life.

Our survey respondents also valued alternative formats for funding applications. One respondent had had a positive experience with The Young Gamechangers Fund because they, "offered multiple methods of submitting an application" - (Survey Respondent ID39).

3.3.3 NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM: THE ROLE OF GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

Having support and guidance throughout the application process was deemed essential by many participants. They stressed that having someone to turn to for help and advice was key to building confidence, providing reassurance, and motivating them to complete their application. This was especially important for young people who may be new to the application process and unsure of what to expect. Knowing that someone was available to help and support them made the process feel less daunting and more manageable.

As one participant noted, having a point of contact can make a significant difference: "just having someone being able to, like, whether it's an info session, or whether it is some kind of emailing or or even a phone number… just knowing that there is someone who actually wants you to apply" - Focus Group Participant ID1

To address this need, participants suggested a range of support options, including:

- Phone numbers and emails: having a direct point of contact to ask questions and get help.
- Information sessions: attending workshops or info sessions to learn more about the application process and get tips from experienced staff.
- Community support groups: being part of a community of peers who are also applying for funding, to share experiences and advice.
- Online forums: having access to online forums or discussion groups where they can ask questions, share their experiences, and get support from others who have gone through the process.
- Transparency: clear and upfront information about funding opportunities, including eligibility criteria, success rates, and the number of applications typically received, to help manage expectations and make informed decisions.

These suggestions are reinforced by the survey data, which shows that respondents prioritise support and guidance when applying for funding. The top resources and support options cited by respondents include:

- Workshops on application writing (54%): suggesting that young people value hands-on guidance and training to help them develop their application skills.

- Clear guidelines and examples (51%): indicating that respondents want to have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and what makes a successful application.

- Mandatory feedback on rejection (48%): highlighting the importance of feedback in helping applicants learn and improve, and demonstrating that respondents value transparency and accountability in the application process.

- Mentorship from experienced applicants (44%): showing that young people recognize the value of learning from others who have gone through the process and are seeking guidance and support from peers who have successfully navigated the application process.
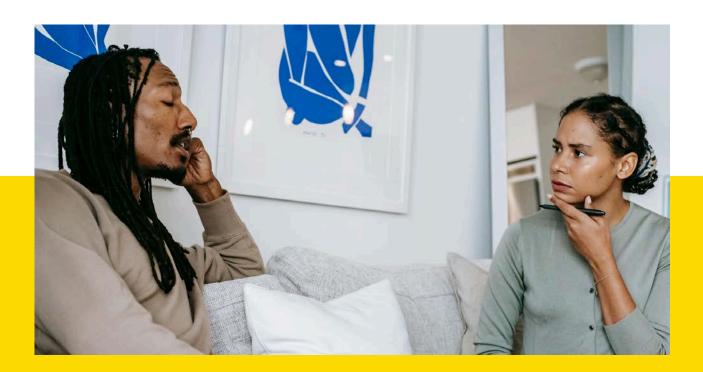
One survey participant highlighted the Enactus Spark 2025 programme for social enterprises as an example of an organisation that, "support(s) you with building a solid proposal throughout the programme which gives you a better opportunity" - (Survey Respondent ID49). They recognised that this support directly contributed to their chances of success with this programme.

By embedding support services into funding processes, organisations can have a profound impact on the applicant experience. This can enable applicants to feel confident, motivated, and supported throughout their journey, ultimately leading to more successful applications and more young people achieving their goals and realising their potential.

3.4 CONVERSATIONS WITH FUNDERS

In parallel with our work to understand young people's experiences, we conducted a series of conversations with individuals working across the funding landscape. Participants included programme leads, grant managers, trustees, and policy officers from a range of organisations, including national foundations, heritage bodies, independent trusts, and youth-focused funding initiatives operating in the UK.

To support open and honest reflection, participants and organisations have been anonymised in this report. Quotes are attributed using participant IDs rather than organisational names or roles. This section synthesises their insights and points toward areas where meaningful change is possible.

3.4.1 Eligibility Rules Exclude Informal and Youth-Led Groups

Many funders require applicants to be formally constituted organisations - typically registered charities or CICs - with a bank account, board structure, and governance policies. While intended to mitigate risk, these requirements often exclude the very groups funders claim to support: youth-led collectives, grassroots organisers, or early-stage initiatives that lack the infrastructure to meet formal eligibility.

Funders acknowledged this tension and noted that groups of young people often have compelling ideas and local traction, but are blocked from applying unless they partner with an established organisation, a solution that brings its own risks of tokenism or mission drift.
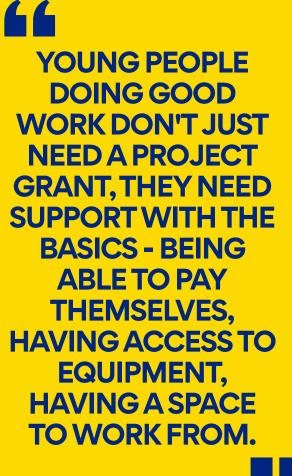
Some funders are exploring alternative approaches, including intermediary models and fiscal sponsorships, but these remain underdeveloped and reliant on trusted relationships rather than open access.

"

I THINK WE OFTEN EXPECT THE PERFECT SAFEGUARDING POLICY, THE PERFECT RISK ASSESSMENT, AND ALL THE GOVERNANCE STUFF FROM GROUPS THAT ARE JUST TRYING TO DO SOMETHING REALLY BASIC IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

"

- FUNDING PARTICIPANT 1

3.4.2 Core Funding Is Rare but Vital

Funders frequently observed that young applicants are forced to invent discrete "projects" to secure support, even when their needs relate to core operating costs: rent, salaries, data access, or compensating collaborators. This creates an artificial separation between a group's mission and its means, and prevents longer-term sustainability. One funder shared an example of a youth-led feminist group who had a fully designed programme, but couldn't deliver it without money to pay their lead organiser and volunteers. The consensus was clear: if funders want to support meaningful youth-led change, they must back the people doing the work, not just the outputs.

> **" YOUNG PEOPLE DOING GOOD WORK DON'T JUST NEED A PROJECT GRANT, THEY NEED SUPPORT WITH THE BASICS - BEING ABLE TO PAY THEMSELVES, HAVING ACCESS TO EQUIPMENT, HAVING A SPACE TO WORK FROM. "**
>
> **- FUNDING PARTICIPANT 1**

"It's not about monetising volunteers, it's about inclusion. If people can't afford to show up, they can't be involved." - Funding Participant 3

3.4.3 Sector Language Reinforces Power Imbalances

Technical or strategic language in application forms, such as "systemic change," "asset-based practice," or "intersectional approach" can act as an unintended barrier. While some youth-led groups are doing exactly this work, they may not frame it in sector-approved terms, resulting in strong applications being overlooked or rejected.

Funders recognised this and described efforts to simplify or explain their terminology. However, they also acknowledged the deeper issue: power remains with those who define the terms of engagement. There was an appetite for clearer signposting, coaching, and pre-application support, but also a need for funders themselves to do more of the translation work.

"They're doing systemic work, but they don't call it that. It's unfortunate but if you don't use the right words, you're less likely to get through." - Funding Participant 2

"We use so much jargon without meaning to, and even if someone's work is brilliant, if they don't describe it in the 'right' language, it can get overlooked." - Funding Participan

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3.4.4 The Nature of Youth Organising Is Changing

Young people are increasingly organising in non-traditional ways, through networks, digital campaigns, anonymous collectives, and fast-moving local actions. These forms of activism are responsive, relational, and often not publicly branded or registered. This makes them hard to fund within traditional frameworks.

Funders shared that they are seeing more "faceless movements" emerge, where safety concerns, political climate, or cultural reasons prevent formalisation. This is particularly relevant for migrant, refugee, and queer youth, or those working on politically sensitive issues.

While some funders are adapting by using rolling applications, simplified processes, or intermediary partners, others admitted they struggle to support these models without compromising accountability requirements.

> **"**
>
> **A LOT OF YOUTH-LED WORK NOW IS FACELESS BY DESIGN - FOR SAFETY, FOR STRATEGY. BUT OUR SYSTEMS STILL WANT A NAME AND A FIVE-YEAR PLAN.**
>
> **- FUNDING PARTICIPANT 3**

3.4.5 Youth Participation in Governance Is Growing... Slowly

Several funders shared examples of involving young people in decision-making, including youth panels, advisory boards, and co-designed programmes. These initiatives have often been attached to specific strands of work (e.g., youth funds), but are now starting to appear in broader governance structures. However, many organisations are still early in this journey. One contributor noted that, while their fund had embedded youth-voice in a flagship programme, the momentum slowed once the programme ended. Youth involvement is increasingly seen as not just desirable but necessary, particularly when decisions affect young people's futures. Funders agreed that representation needs to go beyond consultation and into real strategic participation.

WE DID GREAT WORK WITH YOUTH VOICE IN ONE PROGRAMME, BUT THEN THE MOMENTUM DROPPED OFF. WE'RE ONLY NOW THINKING AGAIN ABOUT HOW TO EMBED IT ACROSS THE ORGANISATION.

- FUNDING PARTICIPANT 4

3.4.6 Programmes Must Allow for Flexibility and Change

A distinctive insight from the heritage sector highlighted the limitations of rigid project planning. One funder described how traditional expectations, such as requesting a five-year plan at the outset, don't allow for the dynamism of youth-led work. Instead, their "Kick the Dust" programme used annual planning cycles, which allowed projects to evolve alongside the changing needs, ideas, and lives of the young people involved.

This more iterative approach recognised that young people grow, shift focus, and reconfigure their goals. It also helped to avoid burnout and create more responsive, relevant programming. In the words of the funder: "We need to be less risk averse. We need to experiment more, and build mechanisms for change into the funding process itself."

YOUNG PEOPLE GROW. THEIR IDEAS SHIFT. IF WE WANT AUTHENTIC INVOLVEMENT, THE FUNDING STRUCTURE HAS TO FLEX TOO.

- FUNDING PARTICIPANT 4

4. CONCLUSION

In parallel with our work to understand young people's experiences, we conducted a series of conversations with individuals working across the funding landscape. Participants included programme leads, grant managers, trustees, and policy officers from a range of organisations, including national foundations, heritage bodies, independent trusts, and youth-focused funding initiatives operating in the UK.

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Funders acknowledged this tension and noted that groups of young people often have compelling ideas and local traction, but are blocked from applying unless they partner with an established organisation, a solution that brings its own risks of tokenism or mission drift.
Some funders are exploring alternative approaches, including intermediary models and fiscal sponsorships, but these remain underdeveloped and reliant on trusted relationships rather than open access.

"I think we often expect the perfect safeguarding policy, the perfect risk assessment, and all the governance stuff from groups that are just trying to do something really basic in their communities." - Funding Participant 1

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Embed Tangible, People-Facing Support Throughout the Application Process

Young people repeatedly highlighted the absence of human connection during application processes. Many found themselves lost in opaque systems, unable to speak to a real person or access meaningful guidance. Funders must shift away from faceless digital portals and towards embedded, people-facing support models. This could include:

- Named contacts for each fund or round, available via email or phone.
- Drop-in support sessions, Q&As, or application surgeries for prospective applicants.
- Live feedback loops, where young applicants can receive informal advice before submission.

These methods are especially important for young people without prior fundraising experience or professional networks. Support should not assume a base level of familiarity with sector norms or language.
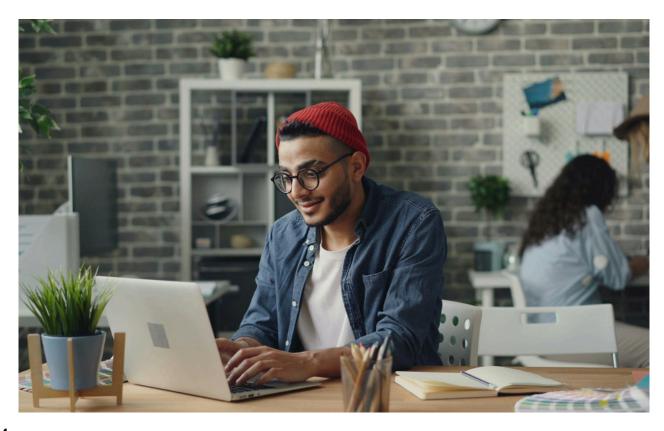
5.2 Rethink Application Design: Flexibility, Simplicity, and Relevance

Many young people described application processes as intimidating, overly complex, or misaligned with how their work is actually structured. While there's a need to maintain fairness and transparency, funders should re-examine how their processes either enable or deter youth-led engagement.

> We recommend:
> - Short-form applications for first-stage or small grants, with longer forms only introduced later.
> - Video, voice note, or visual submission options, enabling applicants to share ideas in formats that suit their communication style.
> - Clear examples of what good answers look like, especially for questions about outcomes, governance, or youth involvement.

Application forms should reflect the diversity of young people's contexts, including neurodivergence, caring responsibilities, and digital access. Flexibility isn't a luxury , it's an access need.

5.3 Address the Sector's Information Gap: Clear, Consistent Guidance

Survey data and interviews consistently highlighted that a lack of clear, accessible information was one of the biggest barriers to young people applying for funding , more so than the complexity of the application itself.

Key areas for improvement include:

- Transparent eligibility criteria , particularly where youth-led collectives or informal groups are concerned.
- Clear explanations of terms like "impact," "governance," or "systemic change."
- Guidance that demystifies the process , what happens after applying, how decisions are made, how to appeal or learn from rejections.

Funders should also coordinate outreach to ensure information is reaching young people beyond existing networks , e.g. in schools, colleges, libraries, youth centres, and online platforms where young creatives and activists gather.

5.4 Create and Invest in Youth Peer Networks and Communities of Practice

One-off grants do not support long-term change if youth-led groups remain isolated. Many young people described working in silos, unable to find others doing similar work, or struggling to sustain energy and momentum without peer support.

Funders and infrastructure bodies should:

- Fund youth-led networks, learning cohorts, and open forums that encourage collaboration and reduce duplication.
- Provide access to co-working or community spaces, both physical and digital.
- Support intermediaries and youth-focussed hubs to host regular meet-ups, mentoring schemes, and creative labs for youth-led groups to grow ideas together.

This investment would build leadership, reduce burnout, and enable innovation by connecting young people beyond individual project cycles.

5.5 Prioritise Youth Voice in Strategy and Decision-Making

Many funders, especially those unable to fund individuals directly, expressed a willingness to involve young people in governance , but in practice, this is often limited or symbolic.

move beyond tokenism, funders should:

- Embed youth representatives in decision-making panels, including at shortlisting and funding allocation stages.
- Establish or strengthen youth advisory boards, with real influence on funding priorities and strategy.
- Learn from effective models , such as Kick the Dust, the Diana Award, and We Don't Settle , where youth voice has shaped organisational direction.

Involvement must go beyond youth-specific funding streams. Young people want to influence decisions about climate, culture, health, and justice , not only "youth" issues. That influence must be supported by training, compensation, and clear pathways for progression.

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