

Joining the Dots

Supporting grassroots youth
organisations to make great youth
work happen

Introduction

‘Joining the Dots’ has been an investigative consultation commissioned by the National Youth Agency (NYA) to better understand the needs of grassroots youth organisations and how the NYA, along with sector partners, can support frontline youth workers to make great youth work happen.

The incentive for this consultation has been driven by two factors:

- a. The role of the NYA during the Covid-19 emergency and how this has drawn many grassroots youth organisations in to closer engagement with the NYA
- b. An appraisal of perceptions of the NYA as part of its strategic review in to engagement with sector stakeholders including funders, government, and youth work organisations.

These factors combined to raise questions about how the NYA should evolve its services and relationships in support of grassroots organisations in a post-emergency context for youth work.

The following questions capture lines of enquiry that have underpinned the consultation:

- How are grassroots youth organisations surviving in the current climate?
- What are grassroots youth organisations current and most pressing needs?
- What do grassroots youth organisations think about current levels of support?
- Who is best placed to provide the required support for grassroots youth work?
- In what ways should the NYA respond to the needs of grassroots youth organisations?

Consultation Process

The investigative consultation was designed to progress through four phases*:

- **Phase 1: An internal evaluation phase (January-February 2022)**
Testing lines of enquiry with the NYA staff team and identifying key themes
- **Phase 2: An external exploration phase (March-April 2022)**
Testing lines of enquiry and key themes with strategic stakeholders in the sector
- **Phase 3: An open interrogation phase (May-September 2022)**
Showcasing support at regional level and listening to grassroots youth organisations
- **Phase 4: An integration phase**
Collating feedback and identifying areas where the NYA can integrate learning

The investigative consultation has also been cognisant of complementary initiatives being undertaken during the consultation window that, collectively, are designed to inform the NYA strategic review. These have included:

- An internal review of staff structures to meet the demands of current and future services
- An evaluation of the NYA's mission and theory of change (undertaken by Trust Impact)
- The growth of new national programmes of commissioned work (e.g. YIF; Thrive)
- An evolution of digital tools to inform and resource future services (Youth Work One)

The report that follows provides an account of findings of each phase of the consultation, culminating in recommendations for the NYA to consider integrating in to its strategic review of services as it refreshes its three year strategic plan.

*see visual illustration of the consultation process in appendix 1.

Phase 1: Internal Evaluation (January-February 2022)

The first consultation involved the staff team with an open discussion related to the lines of enquiry underpinning the consultation. This involved individual interviews with 25 NYA staff to identify how they understood the role of the NYA in supporting grassroots youth organisations.

The interviews used a discussion framework of: why, what, who, how and when, to test the appetite for developing the NYA's work with grassroots organisations and to identify common themes.

A summary of the outcomes* from this exercise is included here:

Question	Most common answer	Implications for the NYA
Why?	Because the NYA is the standards body for youth work. Setting the standard 'for great youth work to happen' for all youth services.	Greater connection and awareness with/of frontline work is needed to embed standards of practice in the sector as a whole (across multiple services).
What?	Activities in support of frontline work(ers) that improve standards and access to support.	Focus services on: Guidance; Training; Qualifications; CPD; Networks and convening activity; and shared learning. Supported by high quality digital tools.
Who?	Cast the net wide! Work across ecosystems where local services are engaging young people using youth work, in and beyond traditional youth work settings.	Further development is needed to secure a common approach to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools for engagement • Partnership arrangements • Methods of data gathering
How?	Work collaboratively, deliver in partnerships wherever possible and only innovate to develop quality services that can be shared and/or passed on for local delivery.	Develop a dispersal model that builds, supports and recognises regional/local agency; and act as a conduit for enabling others (inc. funding and consortia).

<p>When?</p>	<p>Time should be allowed to adjust to post-pandemic realities and to prioritise actions. To move from a reactive to responsive and proactive position.</p>	<p>Any developments should be high quality, joined-up across the NYA, and sustainable.</p> <p>Any new initiatives should be phased according to priority, sequencing actions with clarity of communication (int. & ext.).</p>
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Additional observations:

Throughout conversations across the staff team there were five themes that were frequently discussed and revisited. These can be illustrated by five key words:

- **Guidance** – a very strong message about standards guidance being the bedrock of NYA’s work
- **Connecting** – a high value placed on connecting with the sector and those ‘at the frontline’
- **Collaboration** – a common value of working with others to achieve these ambitions
- **Quality** – a consistent message about excellence and embodying quality standards
- **Process** – a concern for doing things well, in a timely and informed plan of action

The level of engagement from the staff team was very high with 70-80% of feedback of a similar and positive nature; 20-30% of feedback was more nuanced and recognised specific challenges that are reflected under ‘other considerations’ in the responses illustrated in appendix 2.

*Further data and more detailed responses to each question are illustrated in appendix 2

Phase 2: External Exploration (March-April 2022)

The second consultation involved strategic stakeholders in the youth sector through a further set of discussions that addressed the lines of enquiry underpinning the consultation. This involved individual interviews with twenty stakeholders including regional agencies, other national/umbrella youth organisations and civil servants.

Sector stakeholders were provided with an invitation to engage in this phase that set the context for the discussion (see appendix 3) with particular reference to five areas of need (see table below).

Sector stakeholders were asked who was best-placed to address these needs, what role the NYA should fulfil in relation to these needs and how else the NYA should position itself in support of the sector as it transitioned from the emergency measures implemented during the pandemic.

The headlines from this exercise are included here:

Need	Ambition	Headline response
Guidance	To set measurable standards for youth work and youth organisations	Almost universal endorsement of the NYA's role in leading this work and to build on the current set of available guidance
Support	To provide access to advice and support for the development of grassroots youth organisations	A consensus that this was best provided at regional/local level but that gaps existed in support structures / investment is needed
Training	To provide skills development, qualifications and CPD for workers	Recognition of the work of the NYA in rebuilding a training infrastructure and that workforce development was a priority that should be delivered through partnerships
Networks	To connect frontline workers in similar fields of practice and around issues of concern to them	A consensus there is value in this but that the sector was complex with a proliferation of networks that require careful navigation
Knowledge	To build the evidence-base and share learning in quality youth work	A consensus that research and learning require a collaborative approach with the need to recognise existing expertise and invest in gathering / open access data

Advocacy*	To convey the needs of the sector to decision makers and funders	A strong message was conveyed about the important role the NYA fulfils in this function and how this should be developed through collaboration and partnership
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*This sixth need was added/amplified following discussions with sector stakeholders.

Additional Observations:

The conversations also addressed some notable positives and challenges for the NYA in working with sector partners to provide the support required by grassroots youth organisations. These included:

- A high level of appreciation for the role the NYA fulfilled during the Covid-19 crisis; a positive view of the development of guidance/resources available online; a desire to form closer and more formalised relationships with the NYA (especially those who were new to the NYA)
- Some caution was also expressed with reference to: ensuring the NYA’s tone of voice and attributes recognised the role of sector partners; ensuring NYA programmes did not compete with sector partners; and clarifying the breadth of reach across the youth sector.

Phase 3: Open Interrogation – The Roadshows (May-September 2022)

The third consultation involved interrogating the themes that had emerged from phase 1 and 2 through a national roadshow programme that visited each of the nine English regions. These events were co-designed with regional partners to combine regional and national lines of enquiry.

The events were planned and promoted between May-August 2022, and were delivered over three consecutive weeks in September 2022. Over 700 delegates registered on events. The programme (see appendix 4) involved a morning reception for strategic leaders in each region followed by an open invitation to an afternoon of dialogue around the needs of grassroots youth organisations.



Aspect 1: Messages from local leaders across regions:

Each of the nine morning receptions included a selection of local leaders from voluntary, public and private sector youth agencies. The invitations were sent to agency leaders identified by regional partners with the aim of interrogating the context for enabling youth work in each region.

The morning reception provided an opportunity for local leaders to participate in discussion around regional priorities and to engage with national initiatives being led by the NYA. These discussions provided the platform for progressing new and established regional collaborations and allowed for identification of familiar challenges across regions and delivery partners.

Common themes	Indicators
Inequity of investment	There was significant variation, and inequity, in the funding of youth work across local areas. There were questions surrounding how national programmes prioritised spending and, while the overall uplift in funding was welcomed, confusion about prioritisation. The broader funding landscape was also challenging to navigate for both LA and VCS.
Sustaining the workforce	All regions were facing a challenge in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified and experienced youth workers. Reasons for this were varied but included: levels of pay; insecurity of part-time and/or short-term contracts; and competition between agencies for contracts.
Training the workforce	All regions recognised that training, qualifications and the 'status' of the workforce were critical to enabling impactful youth work. There were some positive developments in the roll-out of level 2 and 3 training but full geographical coverage and access was yet to be secured.
Securing youth voice	There was a positive and consistent message about the active participation of young people in influencing service delivery in local areas, but questions about whether the voice of all young people was reaching decision makers.
Collaboration	There were some outstanding examples of collaboration in some regions and emerging developments in others. These reflected how established regional infrastructure was in each area and highlighted need for levelling the playing field across regions to encourage collective impact.

There was also discussion and recognition of where national developments could help address local challenges, with the direction of travel being welcomed, and encouragement for further progress on [Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities](#); the [Youth Guarantee](#); and [data/evidence gathering](#).

Additional Observations:

The conversations, while recognising specific challenges, were generally positive about the wider recognition and value being placed on youth work. Two broader questions were often voiced:

- How national bodies could work in a more co-ordinated way to support local agencies?
- How the sector will be affected and should be responding to the cost of living crisis?

Aspect 2: Messages from grassroots youth organisations:

The afternoon sessions of regional roundtable roadshow events were made available through open invitation via the NYA Network, regional partners and sector-wide promotion. It attracted **over 700** people to register across the nine regional venues for an afternoon of information sharing and dialogue around the themes identified through earlier phases of the joining the dots consultation.

The thematic discussions were designed to interrogate the most pressing needs of grassroots organisations framed around:

- sector investment
- policy and advocacy
- quality and standards
- support for local youth work(ers).

Discussions were lively and engaging with participants identifying a wide range of issues through note takers, feedback sessions and an online data capture tool*. An analysis of responses across regions identified four dominant themes that emerged from the discussions:

A. Invest, longer-term, in existing youth work

‘Short-term funding destabilises and undermines good youth work’

Unequivocally and universally, participants said that longer-term funding is needed to stabilise services available to young people as too many services are surviving on 12 month cycles of miscellaneous grant income; and that longer-term funding was essential to provide job security for workers to be able build the kind of high quality impactful relationships we aspire to with young people.

Participants called for a review of how the sector is funded across funding foundations, agencies and authorities to enable this to happen more effectively.

B. Advocate for existing, particularly local, youth work

'Focus on the local and listen to what young people are saying'

Participants said that national programmes often feel very removed from local delivery and, while they acknowledged the increasing value being placed on youth work through recent policy announcements such as the Youth Guarantee, there is still work to be done in connecting national policy with grassroots youth work.

Participants also called for better feedback mechanisms from national policy makers, particular on how and why decisions are made, and for assurances that all young people's voices were being heard in the formation of programmes.

C. Strengthen youth work(er) support

'Secure training, qualifications, CPD and recognition for youth workers'

Participants said that quality youth services depend on quality youth workers and that this demands wider access to training, qualifications and CPD pathways at all levels of the workforce.

Recent initiatives to improve access to guidance and training were welcomed as was the Covid recognition of Key Worker status for qualified youth workers. Participants called for a continuing focus on the development of guidance that asserts 'what good youth work looks like'; strengthening career development in youth work; and in youth worker identities.

D. Collaborate in support of local youth work

'Support, where it exists, is helpful – but work better together!'

Participants said that fragmentation and competition between local and national youth work agencies had been damaging to the effectiveness of the sector in the past; and that national, regional and local infrastructure agencies were essential in securing collaboration around youth work provision (with some very good examples of best practice seen during the roadshows).

However, there was a call for greater development in areas that are currently undeserved by infrastructure agencies and a general call for national agencies to work better together in co-ordinating guidance, support and wider initiatives targeted to support grassroots youth work.

*A sample of measurable data captured from the roadshow is available in appendix 5

Further interpretation of messages from grassroots youth organisations:

The four dominant themes provided a wealth of insight from grassroots organisations about the state of the sector and how the NYA, with its partners, could respond to these messages. In addition to the summary provided on page 6 of this report, further insight, and feedback within each of these themes is included here to amplify what was heard:

A. Invest, longer-term, in existing youth work

‘Short-term funding destabilises and undermines good youth work’

Messages about where funding / funders are problematic:

- **Too much funding is focussed on 12-month short term objectives;** and too many funding streams require new or innovative projects as opposed to funding existing work.
- **The time required to apply for and service funds is draining organisations of core resources;** and reporting expectations are often disproportionate to the size of a grant.
- **Bidding and application processes create a competitive environment** that undermines co-operation between service providers and fragments the service experience for young people. The corporate funding style to grant making was seen as damaging to the sector.
- The growth in large national agencies that bid for local contracts (and ‘frequently win’) is **undermining locally established youth services,** staff retention and access to services.
- The continued focus on targeted services and numerical outcomes is **limiting the holistic engagement** required to support young people and work alongside allied services.

Messages about what funders could do better:

- **Fund for a minimum of 3 years** and where possible for longer so that youth workers have security to see through long-term relationships with young people; and vice versa.
- **Provide adequate timescales** for funding applications, recognise the cost of fund raising and make provision in funding grants that provides sufficient cover for core costs / overheads.
- **Build in flexibility** to funding grants that allows services to flex to demonstrated needs.
- **Seek out and fund already established and successful youth projects** with a knowledge of their locality and locally identified needs (recognise trends outside the macro data).
- Make it a **requirement that staff are qualified** for the work being funded and/or provide financial support for the training/qualifications of staff in addition to project funding.

- **Simplify systems and processes** to achieve funding and in reporting on funded work.

Messages about what the NYA and other sector agencies could do to help:

- **Support smaller local organisations** with tools for accessing appropriate funding streams, including better access to funding sources and tools for demonstrating impact.
- **Advocate on behalf of grassroots youth organisations**, speak up on their behalf to funders and especially where they are afraid to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’.
- **Work with funders to identify and redistribute funding** to underserved areas of the country, and to challenge poor funding behaviours including the ‘sustainability fallacy’ (i.e. youth projects will always need the continuing support of a diverse range of funding agencies).

B. Advocate for existing, particularly local, youth work

‘Focus on the local and listen to what young people are saying’

Messages about where advocacy is problematic:

- There has been a wealth of approaches for grassroots youth organisations to ‘feed up’ to decision makers (which is generally welcomed) but the **level of ‘feed back’ to them is poor**
- **It is often unclear** how national policies have been informed by grassroots youth organisations and young people’s voices – national would appear to disregard the local.
- There is a concern that **decision makers are unrepresentative of the diversity within communities** that are impacted by their decisions.
- The current policy environment was often referred to as **too short-term or populist** and concern was expressed about the constant change in policy and personnel (often leading to engagement fatigue and having to repeat the same stories over and over again!).

Messages about how advocacy could be better:

- When national, regional, and local bodies consult with young people they should **ensure they follow through with clear and timely feedback** on what has happened as a result.
- Where bodies consult agencies to form reports or recommendations, they should **ensure that all contributors are fully attributed** in any reports and provided with copies of reports.
- When constructing research and consultations, agencies **could do better in using broader and more inclusive styles of enquiry** that go beyond seeking evidence for an existing idea.
- **Better communication is required** to explain what and why national programmes are funded, and greater transparency is needed about how decisions are made.

Messages about what the NYA and other sector agencies could do to help:

- **Ensure there are clear pathways for advocacy and voice** from grassroots youth organisations through to local, regional and national decision makers (and ensure this is representative).
- ‘Close the feedback loops’ – **make sure all consultations and decisions are clearly fed back** to grassroots youth organisations and to young people themselves.
- **Strengthen the collective voice of the sector** and the mechanisms for being responsive to needs as they arise: ‘speak truth to power’ and champion youth work in all its forms.
- There was a request to **protect and/or rebuild the infrastructure** for youth voice at local, regional and national levels (e.g. youth councils, cabinets and parliament).
- There was a request to explore **better joined-up digital tools** and forums for providing intelligence on youth services, young people’s needs and youth workers insights.
- There was a request to **work better with ‘allies’ across the sector** that are engaged with young people and youth services e.g. Health; Schools; Youth Justice; Leisure/Sports Services.

C. Strengthen youth work(er) support

‘Secure training, qualifications, CPD and recognition for youth workers’

Messages about where youth work(er) support is problematic:

- It was broadly stated that the expectation youth workers were trained and qualified has been **eroded by a decade of underinvestment in the workforce**. This has resulted in a less qualified workforce with a fragmented understanding of the youth work approach
- There were **questions expressed about the accessibility of existing training and qualification pathways**; and that experience of access to these (at all levels) was unequally distributed
- Concerns were vocalised about the **terms and conditions for youth work employment** (contractually and practically); and the lack of supervision and/or accountability for workers
- It isn’t always apparent or obvious **where youth workers should turn for advice and guidance**; and the intensity of workloads is limiting time for training and development

Messages about how youth work(er) support could be better:

- Employers and funding agencies should **actively require/recruit qualified workers** and/or make it a requirement for unqualified workers to train towards relevant qualifications.
- The **provision of basic training should be universally available** and accessible to volunteers.

- The development of continuing professional development courses and qualifications for current youth workers is **underdeveloped and requires further investment**.
- The introduction of a **system for registering and recognising youth workers was broadly supported** as a method for protecting workers and young people; and building recognition for youth workers progression and professional identity.

Messages about what the NYA and other sector agencies could do to help:

- The NYA and other national agencies should **raise the profile for working in the sector** using advertising and campaigns that increase visibility and support recruitment to vacant posts.
- Agencies need to **work together on securing ‘what good looks like’**, supported by relevant and contextualised quality assurance tools, standards, guidance and kitemarks.
- The NYA should build on its guidance bank of resources, widening these to **address the different contexts for youth work** and utilising visual (short video) tools that are universally available to the workforce as examples of good practice and address current issues.
- The NYA, other national agencies and funders should **recognise ‘quality isn’t cheap’** by promoting recommended pay structures, progression routes and qualifications.
- The NYA should secure a **minimum requirement for adults engaged in work with young people** and consider other measures that protect the identity of youth work(ers).

D. Collaborate in support of local youth work

‘Support, where it exists, is helpful – but work better together!’

Messages about where collaboration is problematic:

- Competition has become the status-quo through adopting the marketisation of youth work services; and this has created closed, protected and sometimes antagonistic behaviours between youth work organisations that become self-serving for organisational gain. This often **distracts from the needs of young people** that require organisations to collaborate.
- The emergence of large national and regional providers of youth services has created a new power dynamic that **inhibits collaboration** or ‘tilts favour towards the big boys’.
- There has emerged a competition to harvest young peoples voice’s, and there is a **danger of competing ‘for’ young people’s voices** as opposed to collaborating in listening to them .
- There is a danger in agencies that seek to protect their ‘intellectual knowledge’ as a ‘commercial advantage’ over other organisations when it has the **potential to enrich all**.

Messages about how collaboration could be better:

- **National and regional agencies should ensure grassroots organisations are represented** and involved in decision making at all levels of engagement with sector stakeholders.
- There should be **more co-operation between local authority and voluntary/community sector organisations** in recognition of the collective responsibility towards young people's wellbeing – and this should go beyond commissioning and grant funding relationships.
- There needs to be **support for collaboration and partnership** at local area levels in addition to regions. There was active interest in the development of Local Youth Partnerships.
- Agencies at local, regional and national level should explore further where shared use of resources, human and physical, can **reduce duplication and promote the sector**.

Messages about what the NYA and other sector agencies could do to help:

- Grassroots organisations were **not always aware of how to access support from infrastructure bodies** – the NYA could act as a curator (in mapping and signposting) to sub-regional, regional and national bodies that can meet youth organisations needs.
- National agencies should **work together in addressing underserved areas/regions** in England to ensure a fairer allocation of support, funding and access to youth work provision.
- When lobbying decision makers and politicians, national agencies were **encouraged to present a united front in campaigning 'on behalf of the sector'** - not just themselves - through co-ordinated communication channels and messaging from key personnel.
- The NYA's role as a convenor was highly valued, the NYA is **encouraged to continue drawing people together** – in person and online – around themes, urgent issues and standards.
- National agencies – where possible - should **work together more often in hosting regional events and roadshows**. There was the suggestion a more regular multi-agency roadshow would be a better use of grassroots organisations time and embody collaboration.

Phase 4: Integration of Learning

The consultation has identified a range of issues for the NYA as it considers its role in 'joining the dots' in support of grassroots youth organisations and in making 'great youth work happen.'

These issues require careful evaluation to shape the services and relationships that the NYA undertakes in supporting the sector in a post-emergency context for youth work. To some extent, 'context is everything' in identifying priorities for NYA service development and delivery in the next three years. While the UK is no longer in a state of emergency (as manifest in lockdown), it continues to face a cost of living crisis, persistent social inequalities, a continuing covid pandemic, political turmoil, climate change and the shadow of international conflicts. The combination of these challenges is the context in which the NYA is called to serve the youth work sector. The NYA has, undoubtedly, made a positive impact on the sector during the Covid-19 emergency and the consultation (at all phases but especially at phase 3) identified the pivotal role the NYA has fulfilled in securing the value of youth work during the pandemic. A wave of appreciation has been expressed for this function and many new youth agencies were drawn to the NYA as a result.

The next steps in consolidating this engagement and learning will be pivotal for the NYA. The youth work sector, despite new interest and investment, is still in turbulence and is facing further uncertainty in the face of persistent economic instability. Navigating this context will require determination and careful decision making to support the future stability of youth work in England.

Recommendations

The consultation process has highlighted and affirmed many areas of NYA's current workstreams. Looking forwards, the collective feedback from participants combine to amplify how the NYA can go further and deeper in its support for grassroots youth work. This is captured below under 4 themes:

Advocate for the sector

- **Act more to convene and influence decision makers around areas of concern for the sector**

The sector has looked to the NYA for leadership during the covid-emergency. The NYA should build on this momentum but pivot to lead on issues clearly driven and attributed to grassroot voices.

This requires the NYA to have resources and mechanisms for listening both directly to grassroot organisations and through its partner agencies. As an example, an 'area of concern' that arose from phase 3 of this project was to speak clearly to funders about the challenges for organisations that are created by existing funding behaviours – a public response to this issue as a starter will evidence how the NYA is speaking on its behalf to influence decision makers.

- **Consider carefully how grassroots voices are included in influencing spaces and activities**

The NYA should explore further how it can speak both with and on behalf of grassroots organisations.

This may require building a network, pool or forum of representative voices that are regularly consulted and encouraged to raise issues for NYA advocacy. This should be developed alongside existing regional partnerships that also support local delivery.

- **Develop methods for communicating on behalf of the sector and 'close the feedback loop.'**

The NYA should build on existing work, such as the National Youth Sector Advisory Board, as a platform for communicating key messages on behalf of the sector and alongside other sector stakeholders.

It should continue to amplify and campaign for the role of youth work and ensure there are mechanisms for keeping the sector informed with regular feedback on how its work is serving the interests of grassroots youth organisations and frontline workers (its impact).

Set the standard

- **Continue to develop clear and accessible guidance for 'what makes for good youth work'**

The role of the NYA as a the standard bearer for youth work is clear. Youth sector organisations that operate in a wide range of settings are – increasingly - looking to the NYA for guidance.

The NYA should continue to develop contextualised standards and guidance in support of grassroots youth work and youth organisations.

- **Ensure guidance is developed with sector stakeholders and clearly attributed to contributors**

In developing guidance, the NYA should ensure there is a clear evidence trail and methodology for attributing standards and guidance to those involved in its co-creation.

The NYA should ensure that all guidance is informed by sector stakeholders and, so far as is practicable, ensure there is a collective endorsement of published guidance.

- **Develop tools and technologies that make guidance available to all**

In publishing guidance, the NYA should continue to build its bank of resources that utilise digital media through online material.

Guidance and publications should be made available in formats that can be accessed by youth workers and youth organisations in through documentation, visual illustrations and video formats – providing access in full and bitesize designs.

Equip the workforce

- **Continue to develop career pathways, support qualifications and CPD for youth workers**

The recent work to rebuild the training and development pathways for youth workers was widely welcomed by grassroots organisations. However, there is still work to be done to ensure the pathways from entry level training to continuing professional development is fully integrated in to the operational programmes for youth work organisations.

The NYA should ensure the infrastructure for training, qualifications and CPD is developed to support progression across the sector and ensure an equitable offer is available across regions.

- **Enhance the recognition, status and security of the youth work profession**

The workforce continues to express frustration at being fragmented, sidelined and/or hidden within much larger services or service providers. As a result, many youth workers feel vulnerable in their jobs or lack a sense of collective identity. The NYA should build on the development of youth worker networks, a youth worker register and employment standards for youth workers.

The NYA should work with sector colleagues to secure greater recognition for youth workers, at all levels of practice, and to advocate for minimum levels of workplace supervision and support.

- **Develop tools and technologies that connect youth workers and create a shared identity**

There is an appetite amongst youth workers, at all levels, for greater connection and shared learning. The covid pandemic has created new connections and made the use of on line tools a more universal method for work place, voluntary and professional connections.

The NYA should build on this appetite for connection through tools and technologies that provide youth workers with a platform for building a shared identity across similar service areas, thematic programmes and to support career development.

Collaborate

- **Develop relationships and partnerships that facilitate support for grassroots youth work**

The NYA holds an influential role within the sector as the ‘national body for youth work in England’. The NYA has a responsibility to use this status in support of grassroots youth work. The NYA has acknowledged it cannot achieve this on its own and must work in partnership with sector stakeholders to achieve this (its) goal. However, the youth work sector is wide and diverse. This requires a conscious and intentional allocation of resources to develop and/or sustain relationships with sector stakeholders that provides the most fertile ground for sector wide benefits.

The NYA should make this a specific focus of its work streams and directorate responsibilities in building stronger and more purposeful relationships with sector partners.

- **Invest in areas underserved by support infrastructure to level the playing field**

The NYA has the responsibility for promoting good youth work across the length and breadth of England. This is no small task and will only have limited impact if driven centrally as it will struggle to adapt, respond and/or adjust for regional differences and demand. The NYA should work with existing regional partners and seek to enable investment in building new regional and/or local area partnerships that provide the support required for grassroots youth work, prioritising areas that are underserved by existing support infrastructure.

The NYA will require more dedicated personnel resource to enable the development of support infrastructure.

- **Secure relationships with sector partners through clearer partnership agreements**

In strengthening relationships and partnerships, the NYA should establish clearer expectations and agreements with organisations that partner with the NYA. The NYA would benefit from implementing, sustaining and reviewing partnership agreements that reflect the status of relationships with different stakeholders. These agreements should clearly state what partners can expect from their relationship with the NYA and vice versa.

Agreements should take in to account the different contexts, responsibilities and operations of respective partners e.g. national partners, regional partners, local authorities and local area partnerships etc; and the focus of these agreements should be on what they achieve for grassroots youth work, aside from the benefits or protections they afford to any given organisation.

Final Remarks:

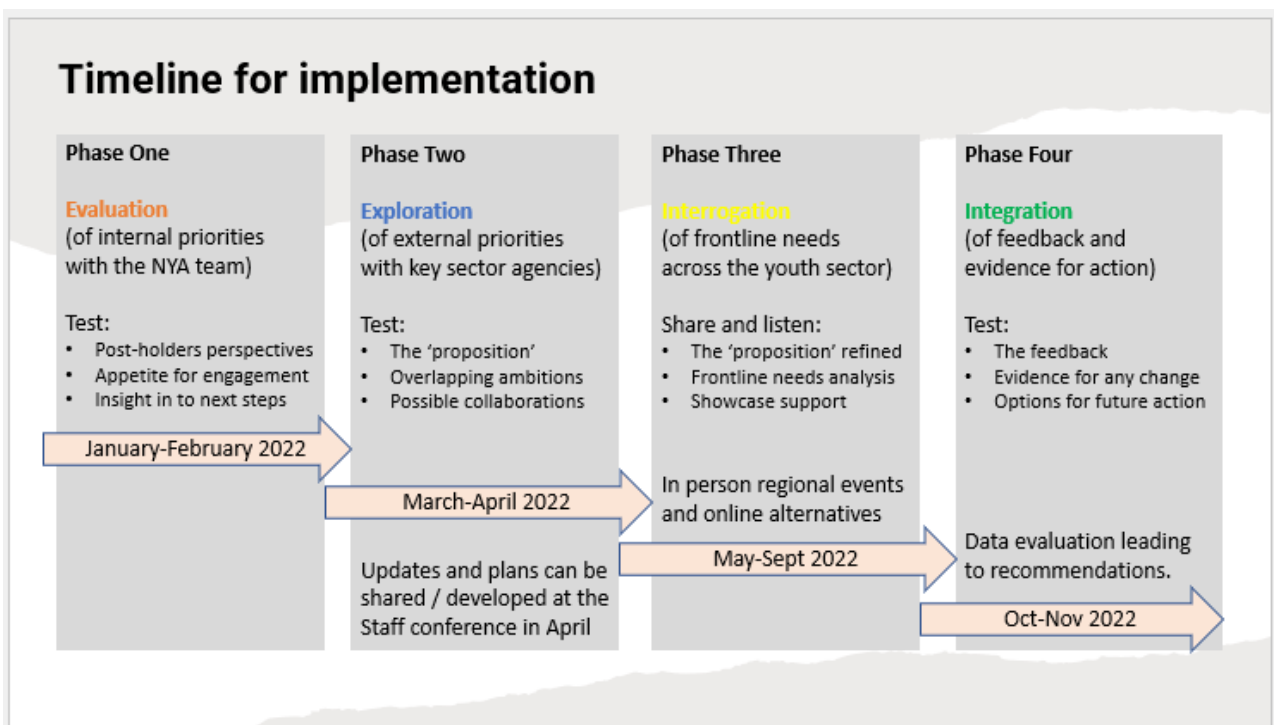
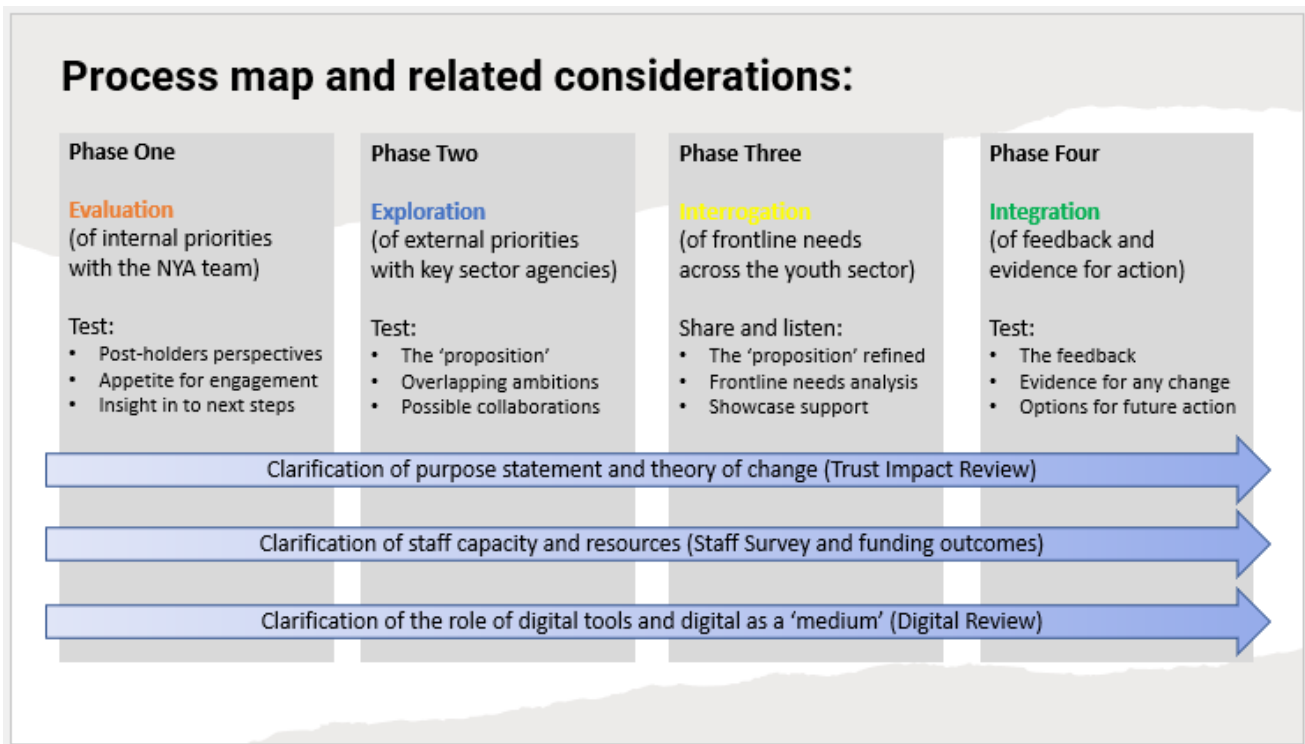
As a consultant, it has been a privilege to interview NYA colleagues, work alongside them and lead on the roadshow programme over a 12 month window during the 'joining the dots' consultation. In doing so, it has been clear to me that the team is committed to securing the best possible future for young people through increasing their access to high quality youth work in all its forms.

The narrative and recommendations in this report affirm what I have observed is an already established direction of travel for the NYA in achieving its goal of 'making great youth work happen'. The integration of these recommendations in to the emerging strategic plan is evidence of the responsiveness of the NYA to the voices of grassroots youth work. The challenge – now - is to identify how to allocate the available resources and what to prioritise in a timely way that will contribute to a more sustainable future for the sector and for the role of the NYA.

I am sure the NYA will rise to this task as a reflection of its aspirations with and on behalf of grassroots youth work and the many passionate youth workers that make great youth work happen.

Paul Fenton, February 2023

Appendix 1: Consultation Pathway



Joining the Dots:

Supporting grassroots youth organisations to make great youth work happen

Consultation with second tier youth sector agencies

Context:

The National Youth Agency, as the standards body for Youth Work in England, has taken a lead role in providing guidance and support to the youth sector throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. We have worked closely with government, sector partners and grassroots organisations to ensure youth work could respond safely, purposefully, and contextually to the challenges presented by Covid-19.

Throughout this period, we have been listening to what grassroots organisations and frontline workers have been telling us about, not only their needs during the pandemic but, what they require to make great youth work happen as we emerge and evolve from two years under the shadow of Covid-19. The feedback we have received suggests grassroots organisations value/want/need:

1. **Guidance:** that delivers nationally recognised standards for youth work practice(s)
2. **Support:** that provides advice for local organisations to operate effectively and sustainably
3. **Training:** that supports frontline work with young people from entry level to CPD
4. **Networks:** that offer opportunities for connecting frontline workers in similar fields of practice
5. **Knowledge:** that encourages shared learning and access to evidence-based research

Response:

The NYA is conscious of the importance to respond to these needs with our partners across the sector. We recognise we cannot do this alone and want to work with sector partners to design, deliver and disseminate outcomes. We also want to ensure our response to the needs of grassroots organisations is informed by how your organisation is positioned to support the sector now and going forward.

The pandemic has drawn the youth sector together in an unprecedented fashion, utilised new technologies to connect with frontline workers and increased the recognition of the valued work being undertaken by grassroots youth organisations. We would like to build on these positive developments at a critical time for the sector as it adjusts to a changeable landscape for sustaining youth services.

We therefore intend to undertake a fresh series of regional roadshows called 'Joining the Dots' in summer 2022 (complemented by online alternatives) to showcase the work of the sector. We've run a couple of series of roadshows in the past with partners and these have been very well received by the sector. We are keen to engage you in how we explore the needs of the youth sector post pandemic. The events will signpost to existing supportive infrastructures, test ideas for developing responses to areas of need, and provide a platform for connections with/across grassroots organisations.

Next Steps:

The NYA has commissioned a Senior Associate, Paul Fenton, to work alongside the NYA in evaluating the NYA's response to the needs of grassroots youth organisations; in the design and delivery of the 'Joining the Dots' roadshow; and in the dissemination of outcomes from these events.

We have asked Paul Fenton to meet with sector partners to identify how the needs we have identified link with your own ambitions to support grassroots organisations within your sphere of influence and whether you would like to partner with us in the 'Joining the Dots' summer roadshow.

Paul Fenton will be in touch with you with an invitation to arrange a meeting/discussion at your earliest convenience and you can also make direct contact to arrange this using these details:

Appendix 4: Phase 3 Programme

NYA Roadshow Programme Overview

Morning programme: 10:00-12:30 BST

The morning reception is 'invitation only' and targeted at lead agency representatives who have a more strategic/organisational leadership role in supporting youth work/the sector across each region. It is expected this will be a 'higher level' discussion of lead agency challenges and opportunities in working with current initiatives and partnering across the region.

- 10.00am Welcome and Refreshments
- 10.30am Opening presentations: NYA and Regional Partner
[Statutory Guidance/Standards, YIF, Youth Guarantee and latest news]
- 11.00am Roundtable discussions on regional themes

(tailored to regions, e.g. YIF partnerships; recruitment and retention; training)
- 12.00pm Questions, responses and closing remarks
- 12.30pm Network lunch (joined by afternoon delegates)

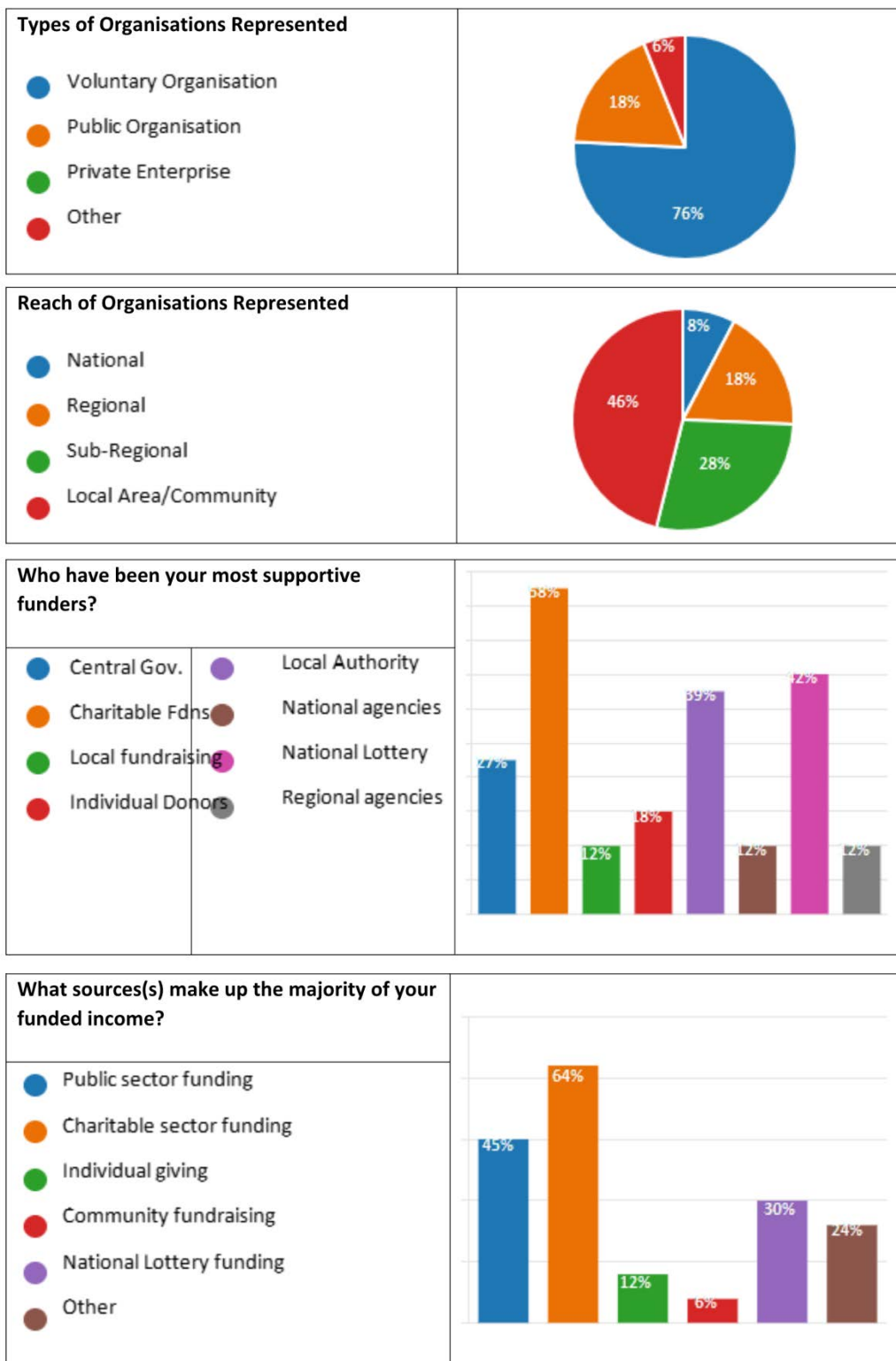
Afternoon Programme: 12:30-17:00 BST

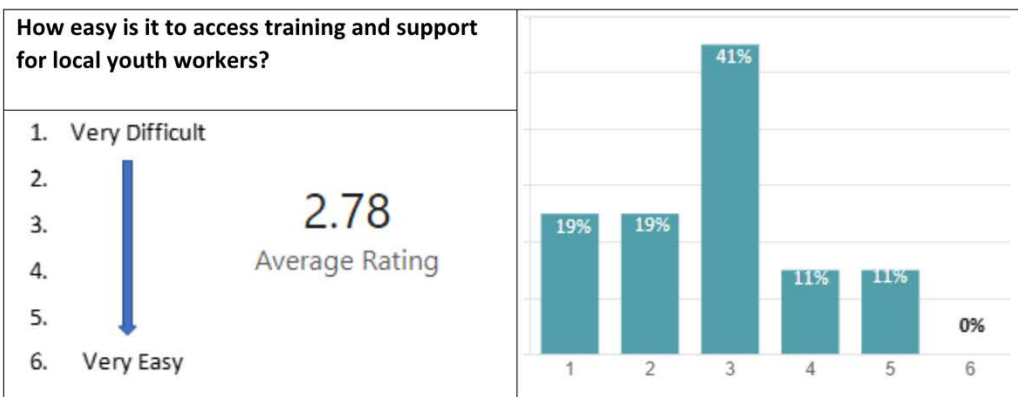
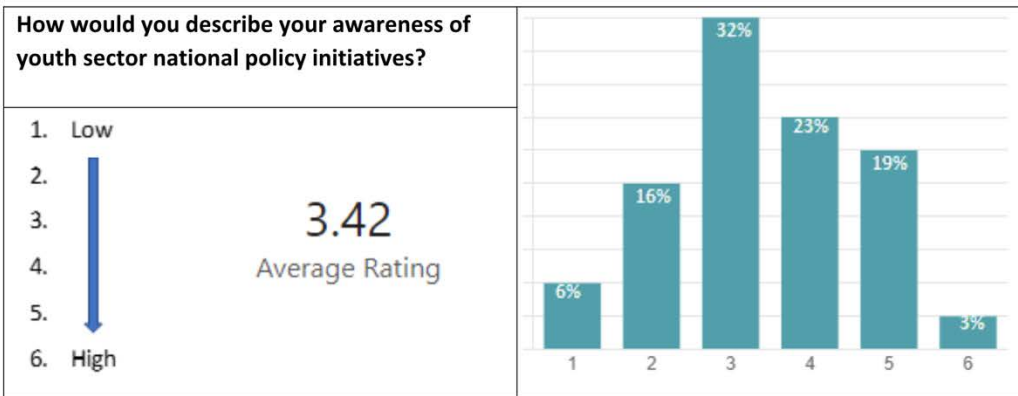
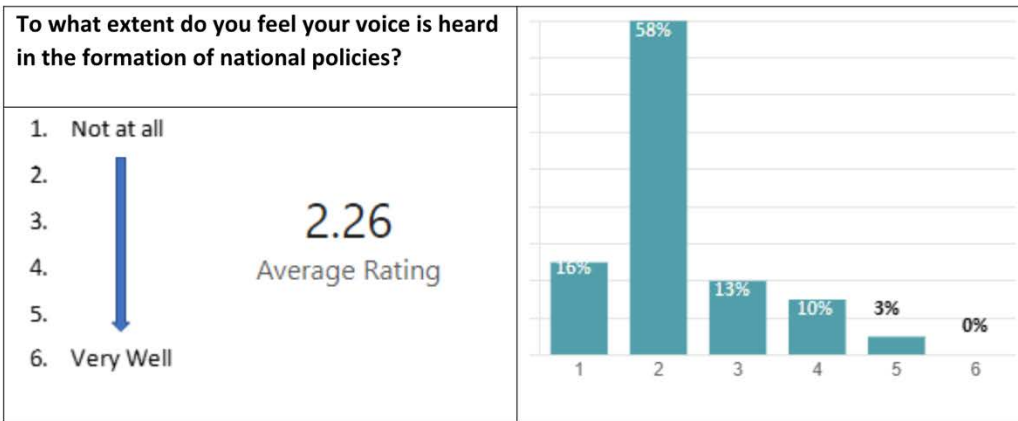
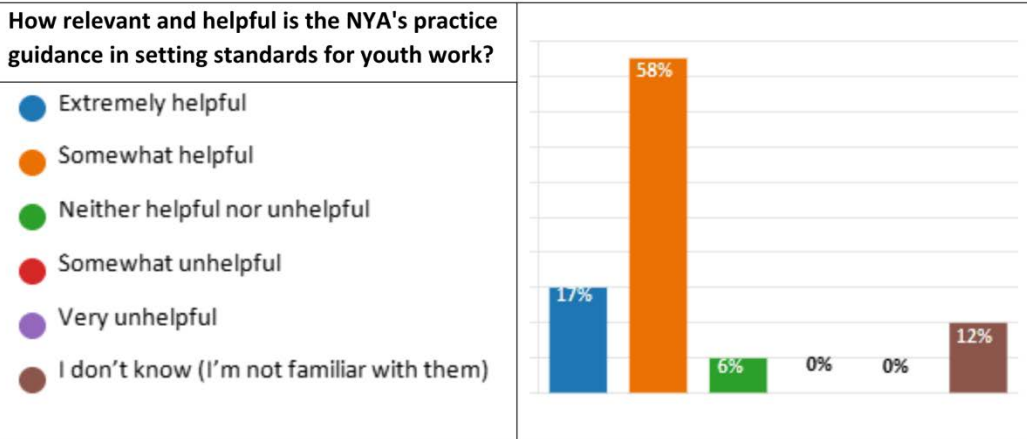
The Roadshow programme will continue during the afternoon, from 12.30-5.00pm, when we will be joined by delegates that have registered for the open roadshow event. The NYA, in collaboration with regional partners, are holding these open events to engage with grassroots youth organisations in a broad discussion on policy, youth work standards, programmes and youth sector investment.

- 12.30pm Network lunch (joined by afternoon delegates)
- 1.30pm Opening presentations: NYA and Regional Partner
[Approx. 10-15 minutes each, alongside welcome and context setting]
- 2.00pm Roundtable Discussion 1: Sector Investment
- 2.30pm Roundtable Discussion 2: Policy and Advocacy
- 3.00pm Break
- 3.30pm Roundtable Discussion 3: Youth Work Standards
- 4.00pm Roundtable Discussion 4: Support for local youth work
- 4.30pm Plenary Q&A / Presentations
- 5.00pm Close

Note: Paul Fenton will MD the event and design a digital data capture tool for all sessions, and some evaluation questions to complete at the end of the day. The provided briefs/questions will be provided in hard copy for each discussion and digitised to support data capture for universal use across all venues.

Appendix 5: Phase 3 - Sample from Data Capture





National Youth Agency

9 Newarke Street, Leicester LE1 5SN

Company registration no. 2912597

Register charity in England and Wales no. 1035804

nya.org.uk