Westminster Foundation

The Westminster Foundation Youth Panel Framework

Learnings, reflections and practical guidance for youth-led grant-making

In partnership with
Leaders Unlocked and
Cheshire Community Foundation
2025–2026



Youth-led • Community-rooted • Power-sharing

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Key terms used in this framework

Youth Panel	A group of young people with equal power in decision-making who each give their individual opinion to form a collective decision. At the Westminster Foundation, young people are those 0-25 years old. Some organisations extend the definition of young to 30 years old.
Grant	An amount of money awarded for a specific purpose that does not need to be repaid.
Grantee	In this context, the specific organisation with a charitable purpose that is awarded the funding.
Meaningful participation	When young people have real influence over decisions that affect them, are supported to understand those decisions and can see how their time and views lead to genuine change.
Youth Voice	The meaningful involvement of young people in shaping decisions, actions and systems that affect their lives, based on their lived experience, perspectives and priorities.
Values	Principles and standards of behaviour which inform how we work and ensure we remain true to our beliefs. In this project, we used the Involving Young People Collective's 10 Values for co-production to serve as an indication of best practice that we (partners and panel members) would uphold in working together.
Expression of Interest	The first stage of a multi-stage application process. The organisation applying is asked to provide basic information with a brief overview of the work they want to do with the funding.

Executive summary

Between 2025 and 2026, the Westminster Foundation ran a ten-month pilot to put young people at the heart of grant-making; partnering with two organisations operating locally, Leaders Unlocked and Cheshire Community Foundation.

A panel of sixteen young people aged 14–21 from Chester and Ellesmere Port were recruited to co-design the pilot funding programme, assess applications and award £30,000 to organisations in the community. This framework explores how delivery partners and panel members worked together to deliver the programme, what we learned and how others can apply these lessons in their own work.

'We' refers to the full partnership between the Westminster Foundation, Leaders Unlocked, Cheshire Community Foundation and the panel members.

The result

The three highest-scoring applications were awarded £10,000 each by the panel; who decided the amount would enable depth in delivery, rather than splitting or distributing the funds more widely. Three local organisations that champion youth leadership were ultimately awarded funding through the process: Youth Federation, The Boaty Theatre Company and Inspiring Your Future CIC.



"I'm really happy and proud of the difference we've made, as we've made a lot of decisions together. A lot of young people my age in my area are just watching the world go by."

Executive summary

As part of developing the framework, panel members chose to contribute by sharing their reflections and experiences through quotes woven throughout this document.

Young people on the panel designed the criteria, reviewed seventeen Expressions of Interest (EOI), shortlisted eight organisations and made the final funding decisions. They did not rubber-stamp adult choices; they challenged assumptions, held debates and produced a portfolio of funded projects that directly reflected the needs of their communities.

This framework draws on the full arc of that experience; from early research and partner recruitment through to celebration and reflection. It is specific about what worked and practical about what others can do to apply the lessons learnt. We have structured it as both a narrative account and a toolkit, so it can be read from cover to cover or dipped into as a planning resource.

You will also find honest reflections on the challenges encountered along the way; many of which are familiar to others working in this space across the sector. The framework explores how those challenges were identified, discussed and mitigated as the programme progressed and the role that close communication and shared values between delivery partners played in keeping the work on track successfully.

Alongside this, the framework captures what young people themselves say they have learnt over the course of the pilot: from a clearer understanding of grant-making and decision-making to growing confidence, communication and collaborative leadership.

We would like to extend thanks to all the people who made this panel pilot a success and supported us along the way: Youth Panel members, Leaders Unlocked, Cheshire Community Foundation, The Bluecoat Charity, Youth Federation, Inspiring Your Future CIC, The Boaty Theatre Company, the Westminster Foundation team and Trustees. Without you, this project would not have been such a positive and meaningful experience for everyone involved.

Five things we now know to be true

1. Young people make strong funding decisions when they are properly supported to understand the implications of their choices.
2. Belonging comes before contribution. Relationship building must not be skipped. Trust, consistency and care are the conditions that make meaningful participation possible.
3. Power sharing must be intentional and actively maintained. It does not happen by default.
4. Equity of voice must be designed in and not assumed. You must actively create the conditions that enable different people to speak, be listened to and influence decisions.
5. Accessibility is not an add-on. The way sessions are designed and resourced (time, staff support, meeting access needs) directly affects the quality of Youth Voice and decision-making.

Purpose of this framework

What this framework is for

This framework does two things. The first part tells an honest account of what we did as a partnership of practitioners and young people – the process, decisions, what worked well, challenges and outcomes.

The second part is a toolkit. It is designed to be used by anyone setting up or supporting a youth panel of a similar kind. The stages, considerations and checklist questions can be adapted to different contexts; whether you are a small community funder, a national charity or a local authority.

We have written this framework as guidance rather than a fixed model because we believe context matters. What worked for us in Chester and Ellesmere Port may not map neatly onto another situation or area; however the principles, structures and the questions we used are transferable.

Who it is intended to support and inform?

Audience	How this framework is relevant to each audience: What it provides
Organisations implementing youth panels	Practical guidance on every stage: design, recruitment, facilitation, decision-making, celebration and reflection.
Funders & commissioners	Evidence and learning about what participatory grant-making requires in terms of time, resource and genuine commitment to power sharing.
Young people	An honest account of what this approach looks and feels like in practice, written to be accessible to readers who are at different levels of youth involvement in decision-making.
Sector stakeholders	Implications and learning for how the wider sector approaches Youth Voice in decision-making.

Why the Youth Panel pilot was developed & who was involved

The Westminster Foundation's decision to involve young people in grant-making followed a dedicated research phase in 2023–2024.

During this time, the Foundation explored what meaningful Youth Voice in funding looks like and why it was important for the organisation's development. Led by a Youth Consultant, the process drew on insights from both young people and other funders across the sector.

The Foundation had a clear sense of purpose: it wanted to further understand the needs and priorities of young people in the communities it served, and it wanted those young people to be the ones making decisions about how money was spent in their communities. Active representation and genuine power sharing was the goal; giving young people real authority to make real funding decisions and see their direct impact.

Who was involved

The programme was delivered through a partnership model with complementary roles:

Partner	Role
Westminster Foundation	Held overall responsibility as commissioner. Developed the participatory grant-making framework, supported co-design of activities; coordinated payments, oversaw storytelling and communications, led on monitoring the learning and ensured it informed future strategy and governance.
Cheshire Community Foundation	Administered the £30,000 fund. Imparted grant-making expertise and local funding context, facilitated fund-building and decision-making development days, managed communications with applicants and chosen grantees. Will lead the grants monitoring and evaluation process.
Leaders Unlocked	Led youth-centred design and facilitation, co-ordinated remuneration and travel expenses for panellists, supported the panel during and between development days, managed safeguarding and pastoral support, co-designed activities with young people and partners.
Youth Panel members	Thirteen young people from Chester and Ellesmere Port who were at the heart of decisions throughout the pilot (Abdul, Ashley, Eden, Elizabeth, Emily, Harmony, Lexie, Liam, Luke, Mason, Paul, Perle, Tilly).

Why partners mattered from the start





The selection of delivery partners was a deliberate, values-led process that played a critical role in the success of the pilot; the Westminster Foundation intentionally partnered with Cheshire Community Foundation for their local community knowledge and expertise in grant-making, and with Leaders Unlocked for their substantial experience in high-quality youth engagement and strong presence in the region. These complementary strengths, alongside a strong alignment to the Foundation's values and ways of working, were key to the programme's success.

This alignment was evident from the outset and created a strong foundation for collaboration throughout the project. Regular communication, shared ownership and a collective commitment to centring young people's voices reduced duplication, supported effective decision-making and enabled challenges to be addressed quickly.

As many panel members were new to grant-making concepts, it was important to partner with organisations that could translate complex ideas into engaging, accessible learning experiences. Cheshire Community Foundation's understanding of the local funding landscape combined with Leaders Unlocked's expertise in youth participation, helped to ensure effective recruitment, youth-centred programme design and smooth delivery of the pilot.

Each partner played a distinct role in creating the conditions for meaningful engagement. Leaders Unlocked provided significant pastoral support, maintaining regular contact with panel members between sessions through one-to-one check-ins and a WhatsApp group.

This ongoing engagement helped sustain participation, build trust and ensure young people felt listened to and valued throughout the project. Their extensive experience of supporting young people to develop confidence, leadership skills and informed decision-making also provided important developmental scaffolding as panel members took on increasing responsibility.

The expertise of the Westminster Foundation Youth Voice Advisor was also central to the pilot's design and delivery. Drawing on both lived experience as a former participant in youth-led projects and professional experience delivering participatory grant-making programmes; this role helped shape the project, inform facilitation approaches and adapt activities in response to the needs of the group.

The Westminster Foundation's Cheshire Grants Manager attended most sessions, providing staff support and leading a workshop on bias and fair decision-making. Their consistent presence brought more reassurance during the more demanding stages of the process; while Cheshire Community Foundation's deep understanding of the local context helped ensure discussions and funding decisions remained grounded in the needs and experiences of local communities.

Together, this combination of aligned values, expertise, local insight and relationship-centred youth work created the conditions for the pilot to function effectively and deliver on its aims.

The wider context: youth funding and the sector

The pilot sits within a broader movement towards participatory grant-making, an approach that moves decision-making power away from traditional gatekeepers and towards the communities that funding is meant to serve.

Youth-led grant-making specifically recognises that young people are experts in their own lives, communities and that their perspectives are essential to directing resources effectively.

Frameworks such as Hart's Ladder of Participation, the Lundy Model and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) all point in the same direction: children and young people should not just be consulted, they should be active agents that are provided with appropriate guidance and support in the decisions that affect them. This pilot was an attempt to put those principles into practice in a concrete and accountable way; to provide the infrastructure and resource for them to make informed decisions and see their impact. We intentionally recruited young people aged 14–21, maintaining a broad age range to test how different age groups would engage with the programme and to inform future funding practice.

The pilot demonstrated that age itself was less important than the quality of support provided. With skilled facilitation, accessible information and appropriate support; panel members were able to engage effectively in discussions and decision-making regardless of age. The primary consideration was therefore ensuring that engagement approaches were tailored to meet the needs of a diverse group of young people; all of whom were new to grant-making.

At the same time, the pilot was honest about the challenges. Participatory approaches require a great deal of time, resource, flexibility and skilled facilitation. They require funders and organisations to relinquish control and that can sometimes feel uncomfortable. This framework does not pretend otherwise. But it does demonstrate that the impact and outcomes make the effort worthwhile.

What the panel cared about

Early in the process, the panel identified several community concerns, including growing safety issues and a lack of accessible activities and opportunities for young people. They felt these challenges contributed to boredom and in some cases, anti-social behaviour; shaping the fund's focus.



Principles we worked alongside

The five pillars of our framework

Our approach was shaped by five core pillars that emerged from development days, conversations with the panel and reflections from the delivery team. They are the conditions we believe make Youth Voice meaningful rather than performative.

1. Belonging first

Belonging is not a soft outcome. It is the precondition for everything else. If young people do not feel that they are valued and belong to something, participation becomes fragile and the quality of voice and decision-making suffers as a result.

Monthly in-person sessions, having consistent adults supporting and providing dedicated time to build relationships meant many panel members felt part of a community they did not want to drop out of despite the demands of everyday life.

Fun, social interaction and relationship-building were central to why young people kept attending, contributing and showing up with care for the work. The programme made space for informal connection, natural breaks during sessions, laughter and shared moments through social activities embedded alongside the more demanding grant-making tasks. Remembering birthdays, celebrating milestones and sharing gestures of appreciation such as Christmas hampers; helped the young people feel valued as partners in the project. Over 80% of the panel stayed involved throughout the programme, demonstrating strong engagement and commitment.

Social activities were embedded into the programme from the outset, with budget allocated accordingly. The choice of activities was itself intentional and youth-led, with panel members choosing options that met the budget. For example, the panel chose an escape room for one of their socials because they wanted to have fun and understand each other's ways of decision-making better. Logistically, the socials were scheduled at the end of decision-making days, which served two purposes: they rewarded participation while giving the group time to relax and have fun after a day of working on the fund.

"Being on the panel has made me feel like I'm part of something and have a strong sense of belonging."

Principles we worked alongside

2. Care

The project was designed with reciprocity as one of its central aims. This meant recognising the pressures of everyday life that young people experience and ensuring that social time, bonding and acknowledgement were built into the programme, not treated as add-ons.

Leaders Unlocked, as pastoral leads ensured panel members were prepared and supported throughout. In practice, this looked like having feedback loops and support during one-to-one conversations, being available for panel members to reach out between sessions and offering them extra opportunities outside of the project to further strengthen their development.

If young people do not feel safe and valued, they are unlikely to stay involved long enough to influence decisions in a meaningful way.

3. Power-sharing

The panel were asked to make real funding decisions, where they would visibly see the outcome of their decisions and exercise genuine decision-making power. They co-designed the fund's target, criteria and application process. They were supported by adults, given enough time and provided with examples to prompt and amplify their thinking.

There were moments when adults stepped in more than intended, particularly where context was missing, specific grant-making expertise needed sharing or a stage needed clarifying. We found that youth-led decision-making only works when young people are properly supported to understand the implications of their choices.

4. Intentional equity of voice

Some panel members were more confident and outspoken than others. This meant that quieter voices were sometimes overshadowed. Structured techniques: small group work, rotating roles and 'step up, step back' guidance helped balance this over time.

Fair participation must be designed, protected and revisited throughout the project. It does not happen naturally in adult groups, and young people's groups are no different.

Panel members noticed and valued this too. As one put it, what they enjoyed most was *"hearing everybody's ideas and actually seeing things from a different view"*; a telling reflection of what equity of voice can make possible when it is intentionally held.

"I've enjoyed how much responsibility we have been given and how much choice we have in making change, also meeting people I haven't met before."

Principles we worked alongside

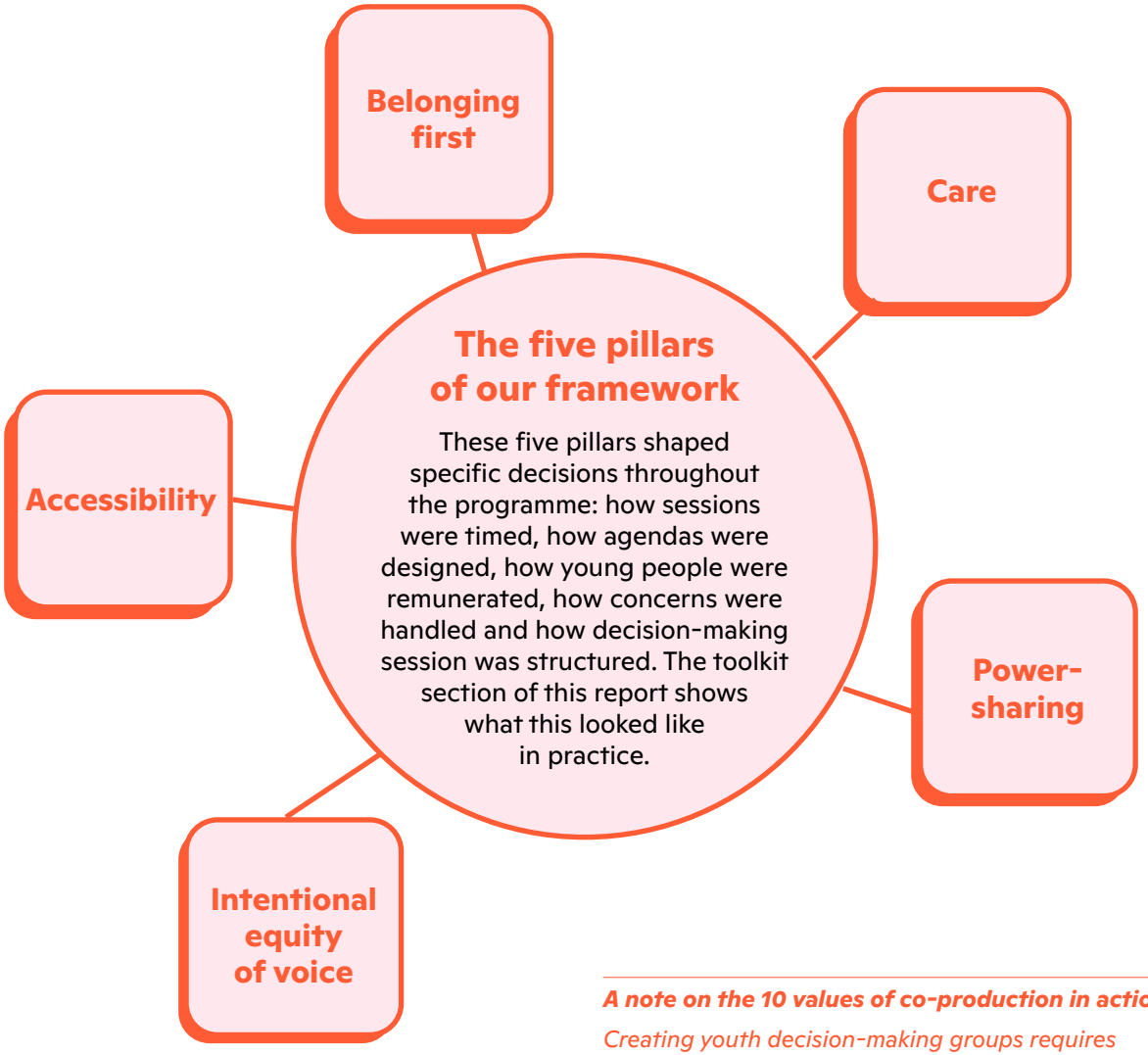
5. Accessibility

Different panellists engaged in different ways. Some found online sessions difficult; others needed more visual or audio materials. During in-person sessions, energy levels fluctuated particularly after lunch. When sessions were adapted to include more movement, games and interactive elements, engagement improved noticeably.

Additional adjustments were also made to support young people with different access needs and preferences, including sensory toy aids such as fidget spinners and flexible ways of participating where young people could move around the room was offered. Feedback from panellists that required this adjustment indicated that these adaptations helped them feel more comfortable, supported and able to contribute fully.

The venue also mattered as a key enabler for participation. Providing accessible, centrally located youth-friendly space such as The Bluecoat building contributed to the comfortable environment.

Accessibility is not just about inclusion. It directly affects the quality of Youth Voice and the equity of decision-making. This is worth holding onto: designing for accessibility is not a concession to those who find things harder. It makes the whole process better for everyone.



A note on the 10 values of co-production in action

Creating youth decision-making groups requires considerable resource – time, care and skilled facilitation. Scaling Youth Voice means maintaining the values, principles and conditions, not just replicating formats. The 'what' is less important than the 'why' and the 'how'.

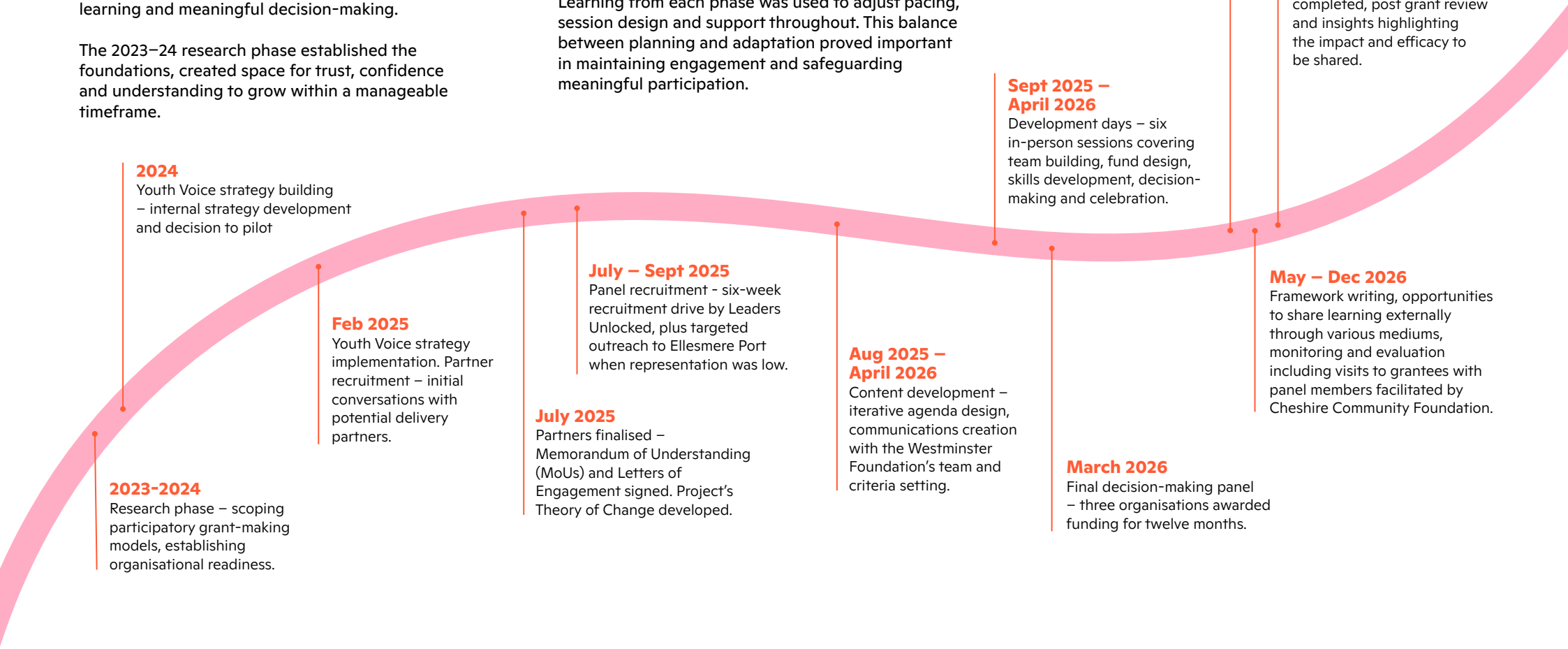
Methodology and timeline

How the pilot was designed

The pilot was designed as a ten-month hybrid programme combining in-person development days with online and offline activity between sessions. The shorter timeframe was intentional; helping to sustain momentum and engagement while still providing sufficient time for relationship-building, learning and meaningful decision-making.

The 2023–24 research phase established the foundations, created space for trust, confidence and understanding to grow within a manageable timeframe.

The programme was built around a central activity plan, mapped in advance and tracked through shared documents that contained the activity overview, meeting notes, a risk matrix, development day outlines, decision-making milestones, learning collation space and the final celebration and reflection phases. While the documents provided structure, the programme remained deliberately flexible. Learning from each phase was used to adjust pacing, session design and support throughout. This balance between planning and adaptation proved important in maintaining engagement and safeguarding meaningful participation.



2023-2024
Research phase – scoping participatory grant-making models, establishing organisational readiness.

2024
Youth Voice strategy building – internal strategy development and decision to pilot

Feb 2025
Youth Voice strategy implementation. Partner recruitment – initial conversations with potential delivery partners.

July 2025
Partners finalised – Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) and Letters of Engagement signed. Project's Theory of Change developed.

July – Sept 2025
Panel recruitment - six-week recruitment drive by Leaders Unlocked, plus targeted outreach to Ellesmere Port when representation was low.

Aug 2025 – April 2026
Content development – iterative agenda design, communications creation with the Westminster Foundation's team and criteria setting.

Sept 2025 – April 2026
Development days – six in-person sessions covering team building, fund design, skills development, decision-making and celebration.

March 2026
Final decision-making panel – three organisations awarded funding for twelve months.

April 2026
Celebration and reflection – celebration event with speeches and certificates, and connecting the panellists with follow-on opportunities

May – Dec 2026
Framework writing, opportunities to share learning externally through various mediums, monitoring and evaluation including visits to grantees with panel members facilitated by Cheshire Community Foundation.

Post Dec 2026
Following twelve months of the funding being used and monitoring and evaluation completed, post grant review and insights highlighting the impact and efficacy to be shared.

Methodology and timeline

Governance, safeguarding and data protection

Safeguarding was treated as a core condition of participation. The programme followed Leaders Unlocked's Safeguarding and Data Protection Policy, which covers both children and young adults.

Any safeguarding concerns were reported through Leaders Unlocked's process, directly to their Safeguarding Designated Lead with oversight shared across partners.

Young people's personal data was handled carefully and proportionately, stored in protected documents with access limited to relevant team members in the delivery team. Data collected included contact details, age, pronouns, access needs, photographs, health and dietary needs and where relevant; experience of free school meals or social care. This information was collected only to support safeguarding, accessibility and inclusion in the project experience.

Financial transparency

The budget was designed to properly support participation with reasonable flex to meet project needs. Young people were remunerated for their time at £13 per hour, equivalent to the living wage at the time via retailer vouchers, chosen to avoid any impact on other financial support they might receive. Vouchers were issued; bi-monthly and summary sheets showed hours completed and amounts earned were documented.

The £30,000 grant fund was administered by Cheshire Community Foundation and distributed in one full round as one-year grants of £10,000 per organisation. Payments to delivery partners were managed by the Westminster Foundation's Finance Team, following signed MOUs and Letters of Engagement.





The process: what we did

Recruiting the panel

Leaders Unlocked carried out a six-week recruitment drive in summer 2025. Drawing on an initial database of schools, colleges and youth organisations. They ran a two-stage process: an accessible application document with guidance and a consent form, followed by a telephone interview exploring the applicant's interests, reasons for applying and availability.

Initially nine young people were recruited from the Chester area. A targeted second phase focused specifically on Ellesmere Port, working with local schools to recruit more young people.

Overall, sixteen young people were recruited to the panel, with thirteen continuing their involvement throughout the project.

The recruitment process was not without its challenges. Recruitment coincided with the summer holiday period, and representation was uneven by gender and geography at first. The targeted Ellesmere Port outreach helped address the geographic imbalance. This experience shaped our thinking on future recruitment, which we explore in the **Findings** section (p17).

Designing the fund

One of the panel's first significant tasks was to explore the needs, challenges and opportunities facing young people in their communities. Working collaboratively in groups, they reflected on their own lived experience and discussed the issues they encountered in everyday life. These conversations shaped not only the priorities of the fund but also its identity, with panellists choosing the name 'Our Voice, Our Community' to reflect their ambition for young people to have a meaningful say in decisions that affect their lives and local areas.

A clear theme emerged: there was a perceived lack of accessible activities and opportunities for young people locally. The panel felt this absence could contribute to boredom and in some cases, anti-social behaviour. They therefore identified the creation of positive, engaging activities as a key priority while also recognising the wider benefits: stronger communities, more long-term opportunities and better relationships between young people.

The panel agreed that the fund should focus on supporting diversionary activities for young people, with the primary objective of addressing anti-social behaviour. However, they were also clear that well-designed youth activities could deliver much broader outcomes, including:

- Increased youth engagement and participation
- Development of life skills
- Improved physical and mental wellbeing
- Stronger relationships and social connections
- Raised aspirations and future opportunities

These outcomes became central to the grant programme's vision and assessment framework, written and owned by the young people themselves.

The panel opted for a two-stage application process: an EOI followed by a full application for shortlisted organisations. Over the Christmas holiday period, panel members continued their involvement by reviewing the proposed EOI stage before it was launched. They provided feedback on the assessment criteria, how the fund would be communicated including its visual representation, refined the application questions and considered the accessibility of the document from the perspective of potential applicants. This helped ensure that the process reflected the priorities and expectations of the young people who would ultimately be assessing submissions. The panel decided that grants could be up to £10,000.

A moment of genuine power sharing

When the young people decided that organisations should be able to apply for up to £10,000, this challenged some professional assumptions. It was a moment that required the adults in the room to genuinely step back. The decision was made to award larger grants on the basis that it enabled organisations to deliver more substantial and impactful projects rather than diluting impact across many grants.

The process: what we did

Development days: session by session

Seven in-person development days held on Saturdays for four hours from 12pm informed the core of the programme; with young people invited to arrive from 11:30am to allow time to settle in, connect with peers and prepare for the day ahead.

Each day was designed with clear aims, structured activities and ongoing learning from previous sessions:

Session	Focus	Key activities	Key learning
1. September 2025	Getting to know each other; introduction to grant-making; mapping.	Human bingo icebreaker; partner introductions, introduction to the 10 Values of Co-production and the project's theory of change; mind-mapping local challenges in groups.	The group contract was not completed due to time constraints and should have been scheduled.
2. October 2025	Build cohesion; deepen understanding of community challenges; begin fund design.	Group contract; standing debates; group-work to identify local challenges; Cheshire Community Foundation presentation on grant design; comms activity.	Needed more time to understand grant programme parameters. Not enough time for reflection or comms activity as they were held towards the end of the day; when some members were preparing to leave early. Google forms didn't work very well to capture Panel feedback.
3. November 2025	Build skills and confidence; finalise grant criteria; generate comms content.	Panel members delivered the recap of previous meeting items and decisions; standing debates on local priorities; Cheshire Community Foundation workshop on finalising key aspects of the grant round; Westminster Foundation comms workshop with support from Leaders Unlocked comms expert.	Re-iterating the importance of panel members being on time and requesting earlier arrival (11:30) for a 12pm start made a different to the work being started on time. Panel-delivered recap was effective. Standing debates consistently engage the group. Choice of format in comms workshop and resources worked well. Having a young content creator from Leaders Unlocked involved really helped the group's confidence and outputs in the comms tasks.
4. January 2026	Develop a shared understanding of fairness, unconscious bias and principles for decision-making; build confidence for later funding decisions.	Recap of discussion and decisions before the holidays; icebreaker; briefing on programme timeline and key stages; workshop on fair decision-making and unconscious bias; group work designing the EOI's shortlisting process; prepping for the final panel; feedback via mentimeter; introduction of online fortnightly supplementary sessions.	Group work on unconscious bias and fairness was effective and helped the Panel to reach a higher level of understanding of what's involved in funding decisions. Introducing supplementary sessions helped to maintain learning and to meet decision-making deadlines.
5. February 2026	Prepare for decision-making; brief panel on shortlisting; develop ability to speak publicly.	Group recap of achievements; briefing on shortlisted organisations; Panel Q&A activity to practice public speaking; video creation.	Breaking into new groups was effective. Panel Q&A activity worked very well but over-ran. Comms task didn't have enough time or energy because it took place later in the day.

The process: what we did

Session	Focus	Key activities	Key learning
6. March 2025	Full decision-making panel – final funding decisions.	Recap; icebreaker; structured decision-making on six applications using scoring framework, flip-chart paper and Mentimeter; reflections.	The panel was able to explain and justify every decision to support feedback. The process was rigorous and led by the panel throughout.
7. April 2025	Celebrate achievements with partners and awarded organisations.	Partner presentations; speeches from Youth Panel members; speeches from awarded organisations; certificates.	A great success. Speeches from panel members and organisations were heartfelt. Grants were particularly significant for smaller organisations.

How decisions were made

The decision-making process was one of the most carefully designed parts of the programme. Young people were not simply handed a shortlist and asked to vote. They built their understanding of grant-making incrementally; reviewing mock applications, exploring unconscious bias, practising scoring and developing their own criteria before making their final decisions about which organisations to fund.

Seventeen EOI's were reviewed in an online assessment session that lasted just over two hours. The panel co-designed their scoring framework, we used Mentimeter, a polling tool that lets you engage with audiences in real time; to score each application against three questions: how well the project met the fund's criteria; the experience and capability of the applicant organisation; and the extent to which Youth Voice was embedded. Each criterion was scored on a 0-4 scale, with definitions agreed by the panel.

Although the session lasted considerably longer than planned, panel members remained committed throughout, carefully considering every application before shortlisting eight organisations. Steps were also taken to ensure that panel members who felt less confident sharing their views verbally could contribute through the chat function.

This experience challenged some of our assumptions about young people's engagement with online activity. We had anticipated that reviewing many applications in a lengthy virtual session might lead to fatigue or disengagement. Instead, panel members remained focused and chose to stay online well beyond the planned finish time, demonstrating a genuine commitment to the responsibility of making funding decisions.

In the final in-person development day, six full applications were considered as one organisation dropped out of the process, and another did not meet the due diligence requirements. Post-it note reflections, which helped to provide a visual summary of the session, preceded facilitated discussion and the same scoring framework was applied, ensuring consistency and reinforcing panel ownership of the process.

One interesting learning point emerged from the final decision-making session. Some partners had assumed that building movement into the process would help maintain energy and engagement, so panel members were invited to place their reflections and questions on post-it notes in designated areas around the room. In practice, many panel members chose to remain seated, instead asking one person to place notes on their behalf, while remaining fully engaged in the discussion. It was a useful reminder that participation and engagement do not always look the way adults expect it to.

The outcome

The three highest-scoring applications totalled exactly £30,000 – the full value of the fund. The panel had designed a grant programme that achieved an excellent balance across both geographies and themes, supporting projects spanning sport, theatre and social action.

Findings and reflections

What worked well

Strong partner alignment

Confirming delivery partnerships before recruitment and investing time in shared values conversations built strong relationships from the outset. Regular meetings and shared ownership reduced confusion and duplication, helping partners navigate challenges together and stay connected to the pilot's purpose.

Meaningful remuneration

Paying panel members at a living wage equivalent (via retailer vouchers) sent a clear message: your time and expertise matter. Vouchers were chosen as the recognition method to ensure participation did not inadvertently affect any benefits that young people or their families may have been receiving, while also providing a legally and administratively appropriate way to recognise contributions from panellists across a wide age range, including those as young as 14.

Summary sheets recording hours completed and vouchers earned gave visibility over their contribution. Several panel members reflected that being paid made the project feel real and gave them more motivation.

Travel costs were covered where required and transport was organised when needed, helping to reduce barriers to attendance.

In-person engagement

Monthly in-person development days provided the primary space for learning, discussion and decision-making. The energy, collaboration and relationship-building they enabled would have been difficult to replicate online.

Retention was strong and young people frequently cited the in-person sessions as the highlight of their involvement.

Food chosen by the young people: fresh fruit, snacks and pizzas was provided during in-person development days to help sustain energy levels and support full participation throughout the longer sessions.

Young people's time, comfort and joy mattered; feedback from panel members indicated that these arrangements helped them feel valued, supported and cared for throughout the programme.

After trying another office space for the first few sessions, we moved to The Bluecoat Charity. As a local venue made available for the panel to use on Saturdays, it provided a welcoming and accessible environment. The space also allowed for movement, group activities and informal connection; all of which supported the quality of participation during the development days.

Skills & aspirations-led development days

At the start of the programme, panel members were asked to complete a skills questionnaire, giving them space to tell us as individuals what they wanted to gain from being part of the pilot. This early insight directly shaped the planning of the development days, helping the delivery team understand where skills could be strengthened or developed and where young people could be supported to positively challenge themselves in areas they were keen to grow. It meant that the agenda was not built around assumptions, but around what they had actually told us they wanted.

The questionnaire was revisited throughout the programme, in particular during one-to-one check-ins with Leaders Unlocked. These conversations allowed young people to reflect directly on their progress and to tell us whether the panel experience was meeting their expectations. It allowed us to adjust where needed, rather than waiting until the end of the pilot to discover whether individual aspirations had been met. For us as delivery partners, this also reflected a wider mindset that ran through the programme: we were always thinking about skills in two timeframes: what would support young people during the pilot itself and what could they carry forward into their futures beyond it.

Findings and reflections

Standing debates

Standing debates; where panel members physically move to one side of the room or another in response to statements were consistently effective at energising the group, surfacing diverse perspectives and creating the conditions for genuine discussion. They worked particularly well when statements connected directly to the panel's priorities and topics that were impacting their everyday life, such as the voting age and anti-social behaviour. We infused fun into these formats too, where some debates where on non-work-related topics, for example 'are ghosts real?'.

Young people designing & owning the criteria

Perhaps the most significant success was the extent to which young people genuinely owned the funding criteria they had designed. When it came to the final assessment session, they were able to explain and justify every decision they made. The criteria were theirs, which meant the decisions were too.

Celebration as a meaningful close

The celebration day was described by multiple attendees as 'moving'. Speeches from panel members and awarded organisations captured the real impact of this work and what it means to communities: the grants were particularly significant for the smaller organisations and the young people's pride in what they had created was visible. Celebration and closure matter. They reinforce ownership and mark the significance of what has been achieved.



What didn't work (and why)

Recruitment timing

Running the recruitment window across the summer period made it harder to reach young people through school and college channels. Some applicants who expressed interest did not complete the process because the timing was difficult. In hindsight, earlier planning would have allowed recruitment to begin before the holiday period or be structured around it more carefully.

Uneven geographic and demographic representation

Initial recruitment produced a panel that was uneven in terms of geography and gender. The targeted Ellesmere Port outreach addressed some of this, but it required an additional three weeks of work mid-process. Monitoring diversity from the very start of recruitment would allow adjustments to be made earlier and with less disruption.

Online sessions did not work equally for everyone

Some panel members struggled to engage online; due to access, comfort or energy. Those who missed in-person sessions sometimes felt less confident or informed when they returned. Online sessions also tended to generate fatigue more quickly than in-person ones and the social bonding that underpins belonging simply did not happen in the same way on screen.

Limited structured feedback from grantees

We did not build in enough structured space for grantees to feedback specifically on the experience of being assessed by a youth panel. They were offered the opportunity during the celebration event. This was a missed opportunity. Grantee perspectives on the process could deepen our understanding of what works and could also give panel members richer feedback on the impact of their decisions during the project.

Findings and reflections

Challenges we experienced and how we responded

Even with careful planning, the pilot surfaced a number of live tensions that we had to navigate as the project progressed. Several of these sat alongside, rather than overlapping with the issues described above and naming them honestly feels important for anyone considering designing similar work or wanting to improve their practice.



Managing time and workload

The three-day EOI review period proved challenging for some panel members alongside their existing commitments and knowledge gaps occasionally emerged between monthly sessions. To address this, supplementary online sessions were introduced from January onwards, which improved confidence, strengthened understanding and helped maintain momentum between development days.

Creating equitable participation

Some panel members were more confident than others, creating a risk that certain voices could dominate discussions. Facilitators responded by using smaller group activities, encouraging more confident participants to create space for others and providing additional support to those less comfortable speaking in larger groups.

Responding to accessibility needs

Neurodiverse accessibility needs became clearer as we got to know the group. Session formats were adapted to include more breaks, movement and visual learning approaches. Additional support was also provided between sessions where needed to help young people remain engaged and confident in the process.

Maintaining energy and engagement

Longer decision-making sessions, particularly online, could lead to fatigue. The team adjusted the design of sessions by incorporating movement, offering varied activities, regular breaks, fidget toys and more interactive facilitation approaches to help maintain concentration and participation.

Building reflection into the process

Reflection time was initially squeezed by other activities, reducing opportunities to capture learning. This meant we did not always capture the learning we needed in the moment. It also meant that panel members had less opportunity to process what they had done and what it meant to them. Over time, the team moved towards more flexible feedback methods, including conversations, voice notes and WhatsApp feedback, which proved more accessible and effective than written forms alone.

Balancing organisational requirements with youth ownership

At times, delivery timelines and organisational processes created pressure to guide discussions towards predetermined approaches. Ongoing reflection between partners helped identify these moments and create more space for young people to influence both the fund design and decision-making processes.

Findings and reflections

What young people have learnt

The learning young people demonstrated over the course of the pilot was significant, both in what they told us directly, through verbal reflections, surveys and one-to-one conversations, and in what we observed across the development days and decision-making sessions. Three broad themes stand out.

Philanthropy and decision-making

Panel members developed a much clearer understanding of how charity funding works, including the realities of application processes, what different activities cost and how money moves through grant programmes. They became more attuned to the importance of place, demographics and specificity in funding criteria and were able to talk about why these things matter in practice. Awareness of unconscious bias grew noticeably and by the fourth development day and the EOI meeting, young people were able to articulate funding rationales with confidence; explaining why a particular project mattered and how their decisions related to the criteria they had designed.

Confidence and communication

Confidence in presenting, debating and contributing grew across the cohort. Quieter members increasingly began to take the lead in small group tasks and discussions; group interaction became more comfortable and sociable as the months went on.

Panel members spoke about this growth in their own terms; one reflecting that the experience *"has brought me outside of my comfort zone"*, and another noting: *"During my experience in the youth panel I have gained more confidence and group work skills while I have been here."* A further reflection captured the link between learning and social growth: *"I've really enjoyed learning about how grant processes work and meeting new people, building my confidence within social skills."*

Beyond the grant-making process itself, panel members played an active role in communicating the programme to external audiences. Through 'vox-pop' style interviews and communications workshops, they co-created content and decided how they wanted to tell their stories. The Westminster Foundation Communications team provided context and creative briefs, while a youth comms expert from Leaders Unlocked worked alongside panellists to develop ideas, build confidence and bring their vision to life. This approach ensured young people were not simply the subject of programme communications but active contributors to how the fund and their experiences were shared.

One panel member also shared with us the outcome of being part of a project that they found manageable and gave them a sense of belonging:

"This is the first programme I have ever completed."

Leadership and teamwork

Collaborative leadership grew through group tasks, with panel members taking shared responsibility for setting criteria and reviewing applications. The experience of shared decision-making, both during criteria setting and the applications review built a sense of collective ownership of the work and peer relationships strengthened as the group cohered. Young people now describe themselves as *"part of something important"* and have expressed a clear interest in continuing to contribute to community action beyond the pilot. This commitment has already translated into further opportunities, with two panellists going on to join national youth decision-making panels, two securing employment and another using their involvement in the Youth Panel as evidence towards achieving their Duke of Edinburgh Award. Together, these outcomes demonstrate how meaningful participation can build confidence, skills and pathways into future leadership roles.

Findings and reflections

What we would do differently

With the benefit of hindsight, here is what we would change:

Revisit ground rules regularly throughout the project, not just at the start. Dominant voices emerge in any group; normalising different ways of contributing is an ongoing task.

Prepare a standard setup pack for partners and a recruitment pack for young people: including MOU templates, contracts and role descriptors in advance of the project starting. Some processes had to be created mid-project and sent to people later, which slowed early delivery.

Monitor diversity during recruitment, not just at the end. Build in decision points to adjust outreach if representation is uneven.

Protect time for reflection as a non-negotiable in every agenda. Treat it with the same priority as the decision-making activities.

Create the group contract at the start of the first session and regularly refer to it. This sets the tone and continues to give young people ownership of the norms.

Build in a minimum of one hour for reflection throughout the programme. This does not need to take place in one sitting, but young people shouldbe offered multiple opportunities and methods to share feedback to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Plan multiple routes for young people to stay connected between sessions, particularly for those who struggle with online formats. Peer-to-peer communication and briefing structures can help those who miss sessions stay genuinely informed.

Build in structured grantee feedback on the youth-led process. Design this as a formal stage of the programme, not an afterthought.

Recruit around young people's calendars. Avoid summer holiday periods or plan specifically for them.

Implications for the sector

For funders

Youth-led grant-making is not a cheaper or simpler version of traditional grant-making. It requires more time, resource and a genuine willingness to relinquish control. Funders thinking about participatory approaches should go in with clear expectations:

- Budget adequately for facilitation, pastoral support, remuneration and partner coordination. These are not extras; they are the substance of the model.
- Invest in partner relationships before recruitment begins. Shared values and clear outlined role boundaries with specificities on where each partner's role starts and finishes make everything else easier.
- Be genuinely prepared for young people to make decisions you would not have made. The panel's choice of grant size challenged professional assumptions and while it is too early to determine the full impact of this decision; the rationale prompted valuable reflection on assumptions about how funding should be distributed.
- Build in time for learning as well as deciding. Young people need to understand the implications of their choices before they make them.
- Commit to the full arc of the project, including celebration. Completion matters. It reinforces the legitimacy of what young people have done and honours their investment.

For young people

If you are a young person reading this or thinking about getting involved in something like it, here is what we want you to know:

- Your perspective is not just welcome. It is essential. You understand your community in ways that adults genuinely do not. Decisions about you must be made with you.
- You will be supported to build the knowledge you need. You do not need to arrive knowing how grant-making works or worry about not having experience.
- You should be remunerated for your time. Your expertise has value and must be recognised; this can take different forms, whether financial or through other appropriate and meaningful forms of compensation.
- It is okay not to know things. Asking questions, changing your mind and debating with others is how the process works; these are not a sign of weakness.
- What you decide will have real consequences for real organisations and real young people. That is both the weight and the privilege of it. It is a great responsibility.

For funded organisations

If your organisation is applying to a fund where young people are making decisions, there are some things worth knowing:

- The young people reviewing your application are taking it seriously. They spend significant time understanding the issues and may have developed their own criteria; treat the process with the same care you would any other application to a funder.
- Embed Youth Voice in your project design, not just your application language. The young people will notice, ask questions and want to see real evidence of your principles and approach in action.
- If you are successful, consider how you will engage with the panel during delivery. These are not passive funders. They have a stake in the outcomes.
- Feedback on the process matters. Share your experience of being assessed by young people, it helps the model and practice improve. If you have the opportunity share this directly with them.

A question for funders to sit with

Genuine participation does not mean removing all boundaries. It does mean being prepared for young people to reach conclusions that challenge our own. Are we comfortable with that?

Implications for the sector

For wider sector stakeholders

The Westminster Foundation Youth Panel pilot is one example of a growing movement. As the sector moves toward participatory and co-designed approaches, there are broader questions worth holding:

- How do we scale the conditions for genuine Youth Voice, not just the formats? Replicating a model without replicating the values behind it risks producing tokenistic participation.
- How do we build sector-wide infrastructure, training, templates, shared learning so that organisations do not have to start from scratch each time?
- How do we ensure that youth panels are diverse and genuinely representative of the communities they serve not just the young people who are visible and quicker to access?
- How do we hold ourselves accountable to the Hart's Ladder and Lundy principles, treating them as operational rather than aspirational ideas?

This pilot is a contribution to those questions. It is not the whole answer, but it shows what is possible when the conditions are right.







Toolkit:
Applying the learning



Stage-by-stage guidance

Stage	What we did	What worked	What didn't work	If we did this again
1. Partner identification and selection	• Identified and brought together partners with complementary expertise in youth participation, grant-making and local community connections. • Took time to invest in relationship building, clarifying roles and establishing a shared commitment to youth-led decision-making before delivery began.	• The partnership was the foundation of the pilot's success. Each organisation brought different strengths, trusted relationships and expertise; creating a delivery model that would not have been possible through a single organisation alone. • Strong alignment on values and regular communication enabled challenges to be addressed collaboratively and quickly.	• Expectations, roles and ways of working were not always formally documented at the outset, creating some early ambiguity and challenge.	• Invest early in identifying partners who are rooted in the communities we seek to support. • Always ensure there are shared values, different types of expertise related to the work and ways of working complement one another. • Formalise roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes early; be detailed as this fosters more trust and shared ownership before delivery begins.
2. Research and scoping	• Brought partners together early, clarified shared values, and treated the project as a pilot. Used a live learning log to reflect and adapt.	• Strong partner alignment made collaboration easier. Regular meetings + shared responsibility reduced confusion and mitigated challenges quickly.	• Missing templates (contracts, MOUs) and internal systems slowed early delivery.	• Prepare a standard project pack in advance including recruitment and onboarding documents; agree decision-making parameters early e.g. the wider timeline for example for transparency on when project outputs must be reported.
3. Recruitment	• Conducted outreach to schools, partner networks and social media. Created a recruitment pack explaining the opportunity.	• Strong interest and good diversity of lived experience. Teacher recommendations and Facebook outreach were particularly effective.	• Recruitment clashed with summer holidays. Representation was uneven by gender and geography.	• Recruit around young people's calendars. Monitor diversity early so outreach can be adjusted. • Ensure social media recruitment goes beyond Linked.

Continued overleaf

Stage	What we did	What worked	What didn't work	If we did this again
4. Setting ground rules	• Used icebreakers, group discussions and facilitation techniques to set expectations around respect and shared decision-making.	• Over time, quieter young people became more confident and even began speaking on behalf of the group.	• Some early activities were found to be intimidating. Dominant voices emerged before stronger facilitation was in place.	• Revisit the group agreement and the ten values of co-production regularly and normalise different ways of contributing.
5. Maintaining engagement	• Ran monthly in-person sessions, offered online catch-ups, carried out one-to-one check-ins and recognised contributions. Asked panel members to complete a skills questionnaire at the start of the programme, using their responses to shape development days and revisiting it during check-ins to track individual progress and aspirations.	• Young people said the pace felt manageable and they felt part of something important. Retention was strong. • A staff member supported young people who required additional support in and out of sessions.	• Those who missed sessions sometimes felt less confident or informed. Online engagement did not work for everyone.	• Plan multiple ways for young people to stay connected. Budget for pastoral support. • Have more resource for staff pastoral support; particularly when working with young people with multiple additional needs.
6. Sessions and decision-making	• Ran development days using debates, group tasks and grant-making exercises, supported by pre-tasks on values and bias. • Held in-person sessions in a welcoming, central location, which offered the flexibility of timings and ability to provide our own catering. • Offered supplementary fortnightly sessions where required; to maintain momentum, knowledge sharing and decision-making.	• Young people were able to explain and defend their funding decisions. Interactive formats sustained engagement. • Panel members loved the space, were able to easily access it, felt comfortable and were able to work and relax during the sessions. • Opportunities were created for young people to develop public speaking, create their own content and lead on external communications for their fund.	• Time pressure reduced reflection. Limited context sometimes led to adult influence. Long online sessions risked fatigue.	• Separate learning from decision-making and protect time for reflection. • Ensure the venue of choice is one that offers flexibility, is scoped in advance and provisionally secured ahead of panel recruitment. • Be flexible with session formats and adjust appropriately.

Youth participation points for reflection

Use these question points for planning, accountability and reflection. It is not an exhaustive list, but aims to cover the questions that most often determine whether a youth decision-making group operates as meaningful participation.

Are young people genuinely leading?

- [ ] Are the young people making real decisions and not just endorsing decisions adults have already made?
- [ ] Do they understand the impact of those decisions on real organisations and real people?
- [ ] Have young people had support to input into designing the process they are part of?

Is the environment right?

- [ ] Is there enough time for learning, reflection and debate?
- [ ] Are sessions planned around young people's lives, not the convenience of adults?
- [ ] Is there space for social interaction that is not work-focused?
- [ ] Are materials accessible to different needs and energy levels?
- [ ] Have young people been asked at the start what they want to gain as individuals through a skills questionnaire or similar so that sessions can be shaped around their aspirations and needs?

Are the participation skills in place to enable equitable participation?

- [ ] Are facilitators skilled in managing group dynamics, beyond delivering content?
- [ ] Are there structured techniques in place to ensure quieter voices are heard?
- [ ] Are ground rules revisited regularly throughout the project?

Is the care genuine?

- [ ] Is safeguarding proactive and clearly understood by all partners?
- [ ] Is time allocated for pastoral support and one-to-one check-ins, providing feedback that goes both ways?
- [ ] Are young people remunerated fairly for their time and expertise?
- [ ] Are young people recognised and thanked in meaningful ways throughout?
- [ ] Are individual aspirations revisited in regular check-ins, so young people can say whether they are getting what they hoped for from the process?

Is the structure sound?

- [ ] Are partner roles and responsibilities clearly defined and agreed before the project begins?
- [ ] Are key project documents such as contracts, MOUs and financial governance arrangements in place before recruitment starts?
- [ ] Is there a mechanism for capturing and acting on learning throughout the project?

What good practice looks like

Good practice in youth-led panels is less about following a specific model and more about consistently asking the right questions. Here are some markers of what it looks like when things are going well:

The programme flexes to ensure young people can participate fully

Good practice means adjusting session timing, format and content based on what the panel needs, not what is most convenient for the delivery team or commissioning organisation. If a session is always running over, or always losing energy at the same point, that is information. Act on it.

Adults are holding back in the right moments

Good facilitation is partly about stepping in and partly about stepping back. When adults are comfortable being quiet, trusting young people to work through complexity; that signals genuine power sharing. When every difficult moment gets redirected by an adult, something important is lost.

Reflection, learning & impact

Reflection and learning throughout the project ensures actions can be taken to improve the process for young people and the organisations supporting them. A future phase beyond the learning should focus on the impact of the young people's funding decisions. While this report explores the process and immediate outcomes of the pilot, following up with funded organisations once grants have been delivered will provide valuable evidence about the longer-term impact of youth-led grant-making and the decisions made by young people.

Celebration is as important as anything else

The way a programme ends matters as much as how it begins. A meaningful wrap up of the journey, where young people's contributions are publicly recognised, where grantees speak about what the funding has meant, where the weight of what has been achieved is named aloud sets the tone for what young people take away and what they carry forward.

Young people are explaining, not just deciding

When panel members can explain why they made a particular decision in their own words, with reference to the criteria they designed, that is a sign that the process is working. It means they understand, they own, and they are not just ratifying adult choices.

Preparation for young people's next steps to set them up for success

The follow up opportunities to programmes such as this are essential, to enable further development of the skills young people have learnt. Connect with others in the sector and locally; there are many great organisations making their offers visible to young people and supporting them with the information and guidance they need to take them up; this is important for their confidence and skills to continue developing.

When given the power, knowledge, support and space to lead, young people can develop robust and effective programmes that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of their communities.

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