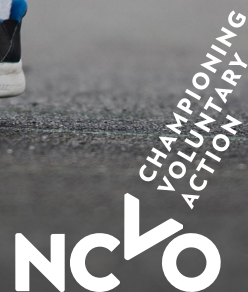


# DELIVERING OUR STRATEGY 'BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF THE FUTURE TOGETHER'

Evidence, learning and next steps (2024)



Foundation



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This evaluation was conducted by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in partnership with Co-op Foundation.

We are grateful to the young people and funded partners who contributed their time and insight throughout – testing the evaluation tools, completing the surveys, taking part in focus groups and interviews, and sharing feedback on the emerging findings and recommendations. Your openness and expertise have strengthened the quality of this evaluation and the learning it provides for our future practice.

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# CONTENTS

<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1. Methodology	
1.2. Key findings	
1.3. Recommendations and next steps	
<b>2. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1. Intended audience and structure of the report	
2.2. Methodology	
2.3. Ethical considerations	
2.4. Limitations	
<b>3. PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>15</b>
3.1. Young people	
3.2. Funded partners engaged in youth work	
3.3. Carbon Innovation Fund, Community Spaces loans and strategic funded partners	
<b>4. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>18</b>
4.1. What engagement looked like (duration, frequency and activities)	
4.2. Quality and satisfaction with engagement	
4.3. Accessibility	
<b>5. IMPACT</b>	<b>24</b>
5.1. Impact on young people	
5.1.1. Outcome: More young people are meaningfully involved in decision-making/governance, including at the Foundation	
5.1.2. Outcome: Young people have more power to create change	
5.1.3. Outcomes: Increased engagement with diverse young people and partners' inclusion of lived experience in structures	
5.1.4. Outcome: Young people gain skills such as listening, communication, leadership, negotiation, facilitation, participation, activism/youth social action	

- 5.2. Impact on funded partners
  - 5.2.1. Outcomes: Increased opportunities for partners to cooperate and collaborate, and partners work more cooperatively
  - 5.2.2. Outcomes: Partners are stronger and new evidence of the impact and learning from unrestricted funding is generated

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## **6 REFLECTIONS ON CO-OP FOUNDATION SUPPORT 53**

- 6.1. Learning for Co-op Foundation

---

## **7. DISCUSSION: A SECTOR-WIDE PERSPECTIVE ON THE CO-OP FOUNDATION'S FUNDING IMPACT 55**

- 7.1. Young people
  - 7.1.1. Youth influence and engagement: progress and persistent barriers
  - 7.1.2. Accessibility and inclusion: enablers and ongoing challenges
  - 7.1.3. Young people's power to create change
  - 7.1.4. Diversity and lived experience
  - 7.1.5. Young people's skills development
- 7.2. Funded partners
  - 7.2.1. Collaboration
  - 7.2.2. Partners' strength and learning from unrestricted funding
  - 7.2.3. Reflections on Co-op Foundation's support

---

## **8. MOVING FORWARD 61**

- 8.1. Recommendations for Co-op Foundation
- 8.2. Recommendations for funded partners
- 8.3. Shared priorities for funded partners and Co-op Foundation

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## **9. REFERENCES 64**

---

## **APPENDIX 66**

- Profile of survey respondents - **young people**
- Profile of survey respondents - **funded partners**

<b>Visual 1.</b>	Theory of change and evaluation framework approach and process	12
<b>Table 1.</b>	Overview of survey and focus group/individual interviews participants	13
<b>Figure 1.</b>	Duration of engagement	18
<b>Figure 2.</b>	Intensity of engagement	19
<b>Table 2.</b>	Engagement activities	19
<b>Figure 3.</b>	Young people's satisfaction with their level and quality of engagement	21
<b>Figure 4.</b>	Young people's view on accessibility	22
<b>Figure 5.</b>	Hart's Ladder of Participation	25
<b>Figure 6.</b>	How young people participated in decision-making or influenced decisions	26
<b>Figure 7.</b>	Funded partners' reflections on tasks young people undertake in their organisations	27
<b>Figure 8.</b>	The extent young people felt they influenced decision-making	28
<b>Figure 9.</b>	Funded partners' feedback on incentives and recognition	29
<b>Figure 10.</b>	Whether young people felt that taking part in activities had given them a say in community issues	31
<b>Figure 11.</b>	Issues funded partners supported young people to participate in decision-making	32
<b>Infographic 1.</b>	Funded partners' engagement with young people from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences	35
<b>Figure 12.</b>	Young people - professional skills gained	37
<b>Figure 13.</b>	Young people - personal development	39
<b>Figure 14.</b>	Co-op Foundation funding and support enabling collaboration	42
<b>Figure 15.</b>	Benefits of collaboration	43
<b>Figure 16.</b>	Enablers of collaboration	44
<b>Figure 17.</b>	Funded partners becoming stronger as organisations	47
<b>Figure 18.</b>	Leveraging additional funding	50
<b>Figure 19.</b>	Types of Co-op Foundation support influencing organisational strength	51

# 1.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report brings together evidence and learning from Co-op Foundation's 2024 funding activities, capturing progress in delivering its Building communities of the future together strategy. It covers programmes run directly (including the Future Communities Fund, Carbon Innovation Fund, Community Spaces loans portfolio and strategic funds) and programmes managed through delivery partners (including Young Gamechangers Fund and Funding Futures).



## 1.1. METHODOLOGY

Co-op Foundation, in partnership with NCVO, co-created an organisational theory of change in 2023, and developed an evaluation framework to guide consistent data collection. Ten outcomes were prioritised for measurement (five for young people; five for funded organisations) through annual surveys, focus groups and interviews. The tools were tested with funded partners and young people and data collection took place between November 2024–mid January 2025. 32 young people responded to the survey (out of the c.100 to whom it was distributed), and 10 participated in focus groups/interviews. 30 organisations responded to the survey (out of the 68), and 13 took part in focus groups/interviews.

Key limitations of this study include lower-than-anticipated survey response rates (partly due to GDPR restrictions and this being the first cycle), later-than-planned fieldwork, and reliance on self-report (mitigated by anonymity and external facilitation). For safeguarding reasons, only young people aged 16–25 were included this year, meaning the views of younger participants were not captured. Given sample sizes and this being the first cycle, findings are indicative and provide a baseline for tracking change over time.

## 1.2. KEY FINDINGS

### **Youth engagement: high satisfaction, meaningful roles, and headroom to strengthen strategic influence**

Young people reported high satisfaction with both the level (94%) and quality (87%) of engagement. Engagement included substantive roles within Co-op Foundation, delivery and funded partners - such as shaping policy input, co-designing funds and making funding decisions through participatory grantmaking, and taking part in recruitment processes. However, perceived influence is mixed: survey data shows an even split between those who felt they could influence decision-making to a large/very large extent and those reporting some/little influence. Higher-power governance spaces were accessed by fewer participants: 15% reported attending board or senior leadership meetings. Qualitative feedback suggests some young people want greater autonomy—particularly where youth decisions (e.g. on funding) require board ratification.

### **Accessibility and inclusion: strong practice, with inconsistency in recognition/compensation across partners**

Young people reported that their engagement was supported with clear information, safe opportunities to express themselves, and felt confident that their views were listened to and acted upon. Enablers for their engagement included flexible scheduling and online options, financial support for travel/subsistence, quiet spaces/breakout rooms, varied formats, small-group work, inclusive practices (e.g. sensory rooms and pronoun use), training before decision-making, and paid preparation time. Online engagement supported participation for 75% of young respondents, though both young people and partners noted trade-offs: online supports flexibility and can reduce anxiety, while in-person can build deeper connections and confidence. Across funded partners, compensation and recognition practices varied: most offered travel expenses, but fewer offered celebration events, certificates, gift vouchers, or cash payments. Funded partners valued recognition but reported time constraints that limited their ability to offer it as much as they had hoped.

### **Young people's power to create change: strong local outcomes, with barriers where systems change is required**

Most of the young people (75%) reported that taking part in Foundation-funded activities helped them have a say in community issues to a large/very large extent. Young people mentioned tangible outcomes, including safe spaces/support networks, advocacy and awareness-raising, and community changes such as youth travel passes, improved sports kit inclusivity, better transition support for care-experienced young people, and the creation of eco-groups in colleges. A recurring barrier was the scale at which decisions sit: participants felt more able to influence locally, but less able to shift national systems (e.g. transport and mental health), describing limited time or willingness among decision-makers to listen to young people. The community issues young people were involved in addressing are closely linked to Co-op Foundation's strategic priorities diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), youth activism, safety, and sustainability.

## **Skills and personal development: consistently strong, often described as transformative**

Young people reported gaining skills such as teamwork, communication, leadership and activism, alongside increased personal development, including confidence, independence, and knowledge of issues affecting young people. Some described significant confidence journeys over time, moving from silence in meetings to hosting events and leading work. Facilitation emerged as a particularly valued, transferable skill, whilst some described practical learning about becoming financially independent.

## **Funded partners: increased collaboration and organisational strength, enabled by flexible funding and trust-based relationships**

Across funding programmes, organisations stated that the Co-op Foundation support enabled them to collaborate with other organisations to a large/very large extent. Partners cited benefits including access to new skills/expertise, improved services, and reaching more people in their communities. Focus group participants described the value of “leaning on” collaborators’ expertise to develop projects and bids. Barriers to collaborating more included time/capacity constraints, geography, logistical complexity, and administrative burden from other funders.

Most funded partners reported large/very large improvements in financial resilience, trusted relationships with the Co-op Foundation team, and the ability to respond quickly to opportunities. They described increased stability and strategic breathing space (e.g. time to develop a cohesive strategy) and emphasised Co-op Foundation’s relational approach—flexibility, regular communication, and a non-punitive culture contrasting it with “box-ticking” models from other funders.

Unrestricted funding provided additional benefits that extended beyond what was possible with project grants. Funded partners highlighted increased strategic capacity and staff retention, being able to invest in internal systems and external organisational profile, achieving greater reach and responsiveness, improving DEI in governance and practices and covering essential but underfunded operational processes e.g. safeguarding, monitoring and evaluation and volunteer management.

# **1.3. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

Recommendations in the report focus on strengthening youth influence in strategic spaces (including clarity on what is fixed vs negotiable and stronger feedback loops), improving consistency and guidance on paying and recognising young people, continuing advocacy for longer-term unrestricted funding, pairing funding with targeted capacity-building (e.g. HR, safeguarding, evaluation), and expanding peer learning and networking while ensuring events better reflect young people’s leadership and voice. Co-op Foundation will continue to monitor progress annually, using the 2024 framework as a benchmark for long-term change and improving practices.

# 2.

## INTRODUCTION



In October 2022, Co-op Foundation launched its strategy, Building communities of the future together. Alongside the strategy the Foundation shared its vision for future communities built on co-operative values. The vision was shaped by the views of almost 100 diverse young people and now guides its strategic priorities that shape its funding, campaigning and influencing work.

The Foundation has committed to providing flexible, unrestricted funds to those working to build fairer, more co-operative communities. It listens to, invests in and learns from:

- diverse young people who will be the leaders, co-operators, organisers and activists of future communities
- organisations working to bring future, fairer communities to life
- organisations that need support when unpredictable events threaten their ability to build fair communities of the future.

Its approach to funding is distinctive as it combines:

- **Co-operation** – Co-op Foundation believes its vision can only be realised through co-operation across the Co-op and wider social change and philanthropy sectors. It funds in partnership with other organisations as co-funders and/or as delivery partners. For example, it has partnered with UnLtd on its [Funding Futures Programme](#), which they co-fund and manage, supporting 16-30-year-old social entrepreneurs with ideas to help those sidelined by the financial system.
- **Participatory grantmaking** – the Foundation is on a journey to become a fully participatory grantmaker. It involves people from the communities it works with in decisions about how its funds are used. For example, through its [Future Communities Fund](#), it works with the [Future Communities Collective](#) – a group of diverse young people who lead on designing the fund and deciding where the funding is allocated.
- **Unrestricted, flexible and long-term funding** – this approach gives organisations the power to decide how best to use funds to support their community. The Foundation is a member of the Open and Trusting Grantmaking Community, led by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR, 2021).
- **Funding individual young people, aged 10-25** – The Foundation believes young people are crucial to creating fair, co-operative communities. Through programmes such as the [Young Gamechangers Fund](#), it invests in young people and youth-led organisations, transforming their communities on issues linked to its strategic priorities.

This report captures progress against implementing its strategy between January and December 2024. It looked across the Foundation’s funding programmes, including those it runs directly (the Future Communities Fund, [Carbon Innovation Fund](#), [Community Spaces loan portfolio](#), and strategic funds) and programmes managed through delivery partners (the Young Gamechangers Fund and Funding Futures). All funded organisations are referred to as funded partners throughout this document. Where insights are relevant to activities run by delivery partners, this is explicitly stated.

The Foundation recognises that change takes time and will continue to monitor progress annually. This is the first report that captures evidence, learning and next steps for the Foundation in delivering its strategy.

## 2.1. INTENDED AUDIENCE AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

### Audience

This report is relevant to Co-op Foundation, the wider Co-op Group and the organisations and individuals it supports. Other funders interested in tracking progress against their own strategies may also find it useful. As Co-op Foundation mostly focuses on young people and youth-led organisations, it may also be of interest to organisations supporting young people, particularly the insights on how to achieve success and address challenges in engaging young people and giving them more power.

## Structure

The report is organised into eight sections.

### Section 1

Executive summary

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### Section 2

**Introduction:** context, the strategy, the importance of measuring impact, and the methodology.

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### Section 3

Brief profile of respondents.

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### Section 4

**Youth engagement:** how young people have been engaged with Co-op Foundation, delivery partners and funded partners including accessibility, barriers and enablers.

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### Section 5

**Impact:** impact of Co-op Foundation's support for young people and funded organisations, referencing priority outcomes from its theory of change.

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### Section 6

**Reflections:** Captures feedback on Co-op Foundation's support.

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### Section 7

**Discussion:** Key findings within the context of the wider charitable sector.

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### Section 8

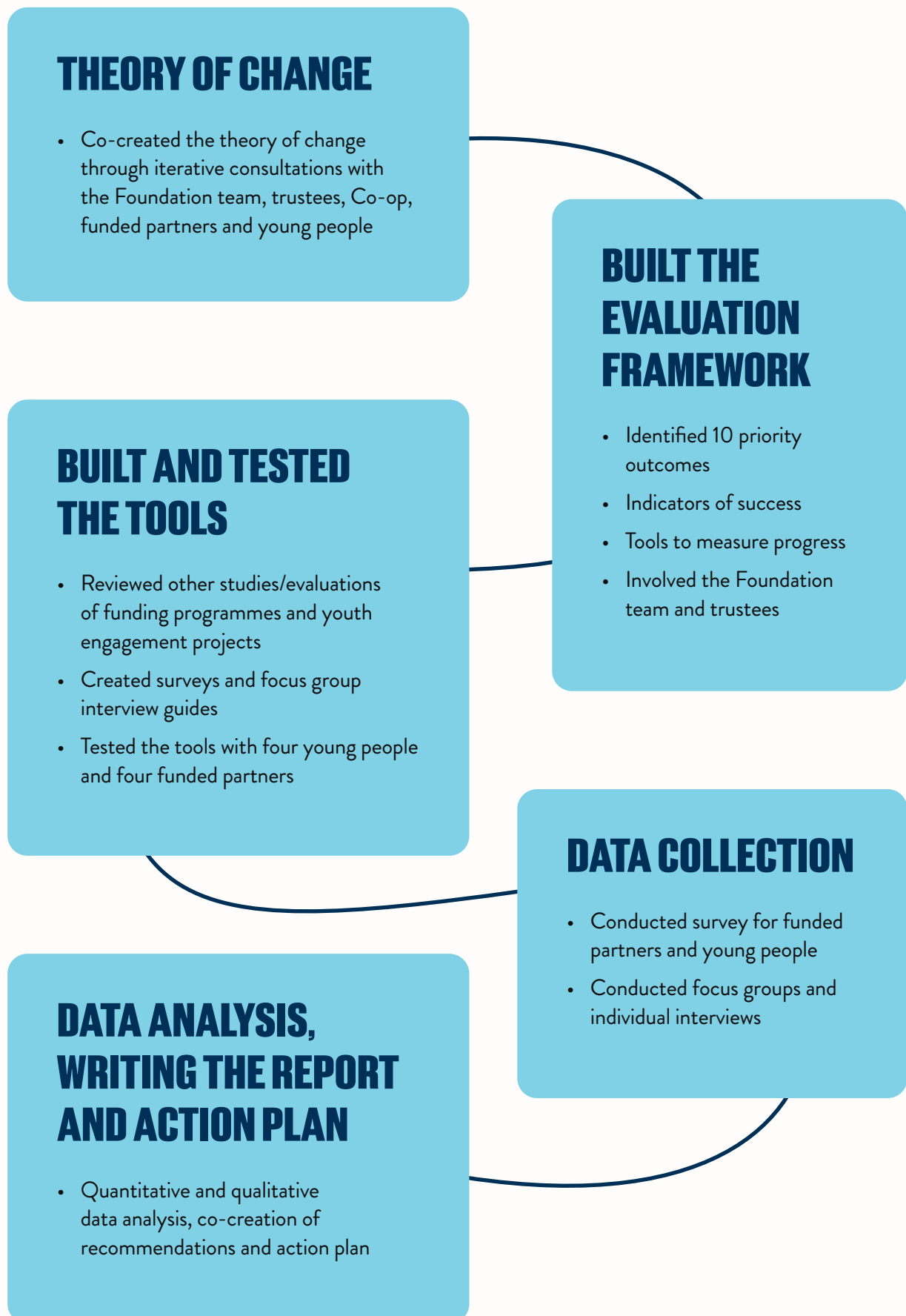
**Moving forward:** recommendations for Co-op Foundation and funded partners.

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## 2.2. METHODOLOGY

Co-op Foundation in partnership with NCVO co-created an **organisational theory of change** in 2023, outlining the outcomes it wants to achieve. An evaluation framework was then developed to guide data collection (see visual 1 for a representation of our approach).

**Visual 1.** Theory of change and evaluation framework approach and process



With input from its trustees and Co-op, the Foundation prioritised 10 outcomes for measuring change – five for funded organisations and five for young people. This report is structured against these outcomes.

The Foundation reviewed existing data collection processes, including annual conversations with funded partners and evaluation approaches built into each funding programme. This highlighted the need for a dedicated tool to consistently measure change against the 10 outcomes. **As a result, it designed three annual surveys:**

- one for young people
- one for funded partners engaged in youth work
- a third for funded partners who work in other fields.

Guides for focus groups and individual interviews were also created.

To ensure robustness, the tools drew on existing surveys from relevant studies (e.g. **Bisiaux et al., 2022; Hickman, Dunne, and Mahmood, 2022; Smith et al., 2023**) and were designed to capture in-depth qualitative data, complementing and triangulating survey findings.

NCVO consultancy supported the process.

## Testing and launch

NCVO tested the tools with four funded partners and six young people and finalised them in October 2024. Data collection began in November 2024.

## Scope and sampling

The findings cover January and December 2024. Surveys were disseminated to all live grants in 2024, where permission to contact the grant holders was in place. Organisations with grants that had already ended could not be contacted due to funding terms and GDPR restrictions. NCVO then conducted focus groups and individual interviews with young people and funded partners (see table 1 below for participant overview).

**Table 1.** Overview of survey and focus group/individual interviews participants

	<b>YOUNG PEOPLE</b>	<b>FUNDED PARTNERS</b>
Survey respondents	32	30
Focus group participants	9	9
Individual interviews participants	1	4

## Survey dissemination

Co-op Foundation disseminated the survey using SurveyMonkey. The Funding and Partnerships team shared the survey with funded partners and young people they work with directly. The delivery partners and funded partners shared it with the organisations and young people they support. Funded partners were asked to share the survey with up to five young people supported through Co-op Foundation activities. The survey was anonymous.

## Focus groups and individual interviews

Participants were recruited through the survey. They could choose between individual interviews and focus group sessions to suit their availability and preferences.

## Reimbursements

Survey participants could enter a prize draw: £100 for young people and £200 for funded organisations. Focus group/interview participants received £70 (funded partners) or £30 (young people).

# 2.3. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All participants gave consent before taking part. For safeguarding reasons, only young people aged 16–25 were included; those aged 16–17 also required parental/responsible adult consent. The Foundation acknowledges that the views of younger participants were not captured this year. It intends to address this in future evaluations.

# 2.4. LIMITATIONS

As with all research and evaluation projects, there were some limitations:

- **Survey response rates:** fewer responses than anticipated from both funded partners and young people, partly due to GDPR restrictions and also this being the first cycle of data collection. Focus groups helped to address gaps.
- **Project delays:** The survey launched later than planned, opening in late November and remaining open until mid-January due to the holiday period.
- **Engaging younger participants:** Securing parental consent made engagement with under-18s more challenging.
- **Response biases:** There is a risk of social desirability bias – some participants may have answered in ways they believed would be viewed favourably. To mitigate this, NCVO (an external consultant) conducted focus groups and interviews, encouraging honest feedback and ensuring anonymity.
- **Recall and memory limitations:** The study relied on self-reported data, which can be affected by recall bias. Triangulation – combining surveys and focus groups and gathering perspectives from both young people and funded organisations (see **Bispo Junior, 2022**) helped address this.
- **Incomplete profile data:** Some participants did not provide demographic data.

# 3.

## PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

This section summarises the number and background of the study's participants.

### 3.1. YOUNG PEOPLE

Co-op Foundation distributed the young people's survey to approximately 100 individuals who:

- Work directly with Co-op Foundation through funding programmes and activities (e.g. the Future Communities Collective, which designs and makes decisions for its participatory grant making).
- Work with organisations it funds.
- Receive funding as individuals through delivery partners, including the Young Gamechangers Fund and Funding Futures.

There were 32 that provided near- or fully-completed responses. Where relevant, the analysis notes partial responses.

Respondents included:

**13** engaged directly by the Co-op Foundation

**10** engaged through Co-op Foundation delivery partners

**9** engaged by funded partners.

10 young people took part in focus groups and interviews. Eight of these young people also filled in the survey, and therefore their demographics are included in the appendix.

Additional demographic detail can be found in the appendices.

## 3.2. FUNDED PARTNERS ENGAGED IN YOUTH WORK

In 2024, the Foundation funded a range of organisations and individuals to support youth engagement across its programmes, including:

**28** youth-led organisations

**8** individuals working on youth engagement or activism

**13** youth-focused organisations

**10** individuals working on financial resilience.

The Foundation supported a wider number of youth-focused funded partners overall. Of these, 20 organisations were eligible to take part in this evaluation and were sent the survey, based on programme scope and permissions.

12 organisations completed the survey, and 3 also took part in interviews. Given the small sample size, results are presented as counts rather than percentages.



## 3.3. CARBON INNOVATION FUND, COMMUNITY SPACES LOANS AND STRATEGIC FUNDED PARTNERS

Alongside youth-focused organisations, the Foundation also supported organisations through:

- Carbon Innovation Fund (CIF)
- Community Spaces loans
- Strategic funding for infrastructure or emergency support.

In 2024, it funded:

**20** organisations under CIF

**7** organisations under strategic interest

**2** organisations received loans.

The Foundation supported a wider number of funded organisations overall in 2024. Of these, 48 organisations were eligible to take part in this evaluation and were sent the survey, based on programme scope and permissions.



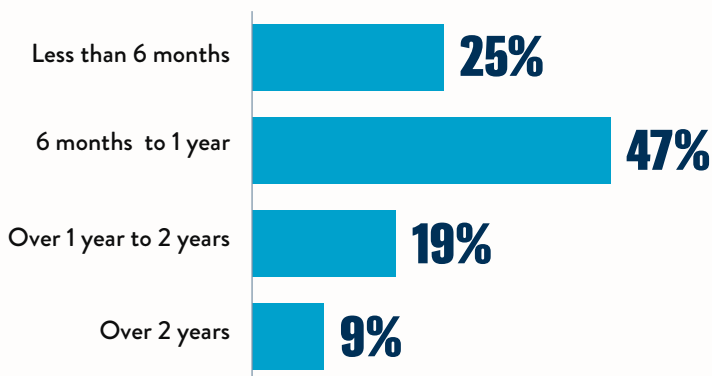
# 4.

## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

This section explores youth engagement in depth – what activities young people engaged in, how they felt about their engagement, areas for improvement, and examples of good practice. The section also looks at how accessible activities were and where improvements could help meet young people’s needs. Findings reflect both young people’s views and those of funded partners. Differences are highlighted where relevant. The data provide crucial contextual information on the conditions that need to be in place to achieve meaningful, accessible youth engagement over time and ensure the young people-related outcomes of the Co-op Foundation’s theory of change are achieved.

### 4.1. WHAT ENGAGEMENT LOOKED LIKE (DURATION, FREQUENCY AND ACTIVITIES)

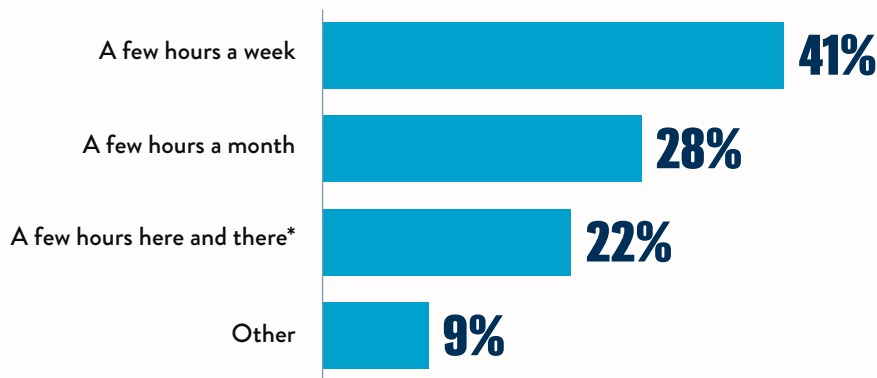
Figure 1. Duration of engagement



Source: How long have you been involved in Co-op Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation activities?  
Base: 32 young people

Figure 1 shows that 72% of survey respondents had engaged with their organisations, delivery partners or Co-op Foundation for less than one year, indicating they were relatively new to these roles.

**Figure 2.** Intensity of engagement



\* can include when some months are busy, some are not

Source: Over the last 12 months, approximately how many hours did you engage with Co-op Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation’s activities? **Base:** 32 young people.

**Table 2.** Engagement activities

ACTIVITIES	%
Making decisions/co-designing a project/activities/funding programme offered by the Co-op Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation	63%
Participatory grant making	53%
Research participation	47%
Training	44%
Campaigning	41%
Organisational decisions	34%
Meeting and influencing decision makers	31%
Debates	28%
Policy development	22%
Volunteering	19%
Received funding	16%
Other	13%
Annual conference	6%

Source: What activities have you been involved in, as part of your role at the Co-op Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation? Tick as many as apply. **Base:** 32 young people.

**Figure 2 shows that engagement intensity varied:**

- 41% participated a few hours a week (consistent, active involvement)
- 28% engaged a few hours a month
- 22% engaged sporadically (“a few hours here and there”).

Young people reported multiple examples of high-level engagement with both Co-op Foundation and delivery and funded partners, including roles with significant decision-making and leadership responsibilities (table 2).

**At Co-op Foundation and through delivery partners, young people:**

- helped shape policy and gave input in organisational governance
- co-designed funding programmes and made funding decisions as part of participatory grantmaking
- participated in recruitment processes

**Examples included:**

- **Young Gamechangers Fund Steering Group** – young people designed the Young Gamechangers funding programme and made grantmaking decisions in paid consultancy roles.
- **Future Communities Collective** – a group of diverse young people who support Co-op Foundation in designing funds, making funding decisions and providing advice on a strategic level- co-designed a fund for young people in the criminal justice system.

**With funded partners, young people:**

- defined and planned activities and campaigns as part of youth steering groups
- influenced research design, including survey questions
- participated in staff recruitment, shaping job adverts and criteria.

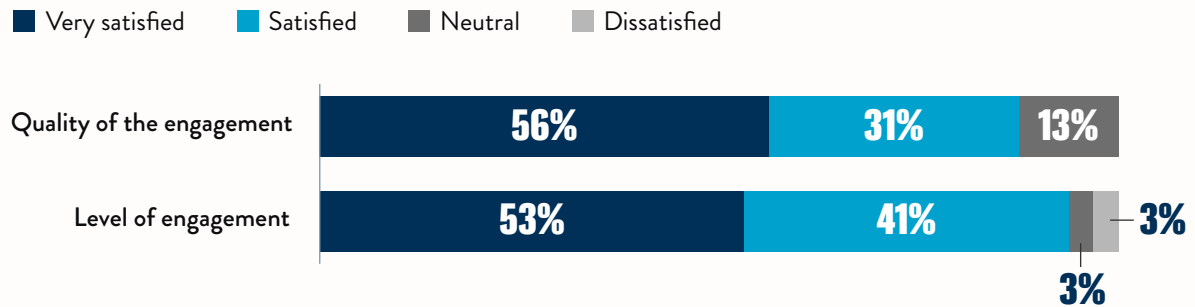
**“We’ve been involved in the recruitment process for new staff...  
We can change the recruitment document and criteria.”**

**Young person – focus group**

Focus group participants described additional examples of engagement, such as residentials, attending multi-day conferences/events and presenting at international conferences, including COP26.

## 4.2. QUALITY AND SATISFACTION WITH ENGAGEMENT

**Figure 3.** Young people's satisfaction with their level and quality of engagement



Source: How satisfied have you been with your engagement with the Co-op Foundation/delivery partner/ funded organisation activities? The level of engagement and the quality of engagement? **Base:** 32 young people.

Figure 3 demonstrates that young people had high levels of satisfaction with the level (94%) and quality of engagement (87%).

“An amazing opportunity because I've never really had something like this before.”

Young person - survey

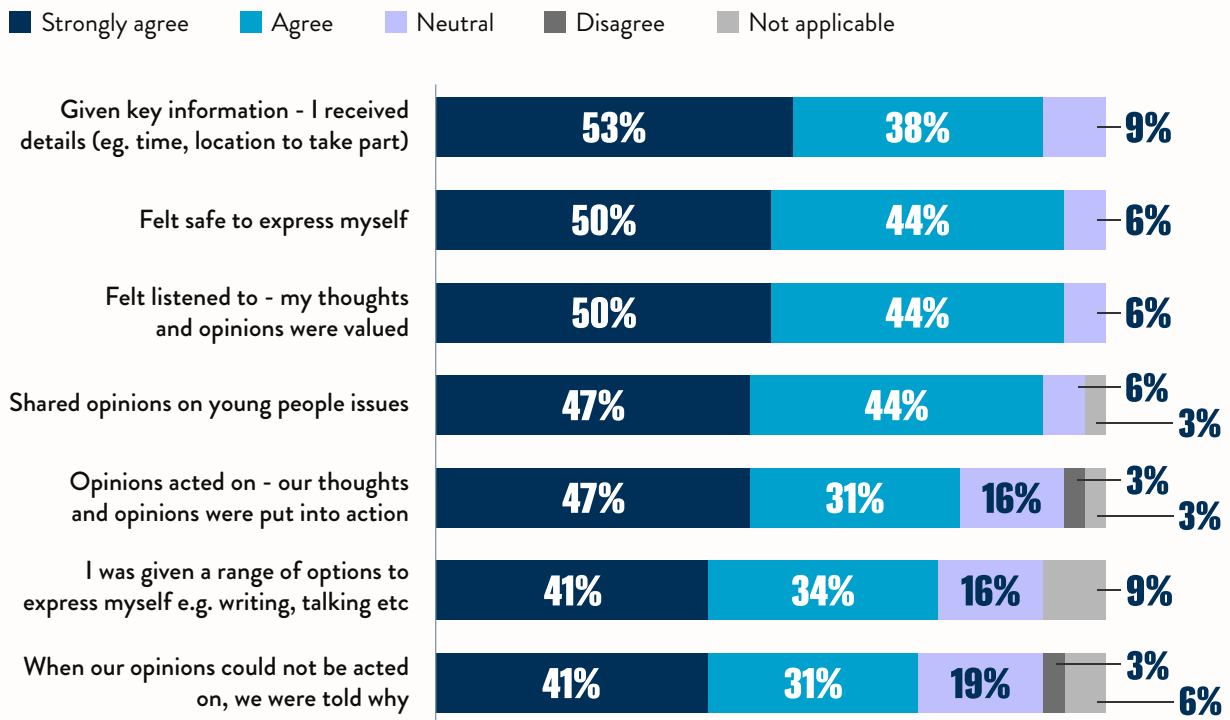


## 4.3. ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility was a key factor shaping young people’s ability to engage meaningfully. This section explores what worked well and where improvements are needed.

### What worked well - young people’s perspective

**Figure 4.** Young people’s view on accessibility



Source: Thinking about the activities you have been involved in, how far do you agree with the following statements?  
 Base: Varies between 29 and 32.

Figure 4 shows that most young people felt supported with clear information and opportunities to express themselves freely and safely. They reported that their voices were listened to and their opinions acted upon, which helped create inclusive, welcoming, and transparent environments.

#### Young people reported several factors which made engagement more accessible:

- Flexible scheduling, online options, and financial compensation
- Quiet spaces and breakout rooms
- Varied activity formats and streamlined application processes
- Financial support for travel and subsistence
- Small group work
- Training before decision-making e.g. theory of change sessions
- Paid preparation time for reviewing resources
- Inclusive practices such as sensory rooms and pronoun use.

“I’m a young carer, and I’ve always had loads of support from Co-op organisations around that. Like if I needed to leave early or I needed to arrive a little late, it always allowed me to do that ...”

Young person – focus group

### Online vs in-person

Online was a popular choice for young people to engage (75% of survey respondents said it helped them participate, n=32), but they held mixed views on which was more beneficial. Online sessions supported flexibility and made it easier for some to attend, especially for those who felt less confident attending in person or in areas with more dispersed young people. Many said that in-person interactions allowed them to build much deeper connections with other young people and with the organisation/delivery and funded partner.

Funded partners also noted that many young people “**feel quite anxious about engaging in-person, and many prefer digital opportunities**” (survey respondent).

At the same time, funded partners also felt that in-person could lead to deeper engagement and build young people’s confidence in a way that online could not.

Overall, partners and young people agreed that the format should depend on the individual’s needs and the activity’s purpose.



# 5. IMPACT

This section is the core of our evaluation: what the evidence says about progress against the outcomes that matter most for delivering the strategy. Grounded in our organisational theory of change and evaluation framework, it synthesises survey results with focus group and interview insight to assess outcomes for young people and funded partners, and to explain why progress is stronger in some areas than others.

Because this is the first Foundation-wide measurement cycle, the findings establish a baseline and should be interpreted in light of known limitations (including response rates and the timing/scope of fieldwork).



## 5.1. IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

### 5.1.1. Outcome: More young people are meaningfully involved in decision-making/governance, including at the Foundation

#### Extent of impact

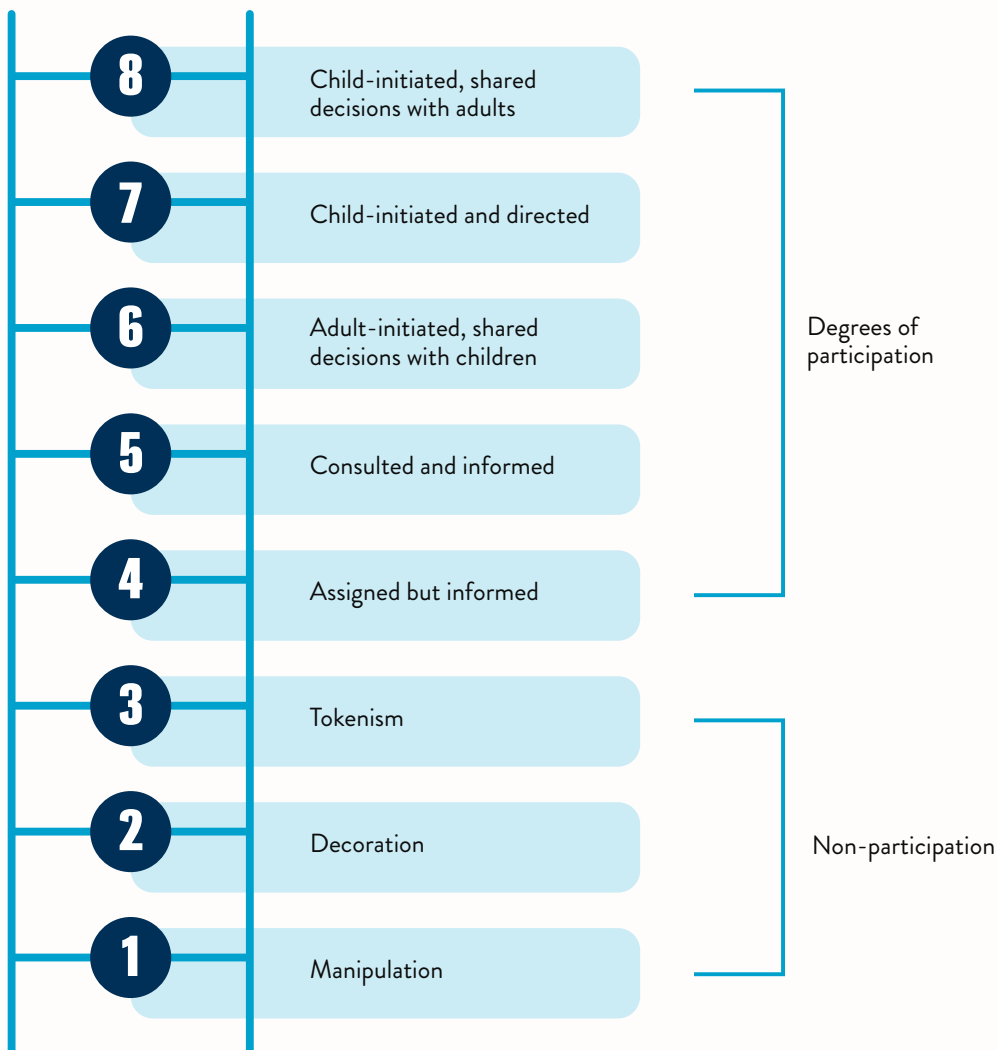
Evidence indicates progress towards this outcome, particularly in the breadth of ways in which young people are contributing to decision-making. Young people described influencing policy development, funding allocation and recruitment, with around one-third contributing to strategic planning and some involved in participatory grantmaking. However, influence is not yet consistently embedded in formal governance spaces – only a small number reported access to board or senior leadership meetings. Strengthening accessibility and consistency (especially reimbursement and recognition) would help deepen and broaden meaningful involvement.

## Overview: Decision-making and influence

Roger Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992- see figure 5) was used to frame survey questions and guide focus group discussions. It should be noted that, as Hart later clarified (2008), the ladder is a critical tool for examining youth participation, not a model where the goal is always to reach the top level (child-initiated shared decisions with adults). The highest level of participation is not inherently superior or suitable for all situations. For instance, while young people may not always want to initiate projects, they should feel confident and capable of doing so when appropriate. Factors like age, interests, and context also influence the most suitable level of participation

Young people were asked to reflect on where they felt they sat on the ladder and what this meant for their experience. Many participants said the ladder helped them understand the spectrum of participation – from being consulted to having full decision-making power – and highlighted where they wanted to move next. Some described feeling “high up the ladder” because they were involved in shaping funding decisions, while others felt they were “still climbing” and wanted more influence.

Figure 5. Hart’s Ladder of Participation\*



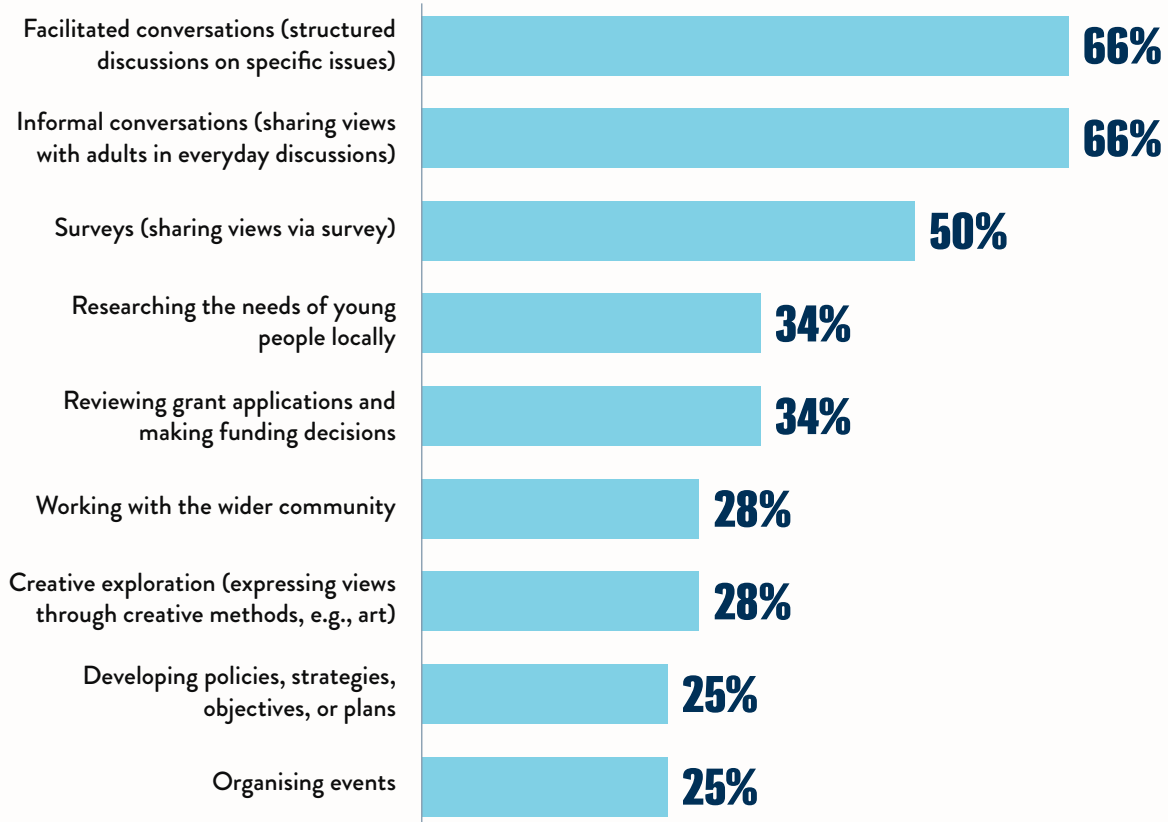
\*This figure is shown to provide conceptual context, not for reporting measured outcomes.

## Ways young people participated in decision-making

Survey and focus group data revealed that young people took part in a mix of strategic and operational roles.

### Young people’s perspective

**Figure 6.** How young people participated in decision-making or influenced decisions



#### Other ways mentioned (< 22%)

- Q&A sessions with decision-makers
- Recruiting and selecting staff or volunteers
- Advisory group membership
- Attending Board or senior management meetings
- Developing new services or resources (e.g. toolkits)
- Testing or assessing services
- Securing money and resources
- Training or mentoring other young people
- Training staff and/or volunteers

**Source:** In what ways have you participated in decision-making or influenced decisions at the Co-op Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation? Please tick all methods and tasks that apply. **Base:** 32 young people

Young people described involvement in decision-making through a wide range of activities (figure 6), including:

- informal and facilitated conversations (both 66%)
- conducting surveys and research (50%).

Activities representing higher levels of influence were less common. Around a quarter (25%) had contributed to policy development or strategic planning. Only 15% had attended board or senior leadership meetings - spaces where organisational decisions are formally made (attendance at these meetings is included in the 'other' category shown above).

## Funded partner perspective

**Figure 7.** Funded partners' reflections on tasks young people undertake in their organisations\*



### Other tasks mentioned (< 6)

- Training staff and/or volunteers
- Researching the needs of young people locally
- Setting budgets
- Mapping existing provisions locally
- Campaigning for change in policy and provision
- Developing complaints procedures
- Assessing grant applications
- Developing or using existing frameworks for assessing services

\*From this point onwards, charts with fewer than 30 respondents are presented as counts rather than percentages

Source: What specific tasks are undertaken by young people in your organisation? Please tick all that apply.

Base: 9 funded partners

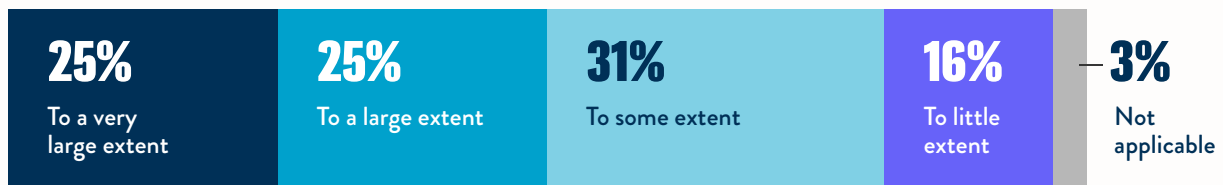
Figure 7 shows funded partners in our sample involve young people in tasks such as:

- recruiting and selecting staff
- organising events
- representing youth perspectives
- developing new provisions or services
- developing policies and services.

Overall, funded partner feedback indicates a more balanced involvement of young people across strategic and operational activities.

## Perceived influence

Figure 8. The extent young people felt they influenced decision-making



Source: To what extent do you feel you have actually influenced decisions made at the Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisations? Base: 32 young people

Figure 8 shows an even split, half of the youth respondents felt they could influence decision-making processes to a large or very large extent, the other half reported only some or little influence.

“I feel like we have been really involved. It is at the top of youth participation.”  
**Young person - survey**

They also commented they would like more influence:

“Our decisions are influential, but in terms of overall policy development, we should be more involved.” **Young person - survey**

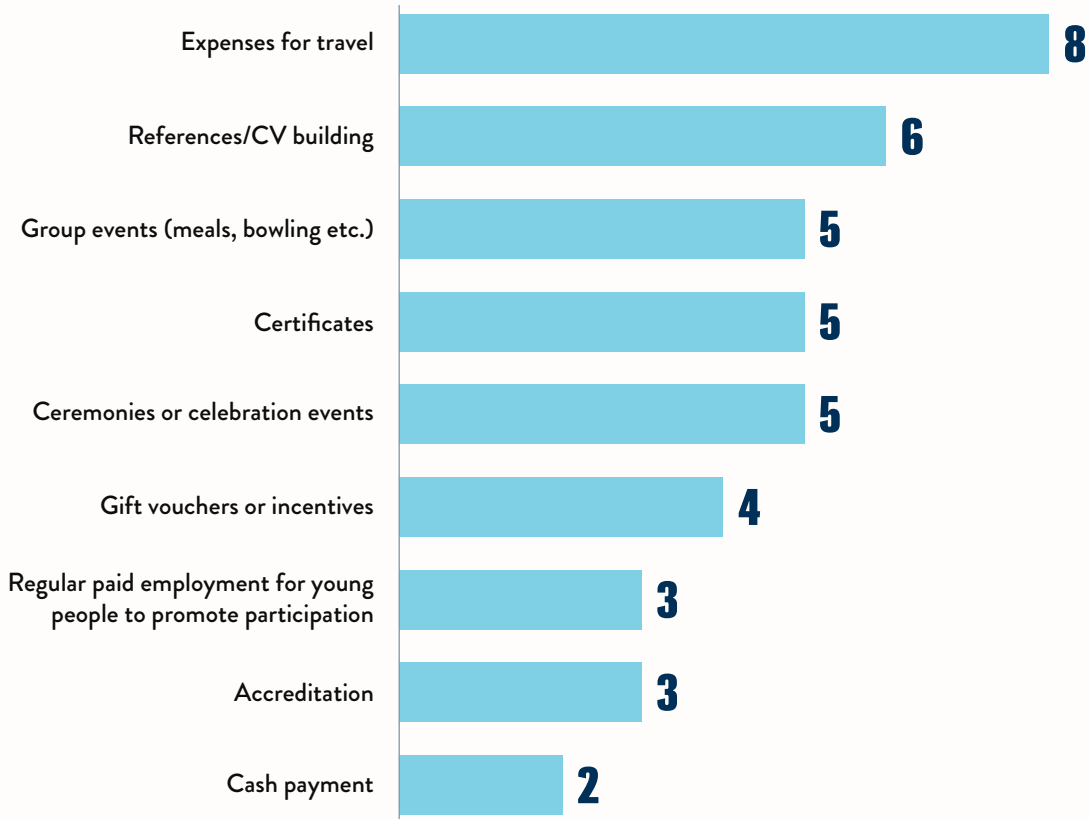
In addition, in the focus groups, a few young people engaged directly by the Co-op Foundation stated that they “should have even more autonomy in terms of shaping what’s happening.” In one case, they mentioned that currently, youth decisions regarding funding need to be ratified by Co-op Foundation’s board. The participant advocated for the youth group to have more autonomy in funding decisions and over the fund’s direction.

This indicates progress but also an opportunity to strengthen youth power in strategic spaces.

Young people also said they would value more time and support to build confidence to take part in such spaces.

## Funded partners' view

Figure 9. Funded partners' feedback on incentives and recognition



Source: What incentives and/or recognition do young people involved in decision-making receive? Please tick all that apply. Base: 9 funded partners

Figure 9 shows that most funded partners offered travel expenses (eight), but fewer offered recognition, such as celebration events (five), certificates (five), gift vouchers (four), or cash payments (two). Partners acknowledged the importance of recognition but often lacked the time or resources to do so:

“I wish we had more time for recognition! It is such a win-win... Unfortunately, we don't have the time to do this as much as I would like.” **Funded partner – focus group**



### Barriers to engagement and suggested strategies

Young people reported barriers to taking part, such as school pressures, lack of prior experience, disability, financial constraints, and limited awareness of opportunities. Funded partners noted additional challenges, including inconsistent communication channels, gatekeeping by other adults/projects, and reliance on social media for recruitment.

“[The] barrier is always going to be the gatekeeper who doesn't pass on the information, even though we're saying you don't need to come with them.”  
**Funded partner – focus group**

### How to make youth engagement in decision-making work

Young people and funded partners highlighted several good practice examples that helped improve engagement:

- Youth-led design and facilitation
- Safe, welcoming spaces and holistic support
- Flexibility for carers and additional needs
- Creative tools (art, identity exercises)
- Coaching and preparation for external engagement
- Personalised approaches (profiles and group agreements).

“It's designed for young people run by young people... [this is] more engaging than an event run by adults.” **Young person – focus group**

“I feel we have nurtured a really positive space where people can say what's on their mind, where people can give feedback, where people can disagree.” **Young person – focus group**

“Even at the start of the [Future Communities] Collective, we were given a profile to fill in... how we best learn, share, receive feedback... to make sure the experience was centred around [our] needs.” **Young person – focus group**

## Benefits of involving young people in decision making in their organisations or having a role in the community – funded partners’ view

Also importantly, funded partners recognised that involving young people in decision-making benefited other young people and their organisations. They mentioned that young people:

- make initiatives more authentic and impactful
- contribute to mutual growth through mixed mentoring
- enable better representation and accessibility, especially for the underrepresented
- create a ripple effect of positive transformation in their charities, including in leadership
- help organisations to access new funding and resources, enabling projects to expand and amplify their influence.

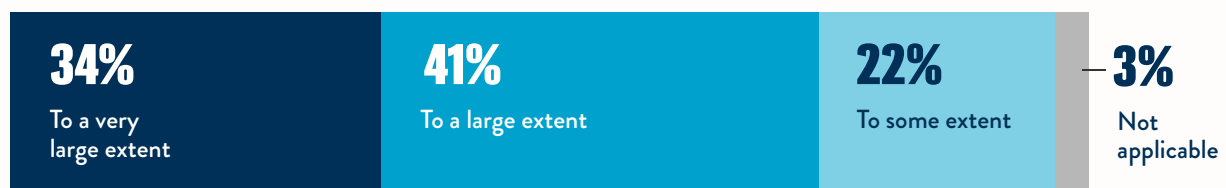
### 5.1.2. Outcome: Young people have more power to create change

#### Extent of impact

Findings indicate strong progress towards this outcome, with young people reporting taking action on issues that matter to them, influencing local priorities and in some cases shaping decisions with services and stakeholders. Survey results and focus group accounts indicate that engagement through Co-op Foundation and delivery and funded partners is helping young people build momentum, organise others, and achieve tangible community change.

Three-quarters of young participants (75%) said taking part in activities – either directly or through delivery and funded partners – helped them have a say in community issues to a large or very large extent, indicating a strong positive impact overall (figure 10).

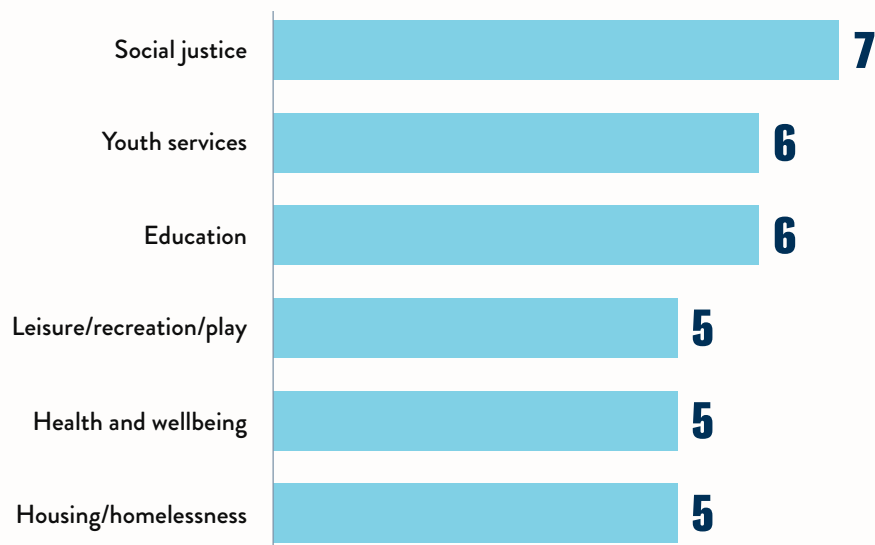
**Figure 10.** Whether young people felt that taking part in activities had given them a say in community issues



Source: To what extent do you feel taking part in the Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation activities has helped you have a say in community issues? Base: 32 young people

Funded partner feedback indicated that young people were influencing decision-making across a wide range of social issues, including social justice, youth services, education, and health (see figure 11). Focus groups with funded partners added further examples, including climate change and digital literacy.

**Figure 11.** Issues funded partners supported young people to participate in decision-making



**Other issues mentioned (< 5)**

- Crime/community safety
- Transport
- Local or national politic
- Social care
- Environmental issues
- Employability, Regeneration

Source: Which of the following issues do you support young people to participate in decision-making about, if any? Please tick all that apply. Base: 9 funded partners

Young people also reported a wide range of tangible outcomes linked to social issues, often rooted in local needs and lived experience:

- **Creating safe spaces and support networks:** for example, groups for young women and care-experienced young people.
- **Awareness raising and advocacy:** including sustainable fashion shows, criminal justice system awareness campaigns, and representation at political events such as the Conservative Party Conference.
- **Community outcomes:** for example, the introduction of youth travel passes, improved sports kit inclusivity, support for care-experienced youth transitioning into independence, and the creation of eco groups in colleges.

“We have hosted events on health, transport and climate change that bring together young people and decision makers to facilitate conversations. Outcome include the Zoom beyond pass for 18-21 year old in South Yorkshire which provides discounted travel.” **Young person - survey**

“I have been able to support young people in the care experienced community 16-25 feel better prepared for their transition into independence.” **Young person - survey**

“I have started the movement for inclusive sports kit policy and it is rolling!”

Young person - survey

“Building relationships and trust with agencies of the justice system, provided support for those that need it, and aid those with poor mental health in my community.”

Young person - survey

Additional impact areas included advocating for better mental health support and transport access; leading campaigns on climate change and social justice; and influencing local services and policies through youth steering groups and participatory grantmaking.

“There’s been quite a lot that we’re able to do at local level ... [we have] examples of the mayor and the transport systems. Even more locally, in [name of area], we work closely with the mental health services we’ve created little steps to a positive mental health leaflet ... that go around the community. We’ve done first aid courses, putting up signs where, like [where the] nearest defibrillators are, online safety events for primary schools.”

Young person – focus group

Some young people explained how they used their experience to support others once their confidence had grown, including moving into youth work or mentoring roles:

“Taking part in [xxx] has equipped me with confidence and experience to support young people coming through these programmes. I have completed volunteer youth worker training so now support the Youth Board in their function.” Young person – focus group

Young people also reported that through this community change work, they had helped reduce systemic barriers by:

- creating inclusive spaces
- enabling marginalised voices to be heard
- building bridges between stakeholders.

Furthermore, young people reported that collaborating with peers and decision-makers amplified their voices.

Overall, the range of community issues that young people were engaged in, reported by both young people and funded partners, aligns with Co-op Foundation’s strategic priorities: diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), youth activism, safety, and sustainability.

## How engagement enabled change

Young people reported that they were able to drive change because they received:

- training, mentoring, and skills development
- paid opportunities
- confidence and practical skills-building support.



## Barriers to creating change in the community

Young people described barriers that limited their ability to create meaningful change in their communities. A key challenge related to the scale at which many of the issues they cared about needed to be addressed. As one participant explained,

“[The] biggest barrier is that a lot of the changes we’re wanting have to come at a very high-level national scale. A lot of the changes we’re wanting to transport systems or to mental health systems can only come from a government decision and it’s very, very difficult to get them. On a large scale, we need to listen to young people.... There’s not always the time or the want to listen to us.” **Young person – focus group**

This reflects a wider feeling among participants that they could influence smaller, local decisions, but had less power when issues required systems change.

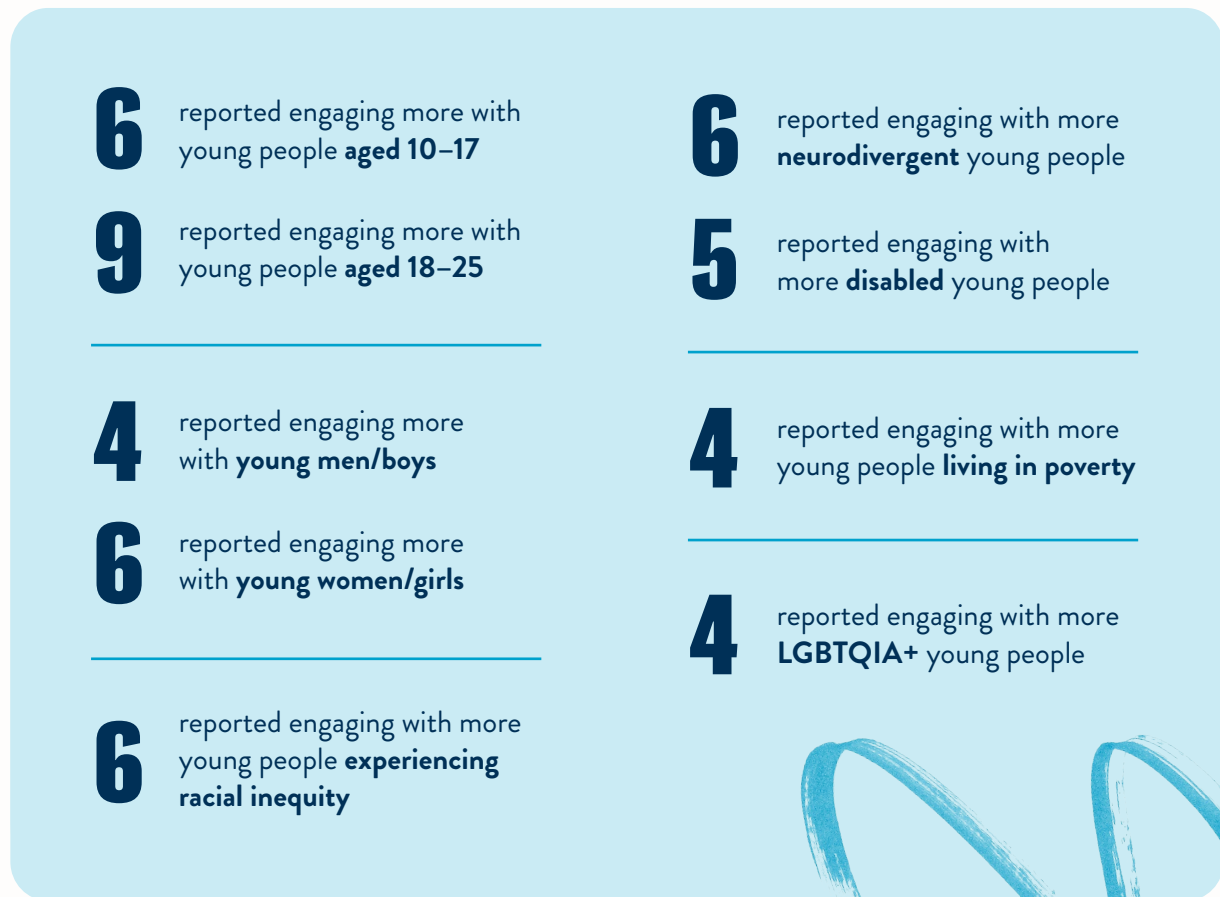
### 5.1.3. Outcomes: Increased engagement with diverse young people and partners’ inclusion of lived experience in structures

#### Extent of impact

This section brings together evidence of two closely linked outcomes: increased engagement with diverse young people and funded partners improve their engagement with and inclusion of people with lived experience in structures/processes. Overall, the findings suggest progress in widening engagement, with funded partners reporting that Co-op Foundation support has helped them engage more young people across a range of ages and other characteristics. However, progress is less consistent in shifting formal power, with partners noting that embedding lived experience in governance structures (e.g. boards and decision-making forums) remains harder to achieve and often requires additional time, capacity and tailored support.

For the funded partners who responded to the survey and engaged young people (n=11), Co-op Foundation funding enabled increasing the engagement of young people from particular groups (infographic 1). From the survey comments and in the focus group, there was a less clear picture for nonbinary, transgender and self-describing young people, as some organisations were not collecting this data.

### Infographic 1. Funded partners' engagement with young people from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences



### Challenges in embedding lived experience within organisations

Some funded partners reported difficulties engaging young people with lived experience in decision-making and governance roles.

One partner highlighted challenges in recruiting beneficiaries to their board:

“One area that we are really struggling with is to get people with lived experience. We would love to have on our board more people who have been actual beneficiaries or participants in our projects to be on our board. We’ve got loads of volunteers who have volunteered on our projects and sit on our Trustee board, but we don’t have anyone who was a beneficiary sitting on our board.” **Funded partner – focus group**

The participant attributed this to the challenges of committing to an active youth board with monthly meetings and activities in between. They took several steps to mitigate this, including reducing the time commitment and running open meetings where young people could attend and observe what a meeting was like. Neither alternative was successful as yet. They were now exploring smaller steering group meetings.

## Reaching and engaging those from disadvantaged backgrounds

In the focus groups, young people raised concerns about who is able to access engagement opportunities. They felt more could be done to reach people in areas they felt were underserved, such as:

- People living outside of large cities
- Young people who are LGBTQIA+
- People from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- People from devolved nations.

This applied to Co-op Foundation, delivery, and funded partner activities.

“Unless you’re in those sorts of bubbles already, you don’t know how to access that, and I think we need to open it up more rather than doing a post on social media. Go into those areas where we know there are so many young people with potential, they just don’t know where to go for these opportunities.” **Young person – focus group**

“They don’t feel confident enough to do that. But also the access barriers for that, for working class communities is quite big, especially in [devolved nation], with a lack of funding and networking compared to other parts of the UK.” **Young person – focus group**

## Learning and conditions for success

Funded partners and young people reflected on the most effective ways to bring in more diverse young people and embed lived experience:

- **Time and trust:** building relationships with diverse young people requires patience and appropriate staffing.
- **Supportive structures:** roles such as ambassadors, including “equity-in-action ambassadors”, can help embed lived experience and strengthen feedback loops.
- **Cultural sensitivity is key:** organisations working with asylum seekers and those with lived migration experiences highlighted the need for cultural awareness and language support.
- **Holistic approach:** providing wrap-around welfare support, signposting to resources, and creating safe, inclusive spaces that prioritise joy and celebration helped engage more diverse groups.
- **Inclusivity in practice:** physical and cultural accommodations (e.g. prayer rooms, dietary considerations, sub-groups for religious, ethnic, and sexual orientation diversity) foster belonging and were seen as very important by young people.

“There is a need to start from where you are at, to give time and space for trust to develop, so lived experience can start to be shared and understood; this might take years. Also important to try and have appropriate workers to support.” **Funded partner - survey**

## 5.1.4. Outcome: Young people gain skills such as listening, communication, leadership, negotiation, facilitation, participation, activism/youth social action

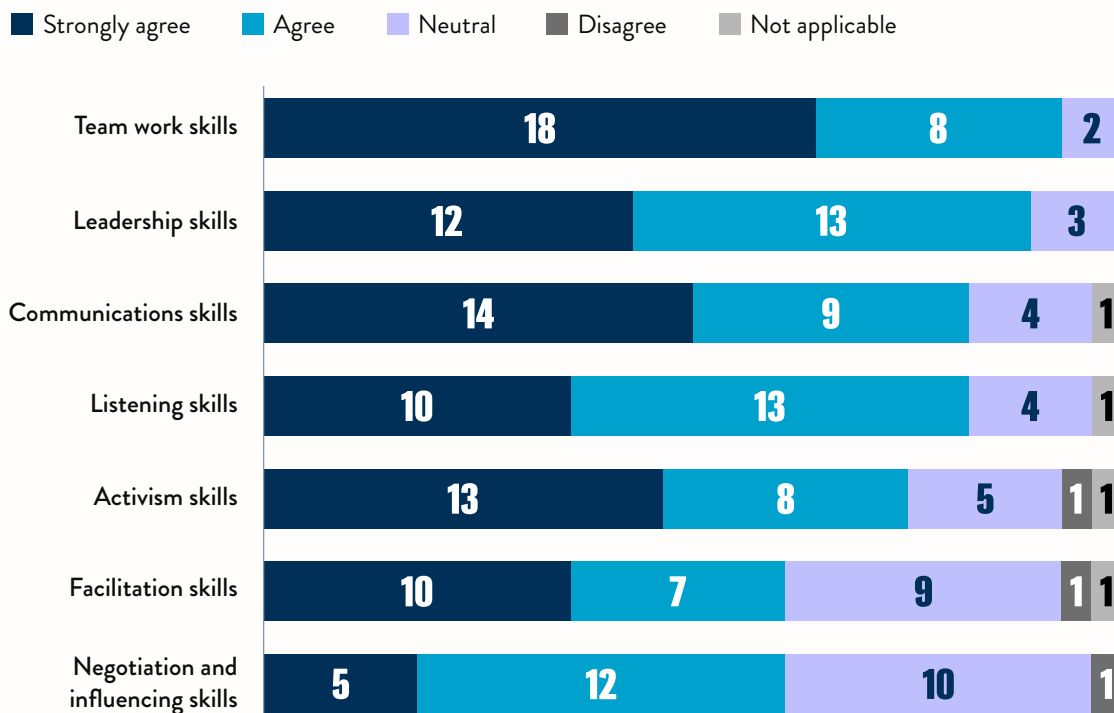
### Extent of impact

Evidence indicates substantial progress towards this outcome, with young people consistently describing both professional skills gains and personal development as a result of their engagement with Co-op Foundation, delivery partners and funded partners. Reported improvements were strongest in confidence, communication, teamwork and leadership alongside emerging development in facilitation and negotiation.

### Evidence of achievement

#### Professional skills

**Figure 12.** Young people - professional skills gained



Source: How far do you agree the participation in Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation activities has helped you to gain the following professional skills? Base: Between 27 and 28 young people.

Young people reported their engagement with Co-op Foundation, delivery and funded partners contributed significantly to their professional growth (figure 12). Survey data shows that participation helped develop teamwork, communication, activism, listening, and leadership skills, with some progress in facilitation and negotiation. These skills were seen as essential for both personal and career development.

In the focus groups, young people described developing public speaking, facilitation, advocacy, and campaigning skills – often in spaces they would not have accessed otherwise. Examples included speaking at national conferences and engaging in policy discussions.

“I was in a [large national conference], and I spoke at [city] about one of our asks in our outcome statement, which was on health.” **Young person – focus group**

Facilitation skills were highlighted as particularly important.

“I think facilitation in this is great. Just having a safe platform to test it out and now I’m using it every day with different projects. I’m working on the listening skills as well ... it’s been nice to apply these skills everywhere.” **Young person – focus group**

Beyond these core skills, young people gained practical insights into the funding sector, governance, and financial management. This knowledge strengthened their leadership capabilities and helped them think about sustainability.

“It’s really started moving me into my leadership [role] ... it made me start thinking about how I should be paying myself, how I can financially be sustainable, not just for me, but for my business.” **Young person – focus group**

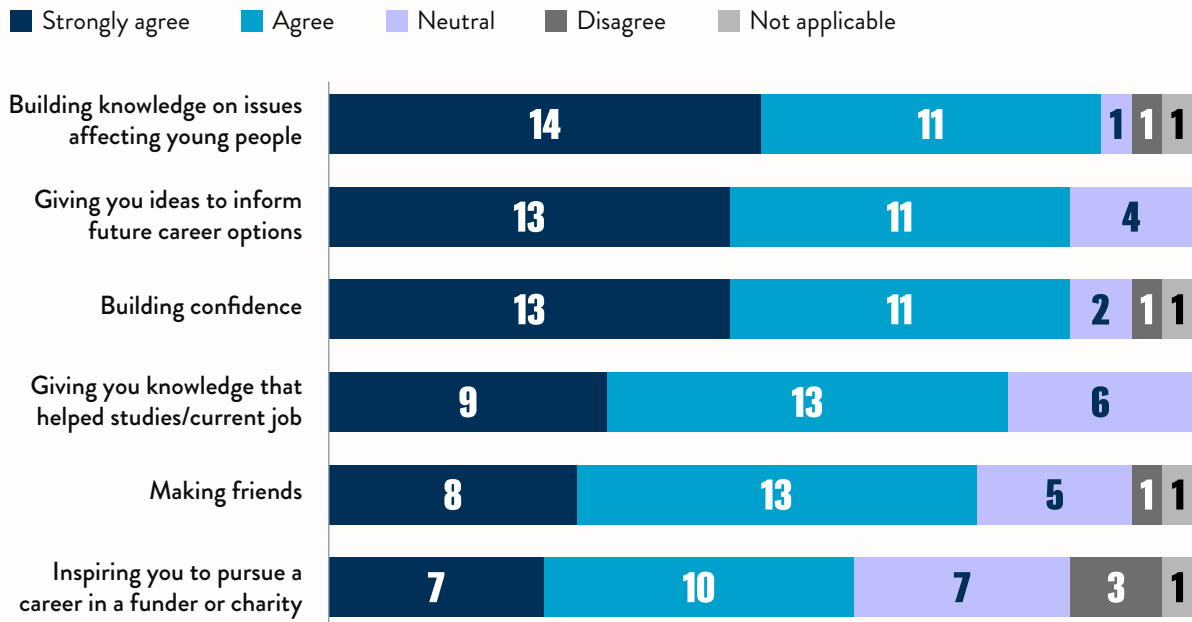
For some, media exposure and brand-building opportunities were transformative.

“They’ve also put me in a lot of media outlets ... I was able to go on BBC News ... The media side of things through UnLtd was just crazy, it was so helpful.” **Young person – focus group**



## Personal development

**Figure 13.** Young people - personal development



Source: How far do you agree that participation in Foundation/delivery partner/funded organisation activities helped you gain the following personal skills, knowledge or inspiration? Base: 28 young people

Young people stated that they experienced a wide range of personal benefits from their engagement with Co-op Foundation, delivery and funded partners (figure 13). Most reported that their knowledge of issues affecting young people increased, and that this learning supported them beyond the programme—helping with studies, work, and life decisions.

Confidence-building was a recurring theme for young people. Many agreed or strongly agreed that participation helped them overcome shyness and develop independence.

“I never knew I’d be able to stand up and deliver training and things like that, so having these opportunities has been great.” **Young person – focus group**

Engagement also fostered friendship and belonging, creating spaces where young people felt connected and supported.

“I was making friends... we’re such a lovely group. I think we’re very quickly bonded and came together... I remember our first in-person catch-up. And it was brilliant – the atmosphere, really refreshing.” **Young person – focus group**

Several participants described transformational changes, such as learning to self-advocate.

“...Even now, standing up for myself in terms of my own needs, for my disability, I would have never [done that before].” **Young person – focus group**

For those funded as individuals, receiving financial support boosted self-belief and commitment.

“Until receiving the Fund, I was doubting if I was going to continue... I felt like, oh my God, someone is believing in me.” **Young person – focus group**

Young people often recognised their personal growth only after reflecting later.

“The personal impact is probably the most important, but it's the one that you don't realise until you've finished.” **Young person – focus group**

Finally, engagement shaped future aspirations. Many reported new career ideas, including grantmaking, charity work, and corporate social responsibility.

“It made me care a lot more about it. Now, where I'm now, I'm actually pursuing a career in corporate social responsibility.” **Young person – focus group**

## Learning and conditions for success

Young people emphasised that professional growth required time, trust, and structured support. Confidence often developed gradually as young people felt safe and gained experience.

“I sat at the back of the meetings and didn't say a single word for about six months... down the line, I'm able to work like this. I've hosted events... run events on mental health... I genuinely wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for being involved in a project like this.” **Young person – focus group**

Young people valued:

- youth-led environments that gave them autonomy and responsibility
- hands-on opportunities to apply skills in real-world contexts
- mentoring and coaching, with regular check-ins and action plans
- safe spaces for practice, including facilitation and leadership roles
- continuous feedback loops to refine skills and build confidence.

“Feedback, feedback, feedback ... not being scared of that feedback and actually then adapting the programme.” **Young person – focus group**

## Where improvements are needed

Young people felt the following would strengthen development opportunities:

- Expand opportunities for strategic decision-making to strengthen negotiation and governance skills.
- Offer specialist support for entrepreneurial young people, including digital engagement and branding.
- Address barriers to participation, such as timing, financial constraints, and geographical reach.



## 5.2. IMPACT ON FUNDED PARTNERS

This evaluation captured the impact of Co-op Foundation support on the funded partners across all programmes, including those that work directly with young people (e.g. through the Future Communities Fund Round 1) and others that didn't (e.g. through the Carbon Innovation Fund (CIF), strategic programmes, and Community Spaces loans).

### 5.2.1. Outcomes: Increased opportunities for partners to cooperate and collaborate, and partners work more cooperatively

#### Extent of impact

In this part, two outcomes are reported together as they are mutually reinforcing: increased opportunities for partners to co-operate and collaborate is often a precondition for partners to work more co-operatively over time. In practice the study focused on “collaboration”, as it is frequently used interchangeably with the term co-operation. For clarity, collaboration was defined in the survey as joint working or sharing knowledge or resources with another organisation – either formally (e.g. via a contract or service-level agreement) or informally (e.g. without a written agreement or no terms set out beforehand).

Where patterns differ across the portfolio – such as between youth engagement-funded partners and those funded through CIF, Community Spaces loans, or strategic programmes – these differences are highlighted.

Overall, the evidence suggests strong progress on collaboration-related outcomes: almost all funded partners reported collaborating to some extent, and 18 of 27 respondents said Co-op Foundation funding and support enabled collaboration to a large or very large extent (figure 14). This points to collaboration being a common feature of delivery across the portfolio, while still leaving room to understand what drives deeper partnership working for different partner types and contexts.

Both organisations receiving unrestricted funding and those receiving project funding, where collaboration was built in, showed similar levels of collaboration as a result of Co-op Foundation funding.

For example, collaboration was a core requirement of the Carbon Innovation Fund. Organisations had to demonstrate collaboration to apply and could apply for larger amounts in the second round if they evidenced partnership working. Annual learning events also enabled partners to connect and share learning from projects, including for example on innovative solutions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the food and farming sector.

Funded partners who received unrestricted funding also stated that collaboration had increased as a result of Co-op Foundation’s support.

However, this was not universal. Survey findings showed that some partners felt it was too early in their organisational journey to collaborate, while others struggled with capacity or the additional time collaboration requires. For example, one loan recipient reported being less engaged in collaboration this year due to financial pressure.

**Figure 14.** Co-op Foundation funding and support enabling collaboration



Source: To what extent has support from the Co-op Foundation helped your organisation to collaborate more? Base: 27 funded partners

### Types of collaboration

Collaborative activities of funded partners with other organisations most commonly involved sharing information, ideas, expertise, or contacts through informal networking (events, calls, emails).

For funded partners with project funding, consortium or joint funding bids were the next most frequent activities, followed by offering joint services to organisations’ beneficiaries and sharing resources such as workspace, facilitation, and/or land. For funded partners with unrestricted funding, the most frequent response was sharing information, ideas, expertise or contacts, meaning collaboration was lighter-touch.

A small number of partners also participated in joint campaigning, more formal information-sharing (e.g. contractual exchange), and training. This reflects sector-specific needs: youth-focused organisations (the largest recipients of unrestricted funding) are often place-based and prioritise safeguarding, while environmental projects (e.g. CIF) tend to collaborate on funding bids and broader systemic issues, such as reducing synthetic fertiliser use.

## Benefits of collaboration

**Figure 15.** Benefits of collaboration



### Other benefits mentioned (< 8)

- Allowed my organisation to focus on core activity
- Improved staff/volunteer recruitment or retention
- No benefits
- Taken a more coordinated approach to address societal issues
- Avoided duplication or service
- Reduced costs/saved money.

**Source:** Which of the following benefits or impacts, if any, do you feel your collaborative activity has had? Tick as many as apply. **Base:** 27 funded partners

Funded partners identified the following benefits from collaboration in the survey (figure 15), including capacity-building – accessing new skills and expertise (20 of 27 respondents) improving services (17) and increasing their number of beneficiaries (16).

Focus group participants described deeper levels of collaboration, including within the Co-op Foundation grant portfolio as well as with many new organisations, including academic, across the UK and further afield, as a result of the funding and Co-op Foundation support.

They described a range of benefits from the collaboration, including extensive learning, bringing in expertise they did not have before, and opening up of new funds and opportunities.

**“It just has made such a difference to us to be able to lean on that expertise and experience that they (the collaborators) have. And I think without that, we wouldn't have been able to contemplate these applications and develop our projects and knowledge. It's been fantastic.”**

**Funded partner – focus group**

“And then potentially opens up all sorts of other possibilities for the way that we’re going and developing our projects and knowledge it’s been fantastic.”

Funded partner – focus group

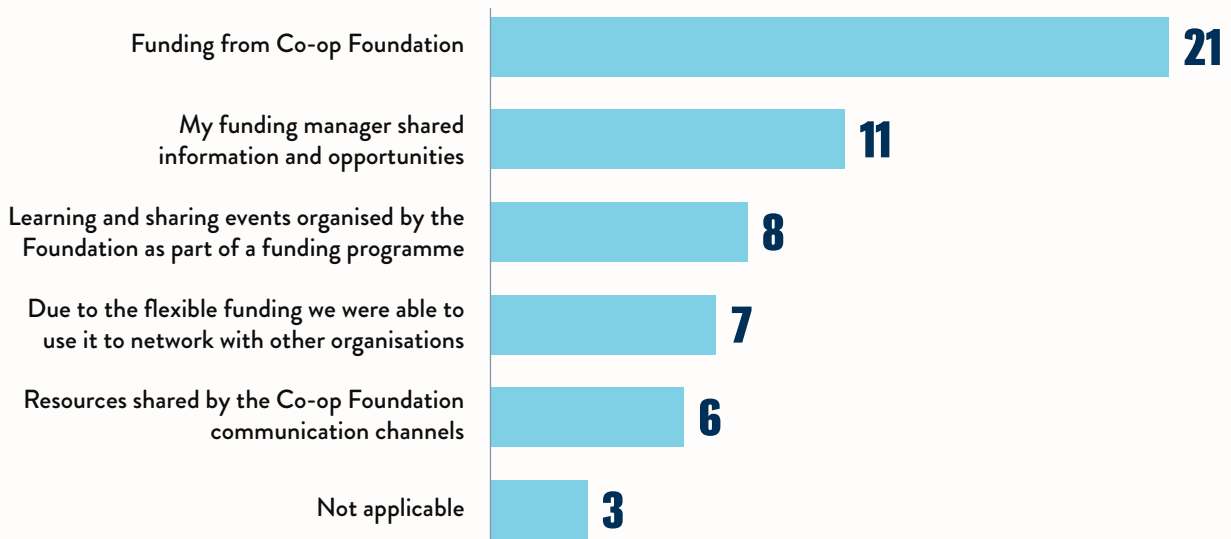
### Difference between funded partners

In the focus groups, partners who received unrestricted funded tended to talk about collaboration mainly as a way to improve delivery for young people – bringing in trainers, sharing referrals, widening access, and navigating local partner relationships. Collaboration was practical, service-focused, and often about equity and inclusion.

Project-funded organisations framed collaboration as a way to advance research, innovation, and organisational strategy – enabling new partnerships, unlocking further funding, strengthening mission, boosting capacity, and enhancing reputation. Their collaboration was more developmental and strategic rather than delivery-focused.

### Learning and conditions for success

Figure 16. Enablers of collaboration



Source: Which of the Foundation activities have helped you to collaborate with other organisations? Tick all that apply.

Base: 27 funded partners

Collaboration worked best when partners have the resources and support to engage meaningfully (figure 16). **Key enablers included:**

- The funding itself, which allowed partners to prioritise collaboration and build open, honest relationships (21 of 27 respondents).
- Active support from the Co-op Foundation team (11), alongside learning events that created spaces for networking and knowledge exchange (8).

Youth organisations also reported that their unrestricted funding made it possible for them to cover travel and participation costs, enabling staff and young people to attend networking activities that they might not have been able to without it.

Focus group participants shed further light on the conditions needed to make collaboration effective in practice, particularly when young people were involved. **Partners emphasised:**

- the need for dedicated coordination time to build and maintain relationships
- sensitivity to context, including safeguarding considerations when collaborating around youth-led work
- the importance of informal networking opportunities and the stability that comes from consistent funding
- clear shared goals and open communication, which supported trust and aligned expectations.

## Challenges and areas for improvement

Funded partners identified several barriers to collaboration:

- Grant requirements, especially from statutory funders, increased administrative burdens and limited time for joint working.
- Geography and physical location, which limited connections for remote or rural partners. Capacity and time constraints, meaning collaboration often became a “nice to have” under resource pressure.
- Logistical complexity, such as coordinating schedules and ensuring accessibility for all partners was challenging.
- Information gaps: sometimes opportunities were blocked by gatekeepers or poor communication between organisations.

“Our European innovation project, even though we knew all the people involved in the Department of Agriculture who are administering it and had good relationships, it was still hard work.” **Funded partner – focus group**

“The only hindrance is just capacity and time. If we have less resources right now, I can’t say yes to things.” **Funded partner – focus group**

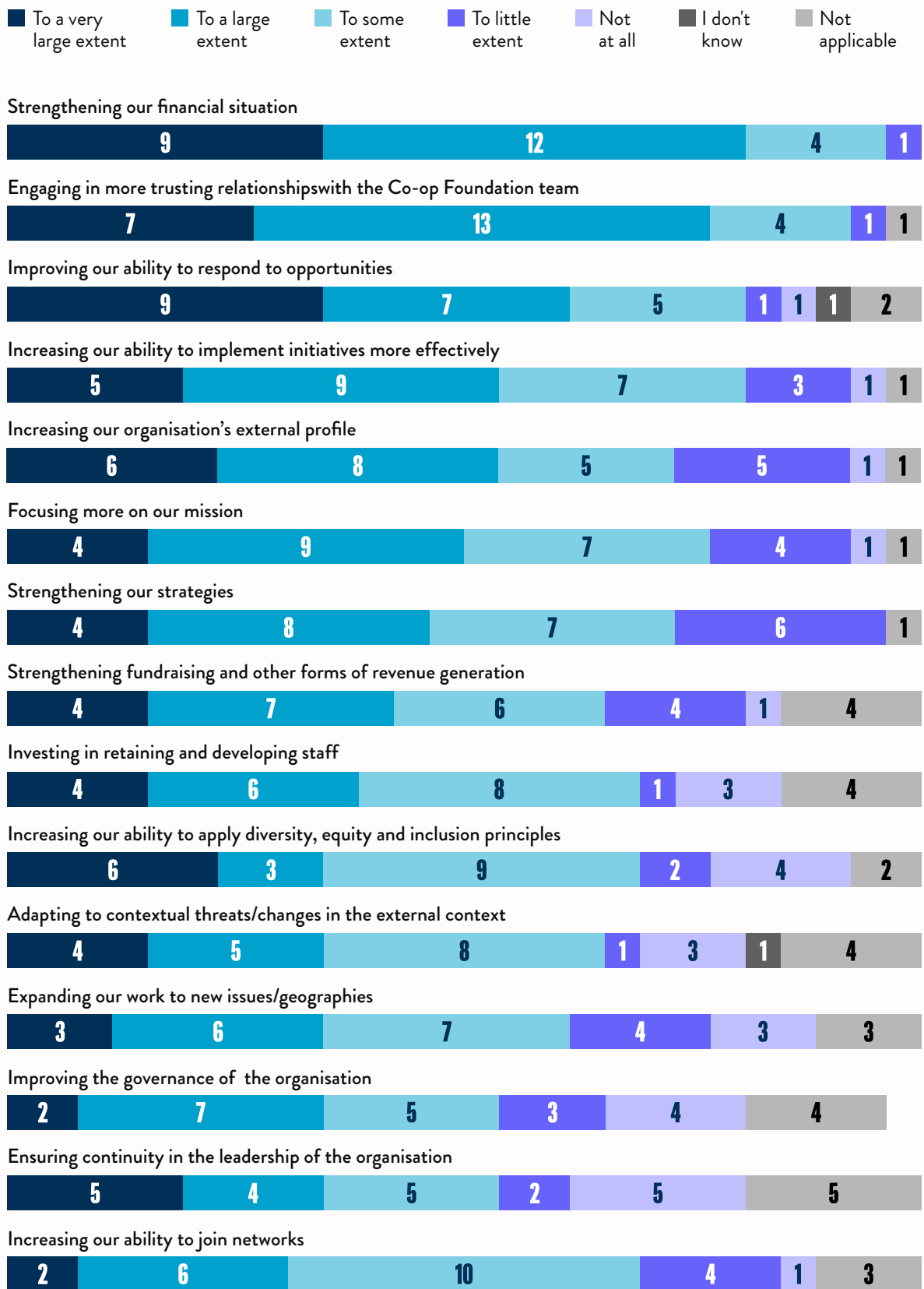


## 5.2.2. Outcomes: Partners are stronger and new evidence of the impact and learning from unrestricted funding is generated

### Extent of impact

This section brings together findings on two closely related outcomes: funded partners becoming stronger organisations (regardless of funding type) and learning about the impact of unrestricted funding (an under-researched area). Across programmes, funded partners described becoming more financially resilient, strategically confident and operationally stable. Crucially, these shifts were not confined to organisations receiving unrestricted funding; organisations receiving restricted, project-based grants also reported organisational strengthening. This suggests that Co-op Foundation’s flexible, relational and trust-based approach can create organisational benefits beyond the specific activity funded. At the same time, funded partners described additional value from unrestricted funding, particularly the “breathing space” to build capacity, invest in internal systems and adapt to emerging needs in ways that are often not possible through restricted grants. Taken together, these findings offer valuable learning for funders on how funding models and funding practices shape organisational strength.

**Figure 17.** Funded partners becoming stronger as organisations



Source: To what extent has the support from the Co-op Foundation helped your organisation in the following aspects, if at all? Base: 25-26

Figure 17 shows that most funded partners reported large or very large improvements in financial resilience, trusted relationships with the Co-op Foundation team, and the ability to respond quickly to opportunities. Many described Co-op Foundation’s support as a “turning point” in their organisational development. Areas such as governance and network-building saw mixed progress. Feedback from interviews and focus groups highlighted several cross cutting drivers of organisational strength.

## Improved stability

Partners consistently attributed improved stability to Co-op Foundation funding, highlighting the level of the funding and also how it contributed not only to their financial situation but also to strengthening their strategy and ability to respond to opportunities:

“It’s definitely strengthened our financial situation... we had time to make a more cohesive strategy.” **Funded partner - survey**

“It’s the biggest grant we’ve ever received... it’s strengthened our financial situation.” **Funded partner - survey**

“The biggest thing is stability – it gives you time to respond to opportunities.” **Funded partner - survey**

Loans recipients reporting using interest-free loans to build or renovate permanent community premises.

## Confidence and trusted relationships

Partners highlighted the Foundation’s relational approach as central to organisational strengthening:

- openness
- flexibility
- regular communication
- a non-punitive culture.

“It’s given us a positive foundational background from which to flourish.” **Funded partner - focus group**

## Ability to innovate and test new approaches

Several organisations used the funding to pilot work they could not otherwise have attempted – from new youth programmes to a novel regenerative agriculture model.

## Experience of receiving a loan

Loan recipients described the interest-free loans as:

- essential in enabling them to even consider borrowing
- less risky and anxiety inducing than typical loans
- flexible in repayment (e.g. holidays granted during the pandemic).

“ It removed the fear – an additional fear on what’s already a hard situation.”

**Funded partner - focus group**

## Unrestricted funding

Unrestricted funding provided additional, specific benefits that extended beyond what was possible under project restricted grants.

### Strategic capacity and staff retention:

- gave organisations breathing space to think long term
- supported retention of skilled staff
- built internal capacity.

“ It opened up more capacity for us... more time for dreaming.”

**Funded partner - focus group**

### Investment in internal systems and profile

Unrestricted funding enabled improvements in areas rarely covered by restricted grants, including:

- HR processes
- Recruitment
- Staff development
- Marketing and communications
- Governance strengthening.

### Greater reach and responsiveness

Youth focused partners reported:

- Increased engagement with diverse young people
- Ability to respond quickly to young people’s needs rather than waiting for new funding.

“It’s allowed us to let young people set the agenda... to be responsive quickly instead of waiting for funding.” **Funded partner - focus group**

### Equity, inclusion and accessibility

Organisations used unrestricted funding to:

- hire DEI leads
- recruit more diverse trustees
- run training for staff and boards
- make volunteering more accessible for disabled and neurodivergent young people.

### Covering essential but underfunded areas

Partners invested in:

- safeguarding
- volunteer management
- admin and preparation time
- monitoring and evaluation.

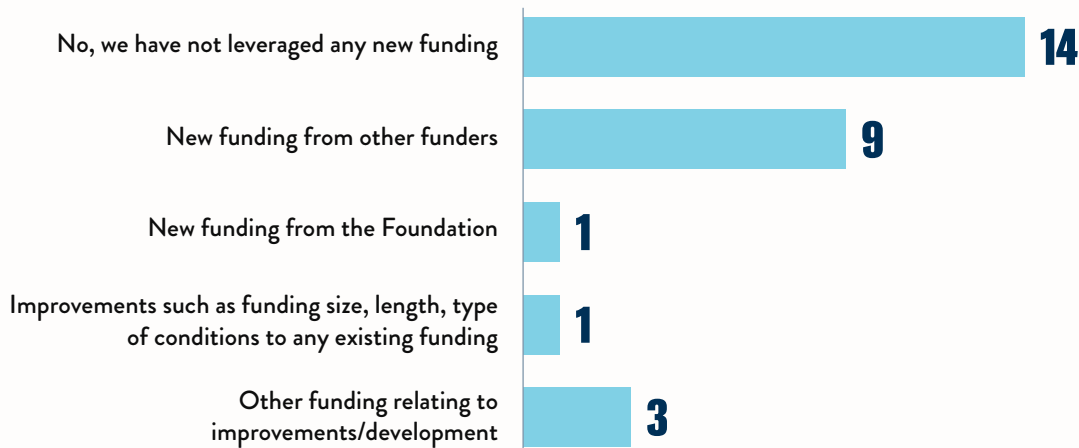
“It has strengthened our strategy – more time to think and less to worry about funding.”  
**Funded partner - focus group**

“It’s allowed us to let young people set the agenda. It’s allowed us to be responsive in a quick time as opposed to going off and having to find funding.” **Funded partner – focus group**

“We’ve been able to employ two young people, not massive hours, but on hours that we wouldn’t have been able to do without that funding and that’s supporting them to do their next bit of career.” **Funded partner – focus group**

### Leveraging additional funding

**Figure 18.** Leveraging additional funding



**Source:** In the last 12 months, as a result of the Co-op Foundation funding and support, has your organisation leveraged any of the following? Tick all that apply. **Base:** 26

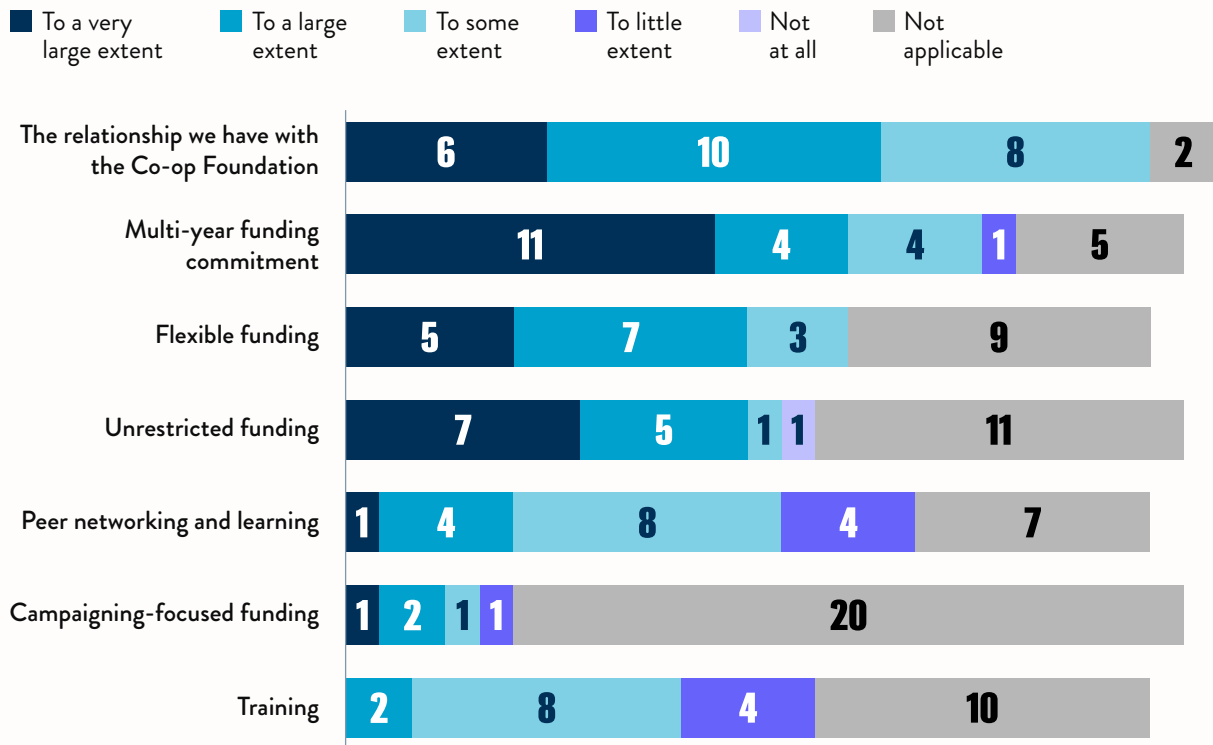
The survey revealed that half of the funded organisations (14) leveraged additional funding following support from Co-op Foundation. This included securing new grants, improving the terms of existing funding, or awaiting further funding (figure 17).

Some of this was from Co-op Foundation, and additional grants were awarded by major funders such as the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, NatWest Social Capital, and the National Lottery Community Fund. Several partners noted that initial Co-op Foundation funding helped them apply for larger pots in a challenging funding landscape.

In the future, the aim is to see an increase in the number of funded partners reporting that they are leveraging additional funding as a result of Co-op Foundation’s support.

## What aspects of Co-op Foundation’s work drove the change

**Figure 19.** Types of Co-op Foundation support influencing organisational strength



Source: To what extent have the different types of support from the Co-op Foundation influenced your organisation?  
 Base: 24-26 funded partners

Figure 19 shows that the relationship with the Co-op Foundation team and unrestricted, flexible funding were the strongest enablers of increased organisational strength. Multi-year funding commitments also contributed significantly. Training and campaigning-focused funding were less prominent enablers overall, reflecting their more limited role within the Foundation’s support offer rather than mixed effectiveness.

### Conditions for success

Partners reported the following aspects needed to be in place to support organisations to be more effective and better able to deliver outcomes:

- Longer-term, unrestricted or flexible funding to sustain progress and avoid reverting to survival mode.
- Support for capacity-building in areas such as HR, safeguarding, and evaluation.
- Opportunities for visibility to raise organisational profiles, build partnerships and networking to amplify impact.

## Challenges and areas for improvement

Despite progress, partners faced several ongoing challenges:

### Funded partners receiving unrestricted funding

- Capacity constraints which limited scaling and innovation.
- Sustainability concerns, particularly the risk of losing momentum once funding ends.
- Short-term funding cycles made it harder to maintain staffing roles and consolidate gains.

### Other partners (project-funded and loan-funded)

- Capacity, time and financial constraints:
  - The most consistent barrier across these organisations was insufficient staff capacity, time and core funding. This was especially pronounced among smaller organisations and one of the loan recipients.
- A highly competitive funding environment.

Many partners described the current funding landscape as “really, really hard,” making it challenging to:

- secure new grants
- leverage additional funding
- maintain stability once existing grants end.

## Environmental and contextual barriers

- Some CIF grant recipients struggled with specific environmental issues such as weather-related disruption, which delayed delivery or spending.
- Remoteness and geographic isolation also limited collaboration for a small number of partners.

## Short-term funding cycles (sector-wide issue)

Respondents described how broader sector funding patterns – short, fragmented or highly restricted grants – made:

- staff retention difficult
- long-term planning challenging
- consolidation of progress harder.

# 6.

## REFLECTIONS ON CO-OP FOUNDATION SUPPORT

Funded partners shared feedback on their experience of Co-op Foundation's support. All respondents reported receiving guidance from their grant managers, as well as opportunities for peer learning and resources on the Foundation's website. Most funded partners accessed these, though loan recipients in the sample did not attend events or use the website.

Overall feedback was highly positive, particularly about Co-op Foundation's ways of working. Funded partners valued its human approach, flexibility, and trust—qualities they felt set it apart from other funders:

“The biggest thing is the human approach. It feels like you've got a human on the other end of the email and phone. They take the time to get it and trust us to do the best we can—such an opposite of the punitive, box-ticking approaches of other funders.” **Funded partner – focus group**

“Our funding manager was genuinely interested, but didn't create any sense of ‘you must deliver against this timeline.’ It was much more: ‘Just let us know how it's going. We want to know the challenges. We trust you to resolve them.’ That set the tone for honesty from the beginning.” **Funded partner – focus group**



Funded partners also praised the flexibility and ease of working with the funder.

“It’s had that flexibility. It’s not been overly onerous. They’re not asking us to show how every single penny’s been spent.” **Funded partner – focus group**

“An organisation just saying, ‘We like you, we fund you already, we want to support you— can you tell us what you need?’ was just incredible.” **Funded partner – focus group**

Peer- sessions were valued for breaking silos and sparking ideas.

“It’s been really interesting to learn about other projects and what else is happening. It’s exciting and different.” **Funded partner – focus group**

Additional positives included the simple application and reporting processes.

## 6.1. LEARNING FOR CO-OP FOUNDATION

Participants suggested some areas for improvement:

- **Facilitate more networking and peer learning:** Capacity constraints made it hard to engage fully; more opportunities to connect would be welcomed.
- **Increase youth representation and leadership:** Even greater youth representation and leadership in Co-op Foundation’s events and decision-making processes.
- **Offer tailored capacity-building support:** Training, mentorship, and specialist expertise would help small teams strengthen their work.
- **Amplify funded partners work and learning:** Sharing insights more widely could inspire and support others in youth work and DEI journeys.



# 7.

## DISCUSSION: A SECTOR-WIDE PERSPECTIVE ON THE CO-OP FOUNDATION'S FUNDING IMPACT

This study, looking across its funding programmes and direct activities with young people, shows that Co-op Foundation's and its delivery and funded partners' approach to youth engagement, flexible funding, and partnership working align with and advance best practice in the UK youth and funding sectors.

It also highlights some persistent challenges around governance-level youth participation, intersectional inclusion, and sector capacity.

It should be noted that this is the first time the Foundation has run these surveys and focus groups, and the sample is relatively small. Findings are indicative rather than representative of all the individuals and organisations the Foundation supports.



# 7.1. YOUNG PEOPLE

## 7.1.1. Youth influence and engagement: progress and persistent barriers

Young people had diverse opportunities to influence decisions within Co-op Foundation and through delivery and funded partners, ranging from event planning to policy development and participatory grantmaking. This mirrors a sector-wide shift towards co-production and shared power, as advocated by organisations such as the National Youth Agency (NYA, n.d.) and the Young Trustees Movement (YTM, n.d.). Almost one-third contributed to strategic planning, but few participated in governance-level spaces, such as board meetings. Survey data showed an even split in perceived influence, indicating progress but room to strengthen youth power in strategic forums. These findings also reflect a national trend: just 3% of UK charity trustees are under 30, with barriers including age stereotypes, lack of confidence, and logistical challenges (YTM, n.d.).

Focus groups highlighted a tension between being fully youth-led and organisational accountability. While many felt highly involved, some noted that decisions – particularly funding allocations – still required board ratification. Exploring shared power models could help balance governance with youth leadership aspirations.

### Conditions for success

Open discussions, training, and paid preparation time were key enablers of meaningful participation. Consistently embedding these practices would support equity and confidence-building.

## 7.1.2. Accessibility and inclusion: enablers and ongoing challenges

Accessibility shaped the quality and equity of engagement. Flexible meeting formats, financial support, and inclusive practices (e.g., sensory-friendly spaces and pronoun use) enabled participation, particularly among young carers and neurodiverse participants. These practices align with the NYA's Equity, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Standards (NYA, 2025). However, more work is needed on reimbursement and recognition for young people across organisations.

Barriers included school pressures, financial constraints, and systemic challenges such as gatekeeping and poor communication between organisations, which restricted participation for some. Sector evidence also highlights the same participation barriers (see DCMS, 2025) that require proactive outreach, holistic support, and creative facilitation to remove them and sustain engagement.

### 7.1.3. Young people's power to create change

Young people reported strong progress in influencing community issues and driving positive change. Two-thirds felt they made a significant impact in their local communities. There was evidence of a wide range of issues young people created change on closely linked to Co-op Foundation's strategic priorities of safety (for example, criminal justice system awareness), sustainability (for example sustainable fashion or eco-groups in colleges), diversity, equity and inclusion (for example improving sports kit inclusivity) and youth activism (for example, events that bring together young people with policymakers on issues of health, transport and climate).

Key enablers included training, mentoring, paid opportunities, and collaboration with decision-makers. Young people were given the power to create change by funding them directly as individuals, e.g., through the Young Gamechangers fund; by involving them in decision-making for our funding; or through our funded partners, who gave them opportunities to lead. Learning opportunities, financial support, and mentoring or other flexible, needs-based 1-1 support have been highlighted by other evaluations of funding programmes for young people as individuals, such as the Young Change Makers Fellowship Programme (Routh et al., 2024).

Funded partners highlighted that youth engagement in governance and decision-making made initiatives more authentic, improved representation, and strengthened organisational capacity. However, access to governance-level spaces and consistency in accessibility remain areas for improvement.

### 7.1.4. Diversity and lived experience

Funded partners reported progress in engaging more diverse young people, including those experiencing racial inequity, neurodivergence, disability, and LGBTQIA+ identities.

Key enablers included time and trust, cultural sensitivity, and holistic support such as wrap-around welfare and inclusive spaces. Mechanisms like equity-in-action ambassadors helped embed lived experience into organisational processes. At the same time, physical and cultural accommodations – such as prayer rooms, dietary considerations, and sub-groups for specific communities – were essential for fostering belonging.

Despite improved engagement, meaningful involvement in decision-making remains a challenge. Organisations struggled to recruit young people with lived experience onto boards, largely due to time commitments and competing responsibilities. Attempts to mitigate this – such as reducing time commitments or offering open meetings – were not yet successful, indicating the need for further development.

These findings underline that inclusion requires intentional investment, flexible structures, and sustained effort. The need to put young people in the driving seat more by giving them additional power to make decisions has been recently recognised at the governmental level in England with the National Youth Strategy (DCMS, 2025).

## 7.1.5. Young people's skills development

There was strong progress in building both professional and personal skills. Young people reported gains in communication, teamwork, leadership, and facilitation, as well as in confidence and independence. Opportunities for public speaking, advocacy, and practical insights into governance and funding were highly valued, with many noting these experiences influenced their career aspirations, including interest in the funding sector.

Key enablers included youth-led environments, mentoring, hands-on experience, and safe spaces for practice. Young people emphasised that developing these skills requires time and space to build confidence.

While progress was evident, fewer participants reported gains in listening, facilitation, and negotiation skills, which may reflect the types of activities they engaged in. Participants in the Young Gamechangers Fund (YGF) and Funding Futures Programme demonstrated greater progress in these areas. Evidence from funding programme evaluations (see [TSIP, 2025](#); [Routh et al., 2024](#)) also confirms similar gains in personal and professional skills, especially an increase in self-belief and confidence to create community change.

Areas for improvement include expanding access to strategic decision-making, offering specialist support for entrepreneurial young people, and addressing barriers such as timing and financial constraints.



## 7.2. FUNDED PARTNERS

### 7.2.1. Collaboration

There was good progress in enabling collaboration among funded partners. This was particularly evident in programmes linked to partnerships with other organisations, such as the Carbon Innovation Fund, which included collaboration as a funding criterion.

Most respondents reported that Co-op Foundation funding and support helped them work together to a large extent. Collaborative activities ranged from informal networking and sharing expertise to joint funding bids, service delivery, and joint campaigning.

Benefits included capacity building, improved services, and enhanced reputation and reach. Flexible funding, learning events, and active support from partnership managers were key enablers, creating space for trust-building and knowledge exchange.

Barriers included time and capacity constraints, heavy reporting requirements from certain funders, and logistical challenges, particularly for geographically dispersed partners.

### 7.2.2. Partners' strength and learning from unrestricted funding

There was strong progress in strengthening funded partners. Survey and focus group findings show that most organisations reported improvements in financial resilience, strategic capacity, and external profile, though progress on governance and network-building was more mixed.

Unrestricted funding enabled partners to prioritise underfunded areas such as safeguarding, staff development, and DEI initiatives, while increasing reach to underserved young people. Flexibility enabled organisations to respond quickly to emerging needs and allowed young people to set the agenda rather than follow rigid project plans. Funding also helped some organisations leverage additional grants, though success was mixed in what they described as a competitive landscape.

The findings are also supported by evidence from funding programme evaluations, such as the Foundation's Future Communities Fund Round 1 (Mills et al., 2025) and the Ford Foundation's BUILD programme in the US (Bisiaux et al., 2022). Programme evaluations show that multi-year unrestricted funding enables organisations to enhance their financial resilience and organisational stability through long-term strategic planning, offering long-term contracts, investing in team training, boosting their emotional resilience, and quickly adapting to meet the emerging needs of the communities they serve.

Despite progress, challenges remain: capacity constraints limited innovation, and partners feared reverting to survival mode once funding ends. Multi-year commitments were seen as critical to sustaining gains and maintaining staff roles. Key enablers included unrestricted, long-term funding, strong relationships with Co-op Foundation team, and opportunities for visibility and networking. Learning suggests that flexibility, trust, and support for capacity-building are essential conditions for success.

### 7.2.3. Reflections on Co-op Foundation's support

Feedback from funded partners was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting Co-op Foundation's human-centred approach, flexibility, and trust-based relationships as distinguishing features compared to other funders. Grantees appreciated the ease of the processes, the simple reporting requirements, and the proactive support from grant managers. Peer-to-peer learning opportunities were valued for breaking silos and sparking collaboration.

#### Key strengths identified:

- human, empathetic approach fostering honesty and trust
- flexible funding and minimal administrative burden
- supportive grant management and simple application/reporting processes
- peer-learning sessions that encouraged knowledge exchange.

The findings of this research on how funded organisations perceive the Foundation's support reflect its strategic commitment to open and trusting philanthropy. In particular, the evidence shows that it practices its commitments of “not wasting time”, “asking relevant questions”, “accepting risk”, “being open”, “enabling flexibility”, “communicating with purpose” and “being proportionate” (see IVAR, 2021). These are also aligned with its co-operative values as a funder (Co-op Foundation, n.d.).



# 8.

## MOVING FORWARD

This chapter brings together recommendations co-produced with the Co-op Foundation team and Board of Trustees, and the Future Communities Collective, insights from evaluation participants, and an analysis of the findings. Actions are grouped for Co-op Foundation, funded partners, and shared priorities, aligned with the outcomes explored in the discussion.

### 8.1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CO-OP FOUNDATION

#### Youth influence and participation

- Clearly define and communicate what is fixed versus negotiable in youth engagement activities, and ensure decisions are shared transparently.
- Improve the timeliness and consistency of communications and follow up on youth input.
- Develop guidance on good practice for paying young people, including policy templates for partners.
- Create guidance for meaningful youth engagement, emphasising co-creation and shared power models.
- Strengthen relationships with young people through flexibility, cultural responsiveness and meeting them where they are.



## Organisational strength and funding

- Continue to advocate for longer-term, unrestricted funding to enable partners to focus on organisational sustainability and avoid reverting to survival mode.
- Pair funding with capacity-building support in key areas such as HR, safeguarding, and evaluation. Tailor the support, which can comprise training, mentorship and access to specialist expertise.
- Maintain flexibility and trust-based funding models as a core principle, recognising the diverse needs of funded partners.
- Use the 2024 evaluation framework findings as a benchmark and track long-term change. Develop mechanisms to capture impact beyond the grant period to assess sustained outcomes.

## Collaboration and learning

- Continue organising annual networking and learning events to strengthen connections and shared learning among partners.
- Share partner success stories through communications spotlights and sector-facing platforms.
- Expand networking and peer-learning opportunities to address capacity constraints and foster collaboration.
- Ensure events better reflect young people's voices and perspectives.
- Amplify grantees' work and learning to inspire and inform the wider sector.

# 8.2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDED PARTNERS

- Develop policies for working with young people, including fair, timely and transparent compensation.
- Participate in training on how to adapt working styles to be more inclusive and accessible to young people.
- Leverage youth networks to reach deeper into communities and to connect with those on the verge of exclusion.
- Maintain connections with other funded partners to strengthen collaboration.



## 8.3. SHARED PRIORITIES FOR FUNDED PARTNERS AND CO-OP FOUNDATION

- Expand youth representation in governance and decision-making structures, ensuring shared power and agency.
- Co-design youth engagement strategies and embed shared power models that reflect equity and inclusion.
- Develop resources and training on digital engagement for organisations working with young people and balance online and in-person engagement to maximise participation and inclusion.
- Increase outreach of opportunities for youth engagement and youth leadership, including building on youth networks and youth-led dissemination channels and increasing presence in events with young people for young people.
- Collaborate with other organisations working with young people to share best practice, coordinate efforts and build collective impact.
- Ensure that engagement timelines and tasks are tailored to young people's schedules, taking into account their school, work and other commitments.
- Showcase funded partner learning and youth-led impact stories to inspire the sector and foster a culture of shared power and inclusion.

## 9.

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# APPENDIX

## Profile of survey respondents - young people

GENDER	
Women or girls	18
Men or boys	6
Non-binary	2
Transgender	1
Unsure	1

AGE	
16-17	2
18-25	24

ETHNICITY	
White British	15
White other	2
Global Majority backgrounds	10

DISABILITY	
Disability	7
No disability	17
Preferred not to say	2

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	
Straight	15
LGBTQ+	8
Preferred not to say	2
Don't know	1

FREE SCHOOL MEALS	
Eligible for free school meals while at school	8
Not eligible	18
Prefer not to say	1

EXPERIENCE OF BEING IN CARE OR CARE LEAVERS	
Care leavers	3
Not care experienced	23
Prefer not to say	1

EXPERIENCE OF BEING A CARER	
Carer	4
Not a carer	20
Prefer not to say	2

## Profile of survey respondents - funded partners

	Funded partners that engage young people	Funded partners from CIF, loans and other strategic funding
<b>YEARS IN OPERATION</b>		
1-5 years	4	7
6-10 years	3	3
11 years +	4	9
<b>ANNUAL TURNOVER</b>		
£10,000-£100,000	2	5
£100,001-£1m	8	8
£1m-£10m	0	5
£10m+	1	1
<b>REGIONAL SPREAD</b>		
UK-wide	4	5
England	6	6
Scotland	0	5
Wales	1	6
Northern Ireland	1	1
<b>URBAN V RURAL</b>		
Mixed or multiple areas	9	8
Coastal	0	2
Rural	0	4
Urban areas	2	5
<b>FUNDING TYPE</b>		
Unrestricted	6	1
Project funding	2	13
Loans		4

	Funded partners that engage young people	Funded partners from CIF, loans and other strategic funding
<b>TYPE OF ORGANISATIONS</b>		
Registered charity	7	8
CIC	2	3
Social enterprise	0	1
Other	2	6
<b>STAFFING (CALCULATED MEDIAN FOR EACH CATEGORY)</b>		
Full time	1	5
Part time or seasonal	5	3
Volunteers	15	5
Trustees, board members, patrons	7	7

## Co-op Foundation delivers funding and campaigns with and for young people.

Proud to be Co-op's charity, we bring co-operative values to everything we do. We understand that the organisations and young people we fund know their communities and the challenges they face best. We listen, learn and support them in open and trusting partnerships. And we provide flexible funding, so they have the freedom to adapt to changing needs.

Together we're stronger. Let's build communities where everyone can thrive.

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Follow us on LinkedIn and Instagram – search '**Co-op Foundation**'

Find us at [www.coopfoundation.org.uk](http://www.coopfoundation.org.uk)

## NCVO consultancy supports funders, their grantees, and the wider sector in designing and delivering learning that strengthens impact across programmes.

We work closely with clients and stakeholders to co-create theories of change and evaluation frameworks, while mentoring and building organisations' capacity to develop their own approaches to monitoring, evaluation, and learning. Our approach is collaborative, flexible and inclusive, with a focus on centring the perspectives of people who are often underrepresented.

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