Foundation

Funding the foundations of youth power

A mid-term evaluation report on the Future Communities Fund Round 1.

November 2026

Open & Trusting

IVAR

Authorship and acknowledgements

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Glossary

This glossary defines key terms, acronyms and concepts used throughout this report.

Diversity

The presence of a wide range of different people within a group, including differences such as race, sex, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs and more.

Equity

Ensuring fair treatment, access and advancement for all people, which may mean distributing resources based on individual needs to correct societal imbalances and create opportunities for those with historically lower access.

Funded partners

The 13 organisations funded by Co-op Foundation under the Future Communities Fund's first round of funding.

Future Communities Fund Round 1 (FCF1)

The first round of the Future Communities Fund, launched by Co-op Foundation in 2023, awarded grants to 13 organisations. The Fund sought to make progress on Co-op Foundation's strategic priorities: enabling youth activism and sharing power; and developing diverse, equitable and inclusive communities.

Inclusion

Creating an environment where every person feels welcomed, respected and valued for who they are.

Learning partner

A learning partner is an external organisation or consultant hired to help funders and funded partners make sense of their work. Rather than just evaluating a funding programme's success at the end, they create space where funders and funded partners can be honest about what's working – and change what isn't – as the project unfolds, build collaborative networks and help adapt strategies as the project unfolds. For FCF1, IVAR was the appointed learning partner.

Multi-year funding

Financial support which is committed for at least two years. In the case of Co-op Foundation's FCF1, 10 organisations were awarded a five-year grant, and three received a three-year grant.

Restricted funding

Grants that must be used for "specific charitable purposes"[1], such as the delivery of a particular project or defined set of activities (project grants), or to pay for a specific element of overheads, such as rental costs or the director's salary (overhead/core cost grants).

Unrestricted funding

Grants that "do not have any restrictions or conditions on their use and can be spent or applied at the discretion of the trustees to further any of the charity's purposes" [1]. These grants come without explicit and formal conditions on how the funding should be spent.

Young people

FCF1 was open to organisations working with young people aged 10–25, although most of the funded partners tend to work with young people at the middle to older end of that age bracket. Across the funded partners, the young people involved represent a range of different backgrounds and life experiences.

[1] Joint Charities SORP-Making Body, 2025

1. Executive summary

Background

The first round of Co-op Foundation's Future Communities Fund (FCF1) aims to promote youth activism and shared power, and to foster more diverse, equitable and inclusive communities. In line with the foundation's commitment to being an Open & Trusting funder[2], FCF1 awarded multi-year, unrestricted funding of up to £150,000 to 13 small and medium-sized organisations that work with young people. In doing so, the programme sought to test the idea that multi-year unrestricted funding strengthens organisations and enhances their capacity to address young people's needs.

Purpose of the report

This report sets out learning from the first three years of FCF1. It is guided by the learning and evaluation framework co-created by Co-op Foundation, funded partners and IVAR at the start of the programme, and explores:

1. The behaviours required of the foundation to be an Open & Trusting funder.
2. How the foundation's multi-year unrestricted funding has made a difference to funded partners.
3. How young people have benefited from the funded partners' work.
4. The extent to which FCF1 is influencing funding practice in the wider sector.

The intention is to capture, apply and share learning on an ongoing basis with a series of annual learning reports. This report builds on the first learning report published in 2025, which focused on the difference multi-year unrestricted funding made for funded partners. It covers all aspects of the FCF1 learning and evaluation framework and, for the first time, introduces data on how young people have benefited from funded partners' work. Further learning reports will follow in 2027 and 2028.

[2] Open & Trusting is an initiative and community of practice, hosted by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR), that encourages grant-makers to adopt simpler, more flexible, and respectful funding practices.

Research methods

Evidence was gathered between November 2025 and March 2026 through:

- Interviews with senior representatives from all 13 funded partners.
- Outputs from workshops involving funded partner staff and young people.
- Research projects by five young people on the impact of funded partners.
- Funded partners' impact reports.
- Co-op Foundation surveys and focus groups with partners and young people, conducted as part of its own strategic evaluation.

We analysed data from these multiple sources to identify recurring themes, which are reported here.

Findings

Funder behaviour

Funded partners see Co-op Foundation as a values-led, trusting and supportive funder committed to inclusive youth participation and shared power, which aligns with their own values. They value its light-touch reporting, accessibility and practical support beyond grants.

Funded partners

Multi-year unrestricted funding has strengthened funded partners' stability and responsiveness. Stability improves through stronger strategic capacity, workforces, financial security and infrastructure. Responsiveness improves because unrestricted funding lets them listen to young people, work at their pace, adapt to changing needs and try new activities.

Although consistent with last year's findings, the latest evidence shows how partners' use of unrestricted funding evolves. As confidence in its flexibility grows, funded partners use funding more strategically and responsively, building organisational capacity, addressing emerging needs and creating activities and opportunities that benefit young people. Organisations accustomed to restricted funding may initially hesitate to exercise this flexibility. Clear communication time, and trust from the funder helped funded partners feel confident using funds in the way they believe is most effective.

Young people

Funded partners benefit young people in two ways. They create safe, consistent, inclusive spaces where young people build trusted relationships with adults and peers, fostering sustained engagement, belonging, confidence, self-esteem and practical, creative, transferable skills. They also help young people express opinions, feel heard,

shape activities and services and take on leadership or activist roles. Multi-year unrestricted funding enhances the organisational ways of working that make these outcomes possible.

Young people have also directly benefited from FCF1 through the young researcher programme and annual learning event, gaining skills, confidence, connections and inspiration from meeting peers.

Influence on the wider sector

Learning from FCF1 is being shared and is contributing to greater funder interest in multi-year unrestricted funding. IVAR's report on assessing the impact of unrestricted funding is its most downloaded publication of the past two years. Funders have also approached Co-op Foundation to learn about its approach. These signs point to a gradual shift towards more open, trusting practices, although multi-year unrestricted funding remains uncommon[3], especially in the youth sector.

Reflections and implications

Our findings validate FCF1's rationale: multi-year, unrestricted funding, backed by values-led, trusting relationships, helps partners strengthen organisational stability and responsiveness. These changes enable more effective support for young people and youth-led practice, showing that how funding is delivered matters as much as the amount. This analysis is reflected in the proposed conceptual framework in Figure 1.

The framework shows how Co-op Foundation's funding and support shape the environment in which funded organisations work. Its funding practices build trust, enabling partners to use funds for stability and responsiveness. These qualities create an organisational support ecosystem that can help young people in meaningful ways, prioritising the outcomes young people value most and shifting power into their hands.

The evaluation found strong evidence that FCF1 has enhanced how power is shared with young people, but less clear evidence that it has contributed to more diverse, equitable and inclusive communities. FCF1 intentionally supported organisations that serve diverse and disadvantaged young people across the UK, and the funding has strengthened funded partners' ability to engage in responsive and inclusive practices. However, findings offer limited evidence that FCF1 has increased the diversity of young people supported or promoted more equity-focused organisational practices. This limitation may stem from the difficulty of distinguishing changes driven by FCF1 from funded partners' existing commitments to marginalised groups and ways of working. Mapping

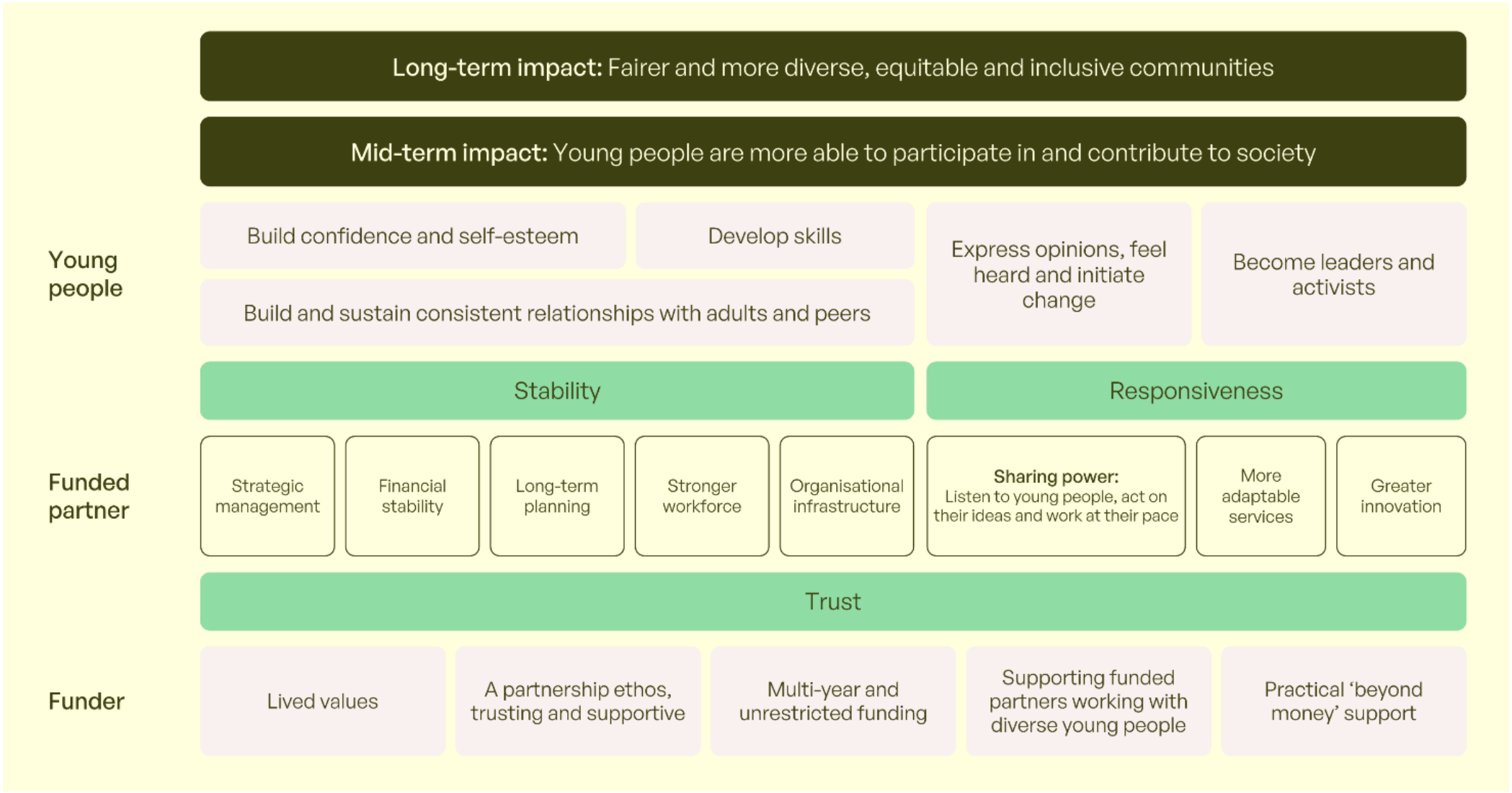
[3] Cairns and Moran, 2026

the specific pathways from funder behaviour to more diverse, equitable and inclusive communities requires further research.

For funders, commissioners and policymakers, our findings suggest Open & Trusting funding, including multi-year unrestricted funding, strengthens youth work, particularly where the goal is to share power with young people and support them to become active and engaged in their communities.

Future research should assess whether benefits seen in FCF1's first three years endure, what follows when multi-year unrestricted funding ends, and whether FCF1 changes wider funding practices.

Figure 1 – Conceptual framework: Creating the conditions for young people to thrive



2. Introduction

About the Future Communities Fund

In 2023, Co-op Foundation launched the first round of the Future Communities Fund (FCF1), which sought to make progress on two strategic priorities: enabling youth activism and sharing power; and developing diverse, equitable and inclusive communities. The funding was designed to be participatory, unrestricted, long-term, trusting, accessible, supportive and to facilitate co-operation. Under FCF1, the foundation awarded grants of up to £30,000 annually for up to five years to 13 small and medium-sized organisations with annual income up to £250,000. The Future Communities Collective, a group of diverse young people, led the funding allocation and supports the foundation with strategic and operational decisions.

The 13 funded partners span a diverse range of community-led charities and social enterprises supporting young people across the UK. Their work includes youth leadership, employability and volunteering, disability support, STEM participation, refugee and migrant inclusion and targeted help for those affected by deprivation, discrimination, the care system or abuse. Collectively, they aim to remove barriers to participation, build skills and confidence and enable young people from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds to thrive and shape their communities. Appendix one summarises each organisation.

FCF1 is underpinned by the assumption that multi-year unrestricted funding will strengthen funded partners and enhance their capacity to respond to young people's needs, driving greater impact. This approach is distinctive because it diverges from the short-term restricted funding so common in the youth and wider charity sector.

Co-op Foundation's approach is supported by a growing body of research showing that multi-year unrestricted funding enhances organisational capacity, which, in turn, improves organisational effectiveness and impact.[4] As part of FCF1, Co-op Foundation wanted to test the assumption that providing multi-year unrestricted funding can be transformational for communities, and appointed IVAR as a learning partner to the programme. IVAR worked with the foundation and the funded partners to develop a learning and evaluation framework to explore the impact of its grants and support on funded partners and young people, and how the foundation's behaviour can enable funded partners to achieve the desired impacts.

[4] Hung and Berrett, 2025; NIRAS, 2022; Mills, 2023; Mills et al., 2024a; Mills and Cairns, 2026; Wiepking and De Wit, 2024

Recent developments in the youth sector

Recent developments in the youth sector, both in the challenges young people face and in the public policy response, have made Co-op Foundation's approach increasingly significant. In the three years since FCF1 was launched, we have seen increasingly widespread youth joblessness – with a million individuals now classed as NEET (not in education, employment or training)[5] – and a fraying social contract has left young people feeling less optimistic about their future prospects.[6] As a result, it is more crucial than ever to invest in supportive programmes that connect young people to their individual and collective power to shape their futures and lead change.

In response to the challenges facing young people, the UK government launched Youth matters: Your national youth strategy in December 2025.[7] This strategy drew on the Youth matters: State of the nation report[8], which was co-produced with young people and drew on over 14,000 young people's voices, presenting evidence on the challenges and experiences of young people in England. The strategy is also backed by an investment of over £500 million to rebuild vital youth services, boost opportunities for young people and empower the next generation. Although the strategy applies only to England, as youth services are devolved matters in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, it is a significant policy change with wide implications for how organisations work with young people.

A key feature of the national youth strategy is giving power to young people so they are seen, heard and can hold services to account. The strategy therefore raises questions about how funding should be delivered, so that youth work organisations can genuinely put power in the hands of young people. FCF1 contributes valuable learning by exploring how flexible, trusting funding can support organisations to translate that commitment into practice.

[5] Milburn, 2026
[6] O'Halloran et al., 2026
[7] Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025
[8] Youth Advisory Group for the National Youth Strategy, 2025

Reflecting on progress

With FCF1 now at the end of its third of five years, it is a good time to reflect on progress. Over the past three years, we have already explored how funders assess impact when making unrestricted grants.[9] We have also examined how funded partners have used their grants and the difference this has made to their operations and capacity to support young people.[10] These reports have created the bedrock from which we can now consider the impact on young people, which is ultimately the programme's most important feature.

This report, therefore, sets out findings from research evidence gathered in 2025-26 and reflects on what we can learn from FCF1 during its first three years. This is done in accordance with the four impact themes of the learning and evaluation framework. The four impact themes and the main learning questions for each of them are set out in Table 1.

Table 1 – Summary of FCF's learning and evaluation framework

Impact type	Main learning questions
Funder behaviour	• What behaviours are required for Co-op Foundation to be an Open & Trusting funder in the field of youth participation?
Impact on funded partners	• Has multi-year unrestricted funding made a difference to funded partners and, if so, how? • Has IVAR's learning partner support made a difference to the funded partners and, if so, how?
Impact on young people	• To what extent have young people benefited from the activities and services delivered by funded partners and, if so, how? • Have young people benefited from their involvement in FCF and, if so, how?
Influencing the practice of other funders	• To what extent is FCF helping to change the funding practices of other funders and, if so, how?

[9] Mills et al., 2024b
[10] Mills et al., 2025

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research approach

Our research approach was shaped by the learning questions developed within the learning and evaluation framework in Appendix two. While this framework was informed by the theory of change used by Co-op Foundation in designing the funding programme, our focus has always been to gather insights from both funded partners and young people to understand their real-life experiences and what truly matters to them, rather than seeking to pre-determine these. By enabling funded partners to explain, in their own terms, how they have been affected by FCF1, and giving power to young people to describe, in their own words, how they have been affected by funded partners, we align with FCF1's commitment to sharing power and youth participation. This requires an inductive research approach that uses open-ended learning questions and builds a conceptual framework directly from insights gathered from both funded partners and the young people they work with.

The research in this second learning report builds on the first learning report for Co-op Foundation. While this report revisits and builds on evidence of how multi-year unrestricted funding strengthens the stability and responsiveness of funded organisations, it focuses more on how this translates into impact for young people.

3.2. Data collection

The research used a mixed-methods approach, drawing on qualitative and quantitative evidence from funded partners, young people, the Co-op Foundation team and IVAR as the learning partner. It also incorporated programme documentation, engagement data and wider evidence on funding practices. Bringing together these sources enabled the evaluation to examine FCF1 from different perspectives and explore four areas of impact: funder behaviour, funded partners, young people and the wider funding landscape.

Table 2 provides an overview of the data collection methods and evidence sources and identifies the areas of impact each contributed to.

Table 2 – Overview of data collection methods and evidence sources and their contribution to the four areas of impact

Data collection methods and evidence sources	Funder behaviour	Impact on funded partners	Impact on young people	Impact on the wider funding landscape
Semi-structured interviews with funded partners	✓	✓	✓	-
Funded partner learning sessions feedback forms	-	✓	-	-
Young researcher projects	-	-	✓	-
Focus group with young researchers	-	-	✓	-
Annual learning event workshops	-	✓	✓	-
Feedback forms from the annual learning event in 2026	-	✓	✓	-
Funded partner reports, including annual reports and impact reports	-	-	✓	-
Data from surveys and focus groups with funded partners and the young people they support used in Co-op Foundation's evaluation framework	-	✓	✓	-
IVAR observations	✓	-	-	-
Statistics on FCF1 report downloads	-	-	-	✓
Recent literature and data on funding practices within the voluntary sector	-	-	-	✓

The evidence sources are described in more detail below. For each source, information is provided on its purpose, scope, timing, participants and method of collection or review, where applicable.

- **Semi-structured interviews with funded partners**: Interviews were held online with senior representatives from all 13 funded partners in late 2025 or early 2026, typically lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, with interviews recorded and transcribed.

- **Funded partner feedback forms from learning sessions**: Between July 2024 and January 2026, IVAR hosted nine learning and peer support sessions for funded partners. After each learning session, funded partners completed a short feedback survey and submitted it to Co-op Foundation.

- **Young researcher projects**: Between June and December 2025, five young people, drawn from five funded partners, undertook a research project to explore the impact of funded partners' work with young people. With training and support from IVAR, the researchers typically collected qualitative data using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Their final reports are included as data in this study.

- **Semi-structured interviews with young researchers**: Semi-structured interviews were held online with three of the five young researchers after completion of their project to understand their experience.

- **Annual learning event workshops**: A series of workshops was held at the Future Communities Fund's annual learning event held in March 2026. The event was attended by 12 staff and 12 young people from seven funded partners, plus four Co-op Foundation staff. Workshop sessions explored the difference funded partners make in young people's lives and the roles young people play within their organisations. The young researchers' findings were also discussed.

- **Feedback forms from the annual learning event in 2026**: Funded partner staff and young people attending the annual learning event were asked to complete a short survey to obtain feedback on the event.

- **Funded partner reports, including impact and annual reports**: Reports from 2025 and 2026 produced by funded partners were collated and reviewed for evidence of their impact on young people.

- **Data from surveys and focus groups used in Co-op Foundation's evaluation framework**: Co-op Foundation collects data annually across its funding programmes as part of its organisational evaluation framework to assess progress against the delivery of its strategy. Data collected from a 2025 survey of funded partners (nine responses) and a sample of their young people (24 responses from 16–25 year-olds), together with a focus group of each (four funded partners and three young people) and six further young people (13–16-year-olds) from a dedicated focus group of under 16s engaged by one funded partner, were provided to the IVAR team.

- **IVAR observations**: As the learning partner on FCF1, the IVAR team observes how foundation staff operate and act in their interactions with funded partners, including during meetings, learning sessions and annual learning events.

- **Statistics on report downloads**: All reports for the FCF1 learning and evaluation have been promoted and published on IVAR's website. Download data for each report from the date of publication through March 2026 has helped us understand the level of interest these reports have generated.

- **Recent literature on funding practices within the voluntary sector**: IVAR actively monitors literature on funding practices in the UK, particularly regarding open and trusting approaches, such as the use of flexible grants. This literature has been used to evaluate sector-wide movement towards more open and trusting funding practices.

Photo 1 – Participants at the FCF1 annual learning event in 2026



3.3. Data analysis

The data was coded by the IVAR team using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns or themes.[11] The research team then interpreted and synthesised the thematic findings to form a cohesive conceptual framework to understand the difference funded partners were making in the lives of young people, and how support and funding from FCF1 were contributing to this.

3.4. Research rigour

Trustworthiness and authenticity

Trustworthiness and authenticity are widely used as criteria to assess the quality of qualitative research.[12] The trustworthiness of the findings set out in this report rests on the breadth and triangulation of the evidence base. The analysis draws on multiple sources, and no single source has been treated as definitive. Instead, the findings are based on recurring patterns across different forms of evidence, with particular weight given to themes that appeared repeatedly across methods and perspectives.

[11] Braun and Clarke, 2021
[12] Lincoln and Guba, 1985 and Guba and Lincoln, 1994

The authenticity of the findings is strengthened by foregrounding the experiences of funded partners and young people themselves. Funded partners were involved from the outset, co-creating the learning and evaluation framework. Funded partners also contributed data to the research and were involved in the analysis of findings, although some have been more actively involved in this process than others. Young people's perspectives are also reflected in young researchers' projects and their involvement in the 2026 annual learning event. Their participation ensured the research has remained open to what matters most to them, rather than simply testing predetermined assumptions. The use of thematic analysis also enabled the research team to move from description to interpretation while remaining grounded in the language, examples and experiences shared by participants.

Contribution, not attribution

There are important limits to what can be claimed. FCF1 is one funding programme within a wider ecosystem of support, and Co-op Foundation has funded only part of each organisation's work. It would therefore be inappropriate to attribute all changes experienced by funded partners or young people directly to Co-op Foundation's grant. The findings are, therefore, best understood as evidence of contribution. They show how multi-year unrestricted funding and trusting funder behaviour help create the organisational conditions in which high-quality, responsive and youth-led work can happen. The analysis recognises the complementarities and interrelationships between the conditions for change, rather than presenting a linear, causal account of how FCF1 contributes to outcomes for funded organisations and young people.

4. Research findings

4.1. Funder behaviour

Learning question:
- What behaviours are required for Co-op Foundation to be an Open & Trusting funder in the field of youth participation?

Data:
- Semi-structured interviews with funded partners
- Data from surveys and focus groups used in Co-op Foundation's evaluation framework
- IVAR observations

Co-op Foundation is committed to funding in a way that is participatory, trusting, accessible, supportive and facilitates co-operation. This is reflected in the foundation's membership of IVAR's Open & Trusting community and its commitment to the principles that underpin it. We know, however, that Open & Trusting funding can present challenges, so it's important to understand how the foundation operates in practice. In this section, we analyse feedback from funded partners regarding the foundation's behaviour and draw on some observations from IVAR.

Values lived by the foundation

A key factor shaping funded partners' perceptions of Co-op Foundation is its consistent reputation as a values-driven funder. Funded partners recognise the foundation's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion, youth participation and sharing power with young people. This matters to funded partners, and some described a sense of pride in the connection.

> **"We're proud to be funded by Co-op because we align with their values."** - Funded partner interview

The fact that a group of young people, members of the Future Communities Collective, were involved in making the grant decisions continues to resonate strongly with funded organisations. They also perceive Co-op Foundation staff as being motivated by the same values, rather than simply being there to distribute money or enhance corporate reputation.

A partnership ethos – behaving in a trusting and supportive way

A second prominent theme is that the foundation behaves in a trusting and supportive way. Funded partners frequently reported a genuine sense of partnership, noting that the foundation treats them as "partners" rather than grantees. They perceive the foundation's staff as supportive and helpful. This sense of partnership is reinforced by other funder practices. The foundation's light-touch approach to oversight and reporting is appreciated because it is flexible, hands-off and respectful of their expertise and time. At the same time, the relationship is not distant, with foundation staff being easy to contact, accessible and responsive. Thus, the foundation remains available when necessary, without being intrusive. This balance of trust and support enables funded partners to feel both independent and adequately supported.

> **"They're a great funder, really light touch, but in a nice way. You know where they are if you need them."** - Funded partner interview

> **"I do feel like if I want to call them anytime, I can... they genuinely care."** - Funded partner interview

Practical "beyond money" support

Some funded partners also appreciated practical forms of support beyond the grant itself, such as brokering helpful introductions, offering marketing support or providing opportunities and experiences for young people. These practical, value-added "beyond money" actions, often tailored to each organisation's needs, made partners feel recognised and important.

> **"We've received tickets to different events at the Co-op Arena. We've never had that before. It was nice, and it felt like they valued us as a partner and appreciated the work we're doing."** - Funded partner interview

As part of its commitment to help funded partners build capacity, the foundation has also factored into the learning partner contract that learning sessions will focus on topics that matter to funded partners, and it works closely with IVAR to structure and bring in experts relevant to their needs. The impact of these learning sessions on funded partners is discussed further in section 4.2.2.

Co-op Foundation has identified how it can best contribute to and support funded partners. It is making its skills, capacities and privileges (such as arena tickets) available because it is working with funded partners on the same aims and understands its role in the ecosystem.

Managing the end of the relationship

Funded partners' main concern was what happens when the funding ends. For the three organisations funded for three years, whose grants end in 2026, this anxiety was especially acute[13]. They were keen to secure replacement multi-year unrestricted funding but found this challenging. While organisations were appreciative of Co-op Foundation's grant and the relationship, some expressed growing concerns about a lack of clarity regarding future opportunities, longer-term support or whether there would be a next phase.

Co-op Foundation has responded to funded partner concerns with a focus on income diversification and fundraising in three learning sessions delivered by IVAR, including presentations by expert fundraisers and by offering additional funding for one-to-one mentoring support from a professional fundraiser. This reflects the foundation's desire to help build organisational capacity and end the funding relationship well. That said, this provision has evolved over the three years of funding, from listening to funded partners, and wasn't set out as part of the process from the beginning. Introducing the question of how the funding relationship will end at the very outset of the grant may help manage the inherent power imbalance that comes from holding the purse strings and further contribute to a "responsible exit".[14]

[13] In the application stage of FCF1, organisations had the opportunity to apply for up to five years' funding and up to £150,000 (£30,000 per year). Most applicants asked for the full amount over five years, but some chose to apply for smaller grants and fewer years, often because they thought it would maximise their chances of securing funding. This led to three of the 13 organisations being funded for three years. In FCF2, Co-op Foundation has committed to funding all organisations for five years to avoid any similar inconsistencies.

[14] Grubb et al., 2026

4.2. Impact on funded partners

4.2.1. How multi-year unrestricted funding enables funded partners

Learning question:
- Has multi-year unrestricted funding made a difference to funded partners and, if so, how?

Data:
- Funded partner interviews
- Data from surveys and focus groups used in Co-op Foundation's evaluation framework

In this section, we consider the impact of multi-year unrestricted funding on funded partners. In doing so, we build on last year's FCF1 learning report, where we explored how multi-year unrestricted funding enabled funded partners[15]. In that report, our analysis showed that organisational capacity was enhanced by greater stability and responsiveness, as summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3 – Prior analysis on how multi-year unrestricted funding impacts funded organisations

Greater organisational stability	Greater responsiveness
• Enhancing strategic management capacity • Boosting emotional resilience • Strengthening the workforce	• Sharing power with young people • More responsive services • Greater innovation • Investing in learning

The 2026 analysis builds on the previous year's findings while remaining responsive to new evidence. Three additional themes emerged under organisational stability: improved financial stability, longer-term planning and enhanced organisational infrastructure. In contrast, evidence on emotional resilience was limited, so it was incorporated into enhanced strategic management capacity. The themes under greater responsiveness remain largely unchanged, although investing in learning has been repositioned as an aspect of enhanced organisational infrastructure. The sections below explore these developments and present further evidence supporting the wider themes.

[15] Mills et al., 2025

Greater organisational stability

Enhanced strategic management capacity

In our 2025 report, we found that multi-year unrestricted funding strengthened strategic management capacity in funded partners by reducing pressure on senior leaders to focus on short-term delivery and fundraising. This gave leaders more time to plan ahead, stay aligned with their mission and values and avoid being driven by other funders' priorities. As a result, some organisations felt able to think more ambitiously about increasing their impact.

These themes were similarly evident in our most recent research data. Funded partners greatly value multi-year unrestricted funding as it allows them to reflect, explore emerging needs and make better strategic decisions. Free from the pressure of delivering short-term outputs, they can explore strategic options, often describing multi-year unrestricted funding as providing "breathing space", "freedom" and the chance to "take a step back". These phrases highlight how multi-year unrestricted funding creates organisational room to think and respond to what they are seeing and hearing from young people. This enabled organisations to identify and prioritise high-impact activities.

> **"We're seeing it as an opportunity for us to reflect and adapt and change...It gives us that flexibility and that breathing space while centring young people's needs."** – Funded partner interview

> **"We've been able to take a step back to identify where we can have the greatest long-term impact."** – Funded partner interview

Our 2025 findings highlighted how multi-year unrestricted funding strengthened organisational leaders' emotional resilience, which emerged as a distinct analytical category. In 2026, however, organisational leaders barely spoke about emotional resilience, except in the sense that Co-op Foundation's funding continued to create "breathing space". One potential explanation is that multi-year unrestricted funding allows organisational leaders to step away from day-to-day responsibilities and "fire-fighting", reducing emotional depletion and freeing time and energy for strategic thinking. As such, they become more attentive to, and hopeful about, shaping their organisation's future strategy and growth.

Funded partners continued to highlight how multi-year unrestricted funding helped them to stay focused on their core purpose:

> **"The funding allows us to remain mission-driven rather than funding-driven".**

Instead of shaping projects to restricted funding requirements, they can align delivery with their mission and values, and prioritise what has the greatest impact.

> **"We can hone in on our mission and work more holistically without the restriction of delivering a project."** – Funded partner interview

Multi-year unrestricted funding has also helped funded partners to strengthen their strategic capacity. It has supported strategic activities such as conducting a strategic review, developing a business model and engaging in more external-facing work, such as building partnerships and exploring how they can work more collaboratively with other organisations. This shows how FCF1 funding often functions as capacity-building capital, enabling organisations to strengthen the strategic foundations that will maximise and sustain impact over time.

Improved financial stability

Although some funded partners reported that FCF1 had contributed to greater financial stability in 2025, the evidence was not sufficiently widespread to warrant a distinct analytical category. In the latest research interviews, however, financial stability emerged as a more prominent theme. The latest findings suggest that multi-year unrestricted funding has reduced financial uncertainty by giving funded partners greater confidence in their day-to-day financial position and reducing the constant pressure to secure short-term income. Rather than spending disproportionate time and energy on financial survival, organisational leaders can focus on what really matters.

> **"It allows me to concentrate on our young people rather than stressing too much on finance."** - Funded partner interview

Multi-year unrestricted funding acts as a financial safety net for organisations. The multi-year element has helped them navigate periods when other income sources may be more volatile. It has also allowed organisations to replenish their reserves when needed and provides reassurance during challenging conditions. In this sense, multi-year unrestricted funding strengthens resilience and changes how secure organisations feel.

> **"It's made a massive contribution to being able to continue... It's given us a lot of security."** - Funded partner interview

Since Co-op is a prominent national brand in the UK, some funded partners felt that a long-term grant from Co-op Foundation brought significant reputational benefits to their

organisation. The funding's flexibility also enabled them to use it as matched funding. As a result, the funding helped them to leverage additional funding.

> **"The support from Co-op Foundation has increased our credibility and visibility, which has helped us secure new funding from other funders. It has also strengthened our confidence in applying for opportunities that align with our values and mission."** - Funded partner comment in a Co-op Foundation evaluation framework survey

More long-term planning

Multi-year unrestricted funding has enabled organisations to maintain service continuity and make more long-term plans. Because the funding is multi-year and not narrowly tied to short project cycles, organisations can make longer-term decisions about staffing, delivery models and programme development, knowing FCF1 monies can plug short-term funding gaps. This supports more sustainable services and reduces disruption when programmes or staff posts are lost due to project funding gaps.

> **"The security of having the funding for the next few years allows the organisation to build a sustainable service."** – Funded partner interview

Importantly, funded partners commented on how these organisational benefits are experienced by service users, who gain access to support for longer periods and encounter more consistent provision.

> **"Our young people notice that they are getting access to things for longer, like the mentoring beyond the end of the initial 12 weeks."** – Funded partner interview

Stronger workforce

The findings from our 2025 research showed that Co-op Foundation's multi-year funding helped funded partners create a more stable workforce by enabling them to employ staff on longer-term and permanent contracts, thereby improving staff recruitment and retention. The funding also supported staff development and wellbeing through training, counselling and other support, helping teams stay skilled, resilient and better equipped to meet young people's needs.

In the latest findings, funded partners said that Co-op Foundation's multi-year unrestricted funding has continued to help them strengthen their workforce.

Organisations have been able to take on more staff, offer more long-term contracts and increase wages, with one organisation achieving its goal of paying the real living wage for all employees. This is significant in the youth sector, where instability and low wages stemming from project-based funding are common. By making roles more attractive, organisations have been able to attract and retain staff more easily, thereby creating more consistency among staff teams. Funded partners felt that this benefited young people directly, as consistent staffing enabled youth workers to build trust and lasting relationships over time.

> **"The funding supported us to look at ways of making staff roles more attractive... to retain staff and build a stronger structure moving forward."** - Funded partner interview

Funded partners have also used multi-year unrestricted funding to invest in their staff. This included paying for various types of training, such as safeguarding, trauma-informed practice and culturally appropriate support. This has improved staff confidence and capability.

Equity, diversity and inclusion theme: Workforce diversity

Access to training and development resources has helped some funded partners recruit and develop less-experienced staff from their local community. This is significant because it helps create relatable mentors and role models. Greater community representation also enhances staff credibility in the eyes of young people. This points to a model of workforce strengthening that includes representation, aspiration and cultural relevance, not just capacity.

Enhanced organisational infrastructure

A recurring theme in the 2026 research data is the use of the funding to invest in organisational systems and "essential running costs" that are often difficult to resource through restricted project funding. Across various funded partners, this included money spent on office and facilities costs, customer relationship management (CRM) systems and external communications.

> **"Our old website wasn't capturing half of what we were doing. The new one, plus increased visibility on social media, means people now know who we are."** - Funded partner interview

In two cases, funding has allowed organisations to “invest in learning” by introducing new data systems that help them monitor and evaluate their work more effectively. While we found a similar theme in last year's research, we previously categorised it under greater organisational responsiveness for 2025, based on the idea that learning comes from listening to young people and is then used to improve services and support. This year, however, we are placing it under enhanced organisational infrastructure, as our latest findings indicate a stronger focus on investing in IT infrastructure – specifically CRM and data management systems – to enhance monitoring and evaluation.

> **“We were able to upgrade to the premium service from our CRM provider, allowing us to collect data in the granular form necessary to tell stories with that data and demonstrate our impact.”** - Funded partner interview

Across the various cases, investment in organisational infrastructure was shaped by each organisation’s stage of development and immediate pressures. For some, this meant improving communications; for others, it meant investing in better data systems or simply covering essential overheads such as office space. This variation suggests that multi-year unrestricted funding is particularly valuable because it enables organisations to address the less visible yet critical capacities that underpin delivery and resilience. These findings point to organisational infrastructure investment as a practical and necessary condition for impact.

Interestingly, as the FCF1 programme evolves, Co-op Foundation funding is increasingly being used for organisational infrastructure. Whereas it was mentioned only sporadically in 2025, it is a significant theme in 2026. This suggests that funded partners are becoming more confident in using the funding as they see fit, including for organisational infrastructure. They are likely growing more comfortable with the idea that Co-op Foundation is different from some other funders who are resistant to their funding being used for overhead costs.

Greater responsiveness

Sharing power with young people

In our 2025 research, we found that multi-year unrestricted funding strengthened organisations’ ability to share power with young people by enabling them to listen and respond more readily. Unlike restricted grants, it allowed organisations to work at young people’s pace and allocate funding quickly to support their interests and ideas. It also created space for greater creativity, experimentation and risk-taking, which helped programmes become more genuinely youth-led. This approach benefits young people and the funded partners.

> **"Working with young people is about building their confidence to run something, to speak on a stage, to write, whatever it is they want to do. It's about being alongside a young person. Not doing to, but doing with."** - Funded partner interview

These findings were replicated in our latest research, particularly regarding the ability to give young people greater influence, ownership and control over decisions that affect them. Multi-year unrestricted funding continues to enable organisations to respond to young people's priorities. Rather than being tied to rigid outputs, fixed timelines or predetermined activities, organisations have been able to respond to what young people "actually wanted" or were "ready for". Several organisations found that multi-year unrestricted funding enabled staff to "quickly say yes" to young people's ideas, reducing the risk of enthusiasm being lost and making participation feel real rather than symbolic.

> **"The funding has enabled us to be adaptable, buoyant, agile, and responsive to young people's needs."** - Funded partner interview

Another recurring theme was the importance of working at the pace young people needed, whether that meant moving quickly with highly motivated groups or slowing down to build confidence, trust and readiness. This was important to funded partners because conventional short-term, restricted funding often privileges funders' deadlines over young people's development. Multi-year unrestricted funding has helped organisations resist this pressure and work "alongside young people", rather than pushing them through pre-set timelines. This was often central to sharing power because it respects where young people are at in their lives.

> **"The Co-op Foundation money allows us to work with young people at their pace.... So, if they want to do something really quick, or conversely, if they said, 'oh, we're not ready, we want to delay', we're fine with that."** - Funded partner interview

Overall, funded partners felt better placed to shift power meaningfully towards young people, creating more opportunities for them to lead, shape programmes, design activities, produce content and influence organisational decisions through committees or advisory structures. They could create space for young people to contribute actively, with ideas and choices that help determine what organisations do and how they do it, rather than being passive recipients.

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) theme: Creating inclusive environments

Funded partners are committed to inclusion and ensuring that diverse young people can benefit from their support. As one funded partner noted:

> **"We are open and inclusive. We have high expectations of our stakeholders and challenge where necessary. We believe that every person has the right to live with dignity, respect and opportunity. This is at the heart of everything we do."** - Funded partner response to Co-op Foundation's evaluation survey

This commitment is evident in how funded partners adopt behaviours that promote inclusion and belonging. They recognise that some young people may initially be shy, unsure whether their opinions are valid or accustomed to deferring to adults. Their work therefore includes facilitation, advocacy support and opportunities to build self-belief, so that young people can speak up for themselves and others. This is especially important for young people with lived experience of discrimination and hardship or additional support needs.

> **"We try to establish a cultural norm for young people to listen to each other and get every voice heard."** - Funded partner interview

> **"We create an environment where everyone can be their true authentic self; where everyone is given a safe space; a zero tolerance for unkindness."** - Funded partner, Co-op Foundation's evaluation survey

Being more open and responsive to youth voice is a plausible mechanism by which FCF1 funding has helped enhance inclusion. When organisations actively listen to young people, they centre lived experience, respond to individual needs and create more inclusive environments. Section 4.3 also shows that connecting young people to people from different backgrounds opens pathways to new leadership, activism and employment opportunities.

While it is evident that funded partners are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion, it is less clear how FCF1 funding has enhanced diversity and equity. In our 2025 findings, we noted that one organisation had employed an equity, diversity and

inclusion officer for a year. We also found that two organisations had used Co-op Foundation's funding to pay young people for their time and expertise, reducing barriers to participation for those from lower-income backgrounds. However, this was not a widespread practice and was not mentioned in research interviews in 2026. Similarly, instances of funded partners using the FCF1 funding to reach out to new underserved groups and diversify the cohorts of young people they work with were also not widely evident in our data. This topic will be explored in future research and reporting, as organisations may be doing more or maintaining their current DEI work, but the research interviews did not capture this.

More adaptable services

In our 2025 research, we found that unrestricted funding enabled funded partners to provide more responsive and adaptable services for young people. They said that the flexibility helped them pivot quickly to changing needs and respond to major community events. It also enabled them to offer more tailored one-to-one support, especially when young people or families faced urgent and unexpected challenges.

These findings were apparent again in our latest research data. Several organisations described being able to act on unexpected issues that would not normally fit within project budgets or planned service delivery.

> **"The funding has given us a bit of freedom to explore and respond to what we're hearing."** - Funded partner interview

Adaptability was considered important because young people's lives can change suddenly, and support needs are often unpredictable. Rather than delivering static, one-size-fits-all support models, funded partners have adapted their approaches to changing circumstances and individual needs. A couple of funded partners described how multi-year unrestricted funding enabled them to continue supporting young people after project funding ended, as they still needed it. Multi-year unrestricted funding also helped funded partners provide more bespoke support based on young people's emerging needs.

> **"The Co-op Foundation funding is great because it enables us to meet the needs of kids in a way that we wouldn't otherwise be able to. At one point, I took some kids to the dentist.... It's a little thing, but it actually makes a huge difference.... having the flexibility to be able to meet a need that has emerged and that you haven't been able to predict and put a funding bid in."** - Funded partner interview

Greater innovation

Our 2025 research found that multi-year unrestricted funding helped organisations respond directly to young people's needs and try new ideas, leading to the development of innovative programmes and activities. This theme was also present in the most recent data analysis, with organisations having used Co-op Foundation funding to "create new pilot projects" and develop new activities.

> **"This funding has allowed us to go, do you know what, we'll give that a go. Why not? Let's try that."** - Funded partner interview

> **"Having unrestricted funding means you're unrestricted in your ability to do as interesting things as possible and use your imagination."** - Funded partner interview

Funded partners were free to experiment without fear of failure. They could do so knowing the funder wouldn't judge them, and they could focus on learning from a new venture rather than delivering output numbers. This was considered important for genuine creativity and innovation.

> **"You're not having to report that a session failed, or nobody turned up...you're able to go, okay, let's rethink this."** - Funded partner comment in a Co-op Foundation evaluation focus group

The challenges and limits of FCF1 funding

While the cumulative evidence strongly supports the efficacy of multi-year unrestricted funding, two important challenges and limits remain. The first is whether funded partners have the confidence to use multi-year unrestricted funding as they see fit. Our 2025 research highlighted how some organisations initially found multi-year unrestricted funding challenging because they were unfamiliar with the freedom it offered and were unsure how best to use it. In our latest research, we have detected growing confidence among funded partners in their ability to make the best possible use of the funding. This is partly due to their growing understanding of the different ways to utilise multi-year unrestricted funding, supported by last year's annual learning event, where organisations shared how they had used it, and by IVAR's subsequent annual learning report. Growing confidence in making the best use of the multi-year unrestricted funding also appears to stem from greater familiarity and comfort with Co-op Foundation, and from an understanding that the funding is truly unrestricted. In other words, they increasingly

recognise that they really can use the funding as they see fit. Establishing this confidence earlier, by providing assurance at the very outset of the funding relationship that the funding really can be used as the organisation prefers and discussing the many different ways that the funding could be used, would be beneficial.

However, while it is evident that funded partners value the multi-year unrestricted funding they receive from FCF1 and that it enhances how they operate as organisations, there are limits to its benefits. This is because funded partners still rely on short-term, restricted grants for most of their funding. They are also operating in a highly competitive funding environment, which means resources are not easily acquired. As such, although FCF1 funding may alleviate some of the pressures faced by funded partners, they remain generally subject to the challenges of limited organisational capacity, demand outweighing resources and unrealistic expectations.[16] Unless more funders adopt multi-year unrestricted funding practices, there will always be limits to what Co-op Foundation's funding can achieve.

4.2.2. How learning partner support enables funded partners

Learning question:
- Has IVAR's support made a difference to the funded partners and, if so, how?

Data:
- Funded partner interviews
- Learning session and annual learning event feedback forms
- Co-op Foundation organisational evaluation framework survey and focus group feedback

A key feature of FCF1 has been the learning partner support IVAR provides.[17] This role includes delivering online learning and peer support sessions for funded partners and an annual learning event, as well as supporting the Co-op Foundation team in turning learning into action. IVAR listens to funded partners to shape the content of these sessions, then works with the foundation to curate the session structure and content. The sessions also create space for peer support, where funded partners can share knowledge and experience. The aim is to create a safe space for the funded partners to talk honestly about their successes and challenges. Where funded partners have

[16] Moran and Cairns, 2025

[17] We recognise that, as learning partner, we are reporting on our own work in this section. Alongside our interviews, we have drawn on feedback forms submitted to Co-op Foundation and on its own survey of funded partners, and we include evidence where funded partners found the programme less useful.

expertise in particular areas, they are invited to deliver a short presentation, if they feel confident and have capacity, for which Co-op Foundation reimburses them.

Table 4 – Focus of learning events and sessions

Year	Annual learning events	Online learning & peer support sessions
2024	• Getting to know one another and shaping the learning programme (Apr)	• Exploration of what funded partners want to get out of FCF1 and shaping the learning framework for FCF1 (Jun) • Communicating the positive difference that organisations make and listening to young people (Jul) • Monitoring and evaluation (Sep) • Introduction to restorative practice (Oct) • Storytelling evaluation (Dec)
2025	• Exploring how FCF1 funding has affected funded partners and reflecting on the organisational characteristics needed to work effectively with young people (May)	• Workforce management (Jan) • Engaging young people in peer research (Jul) • Fundraising training (Sep)
2026	• Exploring the impact of funded partners on young people and the roles that young people play in their organisations (Mar)	• Advocacy and campaigning, and policy developments in the youth sector (Jan) • Income generation strategy (Jul)

Survey feedback from annual learning events and the online learning and peer support sessions has generally been positive. 85% of funded partner staff attending the latest annual learning event in Cardiff in March 2026 were “very satisfied” with the event, and a similar proportion said the same about the 2025 event in Manchester. Responses to the online learning sessions tend to be more limited, but the feedback received has been similarly positive.

Funded partners find that the learning partner programme provides a useful opportunity to meet, connect and build relationships with other youth organisations. Moreover, they appreciate sharing ideas and practices and value what they learn from hearing what other

organisations do. They also appreciate having access to practical support they can apply directly to their own work.

> **"I found going to the face-to-face in Manchester extremely worthwhile…I like the creative approach and the opportunity to share information."** - Funded partner interview

> **"It's amazing to connect with organisations that are doing incredible work and to learn from them."** - Funded partner interview

An example of funded partners applying learning to their own work includes several who described how they started using their FCF1 funding for organisational development and overheads after hearing how other organisations used their funding to strengthen organisational capacity at the 2025 annual learning event.

Although the learning programme has proved valuable to most organisations, its usefulness depends on how closely the learning topics align with partners' contexts and stages of development. Some funded partners have observed that although they share a common theme of working with young people, their diversity is also considerable. This diversity is evident in the ages of the young people supported, the nature of their needs, their geography and their ways of working. This has led a couple of funded partners to observe that "we do not have much in common" and learning sessions are not always relevant to them. This may partly explain why attendance at learning sessions is patchy, with most online sessions typically attracting just over half of the funded partners, while the in-person annual learning events draw more than two-thirds. That said, non-attendance is more often due to limited internal organisational capacity of funded partners. They are small organisations and face many competing demands on their time. The foundation recognises this, which is why attendance has always been voluntary.

While funded partners understand and appreciate that the foundation has never mandated attendance at online sessions or annual learning events as a condition of funding, they still want to participate wherever possible to demonstrate their commitment and to learn. Given their desire to attend and their stretched capacity, funded partners appreciate IVAR's efforts to shape the programme in response to their interests and needs, including reducing the number of online sessions from seven to three per year in 2025.

> **"They are very sensitive to people's time commitment – as they say so in emails – and they have reduced the frequency of online sessions, which makes it easier for us."** - Funded partner interview

In addition to adapting the FCF1 learning programme in response to funded partner feedback, Co-op Foundation has also used the learning to inform a second round of FCF funding. In particular, by adapting its application criteria, FCF2 has focused on supporting organisations working with young people in the criminal justice system. By funding organisations with more in common, Co-op Foundation hopes to create stronger peer learning opportunities.

4.3. Impact on young people

4.3.1. How young people benefit from the funded partners

Learning question:

- To what extent have young people benefited from the activities and services delivered by funded partners and, if so, how?

Data:

- Annual learning event workshops in 2026, involving funded partner staff and young people
- Funded partner interviews
- Funded partner reports, including annual reports and impact reports
- Young researcher projects
- Data from Co-op Foundation's evaluation framework

In this section, we explore the impact of funded partners on young people, drawing on the analysis of a range of data sources. This data captures funded partners' perspectives on how young people benefit from their activities and services. Importantly, we also capture young people's perspectives through the annual learning event workshops, young researcher projects and Co-op Foundation young people survey and focus groups. In doing so, we consider young people's development progression from participation through to leadership. The emergent analysis highlights the most common and persistent themes from across the various data sources.

In presenting the findings, it is important to highlight that Co-op Foundation's unrestricted funding supports the efforts of its partner organisations and their positive impact on young people. Because this funding is not tied to specific projects, it cannot be directly attributed to specific project outcomes. The findings should, therefore, not be read as Co-op Foundation claiming credit for outcomes, but as showing how its funding and support contribute to them.

Building and sustaining consistent relationships with adults and peers

A common benefit for young people who engage with funded partners is the opportunity to build and maintain trusted relationships with both adults and peers. Establishing safe, inclusive, consistent and predictable spaces is essential for fostering these relationships. Trust deepens through regular attendance and long-term involvement, indicating that meaningful impact comes not from one-off interventions but from continuity, familiarity and repeated positive experiences.

> **"Some of the young people have been attending for years, and you can really see how much more confident they've become.... It's really rewarding to watch them start bonding with others and feeling comfortable in the group."** - Data from a young researcher project

Through the formation of relationships, funded partners have become dependable anchors of support. Having "relatable role models and mentors" and "non-judgemental" support helps young people to feel understood by adults and creates spaces in which they feel they belong. Funded partners have become emotionally significant and stabilising in young people's lives, especially during periods of transition or adversity.

> **"We create spaces where kids genuinely feel like they belong. If you speak to them, they'll generally talk about [our organisation] as family."** - Funded partner interview

As noted in section 4.2.1, young people can build consistent, trusted relationships with staff when there is greater continuity in funded partner workforces, which multi-year unrestricted funding helps to maintain.

Funded partners have also helped young people form connections and relationships with their peers. Funded partners enable young people to develop relationship-building skills by providing supportive spaces for "talking, sharing, and laughing together" and helping them break down barriers and work through differences. Identifying common interests and forging shared experiences helps to create bonds and a shared identity.

> **"The programme's given me friends and a lot of people I now care about and trust in."** - Young person quoted in a funded partner's impact report

Forming relationships is also developmental, creating "a spark that then opens up like a pathway". Relationships give young people confidence to speak freely, ask for help and see themselves as part of something bigger than their immediate circumstances.

Through forming relationships with professionals, mentors and community members from a range of backgrounds, young people have been exposed to new opportunities and broadened their horizons**.** These connections can open pathways into creative projects, education, campaigning, leadership and employment.

> **"Everybody connects with a different type of person…so, having a real mix of people with different life experiences is great… And that's also where young leaders are extremely important, because the kids know what these kids are also exposed to, and they think, 'well, if you can do it, I can do it too.'"** - Funded partner interview

Developing skills

Funded partners have helped young people develop skills through a blend of practical experience and meaningful responsibility. Across the funded partners, there is enormous breadth in the practical experiences young people can engage in. These include everyday practical life skills that help young people manage daily life more confidently and independently, such as changing a fuse, financial literacy and cooking: "they say, I just made your mushroom soup… for 59p you can make soup for eight people!" They include practical organisational and project management skills such as organising events, chairing meetings and conducting risk assessments. They also include developing creative skills such as podcasting, filming, social media and digital communications, painting and performing. This breadth of opportunities reflects the breadth of interests that young people have. As various interviewees noted, it's often about finding out what interests and enthuses young people and being able to respond to that. As noted in section 4.2.1, having the flexibility to respond to young people's interests is the cornerstone of how funded partners can engage them in activities.

> **"What unrestricted funding allows us to do is really focus on young people's personal development….and to be flexible and how they want to do that."** - Funded partner interview

A common theme in the data is how young people learn through doing. Funded partners create environments where young people can practise skills in real situations, rather than only discussing them in theory. Skills development is rooted in active participation, such as volunteering, organising events, facilitating sessions and creating podcasts. This experiential approach helps young people build independence, resilience and a sense of competence. It also allows them to see their own progress more clearly, which in turn supports confidence and motivation.

Another key theme is how funded partners help young people develop transferable skills – "the tools needed to develop and navigate their own lives". Many examples highlight communication, emotional regulation, teamwork, confidence, problem-solving, critical thinking and leadership as central outcomes. Young people are encouraged to speak up, chair meetings, interview others, work in teams and become more confident using these skills in unfamiliar settings. As a result, young people build capabilities that can span education, employment, home and community life. They can practise these skills with each other, then use them in other parts of their lives.

> **"The programme has been amazing. It's been a rollercoaster, but in a good way. It's been a journey with ups and downs, but I can see the growth in myself…I thought it was just going to be about the music, but it's been way more than that. There's been life skills, personal development, many moments and experiences."** - Young person quoted in a funded partner's impact report

> **"It has given me technical skills, industry knowledge, and professional expertise, but I have especially gained many soft skills for the workplace and a general thirst for learning."** - Young person quoted in a funded partner's impact report

Overall, the common pattern is that funded partners support skill development by providing varied opportunities and genuine chances for young people to lead, create and apply what they have learned. This suggests that funded partners see skills development holistically, equipping young people with the habits and self-belief needed to navigate everyday life.

Building confidence and self-esteem

Funded partners have also helped young people build their confidence and self-esteem through meaningful participation and opportunities to succeed in real and visible ways. Creating safe, encouraging environments where young people feel accepted, heard and able to try new things without fear of failure is important for developing their confidence. This includes spaces where they can practise unfamiliar skills, make mistakes and receive constructive feedback. These nurturing environments are especially important for young people who may begin with low confidence, shyness or a sense of exclusion. As one participant at our annual learning event noted, it's about "creating supportive, nourishing environments as the foundations for young people to build their confidence".

> **"Although initially on the edge of the team, I got involved because of my concerns about nature and climate. I was really sure about wanting to help, but struggled with uncertainty, lack of confidence, and finding the right words. … Although extremely nervous about co-delivering a programme for the first time, [my mentor's] guidance about adjusting activities for diverse groups of young people gave me control and my anxiety subsided. She encouraged me to plan and deliver sessions which felt like a huge achievement."** - Young person quoted in a funded partner's impact report

> **"[I was encouraged] to take on the role of a mentor… I'd like to say that responsibility and confidence came naturally to me, but it was thanks to the support of the other mentors that I could organise what I needed to do."** - Young person quoted in a funded partner's impact report

Confidence is strengthened when young people take on responsibility and can see tangible progress in themselves. Funded partner programmes that develop communication, teamwork and employability skills have helped participants feel more prepared for school, work and other transitions. Similarly, funded partners that offer leadership roles, peer mentoring and pathways into staff or trustee positions have given young people evidence of their own capability.

> **"Being a mentor to other girls has been a rewarding experience. I've had the opportunity to guide younger students in workshops."** - Young person quoted in a funded partner's impact report

> **"I came to youth group as a child, started on the youth committee and volunteering, which secured me a place on the adult team, and now I lead my own sessions."** - Young person, annual learning event

Young people's confidence also grows when they feel they have a voice and can influence decisions. Several examples show that participation in co-design, youth councils and other decision-making processes helped young people to see that their opinions matter. This can increase confidence in speaking to peers, family members and wider groups. In this sense, self-esteem is built through genuine experiences of being heard, respected and taken seriously.

> **"I've improved my confidence, and I feel like I can freely speak to others about things we're doing more openly instead of being shy and not saying an idea I have."** - Data from young researcher project

Taken together, our analysis suggests that funded partners help young people build confidence not through one-off interventions, but through sustained experiences of participation, belonging, achievement and affirmation.

Expressing opinions, feeling heard and initiating change

Across the research data, a consistent theme is that funded partners help young people express their opinions by creating a "safe space" where they feel respected and taken seriously. Many examples emphasise the importance of building trust and creating settings in which "young people are not judged", can speak openly and "feel understood". This includes informal spaces like youth clubs and creative programmes, as well as formal settings such as youth councils and governance roles. Young people are also encouraged to listen to one another. In these settings, feeling listened to means being given a chance to speak and experiencing a culture in which adults and peers actively value what young people say.

> **"We listen to them and give them the space to say, 'this is what I feel like' without being scared to say it."** - Funded partner interview

Another strong theme is authentic participation and shared power. The evidence shows that young people are more likely to feel heard when their views shape real decisions rather than being merely tokenistically gathered. Funded partners have supported this by involving young people in devising strategy, designing activities, shaping services, co-producing resources and contributing to organisational decision-making. In some cases, young people are involved at board level as trustees or on youth advisory groups. In others, they have influenced the content of workshops, events or campaigns. The recurring message is that young people feel heard when their contributions have visible consequences and when adults are willing to hand over control.

> **"[We are given] a platform to express feelings and thoughts by letting us lead and take charge of projects."** - Young person at the annual learning event

> **"Young people must feel like they have an authentic sense of ownership over the work that they're doing and that their voice and what they have to say is actually taken seriously."** - Funded partner interview

Diversity, equity and inclusion: Feeling included

Young people recognise the importance of creating inclusive spaces where contributions are encouraged and respected, regardless of who is expressing them. This underpinned their ability to express opinions and feel heard.

> **"Everyone can share their opinions... making sure that people's ideas and their opinions are valued" -** Young person, Co-op Foundation evaluation focus group

Diversity of lived experience was also seen as essential to meaningful youth voice. Young people saw the benefit of being in diverse groups, both for personal learning and for representation.

> **"You get different opinions and ideas because people have lived different lives."** - Young person, Co-op Foundation evaluation focus group

Becoming leaders and activists

Another key theme is that funded partners have supported youth leadership and activism by creating meaningful structures for youth voice. Most funded partners have multiple examples of young people being involved in governance and decision-making within their organisations, including board representation, youth committees and project panels. In these models, young people are not simply consulted; they are given recognised roles, responsibility and influence over strategy, project design and organisational accountability.

> **"Youth involvement in our organisation emphasises power-sharing with a youth rep on the board."** - Funded partner interview

> **"We have a Youth Advisory Board that meets quarterly that sits at the head of the table and holds us accountable."** - Funded partner interview

Funded partners also create opportunities for young people to act on issues that matter to them and to be heard beyond their immediate setting. Activism occurs through

participation in civic life, advocacy and community change. This includes young people undertaking research, designing and implementing their own social action projects, campaigning, contributing to public consultations and shaping service improvement.

> **"[The funded partner] has helped me to use my voice to fight for our rights and built my confidence to stand up for what is right."** - Young person at the annual learning event

> **"We were consulted on supporting the establishment of a youth council in [our local area]."** - Young person at the annual learning event

The intentional provision of staged support is a key feature of how funded partners help young people to grow into leadership and activist roles. The data highlights the importance of helping young people to develop confidence, ethical awareness and the ability to navigate complex issues such as identity, conflict and citizenship. Funded partners recognise that youth leadership is not automatic: it requires structured opportunities, encouragement and support over time. This includes workshops, support programmes and practical opportunities to lead projects, debates or campaigns. It may also incorporate role models and relatable leaders who can help young people imagine themselves as changemakers, so they can see "that person is like me, I can be like that person too". Helping young people understand what they stand for, individually and collectively, is another important component of the process.

> **"We help equip young people to discuss complex topics....and understand that identity should never be weaponised...They learn where to draw the line and know what they stand for ethically."** - Funded partner interview

The findings suggest that leadership development is both a skills-based and a values-based process. This echoes what funded partners told us about their relationship with the foundation, where shared values were a big part of what made it work. Taken together, this suggests values alignment matters at every level of FCF1 – from the funder, to funded partners, to young people.

4.3.2. How young people have learned and networked with peers

Learning question:
- Have young people benefited from their involvement in FCF1 and, if so, how?

Data:
- Semi-structured interviews with young researchers
- Feedback forms from the annual learning event 2026

In this section, we consider how young people have benefited from their direct involvement with FCF1. The funding programme has directly involved young people in two ways. First, we recruited five young people from the funded partners to participate in a young researcher programme exploring the impact of those organisations on young people. Second, 12 young people from the funded partners attended the FCF1 annual learning event in March 2026. Both opportunities were designed to give young people the opportunity to learn and network with their peers.

Learning new skills

The young researchers said they had learned a great deal from their experience. They developed practical skills in planning a research project, interviewing, running focus groups and presenting findings. The project helped build their confidence, independence and time-management and organisational skills. They also explored creative and engaging ways to communicate their research findings. While none of them said they were intent on following a research career, they recognised the transferability of the skills they had developed during the project.

> **"I'll definitely be able to use the training in other situations."** - Young researcher interview

Connecting with peers

Young people also said that they had benefited from networking with their peers through the young researcher programme. Those who were able to join the online sessions valued meeting other young researchers from different parts of the country and with different backgrounds.

> **"I enjoyed being able to speak with people from such different backgrounds, because [where I live] is quite a single cultural place."** - Young researcher interview

The young researchers also connected with other young people in their locality through their research activities, using interviews, focus groups and group discussions to hear diverse perspectives and foster meaningful conversations.

All the young people who attended the annual learning event similarly said it helped them build relationships with peers, with 80% saying it did so to a large or great extent. They enjoyed the opportunity to find out about other people's experiences.

> **"I enjoyed meeting the funders, partners and young people, and hearing their stories and experiences."** - Young person's feedback form

The young people valued these connections because they helped them to see that other young people in different communities shared similar challenges and experiences.

> **"I learnt that there are loads of young people going through the same struggles as my community."** - Young person's feedback form

At the same time, the annual learning event also inspired young people, providing a window into how other young people were assuming leadership and activist roles.

> **"I learnt that everyone is capable of making change."** - Young person's feedback form

Overall, learning new skills and interacting with peers helped young people broaden their horizons and situate their own experiences and understanding within a wider context. This suggests that, as learning partners, we can also create opportunities for young people to learn and contribute to a fund's aims. As we move forward, we plan to respond to feedback from both funded partners and young people to involve young people more in co-designing and leading aspects of the annual learning event, which should contribute further to the young people's development and making their voices heard, as well as enhancing our collective learning.

4.4. The wider funding landscape

Learning question:

- To what extent is FCF1 helping to change the funding practices of other funders and, if so, how?

Data:

- Download data for previous FCF1 learning reports
- References and citations of the reports

Encouraging other funders to consider switching to an open and trusting approach to funding, and specifically to the provision of multi-year unrestricted funding, was one of Co-op Foundation's aspirations with FCF1. This is reflected in the foundation's commitment to publishing all reports emerging from the learning programme.

Earlier reports from the learning programme are proving popular. The most popular thus far has been "A shared endeavour: Five approaches to assessing the impact of unrestricted funding".[18] This has been downloaded over 700 times from IVAR's website, making it the most downloaded IVAR report in the past two years. The 2025 annual learning report, "Enhancing stability and responsiveness: How multi-year unrestricted funding enables organisations to support young people",[19] has also attracted interest, with almost 100 downloads since its publication in September 2025, although the report was focused on a specific sector, making it more niche. While report downloads do not necessarily indicate that a report has been read, it is reasonable to surmise that the reports are having some influence.

Co-op Foundation also uses and shares the reports as part of its influencing work in relevant network meetings such as Children and Young People funders network meetings, Criminal Justice Funders network meetings and other funder and policymaking spaces. Other funders have approached the foundation to ask about its approach to trust-based philanthropy, how it gives unrestricted funding and how it evaluates it. For example, the Environmental Funders Network asked Co-op Foundation to contribute a case study for one of their reports to members encouraging environmental funders to give more unrestricted funding, in which the FCF1 learning reports were cited.[20]

More broadly, the voluntary sector is gradually shifting towards trust-based funding practices. The number of funders signed up to IVAR's Open & Trusting commitments has

[18] Mills et al., 2024b
[19] Mills et al., 2025
[20] Cooke et al., 2026

grown from 140 in June 2024 to 194 in June 2026. Furthermore, IVAR's most recent funding experience survey, completed by 1,207 charities, points to some improvements in the funding experience: 51% of respondents felt funding practices had improved, and only 28% said they had worsened.[21] However, that same survey also noted that while unrestricted and multi-year grants are what charities value most – chosen by over half of charities as one of their top funding priorities – charities said that this remained an uncommon practice.

Recent trend analysis in grant-making suggests that multi-year and unrestricted grant-making is on the rise.[22] The proportion of third-sector organisations stating that grant makers made a long-term investment in their work rose from 31% in 2019 to 40% in 2025. Similarly, organisations receiving unrestricted or "core funding" increased from 46% in 2019 to 56% in 2025, although that fell from its peak of 60% during the coronavirus pandemic in 2022. While these trends suggest the dial is moving towards funders providing multi-year unrestricted funding, the data also indicates it is still far from conventional practice. Further work is needed to persuade more funders to realise the benefits of multi-year unrestricted funding.

[21] Cairns and Moran, 2026
[22] Chapman, 2026

5. Reflections from IVAR

5.1. FCF1's distinctive contribution

The findings presented in this report indicate that FCF1 is making a distinctive contribution to the conditions in which youth organisations can do their best work. The evidence shows how multi-year unrestricted funding, when combined with open and trusting funder behaviour, strengthens the organisational foundations from which funded partners can provide stable and responsive support to young people.

Although we present organisational stability and responsiveness as impacts on funded partners, these are outward-looking benefits, not just inward-looking ones. Organisational stability enables strategic focus, the retention of skilled staff and continuity of relationships. These capacities matter because young people's trust is built over time, often through repeated, reliable contact with adults and peers who remain present in their lives. At the same time, responsiveness is not simply about flexibility in spending. It is about the ability to listen and adapt, and to allow young people's ideas, needs and readiness to shape what happens next. This is significant because the developmental experiences most valued by young people – belonging, confidence, skills, voice and leadership – depend on these ways of working. They are not produced through short-term, tightly controlled projects. They require trust, flexibility and the ability to respond to the realities of young people's lives.

Our findings also show that sharing power with young people requires organisational capacity. Creating the space for meaningful participation requires staff time, accessible opportunities, safe spaces, facilitation skills and the flexibility to work at young people's pace. Multi-year unrestricted funding makes these conditions easier to create. It helps organisations say yes to young people's ideas, support them into leadership roles and create opportunities for young people to make decisions rather than simply be consulted.

Another significant reflection on the findings is that funder behaviour amplifies the value of multi-year unrestricted funding. Funded partners do not describe Co-op Foundation merely as a source of money. They describe it as values-led, relational, accessible and respectful of their expertise. This matters because unrestricted funding is used with confidence when organisations genuinely believe they are trusted to make decisions. In this sense, funder behaviour is a vital mechanism through which the funding becomes useful.

The increasing use of FCF1 grant monies for organisational infrastructure, strategy, workforce development and financial resilience suggests that funded partners are

becoming ever more confident that Co-op Foundation means what it says about trusting them to use funding as they see fit. This trust and understanding appears to have developed over time. That may, in part, be due to the funding team's consistent communication. The learning programme may also have contributed by showcasing the various ways funded partners have used the funding, thereby validating its diverse applications. In future funding programmes, a more proactive approach by the foundation to openly discuss potential uses of the funding and showcase how other organisations have used multi-year unrestricted funding may help funded partners trust more quickly that they can use the resources as they see fit. Funded organisations are conditioned by restricted funding norms to believe that funders don't like them spending money on overheads and organisational capacity, and that it takes clear communication from an open and trusting funder for them to believe otherwise.

For Co-op Foundation, these findings are significant in two ways. First, they provide further evidence that multi-year unrestricted funding aligns well with their ambitions for young people and communities, as it supports the organisational conditions that enable youth-led practice. Second, they show that the foundation's open and trusting behaviour is essential to enabling partners to use multi-year unrestricted funding confidently and purposefully.

The findings also point to an important tension for Co-op Foundation. The more progress the funded partners make through multi-year unrestricted funding, the more there is to lose when that funding ends. For organisations funded for three years, anxiety about what comes next is already acute. This does not undermine the value of FCF1, but it does highlight the depth of value that flexible support provides to youth organisations. This places a responsibility on Co-op Foundation to ensure that the end of the funding relationship is not an administrative afterthought. The foundation has already considered this in FCF1, and the learning partner programme has addressed income diversification and fundraising. Future funding programmes could explore how the relationship will conclude from the outset, which may help address the inherent power imbalance that comes with controlling the finances. A responsible exit, characterised by early communication and support for future sustainability, is integral to a trusting funding relationship that ends well.

Finally, by funding the learning partner role, FCF1 has created the space for funded partners and young people to shape frameworks, analysis and learning. The findings show that funded partners and young people have benefited from their involvement. They also illustrate the potential for evaluation and learning to be another mechanism for sharing power.

5.2. An emergent conceptual framework

When consolidating the findings into a cohesive conceptual framework, it is tempting to link the impact types and establish a causal chain, attributing everything that occurs to the funding. However, Co-op Foundation typically funds a minority share of each organisation's total income, and the ecosystem in which positive change occurs for young people is inevitably complex. Much else besides funding contributes to young people's progress, and making simple linear claims about a funder's impact risks overstating attribution.

A more modest and credible approach is to frame Co-op Foundation's funding and support in terms of the contribution it makes to the work of funded partners – that is, what it makes possible. We therefore present a conceptual framework in Figure 1 (Page 10) to illustrate how Co-op Foundation is helping to create the conditions that enable funded partners to support young people to develop in ways that are meaningful to those young people. The outcomes most valued by young people are placed at the top of the model, and everything beneath it serves to enable them.

The conceptual framework is not intended as a uniform or linear pathway. Since funded partners serve very different groups, small changes can be profound, and the degree and form of power-sharing varies by context. The framework should therefore be understood as a set of interacting conditions rather than a universal progression.

5.3. Comparisons to FCF1's original theories of change

5.3.1. Similarities and differences

Having created a conceptual framework through an inductive process, it is useful to reflect on how it compares with the theories of change developed at the outset of FCF1. The theories of change helped set ambitions and specify intended pathways and outcomes for FCF1. They were theories, however, and now, armed with evidence from practice, it pays to consider how well they correspond to real-world experience.

The framework and the original theories of change share substantial similarities. Both connect funder practice, organisational conditions and young people's outcomes. Both assume that flexible, long-term funding and trusting relationships increase funded partners' agency, responsiveness and ability to involve young people. Both articulate the essential proposition that a funder of youth leadership must embody the same power-sharing values in its funding practices. Outcomes cannot be separated from funding practice.

This report's conceptual framework takes a different approach by integrating the three levels – funder practice, organisational behaviour and young people's outcomes – in one diagram. This is useful because it makes visible how funder behaviour creates organisational conditions that shape young people's experience. The framework also synthesises observed findings into practical concepts that act as building blocks for change without creating a simple linear chain. While the theories of change set out intended change and causal pathways, young people's journeys are rarely linear and may not necessarily progress towards activism or leadership. For some, building confidence and self-esteem may be a significant outcome in itself; not every young person should be expected to become a leader or activist.

Another key difference is that the framework doesn't cover the aspiration that learning from FCF1 may influence other funders. Co-op Foundation's theory of change included the ambition of contributing to a wider movement for multi-year unrestricted funding. While that is happening, as described in section 4.4, the framework focuses more on the internal relationships between funding practice, funded partners and young people's outcomes. Maintaining this sharper focus helps to make the framework more transferable to other youth work funding contexts where a similar external influencing goal may not exist.

5.3.2. Advancing equity, diversity and inclusion

A key difference between the conceptual framework and the FCF1 theories of change is how the theme of diversity, equity and inclusion is less apparent in the former. Advancing diversity, equity and inclusion was a central goal for FCF1 and an anticipated feature of funded partner practice. As such, it is necessary to consider why it is less prominent in the proposed conceptual framework.

While the evaluation found strong evidence that FCF1 has enhanced how power is shared with young people, the evidence is less conclusive about the pathway to more diverse, equitable and inclusive communities. FCF1 intentionally supports organisations that serve diverse and disadvantaged young people across the UK. Moreover, FCF1's flexible, trusting funding has strengthened funded partners' ability to engage in responsive and inclusive practices. However, the research findings offer limited evidence that FCF1 has contributed to more diverse and equitable communities by, for example, increasing the diversity of young people supported or promoting more equity-focused organisational practices. This limitation may stem from the difficulty of distinguishing changes driven by FCF1 from funded partners' pre-existing commitments to marginalised groups and ways of working. The funding may help them strengthen existing practice but not necessarily extend it.

FCF1 funded the 13 organisations because they had demonstrated a commitment to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in their work. It could be argued that simply funding such organisations sustains diversity, equity and inclusion. At the same time, funding organisations where a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion is already evident makes it difficult to separate pre-existing practice from any additional change brought about by FCF1.

It is also possible that in treating the concepts of "diversity, equity and inclusion" as one, the process and mechanisms by which FCF1 might advance them become less clear. Although these terms are related and support one another, treating them as a single, generic concept risks masking the distinct meanings, goals and operational actions needed to advance them. Separating them may help us understand how FCF1's multi-year unrestricted and support affect each.

From our research, we can credibly argue that FCF1 has advanced inclusive practice within funded partners. Flexible, trusting funding enables responsive practice, giving funded partners greater capacity to build safe relationships, respond to individual starting points, work at young people's pace and let young people shape activity. These conditions create more inclusive environments where young people are more likely to feel that they belong. This is implicit in the conceptual framework we have developed from the research findings.

It is harder to say whether and how multi-year unrestricted funding advances diversity and equity practices. While creating inclusive environments supports integrating diverse participants, we don't have sufficient evidence that FCF1 funding enabled funded partners to broaden their demographic reach. That's not to say funded partners don't do this; it's just not apparent in the data collected, and so we cannot confirm that diversity has increased because of FCF1. What we can evidence is that young people connect to people with different backgrounds than themselves through the inclusive environments funded partners create, and these connections can lead to different opportunities and life choices.

Some evidence suggests that funded partners have made progress in promoting equity through FCF1 funding. A couple of partners have used FCF1 funds to pay young people to enable their participation and provide different levels of assistance based on individual needs. However, this evidence is limited. One reason may be that funded partners generally work with disadvantaged youth and therefore don't tend to offer differentiated resources to young people in their own communities. Therefore, while FCF1 funding helps sustain these organisations and, in doing so, helps to address societal imbalances, it may not necessarily lead funded partners to adopt organisational practices that promote equity within their particular community of young people.

Overall, based on the available evidence, it is reasonable to postulate that FCF1, through the mechanism of funded partners' enhanced capacity for responsive practice, has promoted inclusion within funded partners. It is less clear whether it has led to greater diversity among the young people supported or more equity-focused practices. That is not to say, of course, that at the wider societal impact level the FCF1 programme is failing to advance diversity, equity and inclusion. The very fact that FCF1 is helping to strengthen and sustain organisations working with diverse and disadvantaged young people across the UK addresses societal imbalances. For this reason, our conceptual framework shares with FCF1's original theory of change a wider intended impact of "Fairer and more diverse, equitable and inclusive communities".

5.4. Implications for policy and practice

The findings have important implications for how youth policy is implemented. The national youth strategy sets out a ten-year ambition to ensure young people have places to go and things to do, and are seen and heard. The evidence from FCF1 strongly supports this direction but emphasises an important additional point: sharing power with young people depends on the capacity of youth organisations to work relationally, responsively and over time. If policy ambitions around youth voice, trusted adults, safe spaces and participation are to be realised, investment must support not only visible programmes and activities, but also the organisational stability, workforce capacity and infrastructure that make high-quality youth work possible.

For funders, commissioners and policymakers, this points to the value of multi-year, unrestricted funding as a policy tool. The National Youth Strategy will be difficult to achieve through short-term, tightly specified funding alone. Our findings show that multi-year unrestricted funding enables organisations to retain staff, sustain relationships, respond to young people's changing needs and create opportunities for young people to lead. In practice, this means shifting funding and commissioning away from narrow output compliance and towards trust, learning and adaptation.

Young people can be placed "in the driving seat" only where organisations have the resources to create inclusive and safe spaces, listen well and act on what they say. This has implications for practice across the youth sector: organisations need support to build participatory cultures, not just participatory mechanisms. It also has implications for government and independent funders seeking to align with the National Youth Strategy: if they want services that are genuinely locally responsive and youth-led, our findings suggest they may want to fund the less visible foundations of that work, including workforce development, organisational infrastructure and learning and evaluation, and to establish responsible transitions for when funding ends.

5.5. Further research

Future research should follow the funded partners and young people over the remaining years of FCF1 to understand whether the changes identified in this report are sustained, deepened or altered over time. Further research could also explore what happens when multi-year unrestricted funding ends, including how organisations manage the transition, whether the gains in stability and responsiveness are maintained and which forms of responsible exit support are most helpful. This would strengthen the evidence on the durability of multi-year unrestricted funding and help funders understand the conditions needed for benefits to last beyond the grant period.

Other flexible funders such as the Fore and Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales have sought to assess whether their funding and support contribute to funded organisations' greater financial sustainability and resilience using quantitative analysis.[23] This approach typically uses income growth as the primary indicator of organisational development and compares the post-grant performance of a cohort of funded organisations with a wider control group of similar unfunded organisations. Whether a narrow financial proxy indicator is a valid measure of organisational effectiveness and impact on people and communities is debatable, but it does offer another approach. This may be something Co-op Foundation could consider, although the small sample size of 13 funded organisations in FCF1 is likely to preclude any statistically significant results. That

[23] Gammoh et al., 2026a; Gammoh et al., 2026b

said, analysing organisations' financial performance during (and perhaps even after) the time they received funding from Co-op Foundation could provide valuable context for discussions with those organisations. This might help explain the factors that influenced their financial trajectory during that funding period.

Our analysis also leaves several evidence gaps unresolved. Further research could examine why advancing diversity equity, and inclusion has not emerged as a significant theme in our findings, even though FCF1's original intent was for the funding to support this. This may require some different research methods or questions. Additionally, although the influence of FCF1 on wider funding practice remains difficult to evidence, future work could explore whether and how other funders, especially those in the youth sector, are drawing on FCF1's learning, and what barriers still prevent multi-year unrestricted funding from becoming mainstream.

6. Reflections from Co-op Foundation

For Co-op Foundation, the findings in this report are both affirming and challenging. FCF1 was designed to explore whether multi-year, unrestricted funding, offered through trusting relationships, could strengthen organisations working with diverse young people and help them to advance sharing power and youth activism. Three years in, the evidence shows that multi-year unrestricted funding helps partners build stability, plan ahead, retain staff, invest in infrastructure and respond to young people's needs and ideas. This matters because multi-year unrestricted funding is one of our strategic commitments. Independent evaluation helps us understand what partners achieve, and what our funding makes possible: safe spaces, trusted relationships, skills, confidence and opportunities to lead.

Our commitment to unrestricted funding and open, trusting philanthropy goes beyond money. We want to practise caring, co-operative philanthropy, recognising funded organisations as partners with shared aims for social change. Partners describe the foundation as values-led, accessible, light-touch and supportive. We value this but know we do not get everything right. We continue to reflect, act where possible within FCF1 and apply learning to future rounds. One learning area is support for partners approaching the end of grants. Some, especially those with three-year grants, are anxious about replacement multi-year unrestricted funding. Acknowledging this challenge, we have focused capacity-building through our learning partner on fundraising, income diversification, corporate relationships and evaluation support, alongside additional, more bespoke one-to-one evaluation mentoring, storytelling evaluation training and one-to-one fundraising advice sessions. For FCF2, we encouraged

organisations to apply for the maximum funding and support period and strengthened eligibility criteria to support peer learning and create a close-knit community of practice.

The findings also matter beyond this programme. As part of our strategy[24], we want to influence more funders to provide unrestricted, multi-year funding. This evaluation strengthens our confidence in advocating for that approach. Funded partners describe multi-year unrestricted funding as providing "breathing space": enabling them to remain mission-driven, plan better, retain staff and build trusted relationships with young people. Yet unrestricted, multi-year funding remains far from standard practice. More funders need to move in this direction if the youth sector is to become more stable, responsive and equitable.

Hearing directly from young people has been especially powerful because it speaks to both strategic priorities: creating more equitable, diverse and inclusive communities, and supporting youth activism and power-sharing. EDI has been central to FCF1 from the start. We funded organisations that give diverse young people leadership opportunities, support youth activism and contribute to inclusive communities. Young people recognised this in practice, describing organisations as "open to all young people" locally, including those "surrounded by drugs, crime and violence", and engaging "people from a lot of different backgrounds because our community is very diverse". Others valued lived experience in the funded organisations, observing that "most of the team are from the local area". At the same time, young people reminded us that EDI is never finished work. One said their organisation involved "lots of different demographics" but also challenged that it "appeals to a certain demographic" and "different races aren't really included". We welcome this challenge. Caring philanthropy must listen to what is working and what still needs to change. Young people also challenged us on resources: partners do as much as they can but could do more with greater capacity backed up by more funding.

The findings of this report resonate with our Young Gamechangers Fund[25], where young people also developed confidence, inner power, agency and leadership through active participation, peer support, mentoring and safe, inclusive spaces. A useful distinction is emerging: in FCF1, where we fund organisations, trusted relationships with adults are especially visible; in Young Gamechangers Fund, where young people and youth-led groups are funded directly, peer mentoring and youth networks are particularly prominent.

[24] Co-op Foundation, 2022
[25] TSIP, 2025

The wider UK context makes this work even more important. The National Youth Strategy in England[26], co-created with young people, presents opportunities to align with a policy movement addressing education, employment, safety, and physical and mental health. More recent political developments have also placed a strong focus on supporting young people, especially NEETs, into employment[27]. Although our initiatives are not primarily employment programmes, they create vital preconditions for young people to thrive: transferable skills, confidence, self-esteem, trusted relationships, peer networks and life ambition. Whatever government priorities emerge, young people's needs and aspirations will continue, and funders have a complementary role to play. Long-term unrestricted funding is critical for organisations supporting young people who, in particular areas in the UK, feel excluded, face deprivation, poor mental health or lack of "things to do"[28]. Our FCF1 is UK-wide, from Redruth in Cornwall and Maidstone to Cardiff, Leeds, Glasgow and Derry, and we hope more funders join us in backing stability, sustainability and scale in areas that need support the most.

[26] DCMS, 2025
[27] Department for Work and Pensions, 2026
[28] Bachelor and Braden, 2026

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Appendix

Appendix one: Funded partners

Funded organisation	Summary of purpose and activity
21 Together	Supports children and young people with Down's syndrome.
Girls Into Coding CIC	Supports girls in pursuing careers in technology and helps bridge the gender gap in STEM.
North West Migrants Forum	Supports refugees and migrants in the northwest of Northern Ireland.
Nurturing Foundations	Helps young people, particularly those from global majority backgrounds, to develop the aspirations, resilience and skills to flourish, and the confidence to play an active role in civic life.
Reestablish Leeds	Shifts power to young people affected by deprivation to discover and actively pursue opportunities to develop their potential while also helping others.
The Rise Collective	Supports disenfranchised 16 to 25-year-olds to thrive personally, creatively and professionally.
RJ Working	Shifts power to young people to create fairer communities through Restorative Leadership programmes.
Roar Pursuits CIC	Helps disadvantaged young people with experience of the care system to overcome barriers.
Romano Lav	A Roma youth-led organisation, challenging discrimination and promoting equality.
Skills & Volunteering Cymru	Enhances the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable members of the local community through volunteering.
Step Now Global CIC	Utilises the power of relatability, role-playing and immersive experiences to mentor, educate and empower young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
The Gina Project CIC	Supports young people who are survivors of rape and sexual abuse.
Youth Work Unit Yorkshire and Humber	Supports youth work organisations and young people to take informed action on issues that affect their lives.

Appendix two: The Future Communities Fund learning and evaluation framework

The research reported in this paper was guided by learning questions set out in a learning and evaluation framework for the Future Communities Fund Round 1. This framework was co-created by IVAR, Co-op Foundation and the 13 funded organisations.

The framework is structured in line with the four levels where Future Communities Fund Round 1 is expected to have an impact. These impact types, together with the learning questions for each, are set out in the tables below.

For each level, the framework poses an overarching learning question with a series of sub-questions to guide research activities. The overarching learning questions are designed to be broad and open-ended, allowing space for research to uncover unexpected findings. The sub-questions similarly include a set of general questions that are not prescriptive of the changes we expect to see, although they also include some questions that specifically address Future Communities Fund Round 1 strategic themes around 1) youth activism and shared power and 2) diversity, equity and inclusion.

Table 5 – Future Communities Fund learning and evaluation questions

Impact type	Activities	Main learning question	Learning sub-questions
Funder behaviour	Training Internal learning Commissioning a learning partner	What behaviours are required for Co-op Foundation to be an open and trusting funder in the field of youth participation?	General • What behaviours and skills do Co-op Foundation need to adopt as it engages in unrestricted and participatory grant-making? • How can Co-op Foundation build strong, trusting relationships with its funded partners? • How can Co-op Foundation integrate participatory approaches into its work?
Impact on funded organisations	Multi-year unrestricted funding	Has multi-year unrestricted funding made a difference to funded partners and, if so, how?	General • What has FCF funding enabled funded partners to do that they couldn't have achieved without it? • How do funded partners perceive that young people are benefiting from any organisational changes made? FCF themes • Have funded partners strengthened young people's involvement in organisational governance and leadership and, if so, how? • Have funded partners made opportunities for young people's involvement more equitable and inclusive and, if so, how? • How does involving young people in governance impact an organisation's ability to deliver its mission successfully? • Have funded partners encountered any barriers or challenges as they try to involve young people more?
	Learning partner support for learning and evaluation	Has IVAR's learning partner support made a difference to the funded partners and, if so, how?	General • What difference has IVAR's support made to the funded partner's knowledge, skills and capacity, especially around learning and evaluation?

Impact type	Activities	Main learning question	Learning sub-questions
Impact on young people	Multi-year unrestricted funding to organisations that support diverse young people.	To what extent have young people benefited from the activities and services delivered by funded partners and, if so, how?	General • What difference has engaging with the funded partner made to the lives of young people? FCF themes • What roles are young people taking in funded partners and how are they benefiting from them? • Where young people take on leadership roles, what training and support have they received and how have they benefited from this? • What barriers have young people faced in accessing and performing leadership roles, and how did they overcome them?
	Opportunities for young people to learn and network with their peers.	Have young people benefited from their involvement in FCF and, if so, how?	General • How have young researchers benefited from their involvement in FCF learning activities? • What connections do young people make with their peers from other funded partners?
Influencing the practice of other funders	Funding to infrastructure supporting unrestricted funders e.g. IVAR. Networking activities. Dissemination of learning and evaluation.	To what extent is FCF helping to change the funding practices of other funders and, if so, how?	General • What influence is FCF having on the practices of other funders? • Are other funders changing the way they evaluate the impact of unrestricted funding? FCF themes • Are other funders of youth participation adopting more participatory approaches?