

# DO I HEAR YOU?

Exploring the Listening Culture of Funders in the UK



PHASE 1

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## DO I HEAR YOU? EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The landscape that makes up who funders listen to is inherently complex and varied. Also, as organisations that distribute money, this colours all interactions and impacts many of the listening relationships funders hold. Over the last 18 months funders within the Listening Fund have reflected on where listening does and doesn't work, whilst also discussing the unique context that funders listen within. At present, listening takes place within funders to: develop their self-awareness; so that they can gain knowledge; and to support them to devolve power. It can take place in many different ways such as in monitoring and evaluation, governance, decision making and to inform strategy. Funders listen to a range of different audiences including current and prospective grantees, lived experience, their own experts and advisors, community members, other funders, networks and umbrella bodies, research bodies and sector leaders as well as their own personal external influences such as their personal relationships and the media. Through our reflective sessions four key areas of development emerged which were integral to funders improving their listening practices and cultures when considering all these audiences. These are summarised below.

### Closing the Listening Loop

Funders shared that actions that stemmed from listening were inconsistent. For funders to listen well they need to see listening as a whole process which includes responding to what is heard.

**Key questions:** What is needed to allow knowledge from listening to flow around an organisation, to make an impact, and then flow back to who is being listened to? How open are your future plans and strategy to what you hear and how does that interact with your own internal agenda and interests? What are the accountability structures that you have for those that you listen to, and who are you and who should you be accountable to?

**How this can be addressed:** improved accountability structures for listening e.g. governance, feedback systems

### Inclusive Listening

Funders shared that they needed to become more inclusive in how they listened. Many reflected they tended to listen to the same people and that there was a lack of diversity in who they listened to e.g. class, race, political views

**Key questions:** How does unconscious bias show up in who you trust, make time to listen to and if and how you close the listening loop? What are the methods that you use for listening and do you tend to listen in the same ways and rely on people coming to you – conversations, surveys? What space is there for you to reflect on the diversity of who you listen to and manage this?

**How this can be addressed:** Reflections on implicit and unconscious bias and actions to manage this

### Equitable Listening

Listening for funders happens within a skewed power dynamic. Funders spoke about the ways power impacted their ability to listen effectively. From whether they were really being open and led by what they heard, to how they listened and what they did with their listening.

**Key questions:** How can you make the process of listening feel safer and what capacity is needed to listen in a way that is ethical? How can you question your entitlement over knowledge and create space to support others to take what they have shared forward and devolve power to others? How can those being listened to become decision makers? How can power be shared and devolved so that the agenda for listening is held more collectively by those being listened to and you can be more transparent about your agenda and assumption?

**How this can be addressed:** By understanding what extractive and equitable listening practices look like

### Capacity to Listen

To listen effectively, build relationships and act on what we hear, what resources are needed? Almost all participants described not having the time needed to listen in the way they wanted to.

**Key questions:** What does it take to listen well – time, skills, space, people? How can we reimagine ourselves as listening organisations – could this provide us with a way to make listening sustainable within our organisations? What is the right thing to do if and when we are unable to listen well and may cause harm?

**How this can be addressed:** Investment in listening well supported with resources and systematising

# Do I hear you? Exploring the listening culture of funders in the UK

## The Listening Fund Funder Reflection Phase 1 report

### Introduction

The months since the pandemic hit the UK in spring 2020 have been ones that have exposed the power dynamics and fractures in our sector. They have also made us see the role that philanthropy can play in crisis and the possibilities that can be realised when philanthropy listens to those it looks to serve and power is transferred.

But as a sector do we have a good understanding of the power dynamics that we operate within and what is needed to disrupt them at their core? For example, evidence shows us that many of those that work within the voluntary sector do not feel listened to by the majority of funders, despite many funders reporting feeling confident about their listening practices and relationships. There is a potential mismatch between how funders think they are listening and how the sector is experiencing them. More needs to be done to support funders to reflect on how they listen and the challenges and barriers within this process. To contribute to this discussion the funders within the Listening Fund have come together to collectively reflect on how they listen and what is needed for them to listen more effectively, inclusively and equitably.

### Why Listening?

The Listening Fund was established in England in 2018 and Scotland in 2019, supporting a host of organisations across these two countries to further their listening practices with young people. Listening is a term which intentionally moves organisations' focus beyond gathering feedback – often undertaken once decisions are made – and encourages them to engage with the power dynamics that inform which voices are heard during the decision-making process. The Fund's ambition is to advance the ability of the youth sector to listen and respond to their core constituents - young people; and by supporting and enabling change in listening practice at an organisational level, to empower young people to influence and challenge at a systemic level.

As well as supporting the youth sector to strengthen their listening, the programmes' funders also committed to going on their own learning journey. Over the last 18 months these funders have come together separately and collectively to explore what listening meant to them and how it takes place within their organisations. They have reflected on where listening works well, where it doesn't work as well, whilst also discussing the unique context that funders listen within. The report outlines some of our findings from this phase, looking at what funders have in common, no matter their size, governance approach or strategy. It is not meant as an academic study or analysis, but more the articulation of our group reflections and the patterns that have emerged. From our perspective, many funders seem to be grappling with the same questions and issues when it comes to listening.

We are hoping this report helps others reflect on how we in philanthropy truly hear others and act on what they say.

This report is made up of two halves.

The first section looks at where listening practice is now asking questions such as

- What is the context funders listen within?
- What does listening mean to different funders?
- Why does listening take place within funders?
- What are the key groups that funders listen to?
- Where are funders failing to listen?

The second section focuses on how listening practices within funders needs to develop, sharing four key areas of development that have been common themes in our reflections. This section touches on the following questions:

- What must funders be mindful of when they listen?
- What do funders need to do to listen well?
- What are the key questions that we need to address?
- What are the collective areas of development that funders should concentrate on?

This report is primarily for funders but we feel there is much here that speaks to the wider sector we work in and shows the issues we are exploring.



disagree and challenge etc. Funders often felt trapped within their roles and identities unable to create neutral and safe interactions for those they were listening to.

## What does listening mean and why does it take place?

Listening was a powerful framework to use when asking funders to reflect. It enabled them to engage with their values and power dynamics, as well as the way their organisations functioned and their relationships and practices with others. Reflective workshops covered a large breadth of content including power dynamics, feedback, monitoring and evaluation, decision making, relationships and trust.

At the start of our journey it became clear that the term listening was being used very differently with funders. Rather than try to find a narrow common ground around listening, we used our workshops to explore what listening meant to different funders, who they were listening to and where and how it took place. In this report listening was a term that could be applied to many different audiences, not just grantees or community members. Listening was also used to talk about relationships with other funders, umbrella bodies and research institutions, the media or the government. Listening could happen directly through direct interactions and communication with others. It could also take place indirectly through learning via other organisations or institutions like grantees, research bodies and experts.<sup>2</sup>

The key interpretations of the term listening are summarised in the table below

*Table 1: How do funders see the term Listening*

<b>Interpretation of the term listening</b>	<b>Examples of how this may take place in a funder</b>
Listening practices to set organisational and long-term strategy	Organisational decisions about devolving power e.g. trustees, decision making approaches
Listening to learn regarding a programme of work	Listening to learn about a particular area of need or sector e.g. Climate justice, mental health, education Listening to learn about a particular demographic's experiences, assets and needs e.g. looked after children Listening to understand the context, assets and needs of a particular place and geography
Listening to make decisions around grant making	Participatory funding approaches Lived experience experts and leaders The make-up of decision making committees The role of experts and advisers Inform knowledge of grant making staff used to assess applications
Listening to manage relationships with grantees	Relational approach with grantees Capacity building
Listening to improve systems and processes	Listening to unsuccessful applicants for feedback about application processes

<sup>2</sup> Bridging the Gap – Foundation Listening Practices

Listening to show impact	Monitoring and evaluation Key performance indicators

Funders tended to lean into one or two of these interpretations of listening when they spoke about listening without being guided to a single definition. This seemed to be due to the following two reasons.

### 1) Role

The role of the person within the organisation would guide how they saw listening e.g. if they were involved in learning and monitoring and evaluation this is what they saw listening as being, whereas if they were involved in participatory or community led funding approaches this was the primary way they spoke about listening. This raises questions around whether anyone in the organisation holds a holistic picture of how the funder is listening and also if there is room for listening to take place without an agenda of feedback, monitoring and evaluation etc. It is also connected to leadership and the role leadership can play in drawing together the different listening practices within an organisation and how this can impact the organisation more widely. The role that leadership play in listening is something that should be further explored.

### 2) Organisational priorities

Funders within the Listening Fund had made a commitment to listening and were aware of this term and language. This often connected to their own internal priorities around listening and where they were on their journey to create a culture of listening. For those at the earlier stages of this journey listening was about building relationships with grantees. For others who were building their listening practices it was about devolving power and using listening to more deeply direct and change the organisations they were a part of.

The chart below shows why listening occurred in their organisations according to some foundation staff in participating funders from our survey. What is clear is that there are many different reasons that funders listen, from learning, to decision making to evaluating impact with no one purpose for listening being clear.

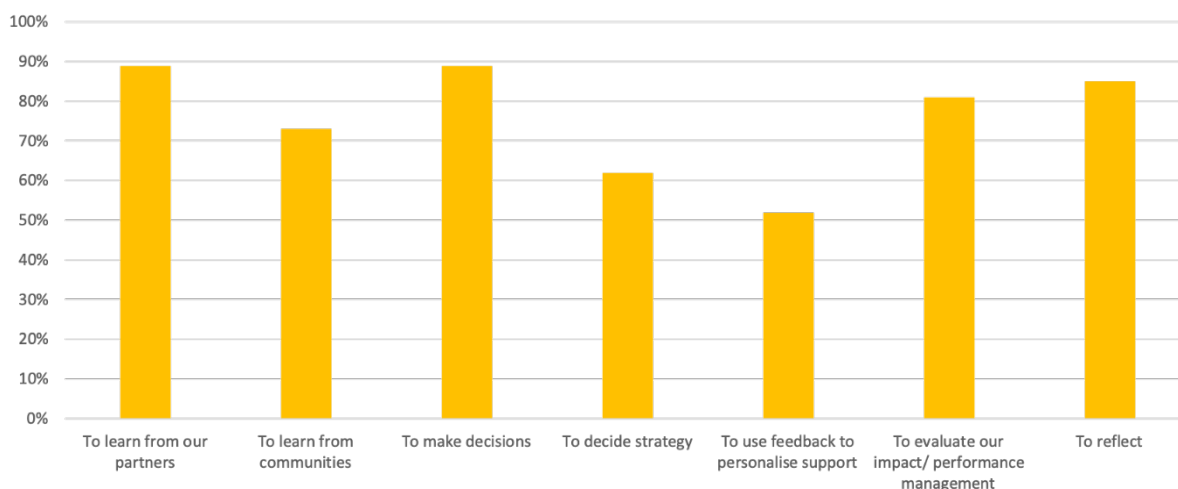


Figure 1: Survey Results - Why does Listening occur in funders?







Funders shared that they did have grantees that they listened to more than others and multiple funders had discussions around hierarchies of relationships or unconscious biases when listening to grantees. There were also reflections about the relationships of influence that some grantees held e.g. with trustees and leadership which led to them being listened to more. Funders also spoke about relationships being developed more with grantees where communication felt easier. This could be due to personality, confidence, similar political outlooks, the demographic backgrounds such as class and race. This could also be grantees who had similar outlook and views to funders and were saying the things that funders were looking to reinforce what they wanted to hear. How funders listen to grantees is therefore not always systematic and equitable.

This was also true of prospective grantees whose chance to engage with funders was often dependant on hidden hierarchies. Interactions ahead of applications processes tended to be based on existing relationships, networks and recommendations. Also the capacity and confidence to reach out to funders at this stage was by no means universal, and access was dependant on demographics such as geography, class, size of organisation etc. This also impacted the nature of the interaction which could go from brief emails to one to one meetings or calls. These interactions were also impacted by the type of application processes e.g. open or invitation only. For some funders with second stage application processes, grant managers often listened to and worked with organisations in order to understand them better and advocate on their behalf to decision making panels.

The mechanisms and systems developed by funders to listen to prospective grantees tended to be light touch and in most cases didn't give space for listening, often being more of a tick box exercise or one that gave the appearance of care. For example mechanisms such as surveys that were anonymous or other feedback about application processes tended to only make superficial changes to application processes and larger more sustainable feedback for example about eligibility criteria or funding strategies were not taken onboard. The framework within which funders listened to prospective grantees seemed so narrow as to raise the question; was this really listening? Also how inclusive are these methods? Concerns were shared about which applicants took part in these feedback processes and what groups these methods worked well for.

Finally funders spoke about some of the mechanisms they had in place to provide unsuccessful applicants feedback about their application via emails or calls. Some funders felt these were really important interactions which allowed for dialogue and learning on both sides. Others felt that the interactions were seldom honest or transparent and only offered the appearance of care.

There were also reflections regarding both current and prospective grantees about the space for honesty and the impact that a current or prospective financial relationship had on the power dynamics when listening. Funders reflected on both the assumptions being made about grantees and also the level of openness, honesty and transparency funders felt they had and were comfortable with. Whilst funders spoke at great length about listening to grantees, this listening was often undertaken with grantees' leaders and senior members of staff. Relationships with more frontline and project staff at grantees seemed rare and listening to this group was more indirect. This made sense in terms of capacity and who held relationships but also impacted the nature of what was being learnt.

Fundamentally trust and relationships seemed key when listening to grantees, as did the capacity needed to build trust and relationships to create meaningful opportunities to listen well and



### ***Areas and further question to explore***

#### *Current*

- What space is there for grantees to set the agenda and hold more power?
- How can we be more aware of what leads us to listen more to certain grantees and less to others and how do we make this fairer and more equitable?
- Are grant holders telling funders what they want to hear and is there space for honesty and transparency?

#### *Prospective*

- How can we be aware of what leads us to listen to certain applicants and not others and how to open up these processes in a fairer and more equitable fashion?
- How can we create ways for this listening to inform wider change and close these feedback loops?
- How much honesty is there in interactions with unsuccessful applicants and what can be done to address this?

### **Communities**

Funders all worked to listen to communities whether that was community leaders, service users or those not engaging with services. However, the levels of this interaction was very varied with some funders listening to communities indirectly through grantees of experts whilst in some rare cases funders had dedicated staff building relationships with communities outside of funding relationships. Certain funders had regional or place based approached to funding which led to more efforts to listen to communities to inform these strategies and understand more about needs in the area and impacts made by projects funded there. Learning played a core role in why funders listen to communities. Funders described wanting to hear communities in their own words, and to understand the systems and places they were trying to change.

Again, there were reflections on who was it that funders engaged with within communities and the reflection that more marginalised groups were often not engaged with. Certain funders spoke about their relationships being based more in mainstream systems and structures such as public services; schools, the local council, faith leaders and other community leaders and representatives. Funders also reflected on the methods they used to engage with communities and how open and inclusive they were. Funders spoke about the capacity needed to listen to communities and the public. Many funders did not have the space in their roles to build these relationships or develop mechanism to develop wider ways to engage with people outside of grant making. Hence there was a tendency to engage with the most easy to reach individuals within communities or rely on existing and mainstream structures such as the local authority or bodies such as schools.

In the majority of cases, listening to communities was framed around compliance, rather than to devolve power or inform ongoing strategy. Listening took place for learning and to assess impact of funding that had been distributed. In most cases funders listened to communities indirectly through others such as grantees or consultants. This could be though informal check ins and conversations but could also be through more formal listening such as research conducted by grantees. Funders also spoke about how they listened directly to communities often through face to face visits to grantees projects or other community facing events and gatherings. Whilst many funders found these visits useful there were uncomfortable reflections on the levels of honesty in these conversations and how safe and ethical they sometimes were. Certain funders spoke about hearing sensitive stories or being around vulnerable groups and questioned whether these interactions were really needed and well executed. Also there was a recognition that funders needed to have the

capacity and skills required to handle face to face interactions. Many frontline staff in different sectors from psychology to firefighting are provided with guidance about how to work with communities and also to manage interactions with vulnerable groups. For example training and guidance on how to hold sensitive emotions, maintain healthy boundaries and create safe environments for others. Many sectors use approaches such as supervision<sup>4</sup>, mental health first aiders<sup>5</sup> or trauma risk management<sup>6</sup> to provide emotional support especially when people may be exposed to difficult subject matter in their roles. Most funders spoken to did not have this support in place and said there hadn't been a consideration of the emotional impacts of listening.

#### ***Why do funders listen to communities?***

- To learn directly from communities understanding the systems that funders are trying to change
- To assess impact and for monitoring and evaluation
- To gain buy in and legitimacy within the wider sector of funders
- To check against existing strategy

#### ***How do funders listen to communities?***

- Indirectly through grantees, research or experts
- Through face to face visits to partners
- Community based events and meetings
- By attending existing community meetings and connecting to existing local networks for building relationships

#### ***Areas and further question to explore***

- What capacity, support structures and skills are needed for funders to listen to communities?
- What are the ethics of interactions with vulnerable groups and what are the power dynamics funders need to be aware of when engaging directly with communities?
- How honest are these interactions and how are they influenced by prospective funding?
- What is lost when this listening happens indirectly and how much do agendas to the intermediates impact what funders hear?
- What can be done to listen to communities not just to learn but to also involve them directly in decision making and to genuinely devolve power further to them?

#### **Lived Experience**

Lived experience is 'the experience(s) of people on whom a social issue, or combination of issues, has had a direct impact'<sup>7</sup>. Lived experience was spoken about in all workshops and experts by experience were recognised as a critical group to listen to. Lived experience was engaged with in very different ways from listening to service users to engaging with lived experience leaders and elders. Whilst all funders recognised the importance of lived experience and referred to the wider awareness in philanthropy and the social sector of lived experience, most funders also reflected that this was not a group they listened to as well as they would want to. Philanthropy has traditionally been reliant and led by learnt experience such as academic research or the public sector and its

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/listen/201905/why-good-supervision-in-psychotherapy-matters>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/one-million-people-to-receive-mental-health-first-aid-training/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hantsfire.gov.uk/about-us/what-we-do/trim/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://thelivedexperience.org>

knowledge of a need such as mental health or criminal justice. Those directly with experience of these issues have often been outside of funding strategy around these areas or decision making. This meant that many funders involved in this reflection saw themselves as very early in engaging and listening to lived experience and reflected that they was much more to do. There were many reflections about the considerations that needed to be taken into account when funders engaged with lived experience. Some of the Listening Fund funders also explored the power dynamics that came into play when engaging with children and young people to inform their work. Below are some of the questions that emerged that funders felt needed to be asked when engaging with lived experience.

- Do they have a clear understanding of the context and why they are there?
- Are they set up to be equals?
- Who is the broker e.g. an adult, an organisation?
- Is the interaction seeking to engage in lived experience and someone's story without thinking about whether there is real consent, the interaction is safe and there's been real thought to the terms around story?
- How does the method being used for listening meet their needs e.g. innate confidence, what makes them feel comfortable, language?
- How genuine are these interactions and what are the power dynamics within them?

Some funders engaged with lived experience through their engagement with grantees and communities, using direct and indirect listening methods with service users as has been described in this report. However many grantees also reflected on the limitations of these interactions and the need to move on from service user conversations to the devolvement of power to lived experience so that this listening made a deeper impact on strategy and organisational culture. Certain funders had done this through ensuring that there was lived experience on their board of trustees, others had created structures such as advisor boards or sector specific lived experience groups. Others had attempted to involved lived experience into the design of their grant making or brought in experts by experience as advisors and consultants.

Certain funders wondered about the real impact of listening to lived experience and whether this was really taking place or was more tokenistic. They also reflected on the fact that there might have been good practice in certain projects or funding streams but this was usually isolated and did not become wider organisational practice. Funders also spoke about the mistakes they felt they had made around working with lived experience and the need for knowledge, skills and capacity to do this effectively and authentically. There were also concerns around the methods used to engage with lived experience and whether more could be done to create deeper and more inclusive conversations. Discussions around engaging with lived experience sometimes brought to the surface a lack of confidence and difficult emotions such as guilt and shame.

#### ***Why do funders listen to lived experience?***

- To learn and gain knowledge
- To make better decisions informed by experience
- Organisational values and culture
- Pressure brought about by wider conversations in philanthropy and advocacy about the importance of lived experience

### ***How do funders listen to lived experience?***

- Through existing methods to engage with communities such as visits and events as well as indirectly through grantees
- Representation on trustee boards
- Other advisory groups and boards used internally
- Consultants and advisors
- Within participatory grant making mechanisms

### ***Areas and further question to explore***

- How can funders do more to listen to lived experience across their organisations and practice?
- At what levels in an organisation does listening to lived experience take place?
- How can foundations move beyond conversations with service users to engaging more deeply with lived experience and transferring power to do this?
- To what extent are funders engaging with lived experience because they see its value or because of wider pressures in philanthropy to 'shift power'?

### **Sector Leaders/ Research bodies /Umbrella bodies**

Another group mentioned by all funders involved in this reflection were those described as sector leaders or thought leaders. This was sometimes used to describe individuals and in other cases used to describe organisations such as research and advocacy bodies or umbrella groups. Listening to this group informed learning and could shape the strategy and decision making of funders for example for funding programmes around young people, climate change or mental health. These voices also sometimes could feel more like a 'neutral source' of knowledge, as they could provide valuable learning outside of funding relationships. They could also provide a wider picture of sectors and issues, often speaking beyond the experiences of one organisation or geographical area.

Many funders spoke about listening to this group through reports, articles, blogs and social media. Listening could also take place through events and conferences. Other funders also listened through relationships and calls, emails and face to face meetings. Reflections showed concerns around if funders were essentially listening to the same groups and voices and where there was room to engaging with more diverse views and marginalised voices. However funders also spoke about engaging with bodies that specialised in and advocated for missing voices and groups.

### ***Why do funders listen to sector leaders?***

- To learn and gain knowledge
- To inform strategy and decision making
- To gain specialist knowledge or hear indirectly from certain communities or groups

### ***How do funders listen to sector leaders?***

- Publications such as reports, blogs and articles
- Events such as conference, webinars and smaller meetings and round tables
- Relationships

### ***Areas and further question to explore***





- How can funders reflect on the limitations of these viewpoints and how they can continue to bring in new voices and opinions?
- How can there be more understanding of the agendas we all hold including experts and advisors and how this impacts what is being listened to?

### **Other Funders**

Funders all spoke about how they listened to other funders within their sector. These relationships seemed important for learning as well as benchmarking and self-awareness. Funders often acted as a community using their relationships to share knowledge, test ideas and challenge one another. However, the capacity to engage with other funders also depended on the role people were in and the time and opportunity to speak to others externally. Many networks and events also facilitated these peer relationships as well as close one to one relationships leading to regular check ins. The Listening Fund was an example of a structure and project that brought different funders together to share and learn from one another as well as to look at collective ways to work and move forwards. Funders were often also in other relationships with funders through different projects or even as delivery partners.

These relationships again were cited as a safe place to discuss, learn and be challenged. However, it was also shared that funders often formed clusters which could be positive as it allowed for deeper ways to collaborate but also meant there was a real danger of group think. This danger of group think has also been described by other funders outside of the Listening Fund who spoke about their tendency to engage with the same experts and grantees leading to marginalised voices being listened to less, unable to break into these networks. There were also concerns about the diversity of viewpoints held by different funders who usually had similar views and backgrounds. Comments were also made about the lack of diversity in foundation staff when it came to demographics such as class or race.

#### ***Why do funders listen to other funders?***

- To learn and gain knowledge from others in similar roles and addressing similar needs
- For an external perspective from someone in a similar context

#### ***How do funders listen to other funders?***

- Informal relationships
- Networks and events
- Formal collaborations and through projects
- Delivery partner relationships

#### ***Areas and further question to explore***

- How can funders be aware of the risks of collaboration and avoid group think or creating new hierarchies of those they collectively listen to?

### **External voices e.g. personal relationships, the media**

Finally, funders also spoke about how much they turned to other external sources outside of their day-to-day roles to listen and learn. In some cases this external influence came through their personal relationships such as family, children and young people or friends they had that might have relevant knowledge and experience. This could also include other networks that funder may be involved in a professional context. These seemed to be trusted people funders turned to think things

out, learn and test ideas. Those with children spoke about they drew upon these relationships to learn and reflect about children, young people and sectors such as education.

These relationships were a way for funders to listen outside of funding relationships and some participants spoke about the value of listening without the agenda of money and resource. However there were also reflections of the lack of diversity of these groups and relationships and how representative this listening was.

Certain funders also referred explicitly to listening to the media in different ways whether this was newspapers, TV, radio, sector press or other news sources. The majority of funders involved in this reflection said they looked to the media to listen to the views of the wider public or to understand how things sat with others. The media could also be a source of knowledge about needs and gaps and could also influence the language funders used. Funders also listened to the media to support the management of risk, being very aware of how press attention could impact organisations and trying to stay away from conflict and what could turn into a scandal. Funders were mindful of the pressure they could be put under via the media and there were admissions that this could impact decisions and behaviour sometimes very reactively.

Many funders had not been aware of how voices outside their direct relationships informed their thinking and perceptions. Whilst this was usually quite unstructured it was potentially very influential and something that funders should reflect on so that they can also be aware of the benefits and challenges that can come from listening to these sources.

#### ***Why do funders listen to external voices?***

- To listen outside of grant making or formal engagements with experts and escape some of the power dynamics within this
- To test ideas with those external to their organisations
- To manage and avoid risk
- To learn and gain knowledge
- To indirectly listen to the public
- To learn and draw on lived experience

#### ***How do funders listen to the external voices?***

- Informally through existing relationships
- Through reading and listening to media sources
- Through relationships with journalist and sector press.

#### ***Areas and further question to explore***

- How can funders draw on their own relationships whilst also being aware of the limits of this knowledge?
- How does the role of being a funder and the power dynamics associated with this impact listening?
- What are other ways funders can learn and test ideas that is outside of the power dynamics of monetary relationships?
- How are funders impacted by media voices and fear of media attention?
- What aspects of the media impact philanthropy and how does this change with different funders? What is lost when funders do not listen more closely to the media?







By 'closing the listening loop' we are referring to:

Taking an action based on what has been heard

As has been described earlier in the report what was learnt or heard through listening was often lost. Funders were not consistent in responding to what they heard and struggled to do this due to a lack of capacity or understanding around how to translate what they had heard into wider organisational change.

Feeding back to those that have been listened to

Listening was also often described as a one-way activity. Even if there had been an effort to address what had been heard, funders did not prioritise feeding this back to those they had listened to. This again reinforces unequal power dynamics around listening and who it is for, and the way that those are being listened to are engaged and treated throughout a process

Questions we encourage funders to consider

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*What is needed to allow knowledge from listening to flow around an organisation, make an impact and then flow back to who is being listened to?*

*How open are your future plans and strategy to what you listen to and how does that interact with your own internal agenda and interests?*

*What are the accountability structures that you have for those that you listen to, and who are you and who should you be accountable to?*

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### **Inclusive Listening: Who do we listen to?**

Another core theme that emerged from this reflection was the hierarchies around who funders listen to. Many funders reported that they tended to turn to trusted voices and acknowledged the lack of diversity in who these were. Interestingly even though this was a strong theme in workshops many participants shared that this was not something they had reflected on or looked at closely. Our surveys showed that only a third of participants would describe who they listened to as very diverse. Just over 20% described those that they spoke to as having very different views, values and perspectives. Who are the voices that make up the groups we don't listen to and what is the impact of leaving these voices behind? Also, even when funders were listening to diverse groups, who did they engage with more frequently and who did they hold the strongest listening relationships with?

There is a lack of data in UK philanthropy around the diversity of who we fund. There is even less analysis and reflection on who we listen to. How diverse are the experts our organisations tend to engage with? Are the sector leaders we listen to giving us the diversity of views and perspectives that we need? Do the ways we tend to want to engage with people bring in the same views and groups? We know from evidence that nomination processes are inherently biased. Familiar pools develop and we there is a lack of diversity in our connections and the ecosystems we are a part of.







## How can these areas and questions be addressed?

### How do we close the Listening Loop?

The lack of accountability structures around listening was a key theme which emerged from our conversations. Funders felt that these structures were needed to support them to better act and respond to what they heard, and to enable this to be more of a priority. Over half of those that took part in our survey did not feel that they had an accountability structure or system that supported or encourage listening. In March 2020 a group of Listening Fund funders came together to explore the idea of accountability structures for listening and what this might look like though the opportunity to follow up this initial conversation was impacted by the pandemic. This is an area that we want to build on in the next phase of the Listening Fund. However, key questions, early ideas and concerns around accountability and listening shared at the discussion included:

- Is there is a need to align reporting structures for listening, either between funders, or internally?
- What role do KPIs have in supporting listening without losing the richness of listening as a process?
- How can we build on the use of surveys such as Centre for Effective Philanthropy<sup>9</sup> whilst being mindful that this is a superficial tool and doesn't address the nuances and complexities of listening?
- What are the basic standards for reporting internally for listening?
- Can annual reports be used to draw out strategic themes in listening and provide an overview of what a funder is hearing and how it can react to this?
- Who are we accountable to? How can we involve those we listen to in the accountability process?
- How do we resource our partners for the capacity needed to take part in any new infrastructure to support closing the loop?
- How do reporting structures for listening allow for building trust and the pace needed?
- What does an iterative design process of accountability structures for listening look like?
- Does the framework allow for listening to be strategic and led by scoping or will it make listening and action more reactive?
- What are the measures that could be used to judge how we listen e.g. how we are perceived, trust, how we make wider impact with what we have learnt

#### ***Learning from Best Practice***

Fund for Shared Insight / Listen 4 Good <https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good/>  
Listen4Good is a Fund for Shared Insight initiative designed to help nonprofits build sustainable, high-quality, client-focused feedback loops that lead to meaningful change. Their goal is to provide widespread access to tools and resources that help organisations systematically listen to and respond to the people they seek to help, especially those whose voices are least heard. Working with funders and nonprofits, L4G is building key infrastructure for feedback in the social sector and creating a community of organisations committed to using feedback and constituent input to bring about positive changes in the way they make decisions, deliver services, and partner with clients. The initiative emphasizes the critical importance of building trust between nonprofit organizations and funders so that feedback can be honestly shared.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://cep.org/donors/>





## How can we Listen more Equitably?

Extractive vs equitable listening was a concept that many funders involved in this reflection exercise found difficult to understand and the power dynamics within listening could be hard to navigate. As the listening practices between funders and those they listen are often very entrenched it was sometimes a challenge to imagine more equitable approaches and relationships. Based on a workshop held in March 2020 with Listening Fund funders a number of tools have been developed by Farzana Khan and Nusrat Faizullah to help funders to understand the concept of equitable listening.

### Tool 1: Empathising with those that share their stories

Funders listening can often relate to a person's lived experience and stories. However do funders understand how it feels to share stories and what are the power dynamics when a story is shared? Also what is the ownership of a story and how can we reflect upon how lived experience and stories may be used by a funder? The diagram below captures how it can feel to have your story told with each box describing a different group of emotions and experiences. By being more aware of these impacts and feelings funders can understand what they need to consider to create safer and less extractive listening interactions.

#### *The Feelings Experienced when Sharing your Story*



### Tool 2 : Moving from Extractive to Equitable Listening

Our reflections showed that funders and organisations often normalised very extractive approaches to listening. Funders did not have a clear understanding of the practices that made up both ethical and extractive listening. The following grid captures and breaks down these practices to make good and bad practice clearer and the multiple areas that need to be considered by funders when listening.

#### *Moving from Extractive to Equitable Listening Practices*

Area	Extractive	Equitable
Relationship	Relationships that don't acknowledge power dynamics and assumes people are engaging equally	Trust has been built through time, openness, action and an acknowledgement of the different power both parties hold.

	<p>Interactions and influence that are dependant on supporting the narratives and agendas of a funder/ person with power</p>	<p>Relationships that can hold different views and narratives without making those in less power feel exploited</p> <p>An effort made in ways that balance participation and contributions, regarding the different power people hold and their role</p>
Extent of impact	<p>Tokenistic involvement and not invested in utilising what has been heard in an impactful way</p> <p>Using listening to prove rather than learn and be led by what is heard</p> <p>Pathways and decisions already in mind and pretending decisions haven't already been made</p> <p>Selective listening to assumptions and narratives that affirmed the funders own position/ agenda</p>	<p>Structures and space for listening to make a meaningful impact.</p> <p>Listening leads processes and doesn't just reinforce existing strategies and direction</p> <p>Power has been devolved to those being listened to so that they can be decision makers</p> <p>Capacity to communicate dissatisfaction and safely express feedback and critique without facing negativity and/ or hostility</p>
Ownership of the story	<p>Entitlement to someone else's knowledge and appropriating lived-experience</p> <p>Using own privilege to make use of this knowledge for own agenda and organisation</p> <p>Picking out parts of a story that they feel is of value</p> <p>Using lived experience to gain authenticity without investing in person/org</p>	<p>Sharing learning in a way that uplift and visibilise with permission and consent</p> <p>Seeing the person as a knowledge producer</p> <p>Being invested in the story and the contributions made irrespective of the consequence to the organisations internal plans and agendas</p>
Expectations	<p>Expectation of training and upskilling</p> <p>Based around time scale/pace of funder</p> <p>Expectation of input and people's time and knowledge without remuneration or at a much lower payment to others</p>	<p>Timescales and pace is based around people's capacities and is not performative</p> <p>Those listened to have been remunerated and also inform what this looks like</p> <p>Remuneration that does not follow inequitable hierarchies of knowledge, own biases</p>
Spaces for listening	<p>Space can feel exposed to those that are being listened to.</p> <p>There has not been careful thought into how the listening is taking place</p>	<p>Safe spaces are carefully designed and held for listening</p> <p>Funders are aware of when they should not be directly involved in listening</p>











expertise. Listening is a practice that needs to be systematised – for consistency and accountability. Finally listening is a practice that needs to be constantly developed and prioritised at all levels of an organisation.