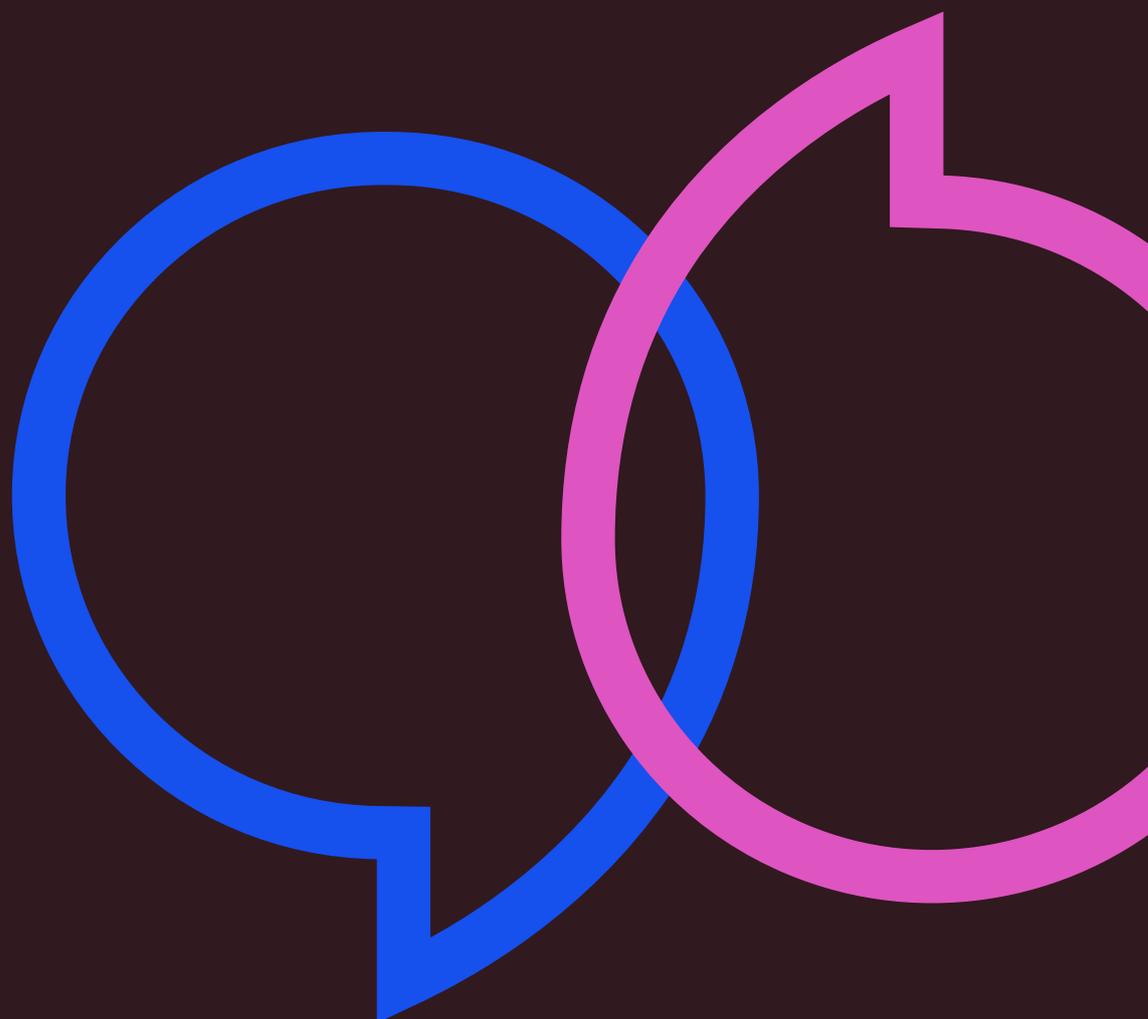




Meaningful Youth Participation in Grant-Making: A Case Study



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1. Executive Summary

This case study by YouthLink Scotland presents an example of meaningful youth participation in grant-making. It focuses on the Youth Arts Open Fund, a Creative Scotland grant programme, administered by YouthLink Scotland, which supports youth-led arts activities for marginalised children and young people.



“This process was invaluable in enabling children and young people to play a central role in decision-making in the Youth Arts Open Fund, directly shaping which arts opportunities were given funding support. As administrators of the fund, YouthLink Scotland expertly supported and empowered the youth panel’s involvement. Their vast skills and experience in working directly with children and young people and the training and guidance they provided ensured the panel had the right circumstances to be fully engaged and make informed, independent decisions. Working with YouthLink Scotland on this fund has been a great learning experience for us on how youth participation can be embedded in funding decisions in a way that is both authentic and impactful.”

— Jonathan McLean, Creative Learning Officer, Creative Scotland

The study outlines key learnings and best practices in youth participation in grant-making, emphasising that effective participation requires more than just inclusion, it demands investment in structured learning, development, and ongoing support.

It argues, that by adopting a youth work approach to supporting participation, young people are empowered to contribute in ways that feel genuinely meaningful, ensuring that their decisions are informed, fair, and impactful.

It suggests the following key considerations for meaningful youth participation in grant-making that is more than symbolic involvement.

Funders and stakeholders should:

- ✓ Provide pre-assessment learning opportunities, such as grant evaluation training.
- ✓ Ensure young people understand their role and influence in the decision-making process.
- ✓ Offer ongoing support, mentorship, and accredited learning to enhance skills and confidence.
- ✓ Recognise and fairly compensate young participants for their time and contributions.
- ✓ Enable long-term involvement rather than treating participation as a one-time event.





2. Introduction

At YouthLink Scotland, we have spent over two decades exploring and refining youth participation in grant-making. This case study represents the collective learning and experience gained over that time. While we don't claim to have a perfect model, we believe we are close to getting it right, and we remain committed to continuous refinement of our approach through ongoing consultation with young people and stakeholders.

What sets our approach apart is the focus on meaningful participation, where "meaningful" means putting young people's experience first. We view youth involvement in grant-making as a youth work opportunity, just like any other. For participation to be truly meaningful, it must be underpinned by a relationship-based learning and development programme and process that equips young people with the skills, confidence, and knowledge to make informed decisions. When this commitment to young people's experience comes first, the process becomes more effective, equitable, and impactful, not just for the young people, but also for funders and applicant organisations.

Simply put, without a robust learning and development programme, youth participation risks being tokenistic.

Poorly supported decision-making can lead to arbitrary funding choices, reduced impact, and a compromised experience for all involved, from young people to funders and applicants.



"It was truly an amazing experience. From the very beginning, the training sessions were incredibly engaging and provided knowledge that significantly benefited my understanding of the grant-making process. They made sure to create an interactive environment that encouraged active participation, which I greatly appreciated".

— Young Person





3. The Fund

The Youth Arts Open Fund is administered by YouthLink Scotland on behalf of Creative Scotland. It provides small-scale funding to freelance artists and organisations to deliver youth-led arts activities for children and young people facing barriers to participation.

YouthLink Scotland designed and supported the youth participation process.

Crucially, Creative Scotland not only supported but actively enabled this approach to young people's participation by investing the time, resources, and trust necessary to ensure young people's involvement was authentic and impactful.



“Creative Scotland is committed to ensuring that children and young people can access their right to arts and culture and have a meaningful voice in shaping its development, in line with the principles of the UNCRC. Our partnership with YouthLink Scotland on the Youth Arts Open Fund (YAOF) process this year was a key step in piloting the strengthening of youth participation in our funding-based decision-making. While this approach required significant investment, it was essential to ensuring that children and young people's perspectives were embedded in a way that was both meaningful and appropriate. Their involvement has ensured that the arts opportunities supported by the Youth Arts Open Fund are relevant, engaging, and reflective of the needs and aspirations of their peers.”

— [Colin Bradie](#), Head of Creative Learning & Young People, Creative Scotland





4. Participation Model

Type of participation:

- Youth-led decision-making (see Typology of Youth Participation in Grant- Making, YouthLink Scotland).

Role of adults/fund owner organisation:

- Fund development and focus of the fund.
- Initial sifting of applications by arts experts to remove those that were ineligible or not of a good technical standard.

Reason for any involvement of adults/fund owner organisation:

- To make meaningful youth participation possible. This fund was previously very over-subscribed, receiving 213 applications with a total ask of £2.5M from an available £1M. It is not feasible to ask young people to deal with this volume of applications.
- To recognise that young people are bringing lived experience not technical arts project knowledge.
- To ensure that applications assessed by young people were eligible, and of a good technical standard.

Note: The rationale for this involvement was based on experience of the high demand for this type of funding and previous volume of applications and the knowledge that without some sifting of applications - youth-led decision-making is an unfair and impossible ask of young people. This was indeed the case for this iteration of the fund. 162 applications were received with a total ask of £2M from an available £447k.

Role of young people:

- To have full final decision-making power in relation to applications that were eligible and of a good technical standard.
- To decide which of the fund criteria they would focus on to assess applications (to ensure that their lived experience was relevant).
- The young people assessed 57 applications with a combined ask of £760k. They made 33 awards totaling £444K





5. Recruiting the Young People

At YouthLink Scotland, we take the involvement of young people with lived experience seriously, it is a core element of meaningful participation. However, it is essential that lived experience is clearly defined in relation to each specific fund and type of participation. For the Youth Arts Open Fund, this meant engaging young people who had experience and knowledge of living in, or being part of, communities that experience marginalisation and barriers to participation in the arts.

We were clear, from the outset, that **while their own experience was central, they were not representing other young people** with similar lived experience or from their geographical area.

We're lucky enough to support a number of volunteering initiatives for young people with this lived experience and to support networks of organisations and practitioners that reach deep into marginalised communities and work with young people facing multiple barriers to learning and development opportunities. These partnerships were invaluable in identifying young people who were both interested and willing to make the required level of commitment.

We believe the success of our recruitment process stemmed from framing this as an opportunity for young people first and foremost. Before young people expressed interest, **we worked with our partners to ensure they understood:**

- ✓ The expectations and responsibilities involved.
- ✓ What they would gain from the experience, including accredited learning.
- ✓ How their contributions would make an impact.
- ✓ Levels of remuneration
- ✓ The time commitment required

This approach allowed us to bring together a diverse, engaged, and well-informed group of young people who were not only keen to participate but also committed to the rigorous preparatory work necessary for informed decision-making.





6. The Learning and Support Programme:

From past experience, we know that meaningful youth participation requires more than just presence, it requires preparation and support. It is unrealistic and unfair to expect young people to arrive on decision-making day fully informed and ready to assess applications without structured learning and guidance.

As facilitators of young people's participation in our grant programmes, we see it as our responsibility to ensure that the necessary learning opportunities are in place to make participation meaningful and effective.

Here's our process. We're really proud of it and really proud of and grateful for the commitment of the young people involved (and for all the fun we had!).

Stage 1 – Pre-Assessment Support

Residential Training:

Approximately six weeks before the assessment process began, we held a residential training weekend where young people completed our accredited "Introduction to Grant-Making" qualification (SCQF Level: 5 SCQF Credit Points: 1 Notional Learning Hours: 10).

The residential experience proved essential for:

- Building Strong Relationships
 - The residential setting allowed young people to form trusting relationships, making them more confident and cohesive as a team when it came to the time for collective decision-making.
 - Spending a couple of days together also fostered trust between the young people and us as facilitators, ensuring they felt supported throughout the assessment process.
- Developing Essential Knowledge and Critical Thinking
 - The training provided a solid foundation in grant-making, covering different models of youth participation, how to apply fund criteria, and critical thinking in decision-making.
 - This ensured young people were fully informed about their role, equipping them with the tools to assess applications effectively.
 - Crucially, we were transparent about, and discussed with them, the level of participation they were engaging in and how it compared to other models of participation in grant-making (see Section 4).

When young people understand, agree with, and take ownership of their role, participation becomes far more meaningful and empowering.



Online training and support

Following the residential, we held an online session to provide deeper insights into the Youth Arts Open Fund. With their training in place, young people were able to ask critical questions and develop a clear understanding of the fund objectives and criteria and through discussion, to decide which of the fund criteria they wanted to apply to ensure that their decisions were made on the basis of their own experience and what they, as young people, considered to be most relevant and important.

The young people chose to focus on three of the fund criteria:

1. The potential impact of the arts opportunity for the young people that would benefit
2. The extent to which the idea for the project was youth-led or would be implemented in a youth-led way.
3. The extent to which the project seemed inclusive

These criteria are quite complex and nuanced so we worked together to develop a shared understanding of what strong and weak examples might look like. At this stage, no applications had been distributed to the young people and it was therefore possible to discuss strong and weak examples without influencing the young people's opinion of any application.



"The freedom we had in making decisions as a group was empowering, and being able to choose our own criteria for assessing applications made a significant difference. It allowed us to tailor the process to what felt most relevant and fair, the support and training provided was great, ensuring that we were well-prepared and confident in our roles."

— Young Person



Stage 2 – Supporting Assessment

When the young people received the applications they would be scoring, we held a further online meeting to familiarise them with the online system for viewing, scoring and commenting on applications and to check that they had everything they needed.

We agreed that they would all score the same five applications and we'd come back together to look at any big differences in individual scoring. (We do this with adult assessors too, it's important for fairness to try to calibrate the interpretation and application of the assessment criteria as far as possible).

We met the following week and discussed the differences that had come up and revisited the criteria and what we would expect to see if they had been met well or poorly. To avoid leading in any way, we did this by generic reference to the criteria and made it clear that no one was expected to change their scores (but they could).

We think this calibration support is a small but really important step in support of meaningful participation and fair, informed decision-making.

As a final step in supporting the young people during the assessment phase we agreed dates and times for optional bi-weekly drop-in support sessions where we would be available online if anyone had questions or needed any kind of support.

We also used our WhatsApp group to provide lots of encouragement and reminders that we were there for support at any point with anything!



“Being a part of the youth arts board was rewarding. I genuinely felt that my input was valued and that my perspectives were considered in the decision-making process. This sense of genuine participation allowed me to feel that I had a real say in things and contributed to the collective goals.”

— Young Person



Stage 3 – Panel Meeting

At the end of the assessment period, we had a two-day residential panel meeting. The purpose of this panel, like any other, was to bring assessors together and make final decisions about awards.

What we're most proud of at this stage is that the young people had already done so much work that we were able to just do what we normally do here for adult panels and just facilitate! The young people made decisions completely autonomously and while panel meetings are always a bit grueling, we only stepped in to give generic advice, to offer methods for addressing deadlock and to keep morale up. We also provided lots of sustenance and energizer activities!!

Sound unexciting? That's because a panel process is where agreement is reached. **Young people should not see applications for the first time at a decision-making meeting. We would never take this approach with an adult panel.**

Young people's participation may be supported by innovative participatory "on-the-day" tech (voting systems etc.) but this don't mean much unless young people have a robust understanding of grant-making generally and of the specific fund they are supporting AND have had access to a significant amount of support leading up to decision-making.

Stage 4 – Ongoing Involvement

Some of the awards that the young people made were conditional on reassurances or further information from the applicant organisations. These conditions were communicated to the applicants by YouthLink Scotland but the decisions as to whether conditions were fully met, were made by the young people in the weeks following the panel meeting.

We're currently planning project visits with the young people. Meaningful participation doesn't end when the hard work is done and the decisions made. **The young people put in so much work and were so supportive of the fund and the projects that they selected for awards that it feels very important (and fair) to facilitate their involvement in seeing the projects come to life.** After all, that's the best bit of grant-making!

The young people also received vouchers in recognition of the time and effort they put into the process.





7. Conclusion:

We hope this case study demonstrates that meaningful youth participation in grant-making is not just about inclusion but about empowering young people through education, support, and building trusting relationships. We hope it shows that when a robust support framework is in place, young people can make informed, equitable funding decisions that benefit their communities. The model we've described underscores the necessity of intentional planning, adequate resources, and long-term engagement to ensure that youth participation is truly impactful. We hope this case study can serve as a blueprint for funders to both recognise tokenistic involvement and to develop participation processes that are genuinely meaningful, where young people are not just participants but partners whose involvement supports the impact of grant-programmes and ultimately the lives of young people in Scotland.

To complement this case study, we have developed "A Typology of Youth Participation in Grant-Making", a practical framework that distinguishes between participation that merely looks good and participation that is truly meaningful.

We hope this typology serves as a guide for funders and stakeholders, helping them design authentic, effective, and impactful youth involvement strategies in grant-making.



"Overall, the combination of decision-making freedom, personalised criteria, and excellent support made the experience truly meaningful, worthwhile and enjoyable."

— Young Person



Appendix:

A Typology of Young People's Participation in Grant-Making:

A structured typology of young people's participation in grant-making, categorising different levels of involvement based on depth, decision-making power, and learning opportunities.

1. Tokenistic Participation

Young people are included for optics rather than meaningful contribution. It looks good and the young people will likely have given up a lot of their time and effort but there is no real substance to their participation. Young people involved in tokenistic participation may learn that participation is a sham.

What does this look like?

- Young people may be involved but have no real decision-making power.
- They may have decision-making power but are not fully trained, supported and informed.
- Supporting adults may influence (often in the form of "advice").

For Example:

- Youth people are invited to contribute to a funding panel but:
 - Have not been supported to understand their role or to be prepared and informed enough to contribute in a meaningful way.
 - Adults are not skilled enough or open enough to give full weight to young people's input
- Young people are tasked with making funding decisions autonomously but:
 - Have not received the training and support required to ensure that they feel confident and equipped to undertake this role and are prepared, knowledgeable and informed enough to make criteria-based decisions that are fair to the applicants.
 - Have not been supported to assess applications ahead of the panel meeting. (The purpose of a panel meeting is to agree decisions as a group. If young people are seeing applications for the first time at a panel meeting this is not meaningful participation.)
 - Those facilitating either consciously or unconsciously influence decision-making. This can occur as a result of poor preparation and support for young people and facilitators stepping in to "help" at the point of decision-making because young people are struggling with the volume and content of applications.

Levels of Engagement, Influence and Opportunity (Young People)

Minimal influence

Symbolic engagement

No learning opportunities

Potential negative learning and outcomes.



2. Consultative Participation

Young people are asked for their opinions but do not influence final funding decisions.

Their perspectives may be gathered through surveys, focus groups, or advisory sessions.

Young people understand the process and that their input will be taken seriously and make a difference.

Adults retain full control over fund allocation.

Examples:

- Young people are invited to help design a fund for other young people that will be run by adults.
- Young people provide recommendations on grant applications, but funders make the final decisions.

Levels of Engagement, Influence and Opportunity (Young People)

Some influence

Input without final say

To be meaningful, this type of participation should be supported by learning opportunities for young people that mean they are fully informed of the purpose and limitations of their input and that mean they are informed and fully equipped to undertake the role.

Level of influence will vary according to capacity and willingness of adults to genuinely engage and take on board young people's opinions.

Considerable risk of becoming tokenistic if adults do not genuinely engage and take on board young people's opinions.

Levels of influence will vary according to the extent to which young people have been supported to understand and undertake the role.

Considerable risk of becoming tokenistic if young people are not fully supported to understand and undertake the role.

Where adults do engage well and young people are fully aware of the limits of their influence this is a legitimate and meaningful form of participation.



3. Collaborative Participation

Young people work alongside adults in assessing applications and making funding decisions.

They receive training and support to understand the grant-making process.

Decision-making is shared, with young people having a defined role in funding allocation.

Example:

- A mixed panel of young and adult assessors' reviews grant applications together.

Levels of Engagement, Influence and Opportunity (Young People)

Shared decision-making

Structured involvement of young people.

Supported by learning opportunities for young people that mean they are fully informed of the purpose and limitations of their input and that mean they are informed and fully equipped to undertake the role.

Level of influence will vary according the capacity and willingness of adults to genuinely engage and take on board young people's opinions.

Considerable risk of becoming tokenistic if adults do not genuinely engage and take on board young people's opinions.

Levels of influence will vary according to the extent to which young people have been supported to understand and undertake the role.

Risk of becoming tokenistic if young people are not fully supported to understand and undertake the role.

Where adults do engage well and young people are fully aware of the limits of their influence this is a legitimate form of participation.

Note: this type of participation requires a lot of commitment, planning and possibly a significant amount of training for the adults involved if young people are to have an equal voice and influence in shared decision-making with adults.



4. Youth-Led Decision-Making

Young people are the primary decision-makers in grant allocation.

They design the criteria, assess applications, and allocate funds with minimal adult intervention.

Requires comprehensive training, long-term mentorship, and structural support.

Examples:

A youth-led funding board controls a specific grant, setting priorities and making final decisions. This may be facilitated by adults but not in any way influenced

It is known that a fund will receive hundreds of applications and be hugely over-subscribed. Adult assessors assess applications from an eligibility technical and financial perspective and pass eligible applications to young people to make final decisions based on criteria that the young people have developed (see YouthLink Scotland case study)

Levels of Engagement, Influence and Opportunity (Young People)

High influence

Independent decision-making

Levels of influence will vary according to the extent of adult intervention.

Risk of tokenism where adult intervention moves beyond facilitation and influences decision-making.

Levels of influence will vary according to the extent to which young people have been supported to understand and undertake the role.

Risk of tokenism and arbitrary/unfair decision-making if young people have not been fully supported to understand and undertake the role.

This type of participation requires a significant commitment of time and resources to ensure young people are fully informed and equipped to make decisions autonomously and in the interests of the fund, the applicants and the young people that will benefit.



5. Fully Youth-Designed and Managed Funding

Young people create and manage the entire grant-making process, from fund design to evaluation.

They advocate for and shape youth-led funding models at a systemic level.

The role of any support organisation is to finance (make funds available).

Example:

A youth-led organisation identifies a need or issues affecting young people; attracts funding; designs the fund model; decides fund objectives and criteria; receives and assesses applications independently; distributes funding and monitors delivery and evaluates impact for their own learning and future iterations of the fund or new funds that they will deliver.

Levels of Engagement, Influence and Opportunity (Young People)

Some influence

Input without final say

Requires institutional commitment to sustained youth leadership and investment in long-term support.

This model is very rare as it requires that there is no pre-determined accountability for specific impact or restrictions on the use of funds from whoever provides the financial input.

It is most likely to occur when young people are fundraising independently and not distributing public money.





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