

LEARNING BRIEFING

# THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH:

A SUMMATIVE LOOK AT SPIRIT OF  
2012'S YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL



**SPIRIT OF 2012**  
INVESTING IN HAPPINESS

## ABOUT THE YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL

Spirit of 2012's (Spirit) Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) was established to ensure that young people were part of the organisation's decision making. From 2015-2021, there were three panel cohorts made up of members from across the UK. The Chair of each Youth Advisory Panel sat on Spirit of 2012's Board as a Director and acted as the link between the Panel and the Board.

In total 31 young people sat on the Youth Advisory Panel between 2015-2021 in three different cohorts: 2015-2016, 2017-2018 and 2019-2021. The final cohort was extended by six months into 2021 to account for disruption during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Panellists were geographically spread throughout the UK, with representation across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Panellists were aged between 18 and 29 years old.

Young people applied to become part of the YAP through an online application form. Accessibility was embedded in the process, with young people given the option to submit their application either by video or in an alternative format appropriate to their needs. Spirit of 2012 selected panellists to achieve a balance between several criteria, including: age; geographical location; passion for Spirit's mission, vision, and funded projects; knowledge and interest in issues affecting young people in their local area and around the country; ability to commit to panel meetings, project visits and wider YAP and Spirit activities, and how much the young person stood to gain by being part of the panel.

## HOW DID THE YAP WORK?

The management of the YAP was supported by Participation People, a delivery partner contracted to oversee recruitment, lead on safeguarding, run a personal development programme for panellists (including regular coaching), and to organise logistics for meetings, including panellists' travel and accommodation. Participation People maintained this role from 2015 through to the Panel's close in 2021.

*Panellists were offered mentors from Spirit staff and Board members to support their work on the YAP, and also to support their personal and professional development.*

A Spirit of 2012 staff member acted as Secretariat to each Panel and liaised regularly with members in between meetings to organise project visits, to invite members to assess grant funding applications, to invite input to programme development discussions, to sit on grant funding interview panels, and to act as ambassador for Spirit at a range of events and roundtables. Panellists were offered mentors from Spirit staff and Board members to support their work on the YAP, and also to support their personal and professional development.

All YAP members received an AQA accreditation for the activities they completed while a member of the Panel.

## WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THE YAP, AND HOW DID THIS WORK IN PRACTICE?

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Spirit of 2012 set up the YAP to deliver four key objectives. Here we provide examples of how the panel achieved these.

### 1. Involve young voices in the fabric of Spirit's decision making

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- The YAP ran three Youth Advisory Panel Challenge Funds, each offering up to £100k to projects responding to a theme or need identified by panellists. Programme ideas were scoped and developed by the YAP with close support from Spirit staff, and the approval of Spirit's Board at the design phase.
- Panel members were consulted on the £1.8m Young Women and Girls: Changemakers funding round in 2016-17. They led the stakeholder consultation session and one member sat on the interview panel. A YAP member has been sitting on the strategic steering group since the successful UK Youth project, EmpowHER, began delivery in 2018.
- Youth Advisory Panellists sat on the steering group and decision-making panel for the DCMS-funded Carers' Music Fund in 2018, and on the interview panel for several applications including Coventry UK City of Culture's Caring City project bid, and the Jo Cox Foundation's Great Get Together proposal.

### 2. Provide young people's perspectives to inform Spirit's operations, programmes, partnerships and communications

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- Panellists represented Spirit at a range of events and workshops, including informal grantee project sessions, training and sharing events run by grantees, and high-profile events such as the British Ethnic Diversity in Sport Awards (BEDSAs) and Spirit's launch event at the House of Lords.
- Several panellists became #iwill ambassadors, which strengthened Spirit's ties with the #iwill Fund beyond its match funder relationship.
- The blog section of Spirit's website is peppered with insights from YAP members responding to external events, or providing their own opinions on themes relating to Spirit's purpose.

### 3. Develop key skills and enhance the employability of panel members through support and training

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- Each panel took part in a residential shortly after young people were appointed, during which they identified their goals, and worked with Spirit on how they would achieve them.
- Throughout their time on the YAP young people were offered coaching sessions with Participation People to help them achieve their personal goals.
- Spirit provided communications and PR training for each Panel to support their work, representing and writing for Spirit. Panellists learned essential grant management and impact-measurement skills, including: programme and funding round scoping and design; grant and funding round communications; grant assessing; impact measurement, and effective evaluation.

### 4. Offer a meaningful voluntary opportunity to young people who might not otherwise step forward

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- Each panel's membership included disabled and non-disabled people, young people with diagnosed mental and physical health conditions and young people, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, and races.
- Participation People and Spirit aimed to recruit young people who faced barriers to participating through partners and networks that worked directly with young people, ensuring that the opportunity was visible and accessible to anyone who was interested. Applicants learned of the opportunity through a mixture of social media, through their colleges, from their mentors or from youth and social workers.
- Spirit aimed to provide young people with a range of opportunities to support its work. Panellists largely agreed that the work they had done for the panel was worthwhile, and that they had learned a great deal from the experience.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Six years, three panels and 31 young people later, Spirit has learned a great deal about how to effectively engage a diverse and committed panel of young people to advise on its work, at the same time upskilling and inspiring the young people who volunteered their time to support us. We have also learned a great deal about what we would do differently if we were to set up another youth panel.

Here are our five lessons learned and recommendations for organisations setting up a youth board or youth advisory panel:

### 1. BE CLEAR ON THE PANEL'S PURPOSE

Spirit worked with its Board in the early days of the organisation's life to agree the purpose of the youth advisory function. Having a commitment to engage with the panel from every level of the organisation meant that panellists were given many opportunities to get involved. The Board held the organisation to account for its work with the YAP, and asked Spirit to record YAP involvement in board papers and highlight it at board meetings. This meant young people were woven in to the fabric of Spirit's decision making. However, one lesson we did learn was that the addition of the YAP Challenge Fund in 2016 caused an unintended shift in the YAP's purpose, and arguably distracted the Panel from other opportunities where their input could have made a significant difference.

*"For other organisations looking to set up a youth advisory panel I think the first thing is to make sure that you've got the intentions and the resources to match it."*

Youth Advisory Panellist 2017-18

### 2. SET IT UP WITH A TEST-AND-LEARN ETHOS

Spirit had six years to test and learn how to engage young people most effectively in its decision making. In that time certain elements of the YAP offer were more successful than others. For example, the mentoring scheme had varying success, and we chose to make this offer optional for the third cohort. By the end of the final cohort, as mentioned above, it was clear that the Challenge Fund often took precedence over other areas of Spirit business. In future, we would recommend prioritising consultation and core programme business above the YAP's Challenge Fund, and ensure capacity is held back for some of the young people to be involved in other Spirit business. Panellists also expressed a desire to interact more with Spirit's Board, both to learn about governance and to be closer to the organisation's decision-making function. This feedback from panellists influenced how Spirit's approach to youth voice evolved in 2021.

*"Be prepared to get some things wrong."*

Youth Advisory Panellist 2015-16

### 3. YOUTH VOICE DOES NOT SIMPLY MEAN 'DO WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY'

Although many of the panellists spoke about enjoying the freedom to make decisions and being empowered to design and create for themselves, it was not as simple as young people making suggestions or decisions and Spirit acting on these. The panellists had to work collaboratively with each other and with Spirit to develop their ideas, and this inevitably meant negotiation and compromise were necessary for both parties. During the design of the YAP Challenge Funds in particular, Spirit had to turn down certain ideas as they did not fit the programme strategy. While the young people's perspectives were genuinely heard and considered, it's important to set expectations with young people on how their input will influence the final product. There is also a need for expectation management on the role of the Chair; namely that their position on the Board is one that represents a collective responsibility, and not that of an individual with a greater or lesser say than the rest of the Board or panel.

*"There were cases and times when – us being young people – we were very empathetic, we maybe kind of lost our way. But it was up to us to bring ourselves back in terms of where we might make that decision, where that money should go."*

Youth Advisory Panellist 2019-21

### 4. EVOLVE ACCORDING TO ORGANISATIONAL NEED

Some of the changes we made along the way were driven by organisational strategy. When recruiting panellists in 2018 we knew that Spirit was likely to have a greater presence in the Midlands in subsequent years through Coventry UK City of Culture in 2021 and Birmingham Commonwealth Games in 2022. We targeted recruitment to these areas, and for the 2019-21 panel we had three representatives living in the West Midlands. The Spirit Secretariat was often influential in deciding who was recruited to the panel, and if we were to recruit again, we would explore more independent recruitment processes and channels.

How the organisation evolves may also prompt you to re-evaluate the purpose of your youth advisory panel. In 2020 as our third cohort neared the end of its term, Spirit opted to recruit alumni of the panel to Spirit's Board rather than recruit another group of panellists. As a spend-out trust we were conscious that opportunities for a dedicated group of young people to feed into Spirit's decision making and programme design would reduce, and so having a YAP would not be as impactful for either

Spirit or the young people. Using our experience of having a young person on the Board, we opened the opportunity up to all previous panellists, and subsequently appointed three young people as Directors.

*"I think my role and the rest of the panel's roles really have a positive impact on Spirit's work. Now, being part of the Board, I can see how the YAP fed into Spirit as an organisation."*

Youth Advisory Panellist 2019-21

## 5. BE REALISTIC ABOUT WHAT CAN BE ACHIEVED WITH THE RESOURCES AT YOUR DISPOSAL

Spirit's decision to hire a delivery partner proved essential to the YAP's smooth running. Delegating responsibility for booking travel, meeting logistics, safeguarding, and coaching meant Spirit staff could concentrate on involving the YAP in organisational matters. Spirit also benefitted from having Participation People's expertise. Their knowledge of youth voice and how to get the best out of young people, as well as their experience of how youth panels are evolving meant Spirit was regularly challenged to consider what might be next for the YAP. This critical friendship proved invaluable as we decided what should come next at each stage of Spirit's journey.

Despite the support of the delivery partner, the administrative nature of the Spirit Secretariat role took more time than we ever could have anticipated. We would recommend factoring in more staff time to administration than you initially think you need.

*"It's not as easy as you think to facilitate decision making amongst other people – whether that involves getting a third-party contractor involved, dedicating members of staff, or dedicating resources and pots of money. Do those things because otherwise you're going to have a process that's not worth anybody's time."*

Youth Advisory Panellist 2019-21

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Spirit of 2012 continues to value the input of young people, and we continue to support projects that centre young voices in their design and delivery. In our final years, Spirit will carry on having young people on its Board to ensure that youth voice is an ongoing priority in the decisions it makes.

**Spirit of 2012 would like to thank Participation People and the 31 young people who supported us through the Youth Advisory Panel since 2015.**