The Young Foundation

Kickstarting careers in research

Lessons from an innovative pilot scheme

July 2022

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Exceutive summary

This report shares the story of The Young Foundation's journey and the learning gained from participating in the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) Kickstart Scheme. This programme, which ran between September 2020 and March 2022, provided funding to create new jobs for 16- to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit at risk of long-term unemployment.

As it draws to a close, we share our reflections and recommendations as a social research organisation navigating the scheme, and the routes taken to provide effective and enduring support to young people entering the workforce.

Situated within the wider context of tackling employment and social inequality, core to the mission of The Young Foundation, our desire to be involved in the programme reflects three key drivers:

- **The UK context of youth unemployment.** Diversity and place-based inequalities are inherent barriers preventing young people from finding 'good' work. With many of these inequalities compounded by Covid-19, the opportunity afforded by Kickstart to act was one we could not miss.

- **The lack of diversity within the research profession.** With the Social Research Association (SRA), in 2021, The Young Foundation published a ground-breaking report into diversity in the social research sector. Acutely aware that the profession has not gone far enough to create accessible routes in, the Kickstart scheme provided the opportunity to go on our own journey as an organisation – incorporating recommendations from that study into our day-to-day practices.

- **A desire to develop best practices in participatory research.** The Young Foundation has been at the forefront of developing best practice in training Kickstarters and developing community researcher-led projects. Over the past few years, we have established and grown a national Peer Research Network alongside an NCFE Level 2 Award in Peer Research. Kickstart provided a learning ground to build and test this knowledge supported by the expertise of the young Kickstarters.

Critical to our approach was the aim of considering personal and professional development support (beyond the definition of the Kickstart Scheme ; the programme enabled young people to develop the skills, experience and confidence to do well in their research placement, but also to put that into effect in finding future employment. Additional funding from the Youth Futures Foundation and Mohn Westlake Foundation enabled us to provide an appropriate level of support and training, as well as pay the young people at Living Wage Foundation rates.

Between May and October 2021, we employed three cohorts of Kickstarters. Cohorts 1 and 2 started three weeks apart and were brought together as one group after the initial training period. In total, 14 young people were employed through the scheme during this period. Although this report focuses on the experience and learning of the first two cohorts, The Young Foundation has since recruited and trained cohort 3. Cohort 3 started in January 2022 and will finish July 2022, with a further eight trainee researchers involved, bringing the total to 22 across the programme.

During and after the placement, we collected feedback from our Kickstarters on their skills and wellbeing, as well as reflections on the programme and their personal journey. We found that our approach generated significant value to the individuals involved, in the research developed, and for us as an organisation.

Of course, this is not to say we got everything right. Our experience with Kickstart has exposed clear flaws in the way the scheme was developed by the DWP, as well as drawbacks in how we implemented our placement – both have limited some of the value that could have been created. Within this report, we have summarised some of the key lessons learned, what we would do again, and where we would make changes.

While the Kickstart Scheme was not perfect, it provided a rare and valuable opportunity to support young people into employment, and to test and learn how to do this in sectors they might not have otherwise considered or had the opportunity to work in. For those looking to fund or run similar employment programmes (research-themed or otherwise), we hope our learnings and reflections will provide a useful base upon which to build.

As for The Young Foundation, we continue our journey in expanding who gets the chance to work in research through:

- our third (and final) Kickstart cohort, who started in January 2022. With this group, we are looking to embed our learning, and share further reflections.
- rolling out our Level 2 Award in Peer Research, accredited by NCFE, so any peer researcher (whether working with The Young Foundation or another organisation) can be recognised for the knowledge and skills they have developed through their practice.
- expanding our Peer Research Network, creating a UK-wide pool of trained and accredited peer researchers and sharing future job opportunities with them via our Network.

Methodology

This evaluation followed a mixed methods approach pulling together evidence from a number of strands. The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. **Is the programme meeting the needs of the participants?**

Reflecting on the context of young people and employment this draws together an understanding of the need for the programme, exploring how the scheme has plugged challenges and gaps in young people's journey to sustainable employment.

This question is two-fold:

- First, what are the challenges facing young people in accessing employment and which young people are particularly in need of support?
- Second, is the programme reaching the young people in particular need? Is it supporting them in overcoming the challenges they face in relation to employment?

2. How well is the programme being delivered?

- From the perspective of the Kickstarter's, The Young Foundation delivery team and the quality of the research produced, how effectively has the programme been delivered?

- What are the learnings going forward and how have these learnings been implemented into the design and delivery of the programme for cohort 3?

3.What has changed as a result of the programme?

- What has changed in the lives of the Kickstarters who have taken part in the scheme in terms of a) their technical, professional and soft skills, b) in terms of their confidence, goals and aspirations, and c) in their longer-term employment and/or training status?

- What value has the research delivered brought to the social research sector?

- What has changed in the way The Young Foundation team operates as a result of the programme learnings? Although this was not an initial research question, exploration of what has changed for the Kickstarter's and research delivered additionally highlighted a number of changes to the Young Foundation's internal workings.

4. **Does the training and benefit from the programme stick?**

- Exploring the sustainability of the scheme, to what extent do the benefits of the programme – including the training and access to employment opportunities - sustain after the scheme has been delivered?

This evaluation was conducted three months following the delivery of the programme and so can only speak to the sustainability in the short-term after the end of the scheme.

Our hope was also to gain feedback from the Youth Futures Foundation and their Future Voices Group but this was not possible.

Summary of approach

This methodology was developed in close collaboration with Youth Futures Foundation and the internal Kickstart delivery team. A separate evaluation team within The Young Foundation was set-up in tangent to those working on the Kickstart programme, to lead on the evaluation design and delivery, providing an independent and transparent process for the evaluation, while working flexibly to gather evidence and lessons learnt. Effort was made to ensure the Kickstarter's own voices were central to the evaluation, with reflective workshops conducted early on in the process allowing Kickstarters to set the parameters of the evaluation. However, there were limitations and points for future opportunity that must be acknowledged:

- Given the unique and particular journey each Kickstarter took through the scheme, evaluating their collective experience brought up a tension point around the balance of collective vs personal voice. Particularly given the significance of mental health as central to many of the young people's experience of the scheme, we felt a strong need to reflect the personal voice of the participants, alongside traditional thematic analysis.

- We originally intended to do further work with the Kickstarters to fully co-produce the evaluation, taking the opportunity to reflect together on the use and limitations of current standardised methods of evaluating youth employment, including the role of creative methods in enabling young people to have a voice about their experience and to understand any ripple effects. However time constraints on the overall programme, and the need to complete research reports within the time parameters reduced Kickstarters' capacity to undertake this reflection.

The following table describes the key sets of data collected and used in this evaluation:

Data source	**Detail**

Interviews	• Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all members of Young Foundation staff who were heavily involved in the day to day planning, design and delivery of the Kickstart scheme.
	• Interviews took place between November 2021 and January 2022.
	• Interviews explored:
	  ◦ Background to the programme
	  ◦ Aims
	  ◦ Implementation and adaptation
	  ◦ Impact
	  ◦ Challenges and development

Reflective workshops	• Three reflective workshops were conducted with Kickstarters in November 2021. In total eleven of the sixteen Kickstarters were able to attend reflective sessions. • Kickstarters were split into small groups, of up to four, with those they felt most comfortable working with. Advice was taken from project leads on setting up workshop groups. • The aim of the workshops was to provide a space for Kickstarters to reflect on their experience, what they had learnt, what they had found challenging, what they wanted to take away and what they wished had been done differently. • Workshops centred on storytelling, using the with the prompt – 'What was your first 6 months like as a social researcher? Tell us about your journey.' This allowed facilitators and Kickstarters alike to complete the prompt, levelling the space.

River of Life	• Following the workshop each Kickstarter was asked to produce a modified 'river of life' mapping their journey into and through the placement. • 13 of the 16 Kickstarters completed their river. • River of life is an arts-based visual mapping tool which encourages participants to take the lead in telling their story as they express a narrative through drawing. Alongside their drawings participants were asked to note down captions, explaining key details and emotions at each point. • Although most participants used a digital drawing tool, exceptions were made to allow participants to use the tool they felt most comfortable with. This included a voice-note recording explaining the journey taken.
Follow-up survey	• Three months after completing the placement, Kickstarters were asked to complete a survey to understand the impact of the placement on future employment. • The survey included a qualitative reflection on the experience through head, heart, hand followed by a series of questions on training outcomes and their current experience of the job market. • Kickstarters were paid for their time completing the survey. In total 11 of the 16 completed the form.
Monitoring data collected by the internal team	• Completion of a WEMWBS survey every two months while on their placement • Skillsbuilder completed at the beginning and end of their placement with the results informing goals set in their one-to-one meetings

In her own words: Amelia's story

As a graduate, I was full of hope and optimism that I would be able to find a job by Christmas, but this was not to be. I entered the job market in the middle of a pandemic and during one of the 'worst jobs crises since The Great Depression'. Living in Bradford, where the unemployment rate is higher than the national average and opportunities for social research positions are few and far between, I faced challenges.

Overcoming limitations

As a woman with disabilities, one of which greatly impacts my mobility and vulnerability to Covid-19, there were limitations on the types of positions I could go for. Despite applying for Universal Credit, I still struggled. The jobs I applied for would either not get back to me or reject me, and if I got through to the interview stage it was very clear that I was not who they were looking for.

The North-South divide is something we hear a lot of in commentary surrounding social mobility and employment, and I felt this divide keenly as I searched for social research positions; as my work coach and I soon came to realise, most research positions are in London. Some discussed remote working but included the caveat that this was not a permanent option and instead a short-term solution as a result of the pandemic. Furthermore, most opportunities were for a senior researcher, and no matter how much I wished I were, I was not. How do you become a senior researcher if you are struggling to even get a foothold on the research ladder?

The shift online

I entered the new year unemployed and becoming quite despondent with the process. My work coach was very rarely suggesting roles to me, and I was beginning to lose hope of ever finding a role that was either remote working or close enough to where I lived that I could reach it in a reasonable timeframe. It felt unfair to me that even though I had my degrees, and the passion to become involved, I was prevented from entering research due to the North-South divide. It felt almost ironic that, in order to study the social disadvantages that people face, I needed not to be inhibited by such disadvantages.

My feelings of despondency had grown. I began to give up hope of getting into research, and focused almost entirely on roles that would be considered ‘low skilled labour’.

A new (kick)start

It was then that something positive occurred. I was assigned a new work coach and almost immediately she had found me a handful of roles that I could perform very easily as they were almost entirely online, and were also a part of the Kickstart Scheme, which meant my limited experience would not hamper me. And among these roles, one of them was a research position. I applied to them all, but paid significant attention to the role in research, keeping my fingers crossed that this could be my chance. This was my gateway into research.

Chapter 1: Why Kickstart?

Why Kickstart?

The Covid-19 pandemic brought a sudden end to the gradual improvement in the unemployment picture across the UK since the 2012 unemployment peak. Young people in particular have taken the brunt of economic shifts, with youth employment dropping by 8.7% in 2020 compared to 3.7% for older adults[i], leaving 260,000 fewer young people in work as of February 2021 than when the crisis began[ii].

The pandemic has intensified the trend towards increased polarisation in the youth labour market between high and low-skill jobs, leading to fewer 'stepping stone' mid-skill jobs and more young people in insecure and part-time work[iii]. Reduced training opportunities have hampered young people's potential to access 'good' work - defined in a Health Foundation report as 'meaningful employment, offering fair reward for work done with opportunities for progression'. Today, more young people than ever feel at a loss as to how to enter the workforce . Effective and sustainable policy interventions are vital to prevent today's young people entering the workforce becoming the so-called 'lost generation'[iv].

Utilising the Government's Kickstart Scheme, The Young Foundation has sought to shift the narrative. Providing young people with 'good' work, The Young Foundation aimed to pilot an approach to redressing imbalances not just across the workforce but particularly within the social research sector, providing young people traditionally excluded from this field with 'a foot in the door'.

1.1 Covid-19, youth unemployment, and the need for 'good work'.

Prior to Covid-19, youth unemployment rates across the UK had steadily been in decline. Up until February 2020, the picture was increasingly positive, with a year-on-year reduction of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) since the 2012 peak, suggesting a gradual recovery from the financial crisis of the early 2010s[v].

The economic implications of the pandemic brought this gradual rise to a swift end:

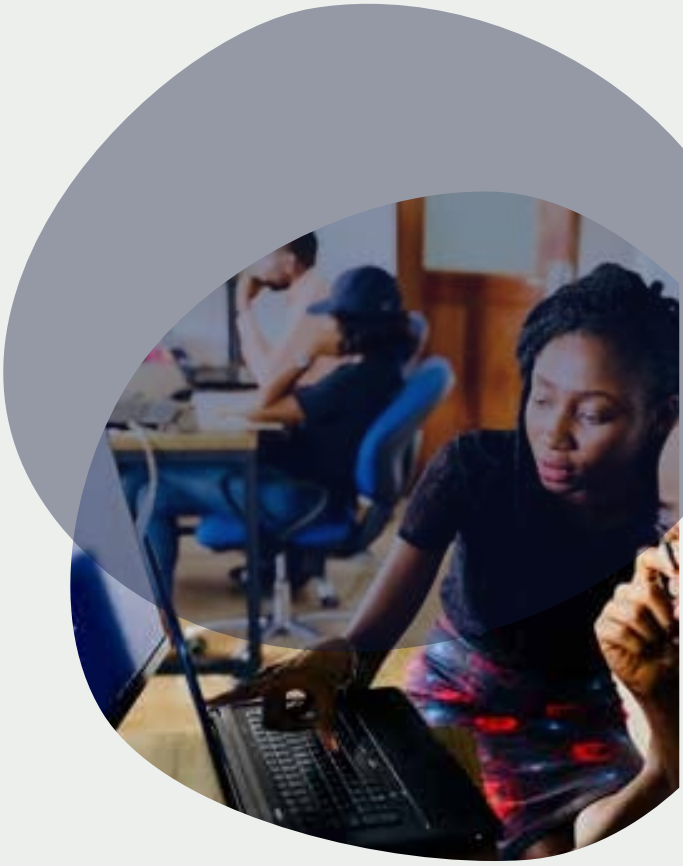
- There were 260,000 fewer young people in work as of February 2021 than when the crisis began.[vi]
- Within one month after a national lockdown was declared in March 2020, the number of 18- to 24-year-olds claiming unemployment related benefits rose by 59%.[vii]

Young people from an ethnic minority background have been disproportionately impacted by the effects of Covid-19 on the employment sector:

- Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be unemployed as a result of the pandemic than their white counterparts. The fall in employment rates has been four times greater for young Black people than for young white people and nearly three times greater for young Asian people than for young white people[viii].
- Despite accounting for just one eighth of the total young people in work, Black and Asian young people have accounted for two thirds of the total fall in youth employment during the pandemic[ix].

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the employment of young people, particularly young people of colour, can largely be attributed to the sectors in which they were employed before the pandemic[x]. These sectors include - but are not limited to - food and hospitality, care, leisure, and retail. Not only are these sectors affected significantly by the pandemic, but studies also indicate they will be the slowest to 'bounce back', meaning young people are likely to continue to bear the brunt of the economic crisis'[xi].

Regional differences in youth unemployment across the UK must also be considered. While London and the Southeast saw the most significant rise in numbers claiming Universal Credit over the course of the pandemic, overall levels of youth unemployment remain highest outside these regions[xii].



Out-of-work claims for Universal Credit among young people are one and half times higher than the national average in 34 local authorities with coastal towns, such as Blackpool and Thanet, and areas experiencing high deprivation prior to the pandemic, such as Burnley and Wolverhampton, continue to show the highest rates of youth unemployment[xiii].

Particularly significant is the rise not just of youth unemployment, but of long-term unemployment, which is defined as being out of employment for at least 12 months (OECD, 2021). This has significant consequences, particularly when experienced early in a person's career.

- Between February 2020 and September 2021, the DWP saw a 195% increase in the level of 16- to 24-year-olds claiming universal credit for over 12 months while in search of employment[xiv].

- Statistics also indicate 170,000 young people were left unemployed for at least six months as of October 2021[xv].

- Young people with a health condition or disability and young parents are more likely to be among the group experiencing longer-term unemployment [xvi] demonstrating demographic inequalities at the heart of the unemployment experience.

Evidence suggests long-term unemployment has 'multiple scarring effects', not just temporarily impacting career and wellbeing prospects but often impacting in later life[xvii].

- Studies suggest being unemployed when young significantly increases the chances of lower wages throughout a person's career, with one suggesting spells of unemployment reduce wages by 14% when re-entering the workforce compared to what they would have received had they been employed for that period[xviii].

- Evidence also highlights impacts on health, the development of soft skills, and feelings of self-worth, with long-term unemployment leading to an increased expectation of future unemployment or lower-quality work[xix].

The Work and Learning Institute estimates the long-running scarring cost for young people entering the labour market in 2021 alone will total of £14.4bn over the next seven years[xx]. Hence, early unemployment can have significant implications for governments reducing later life tax payments as well as increasing welfare payments[xxi]. Early estimates indicate a £2.9bn fiscal loss in 2022 as a result of lower tax income and higher benefit pay-outs[xxii].

Access to 'good work'

The Covid-19 pandemic heightened young people's inability not only to access employment, but particularly to access 'good work'. Some 62% of young people aged 16 to 24 surveyed by The Health Foundation[xxiii] feel the pandemic has made it harder to find high-quality work.

'Good work' is defined in the Health Foundation report as meaningful employment, offering fair reward for work done with opportunities for progression. Further, 'good work' enhances young people's aspirations for work, setting them up with a positive early experience that drives future goals and experiences in the workplace[xxiv].

When asked, young people indicated they value work that is stimulating, looks after their wellbeing, and allows them to grow both personally and professionally. Nearly a third (29%) said the most important factor in ensuring a job was 'good work' was being interesting and fulfilling, while a further 21% said the most important factor was that the role was in their preferred sector[xxv].

There are several barriers to good work that are experienced by young people, including those that Covid-19 has compounded:

- **Precarious employment.** Among young people who are currently employed, many are in precarious forms of employment, either working on short term contracts, 'zero-hours' contracts, or paid low wages. Between April and June 2020, 10.8% of employed young people were on 'zero-hours' contracts, making them the largest proportion of workers employed on these terms[xxvi]. This precarity perpetuates the anxiety and uncertainty experienced by young people.
- **Declining mental health**. Anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns ranked as the top factors when asked about barriers to progressing in the workplace[xxvii]. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many young people have reported an impact on their confidence and wellbeing: 62% stated the pandemic impacted their confidence when it came to work[xxviii]. This has implications, not just for their ability to access work, but also on the type of work young people end up in. A decline in confidence is linked to a reduction in aspirations in the workplace.

Some 42% of young people said their motivation to apply for opportunities had been impacted either 'a lot' or 'a great deal' by the Covid-19 pandemic[xxix]. Declines in confidence were noted more significantly among those from an ethnic minority background.

- **Today's graduates.** Despite 2020 seeing the highest number of young people in education, with a higher education entry rate increasing to 37% from 34% in 2019, the Resolution Foundation predicts the employment rate of today's graduates will be 13% lower in three years' time than it would have been without the pandemic[xxxii].

1.2 Barriers to entering the social research sector

Despite being sectors that frequently, explicitly aim to tackle social inequalities - and that often battle to re-define policy based on community needs - the social research and charity sectors continue to be challenged by issues around representation and accessibility.

In 2021, the Social Research Association commissioned The Young Foundation to undertake ground-breaking research into diversity in the social research sector, which found that on almost every indicator, the more marginalised or minoritised characteristics are part of someone's identity (for example, being from an ethnic minority background, female and disabled), the harder their experience of professional life.

It also showed 'social researchers from minority ethnic backgrounds report poorer experiences than white researchers on almost every indicator of diversity and inclusion.' Particularly in relation to belonging, social researchers from an ethnic minority background reported they are 'less likely to feel emotionally and socially supported at work. They are also less likely to feel comfortable at work, and more likely to have experienced most forms of discriminatory and exclusionary behaviour'. [xxxiii].

According to the 2018 UK Civil Society Almanac[xxxiv] just 9% of the charity sector is 'non-white', compared to 12% of the private sector and 11% of the public sector[xxxv].

This is despite evidence presenting a strong 'business case' for increased diversity in the workplace: data suggests that gender and ethnically diverse organisations are more likely to outperform competitors by 15% and 35% respectively[xxxvi]. Key aspects of this include talent attraction and retention, enhanced corporate reputation, and the ability to provide better products or services[xxxvii].

The diversity in social research report additionally found challenges facing people with disabilities. One person reported feeling as though "Disabled people aren't welcome in social research, because as researchers, we research them rather than them being a part of research … you know, the haves researching the have nots". (The Young Foundation, Sept 2021)

A disproportionate number of social research jobs are based in London, meaning those who do not live in London or the surrounding areas are faced with additional challenges of having to relocate. For many the associated cost, given the relatively low entry-level salary a social researcher can expect, makes relocation a near impossibility, ruling out many of the few opportunities available. Despite Covid-19 enforcing a move to remote working, many charity organisations now require regular travel into the office or have indicated remote working will only be temporary. [1]

Unlike the worlds of finance, law or consulting, there are few formal graduate schemes offered to gain entry-level positions in the charity sector or into social research. Even in the few competitive UK schemes that exist - such as Charityworks or the Civil Service fast stream - the graduate often has little say in the type of work, policy or sub-sector they may end up in. For those who have not chosen the university path, there are even fewer formal routes available. Although The Young Foundation stopped its own practice of unpaid internships in 2014, many entry-level positions in the sector remain unpaid internships, ruling the option out for many young people who need to support themselves. Others rely on finding time to complete charity sector volunteering in order to get 'a foot in the door', and this is another luxury that many young people across the UK cannot afford[xxxviii].

[1] For example, of almost 3,573 jobs advertised on CharityJob.co.uk in early May 2022, 1,908 were advertised as 'on-site', with only 377 fully remote (and the remainder hybrid). While many such roles do indeed require on-site work (eg support workers, shop managers), it also included dozens of roles in fundraising, social media, administration, data analysis, finance and so on.

1.3 The Young Foundation and Kickstart

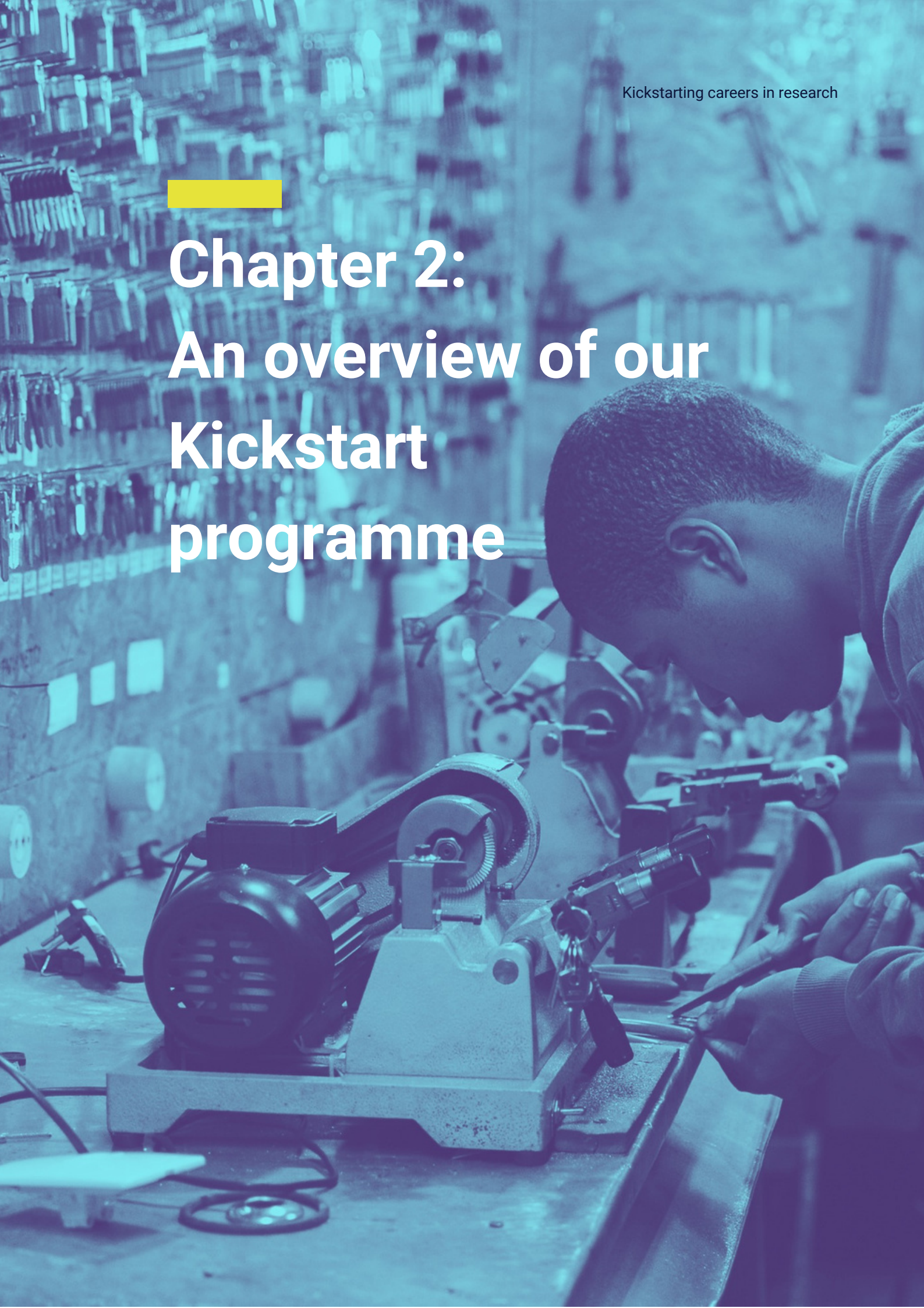
At the core of The Young Foundation's work is a belief in and commitment to including the excluded. In line with our ethos of 'working with' rather than 'working for', the need for an inclusive and diverse workforce is paramount. Utilising the framework offered by the DWP Kickstart Scheme, The Young Foundation aimed to directly respond to many of the challenges laid out in this chapter, building new opportunities for young people.

Over the past few years, The Young Foundation has invested in growing our Peer Research Network, raising the methodology's profile, and strengthening the evidence-base on best practice in peer research. Alongside the development of The Young Foundation's Kickstart offer, we launched a Level 2 Award in Peer Research, accredited by NCFE, allowing those who work and train as peer researchers to gain formal recognition of their skills.

The Kickstart Scheme sits within this wider context at The Young Foundation; it provided a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between traditional peer research approaches (typically short-term and part-time) and forms of more intensive and longer-term training that serve as a gateway into sustained employment.

Overall, our adoption of the scheme aimed to:

- provide a 'good work' opportunity, giving young people the chance to gain new and transferable skills, boosting their confidence in the workplace and their employability.
- give young people a space to develop experience working in social research and the third sector, providing a route otherwise inaccessible to so many.
- test ways of working, considering to adapt and change how we operate as an employer to ensure success for both the young people and us as an organisation.
- generate useful and meaningful research on topics of importance to young people, shaped by them and with their perspectives at the heart.
- share our learning about this kind of programme widely, with a particular emphasis on those sectors in which we have a strong voice.



Chapter 2: An overview of our Kickstart programme

Timeline

May 21 | June 21 | July 21 | Aug 21 | Sept 21 | Oct 21

Training

- Introductory training
- Interviewing skills, desk based reseach
- Liasing with commissioners, recruiting participants
- Managing projects, designing outputs

Career support

- Linked in, local networking

- Application support

Research

- Practice Sprint: Covid-19
- Sprint 2: experiences in employment
- Sprint 3: fatphobia, racism and financial literacy

Our Kickstarters

Our Kickstarters were recruited in two cohorts. Cohort one began in May 2021 with seven young people and cohort 2 joined in June 2021 as a group of seven. In total 38% of Kickstarters identify as male and 62% as female. Coming from a range of backgrounds, geographies and lived experiences, the young people recruited represent a myriad of people across England.

Illustration by Disha Das and Miraal Azhar

Projects

The Kickstart programme was broken down into three phases or 'sprints'.

Sprint 1

The first project, fondly coined the 'pancake project' (in recognition of the fact that the first one is never perfect and it's important to season the pan), provided the Kickstarters with the opportunity to develop their research skills without the pressure of having to publish the findings externally. This meant they could make mistakes while practising and developing new skills.

Sprint 2

The second projects were co-commissioned by the Youth Futures Foundation's Future Voices group who acted as young commissioners. These projects focused on experiences of employment and allowed the Kickstarters to gain a better understanding of what a research journey looks like when responding to an external client.

Young people, ADHD, and employment: This project explores young people's experiences with ADHD and their transition from education to employment. By speaking to young people with diagnosed and undiagnosed ADHD, their research uncovers the challenges young people with ADHD face including negative stereotyping, a lack of tailored support in the workplace, and an often slow and unsupported route to a diagnosis. Read the full report here.

LGBTQ+ Young people's experience in employment 2021: This project explores experiences of young LGBTQ+ people both in seeking employment and once in the workplace. Through collecting the stories of 20 18- to 25-year-olds in UK, the report highlights the challenges and fear of discrimination faced by many LGBTQ+ people in the workplace. Read the full findings and recommendations here.

Sprint 3

The third projects were decided upon by the Kickstarters themselves, allowing them to explore topics of personal importance to them and their peers. Given that the first two sprints were more directive, this sprint allowed them to own their research projects from inception to completion. The Kickstarters were unafraid to push the boundaries with their research ideas. Topics were:

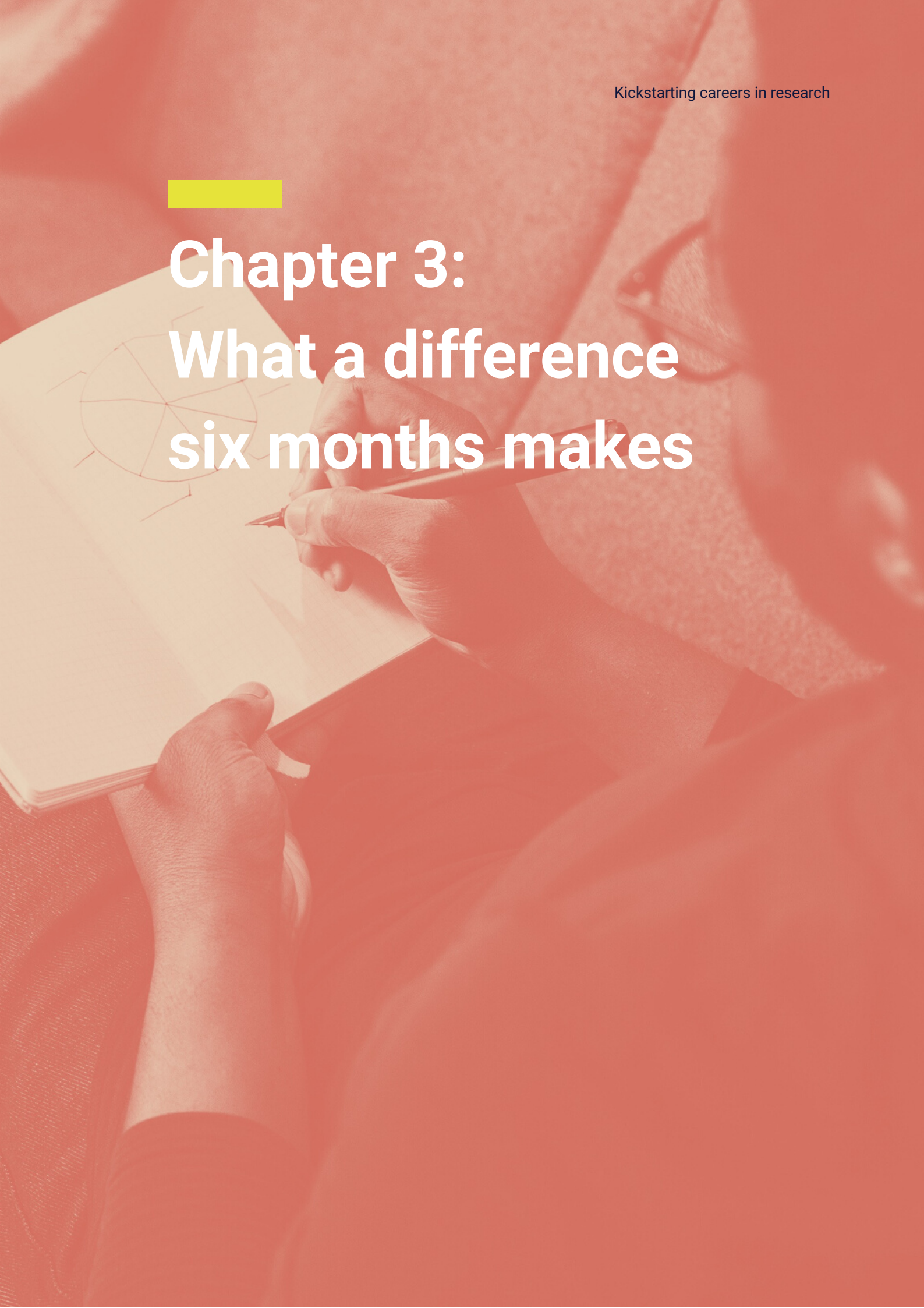
Young adults and financial literacy: Drawing on existing research which highlights the disadvantage many young people face when it comes to financial literacy and personal finances the research explored the experiences of 18–25-year-olds moving away from home, entering the job market, and managing a budget for the first time. Read the full report here.

Racism on social media: Inspired by personal experiences, in this report Kickstarters share accounts from 18- to 25-year-olds from ethnic minority backgrounds describing the role of social media in perpetuating racism. The report explores the ineffectiveness of online reporting, the need for education, and the personal impacts receiving online abuse can have. Read the full findings and recommendations here.

Fatphobia: This report was also inspired by a small group of Kickstarters who had either directly experienced fatphobia or had seen it experienced by others and wanted to bring light to a topic they felt was easily misunderstood. The report explores young people's experiences of fatphobia across their life course including socially and medically. Read the full report here.

Funding

The Kickstart Scheme was subsidised by the government which provided a minimum wage salary for 25 hours a week for each Kickstarter. Additional funding was provided by the Youth Futures Foundation and the Mohn Westlake Foundation, which allowed The Young Foundation to top up wages to the Living Wage Foundation rates, and to employ a full-time manager to train and support the Kickstarters pastorally. The additional funding received from both partners was critical to enabling us to deliver at the intended scale and with the desired level of training and support.



Chapter 3: What a difference six months makes

What a difference six months makes

"We all went on a journey, and we all got something out of it"

- Cohort 1 Kickstarter

Fundamental to the aims of the Kickstart Scheme is to upskill, train and build the professional confidence of young people who had previously struggled to gain long-term employment. Framed around The Young Foundation's peer research skills framework (publication forthcoming), the Kickstarters were trained to develop research and essential skills including:

- communication skills
- technical research skills
- research and project management skills
- personal and professional effectiveness skills

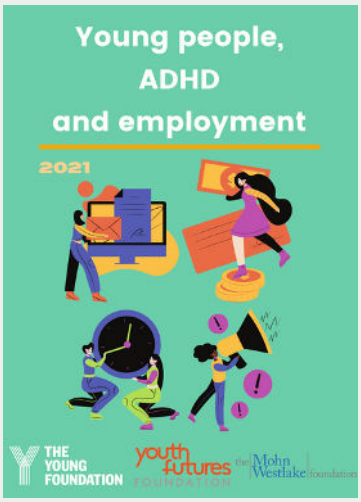
Over the course of the six-month placement, The Young Foundation measured changes in Kickstarters' communication skills as well as their attitude towards the future and their wellbeing. There were clear and significant improvements in confidence, communication skills, technical research skills and attitudes towards their personal and professional abilities which demonstrated the placement 'value add' on the young people's skills.

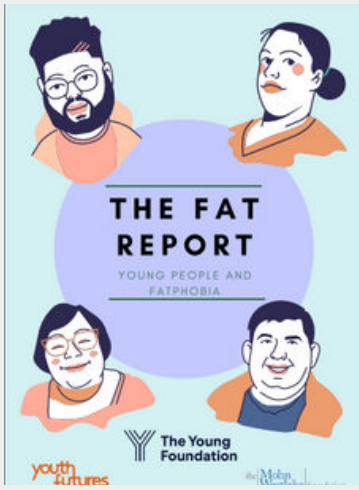
3.1 Communication skills

Collaboration and communication are core skills developed through peer research training. Looking holistically at workplace skills, collaboration and communication are defined as key transferable skills relevant and beneficial to all forms of employment (Hossam, 2021). When asked 'what one thing will you remember from your kickstart experience', 50% of Kickstarters related their reply to gaining "valuable communication skills" and cross-team collaboration skills.

Accessible communication was at the core of the Kickstarters' interests. Acutely aware of the inaccessibility of research, the group took it upon themselves to ensure the reports they published were accessible to a variety of audiences, particularly the young people who had contributed their time and shared their stories. Utilising the gov.uk accessibility framework, each peer research report used large sized text, bold images, and eye-catching design. Unnecessary jargon was also removed, and definitions were added into reports where appropriate, with one report even laying out a key terminology page. Drawing on their personal experiences, Kickstarters were able to build their communications expertise, learning how to produce outputs appropriate for a range of audiences.

Testament to the improvement in their external presentation skills, one member of staff at The Young Foundation said: *"When I look at the recruitment materials, and what they've put out with very little steer and direction from us, I think it just goes to show that all of that [communication] learning was there. That was a real moment where [they said] 'yes, we've co-produced things up to now but this is our time to really fly'."*





3.2 Technical research and management skills

The structure of the scheme meant Kickstarters were taken on a journey, initially trained in the basics of how to undertake research design and delivery, before conducting three research projects where they took on increasing levels of responsibility. One Kickstarter compared the experience to a new-born learning to walk explaining she *"barely knew what research was"* when starting and now felt as though she could *"walk on her own for at least 10 minutes"*.

When mapping their collective journey, cohort two spoke of sprint 1 as where they learned how to use research tools as well as the background of participatory research. Sprint 2 saw a heavier focus on elements such as literature review and navigating funder relationships, while sprint 3 was where *"all the knowledge came together, feeding into this concluding project"*.

"I met a lot of new people, and learned a lot about helping communities, as well as fleshing out some skills that are useful all round - like transcribing."

By the end of the placement:

- 100% of Kickstarters reported feeling 'quite confident' or 'very confident' doing ethical research and reporting their research findings.
- 91% reported feeling 'confident' storing data correctly.
- 91% reported feeling 'confident' in analysing qualitative data.
- 82% of reported feeling' confident' explaining different research methods.

"Many of the experiences referenced by the Kickstarters as adding particular value to their research skills were afforded through the projects commissioned by the Youth Futures Foundation und team and three Future Voice Group members – paid youth ambassadors who were trained in co-commissioning research for this project.

Working with an external funder was a valuable experience for the Kickstarters. Noticing the complexity of the funding sector, they explained how valuable it was to navigate challenges that arose in relation to external targets, such as meeting funder timelines and marrying competing priorities.

During reflection sessions, the Kickstarters agreed that the experience was a *"really interesting insight into a totally different world"*, providing them with technical research experience from all angles of a research project. Some also explained that direct feedback from the funder helped clarify expectations of research and improved their ability to understand how projects related to a wider context and wider set of organisational ambitions.

Transitioning across the three sprints allowed the Kickstarters to develop their research management skills. Reflecting on the project, their line manager emphasised the Kickstarters' increasing independence across the scheme commenting, *"just before sprint 3 started I went to them with a plan to ask them to think about their final research topics and split into groups... And they'd already done it! They came into the session like 'okay, so we want to do this, this and this and so I just had to rework the whole session [..] because they were a step ahead already"*.

By sprint 3, the Kickstarters had taken ownership of the process, dividing up the planning and allocating tasks to develop and conduct the research. This allowed them to test skills around time management and independent working that they had built through the earlier stages of the programme. The Kickstarters' increasing ability to manage research processes relate to the wider core skills needed in a workplace, particularly understanding and breaking down a task, working in a team, managing expectations, and managing deadlines. These wider transferable skills are crucial, helping young people keep up with the *"lightning pace"* of today's workplace.

3.3 Personal and professional effectiveness

"I think the political aim of the Kickstart programme, as it says on the tin, is supporting people who are far away from the employment marketplace into a really solid induction … a six-month induction into the world of work."
Senior member of The Young Foundation's team

When developing peer researcher training, The Young Foundation recognised early on the intertwining nature of personal and professional development. Although the Kickstart scheme as laid out by the DWP focuses on building professional skills, the internal team recognised it is impossible to divorce the two and ensured holistic support was provided in relation to Kickstarters' wellbeing needs throughout the programme.

A shift in self-confidence was the most consistent reflection from Kickstarters. Each noted that taking part in the scheme had significantly boosted their confidence, taking them on a journey from feeling "deflated", "lost" and at a "dead end" to now feeling "hopeful", "excited" and "knowledgeable about what they wanted for their own lives". Of taking part in the placement, one Kickstarter said they felt *"more confident in my new and existing abilities"*, with another explaining it made them feel *"very good and far more confident"*.

The Kickstarters' collective reflections on their research journey (through a 'River of Life' activity, see methodology) reflected a growth in confidence from a personal perspective, highlighting how the role changed their self-belief, showing them just how much they could do and achieve.

Many spoke of Sprint 2 as a "turning point" in their confidence. Some reflected that "after the interviews [in Sprint 1] went fine, I could be more confident and felt like I knew what I was doing". Several Kickstarters highlighted the strength that came from overcoming the challenges in Sprint 1, realising that they could "do it". Many attributed their increased confidence to having gained a practical understanding of what research was, saying they felt they were getting to grips with the concept and beginning to understand how to approach a research project.

3.4 Greater civic engagement

Many of the Kickstarters highlighted that the placement had generated a desire within them to *"want to be heard"*. A number explained the placement had shown them they were passionate about *"important topics"* and that the work had given them the communication skills to articulate their concerns and beliefs to the people around them.

The programme aimed to support young people to find value in their own voice. Reflecting on her ambitions for the programme, one senior lead at The Young Foundation explained *"we wanted it to feel really genuine [...] and for the young people to both feel as though they have a voice themselves, but also can reach out to huge numbers of young people in their networks [..] I think it presented an opportunity in terms of hearing about the issues that are really important to young people"*.

Kickstarters reflected that the opportunity afforded them the chance to hear from people their age they otherwise would never have spoken to. Cohort 2 collectively spoke of the opportunity *"opening their minds up to new perspectives"*, highlighting that hearing their peers voice opinions on challenging or personal topics during interviews encouraged them to feel empowered to do the same. Not only did the placement allow Kickstarters to learn about important issues that mattered to them but also provided a comfortable space to gain confidence learning to articulate opinions on issues they cared about: *"It felt rewarding. I was able to develop new skills while educating myself around topics that I don't usually get to discuss in my everyday life."*

In this way, the communication skills gained by Kickstarters had a dual purpose; not only helping boost their career development but also giving many a stronger sense of identity, voice, and strength in their community – and a greater desire to contribute and be heard.

A desire to carve out space for their opinions to be heard is something many of the Kickstarters have continued, with 55% of those in our cohorts reporting that they engaged in social action in the three months after completing their placement. For two of the Kickstarters this included LQBTQ+ campaigning, for one youth work volunteering, and for another disability activism. Although some explained this was something they had done prior to their Kickstart role, many noted the particular influence their peer research experience had on either getting involved in social action or increasing their level of engagement.

Getting involved in disability activism since her placement, one young person explained, "I wanted to be more involved pre-Kickstart but did not have the confidence to be involved fully. I am slowly becoming more vocal/active in this space".

3.5 'A foot in the door'

"I feel much more confident in my skills as a researcher. I also feel accomplished as I have managed to kickstart my career in research"

One of the most significant successes of the six-month placement was that it provided so many young people with 'a foot in the door' into the social research sector. As detailed through Amelia and Elly's stories (page 6 and page 27) the Kickstart scheme at The Young Foundation opened the door to people who had been trying to find a route into research. As laid out in chapter 1, particularly for young people who identified as disabled and those living outside London, the prospect of working in social research was challenging. As a new pathway into the sector, the Kickstart placement afforded those who had long desired to work in research but lacked the opportunities, the chance to build networks and gain experience. This has allowed them to take their first step onto the research career ladder.

Several Kickstarters reflected on the pre-application stage as a period where they "felt deflated" repeatedly being recommended jobs they felt "weren't suitable" for them as they struggled to find a way to get into a sector they desired. One explained she *"felt a burst of excitement in the pit of my stomach"* when she heard about the peer research placement from her job coach, realising a career in research may be possible for her.

Highlighting aspects of the programme she was most proud of, one member of The Young Foundation's team said, *"there's something that I just find really exciting about teaching research skills to people, and I think we had a group of Kickstarters some of whom really wanted to get into research and couldn't find a route, couldn't find a way into social research."*

Although the scheme targeted those seeking a career in social research, as an organisation we were acutely aware that the barriers to accessing research meant many young people were unlikely to have considered the role. The placement offered a career trial, learning what the profession involves and discovering if it was something they enjoyed and wanted to pursue.

A number of young people reflected that research hadn't seemed a plausible career *"for someone like me"*, with many acknowledging they had a *"preconceived notion of what research was"* and that, throughout the programme, they shifted, *"from one understanding of research to a wider view"*. Looking back on the experience at the end of the programme, one explained the role had allowed them to realise *"research is so critical"* to the world around them and they now value it as a way to make a difference.

Reflecting more broadly on the notion of 'good' work, all Kickstarters identified the valuable professional skills and direction they gained. One Kickstarter explained the placement made them feel, *"confident and proud, and it helped me figure out the path I would like to take in the future"*. Another Kickstarter explained they *"now want more from the future"*, indicating the positive experience in work had opened a door, even if they did not want to enter into the social research profession.

The flexibility of the programme meant Kickstarters could, and were encouraged to, pursue other avenues of work. Some Kickstarters took on additional opportunities as part of their placement to study graphic design, film editing, and illustration. The breadth of The Young Foundation's work aided this as there is flexibility and resource available to allow young people to engage with various projects and use their creative skills to support the wider team. One senior leads on the project explained *"we continued to realise that, within the cohort, we had some incredibly creative young people who had skills that we haven't surfaced yet [...] if I think about some of the work that's happened around illustration, and some of the Canva work that's been put together [..] some really creative things"*.

Although knowing they enjoy creative activities, often our Kickstarters had not thought of using them in the workplace. Opening opportunities, allowing them to test their interest and bring new skills to the table, boosted their confidence and highlighted new avenues that they could potentially pursue after completing their role at The Young Foundation.

Kickstarting careers in research

The opportunity *"changed my view on what employment could be like"*, giving many young people aspirations for their career trajectory and opening their eyes to the types of employment they might seek.

Data captured three months after the Kickstarters concluded their placement showed:

- Seven Kickstarters had continued to pursue work in the social research or charity sector.
- 71% of Kickstarters were either in or actively applying for jobs that fit with their desired career aspirations.
- A positive impact on their career trajectory, with just 14% of the young people in or applying for jobs they would have applied for prior to taking part in the Kickstart scheme.
- 55% of Kickstarters had found and taken up employment since finishing their placement.

The Young Foundation is also extremely proud to have offered several roles to Kickstarters from cohorts 1 and 2. Two Kickstarters have taken up permanent positions in the Research team, one has a part-time research engagement position, and another is working flexibly on a youth-led project.

3.6 Breaking boundaries? The employer perspective

Beyond breaking the boundaries of who can and does work in social research, the nature of the placement in itself provided the working ground for a test and learn approach to organisational ways of working. The time-limited nature enabled employers and Kickstarters alike to experiment with different methods and organisational techniques without it being a 'make or break' scenario as it would be in a first job or on a longer-term employment contract.

Particularly around mental health and openness in the workplace, participating in the Kickstart scheme allowed The Young Foundation to stretch boundaries, testing new solutions to flexible working to ensure young people felt supported and able to engage. Despite raising some challenges, several members of the team reflected on how special it was to be at the forefront, providing 'good work' opportunities. One pondered whether there was *"something generational about it?"*, highlighting it was *"nice, as The Young Foundation, to be in that space and show that actually when you work with an employer, there are going to be some things that they need and want, and [some things that] you need and want. Working out the bridge, and where we kind of meet each other, is really interesting."*

She went on to explain that, although it was a challenge to navigate mechanisms of support and the openness of the cohorts, she was energised by *"how comfortable people are to bring themselves to work"* and hoped this was something the organisation would learn from and continue to trial in order to accommodate the different needs of employees.

Particularly given the timing of the placement through the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for increased support and flexibility in the workplace is something many employers were grappling with. To work alongside 12 young people to create space where they could truly bring themselves to work, feel valued and receive wrap-around support, is something The Young Foundation was proud to help normalise. Particularly given the placement was the first experience of employment for many of the young people involved, setting this expectation could have long-term benefits in their careers.

3.7 What worked?

The conversations with Kickstarters and staff revealed three key factors that enabled these outcomes:

- The three-sprint structure of the programme allowed a gradual development, increasingly stretching skills into practical projects as Kickstarters became more autonomous and independent in their work. This practical transition is important to building young people's experience and gradually developing confidence.

- The structure of the programme provided a safe environment for young people to test and learn, trialling a less-known career path to discover whether it was something they enjoyed and wanted to pursue. This space is essential to increase diversity in the social research sector, bringing in young people who would otherwise never consider the role.

- Kickstarters reflected that they received *"wrap-around support"* as they *"gained confidence navigating employment"*. The ongoing support helped made them feel able to push themselves into increasingly challenging situations. In line with aims around 'good work', this provided a comfortable learning ground, prioritising wellbeing while building capacity. Summarised by one Kickstarter in her feedback survey response, *"I really couldn't fault the support we had while on the programme. We were supported and encouraged in such a positive and gentle way. I built so much confidence in my time. I was given a really good opportunity that I will be forever grateful for"*.

In her own words: Elly's story

I had poor school experiences due to bullying and a late diagnosis of dyslexia and dyspraxia, but I wasn't going to let that hold me back. I was determined to go on and do amazing things – so ending up on universal credit was disheartening. I wanted more than a 'normal job' where I checked in and out every day and completed mundane tasks. I wanted my job to mean something. I wanted to do something that mattered, something that would drive positive change. I also wanted to develop my own skills and do the things that, deep down, I knew I could. I just didn't know what that job would look like, or how I would get there.

Making a change

Unlike some of my peers, I was lucky enough to have a job coach who was enthusiastic and helpful. When she told me about the peer research position, I felt a burst of excitement in the pit of my stomach. This was it; this was how I was going to make change. Peer research wasn't something I had ever considered. I didn't even know such jobs existed.

Passion and drive

Despite being shy and lacking in confidence, working at The Young Foundation allowed me to develop my skills, confidence and push myself to meet new people. It also furthered my passion for different social issues and working across different research projects allowed me to gain an insight into the experiences of different people.

The placement was a safe place to grow 'on the job'; I didn't need to know everything or have it all figured out. The initial peer research training was followed by three research sprints, where I received regular feedback and continued to develop my research skills.

Opening up

In my third and last sprint, I was part of a group that explored young people's experiences of fatphobia, and it was inspiring to see how open and vulnerable everyone was – even if it was hard-hitting for us to analyse and share our stories. The Young Foundation was open to us exploring this topic, even if not everyone understood it. I went from being scared to mention the topic to speaking about it freely – something I would not have done at the beginning of my placement.
Getting paid for doing work that I care about with every fibre of my being was amazing. I was able to listen to other people's struggles within society and give people a platform to have their voices heard. It's been a life-changing experience. Empowering other young people has helped me on my journey of self-empowerment.

Chapter 4: Not far enough? Challenges and limitations of our approach

In publishing this evaluation, we want to tell the full story. Those who have worked in participatory research know that it is a 'beautifully messy process' and that prioritising co-production often throws up new and unexpected challenges along the way. This chapter lays out the 'messy', to help other organisations hoping to embark on similar training schemes, or organisations funding this work, take on board our learning. Some of the challenges relate specifically to the parameters set by the Kickstart scheme, while others relate to our own decisions.

4.1 Being approved as a Kickstart employer

The process of being approved as a Kickstart employer was surprisingly simple at first, requiring the completion of just a short form. This was a welcome change. However, despite applying swiftly when the scheme opened, it took over two months to be approved. With no automated system to track our application, it took multiple calls and emails to understand the cause of the delay. This was because the new systems put in place for the scheme were not tested prior to launch.

It became apparent that the scheme had primarily been designed for and expected to attract major employers. Unadvertised criteria, such as a ratio of permanent staff to the number of Kickstarters, were mentioned after we had our application approved, along with questions about the roles on offer, including one person asking, 'is peer research a job?'.

The challenges faced were particularly surprising given that DWP designed the scheme with a view to "... encouraging more involvement from private-sector employers, as well as public and voluntary sector employers. It expected this would both increase the number of job placements available and mean they more closely resembled 'real' jobs that would help young people find sustained employment after the scheme".xli While we were eventually approved, there is clear learning for such schemes in recognising, preparing for, and accommodating the diversity of employers who may wish to participate.

4.2 Challenges of recruitment

Despite a clear need for the Kickstart scheme, as outlined in section 2, The Young Foundation found recruiting our Kickstart cohorts extremely difficult. This was an experience shared with other employers across the country who struggled to fill placements despite a plethora of 'gateway organisations' opening up to support recruitment.

Applications opened in March 2021 and early plans anticipated recruiting a total of 15 Kickstarters in cohort 1 to start in April and 15 in a later cohort 2. However, recruitment challenges we had to extend the advertising window and, in early May 2021, just seven Kickstarters had taken up their place with a further seven joining in late May. We then recruited for a further eight for a third cohort to start later in the year.

Between the time the Kickstart scheme was devised and the time our Kickstarters were recruited, there was a shift in employment across the country. August to September 2021 saw 1.2m job vacancies in the economy, the highest number of vacancies since records began in 2001. Although many of these jobs were seasonal, short-term contracts in response to the easing of restrictions that often did not provide routes into sustained or 'good work', it did have an impact on the speed and effectiveness of our Kickstart recruitment process.

This sudden shift, particularly coinciding with the summer months, meant many young people chose to take up seasonal employment. The Young Foundation HR team noted they initially received a lot application, but that *"as the year went by, the hype died down or something happened that meant we weren't getting as many"*.

The challenges faced (and the subsequent administrative burden of recruitment) are also in conflict with the DWP's identification of the charity sector as one of its priority areas. Despite active engagement, The Young Foundation was not invited to any targeted outreach activities and received no additional support from the New Business Team, as described in the NAO report.[xlii].

The administrative burden

This challenge was exacerbated by the arduous and complex process of recruitment enforced through the Kickstart scheme. The scheme's application process ensured young people were only able to apply for a Kickstarter role through their job coach, meaning if young people saw the role advertised elsewhere, they had to take the opportunity back to their job coach in order to apply. It became apparent, through conversations with potential and actual applicants, and in direct conversations with Job Centres, that job coaches found it difficult to locate roles on their database. Positions advertised as open nationally (as ours were) appeared to be particularly hard to find.

A number of problems emerged in terms of the way the scheme was implemented via Job Centres:

- There appeared to be no mechanism to alert job coaches to all Kickstart opportunities that young people in their area were eligible for.
- Employers were not provided by default with the job role identification code that would enable them to share it with job coaches directly – it took The Young Foundation several weeks to obtain this critical information.
- Employers were not given a point of contact to resolve problems arising during the recruitment process.

Poor communication from the DWP also made recruitment extremely challenging. During reflection interviews, The Young Foundation team reported that the DWP helpline was unresponsive and that there was no clear point of contact to reach out to. One senior colleague explained she had to call *"multiple times"* but that *"no one ever responded"*. The Young Foundation HR team echoed this explaining *"there's no one for me to speak to at DWP and then for DWP to say, 'OK this is what we need [you to do]', because it's just generic inboxes that the emails go into. I think that's one of the reasons why we've not been successful [in recruiting more people] because there's just no one point of contact"*.

In response, The Young Foundation decided to take a 'knocking on doors' approach and identified several high-priority locations for recruitment. We found success when working through local networks and building personal relationships with job coaches. Through speaking directly to job coaches, the team learned that national vacancies drop to the bottom of the Kickstart database, meaning many job centres failed to see them, let alone share them with young people.

One Job Centre regularly hosted an event where local companies, particularly in industry and retail, could come and present their job offer directly to Kickstarters. This was only targeted towards businesses recruiting locally, meaning organisations such as The Young Foundation, who were recruiting nationally, were missed. However, thanks to the personal relationship built up with job coaches The Young Foundation team were able to attend the day, receiving a positive response to the role and a number of subsequent applications.

We also used social media and outreach to community groups in specific locations to promote our opportunity directly to young people. This was also effective, but resulted in a time-consuming process of liaison between applicants and their job coaches as they tried to identify the role on the system.

Reaching a diverse cohort

Diversity amongst Kickstart recruits was an unexpected challenge for The Young Foundation team. One of the key aims of running the Kickstart scheme at The Young Foundation was "supporting people who are far away from the employment marketplace". Despite The Young Foundation cohort meeting the DWP's advice on claimants who 'Kickstart would be most suitable for' (NAO, 2021), the definition of young people 'far away from the employment marketplace' was one we grappled with during the recruitment process to ensure those recruited would benefit most from the opportunities of the scheme.

Initially, The Young Foundation intended the cohorts to focus mainly on those who had not attended university, aiming to reach those most excluded from the social research sector. Yet, of the total who applied, 31% had taken a non-university path. Ultimately, of our 14 Kickstarters, eight had completed an undergraduate degree. Only one applicant had a postgraduate qualification. Initially, The Young Foundation intended to focus recruitment mainly on those who had not attended university, aiming to reach those most excluded from the social research sector. Yet, of the total who applied, just 31% had taken a non-university path. Ultimately, of our 14 Kickstarters, eight had an undergraduate degree. Only one applicant had a postgraduate qualification, and were accepted as they faced other challenges in accessing the workplace. The lead on the project reflected on the challenge of deferring from this aim wondering whether they were still supporting those furthest away from the marketplace: *"we did decide to take on some young people who had a degree. Initially, we were a bit conflicted about that and wondered whether we should do that, whether that would be the right thing. I think, actually, what we heard from those young people about their challenges of accessing work, challenges, particularly around disability around accessibility of the workplace, it was absolutely the right thing to do"*.

Despite the need for increased ethnic and gender diversity in social research, 86% of cohort 1 identified as White English or White British. Cohort 2 was more diverse with 38% identifying as White British, 38% as Asian, 12% Black and 12% as White European. In cohort 1 71% identified as female and 63% identified as female in cohort 2. Particularly given the NAO data shows that young Black and Asian people are more likely to take up Kickstart scheme placements than their white counterparts, these figures are potentially indicative that The Young Foundation's Kickstart recruitment process did not go far enough in redressing the imbalance across social research for young people from ethnic minority communities. In contrast, while the NAO report shows only 1% of Kickstarters claim disability benefits (vs. 3% of the national population), 29% of our Kickstarters identified as disabled, and 14% preferred not to say. Many of our Kickstarters did not qualify for disability benefits but nonetheless faced challenges accessing employment as a result of physical or mental health challenges.

Clarity of role

Speaking to job coaches directly also revealed the clarity of the job advert hindered recruitment. The team found that, when job coaches could access the advert, they were "not exactly sure what the placement was", as they were unfamiliar with the research role and what it meant practically. One senior researcher reflected on the need to make the language in the advert more accessible and easier to understand, saying many people "didn't know this [research] world existed, to them it might as well have been in French [..] we really needed to think more about how to bridge the gap". Language used in roles and recruitment is a key barrier in recruiting people to the social research sector.

Direct conversations with job coaches and, eventually, the young people revealed the job offer was appealing, with many welcoming the chance to work from home, work flexibly, and get involved in something new. However, the initial lack of understanding from job coaches meant these benefits were not trickling down to the job-seekers, and that even those who could access the advert were choosing not to engage further or put young people forward for the role. Hence, simplifying job adverts to ensure they are in plain English and do not alienate people who might not think research is 'for them' is essential in breaking down barriers to entering the social research sector.

Learnings regarding the job advert, but particularly in relation to the 'local first' approach of the DWP system, has been particularly valuable to The Young Foundation. This approach has since been employed to recruit for our Kickstart cohort 3, of which 22% of recruits identify as Black, 11% Asian and 67% White British.

4.3 Capacity limitations

Providing sufficient support for the young people during their transition into work was a key component of The Young Foundations' Kickstart scheme. For the majority of Kickstarters, this was their first formal employment role. During evaluation workshops and reflection activities, almost all Kickstarters said they arrived feeling uncertain, not knowing what to expect, and unsure what would be expected of them. Reflecting on their early days in post, one senior lead explained: *"some had fears around things like their readiness to come online every day, to log in every day, and keep in contact with us."*

Given the initial uncertainty and lack of experience among most of the new starters, and the fact that the role was based remotely, with Kickstarters working from home, significant pastoral and training support was necessary to ensure a comfortable and appropriate start. The project was structured with one senior researcher managing all 12 Kickstarters, supported by a more senior team member who sat further away from the day-to-day project activities. Although all Kickstarters praised the one-to-one support they received, noting *"the amount of support [..] received from my manager"* as their key takeaway from the experience and that they had received 'incredible support', they also highlighted it would have been beneficial to *"not have just one person to look after so many people"*.

The Kickstarters explained their manager had had "a lot to do on the programme" and that they sometimes felt "bad reaching out for smaller questions". Despite noting they did feel able to ask for help when needed, many explained a second point of contact would have helped ease the pressure and ensure a smoother transition into certain tasks and aspects of the project. "We needed more readily-available managerial support. There was only one point of contact, who was in charge of two separate cohorts of about 12 people [in total]. Having another member of staff to liaise with more often would have been great." This became a challenge if their main point of contact was on leave or off sick, as other members of staff generally did not have the same oversight.

An additional complicating factor was that many of the young people were dealing with mental health issues during their placement. Over the six months, several Kickstarters were actively seeking a diagnosis while navigating the new challenges and routines of working life.

Good working conditions helped ensured none of the young people dropped out, despite significant health challenges, and this should be celebrated. It can largely be attributed to the flexibility and accessibility of the role, as well as the relationship built up between Kickstarters and their line-manager. Significant resources and time went into working with young people to understand where and when they needed to take a step back and what additional support could ensure they had the flexibility to stay on in the role.

During reflection sessions, Kickstarters referenced the peaks and troughs of the programme in relation to their personal mental health challenges. One shared that receiving bad health news midway through the project impacted their ability to stay on track and engage. When discussing their favourite part of the programme, another Kickstarter said *"sprint 3 was much harder for me but that was probably because of my mental health at the time"*.

Many noted a direct correlation between their experience of the programme and external challenges faced in their day-to-day lives. Many noted aspects that may have been easier for them to deal with, had it not been for the effects of the pandemic on their mental and sometimes physical health.

"A lot of time went into understanding, 'what are their coping mechanisms?' Was it a job function you could support them to do - so things like having a camera off, if that helps them, let's encourage them to do that. If they're not particularly feeling well, then let's say you don't have to talk or kind of participate in that one meeting" - Researcher at The Young Foundation

Provisions put in place included an acceptance of 'camera off' meeting participation, flexible working hours, and reduced participation in meetings. While this worked during the placement and did not limit Kickstarters ability to produce good quality work, it is likely that some or all may not be possible in many other workplaces, or indeed, at The Young Foundation on a longer-term basis.

While acknowledging it was the "right thing to do", several members of The Young Foundation's team questioned whether these provisions would make it more difficult for the Kickstarters to transition into other workplaces and hinder the young people's preparedness for future work opportunities. This might be particularly significant if transitioning into a larger organisation where one-to-one or peer-to-peer support may not be available, raising concerns about the expectations the Kickstarters may have in future, and the impact a less supportive work environment may have on them.

The Young Foundation adapted well to remote-working during the pandemic and the flexibility brought on by remote-working was in fact a huge positive for the programme in terms of reaching beyond London. It did, however, intensify certain challenges in relation to team dynamics. Some of the Kickstarters did not start their placement with the skills to navigate breakdowns in channels of communication or small disagreements between themselves. Intervention was occasionally needed from HR and more senior members of the team to understand where challenges had occurred and how to bridge misunderstandings.

Kickstarters noted two particular tension points where communication challenges occurred. The first was in bringing together cohort 1 and 2. Although only starting three weeks apart, many reflected on the bond cohort 1 quickly made - sharing similar experiences, having more in common, and discussing feelings openly during meetings. When cohort 2 began, it was clear that it took more time for the groups to bond, and an element of awkwardness developed during team sessions. Although all Kickstarters noted a shift throughout the programme, highlighting by the end it felt much more like one big team, almost all members of cohort 1 spoke of the initial "awkward silences" in group meetings, referencing a slight "friction". Some explained that, given the lack of face-to-face working, more time put into building personal connections, even if only through increased breakout room time, would have helped build camaraderie between the groups.

The second tension point developed in Sprint 2, where teams divided to work more independently on projects - despite the work becoming more enjoyable for almost all Kickstarters.

Some team members explained they felt as though "certain individuals choose to not pull their weight in group projects [...] which result[ed] in me and other Kickstarters taking on a greater level of work whilst being paid the same as individuals doing absolutely nothing!". Another reflected they thought that "the management side need[ed] to be stricter [..as..] sometimes people weren't made to pull their weight and on group projects [if often felt like] only three people were properly working on them".

Work management tools such as Microsoft planner and Trello were praised as they helped record who had completed what. Several of the team, both Kickstarters and project leads, reflected that these tools should have been brought in earlier to reduce uneven allocations and keep track of tasks across such a large team.

4.4 Finding the balance

One unexpected challenge highlighted by two of the Kickstarters was that the placement felt more like schoolwork than a 'real' job. Although acknowledging the scheme was intended as a training placement, one Kickstarter said "I know that the kickstart scheme is aimed at like 16 to 24 year olds, but I felt like the activities that we did were a bit childish. I think they should be *"adulted up a bit"*. Another described placement saying, *"at first I really enjoyed it but as time went on it started to feel like the lesson you hate in school"*.

The structured training programme of three sprints also limited the extent to which Kickstarters integrated with the rest of the organisation. Many explained they felt there was *"less chance to get to know the wider team"*, and *"although not necessarily always a bad thing it sometimes felt like we weren't part of The Young Foundation"*. When asked what could be done differently in the future, one Kickstarter wanted to *"integrate the Kickstarters into the organisation more, instead of mainly working within their own teams [as] this would be a beneficial learning opportunity for everyone"*.

This brought up interesting questions around the balance of training and cultivated supported required by the Kickstarters versus the demands of being fully integrated into the organisation. Despite the need for more tailored support, these reflections indicate a call for inclusion from young people who don't want to be put in their own pen, but instead to interact more freely with the wider team and learn from a larger cohort of people.

This feedback was acted upon with cohort 3 who, after the initial training sprint, were assigned to work on live projects at The Young Foundation.

Four of the cohort worked on place-based projects in their local areas, while the remainder worked on a larger youth-led project alongside other peer researchers. This approach was not without its challenges – including less time to build skills and experience 'success' working independently before joining a core project of The Young Foundation. The result was some of the Kickstarters lacked the confidence that cohorts 1 and 2 developed with a more tailored experience.

4.5 Ambitious timescale

"You know, six months isn't long at all"

The ambitious nature of the project was another complicating factor. Although Kickstarters had the opportunity to develop three strong research projects during their time at The Young Foundation, this meant research was constantly the priority. There was little time for development of other skills or time dedicated to reflecting on the project. Swift transitions into a new project caused by overlapping timelines meant there was little time to reflect on changes the team may want to implement, let alone instigate them. This meant team challenges often had to be worked around rather than worked through.

Reflecting on the programme, the project manager noted the significant impact the limited time between her starting her role and the Kickstarters beginning theirs had on the overall structure of the programme. *"I think the hard part is that when I came, I had four working days and then they joined in no time. There was kind of [resources] spread around but mostly it was like, 'okay, you got to pull yourself together'... A lot of the time we were [planning] one or two days ahead."*

She also highlighted that, because funders often need to approve certain aspects of the programme work can be delayed through final revisions, impacting the wider timeline.

Given the two cohorts started three weeks apart, this extension of the project timeline meant the first cohort of Kickstarters were wrapping up their placement while report development was ongoing, leaving their project partners in cohort 2 to finalise the reports.

The ambitious timescale limited the time and emphasis that could be dedicated to developing Kickstarters' job seeking skills, specifically in relation to interview skills and building their local networks. Although time was taken at the beginning of the programme to ensure all Kickstarters worked on a LinkedIn profile and took time to connect with other members of staff at The Young Foundation and people in their local networks, there was little time dedicated to building this into 'real life' relationships during the placement.

The core project team reflected that the future employment skills element of the programme has been *"the biggest challenge and probably the thing that you know, having reflected on it, it's something that I would do differently, and I would structure differently [going forward]"*. Asked in a three-month follow-up survey what should have been done differently to improve the Kickstart experience, one Kickstarter noted" *there should be far greater emphasis on potential future opportunities that could be available once the Kickstart scheme has finished. Both within research and [...] in other fields of work"*.

In reality, the Kickstarters gained a wealth of research experience, researching and co-authoring a total of three published reports each. Yet, particularly when interviewing for other internal roles, we found many Kickstarters struggled to articulate the depth of this experience, often minimising their achievements and their role within the development of each project. Career development support was provided on an ad hoc, individual basis in response to queries from the young people. Time was given to read over CVs, offer practice interviews and application support. Future cohorts would benefit from more formal career support.

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4.6 How far can we go

The success of the Kickstart scheme at The Young Foundation raised questions around how far we can go to develop truly youth-led participatory research. The reality of funding requirements often means that, even within the participatory model, funders and organisations have their own agenda and constraints, so, often, young people cannot take research in whatever direction they choose. Navigating tight timescales and conflicting schedules, getting co-production right, particularly towards the latter end of a project (focusing on co-analysis and co-writing) is often a challenge.

Having two cohorts of young people working 3.5 days a week on the project gave the young people space to carve out the argument they felt was appropriate. This meant the research stayed in the hands of the 'community experts' until the very end of the project and allowed co-analysis techniques and training tools to be both trialled and developed with Kickstarters themselves.

Reflecting on the programme, one senior lead referenced the so-called challenging sprint 3 moment saying *"We very much have co-produced the experience and when things have felt tricky or challenging or they've pushed back, we've worked together to kind of explore how that could feel different and what the change could be. To give a specific example of that, with their final sprint, we gave a little bit of direction-setting, quite early on. And they weren't very happy with that. What they wanted was to have much more of an open framework for their research project and they wanted to be able to kind of lead on what the topic was going to be and who they saw the important audience being"*.

Due to the flexibility of approach built into The Young Foundation and Youth Futures Foundation project model, capacity was there to be led by, and flex to, the specific interests of the young people. The team were able to use the moment as a learning process: *"having a conversation with them about some of the challenges that we would have in presenting three research projects out there and the importance of really nailing who an [external] audience would be."*

Allowing the final three projects to be totally youth-led, while using the challenge to explain the importance of audience for policy impact, had additional benefits. It boosted the Kickstarters' confidence in allowing them to take a research project from start to finish, while also embedding a stronger understanding of the wider policy context beyond just The Young Foundation and the funder. Many of the Kickstarters reflected on this as their favourite stage of the project, welcoming the opportunity to focus on something they had *"totally chosen"* and *"were extremely passionate about"*.

This success of sprint 3 illustrated the potential methods of navigating tension points between communities and funding priorities [JM1] but further highlighted that many participatory projects do not have process in place or time allocated to navigate such challenges.

Although the project benefited from the existing relationship built up between the Kickstarters and the team, as well as the time to discuss the best way to produce a beneficial research project, the time for this is often lacking in peer research projects. This further highlights the importance of only choosing peer research as a method if there is the sufficient time, capacity, and freedom to truly be led by the peer researchers' interests.

Recommendations

Our experience of Kickstart has made visible the significant potential of early career training schemes to support young people into employment in both social research and the social sector more broadly. The background of youth employment, harshened by the reality of young people's experiences of Covid-19 across the UK, provides a stark reminder that such schemes are of increasing not diminishing importance.

Getting these training schemes right is essential to supporting young people into sustained and valuable careers, while also helping professions diversify and become more inclusive in their hiring, training and working practices.

Recommendations for scheme design and implementation

Although the DWP Kickstart Scheme (in its current iteration) closed for applications in March 2022, our programme raised useful learnings, relevant for future programme iterations or to be implemented by other bodies when designing and funding large-scale employee training schemes.

The most important of these is to be ambitious

- about the types of work and future careers that young people can have
- about the types of organisations who can deliver valuable and meaningful opportunities
- about breaking down barriers across geography, socio-economic divides and cultural backgrounds

1. Maximise the potential of national and remote roles

In a post-Covid world, where remote and hybrid working are increasingly the norm, there are opportunities for young people to work with businesses and organisations that are geographically distant, without the need to leave home or incur the costs of relocating. For many young people, this could be game-changing, de-risking trying out a particular career path, opening up careers that may previously have felt unattainable, and enabling those who wish to remain close to family or friends to continue living locally.

This also offers potential to contribute to the government's Levelling Up agenda, increasing the availability and diversity of high-quality training and employment opportunities for people in deprived, remote and rural communities. It has particular potential benefit for those who face multiple disadvantage, including those with disabilities or caring responsibilities for whom remote work is the only feasible or most practical option.

In order to deliver on this potential, however, schemes must be designed to ensure that:

- both national/remote and local opportunities are equally visible to and promoted by local partners such as Job Centres. This was a significant failing of the Kickstart scheme
- there are clear routes for providers of national/remote opportunities to connect with local partners who may be organising in-person recruitment days, information sessions and so on.
- there is an easy mechanism for providers to be able to advertise their roles independently and then refer people to the Job Centre or other gateway provider – such as a unique ID that can be widely shared and linked directly into other relevant systems

2. Fund an appropriate level of support

IIn addition, schemes similar to Kickstart should be designed with the expectation that young people will be provided with the necessary support and training succeed. The DWP training bursary provided for each Kickstarter was an important recognition of this. However, the value of the bursary is unlikely to be sufficient to provide the level of support required for entry into more highly-skilled or knowledge economy-type roles.

Funding must also be allocated towards supporting wellbeing. Given the aim to reach those furthest form the workforce, there is a strong imperative to make funds available for a higher level of 'pastoral care' than is the norm in most workplaces. Our young Kickstarters faced challenges with mental health, housing, childcare, coercive relationships, and family breakdown – all required time and experience to ensure they received the necessary information, support and signposting to continue with their role and learn to manage life challenges alongside employment. Training schemes such as this need to offer wrap-around support to young people from the outset.

3. Provide support for smaller organisations wishing to participate

With the Kickstart scheme, many 'Gateway' providers came into existence to help assure the quality of jobs provided by smaller businesses. Often housed within local authorities, charities, or trade bodies, these organisations acted as intermediaries - receiving funding from the DWP to support smaller organisations. As of November 2021, 70%, of Kickstarter jobs had been filled through Gateways. xliii

As we did not use this system ourselves, we cannot comment on the efficacy of this approach, but we believe it provided a valuable route for smaller organisations to offer placements. We would recommend that such systems are in place from the launch of any future scheme. Smaller organisations are often well placed to offer unique, unusual, and well supported opportunities to young people.

However, they often lack the operational *'back office'* to deal with complex processes, high levels of bureaucracy, and the types of obstacles we faced in becoming an approved Kickstart provider.

The simple initial application form was welcome. However, there needs to be an efficient system for delivery partners to raise concerns and troubleshoot challenges and a better system for monitoring the status of an application. A helpline or appointed contact would be beneficial to ensure organisations can access needed resources. This would help such schemes to reach their full potential and provide appropriate opportunities to young people.

Recommendations for potential host organisations

The most important thing to consider before undertaking the scheme is: can you make the necessary commitment? The resources needed to provide appropriate and holistic support to young people entering the workforce should not be underestimated. Adequate funding and resources – particularly in the form of line management or supervision – are essential components of providing a 'good' training opportunity.

Recruitment and onboarding:

- In the recruitment phase of the programme, build connections with local job centres rather than relying solely on national, online systems to share opportunities. Focus on sharing information about the opportunities directly with job centres.
- Ensure recruitment language is simple and accessible. Remove unnecessary text and jargon, simplifying the role responsibilities and purpose.
- Ensure adequate time is allocated for training and onboarding young people. In a remote working environment, allocate time up-front for virtual coffees and remote introductions to help new recruits integrate into the wider organisation.
- Especially where young people have not been in a formal work setting previously, set clear tasks and work expectations from the offset. Establishing unambiguous 'ground rules' for working as a group and in an office setting (albeit remotely) would improve young people's confidence in performing their role. Shared tools such as Trello and Microsoft Planner ensure everyone is 'on the same page', and reduce potential for conflict.

Providing valuable experience:

- Consider the extent to which it is possible and desirable for your organisation to adopt a participatory approach to the programme – for example, by enabling young people to (co-)design some of their work activities or processes, or being willing to flex and adapt usual ways of working in response to their needs and suggestions. If you are in a position to be open in your approach, consider the recommendations in the following section.
- Wherever possible, provide opportunities for young people to meet, connect and collaborate on projects with other members of staff. Create opportunities for cross-team collaboration to ensure young people are integrated into the wider team and not working in their own silo.
- Ensure cohorts of six or more people have at least two dedicated points of contact to ensure continuity and availability of support and troubleshooting.

'Design in' career development opportunities

- Incorporate reflective spaces, ensuring time is spent supporting young people to explore the skills gained at each stage of their placement. This builds their confidence and provides a platform for them to practice sharing their achievements and experiences to an external audience.
- Organise networking events, potentially coinciding with the launch of significant work (i.e., in this case, Kickstart reports) where young people can directly present their work to and network with professionals in the social research sector. This would boost the visibility of the work and the cohort.
- Integrate career support continuously into the scheme, rather than leaving it until a set phase of the programme.

Recommendations for organisations considering participatory research-based or social action opportunities

Our Kickstart programme focused on using participatory research methods to introduce young people to social research and the wider social sector. While most of our recommendations are applicable to a wide range of opportunities, we also offer here some specific reflections on placements in these fields.

Research in particular - but also policy work, campaigning and other related activities - can often feel opaque and unclear to young people. If ‘good work’ is ‘meaningful work’ then it is incumbent upon the employer to help provide context for any role and activity – to help explain not only what is being done but why, and the impact it is intended to have.

In the case of research, that means covering important issues such as:

- the wider political, social or cultural context to the research – ideally not through ’chalk and talk’ methods, but by encouraging young people to undertake their own enquiry through researching, interviewing key stakeholders (internal or external) and so on, as part of their work or induction.
- when peer research is (and isn’t) the right method.
- potential tensions between funder/project needs and peer researcher interests. As young people grow in skill and confidence, they may be increasingly motivated by a desire to see social action result from their research. Tension can arise when the constraints imposed by the project aims, budget or funder’s research agenda are not discussed or fully understood. Being open about which parts of a project are truly participatory and which are fixed can clarify what they as researchers have ownership of, and where there is a need for compromise.
- managing disagreements. Throughout any research project, it is important to welcome (respectful) disagreement among the cohort - providing space for the team to push back on accepted wisdom or pre-existing evidence about their community and/or the issue they are working on.

- How to ‘close the loop’ and provide feedback to participants. The ethos of peer research is about working with researchers who are members of a particular community. This kind of research is then less extractive than traditional methods. However, sharing findings with the community that has contributed their time, thoughts, ideas and opinions remains the stage of a participatory research project that tends to get least attention, and undoubtedly least time and budget. Funders and project teams should ensure that project plans and budgets allocate resource to ensure research gets back into the hands of the people it came from. This is also important for the trainee cohort as it shows the value of their own research and brings ‘closure’ to the project.
- how to provide funding – or support to apply for funding – to empower young people who wish to create plans that are informed by research findings and take social action.

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Photographs.

Diverse group of young people studying with notebooks and laptop. Photo by Kiera Burton on Pexels.	Cover photo
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