

WHO HAS GAINED?

Moving from Extractive to Equitable Listening



PHASE 1

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Introduction

The months since the pandemic hit the UK in spring 2020 have been ones that have exposed the power dynamics and fractures in our sector. They have also made us see the role that philanthropy can play in crisis and the possibilities that can be realised when philanthropy listens to those it looks to serve and power is transferred. But as a sector do we have a good understanding of the power dynamics that we operate within and what is needed to disrupt them at their core? For example, evidence shows us that many of those that work within the voluntary sector do not feel listened to by the majority of funders, despite many funders reporting feeling confident about their listening practices and relationships. There is a potential mismatch between how funders think they are listening and how the sector is experiencing them. More needs to be done to support funders to reflect on how they listen and the challenges and barriers within this process.

This document is an extract from the Listening Fund Report – Do I Hear You? Exploring the listening culture of funders in the UK published in December 2020. The Listening Fund was established in England in 2018 and Scotland in 2019, supporting a host of organisations across these two countries to further their listening practices with young people. Listening is a term which intentionally moves organisations' focus beyond gathering feedback – often undertaken once decisions are made – and encourages them to engage with the power dynamics that inform which voices are heard during the decision-making process. The Fund's ambition is to advance the ability of the youth sector to listen and respond to their core constituents - young people; and by supporting and enabling change in listening practice at an organisational level, to empower young people to influence and challenge at a systemic level. The funders within the Listening Fund have come together to collectively reflect on how they listen and what is needed for them to listen more effectively, inclusively and equitably.

One of the key reflections of the report was the power dynamics within which listening took place and the need for funders to move from extractive to equitable listening. Listening for funders happens within a skewed power dynamic. Funders spoke about the ways power impacted their ability to listen effectively, from whether they were really being open and led by the what they listened to, to how they listened and what they did with their listening. Key questions that came up included:

- Have we interrogated how and why we listen to someone?
- What is needed to be ethical and equitable in how we listen?
- What do extractive listening behaviours look like?

This document outlines some of our reflections and also offers some tools which we developed to help answer these questions.

Where are we failing?

Whilst there is much good practice and places where funders listen well, it became clear through our reflections that this was not always the case. When looking at all the audiences described in this reflection, from grantees to other funders, what was made apparent was the hidden power dynamics often at play that impacted who funders listened to, how listening takes place within funders and the actions that emerge from this. Much of what was shared is not isolated to funders but a reflection of the wider system philanthropy exists within.

The listening cultures within funders reflect the systems of oppression in our society. When listening takes place it does so within a system that is inherently based around cultures of sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia and racism and cannot escape these. The philanthropic sector lacks diversity and lived experience as highlighted by 2027, Charities So White and Future Foundations UK among others. This is especially true at board and decision-making level.¹ This can amplify the way inequalities play out within funding organisations and impacts who is listened to and what is heard. Listening also take place within roles which are often overstretched and there is often not the capacity, support and prioritisation needed for good quality listening to take place.

We cannot explore listening without acknowledging how inequalities manifest in our organisational cultures and relationships and the capacity, skills and support needed to challenge this. The impacts of power and inequity flowed through many of our conversations around listening showing that there was much more that was needed for funders to address in their listening practices.

Who funders listen to

There has been a clear indication from funders taking part in this reflection that there was a need to listen to more voices within different audiences, whether this was by creating capacity, building relationships, questioning who they engaged with and who they didn't, or creating different mechanisms to listen that were more inclusive. Funders were also aware of groups that weren't listened to and that they needed to do more to identify, amplify and address missing voices.

How funders listen

As well as listening to more voices, funders made clear that they wanted to 'listen well' which required capacity, space and support as well as wider organisational structures and cultures that supported listening. Funders shared that even when listening was taking place, more could be done to make the processes for listening more inclusive and equitable.

What happens with listening

Listening needs to be seen as a whole process which includes action, rather than an isolated activity. When funders did listen in most cases this did not impact organisational practices and strategy in the way that it could. Listening could become trapped within a framework of compliance and gathering knowledge rather than devolving power and developing accountability and self-awareness.

Equitable Listening: How and why do we listen?

Power was mentioned repeatedly in every conversation about listening. It became clear early in our collective conversations that without the right power dynamics listening could not be meaningful or effective. Whilst there have been more and more conversations about the importance of listening, listening well and being aware of the power dynamics in listening was not widely understood. Without equitable practices at the heart of how we listen, listening could be unsafe, damaging and extractive.

¹ <https://www.inclusiveboards.co.uk/>

By equitable listening we are referring to:

Transparency about the agenda for listening – When engaging with experts, grantees, communities as well as others, funders described having an agenda in mind. They were listening in order to prove something rather than to be open and led by what they were hearing. This agenda was rarely explicit or transparent and the lack of a closed listening loop meant that agendas were often not changed by what others said.

A safe space for listening – Funders often did not think about the experience of those that they were listening to. Often listening could impact funding for grantees of commissioned work of those engaged as advisers and experts even if this was unsaid. When engaging with lived experience there was not enough thought given to whether the interaction was emotionally safe for those involved and who had power in the sharing of these stories. Was it safe for those being listened to speak truth to power and be honest? How open were funders to what was being said?

The power dynamics in listening – Often funders were in a position of power about what was listened to and if and how to take this forward. Certain groups such as communities and lived experience were seen as valid sources to gain knowledge but funders did not tend to listen to these groups by putting them in positions of leadership or decision making. Knowledge could be extracted from certain groups who were not in position of power moving forward. There were also interesting patterns on who was expected to give knowledge and insight for free which was also based around biases and who was valued.

Questions we encourage funders to consider:

How can you make the process of listening feel safer and what capacity is needed to listen in a way that is ethical e.g. time, space, environment, emotional support, financial payment?

How can you question your entitlement over knowledge and create space to support others to take what they have shared forward and devolve power to others? How can those being listened to become decision makers?

How can power be shared and devolved so that the agenda for listening is held more collectively by those being listened to and can you be more transparent about your agenda and assumption?

How can we Listen more Equitably?

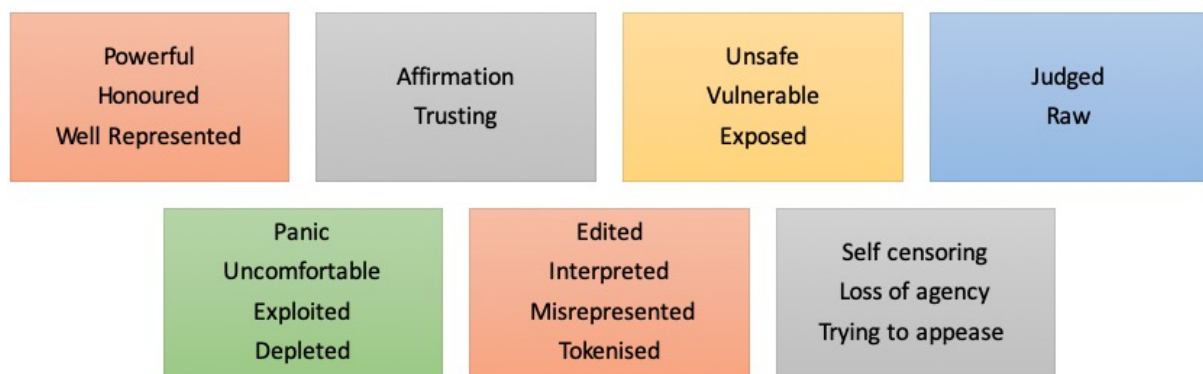
Extractive vs equitable listening was a concept that many funders involved in this reflection exercise found difficult to understand and the power dynamics within listening could be hard to navigate. As the listening practices between funders and those they listen are often very entrenched it was sometimes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

by Farzana Khan and Nusrat Faizullah to help funders to understand the concept of equitable listening.

Tool 1: Empathising with those that share their stories

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

The Feelings Experienced when Sharing your Story



Tool 2 : Moving from Extractive to Equitable Listening

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

Moving from Extractive to Equitable Listening Practices

Area	Extractive	Equitable
Relationship	<p>Relationships that don't acknowledge power dynamics and assumes people are engaging equally</p> <p>Interactions and influence that are dependant on supporting the narratives and agendas of a funder/ person with power</p>	<p>Trust has been built through time, openness, action and an acknowledgement of the different power both parties hold.</p> <p>Relationships that can hold different views and narratives without making those in less power feel exploited</p> <p>An effort made in ways that balance participation and contributions, regarding the different power people hold and their role</p>

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

Tool 3: By the end of the listening interaction or conversation who has gained more?

The final tool developed was a reflective tool for funders to consider how equitable a listening interaction has been and also to support them to take action to address the power dynamics of each listening interactions.

At the end of a listening interaction, relationship or conversation please consider the following questions and think of actions you should take to address any power imbalances revealed

Who Has Gained More?

What did it take to source this knowledge?

- Where has this knowledge you have listened to come from?
- Have you understood and acknowledged what was needed for someone to share what you are listening to e.g. emotional labour of lived experience, resources and time to create policy documents?
- How does sharing this impact them and you?

Who has the ability to act on and transfer what has been listened to?

- Who can catalyse and take forward action based on what has been shared?
- Who hasn't learnt something that is transferable beyond a work environment?

How does this relationship impact social capital?

- Does this relationship or knowledge provide a funder with credibility?
- How might a relationship with you jeopardise someone's work e.g. some grassroots groups are impacted negatively by relationships with funders?

How vulnerable has someone been made by this listening interaction?

- How has sharing this knowledge impacted how safe or vulnerable someone feels in the short and longer term?
- Has this listening interaction exposed someone in any way?

These tools are only a starting point to help you to understand and reflect upon power dynamics in how you listen. The Listening Fund hopes to build upon this and to continue having conversations about how the philanthropic sector can move to more equitable listening practices.

The Way Forward

This reflection feels like only a small first step into understanding the complex dynamics when funders listen and what they need to do in order to listen well. However, the chance for collective conversations with the broad anchor that listening provides has been deeply revealing and exposing. By working together and creating safe spaces for reflection and challenge, the funders that took part in this exercise were able to identify common patterns, opportunities and challenges. They were able to consider how issues of power, inequality and systemic oppression are tied in to how we listen. Whilst there was much good practice, funders could also see there was more to do to challenge this.

Funders know that listening is important and there is a deep commitment to it from all the funders involved in this reflective exercise. There is a wider movement for change that the Listening Fund is a part of which is challenging the power dynamics within philanthropy. Whether we are talking about listening, lived experience, participatory funding, being bottom up, place based approaches, systems change or power, there is a broad consensus that there is another way. Funders want to better serve their purpose and the communities they are wanting to impact. This report shows this deep and collective commitment to change but also demonstrates how far we are from where we want to be. Listening superficially or in a way that is tokenistic does not provide us with the knowledge and relationships we require. Listening needs to take place within equitable power dynamics, with a diverse group of communities and across an organisation from projects to governance.

It is often in the face of complexity that the solutions feel too difficult or there is a want to turn away or freeze. However this report should not be read in this way. If we really want to listen we have to do this well and invest in creating the organisational cultures we need to support listening. We have to build on good practice from projects and drive for listening in areas such as governance, strategy, accountability and decision making. Listening cannot happen without intention and investment. Listening is a practice that needs to be resourced – with time, training, investment, external expertise. Listening is a practice that needs to be systematised – for consistency and accountability. Finally listening is a practice that needs to be constantly developed and prioritised at all levels of an organisation.