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GEORGE WILLIAMS  
COLLEGE

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# "WHAT IS THE STATE OF YOUTH WORK IN SHEFFIELD?"

A COLLECTIVE ENQUIRY: PHASE 1

SUMMARY

Gin Gregg-Auriac and Justin Watson, March 2025

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2025 the Sheffield Youth Alliance commissioned YMCA George Williams College and Good Work With to undertake an initial piece of work in support of answering the question:

### **“What is the state of youth work in Sheffield?”**

Sheffield Youth Alliance, including Sheffield City Council, are seeking to ensure that the needs and ambitions of all young people are met through an ambitious, high quality, well resourced, safe, supported and connected youth sector.

Key to delivering for all young people across Sheffield is a collective and evidence-driven understanding of the ‘state of youth work’ in the city, and a shared analysis of how the city can best use existing resources (including money, power, position) and new opportunities.

An initial phase of work was led by Gin and Justin from Good Work With in February and March 2025 – it has delivered the following:

1. **A framework for enquiry:** A bespoke framework for the city that provides the foundations, lines of enquiry, and practical steps towards answering the core question ‘*What is the state of youth work in Sheffield?*’, encompassing core themes for the effective delivery of youth provision (as set out in the National Youth Work Curriculum) as well as assumptions and risks (taken from our understanding and experience of best practice at a local authority level)
2. **A reflections report:** A report outlining early findings, analysis and reflections on the state of youth work in Sheffield, through our engagement with the Sheffield Youth Alliance partners across the city, and key stakeholders across the public and private sectors
3. **A landscape and opportunities report:** A report outlining our understanding of the youth sector landscape at local, regional and national levels, and a series of recommendations for Sheffield on aligning to this landscape and meeting council and partner ambitions for young people in the city
4. **Action plan:** a clear action plan and set of recommendations for a potential Phase 2 of this project, and effective practical use of the framework and implementation of findings

This document provides a summary of progress made to the end of March 2025, and a proposal for next steps.

## KEY THEMES FROM SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

Gin and Justin engaged with over 50 local partners through 121s and workshops, both in localities and across Sheffield. Supported by desk research, this led to a number of key themes emerging which need to inform a full enquiry.

Throughout our conversations partners expressed their passion for Sheffield, acknowledging the challenges but committed to making a real difference in the lives of children, young people and their families.

These conversations uncovered a clear and consistent set of themes which should underpin further work, both in consideration of a full enquiry and development of collaborative practice in the city through Sheffield Youth Alliance.

They are:

### **Strong Foundations to Build On**

- The huge passion and commitment of individuals and organisations and a desire to celebrate and grow youth work and the offer for children and young people across the city
- The consistent belief in the dynamism, vibrancy and creativity seen across Sheffield, embedded in the way the city works and how it can use this as a driver of the city overall and of work with young people
- The desire to make the most of a range of key assets in the city including universities, anchor institutions, arts and culture, the significant economic development and commitments from the LA on investment
- A passion and desire to influence systems impacting on young people's lives, including schools, health etc.
- The clear and unequivocal commitment to young people's voice and experiences, and a strong desire to ensure that young people are shaping their services, their communities and their city

### **Opportunities For Shared Understanding**

There were a range of views, and healthy debates, around a number of key issues for Sheffield and work with children and young people.

A further phase of work will need to explore these areas in more detail, and seek to understand the different perspectives and get under the skin of the views and experiences of partners, and young people themselves.

Key areas include:

- **Geography** - there were a range of views on how young people (and people supporting young people) experience the city through its geography, with reflections on the challenges faced in navigating the city (due to the hills and valleys), how easy it is to get around and access services (due to local public transport - quality, accessibility and cost), and how connected communities are due to range of factors (including wealth and class, urban versus rural areas)
- **Poverty and inequality** - many partners talked about the impact of poverty and inequality on the lives of young people and their families, and how experiences of the city are shaped by poverty, alongside ability to access and navigate opportunities (which is impacted by poverty and inequality). We also heard about the factors contributing to inequality, and that we need to be mindful of how national decisions can impact what happens in Sheffield (see Landscapes and Opportunities report).

Inequity was also raised as a key issue, and factor in how we consider youth work in the city - both in broad economic terms (where money is, how fair systems are e.g. taxation, welfare and benefits) as well as the distribution of resources, including the commissioning of youth services.

- **Resources** - we heard a range of views on whether or not the sector is 'well-resourced' - often reflecting personal experiences of funding (or of decisions on funding, whether positive or negative) - however there was a clear agreement that the city needs and wants more, and also wants to ensure that it is getting its fair share of support and investment, locally but also regionally and nationally (including making the most of national funding opportunities). Communication and transparency about resourcing was also flagged, it was clear that a deeper understanding of funding flows in the city could support strong stewarding of existing resources.
- **Data** - a number of discussions focused on data, information and the need for a greater culture of sharing, and the right infrastructure to enable data to be collected, collectively understood and used for the benefit of all children and young people - this included data on provision (who, what, how) as well as a shared understanding of the needs of the city, and a shared approach to meet need which increased transparency, built trust and reduced competition.

## **A Platform For Meeting Shared Ambition and Need**

As we note above, the passion and commitment from all partners was incredibly strong - whilst acknowledging the challenges, everyone we spoke to wanted to be part of doing more for young people, and critically wanted to do it together.

From our conversations, we believe that there is significant appetite for:

- **Shared spaces** – formal and informal spaces and opportunities to connect, learn and share information.
- **A desire to support and grow universal youth work** – a recognition that funding pressures means that youth work is more readily funded when it is targeted and/ or deficit based. There was a real appetite for universal, preventative work that builds on young people’s talents and ambitions.
- **Best use of community facilities** –with recent capital investment in Sheffield, partners want to work together to make the most of spaces for the sector and for children and young people, being creative about use of venues and securing the resources needed to keep venues open (e.g. staff, administration and heating costs).
- **Greater connection and collaboration** – broadly people want to connect to others, and share spaces with others sharing their ambitions and specifically people want to explore shared opportunities and activities which will add value and reduce challenges around competition, finances and capacity.
- **Shared strategy** – it was very clear that there is a huge appetite for a shared vision and set of ambitions for the city for young people, and further a desire to deliver a shared set of commitments together.
- **Investment in workforce development** – people expressed pride in the long history of youth work in the city, and that founding mothers and fathers of youth work practiced in Sheffield. There was thus an appetite for understanding our current workforce and supporting its continued professional development.
- **A sense of belonging in the sector** – partners wanted to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and feel needed and wanted in shared spaces, building trust and connection together. It was also acknowledged that this will take time, and commitment – it will require *going on a journey together*.
- **Shared data** – shared data and insights are key, and (as noted above) there was a really strong desire to move beyond just having the data but working towards collective understanding and use for all (including use in provision design, funding and influencing)
- **Creative and innovative approaches** – it is clear that this work cannot be a success unless it is shaped by the city and in ways which align to the values and principles of how the city best works. Creativity and innovation will be key.

## Children and Young People's Voice

This phase of work relied on the expert views of the sector and implicitly trusted their insight on behalf of children and young people.

This means we have not yet heard directly from young people. Young people cannot be peripheral to this process, and we have heard loud and clear that young people's voices, and their experiences, should be central to further work. A core pillar of work in the full enquiry should start with an assessment of what we already know, and how we can build on previous and current engagement and consultation of young people across the city.

### A note on inclusion

This phase of work was necessarily rapid, aiming to build momentum and drive progress for children, young people, and the sector that supports them.

We recognise that pace and inclusion are often in tension. When speed is prioritised, there is a risk that while activities gain traction and deliverables are met, existing power structures remain unchallenged, and voices may be missed from the process.

To mitigate this, we conducted 1:1 meetings as well as working in localities and online localities to ensure a breadth of engagement.

However, we acknowledge that a rapid process can still present barriers for some individuals and organisations. As a result, there may be gaps in the analysis, particularly in representation from the following groups:

- **Neighbourhood-led initiatives** – While we engaged with some (e.g, Firvale Community Hub), we recognise there are more voices to be included.
- **Volunteer-led organisations**, including uniformed groups who are making a significant contribution to the city's youth offer
- **Faith-led groups** – We understand that many faith-led groups are also volunteer-led and may not have had the capacity to engage. Further, while many Muslim colleagues participated, we acknowledge that Ramadan will have limited opportunities for further engagement.
- **Youth work-adjacent activities**, such as organisations delivering the SEND local offer

Additionally, we recognise that we have not yet fully explored intersectionality in the context of this work or how youth work in Sheffield is evolving to meet the diverse and changing needs of children and young people.

Finally, the fact that this enquiry has surfaced concerns around trust and inclusion suggests there may be colleagues on the fringes of this work who have not yet been able to proactively engage. This is an important consideration for the next phase, ensuring that all voices are heard and represented as the work moves forward.

We recommend that the second stage of work prioritises inclusion, explicitly paying attention to exploring power. Future work can be framed around using solid engagement frameworks including those from Asset Based Community Development.

Specific tactics could include:

- Prioritising engagement of underrepresented groups
- Work with allies those leaders we have established rapport with to reach into their networks and promote engagement
- Using an outreach model, attending provision and sessions (rather than calling people to meetings)
- Having further clear messages about a desired shift in approaches through the work of the Alliance

## **KEY THEMES - AND CRITICAL DECISIONS - TO MOVE FORWARD**

During the initial engagement period, several important themes emerged that require deeper exploration.

The next phase of work must ensure these key areas receive appropriate attention. Further choices must be made, along with a strategy for communicating them effectively to all partners and stakeholders, fostering a culture of collective action.

The proposed enquiry framework (as outlined in an accompanying paper) may not suit everyone. It must navigate complex and contested spaces while remaining mindful of its impact on individuals and organisations.

However, decisive action is essential, with a clear process focused on a shared ambition for children and young people, ensuring progress together.

With this in mind, we recommend giving particular attention to the following areas:

### **The context in which this work sits**

The current context is complex, nuanced and shifting – locally, regionally and nationally. Understanding this context fully should form part of the next phase of work, moving towards a shared strategy and an established Alliance.

There will be areas that are contested, with different experiences of services, support and engagement systems and organisations (again at local, regional and national levels).

We cover this topic in more detail in the Landscapes and Opportunities paper.

## How is the city thinking about young people?

Sheffield is thinking about young people in lots of different ways at the moment, which is really exciting but also presents a challenge on alignment, phasing and influencing.

It will be important to understand how a full enquiry (and the outcomes and outputs that are agreed) can connect to wider work, add value and be seen as a core pillar of how the city is shaped by young people. This includes local work on the City Goals and Culture Strategy and national work on the National Youth Strategy.

This topic is also covered in more detail in the Landscapes and Opportunities paper.

## Who is the system?

'The system' came up a lot in our discussions with partners - and it is a consistent theme in our discussions in other areas of the country too.

We can make some assumptions about what partners mean when they talk about the system, including:

- 'Other people' generally and the way they behave, particularly those who are perceived to have more power
- Local authority overall - as the 'system' which runs the city
- Specific decisions by funders or commissioners - as the 'system' which funds work, and decides if work happens or not
- National systems of power - as, for example, the 'system' which decided what benefits people get, and ultimately how much money a family has in their pockets

'The system' is easily used as a short-cut for our frustrations on a number of topics, including funding. Further work is needed to a) understand the system which shapes the lives of young people in Sheffield and b) understand partner and young people's experiences, and their own interpretations of the system.

Further to this, the system can be used as a blocker to action - it is sometimes easy to not do anything, using the system as an excuse.

This is not to undermine legitimate concerns about being 'outside of the system', and feeling excluded - inclusion, and removing barriers, needs to be a key consideration in further work (see Inclusion section above).

As part of our exploration of what we mean by system, we need to acknowledge that ultimately the system is us, it is not something that stands apart from people or organisations, and that it is critical that roles and behaviours within a system are understood. Future work could explore what it takes for people to collectively develop a thriving system which supports everyone to shape it, and behave in ways which will benefit young people.

## Trust

For the purposes of this paper, we define trust as “firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something”.

Trust was a significant theme of our discussions with partners – both in direct conversations, and also a rationale suggested for why engagement wasn’t higher (i.e. it was suggested that a lack of trust meant people did not want to engage – this was not the sole reason, others issues such as capacity and Ramadan were also suggested).

Historic issues (and individual interpretations of that history, and what it means now) has impacted on levels of trust – and continues to be a live issue for many we spoke to.

When partners talk about trust, they talked broadly about it in two ways:

- **Values, principles and behaviours** – partners talked about a need for respect, inclusion, and how personal relationships had impacted their trust, including predictable behaviour (e.g. people doing that they say they will do)
- **Practical actions** – partners talked about specific things that had happened which impacted on trust, including funding decisions, how spaces are used (to convene, and who is in the room), debates about quality and impact (often linked to funding)

## History

Sheffield is not alone in having a complex history – often fueled by circumstances beyond local control but that are impacted by local decisions, personalities and ways of working.

We’ve heard, very passionately, about this history – and a range of views on what should be done about it.

There is no one history and one narrative. And there probably never will be.

The key is how you move forward – and under what framing.

Our recommendation is that the sector, with support from the Alliance, seeks to move forward together with a shared ambition for the future, which is informed by learning from the past.

History should inform how the city moves forward, but it must also allow the city to move forward, and do so together.

To do this, a focus on building trust, understanding and sharing power, and communicating openness and transparently will be key.

## Connection and collaboration

We know, instinctively, that connection and collaboration are good – for us, for our work, and for children and young people. Yet it is rarely invested in, and the creation of collaborative spaces often risks creating further challenges – around power and inclusion.

We have heard consistently that connection (being connected to others) and collaboration (moving beyond connection to action together) are key – and should be drivers of a new vision for Sheffield and its young people.

Significant work has already been undertaken to develop the Sheffield Youth Alliance, and we would support further development of the Alliance alongside a second phase of this work.

There are a range of options for formalising the next steps of the Alliance – including established models like [Young People's Foundations](#) – support to establish strong and sustainable partnerships, and growing evidence base on their impact to help make the case locally, and to funders and government.

## Power

There is power all over the place, and the impacts of power (or rather the use of power) came through clearly from partners. They talked about the past, and decisions that they didn't support (around funding, or services) and about now and the future, and how sharing power would help remove barriers to moving forward together.

We also know that collaborative practice can negatively impact power dynamics and equity, creating partnerships doesn't automatically lead to democratic practice and behaviours.

Partnership development can:

- Create new bases of power and hierarchies
- Gloss over existing power and hide them from view
- Minimise people's genuine concerns with nice language

Key to the next phase of this work will be a collective effort to understand, acknowledge and act on the power within and outwith the local system for the benefit of everyone.

There is a lot more to say about power. However, at this point, we would strongly support the statement from a local partner, which summarises the approach that partners are looking for:

***'We need to act differently together'***

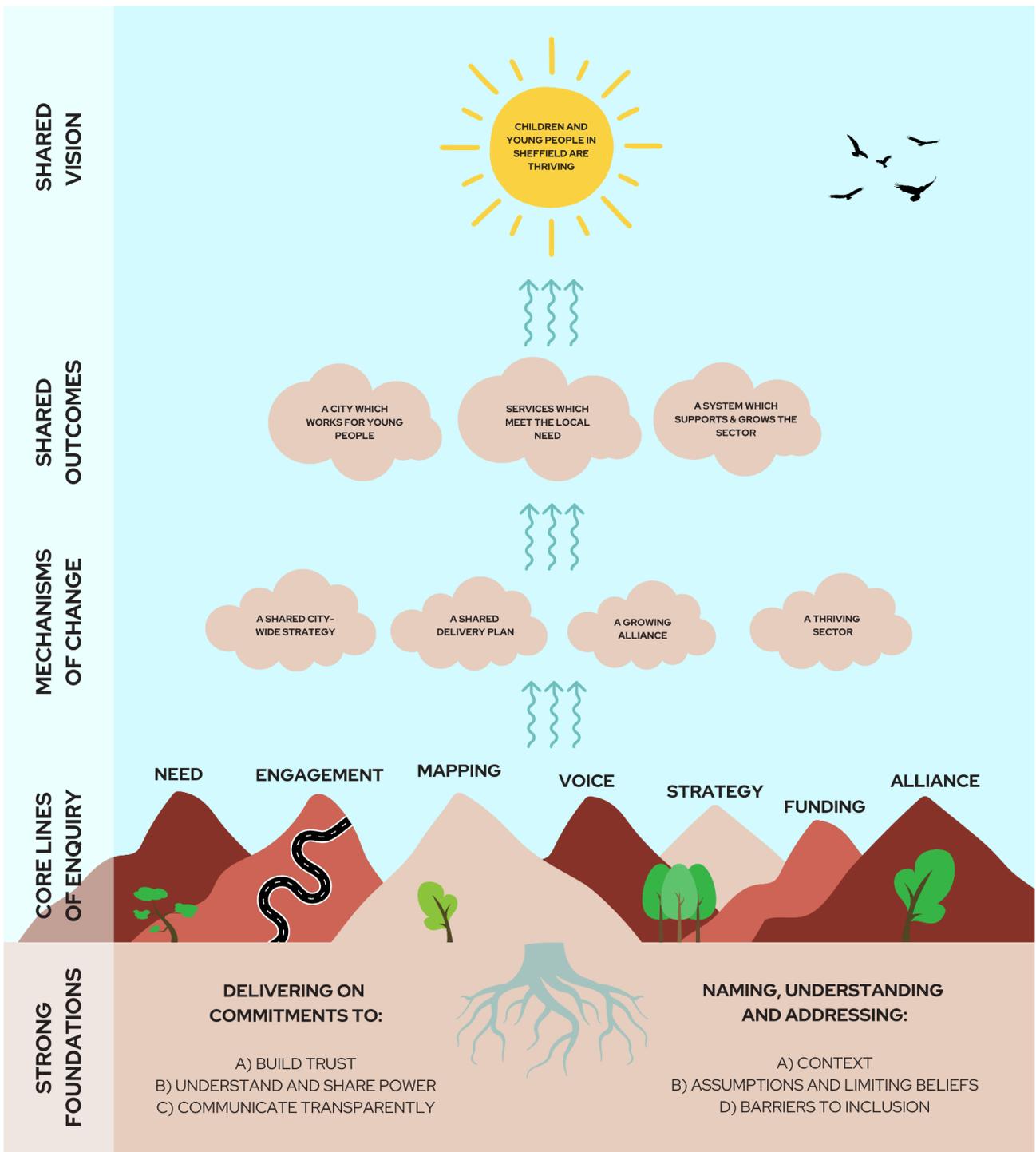
## A BESPOKE FRAMEWORK FOR SHEFFIELD

Designed for all those in Sheffield who are passionate about creating a youth sector that works for children and young people, this framework builds on the insight gathered from the sector and provides the foundations and key questions to foster shared understanding and collective problem-solving. It offers a unifying language and approach to help organisations work together in addressing sector-wide challenges.

We believe this framework should act as a living 'strategy in action', enabling meaningful collaboration. The urgency of the issues we face means that neither children, young people, nor the sector itself can afford to wait for formal enquiries to conclude. Instead, action must happen alongside the enquiry; building on existing strengths, learning from each other, and shaping a system that is responsive, dynamic, and driven by the needs of those it serves. This is a call to action for all of us to work collectively, ensuring that solutions are not only envisioned but actively implemented in real time.

At the top of the framework sits collective visioning, where we co-create a shared direction for the sector, ensuring that our work is not only responsive but transformative. It is this vision that will sustain long-term change, moving us beyond immediate problem-solving / deficit-based practice and towards a reimagined future for young people.

At the centre is the core enquiry—the critical questions the sector must answer to better serve young people. However, without strong foundations beneath it, and a vision above it, this enquiry risks becoming purely functional, reductive, and ultimately reinforcing the very system we seek to change.



## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER WORK

### *Recommendations based on first principles and collective wisdom*

#### **Recommendation 1: Keep Going!**

We believe that working together is better for everyone – for children and young people, the sector that supports them and for funders and decision makers.

The collective effort through development of the Alliance thus far and the momentum built through a first stage at pace has demonstrated need, capacity and will for a collective mobilisation for the benefit of children and young people and the sector as a whole. We recommend you continue to pursue this shared work.

#### **Recommendation 2: Framework Structure and Core Focus Areas**

We recommend that a second phase of work uses the bespoke framework for Sheffield as its starting point. The framework should operate across three connected levels:

1. **Strong Foundations** – ensuring that the enquiry (and Alliance development) purposefully and proactively:
  - a. builds trust, understands and shares power and communicates transparently
  - b. seeks to name, understand and address context, assumptions and limiting beliefs and barriers to inclusion
2. **Shared Vision** – ensuring that the enquiry (and Alliance development) support progress towards a shared vision, with specific and tangible shared outcomes and mechanisms of change which bridge the gap between activities and making the vision a reality
3. **Key Lines of Enquiry** – ensuring that the enquiry focuses on:
  - a. Need: A full and comprehensive needs assessment that underpins and informs the city's strategy and plans for youth work in the city
  - b. Engagement: A process of building relationships, collaboration, and communication between organisations, stakeholders, and partners.
  - c. Mapping: An analysis of the key assets in the city in terms of provision, infrastructure and workforce
  - d. Voice: An understanding how children and young people's voice and experience is shaping youth work in the city
  - e. Strategy: A coherent, collective strategy that unites the sector's efforts and focuses on sustainable, long-term impact for children and young people in Sheffield

- f. Funding: A deep understanding of how current resources are being used, as well as the opportunities for building the resource available
- g. Alliance: A process of building collective working partnership and collaboration in the city

### *Recommendations informed by engagement with the sector (as outlined in the Reflections Report)*

#### **Recommendation 3: Purpose, Scope and Boundaries**

The full enquiry must have a clearly defined purpose that resonates with the sector and partners, particularly regarding:

- What is in and out of scope (e.g., is this focused on youth work practice, the broader youth offer, or wider systems impacting young people?)
- How the enquiry connects to existing local strategies (e.g., City Goals, Culture Strategy) and national frameworks (e.g., National Youth Strategy)
- How young people will be involved, and what role they play in shaping the process and the outcomes (see below)

#### **Recommendation 4: Young People at the Centre**

It must be explicit how the enquiry will:

- Prioritise young people's voices, experiences, and leadership
- Ensure meaningful engagement of young people throughout
- Use young people's insights to challenge assumptions and shape recommendations

#### **Recommendation 5: Equity, Inclusion, and Representation**

A full enquiry needs to directly address the gaps and inequities already highlighted. This means:

- Ensuring broad representation, including those most marginalised and excluded
- Being honest about who is around the table – and who is not – and why
- Considering specific methods to include underrepresented communities (racialised communities, disabled young people, care-experienced young people, LGBTQ+ young people, and those facing poverty)

## **Recommendation 6: System Mapping and Power Analysis**

The enquiry must create space to ensure that we understand not only what is being delivered (standard 'provision mapping') but also existing assets in workforce development and infrastructure. We should also consider the system in which this work is being delivered. This includes:

- Mapping the 'youth system' in Sheffield: who holds power, who controls resources, and who influences decision-making
- Exploring historic and current barriers – particularly around power, trust, and funding – with the aim of identifying solutions, not just restating problems
- Acknowledging how power dynamics play out within collaborative spaces and take steps to mitigate this
- Exploring how this work can, and should, connect to wider work across the city - adding value and influencing city-wide policy and practice

## **Recommendation 7: Partnership development\***

Alongside the full enquiry, partners should seek to develop the Sheffield Youth Alliance and establish its presence within the city as the partnership for children and young people. This includes:

- Defining the vision, mission and purpose of the Alliance
- Establishing a strong and engaging brand and identity which reflects the ambitions of the partnership and its partners
- Progressing work on governance, membership and network engagement, building connection and trust across the city
- Exploring how the Alliance will be resourced and become sustainable
- Delivering some quick wins - including connections across related activities in Sheffield, further Alliance meetings and events, and showcasing the great work delivered by partners

\*also a recommendation informed by initial mapping and desk research.

*Recommendations informed by initial mapping and desk research (as outlined in the Landscape and Opportunities Report).*

### **Recommendation 8: Data, insights and need**

A full and clear understanding of the needs, and ambitions, of young people and the sector will be vital to ensuring that the alliance (and the sector as a whole) is well positioned to secure support and investment, and influence locally, regionally and nationally

### **Recommendation 9: Local alignment and coordination**

With a number of local initiatives and programmes focusing on young people in the city, it will be critical to ensure that the enquiry, and the Alliance itself, are aligned to wider developments and can add value (e.g. provide direct connections to young people and communities through their services) as well as influence strategies, policies and practice.

### **Recommendation 10: Influencing and engagement**

The full enquiry needs to make recommendations on a full Influencing and Engagement Strategy for the city, ideally delivered in partnership through the Sheffield Youth Alliance.

However, timing is critical and we would recommend that coordinated approaches to influencing at all levels are prioritised by the Alliance immediately, allowing the city to inform and influence critical developments especially at a national level.

It will also be key to outline what Sheffield can bring to regional and national spaces - including expertise and experience on specific issues, a strong track record in delivery and/or high quality and impactful youth voice and co-production work.

## PROPOSED NEXT STEPS

1. Sheffield Youth Alliance, with the support of the City Council, will focus on developing itself as a key resource and mechanism for the sector in Sheffield. This includes strengthening activity in:
  - Strategy and tactics
  - Membership
  - Governance
  - Engagement and communications
  - Influencing
  - Connecting to wider support
  
2. Sheffield City Council will commission a full enquiry into the State of the Youth Sector which will include:
  - Wide sector engagement
  - A comprehensive needs analysis
  - A detailed provision map and recommendations on how the youth offer is communicated throughout the City
  - A map of assets and power in the City
  - An analysis of funding in the city and a collective fundraising strategy for youth work in Sheffield
  
3. Sheffield City Council, in collaboration with Sheffield Youth Alliance, young people and partners across the city, will develop a youth work strategy for Sheffield