



Levelling Up North of England for Rural Youth: Co-design Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract:

This paper explores how co-design approaches contribute to support, learning and work opportunities for young people who are socially and economically disadvantaged because of where they live in the UK. The paper presents a project in which an arts organisation, design researcher and young people living in three rural areas in the North West of England came together to co-design opportunities for rural youth. The approach benefitted all involved, delivering outcomes such as new networks, youth spaces, paid work opportunities and transformed the arts organisation's practice. The place-based co-design approach broadened awareness of rural opportunities, shifted views on living and working rurally, increased confidence, developed skills and created informal career guidance spaces. The paper advocates for design research to address place-based socio-economic inequalities, therefore "levelling up" or rebalancing the learning, support and work opportunities for young people, therefore investing in peoples' lives through collaborative design.

Keywords: Co-design, rural, young people, levelling up

1. Introduction

Where a young person grows up in the UK affects their future life chances. Young people growing up in places that are struggling socially and economically with insufficient work and learning opportunities are particularly concentrated in the North of England and this forces many young people to move away (Johns et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2015; Rowthorn, 2010). This has detrimental effects on the economic potential and social cohesion of those communities. Design research delivers value when addressing complex social and economic challenges (Rodgers, Mazzarella, & Conerney, 2020). There is a need for explorations of how the benefits can be equitably distributed to places and people in the UK, who could benefit the most (Bailey et al., 2021; Design Council, 2018; Kimbell et al., 2021).

This project is part of a series of projects exploring examples of co-design approaches as a way to assist young peoples' fair access to support, learning and work opportunities throughout the North West of England, part of a AHRC funded programme called Transformation North West. This project takes place with young people aged 14 to 21 in three rural locations in Cumbria and the Yorkshire Dales. Here, many young people are forced to move away due to limited access to high-quality work, learning opportunities and affordable housing (Craven Council, 2011; South Lakeland Council, 2014; House of Lords Select Committee, 2019). A large proportion of the workforce in these areas have been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, (National Youth Agency, 2021, Wallace-Stephens & Lockey, 2020) and young people are one of the groups most affected (EHRC, 2020).

The paper outlines the possibilities of co-design approaches with people and places often overlooked in terms of research, investment and policy. The vehicle for this research was the co-design of a creative events programme for young people in the rural locations aiming to encourage them to live and work rurally in the future, which was led by an arts organisation ("organisation" in this paper), based in the North West of England.

The background and significance of this research is outlined in the next section, followed by the methodology in section 3, including an outline of the co-design approach. The co-design outcomes are shared in section 4 and the paper finishes with findings and discussion in section 5 and conclusions in section 6.

2. Background

2.1 Levelling Up in the UK

The UK is one of the most socio-economically unequal countries in the developed world (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020). Low levels of employment, skills, productivity, average wages and job creation are concentrated in the North of England (Johns et al., 2020). Former industrial, coastal and rural locations struggle in particular (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020; National Youth Agency, 2021, Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Rural youth have little to no provision to address inequalities and are regularly overlooked and excluded from the UK government's Levelling Up agenda (National Youth Agency, 2021). The UK's public research and development funding is concentrated in three cities; London, Oxford and Cambridge, accounting for 46% of the total spent in the UK, contributing to further success of prosperous areas (Forth & Jones, 2020). The UK government is prioritising "levelling-up" or rebalancing the country (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020; HM Treasury, 2021; IPPR, 2020; Tomaney & Pike, 2020). Details of what this involves are unfolding, but it should aim to include fundamental investment into improving peoples' daily lives (learning, employment and wellbeing) as well as physical infrastructure, such as transport (Colebrook, 2018; Johns et al., 2020; Kelsey and Kenny, 2021). Investment and guidance, as well as co-design, are needed to improve rural youth provision, including safe spaces, opportunities and support (National Youth Agency, 2021).

2.2 Co-Design

There is a need for research, exploring how design can contribute to tackling place-based inequality and distributing the benefits to more people and places in the UK (Bailey et al., 2021; Design Council, 2018, 2021; Kimbell et al., 2021). Collaborative design approaches have been applied to provide underrepresented people an active role in developing design interventions that directly benefit them and their communities (Galleguillos Ramírez & Coşkun, 2020; Hagen et al., 2018; Zamenopoulos & Alexiou, 2018). However, there is limited literature on the use of co-design with young people who do

not have fair access to learning and work opportunities in the UK, therefore this research looks to explore this area.

Genuine co-design enables the beneficiaries of the design intervention to influence the outcomes and have more than just a say (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2014; McKercher, 2020; Meroni, Selloni, & Rossi, 2018). To deliver lasting value to those involved and their communities, the approach should consider the sustainability of the intervention before, during and after co-design (Sejer Iversen & Dindler, 2014). Co-design approaches can be used to create design outcomes including products, services and experiences, and being actively involved is believed to have the potential to deliver social value to participants (Hagen et al., 2018; Prendiville & Akama, 2016; Sanders & Simons, 2009). This research uses the Sanders and Stappers (2008) view of co-design as those who are and are not formally trained in design working together through a design process, which includes principles, processes and a collection of tools to guide the participants (Blomkamp, 2018; Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

3. Methodology

This research is part of a series of projects (Wareing, 2019; Wareing et al., 2019a, 2019b) with young people in locations throughout the North West of England, each taking an action research approach (McNiff, 2014), which delivers learnings to both the researcher and organisations involved. The project was created in partnership with the organisation, incorporating a series of workshops in each location, as well as further development of the interventions. The project included frequent reflections on the approach through conversations, emails and online templates. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the practitioners towards the end of the project, prompting thoughts on what worked well, the challenges, learnings and implications for future work.

All young participants were provided with clear and visual participation information at the beginning and reminded verbally throughout. At the end of each workshop, they used simple and exploratory evaluation tools (Example in Figure 1) to reflect on what they gained from the workshops, as well as other topics such as new ideas and motivations. This approach had to be flexible for everyone to allow for the limited time, unexpected events and individual preferences.

The figure displays four evaluation cards arranged in a 2x2 grid, each with a title and a question, followed by handwritten responses in blue ink.

- Card 1 (Top Left):**
 - Title:** What do you think?
 - Question:** Have you gained or learnt anything from taking part in this co-design session? Tell us what and why...
 - Response:** I have learnt that everyone can do something together for young people specifically.
 - Question:** Do you feel like you were listened to and included? Why?
 - Response:** Yes because we accepted everyone's ideas.
- Card 2 (Top Right):**
 - Question:** How do you think the designed activities in both sessions helped or didn't help you? What did they do?
 - Response:** Yes they were a creative way of us putting all our ideas together.
 - Question:** What was your favourite activity and why?
 - Response:** The map we did because it was visual.
 - Question:** What was your least favourite activity and why?
 - Response:** The jobs one because I didn't know.
- Card 3 (Bottom Left):**
 - Question:** Has it made you think about future jobs differently? What and why?
 - Response:** Yes it has made me think more about where I live and what I can easily do in the future.
 - Question:** Has it made you think or feel differently about where you live? What and why?
 - Response:** Yes I have realised there are lots of opportunities.
 - Question:** Has it helped you to consider living around here in the future? Why?
 - Response:** Yes it has made me realise what I do and don't like about Bentham.
- Card 4 (Bottom Right):**
 - Question:** Has attending the sessions made you think about doing something new or different? What and why?
 - Response:** Yes doing something for young people because there isn't much to do.
 - Question:** Would you like to stay involved in The FGLD? How?
 - Response:** Yes because it is a good opportunity.

Figure 1. Example of responses using an evaluation tool (Author, 2020)

3.2 Co-design Approach

Six individual 2.5-hour workshops were designed and delivered, two in each rural location over a period of two months (Figure 2), for which the organisation was responsible for recruitment. Further co-design activities were to be delivered following the delivery of these. However, ongoing Covid-19 restrictions disrupted these plans. The approach aimed to explore two themes to drive the co-design:

1. The young people's interests, skills, ambitions for the future and the support they needed to achieve this, which may not be provided locally and could be incorporated into the events.
2. The three individual locations the events would take place, which involved listening to local young people's views on the assets there, as well as what was missing.

The design researcher, formally trained in design, led the co-design approach, designing the structure of the workshops and tools within each one and the guidelines for the facilitation team, which is explored in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

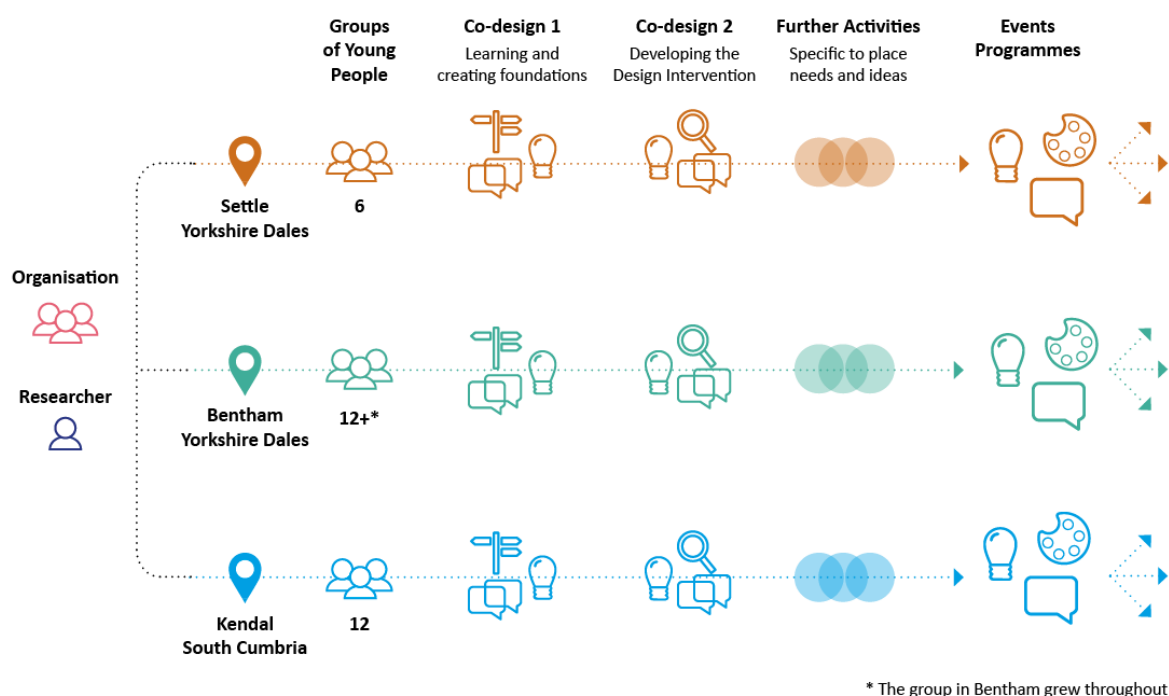


Figure 2. A simplified diagram of the people and co-design activities in three locations (Author, 2021)

3.3 Workshop 1 – Learning and Creating Foundations

This workshop was designed as a space for participants to reflect, share views of rural life and their future ambitions, resulting in mutual learning for the participants and the organisation, as well as creating the foundations for the events programme design. Key activities for engaging the young people in the first workshop are listed below with images in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

- Reflecting on rural life now, interests and skills, future ambitions and plans to achieve this.
- Identifying local assets, including people and places by creating individual maps, which were later combined to refine the overall event design.
- Responding to questions about the town and the future, whilst moving around the room and discussing with one another. One group agreed that where there was a lack of opportunities, there was an opportunity to create their own, capturing the project's ethos.
- Using a pack of cards with themes such as 'crafts' and 'mentoring' to discuss possible programme features and generating their own ideas. This caused excitement and one participant exclaimed "we've got the power!"

From the outset, co-design principles were key; it was outlined that the young people were the experts in their own experiences of living in rural areas, we aimed to draw out the strengths of the young people and locations, there were no wrong answers and we were open to all ideas.

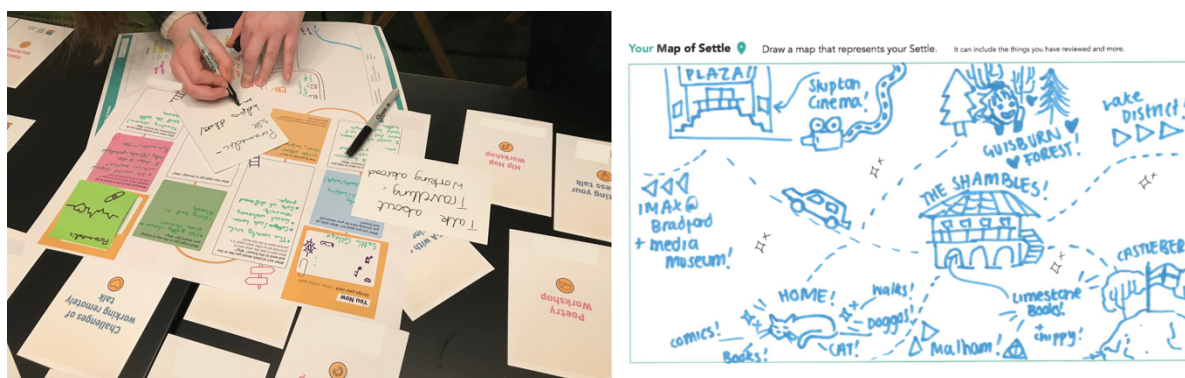


Figure 3. Career path tools with map and activity cards (Left) Participant's hometown map (Right) (Author, 2020)

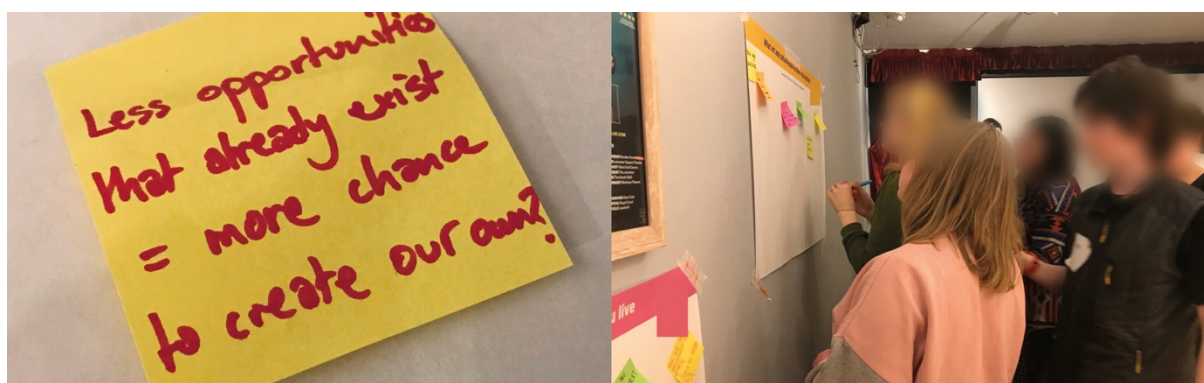


Figure 4. Opportunities sticky note (Left) Discussing views on rural life (Right) (Author and Huang, 2020)

3.4 Workshop 2 – Developing the Design Intervention

The second workshop aimed to take action on the young people's ideas and views from the first workshop by co-designing together. Key activities for engaging the young people in the first workshop are listed below with images in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

- Future rural areas for young people were imagined, generating visions with an abundance of cultural activities, co-working spaces and opportunities to connect with others, making it an attractive place to stay in the future.
- Groups outlined features of a successful events programme for their hometown, including existing assets and new activities.
- To finalise decisions on the programme content, groups selected from events described on cards that the organisation had chosen beforehand.
- To re-establish the young people's design influence, groups used a tool to depict how they might tailor these events to their interests and local towns, with blank cards provided for emerging ideas.

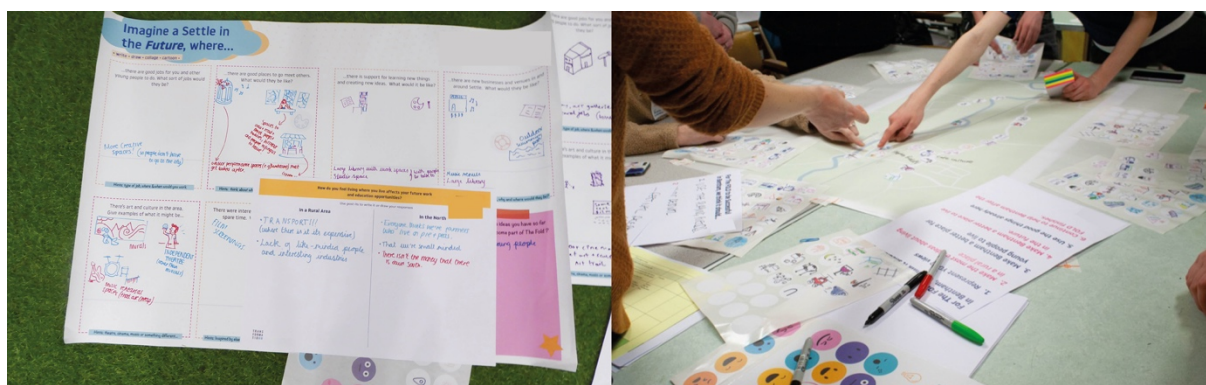


Figure 5. Imagining the future of the hometown (Left) (Author, 2020) and creating event maps (Right) (Huang, 2020)

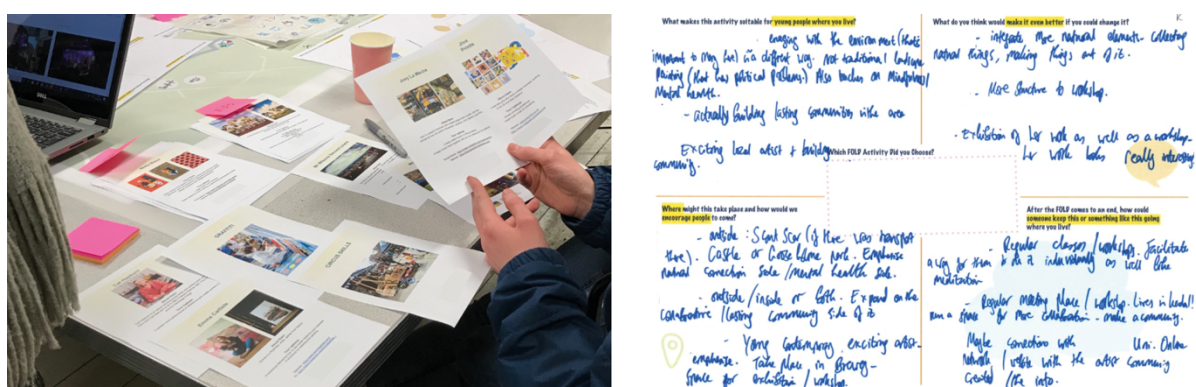


Figure 6. Pre-selected ideas card sort (Left) (Huang, 2020) and tool to adapt event ideas (Author, 2020)

4. Outcomes

The co-design workshops initiated the creation of several design outcomes:

- Changes to rural environments for young people, including places to socialise and public artwork (Figure 7, right), one of which is featured in local news (Tate, 2021).
- New youth-run network, including youth-run events and online zine (Figure 7), a space for those interested in creative careers in South Cumbria.
- Online creative skill development activities and paid work experience for co-designers.
- Young co-designers continuing to collaborate and speak at other events.
- Interest and enquiries into co-design collaborations and practice from other large rural organisations.

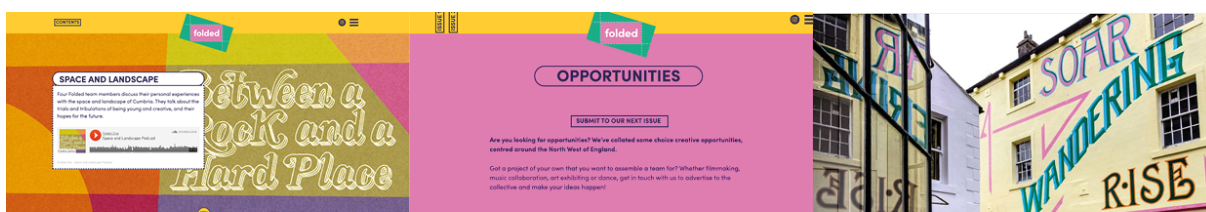


Figure 7 - Zine examples (Left and Centre) and Mural in Settle (Right) (Stephen Garnett Photography, 2021)

Figure 8 and tables 1 and 2 show some examples of question themes and reflections from the young people and practitioners, demonstrating the positive responses to the workshops, and examples of how young people were made to feel valued.

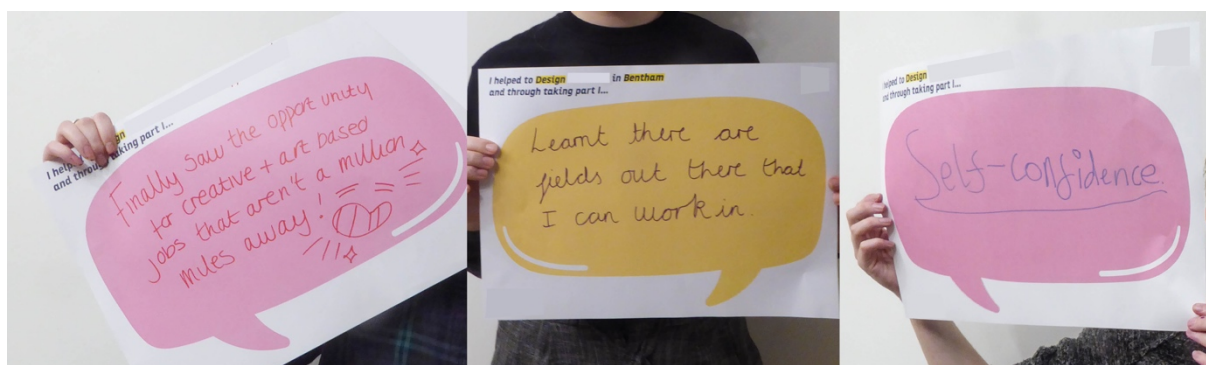


Figure 8. Examples of what young people told us they gained from taking part on one evaluation tool (Author, 2020).


Topics Explored	Examples of Responses from the Young People 
Did you feel listened to and included in the workshop? And why?	<p>"Listened to as well as shown respect."</p> <p>"Because people are interested in what I say."</p> <p>"Yep, as we suggested some of the ideas and built on them."</p>
How do you think the activities in the workshop helped or didn't help you?	<p>"I had my say."</p> <p>"Yes, they were a creative way of us putting our ideas together."</p> <p>"They helped give enough framework to not be afraid of a blank page but enough space for free thinking/talking."</p>
Reflections on hometown, the future and jobs:	<p>"I realised my dream job can be in my town."</p> <p>"It's made me feel as though there are more activities to do in my area and maybe I don't need to travel as much."</p> <p>"More hope in the artistic, young community here. More people than I thought with similar interests. More opportunity to collaborate."</p>

Table 1: Examples of questions and reflections from young participants (Author, 2021)

Examples of Observations and Reflections from Organisation Practitioners

"The fact that stickers were made of everyone's drawings from the previous session was great - everyone loved finding their own and I think it made everyone feel that what they'd done last time had been appreciated and something made of it."

"I think there was also excitement/novelty around the idea of big map that was of the place that they lived...a place that is usually 'overlooked' in their opinion, made into something big and bold!"

"If we'd gone in there and said 'look at this, what do you think or look at these cards, choose which ones you want', then we wouldn't have got the same outcome if we hadn't gone through the process that you designed. It made it more true to them by going through the tools, the tools that you'd created, but I was at first sceptical about how we were going to get from A to B."

Table 2: Examples of observations and reflections from the practitioners (Author, 2021)

5. Findings and Discussion

The co-design approach produced several co-design outcomes contributing to the creation of the events programme for young people in rural areas (details in section 5.2), as well as transformational outcomes for both the young people and the organisation involved. Figure 9 shows what is identified as influencing the co-design approach, the focus of the activities and the different types of outcomes delivered, which are discussed further in this section.

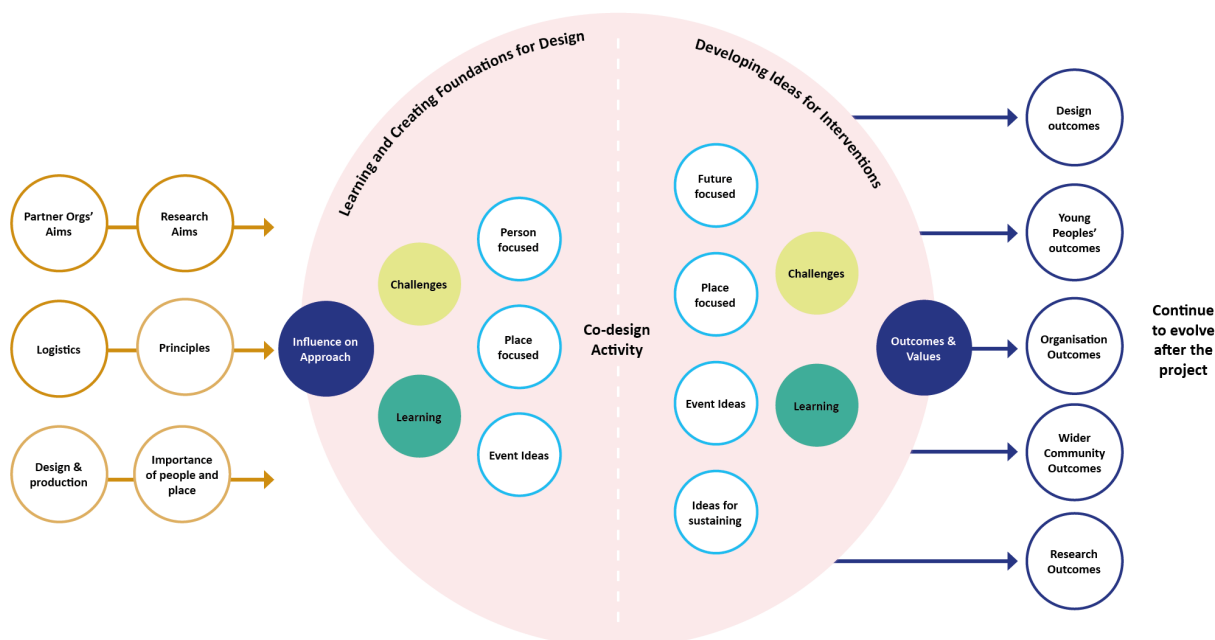


Figure 9: Diagram of Overall Approach (Author, 2021)

5.1 The Co-Design Approach

The co-design approach had a dual aim to design a creative events programme for skill development and job inspiration in rural communities, as well as explore how co-design could help address inequalities in access to learning and work opportunities for young people. The design-led approach, created by the design researcher was underpinned by co-design principles that included respect and value of the young people, their ideas and what their local areas already had to offer. The design researcher explicitly aimed to create a process that benefitted the organisation, enabling them to learn about co-design, as well as the young people, who would be empowered to influence events in their community and learn about future opportunities. This resulted in various place-based design interventions that supported young people in rural communities, as well as transformational outcomes for young people (section 5.2) and the organisation (section 5.3).

In the workshop, the activities and tools fit into three categories; they are people (eg. individual aspirations), place (eg. local strengths) or future (eg. imagining possible futures) focused (included in Figure 9), all three of which drew together elements that would make the programme of events relevant and supportive to young people in the three areas. Aiming to create an events programme that be the initiate steps to improved futures for rural youth. This was made possible through designed structures, guidance, encouragement, permission and the demonstration of a clear investment of high-quality design resources and time, that put local young people and their hometowns at the centre (mentioned in Table 2). It was also noted that the young people enjoyed using tools to discuss where they live and create event ideas. This links to the idea that co-design incorporates principles, processes

and tools (Blomkamp, 2018; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), but extends the idea for use in this context by including the importance of valuing people and place.

Many of the challenges faced were due to the stretched capacity when delivering in three locations, responding to the outcomes of each workshop, as well as producing and preparing activities. The organisation was sometimes sceptical of elements of the co-design process (Table 2) that were not directly focused on event creation, but following the process they reflected that the approach drew out the ideas and views of the young people, allowing each event programme to be unique to the locations. At points, the co-design moved into a consultation where young people were asked to select from predefined events, which the organisation felt avoided promising what could not be delivered. Covid-19 restrictions were both a challenge and opportunity, resulting in the design of the events programme having to change form and return to some of the young peoples' original ideas from the workshops, which could be delivered safely and remotely.

5.2 Value for Young People in Rural Communities

Through participating in the co-design and reflecting on the experience through conversations with the facilitators and using the evaluation tools, young people reported that they had experienced changes that affected themselves personally, such as an increase in confidence, skill development and motivation to try new things. They also experienced changes in how they viewed their future in terms of jobs and possibilities in rural areas, and changes to how they viewed their hometown, in terms of what is available now and what might be possible in the future (Figure 8 and Table 2). Furthermore, all reported that the workshops made them feel included, listened to and many described how they felt valued and respected by facilitators and other participants, particularly in the way in which their ideas were acknowledged and developed. This builds on research that indicates the potential of co-design to have a positive social impact on participants (Hagen et al., 2018; Prendiville & Akama, 2016; Sanders & Simons, 2009) and in this research, a co-design approach becomes a tool for youth futures and employment support. The project continues to evolve beyond the initial workshops and arguably the outcomes have the potential to influence young peoples' lives going into the future and contribute to socio-economic changes for the rural communities, addressing geographical inequalities. Although the relationship with the organisation continues, it is difficult to evaluate the continued and evolving impact, particularly with the young people involved due to the limited duration of the project and the interruption of Covid-19 restrictions.

5.3 Value for the Organisation

The co-design was fundamental to upskilling the practitioners, as well as opening their eyes to a new approach and ensuring genuine involvement of the young people. The organisation plans to embed the approach into their business for future projects because they realise it is a superior way to engage with communities and embed sustainable projects, rather than parachuting into a community as outsiders. One of the practitioners said:

We really can imagine how co-design could be a fundamental part of what we do because the outcomes are so genuine, authentic and true to the project.
(Organisation Director, Interview, 2020)

They believe that the co-design structure and tools were key to the engagement, giving them confidence as facilitators, and helping young people generate ideas. The organisation recognise that they had to approach the project with a new co-design mindset in which they were not the experts and that they were there to listen to the young people. However, they were less comfortable with

enabling the young people to have control over the design of the activities that would take place within the events programme.

The organisation reported that the co-design approach provided social, cultural and economic value for their work and the communities they work in, based on research by Rodgers et al. (2020). In terms of social value, they identify co-design skill development, as well as participatory and inclusive value incorporated into their future practice. Culturally, they report that the co-design approach made participants feel valued and achieve their aspirations, as well as supporting effective and sensitive interaction with the communities. The project also influenced interest in co-design approaches from other organisations in the North West of England. In terms of economic value, they state the co-design approach influenced a grant of £100,000 in funding and will strengthen future bids. This demonstrates how co-design was transformational to the organisation and young people, as well as influencing other communities in the North of England, beyond the co-design project.

6. Conclusions

This paper has explored co-design possibilities and challenges of “levelling up”, therefore aiming to improve access to learning, support and work opportunities for young people in rural areas in the North of England. The design outcomes aimed to improve their local lives by building networks, showcasing the talent in rural areas, developing skills, improving youth spaces and creating paid work, which will deliver meaningful, long-lasting benefits to young people and communities. The project generated further interest from other organisations wishing to engage with rural youth, having the potential to further disperse the benefits and generate funding in rural North West England.

It was discovered that:

- The design-led elements of the co-design approach, the principles, high-quality tools and structure enabled young people to influence decisions, learn and be actively involved in the design process, as well as valuing local people and places.
- The co-design approach also enabled young people to be comfortable imagining their futures. This resulted in a broader awareness of the opportunities available to young people in rural communities as well as an increase in confidence in their abilities
- The workshops were informal spaces to learn about career possibilities, develop skills and build relationships with others.
- The act of co-designing (creating own ideas, discussing and developing) to influence opportunities for young people in rural communities, plus facilitators handling the ideas with care (listening, recording, including) was highly valuable and fulfilling to the young people.
- For the organisation, the co-design approach was fundamental to the success of the project, gave them confidence as facilitators and will transform future practice.
- The project delivered social, economic and cultural value to people and places with barriers to learning and opportunities.

This paper outlines that co-design approaches can be used as a tool in locations where young people face barriers to learning and work opportunities, with the potential to provide support, as well as help young people to feel valued, develop confidence, be more aware of opportunities and how to access them. This paper also outlines how a co-design approach can support local organisations, securing

funding and work to develop interventions that take steps to address inequalities with and for local communities, therefore levelling up.

This paper presents ongoing research, exploring ways in which place-based co-design approaches put people and places in the UK, which are facing challenges at the centre of a vision for “levelling up” and an inclusive economy in the UK, at a time when the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has put long-term inequalities in the spotlight. It is hoped that this paper draws attention to the possibilities and challenges of the application of co-design in this area. Overall, this paper highlights how collaborative design research and practice, especially approaches that are design-led, treat people, places and ideas with respect and that draw on strengths that can help to invest in young people and overlooked communities, making a difference in the lives of young people and the places that need it most.

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