



The Power of Four

Lessons from the
VOYCE collaboration
2018



Written by the Centre for Social Impact



The VOYCE collaboration journey – *funder perspective*

“As funders we ask community organisations to collaborate all the time. When you do it yourself, you experience the challenges and understand the flexibility, commitment and trust it takes. You see how your own processes are set up for safety, accountability and transparency and how these constrain people. It makes you humble, and alert to the difficulties of collaborating, and makes you change your processes.”

“There are some incredible people in our field [philanthropy], with cleverness, passion and commitment. When we put our hearts and minds to collaborating we can do extraordinary things. It’s good fun too, we should do more of it.”

“The future of philanthropy looks like more of this – to make more significant change together. VOYCE is a beacon of what is possible and what can be done.”

This report presents the story of and lessons learned from a collaboration between four philanthropic funders that led to the establishment of VOYCE – Whakarongo Mai¹. VOYCE is an independent charitable trust for children and young people in foster care.

The funders harnessed ‘the power of four’ to generate significant change in the foster care system. They are The Tindall Foundation, the Todd Foundation, the Vodafone New Zealand Foundation (Vodafone Foundation) and Foundation North.

The focus here is on the funders’ experience of the VOYCE collaboration, which also included care-experienced children and young people, central government, iwi and the foster care sector. The funders wanted to “identify what we learned and what works, so we can do it again; to show what collaboration looks like to us”.

The journey that led to the April 2017 establishment of VOYCE from the funders’ perspective is shared, then lessons and key messages arising.



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Manager, Vodafone Foundation



John McCarthy
Manager, The Tindall Foundation



Christina Howard
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¹ See www.voyce.org.nz

Part one 2013 to 2015 - landing on focus and pathway

The journey began for these four funders in 2013, when The Tindall Foundation researched foster care as a potential area for investment. Foster care in New Zealand has a scope and scale that philanthropy can address (around 5,000 children and young people); it involves a vulnerable and disadvantaged group; and it is a system in clear need of change².

After some discussion, in 2014 the Tindall and Todd Foundations agreed to explore a collaboration in foster care. Todd had already funded foster care and Todd's Executive Director had worked for Child, Youth and Family (CYF)³ and been involved with foster care teams. The Tindall Foundation Manager is a former Manager of Lifewise⁴, a social development organisation that offers foster care services.

In 2014 the Philanthropy New Zealand Youth Funders' Network was discussing opportunities for collaboration. At one critical Network meeting, staff from the four funding bodies in this story were present. They decided to explore a potential collaboration around foster care.

In 2014 the four funders met with CYF to discuss the potential to work together on foster care. After a positive initial response from CYF, the funders began being passed to different agency staff, before being advised that CYF was going to be restructured and to pursue their own collaboration.

In March 2015 the four funders held a workshop to explore a possible focus for collaboration. Around 25 people were invited, including care-experienced young people, foster carers, representatives of care provider organisations, a Family Court Judge, an academic and an Office of the Children's Commissioner representative. Government agencies were not invited, to ensure that young people and those in the care sector felt safe expressing their views on the current system.

The workshop explored the current state for young people in foster care and post care, perceptions of what was and was not working, unhelpful paradigms and beliefs around foster care, what a new paradigm could look like, and potential processes and resources to bring this new paradigm into being.

This workshop was described as "a shot to the heart" and an eye-opener for funders; a deeply moving day as people shared stories, grappled with concerns and deep hurt, and acknowledged that despite best efforts the care system was fundamentally flawed.

While several ideas for action emerged⁵, the idea of a peak body for children in care stood out: "That seemed number one – if we use the principle of 'nothing about us without us', we couldn't do anything else". Earlier work by Dingwall Trust⁶ had also established that care-experienced young people were strongly in favour of such a peak body.

As well as personally moving and motivating participants, this pivotal workshop crystallised an intent and commitment to raise the voices of and connect young people in care. This commitment became the foundation of the VOYCE journey.



² Issues identified in a 2013 Tindall Foundation paper included: foster care is linked to poor outcomes later in life; care givers need high-quality, standardised training; early intervention to reduce the risk of care is needed; and services and processes when transitioning from care need improving. In 2013 the state's responsibility for care stopped on a young person's 17th birthday.

³ Child, Youth and Family was the government agency with legal powers to protect and support children and young people, until it was replaced by a new Oranga Tamariki-Ministry for Children www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/ in April 2017.

⁴ See www.lifewise.org.nz.

Support for a collaboration in foster care is established

A powerful workshop establishes a compelling focus for collaboration

As the four funders began processing the workshop and taking information and options back to their respective boards, the then Minister of Social Development, Anne Tolley, officially announced a comprehensive review of CYF, to be led by economist and company director Paula Rebstock.

In May 2015 the funders sponsored and presented a proposal to Paula Rebstock for the four funders to fund Tracie Shipton, Director of Dingwall Trust, to prepare a business case for a peak body for children and young people in care, as part of the CYF review⁷. Tracie was identified for this role by the funders as a long-term and articulate advocate for connecting children and young people in care and for their voices to inform decisions made about them. She brought experience in working with children and young people in foster care as a foster care parent, social worker and manager of foster care services.

At a pivotal meeting with Minister Tolley, the four funders made their case for a philanthropic and government collaboration in foster care, as equal partners with different roles and strengths to contribute. The funders made it clear that the new service would be developed with children and young people in care. Paula Rebstock agreed to the proposal to create the business case for a peak body and confirmed that Minister Tolley supported a government and philanthropic collaboration in this area.

Restructure of CYF announced – the four funders gain government agreement to make the case for an independent organisation connecting and conveying the voices of children in care, as part of the CYF review

⁵ These were: 1) a stand-alone organisation for children and young people in care (a peak body), similar to Create Foundation in Australia or Who Cares? Scotland; 2) an intensive, child-centred intervention to support children in care's return to their families; and 3) a programme aimed at reducing the likelihood of young people being taken into care from at-risk families, based on a model from Ireland.

⁶ See <http://www.dingwall.co.nz>. Dingwall Trust provides support services to children and young people in need of out-of-home care.

⁷ The funding was provided for three days per week for Tracie's salary, backfill for her role as Director of Dingwall Trust, and expenses. The four funders contributed equally and the funding was sought and provided in two stages – to prepare the case for the new service, and to design and establish the new service.

Part Two 2016 - green light, intentional collaboration and legislative change

Government established an Expert Advisory Panel to oversee the CYF review. Tracie Shipton, the four funders and care-experienced young people presented the business case for a peak body for children in care to this Panel. The interim Expert Advisory Panel report at the end of 2015 included a recommendation to establish this peak body, as did the final Panel report to government in April 2016. Tracie Shipton was then seconded part-time to the 'Investing in Children' programme in the CYF review, as a workstream co-lead with a government staff member in that team, to establish a new 'kids in care' entity. Financial support for Tracie to undertake this secondment was provided by the funders.

In February 2016 the four funders held an externally facilitated collaboration review session. In this session "we gave ourselves the power to act naively and proceed until apprehended. We had the trust and confidence from our boards to do that". The session explored funders' views on what could go wrong, why they were there and how they would handle challenges. This was a key session in which the principles for working together, and also working with government and others, were established (described later).

As a result of this workshop, the funders identified the following principles as essential for the new service:

- Care-experienced children and young people will participate at every step and shape the new service, along with iwi and non-government organisations (NGOs)
- The state is fully responsible as 'parent' for those in foster care, and as the 'responsible parent' the new service should be fully funded by government, and be financially secure and sustainable
- Philanthropic contributions can complement core government funding
- The new service must be independent of government – this was identified early on as crucial for young people.

Tracie was described by one of the funders as a "gritty disruptor" throughout the collaboration, passionate about children and young people in care and unafraid to ask awkward questions, challenge government processes and uphold the above principles.

The four funders considered that the government staff working with Tracie were highly skilled, open, supportive and invaluable in navigating government processes.

Tindall Foundation Manager John McCarthy headed a Steering Group set up to oversee the design process for the new service. The Steering Group membership included care-experienced young people and representatives from government, iwi and the foster care sector. John was also the nominee from the four funders to liaise and work with government during this phase, and played a backbone role throughout the collaboration (described later).

While formal government approval via the CYF review to establish the new service was being gained, the four funders decided to get on with designing the new service. A legal trust deed was developed, Charities Services status was gained and potential trustees for an Establishment Board for the new organisation were identified. Pro-bono legal support was leveraged via Vodafone's commercial relationship with Bell Gully.

Collaboration principles established by the four funders

Funder principles for working with government established

Collaborative workshops and interactive events were held with more than 100 care-experienced children and young people around New Zealand. Vodafone hosted a Hackathon to design options for a digital platform, from which 10 young innovators were funded \$5,000 each to prototype ideas for the platform. From these processes, the detailed roles of the organisation and the name of VOYCE (Voice of the Young and Care Experienced) – Whakarongo Mai and its structure, logo and website were designed.

During the developmental process, it became clear that there was no mechanism in government for creating an independent organisation that was fully funded by government. With help from the State Services Commission, a way through this was found that required a legislative change – which occurred in December 2016.

Ultimately, as a result of the collaboration and the co-design process, an independent organisation was negotiated, along with a legislated requirement for the Chief Executive of the new government agency for children, Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children, to make ongoing provision in its budget for core funding of this organisation for children and young people in foster care. In December 2016, after many meetings, long hours, discussions and engagement with children, young people, iwi, NGOs, the funders and government, the green light was given by government for this new peak body for kids in care to be implemented.

Participatory process to design the new organisation, with care-experienced children and young people at the centre



Hackathon to support marketing and engagement for VOYCE

Part Three 2017 - establishing VOYCE – Whakarongo Mai

In early 2017 the Establishment Board for the new organisation was appointed; it included care-experienced young people and representatives from philanthropy, iwi, the care sector and government. John McCarthy from Tindall was Chair of this Board until September 2017, when he moved to being a Board member, with plans to move off the Board in 2018. Semisi (James) Prescott is now the Board Chair.

The digital platform for VOYCE was formally launched in April 2017 and the inaugural Chief Executive and Board members were appointed in September 2017. Most current Board members played integral roles in shaping the journey of VOYCE. Three young people with care experience are currently on the Board. The vision for VOYCE is for more and more of its team and Board to have had care experience or other links with foster care.

Part Four 2018 - what next?

With its vision, values, structure, core government funding, management team and Board in place, VOYCE is working to manifest its aims and is forming key relationships, including a partnership with government.

In 2018 the four funders agreed to a collaborative funding arrangement for VOYCE for the next three years. This occurred via one collective approach rather than separate applications to the four funders through separate processes. Growing possibilities around corporate philanthropy to support the work of VOYCE and others in the community sector is considered a major area of potential.



Director of Dingwall Trust Tracie Shipton (left) and former CE of the Vodafone Foundation Abbie Reynolds at the VOYCE launch, April 2017

Achievements of the VOYCE collaboration

“What is ours to celebrate? A new organisation that is doing something really different, created via a working partnership with young people and government, with youth voice genuinely at the centre. We did what we said we would. We drove an outcome and created the infrastructure to support that outcome.”

“A key achievement was to develop and go through an emergent process together, sensing and innovating, not being sticklers for process, going beyond the norms and risk cultures of our organisations, using peer pressure to push the boundaries of our organisations. I salute the bravery of our boards!”

The main achievements of this collaboration are viewed by the funders as follows.

System change to benefit children and young people

- Creation of a new, independent entity for children and young people in care.
- Legislative change so government can fully fund this independent entity over time.

Participation and influence of care-experienced children and young people

- Care-experienced children and young people genuinely shaped the initiative throughout.
- A service that is more likely to make a difference and influence wider system change because children and young people are at the centre of it.

Working differently

- The funder team had chemistry, shared diverse skills, played to strengths and made the process fun.
- Fast prototyping, creative problem-solving and an iterative process were employed – an ‘elastic-sided playpen’.
- Just enough bureaucracy to be safe – and no more.
- Navigating organisational norms to create the freedom to act and fund differently.

Effective approach with government

- Funders led proactively, approaching government as a partner.
- The funders presented a united front to demand change.
- Access was gained to Ministers and the CYF review team; avenues to influence were created (being on key groups, leading processes and funding external expertise).
- Funders were able to keep things moving when government processes were slow.
- Reciprocity with government: “They want our money, we want to change their system”.

Other than staff time, which was considerable, costs for funders related to developing the business case, facilitating the design of the service (salaries and related costs), building the VOYCE website and facilitating the collaboration. Boards were asked to approve small amounts of funding as needed, as the collaboration developed. This collaboration was not costly for the funders in terms of grant funding.

Impact for the four funders

“Funders are wary of funder capture and do not often go out in front. VOYCE has given confidence that if the right people, processes and voices are involved then we can be proactive in influencing and creating solutions. Different funders can take different risks, which makes it even more powerful when we work together.”

“We learned that big issues can be tackled together; that this is a compelling and good use of funders’ time. We had a strong sense of belonging and inclusion in the group; we are a tight bunch and had a really good time.”

In 2017 the Vodafone⁸ and Todd⁹ Foundations set up Collaboration Funds, influenced by the VOYCE collaboration experience. The Todd Foundation’s fund is specifically for collaborating proactively with other funders where there is strategic value in doing so, as was the case with VOYCE.

Vodafone will be open to the next collaboration rather than go looking for it: “You can’t force collaboration, but the more you make space the more things can arise; create the space and it will come”.

Foundation North created an Innovation Unit¹⁰ in 2018, which was informed by the learning from VOYCE. Tindall has learned the value of playing a backbone role in a collaboration and that a small financial investment can leverage huge things. All of the funders learned that it is possible to collaborate with government for shared outcomes.

The VOYCE collaboration has built an understanding of what high-functioning collaboration looks like and is a flagship project for all four funders, providing a tangible case study of the power of working together: “it’s been a powerful thing to talk about. It is a shining light of the potential for philanthropy to broker collective impact”; “VOYCE is a really relatable piece of work, everyone gets it, there are 5,000-plus kids in care and we are not doing well enough for them”. The VOYCE experience has built confidence that funders can use their mana and financial power to influence and work with government.

VOYCE reflects a different funding paradigm, in which funders can lead from the front where this is useful, rather than fund others to do so. The funders are clear that they were only comfortable leading in this way because of the process they ran to ensure that what they were doing was wanted and needed by the young people and community organisations concerned.

The VOYCE collaboration has encouraged the funders to be more flexible and less bureaucratic in their processes; they have learned that “we can get through any process as long as there is trust”. All of the funder representatives experienced personal and professional development by working with and learning from others.

“It’s an unusual place, a place of community and the collective rather than of power.”

Importantly, this experience has made these funders feel invested in what they have helped to create. They want to have ongoing relationships with each other as funders, to keep supporting the kaupapa of VOYCE and to look for other opportunities to make a difference together.

“We co-fund all the time but we haven’t truly worked like this before”

⁸ See www.foundation.vodafone.co.nz/collaboration-fund for information on Vodafone’s Collaboration Funds.

⁹ See www.toddfoundation.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Todd_Funding-Statement-1.pdf.

¹⁰ See the 2018 Foundation North Strategic Plan, which outlines its new approach to funding: www.foundationnorth.org.nz/about-us/strategic-plan/

Success factors for the VOYCE collaboration

“We referred to ourselves as the power of four – we were way more powerful together. We brought firepower and moral authority.”

The X factor of any project or collaboration is the personal and professional qualities of the people involved and the dynamic among those people. In the VOYCE collaboration, a strong purpose combined with a creative process, shared values, trust, technical expertise, good timing and the ability to sit with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Shared purpose and vision for collaborating

As well as having a strong shared purpose – to connect, support and raise the voices of children in care – the collaboration had a vision to:

Share our time, money, selves and wisdom in a more powerful way to have an impact on wicked problems of common interest.

Principles-based collaboration

The principles for collaborating identified in February 2016 were:

Shape the system

Learn and grow in chaos

Model a new way

Do good shit, do no harm

Put young people at the centre

Be brave, be real, have fun.

Using collective power, playing to strengths

Collective power was utilised when engaging with government and convincing boards of the merits of the collaboration.

Each funder contributed different strengths (Vodafone communication, marketing, corporate skills; Foundation North size, hosting; Tindall a backbone role; Todd guardian of principles, experience in foster care).

Made it up together along the way

The funders gave each other collective permission to act naively, be hopeful, organic, opportunistic and ambitious, have no predetermined answers, be creative and bold, and ‘see what emerged’.

Those affected at the centre

The ongoing, meaningful participation of care-experienced children and young people is at the heart of this collaboration and its success.

Tracie Shipton was considered to have achieved richer participation as she is trusted by care-experienced youth.

Right people, trust, backbone role, fun

Leaders and staff from each organisation with mana and influence participated and had fun together. John McCarthy played a critical backbone role throughout, representing the four funders at government level and on the Board of VOYCE.

Some foundation staff understood and had backgrounds in foster care, which also helped considerably. External expertise was brought in as needed.

Right conditions and timing

Without the review of CYF, VOYCE may not have emerged.

There was shared agreement that change was needed.

Reflective and robust

Taking time to reflect, learn and document along the way.

A theory of change and formal evaluation were not considered necessary, although a critical friend could have been useful.

A democratic process was used for the collaboration, with chairing and facilitation shared amongst the group. Focused effort was put into making participation attractive and easy:

“We created a structure that made making the time easy – people would want to be involved, we made it fun, put meetings in diaries early, used technology, focused on the kaupapa. You need to work in ways that work for people and lower the barriers to staying involved. You need to create the right ‘container’ for collaboration, that provides safety and clarity on who will do what and how, while holding a dynamic thing.”

The anchoring or backbone role played by John McCarthy was seen as critical by all involved. John had an existing interest in foster care, connections, expertise, leadership and the humility for this role: “a way about him that made a lot of decisions happen”. John wanted the process to work for everyone and was also a powerful spokesperson for the initiative, helping to engage boards and government.

Ministerial leadership was seen as key to success, as was the work by Paula Rebstock opening up the partnership. There was also strong support for the proposal on the Expert Advisory Panel from Panel member Duncan Dunlop, from Who Cares? Scotland, which is a similar organisation to VOYCE.

In this collaboration the state was considered by the funders to be the parent of children and young people in care, with funders taking moral authority and values to the table. There is a clear understanding among the funders that government has the responsibility to fund core service provision for those in care, whilst philanthropy’s contribution is about impact investment, supporting positive social change and funding innovation.

Challenges

While the path of this collaboration was generally smooth, at times the journey was messy and unclear. There were occasional ‘table thumpings’ in government settings, in terms of:

- Ensuring that government was equally committed to hearing from and involving care-experienced young people
- Moving beyond the traditional government process of designing a service and putting it out to competitive tender
- Making sure the organisation was understood to be much more than an ‘advocacy service’, including connecting young people in care, raising their voices and supporting a positive care identity.

¹¹ See www.whocarescotland.org.

Other areas of challenge or where things might have been done differently were described as follows.

Continuity and ‘dropping the ball’

There was some change in the people leading the collaboration from different organisations, as several people left their jobs at the Vodafone Foundation and Foundation North. While this created occasional delays and risks as new people were inducted, it did not disrupt the collaboration. Having a backbone agency, strong peer relationships, the success factors above and personal commitments from key personnel supported its ongoing momentum.

At times the funders felt they had drifted or dropped the ball. For example, in 2017, once it had been agreed by government to establish VOYCE, there was a sense that people collectively rested on their laurels, other than John McCarthy from Tindall who was part of the Establishment Board.

Different organisational processes and board and organisational engagement

“We must be able to change our practices to accommodate what’s needed.”

All of the funders had different processes and timelines for decision-making. This was not an issue early on as the funding involved was small, but later on decisions were needed quickly at times and board processes had to be navigated. Larger funders were generally less agile than smaller ones.

A risk was that at any time any of the funders’ boards could have declined further funding or involvement in the collaboration, or had some rule or process that got in the way of progress. It is a reflection of the trust and relationships between these boards and their staff that this did not occur. Making sure that boards were engaged enough and appropriately was an ongoing issue for all of the funders.

A lot of people unfamiliar with foster care were involved from the funder organisations. This could have derailed the initiative if there had not been the right awareness and communication within the four organisations; this needed to be skilfully managed.

Resourcing participation

While small in grants funding, this kind of collaboration requires significant time and effort from philanthropic staff. There needs to be the potential for significant outcomes to justify the amount of time required.

Participating in the VOYCE collaboration affected the capacity of the community organisations involved. It utilised, for example, much of the Director of Dingwall Trust’s time, which had a significant impact on Dingwall Trust. In hindsight, the funders reflected, they could have been more proactive about resourcing and supporting participation by iwi/Māori and NGOs.

Significant time and energy was also asked of many care-experienced young people to take part in this collaboration, which needed to be valued and resourced appropriately. Keeping aware of the demands on young people and resourcing their participation creatively and fully were important.

Time and timing

A challenge was making the time to participate, especially with chief executives leading and having very different organisational processes. The funders learned not expect everyone to contribute in the same way, at the same level. The funders are also aware that if government had not been ready for this proposal and if the CYF review had not been underway, it is unclear how successful the initiative would have been.

Legitimacy

It was noted that some may see this collaboration as overstepping the funding role by creating a new organisation. A key learning here was that the voice of lived experience or the 'end user' is critical to change efforts involving philanthropy: "As funders we're not legitimate directing change (outside funding systems) without the voice of the end user".

The sweet spot for collaboration

The 'sweet spot' for collaboration sits among the factors below. Not all may be present at the beginning and may need to be developed, but all need to be paid attention.

- Clear need and purpose
- Principles and values
- Mandate and commitment
- Voice of lived experience
- Participation
- Ability to influence
- Potential for significant change
- Timing
- Right conditions
- Leadership
- Backbone role
- Pooling resources and skills
- Right people
- Trust
- Good group dynamic
- Skilful facilitation
- Creative process

Key messages for philanthropic collaboration

“We were all attached by the heart to this kaupapa, but everything is like that if you hear from the people affected. The voice of lived experience and being connected to that is so important.”

“What makes VOYCE a ‘real’ collaboration rather than co-funding is all sitting in a room together, deciding together, allowing intuition to flow, being thoughtful and equal partners, and taking time.”

“We were being ourselves; it’s lucky that we were a complementary group.”

Innovation and change tend to come from creative liaisons among diverse people and from process over content. The ‘secret sauce’ of collaboration is the unique mix each time of the people involved, the processes used and the decisions made about how to utilise power and strengths for good. The four funders note that this kind of collaboration doesn’t have to be the domain of organisational leaders at chief executive level only, as long as the staff involved have autonomy and leadership capabilities.

When the purpose and principles underpinning a shared endeavour are crystal-clear and feel ‘right’ to all involved, the flow and force of the work are strengthened. There is also a kind of moral authority in the way it unfolds – several people mentioned that the funders brought a moral imperative to do the right thing by care-experienced young people to this initiative.

Key messages for philanthropic funders from the VOYCE collaboration are as follows:

- Put the purpose at the centre and keep it there, rather than ego or ‘us’ (the funders)
- A clear mandate is needed and for staff to be given appropriate autonomy
- Connect to the voices of lived experience – put those affected at the centre and resource their participation
- Invest in relationships and in how you will collaborate, and bring in expertise to assist this
- Work with people whom you like, make it fun and easy to participate
- Understand and fully utilise your combined power and strengths
- Read the landscape well, consider timing and conditions for change, create flow, look for synchronicity and opportunities: “find the soft space and push through it”
- Encourage fresh new ideas and experimentation
- Make sure reflection is regular and capture learning.

Different funders are able to take different risks. Together, funders can be more creative in how they seek to make a difference.

“Philanthropy has always been in the space of risk and vision. We are coming back to our roots, getting back to innovating, risk taking and wanting to make change.”

“We don’t have the luxury of continuing to do what we’ve always done; we won’t create the change we want. We need higher-risk funding to pioneer new ways.”