



Migration Exchange

at  Global Dialogue

Strengthening Leadership through Participatory Grant-Making in the UK Migration Sector

Shaping the Future



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1 | About Migration Exchange

[Migration Exchange](#) (MEX) is a UK-based charitable programme whose mission is to cultivate insight, collaboration and collective action, towards changing the UK migration system for good. Our purpose is to be a bridge between funders, charities and communities and build a fair and dignified UK migration system, together. We gather and share insight, we unlock resources, and we create spaces for collaboration to spark collective action. Through our convenings, reports, strategic interventions on preparedness and pooled funds, we try to stay responsive, listening deeply, adapting with care, and moving fast when it matters most.

Our values

- **Equity** guides us to elevate diverse voices, remove barriers, and create spaces where everyone can belong, lead and shape change.
- **Collaboration** is core to our practice, we share insight, pool wisdom and bring people together to multiply impact.
- **Responsiveness** keeps us close to the sector, listening deeply, adapting with care, and acting decisively in a fast-moving world.
- **Integrity** grounds us in what is right, standing alongside partners and staying true to our commitments even when the path is hard.
- **Courage** compels us to face complexity head-on, nurture relationships, and push for change even when it is difficult.

2 | Introduction – From leadership gaps to Shaping the Future

The Shaping the Future Leadership Initiative was born out of a clear leadership gap in the UK migration sector. Organisations are operating under immense pressure: escalating political hostility, policy uncertainty, rising need, and under-resourcing. The Home Secretary's recent proposals to introduce temporary protection and conditional support for refugees underscore how precarious life has become for people seeking sanctuary. These policies erode trust, harden social divisions, and increase operational strain on organisations already navigating legal complexities, burnout, and targeted attacks.

When MEX launched this initiative in 2023, we did not anticipate that conditions for sector leaders would become even more challenging. Yet, this moment also revealed possibilities: solidarity, collaboration, and collective care are emerging as essential strategies for sustaining the sector. We are deeply grateful to our funders for trusting MEX to model a new approach, investing in participatory, lived experience-led methods to strengthen leadership and equity.

MEX has built significant expertise in developing and delivering leadership interventions in the migration sector. Our work is research-driven and grounded in the needs of the sector. In 2018, we conducted a comprehensive review to identify pressing leadership development gaps, leading to the 'Leading Beyond Borders' online programme for emerging leaders (2018–2022). In December 2022, we published a scoping of leadership provision, and in March 2023 convened a sector-wide leadership forum. Insights from these initiatives shaped the Equity Catalysts community of practice, fostering peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. These findings highlighted the urgent need for more targeted investment in leadership development — the foundation for Shaping the Future.

The initiative places decision-making power directly in the hands of lived-experience leaders through a participatory, pooled-fund approach. Ten leaders formed the Co-Creation

Group, designing the fund, setting the criteria, assessing applications, and making final decisions. This approach directly aligns with the fund's objectives: resourcing leadership development across organisations, supporting holistic and sustainable approaches, and generating learning to influence sector practice. As one Co-Creation Group member reflected: "Each session was a masterclass in humility and growth. We weren't just distributing resources — we were shifting power."

Shaping the Future is more than a funding programme — it is an attempt to create a different future for the sector. By centring lived experience, building peer networks, and fostering collaboration, the fund works against the momentum of far-right, authoritarian narratives in communities, policies, and everyday life, aiming to strengthen leadership, equity, and resilience across the UK migration sector.

"This unique, power-shifting experience gave me hope in the UK charitable funding system. It rightly puts decision-making power in the hands of those most affected — where it belongs."

Fouad Al Kadi, Co-Creation Group member

2.1 | Executive Summary

Why participatory grant-making matters

The core principle of *Shaping the Future* is shifting power and resources toward those closest to the issues.

Participatory grant-making places decision-making authority in the hands of lived-experience leaders, ensuring funding decisions are grounded in the realities of the sector. This approach fosters equity, supports holistic and anti-oppressive leadership practices, and strengthens the sector's capacity to respond to complex challenges.

What we built

Ten leaders with lived-experience formed the Co-Creation Group, designing the Fund, shaping criteria, assessing every application, and making final decisions. The Fund includes three streams— Personal Development, Organisational Development, and Systems Change—and was launched through an open call to maximise access and transparency. The Fund received 1,465 applications from across the UK, highlighting both the reach of the initiative and the high demand for leadership support. The participatory approach enabled organisations, and

unregistered groups that might otherwise have been excluded and revealed persistent gaps in sector-wide leadership investment.

Alignment with Fund Objectives

The Co-Creation Group ensured that assessment and decision-making directly aligned with the three Fund objectives:

1. Resourcing leadership development: Funding was prioritised for initiatives strengthening leadership across organisations, networks, and individuals.
2. Supporting holistic and sustainable leadership: Decisions considered wellbeing, anti-racist and feminist approaches, and the active involvement of lived-experience leaders in governance.
3. Generating wider learning and sector influence: The participatory process created peer-learning, documented insights, and established approaches to strengthen leadership and equity across the sector.

Key learnings from the first year

- Centring people: The programme was person-centred, embedding inclusion into the design and directly supporting individuals—a rare practice in the sector.
- Trust and psychological safety: Co-Creation Group members reported high levels of trust and collaboration, enabling productive disagreements, shared decision-making, and a strong sense of solidarity. Personal connections and friendships formed through the process, and members stated that being part of a like-minded community helped them feel less isolated, making it a more rewarding experience with group members commenting that they felt more confident in their contributions.
- Diversity of voices: The breadth of experience across backgrounds, specialisms, and thinking styles enriched decision-making and ensured equitable assessments of applications.

“This process reflected what leadership should be — inclusive, thoughtful and rooted in lived reality”.

Maysa Ismael, Co-Creation Group member

- Flexibility and adaptation: The process evolved in response to participants' feedback, including adjustments to timelines, engagement in the assessment process, and a final in-person session to strengthen relationships and celebrate achievements.
- Compensation and recognition: Members' time and expertise were formally acknowledged, supporting equity and reinforcing the value of lived experience leadership.
- Learning by doing: Participation allowed both Co-Creation Group members and MEX staff to build capacity in participatory practice, creating ripple effects across the sector.

2.2 | About Shaping the Future Leadership Initiative

Shaping the Future is a three-year, co-designed leadership initiative and pooled fund led by Migration Exchange (MEX). It aims to strengthen leadership across the UK refugee and migration sector at a time of significant political, economic and social challenge. The initiative responds to long-standing sector calls for leadership development that is *bespoke, equitable, rooted in anti-oppressive practice, and accessible to people with lived experience of the immigration system*.

This learning report is one of three produced for funders. It focuses specifically on the conditions needed for effective participatory grant-making, drawing on the process, insights and practice emerging from Shaping the Future.

A participatory approach to resourcing leadership

Shaping the Future is built on a participatory grant-making model. The strategy, funding criteria and grant decisions are co-designed by a Co-Creation Group made up of practitioners and leaders with lived experience of migration. This approach shifts power to those closest to the issues, ensuring resources reach organisations and networks best placed to grow leadership capacity in ways that reflect real sector needs.

“Each session was a masterclass in humility and growth. We weren’t just distributing resources — we were shifting power.”

Fidelia Elias, Co-Creation Group member

Why leadership – and why now?

MEX's previous leadership interventions, alongside sector research (2022–24), highlight the need to:

- Address leadership development gaps across organisations and networks
- Prioritise wellbeing and sustainability
- Remove barriers for people with lived experience to lead
- Move away from one-size-fits-all programmes toward tailored, context-specific approaches

Shaping the Future responds directly to these findings by resourcing organisations to develop their own leadership approaches, including those that centre anti-oppressive practice, system-change thinking and community strength.

What the initiative will do

Over three years, the pooled fund will:

1. Resource leadership development within organisations and networks

Providing flexible grants to organisations working on migration and refugee issues in the UK, including networks, collaborations and early-stage initiatives.

2. Support holistic and sustainable leadership approaches

Prioritising wellbeing, anti-racist and feminist leadership practices, and strengthening the role of lived experience in decision-making.

3. Generate wider learning and influence sector practice

Documenting participatory grant-making, building a peer learning network of grant partners, and contributing insights to strengthen leadership and equity across the wider field.

Learning and long-term vision

Learning is embedded throughout the initiative, supported by Curiosity Society and The 3 Hijabis. This report focuses on participatory grant-making, while future reports will examine:

- The impact of leadership development approaches supported through the fund
- How grant partners collaborate, learn and strengthen systems-change capabilities

By 2027, *Shaping the Future* aims to leave a legacy of stronger connections, a more diverse and resilient leadership pipeline, and improved access to equitable and participatory funding models across the refugee and migration sector.

Building a Pooled Fund, committed to participatory process

To resource *Shaping the Future*, MEX developed a Concept Note outlining the leadership challenges facing the migration and refugee sector and a participatory solution grounded in research and sector convenings. The pooled fund was made possible through the collaboration and support of AB Charitable Trust, Barrow Cadbury Trust, Refugee Council, This Day Foundation, Unbound Philanthropy, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Henry Smith Charity and Rayne Foundation. Their commitment and partnership enabled this initiative to take shape.

A pooled fund offers funders the opportunity to align around shared goals, increase strategic impact and develop a deeper, collective understanding of sector needs. Given the severe resourcing pressures the sector faces, pooled funds also provide a more coordinated and efficient way to channel funds while creating valuable opportunities for shared learning. Evidence from Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2024 *Shifting Power* report reinforces these benefits—highlighting how pooled funds can build the funding pipeline, raise the profile of an issue and strengthen field-building—while also signalling challenges such as funders needing to cede control, sustain long-term resources and demonstrate added value.

From the outset, the Concept Note was clear that while the fund's aims would remain constant, its design and decision-making would be led through participatory methods. Securing this early buy-in required deliberate conversation, as MEX made the case for why

participatory grant-making was the right approach for this initiative and the sector. Throughout the development period, MEX maintained close communication with funders—sharing regular written updates and hosting online check-ins—to keep them informed, engaged and confident in the fund’s progress and the unfolding participatory process.




3 | Centring Lived Experience Through Participatory Grant-Making

A core principle of *Shaping the Future* is that people with lived experience of the immigration and asylum system should not only benefit from leadership development but help shape how leadership is defined, supported and resourced across the sector. MEX's report on leadership highlighted that there is a *“growing recognition that people with lived experience of key issues should be leading change relating to those issues, and that people who combine lived and learned experience can develop more impactful policy and programmes.”*

Centring lived experience within the Shaping the Future Leadership Initiative has been critical to achieving the grant's objectives. From the outset, it was important to define what lived experience meant and the values we would embed throughout this process. Lived experience refers to individuals who have personally navigated the challenges of immigration, asylum, or nationality systems and who understand how these experiences intersect with structural racism, social inequality, and exclusionary practices.

As Baljit Sandu notes, *“Lived experience leaders are individuals who not only bring their direct experiences of the immigration system but have also developed an understanding of how these experiences fit within broader contexts of structural disadvantage and inequality. They use their expertise to drive change by challenging unjust systems, creating community power, and championing human rights.”* (LEX Leadership, 2019)

Our earlier research highlighted a growing belief that individuals who combine lived and learned experience are well positioned to design more relevant and impactful responses to sector challenges. In this initiative, lived experience leadership is understood not as representation alone, but as expertise rooted in insight, credibility and proximity to the issues.




Our reports and engagements have reinforced that lived experience leadership must be more than representation. It should centre individuals with lived experience to shape policy, dismantle oppressive systems, and lead organisations effectively.

Participants in our leadership development work emphasised the importance of valuing expertise through appropriate support:

“What would make a big difference to me is getting paid well for the work that I do and the expertise I bring – one of the reasons I would leave the sector is because it doesn’t pay that well... We lose good leaders in the sector because there isn’t sufficient funding to support top-level leaders, especially those with lived experience.”

This principle informed the decision to adopt a participatory grant-making approach. Instead of funders or intermediaries determining priorities, decision-making power was intentionally shared with a group of lived experience leaders who co-designed the fund’s strategy, parameters and grant criteria. Their proximity to the immigration system—and their experience navigating structural inequalities, organisational environments and community leadership—meant they were well placed to identify the approaches most likely to support leadership, wellbeing and sustainability across the sector.

Using participatory design allowed MEX to question traditional assumptions about how leadership funding should be shaped. Co-creators refined criteria, surfaced blind spots and ensured the fund aligned with the sector’s real needs rather than external expectations. This collaborative model helped build a shared sense of ownership and accountability, while modelling an alternative way for resources to be directed by those closest to the issues.



This approach also aligned with wider sector calls—from the *Reclaiming Lived Experience* conference and other research—for lived experience to be recognised as a form of expertise, for safer and more enabling leadership environments, and for more equitable routes to decision-making. A clear power analysis underpinned the process: lived experience is not homogenous, and leaders were

engaged based on their commitment to anti-oppressive, feminist and anti-racist approaches, not identity alone.

For funders, participatory grant-making required a shift in practice, including ceding some traditional decision-making roles and placing trust in the insight and judgement of lived experience leaders. MEX believes this approach helps funders gain a deeper understanding of the sector, build confidence in more collaborative practices and resource leadership development in ways that are more responsive and meaningful.

Centring lived experience through a participatory process has been essential to achieving the grant's objectives. By giving decision-making power to leaders with firsthand experience of the migration system, the fund has been shaped around what the sector actually needs to develop and sustain lived experience leadership. This has ensured that resources support the right forms of leadership growth, organisational capacity and system-focused work, making the fund more targeted, relevant and effective.

3.1 | How we built the Fund

Setting up the Co-Creation Group

To deliver the fund participatorily, we began by recruiting a Co-Creation Group (CCG) through an open call shared across the migration and social change sectors. We received 59 applications from across the UK and Ireland. Ten people were selected for their lived experience of the immigration system and their knowledge of leadership, organisational development and movement-building. This mix ensured the Fund would be shaped by people with direct insight into the sector's barriers and possibilities.

Designing the Fund

Our design process centred on the grant's core objectives: strengthening leadership pathways, investing in lived experience leadership and supporting systemic change. We invited each CCG member to share reflections from their own leadership

journeys and what they believed the sector needed most. Their insights formed the foundation of the Fund's design.

Several themes emerged clearly. Members emphasised the lack of support for emerging leaders: *"There are a lot of barriers once you get your status... Lived experience leaders need the most help and support to learn from others."* Others highlighted the need to resource organisations so they can create progression routes: *"Fund things like fellowships, pay salaries... We need a pipeline of people ready to take on senior roles."* They also stressed the importance of recognising the expertise held in communities: *"People with lived experience bring resilience and innovation... Volunteers also need investment so they can progress to paid roles."*

Across the discussions, the Group called for leadership support at multiple levels—individual, organisational and sectoral—and for resources that could strengthen anti-oppressive practice, wellbeing and power building. As one member put it: *"We need to invest in leadership at different levels and let people tell us what they need."*

Designing the funding offer

Drawing from these insights, the CCG shaped a three-part funding offer aligned with the grant's objectives. These streams are described in fully elsewhere, but in brief they include:

- Personal Development – supporting individuals to access training, develop ideas or cover practical costs that enable leadership growth.
- Organisational Development – resourcing organisations to build leadership pathways, strengthen participatory practice and support the wellbeing of lived experience leaders.
- Systems Change – funding advocacy, collaboration and narrative work that advances long-term systemic impact.

Launching the fund

To make the opportunity accessible, the CCG chose an open call process. MEX drafted application materials with their feedback, offering written, audio or video formats and interpretation support.

Two applicant webinars were delivered, and a communications pack was shared with CCG members to support outreach. The Fund was launched online and promoted across migration networks and social media.

3.2 | Reach

The open call, shaped and promoted with support from the Co-Creation Group (CCG), enabled the Fund to reach a wide and diverse range of individuals, organisations, and networks, including grassroots groups and unregistered charities often excluded from traditional funding. This demonstrates a key benefit of participatory grant-making: centring lived experience not only strengthens decision-making but also broadens access, equity, and diversity of applicants. For funders, it shows how participatory approaches can connect with communities beyond usual networks.

The response highlighted both the breadth of engagement and the scale of unmet demand for leadership support:

- Individual applications: 995
- Organisation applications: 403
- Partnership applications: 67
- Total: 1,465

Applications came from across the UK, with London representing 29.9% of individual applications, and strong engagement from the North West, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humber. Organisational and partnership applications were more concentrated in London and the South East, though many reported work spanning multiple regions or nationally. Lived experience was central across all applications: 96% of individuals had lived experience, and all organisations and partnerships worked with leaders with lived experience.

3.3 | Decision-making

The CCG was involved at every stage to ensure that decisions were fair, transparent, and aligned with the Fund's objectives. After MEX conducted an initial eligibility check, the Group divided

into sub-groups to review individual, organisational, and partnership applications. A shared rubric guided scoring, and shortlisted applications were discussed and ranked collaboratively.

In assessing applications, the CCG explicitly considered how proposals aligned with the grant's three core objectives:

1. Resourcing leadership development within organisations and networks
The Group evaluated whether applications strengthened leadership capacity, created pathways for emerging leaders, and supported organisational or network-wide growth.
2. Supporting holistic and sustainable leadership approaches
Applications were assessed for their integration of wellbeing, anti-racist and feminist practices, and meaningful involvement of lived experience in decision-making. The CCG prioritised initiatives addressing systemic barriers and fostering inclusive, sustainable leadership.
3. Generating wider learning and sector influence
The Group reflected on each proposal's potential to contribute to peer-learning, innovation, and knowledge-sharing that could inform broader sector practice and strengthen equitable leadership approaches.

Through this process, the CCG not only selected projects likely to deliver tangible leadership outcomes but also modelled participatory decision-making that advanced the Fund's objectives. By linking assessment criteria to these

objectives, the Fund ensured that its limited resources were directed strategically, maximising both immediate impact and longer-term systemic change.

3.4 | Learnings

Centring people

The programme was perceived as person-centred, focused on community representation and collective voice. There was no need to justify inclusion: it was inherently built into the design. One innovative aspect was the fund's ability to support individuals

“This unique, power-shifting experience gave me hope in the UK charitable funding system. It rightly puts decision-making power in the hands of those most affected — where it belongs.”

Fouad Al Kadi, Co-Creation Group Member

directly, which is rare in the sector. This approach was deeply appreciated and recommended as a model for future programmes.

Trust and psychological safety

Overall, feelings of trust and collaboration within the process were rated highly, with most CCG members scoring it 4 or 5 out of 5. This indicates a strong sense of mutual respect, openness, and shared purpose among members. The positive interpersonal dynamics were viewed as a key factor in the process's success and members' engagement. Trust within the group was a foundation of the process. Members relied on one another's assessments and felt confident in collective decision-making, an essential feature given the workload and the collaborative nature of the process. There was room for differing opinions, with members engaging in productive disagreements. This "helpful challenge" indicated a psychologically safe environment, where all contributions were welcomed and valued.

Given the intensity of the process and the volume of decisions, this trust wasn't just relational; it was what made the work manageable. However, while interpersonal trust within the group was strong, some members noted a lack of clarity or transparency in the broader process, raising questions about how trust operates not just between people, but between members and the system they're navigating.

The formation of genuine personal connections and friendships within the group added emotional value to the experience and contributed to the overall sense of reward and belonging. The group provided a sense of safety and solidarity. Many members remarked on how much less isolated they felt being part of a like-minded, high-capacity community.

Diversity of voices and experiences

The CCG highlighted the richness of experience among its members as a key success factor. Diversity was reflected across specialisms, age, backgrounds, thinking styles, and working methods. This breadth of perspective was especially effective during the assessment phase, contributing to equitable decision-making and demonstrating the value of truly varied participation.

“It’s an experience that left me both hopeful and more equipped for future collective work.”

Lediana Pajaj, Co-
Creation Group Member

Inevitably, facilitating the work of a diverse group of people required particular skills including the ability to handle tensions, generate consensus and foster open discussions where appropriate. Initial concerns about varying degrees of seniority in the team subsided as the programme progressed and members found their comfort with the process and trust with each other.

Divergence emerged in relation to ways of engaging with the fund, communication styles and preferences, and required additional coordination, including one on one conversations with different members at different times

It is important to highlight that the entire process was conducted online. This virtual format, while praised for enabling access and flexibility, also presented barriers to informal relationship building and sustained engagement, especially in the earlier days of the fund. One of the examples of the adaptive nature of the fund was proactively addressing this emergent learning and introducing a final in-person session so the CCG could come together for a learning workshop and celebration.

Definitions

From the outset the CCG sought clarity and built a shared understanding of language and key principles that would inform the design of the fund. Agreeing on definitions was an important first step as it enabled the group to ground the design process in shared understanding and build consensus.

Flexibility and adaptation

Flexibility was a cornerstone of the programme’s success. From accommodating people’s schedules to adapting grant structures (e.g., increasing funding amounts after group feedback), the process showed a willingness to respond and evolve. One of the great examples of this was allowing the group to engage in the application assessment process earlier than originally planned which was seen as a major success. Despite the additional time, it

added value from sector expertise and illustrated responsive adaptation by the funder.

“This process truly created space for migrant leaders to lead.”

Kimberly Garande, Co-Creation Group member

Being adaptable means being responsive, and sometimes this means pivoting and choosing a course of action that wasn't previously stipulated or accounted for. As mentioned, the CCG requested to be part of the process earlier and while being a part of the due diligence process per se was seen as a major improvement, some within the group felt unprepared to engage with it fully and worried about insufficient knowledge of what to look out for in such a process, as well as raising concerns about whether the criteria and approaches were universally applied and shared by all. As a result, the MEX team spent additional time with self-selected CCG members to share expertise and collaborate with them throughout the process in order to ensure CCG members were confident in undertaking the task. However, this did highlight the need for adequate resources to respond to emerging needs and gaps that arise for participants.

Another great example of this adaptability was the final celebration event where the members, who often spoke about the lack of in-person relational time, were finally able to meet in real life to share their experience of the process and celebrate the journey together. Furthermore, the Fund has taken its learning and is going to apply it to their grantee cohort as well, ensuring an in-person event happens earlier on.

Compensation

CCG members' time and contributions were formally recognised and compensated, affirming the value of their expertise and supporting equity in participation which was appreciated by the group and seen as a best practice that is unfortunately not yet practiced universally by the sector. In response to adjusting some tasks and expanding the original scope of work for the CCG, Migration Exchange had to allocate some additional budget to fund this scope change. At the same time, real demands of many tasks were hard to estimate in terms of real time required to complete them, sometimes resulting in members having to work above the agreed scope, which highlights the need for more

aligned expectations. Future processes could benefit from clearer scopes of work and additional “buffer” budgets.

Conflict of interest

Conflicts of interest are common in a sector that works collaboratively. CCG members reflected on how to navigate conflicts of interest that were likely to arise during the decision-making process. They agreed to declare conflicts of interest when assessing each application, pass the application on to another group member for review and remove themselves from any discussions about the specific application.

CCG members occupied a number of spaces and were likely to be aware of or have partnered with applicants for funding. Having a discussion about how to handle such conflicts built trust among the group and increased trust in the fairness and legitimacy of the decision-making process.

“This gave me real insight into how just funding can work.”

Loraine Masiya
Mponela, Co-Creation
Group member

Learning by doing - building capacity

The process was widely described as intense and full of learning. CCG members and Migration Exchange staff reflected on the steep learning curve they experienced, and many noted that their understanding of participatory practice evolved significantly over time. While more senior members of the group were naturally more often in the position of sharing their knowledge, others had to “learn on the go”. This means that just by virtue of engaging in this process, many in the group built their capacity, thus generating positive outcomes in the wider sector, by bringing their learnings with them.

3.5 | Why participatory grant-making matters now

The UK migration sector is navigating a period of profound uncertainty. Political hostility is intensifying, public discourse is increasingly polarised, and organisations are being asked to do more with fewer resources — often while absorbing the emotional and operational impacts of rapidly shifting policy. In this context, funders are under pressure to act decisively, responsibly and with care. Participatory grant-making offers a way to meet this moment with integrity. By placing decision-making power in the hands of

those closest to the realities of the immigration system, funders can ensure that limited resources are directed where they are most needed, most effective and most just. This approach recognises lived experience not as representation, but as expertise — rooted in proximity, insight and accountability to communities.

At a time when trust in institutions is fragile, participatory approaches also strengthen the legitimacy of funding decisions. They model transparency, shared responsibility and collective leadership, countering narratives of exclusion and reinforcing the values that underpin social justice funding. When resourced well, participatory grant-making is not slower or less rigorous; it is more grounded, more adaptive and better equipped to respond to complexity.

Crucially, participatory grant-making invests in people, relationships and leadership — the foundations the sector needs to sustain itself through prolonged political pressure. It is not simply a method of distributing funds, but a way of strengthening resilience, solidarity and collective capacity for the long term.

3.6 | Five key recommendations for funders

1. Share decision-making power with lived-experience leaders

Funders should move beyond consultation and intentionally place lived-experience leaders in positions of real authority — enabling them to shape funding priorities, define criteria and make final decisions. This requires clarity about where power sits and a commitment to honouring decisions that emerge from the collective process, even when they challenge established assumptions.

2. Resource participatory processes with care and realism

Participatory grant-making is relational, skilled and time-intensive work. Funders should ensure healthy budgets that cover fair compensation, facilitation, accessibility needs, training and contingency. Proper resourcing affirms the value of lived

experience expertise and enables processes that are sustainable, equitable and responsive.

3. Create the conditions for trust, care and meaningful participation

Effective participation depends on psychological safety, strong relationships and attention to differing needs and capacities. Funders should prioritise relationship-building, flexible engagement and care-led approaches that actively remove barriers to participation and enable people to contribute with confidence and integrity.

4. Build flexibility into funding systems and practices

Participatory processes evolve in response to learning and context. Funders should be prepared to adapt timelines, criteria, due diligence and reporting requirements, and to adjust internal systems so that participatory decision-making can genuinely shape outcomes rather than be constrained by fixed structures.

5. Treat learning and transparency as central to impact

Participatory grant-making generates insight that extends far beyond individual funding decisions. Funders should resource reflection, documentation and shared learning, communicate openly about how decisions are made, and use learning to influence wider funding strategy and sector practice. This strengthens trust and supports longer-term shifts in how leadership and equity are resourced.

Taken together, these approaches reflect a commitment not only to funding outcomes, but to shaping a funding system that is more just, responsive and resilient. At a time when the migration sector is under sustained pressure, participatory grant-making offers funders a way to act with courage, care and clarity — and to invest in the leadership needed to navigate what lies ahead.

3.7 | Conclusion

The Shaping the Future Leadership Initiative has demonstrated what becomes possible when we trust the wisdom of those most

directly affected by the UK's migration system and resource them to lead. At a time when political hostility is deepening, public discourse is polarising, and sector leaders are under immense strain, this work has shown that participatory, values-driven approaches are not just desirable — they are essential.

Through this initiative, ten lived experience leaders were not simply consulted but entrusted with real power. Their leadership shaped the funding strategy, strengthened the sector's understanding of what equitable practice looks like, and modelled a way of working rooted in collaboration, integrity and courage. The process was not always easy. It required time, capacity, experimentation and collective learning. But it also generated connection, trust and a renewed sense of what leadership can be when people are supported to bring both their lived and learned expertise.

The findings from this first report affirm that lived experience leadership strengthens our collective ability to navigate complex challenges, imagine better futures and act decisively in turbulent times. It builds more relevant, more grounded and ultimately more impactful strategies for change. And it aligns directly with the fundamental values that guide MEX: striving for equity, working collaboratively, responding with care, acting with integrity and leading with courage even when the path is uncertain.

Through sharing this learning in this report we hope Shaping the Future initiative will shift practice — for funders, for organisations and for the leaders involved. But it is only the beginning. The next phase of the programme, and the upcoming reports in this series, will explore the impact that Shaping the Future is having on leadership in the sector.

Our commitment is to stay responsive, and stay alongside the sector as it meets this moment. By investing in people — especially those whose expertise is too often undervalued — we are strengthening the foundations for a more just, more caring and more hopeful future for everyone who moves.

“This was a power-shifting process. I hope more funders follow this lead.”

Fouad Al Kadi, Founder of Shift Up, youth participation and leadership development expert

Thank you

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Thank you to the Co-Creation Group, who held on fiercely to the possibility of a different way of distributing funds.

Thank you to all the funders of this programme.

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**Barrow
Cadbury
Trust**