

March 2021

The City Corporation's Education, Cultural and Creative Learning and Skills Strategies Mid- Term Review

**CF
EY** | The Centre
for Education
& Youth





Purpose of review

The City Corporation's educational vision is driven by three interconnected five year (2019-23) strategies:

- Education
- Cultural and Creative Learning
- Skills

We conducted a rapid mid-term strategy review with the City's main strategic delivery partners, focused on four key questions:

- 1. What is the shared and collective view of 'flourishing' and 'social mobility'?**
- 2. Is this vision shared across the main strategy partners?**
- 3. Do our strategy partners feel connected to the strategies and the offer from the City Corporation?**
- 4. Where is the most impact occurring? What are the highlights and models of best practice?**

Approach and methods

Our methods consisted of:

- a) A short desk review of strategy documents and strategy progress reports
- b) Six 'rapid response' sessions
- c) Eight confidential interviews with 11 key strategy partners
- d) Two focus groups with a diverse range of stakeholders

We aimed to:

- elicit agreement, healthy disagreement and critique
- acknowledge and address power dynamics in any conversations
- develop a clear set of recommendations

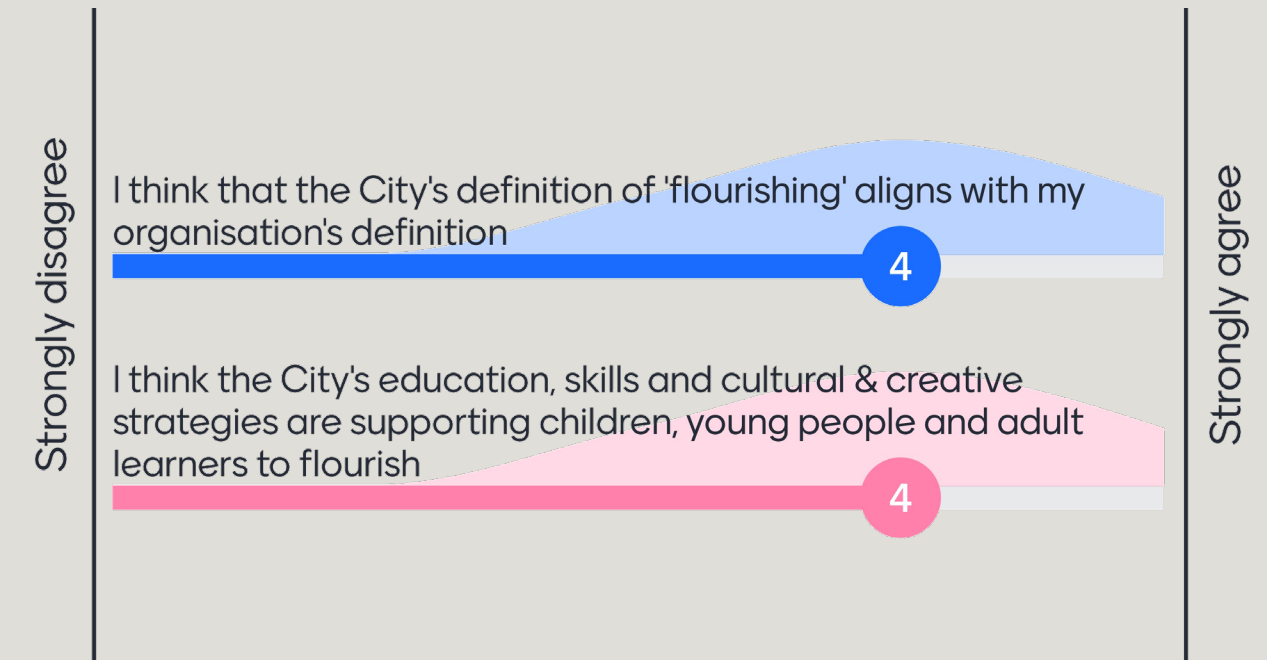
In total, we estimate that we engaged with 70 to 80 partners during our research.

Mission and vision

Flourishing



Flourishing



Our research suggests:

- Partners have a shared and collective view of flourishing in its broadest sense.
- There were no obvious tensions in the descriptions, or differences between different partners.
- Many partners linked flourishing to broader social mobility goals.
- Few partners made links between how the City as a unique place could have a particular role in supporting flourishing.

Social mobility



Improving outcomes
Everything for all
Equality of choice
Opportunity to succeed
Break out of family cycle of poverty
Enable travel along access routes
Every child can achieve their potential
Taking advantage of opportunities available
Understanding options available
Opening up opportunities for people who wouldn't otherwise have them
Improve opportunities
Removing barriers
Intergenerational mobility
Equity
Ambition
Employability
Equality of opportunity
Opportunity
Aspiration
Inclusive
Development
Employment
Prepared
Life improvement
Open access routes
Connected
Transforming lives
Skills
Change social status
Access to education
Not taking no for an answer
All backgrounds
Up or down socioeconomic ladder
Transforming communities
Achievement

Social mobility



Our research suggests:

- Partners held a common understanding of, and general support for, a broad definition of the term.
- There were some contested opinions on the nature of social mobility, and its value as a goal.
- Some partners mentioned structural barriers to addressing inequality and achieving social mobility, caused by a wider set of political, social and economic factors that the City has only very limited influence over.

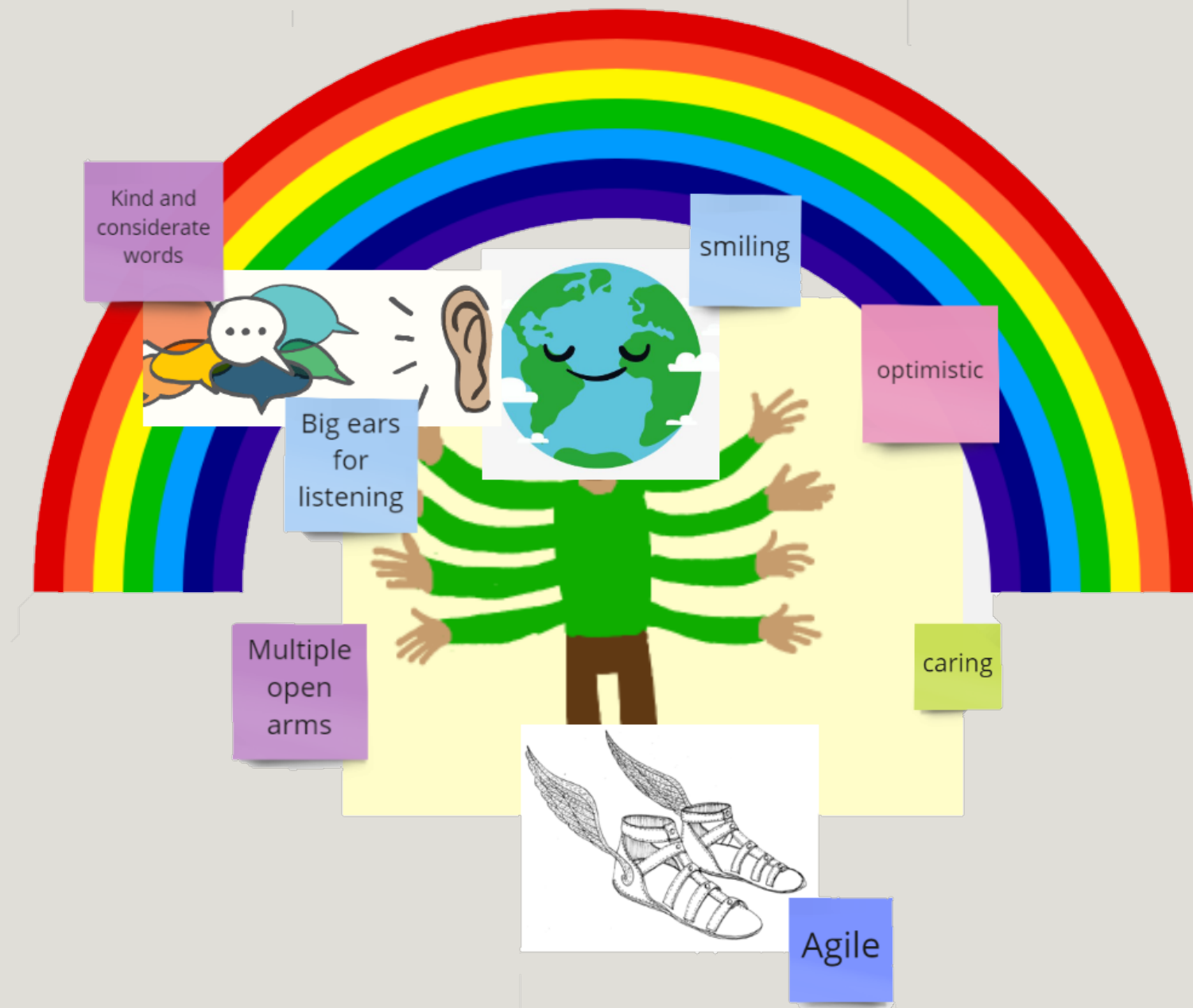
Connections and strategy

Main findings



Our research suggests:

- Partners showed enthusiasm to play a role in achieving the City's strategic aims.
- There is widespread appreciation for the programmes, resources and connections that the City offers.
- While many partners were engaging with the strategies (as documents) for the first time, we saw willingness and desire to become more connected with the overall strategies.





The Education Unit

- Perceptions of the Education Strategy Unit were positive.
- Partners felt that the unit benefits from strong leadership and direction, with staff who are approachable and receptive and a culture that encourages healthy dialogue and feedback.
- A small number had questions about the overall purpose of the unit, and some had recommendations around a shifting of focus from monitoring to implementation.
- Partners saw the unit as a catalyst: maintaining momentum on key collaborative priorities and programmes that could be at risk of inertia or slower progress if left to individual organisations



"There's a clear leadership and direction. We may not necessarily agree with the kind of nuances, but we agree with the broad direction. It is a good healthy dialogue between officers, between the leadership and the result is a good tension."

Cultural Partner

Programmes and impact

Main findings

"The City helps us contribute to things we could never have done by ourselves."

Cultural partner

Our research suggests:

- All partners could talk with passion and clarity about the impact of particular projects they had engaged with or led.
- In adult learning, partners agreed that the apprenticeships offer had improved significantly. Further gains could be made by increasing recruitment of City apprentices into City-based roles.
- Under the strategies, an already strong suite of cultural and creative opportunities has progressed and is now of even higher quality.
- The Culture Mile Learning approach, blending strategy with action, demonstrates the 'City at its best' for partners.
- Schools and skills partners found the small, one-off opportunities valuable and impactful. However they also discussed the need for more sustained, longer-term programmes.



'I think that's something that a city does incredibly well, they offer a lot of opportunities to develop and allow children to flourish and show skills in areas of art, music, drama dance, and I think that's a real strength and being part of the academy trust, I think it's opened up a lot of doors for our children to be exposed to develop those skills.'

School Partner

Targeting

"The City and its resources are very powerful in enthusing young people and re-engaging them in their learning."

School partner

"Priorities will change and we will all need to be flexible to the needs of each of our communities, working with the City where there may be trends across schools or where there may need to be a tailored programme."

School partner

Our research suggests:

- Partners felt that the City's resources had greatest impact when directed at the most vulnerable young people.
- Partners would like to work with the City to ensure its resources support the young people and adults who have suffered most from the negative impacts of the pandemic .
- Partners, especially those supporting adult learners, argued that the City needed a sustained approach to supporting more vulnerable or lower-attaining learners, moving beyond initial, one-off access to opportunities towards achieving longer-term progression and retention.



Conditions for success

From our findings, we can draw out some insights about the 'conditions for success' – the common elements across these programmes that make them feel valuable and impactful to partners. Are the City's programmes most impactful when:

- They are targeted at a clearly articulated need
- They are based on notions of reciprocity and mutual gain
- They are co-designed between participating partners
- They rapidly focus on particular groups of students, or design approaches and interventions that enable inclusivity
- They are planned in advance, giving sufficient lead in time to institutions
- The role of the City's Education Unit is as clear, and understood by all partners

The strategies and Covid

Main findings

Our research suggests:

- Some partners felt that, post-Covid, a more specific definition of 'flourishing' could be helpful.
- Tutors spoke about how the more practical courses had suffered most during the pandemic and raised the need for support when face-to face opportunities were possible again. In response to the challenges raised during the pandemic, tutors suggested that adult learners needed more opportunities to showcase their efforts as well as more support with their mental health.



"Covid puts a different perspective on flourishing – a case of survival and adapting to the adverse and distributional impact on learning that covid has had... We need to be careful when we use words like flourishing, to make it relevant to the context we are now facing."

Strategy Partner

Recommendations

Vision and mission



Recommendation 1

Work with education, skills and cultural partners to capture what 'flourishing' and 'social mobility' mean in relation to each strategy. The City can use this process to capitalise on appetite among some partners to be more involved in the City's strategic direction while ensuring the definitions remain suitably broad, inclusive and relevant to partners' day-to-day work. This will also help the City respond to partners' desire for clarity on what these definitions mean post-Covid for them, their work and beneficiaries.

Connections and strategy



Recommendation 2

Ensure that the various forums the City convenes are used in part for 'strategic check-ins'. We believe this will build partners' broader understanding of the strategies and one another's contribution to them, without the City needing to be dogmatic in its approach. These check-ins could involve:

- The Education Unit updating partners on its overall progress on strategy, where it is struggling, and where it is looking for additional advice or support
- Offering partners opportunities to share news and update in relation to their work tied to the strategies ('Please update the forum on your current projects, and – if and where possible – how these relate to our broader, shared goals under the [education/skills/culture] strategy')
- Enabling partners to highlight support that they would value in working towards strategic goals ('Would you like any support, either from the City, or other strategic partners?')

Connections and strategy



Recommendation 3

Create a simple way to categorise the Education Strategy Unit's role in each activity it supports, so that partners are clear about what they should expect from the Unit within each activity or programme. For example, the Unit might play the role of 'builder' in some contexts, or 'broker' in others.

Although the Unit may play more than one role in each activity, the categorisation might still offer partners greater clarity.

Recommendation 4

Broker, build, extend and fund a small number of communities of practice and programmes. Select a small number of 'common challenges' that concern partners *across all three strategies* and build small, time-limited communities of practice that encourage partners to co-design solutions to these challenges through 'joint practice development' that makes use of partners' expertise and interests. Where possible, fund and rigorously evaluate these solutions.

Possible themes for challenges that have emerged from our discussions with partners include:

- Mental health and wellbeing
- Consolidating and building on remote learning innovations and infrastructure
- Anti-racist strategies and curriculum support
- Collaborative professional development that supports retention across schools, cultural organisations, and adult learning services
- Programmes focused on climate action as an issue, which is already a high priority for the City, and which one strategic partner said, "touches on many members' interests"

Recommendation 5

Redesign the Education Strategy Unit's annual report to become a more reflective document that can better inform scrutiny and decision making. Perhaps the City could build its monitoring and reporting around a dashboard with a clear set of key performance indicators and a red/amber/green (RAG) rating. The narrative and qualitative nature of some evaluative work should also be captured, but in less detail than is currently the case. This could form the basis for a public facing annual report on education, culture, and skills.

Recommendation 6

Rebalance monitoring and scrutiny processes. During this research partners called for both more and less monitoring by the City. The City should identify the monitoring data that partners working under each strategy would most value, and seek to provide this in a minimal and easy-to-access format. This could resemble the written formats suggested in recommendation 5, providing useful data in a minimal and easy-to-read format. However, it is also about maintaining dialogue with partners, and the City can communicate how it is working to implement and deliver against shared goals, perhaps during partner forums (see recommendation 2).

Covid response



Recommendation 7

Retarget resources in response to emerging data and evidence on where the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been greatest. Although the use of evidence needs to be careful and patient, rather than jumping to anecdote-based conclusions, a priority might be providing resources and a learning offer to support those adult learners whose progress has been most significantly affected by the pandemic, and working with school partners to identify how best to use the City's resources to support children.