At a glance: YIF outcomes framework

The youth sector, like many others, is facing tough times. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the challenge of making decisions about a sector with very little common data and, arguably, lacking a collective voice. In the absence of a clear picture of the sector, it is a challenge to know how and where to channel resources.

A number of initiatives are seeking to address this gap (e.g. the Centre for Youth Impact's Youth Sector Data Standard) and it is hoped that as we emerge from the pandemic, the youth sector will develop a shared understanding of what can be learnt from this period of change and disruption; how the sector can best respond to the potential increase in need; and how the sector will secure the limited local funding available for youth services.

An important part of achieving this shared picture is developing mutual agreement and understanding about the outcomes and impact of open access youth work, which can be achieved through a shared evaluation approach. In this paper, we describe the YIF shared outcomes measurement framework that has been developed for the YIF funded organisations, which is part of the largest shared evaluation of open access youth provision in the UK to date.

Shared measurement for open access youth provision

Shared measurement involves organisations that are working towards similar goals collaborating to develop a shared understanding of *what* to measure and *how* to measure it: the effort is shared, as is the approach and the resulting learning. There are clear benefits to this, both for organisations and the wider sector, but shared measurement is not easy. In particular, it can feel like a balancing act between relevance and applicability at the collective versus the organisational level, taking into account the nuance of the context, delivery, local community, young people's interests and so on. It's often easier to focus on what makes us unique rather than what we have in common, especially in a competitive climate.

These challenges are amplified in open access youth provision—services and opportunities for young people that are 'open' to all, and take place outside of formal education in mainly community settings. The offer for young people is diverse, and so too are the young people who take part.

Open access youth provision is not a neatly structured programme of activities. It doesn't have a start, middle and end with a standardised 'user journey'. Multiple activities may be on offer at any one time, and young people can exercise a choice in what they do. Provision is often unstructured and responsive to the needs and interests of young people taking part. In most cases, as a matter of principle, young people's engagement is voluntary, and as a result can be irregular and unpredictable.

The responsive nature of this work also means that much open access youth provision does not have pre-determined outcomes for young people. It is focused on offering young people somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to. At the heart of this is personal and social development, but it is rarely expressed in 'intended outcome' terms. Young people's varied patterns of engagement also mean that they grow, develop and learn at their own pace.

This context creates a greater need for shared measurement, but also a greater challenge in pursuing it. Open access youth providers have long felt themselves to be 'the poor relation' to more targeted provision, for which impact evaluation tends to be more straightforward (and thus more prevalent). The practical realities of developing and implementing shared measurement/ evaluation frameworks in open access settings have stalled despite many efforts.

Shared measurement assumes a shared level of skill and capacity across the many organisations participating, and this is rarely the case. The open, informal nature of provision, and low adult-to-young-person ratio means that even basic individual data collection can be extremely difficult, and the process of data collection takes a considerable amount of time. What's more, a data collection system can make or break a shared measurement initiative. If people encounter challenges entering or accessing data, or it's more difficult or less useful than their existing system, they will not use it.

The Youth Investment Fund Learning Project

The Youth Investment Fund (YIF) is a joint investment between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the National Lottery Community Fund of £40m to expand delivery of open access youth provision in six regions of England. It has provided a unique opportunity to try a shared measurement approach, with a full appreciation of the challenges involved.[1] In particular, the YIF learning team (led by NPC and the Centre for Youth Impact) have been testing a shared

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[1] See Matthew Hill's blog: 'Cracking the impact nut' or How the YIF learning and impact strand responds to the challenges of evaluation in open access provision, 3 December 2017

outcomes framework, aligned with a shared theory of change developed to sit across the 90 grant holding organisations.[2] The collection of outcomes data is part of our five types of data evaluation framework, that also includes the collection of data about beneficiaries (the young people 'using' provision), attendance, feedback from young people, and quality of practice.

About the YIF shared outcomes framework

The YIF shared outcomes framework is an attempt to provide a consistent, common approach to measuring changes in the values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviours that young people develop as a result of participating in open access youth provision. This is the type of insight that grant holders told us they were most keen to see emerge through the Youth Investment Fund: evidence of the positive changes young people experience through their participation in provision, with research to underpin the connection to later life outcomes in learning, work, health and relationships. We set out to develop an outcomes framework and associated measurement approach that would be appropriate (both relevant and feasible to implement) for a broad range of youth settings and drew on existing research.

We tried to balance insights from academic research with the expertise of our co-design group,[3] and the interests of the funders, when selecting meaningful outcomes to measure. Both the academic research and the co-design group highlighted the importance of measuring intermediate changes in personal, social and emotional skills rather than longer-term outcomes that are developed over time. This was a recognition of both the practical challenges in longitudinal research, and the complex nature of young people's lives. Our key considerations for selecting the outcomes in the framework were that:

- the outcomes were both measurable and malleable, with the potential to change within a three to six-month period;

- they were likely to be the most common across different types of Youth Investment Fund provision;

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[2] See YIF learning and insight paper one for a detailed exploration of the overarching evaluation framework for the Youth Investment Fund Learning Project

[3] For more on our approach to co-design, see Karen Scanlon and Kevin Franks' blog: Strength in numbers: Co-development of the YIF shared evaluation framework, 2 May 2019

- they were outcomes that grant holders cared about and believed to be important for the young people they worked with;

- they could be measured using freely available, standardised questions that were accessible for practitioners and young people; and

- they had evidenced links to longer term impacts for young people and communities.

Recognising and balancing trade-offs

We have now finished collecting outcomes data from grant holders. Our *YIF Insight paper 3: A shared outcomes framework for open access youth provision* explores some our learning to date from the data collection process. The learning team will be spending the rest of the year analysing the data and sharing findings and learnings in early 2021.

We already know that there will be limitations to our analysis based on the volume and nature of the data we have collected. We have received a far smaller number of outcomes surveys than we had hoped, and from far fewer 'new' young people—that is those that had joined provision in the month prior to completing the survey. Engaging 'new' young people was an important part of the outcomes measurement approach, which is based on a 'before and after' design.

We suspect, some of these limitations could have been reduced if the YIF Learning Project had not taken a shared approach, rooted in co-production principles. The co-design process rightly took time to convene and engage a core group of practitioners, and then to share and sense-check our proposed approach with the wider cohort. Determining the approach without (or with much less) consultation would have meant we could have started outcomes data collection earlier, but may equally have created a greater sense of imposition and resentment, with potential challenges being blamed on a lack of consensus. By starting later, the time period for outcomes data collection was reduced to one year, which inevitably affected sample size and the number of data collection waves.

We had originally planned to collect data at baseline, 3 months, 6 months and where possible up to 12 months, but we only have data from baseline, 3 months and 6 months (though minimal) – reducing the likelihood that we will fully capture the long term impact of open access youth provision. We don't know whether the delayed start to outcomes data collection in effect meant we missed the most opportune moment—when the majority of YIF grantees were up and running with their YIF funded services—to reach a sizable sample of 'new' young people. It may also have been an unrealistic expectation, of both grant holders and the evaluation team, for organisations to

regularly receive 'new' young people in their final year of grant funded delivery. Furthermore, as the outcomes approach was not set at the start, it was hard for grant holders to anticipate associated demands in year three.

Similarly, our approach of inviting grant holders to opt-in to outcomes data collection may have limited the number of surveys received—one third opted in (our target sample). We could have taken an approach of expecting involvement from all grant holders but enforcing this would have been a huge drain on resources and, again, could have impacted on relationships.

Taking an opt-in approach to outcomes data collection meant that there was a greater likelihood that grant holders would self-determine the amount of data they would be able to collect, and enabled us to work with the organisations that felt the most motivated and able to participate in the outcomes surveys. We also thought that an opt-in approach with a sub-section of organisations would reduce the likelihood of grant holders perceiving that their contribution would matter less because there were other organisations also collecting outcomes data. By giving grant holders the option to continue collecting their own existing individual organisational outcomes evaluation approach, alongside the YIF outcomes approach, we may have inadvertently reduced their level of engagement and/or created too much of a burden on staff and young people.

A further trade-off was the shared approach itself. Having consulted grant holders at the beginning of the YIF, we knew that approximately half of them were already taking steps to measure or track outcomes, but the variety of tools and methods was wide, as were the outcomes being measured. Adopting a shared approach meant that collation and analysis of data would be much more straightforward, but it also meant introducing a new and potentially additional process for many. This effect was amplified by the data platform developed for the YIF Learning Project, which was new to all grant holders, and created demands around inter-operability and user support.

As a consequence, despite engaging and training a third of grantees in outcomes data collection in March 2019, only half of them were able to manage the process. This required us to seek more organisations to participate during the summer of 2019 (when we reached 39/91 organisations). However, the number of surveys that the YIF grantees were able to collect in practice was much lower than they, or we, had anticipated.

Our audit of survey responses to date shows that the majority of surveys returned are baseline surveys from young people who have been attending provision for some time (referred to as 'existing'), with only a small number of surveys being returned from 'new' young people. There is also a large attrition (drop out) rate at three-months and very few surveys from young people at the six-month time point. Not having a large enough sample of 'new' young people will affect our ability to run a comparative analysis of changes in outcomes with a group of young people (not attending

YIF provision) who we surveyed through a separate YouGov survey. Our plan is to undertake full data analysis of the YIF outcomes data over the summer of 2020, and to explore potential links between outcomes data and other types of YIF data (engagement and activity data, user feedback data and quality data) as well as delving more deeply into what we can learn from young people who have been participating in provision for some time.

We are currently working with YIF grant holders to learn more about the outcomes data collection process and will explore the potential reasons for the lower than expected response rate to the YIF outcomes data collection. There are potentially many important lessons to be learnt from the YIF outcomes approach, which we hope will inform future evaluation approaches for the sector.

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