



The Youth Investment Fund Learning Project

Executive summary: Findings from a shared evaluation of open access youth provision

Summary of Insight Paper Seven - May 2021

1.1 About the Youth Investment Fund evaluation

In this summary we present findings from the Youth Investment Fund (YIF) shared evaluation. The YIF was a joint £40m investment between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and The National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) to expand delivery of open access youth services in six regions of England. It was one of the biggest investments in open access youth provision in recent years and supported 90 organisations between 2017 and 2020. The YIF aimed to support young people's personal development by building their confidence and supporting them to become happy, healthy, and economically active adults.

We adopted an innovative mixed-methods evaluation approach, which included a [qualitative process evaluation](#) and a [quantitative impact and process evaluation](#). This paper summarises the findings of the latter, the specific aims of which were to:

- Understand which young people engaged with YIF-funded open access youth provision.
- Understand the types of activities experienced by young people and the ways in which young people engaged with these different activities.
- Understand the quality of youth provision funded by the YIF.
- Assess the impact of YIF-funded youth provision on young people's outcomes.
- Understand which factors contribute to the impact of youth provision and in what ways.

1.2 Summary of key findings

The YIF evaluation makes a valuable contribution to understanding how open access youth provision supports the development of young people and provides emerging evidence related to the aims set out above. The findings relate to the sample of YIF organisations for which we have usable data and therefore may not fully represent the wider YIF cohort or open access youth provision more generally. When reading the

findings, limitations of our data should be considered, including relatively small sample sizes for the outcomes data and the dominance of data from one grant holder in the impact analysis.

Our key findings are presented below.

Box 1: Outcomes measured in the YIF evaluation

The impact of YIF provision has been measured using 21 outcomes, broadly categorised into the following domains.

1. **Self-confidence and personal locus of control** (defined as the tendency to take responsibility for self-actions and successes)
2. **Leadership**
3. **Social skills**
4. Self-regulation
5. **Communication and self-expression**
6. **Social connectedness**
7. **Happiness and wellbeing**

Domains 1-5 relate to social and emotional learning. Outcomes related to domains 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7, highlighted in bold, were found to have statistically significant impacts among young people attending youth provision at three months. Full details of the outcomes measure can be found in Section 4.3.5 in the [main report](#).

1.2.1 The quality, impact and reach of youth provision

1. **Open access youth provision has the potential to significantly improve social and emotional learning skills, social connectedness, and wellbeing for young people, particularly those with most to gain.** Young people attending YIF provision made greater improvements in most outcome domains (see Box 1) compared to a group of young people who did not attend provision. Looking across the 12 projects providing baseline and follow-up data at approximately three-months, we found statistically significant impacts related to social skills, self-confidence, leadership, communication and self-expression, social connectedness and happiness and wellbeing.

Young people with medium to low social and emotional learning (SEL) skill profiles at baseline made greater gains than those with high SEL skill profiles on some outcomes related to personal locus of control, social skills, communication and self-expression, and wellbeing (see Section 8.5). SEL skills have been linked with longer term impacts such as improved mental and physical health, educational attainment, finding and sustaining employment, positive long-term relationships, and life satisfaction.¹

2. **Higher quality youth provision is related to better outcomes for young people.** Young people participating in higher quality provision – as measured by the Programme Quality Assessment (PQA) – experienced better outcomes across all outcome domains compared to those taking part in lower quality provision.

Young people may experience greater SEL skill growth in targeted (or combined targeted and universal) provision, but universal provision plays an important initial engagement role. Young people attending targeted provision² (either on its own or alongside universal provision), made greater gains across some outcomes related to social skills, leadership, self-regulation and communication and self-expression than those attending universal provision only.³

The [YIF process evaluation](#) highlighted the role of universal provision in reaching and engaging young people in positive activities and informal learning opportunities. Specifically, the universal offer was referred to as ‘foundational’ in reaching and engaging with young

¹ See [Insight Paper 3: A shared outcomes framework for open access youth provision](#) and [Open Access Youth Work: A narrative review of impact \(Hill, 2020\)](#).

² Provision that was designed for, focused on and delivered to particular groups of young people

³ Provision that was designed for, and open, to all

people locally, and as playing a ‘funnelling’ role in identifying and connecting with young people who may need a more focused targeted offer.

- 3. Youth provision is generally high quality and valued by young people.** Young people rated provision highly in terms of the quality and value of provision in their lives; experiencing a safe and supportive environment; and the offer of stimulating, positively challenging and fun activities. Whilst still positive, feedback was relatively poorer relating to empowerment and youth voice. Additionally, we found that the quality of the youth provision settings was generally medium to high, as rated by grant holders taking part in the PQA process and that higher-quality settings received more positive feedback from young people related to empowerment and youth voice.
- 4. Youth organisations are generally reaching the young people who need them, but more attention should be paid to supporting the specific needs of girls and young women.** YIF provision was successful in attracting and engaging with a broad range of young people living in some of the most deprived areas of the country. Based on our data, grant holders were successful at engaging young people from ethnic minority backgrounds – specifically young Black people and young people from mixed/multiple ethnic groups.

However, there appears to be a gender bias towards males. This is particularly pronounced when we look at intersections in the data, where we find that girls and young women from ethnic minority backgrounds were underrepresented to a greater degree than their White female peers. Notably, Asian girls and young women were least represented in the cohort of young people attending YIF provision based on our sample.

- 5. Around a fifth of young people were reporting poor wellbeing.** 21% of young people taking part in YIF funded activities were experiencing high psychological distress or risk of depression at baseline and 40% reported feeling lonely at least occasionally (see Section 5.2 in our [main report](#) for further details).

1.2.2 Evaluating and learning about open access youth provision

6. **The YIF evaluation approach, drawing on five types of data, was methodologically robust. It has generated new insight into the impact of open access youth provision.** The YIF Learning evaluation framework established a credible and potentially powerful approach to understanding what works, for whom and in what circumstances in open access youth provision.

The framework enabled triangulation of data across multiple settings and data types and provided for in-depth testing of hypotheses. It also offers an enduring approach to evaluation that is feasible for youth organisations of all sizes, both individually and collectively. However, collecting outcomes data over time for young people remains challenging (see Finding 8).

7. **Thinking beyond outcomes yields more insightful and useful learning.** Gathering five types of quantitative data (beneficiary, engagement, quality, feedback, and outcomes) and exploring the links between them revealed the relationships between quality of provision, the experiences of young people, and impact. This led to more 'actionable' insights for both funders and providers.

The most challenging part of the evaluation design was collecting outcomes data over time and future evaluations are likely to face the same issues that we did. The YIF Learning Project's evaluation approach offers more flexible and feasible ways for providers and funders to understand and improve the impact of open access youth provision. More work is needed to examine alternative approaches to outcome data collection that are acceptable and feasible in evaluating youth provision.

8. **Shared evaluation is feasible and highly valuable, but practically challenging.** Whilst it was challenging, YIF providers were able to collect and share sufficient data to address the research aims presented. To get to this point required huge effort on behalf of both the Learning Team and the YIF grant holders.

There was significant variation across grant holders in terms of evaluation capacity, resource and motivation to take part in the shared YIF evaluation, despite a general belief and consensus among grant holders in the importance and value of evaluation both for the purposes of proving and improving. Where resources were stretched, the demands of front-line delivery and the sustainability of the organisation took priority, a tension that was felt by many participating in outcomes data collection, particularly in the final year of grant funding.

1.3 Recommendations

1.3.1 Recommendations for youth organisations

1. **Continue to provide a broad offer to meet the varied needs of young people but identify those who may be excluded.** Use data about your beneficiaries, alongside your relationships and knowledge of the community in which you work, to understand any groups of young people who are not accessing your provision and potential barriers to their engagement. Pay particular attention to the experiences and needs of girls and young women, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds.
2. **Continue to listen to young people and embed systematic collection of feedback into practice.** Close the feedback loop by telling young people what you have heard and how you are going to address it. Put those changes into practice and show young people when these changes have been made.
3. **Think beyond outcomes when evaluating your work.** Quality of provision and young people's experiences play a critical role in developing social and emotional skills. Capturing data on these aspects of your provision gives a much fuller picture of how and why change might be happening for young people.
4. **Consider how measuring SEL skills can usefully be integrated into practice** to support better understanding of young people's needs and development areas. Understanding the 'profile' of groups that you work with is vitally important for quality and equity.
5. **Consider using shared approaches and frameworks for evaluation** alongside bespoke qualitative methods to build a sector-wide evidence base of the quality and impact of youth provision. The [Centre for Youth Impact](#) have further information about shared evaluation in the youth sector.

1.3.2 Recommendations for Funders

1. **Invest in open access youth provision through funding like the YIF.** Funding for this type of provision has been significantly reduced over the past ten years, yet our findings and those of others⁴ suggest it is a powerful way to support young people to thrive both now and in the future, to manage the transition into adulthood, and to grow into healthy and happy adults, through developing SEL skills and positive relationships.
2. **Pay attention to beneficiary data for open access youth provision** and interrogate any potential inequities in terms of access. Identify gender bias, in particular barriers to access for girls and young women from ethnic minority backgrounds.
3. **Support organisations to focus on continuous learning about their practice as well as impact evaluation.** Encourage a structured and detailed focus on quality and youth voice in grant holder learning and evaluation practices.
4. **Make it easier for organisations to collect and share honest numbers.** This requires a culture of 'low stakes accountability' in which learning and improvement is prioritised over results.
5. **Support shared evaluation by championing common frameworks** and aligning your reporting expectations. Listen to youth organisations and other funders about what data is being collected and think about how this aligns with your expectations. This shift requires funding for infrastructure support for learning, development and evaluation, and a change in how funding is perceived to incentivise organisations taking an individual approach.
6. **Improve future large-scale evaluations by:**
 - **Working in partnership with your evaluator and making it a shared endeavour.** Be clear about what is being monitored and measured, and how it will contribute to the evaluation. Use the data you gather to help the sector improve by making it publicly available, sharing what you've learnt and what you're going to do differently as a result.

⁴ [Open Access Youth Work: A narrative review of impact \(Hill, 2020\)](#).

- **Starting the conversation early.** Engage with the target audience (either grant holders or potential applicants) before you and your evaluation partner design the evaluation approach to understand the delivery process and pressures that youth organisations are under. Work with the sector and your evaluation partner so that a theory of change, a measurement framework and related tools are in place before grants are awarded. Outline evaluation expectations from the beginning and be clear about the time and budget required.
- **Providing ongoing capacity building, infrastructure support and account for staff time to collect and process data.** This shouldn't be a hidden cost and needs to be separate to staff delivery time.
- **Building on what is already known.** We've learnt a huge amount from this evaluation, some of which is presented in this report and some in [Insight Paper 6](#), which clearly outlines what worked and what didn't. Learn from our successes and mistakes and add to existing datasets rather than starting from scratch.

Further information related to these findings can be found in [Insight Paper 6: Looking back, looking forward](#).

1.3.3 Recommendations for future research and evaluation

1. **Align evaluation approaches with youth work practices.** Evaluating open access youth provision is challenging because of the varied ways in which young people engage with provision; misalignment between evaluation approaches and youth work practice; and the practical challenges of collecting data from and about young people. It therefore requires a greater emphasis on:
 - Developmental evaluation approaches that align with the reflective nature of youth work practice.
 - Understanding how different young people engage in different ways with different types of youth provision.
 - Capturing young people's voices and experiences as part of the relational nature of youth provision.
 - A broader range of data types including data on quality and feedback.

2. **Continue to measure short to medium term changes in SEL skills.** Our findings support the theory that SEL skills are medium-term outcomes developed through high quality youth provision. The Centre for Youth Impact has developed a set of shared measures, building on learning from the YIF, that are available for use in monitoring and evaluation of youth provision.
3. **Improve the quality of beneficiary data.** There were large gaps in our beneficiary data, particularly related to ethnicity. Whilst we acknowledge that collecting this data can be challenging, we need to ask these questions in meaningful ways if we are to understand and attend to inequities.
4. **Make the data collection process useful and aligned with practice** as part of an asses-plan-improve cycle. Enable participating organisations to get real-time feedback from the data being collected and support them to share what they're changing in response.
5. **Allow more time for capacity building work.** Changing or taking on new evaluation and learning practices requires organisational change. Done right, this additional support will require more funding and time to develop even more supportive relationships with grant holders.
6. **Impact evaluation matters but needs to be sector-wide with a longitudinal approach.** Impact evaluation using common data collection tools is valuable in understanding the difference open access youth provision makes to young people's lives, and understanding impact is likely to remain a key interest for policy makers. However, seeking to collect this data as part of an individual organisation's regular evaluation practice is neither proportionate nor appropriate, and can be a waste of precious resource. In addition, we suggest that longitudinal research exploring young people's development into adulthood should incorporate indicators of young people's engagement with, and experiences of, open access youth provision during adolescence. This would add vital insight into the longer-term impact of open access youth provision across the life course.
7. **For future impact evaluations, we recommend a particular focus on increasing the sample size of young people involved and range of organisations from which data is collected,** gathering data on longer-term impacts (e.g. 12 months and beyond), and improving data about new participants to establish a true baseline.

1.4 Methods and Approach

The quantitative evaluation strand of the YIF learning project focused on understanding the difference YIF funded provision has made to young people's lives (impact) and how it did this (process) through shared measurement across the YIF cohort. To understand impact, we employed a quasi-experimental design, comparing outcomes over time between YIF participants and a comparison group (a sample of young people not involved in YIF provision).

We addressed the process question by collecting quantitative data about who was attending provision (beneficiary data), what type of provision/activities they were attending and how often (engagement data), the nature of young people's experiences (feedback data), and the quality of the youth setting (quality data). For feedback, quality, and outcomes data, we intentionally worked with sub-sets of the YIF cohort as they were more resource intensive and not suitable for all types of provision. Full details of the methods used can be found in Section 4.

The full paper can be read at <https://www.youthimpact.uk/yif-learning-project>



Cover photo provided by the National Lottery Community Fund.