



EVALUATION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY: APPLYING LEARNING FROM COVID-19

Insights Brief #3
COVID-19 Grant Round
Learning Partner

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About the Youth Endowment Fund COVID-19 Grant Round

In July 2020, the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) launched the £6.4m COVID-19 Grant Round for organisations based in England and Wales. The grant had two aims: first, to provide targeted support to young people at risk of being involved in violence; and second, to learn fast about the best ways to reach young people during a period of physical distancing.

In total, **129 organisations** were awarded funding from this special round to support the delivery of services and activities, including online and virtual programmes, targeted work in schools and detached youth work (youth work which takes place without the use of a building or activity, but instead focuses on meeting young people in the spaces where they choose to spend their time).

INTRODUCTION TO THIS INSIGHTS BRIEF

A COMMITMENT TO EVIDENCE AND LEARNING

Building robust evidence about the impact of different approaches to reducing youth violence is central to the YEF. Yet the rapidly evolving context of the pandemic, the speed at which organisations are having to adapt, and the scale of the YEF COVID-19 Learning Project demand a different strategy for learning and evidence generation. They require an approach that pulls together the best of what is already known and creates opportunities for grantees to share and learn from each other as the situation unfolds.

As such, the YEF established a Learning Partner role for the COVID-19 Grant Round. Led by the Dartington Service Design Lab, Centre for Youth Impact, Research in Practice and University of Plymouth, the Learning Partnership was set up to work closely with the YEF and grantees over the course of a year to generate and share learning grounded in evidence.

This learning focused on how to engage young people at risk of being involved in violence, the strengths of different forms of support, and how the pandemic is affecting the context in which violence manifests, while also being responsive to learning needs as they develop. Learning has been shared in Insights Briefs, such as this.

This Insights Brief is the third in a series, which accompanies a wider suite of learning and engagement activities with YEF COVID-19 grantees. The first Insights Brief focused on approaches to engaging young people during the pandemic, and the second Insights Brief on core and flexible components of youth provision. This third brief is focused on evaluation, with a particular focus on evaluating youth services in times of uncertainty. We explore 'readiness' for evaluation and the preparation required by both youth services, commissioners and funders to build in and act upon learning. We also examine the barriers to being ready for evaluation activities, using case studies from across the Learning Partnership to articulate these issues. The last section offers recommendations to youth services both in and outside of the grant, as well as evaluators and commissioners of services.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation plays an important role in generating learning that can be used to improve services for young people. This also applies to youth sector organisations, who regularly have to operate in rapidly-changing contexts – this was especially heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. This Insights Brief considers grantees' readiness for evaluation and draws on learning across the project to make recommendations for building evaluation readiness in youth sector organisations.



Our work with the 129 youth work organisations included in the YEF COVID-19 Learning Project lasted throughout the funding period (July 2020 to August 2021). We sought to achieve three objectives:

1. Assess the readiness of these grantees for evaluation.
2. Identify potential barriers and limitations to readiness faced by these grantees and provide support.
3. Use learning about the above to make recommendations for improving readiness.

Through various methods of research and data collection (including surveys, interviews and baseline assessments – see section 2) we found that many grantees in the portfolio struggled to define their service provision and hadn't had time or resources to provide a Theory of Change and/or an evaluation plan. Similarly, we discovered that many grantees did not have enough time or resources to think about and plan for evaluation, or take part in evaluation activities. This may, in part, reflect a disconnect between grantees' understanding and expectations of evaluation and those of funders and evaluators.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

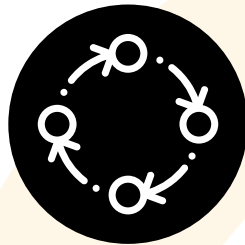
Drawing on this learning, we make two sets of recommendations. First, we recommend funders and commissioners make greater investment in the readiness of youth sector organisations to evaluate and be evaluated. This includes supporting them to:

- Generate simple but clear descriptions of services and their Theory of Change.
- Develop long-term learning agendas to further organisations' visions for supporting young people.
- Invest in the development of all practitioners' understanding of evaluation and, for some, methodological expertise.

Second, we recommend a refocusing of how evaluation is understood, promoted and practised in the youth sector. This involves a greater emphasis on:

- Exploring a broader range of questions and using a greater variety of methods to answer those questions.
- Testing discrete components of a service as well as the whole service.
- Encouraging the use (where appropriate) of more rapid and iterative approaches to the generation and use of evidence.

We believe both sets of recommendations are useful to youth sector organisations, evaluators/learning partners and funders/commissioners of services and evaluations. When these different stakeholders are better aligned in their understanding and expectations, more meaningful and useful evaluation in the sector is likely to happen.



PART 1: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT BEHIND THE RESEARCH

WHAT WE SET OUT TO ACHIEVE

It is widely accepted that it is necessary to evaluate services for young people. There may be disagreements about the focus of such evaluation, or the methods by which it is done, or even who does the evaluation. However, the underlying principle that something valuable can be learnt by asking questions, gathering and analysing data and reflecting on the findings is broadly accepted. For many in the youth sector, the primary purpose of such activity is to learn and use that learning to improve the services available to young people.

This is particularly necessary in a time of uncertainty when the context is changing and service provisions have to respond. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been significant shifts in how services are delivered, with in-person work switching online and a greater focus on keeping young people socially connected. As described in the first Insights Brief, some building-based activity also moved out into the community to reach young people most at risk of involvement in violence. These changes demonstrated the incredible ability of the youth sector to adapt to new challenges. But it also means that we need more evaluation to find out how well these new approaches are working.

Of course, even in better times, the youth sector needs to be responsive to changes in the policy and funding environment, new and emerging needs, technological innovations and the

preferences of young people. Indeed, flexibility and youth-centredness is often a source of pride and identity to those working in the sector and is usually welcomed by young people. So, although uncertainty and change were heightened during the pandemic, these are also, arguably, the norm in the youth sector. As such, there is always a need for evaluation and learning approaches that can work in that context.

Our role as Learning Partner in the Youth Endowment Fund COVID-19 Learning Project was not to evaluate services but rather to work with the 129 grantees to support their learning and build their capacity for improvement. This work involved, first, considering their readiness for evaluation (with particular reference to the service provision funded as part of the portfolio) and, second, helping to strengthen it (where necessary). We learnt a great deal about the things that make it easier and harder for organisations to be ready for evaluation.

This Insights Brief is a summary of that learning. Our recommendations are aimed at youth sector providers but also other stakeholders with an interest in evidence and learning – notably, evaluators and commissioners of services and their evaluation. Ultimately, the aim is to help ensure that evaluation as a process contributes to meaningful learning, service improvement and the wider knowledge base, both during the pandemic and beyond.

METHODS WE USED

Our work with the 129 youth work organisations included in the YEF COVID-19 Learning Project lasted throughout the funding period (July 2020 to August 2021). Most of these organisations (84%) are charities or social enterprises, 12% are local authorities and 4% are private companies.

We sought to achieve three objectives:

- 1** Assess the readiness of these grantees for evaluation.
- 2** Identify potential barriers and limitations to evaluation readiness faced by these grantees and provide support accordingly.
- 3** Use learning about the above to make recommendations for improving readiness.

RESEARCH AND SUPPORT ACTIVITIES



Assessing readiness

1. We carried out a rapid analysis of the written descriptions of provision provided by grantees in their funding applications to understand the definition and goals of their provision and intentions for delivery (see details of the methodology and outcomes in the second Insights Brief).
2. Immediately after grantees received funding, we administered a Support Needs Questionnaire to all 129 grantees to survey their general readiness to evaluate and their immediate support needs at the beginning of the YEF COVID-19 grant round.
3. We carried out an in-depth rapid assessment of the YEF-funded provision of five grantees who

received at least £100,000 in funding (hereinafter, the Big Five). The assessment was undertaken at four months, nine months and one year after grantees received funding, and included a review of the readiness of each provision for evaluation in four areas: Theory of Change, service design, measurement, and learning.



Supporting readiness

1. In response to the findings from the baseline assessments, we developed and delivered a four-part webinar series on developing and using a Theory of Change for service design and evaluation.
2. We also offered eight facilitator-guided, small-group, peer learning

sessions ('clinics') to help some self-selecting grantees enhance their learning and share practice wisdom about ways to address common evaluation challenges.



Monitoring progress

1. To track grantees' progress and level of engagement, we used a pre-and post-webinar questionnaire and elicited feedback during optional post-webinar discussions.
2. We also recorded and documented sessions with the Big Five and clinic participants to capture observable progress and self-reported improvement, respectively.

BRINGING OUR LEARNING TOGETHER

Quantitative data from questionnaires and assessments were summarised using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were analysed using rapid analysis of grantees' texts in questionnaires, and detailed notes (rather than transcriptions) from grantees' group discussions and interviews. Themes were identified and finalised through an iterative process of inductive coding by two researchers followed by discussions and agreement with two other researchers in the Learning Partner team. In the next section, we present the final learning generated by these analyses, followed by our recommendations.





PART 2: OUR FINDINGS

In this section, we explain what we found when assessing readiness for evaluation. We will recap some helpful guidance on how we measured this (as explained in the previous section). Finally, we will share what we learnt about readiness for evaluation both with the Big Five grantees and the smaller grantees.

READINESS FOR EVALUATION



Some grantees' did not clearly define their new provision

In the second Insights Brief², we describe how we created a core components framework that organisations can use to: (1) unpack their service provision to define its most important components, and (2) guide consistent delivery and adaptations. We used this framework to review the funding applications of the 129 grantees. We found that **some grantees did not have a written definition of their provision**, including the components that make up their provision and how they intend to deliver and potentially adapt it during the funding period.

While service provision always needs to be somewhat responsive, for example to changes in context or youth preferences, having a sense of what the provision does and doesn't include is necessary for measuring what is delivered and, ultimately, knowing what is or is not effective.



Most grantees did not have a Theory of Change for their provision

The second Insights Brief also explained briefly what a Theory of Change is and how it can provide a framework for service design and evaluation (explained on the right).

Despite these benefits, we found that **69% of grantees did not have a Theory of Change**ⁱ for their provision at the point when they received funding. When asked about their immediate support needs, 67% of grantees who responded said they needed help to develop or refine their Theory of Changeⁱ.

Our in-depth assessment of the Big Five grantees found that two of these grantees had a written Theory of Change at the start of the funding period. The three others attributed the absence of a Theory of Change to having insufficient time and capabilities to develop one (elaborated on the next page).



Theory of Change recap

- A Theory of Change can provide a common 'picture' or understanding of the provision, including its different components and why they are important for successful implementation and positive outcomes.
- Having this common understanding can support better communication between stakeholders, including service providers and evaluators.
- With a Theory of Change, these stakeholders can also work together to agree on what they expect to happen in terms of implementation and outcomes, and then compare these expectations with what they observe during practice.
- A Theory of Change can also support services to ask searching questions based on their common understanding and expectations, and to develop an evaluation (with suitable research methods) to find relevant answers.
- These answers provide a starting point for learning about and refining the service for different contexts, target populations and desired outcomes.

READINESS FOR EVALUATION



Most grantees did not have an evaluation plan

One of the Big Five grantees attempted to plan how they would evaluate their provision during the funding period – they had written some research questions and identified tools to measure outcomes in young people. However, this grantee, like the other four, had not considered which evaluation design and approaches might be most appropriate for their provision and learning needs, especially in a time of uncertainty. In such a time, these needs include ways to generate, share and use evidence faster than usual, while still maintaining control over the amount and quality of evidence produced.

In their first follow-up assessment three of the Big Five grantees shared that they were experiencing some of the consequences of not starting out with an evaluation plan.

One Big Five grantee reportedly had “more data than we can manage”. They successfully used a mixture of standardised assessments, feedback forms and case notes to quickly collect data at multiple time points. However, they had no time to analyse the data and use the evidence because the staff leading their ‘self-evaluation’ were also directly supporting young people and managing emerging issues posed by the pandemic.

Other Big Five grantees struggled to find alternative ways to collect data when young people and staff no longer had the same levels of availability and interaction as before the pandemic. Additionally, some of the usual data collection tools and methods proved unsuitable for remote collection (especially with young people).

None of the Big Five had checked the quality of their data or determined whether their evidence was good enough for decision-making; again, this is likely because they did not have enough time or capacity to do so.

They also were not using any formal ways to share and act on evidence and learning.



Evaluation plan recap

An evaluation plan is a written document that sets out what will be evaluated, how and for what purpose. It outlines the question(s) to be explored and associated investigation method(s). This includes data sources (e.g., parents, young people, practitioners), means of obtaining data (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, sharing of routine service data), and means of analysing data (e.g., identifying themes from interviews, or comparing young people’s well-being before and after a service). The plan would ideally give a timeline of the order in which things will happen and indicate who will be involved at different stages. Finally, it should say how evaluation findings will be shared and with whom, and how they will be used to inform decision-making and help improve provision.

OUR FINDINGS

READINESS FOR EVALUATION



In our wider survey of all 129 grantees, 76% of those who responded requested support to develop plans for evaluating their provision¹. During facilitator-guided, small-group peer learning sessions (clinics), which were held one year after funding was awarded, some grantees told us that they intended to reuse existing evaluation plans from previous provisions. One stated, “The evaluation [plan] that we brought to the table was a formal one that we’ve worked with for a while.” As with lack of Theories of Change, some grantees attributed the absence of an evaluation plan to insufficient time and capabilities.

Other grantees highlighted a more complex challenge, specifically that how they understand and use evaluation seems different from the understanding and expectations of those who commission and do evaluations (especially funders, researchers and evaluators).

We say more about this challenge in the next section ***Barriers to readiness for evaluation***.

During interviews at the end of the funding period, some grantees told us that they were now able to create their evaluation plan after implementing their provision and understanding it better. This process of ‘learning by doing’ was mentioned often by grantees throughout our engagement with them and proved especially beneficial for those less experienced in service design and evaluation.



Some grantees improved their readiness for evaluation using our support

The final follow-up assessment of the Big Five included three of the five grantees. Between the first assessment and the first follow-up, two of the Big Five grantees discontinued their engagement in the readiness assessment and related one-to-one support with the Learning Partner due to capacity issues. By the end of the funding period, the three remaining Big Five grantees each had a written Theory of Change and an evaluation plan (compared to two and one respectively

at the start of funding). Two of these three Big Five grantees also now had a written description of their provision. The other grantee was still writing their description at the time of the final follow-up.

During discussions and interviews, other grantees among the 129 shared anecdotes describing their achievements:

- They started feeling more able to write their Theory of Change after participating in our four-part webinar series on developing and using Theory of Change.
- They were now aware of the core components approach and how it can help with defining and adapting their provision after reading the second Insights Brief.
- They had started to identify ways to evaluate quickly based on suggestions from their peers and the Learning Partner during the clinics.

BARRIERS TO READINESS FOR EVALUATION



Some grantees did not have enough time to think and plan

It is not unexpected to find that some organisations are not ready for service design and evaluation. Changing contexts and short time frames for responding to funding calls are often associated with more rushing and less rigour, including a lack of best practices such as using evidence-based theories⁶. Some grantees reported that they designed their provision very quickly in response to the call for applications and simply did not have the “time and headspace” at the start to define it or create a Theory of Change or evaluation plan.

Some of them described how limited time and access prevented them from involving a diverse group of stakeholders in the initial design of their provision. Some reported drawing on their own “professional intuition” and involving “staff with lived experience” of the targeted outcomes. One grantee described their “uncertainty about designing a service quickly in response

to COVID-19 based on evidence from previous years of delivery.”

Some grantees were not able to consult existing scientific evidence, theories and wide stakeholder expertise.

This challenge is highlighted in other studies on evaluation, which also question whether it is reasonable to expect the same level of rigour when designing a service provision during a crisis or period of uncertainty when decisions need to be made quickly⁴. The unprecedented nature of events such as COVID-19 might also mean that previous evidence from usual practice is less applicable.

On the other hand, some grantees reflected that having strategic plans for service design and the generation and use of evidence could prepare them better for unexpected events, calls for funding applications with quick turnaround times, and short funding periods.

One grantee reported that “we don’t have anything strategic over the whole programme, and it’s making us wonder whether this is useful for us. We have plans for individual projects and funders but don’t have any plans strategically.”

*Another described their approach as “chasing money.” We reflect on this more in the **Recommendations** section.*

BARRIERS TO READINESS FOR EVALUATION



CASE STUDY 1: THINKING, PLANNING AND EXPERT SUPPORT HELPED ST GILES TRUST IMPROVE THEIR THEORY OF CHANGE

St Giles Trust ('St Giles') was one of the 129 organisations funded by the YEF COVID-19 Learning Project. Their new provision aims to establish additional pathways through which young people can gain support from St Giles case workers for their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

At the start of the funding period, St Giles had only an outline of their Theory of Change in a diagram and no clear written description of their new provision. During one-to-one discussions with the Learning Partner, they shared that they did not have enough time to collaborate with key stakeholders when designing and planning their provision. These stakeholders include young people similar to those they expect to support, and other service providers with whom they need to build partnerships to establish new referral pathways. **Not having a Theory of Change and clear description of their provision limited their ability to 'sell' their provision to these stakeholders and be seen as a valuable option for young people.** Efforts to establish relationships with other service providers were further impeded by the added challenges these service providers also faced due to the pandemic. As a result, at four months into the funding period, St Giles noted that they were establishing the new pathways at a slower pace than intended and they had a lower-than-expected number of new referrals for young people.

In response, St Giles attended the Learning Partner's four-part webinar series on Theory of Change. Following this,

they also received one-to-one support from the Learning Partner over four months to help them use the learning from the series to improve. For instance, during the support sessions, they drew on learning from the series about core components to think about and document the important parts of their provision in detail and draft a Theory of Change. They also used the time between sessions as an opportunity to 'test' their thinking by sharing their draft Theory of Change and description with potential partners to gain buy-in, and with young people to better understand their 'journey' to access support.

By the end of the support sessions, St Giles had written a detailed Theory of Change and had identified the components that seemed most important for implementation and maintaining young people's engagement. They stated that the **Learning Partner support was invaluable because the sessions gave them "time and headspace to think"** as a team, built their understanding of evaluation and Theory of Change **"at a manageable pace"**, and increased their ability to communicate about their provision to others. They recommended that such capacity-building support be given to grantees as early as possible so that the knowledge and skills can be applied at the point of designing services and planning how to implement them. By the end of the funding period, St Giles successfully established additional pathways and had a higher-than-expected number of referrals from a more diverse group of partners than they originally envisioned.

BARRIERS TO READINESS FOR EVALUATION



Some grantees did not have enough knowledge and skills in evaluation

Our exploration found that some grantees viewed evaluation as “formal”, “elaborate”, “rigorous” and “focused on impact, and therefore distinct from their “routine monitoring and learning” work. Some felt that they lack the knowledge and skills to create a Theory of Change or evaluation plan on their own and that “in terms of actual evaluation, we’re kind of bogged down and it’s not something we’re very good at or feel capable of doing well from the outset of projects.”

Our survey of grantees six months after they received funding showed that between 55% and 66% of respondents could not explain how to use a Theory of Change for service design and evaluationⁱⁱ or describe the core components that are usually included in a Theory of Change. More than half (54%) of all respondents were also unfamiliar with key tools associated with evaluation planning, such as an evaluation framework. Some also mentioned lacking the skills

to develop a Theory of Change that adequately describes their provision because they found the process too “prescriptive”, “mechanistic” or “theoretical” to capture the complexities inherent in youth work. In our support clinics, we helped some grantees to discuss and challenge this perception.

The perceived lack of capabilities among some grantees may also be due in part to the (sometimes unclear) differences between service evaluation and research. The former is often presented as internally-led by service providers, requiring less skill and expertise, and focused solely on the needs of service providers and users. In comparison, research is often associated with higher skills and externally-led methodical approaches that focus beyond the immediate priorities of service providers and users⁵.

Our findings suggest that most grantees see their internal measuring and learning as service evaluation and see evaluation as research (especially when funders, researchers and external

evaluators are involved). Specifically, while 76% of organisations asked us for help with ‘evaluating impact’, only 28% requested help with ‘monitoring delivery and engagement’.ⁱⁱⁱ

One grantee stated, “We’re quite big on evaluation. Not necessarily doing elaborate research, but it’s quite embedded. We do case management monitoring, and we have supervisor notes and service user feedback.”

Other studies also mention these different perceptions of practice and research and how they can contribute to conflicting understanding and expectations among service providers and those who commission and do evaluations³. We say more about these potential differences in the next finding.

ⁱⁱ Of the 69 grantees who responded to the Pre-webinar Survey.

ⁱⁱⁱ Of the 113 grantees who responded to the baseline Learning Partner Support Needs Survey.

BARRIERS TO READINESS FOR EVALUATION



Grantees have their own understanding and expectations when it comes to evaluation

Some grantees said that they expected to be told by YEF to undertake an evaluation of their provision but felt relieved when there was no mention of an evaluation in their funding agreement. Others, including some of the Big Five, stated feeling pressure to evaluate and learn quickly because of the direct support being given to them by the Learning Partner. At the same time, some grantees among the 129 told us throughout the project that they were eager to learn about and improve their provision, but they did not know how to do so well.

These findings potentially reinforce our learning above; that some service providers perceive evaluation as externally-requested, researcher-led and “mostly about accountability”. Also, the differences in understanding and expectations that often arise between service providers and those who commission and do evaluations can become wider in a time of uncertainty. This is especially true when provision is launched suddenly, with limited time and availability to collaborate, ask questions, build consensus, and gain buy-in.

The findings also highlight the need to give service providers more knowledge about the various types of evaluation, including those more suited to uncertain and rapidly-changing conditions. One grantee who received this knowledge successfully generated learning from implementing their provision and used this learning to adapt (see Case Study 2 on the next page).

BARRIERS TO READINESS FOR EVALUATION



CASE STUDY 2: NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS HELPED SOLIHULL IMPROVE THEIR EVALUATION PLANNING

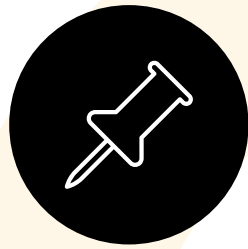
The Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council ('Solihull') also received funding through the YEF COVID-19 Learning Project. Their new provision includes the use of trained youth workers who collaborate with young people to assess their needs and help them navigate (identify, access and use) appropriate support.

During their first one-to-one support session with the Learning Partner, Solihull shared several clear research questions that they wanted to answer by the end of the funding period. But they did not have an evaluation plan including clear ways for collecting and analysing data and using the emerging learning to gain answers.

They were very interested in 'self-evaluating' their new provision to improve it quickly, and their team uniquely included staff who had both clinical and research expertise. However, they were not certain about which evaluation approaches were most appropriate for the early-development stage of their provision and would give them the answers in the time needed. They also felt unsure about whether the evidence they routinely collect in practice was 'good enough' to be considered evaluation. While grappling with these uncertainties, they also struggled to establish positive relationships with some young people and partners as a result of fluctuating availabilities and reduced access to and visibility of young people. Naturally, they shifted most of their attention early on to resolving issues with delivery and away from evaluation.

In the final one-to-one support session, Solihull identified what helped them most to improve their readiness for evaluation. They singled out the direct support from the Learning Partner to refine and extend their list of research questions and to think about research methods like rapid-cycle testing and case-based research, which might quickly and readily fit into what they are already doing (and must do to support young people). They also mentioned how new knowledge and skills in stakeholder mapping and developing a Theory of Change helped them to refine their existing theory with the involvement of youth workers and young people – the main intended 'users' of their Theory of Change.

Solihull successfully undertook rapid learning and improvement over several weeks within the funding period. For instance, they quickly (and creatively) collected feedback from young people in two ways: (1) by modifying one of their standardised research tools into an accessible children's game; and (2) by using card sorting, a common method from the user experience research field. The team then analysed some of their data and used the learning to draw early conclusions about which aspects of delivery were working well or less well and whether and how to change. They fed back this learning to youth workers to help build their interest in evaluation and identify unanswered questions. This experience helped Solihull to recognise the "striking similarities between research methods and what they use for learning in practice". They now have an evaluation plan and a documented methodology for rapid feedback, sharing and learning.



PART 3: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, our recommendations – which are mutually reinforcing – fall into two broad categories; investment in readiness for youth sector organisations to evaluate and/or be evaluated and refocusing how evaluation is understood, promoted and practised in the youth sector.



RECOMMENDATIONS

INVEST IN THE READINESS OF YOUTH SECTOR ORGANISATIONS TO EVALUATE AND BE EVALUATED



Describe the service clearly

Youth sector organisations should have simple descriptions of their intervention(s) and the underlying Theory of Change. It is difficult to meaningfully evaluate a service when it does not have a clear explanation of what it includes and how it is supposed to contribute to its intended goals. Flexibility in terms of things like content, delivery methods and setting can still be built into the design, but a sense of the parameters of this and the factors that influence that flexibility are helpful.

The [TIDieR framework](#)¹ is a simple tool that encourages the clear articulation of the 'what', 'where', 'when', 'whom' and 'why' of a service. The process of distinguishing between core and flexible components (as explained in the second Insights Brief) can support a more detailed description.



Be strategic about evaluation focus and purpose

Youth sector organisations could usefully set their own learning agenda. In practice, this would be a long-term plan that extends beyond the time-horizon of single projects and focuses on furthering the organisation's vision for supporting young people. This contrasts with the current tendency for evaluation to be a hotch-potch of activities driven by project-specific requirements, often imposed by others (including funders, commissioners or evaluators).

A good process for doing long-term planning was developed by [Project Evident](#) in the US. This starts with the organisation's vision and goals and sets the most relevant and important questions that need to be answered to help improve practice. It then assesses the context and capacities of organisations and, from there, develops actionable steps to enable the necessary learning. These include methods, timelines, risk assessments, the resources that will be needed and the intended audience for and use of the evidence. This is collated as a Strategic Evidence Plan (SEP), which can be adapted as needs change. Youth sector organisations will need support with developing their SEP.



Invest in practitioners' evaluation understanding and skills

All staff working in youth sector organisations would benefit from a rudimentary understanding of the kinds of questions evaluation can help to answer, and the variety of methods that can be used to answer those questions. Some will need knowledge and skills required to formulate questions, collect and analyse data, and support the use of findings. These are arguably important at any time but more so during uncertainty when there is little time to plan and prepare.

We recommend the development of a short training course or collection of modules focused on evaluation, for either online or in-person delivery. This should be co-developed and co-delivered with the youth sector and be readily and freely accessible. This training could be complemented by initiatives to embed evaluation and research capacity within provider teams (e.g., by hiring evaluation staff or facilitating 'researchers in residence') or to enable youth sector staff to work alongside evaluation experts on questions of interest and relevance for their organisations (e.g., by buying out a proportion of their time).



RECOMMENDATIONS

REFOCUS HOW EVALUATION IS UNDERSTOOD, PROMOTED AND PRACTISED IN THE YOUTH SECTOR



Broaden the range of questions and methods

Evaluation is sometimes understood to be primarily about estimating impact but of course it can be about a wider set of issues. Understanding impact on outcomes is self-evidently important, and significant progress has been made in recent years in encouraging the more robust design and conduct of such evaluations (e.g., through [standards of evidence](#)).

However, evaluation in the youth sector is sometimes seen as a way of monitoring what services do, rather than helping them to improve. It's also true that impact evaluations aren't right for every service, or at least they may not be appropriate for the service given its stage of development. Other questions may need to take priority. That's why we recommend a mix of evaluation methods, tailored to each project's needs, so that implementation processes and what staff and users think of the service can be better understood (as well as impact). This should help to make sure that people working in the sector can use evaluation findings to improve their offer and really see the benefit of evaluation.



Focus on parts as well as the whole

Traditionally, evaluations focus on the whole service. They answer questions like "Was the service delivered as intended?" and "Does the service achieve its intended outcomes?". These are clearly important issues to understand. However, they can leave us less enlightened about which parts of the service contributed to impact, or which parts need adjustment.

In the second Insights Brief, we suggested that evaluation could also usefully focus on specific components of provision. This might involve testing adaptations to discrete parts of content or delivery methods, and considering how this affects things like reach, engagement, acceptability and even impact. This could be particularly useful in a context of significant uncertainty when frequent adaptations to a service in response to a changing context mean that the 'whole' is in a state of constant flux.



Apply a more rapid and iterative approach

Good evaluation can take time. It needs patience to plan what is going to be done, then carefully gather data, and finally analyse it thoroughly and make sense of the results. Often this lasts the length of the service plus time (often months) before and after. Much of what we know about what is effective and ineffective in improving aspects of youth well-being comes from such evaluations. They are essential.

However, sometimes we need quicker results so that we can learn about and adapt services in real time. This is particularly the case in the earlier stages of developing and testing a service or during periods of continuous change, like the COVID-19 pandemic. To help meet this need, there is considerable scope to expand the acceptance and use of [rapid-cycle testing](#) and related structured improvement methods in the youth sector. These methods involve collecting relatively small amounts of quantitative and qualitative data, analysing them quickly and efficiently, and exploring the results with relevant stakeholders during service delivery with a view to facilitating ongoing innovation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

What can youth sector organisations do?

- Develop simple but clear descriptions of their services, including Theories of Change.
- Develop their own learning agendas, ideally in the form of a Strategic Evidence Plan (SEP).
- Negotiate with funders, commissioners and evaluators to align their learning agenda with others' priorities.
- Support staff to participate in training to build their evaluation understanding and skills.
- Engage with opportunities to host researchers-in-residence or enable staff to work with support from external organisations on relevant evaluation questions.

1

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

IMPLICATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

What can evaluators and learning partners do?

- Support youth sector organisations to develop simple descriptions of their services, including a Theory of Change.
- Support youth sector organisations to develop SEPs, for example by advising on question formulation, methods selection and assessment of evaluability and evaluation readiness.
- Contribute to developing and delivering basic evaluation training for youth sector organisations.
- Consider building researcher-in-residence roles into evaluation proposals, or supporting youth sector practitioners who have dedicated time to investigate an issue of relevance to their organisation with support from external experts.
- Negotiate with commissioners and providers about the choice of evaluation methods on specific projects to ensure optimal alignment with organisational learning agendas.

2

IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATORS AND LEARNING PARTNERS

IMPLICATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

What can commissioners and funders of services and/or evaluations do?

- Assess evaluation readiness at the point of funding applications, for example by encouraging providers to share their service descriptions and Theory of Change, and exploring their capacity for engagement in and use of evaluations.
- Invest in supporting providers to strengthen their evaluation readiness through basic evaluation training and tailored technical assistance with developing SEPs (e.g., through development and capacity-building grants).
- Engage with providers and evaluators from the tendering process through to evaluation to agree and refine the priorities and methods, while always bearing in mind the service's stage of development, context and continuous learning needs.
- Where appropriate, consider funding for embedding evaluation and research capacity within provider teams (e.g., researchers-in-residence).
- Fund opportunities to bring grantees and evaluators together to network, share experience and facilitate learning about evaluation.

3

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMISSIONERS AND FUNDERS OF SERVICES AND/OR EVALUATIONS



PART 4: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation plays an important role in generating learning that can be used to improve services for young people. This also applies to youth work organisations, whether they are operating in a rapidly-changing context such as the COVID-19 pandemic or under comparably better times.



Our work to consider grantees' readiness for evaluation and support them to improve revealed that:

- Much of the service provision funded as part of the portfolio was not well defined.
- Most of it did not have a Theory of Change.
- Most of it lacked an evaluation plan.

We also learnt about barriers to readiness:

- Many grantees reported not having enough time to think and plan.
- Some grantees felt that they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills in evaluation.
- There might be a disconnect between grantees' understanding and expectations of evaluation and those of funders and evaluators.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on this learning, we make two sets of recommendations:

Invest in the readiness of youth sector organisations to evaluate and be evaluated. This includes:

- Generating simple but clear descriptions of services and their Theories of Change.
- Developing long-term learning agendas to further organisations' visions for supporting young people.
- Building basic evaluation understanding and skills within youth sector providers.

Refocus how evaluation is understood, promoted and practised in the youth sector. This involves a greater emphasis on:

- Exploring a broader range of questions and using a greater variety of methods to answer those questions.
- Testing discrete components of services as well as the whole.
- Encouraging the use (where appropriate) of more rapid and iterative approaches to the generation and use of evidence.

Both sets of recommendations have concrete implications for youth sector organisations, evaluators/learning partners and funders/commissioners of services and evaluation. More meaningful and useful evaluation in the sector will only happen when these different stakeholders are better aligned in their understanding and expectations.

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APPENDIX: REFERENCES

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