

The Centre for Youth Impact's response to the 'Building a Statutory Youth Service Labour Party Consultation 2018'

The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations that work together to progress thinking and practice around impact measurement in youth work and services for young people. We aim to work in collaboration with others to test, learn and build momentum behind the impact agenda, across organisations working with young people. This includes working with organisations to help them understand how they can develop their approach to evaluation and to contribute to the evidence base more broadly. In September 2018, the Centre joined forces with Project Oracle, who now operate from inside the Centre.

Please see our consultation response below. We would be delighted to discuss any aspect of our response with you in more detail. We have restricted our response to question f) relating to evaluation.

What is the most effective way to evidence the outcomes and impact of youth work?

The current state of evaluation and evidence

There has been progress in the evaluation of the youth sector over recent years, including an increasing commitment to articulating programme outcomes (especially through theory of change models) and there has generally been an increasing appetite for understanding organisational outcomes through better use of evaluation and evidence. Most organisations we work with feel their approach to evidencing outcomes and impact has become more effective over recent years. While this is promising, there remain considerable challenges and limitations with the current evidence agenda within youth work – especially when applied to provision that lacks pre-determined outcomes (the heart of youth work for many).

Based on our work and experience we believe that current thinking and practice around impact evaluation and outcomes evaluation is potentially **undermining the impact** of youth work in the following ways:

- **It focuses on proving at the expense of improving:** the vast majority of resource and energy has been invested in 'proving' what works. Far less attention has been focused on impact evaluation practices that support service development and continuous improvement;
- **It is disconnected from practice:** outcomes monitoring and measurement is undertaken in isolation from quality assurance, resulting in limited ability to link the experiences of young people participating in programmes with changes in their lives;
- **It promotes competition:** providers are driven to design individual outcomes frameworks and monitoring tools, seeking uniqueness rather than collaboration, and are reluctant to share data and learning;

- **It takes on the characteristics of high stakes accountability:** providers perceive significant risks in talking openly about ‘failure’ and are thus much more likely to ‘game’ or devalue evaluation;
- **It doesn’t make use of existing government data:** many providers find themselves trying to monitor outcome data that is already being collected elsewhere, by schools, local authorities, the criminal justice system, employers or health services, or effectively repeating attempts by other providers to track the same outcomes often amongst the same group of young people;
- **It does not produce comparable data:** it is hard to focus on those programmes and models that create the greatest difference in young people’s lives given the idiosyncrasies of each monitoring and evaluation system and the difficulty of comparing across them;
- **Lack of consensus around a shared evidence base:** we believe that a shared evidence base for youth work would draw heavily on standards of evidence, which are at the heart of our work through Project Oracle validation. However, the blanket misapplication of such standards has led to confusion regarding the state of the evidence base for youth work. This has left some feeling very little evidence of a suitable standard exists whilst others feel there is a huge volume of programmatic and organisational evaluation evidence that should be considered.

Our vision for effective evaluation

To move towards stronger more effective evidence of youth work, evaluation needs to be:

- **Appropriate and proportionate** for the nature and objectives of the provision as well as the young people taking part;
- **Embedded and actionable** so that evaluation efforts are focused on improving provision for young people in a practical way;
- **Shared and collective** in terms of approaches, language and measures used so that data can be aggregated, compared and understood – ultimately contributing to an effective evidence base for youth work.

Appropriate and proportionate

We support standards of evidence and believe that some evidence is higher quality than other evidence. However, it is inappropriate and disproportionate to expect all organisations to provide the highest quality evidence for their work. Instead we need a more sophisticated application of standards of evidence that incorporates considerations of appropriateness and proportionality. Because of this, we recommend that every organisation should be evaluating the quality of provision and the experience that young people have of it but many should not be routinely capturing outcomes or impact data – certainly not in a blanket way for all young people in all forms of provision. Table 1 below sets out how the **provision design, nature of the group** taking part and the **structure of engagement** will all affect whether it is appropriate and feasible to measure outcomes and in what way.

	Measuring outcomes is appropriate	Measuring outcomes is less appropriate (and shouldn't be done routinely)
Provision design	Designed to achieve a specific outcome or set of outcomes	No pre-determined outcomes; aims are co-designed with young people based on their hopes, needs and experience.
Nature of group	Targeted at a specific group of young people who experience a clearly defined need*	Universal so that any young person can attend**
Structure of engagement	Structured so that engagement is consistent; 'change' is expected to be seen over a set period of time	Unstructured so that young people can drop in and out; 'change' is not expected to be seen during a set period of time
<p>* If young people present barriers making them 'hard to engage' measuring outcomes is likely to be difficult, though not impossible. ** Young people may be experiencing a particular need, but it is likely that a significant proportion of the group will not be</p>		

Table 1: Appropriateness of measuring outcomes in different youth work settings

Crucially, the table above is not suggesting that youth work does not achieve outcomes or that it shouldn't be focused on achieving outcomes but that organisational effort and resource are not always well utilised by focusing on directly measuring them.

Embedded and actionable

Evidence can only be effective if it is embedded within practice and provides actionable insight to practitioners, managers, funders and policymakers that is actually used to improve services. Approaches should be *embedded* throughout the evaluation process:

- **Design stage** – evaluation should be driven by good questions, asked by the right people and for the right reasons. The questions can be varied but they should be driven by a *need to know*;
- **Data collection** – only data that helps answer the above questions should be collected and where possible data collection should be integrated in to practice so that it *'goes with the grain'* of provision. In addition to well-designed surveys and structured qualitative collection this will include more creative methods that embody the values of youth work rather than represent its antithesis;
- **Data analysis and interpretation** – at least as much time and attention should be devoted to understanding data as collecting it. Again, where possible, this should be embedded within practice in team meetings and in existing forms of youth engagement;
- **Action and improvement** – crucially the evidence should be acted upon to improve services. This partly relates to it being motivated by learning and improvement in the first place but it also depends on the data itself providing actionable insight. Finally,

this also requires substantial structured support, training or coaching for youth workers to improve.

As outlined above, building effective evidence of the outcomes and impact of youth work is important, however, our work shows there has been an over focus on the measurement of outcomes *in isolation*. We recommend refocusing evaluative efforts to understand and measure what matters *in* youth work practice not merely *as a result* of practice. Firstly, this would direct energies to the improvement and observation of quality *alongside* the monitoring of outcomes, and secondly, as a consequence, it would create the potential for the observation of quality to become predictive of outcomes for young people – greatly contributing to the wider evidence base. In particular, there are two types of data that we believe should be given much greater attention within evaluation:

- **Feedback from young people on their experience of youth work** (not the changes that have resulted). Youth work is based on the understanding that it is certain positive developmental experiences that are the ‘mechanisms of change’ for young people. These tend to emphasise the nature of the relationship between supportive adults and young people – including such experiences as the young person feeling safe, trusted, respected, positively challenged and included. We advocate the systematic and, to some extent, standardised measurement of this experience on a regular basis. Through the [Youth Investment Fund leaning project](#) (led by NPC) we have developed a set of 18 standardised survey questions on user feedback. Another good example of ‘organisational listening’ being integrated into evaluation is as part of [the Listening Fund](#).
- **Understanding and measuring the quality of youth work provision.** There are a number of approaches to quality across the youth sector but in order for this data to be actionable it needs to be embedded within evaluation and focus on quality at the point of provision (i.e. understand what is happening in the relationship between the young person and the youth worker). We have recently started a large UK-wide pilot of the [Youth Programme Quality Intervention](#) (YPQI) funded by the Big Lottery Fund. This draws on a granular framework for social and emotional learning quality that relies on both self-assessment (through peer-to-peer observation) and external assessment (through trained assessors).

Shared and collective

To be effective, evidence (and the wider evidence agenda) needs to be shared across the youth sector. There is broad consensus that this is required but a lack of consensus on exactly what needs to be shared and how this can and should happen. Evidence can be shared at a number of levels:

- **Shared language** around evaluation and impact measurement is required both to increase understanding of some of the fundamental elements of evidence and to unify the sector around a shared evidence agenda. Key terms include the elements of a ‘theory of change’ (see [NPC’s approach](#) and [NCVO CES’s approach](#)) and different

terms for evaluation activity (e.g. 'monitoring', 'service evaluation', 'process evaluation', 'impact assessment' and 'research');

- **Shared outcomes frameworks and measurement** - a shared outcomes framework or theory of change which clearly articulates intended impacts and outcomes as well as details the shared 'mechanisms of change' of youth work. As part of the Youth Investment Fund learning project (led by NPC) we have developed a [shared theory of change](#) for open access youth provision. Despite the wide variety of open access activities offered (sports/ arts/ social action; group/ individual; building-based/ detached) we co-designed a shared framework with the 90 grantees. The Local Government Association (LGA) has also commissioned the Centre for Youth Impact to produce an outcomes framework to help partners across the youth sector to develop and agree mutual aims to support young people in their local areas. The work was in response to LGA's consultations that fed into its vision statement, *Bright Futures: our vision for youth services*, published at the end of 2017. This framework will be published shortly and includes tools and scales for measurement;
- **Shared data and learning** – most current evaluation is aimed at evidencing individual programmes and so comparability is limited. Moreover, the culture of competition and high stakes accountability means there are few examples of organisations openly sharing their data or learning with others. This sharing is necessary to drive higher and more consistent practice.

What can the Labour Party do at the national and local level?

Many of the challenges outlined above relate to the overarching culture of evidence and evaluation within youth work and as such defy quick or clean solutions. Funders, policymakers, evaluators, sector leaders and youth work organisations need to work together to ensure that evaluation is properly resourced to generate effective evidence. This will require a sector wide effort, however, the below makes brief recommendations for the Labour party at national and local level:

- Offer strategic leadership for both:
 - the development of a shared evidence base for youth work that is underpinned by, but moves beyond, standards of evidence and what works;
 - the development of a vision of evaluation that is appropriate and proportionate; embedded and actionable and shared and collective;
- To deliver these strategies energy and resources should be devoted to:
 - synthesising existing evidence before investing in new work;
 - utilising and embedding existing tools and approaches rather than investing in developing new ones;
 - investing in a national data infrastructure where comparable evidence can be compiled, analysed and shared.
- Through the power of national and local government as a funder and commissioner of youth services, Labour should commit to directly funding evaluation that is



appropriate and proportionate; embedded and actionable and shared and collective. In addition, any funding model for local services should make explicit provision for local leadership in evaluation and evidence.

We would be delighted to meet to discuss more specific recommendations and ways to take this agenda forward over the next few weeks. To arrange a meeting please contact matthew.hill@youthimpact.uk.