Exploring the role and potential of an evidence base for youth work and provision for young people – a discussion paper

In June the Centre for Youth Impact and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) are hosting a series of roundtables that will explore the steps necessary to create and sustain an ‘evidence base’ for youth provision in England.

The overarching goals of these roundtables will be to understand:
1. What difference would having an evidence base make, and to whom?
2. Why do we not already have greater consensus regarding the evidence for informal and non-formal provision?
3. What practical steps can we take to collectively progress this debate?
4. What role should Government and other stakeholders play in order to support the creation of a shared evidence base?

In order to explore these questions, five roundtables are being held across various locations in England with a mixture local and national youth organisations, funders, commissioners, evaluators and policymakers all invited to join the debate.

This brief paper, written by the Centre for Youth Impact, sets out the context and background to the roundtables, the process and next steps. The goal is to begin and progress a conversation, rather than to present a finalised position.

This set of discussions has been commissioned by DCMS to complement, and add depth and detail to the work already done for the Civil Society Strategy.

Why explore the role and potential of an evidence base for youth work and provision for young people?

Evidence-based policymaking
Over the last twenty years, there has been a significant shift in the ways in which Government uses evidence within the policymaking process, which has in turn reshaped perceptions of the role of evidence within the youth sector¹. Since the publication of Modernising Government (1999), where the ‘what matters is what works’ approach to policymaking was first pioneered, there has been an increasing focus on ‘putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy making and implementation’ (Davies, 2005). This approach is reflected in the establishment of What Works centres, such the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in 2011 and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) in 2013. The role of these centres, independent of Government, is to:

- collate published evidence on the effectiveness of interventions, assess these using a common ‘currency’, publish clear synthesis reports and share findings in an accessible way with practitioners and commissioners and policy makers. The What Works

¹ For the purposes of this paper, ‘youth sector’ refers to both local authorities and VCSE sector providers of youth work and informal and non-formal provision for young people.
centres will also highlight where it is possible to further the evidence base. (Alexander and Letwin, 2013: 1).

The UK government has not been alone in following such an approach: a similar trajectory for the role of evidence in policymaking can be found across governments in Europe, and in the United States and Australia.

The pursuit of a ‘what works’ philosophy has led to debates over what methodological approaches produce sufficiently robust or even ‘good enough’ evidence: the Network of What Works Centres have led the creation and refinement of Standards of Evidence, which are now widely applied in a range of contexts. Such debates extend well beyond the youth sector, but have arguably presented a particular challenge/exerted a particular influence here.

Evidence and the Youth Sector
Debates over what counts as evidence, when we can have confidence to say that something ‘works’, and the associated evaluation methods have had a significant impact upon the youth sector. This is particularly true in England, but can also be seen within Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. While to some extent, debates within the youth sector mirror wider debates about the role of evidence in policymaking and implementation, there are a number of contextual features of youth provision that mean that the evidence debate is in particularly sharp focus. These include both the reductions in central government and local authority expenditure, which are hitting youth provision disproportionately hard, and the characteristics and ethics of informal and non-formal youth provision, such as being open access, youth-led, long term, and rooted in communities. These ‘features’ structure the context in which evidence can be valued, collected and used. Informal and non-formal provision is also part of a complex system of support and influence in young people’s lives, making its role hard to isolate and scrutinise.

Such tensions were encapsulated in the 2011 Education Select Committee Inquiry into Youth Services, where it was suggested that the youth sector was providing insufficient evidence of its impact on the lives of young people:

“It is hard to reject the basic tenet expounded by a range of youth service representatives and young people themselves, that ‘you know good youth work when you see it’. However, with a tight spending settlement and an increase in commissioning of youth services at a local level we also believe it is essential that publicly funded services are able to demonstrate what difference they make to young people”. (Select Committee on Education, 2011, paragraph 39)

There have been a range of developments in the youth sector evidence debate since the Select Committee Inquiry, including The Catalyst Framework of outcomes for young people (McNeil et al., 2012), the Early Intervention Foundation’s review Social and emotional learning: Skills for life and work (Feinstein, 2015), the establishment of Project Oracle in 2013 and the Centre for Youth Impact in 2014, and a number of voices calling for a different approach to understanding the value of informal and non-formal youth provision. However, the tension between ‘you know good youth work when you see it’ and the request for the youth sector itself to ‘demonstrate what works’ remains and effectively frames the role of evidence in informing practice, what counts as evidence, and what makes evidence ‘good’ or ‘bad’.
Similarly, there remains strong debate about whether such an evidence base may already exist. Many practitioners and delivery organisations argue that there is copious evidence of the impact of their work with young people over many decades – the challenge is more that this evidence doesn’t conform to dominant standards that define rigour or strength, and as such is not recognised or respected. There may also be challenges with this evidence being dispersed, often unrecorded or inconsistently collected, and difficult to analyse.

However, as a recent blog from James Noble, Impact Management Lead at NPC, argued “if we draw on all the ‘vouching’ [as opposed to ‘clinching’] evidence already available, we could probably make a very strong case for ‘what works’ in supporting young people” (Noble, 2018).

It is as a result of wanting to find a way through these tensions that the Centre for Youth Impact and DCMS are convening five roundtables to progress the discussion on the steps necessary to create and sustain a shared evidence base in the youth sector.

What will be happening

We will host discussions on aspirations for an evidence base, defining what matters in youth provision and how to evidence it, the role of outcome measurement, the value of youth feedback and participation, and the potential and challenge of digital approaches to evidence gathering. Each event will include a mixture of youth organisations, funders and commissioners: a cross sector perspective that be essential in agreeing priorities and making progress. We will be holding events across different regions of England to include a geographical breadth.

Discussion will draw on existing initiatives and projects that are seeking to contribute to the youth sector evidence base, alongside reviewing historical perspectives. We anticipate that each event will incorporate broader debate, with deeper consideration of a series of specific questions.

1. Scoping aspirations for an evidence base

To be hosted by Brathay Trust and Youth Focus North West, in Manchester on 26 June.

a. What are the aspirations for an evidence base for the youth sector? Whose aspirations are they?

b. What are the most important features of an evidence base (for example, collective ownership) that would enable it to fulfil aspirations?

c. How would an evidence base inform design, delivery, evaluation and the sustainability of youth provision?

d. What is the role of stakeholders in advocating for, developing, maintaining and using an evidence base for the youth sector?

2. Defining what matters in youth provision

To be hosted by Creative Youth Network and Youth Moves, with Space PSM, in Bristol on 21 June.

a. Are there particular ‘elements’ of youth provision that are most important in contributing to impact in the lives of young people?

b. What do young people tell us matters in youth provision? Is this different from what government, funders etc tell us matters? How do we reconcile differences?
c. Is there value in collectively focusing on a small number of elements in evidence and learning efforts in the youth sector?

d. What are the implications for service design, quality improvement and evaluation?

3. **Outcomes plus: taking a broader view of evidence**
   *To be hosted by Youth Focus: North East, in Newcastle on 28 June.*

   a. What is the role of outcomes data in helping to understand the impact and value of youth provision?
   
b. What are some of the challenges associated with outcomes data, and how could these be overcome?
   
c. What is the role of data on quality, participation and feedback (for example) in building a better understanding of impact?
   
d. How can outcomes data improve services for young people?

4. **Feedback and participation: closing the loop for young people**
   *To be hosted by the Regional Youth Work Unit, Yorkshire and Humber, in York on 27 June.*

   a. What should the role of young people’s feedback and participation be in a shared evidence base?
   
b. What are the barriers and challenges to ‘closing the feedback loop’ for young people?
   
c. When can feedback be used collectively without losing the value of individual voices?
   
d. How do we encourage young people to take a leadership role in the design, delivery and evaluation of youth provision and services?
   
e. Are there circumstances when it is not appropriate to gather evidence or feedback?

5. **The potential of digital: collecting and communicating evidence**
   *To be hosted by London Youth, in London on 25 June.*

   a. How are digital platforms shaping the collection and communication of evidence in the youth sector?
   
b. What digital infrastructure is needed for a shared evidence base?
   
c. What does existing digital provision look like and what is the path to creating the digital infrastructure needed for a shared evidence base?
   
d. How do we harness and enable young people’s digital skills to inform this?
   
e. Are there limits to a digital approach to evidence gathering (when working with young people)? What would be needed to overcome these limitations, in order to achieve a vision for shared evidence base?
   
f. **Next Steps**

Space at each roundtable event will be very limited and so the Centre for Youth Impact will share highlights from the discussions after all of the roundtables have taken place. On 18 September, a conversation on the lessons, opportunities and challenges from the roundtables will be held at the Centre’s Annual Gathering. The Centre for Youth Impact and DCMS will take forward the outcomes of the events into discussions with policy makers and funders.
Where next for evidence and the youth sector?

It is now 19 years since *Modernising Government* (1999) was published and yet there remains a strong view that a paucity of research exists that provides ‘concrete conclusions’ about the ‘real potential [of interventions] to impact on young people’s lives’ (Barry et al., 2018). Given the longevity of this debate and associated tensions, and the limited progress on all sides, we have high hopes for the roundtable series in highlighting new ways forward.

This paper sets out a starting point for discussion. It is intentionally brief, and is not an attempt to cover this debate thoroughly or critically. We hope that the discussions to come will move us collectively closer to understanding how evidence can be generated, collated and interpreted to improve both our work, and the lives of the young people we seek to support.

**Bibliography**

Noble, J. (2018). Let’s stop chasing our tails on impact measurement.
Select Committee on Education (2011). Conclusion and Recommendations.
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. Our vision is for all young people to have access to high quality programmes and services that improve their life chances, by enabling embedded approaches to impact measurement that directly inform practice. Our work, therefore, is dedicated to three objectives, together with our expanded networks and other organisations from across the youth sector: curating the debate, building the movement and shaping the future.

Find out more about the Centre for Youth Impact at www.youthimpact.uk and follow us on @YouthImpactUK.