



Asking good questions

A framework for learning, evaluation
and continuous improvement

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Introduction

This framework has been informed by nearly five years of discussion, development and testing with practitioners, managers, funders and commissioners working across youth work and provision for young people.

It starts from the position that we should *all* want to understand whether positive change is created through our work with and for young people, as well as why and how that change happens. The primary reason we want to understand the *what*, *why* and *how* of this change is so that we can continuously reflect on and improve the quality of our work. Because by doing that, we will increase the impact we have on the lives of the young people with whom we work.

This is much more detailed than asking ‘does it work?’. Specifically, it is more powerful than saying ‘we know it works; we just need to demonstrate it’. ‘Does it work?’ is actually a collection of other questions, bundled up together, all of which matter for different reasons. We need to look at each of these questions separately, and understand how they relate to one another, in order to understand what change we are creating, why we think it’s happening, and how we could improve.

The primary aim of this framework is to help you reflect on your approach to evaluation, and explore how to improve it by building evidence and insight across your work. The framework also explains why it is not enough just to gather data on one part of your provision – participation, for example, or outcomes. You need to build a bigger picture.

The framework is designed to be used by practitioners, and to produce information that will directly help you in your work. It is important to acknowledge that there is often limited time and capacity to devote to this area of work. Acknowledging these constraints, the intention is that the tools and resources set out below should be integrated into your day-to-day practice, providing you with an approach that enables you to learn about, reflect on and adapt your practice as you go.

This is not to say that it won’t take time – particularly in the beginning - to think about these questions: but it is mainly time that is required, not external consultancy, expertise or funding. Meaningful learning, evaluation and continuous improvement involves a team taking ownership of the process: this requires an organisation to invest in that team by giving them the time, space and structure they need to succeed.

It also matters that we ask good questions about our work *collectively*, as well as individually. All work with and for young people operates in a crowded and complex system of relationships, services and structures. It is highly unlikely that any one organisation or provision directly creates change in isolation. Honestly exploring our own impact involves understanding what contribution our work makes alongside others’ in influencing change in young people’s lives.

However, we acknowledge that, in practice, assessing collective impact is hard. A longer term aim for this framework is to support the sector – practitioners, funders, commissioners and policy-makers – to lay strong foundations for this shared endeavour.

With this framework, we are setting out to support groups of organisations to adopt common approaches to their individual learning and evaluation, emphasising core similarities over surface differences. This will lay the foundations for building a shared evidence base, which, over time, will allow us to understand – and improve – how each organisation’s work contributes to our collective aims.

Six Good Questions

The framework sets out six questions that will help you to reflect on and understand the quality and impact of your work with and for young people. We believe that these questions are for everyone: across different roles in youth organisations, across different organisational structures and types, and across different organisational sizes and stages.

All the questions are equally important.

The questions cover different aspects or elements of your work, all of which come together to create change with and for young people. They are designed to support organisations in thinking about their impact as a whole, as well as their evaluation of individual programmes.



Questions 1 and 2 are about understanding context, and designing a high-quality ‘offer’ that responds to this context. These questions are really important in laying the foundation for both delivery and evaluation. It’s very hard to evaluate your work without answering these two questions really well.

In other words – we have to clearly describe what we’re seeking to do, how and why we’re doing it in that way, if we want to be able to understand the quality of our work, whether it’s making a difference, and why.

Questions 3 and 4 are about carefully monitoring the delivery of activities, to understand whether high-quality work is being delivered consistently and with fidelity to your design and ‘intentions’. This includes understanding whether young people are engaging in the way you hoped or expected.





Finally, Questions 5 and 6 are about listening and responding to young people's feedback and drawing together evidence that helps you to understand whether you are meeting your aims. These aims could be specific, pre-determined outcomes (like improved attendance at school or college), broader outcomes related to social and emotional development (including self-efficacy, teamwork and empathy), or 'experiential' goals, like young people accessing a safe space with their peers.

How to use this framework

This guide is designed to be a practical tool to support you to design and structure your approach to learning, evaluation and continuous improvement. The next section introduces you to each of the six questions in detail: at the back you will find a workbook for you to complete as you work through each section in turn.

None of the questions in this framework will evaluate the entirety your work on their own. They connect to one another to build a bigger picture, and each is important in its own right. Collectively, the questions are designed to form a cycle of continuous improvement: working through each of them in turn will help you identify where you are in your cycle, and which areas of your practice you want to focus on next.

Developing a cycle of continuous improvement involves knowing what you are setting out to achieve, identifying the information you need to assess your progress, and having a process in place for you and your colleagues to reflect on this information, and make some decisions about what you want to do differently. Everyone involved in designing and delivering your service or provision should be engaged in this cycle – including the young people you work with.

Overall, this framework recognises that there are a range of methods that will help you measure and understand the impact of your programme or organisation, but these methods are connected to different questions about your work (for example *whether*, *how* or *why* a programme has an effect on young people), and can't be considered in isolation.

Different areas of the framework will be more or less important depending on a few factors:

- What is the overarching question that you are trying to focus on? (e.g. is it understanding the need for your provision, checking whether you're reaching the young people you are most focused on, or measuring overall impact?)
- Do you have any objectives to fulfil by focusing on impact and evaluation? (e.g. accountability, organisational learning, securing funding)
- What existing evaluation insight and knowledge do you already have?
- What do you already do to evaluate your work?

As you start to think about your approach to evaluation, it is important to ask yourself: 'How does the context shape what I'm doing and what evidence do others want from my work?' What you want to learn and what you want others to learn about your work will influence many of your evaluation decisions.

Learning Organisations

Embedding a meaningful approach to evaluation and continuous improvement depends on having a supportive, enabling environment for learning across your organisation. Before you begin working through the six questions, there are three key factors to consider:

1. Leadership

Leaders (and not just CEOs!) need to demonstrate a commitment to reflective evaluation that sits at the heart of the organisation and its operations, and is not just driven by external requirements from funders or other stakeholders.

It is an essential leadership trait in the youth sector to reflect on and value the different aspects of evaluation and incorporate them in day-to-day decision making. An area that is particularly important and often missing in the youth sector is the focus on evidence and impact at the design stage – when you are thinking about and planning new provision, for example as part of a funding application.

Leaders in the sector need to ensure the foundations of all programmes and services are rooted in evidence and decisions about how provision will be structured and offered are taken really thoughtfully. Remember that evidence is not just other people's research – it can also be practice-based evidence (that is, what you've learned from your previous work, and your professional experience).

This commitment to evaluation needs to be shown not just by leaders, but shared across the team of staff and volunteers.

2. Values

Organisational values help teams make decisions and shape *how things are done*, as well as the activities detailed on an annual or strategic plan. It's important that there is agreement on values across the team, and it helps when an organisation's approach and commitment to learning and evaluation is part of this value set.

If there is an organisational commitment to evaluation, you are more likely to find:

- Embedded evaluation that 'goes with the grain' of delivery, rather than feeling like a distraction or a burden.
- Evaluation as part of continuous improvement and learning, rather than a demand from outside the organisation that needs to be complied with.
- A lower-stakes accountability culture, which doesn't blame or punish but instead offers support for improvement.

Overall, incorporating evaluation into your organisation's values means that you are constantly learning in order to support better outcomes for young people, not just jumping through hoops because a funder or someone else has told you to do so.

3. Systems

Systems need to be in place to help you collect, manage and analyse good data on every question in this framework. 'Data' just means 'things we know' that we intentionally gather for reference or for analysis. 'Data' doesn't always mean numbers and figures, and no one type of data is inherently better or worse than another. It just depends what you're collecting it for. Data collection does not have to be daunting. The first step of data collection involves deciding what you want to gather, why, and what you will do with it.

We define useful data as:

- **Actionable:** it produces information on which you can regularly act.
- **Feasible to collect:** it is straightforward to collect and fits comfortably into your everyday work without disrupting it.
- **Productive:** it generates information that you find useful within your work and which isn't handed on to someone else without it informing your work first.
- **Comparative:** it helps you to compare what you do over time, or to what others do, establishing good benchmarks for high quality work with young people.

When it comes to systems for data collection, *less is more* for the majority of organisations supporting young people. Unless you have a healthy budget and good support, it will be much better to focus on a small number of key areas that are fully integrated into your delivery and you can monitor systematically. Most importantly, data should give you valuable information in relation to the question *you're* trying to answer. No data will be able to answer all the questions you have about your work and that's okay. Narrow your focus of enquiry to what is most important and choose the data that will support you in answering that.

We will now move on to look at the six questions in the framework in more detail.

Question 1: Why do we do what we do?

What is this question about?

This question is about setting out the rationale for your work. It enables stakeholders (including staff, young people and the community) to understand the thinking behind your work. It is also a useful process for teams to work through together. It will highlight any assumptions that you're making about your work and any differences of opinion.

Although, in reality, a significant proportion of provision for young people is designed and/or delivered because of funding, there should always be a good sense of whether young people *need* and *want* what you're offering, and how this has informed your approach. It's also important to think about *which* young people you're working with. Are there particular young people that the provision is 'for'? This is almost always the case, even where it is open access.

How do I answer this question?

As set out in the workbook below, answering this question involves understanding the context for your work, and setting out how that context has informed your overall approach.

Your context is the backdrop to a theory of change. Thinking about context includes reflecting on:

- The nature, scale, causes and consequences of the issue or area your provision focuses on
- The opportunity that you're seeking to seize upon
- The assets, needs and interests of your 'target group' or those you specifically hope to support
- The things that affect these young people and their lives

This process also involves examining what evidence is available to support your understanding of the context. This could take the form of external research and statistics (produced by your local authority, for example), as well as evidence your organisation has generated itself. It is usually a good approach to build your understanding of context from a mix of external and internal sources of evidence.

It is important to understand that not all evidence is the same, and has different value for different things. You need to decide which type of evidence is sufficiently rigorous (high quality) or most relevant to your work. You will need to consider the methods used for gathering the evidence (summarising other people's research, for example, or long-term research directly with young people) and the context in which the evidence was gathered. For example, a project that is evaluated in a different country or working with a different age group may not be directly applicable to your work.

Using existing evidence will also help you determine the outcomes that you hope to achieve with and for young people. Outcomes can be long term (a sustained job, for example), medium term (learning a new skill, for example) or short term (developing trust, for example). You should work with young people to understand the outcomes that matter to them, and also think carefully about what your work can reasonably achieve. A one-off careers awareness session is unlikely to lead to a sustained job, for example, but it might develop a young person's understanding of options available to them locally, and help them to feel more confident to seek them out.

Some organisations will need to undertake a needs analysis. This explores what the young people you work with (now or in the future, through a new programme) say they need, and whether it's what you think they need! 'Need' does not have to be deficit-focused or patronising. Asking young people what they need is about offering choice, seeking consent and taking a rights-based approach. 'Needs' can be emotional, social or physical, and may be at different levels within a group of young people.

Articulating the need you're addressing (whether it's for a welcoming and safe space, high-level support for young people in emotional crisis – or both) must also be combined with an understanding of what young people *want*.

Offering something that young people want, but don't need, will have a limited impact. At the same time, if young people need your provision, but don't *want* it – you will also have limited impact, because they won't turn up.

Once you are confident that you have an understanding of your context based on a good range of evidence, you need to be clear about how it applies to your organisation or programmes, and how it has influenced your choice of approach. By 'approach' we mean the key characteristics of your provision – it could be therapeutic or trauma-informed, or it could be focused on youth work and informal education practice. For example, if the evidence suggests that mentoring relationships need to be sustained for a year in order to make a real difference in young people's lives, how are you supporting this in your work?

Being able to explain why you have chosen this approach is really important, because it should respond to the needs, interests and experiences of the young people you're working with, and logically connect with the change you hope to see.

How do I use the answer?

Setting out the evidence you have for your understanding of the context for your work, and how this understanding has informed your choice of approach, is the foundation of building a theory of change. It provides you with the starting point for deciding on all of the details of what you are setting out to do, your overall aims, and choosing how you will measure whether you are achieving those aims. Once you have a solid understanding of context and approach, you are ready to answer our second question – “what **exactly** are we doing?”.

Question 2: What exactly are we doing?

What is the question about?

This question builds on the thinking and planning you have done about ‘why’ by focusing – in detail – on the ‘what’. In this framework, this is done by setting out a theory of change, which consists of the following components:

- **Aim:** the long-term impact that young people and their communities achieve for themselves. This impact is usually experienced in the future, rather than ‘in the now’.
- **Outcomes:** the skills, knowledge, and assets that your provision supports young people to develop and that create the best conditions for young people and communities to experience the longer-term impact.
- **Mechanisms of change:** these are the experiences that young people have in your provision that affect a change in outcomes. They are often referred to as the ‘active ingredients’ in your work and are markers of high-quality delivery.
- **Activities:** what you do, how often, with whom, and in what setting.

How do I answer this question?

Answering this question involves developing each element of your theory of change, as set out in the workbook. It is important to be as specific as you can, and to consider how you will measure whether you are delivering **exactly** what you set out to deliver, and young people are experiencing what you intended.

Building a theory of change should not be a ‘one-shot’ process: it is more useful to think of it as something that you need to work through a few times, on your own, with colleagues, and – where appropriate – with the young people you work with. As you develop and refine your theory of change, you may find that more questions arise, and gaps in your thinking and rationale may crop up. This is a very healthy sign that the process is working!

For each element, there are some key factors to consider:

Aims

As noted above, the aim of your service is something that young people – and in some cases, their communities – achieve *for themselves*. This might be securing a place in further education, stable employment, or experiencing a sustained improvement in their mental health.

Your provision will be designed to support them along the way, and make a contribution to that achievement, but the aim itself will lie beyond what we call the “accountability line”. This is the point beyond which it is difficult to know if a something happened as a direct result of your support, and is likely to come about as a result of other factors too, including the agency of young people themselves. When building your theory of change, it is crucial that you set out what changes lie beyond this line. This means you will be able to distinguish between the things you are measuring - and holding yourselves accountable for achieving - from the things you hope to happen in the future.

It is a reality that aims are often determined by the requirements of a funder or commissioner. Where this is the case, there can be pressure to make claims that your provision will be the sole and direct factor in a young person achieving a positive change in the future. Being open about your 'accountability line' will support you and your stakeholders to have a clearer understanding of the value and contribution of your work.

Outcomes

The outcomes you hope to achieve with and for young people should be on 'your' side of the accountability line, and be connected to your aims. In other words, there needs to be a logical link between supporting young people to achieve these outcomes (an increase in their ability to work effectively in a team, for example), and the likelihood that young people will achieve their aim (to secure stable employment, for example). Outcomes are the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that create the best conditions in which young people can experience positive change.

There are many outcomes frameworks that can help you map different outcome areas, and which pull together some of the research for the importance of these outcomes in the lives of young people. We recommend that you use the '*A Framework of Outcomes for Young People*' (2019) which is a development of the '*Catalyst Framework of Outcomes for Young People* (2012), which has been widely used in the youth sector. This is available on the Centre's website, www.youthimpact.uk.

It focuses on the social and emotional learning of young people, based on strong evidence that supporting such development is an effective way to contribute to positive achievements over the long term.

Mechanisms of change

We refer to mechanisms of change as 'active ingredients' because they are the key to the effectiveness of your provision. They are descriptions of what you want young people to feel, practise and experience *while they are working with you*. Your theory of change will say that, over time, if young people feel, practise and experience these things, they will develop the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours you have set out as your focus.

For example, if you are running an open access drop-in healthy living group, the key priorities for you and your team might be for young people to feel safe, get active and have fun. Over the course of six months, or a year, of a young person regularly attending your drop-in, feeling safe, getting active and having fun, we hope they will in turn experience a positive development in their relationships, their motivation and their focus.

As part of the Youth Investment Fund learning programme, a set of mechanisms of change was co-developed with the input of grantee organisations, which you may find a good place to start. These are grouped under three headings - environment and relationship, nature and delivery of activity, and community - and reflect a consensus across a diverse range of youth organisations about what are the key feelings and experiences the hope young people will engage with through different kinds of provision. You can find more details [here](#)¹.

¹ <https://yiflearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/YIF-learning-and-insight-paper.pdf>

Activities

The key to describing your activities in a way that supports your learning is to be as precise about each of the four elements mentioned above:

- **What you do:** what happens in your provision? What session plans, protocols, values and ethics do staff need to follow? Is there a primary activity that is ‘delivered’ or facilitated?
- **How often:** is the schedule pre-determined? Is there a fixed duration or is it open-ended? Is it sequential? What are the implications if a session needs to be cancelled? Do young people need to engage for a certain amount of time to experience particular activities?
- **With whom:** who is your provision ‘for’? Do you have a target audience, and how will you know if they are accessing your provision? **nb** open access provision may also wish to specify particular groups of young people they are interested in reaching (young people with additional support needs, for example)
- **In what context:** where and when will provision or broader engagement (for example, through detached or outreach work) take place? How many adults need to be there, performing which roles? How important are the physical surroundings?

Alongside these factors, you also need to consider **dosage, core** and **flex**.

‘Dosage’ refers to how much provision young people engage with, and how often. You need to think about duration, that is, what period of time overall do you hope young people will engage – this could be fixed or open ended, but you will still need to be clear about your intention. You will also need to think about intensity: how often do young people engage? Is it more than once a week, or less often? The duration and intensity needs to be aligned to your intention and design. How often and for how long do you think young people need to engage in order to experience positive change? Could a lighter engagement even cause young people some harm?

Core elements of your provision are those which – if they weren’t there – would fundamentally change your provision into something else, and potentially something less effective. The core elements are the things that you hope every single young person you work with will experience. This isn’t necessarily an activity (like a one to one session with a mentor) and could be a perception, like feeling safe or respected. **Flex** refers to other elements which, while also valuable, are ‘flexible’ – their presence or otherwise doesn’t make or break the impact of provision. Interestingly, over time, you may discover that things you thought were core are actually more flexible, and vice versa.

How do I use the answer?

Developing a thorough Theory of Change is a strong foundation for being able to develop a cycle of continuous learning and improvement. The most important things are to ensure that it makes sense to you and your colleagues, that you have collective ownership, and you all understand how to put it into practice.

A simple way to test whether your Theory of Change is clear to everyone is to ask each other to complete the sentence “we do this because...” for every step of your Theory of Change. To test whether you understand how to put it into practice, for each step, complete the sentence “we will know whether we doing this by...”.

As noted above, a Theory of Change should not be a static thing. Once your Theory of Change is agreed (with your team, young people, and stakeholders, for example), it should support you to refine your provision, and generate evidence to inform the design of new programmes. You can also add to the evidence base in your sector by sharing your findings with other groups. We would encourage all youth organisations to share their Theories of Change and narratives (the thinking and evidence behind them) openly.

Question 3: Are we doing it consistently well?

What is the question about?

Asking yourself this question is about consistently considering the quality of the work that you do and whether your delivery can create the expected impact you outlined in your Theory of Change. The primary focus of this question is on quality of practice – what your team of staff and/or volunteers are doing with young people, and what processes you have in place to support them to improve. It is also about checking that the basics of a quality experience for young people are in place – safeguarding, training, building and equipment checks, and so on.

Answering this question first involves considering what high quality looks and feels like, both to you and your staff, and the young people you work with. This definition is bound up in your theory of change: your activities and mechanisms of change should set out what high quality looks like. For example, if you offer kayaking for young people, you will need to have enough safe, working equipment for them all to get involved, ensure that staff are trained in the safety procedures, and are skilled in creating an environment in which young people can challenge themselves with support, and reflect on the process.

This question may be particularly important if you work across multiple sites or run different programmes, as you need to ensure that all the young people you work with get the best experience that you can provide. It is often the case that projects being delivered in multiple sites/settings are delivered in quite different ways, and this makes evaluation really difficult. It also makes it hard to understand why things are done differently, and in what way they differ.

How do we answer this question?

To begin with the basics, your organisation can look at organisational quality marks, such as those developed by [NYA](https://nya.org.uk/nya-quality-mark/)² and [UK Youth](https://www.ukyouth.org/safeguarding/)³, which provide checklists and guidance to ensure you are providing a safe environment for both young people and your team, and complying with statutory and legal requirements. There are also some frameworks for quality delivery in particular types of work with young people, such as [Hear by Right](https://nya.org.uk/hear-by-right/)⁴, which supports youth participation, [Delivering With and Delivering Well](https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/delvr-with-delvrng-well.pdf)⁵ for child and adolescent mental health services, and [One to One Support](https://brightside.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/One-To-One-Support-A-Collaborative-Quality-Framework.pdf)⁶, a quality framework for mentoring and similar programmes.

Alongside frameworks for safe and sound practice with young people, research increasingly highlights common (and quite granular) elements of high quality support for young people. The Centre is currently delivering a UK-wide pilot of the Youth Programme Quality Intervention (YPQI), with the aim of establishing its model of high quality practice as a durable and powerful part of the support infrastructure for the youth sector.

² <https://nya.org.uk/nya-quality-mark/>

³ <https://www.ukyouth.org/safeguarding/>

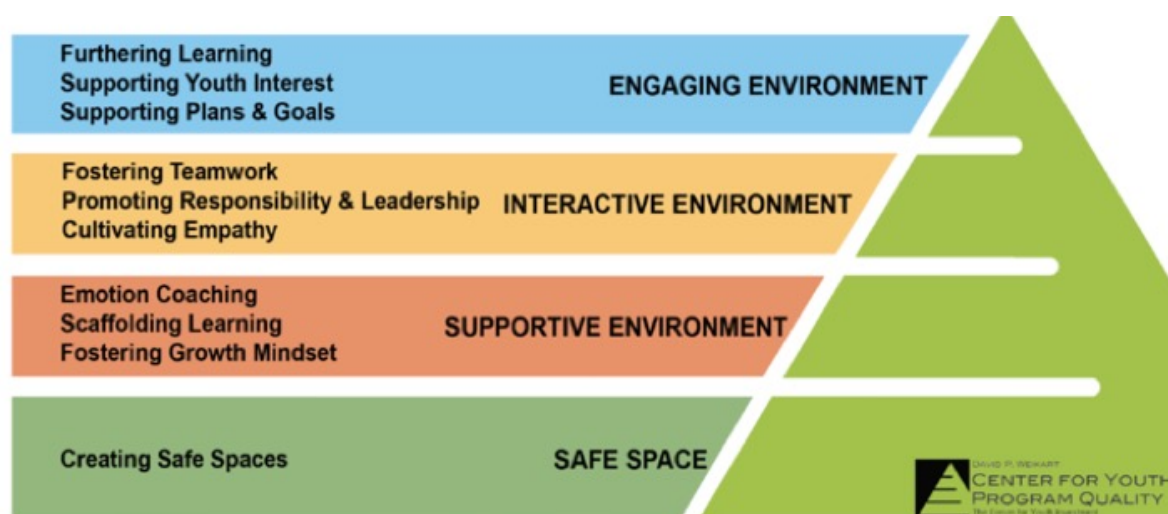
⁴ <https://nya.org.uk/hear-by-right/>

⁵ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/delvr-with-delvrng-well.pdf>

⁶ <https://brightside.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/One-To-One-Support-A-Collaborative-Quality-Framework.pdf>

The YPQI is a continuous quality improvement process designed to support organisations working with young people to improve the quality of what they do, and thus the impact of their work on the lives of young people. It has been designed with, tested and used successfully by thousands of youth organisations in the US.

Over 40 years of research on US youth programs by the High Scope Educational Research Foundation and the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality has demonstrated the characteristics of high-quality youth provision. This includes a safe space, a supportive environment, positive interactions, and engagement with young people. These four domains form the basis of the quality pyramid that sits at the heart of the YPQI:



The process involves a cycle of three stages: **assess, plan** and **improve**.
Each cycle takes place over six months.

The **assess** stage involves a team within a youth organisation using a structured tool to arrive at a set of 'scores' against a detailed list of behaviours displayed by staff or volunteers running a particular service, project or activity they run. In the **plan** stage, the team uses these scores to identify areas of their practice that they want to focus on improving. Finally, in the **improve** stage, the team receives training and support to help them improve those areas they have identified as priorities.

The cycle then begins again, to give the team the opportunity to assess whether they have achieved their improvement goals, and identify what they want to focus on next.

Fundamental to the success of the whole process is that it is experienced in a context of "low stakes accountability". This is an approach intended to move away from 'high stakes' accountability regimes, where there is fear of 'failure', where individuals can be penalised or publicly shamed, where targets may be unattainable and produce perverse incentives, where compliance is seen as mandatory but not helpful, and where there is little or no support to improve.

By contrast, low stakes accountability means that no one will be penalised for one 'low score', and standards set are attainable for all. Support is available to improve and the process is continuous. Those who participate see it as a good use of their time.

You can find more information about the YPQI pilot on [our website](#)⁷.

How do I use the answer?

Data about the quality of your work should provide you with actionable insight that you can use to plan for, and make improvements. It is an opportunity to support reflective practice and positive supervision. The key to making quality improvement work for your organisation is to create a culture that supports and expects improvement to take place. As noted above, this involves leadership, values and systems which encourage and celebrate learning and improvement, and creates time for staff and volunteers to reflect on their practice. Whether you are using the YPQI, or any other process designed to support quality improvement, it is likely to be ineffective unless you have this time and space to assess, plan and improve.

⁷ <https://www.youthimpact.uk/ypqi---uk.html>

Question 4: Are you true to your intentions?

What is the question about?

Asking yourself this question is about taking your core principles seriously, and working to ensure that you are delivering what you planned to deliver (in your answers to questions one and two) with **fidelity**. This can include particular sessions or activities, but also includes quality experiences and settings. 'Fidelity' is not just about 'sticking with the plan'.

It's about checking that you are really working hard to implement those founding principles, engaging those you feel best placed to help, supporting them with programmes designed appropriately, and by doing so giving yourself and the young people the best possible chance of achieving your shared aims. It's about answering the following key questions:

- Are we consistently engaging the group(s) we set out to support?
- Have we designed programmes that support these groups?
- Does our delivery match our design? How do we know?
- Are we consistently offering high quality experiences?
- Have we made any adaptations/changes to our work? Are they appropriate?
- Have we designed programmes that effectively build on our insights and meet our identified needs and demands?
- Can we meaningfully compare ourselves to other programmes and learn from them?

These questions should be asked regularly and the answers shared openly to allow for continual learning and improvement.

How do I answer the question?

Checking that you are being faithful to your intentions calls for two things:

- Firstly, that everyone is clear on what your intentions are and why: staff and volunteers, trustees, young people, and any other relevant stakeholders.
- Secondly, a plan to check regularly that everyone is sticking to these intentions and if not, is able to talk about why.

Your Theory of Change and quality improvement processes are all really important in setting out your intentions of delivery, audience, and impact. It helps you carefully consider what you can do (and what you can't), who your provision is for (and who it isn't), and what can be achieved (and what can't). It also invites you to reflect on dosage, core and flex.

The way you and your team talk about your work needs to reflect your intentions: getting beneath the surface of a project or programme often highlights that the way provision is described or defined (for example, as a six week intervention for young people caught up in gang activity) is not the way it's delivered or experienced (for example, it's open to all young people in a particular geographical area, and they can come for as long as they like, with the freedom to choose activities on the day).

How do I use the answer?

Checking on how closely you stick to your intentions can happen as part of regular leadership and whole team meetings, supervision and staff reflection, and can happen alongside the processes for checking on quality. 'Fidelity monitoring data' is often routine information that youth organisations collect. Crucially, you need to have the right information, and to check that this is being collected in the way you intended. This is where systems are crucial – does everyone know what information they need to collect, how often, how and where to store it? If not, you are likely to find gaps in your data, or that the data you have is incomplete or inconsistent. Remember that the point of data collection is that it's useful to you.

Question 5: What do young people think about what you do?

What is the question about?

This question is about committing to seeking out, listening to and acting on systematic feedback from the young people you are supporting (and maybe some you aren't). It is about measuring and cultivating the conditions that really matter in young people's development and learning.

This stage of the framework is a central feature in the youth sector, as it reflects our values of youth voice and participation. The vast majority of youth organisations already have well-developed processes for empowering young people to share their views and make their voices heard in leadership roles. Understanding what young people think of what you do in an evaluation context is slightly different, and goes beyond youth voice or participation.

As well as giving young people regular opportunities to tell you what matters to them and influence decision making, you also need to seek out their feedback about the mechanisms of change you set out in question two above.

So, for example, if a core principle of your work is that you talk to young people with respect, you should ask them if they think you do this. Equally, if you think it is important that young people feel safe and at ease in your setting, you should ask them if this is how they feel.

It is also important to check whether they feel it's worth their while giving you feedback – young people are much more likely to invest time in sharing their thoughts honestly if they think that you are listening to and acting on what they say.

Gathering feedback from young people focuses on the things that give life to our practice: attitudes, values, emotions, capabilities and agency. Young people's feedback is not evidence of change in outcomes, however, this is where your theory of change can really start to be tested by understanding young people's perception of your work and their experience within it.

How do I answer this question?

The process for gathering feedback from young people should be systematic (methodical and routine) and consistent (using the same questions so you can see how young people's views change over time). It should be a light touch process that enables young people to give their feedback quickly, easily, and where possible, anonymously. In practice, feedback is often offered by young people ad hoc (e.g. they may thank you for an enjoyable session, or you may see them after a period of time and they tell you how much your support meant to them). When we refer to feedback for evaluation, however, we are referring to that which is collected intentionally and systematically so that it is comparable over time.

The design of the feedback process needs to be based on the young people with whom you work. Age, literacy levels, visual and hearing impairments, for example, will all shape your process for gathering feedback.

You should use your Theory of Change and quality statements to develop feedback questions. You may want to ask questions about:

- Trust and respect;
- Support and challenge;
- Feelings of achievement and progress;
- Enjoyment and fun;
- Perceptions of being listened to; and
- Accessibility and relevance.

Keep the questions short and simple, and create some with a yes/no answer (Did we talk to you with respect today?), some with a scale (To what extent do you feel like you're making progress on your goals?), and some with an open or free text answer (What else would you like us to do?). You could have a set of ten or so questions, and use three or four at a time, changing them regularly.

You should also include one or two questions about whether young people feel listened to, and perceive that their feedback is being acted upon.

Feedback can be gathered on paper (sticky dots on a flip chart, notes in a shoebox), electronically (tablet, online survey or text message) or through voice recording. There will be many other ways to gather feedback too – these are just a few simple ideas.

How do I use the answer?

The responses you receive from young people about the experience they have of your provision should form part of your continuous improvement cycle. If some or all are not feeling and experiencing what you intended, you will need to review the design of your provision or service. Even if most of them are, you may reveal, in combination with the other forms of information you've gathered against your theory of change, that there are opportunities to refine how you do what you do.

Question 6: Are you achieving your aims?

What is the question about?

This question is specifically about whether or not your work is achieving its intended aim(s).

In many cases, aims are expressed as outcomes for young people (such as ‘young people will have greater resilience’), but aims are not exclusively outcomes. Many organisations exist to provide a safe space for young people to ‘be young’ and that is perfectly legitimate, in the same way that libraries exist to provide free access to books and parks exist to offer green spaces to communities. Aims are often related to funding – we must collectively acknowledge and name this, though ultimately your aim must be your own. Aims are most likely to be achieved through understanding context, informed design, high quality delivery, fidelity and listening to young people. It is challenging to make all these elements align with someone else’s aim.

If your aims are stated as outcomes, be careful that these outcomes are realistic for the approach, duration, intensity and mechanisms of change within your provision. You also need to be sure that your intended outcomes are both *malleable* and *measurable* – that is, it is something that you might reasonably expect to be able to change through provision, *and* you can measure that change.

Finally, make sure that outcomes are framed in the relevant setting: you may have an intended outcome of improved family relations, but you will only be able to measure this in the family setting; not in the provision setting where you are primarily engaging with young people. Make sure that you are framing outcomes that a young person could develop *within* provision, and where there is the potential to ‘transfer’ the outcome to other domains in their life.

Most evaluation plans only focus on outcome measurement, but we’ve constructed this framework so that the other five questions are equally prioritised, *and* it does not pre-suppose that all aims will be expressed as outcomes for young people. It does, however, call for you to be reflective and open in stating your aims, whatever they are.

Crucially, this framework is designed to make evaluation *meaningful* – by which we mean that the process actively enhances the quality of practice and relationships, and generates ongoing actionable insight. Meaningful evaluation generates a tangible, achievable list of things you can change, and which you are confident will help you and your colleagues get even better at what you do.

Attempting to measure outcomes without an insight into what you’re doing and why, whether you’re delivering in line with your principles and your understanding of high quality, and what young people think about your work, will severely limit the meaning and use of your data. Outcome measurement also tends to be the most resource intensive stage of evaluation, and can be very challenging – sometimes young people don’t sustain their engagement with organisations, so it’s hard to ask them about change in their lives, and some provision is short term or one-off by design, so measuring outcomes before and after simply doesn’t make sense.

Outcome measurement is about gathering information about the *changes* you intend to result from your activities, and *progress towards* meeting your aims. Outcomes are always phrased as an increase, decrease, or maintenance in something, so that they refer to a state that can change over

time. Maintaining something (like mental wellbeing, engagement with a counsellor, or contact with family) is also important, particularly where a situation might have deteriorated without support for the young person. Measuring outcomes is about assessing whether or not this change has been achieved, and looking at the progress towards it.

Outcomes can be for individual young people, for groups, or for the wider community.

Supporting young people inevitably has an end point (even in long-term engagement), either because your programme ends or young people make a conscious decision to move on. This question will help you to identify the part you play in supporting that transition and the positive future that should come with it.

Discussing and negotiating outcomes with young people is critically important. Collecting feedback that asks young people to reflect on changes they feel they have experienced, while not an outcomes measure, is a good way to identify what outcomes you could be supporting young people to develop and which ones would be the most important to test.

It is also important to think about the scale of change you might expect to see, and how well this is aligned with your work. It is very appealing to think about young people's lives being transformed, but it is more often the case that change happens over time, in a complex and interrelated way, as a series of small steps.

Remember that, for young people, there will be a difference in their ability to demonstrate skills, knowledge and attitudes in your provision as compared to other domains of their lives. This is because you are providing them with support that may not be present at home or in the community. It is the difference between 'optimal' skills (when young people receive high quality support) and 'functional' skills (when they don't). You can see changes in optimal skills much more easily than functional skills, which tend to take a lot longer to change significantly. You will need to bear this in mind when thinking about measurement.

How do I answer the question?

There are two ways of measuring outcomes: from inside the programme (through tracking the progress that young people make) or from outside the programme or organisation (through looking at wider changes for young people and communities that arise as a result of your (and others') work, or data that is gathered elsewhere, for example by a school or local authority). The same markers of meaning apply to outcomes measurement as they do to the other types of data. Outcomes data should be actionable and enhance relationships rather than undermine them.

The first step you can take towards measuring outcomes is to focus on internal data. This will be particularly helpful as you collect data so that you can have a benchmark over time, and in time will give you a useful longitudinal (long-term) dataset.

Some programmes are designed to focus on specific outcomes that are identified in advance. The activities and approach of the programme will be designed to make a difference to these particular outcome areas in young people's lives. These outcomes are usually well-defined 'constructs' that are widely understood. Other programme will have a broader focus on young people's social and emotional development.

Outcome measurement tools tend to ask young people to rate their levels of skills, understanding or knowledge: this gets at young people's beliefs about themselves. These tools are recognised as being challenging to administer (particularly in the more informal settings) and do not always produce reliable data. Young people sometimes struggle to understand the concepts they are being asked about, or why they are of interest.

It is also not always clear in which domain of their lives young people are 'speaking' from when they rate themselves – this relates to the difference between optimal skills and functional skills. Generally, functional skills change slowly, so self-report tools are best used on an annual basis. More sensitive measures of change can be gathered through observing young people's behaviours in settings. Behaviours are a powerful indicator of young people's developing social and emotional skills, and regular observation will highlight changes more quickly and sensitively.

Any tools you use should have been rigorously tested as being valid (it measures what it is meant to measure) and reliable (it measures the same thing every time). Using a validated tool also means you can 'aggregate' (gather together and summarise) the data collected. It also means that there will be data from other users of the tool that you can learn from.

For many youth programmes, attempting outcome measurement is difficult. This might be because:

- The programme doesn't have pre-defined outcomes, or has different outcomes for different young people;
- Young people take part in the programme in different ways or with a different 'intensity' (some may come once a week, others three times a week, and yet others just once a month, or they come regularly but choose what activities they take part in);
- The outcomes that you and the young people are interested in are complex, and not everyone agrees on what they mean or look like.

Outcomes may not be relevant to measure with all young people. You may be working with a group of young people within a cohort that are supported to achieving outcomes in a more structured way than other members of the cohort. In your evaluation plan, clearly state which young people you will be measuring outcomes with and why they have been selected.

In these cases where outcomes will be different for each young person, it can be helpful to use 'distance travelled' tools. These tools are designed to be used in a one to one interaction with young people, to help them reflect on their progress over time. They tend to focus on a number of outcomes areas (for example, relationships with my friends, my physical and emotional health, my motivation) and use a scale to help young people think about how they're doing/how things are going in that area of their life.

These tools are designed to support reflection and dialogue, and can show the direction of travel – does the young person feel like things are improving in particular areas of their life? You cannot aggregate up the data from these tools. One person's perception will not be the same as another's. You also can't use them to 'calculate' change from the beginning to the end of a programme – the scales are only meaningful in helping young people to reflect on how they feel at that moment in time.

It is also worth thinking about whether there are any outcomes that are already measured from outside your programmes. This is for some very good reasons:

- Much of the outcomes data that is useful to youth programmes is already collected by schools, the health service, social services, employers and the criminal justice system.
- Collecting internal outcomes data can be expensive and time-consuming and can distract from frontline delivery.
- Youth organisations can spend a lot of time and resource seeking to ‘prove and re-prove’ their impact using outcomes data that is gathered elsewhere – it is better to build a solid foundation for the impact of your work, and then monitor the quality and fidelity of your delivery over time.
- Outcomes data is most useful when it is longitudinal and comparative, and this makes it particularly difficult for individual programmes to collect consistently

For some programmes you could use initiatives that outsource high quality outcome data. The [Ministry of Justice Datalab](#)⁸ is a good example of this approach. These can be cheaper, more efficient and reliable than in-house outcomes measures. They are also being explored in employment and healthcare, so this is a route to establishing outcomes data that will be increasingly viable in the sector.

How do I use the answer?

Outcome measurement is often required by funders, commissioners and other external stakeholders. Youth organisations can feel like measuring outcomes is the only way they can ‘demonstrate’ the impact of their work. However, this stage is no more important than any other stage in this framework, and cannot be considered in isolation. Its relative importance is due to the fact that outcomes can only tell you a very small part of the overall story, so they shouldn’t take the focus away from other areas of evaluation.

Measuring your outcomes can be used as a check on your Theory of Change (Is that what really happened? Does your model stack up?), but also to work out whether your work is having any other unintended effects, whether positive or negative. Often, after a period of evaluation, theories of change are refined to become more precise and include fewer outcomes than were on the original version because you know more about what your provision does and doesn’t do.

Overall, working through each of the six questions in turn should create a situation in which your outcomes predictably follow from your activities, as per the logic provided by your Theory of Change. At this stage, your outcome measurement becomes an external check on your intentions and can be conducted every three to five years if there are no *significant* changes in your work or the context in which you operate. It can only evolve to this if your insight into all the other aspects of your provision are deep and consistent.

⁸

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/794249/User_Journey_Document_Update_PDF.pdf

Six Questions Workbook

How are you applying this framework to your work? This framework could be applied to your whole organisation's practice, or a specific programme/project.

Question 1: Why do you do what you do?

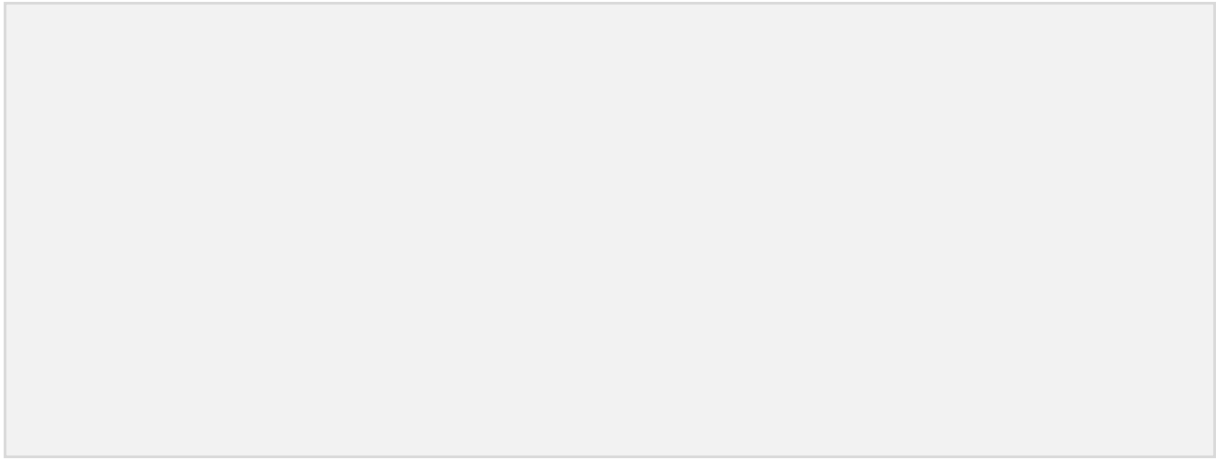
Context

What do you know about the assets, needs, and interests of the young people you work with or intend to work with? What information do you have?

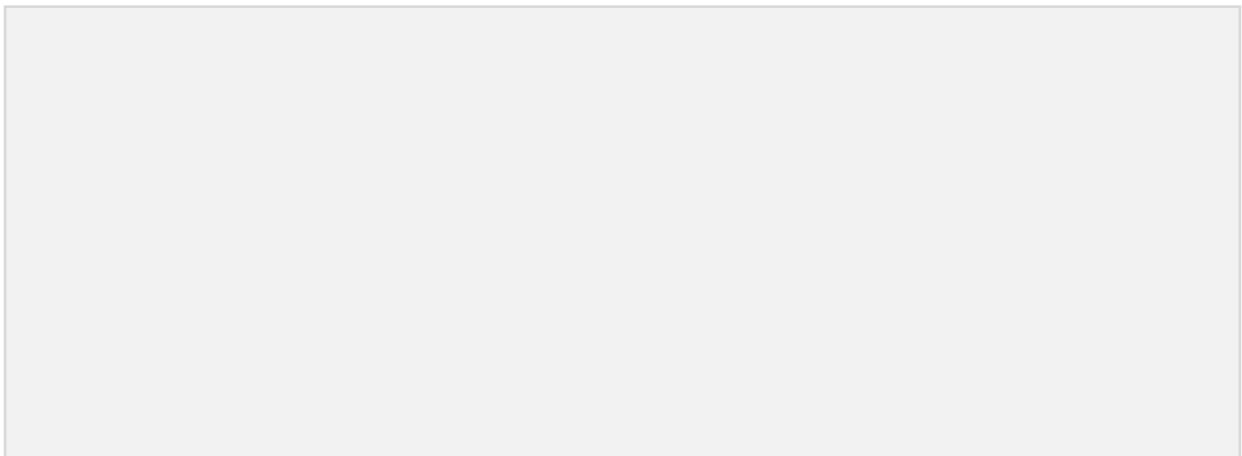
What else do you want or need to know about the context you are working within, and how could you go about finding out?

Approach

How would you describe your approach to working with young people?



Why has your organisation chosen this approach? Are there other approaches you could have taken?



Question 2: What exactly do you do?

Can you identify the following components of a theory of change for the area of work you are applying this framework to?

Aim

Outcomes

Mechanisms of Change

Activities

Which elements of your provision are ‘core’ and ‘flex’?

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| <p>Core</p> | <p>Flex</p> |
|-------------|-------------|

What do you know about ‘dosage’ - duration and intensity - for the young people you work with, and how it affects the impact of your provision?

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

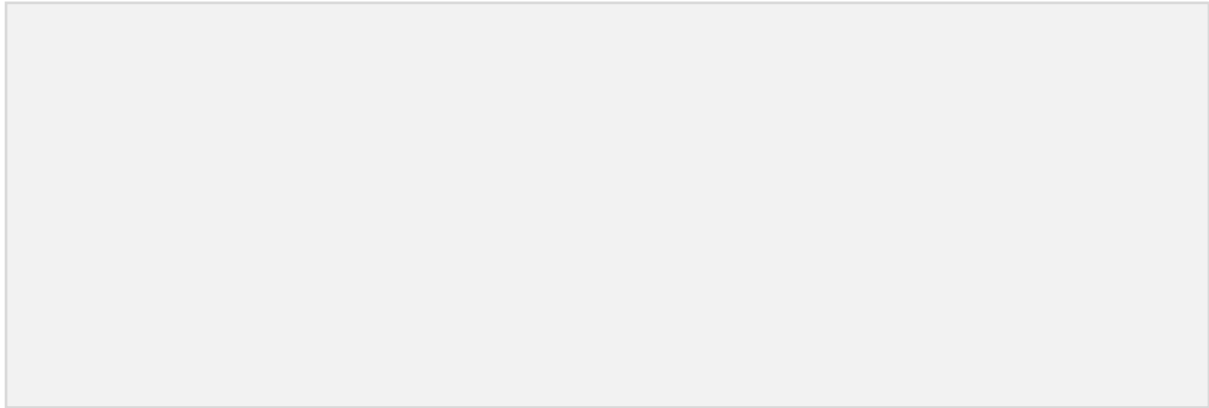
Question 3: Are you doing it consistently well?

How does your organisation define quality in its work?

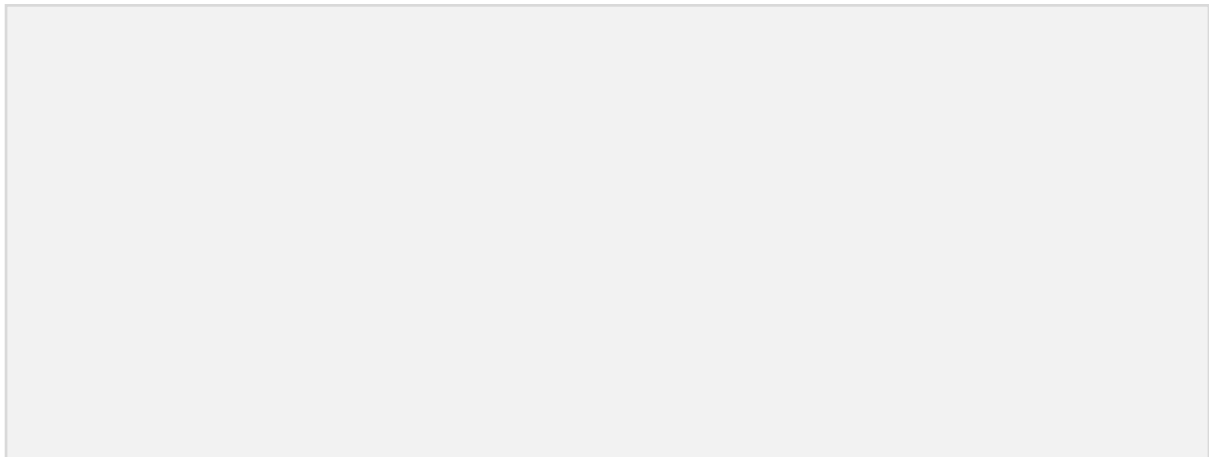
How does your organisation monitor and improve quality? What more could be implemented to support improvement?

Question 4: Are you staying true to your intentions?

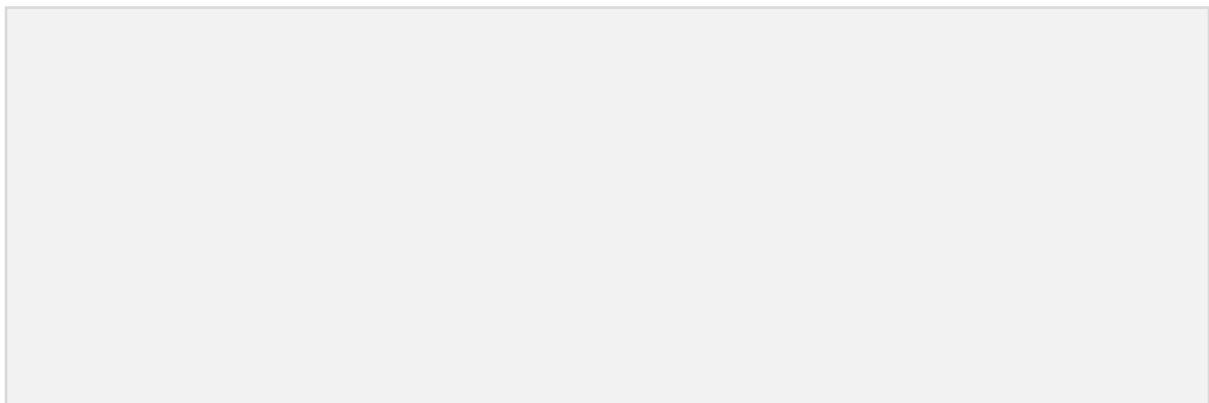
What are the key sources of monitoring data that your organisation routinely collects, and why? How do they relate to your intentions?



Based on this information, what conclusions can you draw about whether your provision is staying true to its intentions and why?



What other types of potentially useful data are missing?



Question 5: What do young people think about what you do?

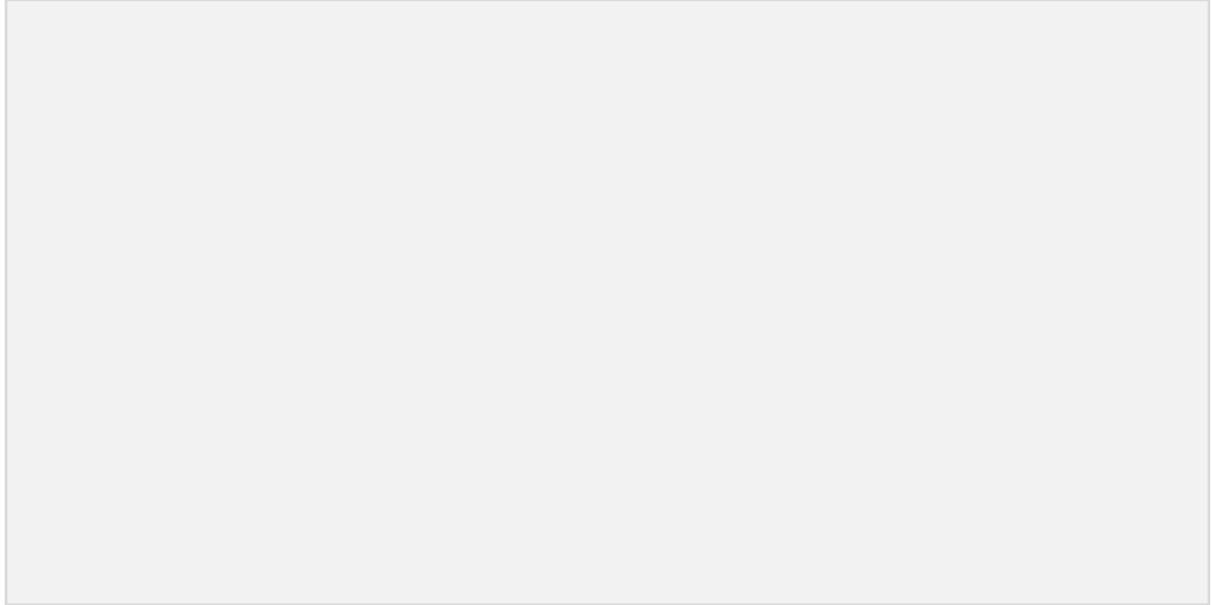
**How frequently would it make sense to collect feedback, how, and from whom?
How will you ensure that all young people have a voice?**

Are there any particular challenges that you might face?

**Can you suggest up to five feedback questions your organisation could ask?
Think back to your mechanisms of change.**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How might the organisation respond to feedback from these questions in a way that would improve quality, delivery and young people's experience?

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Question 6: Are you achieving your aims?

**What is/are the aim(s) of your work?
How were they decided?**

**Are there pre-determined outcomes for your provision?
If so, what are they? If not, do you think this matters?**

How might Question 6 be answered in a meaningful way for your organisation?

For you, what would make that approach meaningful?



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](https://twitter.com/YouthImpactUK).