

Framing our learning

Reflections as we start to share findings from the Youth Investment Fund Learning Project

The Youth Investment Fund (YIF) is one of the biggest investments in open access youth provision in recent years. A joint investment of £40m between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and The National Lottery Community Fund, the YIF has supported 90 youth organisations to expand their provision for young people in six regions of England. The three year programme (2017-2020) has provided a unique opportunity to gain insights into a field that, in terms of impact, is under-researched and poorly understood. The YIF Learning Project, led by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) in partnership with the Centre for Youth Impact and a wider [consortium of research partners](#), is in its final phase now, and will be publishing findings throughout the autumn and winter of 2020/21.

From the outset, the YIF Learning Project set out to test a new approach, in recognition of the profound limitations of traditional impact evaluation in informal and non-formal youth provision (see the aims of the YIF Learning Project below). Central to this was taking a shared approach that could be embedded into practice. As a result, this evaluation has consistently tried and learned from new approaches - and we have experienced all the associated risks and rewards.



Co-develop a shared approach to evaluation which is adaptable and appropriate across all provision



Build a base of knowledge and insight into young people's engagement in informal & non-formal provision, and how it makes a difference to their lives



Leave the sector with what they need to self-evaluate long after YIF funding has ended

As we gather the data from the final phase of delivery, and begin the detailed work of analysing and understanding the emerging findings, we are reflecting on our key learning to date. We share this now as a frame for the insights that will be published over the coming months. We are learning not just about the nature and impact of open access youth provision – who participates, how often, what they experience and how it effects change – but also the process of designing and implementing a mixed-method evaluation within diverse, youth-led and community-based provision. Our early findings reinforce how much open access youth provision is valued by young people, and have highlighted the power and potential of gathering and learning from routine feedback and quality data.

The approach of the YIF Learning Project was specifically designed to respond to, or even pre-empt the challenges associated with impact evaluation in informal and non-formal youth settings. Despite this, we still experienced many of the issues we feared. There are lots of really good reasons why this type of shared evaluation is a long road, with frequent diversions, and not many make it to their original destination. We're endlessly grateful to all the YIF grant holders for their commitment, patience and willingness to test new ideas and participate. We've been enthused and inspired by the proactive challenge and questioning from them. We have collectively benefited from the driving principle of learning: this has helped us to tackle some difficult questions, and make some difficult decisions.

Here are some of our key reflections on our collective work so far:

- 1. Shared measurement assumes a shared level of skill and capacity across the many organisations participating, and this is rarely the case.** A shared measurement approach was new to many of the youth organisations that were part of the YIF, and within the cohort, there were very varied experiences with evaluation. Some had little experience or capacity in-house, whilst others were already using bespoke outcome tools and evaluation frameworks across their work. Shared measurement can mean some organisations have to take on new knowledge and behaviours and introduce new evaluation processes, whilst others may need to make difficult decisions about what of their existing evaluation approach to give up. We found these hard messages to communicate, and we didn't always have the capacity we needed to provide the right kind of support. Equally, we weren't always able to frame a consistently compelling narrative for grant holders about the incentives for their engagement – for their delivery, for young people and the wider sector.
- 2. Co-design is valuable but takes time and impetus away from implementation.** The first 12-18 months of the YIF Learning Project involved co-designing the evaluation approach, and so data collection did not commence for many grant holders until the second year of

their funding. By starting later, the time period for data collection was reduced, affecting sample size and the extent to which the approach was embedded into practice. We don't know whether the delayed start to data collection in effect meant we missed the most opportune moment for data collection with some young people - when YIF grant holders began running new activities or services. And, as the evaluation approach was not set at the start, it was hard for grant holders to budget for it once delivery was underway.

3. **By co-designing the approach to all our data collection**, rather than insisting that all grant holders collect the same information through instruction and enforcement, there was a greater likelihood that grant holders would self-determine the types and amount of data they would be able to collect – and this was indeed the case in practice. It also left the option, for those who found compromising on their own individual organisational approach to evaluation less appealing, to not engage.
4. **The open, informal nature of provision, and low adult-to-young-person ratio means that even basic individual data collection can be extremely difficult, both technically and philosophically.** There can be a mismatch between open access settings, characterised by informal and unstructured/semi-structured activities, and the administration of a formal survey, such as our YIF outcomes survey, which had specific requirements for completion. This is particularly true when the format of a survey or the method of completion 'disrupts' activities or curtails the dialogic nature of youth work. This is a trade-off that is inherent in shared outcomes approaches particularly, where it's very challenging to maintain fidelity to youth work practice *and* to using the measurement tool as intended. Equally, we saw that the collection of basic demographic data from young people was extremely challenging. It appears that many youth organisations were uncomfortable with asking for information about ethnicity or gender, for example, or gathering date of birth in the standard format required by a common evaluation framework. Again, this is likely to come down to a combination of capacity demands, incompatibility with the ethos and process of youth work, and insufficient explanation about why these data mattered for the evaluation. What we thought might be the most straightforward data to collect turned out to not to be the case at all.
5. **Measurement and data collection takes time.** Even though we designed the approach to gathering data to be as straightforward as possible, it still represented a heavy demand on the grant holders - and for some, this demand was simply too great. Time was needed not just to collect and enter data onto the online system (which some grant holders found difficult to use), but also to fully explain the process to young people, gain informed consent from them (and parents/carers, where appropriate) and support them to respond in the way that

worked best for them as individuals – whether on paper or on screen, for example. Despite the desire amongst a majority of grant holders to have up to date evaluation data – particularly on outcomes for young people - the practical challenges of gathering the data proved too significant a barrier for many.

6. **Shared measurement requires behaviour and culture change.** It's simply not enough to train individuals in new ways of doing things when there are wider organisational issues at stake. Even the most promising evaluation approach will struggle for sustainability if it's pitted against another five different frameworks attached to different funding streams within one organisation. A further risk of connecting shared measurement to one funding stream or grant programme is the likelihood of it fading away when the funding ends, or – as we found – when the key individuals within an organisation move on. We needed to do more, earlier in the life of the YIF, to support organisation-wide buy in to the data collection approach, beyond initial co-design workshops and training of individual organisation representatives.
7. **A data collection system can make or break a shared measurement initiative.** If people encounter challenges entering or accessing data, or it's more difficult or less useful than their existing system, they will not use it. Systems need to be simple to use, and seamlessly connect to other systems already in place. They also need to provide useful and timely read-outs in a format that enable data and insight to be used. We didn't get these specifications right – though we always knew that developing a data system for a project like this would involve potentially difficult trade-offs.

These early reflections are proving to be critical in helping us to make sense of the data we've gathered, and the emerging findings. They also provide a foundation for the key messages that we will share through the YIF Learning Project, and in particular in our sixth Insight Paper, which will draw together our learning with reflections from grant holder organisations. These messages reach far beyond what we've learned about the impact of open access youth provision, and are lessons about the experience of designing, implementing and sticking with an ambitious and pioneering approach to evaluation.

We'll be spending the rest of this year delving into the data that grant holders shared with us, and exploring what it says. There are many things we'd do differently in the YIF Learning Project if we could do it all again, but much of this we only know because we tried it in the first place. There are also lots of things we hope will stick and be used again, by both youth organisations and funders.

Watch this space for more reflections and learning from the YIF Learning Project team throughout this year.