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## THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH IMPACT

PART OF YMCA ENGLAND & WALES

# Alignment 101

Key takeaways from our work on shared measurement and alignment of data, evidence and narrative

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Department  
for Culture  
Media & Sport

Everyone should have a fair chance to discover who they are and what they can become.

## About YMCA

YMCA believes in fairness and opportunity. There are essential building blocks for a full and rewarding life: a safe home; acceptance; guidance; friendship; physical and mental health; academic support; employment skills; and access to real opportunities. Many young people have never known these things; other people have lost one or more as they grew up, but we all need them. All of us. At YMCA, we provide these critical foundations for a fresh, strong start for young people and a better quality of life in the community.

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# What are the main takeaways from our work on alignment in the youth sector?

## What is this document for?

This document summarises the key outputs from a ‘listening project’, led by YMCA George Williams College (2024/2025) as part of its role convening the Youth Work Evidence Alliance. The College was funded by DCMS to establish an alliance of actors focused on improving impact, building evidence and supporting the youth sector, and through this cumulatively generating insights and learning.

With the closure of the College, we committed to ensuring the insight is not lost, but is made available to those who will be able to take the thinking forward. We anticipate this short summary will be most useful for those working directly on questions of alignment in the youth sector, such as the DCMS Youth Research Advisory Group, the Infrastructure Funder Collective and the Regional Impact Networks, now led by the Network of Regional Youth Work Units.

## What is the issue... why is it important?

We know many practitioners, policy makers, funders and commissioners feel that a lack of alignment around evidence, data and narrative limits the youth sector’s ability to:

- Tell more powerful and consistent stories about what good youth work looks like and why it matters to young people and society;
- Advocate for the quality and principles of effective youth work;
- Support wider awareness and adoption of ‘best practice’ around impact measurement; and
- Increase efficiencies and reduce the burden on individual practitioners to start from scratch each time they want to evaluate the impact of their practice.

We have seen how a lack alignment in the sector is compounded by:

- Longstanding financial pressures, which have seen a marked trend towards reduced investment in youth work and a focus on outcomes-driven or more targeted approaches (as opposed to open-access provision)
- The sector itself being diverse, disparate and dispersed, comprising a huge range of sizes of organisation, types of practice, funding streams and desired impacts, and resting on significant amounts of voluntary labour
- A need and desire for person-centred and relational approaches in the youth sector

## What are some of the key outputs we have developed?

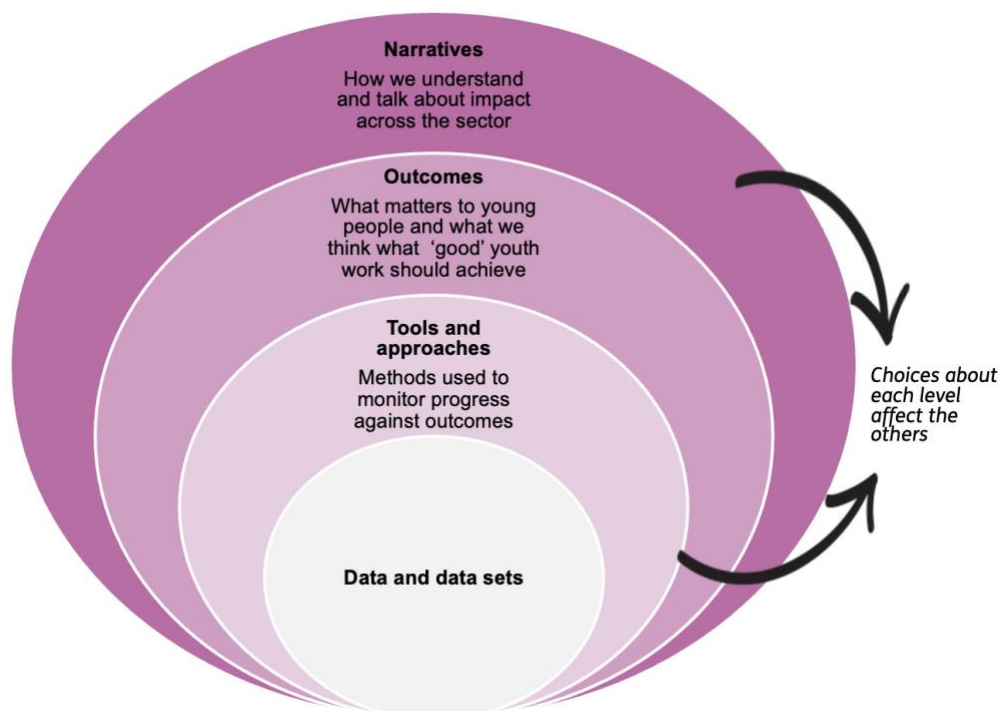
From this work, some of our main contributions are:

1. A framework to clarify what we are talking about when we talk about alignment
2. A systems map, showing what a more aligned system might look like
3. A set of opportunity areas around alignment
4. A set of principles to foster greater alignment in the youth sector

Below, we offer a brief summary of each:

1. A framework to clarify what we are talking about when we talk about alignment

Alignment can mean different things depending on who you talk to. During our consultation, we developed the following framework to clarify what we might be talking about aligning, and why, across different levels. These levels connect, with decisions at each level affecting all the other levels:



**Narratives:** How we understand and talk about impact across the sector. (e.g. youth work helps young people to feel more optimistic about their futures)

**Outcomes:** What matters to young people and what we think 'good' youth work should be doing (e.g. self-efficacy, or developing a sense of identity)

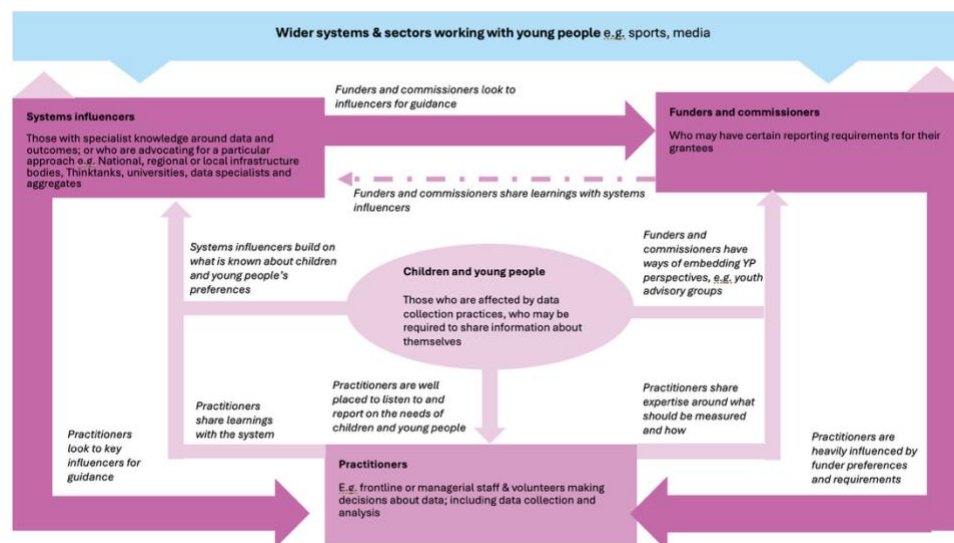
**Tools and approaches:** Methods used to measure or monitor progress against outcomes (e.g. the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, or WEMWBS)

**Data and data-sets:** Information held about the work delivered and the people involved (e.g. demographic data about the young people participating)

## 2. A systems map, showing what a more aligned system might look like:

A diagram of this system is shown below. The key components of this new system would be:

- Strong youth voice mechanisms to centre young people's perspectives and experiences at all levels
- Funders, practitioners and 'systems influencers' working together, in consultation with young people, to design and agree aligned approaches, and there are clear feedback loops to reflect on how they are working
- Stronger commitment, awareness and literacy at the funder and commissioner level, with clearer pathways to support alignment and influence others to do so throughout the system.



## 3. A set of opportunity areas around alignment

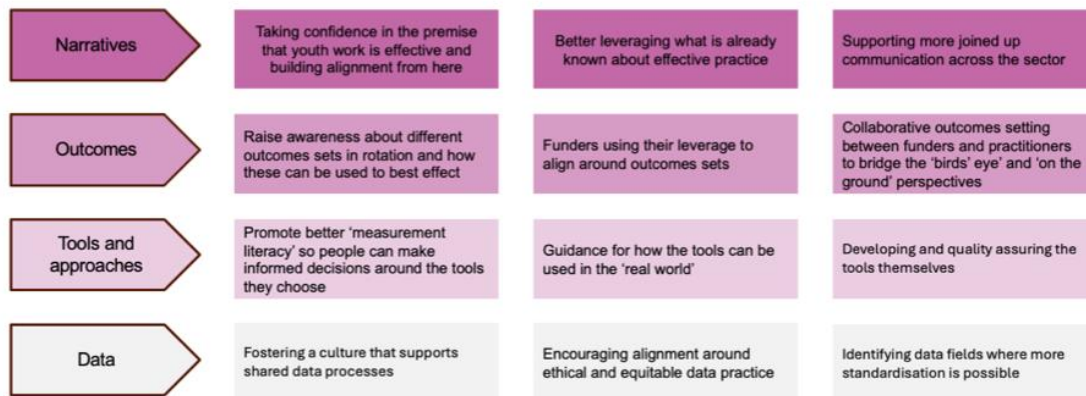
Some of the overall opportunity areas centred around:

- Ensuring young people are kept at the heart of alignment efforts – e.g. by developing better youth voice mechanisms or sharing power with young people so they can take

more ownership of the data and measurement processes that affect them and have more say in how they experience alignment in data gathering and evaluation

- Developing clearer ‘hooks’ or ‘starting points’ into alignment efforts for people early on in their alignment journey, such as by offering encouragement and guidance for different people to be able to ‘start somewhere’. This might include developing criteria around what ‘good’ alignment practice looks like; sharing best practice case studies or simple tools like journey frameworks that can support practitioners in their alignment journey; and providing dedicated resource and space for alignment efforts in funding and commissioning practice.
- Addressing barriers in funding structures that limit alignment (such as competitive over collaborative practice; short term and targeted funding and siloed working) by supporting alignment within collaborative and longer-term funding models, unrestricted funding and learning from past collaborative efforts like Grenfell Emergency funding.

A more detailed summary of opportunity areas can be found in our [full report](#):



#### 4. A set of principles to foster greater alignment in the youth sector:

We developed a set of five principles for anyone to pick up, to support their wider work on alignment. These are:

1. Prioritise alignment over other things
2. Treat young people as subjects, rather than objects, of alignment efforts
3. Embedding equity, diversity and inclusion in alignment efforts
4. Do something collaborative with the data you collect
5. Keep talking about what you’re learning

More detail on what sits under these principles can be found [here](#).



## What might next look like?

Some of the things we identified that would be helpful to shift the needle around alignment include:

- Identifying a ‘neutral driver’ (or backbone support)<sup>1</sup>– an organisation or group that can push forward an alignment strategy, bring people together, and hold the sector to account
- A community of practice or network of early adopters, who can commit to trialling approaches in practice and offer insights and learnings (mutually reinforcing activities and continuous communication)
- A youth advisory group, or similar youth voice mechanism, to ensure young people’s perspectives are at the heart of alignment efforts
- A clear strategy (or common agenda) around alignment, which lays out key priorities and short, medium- and long-term goals, including where we can see ‘quick wins’ (e.g. in the new youth strategy)
- Resourcing for the work that supports longer-term planning, and the testing of new ideas
- Support and platforming from inspiring leaders who are invested in role modelling good practice and sharing learnings

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<sup>1</sup> This thinking draws on the collective impact principles <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-is-collective-impact/>

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**Here for young people**  
**Here for communities**  
**Here for you**

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

FAMILY & YOUTH WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

HOUSING

TRAINING & EDUCATION

SUPPORT & ADVICE