

YOUTH INVESTMENT FUND LEARNING AND INSIGHT PAPER ONE

A shared evaluation framework for open access youth provision

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April 2019



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INTRODUCTION

This is the first in a series of Learning and Insight papers published as part of the learning project for the Youth Investment Fund (YIF).

We hope that these papers will be useful for a broad range of youth organisations (including those that are not part of the YIF cohort), as well as funders, policymakers and evaluators working with and for young people. Our intention for each of these papers is to draw out reflective learning and share actionable insights. In this paper we:

1. Describe the **shared evaluation framework** that has been developed across the 90 YIF-funded organisations. This framework provides the structure for the largest shared evaluation of open access youth provision in the UK to date;
2. Set out the rationale for developing the shared framework.

Who is this paper aimed at?

Anyone working within, supporting or providing funding and resources for informal and non-formal learning provision for young people in the UK. The Youth Investment Fund only covers England, but we believe that the learning is relevant across the UK.

Although our work in developing this framework has been primarily with YIF grantees, who are all providing open access services for young people, the shared evaluation framework is specifically designed to apply to the wider youth sector.

It is closely aligned to the Centre for Youth Impact's [Outcomes Framework](#), which has been developed in collaboration with its regional networks and with the support of the Local Government Association. The approach also maps closely on to the [five types of data](#) framework developed by NPC.

As set out in the second section of this paper, there is a strong set of arguments for developing and embedding shared approaches such as these, to provide a consistent basis for learning, service improvement and evaluation. If this is something you and your organisation support, and you would like to get involved, we would welcome your comments, questions and challenges.

To contact us about getting involved in shared approaches for the Youth Sector, please contact the Centre for Youth Impact: hello@youthimpact.uk, [@YouthImpactUK](#)

To find out more about the YIF programme, please contact YIFlearning@thinknpc.org and visit www.YIFLearning.org

THE YOUTH INVESTMENT FUND

The Youth Investment Fund is a joint investment between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and The National Lottery Community Fund of £40 million to expand delivery of open access youth services in six regions of England, and to enable funded organisations to invest in their own development to increase the sustainability of this youth provision. The three-year programme (2017-2020) is providing new opportunities for young people to get involved in their communities and aims to support the personal development of hundreds of thousands of young people across England, building their confidence and supporting their transition to becoming happy, healthy and economically active adults.

The Youth Investment Fund Learning Project

As part of the investment in local voluntary and community youth organisations, the funders allocated £1 million to a learning project led by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) in partnership with the Centre for Youth Impact and a wider consortium¹. The learning project commenced in May 2017 and is due to be completed in January 2021. It aims to:

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

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

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

Within the YIF, open access youth services are broadly defined and include both traditional youth club provision and more targeted and structured provision across a range of areas including sports, arts, social action and employability. The main unifying feature is that young people do not need to be referred to a provision. Access is 'open' and engagement is voluntary on behalf of the young person.

¹ The other organisations in the YIF Learning Consortium are: Bryson Purdon Research, Dartington Social Research Unit, Keystone Accountability, Nottingham Trent University and Renaisi.

The Youth Investment Fund Shared Evaluation Framework

The shared evaluation framework is made up of two key elements:

- A shared **theory of change** for open access youth provision;
- A shared approach to collecting different types of common **data**.

The shared evaluation framework has been developed through the process of building consensus on how open access youth provision, in its various forms, impacts on the life chances and wellbeing of young people, by creating a **shared theory of change**. Through this process we were also able to build consensus among YIF grant holders on five key types of data that could be gathered collectively, and which are both proportionate and appropriate for use within open access youth settings.

The YIF shared evaluation framework gives both YIF grant holders and others the opportunity to develop greater understanding and insight into how open access provision affects change among young people, whilst also supporting learning and service improvement. It also provides a helpful context for organisations to consider how their work fits within this framework, and to explore the shared data collection tools being used in the YIF evaluation.

A shared theory of change

During the first year of the YIF, we developed a shared theory of change through a co-design process with all grantees.

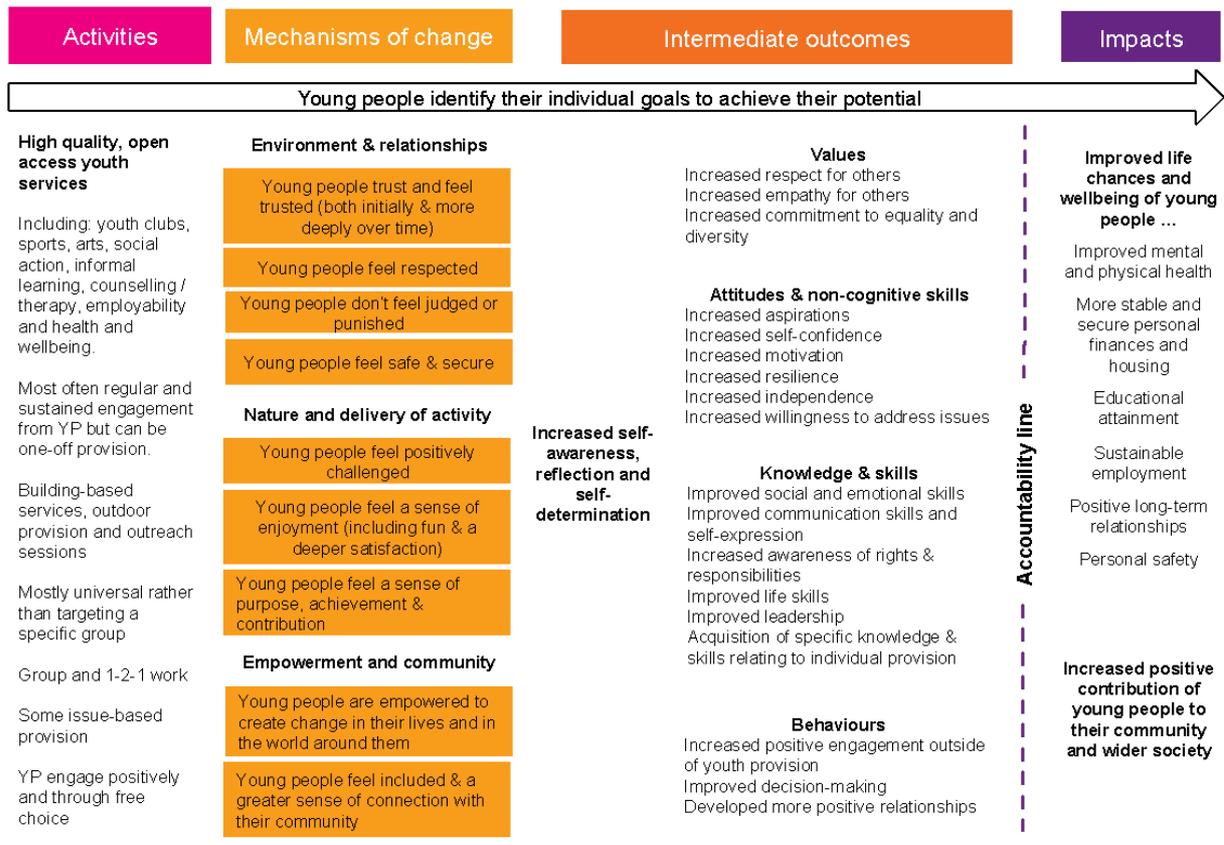
In essence, the theory of change proposes that:

Through engaging young people in **activities and relationships**, provided in such a way that young people have certain **experiences**, they will see some **positive changes** in their values, skills and behaviours, in the short to medium term.

Over the longer term, these changes may contribute to young people creating and experiencing greater change and **impact** in their lives.

Each element has been carefully considered and developed with the input of experienced practitioners. Through the YIF evaluation we expect to identify trends and make linkages between different elements of the shared theory of change by looking for relationships between the different types of data being collected.

Figure 1: Youth Investment Fund grantee level theory of change



1. Activities

The activities offered across open access provision vary hugely, by:

- **Focus** (youth clubs, sports, arts, social action, informal learning, counselling, employability and health and wellbeing services).
- **Intensity** (ranging from regular sustained relationships to one-off engagement, group and one-to-one); and
- **Setting** (ranging across established building-based services, outdoor provision and detached and outreach sessions).

The intention of the framework, particularly the activity categories set out below, is to help organisations describe what they do in a clear, consistent way.

2. Mechanisms of Change

These are the common ingredients that unify open access delivery and, to some extent, distinguish it from other provision. So, whether the activity is boxing, creative writing or health education, it is the **way** the activity is offered and experienced, and the values that underpin it, that sets it apart from other provision for young people.

The mechanisms of change represent what the young person **experiences** as they engage with the provision and are the key elements that lead to the intermediate outcomes. Their presence can also be considered as criteria for high quality provision, as their absence undermines the achievement of positive outcomes.

Each mechanism outlined below is considered to enable positive change for young people. They are grouped under three contextual headings:

- Environment and relationship;
- Nature and delivery of activity;
- Community.

Some mechanisms relate to the specific **environment and relationship** between a practitioner (staff, volunteer or peer) and a young person. Such relationships are thought to be crucial in enabling learning and developmental experiences, as well as being critical (and often a pre-requisite) in engaging young people who might not access other services, such as education or employment support. Important aspects of this relationship are:

- both parties trusting and being trusted;
- young people being treated with respect;
- young people feeling a fundamental sense of safety and security.

The **nature and delivery of the activity** is also important (much more so than the activity itself) as this facilitates a positive challenge, is enjoyable (ranging from fun to a deeper sense of satisfaction) and provides a purpose or opportunity to achieve something concrete that relates to young people's goals. The positive challenge and opportunity to achieve something is important in enabling a young person to become more aware of their own skills, attitudes and behaviours and can also boost a sense of agency and self-efficacy (if the challenge is overcome). **Enjoyment** is a fundamental characteristic that helps facilitate developmental processes.

Finally, some mechanisms relate to **inclusion and empowerment** within a community. It is important that all young people are included and feel a sense of community (even if the community is a small group within an open access setting)—especially for those who do not feel this elsewhere. Young people should be empowered to make change at various levels including to provision (through co-designing and shaping services), to themselves or to their community.

It is a fundamental principle of open access provision that in order for empowerment to be an outcome of activity provision, young people should be empowered **within** those services.

3. Intermediate Outcomes

The intermediate outcomes are then divided into two stages.

The initial outcome of increased self-awareness and reflection includes a conscious knowledge and appreciation of one's own character, strengths, and personal challenges. This is considered a pre-requisite for achieving the intermediate outcomes further to the right on the theory of change.

This more detailed list of outcomes is broken down into four groups: values, attitudes and non-cognitive skills, knowledge and skills, and behaviours. As with the categorisation of activities above, this grouping is intended to help organisations describe the outcomes they are working towards with young people in a clear, consistent way.

The **Accountability line** refers to the point beyond which it is difficult to know if an outcome was directly impacted by an activity, and where individuals and communities *achieve impact for themselves*. Beyond this line, we need to ask ourselves the question: what evidence do we have to connect what we did to what happened in that young person's life over the longer term?

4. Impact

The **long-term impact** of open access provision will often differ from one young person to the next and will likely depend on the length and intensity of an individual's engagement. In addition, it is important that young people identify their own goals and can talk about how change would look and feel in their lives.

Most open access youth providers aim to improve various broad dimensions of wellbeing including health, wealth, education, employment, relationships and civic engagement. Many of these impacts fall beyond the accountability line and are often described by providers as the long-term goals of their provision. As there are many other confounding factors that contribute to achieving these goals, it is not appropriate for open access youth providers to be held directly accountable for achieving them.

Moreover, many of these impacts will only be seen years after the young person's engagement, and are achieved by the young person themselves, rather than by the provider. Instead our focus is on achievement of shorter-term intermediate outcomes through offering high quality provision that enables and creates the conditions for the mechanisms of change. The aim is to create a positive long-term impact in young people's lives and, in turn, contribute to wider social benefits, but these (often) policy goals are not necessarily the focus of day-to-day open access provision.

A SHARED APPROACH TO DATA COLLECTION

The YIF shared evaluation framework identifies five types of data that map on to the different elements of the theory of change. These are set out in the table below:

Table 1: The YIF five types of data

	Type of data	What is it?	Element of ToC it addresses
Appropriate for all grantees	User	Administrative data on exactly which type of young people are engaging.	Activities
	Engagement	Administrative data on exactly what activities young people are engaging in and how often.	Activities
	Feedback	Systematic feedback from young people participating in provision.	Mechanisms of Change—evidence from young people
	Quality	Self and external assessment data on the quality of provision, gathered by peer and external observation.	Mechanisms of Change—evidence from adults/practitioners
Appropriate for some grantees	Outcomes	Pre-post questionnaires to understand whether short-term outcomes have changed for young people.	Intermediate outcomes

The YIF five types of data

User data

This data is used to capture some characteristics of young people engaging in **Activities**, to be used in combination with *engagement* data (see below).

Depending on how the data is collected, organisations may also be able to explore the relationship between these characteristics and *feedback*, *quality* and *outcomes* data.

The beneficiary categories developed for this framework are set out in table 2, overleaf.

Table 2: Beneficiaries categories for the YIF five types of data framework

Demographic data	Categories
A unique user ID	This is so that different bits of data can be linked to an individual young person without providing their name or other identifying feature
Age	Date of birth
Gender	Based on census 2011 categories – ‘Male’, ‘Female’, ‘Other’ and ‘Don’t know’
Ethnicity	Based on census 2011 categories – ‘White’, ‘Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups’, ‘Asian/ Asian British’, ‘Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British’, ‘Other ethnic group’, ‘Don’t know’
Postcode	This is used as a proxy for socio-economic status
Date first registered with provider	Many young people who engage in YIF provision will already have been involved with grantee organisations

These categories are deliberately broad, in order to be applicable for as wide a range of organisations as possible.

Engagement data

This data captures which activities (in the broadest sense) young people are engaging in and how often. It includes a unique user ID from the beneficiary data, so that organisations can understand which groups of young people are taking part in different activities offered.

The framework also includes characteristic groupings of provision, which help organisations describe the **Setting** and **Intensity** of an **Activity**:

Grouping	Relates to...
1. Detached or building based	Setting
2. Group or individual	Setting
3. Targeted or universal	Setting
4. Drop in or fixed	Intensity
5. Time limited or open ended	Intensity
6. Structured or unstructured	Intensity

Detached or building-based. This refers to whether the young person is coming to your space or whether you are going to their space. Detached provision is going out to where young people are whether that be out on the street, in a park or any other space where young people are. Building-based includes any provision where you organise and coordinate the space, including provision within a youth centre, a community venue or any other 'controlled' space such as schools, sports centres or residential centres. Building-based also includes outdoor provision where the space is organised and coordinated by you e.g. sports facilities, arts or field trips.

Group or individual. This refers to whether the young people typically take part in the activity with other young people or on an individual basis. Here, 'group' is not restricted to traditional 'group work' and includes any provision where a young person is not engaging in an activity on their own be it in sports, arts, workshops or in general youth club provision. Individual engagement includes one-to-one as well as any other solo involvement in courses, mentoring or individual activities (where there is no or very little engagement with other young people).

Targeted or universal. Targeted provision is aimed at (or explicitly restricted to) a particular group—even if that group is broad. Targeting often includes explicit eligibility criteria. It includes provision targeted based on gender, ethnicity, special educational need or more issue-specific groups such as those with caring responsibilities, or mental health difficulties. The only exception to this is provision aimed at a particular age group e.g. under-15s basketball—this is still classed as universal.

Drop-in or fixed. This refers to how set the young person's engagement is. Drop-in provision allows young people to drop in and out freely whereas fixed provision involves scheduled, timed sessions where young people are expected to engage for a set amount of time per session, and with regularity.

Time-limited or open-ended. Time-limited provision has a set length of expected engagement which could include one-off engagement or a 12-week programme. Open-ended is rolling provision with no set or expected end date.

Unstructured or structured. This relates to a specific conception of structure. Unstructured provision is where the young person navigates their own way through an activity without their journey being pre-planned by a practitioner e.g. a young person uses a music suite in a youth club or has an informal conversation with a youth worker. Structured provision has a considered sequence that has been planned by the provider—even if the exact sequence is determined by the young person. Structured provision is more likely to have defined learning goals or outcomes.

This list of characteristics will be reviewed periodically, and using the data on activity, we will examine whether it is appropriate to develop classifications of provision.

User feedback data

This data captures what young people are experiencing and feeling in the course of taking part in activities. In collaboration with our research partners [Keystone](#) and our core group² for the YIF, a standardised set of 18 user feedback questions has been developed. The framework offers flexibility on the choice of questions (not all 18

² The 'Core Group' currently includes: Romsey Mill, Youth Moves, Essex Boys and Girls Club, Centre 63, The Mix Stowmarket, Portishead Youth Centre, Youth Focus NE, Positive Futures, Young Somerset, Laburnam Boat Club, Albion Foundation and RSBC.

have to be asked), including additional questions (e.g. a small number of service-specific questions may be useful), and data collection method (e.g. pen and paper, online, interactive workshop/discussion).

The questions are designed to align with the mechanisms of change in a question format e.g. *How respected do you feel whilst at [organisation/ project name]?* In order to ensure comparability, we have asked grantees not to change the question wording³.

The 18 standard questions are set out below.

Question	Answer options
1. How much do you trust the [staff and volunteers] at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
2. How much do you feel the [staff and volunteers] at [organisation/ project] trust you?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
3. How much do you feel valued as an individual whilst at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
4. How respected do you feel whilst at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
P5. How safe do you feel whilst at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
6. How much do you feel positively challenged by the [activities] at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
7. How much do you enjoy your time at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
8. How much do you feel a sense of purpose and achievement through the [activities] at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
9. How much do you influence how the [services] are run at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
10. When you are at [organisation/ project], how empowered do you feel to make positive change in your life?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
11. How included do you feel whilst at [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
12. When you are at [organisation/ project], how much do you feel a sense of community?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
13. To what extent do you receive the support you need from [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
14. How much do you value [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all

³ In order to accommodate those working with younger children, a simplified version of the 18 questions has also been developed, and is available on request.

15. To what extent do you think the services you receive from [organisation/ project] are good quality?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
16. To what extent do you feel it is worth your time and effort to come to [organisation/ project]?	A great deal/ somewhat/ not at all
17. How likely do you think it is that [organisation/ project] will make changes as a result of your feedback?	Very likely/ somewhat likely/ not at all likely
18. Are there any other services that [organisation/ project] could offer that you would value?	Open

This list is not definitive and final; it is itself subject to change in the light of feedback from both providers and young people. It is our intention to review the usage of the 18 questions by the 90 YIF projects over the course of the data collection process and collect feedback from grant holders on their utility and appropriateness. Grant holders are free to add their own questions and we will assess whether there are any additional questions that are commonly used and would be helpful to include.

The feedback data process involves:

- Collecting systematic, anonymous and standardised feedback data across grantees to allow comparability across provision, across organisations and over time;
- Using short, light touch regular surveys to reduce the data collection burden on young people;
- Creating opportunities for *all* young people to offer feedback regularly;
- Focusing questions on young people’s experience of provision based on the mechanisms of change.

The overall intention is for organisations to progress through the five stages of a **Feedback loop**:

1. Designing the feedback process (including the questions and method of collection);
2. Collecting the data (at regular intervals*);
3. Analysing the data;
4. Following up with more detailed dialogue with users if necessary;
5. Course correction (making changes based on findings).

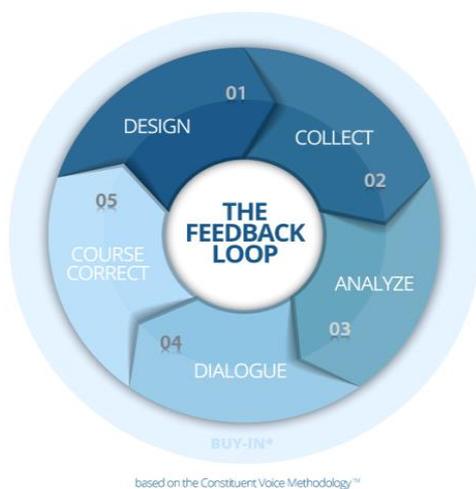


Figure 2: The Feedback Loop: Constituent Voice™

*YIF grantees are expected to collect the data on a minimum of a six-monthly basis, but they can collect it more regularly if they wish.

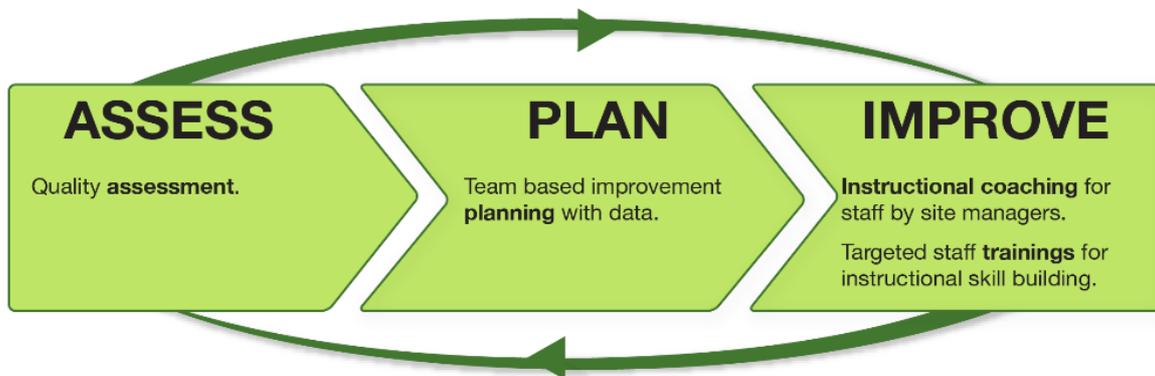
Quality data

This data captures the quality of the provision of activities, as assessed by practitioners themselves. Through a combination of self-assessment, observations by colleagues and external assessment.

Within this framework we are testing and rolling out an approach to measuring, understanding and improving quality that has been successfully developed in the US since the 1990s by the [David P. Weikart Center](#). It is designed to systematically measure the quality of provision **at the point of interaction with young people** in a detailed way.

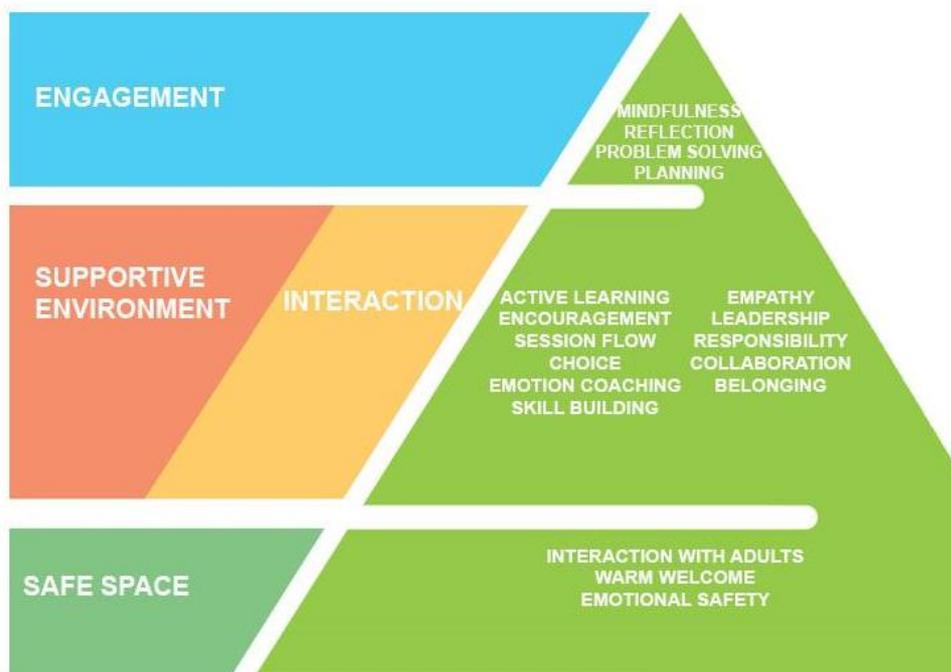
The approach is embedded in a continuous quality improvement cycle below:

Figure 3: Improvement cycle from (Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPIQ) developed by Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality



The process begins with providers completing an assessment of their provision based on the quality framework summarised on page 15. This is done through both self-assessment (by staff within organisations) and external assessment by a peer.

Figure 4: Social and Emotional Learning Pyramid of Program Quality



The assess, plan, improve cycle lasts **six months** and is repeated twice over the course of year. Assessment involves observation and scoring, which includes peer to peer discussion to identify which areas of provision require improvement. Youth workers then attend training to build skills in areas they have identified as requiring improvement.

1. **Observation:** At least two staff members complete at least two observations of different sessions that the organisation provides. The [Social and Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment](#) (SEL PQA) framework provides a template for completing these observations in a structured and consistent way.
2. **Scoring:** Team members then draw on these observations to collectively discuss and score this provision against the 70 individual 'items'^[1] set out in SEL PQA—scoring each item high (5), medium (3) or low (1) and noting accompanying observational data to explain the score. Depending on the size of the team and the number of services being scored, a scoring meeting can last between three and five hours.
3. **Improvement Training:** Two team members take part in improvement training with a specific focus instructional skill building to improve SEL in young people.

To complement self-assessments and provide more objective comparable data, external assessments are then carried out by specially trained peer assessors.

Domains, scales and items

As set out in the pyramid above, the SEL PQA identifies four 'domains' of quality. Within each of these are a number of 'scales', and finally each scale contains a number of 'items'. These items are the foundation for the assessment process—they are in effect a checklist for practitioners to work through when observing each other's

work with young people. Four tables detailing the scales and items for each domain are set out in an appendix on page 21 onwards.

This quality assessment is not an organisational self-assessment, nor is it an assessment of an individual session or an individual member of staff. Instead it is at provision-level (e.g. sports engagement would include football, rugby and basketball sessions), and is designed to focus on specific, measurable improvements to the quality of that provision.

Outcomes data

This aspect of the framework is being rolled out in Spring 2019. Following this roll-out, we will then be publishing a separate insight paper on our shared YIF outcomes approach. The key features of the approach to gathering outcomes data within this framework are outlined below:

Pre- and post- questionnaires. A quantitative approach that collects individual level outcomes data before and after provision is accessed (0 months, three months, six months and 12 months). This includes a self-reported outcomes survey for young people aged 10-18 years that has been co-designed and tested with youth workers and young people.

Focus on intermediate outcomes. The questionnaires focus on the intermediate outcomes in the theory of change where young people are most likely to have experienced change over the medium-term and where the provision is most likely to have contributed to that change. This primarily includes social and emotional skills and non-cognitive skills. The questionnaire includes questions related to the four outcome areas identified in our theory of change: values; attitudes and non-cognitive skills; knowledge and skills; and behaviours. The theory of change is based on an existing evidence that links the intermediate outcomes to many of the longer-term impacts outlined.

Validated questions with some *adaptations*—where possible, questions have been taken from existing validated tools such as the [Longitudinal Study of Young People](#) in England, the [Millenium Cohort Study](#) and the [Children's Society Good Childhood Index](#). In some cases, individual items were taken from larger scales where the scales were deemed to be either overly burdensome on respondents or some items were not linked to the shared theory of change.

Focus on high quality targeted data collection. The approach moves away from 'blanket' collection of outcomes where evaluation attempts to 'count up' all outcomes for all young people. Instead, if the focus is on building the evidence base for the link between different types of provision and outcomes for young people, then a better approach is to collect high-quality data for a sub-section of young people and focus on a sub-section of outcomes, over a meaningful period of time. In the case of the YIF, this will be over twelve months. Moreover, the approach explicitly rejects the value of collecting outcomes data for some forms of provision, including where the engagement is light-touch, very fleeting or irregular. This is not to say that these forms of provision will not contribute to positive change for young people but rather that it is neither proportionate nor meaningful to seek to capture this change through standardised pre- and post- questionnaires.

Counterfactual evidence. The same outcomes questions will be asked of young people who are not involved in YIF provision. The analysis will try to ensure that these young people are as similar to young people who engaged in the YIF as possible (based on the demographic information we have collected).

The approach adopted is an attempt to manage the various trade-offs in any approach to capturing outcomes for open access youth provision. Once the first wave of data collection has been completed (by end of September 2019), the outcomes paper mentioned above will be updated with a full description of this outcomes framework.

WHY DO WE NEED A SHARED EVALUATION APPROACH FOR OPEN ACCESS PROVISION?

The YIF learning project provides a unique opportunity to name, confront and overcome some of the perpetual challenges cited in evaluation of open access settings. Such challenges have been evident in previous work undertaken by NPC, the Centre for Youth Impact and many others, and came across strongly in the phone interviews we undertook with grantees at the very start of the learning project. These challenges have directly informed the development of the shared evaluation approach described above.

Drawing on this experience and feedback, below we set out some of the specific challenges for evaluating open access provision, and some wider limitations of current thinking around evaluation within the sector.

Specific challenges for evaluating open access provision

Much open access youth provision does not have pre-determined outcomes for young people.

The purpose of provision is 'not pre-determined or aimed at addressing specific issues or problems as deemed by policy makers'⁴ and 'this means that the impact of youth work is both difficult to research and emergent'.⁵

Long term outcomes are potentially inappropriate impact measures and would require longitudinal research—much open access youth provision is trying to support young people in their transition to adulthood with impacts 'only becoming apparent after prolonged periods of engagement over a number of years'.⁶

Some elements of youth engagement are difficult to measure. There is no doubt that some of the key elements of successful provision such as supportive relationships⁷ or providing constructive challenge to young people are more difficult to capture than some other, more objective, measures of engagement (e.g. attendance, intensity, duration).

The irregularity and unpredictability of engagement due to the drop-in and/or voluntary nature of much open access youth provision, young people navigate very different paths through activities resulting in diverse engagement patterns.

Ethics and administration. The informal, low adult to young person ratio and the open nature of provision means that even basic individual data collection can be extremely difficult, especially where high standards of research ethics are applied (sometimes directly conflicting with values of confidentiality and young people's autonomy).

⁴ (McGregor, 2015; p75)

⁵ (Fyfe et al, 2018; p4)

⁶ (Fyfe et al, 2018; p4)

⁷ (Ritchie and Ord, 2017)

Limited evaluation capacity and capabilities among workforce—this is a challenge seen across the voluntary sector⁸ but is perhaps particularly acute within open access provision, where many practitioners are working on part-time contracts, or in volunteer positions, and find it difficult to manage data collection administration alongside their ‘frontline’ responsibilities. Furthermore, staff and volunteers are unlikely to be trained in traditional evaluation practice.

Clashing with the values of informal learning—evaluation can be met with scepticism or even resistance when it does not align with (or worse, is perceived to actively undermine) the values of informal learning provision for young people, where it does not allow opportunities for youth involvement, or has outcomes pre-defined by funders.⁹

Evaluation can be disconnected from practice—outcomes monitoring and measurement is often undertaken in isolation from understanding what is actually going on between the worker and young people¹⁰, resulting in limited ability to link the experiences of young people participating in programmes with changes in their lives.

Wider limitations with current thinking around impact evaluation

It focuses on proving at the expense of improving. The vast majority of evaluation resource and energy has been invested in ‘proving’ what works rather than supporting service development and continuous improvement.

It weights quantitative above qualitative measures. Although there have been a number of recent contributions to the evidence base that draw on qualitative methods¹¹ these studies are generally assessed as providing a lower standard of evidence than randomised controlled trials, quasi-experimental designs or large scale pre- and post- questionnaires.

It takes on the characteristics of high stakes accountability. Providers perceive significant risks in talking openly about ‘failure’ and are thus much more likely to ‘game’ or devalue evaluation. High stakes accountability for organisations also plays out when evaluation is framed as compliance with funder’s pre-determined outcomes.

It doesn’t make use of existing data. Many providers find themselves trying to gather outcome data that is already being collected elsewhere, by schools, local authorities, the criminal justice system, employers or health services, or effectively repeating attempts by other providers to track the same outcomes often amongst the same group of young people.

It promotes competition. Providers are driven, often by funding models, to design individual outcomes frameworks and monitoring tools, seeking uniqueness rather than collaboration, and are, as a result, reluctant to share data and learning.

It does not produce comparable data. It’s hard to focus on those programmes and models that create the greatest difference in young people’s lives given the idiosyncrasies of each monitoring and evaluation system and the difficulty of comparing across them.

⁸ (Bach-Mortensen & Montgomery, 2018)

⁹ (de St Croix, 2018)

¹⁰ (de St Croix, 2018)

¹¹ (de St Croix, 2018; Fyfe et al, 2018; Body & Hogg, 2019)

In response to these challenges, through the development of the YIF shared evaluation framework we have attempted to develop an approach that is:

Appropriate and proportionate. Both for the nature and objectives of provision as well as the young people taking part. Our approach seeks to avoid being 'methods led' and instead is designed around key questions that open access youth providers are trying to answer¹² about the experiences of young people and the impact those experiences have on lives. It draws on multiple methods and recommends different approaches for different types of provision – including collecting outcomes data, for grantees who have the capacity to do so and where it's most appropriate for the type of provision. We have carefully designed our approach so that it is manageable and meaningful for youth workers in practice, with options available for data collection to be either quarterly or every six months. Age appropriate versions of use feedback questions have also been developed.

Embedded and actionable. So that evaluation efforts are focused on improving provision for young people in a practical way, both in the 'act of evaluating' and in interpreting the findings. Evidence collection and analysis are more likely to be effective if they 'go with the grain' of and enhance practice and provide actionable insight to practitioners, managers, funders and policymakers that is actually used to improve services. The YIF approach focuses on collecting data related to the 'mechanisms of change' in provision as these are the elements of provision most in practitioners' control or 'sphere of influence'.

Shared and collective. A key strength of the YIF approach lies in focusing on the elements of provision that are shared across grantees and collecting robust data that is comparable across time, provision type and organisations. Through the co-design process, we have developed a set of language and measures designed to ensure that data can be aggregated, compared and understood across a wide variety of projects and contexts. Ultimately, we hope that this will make a decisive contribution to establishing an effective evidence base for open access youth provision.

¹² (Harrison-Evans, Kazimirski & McLeod, 2016)

SUMMARY

This paper has described the shared evaluation framework developed for use by the grantees of the Youth Investment Fund (YIF). This framework is comprised of a shared **theory of change** for open access provision, co-designed with input from all YIF grant-holders and a shared structure for **data collection**, aligned to the theory of change. 36 YIF Grant Holders have been involved in designing and testing the data collection tools and approaches.

The theory of change emphasises the **mechanisms of change** for open access provision, which focus on the **positive experiences** young people have that links the **engagement** with varied **activities** with the achievement of **outcomes**. These mechanisms are also most directly related to provision and are therefore most relevant in terms of improving the **quality** of provision.

The YIF **five types of data** set out in the shared structure are: foundational beneficiary and attendance data; feedback (young people) and quality data (adult practitioners) that explore the mechanisms of change; and targeted outcomes data. Each of these types of data is valuable in its own right but the full power of the shared evaluation framework will be realised through linking up the different bits of data to compare over time and across provision.

It is our intention to review and develop the YIF shared evaluation framework periodically using the learning from the shared YIF dataset, and we aim to share this learning with both YIF grant holders and the wider youth sector over the remaining two years of the project.

This paper also provides a rationale for developing a shared approach which is applicable across all open access youth provision. As noted in the introduction, it is hoped that this framework, in combination with the Centre for Youth Impact's [outcomes framework](#), can be further developed and refined, for the benefit of the wider sector as a whole.

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APPENDIX A – YPQI DOMAINS, SCALES AND ITEMS

Domain	Scale	Item
Safe Space	Emotional Safety	Positive emotional climate
		Support for safe space
		Lack of bias
	Warm Welcome	Youth greeted
		Staff warm and respectful
		Positive staff body language
	Interaction with Adults	Staff at eye level
		Staff circulates
		Behavioral accountability
		Positive behavior management style
		Staff actively involved

Domain	Scale	Item
Interaction	Belonging	Opportunities for youth to get to know each other
		Inclusive relationships
		Personal interest in child
		Staff sets program culture
		Sharing their culture
	Collaboration	Active collaboration
		Shared goals
		Practice group process skills
	Responsibility	Opportunities to take on tasks
		Staff do not intervene intrusively
	Leadership	Mentoring opportunities
		All youth lead group
	Empathy	Listen to experiences of others
		Understand emotions of others
		Kindness and affirmation
		Respect for differences

Domain	Scale	Item
Engagement	Planning	Opportunities to make plans
		Multiple planning strategies used
		Share plans in tangible way
		Monitoring progress toward goal
	Problem Solving	Connect to previous knowledge
		Link examples to principles
		Youth extend knowledge
		Solving a problem in a different way
		Youth identify strategy
		Think creatively
		Self-correct and improve
		Explain thinking
		Use logical reasoning
	Reflection	Multiple reflection strategies
		Reflection on successes or challenges
	Mindfulness	Structured practice of mindfulness
		Calming or focusing practice reminders