

Five principles

Supporting alignment of evidence, data and narrative in
the youth sector

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Department
for Culture
Media & Sport

About these principles

These principles were developed by the Centre for Youth Impact, now part of YMCA England & Wales, with the support of a range of funders, including the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

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Introducing the principles

What are they for?

What are these principles for?



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This document outlines a set of five principles that aim to:

- foster greater alignment around how data, evidence and narrative is used to understand, communicate and improve impact in informal and non-formal learning provision for young people
- support a culture shift around alignment, recognising that change cannot be achieved by one person or organisation alone, but takes multiple people, from different parts of the system to work in concert towards similar goals
- speak to anyone whose work impacts young people in some way
- provide a 'way in' to thinking and talking about alignment for those looking for a place to start
- outline some clear steps that can support practice progress towards alignment, which can be taken by anyone in their alignment journey

How were these principles developed?

These principles were developed during a 'listening project', led by YMCA George Williams College as part of its role convening the Youth Work Evidence Alliance. The College was funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (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.

The listening project, focused on the topic of alignment in measuring impact, took place between the autumn of 2024 and the spring of 2025, during which time it conducted a series of roundtable discussions in order to consult experts, funders and commissioners, practitioners and young people; as well as drawing on insight from wider work with the Back Youth Alliance and Healthy Data Ecosystem Initiative.

Why do we care about alignment of impact in the youth sector?



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When practitioners talk about alignment, they are looking for ways to bring the sector together to better demonstrate impact. This normally means:

- Telling more powerful and consistent stories about what good youth work looks like and why it matters to young people and society
- Advocating for the quality and principles of effective youth work
- Supporting wider awareness and adoption of 'best practice' around impact measurement
- Increasing efficiencies and reducing the burden on individual people to start from scratch each time they want to evaluate the impact of their practice

Why is there a lack of alignment in the sector at the moment?

The youth sector has faced significant challenges in the past few years. Financial pressures saw local authorities spending on average 70% less on youth provision, as well as shifting from open-access provision towards more targeted, outcomes-driven approaches.

Many feel these trends have devalued youth work and put pressure on those working in the sector to justify its worth and contribution. Practitioners may be volunteers, and are often working part-time in short-term contracts to keep a local initiative going with multiple sources of funding. They are looking for impact measurement methods that support a relational, person-centred approach to working with young people, but also provide 'proof' that youth work works. These factors all lead to a wide range of approaches to data, evidence and narrative across the sector.

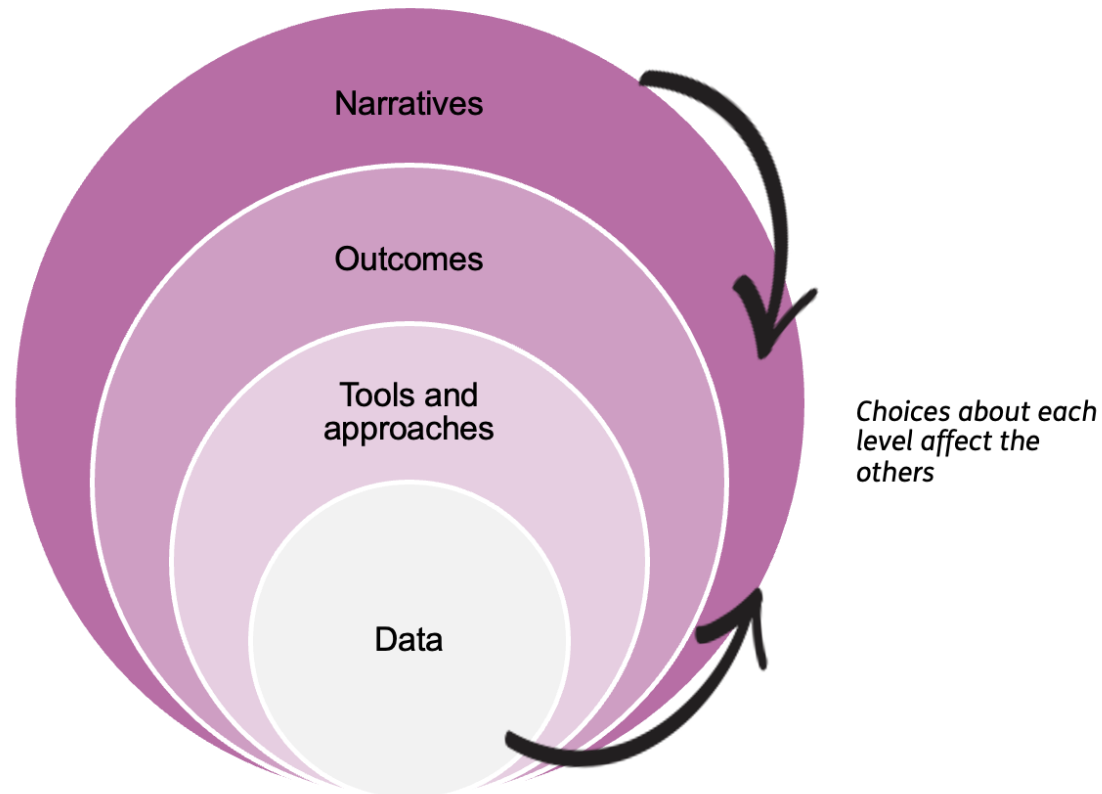
In addition, the sector itself is diverse, disparate and dispersed, comprising a huge range of sizes of organisation, types of practice, funding streams and desired impacts. This makes it hard to develop a joined-up narrative – and evidence base - around the positive impact of youth work and why it's worth investing in as a whole.

Is alignment always a good thing?

Those involved in the listening project did not advocate for 'total alignment'. Young people are growing up in an ever-more diverse world, and the youth sector has always been a diverse tapestry of practice and spaces in response. Our work suggested that 'total alignment' in how we measure, monitor and communicate about practice would be neither possible or desirable – but that the system would benefit from *greater* alignment.

What do we mean when we talk about alignment of impact in the youth sector?

Alignment can mean different things depending on who you talk to. We outline 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.



These levels are:

- **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 - WEMWBS)
- **Data:** Information held about the practice being delivered/offered to young people, and who engages and how (e.g. demographic data about the young people participating)

The principles

The Principles 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

1. Prioritise alignment over other things

Prioritising means identifying where you can become practically involved and take action, as an organisation, team or individual, even if it means making trade-offs with other areas of work. This could take the form of:

- Identifying the areas where alignment is in tension with other values, and when, where and how it can be meaningfully prioritised;
- A public statement of commitment shared internally or externally about where or when you will prioritise alignment and why;
- Allocating time or personnel to work on issues around alignment; and
- Financial investment.

What might this look like in practice?

For funders and commissioners	For practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocating funding or resource to support alignment in the sector (e.g. providing training or space for collaborative working) • Learning about, promoting and sharing best practice around alignment (e.g. writing expectations into commissioning) • Reviewing / pooling data across funded portfolios and historic data sets to identify what is known about outcomes, tools and effective practice, to leverage the evidence base to better effect • Joining or forming collaborative funding initiatives that work towards aligned outcomes, reviewing how this has been done in the past (e.g. DEI data standard, 360 Giving, Propel and Grenfell Emergency Funding) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making space for thinking about alignment within the delivery of programmes or team development time • Supporting staff to develop objectives around alignment or identifying roles where individuals can work on issues around alignment • Joining or forming a community of practice with publicly stated goals around alignment, and committing to sharing learnings publicly • Developing or trialling shared outcomes frameworks, methods or approaches

2. Treat young people as subjects, rather than objects, of alignment efforts

This means working to ensure young people are central in decision making and alignment efforts are accountable to young people in some way, so that 'alignment' means aligning more closely to the needs and priorities of young people.

Opportunities here centre around:

- Developing better youth voice mechanisms to ensure alignment builds on what matters to young people; and
- Sharing power with young people so they can take more ownership of the data and measurement processes that affect them.

What might this look like in practice?

For funders and commissioners	For practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Embedding youth voice practice in funding and commissioning (e.g. by engaging young people in funder strategy development, establishing young commissioner groups or using of youth voice frameworks, like the Lundy Model)• Embedding youth voice practice as a requirement in relevant commissioning, with guidance and signposting around how this can be done well• Investing in trialling, developing and scaling innovative methods to give young people ownership of their own data, e.g. through development of a youth passport or app where they can track their own progress• Identifying opportunities to financially support good quality youth voice practice and feeding learnings back into alignment efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Testing and developing measurement methods with young people – such as through piloting measurement tools or conducting participatory research; and sharing learnings with the wider sector• Identifying ways in which evaluation can be used to improve accountability to young people, as well as to funders• Proactively advocating the data/ evaluation preferences and requirements of young people to funders and commissioners where this is possible

3. Embedding equity, diversity and inclusion in alignment efforts



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This means treating considerations and questions around equity, diversity and inclusion as integral to any conversations or actions supporting alignment of evidence. Alignment should seek to raise the standards of inclusive data practices across the sector and make these more consistent.

Opportunities here centre around:

- Identifying and working to change data practices that exclude or perpetuate inequalities; and
- Supporting the sector to align around data practice that is inclusive and equitable.

What might this look like in practice?

• For funders and commissioners	For practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support work that centralises equity and reviews evidence practice from an equity lens to surface any inherent assumptions around approaches, cultures and lenses and suggest more inclusive adaptations or alternatives as needed• Learning and providing guidance around how demographic data, personal data or more sensitive data can be collected ethically and in a non-intrusive way• Valuing and accepting diverse and inclusive forms of impact measurement• Developing clearer expectations about what proportionate data-collection looks like when working with different cohorts of young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore and champion evaluation methods which are favoured by (all groups of) young people and which support (rather than disrupt) the positive relationships between young people and youth workers• Seeking feedback and input from more marginalised groups around different forms of data collection and updating practice where needed• Explore the different incentives and barriers for young people to engage in impact tracking, and how this can be incentivised ethically, equitably and appropriately and sharing learnings with funders and commissioners• Developing clearer lines of accountability and feedback around how information will be used, who and what the data is for, and how sharing it will be for the benefit of the young people sharing their information

4. Do something collaborative with the data you collect

More alignment requires a culture shift – meaning that multiple partners will need to work with others in order to shift the needle on alignment. More collaboration and dialogue between different parts of the system would help to reduce conflicting narratives and promote consistent and aligned communication.

This could include things like:

- collaborative funding;
- use of shared frameworks; and
- joining up communications with others.

What might this look like in practice?

• For funders and commissioners	For practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resourcing proactive, collaborative narrative shaping activities, that bring together practitioners, young people, sector leaders, funders and commissioners, and build up trusting relationships• Developing collaborative funding initiatives that can foster alignment around outcomes and approaches (e.g. regional pilots, match funding initiatives)• Promoting and funding collaboration between different impact measurement tool developers to align and decouple tools• Identify ways the social work system can be mapped/ made to feel more knowable, to support more joined up working among funders and commissioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Piloting and joining new models that support alignment – e.g. using local or regional models as a way to trial and encourage more collaborative working in specific places; share evidence locally; and generate an evidence base that demonstrates local need• Aligning with other practitioners around very simple outcomes sets or principles, which can act as a foundation which could be modified or adapted in different contexts (e.g. regional or sector variation)• Identifying the core narratives that are already in use and effective, when looking for something to ‘align to’

5. Keep talking about what you're learning

The sector needs to learn from real-life examples of data application, so demystify 'alignment' and support a culture of pragmatism over perfectionism. As impact measurement can sometimes feel quite technical, it can be easy to get stuck in the theoretical when discussing a new, aligned approach. There is a need to move from the theoretical to the practical, in order to establish, iterate and improve alignment in the real world.

What might this look like in practice?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For funders and commissioners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraging funded partners to share learnings about what is working Identifying specific organisations who can take the lead in testing different approaches to data collection and alignment, and how they can help the sector more widely Promoting awareness of the ways in which measure sets can be used flexibly or in conjunction with other tools without adding too much noise or inefficiency e.g. where additional questions can be added so organisations can track their own outcomes alongside standardised measures; how to use them alongside storytelling approaches Outline and make clear some of the different outcomes frameworks used in the sector that people could choose to align to, and the trade-offs involved in choosing between the different sets (e.g. Common Outcomes Framework) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect on how well the data you are collecting is supporting you to make the decisions you need, and tell the stories you want to tell Those using their own outcomes frameworks to share reflections on their data-set and the alignment process Committing to trialling new approaches and recording learnings along the way; publishing learning reports and case studies. Exploring how to embed measures in practice, and sharing what works well or less well in different contexts (e.g. in grassroots settings or with diverse cohorts of young people) Join communities of practice who can share learnings around measurement in practice, and support one another through their learning journey

What does it look like to build on these principles?



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To move the system towards greater alignment, no one actor can shift the dial. Instead, multiple players from across lots of different parts of the system need to take action and start to move towards working better, together.

There are some conditions that can support the move towards alignment across the whole sector, including:

- A set of principles, like these, which invite different stakeholders to commit to the principle of greater alignment and take steps to work towards it
- A coalition of interested parties and early adopters, ideally drawn from multiple places within the system, who can work together to test, learn and improve on aligned approaches in practice
- A neutral 'driver' in the form of an organisation or collaboration that can convene the sector to identify and pursue new opportunities, build on the thinking laid out in these principles, and hold the sector to account; ideally with a youth voice mechanism embedded in this work
- A clear strategy, laying out the short-, medium- and longer-term goals of the work, with indicators of success at each stage
- Resourcing to support the work and enable longer-term planning
- Influential and inspiring leadership to take learnings out to the wider sector, and promote good practice more widely