THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH IMPACT

Part of YMCA George Williams College

Inclusive or intrusive?

An exploration of young peoples' and practitioners' experiences of demographic data and equity in the youth sector

Acknowledgements

We would first like to give our thanks to all the young people and practitioners who gave their time and energy to an interview or focus group, and whose lived experiences have informed this project.

What are we talking about?

The focus of our project

This project is all about **demographic data.**

Demographic data refers to information that describes personal characteristics and background. These characteristics typically include factors such as age, gender identity, ethnicity, income, education level, sexual orientation, religion, disability status, occupation, and geographic location. Other kinds of demographic data may also be collected to reflect the concerns of particular projects or organisations.

Demographic data is collected by organisations, researchers, and policymakers for a wide range of different reasons, including the intention of better understanding and serving individuals and communities.

The focus of our project

We have taken a deliberately broad view, to include everything from date of birth and postcode, through to Free School Meal (FSM) status and gender identity. Through our enquiries, it became very clear to us that demographic data is largely considered synonymous with 'identity' by many that we spoke to, although we acknowledge that, in practice, the gathering of demographic data will include other elements, which may not be considered synonymous in the same way.

In addition, we also noticed that across both young people and practitioners, views on what is 'relevant' data varies, and sometimes intersects with legal and medical responsibilities (e.g. allergies or specific legislation, including GDPR and the 2010 Equality Act). Other data does not but may still 'feel sensitive'.

Demographic data collection has been built into England's education and youth provision systems and structures for many years.

Organisations like the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and parts of the **education sector** have reviewed and revised what demographic data gets collected and how it is collected. However, this has not led to a high level of consistency or clarity in practice.

There has been no routine, formal review of demographic data collection to explore why and how we do this **specifically within the charity/voluntary sector**. In the **informal and non-formal education contexts**, demographic data practices also lack co-ordination and oversight.

It is possible that this is because it is not clear who would lead this work, and because the charity/voluntary sector is so broad, with intersections across many other sectors such as healthcare, youth work, education, social care, youth justice, homelessness, and more.

It is a very complex task.

Youth Work principles and ethics

However, responsible and thoughtful data practices are at the heart of quality work with young people, as set out in the Institute for Youth Work's Code of Ethics:

7. When we receive or collect personal information about young people, we make them aware of with whom and for what purpose that information will be shared. We do not disclose confidential information unless this is necessary to prevent harm or is legally required.
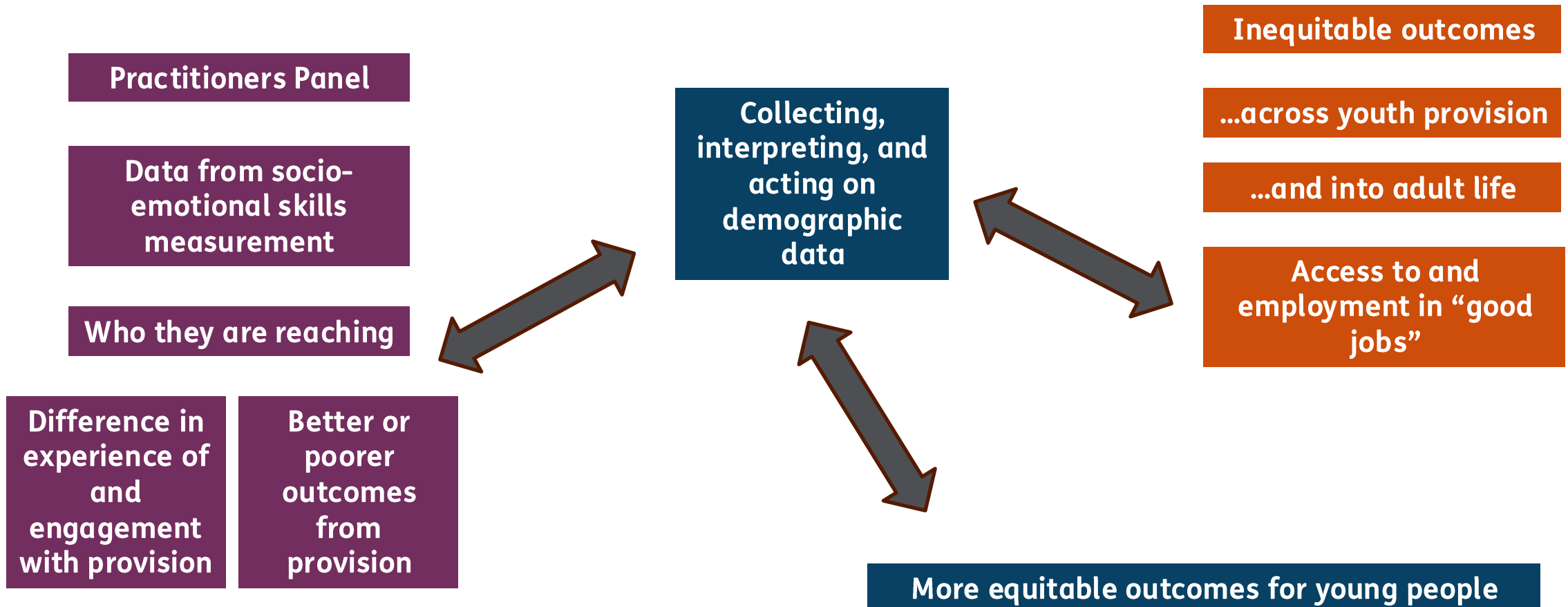
Institute for Youth Work. (n.d.) *The Institute for Youth Work's Code of Ethics.* https://iyw.org.uk/code-of-ethics/

How this work began

Early conversations and reflections (Summer 2021)

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Practitioners Panel

Data from socio-emotional skills measurement

Who they are reaching

Difference in experience of and engagement with provision

Better or poorer outcomes from provision

Collecting, interpreting, and acting on demographic data

Inequitable outcomes

...across youth provision

...and into adult life

Access to and employment in "good jobs"

More equitable outcomes for young people

Identifying a need for action

We identified multiple factors within demographic data practices that are currently limiting **sector-wide action** to increase equity, including the following barriers:

1. The youth sector lacks tools, guidance, and support to meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010

2. The youth sector lacks tailored, appropriate, and consistent approaches to demographic data collection and action

3. The workforce struggles to meet the needs of the current generation of young people, who are both more ethnically diverse than ever, and more frequently and openly discussing and disclosing other dimensions of diversity.

Bringing together a plan (1)

This was the genesis of the E4P project, in which the College, funded by Youth Futures Foundation, has started out on a complex journey to:

A.   Explore knowledge, practice, and views on the collection and use of demographic data in the youth sector in England; and

B.   Co-create recommendations for any changes that would result in better practices – with the definition of 'better' to be first and foremost shaped by young people and practitioners.

Bringing together a plan (2)

This project is called E4P, which stands for "Embedding Equitable Evaluation in Employability Provision".

Whilst we have conducted it within an employability framing, we believe the insights to be widely applicable to all working with and for young people in the youth sector.

The work began in December 2022 and will close at the end of October 2024. It is, however, only the start of an important conversation, and our hope is that funders, researchers, and practitioners can move forward with key insights and recommendations from the project.

We also acknowledge that demographic data practice is just one small part of the equitable evaluation challenge.

We don't claim or expect to have answers at this stage.

We consider that the 'experts by experience' – young people and practitioners – are the voices that should be centred.

We start (with permission) with their experiences.

For this reason, you will find that we have intentionally included many quotes in our full report. Wherever possible, we have also presented young people's and practitioners' perspectives through their verbatim (word-for-word) quotes.

The history of demographic data collection is also complex and long, dating back to at least the Roman Empire.

Stakeholders' involvement in, motivations for, and discourse around personal data collection have all shifted over time (and with it, so have public perceptions and understanding) (Mahon, 2009).

Who collects data and how they use it has always related to **power, culture, and the priorities of wider society.**

For more reflections on this and what this means for our project, please see the main report (pages 17 – 19).

An important note (3)

There is much work to do to make data and evaluation practices within the youth sector (and beyond) in England more equitable.

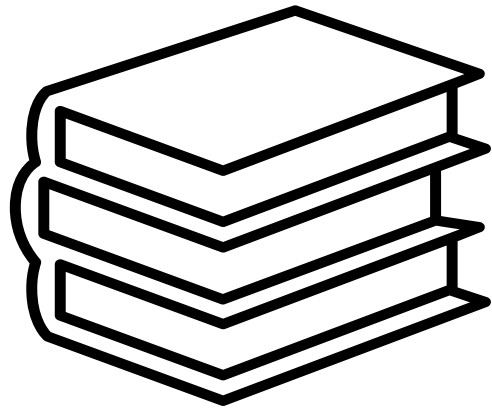Demographic data practice – and this conversation - is part of that work.

We warmly welcome you to join the conversation.

What did we do?

Between April 2023 and July 2024, we undertook the following activities.

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Desk based literature review

We conducted a narrative literature review of 45 items. The original review was conducted in early 2023 and updated in mid 2024 prior to publication, with four additional papers added

Focus groups with young people

We spoke to 63 young people aged 14-24 in 10 focus groups.

These young people were involved with youth organisations in Northampton, Birmingham, Manchester, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Canterbury, and London.

They were held online and in-person.

Interviews with practitioners
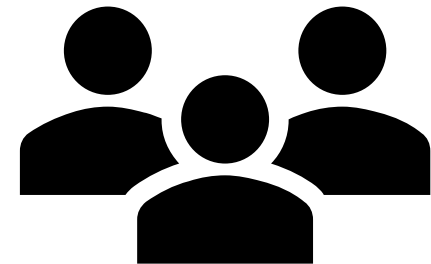
We spoke individually with 15 youth practitioners from the same geographical areas as the young people's focus groups, as well as the Southwest and East Anglia.

The practitioners had or have varied roles within the youth sector.

These were held online.

What *specifically* did we want to find out?

Literature review

We conducted a **literature review** to understand what current literature exists on the topics of:

- Demographic data collection with young people in England;

- Guidance or any standardised tools available for the youth sector in England; and

- The topic of "deficit narratives" within demographic data practice (as we identified this as a significant factor and risk inherent in demographic data collection with young people).

Focus groups with young people

We held focus group discussions with **young people** to learn more about:

- Their understanding of why organisations collect demographic data;

- The words that they feel describe their identities;

- How it feels to be asked these questions; and

- What they would like to see organisations do next.

Interviews with youth practitioners

We also held interviews with **youth practitioners** to learn more about:

- Their experience of collecting demographic data;

- The phrasing and delivery of questions about demographic data;

- How and why demographic information is used within their organisations; and

- Next steps and developments in which they would be particularly interested.

Headline topics

Combined, these explorations have help us to build insight in the following areas:

1. Why do organisations collect demographic data?

2. Does it matter which demographic data organisations collect, or what they do with it?

3. What messages would young people and practitioners like to give organisations who collect demographic data? If they were to redesign the process, what would they suggest?

What did we hear?

From the literature review

Literature review

From the literature review we were unable to identify anything substantial that was specific to England **and** to the context of working with young people.

This highlights the need for better understanding and guidance **specifically** for youth sector organisations in England and – to inform this – the need to have open conversations with those impacted by the process, so that guidance is informed by young people and youth work practitioners.

From young people and practitioners

Why do organisations collect demographic data?

Those collecting demographic data from young people often do not explain why they are collecting it or how they plan to handle it

Young people are not clear or confident on why demographic data is collected, but often 'conform' or 'concede' to sharing it

Because of this, requests for demographic data can generate in young people a sense of apathy or irrelevance, as well as emotions such as boredom, fear, stress, and exasperation

Practitioners similarly feel ambiguity or confusion around purpose of demographic data collection, as well as the likely impact on young people

Both young people and practitioners often associate demographic data with requests or requirements from funders and, sometimes, marketing or advertising provision

Views on what is 'relevant' data varies, and sometimes intersects with medical or legal responsibilities (such as GDPR or the 2010 Equality Act

Quotes from young people

"No, I have no idea what people are doing with data."

"To my knowledge, what I think about data being collected is [that it is] about who to advertise to."

"Even if I weren't to tell them, they would know from looking at me – my name isn't British! They're gonna know, so even if I have doubts, I concede."

"Don't hide it in the terms and conditions, no one reads that!"

Quotes from practitioners

"Like the young people, most of the time I don't want to complete the form because it is just useless, I don't think it is important to have that stuff [information]."

"I've always been shocked at how much demographic data they require...we have a couple of major funders... I hand it over to the funder. And, you know, they kind of deal with it...we've got our set demographic data that we collect for our own purposes."

"There's always an explanation. And the explanation varies depending on the project..."

Does it matter which demographic data organisations collect, or what they do with it?

Demographic data categories have the potential to exacerbate existing stereotypes and reinforce deficit narratives – so they must be chosen carefully

Lack of clarity is exacerbated by inconsistent use of language in the sector by those driving demographic data collection

Data-driven insights can only be generated from reliable, meaningful (and often comparable) data.

However, in the current age, where demographic data relates to identity, categorisation can be difficult because of the fluidity and complexity of identities

Data collection can both have an impact on young people's identity forming (e.g. not being seen or recognised, feeling stigmatised, feeling pressure to have their identity 'figured out') and is directly influenced by the fact that young people are continually (re)forming their identities as they grow up

NB. These insights apply to some but not all categories of data

Does it matter which demographic data organisations collect, or what they do with it?

Requests from those driving data collection can feel in tension with the best interests of young people

Practitioners feel discomfort and/or ill-equipped to facilitate demographic data collection. They identified that they would benefit from further explorations of the impact of the process on young people

The process of collecting demographic data requires time, consideration, relationship building, and specific support from practitioners to young people (e.g. in 'translating' language on forms, or facilitating supportive, trusting conversations about identity)

Practitioners are calling for training and support (e.g. in engaging creatively with sensitive subjects) so that they feel better equipped to have conversations with young people about both identity and demographic data language

Multiple barriers (e.g. lack of trust, irrelevant categories, and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach) also prevent young people and practitioners from engaging with demographic data collection

Quotes from young people

"For me, I think everybody automatically makes assumptions, it is a human thing to do...Not letting those first assumptions or how you interpret people at face value first time get in the way of getting to know them is important..."

"Whenever I have been stereotyped it is about my faith, not about my ethnicity or gender, I know when it happens it is always to do with my faith."

"I don't mind me being labelled 'low income' if it means they get more funding - [that is the] narrative that first came to mind."

"When you fill out category on sexuality - extremely fluid! One month might feel bisexual, next month lesbian, but there isn't an in between because it changes a lot - when you have to tick one box, that can be quite hard. One form I was filling in I had no idea what to say because it changes a lot and I think that is fair to say for a lot of people."

Quotes from practitioners

"They don't necessarily understand why I'm asking if you're on free school dinners. That that feels too much. Because that is something that is imposed on them. They experience some things because of their parents' situation, not because of their own…"

"They [the young people] switch off if it's inaccessible, because the language or it's too much, it's too overwhelming… And if the language is inappropriate, because it's not pitched at them, they just disengage. So, we really do need to work quite hard on making sure how we get the requests to them."

"What's very interesting about ethnicity in the UK is that we don't educate between the difference between ethnicity and nationality. And we're very poor at that…."

What messages would young people like to give organisations who collect demographic data? How would they redesign the process?

Young people shared mixed views

Some questioned whether they would want to redesign a process that they found irrelevant

Others identified that because the data could be used to support underrepresented communities, it would be worth consideration, but felt unable to envision what a new approach would look like

Some requested ongoing conversations about this topic and felt it was the first time that they had thought deeply about it

Young people also wanted to convey the message that they cannot always tick boxes because as they are growing up and learning a lot about themselves – they need wider options if organisations want 'accuracy' in the data they collect, so that options are more likely to truly represent how young people identify

Young people found it a positive experience to be invited to use their voices to influence change on issues that affect them

What messages would young people like to give organisations who collect demographic data? How would they redesign the process?

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Some young people shared key messages for organisations who collect demographic data

1. There should be better communication and more transparency on context, purpose, and action

2. There should be improved process and methods by giving space for fluidity, increasing accessibility, and allowing time to reflect

3. Organisations should recognise that being asked for identity data can feel intrusive or uncomfortable

They also shared reflections on specific demographic categories including faith, sexuality, gender, nationality and ethnicity (these can be seen in the full report)

Quotes from young people

"...if they are using data for action and not telling us, that isn't transparent enough."

"So, I can see how this is going to benefit me – not just you and your statistic. I don't see how I can benefit from you knowing my sexuality, ethnicity."

"I understand that most data collected can be written or check boxes but make it more accessible for deaf and blind people, or language interpreters, to help other people who are in need of that…Say for example, they might not understand the question and it needs to be interpreted in a different way there is a lot of advanced vocabulary – have to ask the person to explain what the question means."

"I think I feel ok about purposeful data collection – if collection of the data brings in a benefit that comes back around to me or the identity they are collecting data on, I would feel ok about it."

What messages would practitioners like to give organisations who collect demographic data? How would they redesign the process?

Practitioners, who held a diverse range of roles within the sector, felt conflicted

For example, some felt that they were positioned between young people and the funders, and that current processes do not meet the needs or best interests of young people

Specifically, practitioners flagged concerns about current methods being used in a way to suit a predefined narrative about specific communities of young people, and a checklist or tokenistic approach

They also highlighted a need for training and more guidance, and to work with young people to establish what representation genuinely looks like within demographic data practices

Quotes from practitioners

" [...] I'm more frustrated that I have to do this, to jump through a hoop so that a funder can feel good about themselves. And it's not about that, per se, is it?"

"I feel like perhaps training for staff as well, I think is important [...] to avoid bias too. Because we're dealing with things that are fairly abstract. It means we often cling to concrete examples. And you give one concrete example. And it's kind of like, that's the one thing that young people can attach themselves to."

What might all of this mean?

Behaviours, practices, and actions that we need to stop doing

Creating and contributing to ambiguity or confusion around the purpose of demographic data collection

Choosing approaches (including categories and methods) that exacerbate stereotypes and reinforce deficit narratives

Choosing approaches that reinforce a checklist or tokenistic approach to demographic data collection

Collecting demographic data in a way that invokes negative feelings and emotions in young people, such as apathy, irrelevance, boredom, fear, stress, exasperation

Creating multiple barriers to engagement and access (including collection tools, language, and age appropriateness)

Prioritising the needs of funders or marketing/advertising above the needs of young people

Behaviours, practices, and actions that we need to start doing

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Protect sufficient time for the process of demographic data collection, e.g. to enable reflection, for trust and relationships to be built, for conversations about identity

Build our understanding of what constitutes data 'accuracy' from the perspective of different stakeholders and/or different uses for demographic data

Co-create approaches with young people that truly represent, as much as possible, how young people identify, which may include 'fluid' and/or be complex in other ways

Develop....

Support, training, and resources for practitioners

Consistent language to be used across the sector

Clear, brief, and specific guidance on why data is being collected and how it will be used

Nuanced, tailored approaches for specific data categories (e.g. sexuality, ethnicity)

As we do this, we need to prioritise...

Ongoing conversations and co-creation so that young people can influence change on issues that affect them (being mindful of the extent to which young people might want to be involved, given that some have expressed a sense of apathy or disconnect)

Approaches that support underrepresented communities

Prioritising improvements to provision (over simply 'proving' that something is happening)

An awareness of the multiple impacts that demographic data collection can have on young people's identity and wellbeing

Addressing tensions between the requests of funders and the interests and needs of young people

Where are we now?

Where are we now?

We have written up what we have heard into an Insights Report. This is quite long, as the topic is complex, young people and practitioners generously shared a lot about their experiences, and we wanted to share their quotes word-for-word as much as possible.

To break these insights down, we have created shorter, more bite-sized documents and resources, including these slides.**You can find all this content on our website: https://www.ymcageorgewilliams.uk/embedding-equitable-evaluation-employability-provision-e4p**

We are now taking these outputs out for discussion through a short consultation and review phase. This review will inform a series of final recommendations for how this work could be moved forward within the youth sector, beyond the life of our project.

What is the purpose of this review and how can I get involved?

Reviewing the insights

Specifically, we want to sense check our interpretation of the findings and ask you:

- Do any of the key findings resonate with you/your experiences?

- Is there anything that does not resonate with you/your experiences?

- What would make the biggest difference to your experience/practice right now?

- Is there anything else you would like to add to the conversation?

To share your responses to these questions, please head to our website: www.ymcageorgewilliams.uk/e4p

An(other) important note

We understand that the insights from E4P might **not feel immediately actionable**, and that our collective ability to improve practice will require a sustained, systemic approach – as well as time, effort, and resources.

We will be doing our best to make this explicit in the final recommendations, and to identify different types of actions and stakeholders. The consultation will help to shape this.

We also acknowledge that this project has not yet engaged with youth sector funders, who are a key stakeholder and influencer within demographic data practice. **<u>We are particularly keen to speak to interested funders as part of the consultation phase.</u>**

What can I expect after the consultation?

Next steps

The project timeline and resources will end in October 2024.

However, we will be writing up a clear set of recommendations, tailored for different audiences such youth organisations and practitioners, researchers and evaluators, and funders.

We will also reiterate and emphasise that this project is just the start of (what we believe to be) an important conversation for the sector.

We will also be advocating for additional funding to continue or support this work in the future, drawing on what we have heard and learnt so far.

Who can I speak to for further information?

Contact details

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