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THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH IMPACT

PART OF YMCA ENGLAND & WALES

A Thousand Flowers

**Aligning the measurement of impact in the
youth sector**

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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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Call to action: Why do we care about alignment in the youth sector?

What is alignment in impact measurement and why is it important?

The youth sector has faced significant challenges in the past few years. Financial pressures resulting from the 2008 financial crash and the Covid-19 pandemic saw local authorities spending on average 70% less on youth provision¹; as well as shifting from open-access provision towards more targeted, outcomes-driven approaches².

Many in the sector felt these trends have devalued youth work and put pressure on those working in the sector itself to demonstrate value and justify investment in these areas.

Demonstrating value (whether in terms of outcomes or economic) can be tricky in the context of the youth sector and its offer to young people. It's a diverse, disparate and dispersed system, comprising a huge range of sizes of organisation, types of practice, funding streams and desired impacts. A significant proportion of the sector depends on the work of volunteers who support part-time to keep a local initiative going. This, coupled with a focus on relational, open-ended engagement with young people, can make it particularly 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.

Across the historical work of the Centre for Youth Impact, and more recently as part of YMCA George Williams College, when practitioners talk about alignment, they are looking for ways to bring the sector together to better demonstrate impact. They are concerned with advocating for, and not undermining, the quality and principles of youth work. Both practitioners and funders tend to be equally worried that the current system places too high a burden on practitioners to start from scratch each time they want to share insight about their impact, and engage in an individual search for 'the best way'.

How can such a diverse, disparate and dispersed sector be brought together to tell – and evidence - a more aligned story? What should be included in this story, and what data might we need to support it? What helps and hinders the telling of a collective story? This report explores some of these questions.

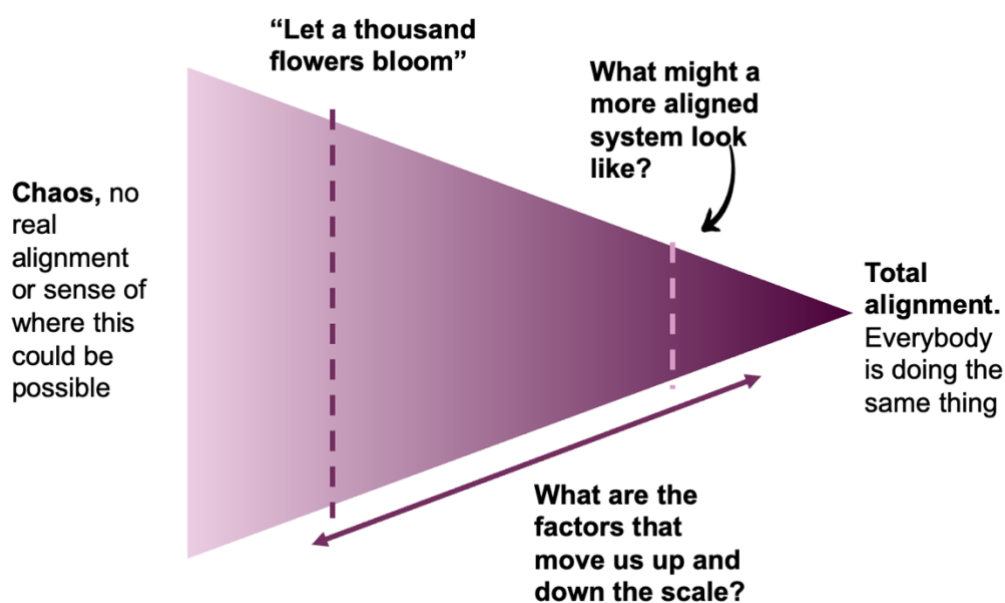
¹ YMCA (2020) Out of Service: A report Examining Local Authority Expenditure on Youth Services in England and Wales.

² McGimpsey, I (2018) The New Youth Sector Assemblage: Reforming Youth Provision Through a Finance Capital Imaginary. *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(2) pp.226-242

This report draws on 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.

Is alignment always a good thing?

The College has never advocated for ‘total alignment’, and the listening project was not an approach to advancing this position. We live in a diverse world, and a diversity of approaches and impacts is needed to support diverse needs. Instead, this report – representing the voices of all those who participated in the listening project – suggests that the current system would benefit from *greater* alignment. Different stakeholders will have different views on how far we move up the scale. It’s equally unlikely that we will ever, collectively, occupy just one place on the scale at any given time. There will be different degrees of alignment in different contexts.



Who is affected and who should be involved?

Building a more aligned system cannot be achieved by one person, agency or organisation alone. The approaches we use to measure and monitor impact, and hold ourselves

accountable are complex, with lots of people invested in the system working one way or another. We need to acknowledge this reality and understand that more joined up working will only be possible if multiple players, from different parts of the system, take seriously their role and responsibility in the move towards greater alignment.

This report is a starting point:

This report is a 'way in' to thinking and talking about alignment for anyone whose work impacts young people in some way. We also hope it's a way into practical progress towards greater alignment: we have outlined some tensions and opportunity areas for those looking to take this work further.

Introduction:

Some 'ways in' to understanding alignment

You can engage with this report in different ways.

You may be interested to reflect on the bigger picture, or think systemically about the broader context in which we collectively operate. Or you may prefer to reflect on what you, as an individual practitioner, commissioner or funder can do to support alignment and why it might matter to you.

This report aims to give anyone delivering, supporting or funding informal or non-formal learning provision for young people a starting point for thinking about the issues and where they could be part of a move towards greater alignment. To support this, we have broken the report into three parts:

- **Part 1:** explores the nature of 'the problem' *in the system as a whole*, through discussing:
 - Why alignment is so complex
 - How we can begin to understand the system where we are hoping to see greater alignment

- **Part 2:** breaks the idea of ‘alignment’ down into *more granular levels*, so we can explore specific tensions and opportunity areas here. These include:
 - Narratives
 - Outcomes
 - Tools and approaches
 - Data
- **Part 3:** Outlines *what we can do* to move towards greater alignment through exploring some specific:
 - Opportunity areas
 - Principles for greater alignment

Where did this work come from?

This document summarises insight 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.

In 2024, the Alliance conducted a wider inquiry into the concept of alignment by consulting:

- Experts
- Funders and commissioners
- Practitioners
- Young people

The College also worked on issues around alignment through its wider work with the Back Youth Alliance and specific project work (including the Healthy Data Ecosystem initiative). and has brought in insight from these related inquiries.

Part 1: Taking a whole-system perspective

Chapter 1:

Why is alignment so complex?

*“If all funders used the same model, it would be easier to determine what info is required for a bid and quicker to put together!” - **Practitioner***

Alignment in the measurement and articulation of impact has long been an issue of interest to the sector, with many initiatives over the years aiming to drive progress towards common approaches. It has been a theme across the evaluation of large-scale youth sector funds (including the first Youth Investment Fund in 2017, and Talent Match, back in 2012) and is a strong strand of work across the What Works Centres focused on young people.

However, despite this energy and hard work, alignment remains a thorny and often contentious topic. This is because although there is often widespread agreement with the principle of alignment, when we take a closer look, the following complexities swiftly appear:

1. Different opinions about how aligned we should be in the first place

There are different underlying assumptions across the sector about how aligned we should be, where alignment efforts should be taking us, and what ‘proportionate’ data collection looks like in pursuit of such alignment. This means that variability can be introduced at many levels (e.g. institutions, organisations or individuals), with multiple different assumptions and preferences.

2. With the sector ‘in crisis’, nobody is prioritising alignment

Right now (and indeed, for much of the last decade), attention and efforts are directed towards survival, securing funding and supporting groups with high need who are not getting support elsewhere.

In this context, new ideas or anything that looks and feels like an additional demand on capacity/resource is more challenging than normal. Practitioners who are under pressure to meet rising need with less time and money don’t have capacity to think about new processes or upskill, and funders are less likely to have spare resource to invest in it. Funders are also nervous about asking for this kind of additional ‘work’ in the current context.

This leads to many prioritising the protection of provision, and sticking with what they already know/do, with concerns that starting pathways towards alignment will create new strands of work that will have to be maintained.

3. It is unclear who should be taking the lead in alignment efforts.

The benefits of alignment accrue mainly at sector level, and it will take a sustained sector-level shift for individual organisations and practitioners to feel a positive change. However, sector-level shifts occur through changes in behaviour of people and organisations, which can often mean a perception of subjugating immediate organisational need to longer-term change a sector level – which in turn will only manifest if others simultaneously prioritise sector-level change. This can make it difficult to see who should be taking the lead.

Practitioners are often keen to take the lead from funders in order to adapt their practice to secure funding. Funders and commissioners tend to prefer to be practice-led and flexible - and are often trying to avoid favouring one particular type of tool or approach.

In this landscape, it is also unclear who gets to set quality standards around alignment, or what 'good' and 'bad' alignment looks like. It also means that those wanting to align don't know what they would be aligning 'to'.

4. The perception that 'aligning' will be resource-intensive and require big changes

Many organisations (and the practitioners that work within them) have invested a lot of time and money in establishing their own approach to evidence and impact, and are reluctant to change it, *particularly* if they feel it will take a lot of time or money to do so. There is also little incentive perceived for organisations to move away from their existing systems, and questions (see above) about who gets to decide what we are collectively moving to. In order to overcome these concerns, any aligned system or approach would need to be tangibly better than the organisation's original, as well as compensating for any perception of 'sunk costs'. This sets a high bar.

5. Aligning outcomes and data can feel theoretically complex and hard to know how to do in practice

Many find it hard to know where to start thinking about alignment – what are they aligning with and how should they do it? It can raise conceptual questions that mean people get 'stuck' in the theory before being able to trial things practically. It can also be challenging to marry 'bigger picture' ambitions (like 'proving youth work works') with more granular details (like consistently measuring the same specific outcomes in relation to socio-emotional skills), and oftentimes the people making the bigger picture decisions are not the same as those grappling with the detail on the ground.

No one is really sure where to find good examples of what alignment looks like in practice. Some cite the evaluation 'industry' as adding to this confusion, since this industry is in part built around designing bespoke approaches that enable organisations to stand out or apart from their peers, rather than align.

6. Thinking about 'aligning' can raise fears of comparison or powerlessness

Many practitioners worry that a move to more alignment will limit their ability to demonstrate uniqueness in their work, and why it is powerful in its own right. Alignment also drives fears of comparison, both philosophically, and practically: practitioners worry that they will be less able to secure funding if they are required to align 'towards' with a model or practice, or expectation of impact, that isn't close to what they're delivering.

The resulting resistance to alignment in turn raises feelings of inertia or powerlessness, with advocates feeling like there have been efforts to align evidence for decades without much success.

7. We aren't really clear on the scale and nature of the system/sector we are trying to align - but we know it's diverse

We don't have an accurate, or up to date picture of the organisations, people or practice that make up the youth sector. What we do know about the system is that it is hugely diverse.

At the funder level, diversity is driven by different (and changing) priorities, funding structures and the levels at which funding operates (e.g. local/ borough level).

Additionally, a significant proportion of funding comes from a multitude of often small and local funders where support for young people is one of many different priorities, meaning grants managers don't have time to engage in detail with the organisations that make up the youth sector locally. There are also many other 'related worlds' that they interact with (e.g. education, sports)

Additionally, a huge amount of the sector is voluntary, which raises questions about how much engagement in evaluation and data can even be expected, and what the channels to support alignment in volunteer-led provision would be.

8. Perceived tensions with person-centred/relational work

Those working with young people in informal and non-formal settings prioritise a bespoke approach that allows them to foster trusting relationships, meet young people 'where they are at', and demonstrate impact on a person-by-person basis. Many practitioners worry that gathering data in these contexts (in particular with more marginalised groups) can feel intrusive and surveillant. There are also concerns that alignment might 'put young people into boxes' (the philosophical opposite of meeting them where they're at), and drive further exclusion and marginalisation.

There are anxieties that a move towards alignment, if accompanied with a move towards more traditional and less flexible data collection methods, could undermine good relational working.

9. Concerns that alignment won't be inclusive or young-person-centred

Many practitioners and funders alike voice concern that moves towards greater alignment will exclude certain groups, such as smaller grassroots organisations or volunteers with less time, capacity and formal training.

There is a similar perception that anything that feels like a 'top down' standardisation effort will stand at odds with centring young people's perspectives and championing youth voice.

These complexities can all be limiting because:

- They call into question our assumptions that alignment is even possible or desirable;
- They can be emotionally draining and disempowering, making us think about challenges across the sector as a whole, and resulting in low motivation to change; and
- They are overwhelming: there are multiple complexities overlapping, which combined serve to hold the system in stasis. It's hard to pinpoint where to start, and many starting points are significant pieces of work in themselves (e.g. mapping the youth work sector in order to better understand it).

This report aims to add more nuance to our understanding of these complexities, so we can begin to see a way in. We start with a discussion of the 'system' in Chapter 2.

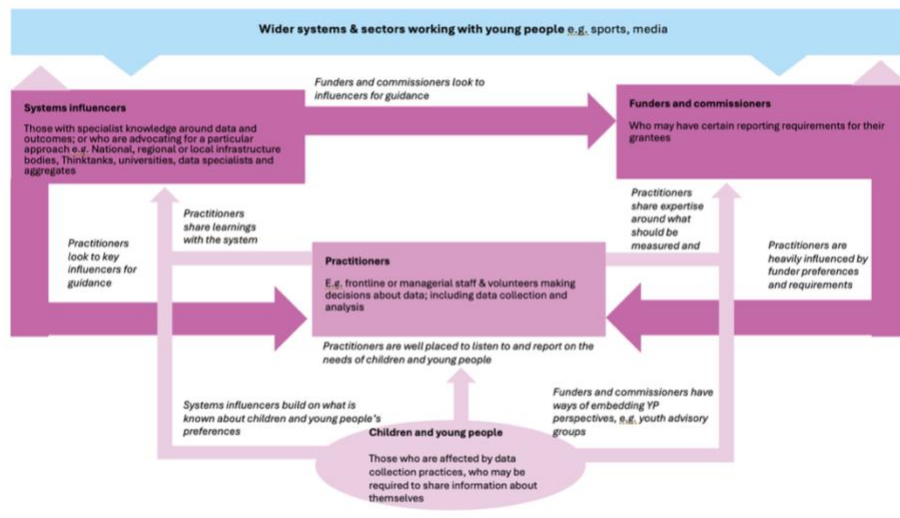
Chapter 2:

How can we understand the 'system' where alignment might happen?

How can we understand the current system?

One way to start thinking about alignment in the youth sector is by mapping out the system and the key stakeholders who would need to work together in order to align³. We worked with the members of the YWEA to map out the key stakeholders influencing and impacting alignment efforts. The map below shows how we understand some of the key groups involved and the relationships between them as we see the system now:

³ NB this is a high-level mapping exercise to understand the context of alignment. The 'systems mapping' discussed in the earlier section is a much bigger project that would need to provide clarity on the youth sector as a whole.



Key things to note about this conception of the system include:

- The darker colours demonstrate increased power and influence in the system
- The system is not static but can shift over time. It's worth asking what conditions hold certain relationships or tensions in place when we are considering systems change
- This 'system' sits within and alongside bigger and other systems. You could imagine zooming out to see relationships with wider systems e.g. education, health

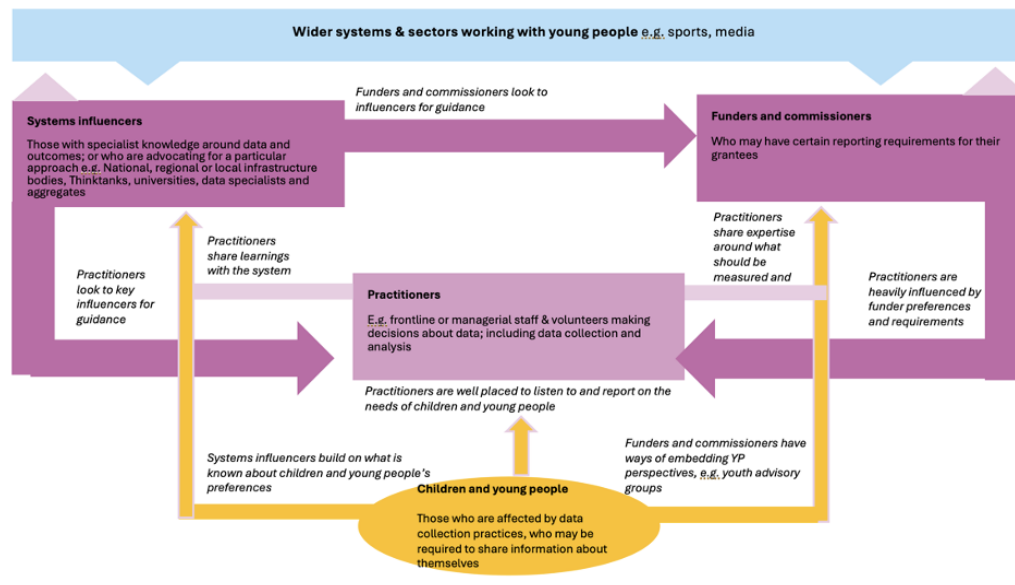
How can we imagine change in this system?

Through our consultation, stakeholders expressed where they'd like to see change in this system, and how they'd like the system of the future to look with regards to alignment. The two main ideas that were surfaced included:

1. Centring and empowering young people to ensure the system is grounded in what matters to them
2. More clear recognition of the responsibilities and powers of funders and commissioners in driving alignment

This led us to re-evaluate the systems map to identify and shift these elements:

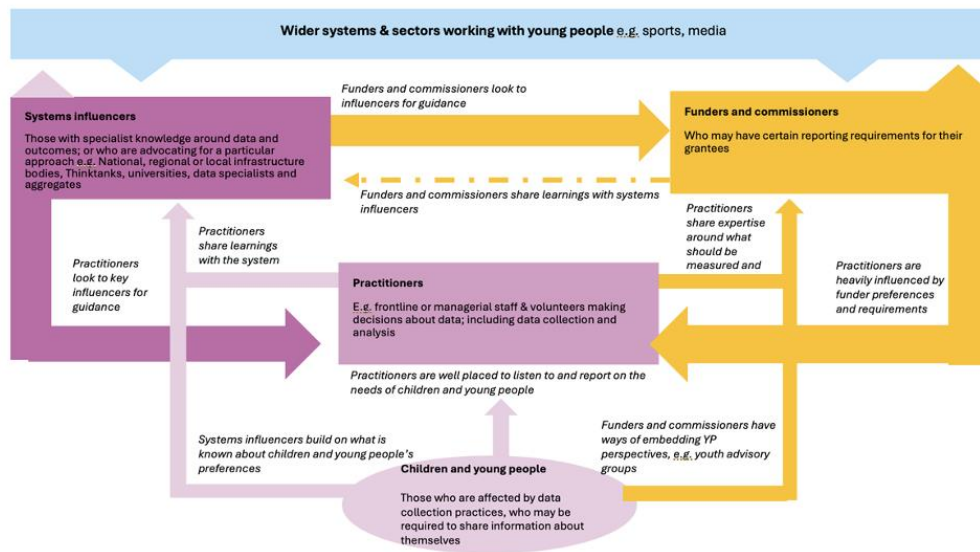
1. Centring young people



Centring young people in this context would mean:

- Emphasising their role as central to the conversation around data and alignment
- Developing the channels for youth voice that give young people power and levers for change in the system – whether that be with systems influencers, practitioners, funders and commissioners
- Starting with considering the impact on young people of any moves toward alignment

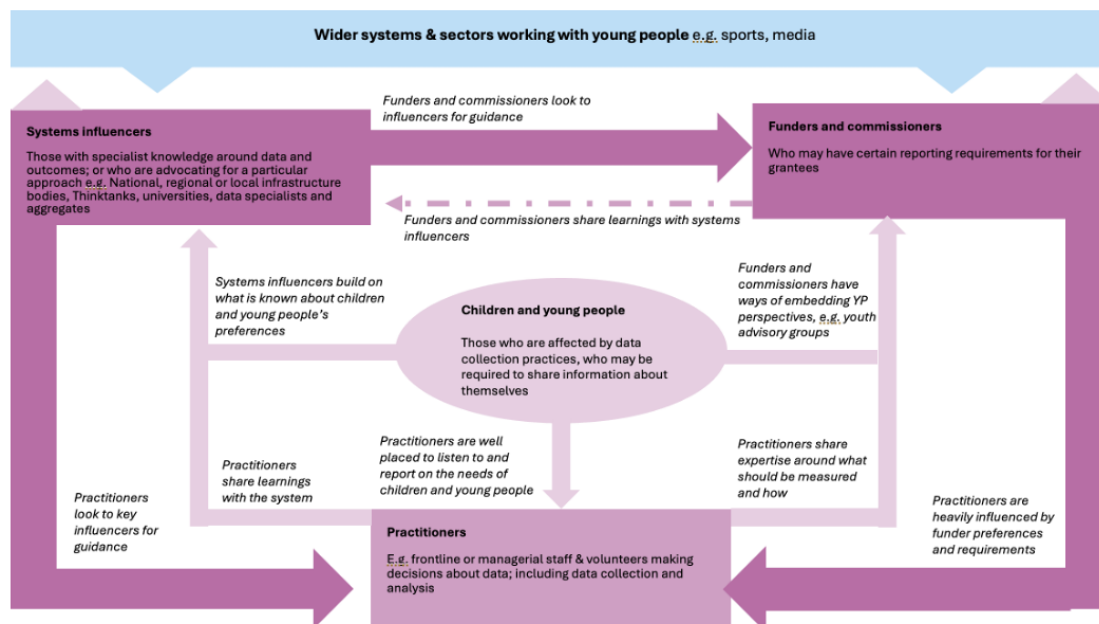
2. Acknowledging the responsibility and influence of funders and commissioners



Acknowledging the influence and responsibility of funders and commissioners in this context would mean:

- A clearer commitment to alignment on the part of funders and commissioners
- Emphasising their role as powerful influencers when it comes to data and alignment practices, and their being willing to 'step into' this power
- Developing collaborative practice to support more joined up working among funders
- Developing channels for communications and influence for funders and commissioners looking to support and drive alignment across the wider system
- Better awareness and championing of the issues and opportunities surrounding alignment among funders and commissioners

As a proof of concept, we developed an example map of how we'd like to see a more aligned system:



The key components of this new system would be:

- Strong youth voice mechanisms to centre youth perspectives at all levels
- Funders, practitioners and 'systems influencers' work 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.

This map, and similar mapping exercises, can support those taking a whole-systems perspective to identify where change might be possible or desirable. This provides a springboard from which to develop further ideas. The following chapter explores how 'alignment' can be broken down into more granular levels, so we can explore specific tensions and opportunity areas at each level.

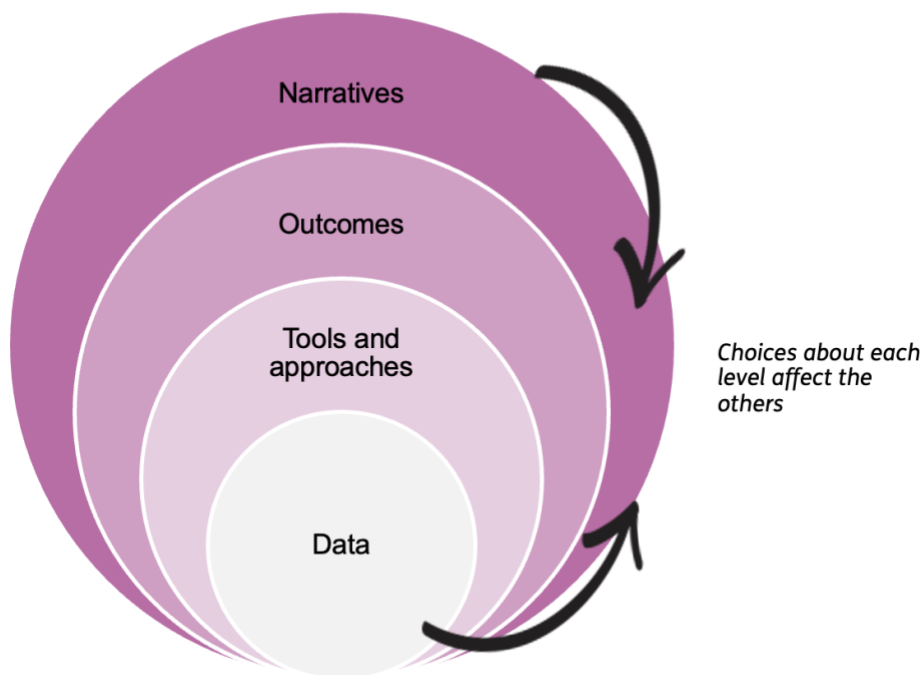
Part 2: What does alignment look like at different levels?

Chapter 3

The different levels of alignment

So, what are we really talking about when discuss alignment in the youth sector?

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 are joined together in a sort of 'chain' – 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)
- **Data:** Information held about the work delivered and the people involved (e.g. demographic data about the young people participating)

The following chapters explore how we can think about alignment at each of these different levels, in order to highlight where there are tensions and opportunity areas for greater alignment.

Chapter 4

Narratives

Why would aligning narratives be a good thing?

“The sector having a voice, rather than us as individuals, would give us a political strength. [We could say] this is the impact we've made across the UK.”

- Practitioner

There is widespread agreement that aligning narratives would help to tell better stories about why youth work is important and the impact it has. The kinds of narratives people were interested to think about included:

- Core message(s) about why youth work is important
- Core message(s) about what good youth work should be doing / how it should be delivered
- Core message(s) about what matters to young people, and what they think youth work should be doing
- Core message(s) about the impact(s) youth work commonly has/ should be aiming for
- Core message(s) about the needs of young people, which are most pressing and where youth work can help

Many believed this would help the sector as a whole, as having a clearer set of core narratives could help raise the profile of good youth work and encourage more resourcing into the youth work system. People raised comparisons with the education system or health sector, where they felt value was more clearly understood without the need for ‘proof’ of impact – perhaps because of more commonly accepted narratives.

Practitioners working at the local and regional level also felt that more aligned narratives could support clearer communication of need. Some felt that there was a perception that only more deprived areas should get funding. They felt a clearer core narrative about the need for youth work could help to communicate the nuance that even in affluent areas there are young people with higher needs (and indeed, their sense of marginalisation might be particularly acute), and that funding can be impactful here too. There was also a

perception that a shared core narrative about the right to youth work for *all* young people was important.

What makes aligning around narratives difficult?

“It’s hard to step back and shape a narrative when we’re overburdened with reactive work” –
Funder

Concerns raised across stakeholders included:

Key concern	What does this mean?	How might we....?
The sector doesn't already have any clear 'narrative' to align to	<p>Practitioners reflected that in such a diverse sector there were 'hundreds of options' for messages they could align to, with no clear option standing out as the 'core' one.</p> <p>Even understanding and defining 'youth work' can be contentious, as there are many different understandings of what 'youth work' is and how it should be delivered across the sector.</p> <p>At a higher level, some acknowledged that the sector switches between deficit-based narratives and strengths-based narratives, and that this can also add to the feeling of confusion over what the key messaging should be.</p>	<p>→ Identify the core narratives that are already in use and effective, where those looking to align could 'align to'</p> <p>→ Seek greater consensus around definitions of youth work practice (in particular) and the different narratives that can be used to support different types of youth work</p> <p>→ Explore the key messages from both an asset-based and a deficit-based perspective, to understand where each can be used for best effect</p>
It's hard to justify investing in narrative-shaping while resources are so tight	<p>Practitioners noted it was hard to shape a narrative while they felt so busy just delivering the work. In particular with the pressures across the system at the moment, practitioners (and funders) felt like they were 'plugging gaps' and 'overburdened with reactive work'.</p> <p>Smaller organisations called for bigger organisations, with more capacity, to help them with this. They were worried that work towards developing narratives could be 'fund sapping' if not managed right.</p>	<p>→ Support and fund proactive, collaborative narrative-shaping</p> <p>→ Identify bigger players in the field who can take more responsibility for narrative work, and the ways in which they can support smaller organisations</p>

<p>We're under pressure to 'prove' youth work works to meet certain outcomes rather than accepting it as positive in its own right</p>	<p>With the youth sector increasingly funded for specific outcomes, stakeholders worried that this eroded the understanding that good youth work is positive in its own right.</p> <p>Many worried they wasted time attempting to provide 'proof' of impact, rather than being able to accept the premise that youth work is valuable and spending their time thinking about improvements and alignment.</p>	<p>→ Develop and support funding structures and initiatives that start from the premise that youth work is effective, rather than encouraging practitioners to 'prove' too many niche impacts that are driven by specific policy initiatives or funding streams (such as employability or knife crime)</p>
<p>It's really challenging to see how we could communicate across such a dispersed and diverse sector</p>	<p>Many acknowledged the challenges of communicating to such a dispersed and diverse sector. There was recognition that different funders / practitioners may need different narratives to support diverse strategies.</p> <p>Even where there are core messages identified, ensuring that these can be shared effectively across the sector to inspire change is complex – given the lack of a clear sector map and the high proportion of informal and voluntary labour.</p>	<p>→ Conduct clearer mapping of the sector to identify who needs to be involved in narrative shaping</p> <p>→ Explore and test how core messages can be communicated to these people – specifically considering groups that might be missed e.g. volunteers, grassroots organisations</p>

<p>Practitioners and those with lived experience are not always the best people to develop 'narratives' - but neither are those too removed from the work.</p>	<p>There was recognition that practitioners on the frontline may not be best placed to develop narratives and impact statements – given their specialism is engaging and working closely with young people.</p> <p>However, there was also a feeling that this should not entirely be developed by those not involved in the day-to-day work (e.g. trustees)</p> <p>While most voiced a desire to keep young people central to narrative shaping, some acknowledged the difficulties in how young people may engage with this: young people may not always articulate their experience in a way that clearly communicates impact (e.g. 'I was at risk of county lines') and in some cases may not be able to fully reflect on benefits or impacts of interventions until years later.</p>	<p>→ Ensure that the pressures for shaping narratives do not fall too heavily on frontline practitioners or those with lived experience</p> <p>→ Support the co-creation of core messages with those who have frontline / personal experience and those who have higher-level systems perspective, to develop messages that can inspire change while staying grounded in the reality of the work</p>
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Chapter 5

Outcomes

Why would aligning around outcomes be a good thing?

Aligning around outcomes could support with developing a clearer impact story, which would support a more impactful narrative (as discussed in the previous chapter).

It would also help to drive efficiency and quality across the sector, as different organisations could build on the work done by previous thinkers in terms of defining and measuring/monitoring outcomes, and focus on putting learning into practice.

While there is variation across the sector, there are some outcomes sets that come up repeatedly in youth work settings. These include:

- **Socio-emotional skills:** There has been growing interest in using socio-emotional skills as a framing for common outcomes, partly to align with wider, global work on 'essential skills' in the education and employment sectors, and to link to the strong evidence base for the value of socio-emotional learning. There is also a general comfort in the connection between 'personal and social development' (a well-established purpose of youth work) and socio-emotional skill development. The language of socio-emotional skills is also preferred over 'soft skills', which practitioners feel are considered less robust and harder to 'sell' to funders compared to 'hard' outcomes such as employment, attainment or reductions in offending rates. Examples include the [College's suite of measurement tools](#), and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.
- **Wellbeing:** All youth work aims to be supportive of short or longer-term wellbeing improvements for young people. At the moment, there is no single measure, although organisations like [Pro Bono Economics](#), [#BeeWell](#) and [Anna Freud Centre](#) have been advocating for and developing practice, theory and tools in this space. The 'monetisation' of wellbeing outcomes is also seen as offering the potential for the youth sector to strengthen its case for investment, although this is contested.
- **Employability and skills:** Some organisations focus on recording employability-focussed skills and the steps towards them. This may overlap with socio-emotional skills, but these are seen as foundational to employability rather than as valuable skills in and of themselves. The most well-used tool in this space is the [SkillsBuilder Framework](#).
- **Relationships or relational practice:** Also overlapping with each of the above categories, some prefer to emphasise a relational approach and the development of

relational skills as the common method and outcome of youth work. An example is the framework Rf4 developed by Vibe.

- **Common outcomes/universal outcomes frameworks:** With the change in Government in 2024, there is renewed appetite for more holistic frameworks that can track impact across multiple areas of significance for all children and young people, similar to Every Child Matters. These frameworks emphasise the universal and holistic nature of outcomes across ages and stages, and domains of young people's lives. Examples include the new Common Outcomes for Children and Young People Collaborative

What makes aligning around outcomes difficult?

*"I have 28 different funders, and they all want something different"- **Practitioner***

Concerns raised across stakeholders included:

Key concern	What does this mean....?	How might we...?
<p>A huge variety of outcomes sets to choose from</p>	<p>Youth work often offers holistic or responsive support, meaning that a great many outcomes may be relevant, and practitioners are aiming to support a range of different outcomes in tandem (e.g. family, wellbeing, community).</p> <p>This can make it hard to choose just one set. Additionally, organisations may emphasise different outcome sets to appeal to different funders, and so may describe the same work as impacting on different outcomes in order to secure funding.</p>	<p>→ Outline and make clear some of the different outcomes sets used in the sector that people could choose to align to, and the trade-offs involved in choosing between the different sets</p> <p>→ Clarify the different types of outcomes that can be used (e.g. experiential, skill-based, perceptual)</p> <p>→ Clarify the relationship between different outcomes to reduce the perception of having to choose between one set or another (e.g. employability or personal and social development)</p>

<p>Diversity at the funder level drives variation in outcomes</p>	<p>Diversity among funders and commissioners can drive diversity in outcomes. Things such as the size of the funder, the type of fund, the location, the topic of interest and preferred language, the funder's specific learning interests, and preferences around accountability can all affect the outcomes sets chosen.</p> <p>There are additional reporting requirements for government and local authorities spending public money, which can also drive how outcomes are monitored.</p> <p>For individual practitioners working with multiple funders, this can mean they are driven to report to multiple outcomes sets and track their work in different ways.</p>	<p>→ Support alignment between different funders, so that those reporting to multiple funders do not have to track lots of different outcomes sets, or speak in different language</p> <p>→ Explore the specific accountability needs of funders/commissioners spending public money and identify where these stand in tension with alignment efforts and what could be done to mitigate tensions</p>
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<p>Desire to measure highly specific outcomes rather than a broader set</p>	<p>Some desire to measure outcomes that they feel are particularly relevant to their work – for example, wanting to measure ‘empathy’ rather than socio-emotional skills more broadly, or wanting to stick with a familiar term like ‘resilience’ rather than align with others who might be measuring the same thing but using a different word. There is concern that aligning to broader outcomes sets could result in loss of nuance, and prevent organisations from demonstrating their uniqueness or specific impact.</p> <p>This is particularly the case where they have already invested in their own systems and may be reluctant to modify these for the sake of alignment.</p> <p>This is also borne out in specific locations, where practitioners worry that aligning will mean they are less able to tailor outcomes sets to local contexts, in particular where they may have different priorities to regional or national actors.</p> <p>The relational nature of youth work means many desire the ability to set and track person-centred ‘outcomes’, and show ‘distance travelled’ on these, rather than a less flexible outcomes set.</p>	<p>→ Identify and promote the ways in which highly specific, person-centred and locally relevant outcomes can be measured alongside broader, aligned sets, and the benefits of choosing broader outcomes on occasion</p> <p>→ Identify opportunities for alignment and incentives for those who have already invested in their own outcomes frameworks and systems</p> <p>→ Explore the ways in which those with their own outcomes frameworks may work in an aligned way with others in the system</p>
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<p>A disconnection between the outcomes funders are interested in and the way practitioners want to work</p>	<p>Many highlighted a difference between the way funders expect to track outcomes and the ways in which practitioners may be thinking about this.</p> <p>In some cases, it was acknowledged that this may just be a case of how language is used, with different layers in the system using different language to refer to similar things: e.g. young people talk about ‘seeing friends’ practitioners talk about ‘building relationships’ and policymakers talk about ‘social cohesion’.</p> <p>However, at a deeper level, there are concerns from practitioners that tracking outcomes to demonstrate value for money can impact on relational working, with some preferring to work in a process-driven, rather than outcomes focussed, way.</p>	<p>→ Support more joined-up thinking between funders and practitioners when it comes to setting outcomes</p> <p>→ Highlight areas where funder need and practitioner needs around outcome tracking are in tension and what can be done to mitigate this</p> <p>→ Align language around outcomes, so that people are clearer when they are actually talking about the same thing</p> <p>→ Ensure that outcomes are chosen that meet funder requirements without undermining the value of good quality relational working</p>
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<p>Not knowing who is in the system or who you should be aligning with</p>	<p>Funders and commissioners, in particular those adjacent to the youth work sector (e.g. NHS commissioners) described it being hard to know how the system is structured: who is working on which outcomes and which other funders to approach when wanting to align or collaborate. Even those more firmly operating within the youth work system discussed how silo-ed working could limit knowing how to align with the wider system.</p> <p>In addition to this, stakeholders highlighted complexities of working within an evolving system, where changing policy priorities can shift funder expectations. Those collecting data were keen to 'future proof' alignment efforts, to ensure the outcomes tracked now would be relevant in the future.</p>	<p>→ Make the youth work system feel more knowable – especially to those working adjacent to it, or newer to it</p> <p>→ Reduce siloed working among funders and commissioners</p> <p>→ Support the development and use of outcomes sets that are in some sense 'future-proofed' to changing policy priorities</p>
<p>Perception that some outcomes are more 'robust' or easier to align than others</p>	<p>Some stakeholders worried that the types of outcomes that would be easier to align around would be so-called 'hard' outcomes (like employment), leaving the outcomes more central to youth work (e.g. social skills) harder to measure.</p> <p>This is also complicated by a lot of the outcomes being indirect – e.g. joining a sports team in order to develop social skills; or the prevention of more negative outcomes elsewhere.</p>	<p>→ Raise awareness and further testing of the ways in which 'softer' (i.e. 'core') or indirect outcomes in youth work can be aligned and measured robustly</p>

Chapter 6

Tools and approaches

Why would aligning around tools and approaches be a good thing?

It is of course important to choose tools and approaches that are appropriate for the context, so when it comes to measuring impact in particular, a degree of flexibility and tailoring is needed.

However, too much flexibility and tailoring can create a lot of ‘noise’ around measuring (and monitoring) impact, which can add to the sense of it being confusing and unregulated. This is compounded by the rise of the evaluation industry, which can create lots of new, ‘innovative’ approaches and drive the sense of methods and tools being highly technical and specialised.

Identifying areas where tools and approaches could be aligned can actually help to support fitness for context – by providing clearer guidance and suggestions for methods that are tried and tested and sector-backed. Additionally, this can support efficiency, by supporting practitioners to connect to tools they can use without needing to reinvent the wheel each time. This is particularly relevant to those already aligning around common outcomes sets and wanting to measure them in a more standardised way.

The most common type of tools and approaches are those that seek to track changes in outcomes for young people. They are sometimes used twice, to capture a ‘before’ and ‘after’, or just once, either to capture retrospective reflection or to show what has been achieved during participation. There are a range of ways in which outcomes can be measured, and alignment may be possible within or alongside each type of tool or approach. The ‘types’ of information stakeholders were interested in measuring over time included:

- Perception of ability (“I feel better able to use public transport independently”)
- Demonstration of skills (observation of a young person mentoring a younger peer)
- Perception of emotions/wellbeing (“I feel less anxious about meeting new people”; “I feel generally happier at school since coming here”)
- Experience of provision (“I had a lot of fun today”; “I really felt listening to”)
- Behaviour or action – i.e. whether or not a specific action/behaviour has been completed (successful completion of a physical challenge, or creating a plan for a residential)

- Practice/Performance measure – assessment of performance against a pre-defined set of standards (achieving an award or certificate; reaching a certain level in a curriculum)

To track these types of information, stakeholders told us they were using a combination of:

- Validated surveys/tools/questions, which are standardised (e.g. WEMWBS)
- Dialogic or ‘key worker’ tools that support conversation and reflection, which may have an element of standardisation (e.g. Outcomes Star)
- In-house or bespoke surveys (e.g. tools created by or for individual organisations to ask young people about self-reported impact or life experiences)
- Feedback questionnaires (e.g. capturing feedback from users)
- Qualitative methods, (e.g. storytelling or ethnography)
- Monitoring engagement (e.g. tracking attendance)
- Online data management platforms that may capture all or some of the above (e.g. Upshot, Office 365)

A note on language:

By tools and approaches, we refer to the ways in which stakeholders are measuring and monitoring their impact on certain outcomes. Some of these tools are referred to as ‘measures’, but we have opted for broader language here to encompass the fact that:

1. ‘Measures’ can be quite a narrow interpretation of the various methods used by stakeholders, and their intent
2. Many of the tools used are not measures, even where they are framed as such, which adds to confusion
3. Measures are used for ‘measurement’, which continues to have negative connotations for some, in particular those working with more marginalised groups who may feel under excess scrutiny more generally (e.g. stop and search) or who do not feel that the relational approach or impact of youth work can be measured at all

It is also worth noting that other aspects of provision may be measured or monitored using aligned tools or approaches, including quality or youth participation, for example. Some of these tools are accredited or attached to a form of validation, which incentivises alignment, but very few are backed by any research or evidence. There is particular nervousness in relation to alignment in the measurement of quality, as this heightens concerns about comparison.

What makes aligning around tools and approaches difficult?

*“I’d like to find a tool for tracking outcomes that wasn’t earth shatteringly expensive – both in terms of investment and the man-hours to use it properly” – **Practitioner***

*“If we’re not up to scratch, how can we put higher expectations on the groups we fund?” - **Funder***

Concerns raised across stakeholders included:

Key concern	What does this mean?	How might we....?
<p>Measuring outcomes is hard – and not everyone has the training or the time to do it well</p>	<p>There is huge variation in outcome tracking driven by the fact that different individuals and organisations have different capabilities and capacities around this.</p> <p>Some practitioners lack a solid understanding of the different tools available, which are more appropriate for different contexts and where standardisation might be possible. This can drive resistance from staff who prefer to use familiar tools rather than try something new. It can also mean inconsistent use of the same tool, with individuals preferring to use these in the way they know how.</p> <p>This is particularly complex for organisations relying on voluntary labour, with many noting that encouraging volunteers to fill in paperwork or gather data can be difficult.</p> <p>This lack of understanding is not just felt at the practice end –funders, commissioners, leadership and trustees may all lack an understanding of the tools and approaches used in learning and evaluation, and also lack the resources or time required to upskill in this area. For some funders, this posed a barrier in their dialogue with practitioners: ‘if we’re not up to scratch, how can we put higher expectations on the groups we fund?’</p>	<p>→ Raise the baseline awareness and skills across practitioners, funders and commissioners and trustees so that they are confident in knowing how to track outcomes and what ‘good’ looks like</p> <p>→ provide clearer guidance around what tools are available, and the trade-offs involved between choosing between one or other type of tool</p> <p>→ Support capacity for training and trialling new approaches for both individuals and organisations</p> <p>→ Support consistent use of the tools available</p> <p>→ Ensure that those working with volunteers are able to track outcomes sufficiently</p> <p>→ Encourage funders to invest in learning around outcomes tracking themselves so they can promote best practice elsewhere</p>

<p>Standardised tools might not be flexible enough for our specific context</p>	<p>It was a general worry that aligning meant adopting a specific standardised tool that would not work well in the context of any one organisation. Practitioners and commissioners alike wanted to emphasise the specific needs of their work and associated outcomes, e.g. working with neurodivergent young people, being compatible with specific CRM software, local context, the need to align with sector-adjacent funders from health, sport, education etc.</p> <p>Similarly, funders and commissioners were worried about ‘insisting’ on one aligned approach and constraining the work of their grantees.</p> <p>Stakeholders from all areas worried that the standardised tools available would not be flexible enough for these needs, and were uncertain around the extent standardised or aligned tools would be able to be adapted or used in conjunction with other more specialised tools. They also worried aligned tools would not be user-friendly for young people (e.g. surveys rather than observational work).</p>	<p>→ Explore and promote the ways in which standardised tools can be adapted and flexed to different contexts</p> <p>→ identify how tools can be run in conjunction with other more context-specific tools and approaches without creating too much noise or inefficiency</p> <p>→ Explore the ways in which standardised tools are perceived by young people, and how these can be run in user-friendly, inclusive ways, including where alternatives should be adopted</p>
<p>Standardised tools and approaches might not be suitable for the young people I work with</p>	<p>Similarly to the above concern, stakeholders worried that adopting new tools or approaches may place an extra burden on the young people they work with.</p> <p>They worried that more aligned tools may not give them the flexibility to work with young people in an ethical, equitable and positive way, because:</p> <p>Questions about mental health may be intrusive or triggering, with a particular concern for standardised questions that can’t be adapted</p>	<p>→ identify and champion the ways in which evaluation methods can support (rather than disrupt) positive relationships between young people and youth worker</p> <p>→ identify and promote methods that give young people choice and flexibility about how and when they get involved</p>

	<p>Certain groups of young people are already subject to heightened levels of surveillance and so are suspicious of attempts to gather data from them</p> <p>Young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) may be excluded by the language or concepts</p> <p>The tools and approaches available are more likely to reinforce dominant (e.g. Western) academic standards at the expense of wider lenses and cultures that might be more appropriate for some of the young people worked with; similarly, these tools may attempt to measure all young people against fixed or inappropriate standards, particularly young people who are neuro-diverse</p> <p>Adopting more 'formalised' approaches to measuring impact could disrupt the more informal, relational approach central to youth work</p> <p>Where they are aware of/advocates for other more creative or young person-centred methods (e.g. video, audio or diaries), they are often less clear on how these can be aligned/ run alongside aligned methods</p> <p>They are not sure how to incentivise young people to take part, but know this will be required to get participation... but also worry that this introduces potential bias</p> <p>They feel it is extractive/ isn't fair asking young people to spend their free time filling in questionnaires</p> <p>They worry about how this information will be used, and want to know how to reassure young people and protect them from extractive 'big data' practices</p>	<p>→ Explore and support the ways in which more creative, young person-centred methods can support alignment (rather than standing in tension with this)</p> <p>→ Explore the different incentives and barriers for young people to engage in impact tracking, and how this can be incentivised ethically, equitably and appropriately</p> <p>→ Explore how (different cohorts of) young people feel about the different tools and approaches available and the impact of these tools on them</p> <p>→ Develop clearer lines of accountability and feedback around how information will be used, and how this will be for the benefit of the young people sharing their information</p>
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	We don't know enough about which tools are appropriate and acceptable for young people, nor enough about the burden of the data collection on them	
It's hard to know what a 'good' tool or approach looks like	<p>Many stakeholders across the system lacked confidence in their ability to critically appraise the different tools and approaches available. Some didn't know where to look to find tools, while others felt there were already lots of options when it comes to standardised measures, but that it was hard to choose between them or decide which one is 'best' (and even what makes a tool 'best'). This was sometimes expressed as distrust in the tools themselves, with people worrying that these may be outdated or not peer reviewed. It wasn't clear whether this was always a real concern, or deployed as further evidence of why it was best to stick with existing approaches.</p> <p>Stakeholders, in particular funders and commissioners, noted a lack of guidance around 'best practice' or 'benchmarks' when it comes to alignment and use of certain tools or approaches.</p> <p>Some reported they had become 'stuck' in their move towards alignment with anxiety over finding the 'perfect' or 'best' tool limiting their ability to move forward practically.</p>	<p>→ Provide more guidance around what 'good' tools and approaches look like when it comes to alignment</p> <p>→ Raise confidence in the tools that are already available e.g. better communicating when they were last updated or reviewed</p> <p>→ Assuage anxiety over finding the 'perfect tool' e.g. by sharing case study examples of how tools have been adapted in different contexts</p>
Some may find it hard to adopt standardised approaches and may miss out	In particular, funders and commissioners were concerned that their ask was proportionate and flexible for grantees – in particular when giving grants to smaller or grassroots organisations, or those relying on voluntary labour.	→ Explore the barriers and drivers for those smaller, local and grassroots organisations, or those relying on voluntary labour to ensure they are not missed out in alignment efforts

	<p>Stakeholders worried that asking everyone to adopt a certain aligned approach risked leaving some of these smaller organisations behind, which would impact the diversity of the sector in the long term.</p> <p>This manifested in a desire from funders to offer flexible options to grantees, and an aversion to insisting too much on consistency. They were also keen to be led by the sector with regards to which approaches were considered effective in frontline settings.</p>	<p>→ Promote approaches to alignment that are accessible to all</p> <p>→ Reassure funders on which approaches are ‘proportionate’ in different settings, to encourage greater confidence on the part of funders to request consistency</p> <p>→ Identify approaches to alignment that are sector-backed and endorsed by practitioners</p>
Perception that measurement systems are ‘earth shatteringly expensive’	<p>Practitioners in particular were worried that aligning around tools and approaches would require time and money in order to get off the ground. They mentioned the cost of licence fees for CRMs or access to certain tools, in addition to the staff time required to input data and ensure effective use of the tools.</p> <p>They also noted that when it came to the ‘market’ for these tools, different online CRMs and software are competing for custom, driving variation in the market in terms of what platform gets used to collect and store information.</p>	<p>→ Identify the ‘price tag’ for different types of alignment and promote free or cheap methods of aligning</p> <p>→ Explore the role of paid-for platforms and CRMs in alignment, to promote the ways in which alignment can be done without needing to invest in licence fees</p> <p>→ Reassure practitioners using different software that this does not mean alignment of any sort is not possible</p>

Chapter 7

Data

Why would aligning around data be a good thing?

Alignment at this level means different things to different people. Some of the ways stakeholders were thinking about this include:

- How information is recorded – the specific format of recording date of birth, for example
- How information is defined – using the same set of criteria for recording information about disability, for example
- How and what information is asked for - for example, how young people are asked to provide their demographic information, and what questions are included
- How data sets are stored and who can access them – for example the publicly available funding data on 360 giving
- How data sets of different types are joined up to add to a broader evidence base – in particular historic data sets held by funders and commissioners

At the most granular level, there can be discrepancies in how information is recorded (e.g. date of birth, postcode) that can limit aggregation or comparability across different types of data set and prevent a more joined up narrative emerging.

Conceptually, a lack of agreement about what individual terms mean or denote can result in an inability to say anything collective other than the most general statements. It can also introduce confusion for young people where they're not sure what terms mean (for example, what constitutes 'regular attendance', or even uncertainty over what a 'youth club' is).

At a higher level, being able to join up data sets, and pull-out trends can be politically powerful, enabling the shaping, testing and challenging of narratives.

What makes aligning around data difficult?

*"It can be challenging even to debate what a 'participant' is – is that someone who attended once? Who attended five times?" – **Practitioner***

Concerns raised across stakeholders included:

Key concern	Details	How might we...?
Not wanting data collection to be invasive	<p>Stakeholders voiced a need to feel secure in why they are collecting data, in particular personal data that may raise questions or challenges from young people or their families. Some had examples of specific types of data they knew to be contentious – e.g. data about sexuality – and felt anxious about how they would justify this data being collected. Despite there being a general sense that no topic is ‘off limits’ for dialogue and discussion in youth work settings, the idea of gathering data about some areas caused significant nervousness.</p> <p>Practitioners were concerned to maintain positive relationships with the young people they worked with, and were sometimes reluctant to collect too much data, and aware that you can’t make assumptions about how people will feel about their demographic data.</p> <p>Some voiced concerns with evidencing need, using metrics such as free school meals, which were perceived to not always be a reliable indicator as new funding streams come online.</p>	<p>→ Explore non-invasive ways of collecting demographic data</p> <p>→ Create a clearer understanding about what proportionate data-collection looks like when working with young people</p> <p>→ Offer advice on evidencing and reporting on need</p>
Reluctance to share data when working competitively	Several people noted the realities of working in a more ‘competitive system’ meaning that organisations may be reluctant to open their data up to scrutiny.	→ Identify opportunities for collaboration outside of competitive processes

		<p>→ Present clear rationales and calls for action for those considering getting involved in data sharing efforts</p> <p>→ Identify and support specific data sharing initiatives</p>
Variations in reporting practices	<p>Differences in data collection may be driven by different eligibility criteria, meaning that not all practitioners or funders are collecting the same demographic information.</p> <p>In addition, comparability across data may be limited due to the variations in how some things are recorded e.g. 'attendance' means different things in different contexts, sometimes meaning 'turning up' and sometimes meaning 'engaging for a prolonged period of time'.</p> <p>Some voiced concern that common categorisations could be unhelpful – e.g. 'South Asian' demographic being a huge category under which to group disparate people.</p>	<p>→ Explore common variations in recording practice and offer suggestions for common terminologies and definitions</p> <p>→ Offer alternatives or nuance to categorisations that practitioners consider too broad or unhelpful</p>

<p>Lack of trust in the data we already have</p>	<p>Practitioners were particularly aware of the ways in which the young people they worked with may misrepresent information in data collection, and the reasons for this – e.g. shame around appearing low-income, lack of disclosure of LGBTQ+ status, not wanting to declare disabilities for fear of being excluded from activities, concern that data will be shared with parents, guardians or even police.</p> <p>Funders and commissioners were also aware that data may be unreliable or biased, and aware that they don't always know about the conditions under which the data they are sent gets collected.</p>	<p>→ Invite honest reflection from practitioners around which data categories are likely to be more or less reliable based on the cohorts they are working with</p>
<p>Concern for data overload</p>	<p>Many voiced that for data to be useful it needs to be analysed and used effectively. People worried that, particularly in the context of tiny, resource poor teams, data was being collected for the 'sake of it', without any clear structures for analysis or reporting.</p> <p>There was also concern that alignment efforts in data may not be sustainable.</p>	<p>→ Explore how different data types are analysed, and where alignment might support more efficient or better-quality processes</p> <p>→ Identify more sustainable work around alignment to support longer term learnings</p>

Part 3: Where are the opportunities to support better alignment?

Chapter 8

Building a culture shift around alignment

Alignment requires a culture shift:

There are lots of opportunities to drive and support better alignment across the system. This chapter offers some different starting points stemming from the barriers and challenges outlined above.

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:

- 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 this report, and hold the sector to account
- A coalition of willing advisors and early adopters, ideally drawn from multiple places within the system, who can offer critical friend feedback as the work continues and - critically - who commit to implementation in practice (rather than feedback from afar)
- A mechanism for ensuring youth voice is effectively embedded in the work e.g. a young advisory group
- A clear strategy, laying out the short-, medium- and longer-term goals of the work, with indicators of success at each stage
- Clearly defined 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
- Identifying the quick wins and broader alignment with sector initiatives and policies
- YMCA George Williams College to make learning from their work to date freely available as part of their legacy

Chapter 9

Key opportunity areas

So where are the opportunity areas?

There are many ways this work could be moved forward – so many that it can be hard to see where to start. To support this, we have clustered opportunity areas in the following structure:

Overall	Ensuring young people are kept at the heart of alignment efforts	Developing clearer 'hooks' or 'starting points' into alignment efforts	Addressing barriers in funding structures that limit alignment
Narratives	Taking confidence in the premise that youth work is effective and building alignment from here	Better leveraging what is already known about effective practice	Supporting more joined up communication across the sector
Outcomes	Raise awareness about different outcomes sets in rotation and how these can be used to best effect	Funders using their leverage to align around outcomes sets	Collaborative outcomes setting between funders and practitioners to bridge the 'birds' eye' and 'on the ground' perspectives
Tools and approaches	Promote better 'measurement literacy' so people can make informed decisions around the tools they choose	Guidance for how the tools can be used in the 'real world'	Developing and quality assuring the tools themselves
Data	Fostering a culture that supports shared data processes	Encouraging alignment around ethical and equitable data practice	Identifying data fields where more standardisation is possible

We will talk through each level in more detail below.

Overall opportunities:

The overall opportunity areas surfaced were:

- Ensuring young people are kept at the heart of alignment efforts
- Developing clearer 'hooks' or 'starting points' into alignment efforts
- Addressing barriers in funding structures that limit alignment

Ensuring young people are kept at the heart of alignment efforts

A core priority across the system is how to ensure the system supports clear lines of accountability to the young people it serves, and that 'alignment' means aligning more closely to the needs and priorities of young people.

Opportunities 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

There is recognition that there is already good work done in this space, but that this can be augmented and standardised so that young people become increasingly influential powerholders in this space.

Some ideas for how this can be done include:

- Embedding youth voice practice, such as engaging young people in funder strategy development, inviting commissioners to hear from young people directly, young commissioner groups or use of youth voice frameworks (like the Lundy model)
- Testing and developing measurement methods with young people – such as through piloting measurement tools or conducting participatory research
- 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 ways in which evaluation can be used to improve accountability to young people, as well as to funders
- More guidance around how young people can be consulted and supported to engage in dialogues around alignment efforts

Developing clearer 'hooks' or 'starting points' into alignment efforts

With such a complex landscape stakeholders agreed it was difficult to know where to start, with no clear pathways and little feedback to suggest alignment efforts would be moving things in the right direction.

This pointed to a need to offer encouragement and guidance for different people to be able to 'start somewhere'. Ideas centred around:

- Building a clear and compelling argument around why moving to greater alignment makes sense in the first place, specifically outlining what the benefits will be for different stakeholders – e.g. young people, practitioners and commissioners (e.g. better understanding local need, more able to influence funders, more aligned to what young people want, etc.)
- Identifying some criteria around what 'good' alignment practice looks like; and developing case studies of what alignment looks like in practice, to bring 'alignment' to life for different stakeholders
- Developing 'starting points' for people early on in their journey, including those that don't require a lot of resource e.g. offering simplified stages or frameworks to give people a sense for the journey they might take to work towards alignment
- Identifying starting points for alignment in the broader system, e.g. starting within specific organisations or sectors, starting with funders and commissioners who have specific levers of power.
- Mapping out the ways in which the youth work sector can be understood, including how this relates to other areas where positive outcomes can be secured for young people and how we might map and understand levers for change in this system; identifying the different channels and actors where alignment is possible
- Investing in dashboards or platforms that enable live data visualisation, so those collecting data can quickly see trends and gain a sense for the ways in which the data they are collecting can help them make decisions
- Understanding the effects framing can have to act as hooks for different people – e.g. framing around urgency and crisis vs. framing around benefits and assets

Addressing barriers in funding structures that limit alignment

The types of structural barriers that stakeholders highlighted included commissioning landscapes that encourage competitive (over collaborative) practice; short term and targeted funding and siloed working at all levels.

The kinds of ideas stakeholders were keen to explore to address these barriers included:

- Collaborative and longer-term funding models that bring people together to work on common issues for a sustained period of time; giving them an opportunity to prioritise alignment
- Unrestricted funding that provides core funding to organisations and gives space to think about alignment
- Exploring and promoting areas where alignment can unlock greater resource
- Ensuring evaluation and learning is included as standard in commissioning
- Learning from where this has been done successfully in the past (e.g. looking for inspiration from the DEI data standard, 360 Giving, Propel and Grenfell emergency funding)
- Identifying and calling for opportunities for influential and inspiring leadership, including direction from central government

Narratives

The opportunity areas surfaced around narratives were:

- Taking confidence in the premise that youth work is effective and building alignment from here
- Better leveraging what is already known about effective practice
- Supporting more joined up communication across the sector

Taking confidence in the premise that youth work is effective and building alignment from here

Stakeholders felt that they were often drawn into feeling the need to 'prove' the effectiveness of youth work in a way that is not required in other sectors (e.g. education or healthcare). It was felt that developing a clearer stance that youth work is effective would serve as a starting point to develop clearer shared narratives around what the impact of good youth work should be.

Stakeholders also felt there was a need to test key messages from both an asset-based and a deficit-based perspective, to understand framing/where each can be used for best effect.

Better leveraging what is already known about effective practice

*I don't want a funder to tell me what to do - I want them to listen to me tell them why what we do is good- and let us crack on with it - **Practitioner***

There is a huge amount of data already held by different people in the system, including historic data held by funders and commissioners. For practitioners, there was a sense that being able to leverage data better would help to develop stronger narratives that could help influence funders and shape funder agendas. This process could add weight and evidence to narratives about what works, where there is need, and what could be improved.

Stakeholders suggested:

- Synthesising historic data to draw out key themes and leverage the evidence base to better effect
- Identifying bigger players in the field who can take more responsibility for narrative work, and the ways in which they can support smaller organisations

Supporting more joined up communication across the sector

Stakeholders felt that more collaboration and dialogue between different parts of the system would help to reduce conflicting narratives and promote consistent and aligned communication.

The types of things that were felt would support this include:

- Resourcing proactive, collaborative narrative shaping activities, that bring together practitioners, young people, sector leaders, funders and commissioners
- More collaborative strategy development and goal setting among funders
- Identifying the core narratives that are already in use and effective, where those looking to align could 'align to'
- Learning from collectives and the tools and approaches they use to align narratives whilst keeping these dynamic and co-owned - such as partnership agreements and memorandums of understanding
- Identifying, defining and emphasising core elements of youth work that make it distinctive, e.g. 'relational practice', 'youth work'
- Conduct clearer mapping of the sector to identify who needs to be involved in narrative shaping and to ensure key groups aren't missed – e.g. volunteers, smaller organisations
- Ensure that the pressure for 'narrative shaping' does not sit too heavily on young people/ those with lived experience

Outcomes:

The opportunity areas surfaced around outcomes were:

- Raise awareness about different outcomes sets in rotation and how these can be used to best effect
- Funders using their leverage to align around outcomes sets
- Collaborative outcomes setting between funders and practitioners to bridge the 'birds' eye' and 'on the ground' perspectives

Raise awareness about different outcomes sets in rotation and how these can be used to best effect

Many needed a starting point to identify where they could align and what they could align to. They wanted to know more about the different outcomes sets and frameworks available and how to use them well.

Specific ideas included:

- 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
- Promoting how generalised outcomes sets can be used alongside targeted, locally specific sets
- Exploring how outcomes sets can sit alongside and support relational practice and person-centred delivery – e.g. outcomes sets that would encompass and support an understanding of 'distance travelled' in individual people, rather than providing static snapshots or standardised goals.
- Better promoting the ways in which 'soft' or relationship-based outcomes can be understood and measured robustly

Funders using their leverage to align around outcomes sets

It was widely recognised that funders have a lever to pull when it comes to alignment of outcomes, given the power and influence many have over practitioner agendas and the ways in which they collect and analyse data. Some felt that funders should be encouraged to recognise the responsibility they have around alignment.

The kinds of ideas raised included:

- Develop principles or accountability mechanisms for funders to drive and demonstrate their commitment to supporting alignment
- Identify ways the social work system can feel more knowable – especially to those funders and commissioners working adjacent to it, or newer to it, to support more joined up working among funders and commissioners

- Encouraging funders to align 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)
- Exploring the ways in which shared outcomes sets can be activated through pooled or collaborative funding initiatives
- Establishing regional pilots to test how funders can work towards shared outcomes (e.g. through established funding groups such as London Funders)
- Identifying outcomes sets which are likely to be relevant now and in the future, so alignment efforts can be 'future proofed' as much as possible
- Learning from existing outcomes frameworks, and how these are implemented in practice e.g. the Common Outcomes Framework
- Explore the specific accountability needs of funders/commissioners spending public money and identify where these stand in tension with alignment efforts and what could be done to mitigate
- Encouraging those with their own outcomes frameworks to share learnings/thinking about alignment

Collaborative outcomes setting between funders and practitioners to bridge the 'birds' eye' and 'on the ground' perspectives

Joining up practice knowledge with funding and commissioning priorities was felt to be crucial in identifying outcomes that would work across multiple levels. It was recognised that funders/ commissioners may have a 'birds-eye' view which can bring strength to conversations about alignment and measurement. However, they are often not close to the day-to-day work as practitioners are, meaning there is a need for nuanced cocreation and ongoing dialogue to ensure alignment efforts remain relevant across different contexts.

Specific ideas surfaced included:

- Funding collaborative spaces on outcomes between funders, commissioners and practitioners to build up trusting relationships
- identifying areas where funder need and practitioner needs around outcome setting are in tension and what can be done to mitigate this
- Work to align language around outcomes, so that people are clearer when they are actually talking about the same thing

Tools and approaches

The opportunity areas surfaced around tools and approaches were:

- Promote better ‘measurement literacy’ so people can make informed decisions around the tools they choose
- Guidance for how the tools can be used in the ‘real world’
- Developing and quality assuring the tools themselves

Promote better ‘measurement literacy’ so people can make informed decisions around the tools they choose

It was understood that a lack of confidence and awareness around impact tracking were big blockers at all levels of the system. This is exacerbated by the sense ‘measurement’ is technical, and some cited the growth of the evaluation industry as a complicating factor here.

The kinds of ideas that were raised to support more confidence included:

- Developing clear guidance, in plain English, for anyone interested to know more about which tools might work to support which outcomes sets, the trade-offs involved in using different measurement systems, the investment required to run these well and what ‘good’ looks like, so funders and organisations can make informed decisions around the tools and approaches they choose
- Support and fund training and trialling new tools and approaches for both individuals and organisations
- Develop training for specific tools and approaches, that keeps it simple and starts small, to support consistent use of the tools available. Ensure this is available to all – e.g. grassroots organisations and volunteers
- Embed training about evaluation methodologies in standard/mandatory youth work training
- Explore and champion evaluation methods which are favoured by young people and which support (rather than disrupt) the positive relationships between young people and youth workers

Guidance for how the tools can be used in the ‘real world’

Stakeholders felt that in many areas of the system, conversations could get stuck in the ‘theoretical’, with people looking for the perfect measure, and unsure if it would work in their setting. It was felt that to support this, there should be a focus on exploring and promoting what it looks like to use measures in ‘the real world’, including sharing learnings about what stakeholders can do to make them more relevant to their specific context.

Specific ideas included:

- Promoting a culture of 'pragmatism over perfectionism', recognising the importance of testing and learning in the real world and sharing learnings trialling tools and approaches
- Training and guidance that includes learning about how to embed measures in practice, learnings from what works well or less well in different contexts (e.g. in grassroots settings or with diverse cohorts of young people)
- 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
- Support communities of practice who can share learnings around measurement in practice, and support one another through their learning journey
- Guidance on how different tools are perceived by young people, how these can be run in user-friendly, inclusive ways and tested with different groups of young people; or where alternatives should be adopted
- Explore the different incentives and barriers for young people to engage in impact tracking, and how this can be incentivised ethically, equitably and appropriately
- Identify the 'price tag' for different types of tool and approach and promote free or cheap methods of aligning
- Reassure funders on which approaches are 'proportionate' in different settings, to encourage greater confidence on the part of funders to request consistency

Developing and quality assuring the tools themselves

Some of the practitioners and funders that were familiar with specific tools had thoughts on what could be done to make these feel more user-friendly. Some voiced concerns that tools were outdated or biased and sought more reassurance that the tools they chose to use would be up-to-date and peer reviewed. The kinds of ideas that were surfaced here included:

- Providing tool-specific 'how to guides' that sit alongside the tools themselves
- Building the sector's confidence that tools and measures are being reviewed and optimised over time by providing more information about the development journeys of different measurement tools, e.g. when and how tools will be reviewed, what this process will look like.
- Promote and fund collaboration between different developers to align and decouple tools
- Reviewing the tools from an equity lens to surface any inherent assumptions around approaches, cultures and lenses and suggest more inclusive adaptations or alternatives as needed
- Explore and develop learnings about how young people perceive different approaches, involving research centres and academic communities to develop this further where possible

Data

The opportunity areas surfaced around data were:

- Fostering a culture that supports shared data processes
- Encouraging alignment around ethical and equitable data practice
- Identifying data fields where more standardisation is possible

Fostering a culture that supports shared data processes

While many were on board with the premise of shared data, they feared that data sharing would be limited by more competitive pressures in the sector.

The ideas to support more data sharing included:

- Identifying and supporting existing data sharing initiatives
- Allocating funding to supporting shared data practices
- Commissioners and funders taking seriously their role to act as brokers between funded partners to create collaborative goals
- Piloting 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
- Ensure data collected is beneficial for practitioners, as well as for funders and commissioners
- Promoting the benefits of sharing data to practitioners and funders, e.g. by demonstrating how shared data sets can be used to make strategic decisions and demonstrate impact via dashboards

Encouraging alignment around ethical and equitable data practice

The majority felt that if we're trying to align, it's important to align in an ethical and equitable way.

Specific ideas here included:

- Creating a clearer understanding about what proportionate data-collection looks like when working with young people
- Guidance around how demographic data, personal data or more sensitive data can be collected ethically and in a non-intrusive way
- 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

Identifying data fields where more standardisation is possible

Stakeholders suspected there to be some data fields where more alignment is possible, because the information collected is common enough that there should be routes to standardise options. However, looking more closely revealed that even for very specific data fields (e.g. around personal or demographic data) there is a lot of complexity and sensitivity to navigate. Specific ideas surfaced here included:

- Reviewing and exploring the ways in which data collection can be streamlined between different partners, so data collection only needs to be done once
- Identifying the data fields where more standardisations may be possible and offering specific guidance around how this can be done well (e.g. demographic data standard);
- Explore common variations in recording practice and offer suggestions for common terminologies and definitions
- Identifying where common data is already captured and how this could be better aligned – e.g. reviewing and agreeing the data that gets captured and shared in 360
- Invite honest reflection from practitioners around which data categories are likely to be more or less reliable based on the cohorts they are working with

Appendix: Collated opportunities

General	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Build a clearer benchmark around the different 'levels' of alignment and identify some criteria or indicators for where we want to get to→ Define spaces (e.g. through targeted funding) for people to explore and prioritise alignment→ identify what 'prioritising alignment' looks like for different actors→ Identify what different parts of the system need to move into more aligned ways of working→ Develop clarity over what 'good' and 'bad' looks like when it comes to alignment→ Identify and funnel resource into exploring and promoting alignment→ Promote the ways in which aligning can be done without requiring huge amounts of investment→ Identify clear starting points and practical examples to bring 'alignment' to life for different stakeholders→ Explore and promote the ways that alignment can lead to unlocking greater resource as opposed to scarcity→ Develop a clearer map of the scale and nature of the sector, and an understanding of the different channels and actors where alignment is possible→ Explore the ways that alignment and person-centred/relational work can support one another rather than standing in tension
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	→ Ensure that young people are centred in alignment efforts
Narratives	<p>Identify the core narratives that are effective/already in use, where those looking to align could 'align to'</p> <p>Provide further clarification around the definitions of 'youth work' and the different narratives that can be used</p> <p>Explore the key messages from both an asset-based and a deficit-based perspective, to understand where each can be used for best effect</p> <p>Support and fund proactive, collaborative narrative-shaping</p> <p>Identify bigger players in the field who can take more responsibility for narrative work, and the ways in which they can support smaller organisations</p> <p>Develop and support funding structures and initiatives that start from the premise that youth work is effective, rather than encouraging practitioners to 'prove' too many niche impacts</p> <p>Conduct clearer mapping of the sector to identify who needs to be involved in narrative shaping</p> <p>Explore and test how core messages can be communicated to these people – specifically considering groups that might be missed e.g. volunteers, grassroots organisations</p> <p>Ensure that the pressures for shaping narratives do not fall too heavily on frontline practitioners or those with lived experiences</p> <p>Support the co-creation of core messages with those who have frontline / personal experience and those who have higher-level systems perspective, to develop messages that can inspire change while staying grounded in the reality of the work</p>

Outcomes	<p>Outline and make clear some of the different outcomes sets used in the sector that people could choose to align to, and the trade-offs involved in choosing between the different sets</p> <p>Support alignment between different funders, so that those reporting to multiple funders do not have to track lots of different outcomes sets</p> <p>Explore the specific accountability needs of funders/commissioners spending public money and identify where these stand in tension with alignment efforts and what could be done to mitigate tensions</p> <p>Identify and promote the ways in which highly specific, person-centred and locally relevant outcomes can be measured alongside broader, aligned sets, and the benefits of choosing broader outcomes on occasion</p> <p>Identify opportunities for alignment and incentives for those who have already invested in their own outcomes frameworks and systems</p> <p>Explore the ways in which those with their own outcomes frameworks may work in an aligned way with others in the system</p> <p>Support more joined-up thinking between funders and practitioners when it comes to setting outcomes</p> <p>Highlight areas where funder need and practitioner needs around outcome tracking are in tension and what can be done to mitigate this</p> <p>Align language around outcomes, so that people are clearer when they are actually talking about the same thing</p> <p>Ensure that outcomes are chosen that meet funder requirements without undermining the value of good quality relational working</p> <p>Make the social work system feel more knowable – especially to those working adjacent to it, or newer to it</p>
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	<p>Reduce siloed working among funders and commissioners</p> <p>Support the development and use of outcomes sets that are in some sense ‘future-proofed’ to changing policy priorities</p> <p>Raise awareness and further testing of the ways in which ‘softer’ (i.e. ‘core’) or indirect outcomes in youth work can be aligned and measured robustly</p>
Tools and approaches	<p>Raise the baseline awareness and skills across practitioners, funders and commissioners and trustees so that they are confident in knowing how to track outcomes and what ‘good’ looks like</p> <p>Provide clearer guidance around what tools are available, and the trade-offs involved between choosing between one or other type of tool</p> <p>Support capacity for training and trialling new approaches for both individuals and organisations</p> <p>Support consistent use of the tools available</p> <p>Ensure that those working with volunteers are able to track outcomes sufficiently</p> <p>Encourage funders to invest in learning around outcomes tracking themselves so they can promote best practice elsewhere</p> <p>Explore and promote the ways in which standardised tools can be adapted and flexed to different contexts</p> <p>Identify how tools can be run in conjunction with other more context-specific tools and approaches without creating too much noise or inefficiency</p> <p>Explore the ways in which standardised tools are perceived by young people, and how these can be run in user-friendly, inclusive ways, including where alternatives should be adopted</p>

	<p>Identify and champion the ways in which evaluation methods can support (rather than disrupt) positive relationships between young people and youth worker</p> <p>Identify and promote methods that give young people choice and flexibility about how and when they get involved</p> <p>Explore and support the ways in which more creative, young person-centred methods can support alignment (rather than standing in tension with this)</p> <p>Explore the different incentives and barriers for young people to engage in impact tracking, and how this can be incentivised ethically, equitably and appropriately</p> <p>Explore how (different cohorts of) young people feel about the different tools and approaches available and the impact of these tools on them</p> <p>Develop clearer lines of accountability and feedback around how information will be used, and how this will be for the benefit of the young people sharing their information</p> <p>Provide more guidance around what 'good' tools and approaches look like when it comes to alignment</p> <p>Raise confidence in the tools that are already available e.g. better communicating when they were last updated or reviewed</p> <p>Assuage anxiety over finding the 'perfect tool' e.g. by sharing case study examples of how tools have been adapted in different contexts</p> <p>Explore the barriers and drivers for those smaller, local and grassroots organisations, or those relying on voluntary labour to ensure they are not missed out in alignment efforts</p> <p>Promote approaches to alignment that are accessible to all</p>
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	<p>Reassure funders on which approaches are 'proportionate' in different settings, to encourage greater confidence on the part of funders to request consistency</p> <p>Identify approaches to alignment that are sector-backed and endorsed by practitioners</p> <p>Identify the 'price tag' for different types of alignment and promote free or cheap methods of aligning</p> <p>Explore the role of paid-for platforms and CRMs in alignment, to promote the ways in which alignment can be done without needing to invest in licence fees</p> <p>Reassure practitioners using different software that this does not mean alignment of any sort is not possible</p>
Data	<p>Explore non-invasive ways of collecting demographic data</p> <p>Create a clearer understanding about what proportionate data-collection looks like when working with young people</p> <p>Offer advice on evidencing and reporting on need</p> <p>Identify opportunities for collaboration outside of competitive processes</p> <p>Present clear rationales and calls for action for those considering getting involved in data sharing efforts</p> <p>Identify and support specific data sharing initiatives</p> <p>Explore common variations in recording practice and offer suggestions for common terminologies and definitions</p> <p>Offer alternatives or nuance to categorisations that practitioners consider too broad or unhelpful</p>

	<p>Invite honest reflection from practitioners around which data categories are likely to be more or less reliable based on the cohorts they are working with</p> <p>Explore how different data types are analysed, and where alignment might support more efficient or better-quality processes</p> <p>Identify more sustainable work around alignment to support longer term learnings</p>
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