

Case study 3: Data and learning





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This case study forms part of the youth employment infrastructure research and evaluation project carried out by RAND Europe in 2021-22 on behalf of the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF).² It explores the ways in which infrastructure organisations (IOs, see Box 1) collect, analyse and disseminate data to support frontline organisations (FOs) helping young people into employment, as well as to create change for those young people directly. It seeks to understand the activities that take place in this area and draw out examples of good practice, as well as the key barriers and facilitators that may play a role. Box 1. What is an infrastructure organisation (IO)?

While there is no standardised definition, for the purpose of this study¹ IOs are understood as third sector organisations whose main purpose is to provide support and services to FOs working directly with young people. IOs may offer support, training, information and advice, act as advocates, promote communication and collaboration between FOs, or seek to influence policy on behalf of them, amongst other activities.

These findings are based on two semi-structured interviews with IOs: the National Youth Agency (NYA) and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP). They are also informed by an interview with a representative from a combined authority (the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)) (see Box 2) with extensive experience collaborating with IOs on data and research initiatives. Interviewees were selected from among the grantees involved in the project. Further interviewees were then identified via snowballing from these interviews. The interviews were complemented by a targeted review of relevant literature and documentation provided by the interviewees and other IOs (see References).



Collecting data

Our IO interviewees reported working with both primary and secondary sources, and both qualitative and quantitative data, with their approaches to collecting this data being highly dependent on the purpose for which they intend it to be used.⁶ Examples of the types of data these organisations use can be found in Table 1.

¹ RAND (2022).

² RAND (2022).

³ NYA (2022).

⁴ AELP (2022a).

⁵ WMCA (2022).

⁶ Interviews with two IOs.

Table 1. Types of data collected and collated by IOs

	Primary source	Secondary source
Quantitative data	→Surveys with FOs, employers and/or young people (AELP, NYA)	 → Publicly available government data (AELP) → Government data available through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests (AELP) → Data from think tanks and foundations (e.g. the Sutton Trust) (AELP)
Qualitative data	 →Interviews with FOs, employers, young people and/or other stakeholders (NYA, AELP) →Sector forum groups (AELP) →Focus groups with learners (AELP) 	 →Online sources, including websites and grey literature (NYA) →Charity Commission Register (NYA)

Source: Interview with two IOs.

In some cases, this data collection is carried out by internal research functions, but these organisations may also collaborate with specialist research organisations for larger projects (see Box 5), or where it is desirable for the output to be seen as having greater validity.⁷ As a membership organisation with significant reach, AELP reported drawing on their member organisations as a key data source as well as the primary means of accessing the voices of employers and young people.⁸ In some cases, AELP asks their members to collect data on specific issues or themes through surveys or focus groups, while in others information is fed back more organically, through sector forum groups or casual interactions.⁹ Decisions around what data to collect and how may come from the board or management of the organisation itself, or from external commissions, including from the government.¹⁰ As the NYA is not a membership organisation, alternative approaches to data collection are used (see Box 4 and the 'Impact' section below).¹¹

Box 3. Mixed methods data collection

In 2021-22, AELP carried out desk research to collate quantitative secondary data regarding the contribution of independent training providers (ITPs) to post-16 technical training in England. This was followed by in-depth interviews with 14 key stakeholders from a range of geographical and occupational areas. A report outlining the findings was launched at a reception in the House of Commons.¹²

Source: Interview with an IO.

Using data to create change

Contributing to evidence-based funding and policy decisions

One of the key data and research functions of AELP was identified as feeding information and data from FOs back into government.¹³ One interviewee explained that the government engages with IOs as conduits to data due to their reach across a large number and range of employment and learning providers.¹⁴ This makes IOs well placed to facilitate discussion and flow of information in a way that governmental

⁷ One interview with an IO.

⁸ One interview with an IO.

⁹ One interview with an IO.

¹⁰ One interview with an IO.

¹¹ One interview with an IO.

¹² Warner (2022).

¹³ One interview with an IO.

¹⁴ One interview with IO.

representatives alone cannot,¹⁵ acting as a gateway to a breadth of expertise across a large number of organisations.¹⁶ While most of AELP's research and data work is selfdriven, the government may, for example, ask IOs like AELP to help with survey data collection to help crystalise an issue they are becoming aware of.¹⁷ One interviewee noted, however, that in these cases the government is more likely to be selective about what and how they publish these data in order to support their position, whereas more transparency was involved when the IO had ownership of the data.¹⁸ IOs may also provide research support functions for larger philanthropic organisations such as the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF)¹⁹ or the Gatsby Foundation,²⁰ from facilitating data collection with members, employers and/or learners, to carrying out a research project end-to-end.²¹

In some cases, IOs may share data and research with government bodies in an effort to support positive change for FOs.²² AELP, for example, assessed the disadvantageous impact of the apprenticeship reforms on smaller employers and younger apprentices and set out a number of discussion points around improving the apprenticeship funding model in a submission to the Department for Education.²³ Similarly, the NYA carries out research to inform government of good practice in youth work and how to best support it (see Box 4). IOs may also feed back information from non-governmental sources, such as think tanks and foundations, of which the government may be less likely to have oversight²⁴ For example, the NYA draws on secondary evidence in their policy reports and submissions as part of their lobbying and influencing strategy.²⁵ Research may be sent to officials directly, or there may be a more formal process of submitting evidence to a Select Committee, the Treasury or for specific consultations.²⁶ Maintaining a strong relationship with the government can also enable IOs to bear influence on departmental funding decisions around data and research, such as the youth directory work that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) has funded the NYA to carry out (see the 'Impact' section below).27

Box 4. Deep dives for a deeper understanding

The NYA is currently carrying out in-depth case studies with nine local authorities (LAs) and their local areas with the aim of better understanding the barriers and facilitators to youth work, in terms of both supply and demand. They have commissioned a specialist research organisation to carry out 100 interviews with organisational leads, LA representatives, counsellors and other stakeholders responsible for the youth work offer. They are also carrying out a number of focus groups with local young people, and speaking to various other relevant stakeholders. This is a relatively new area of work for the NYA, funded by the DCMS. The NYA's ambition is for these qualitative findings to support government

¹⁵ One interview with an IO.

¹⁶ One interview with a research institute.

¹⁷ One interview with an IO.

¹⁸ One interview with an IO.

¹⁹ YFF (2022).

²⁰ Gatsby (2022).

²¹ One interview with an IO.

²² One interview with an IO.

²³ One interview with an IO; AELP (2019).

²⁴ One interview with an IO.

²⁵ One interview with an IO. ²⁶ One interview with an IO.

²⁰ One interview with an IO.

²⁷ One interview with an IO.

understanding of how to support good practice within a local area, as well as to share good practice with other organisations and encourage greater collaboration between them.

Source: Interview with an IO.

IOs may also support other actors to access beneficiaries for the purposes of research.²⁸ Recently, for example, AELP facilitated governmental access to young learners upon the government's request to hear from young people about the extra 40 hours of tuition they were to receive.²⁹ IOs can also benefit specialist research organisations by identifying relevant research participants and brokering these relationships to support engagement in the research.³⁰

One interviewee reported that quantitative data from FOs and beneficiaries tends to amplify the traction that can be gained with policymakers and support more concrete policy change.³¹ In response to this, AELP has shifted towards placing more emphasis on evidence-backed calls for change, although one interviewee indicated that they felt they could still use more quantitative data in their briefings, submissions and consultation responses than they currently do, and that their approach remains too anecdotal at times.³² At the same time, this interviewee indicated that AELP's focus on more qualitative data is also a strength, as it enables them to provide a more nuanced picture of elements such as the quality of training and the barriers at play.³³ Another interviewee indicated that NYA primarily uses secondary, qualitative data in their policy reports as part of their influencing strategy.³⁴ Further, one interviewee was sceptical about the extent to which any amount of evidence short of rigorous impact data could significantly sway budget allocation at the governmental level, given how little is currently allocated to the youth sector.³⁵

Translating and disseminating data for FOs

The interviewees indicated that processing and disseminating data amongst FOs is equally crucial to their IO role as amongst funders and policymakers,³⁶ particularly as many FOs lack the time or resource to monitor and process data themselves.³⁷ AELP, for example, renders relevant governmental data digestible and accessible for their members to ensure that they are equipped to be responsive to changes in policy or current trends, which in turn supports their organisational resilience.³⁸ Moreover, by carrying out their own independent analysis of governmental data, AELP is able to highlight any less favourable trends or discrepancies to which policymakers may not have drawn attention themselves.³⁹ This does, however, introduce the challenge of striking a balance between 'whistle blowing', and maintaining a positive relationship and influence with the government.⁴⁰

²⁸ Interviews with an IO and with a representative from a combined authority.

²⁹ One interview with an IO.

 $^{^{\}mbox{\tiny 30}}$ One interview with a representative from a combined authority.

³¹ One interview with an IO.

 $^{^{32}}$ One interview with an IO.

³³ One interview with an IO.

³⁴ One interview with an IO.

³⁵ One interview with an IO.

³⁶ Interviews with two IOs.

³⁷ One interview with an IO.

³⁸ One interview with an IO.³⁹ One interview with an IO.

⁴⁰ One interview with an IO.

Collating and analysing quantitative data from the government, think tanks and foundations and presenting it in a way that is meaningful to and interpretable by FOs is also a key part of AELP's work.⁴¹ The organisation's newsletter, as well as their strong relationship with FOs and the national press, allows these findings to be shared with other relevant actors.⁴² The interviewee reiterated that quantitative data is also important for gaining traction with the press, not just with policymakers.⁴³ In addition, AELP shares all its data and research on its webpage, and at designated events and sector forum groups.⁴⁴

Limited rigorous evaluative practice

The literature suggests that impact data on the services IOs offer is crucial for demonstrating the value of their work to policymakers, funders and FOs.⁴⁵ This both strengthens the IO's funding bids,⁴⁶ and carries potential to improve local and national policy.⁴⁷ Internally, demonstrating impact can also help to motivate and support staff, volunteers and trustees.⁴⁸ Yet, while IOs tend to monitor their outputs, this is insufficient for assessing the impact these may have had on young people.⁴⁹ One interviewee reported that their organisation carries out some internal evaluation of their service offer, particularly training, but that this tends to function at a more basic feedback level.⁵⁰ Another interviewee noted that while FOs and IOs capture data on inputs and outputs, there is a need for a greater emphasis on also collecting data on outcomes and impact.⁵¹

Key challenges and facilitators for using data to improve employment outcomes for young people

In seeking to use data to improve employment outcomes for young people via FOs, IOs face several challenges:

• Limitations relating to time and human resource can restrict the types of data IOs use and the ways in which they can use them. One interviewee reported limited time and human resource to be the primary barriers to their organisation using more quantitative data.⁵² This is particularly significant in relation to the data and evaluative work IOs do around their own practice. London Youth,⁵³ for example, have highlighted the importance of dedicated human resource in transforming their organisation into one founded on evidence-based practice;⁵⁴ and there is evidence to suggest that many IOs would not be able to support a full evaluation of their services.⁵⁵

⁴¹ One interview with an IO.

⁴² One interview with an IO.

⁴³ One interview with an IO.

⁴⁴ One interview with an IO. ⁴⁵ Bell (2014); Cabinet Office (2014).

⁴⁶ Cabinet Office (2014).

⁴⁷ Bell (2014).

⁴⁸ Bell (2014); Cabinet Office (2014).

⁴⁹ Bell (2014).

⁵⁰ One interview with an IO.

⁵¹ One interview with a representative from a combined authority.

 $^{^{\}rm 52}$ One interview with an IO.

⁵³ London Youth (2022).

⁵⁴ Cabinet Office (2014).

⁵⁵ Wells & Dayson (2010).

- Limited funding for organisations to collect and use data can create financial barriers to activities in this area.⁵⁶ This also limits the level of rigour and credibility of the research that is conducted, as collaborating with external specialist researchers can be more expensive that internal work, and will consequently often require sponsorship.⁵⁷ Opportunities for collecting and analysing data relating to impact across FOs and IOs are also constrained by a lack of investment in robust evaluation.⁵⁸
- Limited in-house experience and expertise involving research and data can result in a lower quality of activities and output in these areas.⁵⁹ One interviewee reported that many actors use the term 'data' in a broad and ambiguous way and without showing an appropriate concern for its quality, validity and reliability.⁶⁰ In some cases, organisations may wish to collect data but are unsure of how to approach it and are concerned that they lack the necessary knowledge and skills.⁶¹ In addition, there may not be a good inhouse understanding of what types of questions can be answered with different methodological approaches, nor the limitations and good practices they involve.⁶² Some stakeholders with whom IOs communicate around data may also lack the data and research literacy to understand what a piece of research can reasonably tell them.⁶³ Finally, as many IOs have a larger lobbying role than they do research function, data and research are often more likely to bolster existing policy standpoints than to inform them.⁶⁴
- Diverse and non-collaborative approaches to data collection and processing across such areas as youth work make it challenging for IOs to access data in the quantity and level of detail required for meaningful analysis of these issues.⁶⁵ The lack of any common reporting framework across youth work organisations, for example, in part due to the absence of any statutory or regulatory body for youth work, means that even while data collection in FOs may be improving, the data is in such a range of formats that it is difficult to standardise for cross-organisational analysis, even just at the level of a common language or taxonomy for the kinds of services on offer.⁶⁶ The lack of data sharing among FOs and other stakeholders working towards a common goal.⁶⁷
- Variable engagement in data collection activities can create challenges for IOs seeking to better understand the FOs with which they work. Response rates to surveys of FOs vary considerably depending on such factors as the time of year and the perceived importance of the issue.⁶⁸ Similarly, high attrition has

- ⁶² Interviews with two IOs.
- ⁶³ One interview with an IO.⁶⁴ One interview with an IO.

⁶⁶ One interview with an IO.

⁵⁶ Bell (2014).

⁵⁷ One interview with an IO.

⁵⁸ One interview with a representative from a combined authority.

⁵⁹ One interview with an IO.

⁶⁰ One interview with an IO.

⁶¹ Bell (2014).

⁶⁵ One interview with an IO.

⁶⁷ One interview with a representative from a combined authority.

⁶⁸ Interviews with two IOs.

been observed among FOs participating in research to demonstrate IO impact,⁶⁹ low engagement due to concerns around added administrative burden was identified as a potential barrier to more standardised data collection approaches.⁷⁰ One interviewee also reported that FOs were experiencing 'survey fatigue' as face-to-face activities that had previously supported data collection were no longer possible during the pandemic.⁷¹ National non-membership IOs may also face significant challenges engaging FOs in data collection, as the complexities of scale make it difficult to develop relationships with these organisations and to understand their local need.⁷² In the case of youth services specifically, this difficulty is aggravated by the fact that local authorities have no statutory duty to provide data on this sector.⁷³ One interviewee noted, however, that it would be difficult to impose any kind of schema onto youth work services if they did not feel it was the outcome of genuine co-production.⁷⁴

• The nature of frontline and IOs' impact can be difficult to evidence, as it is often subtle, incremental and difficult to measure.⁷⁵ Moreover, the potential impact of IOs is mediated by numerous external factors including the receptiveness and responsiveness of FOs, and their work does not produce any simple and immediate returns.⁷⁶ As one interviewee noted, while policymakers tend to look for quantitative, longitudinal data to evidence impact, the amount of data and level of detail that would be required to find even a correlation between using a particular service and any outcomes makes this very challenging.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the type of data required is unlikely to be that which FOs routinely collect.⁷⁸

At the same time, some factors may facilitate IOs to improve the amount and quality of the work they do with research and data:

• Collaboration between IOs and other organisations can improve the reach and quality of the data collection and analysis. For example, local authorities, clinical commissioning groups or universities may already collect relevant data that they would share in return for access to findings.⁷⁹ Indeed, there is already evidence to suggest that partnerships with universities increase IOs' capacity for research and impact measurement.⁸⁰ Collaborating with an external actor (particularly one specialising in research) can lend greater credibility to a piece of research and ensure that it is accessing the right data and asking the right questions (see Box 5, for example).⁸¹ Evaluative work with IOs by dedicated research organisations, as well as an ongoing learning partner relationship

⁶⁹ Bell (2014).

⁷⁰ One interview with an IO.

⁷¹ One interview with an IO.

 $^{^{72}}$ One interview with an IO.

 $^{^{73}}$ One interview with an IO.

⁷⁴ One interview with an IO.

⁷⁵ Wells & Dayson (2010).

⁷⁶ Bell (2014).

⁷⁷ One interview with an IO.

⁷⁸ Bell (2014). ⁷⁹ NAVCA (2015).

⁸⁰ Bell (2014).

⁸¹ One interview with an IO.

between them, can also support improvement of their services.⁸² One interviewee, however, indicated that they do not feel their organisation collaborates around research as much as in other areas as the vested interest of each organisation in certain policy or funding outcomes can make it difficult to achieve synergy between them in terms of priorities and messaging.⁸³ Another interviewee, however, observed that as a result of the pandemic many organisations have begun to see that greater openness and sharing around data within the sector may be beneficial.⁸⁴

Box 5. Collaborative approaches to data collection

In 2017, AELP collaborated with the Warwick Institute for Employment Research⁸⁵ and IFF Research⁸⁶ to survey 200 employers and 75 providers regarding the impact of the levy on Apprenticeship recruitment, resulting in the first hard evidence of reduced recruitment affecting young people, particularly those at Level 2, in direct contradiction to policy intent.⁸⁷ AELP also collaborated with the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA)⁸⁸ on a joint submission to the Justice Committee Inquiry on a prisoner apprenticeship pathway,⁸⁹ with the interviewee reporting that this work played a role in the recent government discourse in this area.

Source: Interview with an IO.

• A broader shift in culture emphasising the importance of quality data and research can facilitate these ambitions among IOs. One interviewee observed that large, national IOs are increasingly developing 'grassroots' connections with FOs from which they are now starting to regularly collect data.⁹⁰ The interviewee noted that this is contributing to improvements in the quality and quantity of data available, which should in turn support more evidence-based positioning.⁹¹ At the same time, this interviewee reported that policymakers are wanting to see better data and more rigorous evidence-based practices.⁹² Governmental support for the use of outcomes-focused approaches in the youth sector has also been made available through such initiatives as Inspiring Impact, an ongoing, sector-led programme aiming to improve impact measurement, as well as a guide to outcomes frameworks.⁹³

Impact on FOs and young people

Supporting FOs to improve service provision and uptake

Both of the IOs interviewed for this case study provide examples of ways in which their research work supports FOs. Research carried out by AELP, for example, provides resources on which FOs can draw to improve the quality of their service provision. Following research work carried out with the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL),⁹⁴ AELP developed a 'code of good governance' for independent training providers (ITP), with the aim of promoting good practice in relation to governance,

⁸² One interview with a representative from a combined authority.

⁸³ One interview with an IO.

⁸⁴ One interview with an IO.

⁸⁵ Warwick Institute for Employment Research (2022).

⁸⁶ IFF Research (2022).

⁸⁷ AELP (2018a); Warwick Institute for Employment Research (2017).

⁸⁸ ERSA (2022).

⁸⁹ AELP & ERSA (2016).

⁹⁰ One interview with an IO.

⁹¹ One interview with an IO.

⁹² One interview with an IO.⁹³ Cabinet Office (2014).

⁹⁴ FETL (2022).

which AELP identified as a key driver of success for both providers and the education and training sector as a whole.⁹⁵ At the same time, AELP has been working to highlight through research the value of ITPs in order to encourage greater governmental support and parity with other Further Education providers (see Box 3).⁹⁶

For the NYA, a key ambition is to enhance the visibility of youth work services in order to promote engagement and uptake. The NYA is currently collecting data to map youth work provision across England in terms of the services that exist, where they operate and what they do, with the aim of creating a publicly available youth work directory that will ultimately allow FOs to sign up and edit their information directly.⁹⁷ These data are being collected through the Charity Commission Register, surveys, internet searches and word-of-mouth, as many youth work services are unregistered.⁹⁸ This directory will improve awareness of the location and nature of youth services available among young people, the government and funders, which has the potential to increase both service uptake and funder support.⁹⁹

Enhancing access to quality support for young people

Some of the research work carried out by IOs also has the potential to impact young people more directly. For example, by promoting the visibility of youth work services through their mapping, the NYA is also enhancing the accessibility of these services by making it easier for young people to identify the type of local support available and the means of accessing it.

The AELP's research work has likewise promoted young people's access to opportunities and support by highlighting the value of programmes and the need for government investment in them. For example, when the Traineeship programme¹⁰⁰ was scaled down for a period of time, AELP continued to collect and share data on the impact of policy decisions with policymakers. These data included: data on learner outcomes, conversations with employers to collate case studies of successful learners, as well as data on referrals to the programme, conversion rates¹⁰¹ and dropout rates, including around young people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups.¹⁰² The work AELP did to sustain the programme, as well as the data they collected to demonstrate its potential, contributed to the government's renewed focus on the programme in the light of the pandemic.¹⁰³ This, in turn, led to additional training opportunities being opened up to young people.

⁹⁵ AELP (2018b).

⁹⁶ AELP (2022b).

⁹⁷ One interview with an IO. For a prototype of the directory, see NYA (2021b).

⁹⁸ One interview with an IO.

⁹⁹ One interview with an IO.

¹⁰⁰ ESFA (2019).

¹⁰¹ The proportion of traineeship starts that go on to start an apprenticeship.

 $^{^{\}rm 102}$ One interview with an IO.

¹⁰³ One interview with an IO.

Lessons for increasing the collection and use of data among IOs to improve employment outcomes for young people

- 1. Facilitating data sharing between organisations would support analysis involving larger quantities of data. This would require logistical changes such as data sharing agreements, but also a shift away from the current concern with vested interest at the expense of collaboration and transparency.
- 2. Developing in-house experience and expertise around research and data would support a greater understanding of the benefits, limitations and applicability of different methodological approaches. It would also encourage a more rigorous approach to evidence-based practice, where policy positions are informed by the data, in place of ad hoc evidencing to support existing positions.
- 3. **Standardising tools and approaches for data collection within FOs** would improve both the quality and quantity of data that can be collected and analysed to support evidence-based policy and practice.
- 4. Activities around data collection and use must be adequately invested in by government and funders at the level of both frontline and IOs. This could include funding to support organisations participating in research, not only for those conducting it.
- 5. Collaboration between different types of organisations supports high quality data use and research by combining a range of expertise around a common objective. For example, research institutes can provide methodological rigour and objectivity, while IOs are well positioned to encourage beneficiary engagement in research activities and outputs.

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Annex. About the youth employment infrastructure research and evaluation project

Support for young people in England has gone through substantial changes over the last several years, in part due to underfunding, structural changes and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have had profound effects on youth employment, especially on young people from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds, who have been disproportionately affected.

These effects have been also felt acutely by organisations which help young people into employment, education or training, including by IOs (third sector organisations which provide services to FOs working directly with young people).

RAND Europe has been commissioned by the YFF to conduct a study on IOs. The study draws on a theory-based approach and mixed methods including interviews, surveys, case studies and workshops to:

- Show how IOs support the youth employment sector and effect change
- Support IOs to improve practice and delivery to stakeholders
- Improve the evidence base of what works by sharing good practice between IOs.

The research questions are:

- 1. How do infrastructure bodies support the needs of organisations working towards youth employment?
- 2. How do IOs effect change (at regional, national and systemic levels)?
- 3. How do IOs network and collaborate?
- 4. What impacts do IOs have on the youth employment organisations they support, and young people?
- 5. How can IOs be better supported by policymakers and funders to improve youth employment outcomes?

The case studies contribute to research questions 2-4. They focus on the different roles that IOs may play, namely: (i) effecting change in policy and practice; (ii) embedding and championing youth voice; (iii) supporting data collection, analysis and learning; (iv) capacity building; and (v) enabling networking and collaboration. This case study examined the role that IOs have in effecting change in policymaking at the regional, national and systemic level.

For more information about this research, please visit:

https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/evaluating-englands-youthemployment-infrastructure.html This case study is part of the of evaluating England's youth employment infrastructure, 2022.

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