

How to build evaluation capacity in the youth employment sector: Reflection note from learning workshop

Youth Futures Foundation partnered with Ipsos, New Philanthropy Capital and the National Centre for Research on a [project](#) to support a total of nine organisations prepare for robust, independent evaluations and improve their internal capabilities for monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

This reflection note captures insights from a collaborative workshop held at the end of the project to share key learnings, reflect on the barriers and enablers of this type of work, and generate recommendations for commissioners, funders and delivery organisations.

1. The pros and cons of 1-2-1 relationships

The project paired each participating delivery organisation with a dedicated evaluation advisor who acted as a consistent, single point of contact. This approach built good working relationships over time and helped manage the variety of inputs across the project.

Delivery organisations appreciated having someone to reach out to when questions or opportunities arose, while it gave the advisors a deeper understanding of their delivery organisation's context, challenges, evaluation needs and existing assets and capabilities. Delivery organisations benefited from this more flexible and tailored support.

For example, for two delivery organisations, evaluation advisors conducted literature reviews on topics specific to their project designs. This helped them develop and improve their theories of change.

There are, however, potential risks with having a single point of contact; there may be delays if key members of staff are unavailable, or if there are staffing changes. It is also more difficult to know how far learning and capacity building is happening at the organisational – as well as individual – level where an advisor is working solely with one organisational representative. This may be mitigated by considering how organisations are sharing knowledge and supporting capacity development through peer learning and internal communication.

2. A range of support is necessary

Depending on an organisation's evaluation needs and existing capabilities, they may need expert advice from a range of different specialists.

While participating delivery organisations had a dedicated evaluation advisor, they also had access to other expertise as needed across the project. For example, independent consultants with expertise in engaging young people in evaluation co-led a community of practice session.

Bringing in outside experts helped increase interest in the sessions and made the sessions feel special.

3. Consider modes of engagement

In-person meetings were found to be helpful for building one-to-one relationships. After meeting face-to-face, evaluation advisors felt they better understood the organisations and individuals they were working with. Delivery organisations reflected that they enjoyed discussing their work and learning in-person.

Holding in-person sessions can also offer opportunities for greater stakeholder engagement. For example, one grantee invited members of their Board, senior management, and project management teams to their in-person theory of change workshop, where they had previously struggled to engage with advisors as effectively in online meetings.

Due to participating organisations being based in different regions of England, the project's community of practice was launched virtually. It was challenging to encourage knowledge sharing and community building in an online environment. On reflection, an in-person event may have facilitated more open and collaborative discussions between grantees.

While face-to-face working offered clear benefits for relationship building, working online was also helpful in facilitating meetings. It could be challenging to align diaries and so offering online and hybrid options was found to be an enabler to ensuring key people were able to attend.

4. Foster a diverse but relevant community of practice

The project included a series of workshops to build a 'community of practice'.

As capability and priorities varied widely across participating organisations, the approach taken was to bring together organisations who had similar monitoring and evaluation capabilities, even if they delivered different types of projects.

While this helped foster connection and make topics more relevant, it may have been even more beneficial to include all organisations receiving support in the same workshops to maximise peer-learning.

Delivery organisations enjoyed hearing about work going on in other areas and sharing their experiences about using different approaches.

The most successful workshops - marked by high-attendance, lively discussion and follow-up conversations between organisations – were those:

- where topics were timely and relevant to 'top of mind' priorities and challenges;
- which combined advice with examples of practice and usable guidance to help organisations embed an evaluation culture.

Popular topics included developing theories of change, choosing a customer relationship management system (CRM) and data management system, and what to expect from an evaluation.

Explore an example <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/publication/data-collection-systems-for-monitoring-and-reporting/>

There is a risk that organisations who are competing for the same funding may be reluctant to share their experience and practice. This is somewhat mitigated by organisations being based in different parts of the country, and where benefits of shared knowledge outweigh competition.

5. Ensure capacity building support is flexible and agile

Some participating organisations required bottom-up support, developing theories of change and participant journey maps from first principles. Others had the building blocks in place and needed more advice on data collection, targeting causal 'hotspots', or preparing more robust evaluation designs.

An agile approach, using 'lean' tools and frameworks, and re-scoping plans on an iterative basis, worked best to maintain engagement and respond to organisations' needs.

This was further supported by Youth Futures' consultative, flexible, and outcome-driven approach as a commissioner, which was effective in helping to shape the project, while allowing evaluation advisers to take a tailored approach based on the needs and preferences of delivery organisations.

Funders should consider flexible types of projects alongside more traditional models to develop the evaluation capacity and capability of the youth employment sector. However, funders and consultancies who typically commission or deliver output-focussed, milestone-bound contracts might find this type of project challenging to deliver as a flexible and tailored approach doesn't align with pre-agreed milestones and deliverables and may be more resource intensive.

Funding support to build evaluation capacity in the youth employment sector has the potential to improve organisations' capability to produce better evidence. This type of work is crucial for strengthening the evidence base of what works to support young people into meaningful employment.